

Pakistan's Role in the Future of Afghanistan

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Summary

The speed of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has surprised everyone. What was expected to take at least three months took merely a few weeks with the Taliban entering Kabul on 15 August 2021. Born with a security dilemma concerning India and territorial disputes with Afghanistan and India, Pakistani policymakers have been viewing Afghanistan through the lens of strategic depth. This means that its Afghanistan policy has been India-centric as it has been trying to limit India's influence in Afghanistan by also paving the way for a pro-Islamabad government in Kabul. Part and parcel of this puzzle has been Pakistan's support for the Taliban. As Pakistan has been a long-time supporter of the Taliban, it is important to analyse how this relationship and other concerns will shape its role in the future of Afghanistan.

Background

After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Washington contacted Islamabad to become its frontline ally in a proxy war against the Soviets. During the Afghan-Soviet War (1979-1989), thousands of holy warriors or *mujahideen* were recruited from around the world, trained in Pakistan and then deployed to Afghanistan. Then Pakistan provided refuge to more than four million Afghan refugees.¹ In addition to receiving billions in economic and military assistance from the United States (US), Pakistan expanded its influence in Afghanistan through close relations with the Afghan *mujahideen* as they later united as the Taliban in the 1990s. In 1994, Mullah Omar founded the Taliban with 50 students in Kandahar. By 1995, the group's control increased to 12 provinces and its size to 25,000 fighters.² Due to its quick territorial gains, the Taliban managed to control most of the country and establish the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) in 1996.

For Pakistan, it was a sense of relief to see a friendly government in Kabul. Due to this, Pakistan was among the only three countries alongside Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates that recognised the IEA. Islamabad's support was the Taliban regime's lifeline as there was close cooperation in terms of human and financial resources, weapons and Pashtun combatants from Pakistan to fight the Northern Alliance.³ Then, Pakistan downplayed the true extent of its cooperation with the Taliban, but it was an open secret. Pakistan's foreign policy has been India-centric, and this dynamic is manifested more than often in the country's relationship with Afghanistan. In the shape of the IEA, Pakistan was

¹ "Afghanistan's refugees: forty years dispossession", Amnesty International, 20 June 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/06/afghanistan-refugees-forty-years/>.

² "Afghan Taliban", Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/afghan-taliban>.

³ Bruce Riedel, "Pakistan, Taliban and the Afghan quagmire", The Brookings Institution, 24 August 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/pakistan-taliban-and-the-afghan-quagmire/>.

not just able to see a regime in Kabul that ignored issues like the Durand Line and Pashtunistan, but also the one that completely disrupted Afghanistan's ties with India. In 1996, India had to close its only diplomatic mission in Kabul.⁴ As New Delhi views the Taliban as Pakistan's proxy, its relationship with the Taliban has been conflictual. This was demonstrated in 1999 when an Indian passenger plane on route from Delhi to Kathmandu was hijacked by Kashmiri militants and landed in Kandahar. New Delhi blamed Pakistan for the incident but in the end settled the matter by releasing three Kashmiri militants to save the lives of 180 passengers.⁵

Islamabad was, however, never in full control of the Taliban as they did not recognise the Durand Line as a permanent border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Also, on many occasions, they did not accede to Pakistan's demands. In 2001, Pakistan tried to persuade the Taliban to not demolish the Buddhas of Bamiyan, but the IEA did not stop.⁶ Similarly, after 9/11, Islamabad, among other states, approached the Taliban to handover Osama bin Laden to the US, but Afghanistan refused citing the Pashtun code of conduct 'Pashtunwali' that urges all Pashtuns to protect their guests.⁷

Since 9/11

After the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the US, Washington wanted Pakistan to join the "war on terror". This alliance involved Pakistan capturing some key Taliban leaders, such as Mullah Abdul Salam Zareef who was Afghanistan's Ambassador to Pakistan during the Taliban regime. Zareef ended up in the notorious Guantanamo Bay.⁸ A founding member of the Taliban, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, was also captured by Pakistan.⁹ This turned the Taliban against Pakistan. In 2010, for example, the Taliban attacked a Pakistani checkpoint and captured 40 soldiers.¹⁰

It is remarkable how the Taliban and Pakistan have repaired their relations. It is mainly due to the convergence of interests as Pakistan wants a friendly government in Kabul and the Taliban needs Islamabad's multifaceted support, such as in the shape of refuge for Taliban members and their families in Pakistan and re-organisation through the Quetta Shura. This allowed Islamabad to gain some leverage as reflected through its ability to bring the Taliban

⁴ Sushant Singh, "Afghanistan shows the limit of India's power", *Foreign Policy*, 22 April 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/22/afghanistan-india-united-states-departure/>.

⁵ Soutik Biswas, "Afghanistan conflict: The Air India flight out on a fateful Sunday", *BBC*, 16 August 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-58228280>.

⁶ "Pakistan and Japan plead for Afghan statues", *CNN*, 9 March 2001, <http://edition.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/central/03/09/afghanistan.destruction/>.

⁷ Saurav Sarkat, "The Taliban and al-Qaeda: Enduring partnership or liability", *The Diplomat*, 16 June 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/the-taliban-and-al-qaeda-enduring-partnership-or-liability/>; and "Taliban: We have bin Laden", *WIRED*, 30 September 2001, <https://www.wired.com/2001/09/taliban-we-have-bin-laden/>.

⁸ "Guantanamo frees ex-Taliban envoy", *Al Jazeera*, 12 September 2005, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2005/9/12/guantanamo-frees-ex-taliban-envoy>.

⁹ Julian Borger, "Pakistan refuses to hand over captured Taliban leaders to Afghanistan", *The Guardian*, 19 March 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/mar/18/pakistan-refuses-handover-taliban-afghanistan>.

¹⁰ "Dozens of Pakistani troops 'captured by the Taliban'", *BBC*, 16 June 2010, <https://www.bbc.com/news/10329806>.

to dialogues.¹¹ Leading up to the US-Taliban peace deal in 2020 in Doha, Islamabad supported the deal in various ways by negotiating with the Taliban and facilitating intra-Afghan negotiations.¹²

While Pakistan's recent narrative shows that it has no favourites in Afghanistan as Pakistani officials have also met non-Pashtun Afghan leaders, its actions revealed that it is on the side of the Taliban. During 2020-21, Taliban delegations visited Islamabad on several occasions for high-level meetings, including with Pakistan's Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and Chief of the Inter-Services Intelligence.¹³ Following the US-Taliban peace deal in 2020, Islamabad has been more comfortable in terms of projecting its relationship with the Taliban as was depicted through the publicisation of meetings with Taliban delegations.

After the Taliban Takeover

As the Taliban's aggression continued after the peace deal with the US, the Afghan government's frustration increased. This was reflected through anti-Pakistan sentiments expressed by not just the public but also by top officials like Vice President Amrullah Saleh who was active on Twitter. Since the regime's collapse, Saleh has taken his anti-Pakistan campaign to the streets.¹⁴ The level of anti-Pakistan sentiment was exhibited through the #SanctionPakistan movement on Twitter, which spread like wildfire as the hashtag was used more than 730,000 within a couple of days of the Taliban's takeover.¹⁵

Immediately after the Taliban's takeover – which perhaps also surprised policymakers in Pakistan – there were different reactions. While the Foreign Office spoke in favour of an inclusive government in Kabul, Prime Minister Imran Khan's remarks reflected a celebration or relief in Pakistan when he said the Afghans have "broken the shackles of slavery".¹⁶

As the Taliban wants to show that the situation is normal in Afghanistan since its takeover, it relies on its long-term partners like Pakistan. Despite that fact that the Taliban has released many imprisoned members of anti-Pakistan, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Islamabad has so far shown no signs of being alarmed by the recent developments in Afghanistan. As many Western countries have thwarted aid to Afghanistan and placed economic sanctions, the Taliban expect Pakistan to help in all possible ways. Pakistan has acted accordingly, by opening the Chaman-Spin Boldak border crossing soon after the Taliban's takeover on 14

¹¹ Riedel, "Pakistan, Taliban and the Afghan quagmire".

¹² "Pakistan: Shoring up Afghanistan's peace process", Crisis Group, 30 June 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/pakistan/b169-pakistan-shoring-afghanistans-peace-process>.

¹³ Charlotte Greenfield and Jibrán Ahmed, "Taliban delegation visits Islamabad, plans for leadership meeting in Pakistan", *Reuters*, 16 December 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-pakistan-idUSKBN28Q171>.

¹⁴ "Afghan VP Amrullah Saleh takes to street, targets Pakistan and Taliban", *Hindustan Times*, 4 August 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/afghan-vp-amrullah-saleh-takes-to-street-targets-pakistan-and-taliban-101628050705013.html>.

¹⁵ "#SanctionPakistan trends as violence rages in Afghanistan", *Al Jazeera*, 11 August 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/11/sanction-pakistan-twitter-trend-afghanistan-taliban>.

¹⁶ Maroosha Muzaffar, "Taliban have broken 'the shackles of slavery,' says Pakistan PM Imran Khan", *Independent*, 18 August 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/south-asia/taliban-pakistan-imran-khan-afghanistan-b1903821.html>.

August 2021.¹⁷ Further demonstrating that nothing has changed for Pakistan, Islamabad continues a special scholarship scheme for Afghan youth to study in top Pakistani institutions.¹⁸ Pakistan's embassy in Kabul is among the only four diplomatic missions, including those from Russia, China and Iran, which remain open. The Pakistan embassy in Kabul has also been issuing visas. Its national carrier, Pakistan International Airlines, has been flying between Kabul and Islamabad to evacuate not just Pakistani citizens but others too. Many Western countries have appreciated Pakistan's support in terms of evacuation efforts.¹⁹

Facing the issue of compliance with the Financial Action Task Force in terms of terrorism financing and similar allegations from many states, Pakistan sees its engagement in Afghanistan as an opportunity to prove that it is a responsible regional actor. Firstly, Pakistan is indicating that it is behind an inclusive government in Afghanistan by not having any favourites. Secondly, it is pressuring the Taliban to take strict actions against the TTP. Finally, Islamabad is helping many Western states evacuate from Afghanistan.

With reference to its support for an inclusive government in Kabul, Islamabad has been discussing with all local, regional and international actors. While the Taliban fighters were outside Kabul, a high-level Afghan delegation was on its way to Islamabad for negotiations. Pakistan claims that it wants to engage all regional actors in the Afghan peace process by organising a conference.²⁰ While Pakistan was side-lined during a recent United Nations Security Council meeting on Afghanistan on 8 August 2021,²¹ Islamabad has approached the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to host an emergency meeting on the situation in Afghanistan.²²

What's Ahead?

Through a greater involvement in Afghanistan, Pakistan wishes to achieve various objectives. While the US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization alliances have failed to achieve their key objectives vis-à-vis the "war on terror" in Afghanistan, Islamabad's positive engagement can be fruitful in terms of repairing its global image. Learning from the lessons of the past, Pakistan needs to work with all Afghan stakeholders to prove its neutrality. This will help Islamabad achieve its desired objectives of creating its positive image in

¹⁷ "Pakistan reopens Chaman-Spin Boldak border crossing after talks with Taliban", *The Print*, 14 August 2021. <https://theprint.in/world/pakistan-reopens-chaman-spin-boldak-border-crossing-after-talks-with-taliban/715349/>.

¹⁸ Abdul Raqeeb Sail, "Pakistan announces 100 scholarships for Afghanistan", *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 23 August 2021, <https://pajhwok.com/2021/08/23/pakistan-announces-100-scholarships-for-afghans/>.

¹⁹ Sana Jamal, "EU seeks Pakistan's help to evacuate foreigners from Kabul", *Gulf News*, 23 August 2021, <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/pakistan/eu-seeks-pakistans-help-to-evacuate-foreigners-from-kabul-1.81761884>.

²⁰ "High-level Afghan delegation arrives in Islamabad", *The Express Tribune*, 15 August 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2315756/high-level-afghan-delegation-arrives-in-islamabad-as-taliban-surround-kabul>.

²¹ "Pakistan expresses regret at not being invited to UN Security Council meeting on Afghanistan", *Firstpost*, 8 August 2021, <https://www.firstpost.com/world/pakistan-expresses-regret-at-not-being-invited-to-un-security-council-meeting-on-afghanistan-9872191.html>.

²² "Pakistan appreciates OIC emergency meeting on Afghanistan", *Business Recorder*, 23 August 2021, <https://www.brecorder.com/news/40115000>

Afghanistan that to-date remains negative despite Pakistan being home to the largest proportion of Afghan refugees in the world.

Anti-Pakistan sentiment in Afghanistan has not changed even though it is home to the nearly three million Afghan refugees.²³ For the past several years, Pakistan has been raising the issue of repatriating Afghan refugees but has given extensions due to requests from United Nations Human Rights Council. While Pakistan's one border crossing with Afghanistan is open, it only allows Afghans with valid Pakistani visas to enter. Islamabad has repeatedly said that it is no longer able to accept more refugees.²⁴ As was the case in 1996 and during the IEA regime, Pakistan is hoping that Afghan refugees would be repatriated soon. This will also serve the interest of the Taliban who want to show that the situation is normal after their takeover and Afghan citizens can return.

Unlike the past, the Taliban now appears to be having more external engagement. This is reflected through the continued diplomatic presence of countries with whom the Taliban has established and/or maintained links after 9/11. After the US troop withdrawal and repatriation of the Taliban members and their families from Pakistan, Islamabad is likely to lose its leverage over the Taliban. In this context, the involvement of other regional players in Afghanistan will help Pakistan maintain some influence over the Taliban. After a recent attack on Chinese citizens in Pakistan, Islamabad had asked Beijing to directly talk with the Taliban to demand the group to cut its ties with terrorist groups like the East Turkestan Islamic Movement.²⁵ This new-found approach in Islamabad is also demonstrated through its narrative demanding an inclusive government in Kabul and desire to host a regional conference involving all stakeholders. It seems Islamabad is trying to repair its image as a principal supporter of the Taliban.

Like China, Pakistan has also demanded the Taliban take strict actions against anti-Pakistan elements in Afghanistan. Accordingly, the Taliban has set up a special commission to investigate the TTP's anti-Pakistan activities.²⁶ It is, however, unclear how this commission will work and when it will submit its findings to the Taliban leadership. For the Taliban it is not easy to make a U-turn on the TTP as the latter has been supporting the Taliban's military in Afghanistan. Hence, for now, the Taliban's association with the TTP remains an irritant in their relations with Pakistan.

Besides the TTP, Pakistan's concern has been regarding allegedly India's anti-Pakistan activities through the Afghan soil. The Taliban have indirectly assured everyone, not just Pakistan, that it will not allow anyone to use Afghanistan's territory against them. Just as it was during the IEA's first government (1996-2001), it is likely that Pakistan will not have to worry about India's presence in Afghanistan. As was the case in 1996, India has quickly

²³ Sarah Atiq, "Afghanistan: Pakistan fences off from Afghan refugees", *BBC*, 19 August 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58187983>.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Amy Chew, "Boosted by China ties, Taliban now faces tough call on ETIM crackdown", *South China Morning Post*, 6 August 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3144148/boosted-china-ties-taliban-now-faces-tough-call-etim-crackdown>.

²⁶ "Afghanistan's Taliban forms commission to look into TTP's anti-Pak acts", *Livemint*, 22 August 2021, <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/afghanistans-taliban-forms-commission-to-look-into-ttp-s-anti-pak-acts-11629590158995.html>.

closed all its diplomatic missions in Afghanistan and continues to evacuate its citizens. The clash of interests between India and Pakistan in Afghanistan will depend on not just their relationship in general but also on the kind of a political set-up that will emerge in Afghanistan. If an inclusive government is established through the support of external actors, including India and Pakistan, it will reduce the likelihood of their continued proxy engagement in Afghanistan.

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