

# Pakistani-Afghan relations after Karzai

By Safdar Sial

## ■ Executive summary

Unlike his predecessor, Hamid Karzai, Afghan president Ashraf Ghani has adopted a policy of rapprochement towards Pakistan. To that end he delayed the implementation of the strategic partnership agreement with India, sought close ties with Pakistan's security establishment, and instituted specific initiatives to alleviate Pakistani concerns over cross-border terrorism. Pakistan, in turn, managed to bring Taliban representatives to the negotiation table in Murree on July 7th 2015. The fledgling Afghan government-Taliban peace process derailed after the announcement of the death of Mullah Omar. Apparently, to dispel the impression of weakness and appease dissident commanders, the new Taliban leader, Mullah Akhtar Mansoor, opted for increased offensives inside Afghanistan. Prospects for political reconciliation in Afghanistan looked murky until the Heart of Asia Conference was held in Islamabad on December 6th 2015. Currently Pakistan and Afghanistan can engage bilaterally and through the Quadrilateral Monitoring Committee, which includes China and the U.S., to increase efforts to resume the Murree talks. They should use the emerging regional geoeconomics to enhance bilateral economic cooperation and work towards establishing a joint border security and coordination mechanism. Pakistan and India should see their ties with Afghanistan more realistically in terms of the emerging bilateral and multilateral engagements in the region.

After a controversial run-off presidential election in June 2014, a National Unity Government was formed in Afghanistan in September, facilitated by the U.S. and United Nations. Ashraf Ghani was sworn in as president on September 29th 2014, while his election rival, Abdullah Abdullah, was given the newly created position of chief executive. The new political administration in Afghanistan faced multiple challenges, mainly in terms of governance-related reforms, intra-Afghan political reconciliation, and engagement with neighbours and the international community to seek their cooperation in achieving peace and stability in the country. Many thought that because it was broad-based and representative of various ethnic political groups and parties, the new Afghan government had the opportunity to address these and other challenges facing the country. Others deemed it to be internally weak and prone to factionalism, because it was a compromise created out of compulsion in order to achieve a workable power-sharing arrangement (Khaama Press, 2014).

President Ghani considered peace as the foremost prerequisite to bringing political and economic stability to his country, which he thought was not possible without establishing good relations with Pakistan. This assumption was based on the perception that Pakistan held considerable influence among the Afghan Taliban's Quetta Shura and Haqqani network and could convince or force them to participate in peace talks with the Afghan government. Therefore, unlike his predecessor, Hamid Karzai, the new Afghan president adopted a policy of rapprochement towards Pakistan, although amid severe criticism at home.

Pakistan's political and military leaderships responded positively to the Afghan president's friendly overtures. Firstly, Ghani's rapprochement towards Pakistan apparently reduced the latter's Indian-centric concerns, which Pakistan thought had remained unaddressed during the Karzai government's tenure in Afghanistan. Secondly, there has been a growing realisation among Pakistani policy-makers and strategists that an insecure and unstable Afghanistan is detrimental to counter-militancy and

peacebuilding efforts in Pakistan. Not only have Pakistani Taliban militants been carrying out cross-border attacks in Pakistan since they sought shelter in Afghanistan after the Pakistani army's 2009 Swat operation, but Pakistan cannot allow the Afghan Taliban to capture Kabul, because this could embolden their Pakistani counterparts and other militants, thus increasing the risk of violence in Pakistan. Thirdly, many in Pakistan believe that due to its increasing economic and trade engagements in the region, China wants to play an active role in restoring peace in Afghanistan and is encouraging Pakistan to do the same.

In general, there was a very positive environment of mutual trust-building and friendly overtures between the two countries until the announcement of the death of the Afghan Taliban supreme leader, Mullah Omar, in July 2015,<sup>1</sup> which not only derailed the fledging peace process between the Afghan government and the Taliban, but also prompted the latter to increase their attacks inside Afghanistan to dispel the impression that their leader's death had made them weak and divided. However, after the fifth Heart of Asia Conference,<sup>2</sup> which was held in Islamabad on December 6th 2015, there is renewed hope that the two countries will soon start working on reducing the mutual lack of trust and resume the peace process with the Taliban. At the conference Pakistan, Afghanistan, the U.S., and China also formed the Quadrilateral Monitoring Committee with the purpose of facilitating and supporting the Afghan reconciliation process. The formation of the committee indicated a form of agreement among these countries on the roadmap for peace talks. The first meeting of the committee was held in Islamabad on January 11th 2016, during which representatives of the four member nations stressed the need for an immediate resumption of peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

### Ghani's rapprochement towards Pakistan: implications and challenges

Soon after taking office, Ghani tried to address some of Pakistan's main concerns, including those linked to Indian influence in Afghanistan. Firstly, he delayed the implementation of the strategic partnership agreement with India<sup>3</sup> and also decided against the purchase of heavy weapons from India, which was requested by former president Hamid Karzai during his final months in office. Many in Afghanistan saw this as part of Ghani's efforts to improve relations with Islamabad (Amini, 2015).

Secondly, Ghani sought close ties with Pakistan's security establishment, unlike his predecessor, who preferred to establish warm military and defence ties with India. As a first step, a high-level Afghan delegation led by Ghani visited the general headquarters of the Pakistani army in Rawalpindi in November 2014 (*The News*, 2014) and also laid a wreath at the Shuhada Monument (Monument of the Martyred).<sup>4</sup> According to Khalid Aziz, an expert on Afghan-Pakistani affairs, Ghani's gesture showed that he "understood the Pakistan military's paramountcy in the oversight of its country's foreign policy with Afghanistan" and wanted it to help Afghanistan achieve political reconciliation with the Afghan Taliban (Aziz, 2015). In January 2015 Ghani also sent six Afghan army cadets to study for 18 months at the military academy in Abbottabad (Assad, 2015). Similarly, amid strong resistance in Afghanistan, a memorandum of understanding was signed between Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) for cooperation in intelligence sharing and coordinated intelligence operations on both sides of the border (Syed, 2015). These measures triggered a strong outcry in Afghanistan that entailed severe criticism of the Ghani government from parliamentarians, civil society groups, and Hamid Karzai, who publicly accused the Ghani administration of treason for signing the intelligence-sharing agreement with Pakistan (Assad, 2015).

Thirdly, Ghani took some specific initiatives to alleviate Pakistani concerns over cross-border terrorism that included increasing pressure on the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants sheltering in Afghanistan, providing access to ISI officials to investigate anti-Pakistan elements in Afghan jails, and coordinating border patrols (Assad, 2015). Afghan security forces also conducted some operations in Pakistani-Afghan border areas where reportedly Pakistani Taliban militants allegedly involved in the Peshawar army public school attack (December 2014) were hiding.

Fourthly, Ghani struck trade deals with Pakistan soon after coming to power that were anticipated to boost bilateral trade between the two countries from the current \$1.6 billion to \$5 billion by 2017. The agreements included reducing tariffs and granting each other preferential trade status (*Dawn*, 2015). Ghani also offered Pakistani investors generous access to Afghanistan, including to free industrial zones.

A review of news and analyses that appeared in Afghan media in the early days of the National Unity Government suggested that most of Afghanistan's political and security elites and the people in general were not happy about

1 On July 29th 2015 the Afghan government announced that the Taliban supreme leader, Mullah Omar, had died in 2013 in a hospital in the Pakistani city of Karachi and had been buried secretly in Afghanistan. The announcement came just two days before the second round of talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban was to be held; the first round of talks was held on July 7th in Murree, Pakistan.

2 Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and the United Arab Emirates are part of the Heart of Asia initiative launched in 2011 to encourage economic and security cooperation between Afghanistan and its neighbours. The U.S. and over 20 other nations and organisations serve as "supporting nations" to the process.

3 Signed in October 2011, the agreement was expected to give India a formal role in Afghan security, including the training of Afghan military personnel.

4 The delegation comprised President Ghani, Defence Minister General Bismillah Muhammadi, Chief of Army Staff General Sher Muhammad Karimi, senior ministers and Afghan security officials.

Ghani's pro-Pakistan policy overtures. However, they accepted them as a matter of expediency, hoping that Pakistan could contribute to bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan by influencing the Afghan Taliban to engage in talks with the Afghan government. However, Ghani remained under constant internal pressure because he needed to deliver results quickly.

Bilateral pledges made by the two countries, including of non-interference in each other's affairs, and improving border security and counter-terrorism coordination, could not be fully realised. There were two main reasons for this: firstly, Ghani's high-level decisions vis-à-vis Pakistan did not enjoy across-the-board and top-down acceptance in Afghanistan; and, secondly, increasing Taliban attacks after the announcement of Mullah Omar's death increased political and security opposition to Ghani's pro-Pakistan overtures.

Currently there appears to be a growing consensus in Afghanistan that Pakistan is largely responsible for the growing insecurity and Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan and that Ghani's policy of reconciliation with Pakistan and the Taliban has failed. Ghani's political popularity and influence have also declined in recent months, particularly after the talks with the Taliban stalled and terrorist attacks increased in the country.

## **Pakistan's response: facilitation of the Afghan peace process**

Since his takeover as Afghanistan's president in September 2014, Ghani and his team had been reaching out to the Taliban and Pakistan, as well as China and Saudi Arabia, to achieve political reconciliation in Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> During his visit to Beijing in October 2014 to attend the Fourth Heart of Asia Conference he stated that peace was his highest priority and proposed to set up a "peace and reconciliation forum" that included representatives from Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the Taliban leadership to discuss how to end the Afghan war (Ruting, 2015). Many in Afghanistan also saw his visits to Saudi Arabia, particularly the third one in March 2015, as part of the process of advancing peace talks with the Taliban. Some Afghan parliamentarians believed that Saudi Arabia could use its influence in Pakistan to bring Taliban leaders to the negotiation table (Amiry, 2015).

Several weeks before it managed to host the first round of the Murree talks on July 7th 2015, Pakistan had started an attempt to influence the Afghan Taliban leaders to support political reconciliation in Afghanistan. During a joint press conference with the Afghan president in Kabul in May 2015, the Pakistani prime minister condemned the Taliban's summer offensive as an act of terrorism and vowed to eliminate their sanctuaries in Pakistan (Haider & Haider,

2015). He also stated that Afghanistan's enemies were Pakistan's enemies. Apart from this, Pakistan had also conveyed a very clear and categorical message to the Afghan Taliban leaders that they should stop creating trouble in Afghanistan and instead engage in talks with the Afghan government. Pakistani efforts, including those by the Pakistani army and the ISI, played a key role in bringing the Taliban leaders to the negotiation table.

Chinese and U.S. representatives were also present as observers at the Murree talks, while the UN secretary general welcomed the talks. Unlike as in past statements, the Taliban also did not deny or denounce the talks. According to media reports, Afghan government officials demanded a ceasefire, while the Taliban asked for the formation of a national government that would include them, with Pakistan and China as guarantors (Yousaf, 2015). A prominent leader of the Afghan Taliban, Agha Motasim Jan, lauded the Murree talks and said they were significant because the main internal and external stakeholders participated. He said that the participation of the Afghan Taliban leaders Abdul Latif Mansoor and Abbas Akhwand, and the representative of the Haqqani network, Ibrahim Haqqani, suggested that the Taliban leadership was directly involved in the peace process (*Daily Express*, 2015). But not all Taliban leaders endorsed the talks, with the main opposition coming from some field commanders. Rifts among the Taliban became clearer when the death of Mullah Omar was announced two days before the second round of the Murree talks was to be held on July 31st 2015.

The Afghan government had declared the Murree talks successful because both main parties expressed a wish to bring peace to Afghanistan. Afghan deputy foreign minister Hekmat Khalil Karzai<sup>6</sup> said on his arrival in Kabul after participating in the talks that his government was willing to talk with the Taliban on all matters, including a constitution and the release of detainees, with a view to achieving peace and security in the country. Karzai appeared convinced that those who participated on behalf of the Taliban in Murree were nominated by and represented the Taliban's main leadership, including the Haqqani network (BBC Urdu, 2015).

There is also a perception in Pakistan that China is supporting Pakistan's efforts to establish friendly ties with Afghanistan and contribute to the process of political reconciliation there. Before the Murree talks a session of back channel talks between representatives of the Afghan government and the Taliban was held in Urumqi, China on May 19th; the talks were attended by some Afghan Taliban leaders based in Pakistan, including Mullah Abdur Jalil and Mullah Hassan (Ali, 2015). China's growing interest in actively engaging in the Afghan peace process and influencing Pakistan to establish friendly relations with its neighbours is motivated by its rising stakes in South and

<sup>5</sup> The Ghani administration uses the term "peace" for reconciliation.

<sup>6</sup> The main Afghan government representative at the talks.

Central Asia in terms of security, and trade and economic projects. China is also concerned about Chinese Uighur militants' presence and nexuses with militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan, including the anti-China East Turkestan Islamic Movement and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Some in Afghanistan believed that the Urumqi talks were likely a consequence of increasing Pakistani pressure on the Pakistan-based Afghan Taliban (Osman, 2015a).

The realisation is growing among Pakistan's political and military leadership that an unstable and chaotic Afghanistan is detrimental to Pakistan's peace and security. Ultimately, Pakistan's emphasis on achieving political reconciliation in Afghanistan is mainly driven by its fear of growing insecurity in that country, which could impact Pakistan. This perception has strengthened after the launch of military operations in the Pakistani tribal areas, which have pushed most local and international Islamist militant groups to the other side of the Pakistani-Afghan border. While these operations have improved internal security, they have at the same time made the border security situation fragile and increased the threat of cross-border terrorism inside Pakistan. Many Pakistani Taliban groups, including the Mullah Fazlullah-led TTP, have found sanctuary in Afghanistan. After the December 2014 terrorist attack on the army public school in Peshawar, which killed more than 130 children, Pakistani investigators said that the attack was conceived and orchestrated from TTP sanctuaries in Afghanistan.

The recent Taliban offensives in some northern Afghan provinces, including Kunduz, Takhar and Badakhshan, have disturbed both Pakistan and China. Badakhshan shares a border with Pakistan's Chitral district and is also separated from China's Xinjiang province by the Wakhan strip. These Chinese and Pakistani regions are starting points for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Islamic State (IS) affiliates or supporters have also shown their presence in Afghanistan's eastern and northern provinces. Many Central Asian and Chinese Uighur militants who fled from the Pakistani tribal areas due to ongoing military operations have also found shelter in northern Afghanistan. Analysts believe that the growing focus of Taliban (both Afghan and Pakistani), IS and Central Asian militants on the provinces of eastern and northern Afghanistan, which share a border with Pakistan, is a serious cause of worry for Islamabad.

For Pakistan, the Taliban are important Afghan political stakeholders and making them hostile would not only undermine Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan, but also add to the former's internal insecurity. Pakistan supports an Afghan-led and -owned reconciliation process that includes the Taliban, and believes that it cannot use military force against the Taliban and simultaneously try to convince them to engage in talks with the Afghan govern-

ment (Upadhyay, 2015). The U.S. and China have also recently declared the Afghan Taliban to be stakeholders in the Afghan political reconciliation process. Pentagon spokesman Jeff Davis said in a news conference in Washington, DC on November 4th 2015 that the U.S. was not conducting counter-terrorism operations against the Taliban and it viewed them as "being an important partner in a peaceful Afghan-led reconciliation process" (Iqbal, 2015). A few days later China's special envoy for Afghanistan, Deng Xijun, was quoted by Pakistani media as describing the Taliban as "one of the main forces in Afghanistan's political arena" (Khan, 2015b). Indeed, since late 2014<sup>7</sup> China has been manifesting that it is willing to play a key role in the Afghan government's reconciliation with various "political factions, including the Taliban" (Siddique, 2015), thus recognising the latter as one of the main political stakeholders in the country.

### The way forward: prospects and challenges

Prospects for achieving political reconciliation in Afghanistan looked very murky until recently, when the Fifth Heart of Asia Conference was held in Islamabad on December 6th 2015. The announcement of Mullah Omar's death in July 2015 had been followed by some negative developments. The Afghan government might have released the news of Omar's death to obtain a form of leverage over the Taliban in the negotiations, but this proved to be counterproductive. Firstly, it derailed the fledgling peace process, exposed and increased internal rifts among the Taliban leaders, and prompted the new Taliban leader, Mullah Akhtar Mansoor, to take a hardline stance to appease the dissident Taliban commanders who did not want to engage in talks with the Afghan government. Consequently, the Taliban reverted to their traditional stance – that they would not hold talks with the government until international forces are completely withdrawn from the country and the Afghan government's agreements in this regard are abrogated – and increased their attacks inside Afghanistan.

Secondly, the announcement of Omar's death took the level of trust between Pakistan and Afghanistan back to that of the pre-Ghani era, when the two countries were caught in the mutual blame game of not doing enough to stop cross-border terrorism and providing sanctuary to the other's militants. Many in Pakistan believed that anti-talks elements within the Afghan government and security agencies that did not want Pakistan to play the main role in the process were behind the announcement. As a consequence, after the derailing of the peace process and increased Taliban attacks, including the one in Kabul on August 7th that killed more than 50 people, even President Ghani started issuing anti-Pakistan statements. A few days after the Kabul attacks the Afghan president said that he no longer wanted Pakistan to bring the Taliban to the

<sup>7</sup> Besides Chinese diplomats' holding meetings with Afghan Taliban emissaries in the Gulf and Pakistan, a Taliban delegation had also visited Beijing in late 2015 (Siddique, 2015).

negotiation table but instead wanted it to eliminate the Afghan Taliban's sanctuaries on Pakistani soil (Mashal, 2015). First Vice President General Abdul Rashid Dostum, Chief Executive Abdullah and NDS officials followed suit, accusing Pakistan of contributing to insecurity in Afghanistan. Apart from the Taliban attacks, Ghani's growing frustration was also due to the statement issued by the Taliban's new leader, Mullah Mansoor, that the Taliban rejected peace talks with the Afghan government and would continue their struggle until the enforcement of sharia in Afghanistan. Ghani also alleged that by allowing the Taliban leaders to hold a gathering outside Quetta to elect their new leader, Pakistan had broken promises made to his government by Pakistani officials (Mashal, 2015).

The Fifth Heart of Asia Conference increased the prospects of the resumption of Afghan talks with the Taliban, as well as of a long-stalled comprehensive dialogue between Pakistan and India, which could also support a constructive engagement between Pakistan and Afghanistan. During the discussions at the conference, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the U.S. and China all called for a renewed effort to open talks with the Afghan Taliban groups willing to reconcile with the government. During his stay in Islamabad for the conference President Ghani also had a meeting with the Pakistani chief of army staff, General Raheel Sharif, who reportedly assured Ghani of Pakistani support for reconciliation with the Taliban. Afghan foreign minister Salahuddin Rabbani expressed the hope after the conference that the peace process would start as soon as possible (Shah & Donati, 2015). However, in a Facebook post on the same day NDS chief Rahmatullah Nabil strongly criticised Pakistan, describing it as an enemy of Afghanistan, and also President Ghani for his rapprochement towards Pakistan. Next day he resigned, citing policy disagreements (Shalizi, 2015). Nabil's resignation came after a Taliban raid on Kandahar airport that claimed 50 lives. A few days later Ghani denied that the NDS chief had been removed from office at Pakistan's request and suggested that peace negotiations with the Taliban might begin within a few weeks. This hope was based on the fact that the U.S. and China had committed to facilitating and supporting an Afghan-led and -owned peace process through the Quadri-lateral Monitoring Committee comprising representatives from Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the U.S. The first meeting of the committee was held in Islamabad on January 11th 2016.<sup>8</sup> While acknowledging the roles of their respective countries in the Afghan peace process, the members of the committee emphasised the immediate need for direct talks between representatives of the Afghan government and the Taliban groups in the peace process. Sartaj Aziz, the adviser on foreign affairs to the Pakistani prime minister, underscored the significance of not attaching any preconditions to the peace talks. He also

warned that differentiating between reconcilable and irreconcilable Taliban groups at a time when the talks had not even started could be counterproductive (Dawn, 2016).

This suggests that prospects for the resumption of talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban have increased. However, this could take more time than anticipated by the stakeholders, mainly due to growing internal rifts among the Taliban and the prevalent lack of trust between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Also, the Afghan government appears ill-prepared to resume the stalled talks with the Taliban, largely due to increasing Taliban offensives in parts of Afghanistan and growing internal pressure to carry out operations against the militants, and also because of the lack of political consensus in Afghanistan on this issue.

The Taliban still continue to address their internal rifts, which have largely revolved around the issue of leadership after the announcement of Mullah Omar's death. After the Taliban's Rahbri Shura (Leadership Council) nominated Omar's deputy, Mullah Akhtar Mansoor, as the new head in late July 2015, many Taliban leaders questioned his legitimacy and credibility, because it was Mansoor's decision to keep the death of Mullah Omar secret for almost two years, which some thought was for his personal interests. The main opposition to Mansoor's leadership came from Omar's son, Mullah Muhammad Yaqoob, who had been in the camp of Abdul Qayyum Zakir, a senior Taliban military commander who was sacked by Mansoor in April 2014 (Khan, 2015a). Anti-Mansoor Taliban commanders were also not happy over his decision to send a delegation to the peace talks in Murree. However, Yaqoob and his brother, Mullah Abdul Manan, declared allegiance to Mansoor in September 2015, reportedly due to the efforts of religious scholars and clergy who wanted the Taliban to remain united.

A few weeks later dissident Taliban commanders elected Mullah Mohammad Rasool as their leader, thus challenging Mansoor's authority. Abdul Manan Niazi, Mansoor Dadullah<sup>9</sup> and Shir Mohammad Akhundzada were appointed as Rasool's deputies for military affairs and Mullah Baz Mohammad Haris was appointed his deputy for political affairs (BBC News, 2015). According to Taliban sources, Rasool is among the veteran Taliban leaders who spent ten years with Mullah Omar and was one of his trusted supporters (Ahmad, 2015). Soon after its formation the Rasool faction expressed its willingness to engage in the peace process with the Afghan government (Tolo News, 2015), which some thought could raise questions about the faction's credibility among Taliban commanders opposed to the pro-talks Taliban group led by Mansoor. The group also engaged in fierce clashes with pro-Mansoor militants in Zabul province in November 2015, which claimed the lives

8 The delegations were led by Afghan deputy foreign minister Hekmat Khalil Karzai; Pakistani foreign secretary Aziz Ahmad Chaudhry; the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard G. Olson; and China's special envoy for Afghanistan, Deng Xijun.

9 Mullah Mansoor Dadullah was killed on November 12th 2015 in Zabul in a clash with fighters supporting Taliban leader Akhtar Mansoor.

of over 100 militants from both sides (Hotak, 2015). The clashes between the two groups later spread to Herat province. However, according to a media report, a *fatwa* (religious decree) signed by about 2,000 religious scholars condemning the infighting and distributed by a prominent Taliban leader, Agha Jan Motasim, has forced the two groups to stop fighting and engage in negotiations (Khan, 2015c).

Afghanistan's militant landscape is becoming quite complex, which could complicate the process of political reconciliation there, besides adding to security threats. Firstly, the Taliban are no longer a monolithic entity, as the Afghan president recently said in an interview with France 24 television in Paris: "There are groups of Taliban and we will engage in talking with some of them and if some of them would like to come through the mediation of Pakistan, that's something that we need to talk about" (*The Nation*, 2015). Secondly, there is a growing support for IS among local and foreign groups and individuals in Afghanistan. Those in Afghanistan who have pledged allegiance to or supported IS include hardline and dissenting factions/ commanders of the Afghan Taliban who are inspired by IS's achievements; factions of Hizb-e-Islami Afghanistan; Pakistani Taliban commanders who broke away from the TTP, declared their allegiance to IS and later moved across the border to Afghanistan due to ongoing military operations in the Pakistani tribal areas; factions of Uzbek and other Central Asian militants; and some leaders of the so-called Salafi Taliban based in Afghanistan's Kunar and Nuristan provinces (Sial, 2015). In this context Taliban chief Mansoor's failure to keep the movement united and keep the dissident hardliners in the fold will allow IS and IS-inspired militants in Afghanistan to continue recruiting Taliban militants and commanders.

On the other hand, the Taliban's increasing attacks and the capture of Kunduz on September 28th 2015, as well as growing IS influence mainly in Nangarhar, has made the Afghan people suspicious of the incumbent government's and security forces' ability to protect them. After the Kunduz attack President Barack Obama announced a delay in the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in order to support the Afghan security forces in their fight against the militants. The Taliban are employing urban warfare as a new tactic in their fight and have been able to make significant inroads into several regions, including Kunduz, Khost, Ghazni, Takhar, Faryab, Herat, Farah, Sar-e-Pul, Baghlan, Badakhshan and Helmand. Local experts see the poor performance of the government-supported local tribal militias and Afghan police, lack of coordination among security institutions, and dysfunctional nature of local politics as factors that are providing the Taliban with space to invade these areas (Osman, 2015b).

At the same time the Afghan government, due to its internal weaknesses, is unable to build up its own credibility among the masses and exploit rifts among the Taliban to its advantage. Indeed, the National Unity Government appears to be quite divided internally due to the fragile political system, weak political and security institutions, and the government's reliance on ethnic and tribal warlords. Ghani tried to include intellectuals and technocrats in his government, but finally had to rely on warlords, who when they feel aggrieved tend to work against the government, while some would even like to make secret deals with the Taliban (Safi, 2015). Power-sharing arrangements among key stakeholders further weakened the government instead of strengthening it. Ultimately, an internally weak and irresolute government could not send a strong message to either the Taliban or its own people.

## Recommendations

The gaps in Afghanistan's institutional capacity and political preparedness notwithstanding, Pakistan cannot afford to remain indifferent to the security challenges facing Afghanistan because they have a direct bearing on its own security and stability. It is expected that after the Heart of Asia Conference the two countries will start to rebuild the shattered trust between them, and there are some major areas where they can engage to help bring peace and stability to Afghanistan and the region.

Firstly, Pakistan and Afghanistan can engage both bilaterally and through the Quadilateral Monitoring Committee that was formed at the Heart of Asia Conference to oversee the Afghan peace process in order to step up efforts to resume the Murree peace talks with the Taliban. Mullah Mansoor still leads the main Taliban group<sup>10</sup> and a key leader of the Haqqani network, Sirajuddin Haqqani, is among his deputies. Despite internal rifts in the Afghan Taliban, these two groups still largely control the Taliban movement. As stated earlier, their representatives participated in the first round of talks held in Murree and efforts should be made to bring them back to the negotiation table.

Secondly, the two countries should use the emerging regional geoeconomics to enhance bilateral economic and trade cooperation, which will not only help them improve bilateral ties, but also open a new era of economic development. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is planned to provide links to Afghanistan, India and Iran, and both China and Pakistan believe that Afghanistan should benefit from the multi-billion dollar regional connectivity project. Also, the leaders of these countries inaugurated the construction of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline on December 13th 2015, which is expected to be

10 Some recent reports said the Taliban chief was wounded in an internal gunfight between the Taliban commanders, while some even indicated that he was dead. Although the Taliban released an audiotape of Mullah Mansoor to dispel the impression of his death, no independent confirmation is available thus far.

completed towards the end of 2018 at a cost of \$10 billion (Moosakhail, 2015). Projects like TAPI, which bring together India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, can also open up the way to functionalising Afghan-Indian transit trade through Pakistan.

Thirdly, because Pakistan and Afghanistan face common security threats, they should create some form of joint border security and coordination mechanism. For this to happen they first need to coordinate their threat perceptions and build bilateral trust. Although many believe that Afghan leaders use the issue of the Durand Line as a form of political rhetoric, it still has a bearing on attempts to enhance border security and coordination through such methods as installing biometric systems and fencing, and digging trenches.

Finally, instead of engaging in a zero-sum game vis-à-vis Afghanistan, Pakistan and India should see their respective ties with that country more realistically in the emerging dynamics of bilateral and multilateral geoeconomic engagements in the region. India's increased involvement and defence cooperation with Afghanistan could trigger a proxy war in Afghanistan, including on the Pakistani-Afghan border. This will certainly add to Pakistan's India-specific insecurities in Afghanistan. Pakistan should also be mindful that its image among Afghan leaders and the Afghan people as a destabilising factor, as suggested by frequent statements and reports published in the Afghan media, could push Afghanistan and its people further away from Pakistan and closer to India, which in Pakistani eyes could use Afghanistan to create trouble in Pakistan. Apparently, this realisation, along with the internal security implications of a chaotic Afghanistan, makes the case for Pakistan to support intra-Afghan political reconciliation.

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## ■ THE AUTHOR

**Safdar Sial** has been working with the Islamabad-based research and policy advocacy organisation Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) as a research analyst since March 2007. His work focuses on conflict, insecurity, and violence in Pakistan and Afghanistan; regional political, strategic and security issues; and media and governance. He has published extensively in national and international journals; is a co-author of *Dynamics of Taliban Insurgency in FATA and Radicalization in Pakistan*; is the editor of *Critical Ideologies: A Debate on Takfeer and Khurooj*; and is an associate editor of the PIPS research journal *Conflict and Peace Studies*.

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