

## Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations During Ashraf Ghani Era

**Huma Qayum**

Department of Political Science and IR, International Islamic University Islamabad, IIUI, Pakistan

**Dr. Muhammad Tariq**

Department of Political Science Hazara University Mansehra, Pakistan

**Abstract:**

*Since the emergence of Ashraf Ghani as a president in Afghanistan as a result of the 2014 elections, a dramatic shift from conflict to cooperation in Pak-Afghan relations can be seen. As compared with the Hamid Karzai era which engulfed Pakistan under the shadow of the blame game. In the era of Ashraf Ghani, several military CBMs were taken from both sides reflected a positive approach in crisis and conflict-ridden relations of both the states. Pakistan's military and security establishment is keen to sort out the issue of cross-border militancy. In this regard, border fencing started from the Pakistan side can be termed as a positive initiative to ensure the security of peoples living on both sides of the Durand Line. Similarly, Ashraf Ghani was keen to reconcile with the Taliban elements, and in this regard, he needs Pakistan's support. Pakistan played an important role to bring the Taliban towards negotiation with the Afghan regime because previously the Taliban never want to talk with the Ashraf Ghani regime. And not considered his government as the legitimate one. It was Pakistan's efforts that an agreement of peace and reconciliation was finalized among the Taliban and Afghan government. As peace in Afghanistan will pave the way for peace and friendly relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan.*

**Keywords:** National Unity Government, Cross Border Militancy, CBMs, Security, The Taliban,

Reconciliation, Blame Game, Conflict & Cooperation.

**Introduction**

Afterward, the challenging Afghan Presidential elections were held in June 2014 in consequence, a *National Unity Government (NUG)* remained molded-in September 2014. *Ashraf Ghani* remained sworn as President of Afghanistan on 29<sup>th</sup> September 2014. He took drastic steps to address the state matters to transfer post-2014 Afghanistan into the well-governing state. Since the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG) in Afghanistan in 2014, a positive shift came across in the two country's relations. President Ghani stated that "partnership with Pakistan as an important pillar of Afghan's foreign policy". Similarly, Nawaz Sharif in response to President Ghani's remarks that "*Pak-Afghan relations have been undergoing qualitative transformation since the new government took office*".

For the last thirteen years, the blame game and mistrust continue between the two states. The main reason behind it was cross-border militancy which destabilized both State security. Pak-Afghan border was considered a major source of friction in the Karzai era. Pakistan took drastic steps towards border fencing to stop cross border militancy and cease to exist the blame game. President of Pakistan Mamnoon Hussain visited Kabul on 29 September 2014 to attend the “*oath-taking ceremony of President Ghani*”. This was the first step towards the normalization of the two state's relations. After a brief time, advisor *on foreign affairs* Sartaj Aziz visited Afghanistan on 20 October 2014. And wish to have a bilateral foreign policy based on trust and cooperation. Ashraf Ghani also paid his first visit to Pakistan in November 2014. He stressed close ties, mutual trust, bolstering security, and strong bilateral relations.

The relations of Pakistan and Afghanistan in the emergence of the current scenario can best be analyzed by the Prisoner's Dilemma in game theory. Prisoner's Dilemma is a highly complicated game in international relations. It tackles interstate relations, cooperation, and bilateral problems. In this game the two rational actors Pakistan and Afghanistan if fail to cooperate they would get less benefit from doing so. Through this game both the states would benefit from a peaceful Afghanistan. Peace in Afghanistan will also allow the US to end its longest war in Afghanistan.

### **Literature Review**

After coming into office, the National Unity Government in Afghanistan adopted a conciliatory approach towards Pakistan to bring the Taliban on table talks (Yousaf & Smith, 2015). Ashraf Ghani paid 3 visits to Pakistan since his election as a President in 2014. He admired Pakistan's role as a negotiator in the Afghan peace settlement. As it was a challenging task to bring the Taliban on table talks with the Afghan authority. As the Taliban did not recognize the Afghan government as a legitimate one, but a puppet regime of the US (Al Jazeera News, 2019). The Taliban agreed to cease attacks in the war-torn country in return for prisoner's exchange and the US lifting sanctions against them (The News International, December 2020). During Ashraf Ghani's visit to Pakistan in June 2019, he was warmly received and during his meeting with Prime Minister Imran Khan, both leaders stressed qualitative transformation in bilateral relations as a vision of a peaceful neighborhood. Both the leaders knock the economic ties on the completion of CASA-1000 electricity and transmission line and TAPI gas pipeline (Dawn News, 2019).

### **Military CBMs Among the Two States**

In positive terms of the relations on November 6, 2014, Pakistan COAS *General Raheel Sharif* visited Kabul and discussed many issues including the post-2014 scenario. Along with other senior army officials, Raheel Sharif and President Ashraf Ghani hold the meeting, also attended by chief executive Abdullah Abdullah and Afghan Defense Minister Bismillah Mohammedi. Gen Raheel presented complete support of military working out and course accommodations to Afghan Security Forces in Pakistan military academy (Kakul), which was accepted by Afghans authority. This offer was previously rejected by the Afghan government on the plea that Pakistan is still supporting various insurgents groups in Afghanistan. While in Pakistan's opinion any kind of terrorist attack came across from inside Afghanistan. To resolve this dilemma, Pakistan cleared the Afghan perception that the ongoing operation in North Waziristan Agency is a clear manifestation against all terrorist groups without any discrimination. Because terrorists are common enemies for both states' security. An ISPR press release, that a 'viable change' of NUG policies can be seen towards Pakistan. Gen. Raheel Sharif praised the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani government policies with the hope that the new establishment would transform both state relations into a 'warm and mutually' beneficial affiliation. Director General Saleem Bajwa declared both leaders' meetings as a 'great deal of goodwill and positivity' (Kamran, 2014).

Ghani was well-thought-out that “peace and stability in Afghanistan are indispensable without Pakistan's support”. Although faced severe criticism on the domestic front, Ashraf Ghani was more optimistic towards Pakistan compared with his predecessors Karzai. He addresses some of Pakistan's foremost anxieties to

improve relations, i.e. he delayed the implementation of a strategic partnership agreement with India, and postponed the purchase of weapons from India, which was demanded by Karzai during his last visit. Ghani took some strategic initiative of Pakistan over cross-border terrorism and TTP sheltering in Afghanistan. Provided inquiring assess to ISI official to Afghan jails for investigation against Anti-Pakistani elements (Safdar, 2016). Ghani faced strong criticism internally, however, he believed Pakistan would play a mediating role and would use her good office by influencing the Taliban to engage them in talks with the Afghan government. Although, bilateral coordination, border security measures, and allegations and counter-allegations could not fully be realized. Ghani's rapprochement towards Pakistan was not acceptable to some of the Afghan elements. Second, the growing Taliban attacks after the death of Mullah Omar increased Ashraf Ghani's pro-Pakistan approaches. This growing instability in Afghanistan declined Ghani reconciliation policies towards Pakistan. A transitional government of President Ashraf Ghani gave imputes to a new war-like situation in Afghanistan. Which have direct security costs for Pakistan, due to which Pakistan started direct military operation after declining for years to act against the hub of militant groups in the tribal areas of Pakistan. It was a thoughtful campaign, with bombers and weapons gutting down the towns of Miran Shah and Mir Ali, the empty whole of the Tochi River Valley along with the Afghan border. In the aftermath of the military operation of the Pak-Army busted open bomb factories, training camps, and tortured cells. More than half a million population of the tribal belt internally displaced IDPs fled to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and a quarter of a million fled to Afghanistan (Gall, 2015).

### Trilateral Meeting in Islamabad

To improve both country's relations and border security in December 2014 a trilateral meeting was held in Islamabad. The meeting was attended by Pakistan COAS "Raheel Sharif, Afghan national army chief Sher Muhammad Karimi and ISAF commander General John Campbell". Discussions were held on the security cooperation of the Pak-Afghan border (Amina, 2015). In a joint statement, all three states put the following points on the agenda. That member states should work for peace and harmony in Pak-Afghan Relations and promote the "Afghan-owned and Afghan-led peace process". To accelerate the political efforts to put an end to terrorism and violence. Dialogue with the Taliban and CBMs would be encouraged to safeguard Afghanistan's sovereignty, unity, independence, and territorial integrity. Pakistan and Afghanistan are committed to broadening economic, political, security, state to state, and people to people cooperation and interaction. To secure both state's stability, security, the peace process, and national interests (Washington D.C, 2015).

In a move towards border coordination, both states exchanged several militaries to the military commander's contacts, which opened a new era of the bilateral relationship. In this regard first, a visit was paid on 11 January 2015 to Kabul by Lt General Hidayat Ur Rehman. During such meetings, many issues related to security and stability came under discussion, special focus was border management and security. The meeting was attended by ISAF representatives and the Afghan Border Police. Lt. General Rehman discussed with the Eastern Nangarhar province military head this province had a border with Pakistan's FATA areas. On 13 January 2015 Commander of Southern Command Lt General Nasir Khan Janjua visited Afghanistan for the second round of Commander meeting. The two sides keep stress on the border mechanism and two points Torkham and Spin Boldak have been reactivated (Daily Dawn, 2015). Afghanistan was hopeful about Pakistan's role to carry the *Taliban* to the negotiating table. Pakistan to influence the Afghan Taliban started efforts several weeks before the Murree talks, which was held on July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015. In May 2015, Nawaz Sharif along with Ashraf Ghani in a joint press conference stated that any kind of resistance against Afghanistan will be dealt with severely, and the involved elements will be strictly punished. Sharif asserted that the menace of terrorism can be rooted out by mutual firm determination and the adoption of a comprehensive strategy. Nawaz Sharif declared Afghanistan's enemies as Pakistan's enemies (Mateen, 2015).

### Hearth of Asia Conference and Afghanistan at Its Core

HoA IP provides a platform for regional connectivity and collaboration by inserting Afghanistan at its core. A stable Afghanistan will pave the way for peace and prosperity to the Hearth of Asia regions. The focus of this organization was to address the joint challenges of Afghanistan and its line regions. The organization consists of 14-member states that are

*“Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, and the United Arab Emirates. 17 supporting countries including Australia, Canada, Denmark, Egypt, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Iraq, Japan, Norway, Poland, Spain, Sweden, UK and US and 12 supporting regional and international organizations are UN, NATO, SAARC, SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) and OIC” (IAS Score, 2016).*

Its first conference was held in 2011 in Turkey, second in 2012 (Kabul, Afghanistan), third in 2013 in Almaty (Kazakhstan), fourth in 2014 Beijing. Afghanistan is the permanent chair of the hearth of the Asia process. Member states persuading CBMs in six key areas are counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics, disaster management, education, trade-investment, and regional infrastructure.

**The 5<sup>th</sup>** hearth of Asia conference was held in Islamabad from 8 to 10 December 2015. A regional conference in Islamabad provided another chance for peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan. This conference was co-chaired by the Afghan minister of foreign affairs Mr. Salahuddin Rabbani and Sartaj Aziz of Pakistan. In Islamabad, a declaration of gratitude was paid to prime minister Nawaz Sharif and President Ashraf Ghani for attending the open ceremony of the fifth ministerial conference. The conference was attended by Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj, 14 high-level delegates, and foreign ministers from the participating and supporting countries (Tribune, 2016).

Pakistan on this occasion regarding Afghanistan emphasized that “Pakistan wants durable peace and stability in Afghanistan. Unstable Afghanistan is not in Pakistan’s interests. Pakistan will, therefore, support all events aimed at strengthening peace and stability in Afghanistan”. In concluding remarks Aziz said that “from last decade terrorism remained a major threat to world peace and security, Pakistan has suffered a lot both economically and huge human loss due to terrorism”. Pakistan asserts on this platform that “closer regional cooperation can play an effective role in eliminating the menace of terrorism”.

Considering the aims and importance of the Istanbul Process the Islamabad Conference focused on Pak-Afghan dialogue with the Taliban, to develop the economy of Afghanistan through trade, issues related to Afghanistan security and restoration of stability, discussion about the presence of Daesh in Afghanistan, non-interference in each other internal affairs. As member states praised the combat mission of ISAF that would contribute to the realization of peace and stability in the region. Afghanistan admired Pakistan and Iran for the hospitality of millions of Afghan refugees from the last 3 decades (Islamabad Declaration, 2015).

Intended for the promotion of economic connectivity, it was urged that the region has enormous potential of human and natural resources, in a well-connected region, such resources could be utilized. Energy productivity, trade enhancement, movement of people, employment generation and transform Afghanistan as a transit hub to remove bottlenecks in way of transit and trade. Hearth of Asia states would be linked through CBMs on numerous levels. December 2015 conference in Islamabad saw a joint declaration reaffirming the member states to recognize mutual sovereignty and territorial integrity of each other. Pakistan and India also decided to resurrect the bilateral issues and long-standing talks on Kashmir (The Asian Foundation Survey, 2016).

Ministerial-level 6<sup>th</sup> heart of Asia annual conference of regional and Asian countries on Afghanistan was held in Amritsar (India) on December 4, 2016. The conference was inaugurated by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani. 40 states delegates attended the conference. The main theme of the conference was “Addressing Challenges and Achieving Prosperity”. In

advance, India and Afghanistan given the focus on the elimination of terrorism from Pakistan as “the greatest threat” to regional peace and stability, call for its immediate end. India focused on collective efforts to guarantee the exclusion of rising forces of extremism and terrorist’s safe heavens. Negotiations were held on major connectivity of the Chabahar project, signing of CASA-1000 in May 2016, Turkmenistan-Afghanistan railway project completed in November 2016 will connect Caspian to Afghanistan and China, and TAPI gas pipeline project launched in December 2015. India and Afghanistan have imagined land trade from Chabahar port and devoted air corridor among Delhi and Kabul to avoid Pakistan. While Afghanistan is closer through rail line with Iran and Yiwu (China) as compared with India. On security situation of Afghanistan focused on the agenda was counter-terrorism and creation of stability in Afghanistan, provision of economic connectivity and development for Afghanistan as an essential element (The Asia Foundation, 2016).

To analyze the 2016 HoA conference, India used to compel Islamabad for its trade connectivity with Afghanistan through the Wagah border under transit trade. It will have pressurized Pakistan for the time being but in the long run, may diminish the two countries of their restricted influence as Pakistan’s neighbors originating further hindrances to trade between India and Afghanistan. Other declarations put under consideration was anxiety about violence caused by the terrorist in Afghanistan by Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Haqqani network. Menace of drugs and financial support to terrorists in Afghanistan. CBMs and to enhance wider regional and economic connectivity. Consequently, the heart of the Asia process leftovers serious in falsifying collaboration to realize Afghanistan’s potential to be a vibrant Asian “Hub” (KG Today, 2016).

On 27 April 2017, a high-level army delegation from Pakistan headed by Chief of General Staff (CGS) Lieutenant General Bilal Akbar visited Kabul in the direction of COAS Gen Bajwa. The delegation held a meeting with Afghan acting defense minister Mr. Tariq Shah and Afghan Chief of Army Staff General Mohammad Sharif Yaftail. The Pakistan delegation on behalf of COAS paid condolence to the people of Afghanistan and Afghan forces on the tragic accident of the Mazar-e-Sharif attacks. The delegates discuss bilateral border coordination measures. In the ISPR brief, Pakistan conveyed the message to Afghan authority that the “Pakistan army had control in all areas adjacent to the Pak-Afghan border and shall not allow its soil to be used against Afghanistan. Terrorist is a common threat to both states (Samaa, 2018).

On October 2, 2017, COAS General Qamar Javed Bajwa on the invitation of President Ghani visited Afghanistan presages a new chapter in ending the Afghan conflict (Dawn, 2017). the one-one meeting was held between the two leaders in the Presidential palace. During the meeting, several critical issues came under discussion including the war on terrorism, regional security, bilateral relations, border security management, peace and stability, and transit trade. Bajwa said that “Pakistan would provide any cooperation in the war on terrorism and supports an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led peace talks”. Ghani said that both states are friendly nations, joint working can move ahead peace and reconciliation of the two countries as well as cooperation can let the peoples of both states out of poverty. US Secretary of state and Chairman Joint Chief of Staff Gen Joseph Dunford also admired the importance of Gen Bajwa’s visit that “He had very good meetings with Afghan leadership, our leadership was engaged in those meetings as well” (Caspian Block, 2017).

A series of terrorist attacks that occurred in Afghanistan capital Kabul from January to July 2018 caused the death of almost 200 lives of the Afghan national army, civilians, terrorists, and US soldiers. Despite a ceasefire from the Afghan government in Eid days, 30 soldiers were killed by the Taliban in June 2018 (Aljazeera news, 2018). In the InterContinental hotel attack in Kabul on 20 January 2018, 42 peoples were dead, and more than 14 peoples were injured (Dawn, 2015). In May, June, and July dozens of people were killed in militant attacks across the Afghan cities. Afghanistan blamed the Pakistan-based Haqqani network, The US also pressurized Pakistan for the trace of safe heavens and cut off military aid due to support the Taliban involved in Kabul attacks (Afghanistan, 2018). Pakistan strongly condemned the Kabul attacks and in the response to Kabul’s blames on Pakistan declared the charges based on misperception

created by foreign elements. Pakistan called the 18<sup>th</sup> meeting of the National Security Committee (NSC) under the chair of Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi included civil and military officials. NSC members reviewed the security situation of Afghanistan and admired the pain and anguish of Afghans as the extreme victim of terrorism and stood by their side in complete solidarity for regional peace.

Since the emergence of a new democratic set up in Pakistan, after the 25 July 2018 general elections, the new administration of the PTI government showed positive terms in relations. President Ashraf Ghani's telephone call to the newly elected prime minister of Pakistan Imran Khan is a positive indicator of the troublesome relationship of both states. Pakistan's foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi launched his first one-day official trip to Afghanistan on 15, September 2018. After taking oath as foreign minister, on the invitation of his Afghan counterpart. He along with high-level delegations meet Afghan counterpart Salahuddin Rabbani, one on one meeting with President Ashraf Ghani to join hands for peace and stability in the region. Both states committed to working together for peace. Pakistan-Afghanistan Action Plan for Peace and Security (APAPPS), issue of Jalalabad Consulate closer, mutual trusts, issue of Afghan refugees, counter-terrorism and security, bilateral trade and transit, repatriation and people to people contacts came under consideration (The Express Tribune, 2018). In October next round of economic commission talks will be held in Islamabad. Discussion of two counterparts held on the meeting of Joint-Economic Commission (JEC), Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit-Trade Coordination Authority (APTTCA), meeting on the steering committee of Ulema conference came under discussion in next round of CBMs. Qureshi handed over a letter from Prime Minister Imran Khan's side to President Ashraf Ghani, marking the first consignment of 40,000 tons of wheat gifted to Afghan people (Geo News, 2018). Prime Minister Imran Khan commenting his decision to grant citizenship to Afghan immigrants on the National Assembly floor, 'children who were born in Pakistan to migrants have automatic right to become a Pakistani citizen'. Pakistan is also hosting 1.5 million registered Afghan refugees in all provinces of Pakistan including Azad Kashmir (Samaa, 2018).

### Conclusion

Despite relative hostility on both sides of the border the expression of tolerance, mutual trust, and confidence going side by side mending barriers in Pak-Afghan relations. To break the Prisoners Dilemma and arrive at a mutual settlement in Afghanistan, a strong need for incremental and sustained confidence-building measures are required. As there seems to be no predictable alternative strategy of gradual trust-building and peaceful engagement. A middle way is required which can help to break the impasse. The whole scenario here is appropriate in the Prisoners Dilemma of the 'Game theory' that for less pay off cooperation is indispensable in two states. The civil-military approach makes improvements in Pak-Afghan ties, especially in the civilian directed areas in the field of trade and people to people contacts. The wind is now blowing in the right direction after the newly elected set up in Pakistan because of the July 2018 general elections. It is a long way approach that will settle with time. Despite the long-term payoff, these actors might focus on immediate cooperation. To conclude it is said that relations of Pakistan and Afghanistan normalized to some extent during the Ashraf Ghani era as compared with the Hamid Karzai era which engulf Pakistan under blame game.

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