

DECODING PAKISTAN'S 'STRATEGIC SHIFT' IN AFGHANISTAN

MOEED YUSUF



STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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Preface

With barely a year and a half to go, Afghanistan's neighbours are understandably nervous about what will happen to security and stability in the region after the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) leaves Afghanistan in December 2014.

There is a clear need for cooperative policy approaches based on better understanding of the interests and worries of Afghanistan and its neighbours. SIPRI launched the Wider Central Asia (WCA) initiative in January 2012 with the express purpose of promoting and facilitating dialogue on security in Afghanistan's neighbourhood. It has brought together experts and officials from Iran, Pakistan and five Central Asian states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, as well as from Europe and the United States. It has also sought to complement structured dialogues with independent analysis.

Pakistan has played a crucial role in shaping contemporary Afghanistan, and it is recognized that no sustainable solution to Afghanistan's current security problems is possible without Pakistan's involvement. This is what makes Pakistan's purported 'strategic shift' towards Afghanistan so intriguing. In this SIPRI report, Moeed Yusuf, one of the most prominent experts on Pakistani policy-making processes, sets out clearly and persuasively the thinking that has guided Pakistan's policy on Afghanistan. In particular, he unpicks the so-called strategic shift and what opportunities it really offers for greater cooperation.

I would like to thank Mr Yusuf, along with Chalinda Dilesh Weerasinghe and Shehzad Atta, who provided background and research assistance. Gratitude is also due to the numerous regional officials and experts who have contributed their insights and energy to the WCA initiative. I would also like to thank the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, which generously funds the initiative. Finally, thanks are due to all those within SIPRI who helped in the development of this report, in particular Dr Neil Melvin, Dr Bruce Koepke, Theresa Höghammar and the SIPRI editors, especially Caspar Trimmer.

Professor Tilman Brück
Director, SIPRI
Stockholm, May 2013

Summary

Pakistan is seen by the international community, particularly the United States, as both a formal ally and a major obstacle to peace in Afghanistan. Pakistan's recently touted 'strategic shift' towards more positive and cooperative engagement on Afghanistan was therefore cautiously welcomed. Having treated Afghanistan as its backyard and pursued exceptionally intrusive policies for years before the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States, Pakistan's approach to Afghanistan has moderated gradually since the resurgence of the Afghan Taliban insurgency in 2006 and the spectacular rise in violence within Pakistan the year after. The 'shift' in strategy has, however, only been actively highlighted by the Pakistani state since early 2012. It is primarily marked by a strong push to achieve an 'inclusive' reconciliation process in which the Taliban are key negotiating parties, leading to a power-sharing arrangement. Over the past few months, Pakistan has taken some steps to facilitate talks with the Taliban and broaden its relationships among Afghan political actors.

Pakistan's recent actions—up to and including the 'strategic shift'—are all part of an attempt by Pakistan's strategic elite to safeguard what it sees as Pakistan's best interests. This elite's policy thinking on Afghanistan is driven by three fundamental considerations: the rise of domestic instability and terrorism, which is now its top priority; its longstanding rivalry with, and suspicion of, India; and its desire to avoid a surge in Pashtun nationalism among its own large Pashtun population. An inclusive Afghan reconciliation process is Pakistani planners' silver bullet for satisfying all three policy drivers. In the 'end game' phase in Afghanistan—the period from December 2009, when US President Barack Obama announced his plans for a 'surge' in international forces in Afghanistan, to December 2014—Pakistan has consistently pursued this objective and opposed any developments that would interfere with it.

Pakistan neither wants chaos and civil war in Afghanistan nor outright Taliban rule, both of which it believes would feed its own domestic militancy problem—as well as having a number of other negative impacts. At the same time, however, it does not wish to confront the Afghan Taliban sanctuaries, despite the tension this causes with Afghanistan and the USA, because it fears a domestic militant backlash, especially if the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban were to join forces; and it hopes a still-friendly Afghan Taliban will promote its interests in post-2014 Afghanistan, either as part of a stable political dispensation or—in the worst case—as a proxy in an Afghan civil war.

With regard to the Indian–Pakistani rivalry, Pakistan no longer wishes to keep India out of Afghanistan entirely. It recognizes the popular and useful contribution India has made to development in Afghanistan. However, both countries still harbour a great deal of mutual mistrust. Pakistan's priority is to ensure India does not use its presence in Afghanistan to pursue an anti-Pakistan strategy.

The way forward

International and Afghan forces cannot weaken the Taliban insurgency irreversibly before December 2014. There is therefore no option but to push forward the agenda of reconciliation with the Afghan Taliban in a manner close to the inclusive process advocated by Pakistan. To make this happen, all of the main actors—the Afghan Government, Pakistan, the USA and the Afghan political factions including the Taliban—need to agree a single, unified formula for reconciliation.

The process should be truly Afghan-led and Afghan-owned. External actors should keep their involvement and conditions to a minimum. In particular, Pakistan's role should be limited to facilitation and prodding Taliban hardliners to accept a power-sharing arrangement. If such an arrangement is worked out, in future Pakistan should use its influence with the Taliban leadership to encourage moderation of its positions. Pakistan should also continue to build bridges with moderate (non-Taliban) Pashtun and non-Pashtun political actors in Afghanistan, including members of the former Northern Alliance factions.

In order to address their current impasse over the presence in Pakistan of Afghan Taliban sanctuaries, Pakistan and the USA should consider a deal whereby Pakistan pressures the Afghan Taliban operating from its territory to cease attacks during any peace talks, while the USA reciprocates with a conditional localized ceasefire.

India and Pakistan should start bilateral dialogues on intelligence and development matters in Afghanistan, in order to allay mutual suspicions and ensure peaceful coexistence in Afghanistan. India could consider moving its development presence further away from the Pakistani border areas.

Pakistan should also seek to expand its economic footprint in Afghanistan.

The international community should modify its approach to Pakistan based on a better understanding of Pakistani interests and concerns, and ensure that Pakistan is heard in future decisions relating to Afghanistan.

Abbreviations

CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
FATA	Federally Administered Tribal Areas
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
TTP	Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan

1. Introduction

The United States-led military campaign in Afghanistan following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the USA not only transformed Afghanistan but also made Pakistan a vital cog in the struggle against terrorism. It has become conventional wisdom that no solution to the problems of Afghanistan can come without Pakistan's support. At the same time, however, Western powers and the international media have put Pakistan under the scanner more frequently than any other state for the failures to achieve peace and stability in Afghanistan.

This paper discusses Pakistan's engagement with Afghanistan from the period of Taliban rule through to the present, and its perspective on the impending drawdown of the international presence at the end of 2014.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Pakistan supported Sunni Islamist Pashtun elements in Afghanistan—including most notably the Taliban, before and during their rule of Afghanistan in 1996–2001—and exploited Afghan territory as part of its infamous 'strategic depth' policy against India.¹ Throughout the years of international presence in Afghanistan since September 2001 Pakistan has been seen by the West as both an ally and a villain, allowing key elements of the Taliban insurgent movement to operate from Pakistani territory and undermining moves to negotiate with them. Since early 2012, Pakistani leaders have sought to convey to the world that they have adopted a more hands-off approach towards Afghanistan. This 'strategic shift' has been touted with repeated claims of greater willingness to support Afghan reconciliation talks; moves to engage in regional outreach, including with countries Pakistan has not traditionally seen as partners in Afghanistan; the release of a number of mid-level Afghan Taliban prisoners from Pakistani custody in late 2012; and public calls on the Taliban to negotiate sincerely.

In tracing Pakistan's thinking about the 'endgame' in Afghanistan—the period from December 2009, when US President Barack Obama announced his plans for a 'surge' in international forces in Afghanistan to December 2014—this paper argues that Pakistan's objective has been consistent: to ensure a political reconciliation process takes place in Afghanistan that gives significant weight to the Taliban's demands.² The Pakistani state apparatus sees such a process as offering the best chance of limiting future domestic Islamist violence, now its foremost source of concern, and of safeguarding against the emergence of a hostile government in Afghanistan overly sympathetic to India, without allowing

¹ Designed to offset Indian superiority, 3 aspects of Pakistan military's 'strategic depth' policy that are most relevant to the discussion here are (a) a physical concept seeking to incorporate use of Afghan territory as part of Pakistan's war-fighting plans vis-à-vis India; (b) treating Afghanistan as Pakistan's backyard in order to keep all Indian influence out of Afghanistan; and (c) using Afghan territory as the forward base for Pakistan's sub-conventional pro-militancy strategy in Indian Kashmir during the 1990s. See Pande, A., *Explaining Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Escaping India* (Routledge: London, 2011), pp. 1–87.

² The term 'endgame' has become popular shorthand for the security, political and economic transitions in Afghanistan set for completion by the end of 2014 and marked by the planned drawdown of international troops, the hope for a political settlement among Afghan political actors, and an economic model driven much more by internal Afghan responsibility than by external assistance.

Afghanistan to descend into chaos. Virtually all Pakistani actions in the endgame have been dictated by the overriding objective of bringing about this 'inclusive' reconciliation process.

One of the central questions for this paper is how far the 'strategic shift' marks a genuine change in policy, rather than rhetoric. The main argument proposed is that the shift is real insofar as it signifies a move away from the 'strategic depth' policy. However, it can most accurately be depicted as a moderation of Pakistan's traditional position. Also, while the ostensible shift in policy objectives resulted in visibly changed Pakistani behaviour only in 2012, in reality it began after the resurgence of the Afghan Taliban insurgency in 2006 and the spectacular rise in violence within Pakistan the following year.³ Pakistan's conciliatory overtures since early 2012 are best understood as actions in pursuit of its goal of an inclusive Afghan reconciliation process. Their real significance is in their timing: Pakistan's new-found enthusiasm to support an Afghan settlement indicates that it senses an opening and believes that its proactive support between now and 2014 is likely to push the negotiation process in the direction it desires.

The Pakistani establishment

It is important to note at this stage that this paper does not seek to represent the breadth of Pakistani opinion on the country's Afghan strategy. Rather, it focuses primarily on explaining, as the author sees it, the thinking and positioning of the Pakistani strategic elite and its supporters—popularly dubbed the 'establishment'. While this paper occasionally notes prominent critiques from Pakistani civil society, it does not do so systematically. The narrative thus expounds on a very narrow—yet crucial—element of the Afghan conundrum. Such a focus is tenable given the objective outlined for this undertaking: to analyse the Pakistani state's engagement with Afghanistan.

Throughout Pakistan's history, a small military–intelligence-led clique has operated as a rather opaque and insular conglomerate dictating Pakistan's foreign policy direction. The establishment consists of the army's top leadership along with a section of the intelligence community, the civilian bureaucracy, amenable politicians (whose strength and make-up have varied over time), and a chorus of intellectuals willing to underwrite their worldview.⁴ The establishment has maintained its stranglehold on Pakistan's Afghan policy for much of Pakistan's post-partition history.

³ On the Taliban's resurgence see International Crisis Group (ICG), *The Insurgency in Afghanistan's Heartland*, Asia Report no. 207 (ICG: Brussels, 27 June 2011), pp. 5–7; and Giustozzi, A. (ed.), *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field* (Columbia University Press: New York, 2012). Terrorism-related deaths in Pakistan rose from 1471 in 2006 to 3598 in 2007 and 6715 in 2008. They peaked at 11 704 in 2009. See South Asia Terrorism Portal, 'Fatalities in terrorist violence in Pakistan 2003–2013', <<http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/database/casualties.htm>>.

⁴ For 2 prominent definitions of the establishment see Cohen, S. P., *The Idea of Pakistan*, (Brookings Institution Press: Washington, DC, 2006), p. 4; and Syed, M. H., 'Media barons', *Friday Times*, 18 Aug. 2006.

Structure of the paper

Chapter 2 of this paper examines the main concerns that have driven Pakistan's Afghan policy over the years, and how these have translated into policy action. It discusses the changes that took place following the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, and the more recent 'strategic shift'. Chapter 3 seeks to explain the thinking behind Pakistan's apparently paradoxical behaviour in the endgame up to early 2012. Chapter 4 looks in more detail at Pakistan's actions since 2012 and how far these have advanced its aim of promoting inclusive reconciliation talks. Chapter 5 offers conclusions and discusses the way forward.

2. The ‘strategic shift’: from what, to where?

Any positive shift in Pakistan’s Afghanistan policy is seen as critical to Afghanistan’s future given the influence—and indeed the spoiling power—Pakistan has exhibited in Afghanistan in the past. To understand Pakistan’s actions in the Afghanistan endgame—and to assess how far the touted strategic shift represents a genuine change in policy—it is important to establish the baseline; that is, what the shift professes to be a move away from.

Pakistani policy up to 2001

The Pakistani establishment’s traditional thinking on Afghanistan was dominated by two factors: the division of the ethnic Pashtun heartland between Pakistan and Afghanistan; and Pakistan’s competition with India, which has persisted since the two countries’ independence in 1947. Up until at least the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, these were the main drivers shaping its Afghan policy.

The spectre of Pashtun nationalism

Pakistan and Afghanistan are together home to approximately 43 million ethnic Pashtuns.⁵ The Durand Line, the 2640-kilometre demarcation separating the two countries, is not recognized by Afghanistan, which lays claims to the Pashtun-majority areas of Pakistan.⁶ Successive Pakistani governments have worried about the possibility of Pashtun nationalism—once a potent force—engulfing Pakistan’s north-west.⁷

This concern is part of a broader aversion to ethno-nationalism that has affected the core of Pakistan’s identity. Beset by irredentist claims—including from Afghanistan—throughout Pakistan’s history and driven by the necessity of holding the country together despite its multiple ethnic cleavages, the Pakistani state has sought, with limited success, to promote a united Muslim identity to subsume its fault lines and subdue ethno-nationalism.⁸ In line with this, the establishment has always hoped for a dispensation in Afghanistan that would not

⁵ The exact size of the total Pashtun population is unclear as recent census data is unavailable in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. The estimate provided is based on population figures and ethnic breakdown estimates given in the CIA *World Factbook*. US Central Intelligence Agency, *World Factbook*, online version, <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>>.

⁶ Ramin, A. and Siddiqui, N., ‘Blood line: Afghanistan and Pakistan’s unspoken border dispute’, *World Policy* blog, 2 Jan. 2013, <<http://www.worldpolicy.org/blog/2013/01/02/blood-line-afghanistan-and-pakistan’s-unspoken-border-dispute>>.

⁷ On Pashtun nationalism and related interstate tensions see Qureshi, S. M. M., ‘Pakhtunistan: the frontier dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan’, *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 39, no. 1, (spring–summer 1966), p. 101; Saikal, A., ‘Afghanistan and Pakistan: the question of Pashtun nationalism?’, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 30, no. 1 (Mar. 2010), pp. 5–17; and Khan, A., *Politics of Identity: Ethnic Nationalism and the State in Pakistan* (SAGE Publications: New York, 6 Jan. 2005), pp. 83–109.

⁸ See Wilder, A., ‘Islam and political legitimacy in Pakistan’, ed. M. A. Syed, *Islam and Democracy in Pakistan* (National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research: Islamabad, 2005), pp. 31–88. On the origins and persistence of the tension between Pakistan’s various identities see Jaffrelot, C., ‘Islamic identity and ethnic tensions’, ed. C. Jaffrelot, *A History of Pakistan and its Origins* (Anthem Press: London, 2002), pp. 9–38.

use the 'Pashtun card' against Pakistan by actively laying claims to its Pashtun-dominated territories. The Pakistani establishment also wishes to avoid any circumstances that might inflame the sensitivities of Pakistani Pashtuns, be it internal developments in Afghanistan that alienate Afghan Pashtuns, or any action by the Pakistani state.

The establishment has held on to these ways of thinking despite significant opposition, both inside and outside Pakistan, to the idea of religion as a basis for Pakistani unity. There are also signs that this strategy has enhanced, not checked, resentment among Pakistan's minority ethnicities at the perceived political and economic dominance of ethnic Punjabis and of Punjab province.⁹ More importantly, nationalism among Pakistani Pashtuns long ago gave way to a preference for integration and mainstreaming within Pakistan.¹⁰

The 'two-front threat'

The Pakistani establishment's fixation on rivalry with India has come at great cost. It has diverted much of Pakistan's productive energy and created a siege mentality among its citizens. It has bloated defence needs at the cost of social and economic development and forced it to abandon regional economic integration. Pakistan is now facing massive fallout from decades of support to Islamist militants in a quest to continue challenging India.¹¹

Afghanistan plays into this rivalry as the Pakistani military wants to avoid at all costs simultaneous active threats on its eastern (Indian) and western (Afghan) borders—the 'two front' situation as Pakistani strategists call it.¹² This has translated into a quest to seek a dispensation in Afghanistan that is not sympathetic to India.

From priorities to policy actions, 1980–2001

The desired outcome of Pakistan's traditional Afghan policy was (and remains) an unchallenging and friendly Afghanistan with a dispensation in Kabul that is not eager to exploit Pashtun nationalism or to support India ahead of Pakistan. This policy was most obviously on display after the December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. For nearly a decade thereafter, the Pakistani spy agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), in collaboration with the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), backed the Mujahideen insurgency to drive out the Soviet forces.¹³ In the mid-1990s, the ISI backed the Afghan Taliban's rise to

⁹ See Jaffrelot, C., 'The Punjabization of Pakistan: Myth or reality?', ed. C. Jaffrelot, *Pakistan: Nationalism without a Nation* (Zed Books: London, 2002), pp. 51–63.

¹⁰ Khan (note 7).

¹¹ Yusuf, M., 'The intersection among development, politics, and security', eds A. Weiss and S. G. Khattak, *Development Challenges Confronting Pakistan* (Kumarian Press: Sterling, VA, 2013), pp. 239–67.

¹² Agha, A. S., 'Pakistan's security perceptions', ed. I. Alam, *Security and Nuclear Stabilization in South Asia* (Free Media Association: Lahore, 2006), pp. 201–216.

¹³ On developments in Afghanistan during this period, including Pakistan's role, see Coll, S., *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (Penguin Books: London, 2004).

power.¹⁴ For the Pakistani establishment, the Taliban under Mullah Mohammad Omar had the advantage of being Islamists. The establishment believed that this would make them uninterested in raising the issue of Pashtun nationalism.¹⁵

During the 1990s Pakistan took its Afghan strategy to the extreme by incorporating the use of Afghan territory into its war-fighting plans against India and utilizing Afghan soil to train and launch militants fighting Indian rule in Jammu and Kashmir, in the quest for 'strategic depth'.¹⁶ Pakistan's policy during these decades gained it a reputation of being excessively interfering and of supporting only amenable—ultra-conservative—Pashtuns to the detriment of all other political actors in Afghanistan.¹⁷ As a result, it alienated the Northern Alliance, an umbrella politico-military front led by various northern Afghan factions who came together to oppose the Taliban's rise.¹⁸

On the eve of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, Pakistan was globally isolated on the Afghanistan question as the chief patron of Mullah Omar's Taliban regime, which had hosted al-Qaeda and an assortment of other Islamist militants such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Chechen Islamist militants, and Uighur separatists from China. It was also extremely unpopular with the anti-Taliban elements that would soon enter the corridors of power in Kabul.

Responding to the new realities after September 2001

The vastly changed dynamics in Afghanistan since the international presence arrived in the country in October 2001, and Pakistan's trajectory over the past decade, have challenged the traditional drivers of Pakistan's Afghanistan policy. While rivalry with India and the suppression of Pashtun nationalism have not been abandoned as drivers, they have been moderated, and at least one new factor—domestic instability—has taken priority.

The USA's 'original sin' in Afghanistan

Fundamentally, the Pakistani state has viewed Afghanistan since September 2001 in terms of the US presence on its border. Pakistan's Afghanistan policy has

¹⁴ For more on the Taliban movement and its conduct in power see Gohari, M. J., *The Taliban: Ascent to Power* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 27 Sep. 2001), pp. 26–133.

¹⁵ Rashid, A., *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, 2nd edn (Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, 2010), p. 187.

¹⁶ Rashid (note 15), p. 186.

¹⁷ Rubin, B. R. and Siddique, A., 'Resolving the Pakistan–Afghanistan stalemate', US Institute of Peace Special Report no. 176, Oct. 2006, <<http://www.usip.org/files/resources/SRoct06.pdf>>. Liberally oriented Pashtuns in Afghanistan and Pakistan have taken serious issue with the Pakistani establishment's tendency to present hard-line Sunni Islamist elements like the Taliban as representatives of the Afghan Pashtuns. See the series of articles by Farhat Taj starting with Taj, F., 'Taliban are Pak Army proxies, not Pashtun nationalists—I', *Friday Times*, 30 Mar. 2012.

¹⁸ The Northern Alliance, formally the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, was formed in opposition to the Taliban in 1996, and on the eve of the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan controlled 10–15% of Afghan territory. The group included the famous Tajik commander Ahmed Shah Masoud, Uzbek commander Abdul Rashid Dostum, Hazara leaders, and anti-Taliban Pashtuns. Pashtun commander Gulbadeen Hikmatyar, once close to the ISL, also allied at some periods with the Northern Alliance against the Taliban.

therefore been affected more by developments in the Pakistani–US relationship and less by those in Afghan–Pakistani ties. This has offered little comfort vis-à-vis the two traditional drivers of Pakistan's Afghan policy. From the Pakistani establishment's perspective, the USA's post-2001 Afghanistan policy, and its broader approach to South Asia, have forced Pakistan to deal with both an unfriendly government in Kabul and a growing regional imbalance in favour of India.

Immediately after the 11 September 2001 attacks, the military-led Pakistani Government of the time advised the USA to deal with the moderates among Taliban ranks in order to isolate al-Qaeda after a short military campaign in Afghanistan.¹⁹ Instead, the USA committed what the Pakistani establishment has ever since considered the 'original sin': co-opting members of the erstwhile Northern Alliance to take charge in Kabul. Even though the representation of the northern factions in Kabul was subsequently reduced, the Pakistani establishment saw the ouster of the Taliban's regime as ushering in a new era in which the dice were loaded against it.²⁰

Pakistan would thereafter be highly suspicious of the US agenda in Afghanistan and Pakistan—and the USA would be equally suspicious of Pakistan's motives—even as the two continued to be formal allies in the 'war on terrorism'. Moreover, the Pakistani establishment saw a direct connection between the US presence in Afghanistan and the increase in Indian leverage with the Afghan Government.²¹ This fed Pakistan's worries about a 'two-front' threat.

The rise of domestic terrorism

The factor that has affected Pakistan's thinking since 2001 even more than these traditional concerns is the rise in domestic terrorism. Pakistan has seen a remarkable deterioration in its internal security situation with almost 47 500 people killed since 2003 in terrorist incidents perpetrated largely by, or at the behest of, al-Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban. The latter is a conglomerate whose roots can be traced back to the post-September 2001 uprising among the anti-US tribal Pashtuns on the Pakistani side of the Durand Line.²²

The Pakistani Taliban coalesced under an umbrella organization, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), only in 2007. However, the TTP's formation was the logical conclusion of the return of a culture of militancy in the Federally

¹⁹ Pervez Musharraf, the Pakistani military ruler at the time, had provided unsolicited council to US President George W. Bush. There were 3 pillars to the suggested course: (a) deal with the moderate Taliban to isolate the hardliners and al-Qaeda; (b) do not allow the Northern Alliance to take control of Kabul; and (c) make the military campaign swift, targeted and limited in scope. Hussain, Z., *Frontline Pakistan: The Struggle with Militant Islam* (Columbia University Press: New York, 2008), p. 48.

²⁰ Hussain (note 19), pp. 48–49.

²¹ Yusuf, M., 'Rational institutional design, perverse incentives, and the US–Pakistan relationship post-9/11', *Defence Against Terrorism Review*, vol. 2, no. 1 (spring 2009).

²² South Asia Terrorism Portal (note 3). On the origins of the Pakistani Taliban see Qazi, S. H. 'An extended profile of the Pakistani Taliban', Institute for Social Policy and Understanding Policy Brief no. 44, Aug. 2011, <<http://www.ispu.org/Policy/34/Publications.aspx>>. On the TTP and militancy in FATA see Qazi, S. H., 'Rebels of the frontier: origins, organization, and recruitment of the Pakistani Taliban', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, vol. 22, no. 4 (Oct. 2011).

Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), a mainly Pashtun semi-autonomous region of north-west Pakistan that shares a long border with Afghanistan.²³ This militancy was driven by the mobilization of thousands of Pakistani tribal Pashtuns to fight against the foreign presence in Afghanistan after 2001 and by violent resentment of the Pakistani Army's forays into the semi-autonomous FATA from 2002 onwards to tackle foreign militants fleeing the US military campaign across the Durand Line.

The Pakistani Taliban's justification for targeting the Pakistani state all along has been that the country's military is supporting the USA—the 'infidel' foreign occupying force in Afghanistan—against fellow Muslims. The crux of their message is most aptly captured by Eamon Murphy: 'The Pakistan Taliban claimed that, as proud Pashtuns, they were only defending themselves against the Pakistani military which had become nothing other than the servant of the US.'²⁴ This narrative conveniently conflated their real—militant Islamist—agenda with anti-US sentiment that was already rife in Pakistan and caused much ambivalence among Pakistanis in terms of the threat they posed.²⁵

The Taliban sanctuaries as a complicating factor

Moreover, the most prominent Afghan Taliban factions—the Haqqani network and Mullah Omar's Taliban group (hereafter referred to collectively as the Afghan Taliban)—fighting the international presence in Afghanistan have found sanctuary in Pakistan: the Haqqani network in the North Waziristan agency of FATA and Mullah Omar's group further south in the city of Quetta in Baluchistan province—thus the popularly used name Quetta Shura. The Quetta Shura is the same Taliban group that ruled Afghanistan before September 2001 and has its strongholds in southern Afghanistan. The Haqqani network is a former Mujahideen group that fought the Soviets and thereafter retained its dominance over strongholds in Khost, Paktika and Paktia provinces in eastern Afghanistan.²⁶ Both groups crossed over into Pakistan to escape the US-led military campaign after September 2001. Pakistan has been under tremendous external pressure to act against them militarily.

The Afghan Taliban have been careful not to target the Pakistani state directly. The Quetta Shura, and to a lesser extent the Haqqani network, have sought to distance themselves from the Pakistani Taliban's actions against the state.²⁷ Nonetheless, several factors link the Afghan and Pakistani groups, beyond the ideological connection. For example, the Pakistani Taliban has provided the Haqqani network with safe havens in FATA and facilitated the group's recruit-

²³ Qazi, 'An extended profile of the Pakistani Taliban' (note 22)

²⁴ Murphy, E., *The Making of Terrorism in Pakistan: Historical and Social Roots of Extremism* (Routledge: London, 2012), p. 146.

²⁵ Yusuf, M., 'Taliban have been fooling us all along', *Friday Times*, 8 May 2009.

²⁶ On the Quetta Shura Taliban see Rashid (note 15), pp. 17–81; and Nojumi, N., 'The rise and fall of the Taliban', eds R. Crews and A. Tarzi, *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 2008), pp. 90–117. On the Haqqani network see Brown, V. B. and Rassler, D., *Fountainhead of Jihad: The Haqqani Nexus, 1973–2012* (Columbia University Press: New York, 2013).

²⁷ Basit, A., 'Militant landscape after Miranshah agreement', M. A. Rana, S. Sial and A. Basit, *Dynamics of Taliban Insurgency in FATA* (Pak Institute for Peace Studies: Islamabad, 2010), p. 103.

ment.²⁸ Both groups are closely linked to al-Qaeda. The Pakistani Taliban also formally pledge allegiance to the Afghan Taliban's supreme leader, Mullah Omar.²⁹ Moreover, the Pakistani Taliban have used their ideological affinity with the Afghan Taliban movement to win recruits and sympathy.³⁰

The Pakistani official narrative blames the regional context for Pakistan's internal security woes. In reality, while the trigger for the onslaught of domestic violence after September 2001 was the tribal uprising in support of the ousted Afghan Taliban regime and against the Pakistani military's ingress into FATA, there is little question that it was the Pakistani establishment's nurturing of domestic militants since the 1980s, and a lingering sense that some of them could be used as strategic assets, that explains the spread and sustainability of the Islamist groups operating against the Pakistani state today.³¹ Even since September 2001, Pakistan has continued to pick and choose favourites among Islamist outfits and has only selectively targeted some while sparing, and even supporting, others. It has gone after groups like the Pakistani Taliban and foreign groups like al-Qaeda but has spared anti-Indian militant outfits and Afghan insurgent groups on its soil.³² It officially pleads lack of capacity to broaden its counterterrorism campaign, although international observers accuse the Pakistani establishment of lacking the will to go after elements it may still consider its strategic assets.

Pakistan's Afghan policy 2001–12: new aims, old behaviour

Operationally, the emergence of domestic terrorism as the top priority has led to acute unwillingness among Pakistani policymakers to sanction any action they believe will further energize violent domestic opposition. Perhaps most importantly for Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan and the international community, especially in the endgame phase, this has made Pakistan even more reluctant to confront the Afghan Taliban sanctuaries. Pakistani planners believe that going after them militarily would not only turn them against the Pakistani state—thereby forcing them to shed their restraint on this count—but also earn extra support for domestic militants. Meanwhile, the Afghan Government and international actors see the sanctuaries as one of the biggest, if not *the* biggest, contributors to Afghanistan's domestic instability.

While Pakistan still wants to retain friendly, or at least not hostile, relations with the Afghan Taliban, it no longer believes an outright Taliban victory is pos-

²⁸ International Crisis Group (note 3), pp. 14–15.

²⁹ See Basit (note 27), pp. 103, 129–30.

³⁰ On the recruitment messages of the Pakistani Taliban and other rebel groups in FATA see Qazi, 'Rebels of the frontier . . .' (note 22).

³¹ Rana, M. A., 'Post-9/11 developments and emergence of local Taliban groups', Rana, Sial and Basit (note 27), pp. 69–96. On the spread of violence in Pakistan since Sep. 2001 see Murphy (note 24), pp. 137–59.

³² See Siddiq, A., 'Pakistan's counterterrorism strategy: separating friends from enemies', *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 1 (Feb. 2011), pp. 149–62; and Tankel, S., 'Lashkar-e-Taiba in perspective: an evolving threat', Counterterrorism Strategy Initiative Policy Paper, New America Foundation, Feb. 2010, pp. 3–4. On Pakistan's selective approach to militant groups see Yusuf, M., 'A society on the precipice? examining the prospects of youth radicalization in Pakistan', M. Kugelman and R. M. Hathaway, *Reaping the Dividend: Overcoming Pakistan's Demographic Challenges* (Woodrow Wilson Press: Washington, DC, 2011), p. 94.

sible in Afghanistan—nor would it wish to see one. It fears that the Taliban taking power once again in Afghanistan would give the Pakistani Taliban's campaign a moral and psychological boost, thereby facilitating the further spread of their ideology within Pakistan.³³ In this regard, the establishment considers the Pakistani policy of the 1990s that actively backed the Taliban's rise to power a blunder.³⁴

Furthermore, the change in power dynamics in Afghanistan and improved fortunes of minority ethnic groups in the country have gradually convinced Pakistani planners over the past decade that outright Taliban rule of Afghanistan would not be tolerated. Supporting the Taliban in this aim would be tantamount to fuelling a fresh civil war, and perhaps ensuring outright chaos in Afghanistan.

Fear of Afghanistan's descent into chaos is a major factor in Pakistani planners' calculus. If the situation in Afghanistan breaks down into civil war they foresee many different types of negative spillover, including (a) continuing unrest and instability in Pakistan's tribal border regions; (b) the Pakistani Taliban being increasingly able to exploit the security vacuum and find refuge in Afghan border areas (as they already have in the past year);³⁵ (c) continued traction for the Pakistani Taliban's efforts to link themselves, at least ideologically, to the Afghan Taliban; (d) a fresh refugee influx from Afghanistan adding to the already 1.7 million-strong Afghan refugee population in Pakistan;³⁶ and (e) heightened tensions between India and Pakistan as they back rival proxies in the fighting that would ensue in Afghanistan in this scenario.

Once again, Pakistan's vision of how such an outcome is to be avoided and which actors have the most to contribute is very different—and in fact often opposed—to that of the USA and the international community. The Pakistani establishment believes that the most prudent way forward is an even-handed Afghan reconciliation process inclusive of the Taliban factions present on its soil, which would bring about a negotiated power-sharing arrangement in Afghanistan.³⁷ The USA and much of the current ruling elite in Kabul, however, preferred to weaken the Afghan Taliban insurgents and only reconcile with the remnants who are amenable to the US vision for Afghanistan's political future.³⁸

³³ Weinbaum, M., 'What Pakistan seeks in Afghanistan', Foreign Policy Association blog, Middle East Institute, 20 Dec. 2012, <<http://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2012/12/20/>>.

³⁴ Yusuf, M., Yusuf, H, and Zaidi, S., 'Pakistan, the United States, and the endgame in Afghanistan: perceptions of Pakistan's foreign policy elite', Jinnah Institute and US Institute of Peace, 2011, <http://www.jinnah-institute.org/images/ji_afghanendgame.pdf>, pp. 21–23, 30–35.

³⁵ Khan, T., 'TTP admits to having safe haven in Afghanistan', *Express Tribune*, 26 June 2012.

³⁶ UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 'Pakistan', UNHCR Global Appeal 2012–2013', <<http://www.unhcr.org/ga12/index.xml>>.

³⁷ Yusuf, Yusuf and Zaidi (note 34), pp. 23, 30–32.

³⁸ This position was formally elucidated by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Feb. 2011. In what was seen as a softening in the US position, she suggested to the Taliban: 'Break ties with al-Qaida, renounce violence, and abide by the Afghan constitution, and you can rejoin Afghan society; refuse and you will continue to face the consequences of being tied to al-Qaida as an enemy of the international community.' US Department of State, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, Remarks at the launch of the Asia Society's series of Richard C. Holbrooke memorial addresses, New York, 18 Feb. 2011, <<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/02/156815.htm>>.

The rivalry with India has affected Pakistan's current Afghan policy in two ways. Pakistan is concerned that the current power balance in Afghanistan—with elements of the erstwhile Northern Alliance and Pashtun elements opposed to the Taliban and unfavourable to Pakistan in the ascendant—is tipped in India's favour. The establishment's recourse has been to maintain ties with the Afghan Taliban factions on its soil. However, Pakistan's goal is no longer to entirely exclude India from Afghanistan and to use Afghan territory to prick its rival through subconventional warfare. Rather, Pakistan seems reconciled with an Indian development presence, exceptionally popular in Afghanistan as it is, but wants to ensure that the Afghan context does not provide India the space to pursue security-driven agendas against Pakistan.³⁹

Even as this amounts to a moderation of Pakistan's traditional goals, the policy actions to achieve this remain security-centric. The establishment still seems to be driven by what Pakistan's liberally inclined intelligentsia has condemned as sheer paranoia about regional developments.⁴⁰ This suggests that Pakistan will continue forgoing regional economic integration and the benefit from potential cooperation with India on investment ventures in Afghanistan. To be sure, India's Afghanistan strategy has also sought to undercut Pakistan's influence; in fact, many in India would like to see their country take a more aggressive approach to Afghanistan.⁴¹ There has therefore been little scope for cooperation amid outright competition perpetuated by both sides.

As far as the 2014 Afghan transition goes, then, Pakistan has been seeking to retain ties and avoid hostility with the Afghan Taliban—allowing them to continue operating from Pakistan in the process—but without backing their outright victory against the international troop presence and the Afghan authorities. The Pakistani establishment has sought to operationalize this balance by pushing, above all else, a vision of Afghan reconciliation that is heavily focused on the Taliban's inclusion as a significant player in Afghan politics.

The Afghan Government and Western countries, in particular, would prefer a political settlement in which the Taliban are just one of many groups that must agree to play by democratic rules without any preferential treatment, and where the current Afghan democratic process is central to any future political transition. Pakistan does not oppose the continuity of Afghanistan's democratic transitions. However, it has been seeking what it calls an 'inclusive' reconciliation process that allows for a meaningful—as opposed to cosmetic—Taliban presence. It believes that in light of the military stalemate on the ground, the impending drawdown of international forces, and the desire of the Afghan Taliban's

³⁹ Yusuf, Yusuf and Zaidi (note 34), pp. 38–39.

⁴⁰ For the liberal critique of Pakistan's official policy see e.g. Sirmed, M., 'Liberalization of strategic depth-I', *Daily Times*, 12 Sep. 2011; Sirmed, M., 'Liberalization of strategic depth-II', *Daily Times*, 19 Sep. 2011; Taqi, M., 'Pakistan's little Great Game', *Daily Times*, 15 Sep. 2011; and Shafi, K., 'Pakistan is ours too', *Express Tribune*, 22 Sep. 2011.

⁴¹ See Dasgupta, S., 'Post-2014 Afghanistan: Regional politics and the prospects for stability', US Institute for Peace Special Report, forthcoming 2013; and Pant, H. V., 'India's "Af-Pak" conundrum: South Asia in flux', *Orbis*, vol. 57, no. 2 (winter 2012).

Pakistan-based leadership to gain political legitimacy, such a process would naturally lead to a power-sharing arrangement.

Pakistani planners hope that this outcome would, in order of priority, (a) prompt the Afghan Taliban to give up their sanctuaries in Pakistan without Pakistan having to fight them; (b) keep the Afghan Taliban from joining hands with the Pakistani Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban from receiving a fresh boost from a Taliban military victory in Afghanistan; (c) end or at least reduce the violence in Afghanistan and thereby prevent excessive spillover into Pakistan; and (d) give Pakistan a non-hostile actor, if not a powerful partner, in Afghan politics to buffer against any troubling Indian ingress in Afghanistan's southern and eastern regions close to Pakistan. An inclusive reconciliation process, then, is Pakistani planners' silver bullet for satisfying all of its three main policy drivers.

3. The logic behind Pakistan's paradoxical behaviour in the endgame

Pakistan's changed priorities and moderated objectives notwithstanding, its approach achieved little in the first two years of the endgame. Until the summer of 2012, the international community continued to question Pakistan's sincerity in opposing the insurgency in Afghanistan. Pakistan seemed to be holding out against virtually all other important players in the Afghan endgame; it was reviled, cornered and made acutely aware of the prospects of international isolation.

A puzzling aspect of Pakistani strategy was the apparent mismatch between its moderated objectives and policy actions that often seemed aggressive, destabilizing and at times very similar to the Pakistani tactics of yesteryear. At least from a Western point of view, Pakistan continued to come across as a spoiler in Afghanistan. Two aspects of its policy during this period stand out as seeming contradictions to the moderated Pakistani vision.

First, if Pakistan desired a political reconciliation process—even if it had very specific and narrow ideas about what such a process ought to look like—it might have been expected to eagerly assist in bringing the Taliban leaders on its soil to the negotiating table. In reality, until the latter part of 2012, Pakistani efforts in this direction were few and far between. Much more frequent, in fact, were reports of Pakistan undermining other stakeholders' efforts to establish contact with the Afghan Taliban.

Second, there was an inherent tension between Pakistan's desire to avoid lingering instability and chaos in Afghanistan and its reluctance to tackle the Afghan Taliban sanctuaries that are the cause of much violence across the Durand Line. In reality, both of these apparently paradoxical aspects of Pakistani behaviour were deliberate policy choices in pursuit of an inclusive reconciliation in Afghanistan—within the constraints of post-2011 realities.

Mixed messages on reconciliation

Pakistan's reluctance to proactively support negotiations with the Taliban can be best explained by the centrality of the US presence in Afghanistan in the minds of Pakistani policymakers and the disconnect between the Pakistani and US positions on the way forward. Both the USA and Pakistan, like other external actors, have wanted an end to the Afghan insurgency for some time. However, Pakistan has long believed that that the situation on the ground is unlikely to move beyond a military stalemate. At the start of the endgame, Pakistani planners postulated that the longer the military campaign continued without a clear plan to negotiate politically, the longer the instability in Afghanistan would persist and the more boxed in Pakistan would become. The US position at the time was fundamentally different: while the idea of talking to the Taliban was integral to the USA's

endgame strategy—contacts were made starting in 2010⁴²—the troop surge was essentially meant to weaken the Afghan Taliban leadership and wean off their middle- and lower-ranking cadres. If the surge had succeeded in irreversibly weakening the Taliban, it would have forced the Taliban to negotiate from a position of weakness.

This disconnect meant that the Pakistani establishment never trusted the USA's commitment to the cause of even-handed and meaningful reconciliation with the Taliban. The establishment responded by holding back its own cards in terms of facilitating US contacts with the Taliban. What Pakistan sought was a clear and detailed road map from the USA on how the military and political tracks of its strategy would complement each other. Pakistan also wanted a central role in any negotiation process; it saw this as the only way to safeguard its interests among actors who may otherwise, it felt, try to minimize its role and ignore its concerns in an Afghan settlement. The USA was equally distrustful of Pakistan. As a result, it wanted to explore any possibilities of talking to the Taliban directly (even as it wished to convince the Taliban to overcome their reluctance to talk to the Afghan Government directly), not through or with Pakistan.⁴³

Pakistan and the USA ended up playing a game of 'chicken' between 2010 and 2012. Every time the USA was unable to deliver the road map for its fight-and-talk strategy or established direct contacts with any Taliban factions based in Pakistan, Pakistan's suspicions only grew and it became even less cooperative.⁴⁴ For the USA, this was proof that Pakistan was still only interested in using the Taliban as proxies for its traditional agendas. The end result was that both sides continued their policies—the USA with its poorly defined fight-and-talk strategy, led by the military surge, and Pakistan arguing for its vision of reconciliation. As one leading American expert put it, Pakistan's decision makers never did see 'reason to rush into endgame talks that they cannot control or predict'.⁴⁵

Leaving the sanctuaries alone

Pakistan's policy on the Afghan Taliban sanctuaries remains unaltered even today. Three factors explain Pakistan's tolerance and support for the Afghan Taliban sanctuaries despite their obvious role in destabilizing Afghanistan.

⁴² There were contacts between US and Taliban interlocutors in 2010 and then through German-sponsored talks in 2010–11. Rashid, A., 'The truth behind America's Taliban talks', A-list blog, 29 June 2011, <<http://blogs.ft.com/the-a-list/2011/06/29/the-truth-behind-americas-taliban-talks/>>. See also Hossal, R., 'Talking with the Taliban: a timeline', 20 Jan. 2012, <<http://www.smartwar.org/2012/01/talking-with-the-taliban-a-timeline/>>.

⁴³ Bajoria, J., 'Gauging US–Taliban talks', interview with Steve Coll, President of the New America Foundation, Council on Foreign Relations, 24 Feb. 2011, <<http://www.cfr.org/afghanistan/gauging-us-taliban-talks/p24214>>.

⁴⁴ US Secretary of State Clinton's Feb. 2011 Asia Society speech (note 38) is considered the first formal mention of the so-called fight-and-talk strategy towards the Taliban. The terms 'talk, fight, and build' were used subsequently. Yusufzai, R., 'US looking to negotiate with the Taliban', *Newsline*, 30 Jan. 2012, <<http://www.newslinemagazine.com/2012/01/us-looking-to-negotiate-with-the-taliban/>>.

⁴⁵ Coll, S. 'What does Pakistan want?', *New Yorker*, 29 Mar. 2012.

First, and most important, is the perceived link between the sanctuaries and domestic militancy. The author's conversations with a wide spectrum of Pakistani stakeholders have confirmed that there is a genuine belief within the establishment that the state does not have the capacity to tackle the militancy problem in a comprehensive manner. Besides the Pakistani Taliban, domestic militants include a plethora of sectarian and anti-Indian militant groups, some of which have splintered and turned against the state while others are allowed to operate relatively freely as long as they do not attack the state.⁴⁶ In this context, the Afghan Taliban sanctuaries are seen as a hornets' nest, disturbing which could bring a major backlash within Pakistan. The military's constant pleas of its inability to root out the sanctuaries by force, then, are more than mere bluff.⁴⁷

The second consideration in Pakistan's policy on the sanctuaries is fiercely Machiavellian. The predominant tactic seems to be turning a blind eye to Afghan Taliban activities—an 'I don't touch you—you don't touch me' policy. In the past, the Pakistani military has even concluded formal 'peace' deals with anti-US groups affiliated with the Haqqani network.⁴⁸ In addition, however, the intelligence complex has been repeatedly accused of supporting targeted attacks against Afghan, Western and Indian targets in Afghanistan.⁴⁹ US officials have even openly berated the ISI for providing operational guidance to the Haqqani network.⁵⁰

Finally, avoiding actions that may turn the Afghan Taliban against the Pakistani state is also part of a classic hedging strategy. Afghanistan's descent into chaos remains a possibility and a potent threat. Pakistan does not want to alienate the Taliban factions as in the last resort both might need to cooperate in a potential civil war scenario in Afghanistan.

Pakistan's approach to the sanctuaries to date has furthered its primary interest in an inclusive negotiation process in Afghanistan. De facto and de jure, it has kept US costs in Afghanistan high enough that the USA would ultimately

⁴⁶ Siddiq (note 32).

⁴⁷ Pakistani Army, 'Ten years since 9/11: our collective experience (Pakistan's perspective)', reproduced in Coll (note 45). For an analysis reflective of the official thinking on this issue see Afzal, S. N., 'North Waziristan: the death trap', Spearhead Research, 29 Dec. 2010, <http://www.spearheadresearch.org/pages/documents/North_Waziristan_-_The_Death_Trap.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Perhaps the most prominent of these is the Muqami Taliban, a group founded by Hafiz Gulabatur and Maulvi Nazir, pro-Afghan Taliban militants who fought against US forces in Afghanistan but struck a deal with the Pakistani state, first to oust the Uzbek and Arab fighters from their FATA strongholds and then to challenge the Pakistani Taliban. Maulvi Nazir was recently killed in a US drone attack in FATA. Wazir, H., 'U.S. drone strike kills Pakistan Taliban commander: sources', Reuters, 3 Jan. 2013.

⁴⁹ See e.g. Roggio, B., 'ISI supported attack on US embassy, ISAF HQ in Kabul', Long War Journal, Threat Matrix blog, 22 Sep. 2011, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2011/09/isi_supported_attack_on_us_emb.php>.

⁵⁰ The most prominent of these statements came from Admiral Mike Mullen, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, when he called the Haqqani network a 'veritable arm' of the ISI in a hearing before the US Congress. 'Haqqani network is a "veritable arm" of ISI: Mullen', *Dawn*, 22 Sep. 2011. See also Waldman, M., 'The Sun in the Sky: the relationship between Pakistan's ISI and Afghan insurgents', Crisis States Research Centre, Discussion Paper no. 18, June 2010, <<http://www2.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/crisisStates/download/dp/DP%2018.pdf>>; and the BBC documentary series *Secret Pakistan*, first aired in Oct. 2011.

have to give up any hope of military domination and consider it necessary to negotiate with the Taliban relatively even-handedly.

The flip side: good faith and cooperation with the USA

Some aspects of Pakistani behaviour suggest, however, that its planners are being careful not to overplay their hand with regard to the sanctuaries lest the USA turn against Pakistan or abandon Afghanistan altogether without any prospect of a political deal. Pakistani interlocutors have repeatedly warned the USA not to leave Afghanistan without setting in motion a process leading to a sustainable political and security structure.⁵¹

This is perhaps why the ISI, in parallel to allowing the sanctuaries to remain operational, has also forced the Afghan Taliban in the sanctuaries to curb their activities, especially at times when external pressure to do so has increased for one reason or another. It has also arrested a significant number of Afghan Taliban, including some key figures, over the years.⁵² In what may be further evidence of sensitivity to US 'red lines', Pakistan has emphasized its all-out support for the USA against the al-Qaeda presence in Pakistan. It has allowed the USA considerable leeway for direct action against al-Qaeda and Afghan Taliban factions through special forces operations and drone strikes in FATA (even if Pakistan's public stance has been unequivocal disapproval of drone strikes);⁵³ and it has provided intelligence cooperation on targets in FATA and on any leads dealing with threats to Western homelands.⁵⁴

In sum, Pakistan's paradoxical behaviour could be seen as a fundamentally high-risk approach aimed at prioritizing the establishment's preferred vision of an Afghan reconciliation process without Pakistan having to act against the Afghan Taliban or to cope with an even greater domestic militancy problem. Since the Pakistani establishment believes that this will move Afghanistan beyond its current impasse while protecting Pakistan's self-defined interests, it has opposed, and its actions have undermined, any developments during the end-game that could interfere with this primary objective.

⁵¹ Hussain (note 19), p. 5.

⁵² Syed, B., 'Pakistan to consult Afghans before freeing Taliban', *Dawn*, 9 Feb. 2013.

⁵³ It must be noted that much of the Pakistani cooperation in terms of allowing US direct action on Pakistani soil has been clandestine and limited to targets in FATA or Quetta and its vicinity. This is why the publicly acknowledged US raid that killed Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad on 2 May 2011 created such a major uproar in Pakistan.

⁵⁴ Based on the author's off-the-record conversations with Pakistani military officials and experts privy to closed-door briefings. In 1 informal meeting in 2011, a military official presented to a private gathering of journalists a list of joint operations conducted by Pakistan and the USA against the Quetta Shura presence in and around Quetta.

4. Approaching the ISAF withdrawal: what has Pakistan achieved?

Even if the paradoxes in the Pakistani position in the endgame are based on some kind of logic, the strategy seemed to have brought it no closer to achieving its desired end state in Afghanistan by the beginning of 2012. Not only was Pakistan singled out as a major problem in Afghanistan by the international media, but it also became amply clear that the appetite among Western governments and publics to continue investing in a heavy physical footprint to stabilize Afghanistan had all but disappeared. In fact, support for a precipitous withdrawal began to grow.⁵⁵ This could hardly be acceptable to Pakistani planners. They see the current Afghan leadership as a clique who are not only unfavourable towards Pakistan but will continue to be resisted violently—to the detriment of Afghanistan, Pakistan and the USA—unless there is a political deal involving the Taliban.

Announcing the strategic shift

Fearing such an outcome, in early 2012 the Pakistani establishment began to publicly claim a ‘strategic shift’ in its thinking on Afghanistan. Rather remarkably by Pakistani standards, the Foreign Office took the lead on public presentation of this claimed shift, with the military staying in the background.⁵⁶

Perhaps driven by the obvious realization of the impasse with the USA, Pakistan attempted to convince regional actors and the Afghan Government that it was no longer pursuing strategic depth in Afghanistan. It also began explaining its rationale for an inclusive reconciliation process. Pakistan made diplomatic efforts to win appreciation and support for its stance from countries like Iran, the Central Asian republics, China, Russia and Turkey.⁵⁷

Perhaps the most extraordinary move in terms of regional outreach, one that helped lend credibility to Pakistan’s appeals, was its effort to directly engage with political actors of the former Northern Alliance factions, despite their long-standing enmity. The move was prompted by Pakistan’s realization that it stood isolated on the Afghan question and needed to broaden its narrow set of contacts in the country if it was to have any chance of being accepted as an interlocutor by the Afghans. Also, since Pakistan’s ideal outcome was a power-sharing arrangement in Kabul, it needed to at least signal its willingness to open up to major Afghan political actors who would likely be part of the post-2014 set-up.

⁵⁵ Not only is there public support for a rapid exit in many Western countries but even institutions like the US Congress have spoken in favour of a precipitous ‘end’ to the war. As recently as Nov. 2012 the US Senate passed a resolution calling for an accelerated withdrawal from Afghanistan. Cassata, D., ‘Senate backs faster US withdrawal from Afghanistan’, Associated Press, 30 Nov. 2012.

⁵⁶ Pakistan’s foreign minister, Hina Rabbani Khar, took the lead in promoting Pakistan’s ‘new’ outlook by conducting high-profile visits to India and Afghanistan. The Foreign Office, however, remained unable to assert a vision that differed from that of the establishment. See Gul, I., ‘Missed opportunities’, *Friday Times*, 22 Mar. 2013.

⁵⁷ Yusuf, Yusuf and Zaidi (note 34), p. 36.

While low-key contacts had been made for some time between Pakistani military figures and diplomats and the northern factions, Pakistan made it a point to publicize its outreach on the occasion of a visit to Kabul by its foreign minister, Hina Rabbani Khar, in February 2012.⁵⁸ Special note was made of a number of meetings with non-Pashtun Afghan opposition leaders during the visit. This diplomacy was kept up in a follow-up trip by the Pakistani prime minister, Raja Pervaiz Ashraf, later in the year.⁵⁹ There has been little public information about these contacts since then, but they seem to be continuing.⁶⁰ The mistrust between Pakistan and non-Pashtun Afghan leaders is too deep to be overcome by a few meetings. More important from Pakistan's perspective, perhaps, was the symbolism and the signal that it was willing to move beyond its strictly ethno-centric approach to Afghanistan and work with a broader set of actors in the future.

Will desperation make reconciliation happen after all?

For the most part, Pakistan's moves from early 2012 attracted appreciation and cautious optimism from the international community, including the USA. However, the fact still remained that no robust reconciliation process was in place. Crucial time was lost in 2011 and much of 2012 due to the fragility of Pakistani-US relations and increasing tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan and between Afghanistan and the USA.⁶¹ The Afghan-US troubles were predominantly over US counterinsurgency tactics and the USA's dissatisfaction with the Karzai administration's governance and corruption scandals.

Nevertheless, even as the impasse continued, the persistence of the Afghan Taliban-led insurgency led to a virtual consensus among the key players that a military victory in Afghanistan is impossible and that the Afghan Taliban factions in Pakistan have to be brought into a political solution. While the role of policy failures and negative developments within Afghanistan has been central—and has often been downplayed by Western media and observers—the violence originating from the sanctuaries has been significant in denting the prospects of a military victory in Afghanistan. It is amply clear that the Taliban will be entering the negotiations on an even footing, if not from a position of relative strength.

⁵⁸ Vogt, H. and Abbot, S., 'New Pakistan outreach could aid Afghan peace deal', Associated Press, 27 Oct. 2012.

⁵⁹ Vogt and Abbot (note 58).

⁶⁰ Pakistan's continued outreach to the northern faction leaders was confirmed in a recent off-the-record briefing to journalists by a senior Pakistani military officer, Rawal Pindi, Mar. 2013.

⁶¹ In addition to the impasse over the way forward on Afghanistan, the Pakistani-US relationship was hit by a series of crises in 2011. A US contractor killed 2 Pakistani citizens in Lahore in Jan.; the US conducted the unilateral raid that killed Osama Bin Laden in Abbottabad on 2 May; Admiral Mullen's accusation about the Haqqani network being the 'veritable arm' of the ISI came in Sep. (see note 50); and a US attack on a Pakistani border post at Salala killed 24 Pakistani security personnel in Nov. For a timeline of tension-inducing developments see 'Pak-US timeline 2011-present', Jinnah Institute, <<http://www.jinnah-institute.org/pak-us-timeline>>, accessed 30 Apr. 2013.

'Inclusive reconciliation' gains support

Recent events suggest that the Pakistani establishment may have waited out everyone long enough to see its version of reconciliation being entertained. As Pakistan has rushed to find regional support for its position, others have been just as eager to break the impasse blocking an overarching Afghan settlement. With desperation only increasing among all of the key actors, including Pakistan, there are renewed efforts to re-energize the reconciliation track.

In December 2012 there were publicly acknowledged meetings between Taliban interlocutors and representatives of the Afghan Government. This was a departure for the Taliban, whose formal position was that it would not negotiate with the Karzai administration.⁶² The stalled 'Qatar process' initiated in 2011 by the USA, in which the Taliban would be allowed to maintain an office in Doha for reconciliation talks, has also found renewed support.⁶³ Unlike in 2011, when the Afghan Government and Pakistan had shown reservations about the Qatar process, both have now publicly called on the Taliban to negotiate sincerely through the Doha office.⁶⁴

Moreover, the USA and Pakistan have set up a 'contact group' to work specifically on arranging safe passage for the Taliban interlocutors to participate in talks with the Afghan Government in Kabul. Linked to this effort, the United Nations Security Council allowed exemptions to its long-standing travel restrictions on Taliban members in December 2012.⁶⁵ In February 2013 the Afghan, British and Pakistani premiers also met and agreed on an ambitious—and quite obviously unrealistic—six-month deadline to reach a peace deal with the Taliban.⁶⁶ The USA has been vocal in its backing of such decisions. It seems content with deferring a lead role to others and has continuously stressed its goal of putting the Afghan Government in the lead in any negotiations with the Taliban.⁶⁷

Pakistan has responded with conciliatory measures of its own. A flurry of visits and contacts between Afghan and Pakistani officials was followed by the release of 18 Afghan Taliban prisoners in Pakistani custody in November 2012 and another 8 in December.⁶⁸ The prisoner release is no minor development. These prisoners were potential Taliban interlocutors who had been jealously guarded by Pakistan as bargaining chips to ensure its relevance in any peace process. As a

⁶² Adeel, M., 'Afghan peace council meets Taliban in Paris Conference', Khaama Press, 17 Dec. 2012, <<http://www.khaama.com/afghan-peace-council-meets-taliban-in-paris-conference-1136>>.

⁶³ 'US mum over reported Taliban office in Qatar' Fox News, 12 Sep. 2011, <<http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2011/09/12/us-mum-over-reported-taliban-office-in-qatar/>>; and 'Taliban opens office in Qatar', United Press International, 16 Jan. 2013, <<http://www.upi.com/World-News/2013/01/16/44731358368647>>.

⁶⁴ Agence France-Presse, 'Pakistan, Afghan, UK leaders urge Taliban "to enter into dialogue"', *Dawn*, 4 Feb. 2013.

⁶⁵ UN Security Council Resolution 2082, 17 Dec. 2012; and 'U.N. makes it easier for blacklisted Taliban to travel for peace talks', Reuters, 17 Dec. 2012.

⁶⁶ Agence France-Presse (note 64).

⁶⁷ 'US supports Pak-Afghan deadline for Taliban deal', *Dawn*, 6 Feb. 2013.

⁶⁸ Gray, D. D. and Shah, A., 'Afghan negotiator hopes release of 8 Taliban prisoners by Pakistan will further peace process', Associated Press, 1 Jan. 2013.

follow-up, Pakistan has promised future releases and agreed to give the Afghan Government a say in their timing and manner.⁶⁹

Interestingly, the international community has taken a much more conciliatory tone towards Pakistan in recent months, praising it for its assistance to further the peace process, even though there have been parallel calls for greater action against Afghan militants and finger pointing between Afghanistan and Pakistan has continued. Reportedly, Western officials have also assured Pakistan in recent negotiations that its concerns will not be overlooked if it supports the negotiation process. Pakistani officials are now openly calling for a quick peace deal with the Afghan Taliban insurgents.⁷⁰

Perhaps most instructive is the change in tone and substance of some of the reconciliation plans that have been worked out behind the scenes over the past few months. There seems to be a growing convergence on handling Afghanistan's political future in a manner that is much closer to the Pakistani vision than the international community was willing to consider at the beginning of the endgame.

One example is the Peace Process Roadmap to 2015 plan produced by the Afghan High Peace Council, a body tasked by President Karzai with furthering the political reconciliation agenda in Afghanistan. Even though it was only a draft document, the plan did give significant insight into the shift in thinking on reconciliation within the Afghan Government. Leaked in November 2012, it afforded Pakistan its much desired role as the principal party responsible for arranging talks with the Taliban.⁷¹ The plan called for a proactive reconciliation process in 2013 and for the Taliban to have a say in the ISAF withdrawal from Afghanistan. While the Afghan Taliban insurgents would join the political mainstream, including contesting elections, they would be accorded a share 'in the power structure of the state, to include non-elected positions at different levels'.⁷²

The importance of this plan is not necessarily the probability of its success—it was greeted with extreme scepticism among Western observers and little has been heard of it since—but the change in mindset it represents in Kabul and other capitals.⁷³ After years of maximalist bargaining, intransigence and failure to converge on strategies by all sides, it is the overall refocusing on reconciliation in Afghanistan in the past few months that is fundamentally different.

The challenge ahead

None of this is to gloss over the very real difficulties that continue to face efforts to build political bridges in Afghanistan. Despite all sides attempting to find

⁶⁹ Syed (note 52).

⁷⁰ Yousaf, K., 'Push for Afghan peace: Ankara summit to look afresh at "Taliban office" plan', *Express Tribune*, 10 Dec. 2012.

⁷¹ For the available details of the plan see Landay, J. S., 'Afghanistan peace plan would increase Pakistan's role', *McClatchy Newspapers*, 8 Dec. 2012, <<http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2012/12/08/176825/afghanistan-considering-peace.html>>.

⁷² Landay (note 71).

⁷³ For a Western perspective on the plan see Chayes, S., 'Afghanistan's roadmap to the past', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 31 Dec. 2012, <<http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/12/31/afghanistan-s-roadmap-to-past/ey47>>.

common ground, relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan and between Afghanistan and the USA remain tense. President Karzai has adopted an extremely nationalist tone and has repeatedly accused the USA of exacerbating his country's problems.⁷⁴ He also insists that his government should be seen as the sole representative of the Afghan people in negotiations with the Taliban, not as an equal party.⁷⁵ Ironically, even Pakistani Foreign Office officials have publicly described Karzai as an obstacle to reconciliation in recent months.⁷⁶ The end result is that serious reconciliation talks are still not underway and the Taliban's Qatar presence remains underutilized.⁷⁷

However divided the main stakeholders still seem to be, the Afghan endgame has reached a stage where any hope of a peaceful transition depends on them abandoning their more Machiavellian aims. All key actors now seem to agree on some key points: that the 2014 drawdown is inevitable; that Afghanistan risks much greater instability if this deadline passes with no political reconciliation process in place; that Afghanistan's descent into chaos would have negative spill-over effects for its neighbours and a revival of proxy confrontation; and that the interested parties have hardly anything to show for past efforts at reconciliation. It is only natural, therefore, that their respective positions should begin to soften. It is this common desperation—or, to put it bluntly, the fear of total failure in Afghanistan—that makes the recent developments more hopeful than those of the past. To be sure, there is still no guarantee that a successful reconciliation process will be put in place and seen through to its conclusion; there is, however, greater convergence on the need to sincerely attempt this than ever before.

⁷⁴ Knox, O., 'Karzai blames NATO, U.S. for violence, corruption in Afghanistan', Yahoo News, The Ticket blog, 6 Dec. 2012, <<http://news.yahoo.com/blogs/ticket/karzai-blames-nato-us-violence-afghanistan-151702207/>>. Recent outbursts and allegations by President Karzai have frustrated the USA. For an appreciation of the frustration in Washington see Gelb, L., 'To hell with Karzai', Daily Beast, 12 Mar. 2013, <<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/03/12/to-hell-with-karzai.html>>.

⁷⁵ Ruttig, T., 'The Qatar office conundrum: Karzai's quest for control over Taleban talks', Afghanistan Analysts Network blog, 5 Apr. 2013, <<http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=3333>>.

⁷⁶ Zahra-Malik, M., 'Pakistan sees Afghanistan's Karzai as obstacle to peace with Taliban', Reuters, 24 Mar. 2013.

⁷⁷ Nordland, R., 'Peace envoys from Taliban at loose ends in Qatar', *New York Times*, 9 Apr. 2013.

5. Conclusions and the way forward

Assessing how genuine Pakistan's 'strategic shift' is depends on the baseline against which Pakistan's current behaviour is compared. If it is Pakistan's aggressive push for strategic depth and its purely ethno-centric approach, the shift is real and tangible. Pakistan no longer wishes for outright Taliban rule in Afghanistan. It does, however, want the Taliban to be given meaningful representation in a political reconciliation process that would allow them post-2014 political space. This implies that Pakistan accepts that it must work with a broader set of Afghan stakeholders—both Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns. The Pakistani establishment has also moderated its goal from shutting India out of Afghanistan altogether to one of ensuring that India is not able to stir up trouble within Pakistan or help create a hostile Afghan dispensation.

The real change, however, has not been in Pakistan's actions—which still seem highly destabilizing to an outside observer—but in the principal driver of Pakistan's behaviour: domestic instability. The fact that Pakistan's policies remain troubling to the Afghan Government and the West, and its failure to act decisively against the Afghan Taliban presence in Pakistan, are primarily because of the domestic repercussions it fears from going after the sanctuaries, and its desire to create a scenario whereby the Taliban are willing to return to Afghanistan through a political deal.

Overall, Pakistan's shift is more accurately represented as a moderation, rather than a transformation, of its mindset. Its most recent overtures and claims of a strategic shift are simply what it sees as the most effective way to pursue its objectives in a somewhat changed—even desperate—context as far as the Afghan endgame is concerned.

There is little reason for Pakistani planners to congratulate themselves on the situation today. The Pakistani establishment's stakes have been kept alive in the Afghan endgame, but it can hardly be comfortable with the strategic repercussions of its moves. The 1990s saw an outright tactical victory for Pakistan, only to be followed by a massive strategic blowback from its actions. The onus is on the Pakistani establishment to avoid a repeat of this. The good news is that there is a clearly discernible difference between the Pakistani establishment's body language today and that in the pre-September 2001 days: it now seems to be more worried about the threat of chaos in Afghanistan than excited about the prospects of a tactical victory.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Author's impression based on conversations with Pakistan military and foreign office officials between Mar. 2012 and Mar. 2013.

The way forward

ISAF cannot weaken the Taliban insurgency irreversibly in the months left before its scheduled withdrawal. There is therefore no option but to push forward the agenda of reconciliation with the Afghan Taliban.

All of the main actors—the Afghan Government; Afghan political factions including the Taliban; Pakistan; and the USA—now need to agree and accept a formula to move ahead with reconciliation. The multiple, competing efforts to woo the Taliban into talks that have been pursued for too long have only increased suspicions among these actors. Whatever process is ultimately chosen must have the blessing of all actors and must be allowed to function freely within the parameters laid out.

The greatest possibility for success will be through a truly Afghan-led and Afghan-owned process. Pakistan, the USA and other external actors should only put forth their absolute non-negotiables—and these should be minimal—as they allow Afghan representatives to negotiate directly.

Pakistan has traditionally been the most aggressive of the regional actors; now that the Taliban's presence in talks is likely to be meaningful, it must accept that its role is no more than a facilitator that constantly prods the hardliners among the Taliban to accept power sharing as the optimal outcome. The world, too, must not expect Pakistan to deliver more than this.

If the Taliban do find political space in post-2014 Afghanistan, Pakistan's most important service would be to apply constant pressure on the Taliban leadership to moderate its views. A moderated Afghan Taliban will not only benefit Afghan politics but will also have a desirable spin-off effect in terms of denting support for the Pakistani Taliban, who continue to cite their ideological affinity with their Afghan counterparts to gain traction.

To achieve this, Pakistan must accept moderate Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns in Afghanistan as its partners. It must continue expanding its nascent contacts with the former Northern Alliance factions in Afghanistan. This is all the more important given that Pakistan is vying for an inclusive set-up in Afghanistan that will necessarily involve representation from all major factions.

Pakistan and the USA must come to some agreement on the issue of Afghan militant sanctuaries on Pakistani soil. As long as Pakistan does not confront the Afghan Taliban factions using the sanctuaries, but denies the USA a free hand to do so, this divergence will be irreconcilable. Common ground may be found with an understanding under which Pakistan agrees to pressure the Afghan Taliban to cease their attacks on Afghan and international forces and civilians while peace talks are happening. Presumably, this would also involve a commitment from the USA to reciprocate with a localized ceasefire. Tools such as drone strikes would then only be used against Taliban factions if they breached their commitment.

On India, there is a need to transform the current Indian–Pakistani competition into cooperation in the Afghan context. Specifically, two dialogues need to be initiated between the two sides: on intelligence and on development. The intelligence dialogue could allay mutual fears of the rationales and motives

behind their political and security activities in Afghanistan. The two intelligence communities could institute a verifiable mechanism to address each other's concerns.⁷⁹ The development dialogue could seek ways to cooperate on or readjust development activities in Afghanistan. Concentrating Indian investment activity in the north and west of the country could help to allay Pakistani suspicions about Indian projects near its border. Given India's post-2014 vulnerability in Pashtun-dominated areas close to the Pakistani border, India may be willing to accept this.⁸⁰

Pakistan must continue exploring avenues to expand its economic footprint in Afghanistan, even as security concerns dominate its approach in the run-up to December 2014. Commendably, Afghan–Pakistani trade has risen sharply in recent years.⁸¹ However, there is still huge untapped potential for these two geographically contiguous and intricately connected countries, with relative freedom of movement across their shared border. The Afghan Government is already pitching to attract fresh investment after 2014 and the Pakistani private sector would do well to explore affordable options. As economic activity in Afghanistan increases, the country also remains a highly attractive destination for Pakistani services and labour.⁸²

Finally, the international community cannot be satisfied with merely blaming Pakistan for the failure in Afghanistan. Its approach to Pakistan has defied one of the fundamentals of realpolitik: it has conflated the doable with the desirable. Rather than internalizing Pakistan's self-defined outlook towards the region and its establishment's vision for Afghanistan, and then crafting appropriate and relevant incentives to mould its behaviour in a desirable direction, external actors have sought to redirect Pakistani thinking through means they believe should appeal to its leaders, not what would actually be attractive to a Pakistani strategic calculus.⁸³ Monetary rewards and promises of long-term support have been prioritized over actions to address Pakistan's regional insecurities. It is too late to go back to the drawing board on these. In the next two years, however, the international community should at least avoid any developments that may force Pakistani planners to reverse their recent enthusiasm towards supporting reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan.

⁷⁹ Yusuf, M. and Lynch, T., 'India–Pakistan dynamic holds key to Afghanistan's future', CNN World, 29 Nov. 2012, <<http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2012/11/29/india-pakistan-dynamic-holds-key-to-afghanistans-future/>>.

⁸⁰ Yusuf and Lynch (note 79).

⁸¹ Pakistani–Afghan bilateral trade increased from \$170 million in 2000–2001 to \$1.49 billion in 2008–2009 and to approximately \$2.5 billion in 2010–11. Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT), 'Pak–Afghan trade', Pak–Afghan Dialogue VI discussion paper, Dec. 2011, <<http://www.pildat.org/publications.asp>>, p. 7.

⁸² According to estimates, over 100 000 Pakistanis work in Afghanistan today but few are registered. Pakistani workers increasingly see Afghanistan as a potential destination. Ali, Z., 'Afghanistan a new destination for skilled labour', *Dawn*, 27 Feb. 2011.

⁸³ Yusuf (note 21).

Decoding Pakistan's 'Strategic Shift' in Afghanistan

When in early 2012 Pakistan touted a major shift in its Afghan policy, the move was cautiously welcomed given the influence—and spoiling power—Pakistan has displayed in Afghanistan in the past. This paper asks exactly what Pakistan's 'strategic shift' entails, what are the motives behind it, and whether it opens any new opportunities for peace in Afghanistan.

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