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Pak-Afghan Ties: Evolution, Challenges and the Way Forward

*Mairaj-ul-Hamid**

Abstract

[Pakistan and Afghanistan are often bracketed as brother nations, having deep rooted historical links, traditional affinity, striking social fabric similarity, shared religious identity, ethno-cultural bondage, and strategic partnerships, all dating back to pre-partition Indian subcontinent era. Nevertheless, in the post-partition regional dynamics and legacy of issues between the British Raj and Afghanistan, bilateral relations between the two have been wavy, marked by ups and downs; yet the affinity and warmth at people-to-people level have remained generally cordial if not idyllic. After 9/11, US-led international coalition invaded Afghanistan; it overthrew the Taliban government and since then the political face of Afghanistan has been managed through overt coercion and covert machinations. The conflict of interest between the people of Afghanistan and foreign installed Afghan governments is the cause of current mass resentment leading to armed resistance; led by Afghan Taliban. The ensuing trouble casts its shadow on Pakistan in the form of inflow of unarmed benign refugees as well as militants alongside arms, drug and human trafficking. Afghan government has brushed aside many meaningful border management proposals from Pakistan. Post 9/11 bilateral relations have been revolving around serious distrust, blame game, refugee crisis, cross border violation leading to an environment of low intensity hostility towards each other. This paper summarizes the profile of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, identifies the challenges, envisages the prospects and proposes ways for narrowing the gap between existing and desired format of relationship. – *Editors*]

Introduction

Afghanistan the “cockpit of Asia” is not only strategically, but also psychologically, culturally, geographically and politically, one of the most important neighbors of Pakistan.¹ Throughout history, the invaders, traders and visitors came to the Indian sub-continent through and from Afghanistan, crossing the Khyber Pass and lands of Sind and Punjab ending up in Delhi, Somnath and beyond. The Aryans, Tatars, Mongols, Afghans and Mughals brought new people with new ideas and cultures which were assimilated with the Indian culture forming contemporary

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¹ Khawar Hussain, “Pakistan’s Afghanistan Policy,” Naval Post Graduate School, California. June, 2005.

new Indian civilization.² History shows that there has been a continuous contact among the people of these two countries. After the partition, both Pakistan and India have developed their relations with Afghanistan according to their respective national interests.

Pakistan, by default, has more commonalities with Afghanistan; yet due to the casual clash of interests, crests and troughs in their relations is taken as normal; and due to overwhelming similarities, the cordiality has always been diluting the on and off propping-up bad taste.

Nature of Bilateral dynamics

Beyond mere geographical contiguity, Pakistan and Afghanistan share religion, culture, ethnic lineage, dialects and history. This makes the nature of the bilateral relations as described by former Afghan President Hamid Karzai as "conjoined and inseparable twins."³ Likewise, words of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif: "enemies of Afghanistan cannot be friends of Pakistan,"⁴ indicate the urge of maintaining robust bilateral relations from the top tier of political leadership of both countries. Another natural facilitator of cordial bilateral relationship is a long-shared border measuring over 2,500 kilometers, which is since centuries, crossed each day by thousands of people, which is a handy source of people-to people contacts as well as trade and economic interactions.⁵ Hence, enablers supporting sustainable joint-ness are fairly potent. Moreover, this cordiality and mutual dependency is supported by the factor of reciprocal strategic importance of both the states for each other, as stability of one state directly effects the internal stability of the other. Roots of this pattern of relationship, partially, date back to pre-partition days. The pattern, by and large, remained in vogue after the division of the subcontinent, notwithstanding eruption of and continuation of run of the mill irritants, psycho-social misgivings and the clash of interests on a few issues at the governmental level.⁶ Nonetheless, people to people affinity has always been an assurance against any serious derailing of bilateral

² Razia Hassan Naqvi, "Cultural History of Indian subcontinent; with special reference to Arts and Music". December, 2012. Accessed on 14 October 2015. http://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/content/pdf/participant-papers/2012-12-aaccd/Cultural_History_of_Indian_subcontinent_with_special_reference_to_Arts_and_Music_-_Muhammad_Ibrar_Raazia_Hassan.pdf

³ Rahimullah Yousufzai, "Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations: A Pakistani Narrative," PILDAT, Islamabad, Pakistan. March 2011. <http://www.pildat.org/Publications/publication/FP/Pak-AfghanParliamentarianDialoguePaper250311.pdf>

⁴ Mateen Haider, Haider Irfan, "Enemies of Afghanistan cannot be friends of Pakistan". *Dawn*, May 12, 2015. <http://www.dawn.com/news/1181502>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Yousufzai, "Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations: A Pakistani Narrative."

mechanisms. This multidimensional affinity has evolved over a long period of time, *inter alia*, because overwhelming demographic segments of both countries practice same religion (Islam) down to sect and sub-sect configuration—Sunni version of Islam, generally conforming to Deobandi school of thought—hence providing a sound ideological foundation.⁷ The Afghan Jihad against former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was an overwhelming manifestation of unanimity of thought engulfing the two peoples.

Owing to peculiarity of location, both the countries are simultaneously affected by global and regional dynamics and fluidity of world order. At the time of USSR's invasion of Afghanistan, there was a pro-USSR and anti-Pakistan government in Kabul, yet Pakistan have opened its arms and hosted more than 3 million Afghan refugees. Though the US led attack on Afghanistan as well as prolonged presence of foreign occupation forces have created many ripples with regard to Pak-Afghan relations,⁸ constant people-to-people contact, mutual assistance, and geographical contiguity averted many crises from spirally down to uncontrollable level. Both the nations have, by and large, been able to maintain good political, cultural, strategic and diplomatic relationship.⁹

Issues and Challenges

Soon after the independence of Pakistan on August 14, 1947, resentment between Pakistan and Afghanistan started as Afghanistan assumed fresh positions over some of already settled issues (The Durand Line) and over some of the partially unresolved issues¹⁰ between Afghanistan and the Great Britain, now impacting the successor state – Pakistan. Afghanistan earned the distinction of casting the only negative vote against Pakistan's bid for the United Nations (UN) membership, on September 30, 1947. Although the negative vote was withdrawn soon after, it sowed the seed of mistrust in the earlier days of evolution of bilateral relations leaving a lasting bad taste.¹¹

⁷ Lewis, martin W, "Deobandi Islam vs. Brelvi Islam in South Asia," Geo-Currents, last updated on October 07, 2010. Accessed on October 15, 2015. <http://www.geocurrents.info/cultural-geography/deobandi-islam-vs-barelvi-islam-in-south-asia>

⁸ Imtiaz Gul, "State of Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations," *PILDAT*, December 2012.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Pashtunistan issue and Zahir Shah's stance on the relations between the government of Pakistan and its Pashtun citizens and his accusation that Pakistani government is marginalizing the Pakhtuns within Pakistan.

¹¹ Shamshad Ahmad, *Pakistan and World Affairs* (Lahore: Jahangir Books, 2010), 302.

The border arrangement and already existing Durand Line was the first issue to be raised by Afghanistan on different forums, despite the fact that the Border Agreement of 1893 was continuously ratified by

The border arrangement and already existing Durand Line was the first issue to be raised by Afghanistan on different forums.

the successive rulers of Afghanistan.¹² As per the treaty Durand Line has the status of international border and according to the Article 11 of Vienna Convention on Succession of States in Respect of Treaties (VCSSRT), it has international acceptance and legitimacy.¹³ That's why, though Afghanistan has raised the Durand

Line issue at bilateral level as an occasional pressure point against Pakistan, it has never taken it up at any multilateral forums.

On the basis of Durand Line, Afghanistan often puts forward its territorial claims over Pakistani territories covering some of the Pashtun inhabited areas falling in tribal areas, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and parts of Balochistan province. Notwithstanding this bitterness, during two India-Pakistan wars (1965 & 1971), Afghanistan assured Pakistan of posing no threat from its western border¹⁴, which helped Pakistan in relocating its troops from Pak-Afghan border to combat zones on India-Pakistan border. Throughout these years Afghanistan remained under the rule of King Zahir Shah.

Later, in 1970s during Sardar Daud era, Kabul once again raised the issue of Durand Line through a dubious radio station "Azadi Radio". It also moved Afghan troops to border areas. These actions made the bilateral relations so tense that Sardar Daud regretted from participating in Islamic Conference Summit 1974, held in Lahore.¹⁵ After Daud era, all rulers of Afghanistan were propelled to power by covert or overt Soviet support, until Soviets invaded Afghanistan militarily in 1979. During this period and until pull-out of Russian troops (1989), the bilateral relations rode two divergent tracks—government to government hostile stream and people to people stream of empathy, warmth and goodwill. Pakistan government and public stood shoulder to shoulder with the people of Afghanistan in opposing and resisting the Soviet invasion and prolonged

¹² Ahmad Shaiyq Qassem, "Pak-Afghan Relations: The Durand Line Issue," *Policy Perspectives*, Volume 5, No 2, 2008.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Umar Sharifi, "Pakistan's foreign Policy toward Afghanistan from 1947-2008," <http://en.afghanistan.ru/doc/130.html> last updated on May 16, 2009.

¹⁵ Hanifur Rahman, "Pak-Afghan Relations during Z.A. Bhutto Era", *Pakistan Journal of History and Culture* 33, no.2 (2012)

occupation, both diplomatically and militarily. For this reason, during this era, different regimes in Kabul, supported and mentored by former USSR, remained at loggerheads with Islamabad. After Geneva accords in 1988, Pakistan helped cobble together a broad-based government comprising of Mujahedeen leadership which had militarily resisted the Soviet occupation. Later, as Taliban rose to power (1996) in the wake of continuing civil war due to internal Afghan dynamics, Pakistan extended diplomatic recognition to Taliban government in 1996.¹⁶ Pakistan's relations with all post-Soviet governments¹⁷ in Afghanistan remained warm till 9/11.

After 9/11 invasion of UN mandated foreign forces, Hamid Karzai administration came to power as a result of Bonn I Agreement and stayed in saddle through the two elections till 2014. While recognized by the international community as well as Pakistan as a legitimate government, it had a discredited mandate as its real power base was American support. After showing initial warmth towards Pakistan, Hamid Karzai set out to build more robust strategic partnership with India. India seized the opportunity and indulged in proxies by using Afghan territory as spring board for launching terrorist operatives in Pakistan and for limiting Pakistan's access into Central Asia, hence marginalizing Pakistan's influence in the region. Indo-Afghan nexus also resurrected the issue of Durand Line through formation of direct contacts with Pashtun political and tribal leaders within Pakistan.¹⁸

Support to each other's ethnic groups is another issue between the two states. Afghanistan is blamed for being involved in supporting insurgencies among the Pashtuns in Balochistan and Tribal Belt of Pakistan, through its consulates in Kandahar and Jalalabad.¹⁹ On the other hand, Pakistan is also blamed for supporting Afghan Taliban.²⁰ While Pakistan became an ally of the US/NATO combine in the "Global War on Terror", later renamed as "Overseas Operations" under Obama administration, yet Karzai government accused Pakistan of double game

¹⁶ Muhibullah Durrani, Ashraf Khan, "Pakistan-Afghan Relations: Historic Mirror," *The Dialogue*, Volume IV, Number 1.

¹⁷ Dr. Najibullah ruled Kabul until he was overthrown in April 1992. Burhanuddin Rabbani remained President until Taliban clenched the power in Kabul in September 1996.

¹⁸ Synovitz, Ron, "Afghanistan: 'Pashtunistan' Issues Linger behind Afghan-Pakistani Row," *Radio Free Europe*, last updated on March 24, 2006, accessed, October 15, 2015. <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1067048.html>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Imtiaz Gul, "Afghanistan imbroglio: Implications for Pakistan's Tribal Areas," *Policy Perspectives*, Volume 5, No 2, 2008.

and backing insurgency in Afghanistan.²¹ Karzai's successor, Ashraf Ghani after some initial positive moves has also observed the similar views.

As a matter of routine, Pakistan is also continuously alleged for nurturing, launching and harboring insurgent/resistant Taliban. Frequent mention of 'Quetta Shura' of Taliban and its alleged operation from Pakistani land is a major bone of contention impeding normalization of bilateral relations. Hamid Karzai had often dubbed Pakistani government as a trouble-maker by accommodating Taliban leadership on its land.²²

From both sides, blames and allegations are frequently exchanged pertaining to illegal border crossings or illegal raising of structures.

On the other hand, Pakistan has also come-up with evidence regarding Afghan government not taking any action against the leadership of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an entity which facilitates, executes and controls terrorist attacks in Pakistan from Afghanistan controlled territories.²³ Pakistan is also of the view that whereabouts and movement of the TTP chief, Mullah Fazlullah, are generally known to the Afghan security forces, but no action is taken to neutralize him, and he continues to reside in the Nuristan province, with impunity.²⁴

When President Ashraf Ghani came to power in Afghanistan, it seemed that the basic nature, i.e. cordiality and brotherhood of Pak-Afghan Relations will be resumed, and it did for a while, when Ashraf Ghani visited Pakistan. He stressed that "the hostility between Pakistan and Afghanistan has been buried in the past two days"²⁵; but few months later he also opted the one of his predecessor— Hamid Karzai. After a couple of attacks presumably by the Taliban on Kabul Airport and Afghan Parliament, Ashraf Ghani alleged Pakistan for steering the attacks and

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Shamshad Ahmad, *Pakistan and World Affairs*, Lahore: Jahangir Books, 2010, 304.

²⁴ Mateen Haider, "Gen Raheel visits Kabul, seeks handover of Mullah Fazlullah," *Dawn*, last updated on December 17, 2014, accessed on October 16, 2015. <http://www.dawn.com/news/1151412>

²⁵ "Afghan President visits Pakistan to reset troubled ties," *BBC.com*, last updated on November 14, 2014, accessed on October 16, 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-30049115>

renounced: "Pakistan is in a continuous unannounced war with Afghanistan".²⁶

Casual skirmishes between the two border security forces in the same context are another issue of concern for both of the states. From both sides, blames and allegations are frequently exchanged pertaining illegal border crossing or illegal raising of structures on either side of the border.²⁷ Although there are about 1000 check posts on Pakistani side of the border and about 100 from Afghan side, about 50,000 persons including militants and insurgents cross the border from both the sides every day, through legal as well as illegal means.²⁸ Both the governments blame each other for unchecked crossings by militants.²⁹

Political influence of India in Afghanistan, and its use to the peril of Pakistan's interests, has always disturbed the Pak-Afghan relations. India factor often adds fuel to the ongoing mistrust and blame game. The reason of current insecurity on Western border of Pakistan is commonly perceived as part of Indian strategy of engaging Pakistan from within Afghanistan.³⁰ The United States is also believed to be playing the role of an irritant in deteriorating Pakistan-Afghanistan bilateral relations on two counts: firstly it overlooks fermenting anti-Pakistan Indian activities in Afghanistan³¹, and secondly it joins Afghan government in blaming for combined failures of the US/NATO and Afghan security forces towards restoring and maintaining order in Afghanistan. While Afghanistan signed an unconditional Strategic Partnership Agreement with India in October

²⁶ Irfan Haider, "Ashraf Ghani slams Pakistan over recent Kabul attacks," *Dawn*, last updated on August 10, 2015. Accessed on October 16, 2015. <http://www.dawn.com/news/1199613>

²⁷ "Two Pakistani soldiers hurt, Afghan guard killed in clash," *Dawn*, last updated on July 02, 2015. Accessed on October 16, 2015. <http://www.dawn.com/news/1191777>

²⁸ Gul, "State of Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations."

²⁹ Huma Yusuf, "Pakistan and Afghanistan: Losing the Blame Game on Militancy," *Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars*, last updated on August 07, 2014, accessed on October 16, 2015. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/pakistan-and-afghanistan-losing-the-blame-game-militancy>

³⁰ Tellis, J Ashalay, "Pakistan's Impending Defeat in Afghanistan," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, last updated on June 22, 2012, accessed on October 16, 2015. <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/06/22/pakistan-s-impending-defeat-in-afghanistan>

³¹ "How India must counter Pakistan in Afghanistan," *Rediff News*, last updated on June 01, 2015. <http://www.rediff.com/news/column/how-india-must-counter-pakistan-in-afghanistan/20150601.html>

2011,³² but when Pakistan expressed similar desire, Afghanistan pre-conditioned it in such a way³³ that it became a non-starter.³⁴

The emergence of Daesh in Afghanistan is also seen and alleged by some Afghans as new tool of Pakistan's foreign policy of handling Afghanistan.³⁵ Some Taliban members both from Pakistani and Afghan Taliban opted for joining the Khorasan Chapter of Daesh, as they were inspired by its phenomenal successes in Syria and Iraq.³⁶ Some Daesh militants have presumably been associated with some of the attacks on Pakistani check posts on Pak-Afghan border.³⁷ While the mistrust between Kabul and Islamabad seems to be at its peak today, blaming each other to cover their own failures, seems convenient approach.³⁸

The October 2015 Taliban attacks on Kunduz and its easy capture was their first major victory after their overthrow in 2001.³⁹ The Afghan forces failed to respond timely, left their positions vacant for ease of Taliban; and later asked for the help of NATO forces.⁴⁰ Despite ANA's (Afghanistan National Army) own failure, unpreparedness, and incapability, Pakistan was blamed for supporting Taliban in attacking

³² "Afghanistan and India sign 'strategic partnership,'" *bbc.com*, last updated on Oct 04, 2011. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-15161776>

³³ The conditions put forward by President Karzai were, "the export of terrorism, suicide bombers, interference and all the other things which result in killing and disturbing the Afghan people's tranquility and destabilizing Afghanistan".

³⁴ "Strategic Partnership Agreement: Pakistan rejects Karzai's pre-conditions," *The Express Tribune*, October 09, 2012.

³⁵ Farhan, Ahmad Haseeb, "The raise of ISIS in Afghanistan is a tactical adjustment of Pakistan's Afghan policy," *khaama.com*, last updated on Feb 22, 2015. <http://www.khaama.com/the-raise-of-isis-in-afghanistan-is-a-tactical-adjustment-of-pakistans-afghan-policy-9949>

³⁶ "Pakistani Taliban militants shifting over to ISIS: Janan Mosazai," *Khaama*, latest updated on September 10, 2015. Accessed on October 16, 2015. <http://www.khaama.com/pakistani-taliban-militants-shifting-over-to-isis-janan-mosazai-1496>

³⁷ "ISIS claims attack on Pakistani check post along Durand Line," *Khaama*, last updated on September 13, 2015, accessed on October 16, 2015. <http://www.khaama.com/isis-claims-attack-on-pakistani-check-post-along-durand-line-1509>.

³⁸ Farhan, Ahmad Haseeb, "The raise of ISIS in Afghanistan is a tactical adjustment of Pakistan's Afghan policy," *Khaama*, last updated on Feb 22, 2015. <http://www.khaama.com/the-raise-of-isis-in-afghanistan-is-a-tactical-adjustment-of-pakistans-afghan-policy-9949>

³⁹ Harrison, Emma Graham "However long it lasts, Taliban capture of Kunduz is a major blow to Afghan government," *Guardian*, last updated on Sep 29, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/29/taliban-capture-kunduz-major-blow-afghan-government>

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Kunduz.⁴¹ Since then, Afghan security forces and Taliban have exchanged territories, and in most of these occurrences, ANA was not able to retake the lost spaces at their own.

Drug trafficking is yet another issue. The report of United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC) shows that 80 percent (5,500 tons) of the global opium is produced in Afghanistan,⁴² and a substantial part of it (45-50%) is exported to foreign countries mainly through Pakistani routes.⁴³ The report further says that, drug production and consumption cycle yields major source of income of the insurgents, and criminals in Afghanistan.⁴⁴ According to the 'United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988,' both Pakistan and Afghanistan are bound to establish an administrative framework and construct a robust mechanism and standard operating procedures for controlling illicit drug trafficking.⁴⁵ Pakistan's border management mechanism is meant both for stopping of illicit trafficking of drugs and terrorists, which Afghanistan should also opt for; but it does not.⁴⁶ Many meaningful initiatives by Pakistan towards better border management have been turned down by Afghanistan, even ANA physically attacked some of the structures raised by Pakistan within its own territory for better and efficient border management.⁴⁷ This gives rise to the notions that Afghan government is not keen to improve the situation and that it may be interested in keeping the matters simmering.

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Although, in the historical context, bilateral relations are on firm footing, such potent challenges are over-shadowing the exploitable potential, making them psychologically a no-go area. The foremost is

⁴¹ "Pakistani operative was using MSF hospital in Afghanistan as Taliban command post: report," *Express Tribune*, last updated on October 16, 2015, accessed on October 17, 2015. tribune.com.pk/story/973846/pakistani-operative-was-using-msf-hospital-in-afghanistan-as-taliban-command-post-report/

⁴² For more details study World drug Report of the UNODC 2014. Available at http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr2014/World_Drug_Report_2014_web.pdf

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ "World Drug Report 2014," United Nations office on Drugs and Crime, Vienna. http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr2014/World_Drug_Report_2014_web.pdf

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ The attack on Angoor Adda gate at Waziristan by Afghan security forces on July 01, 2015 is one of such incidents.

overcoming of trust deficit from both sides. The trust deficit has driven the two states to more patchy and firefighting kind of relationships. Trust deficit along with other constraints has hampered the signing of a Strategic Agreement between Pakistan and Afghanistan.⁴⁸ In this regard, the US backed "Joint Action Plan for Counter-Terrorism,"⁴⁹ is an important step taken for upgrading cooperation and lessening of trust deficit. United States, while sensing the increasing tensions between the two states inked this trilateral agreement with Pakistan and Afghanistan for increasing the cooperation and coordination to curb militancy and

The removal of trust deficit and improving the level of confidence to a level whereby one or two sporadic incidents should not derail the ongoing processes is essential for coming out of prevailing vicious cycle.

control the cross border attacks which is one of the major causes of trust deficit between the two states.⁵⁰ The removal of trust deficit and improving the level of confidence to a level whereby one or two sporadic incidents should not derail the ongoing processes is essential for coming out of prevailing vicious cycle. As long as this does not happen, handle to control forward movement of bilateral relations and putting it in reverse gear would remain under the control of third party. And even

well intentioned efforts may not bring paradigm shift in the relationship. The challenges of irredentist claims, drug trafficking, border management, and stopping of illegal trade can be dealt through political will, diplomatic acumen, and administrative cooperation between two states.

Repatriation of Afghan refugees from Pakistan is also becoming a growing irritant. The issue of Afghan refugees needs proper attention of authorities from both sides. The reported harsh attitude of Pakistani authorities towards Afghan refugees, particularly after Army Public School Peshawar and Bach Khan University Charsadda attacks⁵¹, has the potential of reversing the feeling of goodwill that has evolved through

⁴⁸ Hassan Khan, "Trust Deficit and Pakistan-Afghanistan Rocky Relations," *PILDAT*, December 2012. http://www.pildat.org/Publications/publication/FP/TrustDeficitPak-AfghanRockyRelations_BKPaperEnglish.pdf

⁴⁹ "Afghanistan And Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy," retrieved from <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/135728.pdf>

⁵⁰ Hassan Khan, "Trust Deficit and Pakistan-Afghanistan Rocky Relations," *PILDAT*, December 2012. http://www.pildat.org/Publications/publication/FP/TrustDeficitPak-AfghanRockyRelations_BKPaperEnglish.pdf

⁵¹ Barnett R Rubin, "Triangle of terrorism," *Herald*, last updated on Feb 18, 2016. <http://herald.dawn.com/news/1153346>

good treatment of refugees over the last four decades. Pakistan has acted wisely by extending the stay of Afghan refugees till Dec 31, 2017.⁵² According to UNHCR, about 368,838 individuals (72, 767 families) were repatriated to Afghanistan between January 01 and October 30, 2016, under Voluntary Repatriation Program, but the process was halted from December 01, 2016 to March 31, 2017 due to harsh weather conditions.⁵³ While, Pakistan has hosted the Afghan refugees for the last thirty five years or so and still facilitates voluntary repatriation, there are cases of mishandling as well. Such cases are exploited by the negative elements on both sides. Negative reports appearing in Afghan media regarding the treatment and living conditions of Afghan refugees and their alleged forced repatriation by Pakistan are a reflection of this phenomenon.⁵⁴ Arrest and prosecution of National Geographic fame lady Sharbat Gula by Pakistani authorities due to holding a fake identity card of Pakistan citizenship was in the same context portrayed by Afghan media as persecution of Afghan refugees in Pakistan.⁵⁵

In the contemporary hyper media age, inculcation of sense of responsibility in media of the two countries and channelizing cooperation between the two national media is a challenge. If ways and means are found to overcome this difficulty then media of the two sides could jointly contribute towards bettering bilateral relations. This could be done by using it for better people-to-people contact, increasing awareness of the cultural, ethnic, religious and historical linkages between the two states.⁵⁶ The exchange of media personnel and sharing of reports for bringing improvement in the bilateral relations does exist, but at a low profile, this could be enhanced and channelized.⁵⁷

The India factor in the respective policies of both the sides has remained a factor of deterioration in the relations. Although, as an independent and sovereign state, Afghanistan has the liberty to choose friends of his own but its interactions with such friends should not pose

⁵² Asad Hashim, "Afghan refugees' status extended until end of year," *Aljazeera*, last updated on Feb 07, 2017. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/02/afghan-refugees-status-extended-year-170207180402885.html>

⁵³ Asad Zia, "Inclement weather: UNHCR to suspend refugee repatriation," *The Express Tribune*, Nov 17, 2016.

⁵⁴ "Nearly 1,000 Afghan refugees detained in Pakistan," *Afghanistan Times*, January 24, 2015.

⁵⁵ Jon Boone, "National Geographic 'Afghan Girl' arrested in Pakistan living under false papers," *The Guardian*, last updated on Oct 26, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/26/national-geographic-afghan-girl-arrested-pakistan-false-papers-sharbat-gula>

⁵⁶ "Afghan journalists visit Pakhtunkhwa Radio," *The Frontier Post*, Oct 08, 2015.

⁵⁷ Anees ur Rahman, "Pakistani Journalists Visit Afghanistan," *Borderline*, Aug 13, 2015. <http://borderline.pk/2015/08/13/582/>

security threats to the neighboring countries. Presence of India's consulates in Afghanistan's major cities and their role in jeopardizing Western border is a matter of concern for Pakistan.⁵⁸

Afghanistan is the second largest export market of Pakistani products and both are the largest trading partners. Though bilateral

By default Pakistan has a key role in Afghan reconciliation processes, both ongoing as well as those which could evolve.

official trade level is very low, i.e. \$1.5 billion,⁵⁹ informal trade and smuggling of various goods accounts for over \$6 billion.⁶⁰ This informal trade, though to the peril of both economies, is one of the underlying strengths of people to people bondage. Improvement in roads infrastructure and removing of institutional constraints for making

the travel between the two countries easy could further strengthen people to people relations.

By default Pakistan has a key role in Afghan reconciliation processes, both ongoing as well as those which could evolve. Pakistan has always supported "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned," peace process. However, there are serious limitations with regard to this concept. As long as foreign troops remain stationed and militarily active in Afghanistan, and as long as political dispensations in Afghanistan are evolved as a result of external machinations, the concept "Afghan led and Afghan owned" is like putting cart before the horse. This could only take a shape if channels are provided for evolution of a truly representative leadership reflective of Afghan peoples' aspirations. Until then, responsibility of a deliverable peace process practically rests with the US.⁶¹ During the Afghan peace efforts ranging from the Murree talks⁶² to Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG)⁶³, Pakistan has not only

⁵⁸ M. Ashraf Haideri, "India and Afghanistan: A Growing Partnership," *The Diplomat*, Sep 16, 2015. <http://thediplomat.com/2015/09/india-and-afghanistan-a-growing-partnership/>

⁵⁹ "Pak-Afghan trade volume declined by 50%: ACCI," *The Frontier Post*, July 22, 2016.

⁶⁰ Ishrat Hussain, Muhammad Athar Ilahi, "Future of Afghanistan-Pakistan Trade Relations," *Peace Brief*, United States Institute of Peace, August 2015.

⁶¹ "Pakistan backs Afghan-led peace process," *The Nation*, Sept 15, 2011.

⁶² Murree Peace talks were the only official talks held in Murree on July 07, 2017 hosted by Pakistan. The representatives of Afghan government and Taliban participated in it. USA and China were present as observers.

⁶³ Quadrilateral Coordination Group was formed after the Heart of Asia Conference held in December 2015. Pakistan, Afghanistan, China and USA were its members. It held five meetings in Islamabad and Kabul but due to lack of positive response from Kabul and Taliban it ended.

played its role as a facilitator, but has also used its influence in persuading the Taliban leadership for dialogue.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, allegations from Afghanistan's side that Pakistan intentionally exposed the death of Mullah Umar at this crucial time, are aimed at downplaying Pakistan's sincere efforts.⁶⁵ Death of Mullah Akhtar Mansour in a drone attack in Baluchistan⁶⁶ once again brought the peace process to a naught. Afghan government has approached to place current Afghan leader Mullah Haibatullah⁶⁷ on UN sanctions list. This led to a major rupture to the moves that were taking place to build communication between Taliban and Afghan government. There is a need to float Confidence Building Measures (CBM) to incentivize the Taliban towards resumption of peace process. The success of Afghan peace process is need of the hour for both countries, otherwise elements like Daesh would benefit. Such a development could further threaten Afghanistan's stability with spillover effects on Pakistan and the region. Repeating a dated script about terrorist sanctuaries in FATA would not serve any purpose except continuing the hostilities. Such sanctuaries have been destroyed as a result of military operation Zarb-e-Azb.⁶⁸ Quest for stability in Pakistan and Afghanistan needs sincere joint efforts. However, such initiatives shall remain elusive without first making a negotiated political settlement with Taliban and other groups in Afghanistan.⁶⁹ It is up to Afghanistan to take the lead with the help of Pakistan to persuade Taliban for dialogue.

**There are the game
spoilers and pro-status
quo actors in
Afghanistan who do not
want to have a peaceful
settlement with Taliban.**

⁶⁴ Akbar Jan Marwat, "The Murree Peace Parlays," *Daily Times*, July 16, 2015.

⁶⁵ "Pakistan exposed Mullah Omar's death for its own interests: Kandahar clerics," *Khaama Press Kabul*, Aug 18, 2015. <http://www.khaama.com/pakistan-exposed-mullah-omars-death-for-its-own-interests-kandahar-clerics-1401>

⁶⁶ Jon Boone, "US drone strike in Pakistan kills Taliban leader Mullah Mansoor," *The Guardian*, last updated on May 22, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/21/us-airstrike-taliban-leader-mullah-akhtar-mansoor>

⁶⁷ Tahir Khan, "New Afghan Taliban leader vows no peace talks in audio recording," *Express Tribune*, last updated on May 25, 2016. <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1110367/new-afghan-taliban-leader-vows-no-peace-talks-audio-recording/>

⁶⁸ Baqir Sajjad, "COAS to share Ideas with US on Afghanistan," *Dawn*, Nov 08, 2015.

⁶⁹ Tahir Khan, "Meeting with Afghan delegation: Pakistan for united fight against terrorism," *Express Tribune*, last updated on Aug 13, 2015. <http://tribune.com.pk/story/937281/islamabad-to-share-evidence-of-pakistani-militants-presence-on-afghan-soil-with-kabul/>

There are the game spoilers and pro-status quo actors in Afghanistan who do not want to have a peaceful settlement with Taliban, rather they only believe on crushing them by force, which has not been possible, in spite of using huge military resources by the most powerful country along with its allies, during the last fifteen years. Beside peace process, there are many areas where Pakistan and Afghanistan could work jointly. They could, for example, put in combined effort to improve the life standards including health and education facilities of their citizens and increase employment opportunities through increased bilateral trade.

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Afghan security forces are not fully prepared to face the forthcoming threats from insurgents. Afghanistan was provided largest military and

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financial aid in the history of United States' foreign assistance, i.e. \$104 billion (2002-14), even larger than the post-World War II Marshal Plan⁷⁰ for reconstruction and building of Europe. Largest portion of foreign aid to Afghanistan, \$62 billion, was pumped into Afghan National Security Forces, which are still years away

from becoming a potent and self-sustaining combat entity. ANSF (Afghan National Security Forces) is marred by mass desertions, poor motivation and sub-optimal combat leadership.⁷¹

President Ashraf Ghani had realized the importance of Pakistan for the stability in Afghanistan, yet he chose to go the Karzai way. Nonetheless, the future peace and progress of both countries is deeply intertwined.⁷² Both countries need each other: Pakistan needs Afghanistan for stability, economic prosperity and for the security of its borders; and notwithstanding Afghan leadership's desire to diversify country's trade through Iranian Chabahar port, Afghanistan will continue to need Pakistan for Karachi and Gwadar ports, as well as Pakistani land routes to trade with other countries.

⁷⁰ Marshal Plan was announced by United States for reconstruction of 16 European Countries between 1948 and 1952. It costed \$13.3 Billion which is equal to \$103.4 Billion of today's currency rates.

⁷¹ Tahir Nazir, "Marshal Plan that Built Europe, could not build Afghanistan," *SASSI*, Aug 05, 2015. <http://www.sassi.org/marshal-plan-that-built-europe-could-not-build-afghanistan/>

⁷² Baqir Sajjad, "COAS to share Ideas with US on Afghanistan," *Dawn*, Nov 08, 2015.

Afghanistan and Pakistan need to adopt a more realistic approach towards each other's sensitivities.⁷³ While Pakistan has the right to secure its border against the forces using Afghan land for stirring trouble inside Pakistan, Afghanistan has the right to point out if non-state actors slip into Afghanistan through scantily ruled FATA. Only a combined effort by the two sides could address these issues.⁷⁴ Kabul need to address Pakistan's concerns about India using Afghan land and facilities to sponsor terrorism in Pakistan. Islamabad could employ diplomatic channels, and soft power to degrade rivals' capacity to derail bilateral processes.⁷⁵ Kabul would need to reassure Islamabad that Pak-Afghan relations shall not be affected by its ties with other countries, specifically India. Bilateral ties can also be strengthened if both Kabul and Islamabad opt for economic cooperation and trade as the basic foundation for their engagement. They already have Afghanistan Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) in place, as a rational and viable source to strengthen the bilateral economic ties and trade with other regional states. Diplomatic initiatives are required to stress upon Afghanistan to consider delinking Pakistan's trade with Central Asia with allowing a free two-way Afghan ride to India or with providing India an access to Afghanistan and beyond through its land routes as one of the CBM. India is already trading with Afghanistan and beyond, through Karachi port. Otherwise Pakistan may link its trade with Central Asia with Afghanistan's usage of Pakistani ports like Gwadar and Afghan participation in China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Kabul needs to realize that CPEC enables Pakistan to trade with Central Asia and beyond while bypassing Afghanistan. Moreover, there is a serious need of a mutually agreed roadmap to formalize the informal component of bilateral trade; as and when official trade jumps to five-fold, it would strengthen state to state relations.⁷⁶

Rise of Daesh is a common threat that both the states need to focus upon. Afghanistan insists that Daesh is a new version of Taliban;⁷⁷ this perception may not be true. Nevertheless, expansion of Daesh in Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan is a point of worry for both countries. Both the states must put their act together to counter this new and potential threat. The threat from Daesh is not likely to remain confined

⁷³ Rustam Shah Mohmand, "Developments in Afghanistan: Implications for Pakistan and the Region", *Policy Perspectives* 12, no.1 (2015): 114.

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ Mariana Babur, "Pakistan, Afghanistan reaffirm desire for mutual cooperation," *The News*, Aug 14, 2015.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Zabihullah Tamanna, "Switching white flags for black: ISIL and Afghan Taliban," *Anadolu Agency*, Feb 03, 2015. <http://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/switching-white-flags-for-black-isil-and-afghan-taliban/78274>

to Afghanistan only; over time, it could plague the whole region including Iran, Pakistan, and Central Asian states.

The route and contour of reconciliation and political settlement between the Taliban and Afghan government, would impact future bilateral relations. The idea of handling the peace processes minus Pakistan is not realistic. Afghanistan's outreach to marginalized elements of insurgency are not likely to take the peace process anywhere; instead Afghan government should brace-up for engaging the mainstream Taliban entities which matter in the combat zones. The role of global and regional players in reconciliation with Taliban should develop the resolve for continuing the peace process to final settlement. Current one step forward and two backward would only add to prolongation of stalemate.⁷⁸

Enhanced level of cooperation between the two governments including robust working relationship between their intelligence agencies could add strength to composite relationship.⁷⁹ Recent moves by Kabul to move away from Pakistan and cozy-up with India could make any intra-Afghan peace process a non-starter.⁸⁰ The meeting between Nawaz Sharif and Ashraf Ghani during Paris Climate Conference was made possible due to the visit and persuasion of Pashtun Nationalist Leaders to Kabul.⁸¹ This is a good example of benefiting out of people-to-people contact between the two states. The "Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process," summit jointly hosted by Pakistan and Afghanistan, in Islamabad in December 2015 provided an opportunity to end the dead lock with Afghanistan.⁸² Ashraf Ghani's participation in the conference and his approval of revival of peace talks considerably proved fruitful in bringing the two neighbors close to each other. Yet after few months, the security situation in Afghanistan created more mistrust and Afghan government questioned the role of Pakistan in the peace process.⁸³ Ashraf Ghani's humiliating approach towards Pakistan at the December 2016, "Heart of Asia Conference"⁸⁴ ministerial level meeting, held in India, further

⁷⁸ "China lauds Pakistan's role in facilitating Afghan peace process," *The Nation*, Nov 06, 2015.

⁷⁹ Masood Haidar, "Peace in Afghanistan needed for ending violence, Pakistan tells UN," *Dawn*, Sep 19, 2015.

⁸⁰ Shawn Snow, "Ghani's Pivot Away From Pakistan," *foreignpolicy.com*, last updated on Nov 25, 2015. http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/11/25/ghanis-pivot-away-from-pakistan/?wp_login_redirect=0

⁸¹ "Pak Pashtun nationalists convince Ashraf Ghani to meet Nawaz Sharif," *The News*, Nov 29, 2015.

⁸² "Pakistan's Afghan Challenge," *Dawn*, Dec 10, 2015.

⁸³ "Breakthrough at 'Heart of Asia': Kabul agrees to restart dialogue with 'reconcilable' Taliban," *Dawn*, Dec 10, 2015.

⁸⁴ "Ghani, Modi lash out at Pakistan on terrorism at Heart of Asia moot in Amritsar," *dawn.com.pk*, last updated on Dec, 05, 2016. <http://www.dawn.com/news/1300452>

deepened the rift which is not a good development. Such an approach is likely to further dim the chances of improving bilateral relations. Indeed, sustainable political will from both sides is essential for evolving robust and durable bilateral relations, away from current tendency of a tinder box syndrome.

Conclusion

In case of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, there is a major area of overlap of national interests of the two countries, barring a few irritants. Commonality of interests is underwritten by geographical contiguity, cultural, religious, ethnic and historical similarities. Both countries could safeguard their interests through cooperation and coordination. They should work in unison to overcome irritants. Working out robust and durable peace with country wide insurgency led by Taliban is the need of hour. The differences within the Kabul government circles for major appointments and negotiations with Taliban and other militants are obstructing the bringing of long term stability. Afghanistan cannot achieve it all alone, coopting Pakistan would help achieving it together. Afghan government has to cede political concessions first to bring Taliban to negotiation table; and then for keeping them, engaged till final settlement. Peace agreement with Hizb-e-Islami Afghanistan (HIA) led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, although took a long time in its finalization, yet proved fruitful in mainstreaming one of the resistant group. The model of agreement with HIA can also be used for a negotiated settlement with Taliban. Rise of Daesh and its spread in Afghanistan is another area warranting close coordination between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan should be generous in letting Afghan refugees return at their own pace. Afghanistan should respect Pakistan's sensitivities with regard to its security issues with India and avoid overt and covert appeasement of India at the cost of Pakistan. Pakistan should also realize this fact that no one is favorite for it in Afghanistan and Afghanistan should not be given any opportunity to point out as Pakistan's land being used against Afghanistan.

Afghanistan needs to abide by its international obligations, firstly with regard to demarcation of international border and secondly follow the international norms with regard to border management for putting an end to drugs, small arms and human trafficking as well as cross border attacks. The international community and the neighboring states are obliged to respect the sovereignty of Afghanistan and help it out in its

Sustainable political will from both sides is essential for evolving robust and durable bilateral relations, away from current tendency of a tinder box syndrome.

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stabilization instead of preparing for another great game and use of Afghanistan as a battlefield of proxy wars against each other.

Both the states can become the hub of transit trade, if the already existing trade regimes are implemented. Early materialization of TAPI (Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India Pipeline) and its security on Afghan soil will help in boosting the economies of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Afghanistan should pick up Pakistan’s generous offer of joining the CPEC.

Bilateral relationship always comes with a package of challenges and opportunities. Indeed there are greater challenges especially in case of Pakistan and Afghanistan; where many regional and international players are involved. Nevertheless, leadership of the two countries need to stand-up to occasion and capitalize on opportunities. They owe it to the people of two countries; if the relationship continues to be managed on day to day basis and in the context of irritants, only third parties would benefit at the cost of wellbeing of the people of two countries.

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