

ISAS Brief

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Peace-making Challenges in Afghanistan

The chances of crafting the much-elusive peace in Afghanistan hang in the balance, although the Afghan President is known to carry no anti-Pakistan bias, and India seems to be keeping a low profile and letting Islamabad take its chances in a complex situation, says the author in a personal comment.

Sajjad Ashraf¹

After decades of suspicion, hostility and mutually destructive policies, Pakistan and Afghanistan have a rare moment in history to work together to bring elusive peace to this volatile region.

In Pakistan, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), seeking dialogue with the militants, won elections and assumed power in mid-2013. Some months later, a change of command occurred in the Pakistan Army. Regardless of a civilian facade, Pakistan's Afghan policy is Army-driven. Following the change and, after months of vacillation, the Pakistan Army launched its first major military operation in 2014 to clean up North Waziristan in the

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Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) bordering Afghanistan. Kabul had long accused Islamabad of allowing the Afghan Taliban and other terrorists to nest in this unruly region. It is only after some major terrorist attacks took place within Pakistan, at the state installations like airports, air- and naval-bases, that the new Army Chief ordered a crackdown which was reinforced by an air operation. Kabul and the world community understandably took it as a signal of Pakistan's seriousness in tackling the issue head on.

In Afghanistan, following a disputed election to replace the mercurial Hamid Karzai, Dr Ashraf Ghani took over as President in September 2014. Unlike his rival Dr Abdullah Abdullah – who is now the Chief Executive in a National Unity government – Dr Ghani carries no known anti-Pakistan bias. For Pakistan, this is a positive sign. Dr Ghani's public pronouncements indicate his acceptance that Pakistan is central to the restoration of peace in his war-torn country. Now, with the bulk of foreign forces having withdrawn from Afghanistan, the Afghan leadership has time to find a new balance in embracing a wider section of the population in a national reconciliation process.

In addition, China has shown some interest in helping the various stakeholders to come to the negotiating table to arrive at a common ground. China's interests are mainly two-fold: to expand its economic and political footprints in the region; to prevent the spread of militant Islam into its restive Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

Many challenges to this newfound opportunity still remain. Afghanistan and Pakistan were in a state of 'undeclared war', said Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister Hekmat Khalil Karzai, on 29 May, in an interview given in Islamabad.² Earlier, on 24 May, President Ghani, introducing Masoom Stanekzai as the acting Defence Minister, was more direct, seeking better relations and yet accusing Pakistan of waging an 'undeclared war' against his country.³ And now, on 1 June, in a report carried by the official Afghan news agency Khaama Press, Dr Ghani, echoing Mr Karzai, demanded that Pakistan should deny sanctuary to the Afghan Taliban.⁴

² <http://www.southasianmedia.net/stories/afghanistan/english-language-media/pak-afghan-undeclared-war-has-been-going-on-for-20-years-karzai-story>

³ <http://www.khaama.com/pakistan-engaged-in-an-undeclared-war-with-afghanistan-ghani-1131>

⁴ <http://www.khaama.com/taliban-and-haqqani-members-should-be-handed-over-to-kabul-pakistani-mp-1158>

The harbouring of fugitives in the territory between Afghanistan and the areas that now constitute Pakistan goes back to the days of British rule over India. Since Pakistan's independence in 1947, Kabul has always hosted the Pashtun and Baloch nationalists, while Afghan dissidents have been given refuge in Pakistan.

Failing to convince Islamabad to hand over the Pakistan-based Afghan Taliban, Kabul, in a tit for tat move, started actively sheltering the Pakistani renegades many years back. In addition, the Afghan intelligence agency, National Directorate of Security (NDS) was believed to be running its own retaliatory campaign against the alleged sponsorship of the Pakistan-based Afghan resistance groups by the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). The high-profile killing of Nasiruddin Haqqani, who was mysteriously shot in Islamabad on 10 November 2013, was also believed to have been the handiwork of the Afghan spy agency.⁵ Despite the public expression of bonhomie, both countries balk at the handover of the militants required for acts of terrorism in the other.

Notwithstanding decades of hostility, Pakistan's public pronouncements in support of the government in Kabul have never been friendlier.⁶ These pronouncements range from declaring the enemy of Afghanistan as an enemy of Pakistan as well, and denouncing the actions of Afghan Taliban as terrorism. President Ghani has in turn, invested much of his political capital in a policy of reconciliation with Pakistan, underscoring a belief that durable peace in Afghanistan is possible only with an active Pakistani partnership. He has therefore, put a lot of stock in pushing Pakistan to get the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table, which will, he believes, curtail their violence. While Pakistan's influence over the Afghan Taliban's decision-making process, and Pakistan's ability to get them to the negotiating table, are exaggerated, Afghanistan expects Pakistan to choke the Afghan Taliban's channels of funding and destroy their safe heavens.⁷ The Taliban are also divided over the question whether it makes any sense for them to openly engage in talks with the Kabul government or wait for the time when it might collapse in the face of resistance.

In the backdrop of decades of acrimony, Dr Ghani is compelled to tread carefully. Dr Abdullah Abdullah of the Northern Alliance – the Chief Executive in the Unity Government

⁵ <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304644104579191441394019738>

⁶ <http://tribune.com.pk/story/893480/afghan-attacks-pakistan-for-joint-efforts-to-root-out-terror/>

⁷ <http://tribune.com.pk/story/894571/neighbourly-action-kabul-wants-islamabad-to-throttle-taliban-funding/>

in Kabul – whose hostility towards Pakistan is well-known, or his confidants stay only an earshot away when Dr Ghani conducts his business of state. If his soft-peddalling on Pakistan is not matched by solid action, he faces increasing criticism and reaction from the Abdullah camp, making him politically vulnerable at home.

Even the recently signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for cooperation between Pakistan's ISI and its Afghan counterpart NDS, which is simply a statement of intent and no more, drew so much criticism from the Afghan Parliament and the powerful interests that the government (meaning President Ghani) was compelled to announce a review.⁸ Former President Karzai, by terming the MOU as a deed against the Afghan national interest, has demanded the cancellation of this agreement. The Afghans, who matter, are not ready to forget or forgive Pakistan yet. Such turnarounds dent Dr Ghani's trust with his Pakistani interlocutors. Insiders also cite Dr Ghani's back-peddalling on his promise to facilitate Pakistan's transit-trade to Central Asia by setting a new condition of linking it to the demand that Pakistan facilitate Afghan transit-trade with India. In Pakistan, the tendency to blame India for these reversals thus gains currency. In short, it is one step forward, two steps back.

The United States also seems to have finally come round to accepting Pakistan's centrality to a peaceful end to the conflict in Afghanistan. I hope that Washington will understand that Pakistan will not agree to India filling in the vacuum after the American withdrawal from Afghanistan. India appears to have struck a low-key profile about Afghanistan lately. Because of the absence of geographic contiguity with Afghanistan, India remains at a disadvantage vis-a-vis Pakistan. To that end, India, following a prudent policy, seems to have acquiesced, letting Pakistan take its chances in a highly complicated situation. Of all the players, it is Pakistan that has the closest relationship with much of Afghanistan. Without acknowledging this status and without allowing Pakistan a commensurate role, a peaceful Afghanistan can remain a pipe-dream.

Reports appearing in the international media, though officially denied, indicate that the Afghan Government and the Afghan Taliban leadership have had exploratory meetings in Qatar earlier and, facilitated by China and Pakistan, in the Chinese town of Urumqi recently.⁹

⁸ <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/19671-govt-to-review-controversial-nds-isi-mou>

⁹ <http://www.thefridaytimes.com/tft/a-test-of-kabuls-resolve/>

Since January this year the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) has been performing most security duties. With increased militant pressure, Western sources claim, 1800 ANSF men have been killed and 3,400 wounded between January and April this year. The casualty rate is 65 percent higher compared to previous years.¹⁰ And, worryingly, with only US\$ 2 billion annual revenue, there is no money for the upkeep of 350,000-strong ANSF without external funding, which too is drying up. President Ghani needs to deliver quickly to prevent Afghanistan sliding back to the days when warlords held sway.

The Afghan Taliban are gambling on the fact that Pakistan, given the domestic fires it is dealing with, will not be able to open another front against them. There is a strong impression among the Afghan-watchers that the Unity Government in Kabul will not be able to hold on indefinitely. Given old enmities, its very structure raises concerns. Both sides, led by Dr Ghani and Dr Abdullah Abdullah, are jockeying for influence. In over eight months of power-sharing, the two sides have yet to agree on a full cabinet. The opportunity created for improved Kabul-Islamabad relations, and the strong regional support for peace, could be jeopardised if the stakeholders, amidst increasing violence, do not match their commitments with meaningful follow-up action.

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¹⁰ <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21652338-taliban-are-waging-fierce-new-offensive-north-season-bloodshed>