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## Pakistan's Involvement in the 'Heart of Asia' Conference

*The sixth Heart of Asia-Istanbul-Process Ministerial conference was held on 4 December 2016 in Amritsar (India). Pakistan chose to attend the conference despite India's boycott of the summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) which was scheduled to be hosted by Islamabad. This paper is an analysis of Pakistan's role in the 'Heart of Asia' Conference.*

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The Heart of Asia-Istanbul-Process (HoA-IP) was founded in November 2011 as a regional dialogue-oriented organisation. Its raison d'être has been to provide a platform for regional cooperation aimed at establishing a secure and stable Afghanistan vital to the prosperity of the HoA region. Three out of its 14 participating countries – Afghanistan, Pakistan and India – are also members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Amritsar in India's sub-national State of Punjab was the venue for the Sixth Ministerial conference of the HoA-IP on 4 December 2016. The Pakistani delegation was led by the Prime Minister's Adviser on Foreign Affairs (de facto Foreign Minister) Sartaj Aziz who arrived in Amritsar a day earlier.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Sartaj Aziz Arrives for Heart of Asia before Schedule, May Meet Narendra Modi", *The Economic Times*, www.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/sartaj-aziz-arrives-for-heart-of-asia-before-schedule-may-meet-narendra-modi/articleshow/55772827.cms.

On 28 November 2016, Pakistan's High Commissioner to India Abdul Basit told Indian TV Channel *Aaj Tak* that "The schedule of Foreign Affairs Adviser Sartaj Aziz is not cast in stone and if there was an offer for talks from the host nation, then it would be accepted by Pakistan".<sup>3</sup> This gave rise to speculation about possible India-Pakistan talks on the sidelines of the HoA conference.<sup>4</sup> Last Year's HoA fifth Ministerial conference held in Islamabad raised hopes of a tremendous positive development in India-Pakistan relations. India's Minister for External Affairs Sushma Swaraj held talks with Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and her counterpart Sartaj Aziz.

On that occasion, they signed a joint declaration in which "(b)oth sides, accordingly, agreed to a Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue and directed the Foreign Secretaries to work out the modalities and schedule of the meetings under the Dialogue including Peace and Security, CBMs (Confidence Building Measures), Jammu & Kashmir, Siachen, Sir Creek, Wullar Barrage/Tulbul Navigation Project, Economic and Commercial Cooperation, Counter-Terrorism, Narcotics Control, Humanitarian Issues, People to People exchanges and religious tourism".<sup>5</sup> It must be noted that this unfreezing of Indo-Pakistan relations that took place in December 2015 was not a consequence of a direct bilateral visit by Sushma Swaraj but it was achieved in the context of the wider HoA conference. In a sense, this paved the way to a higher level visit by India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Lahore on 25 December 2015. The day Modi went to Lahore also had special significance as it was the birthday of Nawaz Sharif, as well as India's former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, and Pakistan's founding leader Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Prime Minister Modi also participated in the celebration of Sharif's granddaughter's wedding which coincided with that visit. This marked a peak in India-Pakistan relations in this decade so far. Thus the annual HoA conference is also a platform that can be used to facilitate talks between India and Pakistan, albeit on the margins, without much obstruction from domestic pressure groups. It is also relevant to the objective of the HoA-IP, as a non-antagonistic relationship between India and Pakistan will also be a matter of significance to the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

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<sup>3</sup> "Pakistan Ready to Hold Talks with India, Says Abdul Basit", DAWN [www.dawn.com/news/129196/pakistan-ready-to-hold-talks-with-india-says-abdul-basit](http://www.dawn.com/news/129196/pakistan-ready-to-hold-talks-with-india-says-abdul-basit).

<sup>4</sup> Same as in Note 2

<sup>5</sup> "Joint Statement on Discussion between External Affairs Minister and Adviser to the Prime Minister of Pakistan on Foreign Affairs in Islamabad". Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, [www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/26133/Joint\\_Statement\\_on\\_Discussion\\_between\\_External\\_Affairs\\_Minister\\_and\\_Adviser\\_to\\_the\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_of\\_Pakistan\\_on\\_Foreign\\_Affairs\\_in\\_Islamabad\\_December](http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/26133/Joint_Statement_on_Discussion_between_External_Affairs_Minister_and_Adviser_to_the_Prime_Minister_of_Pakistan_on_Foreign_Affairs_in_Islamabad_December).

Viewed in such light, the HoA conference in Amritsar was a missed opportunity for a revival of the India-Pakistan peace process. As projected by Pakistan, it has been more forthcoming in reaching out to India for the normalisation of bilateral relations. In an NDTV opinion piece, titled “If India Rebuffs Sartaj Aziz, Pak Will Have What It Wants”, a former Indian Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar wrote that “Sartaj wants to emphasize to world opinion that Pakistan is willing and eager to talk to India and that it is India that is playing spoilsport”.<sup>6</sup>

Pakistan’s participation in this year’s conference was arguably a display of strategic prudence in rising above bilateral tensions with India in the interest of the larger South Asian context. Just a month ago, in November 2016 India had, in Pakistan’s perception, orchestrated a boycott of the 19<sup>th</sup> SAARC summit scheduled to be held in Islamabad. Sartaj Aziz said in his speech at the HoA conference in Amritsar: “My participation in the event, despite escalation on the Line of Control and the Working Boundary with India, is testimony to Pakistan’s unflinching commitment for lasting peace in Afghanistan and the region”.<sup>7</sup> He also told reporters after returning to Pakistan that “(e)veryone whom I met at the Heart of Asia conference appreciated us attending the conference despite the situation across the Line of Control”.<sup>8</sup>

This shows that Pakistan has adopted an accommodative stance where the issue of regional peace is concerned. Pakistan’s newly appointed Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa, who has vast experience operating in ‘Azad Kashmir’ (‘Pakistan-occupied Kashmir’ in India’s view), has been reported to consider extremism a greater threat to Pakistan than India.<sup>9</sup> Pakistan faces a tougher battle on its western frontier combating anti-Pakistan militancy. A sustainable ceasefire on Pakistan’s eastern border provides the ability for it to direct resources towards the west. Back In December 2001, after the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament complex and the Jammu and Kashmir Legislative Assembly, India reacted by massing troops along the Line of Control in what was codenamed ‘Operation *Parakram*’ (Sanskrit term for valour). This had compelled Pakistan to redeploy those of its troops who were then providing ‘operational support’ to the United States in its War on Terror in Afghanistan, thus easing the pressure on Al Qaeda and its associates. An escalation of India-Pakistan tensions is in the interest of

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<sup>6</sup> Mani Shankar Aiyar. “Opinion: “If India Rebuffs Sartaj Aziz, Pak Will Have What It Wants”. NDTV <http://www.ndtv.com/opinion/indias-plans-to-be-rude-to-sartaj-aziz-will-give-pak-what-it-wants-1631239>

<sup>7</sup> “Statement by Adviser to the Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs, Mr. Sartaj Aziz, at the Sixth Heart of Asia Ministerial Conference to Be Held in Amritsar”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, [www.mofa.gov.pk/pr-details.php?mm=NDU1NA](http://www.mofa.gov.pk/pr-details.php?mm=NDU1NA),.

<sup>8</sup> “Ashraf Ghani’s Statement Deserves Condemnation: Sartaj Aziz”, The News.pk, [www.thenews.com.pk/latest/169746-Ashraf-Ghanis-statement-deserves-condemnation-Sartaj-Aziz](http://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/169746-Ashraf-Ghanis-statement-deserves-condemnation-Sartaj-Aziz).

<sup>9</sup> “Lt Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa Chosen as New Army Chief”, DAWN.COM, [www.dawn.com/news/1298802](http://www.dawn.com/news/1298802).

terrorist organisations. Hence, any progress in the India-Pakistan peace process has always been followed by terrorist attacks on the Indian soil. So Pakistan contends that India should recognise that Islamabad is an enemy of radical Islamic extremism.

The strongest remarks directed at Pakistan in Amritsar came from Afghan President Ashraf Ghani. In his speech the President highlight five interrelated phenomena.<sup>10</sup>

- 1) Criminal economic networks, centred on drugs, smuggling, human trafficking and other illicit activities
- 2) Close to 30 groups classified as terrorists by the United Nations attempting to establish bases in Afghanistan.
- 3) Military operations in Pakistan that has brought major but selective displacement of Pakistani extremist networks and their allies onto Afghanistan.
- 4) Pakistan's "undeclared war" with Afghanistan despite its efforts to reach out to Pakistan on a bilateral and multilateral basis.
- 5) Fragmented response of states providing sanctuary and support to extremist networks.

The Military operation President Ghani spoke about in the third point is a reference to operation Zarb-e-Azb launched by former Pakistan Chief of Army Staff General (R) Raheel Sharif. This is arguably an indication of the success of Zarb-e-Azb which was aimed at neutralising extremist elements in Pakistan's tribal areas. The open border between Pakistan and Afghanistan provides a safe haven for militants who seek refuge from the onslaught of the Pakistan Army. As such it is imperative for stringent border controls on both sides to prevent unwanted entry and exit of persons. In response to the Afghan President's statements Sartaj Aziz said that "(p)lacing blame and making allegations against any country does not eliminate terrorism".<sup>11</sup> He also said that he had assured President Ashraf Ghani of "Pakistan's full cooperation and tried to highlight the importance of ensuring the functioning of an effective monitoring system at the border".<sup>12</sup>

The HoA conference also witnessed Pakistan facing rejection by its western neighbour of its offer for economic aid. President Ghani said that "Pakistan has generously pledged 500

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<sup>10</sup> "Transcript of H.E. President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani's Remarks at the Heart of Asia 6th Ministerial Conference on Afghanistan". Office of the President, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan [www.president.gov.af/en/news/transcript-of-he-president-mohammad-ashraf-ghanis-remarks-heart-of-asia-6th-ministerial-conference-on-afghanistan](http://www.president.gov.af/en/news/transcript-of-he-president-mohammad-ashraf-ghanis-remarks-heart-of-asia-6th-ministerial-conference-on-afghanistan).

<sup>11</sup> Same as in Note 8

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

million dollars for reconstruction of Afghanistan. This fund, Mr. Aziz, could very well be used for containing extremism because without peace any amount of assistance will not meet the needs of our people”.<sup>13</sup> This seems to support the speculation that it is not a case that Afghanistan does not need the 500 million dollars but rather it has the backing of India to be confident enough to turn down Pakistani assistance. By the same token, it also seems to signal hints of Indian influence behind Afghanistan’s foreign policy decisions.

Pakistan could have perhaps decided to boycott the Amritsar conference by citing the tensions along the Pakistan-India Line of Control. By deciding otherwise, the Sharif government has come in for criticism at home for being “soft” on India.

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<sup>13</sup> Same as in Note 10