



Disentangling Pakistan's Entanglement in Afghanistan

Ameem Lutfi

Series Introduction

The Afghanistan Crisis: Anxieties and Trigger Points

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has prompted a geopolitical free-for-all situation in the country, with regional, if not, extra-regional implications. It ceded the country swiftly to Taliban control, with China, Russia, and Iran all poised to forge close relationships with the new Afghan government.

International players like Qatar, Turkey and Pakistan, which have had functional relations with the Taliban, have sought constructive engagement with the new government, to the extent of opening a pathway for them into the international system. Others, particularly the Central Asian states, the UAE and

Saudi Arabia, are disquieted by security concerns, terrorism-related or otherwise. In Europe, the immediate impact of events in Afghanistan is having to manage a massive refugee crisis.

This series of *Insights* examines the implications of the US disengagement from Afghanistan, ranging from strategic openings in interstate relations to ground-level anxieties.

Cover photo: A Pakistani paramilitary soldier (L) and an Afghan army soldier (R) stand guard in the foreground as goods trucks wait at the Torkham border crossing in Pakistan's Khyber district of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, 3 August 2021. Aamir Qureshi / AFP.

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Ameem Lutfi*

Pakistan's role in (de)stabilising Afghanistan has been at the forefront of regional political discussions since the US departure from Afghanistan. Moving beyond sensational representations that waver between painting Pakistan as a key ally of Afghanistan and the chief agent of discord in the country, this article reassesses contemporary ties between the two neighbouring countries in the context of their deep historical relationship. Repeated migrations and historically patterned political ties inextricably tie the fates of Pakistan and Afghanistan. While Pakistan has often used its historical links in Afghanistan for strengthening its military establishment, questions on interpreting and mobilising these past histories have been reopened with the dramatic changes since the return of the Taliban regime.

Just a few weeks after the fall of the Ashraf Ghani government, a smiling General Faiz, the chief of Pakistan's notorious Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI), was photographed inside the posh Serena Hotel in Kabul.¹ Soon afterwards, social media websites were buzzing with the hashtag “#SanctionPakistan”. Led by supporters of the Ghani

¹ News Desk, “ISI chief becomes first high ranking official to visit Kabul on invitation of the Taliban”, *Friday Times*, 4 September 2021, <https://www.thefridaytimes.com/isi-chief-becomes-first-high-ranking-official-to-visit-kabul-on-invitation-of-the-taliban/>

regime,² including diasporic Afghans, and backed by conservative political leaders in the West,³ the campaign demanded that Islamabad be punished for its underhanded support of Islamist extremists in Afghanistan. As late as July 2021, Pakistan, according to Ghani, had sent 10,000 jihadists across the border.⁴

#Sanction Pakistan?

The list of allegations the #sanctionpakistan campaign levied against Pakistan was long. From providing a safe haven to wanted terrorists and channelling monetary support to them through grey *hawala* networks to supplying arms and even undercover soldiers as force multipliers, Pakistan was presented as the primary patron of Islamists in Afghanistan. As one *New York Times* piece claimed after the Taliban takeover, Pakistan was the real winner of the two-decades long NATO-led war in Afghanistan.⁵

² One of the most vocal supporters was Ghani's vice-president, Amarullah Saleh, who continues to use the hashtag almost on a daily basis.

³ The charge was led by Canada's first ambassador to Afghanistan and a former member of the Conservative party, Chris Alexander, who pointed to Pakistan as the primary reason the United States failed in its reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. See Chris Alexander, "The strategy for Afghanistan went off course long before the US exit", *The Globe and Mail*, 16 August 2021, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-the-strategy-for-afghanistan-went-off-course-long-before-the-us-exit/>

⁴ Suhasini Haider, "Pakistan has not severed its relationship with terror group, says Ashraf Ghani", *The Hindu*, 16 July 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/10000-jihadi-fighters-have-crossed-into-afghanistan-from-pakistan-says-ashraf-ghani/article35363325.ecce>

⁵ Jane Perlez, "The real winner of the Afghan War: It's not who you think", *The New York Times*, 26 August 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/26/world/asia/afghanistan-pakistan-taliban.html>

Sections within the US Congress have long argued that Pakistan has been playing a dangerous double game with great impunity: providing political, military and financial support to Islamists with one hand even as it draws with the other hand substantial military and economic aid from the West, in the name of combating terrorism.⁶ Perhaps the sentiment was expressed most clearly by then President Donald Trump: “The United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies and deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools.”⁷

Allies and Victims

The Pakistani government, as one would expect, has rejected these allegations time and again. The official position — not entirely incorrect — has been that Pakistan has contributed and lost more than any other country in the war against terror. Pakistan was hurled into the “Global War on Terror” under pressure to show categorically whether it was “with or against the free world”. Confronted with the imminent threat of severe sanctions or even military attacks, the Pakistani government agreed to NATO forces using Pakistani soil as the forward base for the invasion of Afghanistan. In doing so, it continued a half-century-long legacy of the United States using Pakistani military bases to conduct military attacks and intelligence operations in the region.⁸

⁶ Muhammad Tahir, “Pakistan provokes deep divisions in Washington”, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 25 May 2011,

<https://www.rferl.org/a/deep-divisions-in-washington-over-pakistan/24196887.html>

⁷ David Sheperdson, “Trump says US has gotten ‘nothing’ from Pakistan aid”, Reuters, 1 January 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-trump-pakistan-idUSKBN1EQ112>

⁸ The first recorded account of Pakistani loaning a military base dates back to 1959, when US President Eisenhower signed an agreement to use Badaber airbase in Peshawar to

During the war in Afghanistan, about 50% of all NATO supplies moved through Pakistan.⁹ Alongside customs-free access to Pakistani maritime ports, Pakistan also offered NATO no-questions-asked access to at least five air and other military bases. Investigative journalists claim these bases were crucial for running logistics operations, operating drones and other airborne activities.

“Pakistan was hurled into the ‘Global War on Terror’ under pressure to show categorically whether it was ‘with or against the free world.’”

All of this access came with little public scrutiny. Knowing that support for the NATO invasion would be met with strong opposition, the Pakistani government kept its offerings under wraps, often through violent means: journalists were arrested and kidnapped for trying to disclose the US military presence.¹⁰

The costs of supporting the War on Terror that Pakistan bore then have been high. Each time the United States has touted the US\$33 billion given in aid, Islamabad has pushed back by claiming that the direct and indirect expenses have been a multiple of this amount.¹¹ In

watch over China and Russia. See Dennis Kux, *The United States and Pakistan, 1947-2000: Disenchanted Allies* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2001), p. 91–92.

⁹ Gregg Carlstrom, “Nato’s Dangerous Supply Lines”, Al Jazeera, 10 June 2010, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2010/6/10/natos-dangerous-supply-lines>

¹⁰ Afzal Nadeem, “Pakistan charges two detained journalists”, AP News, 22 June 2006, <https://apnews.com/article/59ac213cc9b23fb6d948bf4ee706ffd>

¹¹ Dawn Media Group, “Here’s how much aid the US has given to Pakistan”, *Herald*, 21 February 2018, <https://herald.dawn.com/news/1154035>

2018, Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a report that estimated losses of US\$127 billion in the form of compensation to those affected by terrorism, damage to physical infrastructure, the decline in exports and foreign investments, lower returns in the industrial sector, lower tax returns, etc.¹²

“But Pakistan was more than a passive landing strip during the Afghan invasion.”

Far surpassing monetary losses though was the loss of lives. Estimates of the number of Pakistanis killed during the War on Terror range from 64,000 to 83,000.¹³ Of these, at least 35% were civilian casualties written off as collateral damage. This number includes 97 aid workers and 86 journalists, both numbers higher than similar losses in Afghanistan itself.¹⁴

¹² Ministry of Finance, Pakistan (MOF), “Annexure-IV: Impact of War in Afghanistan and Ensuing Terrorism on Pakistan's Economy.” Pakistan Economic Survey 2017–18, MOF, 2018.

¹³ The Pakistani military's public relations office (DG ISPR) sets the estimate at 83,000 while the South Asian Terrorism Portal calculated 63,898 deaths. See Safdar Hussain, “Pakistan's Achievements in War on Terror: But at What Cost (A Special Review of the Current Decade)”, PAK Institute for Peace Studies, n.d., <https://www.pakpips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Pakistan%E2%80%99s-achievements-in-war-on-terror-but-at-what-cost-a-special-review-of-the-current-decade.pdf>

¹⁴ Arif Anjum, “Who were 66,000 Pakistanis killed in 20-year war”, Samaa TV, 11 September 2021, <https://www.samaa.tv/news/2021/09/who-were-66000-pakistan-killed-in-20-year-war/>

But Pakistan was more than a passive landing strip during the Afghan invasion. In the early 2000s, the Pakistani military establishment orchestrated several small-scale operations in its Pashtun belt in the northwestern tribal region bordering Afghanistan. The purported goal was to stop combatants fleeing Afghanistan from regrouping across borders. Over time these operations became more expansive and brutal. Partly owing to domestic concerns urging the government to curb the increasingly frequent terrorist attacks and partly under US pressure to “do more”, the military ran successive campaigns that decimated the entire tribal region. According to one estimate, the military-led counterinsurgency operations displaced 5.3 million people from the region, many of whom had to move several times.¹⁵ With the implicit permission of the United States, the Pakistani government also managed a network of 43 “black” internment sites in the tribal belt, where it tortured and detained without legal recourse those it deemed to be terrorists.¹⁶ The Pakistani military was thus a frontline actor in the Global War on Terror.

The Garrison State

To demand accountability or reparation, residents of the tribal region have led one of the most prominent populist movements in Pakistan

¹⁵ South Asia Terrorism Portal, “FATA Assessment, 2017”, n.d., <https://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/Waziristan/index.html>

¹⁶ Taha Siddiqui and Declan Walsh, “In Pakistan detainees are vanishing in covert jails”, *The New York Times*, 26 July 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/26/world/asia/detainees-vanish-in-secretive-facilities-as-pakistan-fights-taliban.html>

called the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM).¹⁷ Even though most of the internally displaced people have now returned, and brutal military operations have subsided, life in the tribal belt is far from normal. As PTM supporters have frequently reminded us, the Pakistani military is still a constant presence in the region in the form of checkpoints, military courts and its intelligence machinery. The emergency military rule imposed during military operations has now become the norm.

“The Pakistani military is still a constant presence in the northwestern tribal region bordering Afghanistan in the form of checkpoints, military courts and its intelligence machinery.”

Proponents of #sanctionpakistan and foreign critics of the Pakistani military have frequently highlighted the scandalous underhanded payments made to Islamists by personnel from the ISI.¹⁸ Reports of Pakistani colonels or brigadiers covertly meeting with known Islamists make good breaking news. Still, they do not fully articulate the degree to which the military is entrenched in the state's governance logic and economy.

¹⁷ Literally, the name means Pashtun Protection Movement. The Pashtun are the majority ethnic group in the northwestern tribal region.

¹⁸ One figure who has received excessive attention in the global press is Hamid Gul, the former chief of ISI and a known Taliban sympathiser. See Omar Waraich, “Hamid Gul's Pakistan Legacy: Taliban Blowback”, Al Jazeera, 16 August 2015, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/8/16/hamid-gul-pakistan-isi-taliban-blowback.html>

At the time of the partition of India, the military infrastructure in the areas that became part of Pakistan were by some distance the most well-developed bureaucratic machinery. Specifically, the province of Punjab during the late 19th and early 20th centuries became the primary source of military labour for not just British India but also the British expansion across the Indian Ocean. To recruit in large numbers, the colonial government tied enlistment to political advancement and land grants. Feudal chiefs who provided the most recruits quickly rose through the legislative or bureaucratic ranks, and over time most landowners developed close ties with the military. In 1947 Pakistan inherited this military machinery with tentacles in the legislative bodies, civil bureaucracy and agriculture-centred economy.

“As the joke goes, it is easier to envisage a Pakistani military without Pakistan than vice versa.”

On the one hand, this state of affairs led to Pakistan's survival becoming hinged on the Pakistani military's fortunes. As the joke goes, it is easier to envisage a Pakistani military without Pakistan than vice versa. For much of its life, the Pakistani state has peddled an inflated sense of threat from foreign enemies and elements within the country (usually belonging to minority dissident groups) as justification for the exponential increase in the military budget. This manufactured paranoia has also given a blank cheque to the military establishment to roll back civil liberties and deny fundamental human rights — as demonstrated in the military operations in the Pashtun tribal belt.

This security logic creeps into Pakistan's foreign policy as well. In relation to Afghanistan, it has led to the paramouncy of the “strategic

depth” policy. Initially designed by colonial military strategists during the first Anglo-Afghan war, the policy framed the presence of a friendly regime in Afghanistan as essential to creating a buffer between British India and Russia. The Pakistani government later modified the strategy by seeing in Afghanistan a physical space for the military to retreat to in case of an Indian forward march and even as a source of backup military labour.¹⁹ Over time this notion of strategic depth being an existential resource has burrowed so deep into the military psyche that the men in uniform remain committed to preserving it even if it produces dangerous side-effects such as terrorism within Pakistan’s own national borders.

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On the other hand, the overdeveloped military infrastructure has led to the army having an ever-increasing role in the country’s economy. At the macro level, we can see the military’s fingerprint in the rentier logic of the state. The regular functioning of the government has long depended on a steady influx of foreign aid. Much of this aid — as was the case during the War on Terror decades — comes in exchange for protection services or bolstering the country’s defensive capabilities. With foreign powers, notably the United States, fearing that a nuclear-

¹⁹ As early as 1947 the Pakistani military had begun recruiting militants from the Afghan border region for guerrilla war in the contested region of Kashmir.

powered Pakistan could spiral into chaos if they do not keep the Pakistani military establishment on a leash through financial support, the Pakistani state has untethered itself from the tax-paying citizenry. It instead orients itself to selling “protection” to global powers hoping to maintain order in the region.

“The overdeveloped military infrastructure has led to the army having an ever-increasing role in the country’s economy.”

At the micro level, the Pakistani military has its fingers in most economic sectors. Fauji Foundation, while officially only a welfare body for military veterans, is now the country’s largest business conglomerate, involved in banking, leasing, fertilisers, cement, farming, dairy, food and beverage, etc.²⁰ Many of the military’s commercial subsidiaries earned sizeable contracts from the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. Fauji Cement and Askari Cement, for example, were deeply involved in infrastructural reconstruction.²¹ Similarly, one of their transport firms, National Logistics Cell, gained several lucrative NATO contracts for transporting goods from Karachi to Kabul.²²

²⁰ For a detailed exposition of the Pakistani military’s commercial arms, see: Siddiq, Ayesha, *Military Inc: Inside Pakistan’s Military Economy* (Penguin Random House India, 2017).

²¹ Global Cement, “Pakistani export price to afghanistan rises by 25%”, 27 January 2012, <https://www.globalcement.com/news/item/737-cement-export-price-to-afghanistan-rises-by-25>

²² Khawar Gumman, “Army has its eyes on Nato supply deal”, *Dawn*, 7 March 2012, <https://www.dawn.com/news/700795/army-has-its-eye-on-nato-supplies-deal>

Even Pakistan's intelligence agencies operate within this economic logic. Official data on the number of individuals on ISI's payroll is hard to come by, but anecdotal evidence suggests that the agency's ranks are seriously bloated. Islamist sympathisers within the ISI get most of the attention, but the agency is replete with multiple competing factions with their own horses in the race. Operationally, you can have two agents overseeing the affairs of a single madrassa, with one watching out for terrorists to arrest and the other talent-spotting the same elements for missions that could further ISI's own agenda. Regardless of ideological difference, both would know their career advancement depends on inflating the threat or advantage their subjects present. By managing to push their dossiers up the bureaucratic ladder they can lift the boats of all those within their network and even tilt the ideological leaning of the agency. This disaggregated interpretation helps understand how the agency can at the same time be fighting against groups like Tehreek-e-Taliban-Pakistan (TTP) while supporting the Afghan Taliban.

Old Intimacies

Given the heavy costs of war borne by Pakistan and suspicions that the Pakistani military plays a double game for self-gain, it seems that both the moral and strategic stand would be to demand that Pakistan completely retract itself from Afghanistan. On this point, urban Afghan populations, borderland Pashtuns, and US officials would perhaps be in complete agreement.

However, it would be hard for the Pakistani government to extricate itself from Afghanistan. Pakistan and Afghanistan share a 2,670-km border. The tribal groups who live in the area have kinship and friendship ties that straddle the border. Most of these groups have lived

in the area since well before the drawing of the Durand line in 1893 that divided British India from Afghanistan. Governance of these groups requires at least some degree of cross-border co-ordination, and enforcing a rigid boundary demands a great degree of violence. We already see signs of disruption to life in the area, with attempts by Pakistan to fence the border, creating hundreds of fortified outposts and introducing modern surveillance technologies.²³ Such efforts have led to ruptures in families that have long lived together across the two countries and to the petty trade that is essential to survival in the region.²⁴

“The histories of Pakistan and Afghanistan are entwined through empires, trade, religion and migrations.”

The two countries share more than a border. The histories of both are entwined through empires, trade, religion and migrations. The Greeks, Mongols and various Afghan conquerors all traversed through Afghanistan to reach India. Repetitive movements over time developed both the social and physical infrastructure for this long pathway, making it easier for successive generations of soldiers, holy men and other migrants to make the same journey and settle along these routes. The

²³ Ben Farmer and Ihsanullah Tipu Mehsud, “Pakistan builds border fence, limiting militants and families alike”, *The New York Times*, 15 March 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/15/world/asia/pakistan-afghanistan-border-fence.html>

²⁴ Pamir Sahill, “Divided by Pakistan’s border fence, Pashtuns lose business, rights and tribal ties”, *Gandhara* (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty), 17 May 2021, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/pakistan-afghan-border-pashtun-lose-business-rights-tribal-ties/31258865.html>

interactions between these mobile populations and older settlements produced various hybrid traditions such as the Indo-Greek and later the Islamic tradition, seamlessly tying together Indian, Persian and Central Asian cultural elements. The history of India cannot be told without bringing in Afghanistan and vice versa.

Journalistic writings on Afghanistan have a tendency to lean on lazy tropes like the “graveyard of empires”, which suspend the country in time and foreclose possibilities of change. However, the correction should not be a complete rejection of the *longue durée* as a site for concept building. Instead, it should encourage us to search the past for other framings that elucidate the existing social order's recurring and otherwise ignored aspects.

“Journalistic writings on Afghanistan have a tendency to lean on lazy tropes like the ‘graveyard of empires’, which suspend the country in time and foreclose possibilities of change.”

For example, one useful alternative historical frame is to see Afghanistan as the long-established source for military labour in India.²⁵ Even before the rise of Islamic empires in the region, Afghans were known to have moved from rugged mountainous terrains to the plains in northern India to serve under Hindu rulers. The number of mobile soldiers moving from Afghanistan to resettle in India increased with waves of conquerors entering from Central Asia and Afghanistan.

²⁵ Here I refer to historical India, i.e., the pre-partition region consisting of territories currently divided across India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Afghan and Turkic conquerors might have been in competition with each other for the crown of India, but both equally relied on Afghan foot soldiers and commanders to swell their ranks.²⁶ Before consolidating their recruiting bureaucracy in Punjab in the early 20th century, even the British attracted notable Afghan chiefs with land grants in exchange for providing military recruits. Thus, when in 1947 Pakistan started recruiting from borderland Pashtun tribes for the struggle in Kashmir, this long intergenerational memory of migration might have been just as important as “jihadi” propaganda. With the new Taliban regime struggling to keep the economy running, the borderland tribes might be more desperate than ever to find some revenue source through enlistment with the Pakistani military.

“Both Afghanistan and Pakistan have harboured each other’s political dissidents for a long time.”

Another historical framing that can help us understand the entanglement between Afghanistan and Pakistan is that both regions have harboured each other’s political dissidents for a long time. During much of the early modern period, overthrown rulers and pretenders in various parts of India would flee to Afghanistan to both seek protection and rebuild their military forces for mounting a return. This tradition continued well into the modern period. For example, the Khilafat

²⁶ See Muhammad Abdur Rahim, *History of the Afghans in India, 1545–1631 AD, with Special Reference to Their Relations with the Mughals* (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1954), chapter I.

Also see Jos J. L. Gommans, *The Rise of the Indo-Afghan Empire: c. 1710–1780*, Vol. 8 (Brill, 1995), chapter 4.

movement, one of the earliest anti-colonial movements in India, ushered the mass migration of Muslims to Afghanistan and established the first independent Indian government-in-exile. Since the inception of the Pakistani state, a new dynamic has set in, with Kabul nurturing Pashtun and Baloch nationalists from Pakistan, while Islamabad has protected Islamists from Afghanistan. In the 1970s, for example, Pakistani President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto gave refuge and assistance to Islamist student leaders from Afghanistan as a reaction to Afghan President Mohammed Daoud Khan's harbouring of Baloch separatists and supporters of "Pakhtunistan".²⁷ More recently, Pakistan responded to Ashraf Ghani's allegations of Islamabad backing Islamists by pointing to Kabul's support for Pashtun nationalists.²⁸ Busy with pointing fingers, Pakistan fails to recognise that its support for Islamists in Afghanistan strengthens irredentist claims within its own borders.

Revolutionary State and Reactionary Pressures

I tease these provocative historical framings not to suggest things will be as they were in the past but to provide the direction of momentum. Pushing against the inertia of history requires considerable force. Given the radical changes taking place in Afghanistan, shifts in historical trends are not implausible.

The Western media often cast the Taliban as a regressive force trying to turn the clock back on society and restore an outdated culture and 1,400-year-old version of puritanical Islam. Even if this were the

²⁷ David B. Edwards, *Before Taliban* (University of California Press, 2002), p. 76.

²⁸ Saad Hasan, "Is Afghanistan trying to use Pakhtuns against Pakistan", *TRT World*, 11 March 2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/is-afghanistan-trying-to-use-pakhtuns-against-pakistan-34473>

case, the aspiration to fight against millennia of change and the juggernauts of liberalism, modernity, nationalism and capitalism is nothing short of revolutionary. Rather than a traditionalist force, the Taliban need to be understood sociologically as a revolutionary regime,²⁹ like the Bolshevik government. We see elements of this in their attempts at designing a new revolutionary dress that brings together functionality with ideological imperatives,³⁰ akin to the introduction of the Mao suit in China after the success of the 1911 revolution.³¹

“Rather than a traditionalist force, the Taliban need to be understood sociologically as a revolutionary regime, like the Bolshevik government.”

Gyorgy Busztin, in his article in this *Insight* series, comments that struggles within the moderate and extremist factions of the Taliban are reminiscent of the infighting between Stalinists and Trotskyists after the

²⁹ I use the idea of “revolutionary state” as an analytical device to capture all regimes emerging out of a popular ideological movement that overthrows the previous regime (mostly through force). I do not thus imply any positive connotation to the concept.

³⁰ Soon after the Taliban’s takeover, pictures surfaced of pro-Taliban women wearing a new style of burqa with sleeves, unlike the traditional “shuttlecock” burqa. See Ben Farmer, “Afghanistan is a country of colour: Women show traditional dress in contrast to Taliban’s black *niqab*”, *The Telegraph*, 13 September 2021, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2021/09/13/afghanistan-country-colour-women-show-traditional-dress-contrast/>

³¹ Lauren Mack, “What is a Mao suit?”, ThoughtCo., 3 July 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/chinese-clothing-mao-suit-687372>

Bolshevik revolution.³² This is a critical point to think through. Like post-revolution communist states questioning whether someone is “red” enough, the Taliban seem to be debating whether bureaucratic positions should be awarded on the basis of technical competence or adherence to the revolutionary spirit.

“Like other revolutionary regimes trying to stabilise themselves after a period of great upheaval, the Taliban are still uncertain about their relationship with the outside world.”

More importantly, like other revolutionary regimes trying to stabilise themselves after a period of great upheaval, the Taliban are still uncertain about their relationship with the outside world. Do they only associate with countries on their side of the ideological divide? Perhaps even try to export the revolution and revolutionaries? Or, as Alessandro Arduino asks in this *Insight* series, do they give in to pragmatic considerations and seek assistance from Western states even if it tarnishes their revolutionary image?³³ To prove their commitment to the existing international order, should they contain or even repatriate

³² Gyorgy Busztin, “Taliban 2.0: Afghanistan’s Central Asian neighbours weigh different approaches”, *Insight* 271, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore, 23 November 2021, <https://mei.nus.edu.sg/publication/insight-271-taliban-2-0-afghanistans-central-asian-neighbours-weigh-different-approaches/>

³³ Alessandro Arduino, “China and the Taliban: Friends with Benefits”, *Insights* 270, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore, 9 November 2021, <https://mei.nus.edu.sg/publication/insight-270-china-and-the-taliban-friends-with-benefits/>

foreign militants who had been crucial during their revolutionary struggles but have now become a burden?

The Taliban will be far from free in deciding on these questions, and Pakistan will not be the most crucial source of foreign influence on these matters. With foreign aid squeezed since the rise of the Taliban, more than 93% of households in Afghanistan faced malnutrition as of September 2021, and the country faces the prospect of a severe famine.³⁴

“Desperate conditions can just as quickly push revolutionary regimes to double down on ideological positions and even spark reactionary violence.”

But desperate conditions do not necessarily force revolutionary regimes to succumb to normative international standards. They can just as quickly push them to double down on ideological positions and even spark reactionary violence. We have seen this trend at work in various countries like Iran, North Korea, Libya and Venezuela. These examples tell us that continued embargoes on foreign aid will only strengthen the hardliners. In Afghanistan's case, they would also strengthen the hand of the financiers who provide funding through illicit channels — Pakistan's intelligence agencies and their associates.

According to the investigative journalist Anand Gopal, by mid-2002, insurgency in Afghanistan had been wiped out, and Taliban leaders

³⁴ ReliefWeb, “WFP Afghanistan: Situation Report #3, 10 September 2021”, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 10 September 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/wfp-afghanistan-situation-report-3-10-september-2021>

were scrambling for deals with the United States.³⁵ Yet, about two decades later, they emerged stronger than before by taking over the entire country for the first time. Proponents of #sanctionpakistan claim that the Islamist movement survived mainly because of the Pakistani military's protection and active support. Such an analysis, however, severely overestimates the capabilities of the Pakistani military. It suggests that the Pakistani state not only kept the movement on life support for nearly two decades but also made it strong enough to overtake a larger, better-armed and better-trained US-backed Afghan National Army within weeks. It is hard to believe that Pakistan with comparatively paltry resources could achieve what the United States could not with US\$2 trillion³⁶ — create durable allies.

“One cannot deny Pakistan’s role in sustaining the Taliban. But to present Pakistan as the puppet master pulling the strings from behind is but an attempt by the United States and its allies to shift blame.”

Given the Pakistani military establishment’s ideological and economic interests and its long history of directly supporting Islamists

³⁵ Anand Gopal, “How the US created the Afghan war — and then lost it”, *Guernica*, 1 May 2014, <https://www.guernicamag.com/anand-gopal-how-the-u-s-created-the-afghan-war-and-then-lost-it/>

³⁶ Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University, “US Costs to Date for the War in Afghanistan”, August 2021, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/human-and-budgetary-costs-date-us-war-afghanistan-2001-2022>

from Afghanistan, one cannot deny Pakistan's role in sustaining the Taliban. But to present Pakistan as the puppet master pulling the strings from behind is but an attempt by the United States and its allies to shift blame. As Gopal argues, the Taliban survived because even when there was no one left to fight against, the United States continued to wage war against suspected jihadists. In the process, Washington created its own enemies and inflamed popular support for groups resisting it and its cronies, who were often guilty of committing violence at a much grander scale than the Taliban's atrocities. The problem started not with the hasty departure of US troops, as some have pointed out, but with their prolonged presence.

As international pressure on the Taliban regime continues to decimate the local economy, it is not hard to imagine which direction the people of Afghanistan might turn towards when faced with the dilemma of choosing between famine and a neighbour who might offer support, licit or otherwise. ◆

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