

ISAS Brief

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Ramzan Ceasefire:

Peace Interludes in Kashmir and Afghanistan

Initiatives for ceasefires on the occasion of Ramzan this year in Kashmir and Afghanistan have opened a brief window for political and diplomatic engagement among the parties involved.

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As the holy month of Ramzan draws to a close, there is a mild surge in the prospects for peace – at least a brief break from endless conflict – in Kashmir and Afghanistan. The peace interludes might only flatter to deceive, given the tragic and intractable nature of the two conflicts. However, the cessation of military operations, initiated unilaterally by Delhi and Kabul, have opened the space for some political and diplomatic activity in Kashmir and Afghanistan.

Pessimists, who bet that the past is a reliable guide to the future, would point to the repeated failures at building peace in Kashmir and Afghanistan. However, optimists, who think change is inevitable, highlight some new factors at play. One of these centres on the Pakistan army, a critical player in both conflicts. Since early this year, the Pakistan Army Chief, General Qamar

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Jawed Bajwa, has been signaling Rawalpindi's interest in reconciliation with India and Afghanistan as part of his vision for a peaceful Pakistan.²

Delhi and Kabul are, of course, deeply wary of the Pakistani army, given the long record of their respective conflicts with Pakistan. That should not, however, blind us to the many interesting recent developments in Kashmir and Afghanistan. Following a hotline conversation between the Director Generals of Military Operations (DGMOs) of the two countries at the end of May 2018, the two armies "agreed to fully implement, letter and spirit, the 2003 agreement on ceasefire"³ all along the international border and the line of control in Kashmir. The statement by the Indian army made it explicit that the call and the proposal were initiated by the Pakistan army.

For nearly a decade, the ceasefire has been honoured more in breach than observance. The promise of military restraint from the leadership of the two armies, therefore, has been widely welcomed. There have been some media reports of violations since the end of May 2018, but neither side has declared the ceasefire dead.

It may be interesting that the Pakistani initiative for restoring the ceasefire on the border came days after Delhi announced a unilateral cessation of operations against the militants in Kashmir during the holy month of Ramzan. This was part of an effort to revive the internal peace process in Kashmir.⁴ There is some speculation that the Indian government could extend the ceasefire after the Ramzan celebrations. Delhi has also been signaling its willingness to resume the stalled dialogue with the Kashmir groups, but remains reluctant to engage Pakistan in formal talks until cross-border terrorism comes to an end.⁵

² For a recent discussion, see Sanjay Kapoor, 'Pakistan smokes the peacepipe', *Hindu Businessline*, 31 May 2018. <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/pakistan-smokes-the-peace-pipe/article24048909.ece>. Accessed on 11 June 2018.

³ 'India, Pak DGMOs spoke on special hotline, agreed to ensure ceasefire will not be violated- Army', *Hindustan Times*, 29 May 2018. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-pak-dgmos-spoke-on-special-hotline-agreed-to-ensure-ceasefire-will-not-be-violated-army/story-15XgMwdaImj2AP7dfEnnKM.html>. Accessed on 11 June 2018.

⁴ Vijaita Singh, 'Several factors prompted Kashmir ceasefire', *The Hindu*, 17 May 2018. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/several-factors-prompted-kashmir-ceasefire/article23909957.ece>. Accessed on 11 June 2018.

⁵ Hakim Irfan Rashid, 'Ready for talks with right-minded people: Rajnath Singh on J&K separatists', *Economic Times*, 8 June 2018. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/ready-for-talks-with-right-minded-people-rajnath-singh-on-jk-separatists/articleshow/64502465.cms>. Accessed on 11 June 2018.

The political movement has been more dynamic in Afghanistan. On 7 June 2018, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani announced a unilateral ceasefire during the final week of Ramzan running from 12 to 20 June 2018. If Kabul's move was a surprise, the response of the Taliban has caught most observers off-guard. In a statement issued on 9 June 2018, the Taliban ordered its fighters to stop offensive operations against Afghan forces for the first three days of Eid-al-Fitr stretching from 12 to 14 June 2018. The Taliban added two caveats. The Taliban will defend itself if under attack and the ceasefire does not apply to foreign forces in Afghanistan.⁶

This is the first time that the Taliban has ever announced a ceasefire. Although sceptics warn that some violence will continue, many hope that even the limited gesture from the Taliban could be a turning point in the conflict. Part of this expectation is based on the growing international convergence on bringing the conflict to an end.

That Washington has been mounting pressure on Pakistan to stop nurturing insurgent groups in Afghanistan and Kashmir over the last one year is not a secret. In his South Asia policy articulated last summer, United States (US) President Donald Trump had warned Pakistan to cease supporting terror groups on its soil or face the consequences.⁷

The US has begun to cut its assistance to Pakistan and put Islamabad on the watchlist of the international Financial Action Task Force (FATF) earlier this year. The FATF is expected to meet later in June to review Pakistan's actions on eliminating its financial support to terror groups.⁸

⁶ 'Afghan Taliban announces three-day ceasefire over Eid holiday', *RFE/RI Gandhara*, 9 June 2018. <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghan-taliban-announces-three-day-cease-fire-over-eid-holiday-end-of-ramadan-ghani-/29281053.html>. Accessed on 11 June 2018.

⁷ For an analysis of Trump's statement, see C. Raja Mohan, 'ISAS Insights No. 456- America's Reset of Afghan Strategy: Potential Realignment of South Asian Geopolitics', *Institute of South Asian Studies*, 23 August 2017. https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/media/isas_papers/ISAS%20Insights%20No.%20456-%20Americas%20Reset%20of%20Afghan%20Strategy-%20Potential%20Realignment%20of%20South%20Asian%20Geopolitics.pdf. Accessed on 11 June 2018.

⁸ Ghulam Abbas, 'Pakistan needs to address individual, organisational issues to avoid FATF restrictions', *Pakistan Today*, 10 June 2018. <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2018/06/10/pakistan-needs-to-address-individual-organisational-issues-to-avoid-fatf-restrictions/>. Accessed on 11 June 2018.

Trump also freed the US security forces in Afghanistan from multiple constraints imposed by the Barack Obama administration and turned the heat on the Taliban. The Trump administration has bet that by intensifying the diplomatic pressure on Pakistan and military pressure on the Taliban, it can alter the dynamics of the conflict and create the basis for a political process in Afghanistan.

At the end of May, the commander of the international forces in Afghanistan, General John Nicholson, declared that the Trump administration's strategy is beginning to show results. He also revealed that there that there was a dialogue at various levels between the Taliban and the Afghan government. "What you're seeing right now is a lot of the diplomatic activity and dialogue is occurring off the stage, and it's occurring at multiple levels. So you see mid-level, senior-level Taliban leaders engaging with Afghans", General Nicholson said.⁹

Although the Taliban has denied the talks, Ghani's peace offer last February had begun to generate some pressure on the Taliban. Ghani's proposal included many measures, including ceasefire, release of prisoners, recognition of the Taliban as a political formation, direct talks and changes in the Afghan constitution.¹⁰

Getting Pakistan to support the peace process has been a major objective of the Trump administration. In early June 2018, the Senior Director for US South Asia policy at the White House, Lisa Curtis, publicly underlined the Trump administration's expectations from Pakistan. Curtis said the administration has asked Rawalpindi for 'assistance in facilitating a peace process and we have sought to understand Pakistan's own core security concerns and ensure that its interests are taken into account in any peace process'. However, she insisted that 'we have to be clear that Pakistan's interests are not served by a Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan'. Curtis also argued that Pakistan has a 'fundamental responsibility to address the use of its territory by these

⁹ US Department of Defense Transcript of Gen. John Nicholson's briefing from Kabul on 30 May 2018. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1535817/departments-of-defense-press-briefing-by-general-nicholson-via-teleconference-fr/>. Accessed on 11 June 2018.

¹⁰ Kathy Whitehead, 'Government discloses details of Ghani's peace offer', *Tolo News*, 28 February 2018. <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/government-discloses-details-ghani%E2%80%99s-peace-offer> Accessed on 11 June 2018.

malign actors. One can acknowledge Pakistan’s complex security calculus without absolving it of its responsibility to do something of these malign actors,’ Curtis added.¹¹

The resurgence of the Taliban is certainly not in the interest of China, whose influence in Pakistan has grown significantly in the last few years. Beijing was quick to welcome Ghani’s ceasefire offer and called for talks between Kabul and the Taliban. Media reports from Pakistan say China played a key role in getting the Taliban to respond with its own ceasefire offer.¹²

As we get closer to Ramzan celebrations this week, there is speculation that more steps could follow, for example, on prisoner exchange. Both Kabul and the Taliban have called for such a move. Meanwhile Delhi’s decision to extend the ceasefire in Kashmir could reinforce the peace sentiments across the Subcontinent. While the hopes for a durable peace might be premature, the conflicts in Kashmir and Afghanistan might be entering a new phase in their long and depressing history.

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¹¹ Anwar Iqbal, ‘US, Pakistan working to jump-start Afghan peace process’, *Dawn*, 9 June 2018. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1412975>. Accessed on 11 June 2018.

¹² Kamran Yousaf, ‘Afghan Eid truce “backed by Pakistan, China”’, *The Express Tribune*, 11 June 2018. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1732330/1-afghan-eid-truce-backed-pakistan-china/>. Accessed on 11 June 2018.