



## Slipping the Leash? Pakistan's Relationship with the Afghan Taliban

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# Slipping the Leash? Pakistan's Relationship with the Afghan Taliban

**Tricia Bacon**

After nearly 17 years, the conundrum is familiar, though no less frustrating. The US military effort in Afghanistan depends on Pakistan for access to the landlocked country, while Pakistan pursues its own national-security interests by supporting the very group that the United States has expended significant blood and treasure to oppose: the Afghan Taliban. It is a dilemma from which no US administration has been able to escape.

After most major terrorist attacks in Afghanistan, Afghan officials denounce the most likely perpetrator, the Taliban. In the same breath, they condemn Pakistan and blame its intelligence service, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), for cooperating with the Taliban to plan the attack. It is by no means a new or surprising charge. Afghan leaders and civilians alike are quick to blame their neighbour to the east for such incidents and see Pakistan as the puppetmaster behind the insurgency. After Pakistan's decades of meddling and support for proxies in Afghanistan, particularly the Taliban, the instinct is understandable.

The Afghan view of Pakistan's role in the insurgency has also found traction among some Americans who have served in Afghanistan, especially in the current administration, two current senior members of which – Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford – served there as four-star generals. Pakistani leaders, when

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not denying that the Taliban operates in Pakistan, have insisted that they have ‘contact [with], but not control’<sup>1</sup> over the group and blame the insurgency on the Afghan government’s failures of governance and the United States’ missteps. Neither version accurately – or at least fully – portrays the Taliban–Pakistan relationship.

Understanding Pakistan’s relationship with the Taliban is especially important given the Trump administration’s pressure on Islamabad. Substantial attention has been given to the Afghan insurgency and US policy, but Pakistan’s relationship with the Taliban is often treated as static – primarily, if not solely, a reflection of the Pakistani Army’s calculus. This view overlooks the relationship’s fluctuations and complexities, particularly the Taliban’s desire for strategic autonomy. While attempting to change Pakistan’s behaviour towards the Taliban, or any of its proxies for that matter, would always be difficult, attempting to do so when its influence over the Taliban is more tenuous is even less likely to succeed. Currently, Pakistan’s leverage comes primarily from providing the Taliban sanctuary, making it unlikely that Pakistan will capitulate to the United States’ main demand that it oust the Taliban from Pakistan. Should it do so, it will lose its insurance policy in Afghanistan, in which it has invested for decades to ensure its interests.

Support for militant proxies is a long-standing component of Pakistan’s national-security policy. Many of its proxies are key to its agenda against India, which includes a desire to secure a friendly, pliant neighbour on its western border. Less often recognised is the fact that Pakistan’s relationships with client groups vary significantly, both across groups and over time. On one end of the spectrum, it has close ties with the fiercely loyal and obedient Lashkar-e-Taiba, which shares much of the Pakistani Army’s agenda. There has been friction, but overall the relationship rests on strong affective ties as much as shared interests.

In contrast, Pakistan’s relationship with the Taliban has never been warm, and it relies on a narrower, though enduring, overlap in interests.<sup>2</sup> They have a tension-filled relationship in which Pakistan seeks to simultaneously control the Taliban and hide its activities from the United States, while the Taliban attempts to remain independent, yet responsive enough to keep Pakistan’s support.<sup>3</sup> Pakistan became more determined to gain control

over the Taliban as the US commitment to Afghanistan wavered and it saw a pro-India government in Afghanistan emerging, while the Taliban has sought to reduce Pakistan's influence. As the group has grown stronger, it has reduced Pakistan's leverage by gradually cultivating other patrons, acquiring independent sources of resources and gaining extensive territorial control within Afghanistan. In other words, their relationship has shifted such that the Taliban no longer relies on Pakistan to the same degree for guidance, resources or even sanctuary.

### **A new sheriff in town**

On New Year's Day 2018, President Donald Trump announced via Twitter that the United States would freeze aid to Pakistan. While the move caught much of the US government off guard,<sup>4</sup> since taking office the Trump administration has taken a hard line on Pakistan's relationship with the Afghan Taliban, particularly the Haqqani-network faction, which has been responsible for many attacks in Kabul.<sup>5</sup> Previously, the United States had grudgingly tolerated the situation as long as Pakistan cooperated against the United States' top national-security priority: al-Qaeda. So long as Pakistan delivered on al-Qaeda, it was able to evade the United States' demands on the Taliban, a distant second priority.<sup>6</sup> However, on account of the gains made against al-Qaeda in Pakistan under the past two administrations, the Trump administration has greater leeway to pressure Pakistan with respect to its support for the Taliban.

Free from the constraint of needing counter-terrorism assistance within Pakistan, the Trump administration has pushed Islamabad on the Taliban's presence within its borders. The Taliban and the Haqqani network are concentrated across the border from their strongholds in Afghanistan, specifically in Balochistan and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) respectively. But their operatives also find sanctuary in major urban areas of Pakistan, including Karachi, Peshawar and even Islamabad.

Pakistan, of course, denies that the Taliban finds sanctuary within its borders, requesting that the United States provide actionable intelligence and issuing counter-accusations about US and Afghan tolerance of the presence of anti-Pakistan militant groups in Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup> Although last

November Rex Tillerson, then the US secretary of state, agreed to provide intelligence to the Pakistanis, doing so simply alerts the Pakistani security services to what the United States knows, and improves Pakistan's ability to hide its activities.<sup>8</sup>

Despite Tillerson's conciliatory, albeit misguided, gesture, two months later Trump announced the aid freeze, which will affect approximately \$2 billion in security assistance. Pakistan's most powerful player, Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa, has indicated that he will not seek a resumption of aid and that Pakistan will diversify its alliances, strengthening its relationship with China in particular, to reduce its dependence on the United States.<sup>9</sup> Imran Khan, Pakistan's newly elected prime minister, has adopted a hard line against the United States and appears likely to approve of this position.

The Trump administration's move comes at a point when Pakistan has more limited leverage over the Afghan Taliban. Its degree of influence has always been difficult to determine because, as already noted, Pakistan seeks to hide its support for the Taliban from the United States. In addition to its vehement denials, it engages in phony crackdowns involving a revolving door of arrests that are intended to alleviate international pressure as well as to express dissatisfaction with specific Taliban commanders. While the United States may now have greater latitude to pressure Pakistan, Pakistan's influence over the Taliban has diminished, making it all the more unlikely that Pakistan will act against the group to appease the United States.

### **A loosened grip?**

Pakistan has cultivated non-state proxies since its independence, driven primarily by its view that India poses an existential threat. After 9/11, some of those proxies turned against Pakistan, raising hopes that Islamabad would relinquish these policy instruments. Instead, Pakistan's internal-security woes reinforced its proxy relationships.<sup>10</sup> Some of its remaining proxies, including the Taliban and Haqqani network, have utility for its internal security because they discourage violence in Pakistan. In addition, the insurgency in Afghanistan offers an outlet that Islamabad can use to encourage militants to shift their activities away from Pakistan.<sup>11</sup>

Though Pakistan and the Taliban have long-standing common interests, these have not produced a friendship. Pakistan's security establishment largely views the Afghan Taliban with contempt, while the Taliban often resents Pakistan's interference.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, over the course of their relationship, Pakistan's influence over the Taliban has ebbed and flowed, peaking during periods when the Taliban was weak and Pakistan sought to shore up its interests in Afghanistan.

Over time, Pakistan's treatment of the Taliban gradually shifted from employing a mixture of carrots and sticks to relying more on coercive measures – specifically, manipulating the Taliban's sanctuary in Pakistan. This occurred in part because the Taliban found other sources of support and even other havens; however, the group cannot fully escape geography. Pakistan also needed to maintain some deniability, however implausible, for its support for the Taliban, which has constrained its ability to provide significant – that is, detectable – material support. Nonetheless, Pakistan grew determined to cement its influence over the Taliban as it became convinced that the United States was not going to invest sufficiently in Afghanistan and that a Taliban victory was not only plausible, but likely.<sup>13</sup>

It is worth briefly tracing Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban, as it reveals a more complex picture of their relationship than is often acknowledged. But this task is more difficult than one might expect. Pakistan's military, particularly ISI, is a pervasive and feared influence in Pakistan and Afghanistan.<sup>14</sup> The range of its activities is vast; it manipulates public opinion and the media, not only by planting stories, but also by intimidating and even 'disappearing' journalists, civil-society activists and anyone else who dares to publicly criticise the military.<sup>15</sup> Journalist Steve Coll captured the essence of ISI in describing it as 'a powerful, corrosive force within Pakistan, a shadowy deep state that manipulated politics on behalf of the army and ... promoted armed groups of Islamists'.<sup>16</sup> As a result, it is not easy to separate accurate information from the well-earned lore that surrounds ISI.<sup>17</sup> Pakistan's meddling has cultivated a culture in Afghanistan in which Pakistan, specifically ISI, is seen as being behind every act, every attack and every conspiracy, even among some Taliban members<sup>18</sup> – a perception that ISI uses to its advantage. At the same time, realistically, ISI is

not omnipotent: 'it suffers from the same corruption and weakness that plague the entire Pakistani state', says Coll.<sup>19</sup>

### **Pakistan's proxy policy and the Taliban**

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the Taliban is not a Pakistani creation; to view it as such neglects the local conditions that gave rise to the group and underestimates how the Taliban has been, to quote Theo Farrell, 'the maker of its own success'.<sup>20</sup> Even the role of Pakistani madrassas in the Taliban's ideology may have been overemphasised, though the Taliban undoubtedly enjoyed extensive relationships with religious parties and institutions in Pakistan.<sup>21</sup> But during the anti-Soviet war, ISI viewed Kandahar as a 'backwater', so it did not have strong ties with those who would go on to form the Taliban.<sup>22</sup> In the years prior to the Taliban's emergence, Pakistan was backing the warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in an effort to secure a pliable, friendly and anti-India government in Kabul. However, Hekmatyar incurred losses, both militarily and politically, as the civil war raged with no end in sight.<sup>23</sup>

Amid this chaos, the Taliban emerged as a reaction to the absence of security. In the beginning, it was an indigenous movement with a limited agenda: restoring security, enforcing sharia and defending Islam in Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup> Its rise was sudden and unexpected, including in Pakistan, which soon forged ties with and gained influence over the burgeoning movement through the provision of weapons, money and advisers.<sup>25</sup>

Pakistan's substantial support, as well as backing from Saudi Arabia, enabled the Taliban to conquer most of Afghanistan and become the de facto, though not internationally recognised, government.<sup>26</sup> The investment paid off. The period of Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001 was a boon for Pakistan, which had the type of government it sought in Afghanistan: friendly to Islamabad, hostile to New Delhi. Though some saw the relationship as a product of growing ideological convergence between ISI and its client, the Taliban was supported not only by ISI, the army writ large and religious parties in Pakistan, but also by Pakistan's civilian government.<sup>27</sup>

Yet even then the Taliban proved less pliable than Pakistan had wished, and this did not change over time, as the group grew stronger.<sup>28</sup> It rejected ISI appeals to work with warlords as it expanded its territorial control.<sup>29</sup>

When in power, the group was unwilling to recognise the Durand Line as the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, a long-standing source of tension between the two countries.<sup>30</sup> In the midst of the international outcry against the Taliban's decision to destroy historic Buddhist statues in Bamiyan, Pakistan was unable to persuade the Taliban to abandon the plan. Most consequentially, the Taliban was not responsive to Pakistan's efforts to figure out a way to remove Osama bin Laden from Afghanistan, a position that led Saudi Arabia to withdraw its support and left Pakistan as the Taliban's sole patron.<sup>31</sup>

For its part, Pakistan proved a less than ideal benefactor. Above all, Pakistan's decision to cooperate with the United States after 9/11 was a betrayal. Though Pervez Musharraf's government sought to persuade the United States that the Taliban was redeemable,<sup>32</sup> ultimately it capitulated and supported the United States' invasion, permitting the use of Pakistani territory for the effort. Had the relationship been one built on loyalty and affection, these differences surely would have ended it. However, dictated by pragmatic considerations, the relationship weathered these problems.

It is easy to forget after 17 years of war that the Taliban regime fell with astonishing speed, offering far less resistance than expected, and that the insurgency did not emerge until 2003. Though unsure of how Pakistan would receive them, a number of senior Taliban leaders and commanders, lacking options, fled there.<sup>33</sup> They had an array of relationships to fall back on, including with the Afghan refugee community, Pakistani religious parties, madrassas and, not least, ISI.<sup>34</sup>

With the Taliban in tatters and US intentions in Afghanistan unclear, Pakistan reduced, but did not cease, its support for what remained of the Taliban, pushing this support into more covert channels to avoid US detection.<sup>35</sup> Some Taliban were detained in Pakistan, and one senior Taliban diplomat was handed over to the United States. But for the most part, Pakistan looked the other way, allowing the new residents to cross the border and settle there.<sup>36</sup> Initially, Taliban leaders did not agree on a way forward: a few wanted to fight, others wanted to reconcile and still others sought to withdraw from any involvement with the Taliban or the new Afghan government.<sup>37</sup> In this disarray, Pakistan's willingness to offer haven enabled a rump Taliban to survive.<sup>38</sup>

Meanwhile, grievances mounted in Afghanistan, particularly against the predatory warlords empowered by the United States, many of whom had been responsible for the violence that precipitated the Taliban's rise. Taliban leaders began re-grouping in Quetta and reconnecting with their men in Afghanistan, some of whom had attempted to rejoin Afghan society but found themselves targeted.<sup>39</sup> Their inability to return to Afghanistan without fear of detention meant they had to stay in Pakistan, which significantly bolstered Pakistan's leverage over them.

Simultaneously, Pakistan grew concerned that the United States' attention had shifted to Iraq and thus that it would not do what was needed to stabilise Afghanistan, let alone do so in a way acceptable to Pakistan.<sup>40</sup> From the outset, Musharraf had told the United States that the government in Afghanistan must be amenable to Pakistan.<sup>41</sup> The Pakistani government was alarmed by the Afghan government's friendly attitude towards India, and by the Northern Alliance's dominant role in it.<sup>42</sup>

By 2003, Pakistan had rejuvenated its support for the Taliban. Views about the level of Pakistan's support by this point vary widely, from tolerance of Taliban activities to the active provision of training and funds, but definitive proof for any position remains elusive.<sup>43</sup> Coll characterised ISI as 'running a low-level, testing version of the same covert program it had run in Afghanistan for more than two continuous decades'.<sup>44</sup> With the successful Afghan elections in 2004, a window opened to bring in disaffected Taliban, but the opportunity was not seized and the insurgency gained momentum.<sup>45</sup>

Between 2003 and 2005, the Taliban mobilised the support and structures to initiate an insurgency, becoming the focal point for growing opposition to the Afghan government and international forces.<sup>46</sup> The Taliban began sending small infiltration teams into Afghanistan from Pakistan, laying the groundwork for larger influxes.<sup>47</sup> The group erected training facilities in Pakistan. It developed networks of couriers to strengthen command and control between the leadership in Pakistan and personnel in Afghanistan.<sup>48</sup>

Pakistan's support for the Taliban grew, spurred by what it saw as the consolidation of an India-friendly government in Kabul and a waning US commitment.<sup>49</sup> At this stage, the resources the Taliban received from Pakistani security services were critical, as the Taliban lacked independent

and reliable sources of money and weapons. The sanctuary in Pakistan was also indispensable, not only because it offered protection, but also because it allowed members to travel to the Gulf to raise funds. While claims that the Taliban decided to wage an insurgency at the behest of Pakistan are overblown,<sup>50</sup> Pakistani support at this juncture was key to the group's ability to launch the insurgency. As a result, Pakistan enjoyed significant influence over the Taliban.

During the period that followed, roughly from 2006 to 2008, the Taliban insurgency fully emerged, and violence increased significantly. In order to manage the insurgency from Pakistan, Taliban leaders issued standards of conduct for its fighters<sup>51</sup> and sought to better organise existing networks. The group achieved significant territorial and military successes, regaining more than half of Afghanistan's rural Pashtun areas and even expanding into the west and north.<sup>52</sup> In addition, the Taliban was able to attack those working for the Afghan government with seeming impunity. Suicide bombings, once unheard of, proliferated in Afghanistan, with numerous indications that the apparatus preparing the weapons and personnel was based in Pakistan.<sup>53</sup>

The United States' decision to hand over peacekeeping operations to British, European and Canadian forces confirmed Pakistan's suspicions about the United States' lack of commitment to Afghanistan. Increased ISI support for the insurgency followed.<sup>54</sup> The Pakistani government pushed the boundaries to see what support it could provide without being caught red-handed by the United States. Nevertheless, Pakistan, though it enjoyed significant influence, did not control the Taliban. With its resurgence, the Taliban also sought more autonomy.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, Pakistan's policies, like the United States', were not entirely coherent, as it grappled with a growing internal threat from jihadist groups and found the limits of ISI's competence.<sup>56</sup>

Pakistan's support did not go unnoticed. In 2006, the US government lodged its first public accusation that Pakistan was aiding the Taliban. In 2007, US Lieutenant-General Karl Eikenberry, then commander of Combined

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Forces Command–Afghanistan, told Congress that the US could not win in Afghanistan as long as the Taliban enjoyed safe haven in Pakistan<sup>57</sup> – the same refrain at the centre of the Trump administration’s policy today. Pakistan arrested a few Taliban commanders in 2007 to ease US pressure, but its overall support continued unabated.<sup>58</sup>

By 2008–09, the Taliban enjoyed freedom of movement throughout the south and east and could readily strike within Kabul.<sup>59</sup> It controlled or contested between one-quarter and one-third of Afghanistan, and influenced about one-third of the population.<sup>60</sup> Its tactical improvements, such as the accuracy of its indirect fire, strongly suggested that the group was

receiving help from Pakistan. At a minimum, Pakistan offered a place for fighters to train and recuperate. The help from Pakistan grew more overt as the army and Frontier Corps not only allowed the Taliban to cross the border, but even reportedly provided cover fire for it to infiltrate into Afghanistan from Pakistan.<sup>61</sup> The

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### *Obama’s surge posed a threat*

Taliban reciprocated, conducting some operations, such as those against the Indian Embassy, at ISI’s behest.

But Pakistan was not the Taliban’s only or even primary source of strength. The Taliban gained increasing support from the Afghan public, providing dispute resolution through its courts, including hearing complaints against Taliban commanders.<sup>62</sup> Rather than relying on students from madrassas in Pakistan, the group was increasingly able to recruit local fighters.<sup>63</sup> It enjoyed growing legitimacy while the Afghan government faced mounting disillusionment.<sup>64</sup> By 2010, the Taliban was its strongest since its overthrow. Much to Pakistan’s dismay, the group made moves to consolidate its growing independence, most notably by seeking to establish a line of communication to the United States that excluded Pakistan<sup>65</sup> and to open an office in Qatar, beyond Pakistan’s reach.<sup>66</sup>

However, the Obama administration’s surge posed a threat, albeit one with an expiration date. Operations in southern Afghanistan in 2010 sent sizeable numbers of Taliban commanders across the border into Pakistan to wait out American forces. Wounded Taliban commanders went to Pakistan to get medical treatment, while the group’s leaders stayed beyond the

United States' reach. Importantly, the US surge and deadline for withdrawal had the unintended consequence of giving Pakistan the ability to punish the Taliban for its move towards greater independence while impressing upon it the need to secure its interests after the US withdrew.<sup>67</sup>

Pakistan used that leverage to seek greater control over the Taliban, leading to significant strife in the relationship. In 2010, the Pakistani security establishment detained dozens of Taliban in Pakistan, in particular senior leader Mullah Baradar – moves the Taliban interpreted as intended to punish those who were insufficiently responsive to Pakistan.<sup>68</sup> Whether that was the intention or not, such arrests signalled that the behaviour and attitude of the detained members, especially their suspected interest in negotiations without Pakistani involvement, were unacceptable and that others should adjust accordingly or risk the same fate.

Reflecting the nature of their relationship, these detentions have not been the kinds of cushy arrangements that other proxies, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, enjoy.<sup>69</sup> Taliban members, including its former defence minister, have died in Pakistani custody.<sup>70</sup> Pakistan has even refused to hand over the bodies of some of them.<sup>71</sup> Others endured harsh treatment, interrogations and torture. Even Pakistan's show crackdowns – arrests intended to alleviate US pressure – were disruptive and frustrating to the Taliban.

But the surge produced a stalemate, and the gains against the Taliban had limited staying power.<sup>72</sup> The Taliban was thoroughly embedded in Afghanistan,<sup>73</sup> making claims that it was merely a proxy for Pakistan untenable. Yet, with progress elusive in the United States' efforts to negotiate secretly with the Taliban, the US improved Pakistan's leverage over the Taliban by treating it as a 'negotiating agent' for the group.<sup>74</sup> In 2014, Pakistan communicated its displeasure with the Taliban's unilateral efforts to negotiate by arresting the brothers of the main Taliban interlocutor with the United States.<sup>75</sup>

In 2015, Pakistan used its coercive power to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table in an episode that reflects the tensions underlying the relationship. That July, Taliban officials met with Afghan government representatives in Pakistan for the first formal talks. When Pakistan demanded the Taliban attend the talks, Taliban leaders rejected the proposal and sought

to reduce Islamabad's leverage by moving out of Pakistan. Facing mounting pressure, the Taliban leadership capitulated on the condition that the talks be kept secret, though key members based in Qatar still refused to attend. However, Pakistan was keen to prove it was 'the essential peace broker' and publicised the meeting. Though unable to resist Pakistan's pressure to attend the meeting, shortly thereafter the Taliban announced that its representatives in Qatar would have 'sole responsibility' for negotiations, thereby undercutting Pakistan's ability to compel future meetings.<sup>76</sup>

In the meantime, Mullah Omar's extended absence had led to mounting suspicions among the Taliban that he was being held by ISI – another reflection of the Taliban's mistrust of Pakistan. Shortly after the bungled talks in Pakistan, it was revealed that he had died two years prior, a scandal that rocked the Taliban. Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour came to the helm and gradually consolidated his position. Considered a relative moderate, his ascension raised hopes for the prospects of negotiations.<sup>77</sup> But in 2016, Mansour was killed in a US drone strike in Balochistan while returning from Iran. Mansour had resisted Pakistani pressure to engage in negotiations through the quadrilateral peace process,<sup>78</sup> and thus many Taliban saw his death as orchestrated, or at least enabled, by Pakistan, another example of Pakistan's punishing Taliban who were insufficiently deferential to its wishes, in this case for pursuing closer ties with Iran.<sup>79</sup>

In sum, while Pakistan has been an important patron of the Taliban, the relationship is not and has never been friendly. As reflected in its treatment, the Punjabi-dominated Pakistani military establishment looks down on the Afghan Pashtun group, and the disdain is mutual. Rather than Pakistan's steadily controlling a compliant Taliban,<sup>80</sup> the relationship has been a constant push-pull. In fact, the Afghan Taliban has long yearned to get out from under Pakistan's influence. But their common interests have been sufficiently compelling that the relationship has been resilient. In recent years, however, the Taliban has been able to loosen, but by no means escape, Pakistan's grip through its gains in Afghanistan. In addition, the emergence of the Islamic State–Khorasan (ISK) has allowed the Taliban to cultivate more patrons, as some governments now see the Taliban as a more moderate, or at least a less threatening, alternative to ISK.

## The Taliban's improved position in Afghanistan

A late 2017 United Nations review argued that 'the Taliban have increased the territory they are able to contest and, in some areas, have begun to consolidate their hold'.<sup>81</sup> In addition, the report noted that the quality of the violence had changed, with a shift away from asymmetric warfare towards more traditional conflict, reflecting the Taliban's strength.<sup>82</sup> The ability to engage in more conventional warfare is consistent with estimates in February that the group commanded at least 60,000 men.<sup>83</sup> While the war in Afghanistan is a stalemate at best, in recent years the Taliban has improved its ability to raise revenue in Afghanistan and gained control of significant swathes of territory, two developments that have reduced its dependence on Pakistan.

Though there is disagreement about how many districts the Taliban controls or contests compared to the government, most analyses reach the same conclusion: the Afghan government is unable to meaningfully roll back the Taliban's position. According to the US Department of Defense's Special Inspector General's April report, despite months of intense pressure from US airpower, '229 districts were under Afghan government control (73 districts) or influence (156) – an increase of two districts under government influence since last quarter', bringing the Afghan government control or influence to 56.3% of Afghanistan's districts in total. The Taliban controlled 13 districts and influenced 46 more, yielding a total of 59 districts under insurgent influence – an increase of one district since last quarter.<sup>84</sup>

Separately, the *Long War Journal* has found a marked increase in the number of districts the Taliban controlled or contested between October 2015 and August 2017. In October 2015, it found that the Taliban contested 36 districts and controlled 29.<sup>85</sup> By August 2017, it concluded that the Taliban contested 117 and controlled 45, an estimated 45% of districts in Afghanistan.<sup>86</sup> Whichever estimate one uses, the bottom line is that the Taliban controls more territory than at any point since its overthrow.

US officials are quick to point out that the Taliban's territory is in largely rural areas, rather than urban centres. The insurgency controls or influences areas where 12% of the population live (3.9 million people). In the first quarter of 2018, the population living in contested areas (7.4m people)

decreased to roughly 23%, a decline of about one percentage point from the last quarter. However, the overall trend is still increasing Taliban control over the population.<sup>87</sup> The Taliban's territorial holdings and influence over the population thus allow more of the Taliban to find haven in Afghanistan and, by extension, more independence from Pakistan.<sup>88</sup>

In addition, while Pakistan and other donors, especially from the Gulf, have long provided the Taliban with funds,<sup>89</sup> the Taliban has gradually developed robust sources of revenue in Afghanistan that reduce its need for external financing. It profits from lumber and gem smuggling, as well as kidnapping and extortion, there.<sup>90</sup> Most notably, the Taliban benefits from Afghanistan's flourishing drug industry, which supplies more than 80% of the world's opium and much of the world's hashish.<sup>91</sup> According to the 2017 Afghanistan Opium Survey, areas under poppy cultivation had increased by 63% since 2016, and raw-opium production had increased by an estimated 88%.<sup>92</sup> According to the State Department's senior diplomat for South Asia, 'the overwhelming majority of hectares of opium grown is under Taliban control or in contested areas'.<sup>93</sup> The UN stated that up to 90% of drug production currently falls within Taliban-controlled areas, though the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction has noted that drug production also occurs in government-controlled areas.<sup>94</sup> By some estimates, the Taliban gets as much as 60% of its income from the drug trade.<sup>95</sup>

Far from being the only player in the Afghan narcotics business, the Taliban profits primarily from taxing and protecting the drug trade. However, it has become so deeply involved in the industry that some liken it to a cartel,<sup>96</sup> though others caution against viewing the group as profit-driven.<sup>97</sup> What is important is that the Taliban has a high degree of financial independence, perhaps more so than ever before.

### **Courting more patrons**

The Taliban has also improved its relationships with other state patrons. This is consequential because groups with multiple state sponsors can play different benefactors off one another and be less responsive to individual patrons.<sup>98</sup> Whereas the Taliban once relied on Pakistan, it now has more support from Iran and Russia. The emergence of the ISK only encouraged

Iran and Russia to reinforce their ties to the Taliban, as both governments see the Islamic State as an acute threat that the Taliban can help to counter.

Once an avowed adversary of the Taliban, Iran's posture towards the group evolved as it grew more concerned about US intentions. By 2005, Iran had forged ties with the Taliban. In 2007, the State Department accused Iran of providing both weapons and training to the group. By 2011, Iran allowed the Taliban some haven within Iranian borders.<sup>99</sup> In July 2012, Iran permitted the group to open an office in Zahedan, and hosted Taliban leaders, both overtly and covertly.<sup>100</sup> In 2015, Iran welcomed Taliban leaders seeking to escape Pakistani pressure. Most notably, in May 2016 came the aforementioned killing of the leader of the Taliban by a US drone strike, just after he crossed the border into Pakistan while returning from a secret visit to Iran. Since 2016, the Taliban has received military equipment from Iran.<sup>101</sup>

The relationship between the Shia regime in Tehran and the Sunni Taliban is delicate. Its mere existence reveals the Taliban's willingness to engage in realpolitik, and perhaps also the extent to which the Taliban wishes to reduce Islamabad's leverage. The Taliban's shura council in the west, known as the Mashhad shura, reportedly cooperates most closely with Iran, including hosting Iranian representatives.<sup>102</sup> Iran's willingness not only to accept but also to support the Taliban has only grown as the ISK has engaged in sectarian violence against Shi'ites in Afghanistan. The ISK conducted most of the 38 sectarian attacks in 2017, a threefold increase compared to 2016.<sup>103</sup> There was some speculation that Mansour's visit to Iran was in part to gain support or even plan joint operations against this shared enemy.<sup>104</sup>

Connections between Russia and the Taliban are by no means new either, dating back to at least 2007.<sup>105</sup> By autumn 2016, the Russians had become more open about their interactions with the Taliban, perhaps reflecting a growing relationship.<sup>106</sup> Increasingly sceptical of the United States' designs and concerned about the ISK, Russia increased its support for the Taliban. Several US and Afghan officials have alleged that Russia is providing weapons to the Taliban.<sup>107</sup> A senior Taliban leader even admitted that the Taliban had received money, weapons, ammunition and night-vision equipment from Russia.<sup>108</sup>

Russia does not see the Taliban as a transnational threat, whereas it does see the ISK as one, particularly due to its large contingent of Central Asian

operatives. Russia has reportedly provided the Taliban with intelligence on the ISK to assist in the Taliban's efforts to eliminate its rival.<sup>109</sup> Russia is simultaneously positioning itself as a stakeholder in any future negotiations to protect its interests in the region.<sup>110</sup>

### **Down but not out**

The Taliban's increasing independence, evident in both its rhetoric and its action, diminishes the importance of Pakistan's support.<sup>111</sup> In particular, Pakistan had little role in the Taliban's decision to declare an Eid al-Adha ceasefire, its direct talks with US officials or its recent military offensives. Yet the Taliban still needs one key asset from Pakistan: sanctuary. One unintended consequence of the United States' increase in deployed troops and heavy use of airstrikes is that it may increase this need and thereby improve Pakistan's leverage over its client.

Pakistan has other openings for reasserting its influence. The Taliban's leadership losses in recent years have allowed the Haqqani network to gain a more prominent position in the Taliban. While also based on calculations of mutual interest rather than affection, Pakistan's long-standing relationship with the Haqqanis is closer than its ties with other parts of the Taliban.<sup>112</sup>

Ultimately, it is still a marriage of necessity. For Pakistan, the Taliban has proven to be unreliable and difficult to manage. For the Taliban, Pakistan seeks too much control and uses coercive measures to obtain it. In addition, Pakistan is deeply unpopular in Afghanistan.<sup>113</sup> In a 2016 survey, the ISK (5.8%) had more public support than Pakistan (3.7%).<sup>114</sup> Thus, the relationship damages the Taliban's credibility among Afghans, a vulnerability its rival, the ISK, has sought to exploit. Perhaps counter-intuitively, most of the United States' policy focus has been on changing Pakistan's unwavering calculus, when the Taliban has sought ways to reduce Pakistan's leverage.

Now Pakistan is in a bind. It has decreasing influence, yet it is being held responsible for the Taliban by the United States to a greater degree. Undoubtedly, Pakistan can apply considerable pressure and discourage the Taliban from undertaking actions adverse to its interests. But Pakistan can no longer compel the Taliban to take strategic actions that run counter to its own wishes. In other words, Pakistan can act as a spoiler, but probably

not as a peacemaker. The tension between the Taliban and Pakistan will continue, but the new equilibrium has the potential to yield a more independent, though not necessarily less dangerous, Taliban.

The takeaway for the United States is that its leverage for pressuring Pakistan into denying the Taliban sanctuary – the asset that the Taliban values most from Pakistan – has diminished. Although the United States understandably bemoans Pakistan's perfidy, Pakistan has acted consistently in what it sees as its core national-security interests in Afghanistan. Islamabad remains intent on ensuring that an Afghanistan emerges that is friendly to Pakistan, and has invested in an insurance policy to that end for years. Given the trajectory of the conflict, it does not make sense for it to abandon that insurance policy now, let alone to do so in a way that may blow back on Pakistan.

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