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Pakistan’s Deadly Grip on Afghanistan

C. CHRISTINE FAIR

On October 7, 2001, the United States launched Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. The operation aimed to oust the Taliban regime from power because it harbored Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda organization, and it sought to kill or capture bin Laden in response to the September 11 attacks on the United States, which he orchestrated. In December 2001, NATO entered the conflict under the banner of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Both the United States and NATO went to war in partnership with Pakistan, believing that they had adequately coerced and cajoled Afghanistan’s neighbor into cooperating against a militant infrastructure that Pakistan had worked for decades to establish. They were mistaken.

This should have been apparent as early as November 2001, when Pakistan’s military executed the Kunduz airlift, in which it evacuated thousands of Taliban leaders and their al-Qaeda associates, along with their Pakistani advisers from the armed forces and the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI)—just as US special forces operating with an Afghan rebel force, the Northern Alliance, were about to take the city. By 2004, al-Qaeda had abandoned its remaining redoubts in Afghanistan for sanctuaries in Pakistan. The routed Taliban was safely ensconced in Pakistan’s Balochistan province and in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, with *shuras* (leadership councils) in several major Pakistani cities.

By 2005, the Afghan Taliban, with strong support from Pakistan as well as from the Waziristan-based Haqqani Network, had launched an insurgent campaign against US and ISAF missions even while Pakistan was being remunerated handsomely for its role as a purported “coalition partner.”

Between fiscal years 2002 and 2005, the United States provided Pakistan with over \$6.6 billion in economic and military assistance, \$4.1 billion of which came in the form of reimbursements under the Coalition Support Funds (CSF) program.

More than fifteen years have passed since the United States launched operations in Afghanistan, ostensibly with the support of Pakistan. During this period, the Americans scaled up and then scaled down troop deployments and investments in Afghanistan’s economy, infrastructure, civil society, and armed forces, but never managed to deal with the simple fact that, throughout this war, they had depended on the one country that was steadfastly opposed to US and NATO objectives: Pakistan.

America’s new president, Donald Trump, is a reckless, boorish vulgarian; oblivious to the “one president at a time” rule, he began antagonizing China, undermining NATO, and courting Russia before he was even inaugurated. It is Afghanistan’s bad fortune that its future lies in the hands of this unpredictable and unsteady president. If there is one upside, Trump is so erratic and incalculable that he may be able to break with the past way of waging war in Afghanistan—even if by accident. His vituperative and vindictive temperament, along with his shrill rhetoric calling for ramping up the so-called war on “radical Islamic terrorism,” may persuade Pakistan that dangerous consequences could ensue unless it stops supporting militants in Afghanistan.

IMPERIAL INHERITANCE

It has become common in policy circles to reduce Pakistan’s interests in Afghanistan to the relentless conflict it has pursued with India since the two countries became independent in 1947. Others assert that Pakistan began prosecuting its policy of “strategic depth” in Afghanistan with the onset of the jihad against the Soviet Union, which invaded Afghanistan on Christmas Day in 1979.

C. CHRISTINE FAIR is an associate professor in the Security Studies Program at Georgetown University’s Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service and a Current History contributing editor.

Still others claim that Pakistan's army chief, General Aslam Beg, formulated this policy in the early 1990s. These assertions are all incorrect.

In fact, Pakistan inherited its security concerns about Afghanistan from the British along with the doctrine of strategic depth, which the British themselves formulated in the nineteenth century to manage their imperial rivalry with Russia. The Amu River was the hard border separating the Russians from the British Empire. Afghanistan, in this security architecture, was to be a buffer state. In the late 1890s, the Russians and British conspired to force the Afghan king, Abdur Rehman, to accept the northeastern Wakhan Corridor as a part of Afghanistan to ensure that their empires did not share a border.

The Pashtun-dominated Tribal Areas, including parts of Balochistan, formed another boundary separating the wilds of Afghanistan from British India's North-West Frontier Province, which itself comprised a softer boundary that insulated the core of the Raj from any danger emanating from Afghanistan. The British alternated between a "forward policy," in which they managed this series of buffers aggressively with military forces, and a "close border policy," in which they secured the core of the Raj and worked through intermediaries to secure its interests in these concentric buffer zones. The Pakistanis inherited this security architecture and continue using it to this day.

From the earliest weeks of Pakistan's independence, Afghanistan proved to be a thorn in its side. It started with Afghanistan's vote against Pakistan's admission to the United Nations. Islamabad believes that Kabul did this with Indian support, though there is no evidence for this claim. Afghanistan rejected the nineteenth-century boundary, the Durand Line, and laid claim to large swaths of Pakistani territory populated by Pashtuns. This disquieted Pakistan because many of its Pashtuns did not want to join the new nation in 1947: some wanted to join India while others sought an independent Pashtunistan. In September 1950, Islamabad claimed that Afghan tribesmen and regular Afghan troops had crossed into Pakistan 30 miles northeast of Chaman in Balochistan; however, Afghanistan denied the involvement of regular troops. In 1960 and 1961, Pakistan made similar claims about Afghan regular and irregular incur-

sions into its territory on several occasions. One skirmish escalated into a major battle when, according to Pakistan, Afghan forces—including tanks—massed on the Afghan side of the border near Bajaur.

To manage this array of threats, Pakistan encouraged the Jamaat-e-Islami, an Islamist party that had long worked with the military-bureaucratic complex to effectively control Pakistan, to establish a beachhead in Afghanistan under the flag of the Jamiat-e Islami-yi Afghanistan (JIA). This was a successful gambit. The JIA's presence fructified with leadership ensconced in Kabul University and elsewhere. They would form the backbone of the Islamist insurgency that soon convulsed Afghanistan, lasting until the Taliban consolidated power many years later.

BACKING THE MUJAHEDDEEN

In the summer of 1973, Sardar Mohammed Daoud Khan ousted his cousin, King Zahir Shah, from the Afghan throne. Daoud implemented a Soviet-backed modernization scheme that Afghan Islamists opposed. He started a relentless crackdown on these Islamists, who began fleeing to Iran, where a revolution was brewing, and to Pakistan, which had just emerged from its 1971 civil war in which East Pakistan seceded and became Bangladesh, thanks to Indian assistance.

With Pakistan's army in disgrace after losing half of the country, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto became the country's first civilian martial-law administrator and president. Bhutto distrusted Daoud, who revived the Durand Line dispute, supported Pakistani Pashtuns espousing the cause of a greater Pashtunistan, and materially aided Baloch insurgents in Pakistan's restive Balochistan province. In response, by 1974, Bhutto tasked the ISI with organizing Afghan Islamists who had fled to Pakistan, aiming to undermine Daoud.

In July 1977, General Zia ul Haq ousted Bhutto in a coup. Zia and Daoud came close to forging an agreement on the Durand Line. To demonstrate good faith, Zia temporarily halted ISI operations in Afghanistan. In April 1978, however, Daoud was assassinated in a palace coup during the Saur Revolution and Nur Muhammad Taraki came to power with Moscow's backing. Zia resumed operations in Afghanistan after a meeting

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at which Taraki, a staunch atheist, mocked Zia's piety.

Throughout 1978, the ISI and the Frontier Corps, a Pakistani paramilitary organization, consolidated more than fifty Afghan resistance militias into seven major groups. In a book published in 2007, Abdul Sattar, a former foreign minister, explained that for more than a year after the Soviet invasion, Pakistan "continued to support the Afghan resistance . . . providing it modest assistance out of its own meager resources." According to Sattar, the mujahedeen "would be fighting also for Pakistan's own security and independence." General Khalid Mahmud Arif, who served under Bhutto and Zia, agreed in his own book (published in 1995): "Of her own free will, Pakistan adopted the . . . option to protect her national interest and to uphold a vital principle" by covertly aiding the mujahedeen.

This history is exceedingly important because it directly undermines the typical Pakistani narrative, which asserts that Washington lured an unwitting Pakistan into an American-inspired jihad. The reality is that Pakistan courted war with the Soviet Union over Afghanistan because it was in Pakistan's core interests to do so. Even if US President Jimmy Carter had wanted to support Pakistan prior to the Soviet invasion, he could not have done so because his administration sanctioned Pakistan for making advances in its nuclear program in April 1979. US financial assistance could not begin until those sanctions were waived in 1982, after Ronald Reagan became president and persuaded Congress to do so.

Under Reagan, the United States—along with Saudi Arabia and China—provided enormous amounts of assistance to Pakistan to support the militant groups it had already formed. The mujahedeen, which drew heavily from the JIA, fought the Soviets in Afghanistan with this extensive international support until the Geneva Accords were signed in April 1988, ending the conflict and installing a pro-Moscow president, Mohammad Najibullah. Zia was furious with this outcome. He believed that the mujahedeen had won the war and deserved to govern Afghanistan. When the last Soviet soldier crossed the Amu River in 1989 and the United States was completely disengaged from Afghanistan, Pakistan mobilized its resources to undermine Najibullah. Nonetheless, he survived until the Soviet Union disintegrated and was no longer able to subsidize the Afghan rentier state it had built.

After Najibullah fell in 1992, mujahedeen factions fought over control of Afghanistan. In April 1992, Pakistan's ISI brokered the Peshawar Accord, setting up a government in which power rotated among the various anti-Soviet militant groups. The accord collapsed after four years when the first president, Burhanuddin Rabbani, refused to step down. The warring mujahedeen commanders destroyed Kabul and killed tens of thousands of Afghans. The principal contestants were Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Ahmad Shah Massoud. Pakistan backed Hekmatyar because he was a Pashtun Islamist and it hoped he would bring peace to Afghanistan on Islamabad's terms. India, Iran, and Russia (among others) supported Massoud.

SELECTIVE MEMORY

While these militants fought over Afghanistan's remains, the Taliban began to emerge from Pakistan's Deobandi madrassahs. (Deobandism is one of the five Islamic interpretative traditions in Pakistan.) By 1994, they were a serious force in Afghanistan's Kandahar province. As it became increasingly obvious that Hekmatyar would be unable to bring order to Afghanistan, Pakistan's military and ISI threw their support to the Taliban.

With extensive Pakistani financial, military, diplomatic, and political backing, the Taliban expanded from their stronghold in Kandahar by either defeating or co-opting rival warlords and tribal structures. By 1998, the Taliban controlled all but the Panjshir Valley, which was still held by Massoud's Northern Alliance. India, Russia, and Iran continued to support Massoud because they shared acute unease about the Taliban. Massoud remained the Taliban's most significant challenger until September 9, 2001, when an al-Qaeda agent assassinated him.

By the time of the September 11 terrorist attacks, the US government had long since jettisoned its experts on Afghanistan and Pakistan. In 1990, when the United States no longer needed to cooperate with Pakistan, it reinstated the nuclear-related sanctions that had been waived since 1982. The 1985 Pressler Amendment required the US president to certify that Pakistan did not possess a nuclear bomb. But with the Soviet Union vanquished, President George H.W. Bush felt no need to stretch the truth to certify that Pakistan was bomb-free, and sweeping sanctions took effect.

In truth, US officials knew Pakistan possessed a bomb before 1990, but the exigencies of fighting the Soviets compelled them to subordinate

nuclear proliferation concerns to other strategic interests. However, after its nuclear tests of 1998 and the subsequent military coup of October 1999 that brought General Pervez Musharraf to power, Pakistan found itself under multiple layers of redundant sanctions. Few people in the US government had working ties with Pakistan; fewer still understood Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan and what it was ready to do to protect them.

When the George W. Bush administration decided to invade Afghanistan, Pakistan seemed like the obvious partner. Many American officials had a selective memory of the putatively halcyon days of US-Pakistan cooperation. Most had forgotten—or never knew—that Pakistan had finagled itself into multiple defense pacts with the United States that were aimed at countering the spreading influence of the Soviet Union and communist China, even though Islamabad had no interest in the spirit of the pacts. Pakistan sought to participate in them so that it could build up its military against India. Not only had Pakistan declined to participate in the US-led war effort in Vietnam despite being a signatory to the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, it even allied itself with China.

Islamabad complained that the United States did not support it in the war with India that Pakistan initiated in 1965. Pakistan also felt that the tepid American support it received during its 1971 war with India was inadequate, even though any military support was technically illegal, since Pakistan was still under sanctions from the 1965 war. In fact, Pakistan was entitled to no support in either of those wars under the alliance pacts, which specifically pertained to communist aggression.

By 2001, American officials had also forgotten the repeated lies that their Pakistani counterparts told about the status of their country's nuclear program. With the past conveniently forgotten, Washington was confident that Pakistan would support its effort in Afghanistan. Initially, Pakistan provided surprisingly unstinting support, including access to numerous air bases and the port in Karachi, where war material was delivered and then hauled across Pakistani territory en route to Afghanistan. But American missteps and Pakistani interests ensured that Islamabad would play a double game.

In early December 2001, the United States failed to honor its commitment to Musharraf to

prevent the Northern Alliance from taking Kabul, unaware that Pakistan regarded the Northern Alliance as an Indian proxy. As Musharraf saw it, the United States had handed the keys of Kabul to his country's nemesis. From Pakistan's point of view, no matter how noxious the Taliban were, they did perform one essential service: they restricted the Indians to the less-sensitive northern areas of Afghanistan, far from the borders with Balochistan or the tribal areas.

MISPLACED TRUST

By 2005, Pakistan found itself confronting a bloody insurgency at home as its former militant proxies began organizing against the state to punish it for aiding and abetting the US operation in Afghanistan. By this time, India had resurrected its historical presence in Afghanistan under the American and ISAF security umbrella, and the United States had offered India a nuclear energy agreement that was specifically designed to enable India to purchase fissile material for its civilian energy program while using its limited domestic resources for its weapons program. Pakistan has long exaggerated India's footprint in Afghanistan, but it is true that Indian actions seriously dis-

concerted Islamabad. From Musharraf's vantage point, Pakistan was less secure than it was before 9/11.

By 2005, the Taliban relaunched itself more vigorously than ever with Pakistan's sweeping support. Unfortunately, neither the United States nor ISAF understood that Afghanistan was experiencing a Taliban resurgence. They were under the illusion that major military operations had ended with the Taliban's defeat. It would take some two years for them to recognize what they were confronting. The delay in large measure stemmed from the misplaced trust that Bush reposed in Musharraf. By the time the Americans comprehended the extent to which Pakistan was aiding the Taliban, the options were few.

In 2009, the American commander of ISAF, General Stanley McChrystal, believed that the solution to the Afghan quagmire was more troops. McChrystal politically strong-armed Obama into sending an additional 40,000 troops to Afghanistan by strategically leaking his assessment, cultivating support for his policy in the US Con-

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gress, and co-opting Beltway pundits to promote his strategy. The Obama administration also dispatched a comparable number of civilians to engage in governance and development projects throughout Afghanistan, as well as tens of thousands of security contractors who were required to protect these civilians.

The surge of troops and civilians rendered the Americans and their partners in Afghanistan more dependent on Pakistan than ever, precisely at the time when they needed to put greater pressure on Pakistan. ISAF was losing the war due to Pakistan's unstinting support for the Taliban. Yet McChrystal's team did not include a single Pakistan expert. In my conversations with team members, they told me that they had assumed that Pakistan's self-interest aligned with US interests. As events unfolded, it became increasingly apparent that this foundational assumption was flawed.

By 2016, Obama brought the US troop level to below 10,000 as NATO's mission changed (at least in theory) from active combat under the flag of ISAF to supporting Afghan security forces in a new mission named Resolute Support. Today, the situation in Afghanistan is spiraling downward as the Taliban continues to make new gains while consolidating older ones. Hopes that Pakistan would bring the Taliban to the negotiating table continue to fizzle. The reason for this is simple: Pakistan and its proxy, the Taliban, are winning. Why would they negotiate?

Meanwhile, Pakistan has suffered no penalty for its actions. Far from it. Since late 2001, the Americans have provided some \$33 billion in security and economic assistance as well as CSF reimbursements. This program has been particularly pernicious because of the negative incentives it provides, essentially reimbursing Pakistan for undertaking efforts to eliminate terrorists on its own soil.

Under UN Security Council Resolution 1373 (adopted in 2001), Pakistan is obligated to prevent and undermine the ability of terrorist groups from using its territory to organize, train, raise funds and recruits, or engage in other activities required to execute attacks. It should not be compensated for meeting these sovereign responsibilities. Resolution 1373 falls under Chapter VII of the UN charter, which stipulates that states which fail to prevent terrorist attacks may be punished

with force by the UN or member states. CSF payments undermine the importance of these obligations, and they give Pakistan no incentive to cease its support for the myriad Islamist militants it has cultivated. In short, Pakistan has not only avoided being penalized for its actions; it has received substantial material rewards.

SOLVING THE PUZZLE

Unless the United States rights its policies with respect to Pakistan, it has no hope of bringing even a modicum of stability to Afghanistan, and the important gains that have been made over these past fifteen years can easily be reversed. Recently, General John W. Nicholson, the commander of Resolute Support in Afghanistan, testified before the US Senate Armed Services Committee that there is currently a shortfall of a few thousand troops needed to continue training Afghanistan's security forces, which are taking heavy casualties from the Afghan Taliban and allied militant groups. While troops are likely an important piece of this puzzle, the United States must address Pakistan's pernicious role.

Pakistani interests in Afghanistan are enduring and cannot be bought off. Instead of continuing to offer Islamabad incentives, Washington must understand that Pakistan will not let go of Afghanistan until the costs of pursuing its strategy outweigh the numerous benefits it receives. Is changing the calculation possible? Maybe. But it will take political will that the United States thus far has been unwilling to expend. Here are several options that America's heteroclitic new president could conceivably pursue.

First, Washington must wean itself from its reliance on Pakistani territory to sustain its presence in Afghanistan. Currently, lethal supplies are shipped via air routes that cross Pakistani airspace. The Trump administration should tell Pakistan that any efforts to close its airspace will bring severe consequences. At the same time, Trump should work to exploit some of the diplomatic gains with Iran in recent years, instead of seeking to escalate conflict with the Islamic Republic. This would also create an opportunity to consolidate the US partnership with India, which helped build a port in Chabahar, Iran, and road and rail lines linking this port to Afghanistan. Washington could contract with Indian firms to move needed

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supplies via this route. And given Trump's fixation on forging robust ties with Vladimir Putin, perhaps he can secure greater cooperation with Russia on moving supplies through the so-called Northern Distribution Routes. (One links the Latvian Baltic Sea port in Riga to Afghanistan via Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. A second begins at the Georgian Black Sea port of Poti and connects to Afghanistan via the Caspian Sea, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The third runs from Kazakhstan to Kyrgyzstan, then through Tajikistan and into Afghanistan.) Washington should aim to maintain its presence in Afghanistan through a combination of alternative sea-road-rail routes and ongoing use of air resupply.

Second, Washington should discontinue CSF payments, which amount to nearly \$1 billion a year. These funds can be redirected to Afghanistan. While analysts often focus on the "troop drawdown" in Afghanistan, they ignore the other drawdown—in international assistance. Kabul will need sustained financial support because it cannot afford the recurring costs of running the government. Economic sustainability will surely entail downsizing the enormous rentier state the Americans insisted on building. But downsizing is impossible if an active insurgency is underway, since many of those ousted from government jobs will simply join anti-state militias.

Washington should also stop supplying strategic weapons systems that Pakistan wants for a future war with India. Instead, it should provide military equipment and training that is suited specifically for internal security operations. More generally, the United States should normalize its aid to Pakistan, by which I mean it should stop treating Pakistan as a state that deserves extravagant levels of support.

Third, Washington should redouble its efforts at the United Nations to invoke Security Council Resolution 1267 to designate specific individuals as providers of material support to terrorist groups and individuals, based on intelligence or other evidence. China, acting on behalf of Pakistan, continually undermines these efforts. The US ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, should pressure China to explain why it does so. The US Treasury Department should intensify its own efforts to designate individuals as terrorists and apply more pressure on its problematic partners—such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar—to seize their bank accounts. Other steps to pressure Paki-

stan where it hurts would include denying visas to persons in and out of government who support terrorist activities, as well as their families. Washington might also consider targeted actions to kill or capture high-value personnel in the ranks of Pakistani terrorist organizations.

The United States must be prepared to apply more severe punishments should Pakistan refuse to stop employing Islamist militants as tools of its foreign policy. Washington should state clearly that unless Pakistan ceases active support for the Taliban and the Haqqani Network, its status as a "major non-NATO ally" will be withdrawn, which will diminish Pakistan's access to military hardware, spare parts, military training, and other amenities.

If it continues to support these Afghan-based groups, as well as the numerous groups that target India, the United States should threaten to declare Pakistan to be a state sponsor of terrorism. This would have the immediate effect of banning all forms of security assistance, including spare parts for current US-provided weapons systems. But Washington should continue to support programs for civilian governance programs, disaster relief, educational outreach, and maternal and children's health in Pakistan. Even though Pakistani bureaucrats and politicians are at present no less mendacious than their military counterparts when it comes to Islamabad's use of proxies in Afghanistan and India and other problematic policies, they are the only hope that Pakistan may one day become a normal state in which civilians exercise control over the military rather than the military holding sway over the state.

Washington has shown very little willingness to take any such steps, in part because US officials continue to believe the canard that there is some magical combination of military and financial assistance that will bring Pakistan on board. Even worse, there are some who believe that US programs can transform Pakistan over time. This is all delusional. The United States needs to learn the lessons of history and right this course immediately. While past administrations have been too risk-averse to abandon failed policies, perhaps Trump may do so for no other reason than his apparent fondness for change for change's sake. If Washington is unwilling to undertake these actions, it must concede that defeat in Afghanistan is preordained. This is a reality that Afghans know all too well, and fear. ■