

Policy Review

**Revival of Af-Pak Dialogue
amid COVID-19: What
Needs to be Done?**

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1. Introduction

Many rounds of talks between the stakeholders have been held so far to put an end to war in Afghanistan - a war that is going on for more than 40 years. The new efforts to construct Afghan peace process started in 2001, however, still there is no big step forward.

The peace agreement/deal signed between Trump administration and Taliban leadership in Doha (Qatar) on February 29, 2020 is though being considered a key step, it is not enough to achieve a lasting peace. Further steps to make peace happen in the war-torn country, according to experts, may be:

- Negotiating an agreement between the Afghan government and Opposition groups regarding future setup of the country
- Making a suitable plan for the US troop withdrawal, and
- Cooperating with the neighbouring countries, specifically Pakistan, to deal with economic and security issues.

Pakistan has been a partner of negotiation, cooperation, and policy dialogue in Afghan peace process for decades. The exchange of ideas over peace has been done in different formats, including Track-I diplomacy (among officials and state representatives), Track 1.5 diplomacy (between serving or retired officials and civil society representatives), and Track II diplomacy (between civil society representatives from both sides). Annex 1 provides a selected state or track I, track II and 1.5 diplomacy, during the last five years.

Both Pakistan and Afghanistan used diplomacy sessions to strengthen their bilateral and regional relationship. Sometimes these sessions are called dialogue. However, dialogue in definition and practice is different from the communication in political realm. The word 'dialogue' has roots in Greek word of *dialegesthai*. It means "to conduct conversation" (Linel 2009: 2-3). Dialogue in different languages is used in the same sense as 'conversation'¹. However, dialogue is much more than just talking to one another or communication between two sides. It has rather a complex, rich and cultural connotation.

This policy review aims to highlight the necessity of Af-Pak "dialogue" for the restoration of peace in Afghanistan. It also aims to improve the quality of the communication while focusing on different aspects of the dialogue like suitable participants, conditions as well as topics for discussion. Of course, reaching a perfect dialogue based on concepts and principles is not easy.

¹ In Persian, Urdu and Dari languages, the word dialogue is written as *Goft-o-Gu* (گفتگو), which reflects an interactive capacity. It is a combination of two words: 1) *Goft* which means "said", which refers to what has been said, and 2) *Gu*, "say" which refers to permission to talk. Mette Lindgren Helde defines dialogue as a special form of communication, in which participants seek to actively create greater mutual understanding and deeper insight. According to John Stewart dialogue occurs "when the participants let the others happen to them while holding their own ground. Dialogue's primary goal is understanding rather than agreement, an outcome that can result from sustained collaborative inquiry."

The term dialogue is generally used by diplomats and social activists. Using the word dialogue in variety of fields can be a signal of having interest to "understand" other side. It is possible that politicians, who use the word dialogue, don't mean that, but they mean it to conduct "debate" or "negotiations". Debate and negotiation can be used for problem-solving and conflict resolution; Sometimes politicians use the word dialogue to convince the other side. There are four basic principles which make a dialogue fully possible: trust, openness, honesty, and equality.

However, a feedback of experienced participants of the focus group can help analyse the specific mistakes or potential to make “better” dialogue sessions in future.

2. Methodology

The analysis of the paper is mainly the outcome of a focus group discussion (FGD) among Pakistani, Afghan and international experts, who have already participated in Track II and 1.5 diplomacy. The discussion took place in an online webinar series organized by Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) in April 2020.

Since the FGD itself was a platform of dialogue between Afghan and Pakistani actors, there have been some misconceptions regarding the role of Pakistan and expectations of Afghanistan to peace and dialogue in the meeting.

3. Discussion and Analysis

Different political and regional actors should talk to each other instead of talking about each other. That is crucial for constructing peace. Dialogue addresses the stakeholders’ concerns, therefore, they must keep in mind the importance of perception and misperception in international relations as well as in conflict resolution. Involving all the sides in the peace process is a constructivist approach. Any prediction about foreign policy of countries is not possible only by knowing the capabilities and intentions of different actors but also by understanding the ways in which they perceive each other’s capabilities and interests. That is prerequisite to peace and understanding each other through dialogue.

To have a mutual framework for dialogue between Pakistan and Afghanistan, Taimur Shamil (personal communication 2020) stresses the need for creating a conducive environment by taking diplomatic and political initiatives. In the past, “blame game” has adversely affected the Pak-Afghan ties. It is now time that both sides put an end to any propaganda and work for mutual peace.

3.1. Diverse ethnical inclusivity in dialogue

Taimur Shamil (personal communication 2020) says that the dialogue between Pakistan and Afghanistan has always been active. The decades long trade and social interaction along the Pak-Afghan border has allowed people from both sides to understand each other and the political dynamics that impact them. Even during the pandemic situation, the dialogue and interaction between the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan continued albeit in a less formal way. Regarding the internal and external political dynamics in Afghanistan, Shamil (personal communication 2020) adds that any future settlement must ensure an inclusive framework for peace that is acceptable for all the ethnic groups in Afghanistan, i.e. Pashtun and non- Pashtuns as well as religious groups.

3.2 Necessity of bilateral trade ties and Afghan power groups’ help in COVID-19 era

It is not easy to discuss conditions and necessity of dialogue between Afghanistan and Pakistan amid COVID-19 while euphoria of war is still haunting the people of Afghanistan. Dialogue

must bring practical solutions to get people out the difficulties of life. Orzala Nemat (personal communication 2020) says that the current pandemic situation has not stopped the war. The war continues to undermine the freedom and security of the people of Afghanistan. One can count various issues in the context of peace process but for the people of Afghanistan, it is a matter of security and life.

Nemat (personal communication 2020) states that the trade potential of both countries should be optimally utilized in order to benefit the people. The cross-border trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan has an immense potential to improve the lives of the people living on both sides of the border. The trade, in times of COVID-19, would help the people to work on mutual goals. Since Pakistan shares long borders with Afghanistan, therefore, any disaster resulting from pandemic in Afghanistan, may create a huge risk for Pakistan.

Looking at the overall situation arising out of pandemic and the ongoing war in Afghanistan, Nemat (personal communication 2020) believes that low quality of health and education services will bring lot of difficulties to Afghans' lives. For instance, the shortage of trained doctors, nurses, hospital personnel and technical staff with lack of expertise in using new machines is the next challenge. A country of about 39 million people still does not have basic facilities to deal with health issues. Taliban, instead of targeting the government installations, should better concentrate on senilities of COVID-19, and provide support to medical practitioners and health workers for a larger good.

3.3. Prioritizing end of violence and security in Afghanistan in Dialogue

The deal between Taliban and the US in Nemat's view (personal communication, 2020) will not bring peace to Afghanistan. Taliban and other anti-government factions do have a monopoly over violence in Afghanistan and continue to undermine the security situation, therefore, the violence will not be stopped by making a simple deal.

Regarding the military dynamics of Afghan issue, Shamil (personal communication 2020) says:

“Security issue in the region is one of the major concerns for Pakistan and Afghanistan. Since Taliban and Afghan government forces, along with other belligerents, continue to fight for military dominance, the issue seems militaristic in nature. However, military is not the only solution, hence political as well as diplomatic channels should be used to resolve the issue.”

Asif Durrani (personal communication 2020) argues that there are positive developments in connection with signing the peace agreement between the US and Taliban, which would create positive impact on Afghan peace process. Af-Pak dialogue may shape the process of applying this deal positively. Because after 9/11, there were outstanding issues and both countries addressed the problems successfully.

3.4. Narco Business: an obstacle to reach peace

In addition to the factor of conflict between the Afghan government and Taliban, there are other dynamics contributing to peace in Afghanistan. According to Asif Durrani (personal

communication 2020), the business of Narco influences in shaping the power structure in Afghanistan as well. According to the US military, 90% of the world's heroin (worth \$4billion) is produced from opium which is grown in Afghanistan (Rowlatt 2019). “A quarter of this amount is received by opium farmers while the rest goes to district officials, insurgents, warlords, and drug-traffickers” (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC] 2007). Afghan officials have benefited from this narco-business as Bradford (2019) discusses it in his recent book.

Once a country becomes a Narco state, Asif Durrani (personal communication, 2020) says, then its sovereignty is compromised. Citing the example of Columbia, which has been trying to come out of the difficulties for the last four decades, he says it has not been fully successful, even with the US support, therefore, constructing peace in countries which have Narco business, needs extensive efforts to control this menace. All the countries, especially Pakistan as a neighbour, need to cooperate more in this regard.

3.5. Necessity of having non-governmental delegates in dialogue

Civil society and academics can play an important role in the dialogue because of its high learning capacity and the fact that it can use its capacities beyond the social milieu in their respective countries.

Mushtaq Rahim (personal communication 2020) emphasizes the inclusion of scholars and analysts to the dialogue as well. If a state representative comes to dialogue, he/she will defend the view of his/her respective government. Hence the dialogue will remain confine to politics and diplomacy. So, there is a need to change the nature of dialogue by discussing and addressing some common issues. In the dialogue over peace, issues like national interest should be set aside at least for some time. Concentration of dialogue should be on a solution instead of defending certain policies.

3.6. Excluding sensible topics and focusing on practical solutions

Analysing the problems, which hindered peace process in Afghanistan, Nemat (personal communication 2020) believes that domestic issues of Afghanistan should be excluded from the Af-Pak dialogue. Moreover, opposition groups of Afghan government, and groups led by Dr Abdullah Abdullah, for instance, are not the main hindrance in peace, but these are internal power sharing disputes that will resolve eventually in post-election results' bargain. Despite all differences and difficulties inside Afghanistan, there is an agreement over cooperation with Pakistan to strengthen relationship between the two countries. Despite wasting energy on the ethnic composition of Afghan opposition groups, it would be better to focus on basic issues. Nemat (personal communication 2020) suggests the dialogue should focus on common issues especially the ceasefire.

Af-Pak dialogue must have basic benchmark in five areas such as: 1) anti-terrorism, 2) reconciliation, 3) economic development, 4) bilateral cooperation, and 5) regional cooperation. The real significance of civil society actors' dialogue lies not only in building people-to-people contact but also it would illustrate the common hope of both sides for peace. It is to put pressure on the governments as well as establishments on both sides to take priority to the wishes of ordinary people. Facilitation in trade cooperation against drug-trafficking will strengthen peace in the region. Both sides need the cooperation, more than ever, because firstly the US pull-out from Afghanistan or the region makes stability in the region in the next two or five years critical;

secondly, both sides should frame new policies keeping in view the regional peace and security in the wake of COVID-19.

According to Ammara Durrani (personal communication 2020), it is necessary to ask dialogue delegates to reimagine the peace process. In her view, a peaceful Afghanistan needs a just and an inclusive government and society. To make it happen, there is a need to move the current conversation beyond politics and security. Afghans must create a vibrant post-conflict paradigm of good governance, strong political economy, social cohesion, and sustainable development. The conversation should focus on human security because once peace is established, it will benefit the government as well as those who are in charge of security, including human security, health, and education. Peace will benefit whosoever comes to power.

Pakistan has still not adopted a full-spectrum approach towards dialogue that prioritizes human security. Ammara Durrani (personal communication 2020) says that Pakistan has made good progress in cooperation with Afghanistan regarding aspects of traditional bilateral relations, security and economic cooperation, but a people-centric agency of human development – that centralizes women, youths, minorities, the poor and other vulnerable segments of society - is missing. Pakistan has decades of experience in post-conflict stabilization, democratic governance, and sustainable development and can share the experiences with Afghanistan. Pakistani government has yet to fully leverage and engage Afghanistan as a development and prosperity partner. Both the countries need to engage themselves in active exchanges between parliamentarians, civil society, youths, women, media, academia, entrepreneurs, artists, etc. This is what a successful bilateral relationship can look like because these exchanges and collaborations increase the trust, bring normalcy, and smoothen the way for sustainable development to the region.

Dialogue must focus on common human security challenges and opportunities that both countries face. For instance, the youth demographic trends in Afghanistan and Pakistan are common. The average age in Afghanistan is 18+ (Index Mundi, 2018), making it the youngest country in South Asia. Pakistan is the second youngest country in the South Asia, with more than half of its population below the age of 30. Ammara Durrani adds that these common demographic trends illustrate similar human development needs arising in future for both countries. These will require policy responses to leverage on human capital, protection of fundamental rights and political representation. Pakistan government must take these recommendations seriously and facilitate a stronger and dynamic “people-to-people conversation”.

3.7. Avoiding self-righteous expressions and moving forward

There is a general view that participants of dialogue sometimes share self-righteousness when they meet and focus on issues which are outdated. Mushtaq Rahim (personal communication 2020) emphasizes the need to construct trust between two sides in dialogue. For this purpose, a representation of the ‘real’ people is the need of hour.

According to Amina Khan (personal communication 2020), Af-Pak dialogue needs to move away from the vicious blame game. Instead, it should be used as an opportunity to move beyond the past, focus on the future by opening a new chapter in their relationship. Pakistan and Afghanistan need to widen the scope of their bilateral relationship which has often been limited to the outcome of the peace process - while the peace process is an important facet of the Pak-Afghan relationship, it should not be the sole or determining factor. One avenue where both

countries can further their ties is through the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS) as a framework of cooperation. A comprehensive plan like APAPPS has the potential to address majority of the mutual issues. The rapidly changing political environment in Afghanistan demands a better coordination between the two countries so that a mutual and lasting peace may be ensured.

Although official or strategic agreements between the two countries is important, Mushtaq Rahim (personal communication) says that they alone do not guarantee the cooperation; "there have been a lot of documents, which have not been implemented; APAPPS took a lot of energy, time and recourse, but it is partly materialized."

3.8. Extending scope of Af-Pak dialogue to parliamentary and youth initiatives

Ammara Durrani (personal communication 2020) states that involving elected representatives in dialogue will be a solution to deal with the prevailing culture of fear as well as an overly militarized bilateral relationship. She reminds that Afghanistan-Pakistan parliamentary caucus was set up in Karzai government which created an opportunity to discuss and advocate for a more pro-people relationship. Revisiting such cooperation at the parliamentary level can help both countries to move beyond the highly militarized bilateral relationship and gain more democratic views about each other.

Education diplomacy has also been used in recent years to promote dialogue and exchange between the two countries. For example, Allama Iqbal Scholarship Program supports (among other target groups) young Afghan scholars to study in Pakistan. Moreover, civil society actors hold an annual Pak-Afghan Youth Dialogue at academic and extra-curricular levels (Afghan Study Centre 2019). Around 3,000 scholarships have been awarded by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan to the Afghan students under a four-year programme (Darakhshan 2019) as well.

3.9. Empowering Afghans to restore peace

The peace must be restored by the Afghans themselves. Asif Durrani (personal communication 2020) mentions three steps which Afghanistan needs to take to stand on its own feet. First, Afghans must have a will to take their role seriously. "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink," he says and adds that between Pakistan and Afghanistan there are partly blood and partly emotional linkages. Second, Afghan civil society should be empowered and made part of the ongoing effort for peace. Third, Taliban needs to be cleared that they are not the only champions of Islam, as there are different groups, who practice Islam on their own way. All Afghan groups are Muslims and must enjoy security and peace, whether it is Afghan army or Taliban.

Amina Khan (personal communication, 2020) believes that it is time for the Afghans to take ownership of the peace process - external players can't do so. Regional countries like Pakistan can only help support the notion of peace, so at the end of the day reaching a compromise and achieving peace will be an Afghan prerogative. Peace can only be restored if both the stakeholders, i.e. Afghan government and the Taliban decide to compromise. For this, the Taliban will have to drastically reduce and ultimately halt all hostilities towards the state. She reminds that the US and the Taliban signed the peace agreement and that forced the Afghan government to follow specific disciplines for solving problems with Taliban.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Pakistan and Afghanistan have a shared history and culture. Both the countries have maintained cordial relations. However, last several decades had been challenging for both in terms of security and economy. The recent political developments and the peace deal between the Taliban and the US has pinned the hope that a workable solution for lasting peace in the region is possible. Pakistan has a crucial role in supporting and strengthening prospects for peace in Afghanistan.

Given the current scenario, dialogue needs full engagement of both sides. This policy review recommends that:

- Pakistani participants of the dialogue should ensure a successful communication with Afghan delegates in a conducive and free environment putting an end to blame game.
- Both Afghans and Pakistanis have some wrong perception about each other. These can result in illusions and potentially inaccurate judgments. Pakistan should support more dialogues at different levels since 1) the wrong perception of Afghans about Pakistan is due to lack of contact and first-hand experience of exchange with Pakistani civil society, and 2) dialogue constructs trust among each other.
- Diverse range of ethnicities, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras, and a variety of political factions from Afghanistan and Pakistan should be engaged in dialogue for a more holistic approach. Recent experiences of engaging diverse Afghan political and ethnic factions in the dialogue were proved successful as they ended to a good-will gesture.
- The gaps in health care system of Afghanistan and lack of expertise to deal with the pandemic is a major risk for the future of Pakistan as well. Pakistan should support Afghanistan in the provision health facilities and sending its medical staff there.
- The business community should be engaged to address the issues that are related to trade since much of the bilateral ties are tied to trade activity between the two sides.
- Military dynamics of peace has been over. It must be realized that solution of border tension is not a military action but engagement of stakeholders on both sides in dialogue.
- The Narco business in Afghanistan is not only harmful for moral and physical health globally, but it has also harmed the function of a good governance in Afghanistan ruining the base of peace between different stakeholders. Pakistan should cooperate with Afghanistan in the projects against drugs.
- Constructing peace in Afghanistan needs not only diplomatic talks between governmental representatives of both sides (track 1 diplomacy), but also ‘dialogue’ between non-governmental actors. Pakistan should support initiatives of track 2 and 1.5 to facilitate talks between civil society, researchers, scholars, and think tanks from both the countries. For this purpose, a joint think tank free of all sorts of interferences may be established on either side of the border.
- Pakistani delegates of dialogue shall be careful about choosing topics. Topics targeting Afghan domestic affairs can reduce the trust and divert the discussions from the main topics like ‘ceasefire prioritization’.
- Dialogue should concentrate on issues such as reconciliation and cooperation over security (pull-out of US troops) and health (especially COVID-19 pandemic).
- The dialogue should be a practical issue-based communication. It should target solutions and suggestions for a peaceful Afghanistan. Pakistan should support

exchange programmes, which share its experience of democratic governance with Afghans. Moreover, dialogue should focus on the youth, education, job market, and health system.

- Dialogue is an opportunity to understand the other side and not to convince the other side. Pakistani delegates should use dialogue format to construct trust, showing interest in listening to Afghan delegates and avoid self-righteousness. Dialogue is a chance of finding common points to suggest solutions.
- There should be a mechanism in dialogue which motivates the dialogue partners not to criticize the past, therefore, dialogue should concentrate on current potentials of cooperation between the two countries. Pakistan should encourage updating and concluding new agreements and talks around implementing current agreements.
- Track-II or 1.5 diplomacy or sessions between civil society actors are not the only types of dialogue. Pakistan should support different types and formats of dialogues like exchange of parliamentarians, youths, and academics.
- Parliamentary group meetings should be held for a better understanding at government to government level.
- A joint study group between think tanks and universities should also be formed to mainly focus on Afghan peace and other issues.
- Pakistan should also support the dialogue process which may encourage Afghan partners to take their exclusive role seriously. Topics of dialogue should empower Afghans to construct a free and democratic Afghanistan with their own potential.

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Annexure 1

Time	State or Track I diplomacy	Track II and 1.5 diplomacy
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2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3rd round China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Vice Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue (via video link) - July 2020 (foreign affairs ministry, 2020) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic Foresight on Afghan-Pakistan Relations, workshop organized by Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) of Pakistan - February 2020 (FES, 2020) • Track-2 dialogue on the developments in the peace process in Afghanistan, organized by Heart of Asia Society (HAS), Konrad Adenauer foundation (KAS) and the New York University's Center on International Cooperation (CIC) - May and June 2020 (KAS, 2020)
2019 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue, in Islamabad – September 2019 (Afghanistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019) • First Review Session of Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS) - June 2019 (Pakistan Foreign Affairs Ministry, 2019) • China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue, in Kabul (Afghanistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beyond Boundaries: organized by Regional Peace Institute and the Hanns Seidel Foundation - April 2019 (Mehmood, 2019)
2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue, in Beijing (Afghanistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019) • Moscow six part talks: Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, India, Iran and Central Asian nation - April 2017 (Khan, 2017: 4) • Kabul peace process: Pakistan, China, Iran, Russia, India, Saudi Arabia, the US and various European countries - June 2017 (Khan, 2017: 4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beyond Boundaries: March and October 2017 (CRSS, 2017)

2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG): Afghanistan Pakistan, US and China, in Islamabad (January 2016) (Khan, 2017: 4) • Russia, China and Pakistan Trilateral Dialogue on Afghanistan - December 2016 (Khan, 2017: 4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beyond Boundaries - March and August 2016 (CRSS, 2017)
2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2+2+1 or Murree Peace Process in Pakistan, facilitated by Pakistan, supported and attended by Chinese and the US officials who took part as observers - July 2015 (Khan, 2017: 3) • Heart of Asia’ Ministerial Conference: in Pakistan, China, Pakistan and USA attended - December 2015 (Khan, 2017: 3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beyond Boundaries: organized by CRSS in consortium with Safer World and Organization for Economic Studies and Peace (OESP) - October 2015 (CRSS, 2017)

Annexure 2

The participants of the focused group were as follows:

- Taimur Shamil, an academic and a TV talk show host
- Head of an international organization, Afghanistan Office in Kabul
- Dr Orzala Nemat, an Afghan scholar and civil society leader, a former advisor to Afghan President Ashraf Ghani on Sub-National Governance and AREU Director.
- Mushtaq Rahim, Director, Afghanistan Affairs Unit
- Ammara Durrani, Senior Research Fellow, Jinnah Institute (Islamabad) and Visiting Faculty, School of Politics and International Relations, Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad
- Asif Durrani: Pakistan’s former ambassador to Iran and UAE, and former Deputy Head of Mission in Afghanistan

- Amina Khan, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad