

The Tehran Format on Afghanistan and Resolution of Pak-Afghan Stalemate

Dr. Muhammad Tariq

Lecturer, Department of Political Science Hazara University Mansehra.

Email:

muhammadtariq@hu.edu.pk

Saddam Sarwar

M.Phil Scholar, Department of Political Science Hazara University Mansehra.

Email:

saddamsarwar91@gmail.com

Qammar Ali

M.Phil Scholar, Department of Political Science Hazara University. Mansehra.

qamar.alikhan051@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The 'Tehran Format' on Afghanistan is an effort by the regional dynamics to find out a viable solution to the Afghan stalemate. The main purpose of the forum is to bring peace and stability in Afghanistan so as to free the region of instability and insecurity. The irony of the fact is the Afghan Taliban did not participate in the forum while the neighboring countries showed their determination to work with Kabul for the peace and security of the country. This article aims at analyzing the 'Tehran Format' and the issue of the Pak-Afghan stalemate at the regional level. The communiqué also emphasized the need for the de-escalation of tension between Pakistan and Afghanistan that has grown as a result of the Pak-Afghan direct confrontation of the law enforcement agencies. Main findings of the study focus on the need for the resolution of the Afghan stalemate at the regional level and normalization of relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan

Key Words: Tehran, Format, Security, Stability, Regional Dynamics

Introduction

Relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have always been strained due to certain

issues for the last eight decades. Both the countries have been struggling to harmonize relations but cross border terrorism and militancy have been the main hurdles in the way of normalcy, peace and stability. Many efforts have been in progress since 2014 to normalize relations by several regional and extra-regional countries for the facilitation and coordination of the two countries (Abbas, 2025). The aim of these efforts is to avoid confrontation at both the regional and the international level on the security dynamics of Afghanistan. Recently relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan has worsened due to many factors particularly the Indo-Pak escalation of tension during May 2025 that was considered to be the most decisive confrontation in the history of Pakistan where the country made a victory over India (Siddiqui, 2025). The tension escalated between Pakistan and India after India bombed nine sites across six cities in Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir (Siddiqui, 2025).

The second important thing is the evacuation of the Afghan Refugees by the government of Pakistan that have been residing in Pakistan for almost 46 years since the invasion of the USSR in Afghanistan. The people of Afghanistan who migrated to Pakistan during late 1980s established their own business inside Pakistan, entered into matrimonial relations with their Pakistani brethren, and got more involved in blood relations. They even managed to buy joint properties in Pakistan and had to develop and further establish more business enterprises. The process of evacuation of the Afghan refugees has been criticized by the Afghan people who have been living in Pakistan and has been adopting different tactics and strategies to stay in Pakistan but the government of Pakistan has left no stone unturned in dismantling all the 'refugee camps' in the province of Khyber Pakhtukhwa and urging the Afghan Taliban to peaceful return to the country.

The regional powers have been playing an active role in resolving the Pak-Afghan dispute through peaceful and amicable means. The efforts of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Contact Group on Afghanistan, the Istanbul Process, the Extended "Troika" have been actively involved in the peace process. Islamabad considers

participation in the regional groups that may help resolve regional and international issues and all forums that can be of interest to the security parameters of the country. Pakistan's security strategy should broadly focus on three basic strategic objectives. Firstly, since the intervention of the USSR in Afghanistan in 1979 and the resultant withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, Islamabad has been making itself more important stakeholder in the security and strategic affairs of Afghanistan due to depth, duration, and intensity of its exposure to Afghan security (Abbas, 2025). One of the reasons for keeping good relations and taking involvement of Islamabad in Afghan affairs is the presence of a long, porous and windy border between the two countries that drew the attention of the regional and the international community in the post-9/11 syndrome (Tariq D. , 2020).

Pak-Afghan border has been the hub of many economic and cultural activities since long where the people from across both the countries had to cross border into their respective countries for many activities. Pakistan has suffered the most in the post-9/11 era as a result of the long, porous and windy border besides providing shelter and refuge to millions of the Afghan refugees struck by the war during the late 1980s. Besides, cross border infiltration and incidents of militancy coupled with terror emanating from the Pak-Afghan border, the border has served as the hub of economic, political, social and cultural activities since the previous eight decades. But the situation took the worst form when the border area was greatly criticized for being used by the terrorists, militants and the insurgents who always took recourse to the border infiltration on account of the greater number of safe havens used by the outlaws for seeking protection after the acts of perpetration. Thus, Islamabad wants to remain actively involved in all major regional and international forums that may opt for a viable solution to the Afghan issue emanating from the Durand line.

Secondly, Islamabad wants to utilize all the possible channels of forums by developing global awareness campaign and diplomatic signals besides highlighting its security concerns in the regions (Abbas, 2025). This was also made clear at the 'Tehran

Format' that focused on the Pak-Afghan security concerns comprising Iran, Russia, China, Pakistan, and the Central Asian States (Al-Waght, 2025). Pakistan time and again focused on the cross- border infiltration, and the presence of the non-state actors such as the TTP and the BLA on the Afghan soil who have been busy in creating security concerns by posing more challenges for Pakistan in regional dynamics (Abbas, 2025). Main purpose of Islamabad on the forum is to highlight its security concerns as a result of the Pak-Afghan border and posit remedial measures for resolving the issue of security once for all.

Thirdly, Pakistan wants to contain the Taliban strategically in an effort by maximizing pressure on the Taliban regime for favorable results (Abbas, 2025). Previously, Pakistan was considered to be pro-Taliban in Afghanistan and had to face criticism from the regional and the international community for favoring the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Pakistan had to garner support to the Taliban during 1990s but the Taliban regime in the post- US withdrawal scenario has become very tactful and diplomatic in maintaining friendly relations with the regional community. At present Taliban maintain diplomatic ties with 39 countries of the world, which is a sign of good omen for the Taliban regime since this would make them stronger in the affairs of the world and would be in a position to get better prospects of results by keeping close ties at the national and diplomatic level. This would also help in avoiding the previous imbroglio that they had to face during 1996-2001.

Afghan Taliban have been in struggle to garner close relations with the world community and have been trying for the last two years to increase their outreach to regional and international community (Tariq & Hameed, 2025). The Taliban government in Afghanistan has established close ties and diplomatic relations with 39 countries of the world despite violation of human rights, continued ban on girls' education and women's job and employment (Tariq, Gul, & Ikramullah, 2025), and other restrictions on the people of Afghanistan (Abbas, 2025). The only country in the world that has recognized the Taliban regime in Afghanistan is the Russia while other countries who have accepted the Ambassadors of the Afghan government in their countries include China Uzbekistan,

Pakistan, India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Recognizing the Afghan Taliban or recognizing their Ambassadors are the positive aspects for the Taliban government to establish their position in the world community. The Taliban regime was highly criticized during their earlier reign in 1990s but now the Taliban have become more tactful and diplomatic in their attitude and foreign relations. Pakistan is also of the view that Taliban should develop good relations with the neighboring countries by developing consensus to devise a tough strategy against the terrorist networks and the militants.

The 'Tehran Format' failed to reach out at a joint action plan mainly due to several structural challenges due to lack of a cohesive regional approach. Firstly, the regional countries may welcome the Tehran Format- format regional forums but they may be more interested in engaging the Taliban regime bilaterally for securing their objectives in the region (Abbas, 2025). Although the neighboring countries of Afghanistan agree that their stability is linked with the stability of Afghanistan while they may lose as a result of instability in Afghanistan but they remain divided on a collective approach to leverage their own influence for regional peace and stability (Abbas, 2025). Secondly, the member countries of the Tehran Format may seem to be more divided in their approaches towards the Taliban while compelling them to prevent the misuse of the Afghan soil. Thirdly, the regional forums, including the Tehran Format, are consultative in nature and lack binding legal or institutional mechanism to enforce decisions (Abbas, 2025). In most of the cases, where consensus has been reached out on a particular issue, no credible tools can compel compliance by Afghanistan's *de facto* authorities.

Pakistan has been trying its level best to develop harmonized and cordial relations with the neighboring countries and particularly Afghanistan. At the same time, Pakistan also made it clear at the United Nations Security Council that it would take all necessary defensive measures to safeguard its national interest and geographical frontiers (Zaman, 2025). Pakistan has reiterated time and again that Afghanistan's soil should not be used for any terrorist activity but this theory has failed as Afghan soil has once again become a

staging ground for the UN-designated terrorist organizations (Zaman, 2025). Despite the fact, the Taliban regime have completed four years of their rule, their pledges have also failed that the Afghan soil could not be used as ground for terrorist activities nor would it support the UN- designated terrorist networks but of no avail.

The Tehran-Format meeting on Afghanistan, collaborated and attended by the neighboring countries, highlights the challenges faced by Afghanistan and the need to form a coordinated regional strategy for bringing peace and stability in the region (Pars, 2025). The recent communiqué of special representatives from Pakistan, China, Russia, and Central Asian States in Tehran; that held without the participation of Taliban, focused on regional security. The Tehran Format, developed from the Moscow Format, may be one of the platforms aiming at the need for building consensus on Afghanistan (Pars, 2025). Pakistan, being a close neighboring country and a key member in the region, wants this platform to advance its security concerns. Analysts are of the view that the regional forums like the Tehran Format and the Moscow Format, though focusing on the regional stability and Afghan security, have failed to achieve the efficacious results due to structural hindrances (Paris, 2025).

Due to the geostrategic location and importance of Pakistan in the region, Pakistan does participate in all these forums to achieve a long standing peace in Afghanistan. Pakistan's stance is much clear in its objectives; firstly, maintaining an active role in all the regional interactions, since it has always been favoring a peaceful and stable Afghanistan that would result in regional peace and stability. Any instability in Afghanistan bears a direct imprint on the peace and security of the region particularly for a country like Pakistan. Secondly, security concerns is another area worth attention for Pakistan as in the post-9/11 syndrome, Pakistan has suffered the most in human death casualties, injuries, and loss to infrastructure. Moreover, peace deals with the non-state actors and the result military operations upon failure of the peace deals have also affected the country economically and security wise. Thirdly, Pakistan remains concerned with an

effort to exert pressure on the Taliban regime to bring about change in its behavior for resolving issues with Pakistan and live in peaceful co-existence.

The main purpose of the Tehran Format is to reach out an agreed plan by deepening the regional coordination to address political, economic and security challenges coupled with the need to lifting of sanctions on Afghanistan (AMIR VAHDAT, 2025). The irony of the fate lies in the fact that the meeting aimed at positing a viable solution to the Afghan stalemate but the Taliban did not attend the meeting despite the fact that China, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Russia joined the session organized by Iran (AMIR VAHDAT, 2025). Afghanistan's refusal to attend was mainly due to the Taliban-led government's engagement with the regional countries through existing regional organization formats. The Taliban remained isolated from the regional and international community after they retook power in Afghanistan in August 2021 but in 2024, the Taliban developed diplomatic ties with many countries of the world diplomatically and economically (AMIR VAHDAT, 2025).

Afghanistan still struggles to overcome the issues of poverty and economy through all possible means. Poverty and economic depression has struck Afghanistan since millions of people rely on aid and economic assistance for survival. The struggling economy of Afghanistan has been greatly affected by the regional and international community for not recognizing the Taliban retake of power in the wake of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan (AMIR VAHDAT, 2025). Natural disasters and the return of the Afghan refugees to Afghanistan from Pakistan and Iran have made the country rely more on foreign aid and relief packages from the donor agencies and in international community.

Member-countries of the communiqué also stressed the need for security concerns by pledging to combat terrorism, drug-trafficking and human smuggling while opposing the presence of any foreign force in Afghanistan. They also reiterated the need for lifting sanctions and releasing the frozen assets of Afghanistan and urged the international community organizations by supporting the dignified return of Afghan refugees from the

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neighboring countries. Participants also felt the need for easing the tension between Pakistan and Afghanistan that have particularly been strained due to the winding, porous and treacherous nature of the Durand line resulting in the killings of thousands of people, death casualties, injuries, and infrastructure emanating from the cross border infiltration (AMIR VAHDAT, 2025).

Tension escalated between Pakistan and Afghanistan during October 2025 when the two countries got directly involved in open combats. Islamabad has been trying its level best to address the issues of border infiltration and border crossings. Keeping in view the gravity of the situation, Pakistan had to close its key border point, the Chapman for trade and movement of people after clashes between the two states (Dilawar, 2025) . During the recent conflict, both the countries claimed to have killed scores of soldiers from both the parties. Traders and business community from both sides have been urging their respective governments to reopen the borders since the closure of border has caused much financial loss to them (Dilawar, 2025). Closure of border besides loss to the traders, also results in the expiry of perishable goods, loss of imports-exports, increase in employment, and hardships for the local community that remain dependent on cross-border trade. Though the closure of border results in financial problems for the local community yet at the same time helps in overcoming the issues of terrorism and cross-border infiltration.

During the previous regime of Taliban in Afghanistan during 1996-2001, Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan remained normal and cordial but ties between the two states during the current regime of Afghan Taliban have become more strained making the two countries combat each other. Since August 2021 when the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan, Pakistan has faced a surge of militant attacks blaming it on the militants based in Afghanistan, which blame the Afghan government denies (Dilawar, 2025). Blame game between the two countries has been in vogue for the last many decades particularly on the issue of the Durand Line and cross border infiltration. For the first time in the history of both the countries, both Islamabad and Kabul are engaged in open confrontation

during the last three months. One of the viable solutions to the resolution of the cross border infiltration would be the proper management of border coupled with proper border fencing, installation of biometric system at key entry points, increase in the number of security check points and deployment of more security personnel particularly joint security forces from both sides.

The Tehran Format primarily aimed at promoting regional peace and stability and the need for a coordinated approach towards the current Afghan security situation (Yousaf, 2025). Iran's Foreign Ministry issued a statement urging the need for the deliberations, which reflected broad convergence among regional players on security, economic and political priorities related to Afghanistan (Yousaf, 2025). The participants took a mild stance on the security concerns of Afghanistan and expressed their readiness to work with Kabul instead of urging the Taliban to eradicate terrorist outfits in the country. Pakistan's main concern in Afghanistan is to urge the government and eliminate all the terrorist networks and militant outfits. Working for the elimination of militancy and terrorism can bring lasting peace and stability in both Pakistan and Afghanistan since both shares a very long and porous border. It is worth mentioning that other countries' priorities with regard to Afghanistan may be different from the priorities of Pakistan particularly in the post-9/11 scenario. Integration of Afghanistan with the regional dynamics is *sine qua non* for the survival of the state while isolation of the country can lead towards the exacerbation of instability and human suffering (Al-Waght, 2025).

Discussion and Conclusion

Pak-Afghan relations have remained strained due to the issues of cross border terrorism, infiltration and accusation of blame game and counter blame game for creating cross border terrorism and militancy. Though security situation between the two countries have become tenser due to some factors such as the evacuation of Afghan refugees from Pakistan, and the Pak-India May 2025 security situation have led towards the instability of the region. Regional stability depends upon the cordial relations of the neighboring

countries and particularly between Pakistan and India and between Pakistan and Afghanistan. It is also a fact that Pakistan's relations with the two countries have been strained on account of long borders making them face the face the sense of insecurity and fear of threat. The government of Pakistan has been urging the Afghan refugees to return to their country in a peaceful way since the government of Pakistan has provided them all support during their stay in Pakistan. The people of Afghanistan are also resisting the move of the government of Pakistan while the Afghan refugees also show their unwillingness to repatriate to the country on account of their businesses, blood relations and common property ventures.

Pakistan's stance in the 'Tehran Format' mainly focuses on the security dynamics of the country and the resolution of disputes through peaceful means. It is worth mentioning that Pakistan's security strategy mainly rest upon three strategic objectives; firstly since the intervention of the Russian forces in Afghanistan in 1979 and the resultant withdrawal of the foreign troops in 1989 therefrom, Islamabad considers itself an important stakeholder in the security and strategic affairs of Afghanistan. Secondly, Islamabad wants to maintain its security concerns by applying all channels and forums and wants to utilize all the resources of diplomacy and summits. Thirdly, Pakistan wants to contain the Taliban strategically in an effort to maximize pressure on the Taliban regime for favorable results in maintaining friendly relations with the neighboring countries.

Previously Pakistan was considered to be in favor of a pro-Taliban government in Afghanistan that made it face criticism from the regional and the international community. The recent Taliban government is not on good terms with Pakistan and the two countries have been engaged in direct confrontation for the last two and a half months. It is important to mention that the regional and the international community need to maintain diplomatic and friendly ties with the government of Afghanistan. This would make Afghanistan more involved in the affairs of the world and would provide it with the opportunity to receive and send diplomats to countries of the world. At present China,

Uzbekistan, Pakistan, India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have accepted ambassadors from Afghanistan. Other regional powers should also follow this stance so as to strengthen Afghan Taliban's relations with the regional powers and create a harmonious atmosphere in the world.

The 'Tehran Format' failed to reach out at a joint action plan mainly due to several structural challenges due to lack of a cohesive regional approach. Firstly, the regional forums may be more interested in the engagement of the Taliban regime on bilateral forums so as to secure their objectives in the region. Secondly, the member states of the 'Tehran Format' seem to be divided amongst themselves in their approaches towards the Taliban regarding the misuse of Afghan soil. Thirdly, most of the regional forums including the Tehran Format are consultative in nature and lack institutional mechanism for the enforcement of decisions.

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