

PAKISTAN-AFGHANISTAN: RESETTING TIES

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



On 23 March 2025, Pakistan’s Special Representative for Afghanistan, Ambassador Muhammad Sadiq, embarked on a three-day visit to Kabul, aimed at de-escalating tensions and strengthening bilateral relations by addressing key ongoing challenges. During his visit, Ambassador Sadiq held productive discussions with Afghanistan's Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi and Acting Commerce Minister Nooruddin Azizi. ¹ Both sides expressed a commitment to continue diplomatic engagement and work together to tackle critical issues such as trade, security, and the status of Afghan refugees in Pakistan.²

A significant outcome of the meetings was willingness on the part of both sides to address bilateral concerns including by holding a Joint Coordination Committee (JCC) meeting, scheduled to take place in Kabul before April 15, 2025.³ Another positive development was the reopening of the Torkham border crossing on 22 March 2025, after a 27-day closure.⁴ The border had been closed due to a dispute triggered by Kabul’s construction of a post in a contested area, which led to armed

¹ Kamran Yousaf, “Envoy wraps up fruitful Kabul trip”, *Express Tribune*, March 24, 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2536087/envoy-wraps-up-fruitful-kabul-trip>

² Tahir Khan, “Peace and progress in Afghanistan necessary for regional stability: envoy”, *Dawn*, March 23, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/amp/1899846>

³ Shaukat Piracha, “Major breakthrough in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations as joint committee meeting scheduled”, *Aaj Tv*, March 24, 2025, <https://english.aaj.tv/news/330408470/major-breakthrough-in-pakistan-afghanistan-relations-as-joint-committee-meeting-scheduled>

⁴ “Torkham border reopens after 27-day closure following jirga talks”, *The Nation*, March 22, 2025, <https://www.nation.com.pk/22-Mar-2025/torkham-border-reopens-after-27-day-closure-following-jirga-talks>

clashes. Its reopening marks a hopeful step toward restoring normalcy and improving relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Ambassador Muhammad Sadiq's visit came at a time when Pakistan-Afghanistan relations were experiencing formidable challenges. The bilateral relationship has been on a downward trajectory, primarily due to the rise in terrorist attacks by the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a group operating from Afghanistan's territory. Border confrontations, notably along the Torkham crossing, further strained relations. Ambassador Sadiq's visit is seen as a constructive move towards enhancing cooperation and stability in the region, signalling both sides' willingness to resolve differences through engagement and dialogue.

Ambassador Sadiq's meetings with Acting Foreign Minister and Trade Minister in Kabul highlight the distinct priorities of the two countries -- security for Pakistan, and trade for Kabul. However, these two facets are interconnected in many ways and should not be treated in isolation. Security and trade are not mutually exclusive; rather, they complement each other and are both essential for a strong, sustainable relationship. A stable security environment is crucial for facilitating trade; while economic cooperation can help build trust and contribute to long-term peace and stability. Both aspects must be addressed in tandem to create a mutually beneficial partnership. Ambassador Sadiq's visit, therefore, marks a critical moment in attempts to address these longstanding challenges and re-establish constructive dialogue.

When the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, Pakistan played a crucial role in the evacuation process and in engaging with the Interim Government, which resulted in several high-level bilateral exchanges and an initial boost in trade. However, despite these efforts, the relationship faltered again, largely due to deep-rooted grievances and unmet security expectations. Key issues include ongoing concerns over the presence of terrorist groups like the TTP within Afghanistan and the continuation of actions along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

These unresolved security challenges, compounded by a persistent lack of trust, have undermined efforts to foster a more stable and constructive bilateral relationship. While there have been periods of engagement and cooperation, these recurring challenges continue to hinder progress, making it difficult to build a lasting, multifaceted partnership.

The TTP had faced significant setbacks as a result of Pakistan's military operations, which substantially weakened the group. However, following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, the TTP gained significant momentum, by finding refuge and operational space in Afghanistan, allowing it to recuperate and reorganize, ultimately enabling the group to launch violent attacks

against Pakistan once again. The situation particularly worsened in November 2022, when the TTP unilaterally ended a ceasefire with the Pakistan authorities.⁵ This led to a sharp deterioration in security, with the TTP intensifying its attacks on Pakistan's security forces, civilians, and even Chinese personnel based in the country. In 2024, Pakistan experienced 521 terrorist attacks, reflecting a troubling surge in both the frequency and intensity of such incidents, with a 70 percent increase compared to 2023.⁶ The mismanagement at the Pakistan-Afghanistan border has remained a persistent challenge for both countries. The security of the border has increasingly been undermined as militant groups have exploited the situation, damaging the interests of both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The resurgence of the TTP has not only exacerbated Pakistan's security challenges but also further strained the already fragile bilateral ties. Pakistan's frustration has deepened due to the Taliban's perceived indifference and ineffectiveness in curbing the TTP's activities. Islamabad views the Taliban's response as not merely a matter of capacity but also as a reflection of unwillingness and a lack of political will to tackle the growing security threat. This has significantly eroded trust and cooperation between the two countries, complicating efforts to build a more stable and constructive partnership.

Kabul's consistent denial of the presence of the TTP on Afghan soil notwithstanding, several developments suggest otherwise. The Taliban's facilitation of dialogue with the TTP, which led to a ceasefire in June 2022, and their offer to relocate TTP members, clearly indicate that the Afghan Interim Government (AIG) is not only providing refuge to the group but also has significant leverage over it. This raises concerns about the Afghan Taliban's complicity in the TTP's activities.

Furthermore, despite assurances from the Kabul regarding Counter-Terrorism (CT) efforts, both the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) monitoring group have expressed continuing concerns about the Taliban's tolerance toward these militant groups. This continued leniency undermines the AIG's credibility and its commitments to counter-terrorism.

While Pakistan has consistently pressed Kabul for decisive action against the TTP, it has received indifference and even stone-walling. This indifference in addressing Pakistan's legitimate concerns remains a major point of tension. While Islamabad recognizes the potential limitations that Kabul

⁵ Abid Hussain, "Pakistan Taliban ends ceasefire with gov't, threatens new attacks", Al Jazeera, November 28, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/28/pakistan-taliban-ends-ceasefire-with-govt-threatens-new-attacks>

⁶ "Rise in terrorism in 2024 pushes Pakistan towards pre-APS era", Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), January 1, 2025, <https://www.pakpips.com/article/8253>

faces in countering the TTP—particularly the fear that taking strong action could push the group to align with the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) —this approach is ultimately shortsighted. The TTP's growing strength and its expanding transnational terrorist alliances make it an increasingly formidable adversary. This poses not only a heightened threat to Pakistan but also risks undermining the Taliban's own stability. The TTP's rise could jeopardize any long-term prospects for the AIG's rule in Afghanistan, as the group's power and potential to challenge the TTA within Afghanistan increases.

Internally, the Afghan Taliban have managed to establish a degree of security within Afghanistan, but they continue to face significant threats from transnational terrorist groups such as ISKP, Al-Qaeda, and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), in addition to the TTP. While the Taliban have made efforts to combat ISKP, their response to the TTP has been notably less resolute, revealing a clear disparity in their approach to different security challenges. The Taliban have adopted a compartmentalized strategy, prioritizing the concerns of certain countries—particularly neighboring states—over others. This selective approach to countering threats is flawed, as security challenges are interconnected and affect all countries uniformly, especially given the transnational nature of these terrorist networks. All security threats must be accorded due importance with equal urgency to ensure that none are overlooked or neglected at the expense of others.

The Taliban face a critical and straightforward decision: If they wish to be recognized as legitimate members of the international community, they must adhere to established norms and obligations. This includes acting as a responsible stakeholder in regional and global security by refraining from harboring or supporting terrorist groups—an obligation clearly outlined in the Doha Agreement, which they signed.

Furthermore, the Taliban must assess what is truly in their long-term interest: Securing stable governance within Afghanistan in a peaceful and secure neighborhood, or continuing to appease militant groups at the risk of their own survival? Allowing terrorist groups to operate unchecked is not only detrimental to regional security but also poses a direct threat to the Taliban's own rule. These groups are transnational and interdependent—if allowed to grow unchecked, they will inevitably turn on the Taliban, undermining their authority and stability. The Taliban must recognize that confronting these groups is not only essential for regional peace but also critical to their long-term survival as a governing entity.

In this context, a constructive Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship is not only vital for strengthening bilateral ties but also crucial for ensuring broader regional stability. Despite the clear interdependence between the two countries, both have continued to engage in the absence of a

mutually agreed, comprehensive framework that adequately addresses the full range of bilateral issues. The recent developments reflected this ongoing gap, with both sides lacking a structured approach to resolve their differences and build a sustainable partnership.

Both sides must work together to clearly define the parameters and adopt a multi-faceted approach that encompasses all aspects of the relationship. Security is undeniably critical and should be addressed on priority. At the same time, diplomatic, economic, and cultural cooperation are equally important for building a balanced and durable partnership. Among other things, the two countries should consider revisiting the idea of a Strategic Partnership Agreement, similar to the one they initially agreed upon in late November 2012 but never concluded due to prevailing tensions.⁷ Following the strategic partnership agreement signed between Afghanistan and India in 2011⁸ and Afghanistan-Iran Strategic Cooperation Agreement in 2013⁹, a mutually agreed-upon Pakistan-Afghanistan bilateral framework would provide a structured and reliable mechanism to resolve disputes, prevent counterproductive unilateral actions, and ensure thoughtful, consistent decision-making in times of crisis.

Given the transnational nature of the security threats emanating from Afghanistan, it is imperative for regional countries to advocate for a robust, unified framework or mechanism to engage with the Taliban. A collective regional approach would allow neighboring countries to exert greater influence on the Taliban, encouraging them to honor their commitments to reform—whether related to inclusive governance, human and women’s rights, or counter-terrorism efforts. By working together, regional countries can help ensure that the Taliban fulfill their obligations, creating a more stable and cooperative environment in the region.

Geopolitical dynamics in the region have undergone significant transformations, with the emergence of new actors, particularly transnational terrorist organizations, playing a pivotal role. In light of these evolving challenges, it is imperative for both Pakistan and Afghanistan to recognize and adapt to the changing realities, taking proactive steps to establish a stable and secure bilateral relationship. Given the inherent interdependence between the two sides, particularly in the realms

⁷ Jon Boone , “Pakistan 'walking the talk' on peace in Afghanistan”, The Guardian, December 1, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/30/pakistan-walking-walk-afghanistan-peace>

⁸ Text of Agreement on Strategic Partnership between the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan." October 4, 2011. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Accessed March 25, 2025. <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/5383/Text+of+Agreement+on+Strategic+Partnership+between+the+Republic+of+India+and+the+Islamic+Republic+of+Afghanistan>.

⁹ “Afghanistan Signs Strategic Cooperation Agreement With Iran”, Tolo News, August 5, 2013, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/afghanistan-signs-strategic-cooperation-agreement-iran>

of trade and transit, focus should shift from depoliticizing trade to fostering economic interdependence, which can play a critical role in deterring tensions.

While the recent visit of Special Representative is undeniably important, it is essential to ensure that the interactions of this nature achieve sustainable outcomes. The experience in the past has not been very encouraging. Both Islamabad and Kabul must fully acknowledge the critical importance of the bilateral relationship, which can hardly be over-emphasized. There is much at stake for both countries. Although Kabul may have found other partners to engage with, it is essential to remember that, despite current irritants, Pakistan remains Afghanistan's closest, most accessible, and economically viable neighbor. The interdependence between the two countries cannot be under-emphasized a realistic and pragmatic approach is needed that fosters stability and addresses core issues without exacerbating existing tensions.

As challenging as it may seem, the path forward lies in adopting a holistic approach. This includes mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and a shared commitment to regional peace and prosperity. Only through such efforts can Pakistan and Afghanistan build a productive, stable, and enduring relationship that benefits both countries and contributes to broader regional stability.