

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS, SOON-TO-BE ESTRANGED?: How events are straining the relationship between the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani military



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Critics of the Pakistani military have long called its support for the Taliban – and a slew of other Islamist groups – a misadventure that will eventually annihilate everyone and everything in its path. The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan has not only turned that country into a pariah state but also threatens Pakistan's stability.

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Leaders of progressive nationalist Pashtun parties and movements have been warning for the past few years of the onset of a new “great game” in the Af-Pak region, in which Pashtuns and other minorities in Pakistan will become pawns in global and regional powers’ grand designs. They point fingers at the Pakistani military and its militant allies, especially the Taliban, accusing them of being mercenaries serving the architects of the new great game. Dismissive of these warnings – at its own peril, as has been proven – the Pakistani military not only continued providing support to the Afghan Taliban but even strengthened it in the run up to the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan in 2021. However, things have not turned out as Pakistani generals hoped. Afghanistan has become a pariah state, the Afghan Taliban have reverted to their old ways and, alarmingly for the Pakistani military, the Pakistani Taliban have come home to roost, having found new and more conducive conditions to regroup in Afghanistan.

The Pakistani Taliban (Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan or TTP) have conducted 150 attacks in Pakistan in the last three months. This spike in their aggressiveness is a real concern for the Pakistani state since the attacks have also reached Punjab, including the capital, Islamabad. The offensive is a response to the Pakistani military’s spree of target killings of TTP leaders in Afghanistan in the aftermath of a breakdown of a peace process initiated by the former at the request of the Afghan Taliban. Pakistan’s government held two days of meetings of its National Security Committee (NSC) earlier this month, at the end of which its interior minister announced that Pakistan was considering conducting operations against the TTP’s sanctuaries inside Afghanistan. The announcement was met with furious rebuttals from second-tier Afghan Taliban leaders as well as more conciliatory official reaction from the main leaders.

The TTP's attacks are not the only reason for a strained relationship between the Pakistan military and its protégés, the Afghan Taliban. There have also been frequent skirmishes along the Durand Line between the Taliban and Pakistani forces. To make matters worse, the Afghan Taliban's social media influencers have been goading Pakistan for some time now. Crucially, Pakistan's ability to conduct effective diplomacy has also been hampered by the threats the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) poses in Afghanistan, one of whose snipers tried and failed to assassinate Pakistan's ambassador to Afghanistan on December 2nd 2022. Finally, a recently leaked memo from a Taliban military commander stipulates that around 7,000 ISIS fighters were trained in Pakistan close to the Durand Line, in effect blaming the Pakistani military for complacency. In the memo, the commander in question also calls the Durand Line "the imaginary line". Pakistan has historically been wary of Afghan governments that have questioned the Durand Line's validity as an internationally recognised border.

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The uptick in TTP-perpetrated violence and a breakdown in the relationship between the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani military are further compounded by the worsening security, political and economic crises between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Taliban's latest ban on women working in NGOs has jeopardised the delivery of aid to millions of hungry Afghans. To the Taliban's surprise and displeasure, ISIS continues to pose a serious security threat, targeting even the Taliban's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in its latest attack, which resulted in dozens of casualties. The Taliban have cracked down hard on any sources of credible information in an effort to suppress news of the deteriorating security situation. In this context, the country also suffers from its very narrow political setup. The lack of an inclusive political system is increasingly becoming a sticking point between the Taliban and their erstwhile supporters in the region, from Russia to Iran, Turkey and even Pakistan. Pakistan's special envoy to Afghanistan recently criticised the Taliban's unwillingness to form an "inclusive government" at a meeting of regional countries held in Moscow in November 2022, to which the Taliban were not invited. Furthermore, Afghanistan's economy has hit rock bottom, while narco production and trafficking have flourished. The Taliban have also resumed chopping off limbs, public floggings and even executions in an effort to stamp their authority.

While Afghanistan's nosedive into the abyss continues, Pakistan's economy is in tatters. The country has failed to receive bailouts from traditional allies like the US, China and Saudi Arabia. Everyday food staples like flour are not only too expensive for average Pakistanis to afford, they are sometimes unavailable altogether. The political turmoil in the wake of the unseating of the former prime minister, Imran Khan, in

April 2022, continues to take a toll on the country. The political uncertainty and the economic downturn have provided an opportunity for several movements to take shape or further strengthen. Protests are taking place across Pakistan at frequent intervals. Rallies by Imran Khan's supporters have waned recently but could erupt at any time. Non-violent movements in the Pashtun and Baloch regions in the west of the country have increased against the Pakistani military and TTP and other extremist groups, who have resumed a new wave of terrorist attacks across Pakistan. Pashtun and Baloch political and civil society actors strongly suspect the Pakistani military is covertly supporting the extremist groups responsible for these terrorist attacks. Daily protests are taking place in the erstwhile tribal areas. Target killings are also on the rise, such as the one that led to the death of the former president of the Supreme Court Bar Association and stalwart of Pashtun nationalism, Abdul Latif Afridi, who was shot this week in broad daylight inside a courtroom in the western city of Peshawar.

Meanwhile, Russia and Iran are also in flux. With regional countries fighting their own demons, and western countries focused on countering the Russian invasion of Ukraine and that war's impact on the global economy, the Pakistani military and the Taliban government in Afghanistan have failed to monetise the worsening situation in their respective countries. Even the threats of increasing mass migration to Europe have fallen on deaf ears.

All in all, the trends point into an increase in the intensity of all the crises detailed above. Unless the Pakistani military and Afghan Taliban get a grip on events – present and future – in their countries and deescalate the tension blighting their mutual ties, the situation risks spiralling out of control. As Barbara Adams warns us, the intensity and frequency of events has a major impact on what will unfold in the future. For now, both countries are too eventful, meaning too many things are happening too fast for rulers to ensure effective control of matters, particularly violence. Pakistani generals and the Afghan Taliban were strange bedfellows to begin with. While Pakistani generals are known to enjoy and support Western-style freedoms, particularly in the elite Pakistani circles in which they socialise, the Taliban incarcerate, maim and kill those with the same lifestyles in Afghanistan. The relationship has purely been predicated on the convergence of political goals – and to a certain extent economic interests. If such a relationship of convenience ceases to exist, they will eventually become estranged bedfellows.