



## Acceding to Negotiations with Taliban through Pakistan Requires an Honest Neighbour

By Halimullah Kousary<sup>1</sup>

The assassination of Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani on 20 September 2011, former president of Afghanistan during the Mujahideen regime in 1990s and chairman of the Afghan High Peace Council (HPC) urged the Afghan government to recognize Taliban not as an independent force and thus discontinue its efforts to negotiate with them directly.<sup>2</sup> The Afghan government decided to engage Pakistan and through its help push the Taliban to come to the negotiation table.<sup>3</sup> Engaging Pakistan in the Afghan negotiations is pivotal but is also coupled with misgivings as to whether Pakistan would act honestly. On 11 October 2011, Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister stated in a press conference in Kabul that issues related to the Afghan negotiations were discussed with Pakistan in the past but, he added, that the Pakistani authorities are not “honest in what they say”.<sup>4</sup>

For years since 2001 Pakistan has denied providing covert aid for its protégé force- Taliban and the Haqqani Network. And it has repeatedly dismissed claims by the International Community that sanctuaries on its soil exist for these groups. This blame game between Pakistan and the International Community as well as the Afghan government, having continued for years, seems to have taken another turn now. Taliban and Haqqani Network’s increasing and progressively sophisticated insurgent activities against the Afghan government and NATO forces in the recent years have brought Pakistan and the International Community toe-to-toe with each other. The U.S has come down hard on Pakistan trying to urge it to undertake serious actions against the Haqqani Network in North Waziristan Agency of Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Pakistan, however, instead of continuing with the strategy of denial towards the Afghan insurgents’

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<sup>2</sup> “Afghanistan’s former president Burhanuddin Rabbani assassinated”, the Guardian.co.uk, 20 September, 2011

<sup>3</sup> “Karzai: Taliban talks are over, we will negotiate with Pakistan now”, Telegraph.co.uk, 04 October, 2011

<sup>4</sup> “Honest Pakistan needed for Afghanistan’s stability: Ludin” Pajhwok Afghan News, 11 October, 2011



sanctuaries on its soil, now tries to use these sanctuaries as a claim to prevent anti-Pakistan Afghanistan, which is to empower Taliban and the Haqqani Network in the future.

Former president of Pakistan, Pervez Musharraf, in his recent interview with The Daily Telegraph on 28 September 2011 intimated that his country should allow the Haqqani Network to operate on its soil as it can ensure Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> Musharraf argued that, "if Afghanistan is used by India with help from the U.S to create an anti-Pakistan Afghanistan", it is crucially critical for Pakistan to take up strategies that can foil India's efforts. He hinted that in so doing Pakistan should not compromise on insurgent groups like the Haqqani Network. Musharraf made these remarks after Adml Mike Mullen, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, accused Pakistan's intelligence services ISI of aiding and abetting the Haqqani Network against Afghan and NATO forces in Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup>

A critical look at Pakistan's strategies towards Afghanistan pre- and post- 9/11 would elucidate that Pakistan is not preventing an anti-Pakistan Afghanistan but working hard towards installing a regime submissive to the Pakistan's future will for which Pakistan is capitalizing on Taliban and the Haqqani Network. The Afghan government perceives safe sanctuaries for these groups in Pakistan to be the spine of the insurgency that is challenging its authority, triggering instability and impeding economic development in its country. But Pakistan through these sanctuaries wants to ensure an influential role for itself by bringing Taliban and the Haqqani Network into power after a political settlement in Afghanistan.

One might argue that the Afghan government has not done enough to address Pakistan's misgivings about Afghanistan becoming anti-Pakistan. It has been seen that the Afghan government undertook solid measures to convince Pakistan of a responsible and friendly relationship but in line with the legitimate interests of Afghanistan. The Afghan government wanted Afghan led and Afghan owned negotiations with Taliban and also endeavoured to engage Pakistan and seek its assistance in the negotiation process. In confidence building measures with Pakistan, the Afghan government went to the extent that it discontinued

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<sup>5</sup> Duncan Gardham "Musharraf: Why Haqqani terrorist group can help Pakistan", 28 September, 2011

<sup>6</sup> ibid



blaming Pakistan for its interference in Afghanistan, which led to criticism from the Afghan political opposition groups. Osama Bin Laden's death in Pakistan is a case in point. Afghanistan abstained from criticizing Pakistan on Osama's death while the whole world questioned and criticized Pakistan about how Osama managed to live for about five years not in mountains but in Abbottabad- a military city of Pakistan around 60 miles away from Islamabad.

Economic growth in Afghanistan during last ten years turned Afghanistan into a major export market for Pakistan. Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan have increased to two billion USD since the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001<sup>7</sup> while the Afghan-Pak trade Agreement (APTA) inked in July 2010 provides 17 routes through Afghanistan for the Pakistani exports to Central Asia.<sup>8</sup> But still Pakistan remained unmoved by the Afghan government's efforts and apparent economic opportunities for Pakistan in Afghanistan. This is because Pakistan wants not an anti-Pakistan Afghanistan, but an Afghanistan that is governed by a regime submissive to the Pakistani will.

Negotiated settlement of conflicts during the past three decades in Afghanistan has been considered the way forward for Afghanistan; however interference from Pakistan has caused it to fail. During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, after taking office in 1986, President Najibullah made repeated peace overtures to the Mujahideen leaders, offering them a power-sharing deal.<sup>9</sup> The Mujahideen leaders, however, rejected his overtures as one major reason was that Pakistan, which wanted President Najibullah's government toppled by the Mujahideen, opposed it.

Pakistan's strategy of Afghan government negotiations with Taliban is to impede the International Community from playing a major role in the Afghan negotiations. It understands that Afghan negotiations with a major role from the International Community especially U.S is a precursor to a future government set up in Afghanistan that would be friendly but not

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<sup>7</sup> Mohaiuddin Aazim, "Fast growing export markets", dawn.com, 12 September, 2011

<sup>8</sup> "Pak-Afghan Trade Agreement to benefit Pakistan: Amin Fahim", APP, 13 February 2011

<sup>9</sup> Ahmad Rashid, "A deal with the Taliban", Book review of -My life with the Taliban-by Abdul Salam Zaeef, Columbia University Press, January 2010



submissive to Pakistan. The recent assassination of Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani- one of the many examples in the chain of assassinations of Afghan national leaders and tribal elders during the past two years- has been a huge blow to the efforts of direct negotiations with Taliban and Haqqani Network. According to the Afghan government, evidences obtained so far show that Mr. Rabbani's assassination was plotted in Pakistan.<sup>10</sup> Many Afghans in senior political circles argue that Mr. Rabbani's assassination helped Pakistan achieve what it wanted - Afghanistan acceding to negotiations with the Taliban through Pakistan.

The Afghan government is resorting to Pakistan to facilitate negotiations with Taliban and Haqqani Network when Pakistan's lack of honesty (as the Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister explained) and clear intentions of allowing only Pakistan centric Afghan negotiations to take place in Afghanistan are apparent to everyone. Pakistan is ostensibly violating Afghan sovereignty by shelling Afghanistan's border provinces with hundreds of missiles which is described by Afghans as an overt measure by the Pakistani authorities to hurt stability in Afghanistan and undermine the Afghan government.<sup>11</sup> Now the question is that with all this evidence of Pakistan's dishonesty towards Afghanistan so far, what is it that makes the Afghan government hope it would acquire Pakistan's honesty in facilitating Afghan led and Afghan owned negotiations that can lead to neither a submissive nor anti-Pakistan Afghanistan?

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<sup>10</sup> "Afghans Give Pakistanis Evidence In Rabbani Killing" The Associated Press, 01 October, 2011

<sup>11</sup> In June 2011, Pakistani troops fired 400 missiles into different regions in Kunar and Nangarhar provinces. The shelling killed 22 innocent civilians and injured 87 others. Once again on 26 September 2011 Kunar provincial officials reported that in less than a week, nearly 600 missiles were fired from Pakistan into the same provinces displacing over 500 families from the district. ("Pakistan Army Behind Missile Attacks into Afghanistan: NDS" Tolo News, 29 June 2011; Ariana TV Headlines, 26 September, 2011)