



# BETWEEN WAR & PEACE

THE AFGHANISTAN ESSAYS

Conflict in Afghanistan:  
Behind the Pak-US Disconnect

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## The Afghanistan Essays

This 2018 short-essay series by the Jinnah Institute (JI) reflects a range of Pakistani thought leadership on Afghanistan and its complex history with Islamabad. With the region in the current crosshairs of a seemingly intractable conflict, these essays attempt to spur old and new thinking on the history of Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan and existing challenges. The essays cover a range of subject matter on Afghanistan-Pakistan including efforts for peace and reconciliation, threats to security, the broader geopolitical dynamic, and the role of civil society and economy.

This essay titled 'Conflict in Afghanistan: Behind the Pak-US Disconnect' examines the widening disconnect between Washington and Islamabad on the conflict in Afghanistan. It delves into emerging strategic divergences and explores possible albeit narrow pathways for cooperation on reconciliation.

## About the Author

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# CONFLICT IN AFGHANISTAN: BEHIND THE PAK-US DISCONNECT

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## Introduction

When it comes to engaging on Afghanistan, the Pak-US relationship can best be characterised as a structurally flawed marriage but one where divorce is not a rational option. A happy union is impossible because the two sides have very different visions for regional security; their self-perceived strategic interests suffer from fundamental divergences. At the same time, they depend heavily on each other for their respective counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan and Pakistan and recognise that a total rupture in ties risks reversing the gains they have made thus far. Unsurprisingly then, even as they have periodically threatened to call it quits, they have shied away from doing so.

This jaundiced-but-surviving relationship can no longer be taken for granted. While both sides recognise the costs of a rupture and neither wishes for such an outcome, the current environment presents the heightened risk of either side acting in ways that could force a breakdown in ties. The consequences for both partners, and the region, would be dire.

This essay expounds on the strategic divergences and tactical necessities in the relationship, and highlights the risks in the present context. It concludes by offering a way forward for the two sides to continue working together to find an amicable solution to the conflict in Afghanistan.

## Strategic Divergences

At the core of the Pak-US disconnect lies the two countries' disparate approach to regional security. Pakistan's security establishment remains focused on ensuring a security architecture that prevents India from gaining a decisive advantage over it. In that stead, it has perpetually harbored the fear of India being able to create a 'two front' situation by combining its presence on Pakistan's eastern border with influence in Afghanistan. When President Pervez Musharraf agreed to join the US coalition against terrorism after 9/11, one of his explicit demands was to ensure that an India-influenced government did not take hold in Kabul. As Pakistan sees it – and here, perceptions matter far more than reality – sixteen years of US presence in Afghanistan has led to the emergence of a pro-India Afghanistan – specifically, an Afghan security and intelligence establishment perceived as being sympathetic to India – that permits New Delhi to undertake subversive activities inside Pakistan.

On the other hand, the US sees India as a positive force in Afghanistan and accuses Pakistan of actively undermining stability in the country. It also sees Pakistani concerns about Indian intentions in Afghanistan as paranoia. India has been one of the largest donors in Afghanistan and has invested in various development sectors, generating significant goodwill among Afghans.<sup>1</sup> The international community would thus like to see increased Indian involvement in Afghanistan's uplift. The US is conscious of Pakistan's concerns and does not wish to unnecessarily irk Islamabad's sensitivities, but it finds fault with Pakistan's demands that Indian influence be curtailed. The Afghan government also views Pakistan's ask as undue interference in its sovereign preferences.

Nonetheless, Pakistan's alleged support to the Afghan Taliban, including the Haqqani Network, is a direct function of its concern about expanding Indian influence. Even though the relationship between the Taliban and the ISI, Pakistan's intelligence outfit, is far from pleasant, Pakistan's abject failure to diversify its support among Afghan political actors over the years has led it to rely on the Taliban as a hedge to offset India's clout. For the US though, this implies support to its principal enemy that is responsible for significant American and Afghan losses, and is therefore unacceptable.

Pakistan does not wish to see a US defeat in Afghanistan. Nor does it wish to see the Taliban return to power in Kabul. With its own militant problems and a steep rise in intolerance and right-wing conservatism among Pakistanis, it recognises the dangers of a Taliban victory in Afghanistan. A return to the Taliban government of the 1990s would trigger a spillover of radical ideology and give a fillip to the Pakistani Taliban. Yet, the Pakistani security establishment does not trust the US to entertain its concerns vis-à-vis India should it win militarily, or manage to force the Taliban to negotiate from a position of extreme weakness. From the Pakistani security establishment's point of view, US victory without sensitivity to Pakistani concerns presents the prospect of a perpetuation of Indian influence in Kabul. At the same time, the possibility of a U.S. failure creates a perverse incentive to avoid actions that may turn the Taliban against Pakistan.

The larger geostrategic environment in South Asia further complicates the Pak-US relationship. Washington and New Delhi are engaged in a strategic partnership, the objectives of which go well beyond the South Asian region. India's larger importance for the US cautions Washington against policy approaches that may undermine Indian interests in individual conflict theaters such as Afghanistan. In this vein, entertaining Pakistan's concerns in Afghanistan is seen as tantamount to snubbing India and rewarding Pakistan's negative behavior. Meanwhile, for many in the US, the ever-expanding China-Pakistan relationship signals a Pakistani intent to anchor itself in China's camp to ward off US and Indian pressure. This adds to the challenges of US-Pakistan cooperation in Afghanistan.

## Tactical Necessities

Since 9/11, actions by both sides have raised the other's costs tremendously. US engagement in Afghanistan brought the war to Pakistan, and its subsequent mishandling of it destabilised the country. Pakistan's hedging strategy has directly undermined US efforts in Afghanistan. Yet, overlaying their strategic divergences is the hard reality that neither the US nor Pakistan can be isolated from the process of arriving at an amicable solution to Afghanistan. Both have and continue to depend on each other for support. For the US, the provision of air and ground lines of communication, and the use of Pakistani airbases, has been invaluable. Without these, the US military campaign next door would have been severely compromised. Bringing supplies overland on

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<sup>1</sup> Pinker, Steven; Violence Vanquished, The Wall Street Journal, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424053111904106704576583203589408180>

trucks and railroads across Europe and Central Asia gives Russia strategic influence and costs two or three times as much as moving them through Pakistan.<sup>2</sup> Using air transport costs possibly ten times as much.<sup>3</sup> Hardly any comparable alternatives to the use of Pakistani airspace are available. Pak-US intelligence cooperation on groups other than the Afghan Taliban has also been vital. Together, the two sides eliminated/apprehended hundreds of Al-Qaeda operatives in the early years after 9/11. This cooperation extended to other transnational outfits in Afghanistan as well. Even on Afghan insurgent groups, while intelligence links are marred by mistrust, both sides privately acknowledge that they have regularly shared intelligence and cooperated on drone strikes in the past. A quieter but equally crucial aspect of intelligence cooperation has entailed identifying and neutralising direct threats to western homelands, especially when Pakistani citizens or training on Pakistani soil was involved.

Pakistan has also benefited tremendously from US largess in the post-9/11 period. Notwithstanding Pakistan's public disregard for US assistance, the \$33 billion-plus in aid and reimbursements has helped the country, especially the military, enormously. US security sector support accounted for over 20 percent of Pakistan's defense expenditure at its peak.<sup>4</sup> This assistance proved crucial in Pakistan's ability to execute domestic counterterrorism operations against the Pakistani Taliban. Certain US direct actions like drone strikes against Pakistani Taliban leaders were also important signs of US support that helped weaken the outfit. The US also offered critical budget support on numerous occasions to help Pakistan avoid economic crises. Even more importantly, US backing allowed Pakistan a sympathetic hearing from multilateral donors throughout the post-9/11 period. Arguably however, the most important dividend of continued US engagement was that it kept policymakers in Washington hopeful of greater Pakistani cooperation in Afghanistan, thereby preventing them from assuming an entirely coercive posture against Islamabad. Even when the US pressured Pakistan, it remained conservative in testing Pakistan's limits, for fear that harsher actions may destabilise this nuclear-armed country or force it to disrupt the relationship.

## A Future Unlike the Past?

US President Donald Trump announced a new South Asia policy in August 2017.<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, the US National Security Strategy (NSS) was unveiled.<sup>6</sup> These strategies make a more-of-the-same relationship less likely. The new South Asia strategy singles out Pakistan as the problem and explicitly calls for a greater Indian role in Afghanistan. Also, while it envisions a political settlement in Afghanistan as an end goal, its orientation is military-heavy, aimed at weakening the Taliban on the battlefield before talks can be considered. It removes the Obama administration's timelines for withdrawal of US troops, and marginally increases US troop presence in Afghanistan. The NSS demotes terrorism as the principal threat to the US in favor of great power competition; it explicitly declares China and Russia competitors.

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<sup>2</sup> Gjelten, Tom; U.S. Now Relies on Alternate Afghan Supply Routes, National Public Radio, <https://www.npr.org/2011/09/16/140510790/u-s-now-relies-on-alternate-afghan-supply-routes>

<sup>3</sup> Whitlock, Craig; U.S. turns to other routes to supply Afghan war as relations with Pakistan fray, The Washington Post, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-turns-to-other-routes-to-supply-afghan-war-as-relations-with-pakistan-fray/2011/06/30/AGffYvH\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.c4c1cb121e6e](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-turns-to-other-routes-to-supply-afghan-war-as-relations-with-pakistan-fray/2011/06/30/AGffYvH_story.html?utm_term=.c4c1cb121e6e)

<sup>4</sup> Direct Overt U.S. Aid Appropriations for and Military Reimbursements to Pakistan, FY2002-FY2018, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/pakaid.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia, The White House National Security & Defense Press Briefing, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-strategy-afghanistan-south-asia/>

<sup>6</sup> The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, Dec 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

This backdrop implies far greater challenges for Pakistan and the US going forward, even if neither side wants a break in ties. Several factors force one to make this observation.

Foremost, the strategic disconnect is likely to accentuate further. On the one hand, Pakistan's internalisation of the Trump strategy, deeply colored by the mistrust in the Pak-US relationship, creates added incentives for it to avoid changing its strategic paradigm. The explicit US call for a larger Indian role in Afghanistan may not have had a nefarious intent, but its reading in Pakistan is different. For Pakistan's security establishment, the Trump administration's South Asia strategy confirms its worst fears about US intentions in the region. Moreover, Pakistani interlocutors seem to have discounted US interest in a peace process involving the Taliban; the view is further strengthened by official US statements reflecting a lack of urgency on Washington's part to jumpstart dialogue with the insurgency.<sup>7</sup> They see the current US effort as an attempt to defeat the Taliban squarely on the battlefield. They believe that such an outcome is unrealistic, irrespective of Pakistan's actions in support of the US. As put to this author: "Why, then, should Pakistan go after the Taliban and Haqqani Network? That would turn them against the Pakistani state. And Pakistan would have sided with the loser." Also, increasingly prevalent among Pakistani interlocutors is the belief that the US is now viewing Afghanistan as a military base to watch over China, Russia, Iran, and Pakistan's nuclear weapons. This mindset can only widen the strategic disconnect and further frustrate the US.

On the other hand, the Trump administration is fixated on forcing Pakistan to deliver on its demands to neutralise the Afghan Taliban on its soil. There is absolute consensus in Washington on raising Pakistan's costs to achieve this. The focus flows from a firm belief, contested by Pakistan, that the Afghan insurgency cannot be weakened without eliminating Taliban presence in Pakistan. In so far as the quest for stability in Afghanistan is driving U.S. policy, the costs in the relationship with Pakistan become a secondary concern. Moreover, the Trump administration's risk appetite is appreciably greater than the Obama administration's; it is, therefore, far more likely to follow through on its coercive threats against Pakistan. This does not imply that it is oblivious to the costs of a ruptured relationship. Nor does it wish to destabilise Pakistan. However, it believes that previous administrations never truly tested the proposition that seriously pressuring Pakistan would alter its Afghanistan policy to US liking. It is convinced that there is considerable space between the Obama policy, which it characterises as carrot-heavy, and the point beyond which US actions may cause further instability and/or force Pakistan to react in defiance. The Trump administration has already acted upon its intent: it has suspended security assistance, Pakistan may be put on the Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering blacklist, drone strikes have resumed, and other measures to incrementally ratchet up pressure ranging from a squeeze on multilateral donor support to Pakistan, sanctions against individual Pakistani officials, diplomatic isolation, and the unilateral use of force have been discussed.<sup>8</sup>

Pressure on Pakistan is likely to persist, if not increase, in the short-term, since US officials who advocated for renewed investment in Afghanistan and walked President Trump away from his election promise of withdrawing from Afghanistan need quick results to prove the efficacy of their approach. Their challenge is compounded by the fact that the Taliban have proven their ability to match the US military surge with firepower of their own. The upcoming fighting season is likely to be an excessively bloody one. In so far as Washington and Kabul perceive virtually all mega-attacks in Afghanistan attributed to the Taliban to have some link to their presence in Pakistan, pressure on Islamabad is likely to rise as violence escalates.

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<sup>7</sup> Trump Condemns Taliban Role in Afghan Attacks, Says No Talks, The Associated Press, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-01-29/trump-condemns-taliban-role-in-afghan-attacks-no-more-talks>

<sup>8</sup> Shahzad, Asif; Exclusive - Pakistan plans takeover of charities run by Islamist figure U.S. has targeted, Reuters, <https://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFKBN1EQ0T8>

The danger of miscalculating how far the US could go in coercing Pakistan without eliciting a defiant reaction flows from the ambiguity in Pakistan's red lines. Pakistan is also in an election year; its sensitivity to public rebuke or coercive actions may therefore be lower than usual. A senior Pakistani policymaker explained the risk of escalation: "How long before the other side sees my restraint as weakness and pounces hard. I must retaliate sooner rather than later". Should it play out, this tit-for-tat dynamic could send the relationship into a tailspin.

Pakistan's propensity to hold its own in the face of US coercion may be higher due to the growing belief among some Pakistani officials that the country is now solidly anchored in China's camp. Beijing and Islamabad have always enjoyed strong relations but the partnership has traditionally been security-centric. With China's investment in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, Pakistani decision makers are psychologically buoyed and feel that China will be compelled to back Pakistan if the western world isolates it further. The Chinese appetite to do so is far more measured in reality; in fact, China has consistently asked Pakistan to mend its relations with the US. Still, as long as Pakistani leaders believe they have China on their side, they are more likely to resist US pressure.

Ironically, even Pakistan's efforts to oblige the US under pressure may lead to a negative outcome for the relationship. Pakistani officials privately acknowledge that they are extremely wary of a breakdown in ties with the US. They have, therefore, offered cooperation and claim to have delivered on certain US demands in recent months. While they likely see this as a means of warding off further US pressure, Washington may read this flexibility as an index of the success of the coercive toolkit. Its instinct may be to further harden the squeeze on Pakistan. Greater pressure however may end up flirting with Pakistan's pain threshold. Once again, the tit-for-tat dynamic of escalating tensions may ensue.

Finally, the acute mutual mistrust in the relationship reduces the margin for error on both sides. Unlike before, the two sides do not have trusted interlocutors. In the past, personal rapport between key actors like General Musharraf and President Bush and General Kayani and Admiral Mullen proved crucial in keeping the relationship going in moments of high tension. Today, we are missing the champions of the Pak-US relationship in Washington. The practical consequences of this reality have already become evident: the US decision to suspend security assistance to Pakistan is a case in point. Using assistance as negative leverage has been debated ad nauseam in Washington over the years but US government deliberations on this were traditionally split between hardliners and soft-liners who advocated a carrots-first approach. The latter category now draws a blank among key decision makers; this contributed to the aid-suspension decision. Worryingly, Pakistan may be underestimating just how acutely negative its perception is in Washington and how directly this affects the White House's choices. On the Pakistani side too, those who portray China as a substitute to the US have been advocating a minus-US formula for Pakistan's regional security. As US pressure rises, these voices may gain greater traction.

## The Way Forward

For too long, Pakistan and the US have tried to optimise their partnership without addressing the underlying strategic disconnect. This approach is responsible for constant angst and suboptimal outcomes. It must change. The two sides need to work out two verifiable mechanisms that can address each other's main concerns: Pakistan needs to offer evidence of concrete action against the Taliban on its soil; the US should work with the Afghan government to do the same for Pakistani Taliban present in Afghanistan; and the US needs to assuage Pakistani anxieties specifically about Indian subversive activities from Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the Afghan governments should be encouraged to lay out a clear plan for reconciliation with the Taliban and tangible actions in this

direction must be taken to convince Pakistan, and other regional powers, of Washington's commitment to a political settlement that can end the Afghan conflict. Pakistan must be realistic in conveying what role it may be able to play in assisting reconciliation efforts, and make sincere attempts to do so.

The US and Pakistan also need to find ways to foster genuine regional cooperation in Afghanistan. China's role could be especially important given its interest in Afghan stability, its commercial interests in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and its close links with Pakistan. Shifting the conversation to potential economic cooperation between Washington, Beijing, Islamabad, and Kabul, could open up fresh avenues for a more constructive dialogue, and generate real interest in helping limit violence in Afghanistan. CPEC could be an obvious conduit for this conversation. China has already offered to extend the corridor to Afghanistan and US companies are already providing CPEC-related infrastructure.<sup>9</sup> Generating Afghan and US (and even Indian) stakes in it could help create genuine interdependence, give pause to the propensity on all sides to ascribe the worst intentions to the other (including Pakistan's concern that the ulterior US motive in Afghanistan is to keep China, Russia, and Pakistan in check), and dampen the ability of the insurgency in Afghanistan to take advantage of the fissures that presently exist between these states.

Implementing this vision requires trusted interlocutors who can carry out a sustained dialogue to chart a precise way forward. It is crucial for the US and Pakistan to revive dependable communication channels. Key officials need to be designated as point persons and empowered to pursue the suggested course. Without this, the relationship is likely to remain on the brink.

A breakdown in the US-Pakistan relationship will have dire consequences for Afghanistan. Continued engagement, no matter how difficult or caustic, must therefore be prioritized. Neither side has a better alternative. Naysayers on both sides ought not to lose sight of this fundamental reality.

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<sup>9</sup> Blanchard, Ben; China, Pakistan to look at including Afghanistan in \$57 billion economic corridor, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-pakistan-afghanistan/china-pakistan-to-look-at-including-afghanistan-in-57-billion-economic-corridor-idUSKBN1EKOES>