



IMRAN KHAN'S VISIT TO KABUL: AN ASSESSMENT

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



On November 19, 2020 Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan paid a long-awaited day-long visit to Afghanistan. The intent of the visit was to deepen "fraternal bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan," advance the Afghan peace process, and promote "regional economic development and connectivity."¹

The visit came on the heels of a number of confidence-building measures and series of preceding high-level visits to improve bilateral trust and develop a more conducive environment for peaceful ties that could transform the nature of this important relationship. Due to common and mutual interests, as well as the commitment to improve them further – such as by these contacts between representatives of both countries – bilateral engagement between Pakistan and Afghanistan has been on an upward trajectory in recent months.

For instance, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, Chairman of High Council on National Reconciliation visited Islamabad in September. This was followed by visits of Rahman Rahmani, Speaker of Afghanistan's lower house of Parliament and Nisar Ahmad Ghoraini, the Afghan Commerce Minister. Islamabad has also in recent months made several visits and shown a commitment to peaceful ties and friendship with its western neighbour.

Following its nuanced approach to expand its engagement beyond Pashtun groups to all ethnic factions within Afghanistan, Islamabad has also welcomed the visits of Haji Muhammad Mohaqiq

¹ "Joint press conference of Prime Minister Imran Khan and President of Afghanistan Ashraf Ghani," YouTube, November 19, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHtldMvk9ts>

Head of Hizb-e-Wahdat Mardam-e-Afghanistan in 2019, and more recently also the leader of the Hizb-e-Islami, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's in October 2020.

Prime Minister Khan's visit thus did not come in a vacuum, the groundwork had been prepared with both countries moving towards a new phase in ties after decades of instability. Prime Minister Khan stated that the purpose of his visit was to assure the Afghan government that "Pakistan will do everything possible to help reduce violence and in fact move towards a ceasefire."² While there is much goodwill and a desire to improve the relationship behind Prime Minister Khan's statement, as it highlights Pakistan's effort to address mutual mistrust and improve bilateral relations at a time when Afghanistan is undergoing far-reaching changes, at the same time it puts Pakistan in a difficult and challenging position.

Pakistan's role in the Afghan peace process has been well-known and extensively discussed. Publically as well as privately, Islamabad has been pushing both sides in Afghanistan – the government and the Taliban – to engage with each other in the hope of a peaceful settlement. These efforts have resulted in the US-Taliban agreement of 2020 and the subsequent and ongoing intra-Afghan talks. Despite the positive intent in Prime Minister Khan's commitments to ending violence and moving towards a ceasefire, as noted above, such declarations bring their own set of challenges. It puts Pakistan in a compromising position: on the one hand the country is making promises it may not be able to keep, and it is doing so also while raising expectations in Afghanistan.

If Pakistan is unable to convince the Taliban to end all violence, it is not inconceivable that the blame for this will fall on Pakistan – as has been the case in the past. For Pakistan, it is important to be realistic about any pledges made to the Afghan side. If Pakistan falls short on meeting Afghan expectations in this new phase of an upturn in ties, or is unable to deliver on Afghan requests, it could once again undermine the hard-earned trust between two sides. PM Khan's assurances and promises thus have to be seen critically. However, focusing on singular statements is also not desirable, since the visit itself is symbolically significant. It was a welcome and much-needed booster for bilateral relations at a time when both sides should be cognizant that the relationship has improved after real hard work. Thus, while such high level visits continue, and the leaderships of both countries express their commitment to peace, collaboration, and the development of ties on mutual fronts, Islamabad should be cautious when making unrealistic promises. This is since failure on one front can derail progress in other aspects, and can give impetus to the narrative in Kabul and the US that Islamabad is in lockstep with the Taliban and not committed to seeing peace and

² "Imran vows to help stem Afghan bloodshed," *Express Tribune*, November 19, 2020, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2272789/pm-imran-assures-pakistans-unflinching-support-to-end-violence-in-afghanistan>

security in Afghanistan. There are precedents for this to show that this is not simply hypothetical – for instance, as experienced in the aftermath of Ashraf Ghani's visit to Pakistan in 2014, all the positive goodwill and momentum generated amounted to nothing when Pakistan was unable to meet Afghan expectations which sent the bilateral relationship to a downward spiral.

For far too long, Afghanistan's stance regarding Pakistan's role in peace and stability as well as the ongoing peace process with the Afghan Taliban has been somewhat contradictory. Time and again, Afghan authorities have accused Pakistan of supporting and abetting the Taliban. And yet at the same time they have solicited Pakistan to play a role in bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table. Pakistan is thus walking on a tightrope. In order to avoid unnecessary friction, Pakistan should be seen as supporting the process, and highlighting that it is to remain an Afghan-led and Afghan-organized exercise. Therefore, Pakistan must be cautious in what it can do and what it can deliver. This includes such pledges, because at the end of the day, talking to the Taliban and reaching a compromise is solely in the hands of the Afghans themselves.

With promises about the peace process, there is a tendency to continue to limit the relationship to security. The past, including recent decades, reveal clearly that the Pak-Afghan bilateral relationship faces several challenges and that a key limitation is that it has been viewed primarily through a security lens. Expanding the contours of the ties to other fields such as trade, regional connectivity, people to people ties, and not limiting it to the peace process or security alone is thus important for both countries. Now that Pakistan and Afghanistan are attempting to expand the nature of ties to multiple avenues, care should be taken to ensure that issues in security do not automatically lead to reduced trade, economic connectivity, people to people linkages and cultural ties.

As history has shown, it is in any case difficult to broach these subjects and remain committed to them in a relationship that has been based on one primary concern: security. In this regard, it was encouraging to see both President Ghani and Prime Minister Khan focusing on the need to broadening other aspects of their bilateral relationship such as trade and regional connectivity, with the Prime Minister also adding that, "The only way to help people on both sides of the border is by peace, trade and connectivity."³ Most crucially, the official communique or shared vision issued at the end of the visit indicates the desire from both sides to move beyond the past, improve the relationship and expand the contours of their bilateral relationship by focusing primarily on: transparency, mutual and full respect for one another's sovereignty, preventing either's territory to be used against the other; inclusive governance; stronger people/government/security ties,

³ Naveed Siddiqui, "Pakistan will do everything possible to reduce violence in Afghanistan, says PM Imran on maiden Kabul visit", *Dawn*, November 19, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1591240/pakistan-will-do-everything-possible-to-reduce-violence-in-afghanistan-says-pm-imran-on-maiden-kabul-visit>

expeditious resolution of the refugee situation and more integrated economic connectivity, trade and development connecting Pakistan and Afghanistan to the Central Asian region.⁴ In order to expedite the agreement, both sides agreed on a time framework to identify officials to implement the agreed proposals, beginning with December 15, 2020 in which both sides would commence joint intelligence cooperation. This would be followed by a joint proposal for the return of Afghan refugees as well as to further regional connectivity between the two neighbours by January 1st, 2021.⁵

Clearly highlighting that the relationship is moving in the right direction. It is hoped that this positive momentum is maintained, because as has been seen in the past, the positives can very easily be replaced by the negatives.

The visit has also come at a time when the Afghan peace process is being confronted by a plethora of challenges, such as the US decision to further reduce military presence in Afghanistan, the ongoing US presidential transition, as well as the stagnant intra-Afghan dialogue and continuing violence on the part of the Taliban. Considering the fragility of the dialogue process then, the crucial nature of the visit is evident to all observers of the region.

Prime Minister Khan's visit came a day after Pentagon announced reduction in number of US troops from the current 4,500 to 2,500 by mid-January 2021.⁶ This announcement has sped up the timeline agreed between Afghan Taliban and the US in the Doha agreement from mid-2021 to early 2021. It has also indicated a policy-paralysis in the US where a Presidential transition is underway with outgoing President Donald Trump seeking to end the US war in Afghanistan, resulting in further instability in the peace process. Furthermore, uncertainty revolves around the Biden administration's policy towards the Afghan peace process, the US-Taliban agreement and even the role of US peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad. The Taliban, on their part, have expressed hope that the Biden administration will maintain the Doha agreement. While the transition team has not revealed its opinions yet, it is believed there will be review process, and while there may not be an immediate withdrawal from the agreement, a lot will depend on the level of violence and the Taliban's efforts towards a ceasefire. Earlier, Biden as Vice President advocated for a small presence of US troops in

⁴ <https://twitter.com/US4AfghanPeace/status/1330568973168107526>, November 22, 2020.

⁵ "Agreement between Afghanistan and Pakistan on Establishing a Shared Vision in Support of Peace and Stability in Both Countries and the Wider Region," November 19, 2020, <https://www.mfa.gov.af/news/2296-agreement-between-afghanistan-and-pakistan-on-establishing-a-shared-vision-in-support-of-peace-and-stability-in-both-countries-and-the-wider-region.html>

⁶ "US troops in Afghanistan: Allies and Republicans alarmed at withdrawal plan," *BBC News*, November 18, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-54980141>

Afghanistan for counter-terrorism operations. However, it remains to be seen if Biden will advocate for a similar approach or chart a new course.

For Pakistan, relations and peace with Afghanistan should not be dependent exclusively on what the US does or does not do. Peace in Afghanistan is in Pakistan's intrinsic self-interest. To reiterate, this is also where a renewed focus on ties beyond security needs to be centralized as Pakistan and Afghanistan embark on a renewed and potentially positive phase in their relationship. The future of the region depends on it.