The End Game in Afghanistan: Pakistan’s Critical Role

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Key Points

- Pakistan has an important and critical role to play in the lead up to 2014, when the Coalition forces leave Afghanistan.
- Pakistan must be included at the negotiating table to provide the opportunity for any peace and stability.
- Pakistan wants to see a ‘friendly’ Afghanistan post-2014.
- The inclusion of the Taliban in a future Afghan government may not be in Pakistan’s long-term interests.

Summary

In the lead up to 2014, when the Coalition forces will be leaving Afghanistan, Pakistan will have a crucial role to play, not only in the negotiations but also in its relationship with the Afghan Taliban groups hiding in Pakistan. Indeed, there are historical, ethnic, operational and strategic reasons why Pakistan should have a seat at the negotiating table. Pakistan will want to make sure that its Taliban allies get a fair deal in the final outcome. While this may appear to be a good outcome for Islamabad in the medium term, it may not be good for Pakistan’s long-term stability.

Analysis

According to General David Rodriguez, former commander of the Coalition forces in Afghanistan in 2009-2011, “the Afghan forces, supported by the Coalition can achieve irreversible gains and successfully secure Afghanistan’s key terrain by the end of 2014”,¹ when the Coalition forces pull combat troops out of Afghanistan. In the meantime, the

situation on the ground is fluid and will become even more so as the deadline approaches. It is far from certain that General Rodriguez’s optimistic scenario will happen. But one thing is certain, as time ticks away, regional and international players will increasingly want to have a say in the shape of a final agreement – if there is to be such an outcome – that will presumably aim to bring peace to a country that has effectively only known war for most of the last 30 years.

One country which will want – and should have – a seat at the negotiating table will be Pakistan. This is a policy position that has been advocated many times by officials in the Obama administration and it is one that makes a lot of sense. While the active participation of Pakistan in the negotiations leading to a final accord between the major internal and external players involved in Afghanistan does not necessarily guarantee that there will be peace after the Coalition combat troops leave in 2014; it does mean that if Pakistan is excluded from the negotiating table, there will be virtually no chance for peace to succeed post-2014. Pakistan is more than simply another one of Afghanistan’s five neighbours. These factors reinforce the reasons why Pakistan will need to be involved in the negotiations leading up to the end game in Afghanistan and what Pakistan would like to achieve in a post-2014 Afghanistan.

The ties that bind and separate

Relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan date back to well before 1947, when Pakistan became independent on the Partition of British India. As a matter of fact, during the time of colonial rule the north-western and south-western parts of British India, which were later to become the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) (until recently called the North West Frontier Province) and Baluchistan in Pakistan, played an important strategic role for the British in the “Great Game” with the Russians in the 19th century. Those areas of British India played a crucial military role in the many expeditions the British launched – at great expense and with little gain - in trying to subdue Afghanistan.

In addition to overlapping history, Pakistan and Afghanistan also have important ethnic ties: approximately 40 per cent of the population of Afghanistan is Pakhtun, as is 15 per cent of Pakistan’s. Most of them live in the south and east of Afghanistan and in Pakistan, mostly in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) along the border with Afghanistan, and in the provinces of KPK and Baluchistan. Ironically, instead of bringing the two countries closer together, this ethnic commonality has been a source of friction since 1947.

To begin with, Afghanistan opposed the creation of Pakistan because Kabul did not – and still does not - recognise the 2,500 km Durant Line as the international border between the two countries. Its argument has been that the Durant Line is a colonial creation, which artificially divides Pakhtun tribes. Instead, Kabul wanted the ‘Pakistani’ Pakhtuns to either join Afghanistan or create their own state of Pakhtunistan out of the former NWFP and parts of Baluchistan, but without including the Pakhtun areas of Afghanistan. While the two countries were close to reaching an agreement on this issue in 1976, it was never implemented following General Zia-ul-Haq’s coup in 1977.

With the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the political dynamics between Islamabad and Kabul took a dramatic turn. One of the main causes was, of course, the influx of some four million Afghan refugees, who settled in KPK and FATA. Some two million of these refugees are still living in Pakistan today. A critical element complicating the refugee

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situation, was the presence in FATA of the mujahideen, the Chinese, Saudi and Western-supported anti-Afghan government guerrillas, who launched their attacks against the Soviet and Afghan forces from Pakistani territory. Like the situation some 20 years later, the Pakistan government was unable or unwilling to control the activities of these insurgents, with some rebel groups establishing quasi-government enclaves in the tribal areas.³

Following the departure of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan in 1989 and the scramble for power in Kabul, Pakistan began to support some former mujahideen Afghan groups, notably Hezb-i-islami, an Islamic political party headed by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. However, in 1994 Pakistani intelligence began switching its support to the Taliban, a Kandahar-based grouping of Afghan religious students, many of whom, including the leader, Mullah Omar, had studied in the madrassas (religious schools) of Pakistan. By 1996 they had taken over Kabul and would remain in power until 2001, when the US-led coalition forced them to flee from Kabul.

Developments post-2001
With their defeat in October 2001, the Taliban and their al-Qaeda allies escaped across the border into the tribal areas of Pakistan. Hundreds of these foreign fighters settled and married into local tribes. For many of them, it was like coming home. They established safe havens in FATA, especially in South and North Waziristan, and began attacking coalition forces in southern and eastern Afghanistan with some success, particularly from 2005 onwards. Two critical factors facilitated the embedment of these fighters in FATA: first, the physically remote and rugged “no-man’s land” of Pakistan’s tribal areas; and, second, the Pakhtun’s honour code, Pakhtunwali, which, among other things, requires a Pakhtun to offer hospitality, regardless of whether the guest is welcomed or not, a criminal, a friend or an enemy.

In addition to Hekmatyar and Mullar Omar, another Pakhtun leader, Jalaluddin Haqqani, established himself in FATA with his fighters. The latter and his much-feared, powerful son, Sirajuddin, are believed to have some 15,000 men.⁴ While the Haqqanis have sworn allegiance to Mullah Omar, they are increasingly taking an independent line, potentially complicating future negotiations. The Haqqani Network fighters are considered the most lethal of all the Afghan militants, having recently executed some spectacular attacks, including the one on the American embassy in Kabul in September 2011.

Not surprisingly, the insertion of these militants into the tribal areas has had an extremely negative impact on political developments in Pakistan. The most important effect is that is has led to the creeping Talibanisation of FATA and neighbouring parts of KPK. This has included imposing Shariah law, attacking music and video shops, closing barber shops and killing women working in schools or for NGOs.

It has encouraged pro-Taliban Pakistani militants to flex their muscles, including murdering politicians, killing innocent Pakistani civilians, attacking army personnel and assassinating government officials. But, an even more worrisome development for Pakistan is that the Pakistani Taliban groups, which are based mainly in the northwest of the country, have joined forces with jihadists in southern Punjab and Karachi. This linking up of extremist forces confirms that, as opposed to the Afghan Taliban, which stresses Pakhtun identity, the

Pakistani Taliban does not; Islam is its focus. This makes it that much more lethal and dangerous for Pakistan’s future.

In December 2007, a number of Pakistani Taliban groups formed a nominal umbrella organisation - Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Altogether it is estimated to have a force of about 40,000 men. But it is far from being unified or centralised. As a matter of fact, although it has a nominal leader, Hakimullah Mehsud, the TTP is deeply divided by tribal affiliation, leadership ambitions, competition for local domination and whether it should enter into peace accords with the Pakistan government.

Notwithstanding these divisions, there are common ‘principles’ binding these different groups. These include: a deeply-held anti-western and anti-American outlook; a belief that the Pakistani state is not legitimate; a jihadist drive to implement the Shariah throughout Pakistan; and a conviction that anyone who does not adhere to their Weltanschauung, i.e., Shiites, Ahmadiyahs, Sufi-followers and Christians, is a legitimate target for their terrorist acts. These occur on a regular basis throughout the country. According to Pakistan government estimates, some 40,000 people have been killed in terrorist and violent acts in Pakistan in the last 10 years.

**Pakistan’s counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency efforts**

Pakistan has used a two pronged approach towards the militants: coercion and negotiation. To achieve the first prong, the Pakistani army has deployed over 140,000 troops in the border area, which is more than the Coalition forces’ 130,000 men now in Afghanistan. Pakistan’s battle against the militants has cost its army dearly, having lost more men than the Coalition forces have in Afghanistan in 10 years. According to the Pakistan government, over 3,000 military personnel, including many officers, have been killed.

The second prong, negotiation, has not always been successful. In 2004, 2005 and 2006 the Pakistani army cut deals with those jihadist groups in South and North Waziristan that were not attacking them. In return for the army confining itself to camps, the Pakistani Taliban would no longer allow Afghan Taliban fighters to launch attacks against Coalition forces in Afghanistan. The agreements were soon broken by the militants and, instead, the Afghan Taliban attacks against Coalition forces increased.

In February 2009, Islamabad entered into another agreement with a TTP faction in the Swat valley. In this agreement elements of the Shariah would become law and, in return, the jihadists would disarm. Instead the insurgency spread to within 100 kilometres of Islamabad. It took 30–45,000 army personnel to push them back, using heavy-handed tactics and at a great cost to civilians. 2.5 million people were displaced. Most Taliban fighters fled to the tribal areas or Afghanistan and today they lead raids back into Pakistan. In October 2009, the Pakistan army went into South Waziristan with three divisions in pursuit of these militants, but most of the fighters fled to North Waziristan and elsewhere. Almost 400,000 people were displaced in this operation. While militant activity in South Waziristan has since diminished, the area is far from being Taliban-free.

Notwithstanding some major set-backs in negotiating with the militants, the Pakistan government made a fresh offer to hold talks with the TTP in November 2011, which was endorsed by all major parties and, importantly, by the Chief of the Army Staff, General Pervez Kayani. The head of the TTP, Hakimullah Mehsud, promptly rejected the offer, unless the government agreed to reconsider its relationship with the US and enforced Shariah law.

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in the country. His deputy, Maulvi Faqeer Mohammed, on the other hand, accepted the offer. Mohammed was subsequently sacked as deputy when it emerged that he had unilaterally entered into peace talks with the government.

In a related and dangerous development, a number of Pakistani militant groups, some of them part of the TTP, which had already entered into separate peace deals with Islamabad, have recently joined up with the Haqqani Network to form a consultative council under the flag of Taliban leader Mullah Omar. It commits the members to join the Afghans to fight against Coalition forces in Afghanistan. This is an important development because it enables the Afghan Taliban to tap into a new source of Pakistani fighters, having lost hundreds in the last two years. However, the agreement binds together groups that have fought each other in the past in North and South Waziristan, so it is unclear how long this new coalition of jihadist forces can be sustained. Still, it deepens further the already close relationship between Afghan and Pakistani militants, as well as Pakistan’s involvement in developments in Afghanistan.

Until recently, the US wanted the Pakistani army go into North Waziristan and hunt down the Haqqani Network fighters. But the army has no appetite to do so and, given the rugged terrain, it would be difficult and would require an additional 60,000 men to do the job. Moreover, it is already stretched thinly, dealing with militants elsewhere in the country. But a more critical reason for the Pakistani army’s reluctance to pursue the Haqqanis is that Pakistan wants to keep its options open for when NATO forces leave Afghanistan. For Pakistan the Haqqani Network is a strategic asset and it has been a useful domestic tool for the army. Having major policy differences with the TTP over the targeting of Pakistani government forces, the Haqqani Network has been helpful to the Pakistani army in keeping ‘some’ control over the TTP in North Waziristan.

Washington, however, has not been pushing Pakistan to go into North Waziristan since the significant deterioration in Pakistan-US relations, following the unilateral US raid against Bin Laden in May 2011 and the death of 26 Pakistani soldiers killed by NATO forces in November 2011. Another irritant in the US-Pakistan relationship has been the dramatic increase in the use of American un-manned drone attacks against targets in the tribal areas. While these drone strikes have been effective in killing Afghan Taliban, Al-Qaeda and Pakistani Taliban fighters, they have also caused many civilian casualties. This has fuelled rampant anti-Americanism in Pakistan.

All these issues are at present being debated in the Pakistani parliament, as part of its major review of Pakistan-US relations. The Obama Administration’s focus now is how to put the bilateral relationship back on track. This would include Pakistan allowing the resumption of convoys, which bring some 50 per cent of the Coalition’s non-lethal supplies to Afghanistan, through Pakistan. However, depending how long Parliament takes to debate this issue, it may be a few more weeks, if not longer, before there is a resolution to the present bilateral relationship ‘freeze’. Whatever direction the US-Pakistan relationship does take, will have an impact on negotiations about Afghanistan.

**Talks so far**

The whole issue of Afghanistan negotiations is still very fluid and subject to much behind-the-scene talk about talks. So it is difficult to assess with complete certainty the situation on that score. However, we do know that there have been very limited ‘talks’ so far between

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the US and the Taliban. But even these have been suspended for the moment. At the beginning of the year, discussions were held in Qatar, where the Taliban opened a political office in January 2012. According to the US and the Taliban, these were not peace talks; they were discussions about preliminary trust-building measures, including a possible transfer of Taliban prisoners held by the Americans in Guantanamo and elsewhere, and removing some Taliban members from NATO’s “kill or capture” list. These discussions faltered in early March following the killing of 17 civilian Afghans, allegedly by an American soldier.

However, it would appear that the real reason they were suspended is because the Americans, under pressure from the Afghans and the Pakistanis, who were displeased at being cut out of these discussions, were insisting on bringing the Afghans into these ‘talks’. But the Taliban leadership considers Afghan President Karzai as illegitimate and a mere puppet of the West. Nevertheless, the fact that Taliban officials actually held discussions with the Americans is, in itself, a big step forward in the reconciliation process, given that Mullah Omar has always rejected talks with the US as long as American troops are in Afghanistan.

The Americans have made it clear that, for substantive peace talks to begin, the Taliban would have to renounce international terrorism, publicly break with al-Qaeda, end violence and agree to respect the constitution, including the rights of women and minorities. Secretary of State Clinton has made this very clear on several occasions in hearings in the US Congress. But she has also stated that Mullah Omar would have to be included in such talks.8 This is a radical departure from the previous official stance, which considered talking to the Taliban a heretical position.

American officials have also stated publicly that, if peace talks are to succeed, Pakistan will have to be included at the table.9 Pakistan has welcomed this position. However, it has also stressed that it will not lead future negotiations but would follow Kabul’s lead on this issue.10 Pakistan has also made it clear that it supports peace negotiations. Pakistani Prime Minister Gilani has appealed to all Afghan Taliban groups, “to participate in an intra-Afghan process for national reconciliation and peace”.11 But while the Americans and the Pakistanis seem to be in agreement about the need to talk to the Taliban if peace is to have a chance of success post-2014, they are in disagreement as to the pre-conditions for talks. The Pakistanis insist on a ceasefire in Afghanistan as a first step prior to negotiations; the Americans prefer to fight and talk at the same time. Islamabad is also against pre-conditions, such as renouncing violence and accepting the Afghan constitution, for talks with the Taliban.12

Turning to the Haqqani Network, Washington’s position on including it in future negotiations is unclear. Secretary of State Clinton has confirmed that the US has had preliminary meetings with the Haqqanis. But according to a Haqqani Network commander, the group would not take part individually in any peace talks with the US; such negotiations would need to be led by the Taliban.13 In addition to the stalled Qatar discussions, there have been suggestions that talks might be hosted by Saudi Arabia sometime this year. Such talks, if they

10 “Pakistan to support not lead Afghan peace drive”, The News, 23 February 2012.
do take place, are reportedly favoured by the Pakistan and Afghan governments, who have been vexed about not being invited to the ones in Qatar.

Ultimately, these two ‘tracks’ will need to be brought together; that is, one approach that will bring all four major players – the Afghan, Pakistani and American governments and the Taliban (all factions) – together at the negotiating table. However, it will be important that the Afghan government have ultimate ownership of the negotiations, if they are to have any chance of success or credibility. Put differently, any final agreement that appears to be imposed from the outside, would almost certainly fail. Perhaps a United Nations-hosted peace conference, held in a neutral location, such as Geneva, would facilitate the process of bringing the main players to the negotiating table.¹⁴

But regardless of who hosts such negotiations, the discussions will inevitably be one-sided. The West has made it clear that it wants out. NATO has announced that all combat troops will depart by the end of 2014. Accordingly, with the Taliban groups having the bargaining chips on their side, how constructive and genuine can we expect these negotiations to be? Nevertheless, a peace conference framework remains the only way forward for an ‘honourable’ way out for the Coalition members.

**Future Implications**

So what does Pakistan want to see in Kabul? Islamabad wants a ‘friendly’ government in Afghanistan post-2014; one which is stable and does not threaten its national interests. But more importantly, it would not want to see Afghanistan closely allied with its arch-enemy India. The signing of an Indo-Afghan strategic pact in October 2011 did not help matters, particularly given that India will be boosting its military training of the Afghan army and police and forging closer security and trade ties. Given its lack of strategic depth, Pakistan does not want to have two neighbours to worry about, particularly if they are allied to one another.

Accordingly, Pakistan wants – and should have - an input in the final agreement for post-2014 Afghanistan. If Pakistan is given an opportunity to contribute to the final agreement, it will have a stake in ensuring that it works. Islamabad would also want to see all the Taliban factions, including the Haqqani Network and Hekmatyar, involved in the negotiations. It would argue that, given that these Afghan groups have not been defeated by the Coalition forces, they have earned a place at the negotiating table.

Looking ahead to post-2014, there is a distinct possibility that the Taliban and its allies will have a role in a future Government in Kabul. The government in Islamabad may well think this is a good outcome in the medium-term. However, the long-term ramifications for the stability of Pakistan in having the Taliban included in the government in Kabul, could potentially be very bad. Such an Afghan government would give the Pakistani Taliban and fellow *jihadists* a massive moral and psychological boost in their terrorist endeavour to impose the *Shariah* throughout Pakistan.

There would be absolutely no guarantee that because Islamabad facilitated the return to power of the Taliban that it would, in turn, be friendly to the Pakistani government in the future. So, in the long-term, Pakistan would be weakened because of having to deal with an internal insurgency, quite possibly assisted by an Afghan government whose members the

¹⁴ For an interesting discussion about getting the UN involved in such negotiations, see “Talking About Talks: Toward a Political Settlement in Afghanistan”, *International Crisis Group*, Asia Report 221, 26 March 2012.
Pakistan intelligence and army had nurtured in the past. Ironically, the Pakistani Taliban would have the strategic depth that the Pakistan army has been seeking to gain since independence.

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