

## COMMENT 220 - After Kabul – What next for Pakistan?

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After the takeover of Kabul by the Pakistan-sponsored Taliban, one can speculate regarding which role will Islamabad play in Afghanistan's future. This will depend of course on Islamabad's ties with the wider Taliban in general and with the [factions traditionally close to Pakistan](#) in particular, namely the Haqqani Network. Considering the manifold support offered to the Taliban during the last two decades, '[Pakistan has reason to anticipate a more friendly regime in Kabul](#)'. In fact, '[Pakistan was one of the first countries to welcome the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan](#),' celebrating the event as a '[strategic victory](#)'. However, [there are also reasons](#) to believe that relations between the Taliban government and Islamabad will be not as easy as hoped by the Pakistani leadership.

Besides an escalation of violence<sup>1</sup>, Pakistan's main concern<sup>2</sup> is centred on the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, also known as the "Pakistan Taliban" or in brief TTP. Although it seemed that the Taliban had set up a [commission](#) to deal with Pakistan's cross-border terrorism fears, it remains questionable whether this will come to a

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<sup>1</sup> Any further escalation in violence in Afghanistan will have severe economic as well as social-political impacts in Pakistan. Islamabad will most likely be confronted with a new, large influx of Afghan refugees which will not only contribute to current administrative challenges and financial burdens but also to [COVID health concerns](#). From a security perspective, the way Islamists in Pakistan were celebrating the Taliban takeover of Kabul confirms the country's leadership [fear](#) that it will 'energize anti-state militant extremists and bolster Pakistan's ultra-conservative religious groups.' Religious hardliners [could increase the pressure](#) on Islamabad to make the state 'more sharia-compliant', much like what the Taliban are doing in Afghanistan. Another worrying dimension of these "spill-over effects" is that the TTP and other militants groups will [turn against Chinese developments projects](#), especially those linked to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

<sup>2</sup> 'The Durand-Line, the de facto border, will remain as a 'severe issue of content' between both countries.

satisfactory result for Islamabad. In this context, it is important to recognise that there are obvious [shifts](#) in the relations, meaning that today the TTP appears closer to the Taliban, in particular to the Haqqani network. The latter seems to have recalibrated their relations with Islamabad in favour of the TTP. The fact that Pakistan temporarily stripped-off supplies and financial assistance to the Haqqani network due to their resistance to the US-Taliban deal in 2020 was not well-taken by the insurgents. The TTP gave up its [neutrality](#) in the Afghan conflict so as to fight alongside the Taliban against Afghan government forces; on their side, the Haqqani are ignoring the TTP's anti-Pakistan. This is obviously paving the way for their collaboration.<sup>3</sup> Here, it is crucial to understand which leverage the Haqqani possess as concerns power dynamics within the Taliban leadership. As highlighted by Antonio Giustozzi in an [SADF webinar](#), the Haqqani do not dominate the current Taliban government. However, they were able to form an alliance with the Kandahari sub-faction of the Southern Taliban (which traditionally form the movement's leadership by side-lining the Eastern and Northern Taliban groups), thereby putting the Haqqani in a 'stronger position'. Here, Pakistan's Interservice Intelligence-Services (ISI) bolstered its footing in Kabul through its contribution to the coalition formed between the Kandahari Taliban and the Haqqani factions. However, according to Giustozzi, the Pakistani security establishment, 'like everybody else, is trying to control what is going on, they are trying to influence' but they are only 'partially successful'. The fact that there is a [general mistrust of Pakistan both among](#) the wider Taliban<sup>4</sup> and among the [Afghan people](#) constrains Islamabad's options to exercise influence in Afghanistan. More concretely, being recognised as too close to Pakistan could be identified as a disadvantage in an increased power competition among the various Taliban factions.<sup>5</sup> One should not expect the Afghan Taliban to take conclusive action against the TTP. Instead, the Taliban government states that the TTP is a Pakistani problem, not an Afghan one. It therefore rejects demands to crush TTP sanctuaries on Afghan soil. This has

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<sup>3</sup> That the [TTP reduced their ambitions](#) in Pakistan from overthrowing the central government to the secession (or at least last-scale autonomy) of tribal areas bordering Afghanistan as well as the introduction of Sharia law in these areas is an additional factor making the TTP-Haqqani rapprochement possible.

<sup>4</sup> High as well as low level [Taliban detainees interviewed by NATO interrogators](#) 'described Pakistan as "untrustworthy," "manipulative," "controlling," and "demeaning."'

<sup>5</sup> For example, when the Southern Taliban competes with the Haqqani for leverage among the Eastern Taliban. Giustozzi [stresses](#) that the Taliban faction who controls the Eastern groups will most likely lead Afghanistan in the future.

severe consequences for Islamabad. With the Taliban being given an entire state in the form of Afghanistan, the [TTP has regained ideological strength and confidence](#)’ as well as additional resources which the terrorist group will direct against the Pakistani state. In fact, [according to](#) Husain Haqqani, a former Pakistan ambassador to the U.S, the TTP ‘would like to replicate what happened in Afghanistan in at least the Pashtun areas of Pakistan’.

To sum up, there are rifts between Islamabad and factions within the Taliban, foremost the Haqqani. The Pakistani army and ISI which will continue to [seek assurances](#) from the new rulers in Kabul that ‘Afghanistan’s soil will not be used to export terrorism across the Durand Line’. Pakistan will try to capitalise on the Taliban’s need of Islamabad in their efforts to achieve both international legitimacy and administrative support. It is likely that Islamabad will continue its support to the Taliban, including [lobbying efforts](#) to get their government recognised<sup>6</sup>, [pushing the international community](#) for a detachment of human and political rights violations and other atrocities against the Afghan people conducted by the new Taliban regime from international humanitarian aid supplies’, while continuing ‘to [provide military assistance](#) to the Taliban’. In spite of a reduced dependence on military equipment and financial support, the Taliban will continue to rely on logistic, technical, and medical assistance by Pakistan in any upcoming armed confrontation. Also, the opportunities to seek shelter and conduct recruitment within Pakistan remains essential for the Taliban, especially as relations with the US and its allies might freeze again.

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<sup>6</sup> Despite the fact that Pakistan leaders are [publicly declaring](#) that ‘any decision on recognition of the Taliban government would require regional consensus’.

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