[**Strained ties**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1721595/strained-ties)

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RELATIONS between Afghanistan and Pakistan have been strained most of the time, despite attempts at improvement. Afghan and Pakistani leaders have frequently visited each other’s capitals and made tall claims about putting matters on the right track. But relations have continued downhill.

What are the reasons for this? Why are the two countries not moving forward? These questions must be addressed with an open mind and in the spirit of accepting and correcting mistakes.

It’s time for the people of the two countries to emerge from fixated mindsets and take steps to remove the hurdles that have been straining bilateral ties for the past 75 years.

Two events in history, which laid the foundation for adversarial relations between the countries, must be mentioned here. The first stone was cast by our Afghan brothers on Sept 30, 1947, when their representative in the UN voted against Pakistan’s admission to the world body. Though that was a short-lived episode of 20 days and was reversed on Oct 20, 1947, it set the ball rolling — in the wrong direction. While there is frequent mention of the negative vote in public talks in Pakistan, no one mentions when the Afghans voted in favour of Pakistan.

Afghanistan must be treated as a sovereign state.

In all fairness, though, the issue of self-determination for the people of North West Frontier Province should not have been raised when that had already been settled through a referendum in which the overwhelming majority had opted for Pakistan.

The second stone was cast by Pakistan when, in June 1949, it bombed the village of Mughalgai inside Afghanistan. Pakistan claimed that it was an inadvertent act and offered compensation for the damage caused by its warplane. But the Afghan side decided to convene a meeting of the Loya Jirga, which decided that since Pakistan had violated the sanctity of the border first, it would declare the 1893 Durand Line agreement and related treaties dead. The Afghans may be right in raising the issue of the sanctity of the Durand Line, but they did no justice to the reasons that had forced Pakistan to use state power to eliminate troublemakers from across the border.

These two incidents put bilateral relations on the wrong trajectory.

Another important factor to keep in mind while discussing the reasons for strained relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan was the impact of the Soviet invasion of 1979, and, later, of the US-led Nato forces’ occupation of Afghanistan in 2001. Since then, relations with Kabul have been tense, irrespective of the government in power there.

The time has come to take bold decisions and put bilateral relations on the right path. Over the last more than four decades, Afghanistan wasn’t under the peaceful control of one authority. Now it is under one flag. The Afghan Taliban have proved their mettle by controlling the entire country without any serious challenge to their rule. They are now in a better position to take corrective measures. Similarly, Pakistan must have learned the lesson from the wars in Afgha­nistan that power alone cannot solve the problem.

Mistakes of the past should not only be accepted but also regretted by both sides. Only then can we move forward. We need to reconsider our policy towards Afghanistan, keeping in view the fast-changing regional and global situation. The following steps are recommended.

a) Afghanistan must be treated as a sovereign and independent state.

b) No wall or barbed wire can settle boundary disputes. That can be done through dialogue. The border issue must be kept on the back burner until the appropriate time. Afghans do have reservations about the Durand Line but respect its sanctity.

c) The focus must be on facilitating vi­­sas for the Afghans, particularly studen­­ts and sick people. Also, border crossing must be made easy. This is not the case at the moment. Hassle-free trade transactions at Torkham, Chaman, Ghulam Khan and Angoor are the need of the time. Facilitating Afghan transit trade is equally important.

d) Relations between Afghanistan and India should not be made a serious concern unless we see Afghan soil being used against us. Afghanistan, like any other country, has the right to maintain bilateral relations with other states, and India, being an important regional neighbour, can’t be ignored. Further, Afghanistan has historical links with that country. We should have no objections as long as that relationship is not used for activities against Pakistan.

We need to assure the Afghans that we have no strategic depth designs in their country or any intention of interfering in their internal affairs. Let them decide matters for themselves; let them decide how to restore peace in their country, and how to form a government of their choice. This way we can put relations on the right path faster than expected.

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