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China-Pakistan-Afghanistan
trilateral engagement in 2025

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The first visit of 2026 by Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar to China for Strategic Dialogue on 4th January is significant as it offers an opportunity to explore a way out of the impasse in bilateral and trilateral engagements with the Afghan Taliban government.

Taking stock of the situation in Afghanistan during 2025, it is obvious that the international efforts for long term Afghan peace and stability and the recognition of the over four-year-old Taliban government in the post-US Afghanistan remain in a phase of uncertainty and a continuing struggle despite the Taliban maintaining their control on the ground without any immediate or imminent threat to their regime in the near-term. In this regard, the most challenging and consequential development undoubtedly is the unprecedented decline in relations with Pakistan mainly centering around the differences in perspectives on cross-border terrorism particularly TTP's presence and support from the Afghan soil and the increasing acts of terrorism in Pakistan.

The fissures in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations have also seriously affected the crucial trilateral engagement between the three neighbours – China, Pakistan and Afghanistan – and Chinese approach of gradual and consistent progress on expanding engagement with Afghanistan under the Taliban government since 2021 as part of its regional calculus of strengthening relations and connectivity with West Asia and Central Asia. The increasing US-China competition signified by the new US stance of acquiring Bagram Airbase during the last year clearly signals that Afghan theatre remains a highly contested field on the emerging global strategic chess board.

During the first half of 2025, effective trilateral diplomacy was instrumental in the efforts for reconciling differences between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban leadership. Following Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar's visit to Kabul in April 2025 coinciding with the visit of the Taliban government's Acting Minister of Commerce Nooruddin Azizi to Islamabad, in May 2025 at the 5th trilateral meeting of the Foreign Ministers in Beijing the three countries expressed commitment to enhance mutual trust and deepen cooperation including in the BRI and CPEC connectivity.

Close Pakistan-China cooperation in India-Pakistan four-day war in the beginning of May was instrumental in China asserting its influence on Kabul for rapprochement with Pakistan. At the Chinese behest, Pakistan and Afghanistan also agreed to upgrade their diplomatic relations to Ambassadors level, a measure of symbolic and political significance. Continuing the spike of engagement, the 6th trilateral meeting between Wang Yi, Dar and Muttaqi tried to build on towards strengthening relations through more exchanges, development cooperation and trade/transit connectivity.

However, despite these bilateral and trilateral maneuvers the most fundamental question in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations – the issue of TTP sanctuaries in Afghanistan and their linkage to the terrorism in Pakistan – remained unaddressed. As already by August/September, the year 2025 was moving to be the most violent year for Pakistan in a decade due to TTP and BLA terrorism surge, Pakistan's strikes in Afghanistan on terrorist hideouts and the clashes between

the two countries security forces led to the closure of border and suspension of bilateral channels of communication.

The efforts of mediation of Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia in recent months have played a role in de-escalating confrontation and toning down the tempers but short of an agreement on a bilateral mechanism to put the relations back on track. Though in recent weeks, the remarks of the leadership and the senior officials and spokespersons on both sides have emitted signals that the two sides are moving towards a realistic approach of exploring bilateral engagement for normalization of relations, a concrete breakthrough has not yet occurred.

The experts and analysts agree that opening bilateral channels of engagement and effectively using the trilateral with China to act as a catalyst in the relations is the best option out of the current Afghan-Pakistan stalemate due to a number of factors:

One, China as a neighbour has close relations and key leverages with both Islamabad and Kabul. China is Pakistan's most important strategic partner for past over 70 years and with Afghanistan, since 2021 China has pursued a policy of non-interference on political issues while extending valuable support for economic stability through trade and investments. China in fact became the first country to establish full-fledged diplomatic relations with the Afghan Taliban government in 2023 despite the US pressure.

Two, China has a deep interest in addressing the core issues viz. elimination of cross-border terrorism by groups like Daesh, Al-Qaeda, TTP, BLA, ETIM, IMU and all other such entities. Combating terrorism has been central to Chinese regional strategy since Chinese nationals having been victims of terrorism in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan in recent months and years.

Three, to pursue expansion of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Afghan stability is of crucial importance for creating conditions for CPEC's extension to Afghanistan and onwards with Central Asia through infrastructure and energy projects. China is cognizant that it would not be possible to achieve this objective without stabilizing relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Four, Chinese involvement through the trilateral process would also be a way for preventing inroads that India is trying to make with the Afghan Taliban in view of latter's increasing distance with Pakistan. The strategic gain for Pakistan would be averting a two-front situation by not letting India reviving a nexus with terrorist groups along afghan border with Pakistan.

Therefore, as there are indications that the ice has now begun to melt in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, the two countries need to approach bilateral relations with greater maturity and farsightedness. Recognizing that security/counter-terrorism with actionable measures against TTP/BLA is prime concern for Pakistan, but a realistic perspective should guide that it can only be achieved through a framework of cooperative bilateral engagement on an agenda that also includes facilitative border management for trade, transit and movement of people. The Afghan Interim Government has also to be realistic that just being dismissive to Pakistan's concerns regarding the TTP and ascribing TTP as Pakistan's domestic issue is not a prudent approach and it has to be more responsive to Pakistan's sensitivities.

In parallel, the trilateral forum between China, Pakistan and Afghanistan can be used for facilitating normalization of relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The trilateral interaction can help in narrowing down gaps between Pakistan and Afghanistan for enacting a bilateral verification mechanism on security and cross-border terrorism. In addition, Chinese assistance can also be utilized for introducing technology-based solutions for managing documented movement of people and trade and transit goods through designated crossing points. This can become a precursor of regional connectivity and economic integration.

In conclusion, Pakistan-Afghanistan relations during the past year have reached their lowest ebb. The extreme positions adopted by the two sides against each other have been counterproductive in terms of contribution towards resolution of key issues or preventing the downslide in bilateral relations. China being a strategic partner of Pakistan and an intimate neighbour of Afghanistan is deeply concerned about this situation. The China-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue is definitely an occasion to explore workable solutions towards addressing Pakistan-Afghanistan relations in a natural direction.



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