

## The Role of Peace Process in Mitigating the Trust-Deficit in Pak-Afghan Bilateral Relations

Huma Qayum\* Nargis Zaman† Syed Ali Shah‡



**Abstract** *The history of Pak-Afghan relations is dominated more by conflicts than by cooperation since emergence of Pakistan. In the ongoing pattern of peace process, it is proposed that Pakistan should pave the way to bring the Taliban on negotiation table for peace and stability in Afghanistan. The recent steps taken in the form of different Confidence Building Measures show flurry of diplomatic relationship in the emerging cordiality between the two countries. Diverse civil society groups of Pakistan are of the view that the drawdown of US forces from Afghanistan will ultimately create a power vacuum and plunge the country again into yet another civil war. Pakistan's efforts to use its influence to bring the Taliban on table talk will smooth the way for peace, stability and prosperity of Afghanistan as well as security of the entire region. Keeping in view the geographical proximity of the two countries, Pakistan's own vital interests are attached to peace and stability in Afghanistan. Pakistan took cognizance of this very fact and played highly constructive role in facilitating dialogue process in Afghanistan and improving bilateral ties of the two countries.*

### Key Words:

Trust-deficit,  
Peace Process,  
Pakistan,  
Afghanistan,  
High Peace  
Council,  
Reconciliation

### Introduction

Relation between Pakistan and Afghanistan suffer from distrust and blame game since the ouster of the *Taliban* regime in 2001 (News, July 19, 2012). There were several underlying causes of unfriendly ties between the two states. The immediate cause, however, is border security, border management, peace and stability not

\* PhD Scholar, Department of Politics and IR, Islamic International University, Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: [humamdn@gmail.com](mailto:humamdn@gmail.com)

† Lecturer, Department of Political Science, Women University Mardan, Mardan, KP, Pakistan.

‡ Assistant Professor, Department of Pakistan Studies, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Mardan, KP, Pakistan.

only in both countries but particularly Afghanistan. Resurgent Taliban activities in Afghanistan posed serious challenges to the bilateral ties of both countries. Pakistan role in mediation and facilitating dialogue process between Afghan Taliban and Kabul government could help find a lasting and peaceful solution of the Afghan problem. It is widely acknowledged that Pakistan's efforts for a peaceful solution of the Afghan problem and influence in war-torn country could advance peace process with Taliban (Khattak, 2012).

Peace and stability in Afghanistan have been the main objectives of Pakistan's foreign policy (Nuri, 2012). It is also vital for peace and stability in Pakistan and a logical end to the violence in the region. Afghan government is keen to engage the *Taliban* in the peace process through efforts for reconciliation. The *Taliban* are key players in Afghan politics. It is necessary to engage them to find a viable path to restore normalcy to the war-torn country (Fergusson, 2010, p.2). The peace efforts also enjoyed some level of support from the US administration.

The paper examines Pakistan's efforts to facilitate the peace process in Afghanistan and help improve bilateral relations with its western neighbor to bring peace and stability in the region. The paper also evaluates the outcome of these efforts and suggests means to make this process more effective and result oriented.

## **Border Security and Management**

The cross-border attacks were of great concern for both sides especially after the US-led NATO intervention in Afghanistan in October 2001. The establishment of the tripartite commission, comprising military and diplomatic officials from Pakistan, Afghanistan and the US, was a crucial step to address this problem. It was aimed to facilitate communication and information sharing among the three stakeholders. (Siddiqi, 2009). It was setup in early 2003 with the purpose to discuss and coordinate efforts related to peace in Afghanistan and issues related to border security and management. Its first meeting was held on June 17, 2003. Since then, it convened several meetings to foster cooperation on border security (Saikal, 2006).

In the 31<sup>st</sup> Tripartite commissions held in Kabul on September 2010, representatives of Pakistan, Afghanistan and US gave impetus to counter-terrorism strategy (*Times*, 8 October 2010). To boost efforts of border security, Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Ashfaq Pervez Kiyani and Afghan military chief General Karimi signed 36<sup>th</sup> tripartite border commission in Kabul on 21, November 2012. Both countries agreed on several points, like raids on civilians from both sides of the Pak-Afghan border, regional stability as well as top level military to military interactions (News, 22 November 2012). General Ashfaq Pervez Kiyani also raised the issue of border security with the US armed force services chief in Afghanistan General Joseph F. Dunford during his visit to Islamabad on 1 April 2013. There, Pakistan raised the issue of cross-border

militants' attacks launched from inside of Afghanistan on Pakistani territory causing great human disaster (News, 2 April 2013). Earlier, on January 27, 2013, an Afghan delegation led by Bismillah Khan Muhammadi, Afghan Defense Minister, came on a five day visit to Pakistan as part of the efforts to further improve bilateral ties of the two countries. General Bismillah Khan met with Gen. Ashfaq Pervaiz Kiyani and discussed the various issues. The "Tripartite Border Standing Operating Procedures" was also included in the agenda of the meeting. The points under consideration in "Tripartite Border Standing Operating Procedures" were aimed at improving security and defense related issues. Pakistan agreed to cooperate and share border security related issues. (News, 29 January 2013).

Earlier, in July 2010, Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani paid a special visit to Afghanistan to boost the efforts to stop cross border incursions. Similarly, President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan was also seemed determined to resolve this issue through border mechanism commission during his visit to Pakistan in June 2011 (Raja, 2011). In June 2011, in a news conference, President Karzai expressed that he wanted to see a non-violent and quick political solution to the problem. On July 7, 2011, Prime Minister of Pakistan in response to Kabul statement, made a phone call to President Karzai and assured that Pakistan army was exercising 'utmost restraint' against militants and cross border incursion from Afghanistan. Prime Minister Gillani said the situation was required to be "defused quickly." The two leaders also discussed cross-border violations and terrorist attacks from the Afghan side (Tribune, 2011, July 8).

Pakistan-Afghanistan cooperation was deemed indispensable and both states had to take equal strides to meet the growing challenge of insurgency and terrorism in the region. However, some untoward incidents made the environment cloudy as both countries sought to foster bilateral cooperation. The frequent occurrences of cross-border firing from Afghan side posed serious challenges to the process. Especially, incident that took place on May 6, 2013 on Pak-Afghan border once again slowed down the peace process (Dawn, May 8, 2013). Afghanistan's accusation regarding "unprovoked attacks by Pakistani forces" created tension between the two countries while Pakistan's concerns that cross-border raids from Afghanistan were growing in number with the passage of time. Despite Pakistan's protest to Kabul, border attacks continued on Pak-Afghan border in which hundreds of civilians as well as men in uniform were killed (Observer, July 20, 2012).

The frequent border violations, thus, posed a serious threat to the peace process. Once it was suggested by the then Interior Minister of Pakistan Aftab Ahmad Khan Sherpao that the border should be fenced to stop foreign infiltration (Grare, 2006). It was not the first time the anybody from Pakistan side had suggested border fencing as a mean to end unlawful cross-border movement of insurgents on both sides of the common border. However, several quarters from

both sides including the Afghan government opposed the idea. It was feared that any effort to fence such a long border would cause problem for the people of both sides, who were tied by ethnic, cultural and family relations. The Pak-Afghan border in Baluchistan is remarkably porous, with an estimated 50,000-60,000 people crossing it every day. Stopping that flow was believed to be beyond the capacity of the security forces on either side of the border. Moreover, it was a very costly project and Pakistan's meager economy was unable to cope with it. Pakistan, however, has in the recent past started fencing the border despite opposition from Afghanistan.

## **US drawdown and Afghan Peace Process**

The significance of the *Taliban* in Afghan politics as a key actor and stakeholder in returning the country to peace, stability and normalcy was increasingly acknowledged by various circles. Meanwhile, Pak-Afghan relations gradually moved towards right direction indicating prospects of durable solution of Afghan crises. It was not only in the interests of Pakistan but also the entire region. The external world was anxious to see the peaceful future of Afghanistan, especially after the US drawdown in 2014 (*News*, February 7, 2013).

In this context, the US too was anxious about peaceful withdrawal from Afghanistan. Negotiating a deal with the *Taliban* was deemed as the only viable strategy considered by the US to put an end to the war. This option was also in the best interests of NATO troops (Chandrasekaran, 2012). On Sunday 10, 2013, the US Joint Chief of Staff, General Martin Dempsey expressed his views that after 2014 drawdown almost ten to twenty thousand US forces would station for reconstruction and training of Afghan National Army. It is since the poorly and ill-equipped Afghan National Forces would not have the ability to face the domestic resistance in the post-2014 era (*News*, 2013 February 10). In this context, however, reconciliation process was deemed highly important.

The US administration faced severe criticism from civil society organizations and other groups that pressurized the government to pull out NATO forces from Afghanistan. However, US government tried to avoid the stigma of defeat particularly after the overthrow of Taliban regime in Afghanistan as it had lost thousands of soldiers and bore huge financial losses. Several countries had reservations over the US presence in this region. The dream of outright military victory of the US over the *Taliban* did not come true as the *Taliban* controlled areas in Afghanistan had gradually increased since 2003. The US puts all blame on Pakistan under the pretext of double game. The US policymakers believed the growing *Taliban* power was due to the covert support of Pakistani ISI to the *Taliban* and Haqqani network in Waziristan (Haque, 2011). But in fact, Afghan people, by nature, never accepted foreign occupation or suppression and all those foreign powers which attacked Afghanistan in the past ultimately faced a

humiliating defeat. The invaders also admitted their blunders and pledged to never repeat the mistake of attacking Afghanistan.

The US administration realized this very fact sooner than later because it is the philosophy of invaders that they scorn their stooge at the end. In this regard, the US initiated the dialogue process to support the Afghan Taliban internally empower them to overcome the country's unsteady situation, especially after the US withdraw from Afghanistan. Thus, Pakistan also tried to overcome Anti-Pakistani elements from Afghanistan. In a statement issued from the White House on February 14, 2013, the US president Obama expressed his views, that an Afghan-led and Afghan-own peace process was ultimately necessary in the region especially Afghanistan (*News*, February, 14, 2013).

Due to these concerns, the US President Obama, in Chicago summit held in May 2012, announced that withdrawal from Afghanistan would be completed till the end of December 2014. Indeed, the process of drawdown had already begun, and the strength of NATO forces which was more than 1 lack few months earlier, was reduced to 66 thousand step by step. Thus 33 thousand troops already been pulled down before the announcement of drawdown plan. US president Obama after being re-elected for the second time, announced in his presidential speech that he wanted to put an end to "decay of war" (13 years long war). This statement clearly showed that NATO forces would no longer station in Afghanistan. Due to strong resistance from the *Taliban* side, there was a possibility that with the passage of time the US would no longer be able to sustain warfare and troop presence in Afghanistan that could also help to keep a vigilant eye on the rich resources of Central Asia and to contain Russian and Chinese influence and interests in the region (*News*, 2012 November 21). In this context peace process involving opening a window of dialogue with Taliban was deemed quite significant.

In 2010, in order to foster peace process and start conciliation with warring groups mainly Taliban, Afghan government had also established the High Peace Council (HPC) headed by key Afghan leader and former president Burhanuddin Rabbani. HPC had a broad-based representation and support in Afghanis. However, Pakistan's key role in the peace process was also appreciated.

### **Pakistan's Role in Afghan Peace Process**

Pakistan is generally held responsible for domestic violence in Afghanistan both by the US and Afghan government. However, it was also realized by Afghan government and the US administration that Pakistan was an important player and could play mediatory role in facilitating peace process in Afghanistan. It was believed that Pakistan had considerable influence among Afghan Taliban and thus, can help bring them to the table talks. (Grare, 2006). Consequently, Afghanistan took a significant step to include Pakistan in the HPC core-group. Pakistan too

showed its positive gesture to improve its strategic ties with Afghanistan (Khan & Goraya, 2013).

The regular contacts and exchanges of the visits of highest level leadership of both countries and serious deliberations on issues of mutual interest was key for success of peace process. In this context, the visit of the Pakistani Prime Minister Syed Yousaf Raza Gillani to Afghanistan, on 16 April 2011, was a crucial step towards pacing up the conciliation process. In his meeting with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, both leaders reiterated their resolve to foster the bilateral efforts to move forward the reconciliation process after NATO withdrawal. It was decided that the issue of militancy would be resolved through joint efforts and dialogue process. President Karzai said, "The joint peace commission which used to be at the level of foreign ministers has been upgraded by Pakistan to the highest governmental level." Prime Minister Gillani along with General Kiyani, Director General of (ISI) Ahmad Shuja Pasha also held extensive talks with Burhanuddin Rabbani, the Chairman of HPC in Afghanistan to boost the efforts of the peace process. It was for the first time that both military and political leadership held discussions under one-roof (*Express Tribune*, April 17, 2011). It manifested that both military and civil authorities of Pakistan along with Afghan leadership were on the same page on this peace initiative.

The members of HPC led by the Chairman of the council Salahuddin Rabbani (who had replaced his father after latter's assassination in September 2011) visited Pakistan on 12 November 2012 and this visit signified that bilateral relations of both countries were moving in the positive direction. The visit was widely welcomed by different sections of society on both sides of the border. Mr. Rabbani met separately with President Asif Ali Zardari and General Kiyani. In their discussion, both sides' leadership mainly focused on how to persuade the Taliban for negotiation and to put an end to militancy. For peace and stability in Afghanistan, Pakistan guaranteed for every single possible action. On this occasion Salahuddin Rabbani met with Maulana Fazlur Rehman, head of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Fazal ur Rehman group (JUI-F) who had profound influence in the *Taliban* circles. Both parties agreed on holding an Ulema Conference to help put down the militancy and control suicide attacks in Pakistan (Grare, 2006).

On November 30, 2012, Zalmay Rassoul, the Afghan Foreign Minister, paid a special trip to Pakistan to give impetus to the peace process. On the same day, a meeting was held between Pakistan and Afghan delegations in Islamabad. Together with his Pakistani counterpart Hina Rabbani Khar, Zalmay Rassoul, along with other high spokespersons attended the seminar. Later, Miss Khar in an interview with *The Guardian* said, the discussions were held on number of bilateral issues and termed the discussion "frank and candid" which meant that the discussions held on all bilateral issues. To enhance peace and build up a new era of bilateral relationship with Afghanistan, Pakistan handed over a draft of Strategic Partnership Agreement to Afghan representatives (*Dawn*, December 1, 2012).



## **Multilateral Dialogue Process**

Besides bilateral contacts and negotiations, Afghan peace process was also supported and moved forward through multilateral talks and diplomatic channels. An important round of multilateral talks that helped initiate several CBMs was held in Kabul on July 19, 2012. It was attended by British Prime Minister David Camron, Premier Raja Pervaiz Ashraf of Pakistan and Hamid Karzai. The participants expressed their desire for durable peace in Afghanistan as well as the security and stability of the entire region. Pakistan expressed its support for dialogue process in Afghanistan. President Karzai appreciated Pakistan's efforts for intra-Afghan contacts (The News, 19 July 2012). President Karzai also acknowledged long-lasting Pakistani exertions for amity in Afghanistan. Prime Minister Raja Pervaiz Ashraf said on this occasion that peace in Afghanistan would secure the promise of a brighter future of the people of Pakistan (Dawn, 20 July 2012). To carry on two-track peace commission and regular discussions on Afghanistan peace, next round of bilateral talks was also held in Kabul on 19 July 2012. Raja Pervaiz Ashraf assured the Afghan government to continue the regular meetings to bring the insurgents to the table talks (Yousaf, 2012).

On August 16, 2012, Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) met in Makkah in which President Zardari represented Pakistan. In his speech, he discussed the question of security and stability in Afghanistan. He emphasized that, due to unrest and war like situation in Afghanistan, Pakistan was directly affected by the disturbance in his next-door neighbor country. On this occasion Zardari desired that the world community as well as the Muslim world must put the hands together for Afghan reconciliation. Meanwhile, Pakistan appealed the Afghan Taliban to take part in peace process for the sake of regional stability and prosperity (The Nation, 17 August 2012).

On December 13, 2012 President Zardari along with his Afghan and Turkish counterparts attended the 7<sup>th</sup> trilateral summit in Turkey. President Zardari expressed Pakistan's resolve to continue backing efforts in the best interest of Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as for the security and prosperity of the entire region. Pakistan expressed willingness to settle bilateral disagreements through negotiations, bilateral agreements and people-to-people interactions. Intellectuals, civil society activists, and analysts from both Pakistan and Afghanistan stressed on discussion with the *Taliban*. "The Peace Process Roadmap," they noted, was a right move in positive direction, beneficial for Pakistan and Afghanistan. It is a positive way for peace in Afghanistan to keep in direct contacts with the Taliban.

Yet another important development in the process was a trilateral summit held in Chequers, London (UK) on third to fourth February 2013. Prime Minister David Camron, President Zardari, Hamid Karzai, military officials from both the sides as well as members of HPC also attended the summit. The agenda of the summit was to bring the Taliban to the negotiations table and promotion of cooperation in

security related issues between Pakistan and Afghanistan. British Prime Minister Cameron emphasized that the participants had the opportunity to actively pursue efforts for ensuring peace and stability in the region. On this occasion, Pakistan expressed its willingness to move forward the process of dialogue and complete support for the eradication of remnants of the Taliban, who were destabilizing the process of reconciliation. It was the third time that Pakistan had participated in such summits. Earlier, first summit was held in Kabul on July 2012, and second one in New York (USA) on September 2012. The focus of the agenda and participation of member states was to create an atmosphere of peace and stability in the region (Piracha, 2013).

Chequers (UK) Trilateral Summit sounded a loud message of urgency inside and outside the country as it had moved forward the inspiring route of regional stability and reconciliation in Afghanistan having positive implications for adjacent states. In joint statement all the leaders declared, “All sides agreed on the urgency and committed themselves to take all necessary measures to achieve the goal of a peace settlement over the next six months.” The meeting greatly fostered the Pak-Afghan relations. In a joint statement, leaders of both countries agreed upon arrangements to strengthen coordination by taking more CBMs. Pakistan during the Summit agreed to release remaining *Taliban* detainees to add momentum to the process of peace and reconciliation through a new coordination mechanism before consulting the HPC.

The US sought to ease Pak-Afghan border tensions in Brussels talks. The tripartite Brussels meeting was attended by the core group members Pakistan, Afghanistan and the US in last week of April 2013. It was a blessing to get relief and to put the relations between the two countries on right track. (*News*, 23 April 2013). Several allegations from the Afghanistan side were leveled by President Karzai against Pakistan that adversely affected the dialogue process. In such meeting, however, representatives of both countries asserted that the talks and mutual consultation were indispensable to remove the mistrust in bilateral relations. The meeting was also attended by the US Secretary of State John Carry. On this occasion, the US spokesperson expressed the hope that such meetings would help ease out friction between the “often-feuding neighbors” - Afghanistan and Pakistan (*News*, May 7, 2013).

## **Release of Taliban Leaders**

To achieve the objectives of the Peace Process, both sides took many Confidence Building Measures (CBMs). One of these CBMs was related to release of detained Afghan Taliban leaders in Pakistan. The release leaders detained in Pakistan, including high profile persons was an important issue between Afghanistan and Pakistan. From the very beginning of peace process between Pakistan and Afghanistan, it was a major demand from the Afghan side to release several



Taliban leaders including Mullah Baradar, second in rank of the Taliban leadership after Mullah Omar, to accelerate the peace talks. Senior Afghan officials considered him very important figure to engage the *Taliban* in talks (*BBC News*, February 4, 2013). It should be kept in mind that Mullah Barader, a top-leader in the *Taliban* regime, was captured by the American CIA and the Pakistani ISI during joint secret operation in Karachi. Therefore, the US consent was deemed necessary in handing him over to Kabul. To strengthen the peace process, Pakistan, in the next phase released more *Taliban* captives except Mullah Baradar (*News*, December 1, 2012).

Nonetheless, in order to endorse CBMs, Chairman HPC visited Pakistan which conveyed a very positive and encouraging message (Javed, 2012). On the HPC demand, Pakistan released about 7 to 9 *Taliban* on November 15, 2012, to facilitate talks, but the release of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar was kept in abeyance. Pakistan expressed willingness to release some more mid-ranking *Taliban* leaders if demanded by Kabul as a part of good gesture. Pakistani officials were ready to hand-over some important *Taliban* detainees on the recommendation of the HPC. (*Dawn*, February 1, 2013).

Zalmi Rassoul during his visit to Pakistan on November 30, 2012, in a joint press release with Pakistani counterpart said, “We want that Pakistan release more *Taliban* along with Mullah Baradar.” On December 31, 2012 Pakistan released four more *Taliban* prisoners including former *Taliban* Justice Minister Mullah Nooruddin Turabi, Abdul Bari, Mir Ahmad Gul and Mulla Dad, on the plea to take part in the peace process. From November 2012 till January 2013, almost 26 *Taliban* leaders had been freed (*News*, 2013 January 2).

Positively these *Taliban* members could give an impetus to the elusive peace process and might help to bring fighters to the negotiating table (Khan, 2012, November 14). This step of Pakistan was greatly appreciated both at home and abroad. Kabul welcomed it as a practical step by Pakistan in the promotion of reconciliation process (Khan, 2013). “It's been an indication that Pakistanis have adopted the idea of promoting stability here in Afghanistan,” commented Ismail Qasimyar, head of international relations for the peace council in Afghanistan. He further said, “It is a practical step in the right direction, which shows that Pakistani authorities have opened a new chapter for positive co-operation with Afghanistan” (*Al-Jazeera News*, January 1, 2013).

Pakistan was quite optimistic on these developments believing that the freed *Taliban* leaders would help promote the process for peace and to bring Pakistan and Afghanistan closer. This move was to find a peaceful solution to the Afghan turmoil. The release of the Taliban members raised expectations that they would add momentum for peace on the assurance that they would keep themselves away from other *Taliban* activities in contradiction to both countries' sovereignty and that they would delink from *Al-Qaeda* (Popalzai & Khan, 2012). However, American and Afghan response was not encouraging. Washington was opposed to

the move. It had expressed its concerns fearing that the released Taliban members would once again be active in Afghanistan against the NATO troops (Part low & De Young, 2010). Ironically, Afghan government was also not satisfied. It accused Pakistan of keeping Baradar in prison to halt the ongoing peace process which was also being assisted by the CIA. Reportedly, Barader had agreed to reconcile with Afghan government but without Pakistan's role. His negative posture against Pakistan forced Pakistani authorities to keep him in custody (Siddique, 2011).

## **Peace Process under Nawaz Sharif Government**

After the new government was set-up in Pakistan post the general elections held on 11<sup>th</sup> of May 2013, the leadership of both countries strove to rebuild bilateral relations and sustain the dialogue process. Afghan government was highly optimistic towards the possible role of Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif, the newly elected Prime Minister of Pakistan, in Afghan reconciliation process. President Karzai made a phone call to Nawaz Sharif on 6<sup>th</sup> of June 2013, and felicitated him on his assumption of the seat of prime minister. Karzai also sent Sharif an invitation to visit Kabul. Karzai expressed the hope that the new government in Pakistan would help foster the Afghan peace process and work together with Kabul to improve bilateral relations. Premier Nawaz Sharif responded positively and assured the Afghan President of his commitment to establish good and friendly ties with all neighboring countries especially Afghanistan. He said that Pakistan was committed to support all initiatives helpful to peace process and to contact all stakeholders in Afghanistan with the aim to promote peace and stability in the war-torn country as well as in the region. It was widely believed that the government of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) headed by Nawaz Sharif had enjoyed considerable influence among Afghan Taliban that could significantly help towards advancing the peace process.

Premier Sharif reaffirmed his resolve to support Afghan peace process and strengthen bilateral ties with Kabul during the visit of British Foreign Secretary William Hague to Pakistan on July 18, 2013 (*Observer*, July 18, 2013). On 21<sup>st</sup> of July 2013, Pakistan's senior diplomat and special adviser to prime minister on national security and foreign affairs, Sartaj Aziz paid trip to Kabul, held talks with President Karzai and conveyed a Premier Sharif's goodwill message to start a new era of good relations with the government in Kabul (*News*, July 20, 2013). However, the Afghan government looked suspicious towards Pakistan because of its role in US-Taliban talks and considered the entire process as Pakistan-centered and strove to undermine it (*Times*, August 19, 2013). Meanwhile, in the first week of August 2013, the Chairman of the Qawmi Watan Party (QWP), Pakistan Aftab Ahmad Khan Sherpao paid a visit to Afghanistan and tried to remove mistrust between the two countries. He assured the Afghan authorities of Pakistan's sincerity in the peace process and said: "[T]he stable Afghanistan is in favor of

Pakistan, and situation would not get improve until both the neighboring states are on the same page and would mitigate the level of distrust between them.” He further said that both countries should devise a strategy to deal with the post-2014 situation in the region (*Business Recorder*, 2013). The new setup in Pakistan was very keen to develop positive relations with Afghanistan believing that a peaceful, stable and strong Afghanistan was vital for peace and stability in Pakistan.

The efforts to foster Afghan peace process and strengthen Pak-Afghan bilateral relations were further augmented because of close contacts between the top leadership of the two countries. The visit of Afghan President Karzai to Pakistan on August 26-27, 2013 was quite significant in this direction. During his visit to Pakistan along with a high-level delegation, discussions were held wide-ranging issues and challenges faced by both countries. Both sides also explored the prospects of cooperation and decided to take advantage of the opportunities for reciprocal benefits. In a joint press conference with Pakistani prime minister, President Karzai sought Pakistan’s support in the dialogue process with the Taliban. Pakistani government expressed its full support for the peace process. It was confident that peace talks would usher into an era of stable and prosperous Afghanistan. It emphasized that close and brotherly ties were in the interest of both neighbors bound by shared boundaries and common religion and history (Zaafir & Raja, 2013). President Karzai, however, also expressed his desire that Pakistan should release Mullah Baradar to facilitate the peace process. Baradar was expected to play a role of a mediator for dialogue between the Taliban and Afghan government. It was believed to be the only way to ease the prevailing tense relations which engulfed the two neighbors (*Dawn*, August 27, 2013). Nawaz government accepted Afghan demand and in period of less than two weeks after Karzai’s visit, Pakistan freed seven more *Taliban* prisoners to facilitate the peace talks. Mansoor Dadullah son of Mullah Dadullah, a leader in the *Taliban* outfit, was also included in the seven *Taliban* prisoners released by Pakistan side (*Radio Free Library*, 2014). The decision was widely hailed in Afghanistan and regarded as a positive step towards bringing the two states closer to combat common problems. After their release and arrival in Kabul, the Taliban leaders received a warm reception in Afghanistan. In addition, 26 more *Taliban* detainees were released in the next year.

Pakistani decision of releasing Mullah Baradar on September 21, 2013 was aimed at facilitating the resumption of reconciliation process in Afghanistan. His release was considered a sort of CBM between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Kabul welcomed Islamabad’s efforts to boost the peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan and considered it a first signal from Nawaz Sharif in keeping his promise made during President Karzai’s visit to Pakistan. Both sides were hopeful for taking more positive steps in order to mitigate the distrust in mutual relations as well as to bring an end to series of allegations and counter allegations against each other (*Dawn*, September 21, 2013).

To promote the conciliation process and improve bilateral relations of both countries, a five-member Afghan delegation led by HPC Chairman, Salahuddin Rabbani visited Pakistan from 19<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> of November 2013. The HPC members met with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and paid gratitude for facilitating Afghan peace process and providing the channel of communication with the Taliban leadership. The delegation also met Sartaj Aziz who expressed the hope that ongoing efforts would help return Afghanistan to normal life. He stated, “The visit of HPC delegation is part of Pakistan’s continuing engagement with HPC for the facilitation of peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan.” The delegation also met with Mullah Abdul Ghani Barader (*Dawn*, November 22, 2013). To strengthen the Afghan peace process Pakistan freed thirty-seven key Taliban leaders since 2013. Mullah Abdul Manan who had served as a governor and Mullah Younas, a former Zabol Province shadow governor and former Kabul police Chief in the *Taliban* rule, were among the released Taliban. One of the related figures was Mullah Jahangirwal Mullah Omar, who was a special spokesman during the *Taliban* era. Some of the released members later on joined the *Taliban* ranks in Afghanistan. (*Dawn*, November 27, 2013). However, the decision to release Afghan detainees by Pakistan was taken a positive gesture in Afghanistan. A renowned journalist Rahimullah Yusufzai in an interview with the one of the authors commented over the release of the Taliban members in these words: “Releasing of the Afghan Taliban prisoners being held by the Pakistani government, created lot of hopes in Kabul, among the Afghan government.”

Premier Nawaz Sharif after taking oath for the third time paid his first visit to Kabul on 30 November 2013. In a press conference with President Karzai Nawaz Sharif said that “It is an imperative to reverse the destruction cycle of conflict. Pakistan will continue to extend all possible facilitation for the Afghan Peace Process.” Similarly, President Karzai remarked that “no doubt cooperation and relations got more strength after the comeback of Nawaz Sharif government in power” (*Dawn*, 1 December 2013). Both leaders stressed on taking “practical steps” and more CBMS for moving forward the peace process. They underlined the need of increased exchanges of visits from top leadership of both sides for further improvement in bilateral relations. President Karzai also remarked “Terrorism and extremism are dangers for both countries, we discussed the shelters and heavens which are present in the region and we talked about how to put a stop to them.” Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif expressed, that “In our view, the key to sustainable peace in Afghanistan—2014 and beyond—is an inclusive political settlement.”

The visit of Premier Nawaz Sharif was highly successful. It rekindled the hope that a sustained process of dialogue, frequent contacts and discussions on issues of mutual concerns as well as sincere efforts on part of both countries to address each other’s concerns would help transform the bilateral relations of the two countries from quagmire of distrust, tensions and conflicts to the smooth path of tranquility,

friendship and cooperation. Pakistan, however, played highly tremendous role in facilitating the peace process in Afghanistan and Kabul needed to reciprocate in the same way for making the dream of reconciliation and peace in the region true.

## **Conclusion**

The growing Pakistan and Afghanistan relationship in the form of different CBMs as well as peace process was quite helpful in sorting out decades old bilateral differences and misunderstanding. The process was pivotal for future developments in their bilateral relations. Pak-Afghanistan cooperation can end the growing enmity that they faced since independence. No doubt, the peace process opened the new windows of cooperation that can usher into an era of stability, progress and economic development of the entire region. Pakistan always believed that Afghan problems could be solved through peaceful means and dialogue and reconciliation among diverse Afghan groups and warring factions was the key to the process. Meanwhile, frequent contacts and exchanges of visits of leadership at the highest level were deemed highly important for bridging the mistrust and discord in bilateral relations of the two countries. Pakistan's successive democratic governments since 2008 sincerely pursued both objectives believing that peace and stability in Afghanistan as well as good and friendly relations with Kabul were in Pakistan's national interests and pivotal for security and prosperity of the entire region. The countries, however, need to sustain the process in the larger interest of the two countries and the region.

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