

Focus 65 - Pakistan and the future of Afghanistan

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Abstract

According to several [reports](#), it appears that the stage is set for the long-awaited intra-Afghan negotiations (IAN) between rival factions. Both the Afghan Taliban and the Government of Afghanistan expressed their [readiness](#) to start their [first official direct talks](#), which will be held in Qatar. After contributing to the U.S.-Taliban peace deal – which is commonly recognised as an essential step towards the start of the IAN – Pakistan aims to take on a central role in Afghanistan’s future political developments. Pakistan’s civilian and military leadership are therefore trying to normalise their tense relations with the Afghan government. So far, Islamabad continues to support the peace deal between Washington and the Afghan Taliban – and the notion of a power-sharing agreement between the insurgency group and the political leadership in Kabul. However, Islamabad’s interests and policy remain unchanged and are not conducive for an understanding between the major actors in Afghanistan. Pakistan will thus continue to damage peace and stability in its western neighbourhood. Afghanistan will furthermore not only be increasingly affected by the Pakistan-India conflict but also become a new theatre in the evolving India-China conflict.

Keywords:

Pakistan; Afghanistan; Taliban; India; China; Iran; Intra-Afghan-Negotiations/IAN; US-Taliban peace deal; Afghan Peace Process/APP, Durand Line, Pashtuns, Refugees.

Introduction - Pakistan and the peace process in Afghanistan

The peace deal between the U.S. and the Afghan Taliban offered new opportunities to Pakistan. Combined with the withdrawal – partial or total – of foreign troops, it is likely that Islamabad claims a central role in Afghanistan’s upcoming politics. It will not accept to become side-lined in Afghanistan’s upcoming political trajectories – especially not in the negotiations between the political leadership in Kabul, the Taliban and other major Afghan stakeholders. Instead, the Pakistani leadership is likely to become increasingly proactive in exercising influence¹. Pakistan, foremost its military and Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), sees itself as a most qualified actor – one able to create a ‘favourable environment’ for the INA.² Furthermore, the fact that Islamabad continues to host Taliban delegations so as to discuss issues related to Afghanistan’s internal and foreign affairs clearly highlights Pakistan’s political will to influence Kabul’s political arena. However, Pakistan will only play a constructive role in Afghanistan when it recognizes and internalizes two (pre-)conditions for a stable and sustainable Afghan peace process (APP):

The INA must be comprehensive, all-embracing, and inclusive. The support of one-sided parties, namely the Afghan Taliban – or certain factions of the Afghan Taliban – will be perceived as disadvantageous to other ethnic-religious and political groups ([foremost the Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek](#)). An intra-Afghan settlement will be not feasible and the continuation of armed confrontations, even to the point of another civil war, could be the consequence.

Moreover, an APP and potential intra-Afghan understanding will only become sustainable when embedded within a [regional settlement](#). Such a regional settlement requires the successful coordination of peace efforts and the reconciliation of interests of all [external, regional powers](#). The exclusion of one or more foreign stakeholders will have obstructive, destabilising ramifications for the achievement of an [intra-Afghan understanding](#). Furthermore, it is argued here that in order to facilitate the negotiation processes necessary for a regional settlement, a credible and neutral external mediator is needed. It remains to be seen whether Pakistan has the political will, capacities, legitimacy, and creditability to

¹ The latest public statements by Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi reinforce this argument. Most noteworthy is the [call for a ‘responsible withdrawal’ by the US](#), the [demand that Afghan authorities create a ‘favourable environment’](#), or the call on the Afghan political leadership to accept the ‘prisoner swap’ - as well as Qureshi’s request that [Afghan authorities ask the US for an explanation regarding the ‘prisoner swap’](#).

² This belief is expressed in the following [statement by Pakistan’s Foreign Minister \(FM\) Shah Mehmood Qureshi](#): ‘Pakistan can create a favourable environment, it cannot take (Afghanistan's) decisions’.

handle the twofold challenge of achieving an understanding both among Afghan actors and among external regional powers.

However, one must be aware that regardless of the role Pakistan plays in Afghanistan, its action will be hampered by several factors which could lead Islamabad to damage peace and stability in its neighbouring country. First of all, one needs to point out that any Pakistani involvement in Afghanistan will be opposed by large sections of the Afghan civil society and by most Afghan political stakeholders. Considering the traditionally tense Pakistan-Afghanistan ties and underlying causalities – especially cross-border terrorism, the disputed Durand Line (disputed but de facto border between both countries) and related armed conflicts in the frontier regions, Pakistan's economic protectionism and related hampering of Afghan trade as well as the unilateral border fencing project by Pakistan's military – it is easy to understand why Islamabad is perceived as a highly [controversial](#) actor in Afghanistan's internal affairs. Currently, Pakistan's civilian and military leadership are trying to normalise their stressed relations with the Afghan government through an increase in high-level bilateral interactions. Most notable in this context is the [visit](#) by Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Qamar Javed Bajwa to Kabul on June 9, 2020, to discuss the APP and the IAN (and Pakistan's role in both) with President Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, head of the High Council for National Reconciliation. This was also undertaken in a trilateral context including Beijing. For one can also witness an [increasing interest by China in Afghanistan](#)³. From a short-term perspective, besides establishing its own channels of communication with both the Afghan government and the Taliban, China is expected to use its influence in Pakistan so as to ensure its interests in Afghanistan. However, severe scepticism remains in Kabul regarding the willingness by Pakistan's military (including the ISI) to truly reassess its approach towards Afghanistan. There is a common sense in Kabul's government circles, especially within President Ashraf Ghani's political camp, that Islamabad is not likely to reform its Afghan policy and that Afghanistan remains [vulnerable to the hegemonic ambitions](#) of its eastern neighbour. The [latest border clashes](#) (the worst in years⁴), as well as the one-sided import/export restrictions by Islamabad which [disadvantage Afghan traders](#), indicate that Pakistan, despite official

³ F. ex. that [Beijing is offering the Taliban infrastructure projects](#) (the construction of a road network), the further development of military-to-military relations with Kabul, military aid to support the Afghan government's counterterrorism efforts in the form of military equipment and training, as well as other technologies (Chinese internet and navigation systems).

⁴ One of the worst incidents in years happened in the Spin Boldak area leading to the killing of [15 Afghan civilian and 80](#) other civilians were wounded. Another incident appeared at Sarkano District of eastern Kunar Province, [killing eight civilians](#).

rhetoric, has not implemented any policy intended to improve social and economic conditions in Afghanistan.

Pakistan's core interests in Afghanistan

By gaining control over events and achieving substantial leverage in Afghanistan's political decision-making, Pakistan aims to ensure its own interests – which are not beneficial to a constructive INA. Most notably, Islamabad continues to view New Delhi as its archenemy and identifies any kind of Indian presence in Afghanistan as an attempt to open a second, western front capable of threatening its national interests. While there are no Indian troops in Afghanistan, [Pakistan claims](#) that Indian aid and diplomatic missions provide cover for intelligence operations intervening in Pakistan's domestic security affairs. Furthermore, Islamabad accuses New Delhi's development projects in Afghanistan of intending to harm Pakistan's economy – alleging for example that [Indian dam projects](#) aim to undercut waterways (f. ex. Kabul River) and worsen water scarcity in Pakistan. Islamabad also holds that Indian connectivity projects in Afghanistan (road infrastructure) and [Iran](#) (the Chabahar port and the planned Chabahar-Zahedan railway line) intend to impair the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor/CPEC (Wolf, 2019) by offering opportunities to bypass Pakistan.⁵ In the last decade, strained relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan indeed [offered India a window of opportunity](#) to establish cordial and constructive relations with Kabul and become effectively engaged in Afghanistan - without being severely hampered by its conflict with Pakistan. However, the [U.S.-Taliban deal undercut India's engagement in Afghanistan in favour of Pakistan.](#) The [strategic value of Afghanistan for New Delhi is predicated on the presence of the U.S.](#) military in the country. When the [US entirely withdraws](#), New Delhi might lose its strategic investments in Afghanistan. Through its engagement in the US-Taliban negotiations and subsequent US withdrawal, [Pakistan became a part of the peace process.](#) By contrast, India [will face increasingly difficulties to maintain its stakeholder role](#) - despite its engaged, multi-dimensional efforts intended to develop Afghanistan. New Delhi's situation will become even more complex and difficult when the Taliban takes part in Kabul's government and Indian-friendly elements in government and administration are replaced or side-lined. The Taliban⁶ are traditionally known for their anti-Indian stand, and naturally [New Delhi has opposed the Taliban.](#)

⁵ Here, it remains to be seen how relations between Beijing and Tehran will develop, especially regarding the latest [mutual affirmation to strengthen the Sino-Iranian Alliance](#). Only later can one assess the impact of potential Chinese infrastructure projects in Iran on the CPEC's effectivity.

⁶ Particularly the Quetta Shura Taliban (also known as the Rahbari Shura) and the Miran Shah Shura Taliban, also known by the Haqqani network.

perceiving it as a Pakistan's proxy in Afghanistan.⁷ It is, however, interesting to note that the Taliban leadership indicated a willingness to reassess (and improve) its relationship with India.⁸ It remains to be seen whether this statement is reflected in concrete policies or whether it was but part of a public diplomacy campaign intended to create the image of a new, changed, and enlightened Taliban force. Moreover, [New Delhi seems wary](#) of regarding the Taliban as potential partners – even of talking to them publicly. The recent [statement](#) by Taliban emir Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada calling for the establishment of a 'pure Islamic government' and an 'Islamic system' for Afghanistan projects a grim perspective for both the INA and the country's future.

This is gaining significance, since the Taliban has long been – and remains – Pakistan's ['preferred choice to run the government'](#) in Kabul. Besides a theoretical electoral scenario, [two options appear](#). The Taliban and Kabul's current political leadership could enter a 'power sharing model'. Otherwise, the Taliban could 'acquire full control over the centre and periphery', thus completing the disempowerment of Kabul's government. Both options involve a ['undemocratic return to power'](#) by the Taliban - from a Pakistan point of view, the 'best-case scenario'. However, [Pakistan does not want](#) the Taliban to control all levers of power. Particularly, Islamabad does not will its fragile western border region to witness [the return of an Islamic Emirate](#) in line with the one established in the 1990s. Instead, Islamabad [prefers a 'power-sharing model'](#) – with a 'large enough role' for the Taliban to ensure Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan, yet while maintaining the status quo, which seems to be working well for Islamabad. However, in the quest to protect its own national interests, Islamabad may pay more attention to bringing the Taliban into power than to achieving an intra-Afghan understanding. This is relevant because [Pakistan lacks influence over anti-Taliban forces](#) - thus New Delhi could help bridge this gap. However, Islamabad of course perceives such an option as *a priori* against its national interests. It is doubtful that Pakistan would ever compromise on its own interests in Afghanistan. Instead of finding an equilibrium between Kabul's and Islamabad's interests, Pakistan will systematically prioritise the achievement of its own policy goals in Afghanistan.

⁷ ["India's goal in Afghanistan is to mitigate Pakistan's strategic influence so that it can't be used as a safe-haven for anti-India terrorist groups](#), including those that attacked Indian diplomatic missions." "India has also attempted to turn Afghanistan into an access corridor to Central Asia in [an effort to circumvent and outflank Pakistan](#), including by financing the Chabahar port in Iran near the Afghan border."

⁸ Taliban's spokesperson Mohammad Suhail Shaheen stated that it [wants to build ties with India](#), and is even 'willing to enact a law against terror groups using Afghan soil against any other country'. This would mean that the [Taliban acknowledges India's legitimate role in Afghanistan](#).

Pakistan's border fencing project and the recognition of the Durand Line as common border

Another significant point on Pakistan's Afghan agenda concerns achieving Kabul's acknowledgment of the Durand Line as an international border, as well as the legitimisation of Pakistan's border fencing project. Kabul does not accept the legitimacy of the current de-facto border, the Durand Line, which it claims constitutes a violation of its sovereignty. The current Afghan government identifies Pakistan's ongoing border fortification as a threat to Afghanistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Border fortifications are not just a part of a larger border management project intended to undermine movements by cross-border terrorists, smugglers and drug traders. These fortifications possess a clear geopolitical dimension reaching far beyond the officially proclaimed border control function. Concretely, when completed, these forts will provide Pakistan with several strategic assets allowing it to influence decision-making in Kabul to the [detriment of Afghanistan's national interests](#). An accomplished border fencing allows Pakistan to control not only cross-border migrations but also illicit flows of goods. Islamabad would become able to oversee – and block – formal economic activities and trade between both countries. This would allow Pakistan to significantly harm Afghanistan's vast informal economy. Such control could become crucial were the international community decide to place sanctions on Iran-Afghanistan trade or remove economic and financial benefits (aid) to Kabul. [Pakistan's policy of protectionism](#) vis-à-vis Afghan imports is already undercutting the ability by Afghanistan's agricultural and manufacturing sectors to grow⁹. Additionally, the border fencing project also affects the interests of the Pashtuns, who live on both sides of the Durand Line. The impacts of such fencing on the daily lives and livelihoods of these groups will strengthen current feelings of marginalization¹⁰. This will likely feed a fresh cycle of frustration, leading to more violence in the frontier region - instead of achieving the proclaimed goal of more security and stability across the borderland. Moreover, the fortified border will have ramifications

⁹ [It is reported](#) that Pakistan currently allows only fifty trucks of Afghan produce across its border per day. As such, Pakistan protectionism undermines the ability by farmers in Afghanistan 'to make an honest living without turning to narcotics or terrorism, both of which Pakistani authorities say they fear bleeding across the border'.

¹⁰ The fence has severe negative consequences for Pashtun communities, including unprecedented, disproportionate and discriminatory restrictions on their movements within border regions on both sides of the Durand Line. Other violations of the Pashtuns' fundamental rights, including the right to work, food, medical care, education and an adequate standard of living, are also to be assessed. These are severe violations of both international human rights and international humanitarian law. This will lead to more grievances among peoples living in border areas, leading to more violence - which will likely be met by even harsher responses from Pakistani authorities.

for the achievement of an intra-Afghan understanding, particularly if Pakistan takes on a key role in future Afghan politics.

Solving the Pashtunistan challenge

The non-acceptance of the Durand-line as international border is intricately linked with territorial claims by the Afghan government over land held by Pakistan. Furthermore, [territorial demands by the Pashtun tribespeople](#) from within both Pakistan and Afghanistan – more concretely, claims over regions in Pakistan – also exist. Proponents of the Pashtun cause hold that these areas should be part of an independent, or at least autonomous, state for the Pashtuns called ‘Pashtunistan’. This constitutes a severe challenge to Pakistan’s territorial integrity and represents a significant factor in the dispute between Kabul and Islamabad. Addressing the Pashtun challenge forms a major concern to the Pakistani leadership. The Pashtun people constitute a twofold challenge for Pakistan’s interests. The large Pashtun communities in both Pakistan and Afghanistan will function as a countervailing force vis-à-vis Pakistani attempts to bring the Taliban into power. For example, the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement, or Pashtun Protection Movement (PTM), is [holding the Pakistani state](#) ‘accountable by raising its voice against the manipulation of Pashtuns and the use of their land for various agendas, including sponsorship of elements of the Taliban’. This critical view by the PTM regarding the central government and the military is not restricted to the Pashtun areas in Pakistan, but also in Afghanistan. Pakistan might be forced to reassess its support for the Taliban in Afghanistan. However, it is also reported that the ISI already [nurtured numerous small independent groups in the Pashtun heartlands as reserves, should](#) the Taliban become obdurate and defy Pakistani interests. Additionally, the Pashtun are supportive of Afghan claims over territories held by Pakistan¹¹ - and insist on their right to self-determination. From a Pakistani point of view, Pashtun demands would lead to a succession of its Afghan border regions. In order to undermine these territorial claims and Pashtun right to self-determination, Pakistan intends to avoid the restoration of the Pashtun dominance - and thus support non-Pashtun factions, which are generally perceived either as Indian-friendly or at least neutral towards New

¹¹ In 1947, the Pakhtun Khudayi Khidmatgaran movement - guided by Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan (also known as the *Frontier Gandhi*) and which emerged as a nonviolent resistance movement of the Pashtun tribespeople against the British colonial rule in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa/KPK (than North West Frontier Province/NWFP) - demanded a specific, independent or autonomous territory for the Pashtuns. This area (which includes the Pashtun tribal areas of KPK as well as Baluchistan), called *Pashtunistan*, would either become an independent state or become incorporated into Afghanistan. As such, [the Pashtuns not only rejected their incorporation into Pakistan but were also opposed to the formation of an Islamic Pakistan, understood as a state built along religious lines.](#)

Delhi. Islamabad's efforts to achieve its goals in Afghanistan lie in this area within a 'catch-22' situation.

Supplementary Pakistani interests in Afghanistan

Other Pakistani interests include combatting Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP) elements in Afghanistan and avoid foreign fighters (meaning fighters from outside the region) enter Pakistan. In the recently released 26th report of the UN's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team concerning ISIS, al-Qaeda and associated individuals and entities declared that many former Tehreek-e-Taliban fighters have joined ISIS-Khorasan (ISIL-K)¹². It is further reported that 'the total number of Pakistani foreign terrorist fighters in Afghanistan, posing a threat to both countries, is estimated at between 6,000 and 6,500, most of them with TTP'. Instead Pakistan is interested to redirect them towards Kashmir.

Another important, although not major, constituent in Pakistan's rationale lying behind its engagement in Afghanistan concerns the presence of large numbers of Afghan refugees within Pakistani borders¹³. Here, Islamabad follows two goals. (a) To gain control over the current flow of Afghan migrants and avoid [another major influx \(wave/exodus\) of Afghan refugees](#) into Pakistan. (b) To repatriate Afghan refugees residing in Pakistan – if necessary, through coercive force. In the last decades, Pakistan [hosted several million Afghan refugees](#). Islamabad complains that it did not receive from the international community (especially from western countries) the necessary credit and subsequent support to deal with this issue. Pakistan also holds that the successive administrations in Kabul [did not spend enough efforts to catalyse a return by refugees](#). Islamabad expects that a potential pro-Pakistan Taliban government or a government with Taliban participation will address this issue. However, in [the absence of security](#), any enforced repatriation of Afghan refugees will harm Pakistan's relationship not only with the Afghan government but also with the Taliban. The threat of the COVID-19 pandemic is further complicating

¹² The monitoring team also estimates the current ISIL-K membership in Afghanistan at 2,200.

¹³ Generally speaking, [Pakistani authorities are unaware of exactly how many Afghans](#) came into the country so far. [Experts estimate that PAK](#) not only hosts 1.4 million registered Afghan refugees but also accommodates over one million undocumented Afghan individuals. The fact that most of these - approximately 80 per cent - reside in border areas (namely Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa/FATA and Baluchistan) [constitutes a severe challenge to the social fabric](#) of the autochthonous inhabitants and their communities. Being perceived by locals as contenders for limited resources is another source for tensions and instability in the area.

the situation, creating anxiety among expelled refugees as well as among host communities in Afghanistan.

Finally, Islamabad's interest in Afghanistan lies in ensuring '[commercial and transit access to Central Asia](#)' through the country. However, such transit would imply a reciprocal access to India. Islamabad thus finds a dilemma, for a less restricted flow of goods between Afghanistan and India would contradict one of its primary goals of limiting Indian presence in Afghanistan.

Concluding remarks

With an increasing role by Pakistan in both the IAN and the APP, Afghanistan runs the risk of becoming an arena of the actual growing geopolitical competition – especially between New Delhi and Islamabad, but also between New Delhi and Beijing. That India and Pakistan have been for decades conducting some kind of proxy war in Afghanistan is nothing new. However, with an increased Pakistani engagement and the withdrawal of US troops – which served as guarantee for the safety of India's assets in the country – the conflict will receive additional impetus. With a growing Chinese interest in Afghanistan, the escalating tensions between New Delhi and Beijing will have negative ramifications for Afghanistan as well. Considering Beijing's past activities intended to undermine New Delhi's influence and position within all its neighbouring states and beyond, it would be naïve to ignore the likelihood of such a scenario in Afghanistan. For instance, [India is already getting outbid by China in Iran](#), this might serve as a prelude to what could happen in Afghanistan. An emerging engagement by Beijing in Afghanistan, in combination with an India-hostile Pakistan directed by Chinese interests, will increase geopolitical rivalries in the region. Moreover, it will become more difficult for Islamabad to find a balanced approach between Beijing and Washington. For obvious reasons, a newly alienation in US-Pakistan ties would have also negative repercussions for Kabul, foremost by underlining that Islamabad is not fit to function as a mediator in the IAN – as it is unable to contribute to a sustainable regional settlement supporting the APP. Here, it is important to be aware that enforced by the COVID-19 pandemic and the CPEC, Pakistan witnessed another shifting of power from civilian authorities to the military. This has repercussions for the country's foreign policy. As long as the army defines said foreign policy's parameters, Islamabad will be unable to reassess the country's predominantly security-driven approach towards Kabul – properly adding to the grim perspective of peace in Afghanistan. In

consequence, Pakistan will continue to damage peace and progress instead of becoming a stakeholder in a constructive Afghan future.

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