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Pakistan's Defence and Spy Chiefs Discuss Security With Taliban

FEBRUARY 15–28 2023

AFGHANISTAN WATCH

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<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/22/pakistan-defence-minister-isi-head-discuss-security-with-taliban>

"A senior Pakistani delegation has visited Afghanistan's capital for talks with Taliban officials, days after the closure of their busiest border crossing raised tensions between the two countries. Pakistani Defence Minister Khwaja Asif was joined on Wednesday by other top officials – including Lieutenant General Nadeem Anjum, the director general of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency, or ISI – in their meeting with Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Afghanistan acting deputy prime minister for economic affairs, in Kabul.

Sources at Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs told Al Jazeera on Monday that they were not informed by their Afghan counterparts why the border point, the busiest transit route for travellers and trade between the two neighbours, had been closed. "There is an understanding reached at the highest level that border crossings will not be closed by either side," a diplomatic source said. "We will further comment on this development once we are approached by the Afghan interim authorities in Kabul." As of Thursday, thousands of trucks remained stranded on both sides of the border.

Many carried perishable goods.

Comments

Background

The visit by the senior Pakistani delegation (under the chairmanship of Defence Minister Khwaja Asif, joined by Lieutenant General Nadeem Anjum, the Director General of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence & Ambassador Obaid-ur Rehman Nizamani, among others) to Kabul, point towards another attempt by Islamabad to mend relations with discontent Taliban leadership and salvage from the conflict's undesirable outcomes. Islamabad have been backing Taliban for decades, but it would have been beneficial if the group could have formed an inclusive government (taking the global powers in confidence), enabling the monetary institutions to release financial aid which stands on hold. Instead, the group took Kabul through violence and forced erstwhile members of the government into exile, angering the same institutions that once kept the nations afloat.

FEBRUARY 15–28 2023

AFGHANISTAN WATCH

Through this high-powered delegation, the author argues that Islamabad could make an effort in influencing Taliban to take a softer approach (reiterating initiatives to make an inclusive government) and may advise them on undertaking measures in securing its border areas on a promise of influencing West for immediate humanitarian support. On the context of inclusive government, it is in the interest of Islamabad to make such a narrative (which is merely a façade) with the idea of making it relevant as a legitimate actor and a responsible neighbour during this crisis. However, it is too soon to tell, if the group will heed to their advices.

Taliban on the contrary, may pressurise Islamabad to aggressively advocate for international support in international/roundtable conferences, bilateral engagements and at regional dialogues. Islamabad may also urge power players, such as the US, UK, Canada, Netherlands, Sweden and Germany in particular, to re-engage with Kabul, provide financial (monetary aid for humanitarian efforts), and regular humanitarian support (medical aid).

Furthermore, it is without a doubt that the agenda for this delegation talks would have involved the cross-border implications on trade (border skirmishes at Torkham & Chaman-Spin Boldak), including cross border movements of TTP & ISKP militants. In the light of growing mistrust against Islamabad's efforts to cordon borders and ISI's alleged involvement in providing material & infrastructure support to the Deash (ISKP), the presence of DG ISI indicates deliberation over the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan recent attacks, within the gambit of securing Pakistan's national security and its national interest. If the aforementioned assumptions are true, we could see Taliban dictating policy options to Islamabad, at least to this author– which will force Islamabad to concede to some demands on cross border trade and perhaps a second chance for a peaceful negotiation with the TTP.

Politics of Economy

According to a Wardak based expert on foreign trade, out of 14-member delegation, six members were trade & commerce specialist, putting the discussion on the future of their bilateral trade among one of the top priorities.

FEBRUARY 15–28 2023

AFGHANISTAN WATCH

Taking the note of the recent bilateral discussion on Preferential Trade Agreement, the high-powered delegation could have proposed cooperation, prioritising discussions on economy on the following lines:

- Revising terms for PTA,
- PTTA and
- Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

Revising terms for Preferential Trade Agreement?

On January 09, 2023, in a joint virtual meeting, Pakistan & Afghanistan agreed on a Preferential Trade Agreement, with the two sides (Pakistani delegation under Ahsan Ali Mangi, Additional secretary commerce, with Afghan delegation led by Dr Farooq Azizi, an advisor with the ministry of industry and trade), unanimously agreeing to clear the containers currently stuck at the border and on ports. In accordance with the agreement, the Pakistani delegation proposed Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) on 25 items including fruits and vegetables whereas Afghanistan agreed to reduce 60 percent export tax on coal.[1]

According to a former Afghan Ministry of Commerce official, the Taliban government currently levy's USD 280 per ton with custom duties 30% on each ton on export of coal to the energy-crippled Pakistan. Added to this is USD 35 levied as royalty, transport and storage cost. In addition to this, the Taliban levies a heavy duty of USD 1,360 per truck enroute to Pakistan from central Asia, which enormously increases the total cost incurred on buying/procuring coal from Central Asia, making it a major stress on Pakistan's economy. That said, under the existing Transit Trade agreement, trucks coming from Central Asia through Afghanistan can move freely in Pakistan with a



Source: Al Jazeera

[1] Hussain, Ali. 2023. "Pakistan, Afghanistan Agree on PTA." Bilaterals, January 11, 2023. <https://www.bilaterals.org/?pakistan-afghanistan-agree-on-pta>.

FEBRUARY 15-28 2023

AFGHANISTAN WATCH

temporary admission document (TAD) but Pakistani trucks cannot cross beyond Jalalabad. To escape additional levy's (transportation cost), Islamabad has to apply for Temporary Admission Documents for their transit trucks heading to Central Asia from Afghanistan as Pakistani trucks have to load off at Chaman, board on Afghan owned trucks and pay additional levies to enter Central Asia which continues to shatter Pakistani trading community. Moreover, Pakistani traders have to pay a transit fee of USD 250 per truck as for trucks carrying humanitarian relief goods and medical aid from central Asia through Afghanistan.

That said, the aforementioned issues continue to remain unresolved, which could have forced Islamabad to re-negotiate terms for the PTA (before signing the agreement) in an effort to lay the foundation for a negotiation over revision of the APTTA.

Revising APTTA

APTTA 2010 is no longer active and there is no consensus on the revision of the agreement. The proposed 2021 APTTA carries certain amendments and alterations/suggestions which may provide some confidence to Kabul, although according to Kabul based trade experts (during conversation with the author) expressed favourable terms that could benefit the Taliban leadership than Islamabad. In the amended agreement[2], Islamabad has formulated a separate section for transport of goods which was earlier mentioned within the introduction section of the agreement and replaced the phrase all means of transport with transit in the Article 1(a) explicitly talking about expanding the areas for movement of goods.

Islamabad has also removed the phrase avoid unnecessary cost which will prevent levy of unnecessary charges imposed by custom officials of the two states. To increase the number of goods and transport, Islamabad has made the transit hassle free for drivers from both the countries, who will now be issued a permanent permit, whose details are mentioned in the permit and quota section under the Article 2 of the agreement, detailing issuing authority and procedures to apply for permit for drivers. Among other changes include an amendment within the Article 11(4) within the section which says the vehicles carrying the Transit/export Cargo will be allowed

[2] In conversation with a former official with the Afghanistan Chamber of Industries & Mines (ACIM)

FEBRUARY 15–28 2023

AFGHANISTAN WATCH

to carry the return transit cargo/ export cargo from the territory of the other Contracting Party and/ or the third country, once approved, will ease flow of Afghan trucks entering on Pakistani soil.

Pakistan's National Security Quagmire

The question of Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

With DG ISI among the high-powered delegation, it is without a doubt that both sides would have discussed Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

Much recently, the TTP (whose area of operations was largely limited to South Waziristan) now operates in key cities (mosque bombing in Peshawar & has claimed responsibility for attack on the Karachi's police chief office) extending their grip in poche urban cities. The escalation of attacks carried by TTP points toward political and material support it has— backed by radical influential political parties, government sympathisers, whose support is resulting in increased number of fighters, suicide bombers, and weapons. That said, TTP's political base and support continues to emanate from Afghanistan. For the ISI, the biggest challenge is the growing influence of TTP in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) mainly in South Waziristan, North Waziristan, Tank, Bannu & Lakki Marwat.

That said, the Taliban continues to support TTP by providing the group safe heaven within Afghanistan. According to a Kabul based scholar, the TTP has gained support within local citizens (Pashtuns & non-Pashtuns) which share equal dislike towards Pakistan. Moreover, on two separate conversations with the author, Wardak based expert cited three incidents of Taliban commanders joining the ranks within TTP, with some Afghans joining suicide units. But, on Islamabad request, the Interior Minister Siraj Haqqani, have restrained TTP on many occasions. And, today the balance of opinion (cumulatively of Taliban fighters and the people) rests in favour of TTP and for a continued campaign.

- **Predicting Taliban's response**

It is highly likely for Taliban to shift their traditional stance of providing support, especially when the public opinion overlaps their interest. Even when the two nations continue to exchange fire at Torkham and Chaman-Spin Boldak, the public's opinion have almost been clear and loud: condemning Pakistani political leaders and painting them as the sole responsible for the border skirmishes.

FEBRUARY 15–28 2023

AFGHANISTAN WATCH

Even with the high-powered delegation visit to Kabul, it is highly unlikely for Taliban to alter its stance. This becomes all the more certain when the Taliban Interior Ministry leaked a memo citing the presence of Daesh fighters receiving means and materials support from the ISI, with an intention to attack Afghanistan. However, in spite of the Taliban's firm strategic calculus in favour of the TTP, their leadership appears to understand the importance of maintaining a functional relationship with Pakistan — or at least preventing tensions from deteriorating into full-scale conflict. It appears to be a scenario like a tug-of-war, with moments of altercations, deliberations and de-escalations.

- **How will Pakistan play?**

The visit by the DG ISI only points to one conclusion — Islamabad was confused long enough to draft a security policy against TTP, forcing them to delegate the head of its national intelligence agency (by joining a high-powered politico-civil delegation) with an intent to discuss with the Taliban leadership, directly. After discrediting TTPs growing influence within the country and Taliban's continued support to the group even before it took Kabul, Islamabad seems to have accepted the depth of relationship Taliban has with the TTP. This also means a pursuit for a new peace deal — at least some negotiation for a temporary cease-fire— through Taliban. It appears to the author that Pakistani security and foreign ministry officials have accepted the need to engage with Taliban, which will provide more favourable outcomes — rather than asking global community to engage with the group, multilaterally. With Taliban relentlessly supporting the TTP and engaging with Islamabad, simultaneously will result in lesser violence? It is too soon to profess.

The visit of high-powered delegation can also be attributed to Islamabad's desperation in the light of the on-going economic crisis, which every passing day comes nearer to a default.

This puts a stay on Pakistani military's ability to respond. All they can do is conduct small raids and mound defensive operations, but it seriously lacks resources to undertake a sustained military campaign. That does not mean Pakistan will shy away from using offensive aerial capability across the border. Even then severe economic stress and the risk of strong retaliation especially with unconfirmed reports of Taliban factions joining the TTP, may force Islamabad to forfeit cross-border operations once and for all.

AFGHANISTAN WATCH

Assuming that Islamabad does wishes to re-engage in a dialogue or seek a temporary ceasefire, the chances of such a deal seems dim. To begin with, the TTP will try to bend Islamabad on accepting at least some of its demands. These may include imposition of Sharia Law or restoring areas which the government had merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, as semi-autonomous. That said, the TTP is divided within its ranks on truce with Pakistan. Those who shed blood with the Taliban may sway their opinions for truce, but hardliners are unlikely to sway from their stance.

Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-KP)

The Islamic State-Khorasan Province, locally known as Daesh, is not an immediate challenge as it is for the TTP, but movement of fighters operating within Afghanistan may threaten Taliban's legitimacy. Taliban continues to take measures in preventing its territories as recruiting grounds for the Daesh, but the increasing movement of jihadist and Sunni sectarian groups popping up in Wardak, Logar & Pakhtia, speaks otherwise. It is possible for members of such small groups looking at Afghanistan as an attractive destination to extend their hold on certain territories – if Taliban exposes its inability to exercise control or impose Sharia Law or wish to take the fight to them. Yet, for Islamabad it is lesser of a worry than a leverage (only one in hand) it may use against the Taliban if it wishes to negotiate for peace with the TTP.

What to expect?

There are no easy choices for Islamabad. With international financial institutions and great power economies distancing themselves from Pakistan's desperate call for a bailout package, Afghanistan seems to elevate from a vehicle to assert influence over regional economies to a sole entity capable to providing some economic relief. If it turns out to be correct, Taliban could hold Islamabad hostage, making it a diplomatic stooge seeking international cooperation for Kabul in roughly all global platforms. Under this relationship, how will Pakistan seek another attempt for peaceful negotiations with TTP? This relationship not only gives Taliban an edge, makes it better placed than Islamabad which will not only be making peace on certain TTP terms but accept preferential trade agreements benefitting Kabul more in a new reality. If this relationship turns out to be true, Taliban will emerge as a strong regional/legitimate contender for Afghanistan, with Pakistan as a hostage on economic agreements for decades to come, while draining regional economies willing to propose for an economic partnership in the near future. A Taliban dominated negotiation with TTP will have grave consequences on the nation's internal security, which could have domino effect on the complex web of tribal structures existing in FATA/NWFP.

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