[Mosharraf Zaidi](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/mosharraf-zaidi)

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**Evading a new refugee crisis**

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres is attending a conference this week in Islamabad to mark four decades of Pakistan’s role as a host nation for refugees.

Despite constant domestic turmoil, Pakistan has always played a remarkably consistent and constructive role in multilateral fora, particularly at the United Nations, and as a member of the UN Security Council (on the seven occasions that it has been elected to it). Pakistan is a world leader in several key areas of multilateralism that many Pakistanis often either don’t know about, or do not celebrate with enough vigour. Hosting refugees is among the top of that list.

Since 1979, at least six million Afghans have crossed over the border between the two countries, seeking refuge from the war and mayhem that has engulfed Afghanistan for four decades now. After Palestinians in Jordan, Afghans in Pakistan represent the world’s longest and most profound refugee challenge.

Today, there are 1.4 million officially recognized Afghan refugees in Pakistan, with nearly three out of four of them having been born in Pakistan. These Afghans carry official an NADRA document called the POR or Proof of Registration card. In addition, nearly 900,000 Afghans are also officially recognized as Afghans – though without refugee status, and without valid visas. Unlike so many European nations, Pakistan (along with Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Uganda, and Bangladesh) has opened its doors to those that sought refuge on its soil – as a function of the wider ethos of the people of these nations.

On January 29 last year, as the Trump US-Afghan peace talks process was starting up, I wrote in this very column, the following prospects that emerge from these peace talks, for Pakistan:

“No matter what happens in the next few months, Pakistan is staring a generational challenge in Afghanistan, not unlike the one that existed throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s: Afghans do not like and do not trust Pakistan. Today, this includes the Taliban, and includes the millions of young Afghans that have grown up in Uncle Sam’s war economy up north. Whilst Pakistani dissent can be managed with a few menacing tweets, paycheques and the denial of ads, young Afghans and old Taliban won’t be quite as pliable. But Pakistan is not a country that likes to learn from history”.

How can a country that continues to host nearly 2.5 million Afghans be a villain for those very people? How can Afghanistan and Pakistan not be of one mind and soul, on the most important issues for both nations?

All knowing, all seeing, all doing: the Pakistani state’s choices are to blame for every ill in the region. Reasonable people do not make this argument knowingly, but in the absence of context, the repeated identification of only Pakistan’s blunders as the root cause of the intergenerational crises in the region ends up being incomplete, incoherent and, most problematically, unhelpful.

War in Afghanistan, refugees to Pakistan, India’s occupation of Kashmir, and terrorism all around are the product of an intergenerational multi-actor contestation for access to trade and travel routes, commercial opportunity, geo-strategic competition, and ideologically driven contempt. A big part of this is the international community’s coddling of India’s raging obsession with hegemonic power in the region. But India alone does not explain how Pakistan ends up holding the liabilities for the errors and appetites of other nations’ elites.

The big power consensus that has existed in other place at other times has never existed on Afghanistan – especially not since the mid 1970s. Today, as the rest of the world begins to fall apart under the duress of complicated US-China and US-Russia dynamics however, something strangely resembling a consensus has begun to emerge in Afghanistan: no more bleeding.

It is a fragile and delicate moment for Afghans. Those that have grown up in Kabul, under the care of American firepower, have benefitted from the billions flowing through the arteries of the newly formed republic. But this ‘new’ is now 17 years old. It is older than, for example, the 18th Amendment to Pakistan’s constitution. Why the comparison? Because context matters. Pakistani chauvinists have taken to calling Afghan leaders like Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, “Mayors of Kabul”. Well, newsflash: Kabul isn’t that small, and the ‘mayoral’ structures that many in Islamabad and Pindi view with such contempt have shown enormous longevity and resilience.

All this does not excuse the callous Afghan elite for their crimes. No one bears more responsibility for Afghanistan than the Afghan elite – no matter the howls and shrieks of some Afghans, or their supporters or proxies around the planet. Concurrently, no one bears more responsibility for the state of citizen-state relations in far flung and remote areas in Pakistan than the Pakistani elite – and this obviously includes every manner of elite, especially those that wield the most power.

India and its proxies have done and will continue to do everything in their power to distract Pakistan from the path of enabling and supporting the delicate and fragile global consensus for peace in Afghanistan. In the coming days, as the peace plan that Zalmay Khalilzad and the Afghan Taliban have reached morphs into reality, there will be spoilers galore: suicide bombings, assassinations, provocative statements, fake news, protestations and both subtle and shrill distractions from the siraat al mustaqeem. Every single one will be designed to provoke Pakistani decision-makers into intemperate public engagement, over-reactions, and poor judgements – especially at home, where the over-indulgence in counter-fifth generation war tactics has consumed policymakers into several false binaries and poor decisions since 2015.

The stakes for Pakistan could not be higher. For starters, India will seek to keep Afghanistan on the boil so that Pakistan’s blunders from a quarter century ago continue to be Pakistan’s brand in New York, DC, London, Brussels, Paris and Berlin. Overcoming that brand is a vital step in almost every facet of national life: from avoiding unfair treatment at the FATF, to attracting FDI, to finding new export markets, to drawing in expatriate talent, to more relaxed visa restrictions – in short, Pakistan’s economy can no longer afford its existing brand.

The Afghan refugee in Pakistan is resilient to false alarms: only a durable peace will help address the challenge, if at all. The more immediate concern for Pakistan (and the UN) should be the emergence of a new wave within this challenge. If instead of peace, there is a spring and summer of war, and this war were to penetrate city limits in Jalalabad, Kandahar and Kabul, short-term refugee outflows into Pakistan are likely to exceed 250,000 – and this is a conservative figure. How will the already stretched public health, water and sanitation and education systems in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa manage this kind of inflow?

Perhaps most importantly, any breakdown of the peace process, and continuation of war in Afghanistan will continue to blunt Pakistan’s engagement with the ECO, SCO and CAREC. It will undermine the efforts to create a flow of traffic through Afghanistan via nodes like Torkham, and projects like the $400 million Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Economic Corridor. Most of all, it will saddle Pakistan with the twin nightmare of managing its own affairs whilst trying to avoid affairs with Afghanistan.

Forty years of hosting refugees and carrying the burden of other countries’ elites should have taught Pakistan how unforgiving and ungrateful the world is. The warmth of Secretary General Guterres’ visit should not distract or delude Pakistan from this fundamental reality.

The writer is an analyst and commentator.