Pakistan's Pyrrhic Victory in Afghanistan

Islamabad Will Come to Regret Aiding the Taliban's Resurgence

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Foreign Affairs: July 22, 2021

On the Afghanistan–Pakistan border, March 2010. *Adrees Latif / Reuters*

Pakistan's security establishment is cheering the Taliban's recent military gains in Afghanistan. The country's hard-liners have funneled support to the Taliban for decades, and they can now envision their allies firmly ensconced in Kabul. Pakistan got what it wished for—but will come to regret it. A Taliban takeover will leave Pakistan more vulnerable to extremism at home and potentially more isolated on the world stage.

The end of the United States' 20-year war in Afghanistan also promises to mark a turning point in its relationship with Islamabad. Pakistan has long veiled its ambitions in Afghanistan to maintain relations with Washington, but that balancing act—seen in Washington as a double game—will prove impossible in the event that a reconstituted Islamic emirate is established in Kabul. This would not be the vindication that Pakistan's military is expecting: the Taliban are less likely to defer to Pakistan in their moment of triumph, and the Americans are not likely to reconcile with the group over the long term. Pakistan's nightmare scenario would be to find itself caught between an uncontrollable Taliban and international demands to rein them in.

The Taliban's victory will have an equally disastrous effect on Pakistan's domestic peace and security. Islamist extremism has already divided Pakistani society along sectarian lines, and the

ascendance of Afghan Islamists next door will only embolden radicals at home. Efforts to force the Taliban's hand might result in violent blowback, with Pakistani Taliban attacking targets inside Pakistan. And if fighting between the Taliban and their opponents worsens, Pakistan will have to deal with a new flow of refugees. A civil war next door would further damage the country's struggling economy. Pakistani critics of their country's involvement with the Taliban have long feared and predicted this scenario. But Pakistan's generals see the Taliban as an important partner in their competition with India. Weak civilian leaders in Islamabad, meanwhile, have acquiesced to a policy that prioritizes the elimination of real or perceived Indian influence in Afghanistan.

For decades, Pakistan has played a risky game by supporting or tolerating the Taliban and also trying to stay in Washington's good graces. It worked for longer than many might have expected, but it was never going to prove sustainable in the long term. Pakistan has managed to kick the can down the road for a long time. Soon, however, it will reach the end of the road.

THE INDIAN OBSESSION

Pakistan's security establishment has long obsessed about imposing a friendly government in Kabul. That fixation is rooted in the belief that India is plotting to break up Pakistan along ethnic lines and that Afghanistan will be the launching pad for antigovernment insurgencies in Pakistan's Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa regions. These fears have their roots in the fact that Afghanistan claimed parts of Balochistan and Pakistan's Pashtun regions at the time of Pakistan's creation in August 1947. Afghanistan recognized Pakistan and established diplomatic relations a few days later but did not acknowledge the British-drawn Durand Line as an international border until 1976. Afghanistan also remained friendly with India, leading Pakistan to allow Afghan Islamists to organize on its territory even before the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979.

Despite extensive U.S.-Pakistani cooperation in Afghanistan during the Cold War, the two countries never truly reconciled their divergent interests in the country. The United States sent arms and money for the mujahideen through Pakistan as part of a global strategy to bleed the Soviet Union but showed little interest in Afghanistan's future once the Soviets left. Pakistani officials, on the other hand, saw the anti-Soviet jihad as an opportunity to turn Afghanistan into a satellite state. They favored the most fundamentalist mujahideen in the hope that a future government under their control would reject Indian influence and help suppress Baloch and Pashtun ethnic nationalism along their shared border.

These unresolved differences have festered in the intervening decades. Even after Pakistan became the logistical hub for U.S. forces in Afghanistan following 9/11, officials in Islamabad worried about India's influence in Kabul. Pakistan's military supported the Taliban, arguing that the group represented a reality on the ground that their country, as Afghanistan's neighbor with an ethnically overlapping population, could not ignore. For Islamist sympathizers, including those within the establishment, there was also perverse pleasure in causing pain to the United States.

General Hamid Gul, a former head of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, spelled out publicly in 2014 how the ISI used aid provided by the United States after 9/11 to continue funding the Taliban and how it benefited from the U.S. decision to initially ignore the Afghan Islamist group in favor of its pursuit of al Qaeda. He told a television audience in 2014: "When history is written, it will be stated that the ISI defeated the Soviet Union in Afghanistan with the help of America. Then there will be another sentence. The ISI, with the help of America, defeated America."

More recently, senior Pakistani officials have also crowed about the U.S. failure to eliminate the Taliban. Washington's diplomatic engagement with the Islamist group, they believe, amounts to a tacit acceptance of its influence in Afghanistan. After the February 2020 signing in Doha of the U.S.-Taliban agreement, which paved the way for the U.S. troop withdrawal, Khawaja Muhammad Asif, a former Pakistani minister for defense and minister for foreign affairs, tweeted a photograph of U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo meeting Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. He added a comment: "You might have might on your side, but God is with us. Allah u Akbar!"

As foreign minister, Asif insisted that Pakistan's relations with the Taliban only reflected acknowledgment of their political force in Afghanistan. He also criticized the United States for turning Pakistan into a "whipping boy" for its own failure to destroy the group. But he felt no need for diplomatic doublespeak in this moment of triumph. To Pakistanis such as Gul and Asif, the Taliban's impending victory is also a victory for Pakistan's covert operations.

This triumphalism is likely to backfire. Americans have never recognized Pakistan's perception of an existential threat from India as serious, which is why they never understood Pakistan's preference for Pashtun Islamists over Afghan nationalists. Pakistani officials have, over the years, chosen to flatly deny Pakistani actions in Afghanistan or to explain them away. This has led to charges of double-dealing from the Americans, spurring further mistrust in the bilateral relationship. Relations with India and the rest of the world have also suffered, and Pakistan has come to depend excessively on China.

Of its $90 billion in external debt, Pakistan owes 27 percent—or more than $24 billion—to Beijing. It has also been forced to rely on lower-quality Chinese military technology after losing U.S. military assistance.

FAR FROM "NORMAL"

Thirty years of support for jihad has also stoked the country's internal dysfunction. Its economy has struggled, except in years of generous American aid. Homegrown Islamist radicals have incited sporadic violence, such as terrorist attacks on religious minorities and riots demanding the expulsion of the French ambassador over alleged blasphemy in France against the Prophet Muhammad. Women's rights have been publicly questioned and threatened, and mainstream and social media are regularly censored to accommodate radical Islamist sensibilities. The government was forced to "Islamize" the curriculum at the expense of courses in science and critical thinking.

Ironically, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan comes amid promises to reverse these trends. Four years ago, Pakistan's current army chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, declared that he wanted to transform Pakistan into "a normal country." He has since also spoken of the need to improve relations with India and reduce Pakistan's dependence on China.

That vision of transformation included an effort to enable a settlement in Afghanistan. Pakistan started fencing the long and porous border with its neighbor, made overtures to the Kabul government, and promised to help the United States in achieving a peace agreement. Bajwa indicated Pakistan's willingness to expand its partners in Afghanistan to include non-Taliban factions. The ISI arranged meetings between U.S. negotiators and some Taliban leaders, leading to the Doha Agreement, which set a timetable for U.S. military withdrawal in return for vague Taliban promises to start peace talks with other Afghans and prevent territory they controlled from being used to launch terrorist attacks against the United States.

Instead of spurring a return to normalcy in Pakistan, this agreement will only exacerbate the country's challenges. Given the Taliban's hard-line ideology, it was unrealistic for American negotiators to expect that the group would compromise with other Afghans, especially the Kabul government. And although Pakistan facilitated this deal in the hope that it would improve its standing with the United States, it is now likely to get blamed for the Taliban's refusal to stop fighting and agree to power sharing. Bajwa's proclaimed desire to change course has been impeded by Pakistan's earlier policies. Given Pakistan's poor relationship with almost all other groups in Afghanistan, it may have little choice but to stick with the Taliban in the event of renewed civil war across its northwestern border.

The agreement will also not achieve Washington's counterterrorism aims. A UN Security Council report published in June found that the Taliban have not broken off ties with al Qaeda and that senior al Qaeda officials have recently been killed "alongside Taliban associates while co-located with them." The report also identified the Haqqani network, a group the U.S. military once described as a "veritable arm of Pakistan's ISI," as the primary Taliban linkage with al Qaeda. "Ties between the two groups remain close, based on ideological alignment, relationships forged through common struggle and intermarriage," the report reads.

U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, meanwhile, has said that al Qaeda could reconstitute itself in Afghanistan within two years of an American withdrawal. None of these facts have changed President Joe Biden's commitment to pulling out U.S. forces.

Pakistan is anticipating a Taliban victory, even as its leaders continue to speak of the need for reconciliation among Afghans. Although public statements from Islamabad will continue to describe Pakistan's desire for peace, U.S. officials are unlikely to believe Pakistan's protestations that it does not want a Taliban military takeover. The two countries' relationship seems poised to become even more unreliable in the years ahead.

CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR

For those Pakistanis who see the world through the prism of competition with India, a Taliban victory offers some consolation. Pakistan has not been doing well in competition with India on

most fronts, but its proxies in Afghanistan appear to be succeeding—even if Pakistan cannot fully control them.

But it is a pyrrhic victory. These developments will take Pakistan further away from becoming "a normal country," perpetuating dysfunction at home and locking it into a foreign policy defined by hostility toward India and dependence on China. Washington and Islamabad's long, mutual entanglement in Afghanistan threatens to further weaken the U.S.-Pakistani relationship. The United States is unlikely to soon forgive Pakistan for its decades-long enabling of the Taliban. For years to come, Pakistanis will argue whether it was worth the effort to influence Afghanistan through Taliban proxies when, after 9/11, Pakistan could have secured its interests by fully siding with the Americans.