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Pakistan: Shoring Up Afghanistan's Peace Process

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What's new? The fast-paced withdrawal of foreign troops amid stalled peace talks and rising insurgent violence in Afghanistan threatens to undermine Pakistan's efforts to facilitate the Taliban's return to Kabul through power-sharing arrangements that have international backing.

Why does it matter? Should the Afghan peace process continue to sputter or altogether fail, Islamabad's relations with Kabul and Washington would sour. Further instability or Taliban gains in Afghanistan could embolden Pakistani militants aligned with their Afghan counterparts, deepening insecurity in Pakistan, especially in its tribal areas along the Afghan border.

What should be done? Islamabad should reach out to Kabul to reduce mistrust. Using the access and leverage provided by the Taliban leadership's sanctuaries on its territory, Pakistan should press the insurgents to reduce violence and negotiate a compromise on power-sharing arrangements with other Afghan stakeholders.

I. Overview

Pakistan's stakes in a stable Afghanistan have never been higher as violence escalates in that country and the peace process set in train in September 2020 remains largely deadlocked. An unravelling Afghanistan could embolden Pakistani militant groups, particularly the Pakistani Taliban, and threaten yet another massive influx of Afghan refugees. Islamabad has been trying to persuade its Afghan Taliban allies to opt for a peacefully negotiated political settlement. Its failure in that endeavour would strain its ties with Washington and Kabul. With the clock ticking on the deadline for pulling out U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan, Pakistan should redouble its efforts to convince the Taliban to scale back both their attacks and their aspirations to reinstitute their version of Islamic governance – so that the peace process may yet succeed.

Pakistan has supported the Afghan peace process, largely because its long-time Taliban ally can use the talks as a road to power with international legitimacy and the attendant economic support. It saw an opportunity to push for its preferred option – the Taliban's inclusion in power-sharing arrangements – when the Trump administration began pursuing a political settlement in Afghanistan as the U.S. prepared to withdraw troops from the country. Washington acknowledged Islamabad's role in

facilitating the February 2020 U.S. agreement with the Taliban and the subsequent peace talks, also known as the intra-Afghan negotiations.

But in January 2021, when President Joe Biden took over the U.S. administration, the talks were at an impasse. The Taliban continued to rely on violence to strengthen their bargaining position; Kabul, too, appeared unwilling to make substantive compromises. Biden's decision, announced on 14 April 2021, to withdraw all U.S. troops by 11 September, even absent a political settlement, has tightened timelines for getting a peace process moving before the conflict intensifies, as appears likely, in the withdrawal's wake. (At the time of publication, the withdrawal looks set to be completed even earlier, by mid-July.)

Since intra-Afghan negotiations started in Doha, Qatar on 12 September 2020, Pakistan's military leadership and Prime Minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf government have repeatedly emphasised that only a political settlement can end conflict in Afghanistan. Pledging support for an Afghan-led peace process, they have also repeatedly denied backing any party to the conflict. Yet the presence of the Taliban's top military and political leadership on Pakistani territory gives Islamabad a direct role, and hence a big stake, in the intra-Afghan parley. The sanctuary Pakistan gives the Taliban also reinforces mistrust of Pakistani intentions among Afghan governing and opposition circles.

As foreign soldiers leave, and the insurgents appear bent on using force to gain power and install an Islamic system of government, Islamabad faces renewed pressure from Kabul and Washington to convince the Taliban at the very least to reduce violence to ensure that negotiations continue. Pakistan's clout with the insurgents has declined as they continue to make military gains in Afghanistan. That influence has far from dissipated, however, since the Taliban shura (leadership council) still operates out of Pakistani havens. Taliban commanders in Afghanistan may dispute but will still follow that leadership's instructions.

It is in Pakistan's interest to persuade, using pressure if need be, the Taliban shura to break the logjam in the peace talks by reducing violence and moderating demands for Islamic, likely Sunni Deobandi, governance. Indefinitely stalled negotiations would heighten tensions with Kabul and might harm Islamabad's relations with Washington – a grave concern for Pakistani military leaders. China, Pakistan's closest foreign partner, also probably prefers that Islamabad work to produce a more stable outcome than a Taliban victory followed by an attempt at monopolistic rule. A failed peace process could spark all-out civil war in Afghanistan and a massive influx of refugees into Pakistani territory. Violence in Afghanistan would also spill over into Pakistan, destabilising its conflict-prone western border as Taliban gains empower the Afghan insurgents' Pakistani Deobandi militant allies. In the worst-case scenario, a Taliban military takeover in Kabul, Pakistan would face the dilemma of dealing with its ally heading a regime that would enjoy scant outside backing and – crucially – very little financial aid.

Once foreign troops leave Afghanistan, Western patience with the country's unending conflict, and its quarrelling factions, is likely to fade. Time is of the essence if Pakistan is to achieve the objective of a political settlement that gives its Taliban allies a road to legitimate power sharing and prevents the Afghan conflict from undermining security at home.

II. Backdrop

A. Pakistan's Afghan Proxies

Pakistan's intervention in Afghanistan and links with the Taliban predate the movement's 1996 establishment of its Islamic Emirate by several decades. Seeing itself as inheriting the British Indian empire's western frontier, the so-called Durand Line, in 1947, Pakistan perceived Afghanistan as falling within its sphere of influence. It retains this view, often looking at Afghanistan as a "fifth province" that is dependent on a "benevolent big brother's good-will".¹ Afghans have historically bristled at these Pakistani attitudes. The Durand Line, moreover, cuts through areas that the Pashtuns dominating successive Kabul governments have considered their homeland. Afghan leaders have long refused to recognise the 2,430km line as the international border and staked claims to contiguous Pakistani Pashtun-majority territories.² The dispute has marred bilateral relations.

Since at least the 1970s, Pakistan has backed various Afghan Islamist factions as an antidote to Pashtun nationalism. To gain vital U.S. support, Pakistan also provided safe haven and military support to various Afghan mujahideen factions during the so-called anti-Soviet jihad. Many mujahideen leaders now hold prominent positions in Afghan ruling and opposition circles. Though earlier Afghan leaders had sought to distance themselves from Pakistan's rivalry with India, opting for neutrality in the 1965 and 1971 Indo-Pakistani wars, the Soviet-backed communist government in Kabul drew closer to New Delhi as Islamabad sponsored Afghan insurgents.³

Following the 1989 Soviet withdrawal and the civil war that ensued, Pakistani intervention in Afghanistan continued, including failed attempts at forging political settlements among warring mujahideen factions. Yet the pledges, such as after the Soviet withdrawal, to help Afghans find a peaceful solution were mere rhetoric, with Pakistan choosing instead to back handpicked Afghan proxies. Pakistan's preferred Afghan partners first included Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's predominantly Pashtun Hizb-e Islami.

As Hekmatyar lost ground to Afghan opponents, including the Tajik-dominated Jamiat-e Islami, the Pakistan military shifted its support to the largely Pashtun Taliban.⁴ Many present-day Taliban leaders and commanders were students (*talibs*) in madrasas run by two factions of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, a Pakistani Deobandi Pashtun political party, led by Fazlur Rehman and Samiul Haq. Haq, who headed the Akora Khattak madrasa in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province's Nowshera district, had

¹ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former Pakistan ambassador, January 2021; former senator from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, October 2020. See also Crisis Group Asia Report N°262, *Resetting Pakistan's Relations with Afghanistan*, 28 October 2014.

² The 1893 agreement between Mortimer Durand, an emissary of the British Indian government, and Afghan ruler Emir Abdur Rahman demarcated the border between colonial India and Afghanistan, dividing Pashtun-majority areas in the bordering regions of present-day Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Afghanistan does not recognise Pakistan's claim to be the inheritor of that territorial agreement.

³ Ahmad Bilal Khalil, "The Tangled History of the Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Triangle", *The Diplomat*, 16 December 2016.

⁴ For background on the Taliban movement, see Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: The Story of the Afghan Warlords* (London, 2001).

particularly close ties to Taliban founder Mullah Mohammad Omar.⁵ Pakistan's Deobandi madrasa networks were also a major source of Pakistani Pashtun recruits to the Taliban cause.⁶

Pakistan was one of three countries, the others being Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to recognise the Taliban's Islamic Emirate, established after the movement captured Kabul in 1996. The Taliban's rivals, the Northern Alliance, dominated by Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras, not surprisingly sought New Delhi's backing. After the September 2001 terror attacks in the U.S., pressure from Washington prompted Pakistan's military ruler President Pervez Musharraf formally to sever ties with the Taliban.⁷ Yet, after the October 2001 U.S.-led invasion ousted the Taliban's regime, Pakistan provided shelter to their *rahbari shura*, the body composed of their top leaders and military commanders.⁸ The Taliban's command structures – political and military – were reconstituted out of these sanctuaries, which allowed the insurgents to recruit, raise money and conduct attacks on U.S. and aligned forces as well as Western-backed Afghan governments. Aided also by the predation of Kabul's new rulers and abuses by foreign forces, the Taliban gained support in the Pashtun-majority south and east.⁹

B. *Bringing the Taliban in from the Cold*

As the Taliban insurgency gained ground beginning around 2005, successive Afghan governments, namely Hamid Karzai's and Ashraf Ghani's, attributed its military prowess to Pakistani havens and Islamabad's active logistical and material support.¹⁰ The Taliban's resurgence also strained Pakistan's relations with the U.S. In 2011, after an attack on the U.S. embassy in Kabul, Admiral Michael Mullen, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called the Taliban-aligned Haqqani network "a veritable arm" of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) – the Pakistan military's premier intelligence agency.¹¹

⁵ See "University of Jilhad' proud of Taliban alumni", *Dawn*, 17 November 2020; and "Mullah Omar is an angel-like human being: Samiul Haq", Reuters, 15 September 2013.

⁶ Olivier Roy, "Islamic Radicalism in Afghanistan and Pakistan", CNRS, January 2002.

⁷ In an interview, Musharraf claimed that following the September 2001 attacks, Assistant Secretary of State Richard Armitage warned Pakistan to cooperate with the U.S.-led war on terror or "be prepared to be bombed. Be prepared to go back to the stone age". "Bush threatened to bomb Pakistan, says Musharraf", *The Guardian*, 22 September 2006. See also Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: How the War Against Islamic Extremism is Being Lost in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia* (London, 2008).

⁸ Hereafter, this briefing refers to the Taliban's *rahbari shura* (leadership council), also known as the Quetta shura, simply as the Taliban shura.

⁹ Crisis Group Asia Reports N°s 62, *Afghanistan: The Problem of Pashtun Alienation*, 5 August 2003; 207, *The Insurgency in Afghanistan's Heartland*, 27 June 2011; and 256, *Afghanistan's Insurgency after the Transition*, 12 May 2014.

¹⁰ Crisis Group Special Report N°3, *Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight Against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid*, 22 March 2017. See also Zachary Constantino, "The India-Pakistan Rivalry in Afghanistan", U.S. Institute of Peace, 29 January 2020.

¹¹ "Mullen: Pakistan's spy agency supported U.S. embassy attack", *The New York Times*, 22 September 2011. On Pakistan-U.S. tensions over the Haqqani issue, and the links between the Haqqanis and the Taliban, see Rahimullah Yusufzai, "The Haqqani Question", Jinnah Institute, 2018.

Well aware that any path for the Taliban's return to power (in a manner that would not cast Pakistan as, once again, protector of a pariah regime) would depend on international recognition, Pakistani policymakers now faced the challenge of bringing the Taliban in from the cold. As early as the 2001 Bonn conference that drew up a roadmap for post-invasion Afghanistan, Pakistan had asked for the Taliban's inclusion in consultations on Afghanistan's constitutional and political restructuring. A former senior Pakistani diplomat said Pakistan had "pleaded with the U.S. to include the Taliban in Bonn".¹² Pakistan's consistent efforts to persuade the U.S. to bring the Taliban into the political mainstream appeared to bear fruit a decade later, when the Obama administration signalled its intention to leave Afghanistan and its openness to talking with the Taliban.¹³

On 7 July 2015, Pakistan hosted the first direct formal contacts between the Taliban and Afghan government representatives, including the deputy foreign minister, in Murree; U.S. and Chinese representatives were also present. A second round, scheduled for 31 July, was aborted after the Afghan presidential palace disclosed that Taliban leader Mullah Omar had died two years earlier, allegedly in a Pakistani hospital.¹⁴ Subsequent Pakistani efforts at a negotiated settlement that would give the Taliban a pathway to power, including the Quadrilateral Dialogue (Pakistan, Afghanistan, the U.S. and China), made little headway, largely because the insurgents refused to talk directly to the Afghan government. That dialogue, moreover, came to a halt after the U.S. killed Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mohammed Mansour in a drone strike as he re-entered Pakistan from Iran in May 2016.¹⁵

Yet the restructuring of the Taliban shura following Mansour's death, with successor Shaikh Haibatullah Akhunzada appointing Sirajuddin Haqqani as one of his principal deputies, worked to Pakistan's advantage. The Haqqanis, particularly close to Pakistan, were now an integral part of the top Taliban leadership. Any attempt – by Kabul or Washington – to seek dialogue with the Taliban would of necessity include the Haqqanis and hence reduce pressure on Pakistan to cut its ties with the lethal insurgent faction.¹⁶ By 2021, Sirajuddin Haqqani's younger brother, Anas, had become a member of the Taliban negotiating team in Doha and was engaging with U.S. officials.

¹² Crisis Group telephone interview, October 2020. According to a former Pakistani foreign secretary, since the Taliban were "party to a civil war and a part of the political landscape of Afghanistan", Pakistan had suggested that "reconcilable Taliban be brought into the fold of the Bonn process". Riaz Mohammad Khan, "A History of Errors", Jinnah Institute, 2018.

¹³ Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced the Obama administration's policy of promoting reconciliation with the Taliban in a speech before the Asia Society in February 2011. In 2013, the Taliban opened a political office in Doha, reportedly at Washington's request, to facilitate talks. Qatar subsequently assumed a central role in assisting U.S.-Taliban negotiations.

¹⁴ Pakistan held Afghan hardliners, particularly the National Directorate for Intelligence, Afghanistan's intelligence agency, responsible for deliberately leaking the news and for the subsequent failure of the peace talks. Ismail Khan, "Mullah Omar died in Karachi in April 2013: Afghan govt", *Dawn*, 30 July 2015.

¹⁵ Mansour had led the Taliban for at least two years before Mullah Omar's death from prolonged illness. Composed of Pakistani, Afghan, Chinese and U.S. representatives, the Quadrilateral Dialogue began in January 2016.

¹⁶ Fahd Hussain, "What the sanitization of Haqqanis means for Pakistan-U.S. relations", *Al Jazeera*, 14 March 2020.

C. *Facilitating the Peace Process*

The Trump administration's decision to hold direct talks with the Taliban, as it prepared to end the U.S. war in Afghanistan, presented Pakistan with new opportunities to push for the Taliban's inclusion in governance and security structures.¹⁷ In his 2017 South Asia policy address, President Donald Trump had criticised Pakistan for playing a double game, benefiting from massive U.S. assistance and then, naming the Taliban, giving "safe havens to terrorist organisations". Yet Trump also implied that the U.S. might consider a political settlement of the Afghan conflict that included "elements of the Taliban".¹⁸ Once the Trump administration accepted the Taliban's demand to deal directly with them, bypassing the Afghan government, Pakistan was quick to respond positively to U.S. requests to facilitate the nascent peace process.¹⁹

A U.S. analyst commented that the Trump administration's "new plan B", a negotiated outcome of the Afghan war through direct talks with the Taliban, was "always Pakistan's Plan A".²⁰ Pakistan's internal dynamics then, as now, determined the direction of its Afghanistan policy.

Since taking power in a contested election in July 2018, and lacking a stable majority in parliament, Prime Minister Imran Khan has largely ceded decision-making on security and foreign policy to the top brass.²¹ Earlier governments, such as Nawaz Sharif's (2013-2018), had attempted to ease tensions with Afghanistan though the high command still hedged its bets, either actively or tacitly supporting the Afghan insurgency.²² Under Khan's government, however, the military leadership, a former senior army officer said, "is solely responsible for Afghan policy, and the foreign ministry is merely tasked with implementation".²³ That said, the high command's preferred option for Afghanistan is in complete alignment with Khan's. Both support a deal that would protect Pakistan's interests in and influence over Afghanistan, including

¹⁷ For previous Crisis Group analysis of the Afghan peace process, see Crisis Group Asia Briefings N°s 165, *What Future for Afghan Peace Talks under a Biden Administration?*, 13 January 2021; 160, *Twelve Ideas to Make Intra-Afghan Negotiations Work*, 2 March 2020; and 159, *Getting the Afghan Peace Process Back on Track*, 2 October 2019. See also Crisis Group Asia Reports N°s 311, *Taking Stock of the Taliban's Perspectives on Peace*, 11 August 2020; and 298, *Building on Afghanistan's Fleeting Ceasefire*, 19 July 2018.

¹⁸ "President Trump outlines new Afghanistan strategy – full transcript", CBS, 21 August 2017.

¹⁹ A December 2018 Pakistani foreign ministry statement disclosed the details of Trump's letter to Khan, in which the U.S. president "sought Pakistan's support and facilitation" of a "negotiated settlement of the Afghan war". "U.S. seeks Pakistan's help for Afghan peace", *Dawn*, 4 December 2018. The first high-level direct U.S.-Taliban meeting took place in Doha in July 2018, with the talks gaining momentum after Zalmay Khalilzad's September 2018 appointment as special representative on Afghanistan's reconciliation. "Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy in Brief", Congressional Research Service, 25 June 2020.

²⁰ Michael Kugelman, "Imran Khan's opportunity with America", *Dawn*, 2 August 2018. A Pakistani security analyst concurred: "Pakistani authorities say that the U.S. decision to opt for such a negotiated settlement vindicated Pakistan's stance". Crisis Group telephone interview, October 2020.

²¹ Opposition politicians and analysts call this arrangement "hybrid rule", with the civilian government dependent on the military for political survival and in return ceding national security and foreign policy to the military. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Islamabad-based politicians, security analysts, April-May 2021.

²² Crisis Group Report, *Resetting Pakistan's Relations with Afghanistan*, op. cit.

²³ Crisis Group telephone interview, October 2020.

by giving the Taliban a power-sharing role.²⁴ A settlement would also end decades of war in Afghanistan and might help stabilise Pakistan's conflict-prone western borders. Facilitating the U.S.-led Afghan peace process would also help mend relations with Washington.

The peace process soon bore out the predictions of how it would help Pakistan. In October 2018, during Zalmay Khalilzad's visit to Islamabad, a month after he was appointed U.S. special representative for Afghanistan reconciliation, Pakistan released Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a co-founder of the Taliban and formerly Mullah Omar's deputy, who had been detained in Karachi since 2010, when he had reportedly reached out to Hamid Karzai's government without Pakistan's blessing.²⁵ Baradar was allowed to join the Taliban's political office in Doha.²⁶ Baradar's presence gave the political office gravitas it had previously lacked because of his standing within the Taliban shura. Recognising the Pakistan military leadership's predominant policymaking role, the U.S. kept it in the loop as talks with the Taliban progressed. Visits by top U.S. officials, including peace envoy Khalilzad and senior military officers, accompanied every critical juncture.²⁷ An opposition politician said: "The military leadership was under the impression that the U.S. was subletting Afghanistan to them".²⁸

Anxious to ensure that the talks succeeded, the military quickly intervened to remove hurdles, such as after President Trump abruptly called off talks on 6 September 2019 on the eve of an expected deal.²⁹ At a news briefing on 17 January, concluding his visit to Washington, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi said he had told Secretary of State Mike Pompeo: "We fulfilled our promise. The Taliban came to the table. Then you said the delegation should be authoritative and powerful. We did that".³⁰

²⁴ Crisis Group telephone interviews, security analysts, former diplomats, October–November 2020. See also Madiha Sattar, "Pakistan in contact with Afghan Taliban, former Northern Alliance," *Dawn*, 15 February 2013.

²⁵ Adrian Hanni, "Why does Pakistan releasing a key Taliban leader matter?", *The Diplomat*, 30 October 2018. See also Ron Moreau, "Meet the Taliban's new chief", *Newsweek*, 24 July 2009.

²⁶ A Pakistan foreign ministry spokesperson said: "His [Baradar's] release was facilitated by Pakistan at the U.S. request in order to move forward on the shared objective of pursuing a political settlement in Afghanistan". "Khalilzad's visit put off over 'scheduling reasons'", *Dawn*, 15 November 2018. See also Anwar Iqbal, "Mullah Baradar's release fulfils Afghan demand, says U.S.," *Dawn*, 27 October 2018.

²⁷ Anwar Iqbal, "U.S. reaches out to Bajwa, offers ceasefire to Afghan Taliban", *Dawn*, 8 June 2018; "In meeting with FM Qureshi, Pompeo calls on Taliban to negotiate", *Dawn*, 3 October 2018; Iqbal, "Mullah Baradar's release fulfils Afghan demand, says U.S.", op. cit.; Baqir Sajjad Syed, "U.S. assured of support for peace in Afghanistan", *Dawn*, 5 December 2018; "U.S. seeks Pakistan's help for coaxing Taliban back into talks", *Dawn*, 16 January 2019; Ismail Khan, "Pakistan presses Afghan Taliban to meet U.S. envoy in Islamabad", *Dawn*, 17 January 2019; "Centcom chief, Bajwa discuss security, Afghan peace process", Agence France–Presse, 21 January 2019; "COAS (chief of army staff) meets Pompeo, U.S. military leadership", *Dawn*, 25 July 2019.

²⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, October 2020.

²⁹ On 3 October, a Taliban delegation headed by chief negotiator Baradar held talks in Islamabad with the foreign minister and ISI chief Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed; U.S. envoy Khalilzad, also in Islamabad, met the Taliban delegation. Kamran Yousaf, "U.S. envoy meets Taliban as Pakistan pushes for Afghan peace deal", *The Express Tribune*, 4 October 2019.

³⁰ Anwar Iqbal, "Pakistan wants U.S. to get it off the FATF grey list", *Dawn*, 19 February 2020. See also Umar Jamal, "With the Afghan Taliban in Islamabad, is Pakistan finally getting what it has always wanted?", *The Diplomat*, 8 October 2010.

Pakistan's top military and political leaders welcomed the 29 February 2020 U.S.-Taliban peace deal, and committed, in Prime Minister Khan's words, Pakistan "to playing its role" in ensuring it "holds and succeeds".³¹ Through the deal, the Taliban had achieved a key goal: a firm date for the departure of foreign forces in return for pledges to end ties with terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda, and to enter into negotiations over a political settlement to the conflict.³² For Pakistan, the deal's value lay in the prospect of a political settlement that would, by benefiting its Taliban ally, cement Pakistan's influence over Afghanistan. Pakistan's facilitation was also expected to garner U.S. rewards.³³

Those hopes were dashed as the Doha talks, which began in September, made little progress, partly because of Kabul's fractured politics, but largely because the Ghani government and the Taliban shura were equally averse to making concessions.³⁴ It did not help that the talks commenced so close to the U.S. presidential election, adding uncertainty as to whether Washington would stick with the February 2020 deal. With the insurgents also continuing to rely on force to strengthen their bargaining hand, Pakistan's already tense relationship with the Ghani government worsened further. Hoping to salvage progress made, Pakistan has urged the Biden administration to build on the Doha peace process. That process still exists, and U.S. and Pakistani efforts to energise it continue, but it faces new and serious challenges.

III. Back to Square One?

The Biden administration's policy has changed the rules of the Afghanistan game for Afghans and for the country's neighbours. On 14 April, President Biden announced an unconditional withdrawal of U.S. forces by 11 September, the twentieth anniversary of the terror attacks that led to the U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan. The pullout of U.S. and allied troops is well under way and likely to be completed during July, but the prospects of a negotiated peace appear slim.³⁵

An earlier effort by U.S. envoy Zalmay Khalilzad to convince Ghani's government and the Taliban to agree on a transitional power-sharing government at a proposed April meeting in Turkey, alongside a UN-sponsored meeting of major regional stakeholders, had proven a non-starter.³⁶ Angered that the U.S. had reneged on the 1 May

³¹ "Donald Trump welcomes U.S.-Taliban peace deal", *The News*, 29 February 2020. Chairing a corps commanders' meeting in Rawalpindi, underscoring that "the path to regional stability and peace passes through Afghanistan", army chief Qamar Javed Bajwa said: "A collaborative approach and patience can overcome all challenges for which Pakistan is ready to play its part". "Pakistan offers help for peace in Afghanistan", *Dawn*, 14 March 2020.

³² Crisis Group Report, *Taking Stock of the Taliban's Perspectives*, op. cit.

³³ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Islamabad-based security analysts, politicians, February-March 2021.

³⁴ Crisis Group Report, *What Future for Afghan Peace Talks*, op. cit.

³⁵ When the Biden administration took over, the U.S. had some 2,500 to 3,500 troops left in Afghanistan. Some 7,000 troops in the NATO-led coalition are also to leave in coordination with the departing U.S. forces.

³⁶ The UN, Turkey and Qatar were to co-host the meeting. Khalilzad discussed the plan with President Ghani and chief Afghan peace envoy Abdullah Abdullah during a 1-4 March 2021 trip to Kabul. Accompanied by the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, Khalilzad subsequently discussed it

pullout date and reluctant to be pressured openly, the Taliban refused to attend any conference on Afghanistan's future "until all foreign troops withdraw".³⁷

Reacting to Biden's withdrawal announcement, Pakistan's foreign office emphasised that the troop withdrawal "coincides with progress in the peace process". Reportedly persuaded, or pressured, by Pakistan, the Taliban have since agreed to rejoin the peace process, with talks once again resuming in Doha.³⁸ The group's leaders have not yet been convinced, however, to disclose their political vision for Afghanistan, beyond vague generalities such as a demand for an Islamic government. Until they begin to do so, a genuine negotiation cannot take place.

At the same time, the Taliban have also escalated military attacks countrywide, reportedly capturing district centres and threatening provincial capitals, including those ringing Kabul. If the peace process fails to make headway, a new and bloodier phase of Afghanistan's civil war could ensue, with potential consequences for Pakistan's security.

A. *The Costs of International Isolation*

In Pakistani perceptions, a Taliban attempt to seize power would be an undesirable outcome. If the Taliban were to forcibly oust the Afghan government, they would likely lose much of the international legitimacy they gained by declaring their willingness to seek a political settlement of the conflict, all the more so if they crack down violently on former enemies, shut down institutions in which foreign governments have invested heavily and roll back the gains that women have made over the past twenty years. Even if the Taliban do not manage to overthrow the Afghan government, the group's military push undermines Pakistan's hopes for the insurgents' participation in internationally recognised and backed power-sharing arrangements.³⁹

with Pakistan's army chief Bajwa on 8 March. An Afghan media outlet, TOLO News, published a leaked draft of the proposed "Afghanistan Peace Agreement". "Khalilzad meets Bajwa amid Afghan peace push", *Dawn*, 9 March 2021. See also Laurel Miller, "There is no shortcut to peace in Afghanistan", *Foreign Policy*, 15 March 2021; and Thomas Ruttig, "'Another Bonn-style conference': a new plan to 'fix' the war and enable U.S. troops to leave", *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 7 March 2021.

³⁷ "U.S. president presses Pakistan as he announces end to 'forever war' in Afghanistan", *The Express Tribune*, 14 April 2021.

³⁸ Taliban sources said Pakistan had been negotiating with them to rejoin the peace process. Meeting representatives of the Afghan government and the Taliban in Doha on 1 May, Pakistan's Afghan envoy had joined the special envoys of the U.S., China and Russia (the "extended troika") in calling for the resumption of peace talks and also in warning that it would be unacceptable for any group to take over Kabul by force. "Gen Qamar discusses Afghan peace with Ghani, Abdullah in day-long visit", *The Express Tribune*, 10 May 2021; "Extended 'troika' in huddle with Afghan govt, Taliban to break deadlock", *The Express Tribune*, 1 May 2021; "Pakistan backs 'responsible' U.S. troops withdrawal", *The Express Tribune*, 15 April 2021; "Enough is enough – Pakistan not happy with Afghan Taliban", *The News*, 28 April 2021.

³⁹ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Islamabad-based security analysts, April-May 2021. According to an expert on the Taliban, if the peace talks were to fail, the "legitimate path to the Taliban's return to power would be dead, or at least deep-frozen". Antonio Giustozzi, "The Taliban Seek a Negotiated Path to Power: Will It Work?", *RUSI*, 26 April 2021.

Islamabad's role in facilitating U.S.-Taliban negotiations has also somewhat eased tensions with Washington.⁴⁰ As the troop drawdown continues, high-level U.S. contacts, primarily with Pakistan's military leadership, have focused on the country's role in shoring up the Afghan peace process.⁴¹ Responding to questions at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on 27 April, Khalilzad said Pakistan had been "supportive of our efforts to press the Taliban to reduce violence, to enter into negotiations with the government of Afghanistan [and] to be an active participant in peace negotiations". He added, however, that "Pakistan has a special responsibility given its influence over the Taliban. ... We appreciate what Pakistan has done but we are not there yet".⁴²

U.S. support, including resumed military assistance, a top priority for the Pakistani high command, will be contingent on that facilitation.⁴³ The peace process, however, will not survive if the Taliban does not reconsider its campaign to conquer territory, even if it is just short of seizing power. If the Taliban keeps up its offensive, Pakistan will risk international opprobrium should it continue to support the insurgents, including by providing safe haven to the Taliban shura.

Pakistan is also well aware that conflict-torn Afghanistan's economic viability and reconstruction requires extensive international financial support. In a proposed four-point plan on the way forward for the Afghan peace process, Foreign Minister Qureshi, for instance, called on outside powers to "deepen and sustain economic engagement with Afghanistan for its reconstruction and economic development".⁴⁴

The U.S. and other major donors have pledged to continue supporting the Afghan government financially. Yet no amount of international assistance will help prevent economic meltdown if the country returns to all-out civil war, and aid delivery will become increasingly difficult in that scenario as well. Even if the parties reach a peace settlement in which the Taliban impose their version of ultra-orthodox Islam on governance, such support will be in doubt. In November 2020, donors pledged \$12 billion in civilian assistance for Afghanistan, but many countries conditioned the funds on progress in the peace talks and respect for the rule of law, human rights and gender equality. The European Union (EU) made the largest pledge at \$1.4 billion but tied it

⁴⁰ In December 2020, Pakistan for the first time took credit for facilitating "important breakthroughs in the peace process", including, as per the foreign ministry's statement, "(a) U.S.-Taliban Peace Agreement of 29 February; (b) commencement of Intra-Afghan Negotiations on 12 September; and (c) agreement among Afghan parties on the Rules and Procedures on 2 December 2020". Kamran Yousaf, "Pakistan officially takes credit for facilitating Afghan peace", *The Express Tribune*, 28 December 2020.

⁴¹ On 19 February, the U.S. Central Command chief called Bajwa at the army headquarters in Rawalpindi; on 9 March, Ambassador Khalilzad met the Pakistani army chief; on 22 March, U.S. Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin discussed the Afghan peace process in a telephone conversation with Bajwa; on 10 April, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken telephoned the army chief again, seeking Pakistan's help in bringing the Taliban back to the talks; and on 28 April 2021, Austin called him up still another time to discuss the Afghan peace process amid the drawdown of U.S. forces.

⁴² Anwar Iqbal, "U.S. to revive duty-free zones in Pakistan-Afghanistan", *Dawn*, 30 April 2021.

⁴³ In his 14 May withdrawal announcement, President Biden called regional countries, "especially Pakistan", to "do more" to support Afghanistan. "Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan", White House, 14 April 2021.

⁴⁴ "Pakistan proposes 4-point way forward as intra-Afghan talks begin in Qatar", *The Express Tribune*, 12 September 2020.

to a peace settlement based on republican and democratic principles.⁴⁵ Should the Taliban opt for an all-out military takeover, the EU as well as individual Western countries would shun the new regime and likely levy sanctions against it.⁴⁶

B. *Emboldening Homegrown Militants*

If the Taliban increases its military footprint on the ground, its prowess may further embolden Pakistani militants. A retired general said: “The space for the Taliban’s natural allies – Pashtun militants and Sunni sectarian outfits – is already expanding in Afghanistan. Those risks would increase even further if Kabul were to fall to the Taliban”.⁴⁷ A former senior counter-terrorism official likewise warned: “Pakistani sectarian and other militants will be the ultimate beneficiaries of Taliban state capture. Instead of being a strategic asset, the Taliban will become a strategic threat to Pakistan”.⁴⁸

Pakistan civilian and military leaders are particularly concerned about the Taliban’s apparent insistence on replacing the post-Bonn republican order, including the 2004 constitution, with governance based on sharia informed by their Deobandi ideology.⁴⁹ They believe that the imposition in Afghanistan of Sunni Hanafi Islamic jurisprudence as state law, including for the minority Afghan Shia population, could encourage Islamists to renew demands for similar laws at home, fuelling sectarian tensions in a country that has the second largest Shia population in the world after Iran.⁵⁰ Sectarian Pakistani Sunnis could feel empowered by the Taliban’s return to power and might even seek the movement’s backing, as they have in the past.⁵¹ According

⁴⁵ “Foreign donors pledge \$12 billion over four years for Afghanistan but with tougher conditions”, Reuters, 24 November 2020. In the 7 May U.S.-Europe Communiqué on the Afghan Peace Process, participants “agreed that substantial international development assistance will be needed for Afghanistan’s stability during peace negotiations”, committing to provide such support but conditioning it on rights issues. “U.S.-Europe Communiqué on the Afghan Peace Process”, U.S. Department of State, 7 May 2021.

⁴⁶ In a televised interview on 18 April, Secretary of State Blinken said the Taliban must gain power through the political process, not through force, if “it wants to be internationally recognised, if it doesn’t want to be a pariah”. “Biden officials place hope in the Taliban’s desire for legitimacy and money”, *The New York Times*, 23 April 2021.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, November 2020.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group telephone interviews, November 2020.

⁴⁹ In a June 2021 interview, a Taliban spokesperson said that the establishment of an “Islamic government” was the group’s second goal [after the departure of foreign forces], adding “if this second goal is not reached, we will be compelled to continue our war to achieve our goal”. “Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy: In Brief”, Congressional Research Service, 11 June 2021. Though 80 per cent of Afghanistan’s population follows the Hanafi Sunni school of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), the Taliban belong to the far harsher Deobandi tradition, a branch of the Hanafi school.

⁵⁰ Shias constitute around 20 per cent of Pakistan’s population of 220 million. For detailed analysis of Pakistan’s sectarian tensions, see Crisis Group Asia Reports N°s 279, *Pakistan’s Jihadist Landscape: Southern Punjab*, 30 May 2016; 164, *The Militant Jihadi Challenge*, 13 March 2009; and 95, *The State of Sectarianism in Pakistan*, 18 April 2005.

⁵¹ In 1997, for instance, the Pakistani government led by Nawaz Sharif asked the Taliban regime to extradite militants from Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, a sectarian Sunni group responsible for scores of attacks at home. The Taliban claimed that the group was no longer operating in Afghanistan. Yet a top former Pakistani security official disclosed that the Taliban continued to allow Lashkar-e-Jhangvi to run training camps, merely shifting them to other locations in Sarobi, in Jalalabad and near Kabul. Crisis

to some security sources, an expansion of Taliban control over Afghan territory already benefits likeminded Pakistani groups. A former senior security official, for example, said: "The imposition of the Taliban's preferred version of Deobandi Islam in large parts of Afghanistan is boosting Pakistani Deobandi militants".⁵²

An escalation of Afghanistan's civil war could also destabilise Pakistan's tribal belt. Militants from the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (Taliban Movement of Pakistan, or TTP), formed in 2007 from various militant factions with the goal of overthrowing the Pakistani government, are already regrouping in border areas – the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in the country's north west and adjacent regions of Balochistan to the south.⁵³ Militant attacks in the tribal belt, including several launched from across the Afghan border, have killed scores of security personnel in 2021.⁵⁴

Since the Taliban's ouster in 2001, some Pakistani Taliban have fought alongside and provided recruits to their Afghan counterparts in the so-called jihad against Western forces and the Western-backed Afghan government.⁵⁵ Pakistani militants fleeing from Pakistani military operations in the tribal belt have long sheltered in Afghanistan and used havens in remote border areas to conduct cross-border attacks.⁵⁶ Pakistan has accused Afghan intelligence and India of backing Pakistani militants, operating from bases in Afghanistan, to stage raids into Pakistan.⁵⁷ Yet the Pakistani military is well aware of the close ethnic and ideological linkages between the predominantly

Group telephone interview, October 2020. See also "Religion and Militancy in Pakistan and Afghanistan: A Literature Review", Centre for Strategic and International Studies, June 2012.

⁵² Crisis Group telephone interview, former head, National Counter Terrorism Authority, October 2020.

⁵³ For analysis of militancy in Pakistan's tribal borderlands, see Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°150, *Shaping a New Peace in Pakistan's Tribal Areas*, 20 August 2018; and Crisis Group Asia Reports, *The Militant Jihadist Challenge*, op. cit.; N°242, *Countering Militancy in PATA*, 15 January 2013; N°178, *Pakistan: Countering Militancy in FATA*, 21 December 2009; and N°125, *Pakistan's Tribal Borderlands: Appeasing the Militants*, 11 December 2006.

⁵⁴ TTP attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan's tribal belt killed more than a dozen security personnel in May 2021, mainly soldiers but also some police officers. According to a UN report, the TTP was responsible for more than 100 cross-border attacks between July and October 2020. "Twenty-seventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaeda and associated individuals and entities", UN Security Council, 3 February 2021.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group Report, *Resetting Pakistan's Relations with Afghanistan*, op. cit. See also Tahir Khan, "Pakistani Taliban only loyal to Mullah Omar, says TTP spokesperson", *The Express Tribune*, 5 October 2014.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group telephone interviews, senior ex-federal law enforcement officials in Lahore and Islamabad, November 2020-March 2021. See also Daud Khattak, "The complicated relationship between the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban", *Counter-Terrorism Sentinel*, February 2012.

⁵⁷ After two such attacks in September 2019 in which four soldiers were killed, Pakistan's foreign ministry lodged a protest with both Afghan and Indian diplomats in Islamabad. "Four martyred in Afghan border attacks", *The Express Tribune*, 15 September 2019. On 14 November 2020, Foreign Minister Qureshi, accompanied by the military's spokesperson, disclosed a dossier containing "irrefutable proofs" of Indian intelligence allegedly providing weapons to Pakistani Taliban commanders in Afghanistan. Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Specific proof of Indian terrorism in Pakistan unveiled", *Dawn*, 15 November 2020.

Pashtun Deobandi Pakistani Taliban and their Afghan brethren. A security official said: "They are two faces of the same coin".⁵⁸

Despite Pakistani demands, the Afghan Taliban have yet to deny Pakistani Taliban militants shelter or to dissuade their fellow militants from using territory they control to attack Pakistani forces. A former senior Pakistani diplomat with close links to several Pakistani, including military, governments, disclosed: "The Pakistan military has tried but has failed to convince the Taliban leadership to distance itself from the Pakistani Taliban".⁵⁹ On the contrary, Pakistani Taliban splinter groups, based mainly in Taliban-controlled territory, have rejoined the TTP, enhancing that group's ability to attack Pakistani forces.⁶⁰ A Pakistani newspaper editorial that decried TTP "safe havens" in Afghanistan called on Islamabad to "exercise its leverage with the Afghan Taliban and let them know that allowing the TTP or other anti-Pakistan groups to use space under their control will not be tolerated".⁶¹

Separate from any agreement between the Taliban and their Afghan adversaries, Pakistan wants explicit assurances that the insurgents will stop giving refuge to Pakistani Taliban militants on the territory they control.⁶² Notwithstanding the support the Taliban receives from Pakistan, the movement's track record suggests it will be reluctant to give up militants that have often for years fought alongside Afghan Taliban forces and share its ideology. The Taliban's continued rejection of such demands and cross-border attacks by the Pakistani militants could strain relations between Pakistan's high command and its longstanding Afghan allies.

C. *Tensions with Kabul*

The Afghan peace process had given Pakistan a chance to reset its troubled relations with Kabul. In the run-up to intra-Afghan dialogue, and since it began, Pakistan's top political and military leaders have regularly consulted the Ghani government on the talks and other pressing issues, including how to ease border tensions.⁶³ Yet the spike in insurgent violence as foreign forces depart and the Taliban shura's continued presence on Pakistani territory has reinforced Kabul's suspicions of Islamabad's intentions.

In an interview with a German newsmagazine in May, President Ashraf Ghani accused Pakistan of providing the Taliban with "organised logistical support". As the U.S. leaves Afghanistan, Ghani said: "It now plays only a minor role. ... It is first and foremost a matter of getting Pakistan on board".⁶⁴ On 10 May, army chief Qamar

⁵⁸ "Enough is enough – Pakistan not happy with Afghan Taliban", op. cit. Crisis Group interview, former senior army officer, Islamabad, October 2020.

⁵⁹ The interlocutor said: "When we told the Taliban to end ties with the Pakistani Taliban, we were told that the Pakistani *talibs* were helping it fight the jihad against foreign forces. But that excuse no longer holds; the jihad has ended". Crisis Group telephone interview, November 2020.

⁶⁰ "Twenty-seventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team", op. cit.

⁶¹ "Safe havens", *Dawn*, 10 May 2021.

⁶² Crisis Group telephone interviews, former ambassador, January 2021; Islamabad-based security analyst, April 2021.

⁶³ In May 2021, Bajwa and the ISI head met President Ghani in Kabul. The army chief had also visited Kabul in 2020, 2018 and 2017. In November 2020, Prime Minister Khan visited Kabul for the first time since assuming office.

⁶⁴ "The names of the various decision-making bodies of the Taliban are Quetta shura, Miramshah shura and Peshawar shura – named after the Pakistani cities where they are based. There is a deep

Javed Bajwa and ISI chief Faiz Hameed, meeting Ghani in Kabul, reiterated support for the peace process. According to Ghani, Bajwa “clearly assured Afghanistan that the restoration of the Emirate or dictatorship by the Taliban is not in anybody’s interest in the region, especially Pakistan”.⁶⁵ Ghani and other anti-Taliban stakeholders will, however, judge Pakistan’s pledges by its performance – in pressuring the insurgents to reduce violence and in bringing them back to the negotiating table.⁶⁶

Pakistan’s efforts to fence the contested border with Afghanistan could also affect bilateral relations. According to the Pakistani military, the fence construction, which began in 2017, is aimed at preventing cross-border movement of terrorists, as are the 843 planned frontier posts, which it insists are inside Pakistan’s territory.⁶⁷ Yet Pakistani and Afghan forces have clashed over contested posts in the former FATA and other Khyber Pakhtunkhwa regions adjacent to the Afghan border.⁶⁸

Fencing the border has implications that go beyond state-to-state relations. Pakistan has long demanded that around 1.4 million registered Afghan refugees and close to another million Afghan citizens go back to their homeland, citing their presence as both an economic burden and a security threat.⁶⁹ Should Afghanistan enter into another, potentially more lethal, phase of the war, hundreds of thousands of Afghans could again seek shelter in Pakistan. Should Pakistan attempt to forcibly prevent such an influx, the human costs aside, it would anger anti-Taliban Afghan factions and alienate Pashtuns living along the border. A senior Pashtun politician warned: “If the military believes that putting up walls will keep refugees at bay, it should understand that those walls will fall”.⁷⁰

relationship with the state”. “Interview with Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani: ‘I know I am only one bullet away from death’”, *Der Spiegel*, 8 May 2021.

⁶⁵ “FM Qureshi lambasts Afghan NSA for using harsh language against Pakistan”, *The News*, 5 June 2021; “Taliban should take opportunity for peace”, *TOLO News*, 14 May 2021. “Gen Qamar discusses Afghan peace with Ghani, Abdullah in day-long visit”, *The Express Tribune*, 10 May 2021.

⁶⁶ In March, President Ghani’s peace envoy Umer Daudzai called on Pakistan to facilitate an agreement between the Kabul government and the Taliban. The “one other thing” that the Afghan government expected from Pakistan was to use “its influence over the Taliban to agree to a ceasefire”. Rehman Azhar, “Afghanistan urges Pakistan to ‘influence’ Taliban over ceasefire”, *The Express Tribune*, 19 March 2021.

⁶⁷ In December 2020, the Pakistan military’s spokesperson said 83 per cent of the border with Afghanistan had been fenced, predicting the project’s completion by the end of 2021. “Pakistan being subjected to 5th-generation warfare in ‘massive way’ but we are aware of threats: DG ISPR”, *Dawn*, 3 December 2020. In August 2020, rejecting Afghan allegations of “illegal fencing” along the border, Pakistan’s foreign ministry said the fence was “fully in accordance with the established norms of international law without encroaching into Afghan territory”. Naveed Siddiqui, “FO rejects allegations of ‘illegal fencing’ along Pak-Afghan border”, *Dawn*, 13 August 2020; “Muhammad Anis, ‘Pakistan, Afghanistan can’t afford chaos: Bajwa’”, *Dawn*, 29 October 2020.

⁶⁸ Following such a clash in mid-2019, in an August letter to the UN Security Council’s president, the Afghan UN permanent representative alleged “continuous [Pakistani] violations of the territory of Afghanistan”, including constructions of border posts on Afghan territory. Pakistan’s foreign ministry said Pakistani forces had only responded in self-defence when militants attacked their posts from across the border. It also called on the Afghan government to take action against “terrorist camps” along the frontier. Baqir Sajjad Syed, “FO asks Kabul to eliminate terrorist hideouts along border”, *Dawn*, 29 August 2019.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group Report, *Resetting Pakistan’s Relations with Afghanistan*, op. cit. See also Waqar Maroof Khan, “40 years of Afghan refugees in Pakistan”, *The News*, 4 September 2019.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, October 2020.

IV. Pakistan and the Taliban: The Question of Influence

With the departure of all foreign forces fast approaching and no peace settlement in sight, Pakistan's preferred options remain unchanged. It does not support an outright military takeover by the Taliban. "This is our stance in principle", Pakistan's foreign minister told parliament.⁷¹ Instead, it wants a negotiated settlement of the Afghan conflict that gives its Taliban allies a share – possibly a major one – in governance and security structures, with international recognition and support. Pakistan is aware that attempts at monopolistic rule by the Taliban would be contested by anti-Taliban forces and would burden Islamabad with having to decide whether and how to support a regime with little international backing or funding. Yet achieving its preferred outcomes will depend on Pakistan's ability, and indeed intention, to pressure or persuade the Taliban to talk instead of fight and to abandon maximalist positions in future negotiations.

Weeks into the start of the 2020 peace talks, a former Pakistani ambassador to Kabul said: "Pakistan has to dissuade the Taliban from refusing to compromise. We have to make them realise they can overplay the military hand".⁷² The prospects for talks leading to a political settlement have since declined as foreign troops depart and the Taliban seem to gain confidence in their ability to defeat the Afghan security forces on the battlefield. Yet Pakistan retains influence with and leverage over the Taliban, which, if used wisely, could prevent the Afghan conflict from escalating to the point of no return. It is in Pakistan's interest to do so.

Nor can Pakistan absolve itself of all responsibility for the Afghan conflict's outcome, as it would like to do.⁷³ As a study on a future Afghan peace process noted:

Pakistan's role in perpetuating the Afghan conflict by allowing the Taliban safe haven within its territory and Pakistan's perception of Afghanistan as within its legitimate sphere of influence means that its support for the resolution of the conflict will be especially crucial.⁷⁴

Pakistan's ties to the Taliban are certainly far closer, and hence its ability to influence the outfit greater, than any other regional or extra-regional actor. Top Taliban negotiators have as frequently consulted Pakistani officials on the peace talks as they have their Pakistan-based leadership.⁷⁵ The Taliban shura's continued presence gives Paki-

⁷¹ "U.S. Afghan drawdown may be complete by 'July 4'", *The Express Tribune*, 1 June 2021.

⁷² Crisis Group telephone interview, October 2020.

⁷³ In an interview on the sidelines of the February Doha summit, Foreign Minister Qureshi said: "We cannot be guarantors, we have only been facilitators". Anwar Iqbal, "PM tells UN India is planning misadventure", *Dawn*, 26 September 2020.

⁷⁴ Laurel E. Miller and Jonathan S. Black, "Envisioning a Comprehensive Peace Agreement for Afghanistan", RAND, 2019.

⁷⁵ In December 2020, for instance, a delegation of the Taliban's Qatar-based political office, led by Mullah Baradar, in the third such visit since the Doha talks began, met Pakistani officials in Islamabad. Baradar also met with Taliban leaders in Pakistan. Following the April 2021 U.S. troop withdrawal announcement, the Taliban's chief negotiator Mawlawi Abdul Hakim reportedly travelled to Pakistan to consult the shura on the way forward, and also reportedly met Pakistani officials. A Taliban delegation again visited Islamabad the week that the 1 May U.S. troop withdrawal, as envisaged in the February agreement, was due to begin. Naveed Siddiqui, "Qureshi welcomes Taliban team in Islamabad, reiterates Pakistan's desire for durable Afghan peace", *Dawn*, 16 December 2020; "Taliban

stani policymakers unique opportunities of direct access to the leadership. They cannot dictate the shura's decisions, but they can certainly help shape them.⁷⁶

Pakistan's leverage has likely declined, as the Taliban gain ground militarily, but it remains significant. A senior former security official said: "Pakistan's mentor relationship with the Taliban has weakened".⁷⁷ Still, Pakistani authorities, particularly the military and its intelligence arm, retain considerable influence. An expert with extensive knowledge of the relationship said Pakistan's influence has changed, rather than diminished. For instance, Pakistan no longer provides weapons directly to the Taliban but allows the movement to import the arms it purchases freely through Pakistani territory. Emphasising that Taliban sanctuaries in particular remain a major bargaining chip for Pakistan in its dealings with the Taliban, the expert said: "That clout can be used to shape Taliban behaviour".⁷⁸ The Taliban shura is unlikely to relocate to Afghanistan in the foreseeable future. So long as this council needs Pakistani sanctuaries and support, a former senior military officer said, Pakistan will "retain leverage over the Taliban". He said: "We are giving the leadership and their families security and safety".⁷⁹

Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban has certainly not been trouble-free. Taliban leaders who attempted to resist Pakistani preferences in the past were imprisoned or disappeared. Baradar, for instance, was detained for several years before his 2018 release. Two senior Taliban leaders, Mullah Ubaidullah Akhund, the former Taliban defence minister, and Ustad Yasir reportedly died in Pakistani security agencies' custody between 2010 and 2012.⁸⁰ The current Taliban leadership might chafe at perceived Pakistani intervention, but Pakistan has the capacity to use their sanctuaries on its territory as leverage if it so chooses, including to pressure the Taliban to stop giving safe haven to their Pakistani militant brethren.⁸¹ The military's assessment of the costs and benefits – for internal security and the country's international standing – will shape Pakistan's relations with the insurgent group.

negotiators in Pakistan to consult leadership: source", TOLO News, 22 April 2021; "Kabul on high alert amid 'deadline' for U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan", Reuters, 2 May 2021.

⁷⁶ For details of the Taliban's Pakistan-based command structures, see Ashley Jackson and Rahmatullah Amiri, "Insurgent Bureaucracy: How the Taliban Make Policy", U.S. Institute of Peace, November 2019. See also "Twelfth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2557 (2020) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan", UN Security Council, 1 June 2021.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, October 2020.

⁷⁸ The expert added: "If the Taliban leadership did not need Pakistan, they would not still be sitting here". Crisis Group telephone interview, January 2021.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, October 2020.

⁸⁰ "Enough is enough – Pakistan not happy with Afghan Taliban", op. cit. See also Crisis Group Report, *Counter-terrorism Pitfalls*, op. cit.

⁸¹ According to the Congressionally mandated Afghanistan Study Group's February 2021 report: "The Taliban resent accusations that they are Pakistan's puppet and have attempted to diversify their international support, even as it is clear that the Pakistan military and its intelligence apparatus maintains great influence over the group and that the sanctuaries that Pakistan provides are essential to the viability of the insurgency". "Afghanistan Study Group Final Report: A Pathway to Peace in Afghanistan," U.S. Institute of Peace, February 2021.

V. Rethinking Policy toward Afghanistan

Pakistan's civil and military leaders have repeatedly stressed that they will support any political settlement that Afghan stakeholders reach. Their denials of partisanship will, however, have little credence with the Taliban's Afghan adversaries. So long as the insurgent leadership is based in Pakistan, and at those leaders' direction violence continues to spike, Islamabad's repeated pledges that it is trying to convince the Taliban to scale back attacks are unlikely to find believers in Kabul or Washington.⁸²

If the peace talks continue to stall or even fail, and deadly conflict engulfs Pakistan's neighbour, a former senior diplomat warned, "Pakistan would be caught between a rock and a hard place. To be proactive would embroil it in Afghanistan's conflict. Yet it could not afford to sit on the sidelines as it faces growing instability on its western borders".⁸³ Should the Taliban refuse to cease violence and also continue to maintain their close ties with al-Qaeda, Pakistan could also face heightened U.S. pressure to end all support, including sanctuary, for the Taliban leadership.⁸⁴

There are growing concerns in Pakistani policymaking circles about the implications of Afghanistan's worsening conflict for Pakistan's domestic security and for its relations with the U.S. In early June, expressing concern about rising violence in Afghanistan as foreign forces withdraw, Prime Minister Khan, warning that "the Taliban feel they have won the war", added: "We are trying our level best [to achieve] some sort of political settlement before the Americans leave".⁸⁵ The same week, his national security adviser, cautioning that the "hasty" U.S. withdrawal "was not a good idea", called on all Afghan stakeholders "to work towards a political settlement".⁸⁶

Such worries have yet to translate into a tangible policy shift toward either the Taliban leadership or Kabul. Yet, as a former Pakistani ambassador noted, should Pakistan's "declared policy" of seeking "a peaceful Afghanistan" and supporting an "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process" continue to collide "with its operational policy that has long tolerated use of its space by the Taliban leadership", Islamabad might have to reconsider. The ex-ambassador went on: "Pakistan might think it

⁸² Speaking at a trilateral meeting of Pakistani, Afghan and Chinese foreign ministers on 3 June, Qureshi said Pakistan had "repeatedly underscored the need for reduction in violence leading to a ceasefire". Kamran Yousaf, "Afghan drawdown entails 'security challenges', warns FM", *The Express Tribune*, 3 June 2021.

⁸³ Crisis Group telephone interview, January 2021.

⁸⁴ At a 16 June congressional hearing, the U.S. defense secretary and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff both warned that al-Qaeda could pose a threat to the U.S. and its allies from Afghanistan within two years, or even earlier, if the government in Kabul collapses and full-scale civil war erupts. "Militant groups could pose threat to U.S. in two years from Afghanistan", Reuters, 18 June 2021. The June 2021 UN sanctions monitoring team report said the Taliban and al-Qaeda "remain closely aligned and show no indication of breaking ties". "Twelfth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team", op. cit.

⁸⁵ "Strategic depth' no longer policy on India, Afghanistan", *The News*, 5 June 2021.

⁸⁶ The adviser added that the U.S. had "assured us that Pakistan will not be made a scapegoat amidst the withdrawal [of U.S. troops] from Afghanistan, but only time will tell whether they will stick to their words". "Shifting blame on Pakistan to 'save face' amid U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan unacceptable", *Dawn*, 4 June 2021.

would be a good policy to stay away from the Afghan conflict, but the Afghan conflict will not stay away from Pakistan".⁸⁷

A former foreign secretary has proposed a radically different course, essentially a decoupling:

For Pakistan, beset with its own problem of religious extremism and knowing that the world will seek a scapegoat for Afghanistan's civil war, the best course would be to ask the Taliban to leave Pakistan and conduct their negotiations with other Afghan parties from their strongholds in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Pakistan must complete the fencing of its border with Afghanistan and insulate itself to the extent possible from Afghanistan even while keeping trade routes open and providing whatever assistance it can to the peace process.⁸⁸

Pakistan is, however, unlikely to oust the Taliban shura. A retired senior army officer said: "The military will want to keep its links and hence its influence with the Taliban intact".⁸⁹ An expert on the relationship concurred: "Pakistan wants to keep the shura here. It can then, when it so chooses, exercise influence over Taliban decision-making".⁹⁰ Although such influence has limits, Pakistan can, for example, impose restrictions on the movement of Taliban leaders within or outside the country, cut off their communications with field commanders, and even detain leaders and their families, as it has done in the past. Pakistan can also clamp down on the Taliban's extensive business interests in the country, including in Quetta, Peshawar and Karachi, close their bank accounts and take over their properties.⁹¹

Pakistan's policymakers should act now or else it might be too late. They should pressure the Taliban leadership to reduce violence and work with other Afghan stakeholders in reaching a political settlement. As an early step, they should push the Taliban to publish a detailed political vision subject to both scrutiny and the push-and-pull of negotiations. In tandem, they should make an equally earnest effort to pressure and persuade the Afghan Taliban to sever their ties with anti-Pakistan militants. Progress in the peace talks would also improve relations with Kabul, in turn addressing another Pakistani concern, that about India's role as a spoiler of Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan.⁹² At the same time, other governments in the region should also pressure the

⁸⁷ Touqir Hussain, "Gathering storm", *Dawn*, 27 May 2021.

⁸⁸ Najmuddin Sheikh, "The challenges ahead", *Dawn*, 23 April 2021.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, October 2020.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, January 2021.

⁹¹ Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour, using fake identities, purchased around five properties in Karachi and stashed millions of rupees in bank accounts. The government seized these assets after his 2016 death in a U.S. drone strike. Naeem Sahoutara, "Court seizes slain Taliban chief's properties for auction", *Dawn*, 8 May 2020.

⁹² Responding, for instance, to the March U.S. proposal to hold a UN-sponsored meeting of regional countries on Afghanistan, Pakistan's foreign office spokesperson said that, while Pakistan supported regional approaches to solving the Afghan conflict, "at the same time, we need to remain cognisant of the role of spoilers. Unfortunately, India has not been a constructive partner for peace in Afghanistan". "Pakistan welcomes U.S. new 'peace plan' for Afghanistan", *The Express Tribune*, 12 March 2021. A former ambassador, who has served in both civilian and military governments, said, however: "While there are concerns about India's role, that does not define Pakistan's Afghanistan policy". Crisis Group telephone interview, January 2021.

Taliban, for example through travel restrictions, until they demonstrate willingness to participate meaningfully in the Doha peace process.

VI. Conclusion

Up to now, Pakistan has managed to cajole the Taliban to occasionally join talks and to demonstrate interest in a peace process without turning the screws on the leadership and risking a breach in the relationship. In light of the U.S. and NATO withdrawal, the time may be fast approaching when push comes to shove and Pakistan no longer can balance pursuing its preference for a negotiated settlement with its preference for a moderated approach to pressuring the Taliban. Overcoming decades of suspicion and ill will in Kabul will also require Pakistan to stop treating Afghanistan as a Pakistani protectorate and abandon “an approach that has for far too long focused on cultivating Afghan proxies”.⁹³ If the Afghan conflict continues, Pakistan, sitting right next door, stands to lose more than any country but Afghanistan itself.

Islamabad/Washington/Brussels, 30 June 2021

⁹³ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Lahore-based security expert, January 2021; former head, National Counter Terrorism Authority, October 2020.



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