

# The Conduct of Pakistan's Foreign Policy

## Structure, Strengths and Issues

### (2018-2020)

## Policy Brief

### Part-6

#### Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations

When the incumbent government assumed power in 2018, the US had announced to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan after 20 years' war. The Taliban were steering from a strong position and were not willing to talk to the Afghan government for peace. The US and the west, which had long been alleging Pakistan as a part of the problem and supporting the Taliban, eventually accepted Pakistan as part of the solution and urged Pakistan to support the Afghan peace process by persuading the Taliban to participate in the peace talks in Doha. Pakistan played a positive role in this regard and wholeheartedly supported peace talks and urged all Afghan factions to work for a political settlement. Pakistan-Afghanistan relations also witnessed gradual improvement, which was evident from a number of leadership and high-level visits. These developments had generated optimism and set the ground for trust, understanding, and cooperation in the Afghan peace process and better bilateral relations.

#### Chronology

##### (1) Exchange of Visits

Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi paid a second visit to Afghanistan on December 15, 2018, and participated in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Pakistan-China-Afghanistan Trilateral Foreign Ministers' dialogue. The three sides reaffirmed their commitment to further strengthening their relations, deepening cooperation, and advancing connectivity under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), to jointly continue their efforts on security cooperation and counter-terrorism, and reiterated their support to the Afghan-owned, and Afghan-led peace process.

Qureshi, accompanied by the foreign secretary, visited Afghanistan, Iran, China, and Russia from December 24-26, 2018, and briefed the Afghan leadership on Pakistan's efforts for bringing synergy among other regional and international stakeholders to facilitate an intra-Afghan dialogue.

##### Army Chief's Visit to Kabul

Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa, accompanied by Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Director General, Lt General Faiz Hameed, and Pakistan's Special Envoy on Afghanistan, Muhammad Sadiq, made an unannounced visit to Kabul on June 9, 2020, primarily to discuss ways and means with the Afghan leaders including President Ashraf Ghani and Chairman High Council for National Reconciliation, Dr Abdullah Abdullah, to carry forward the Afghan peace process. The visit took place two days after the US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, met General Bajwa and the ISI chief in Islamabad. The visit was an effort to provide help in arranging intra-Afghan talks involving the Taliban and Afghan leadership. The ISPR did not issue any press release on the visit, which indicated the importance of the visit in the context of sensitivities of security-related issues.

##### Prime Minister's Visit to Kabul

On the invitation of the Afghan President, Prime Minister Imran Khan paid his first visit to Kabul on November 19, 2020. The prime minister had a one-on-one meeting with President Ashraf Ghani, delegation-level talks, and joint press stake-out. The focus was on

further deepening the fraternal bilateral relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan, the Afghan peace process, and regional economic development and connectivity.

### **Visit of President Ashraf Ghani to Pakistan**

On the invitation of Prime Minister Imran Khan, President Ashraf Ghani, accompanied by a high-level delegation, visited Pakistan on June 27-28, 2019. President Arif Alvi had a meeting with President Ghani while Prime Minister Imran Khan held delegation-level talks. The wide-ranging talks focused on strengthening bilateral cooperation in diverse areas including political, trade, economic, security, education, people-to-people exchanges, and the Afghan peace process. Earlier, Afghan Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani visited Pakistan in September 2018 to congratulate Shah Mahmood Qureshi on his appointment as the foreign minister. They agreed to work together for achieving lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan and promoting bilateral relations based on the framework of Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS). Foreign Minister Qureshi paid his maiden visit to Kabul on September 15, 2018, and conveyed to the Afghan leadership the resolve of the new government to strengthen bilateral relations and facilitate the Afghan peace process.

In addition, the Taliban Political Committee delegation headed by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Chairman High Council for National Reconciliation, Dr Abdullah Abdullah, leader of Hizb-e-Islami, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and Speaker Afghan Wolesi Jirga, Mir Rahman Rahmani, also visited Pakistan and held in-depth discussions with Pakistan's civil and military leadership on bilateral relations, regional issues, and the Afghan peace process.

### **(2) First and Second Review Sessions of APAPPS**

Foreign Secretary Sohail Mahmood and Afghanistan's Deputy Foreign Minister Idrees Zaman led delegations to the first review session of the APAPPS in Islamabad on June 10, 2019. The foreign secretary reaffirmed Pakistan's commitment to deepening close relations with Afghanistan based on mutual trust to the benefit of the two people and reiterated its commitment to a peaceful, stable, united, and prosperous Afghanistan. Foreign Secretary Sohail Mahmood and Afghan

Deputy Foreign Minister Mirwais Nab attended the second review meeting of the APAPPS in Kabul on August 31, 2020. The two sides discussed shared desire for regional peace, stability, and prosperity, and agreed that APAPPS and its five working groups were the most effective framework to strengthen bilateral relations in diverse fields.

### **(3) The US-Taliban Peace Agreement**

Foreign Minister Qureshi participated in the signing of the US-Taliban peace agreement in Doha on February 29, 2020. The special representatives on Afghanistan affairs of Pakistan, China, Russian Federation, and Iran, in a virtual meeting (May 18, 2020), welcomed the US-Taliban peace agreement, called on foreign troops to withdraw in an orderly manner, urged the international community to support Afghanistan's reconstruction and rehabilitation, supported an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led negotiated solution, and cautioned against the role of 'spoilers'. In these parleys, the Pakistani side maintained that it did not have any favorites in Afghanistan.

### **(4) Pakistan-Afghanistan Border Management and Fencing**

In a press briefing given to members of international media on August 3, 2021, Pakistan's military briefed the participants about completion of 90 percent of the fencing along Pakistan-Afghanistan border, vowing that the remaining 10 percent of the most difficult tasks of improving the border management will be completed this summer to prevent any cross-border attack from both sides as well as entry of illegal travelers. Pakistan commenced the gigantic task of fencing the 2,611-kilometer (1,622-mile) border with Afghanistan in earnest in 2017 after costly army offensives namely Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad to push militants out of the country's tribal areas and into Afghanistan. The military has installed surveillance cameras and "surveillance and intrusion detection systems" to check any movement along the border barriers consisting of two sets of chain-link fences separated by a 2-meter (6.5-foot) space that has been filled with concertina wire coils. The construction of around 1,000 forts along the fence will also ensure organized border management.<sup>1</sup>

The Pakistani Army has rightly claimed that the fence will help to improve security in the country, sharply

<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Yousaf: "Pakistan army completes 90% of fence along Afghan border," AP, August 4, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/pakistan-bd8165697772792b69d65c8509633cd9>



cut terrorist attacks, and prevent tens of thousands of civilians from crossing the border into Afghanistan, thus it would block free crossing over which was historically the practice along the porous border.

### **Analysis**

The incumbent government made consistent efforts to improve relations with Afghanistan. The exchange of leadership and high-level visits set the ground for an upward trajectory and the sustained engagement through regular contacts for enhancing relations with Afghanistan.

In June 2020, the incumbent government appointed Ambassador (retired) Mohammad Sadiq as special representative for Afghanistan. He had served as ambassador to Afghanistan from 2008 to 2014. He visited Afghanistan several times and participated in the US-Afghan peace talks and agreement in Doha. He also arranged a number of visits of Pashtun and non-Pashtun leaders to Pakistan for consultations with the Pakistan civil and military leadership on the Afghan peace process.

Pakistan played a positive role in facilitating (a) the US Taliban peace agreement signed in February 2020; (b) the commencement of intra-Afghan negotiations on September 12, 2020; and (c) the agreement on rules and procedures between the Afghan parties in Doha in December 2020.

On the initiative of the prime minister, the Torkham crossing point has been inaugurated on a 24/7 basis, the time of shipment clearance of Afghan transit trade has been reduced on the border by the Customs, and new border points have been opened. Pakistan has also allowed the Afghan refugees to open bank accounts in Pakistan that would create an enabling environment. The first and second review sessions of the APAPPS have generated momentum to deepen, enhance, and expand bilateral relations in diverse fields. Despite Pakistan's positive steps in the Afghan peace process, the evolving situation in Afghanistan is fraught with several threats and challenges due to lack of understanding and divergent views of the Afghan factions on the political settlement, the peace process, and future dispensation.

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