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SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report analyzes Afghan president Ashraf Ghani's decision to set aside his country's long-standing distrust of its largest neighbor, Pakistan, and to embark instead on a policy of sustained conciliation in an attempt to secure greater cooperation from Pakistan in fighting Taliban militants on Afghan soil. The report examines the logic of Ghani's outreach and considers why, ten months after initiating the policy, he continues to pursue it despite ongoing Taliban violence in Afghanistan and few signs of concrete actions from Pakistan.

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Moeed Yusuf and Scott Smith

Ashraf Ghani's Pakistan Outreach

Fighting against the Odds

Summary

- Immediately after coming to office, the national unity government in Afghanistan undertook the bold but controversial move of adopting a conciliatory approach toward Pakistan to secure its cooperation in bringing the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table and, over the long term, helping the Afghan economy by acting as a sort of "traffic circle" between an integrated South and Central Asian economy.
- This decision has led to a domestic backlash in Afghanistan, colored by a historical mistrust of Pakistan, that undermines President Ashraf Ghani's already weak political position.
- Though former president Hamid Karzai had also sought to enlist Pakistan's support in facilitating negotiations with the Taliban, he vacillated between urging an Afghanistan-Pakistan rapprochement and blaming Pakistan for Afghanistan's problems, while attempting to play off Pakistan against its chief rival, India. Ghani's outreach is substantively different in that it seeks to allay Pakistan's concerns, real or perceived, with regard to its interests in Afghanistan.
- With its key strategic interests addressed, and with China's growing interest in Afghan stability and Pakistan and China's nervousness about the U.S. troop withdrawal potentially increasing the chaos in Afghanistan, Pakistan may now find that it is in its interest to move away from its Karzai-era policy of turning a blind eye to the situation in Afghanistan.
- President Ghani is fighting against the odds. Not only is Pakistan's willingness to provide support unknown, so too is Pakistan's ability to draw the Taliban into a meaningful reconciliation process. The weakness of the Afghan national unity government and the growing perception that it may not last are additional complicating factors.
- Pakistan's tepid response to date has left Ghani increasingly vulnerable politically. But Ghani's approach, though high risk and having a low probability of success, in the absence of any viable alternative offers the only real hope for comprehensive peace in Afghanistan and stability in the region, and should be supported by all concerned parties.

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Introduction

When Afghanistan's national unity government took charge in Kabul in late September 2014, it inherited a country in crisis. The Afghan economy, shaped by twelve years of war and fueled by external development spending, had a weak base on which to sustain itself, and the Taliban-led insurgency was keeping the state on a war footing. The unity government, despite its name, was deeply divided and found basic decisions, such as appointing a cabinet, extremely difficult to make.

The government did, however, undertake one bold and decisive step soon after the inauguration. President Ashraf Ghani offered Pakistan sustained cooperation in exchange for its help in achieving a comprehensive peace with the Taliban insurgency. This was a drastic departure from his predecessor Hamid Karzai's strategy. Karzai deeply distrusted Pakistan, as do most Afghans, and for good reason. Pakistan has contributed significantly to violence in Afghanistan by allowing the Taliban and its affiliated Haqqani network to operate freely from sanctuaries on Pakistani territory. Ghani therefore went out on a limb in courting a reviled neighbor and betting on its willingness to depart from its traditional policy of seeing Afghanistan as little more than its backyard. Ghani's critics argue that Karzai tried hard but failed to convince Pakistan to change its outlook, and that Ghani's approach comes at a "huge cost to Afghanistan with little chance of reward."¹ However, it is the only strategy left to try.

This report analyzes this key moment in the Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship. An obvious question is why President Ghani would pursue such a high-risk strategy and persist with it, even after the Taliban launched a massive spring offensive in April.² The answer lies chiefly in the lack of viable alternatives to bring stability to Afghanistan. President Ghani is correct to argue that the first priority is not necessarily peace with the Taliban but a more general peace with Pakistan.³ Further, a constructive long-term relationship with Pakistan is an essential part of Ghani's broader vision for landlocked Afghanistan to act as the hub of an integrated South and Central Asian economy.⁴

Ultimately, the fate of Ghani's efforts depends on Pakistan's willingness and ability to deliver the Taliban to the negotiating table. Six months into the strategy, Pakistan's intentions remain unknown. But Pakistan may now see a self-interest in helping Afghanistan attain stability that it did not see in the past. In the absence of alternatives, Ghani's effort deserves support from those who desire stability in the region, including rivals, such as India; frustrated and tired allies, such as the United States; and neighbors and near-neighbors.

What the Unity Government Inherited

The Taliban-led insurgency has been the main source of instability in Afghanistan since its revival in earnest in 2005–06. With insecurity worsening year after year, hopes for an outright military defeat of the insurgency are no longer realistic. The imperative of a political negotiation with the Taliban to end the conflict is recognized by the Kabul government and its international partners, including the United States. Little has been achieved to date, however, despite the numerous initiatives undertaken by former president Hamid Karzai and by members of the international community.

President Karzai pursued reconciliation with the Taliban, but inconsistently. At the beginning of his second term he created the High Peace Council, an assembly of respected figures, to guide the peace process.⁵ He appealed through the media to his "Taliban brothers" to return to the Afghan political fold.⁶ Karzai was aware of efforts by the United States and other countries to develop channels of communication with the Taliban leadership for the purpose of finding a negotiated solution, but did not trust them; on occasion he appeared to sabotage them.⁷ At

the same time, the Taliban saw Karzai as an American puppet and pointed to his support for the international troop presence as justification for not talking to him.⁸

Karzai's biggest problem, however, was his inability to solicit Pakistan's cooperation. He tried both carrots and sticks, simultaneously seeking greater cooperation while singling out Pakistan—and in particular its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) spy agency—as the chief abettor of the insurgency and the main reason for his inability to negotiate freely with the Taliban. At the same time, he visited Pakistan nineteen times during his twelve years in power, called Pakistan a “twin brother” while visiting India in 2011,⁹ and repeatedly promised not to allow his country to be used against Pakistan's interests. Apart from occasional concessions, such as the release of about two dozen Taliban prisoners from Pakistani custody in late 2013, these attempts achieved no change in Pakistan's attitude.¹⁰ Consequently, Karzai's relationship with Pakistan's security establishment remained a fundamentally hostile one, with Karzai blaming his problems on Pakistan and Pakistan seeing Karzai helping “India stab Pakistan in the back.”¹¹

Fraught Relations

Karzai's distrust of Pakistan was well founded. Pakistan's constant denials notwithstanding, there is a virtual consensus among the international community that the ISI has knowingly harbored and nurtured the Taliban and its affiliated Haqqani network as a matter of policy—though more so the Haqqanis than the so-called Quetta Shura Taliban, Mullah Omar's group and the core of the movement.¹² There is evidence that Pakistan undermined efforts at talks with the Taliban in the past as well, in particular by arresting senior Taliban members who were known to favor negotiations and allegedly in secret communication with Kabul without Pakistan's knowledge.¹³ Perhaps the most candid assertion of Pakistan's support for the Taliban, specifically the Haqqani network, came from then chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, when he described the Haqqani network as a “veritable arm” of the ISI and asserted that Pakistan was using “violent extremism as an instrument of policy.”¹⁴ President Karzai left office with the bilateral relationship broken and Afghans blaming Pakistan for being a key, perhaps the sole, reason for the absence of any serious reconciliation process with the Taliban.

Karzai seemed to believe that he could force or cajole Pakistan into giving up support for the Taliban without addressing Pakistan's self-identified strategic concerns in Afghanistan. Pakistan ignored Karzai's antics while also skillfully deflecting U.S. pressure to “do more,” even as Islamabad and Rawalpindi continued to absorb substantial Western assistance inflows, which had been offered in part to induce behavioral change among Pakistan's civilian and military leadership. President Karzai earned much respect at home for standing up to Pakistan (and the United States), but his extreme nationalist stance achieved little in terms of bringing peace to his country.

Accommodating Pakistan's Interests

President Ghani's calculus derives from the same logic that drove Karzai's policy—namely, that Pakistan is the problem and, absent a change in Pakistan's attitude, Afghanistan will not stabilize.¹⁵ But, unlike Karzai, Ghani has repeatedly emphasized that the fundamental problem is not the Taliban insurgency itself but an “undeclared state of hostilities” between Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁶ He sees the Taliban as a symptom of this problem, not its essence. While Karzai tried to shame and coerce Pakistan into cooperation, Ghani has sought to make it a part of the solution by trying to convincingly address its concerns in relation to Afghanistan in a way that preserves both countries' interests.

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Pakistan's strategy in Afghanistan during the Karzai years was the offshoot of three basic threat perceptions. First, Afghanistan has always been the staging ground for Pakistan's larger regional competition with its traditional foe, India. Under no circumstances would Pakistan's leaders allow India to gain a strategic foothold in Afghanistan. Pakistan may have shed its infamous policy of "strategic depth," whereby it saw Afghan territory as a physical rear base in case of war with India, but figuratively it has continued to view Afghanistan as its backyard, where even the slightest amount of Indian ingress is regarded as "encirclement" by the enemy.¹⁷ By extension, Pakistan did not want a government in Kabul that was sympathetic to India and antagonistic to Islamabad.

Second, Pakistan recognized that it could not openly defy the world's only superpower—and that it was also benefiting greatly from U.S. funding—and so it had to achieve its first goal of not allowing India a foothold in Afghanistan while remaining a member in good standing of the U.S.-led coalition against terrorism, whatever the contradictions between this second objective and the first. Pakistan executed this balancing act with great skill, utterly frustrating U.S. policymakers, who could not see the point of the double game. Pakistan's third concern was to prevent terrorist blowback on its own territory, where Pakistan's domestic insurgency was increasingly active.¹⁸

Their questionable objectivity aside, viewed through the prism of these long-standing concerns, the post-2001 developments in Afghanistan were alarming for Pakistan. The growing warmth of the Indo-U.S. relationship and the so-called dehyphenation of U.S. policy toward India and Pakistan was seen by Pakistani leaders as fundamentally upsetting the regional balance, and not in their favor.¹⁹ The United States knew its improved ties with India irked Pakistan, but it also believed it had used the closer relationship to restrain Delhi from expanding its role in Afghanistan in a way that would provoke Pakistan. Pakistan, however, perceived India's fairly significant engagement with the Karzai government to be part of this U.S. realignment, offering India the opportunity to reinforce an anti-Pakistan sentiment among Afghans and, more important, within the Panjshiri Tajik-dominated (as Pakistan sees it) Afghan Army officer corps. President Karzai's personal ties to India (he was educated there) and his overtures toward it—aimed partly at eliciting Indian investment and partly at raising Pakistan's diplomatic and strategic costs by signaling his ability to rely more heavily on India at Pakistan's expense—concerned Pakistan further. These perceptions were reinforced when, in the wake of a fast-deteriorating Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship, Karzai signed a strategic partnership agreement with the Indian government in 2011 that included a provision for India to train and provide equipment to the Afghan National Army.²⁰ While neutral observers argued that Karzai's hand was forced by Pakistan's lack of cooperation, Pakistan perceived the provision as evidence of Karzai's inherent preference for India over Pakistan, contributing to Pakistan's mistrust of Karzai.

Another disturbing development was a major terrorist backlash in Pakistan over the past decade that Pakistan considers to be a spillover of U.S. policies in Afghanistan as well as a reaction to its own backing of the United States' actions in Afghanistan, which many Pakistani policymakers regard as having been coerced. The United States and Pakistan have had many public spats on this issue without either truly understanding the other's position. Washington believed that the terrorist backlash within Pakistan was a result of its selective approach in dealing with militants—distinguishing "good" Afghan Taliban from "bad" Pakistani Taliban—and thus counseled Pakistan to "do more" against all insurgent and terrorist groups, including the Afghan Taliban. The Pakistani military attributed the internal chaos to Pakistan's having done "too much" at the United States' behest immediately after 9/11.²¹ To Islamabad, Washington never understood that the armed and restive populations in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas would never accept the overthrow of an Islamic

regime of fellow Pashtuns (the Taliban-led emirate) especially when that overthrow was at the behest of the distrusted United States.²² As the backlash grew, Pakistan's decision makers became convinced that their only way out of the predicament was to become even more selective in their targeting, to leave groups like the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network alone while focusing exclusively on militants who were active against the Pakistani state. The upshot was that while Pakistan continued to offer tactical counterterrorism support to the U.S.-led global war on terror, the underlying logic of Pakistani policy during the Karzai years remained accepting, or even abetting, of controlled chaos in Afghanistan as a means of keeping itself relevant, while trying to limit terrorism within its own territory.²³

Ghani's Hope for Regional Cooperation

President Ghani therefore decided to accommodate Pakistan's concerns to an unprecedented degree, in the expectation of reciprocal cooperation. He has worked to settle Pakistani nerves with respect to India by suspending Karzai's arms deal.²⁴ More generally, he has indicated that he will not try to play the two countries off against each other. Indeed, his stance on the India-Pakistan equation has been unambiguous enough to gain Ghani criticism in India for ignoring Indian interests.²⁵ Even during his maiden presidential visit to India in April 2015, Ghani seemed to pay particular attention to how his statements would be received in Islamabad and deflected the barrage of questions on what his Pakistan policy meant for India.²⁶ That said, he was equally deliberate in reiterating that India would remain relevant to Afghanistan's future development needs and also demanded—in public during his trip to India and in private with Pakistani officials shortly prior to it—that Pakistan allow Afghanistan an overland route to trade with India.²⁷ Ghani understands that for Afghanistan to truly benefit from his "traffic circle" vision of regional economic integration, both Pakistan and India have to be cooperative partners.

With President Obama remaining firm in his promise to withdraw all U.S. troops by January 2017, Ghani is now truly in the lead in terms of engagement with Pakistan and the Taliban and is offering Pakistan a central role in helping Kabul and the Taliban achieve a comprehensive peace. Pakistan's help is required not only to fulfill Ghani's most immediate demand of bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table but also in demobilizing and demilitarizing the Taliban if and when a successful negotiation process with the Taliban is concluded.²⁸ Integrating Pakistan this way eliminates Pakistan's worry, evident during the Karzai administration, that Kabul (or Washington) would exclude it from the table where Afghanistan's future might be negotiated.²⁹ The U.S. troop withdrawal also lowers the stakes of Pakistan's relationship with the superpower, making it easier for Pakistan to pursue its regional interests without conflicting with Washington's interests in the same space.

Equally consequential is that Kabul's principal request of Pakistan at the outset of Ghani's outreach effort was no longer that it take military action against the Afghan Taliban. Rather, it was to get the Taliban to begin direct, meaningful negotiations with the Afghan government through means of Pakistan's choosing. Talks with the Taliban are something Pakistan has long preferred to any effort to seek total military victory, even though it previously resisted, and even sabotaged, negotiation tracks it was not involved in. Ghani's demand for dialogue could conceivably be satisfied without forcing Pakistan to fully turn against the Taliban, a move that Pakistan has resisted for fear of backlash and diminished leverage over the group.

Ghani has also forthrightly addressed Pakistan's concerns about the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), or Pakistani Taliban, who maintain sanctuaries in Kunar and Nuristan provinces on the Afghan side of the Durand Line (the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, established by treaty in 1893). These sanctuaries, which are a primary Pakistani security concern, began functioning during President Karzai's second term as part of an active covert battle between

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the two countries' intelligence agencies. Though the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) is no match for ISI, given the latter's extensive and long-standing networks among Afghanistan's strongmen, militias, and politicians, the NDS did begin to score some points by tolerating a TTP presence in these areas toward the end of Karzai's tenure.³⁰ Ghani has sought to end this approach. Pakistani officials praised Ghani's efforts to deliver the Afghanistan-based perpetrators of the heinous terrorist attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar in December 2014, which left over 130 children dead and shook the Pakistani nation.³¹ Ghani also ordered ANSF operations against sanctuaries in Kunar, at significant human cost to his forces.³² Ghani's ability to do so was also important evidence for Pakistan that he is able to exercise control over his security and intelligence agencies, something Pakistan has doubted, given its conspiratorial perception that the NDS works hand in glove with Indian intelligence.

The long-term vision underpinning Ghani's approach also addresses another shared objective with Pakistan: downsizing the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Securing Pakistan's partnership ultimately hinges on Ghani's ability to convince Pakistan that a stable Afghanistan will not be a threat. Pakistani policymakers have surely determined that a stable Afghanistan, with a 350,000-man security force trained by NATO, would be an unacceptable menace, especially given ongoing unsettled issues between the two neighbors, such as the validity of the international border and Afghan claims on Pakistan territory.³³ For his part, Ghani is aware that in the long run, the country cannot economically sustain such a large force, which continues to be paid for largely by the U.S. military. But the ANSF can be reduced only if there is an end to the insurgency and an economy sufficiently robust to absorb the demobilized troops. Both could be achieved through a seriously conducted reconciliation process coupled with improved regional economic ties.

China's Engagement

Finally, Ghani's approach benefits from another crucial aspect that was missing in previous efforts: He is able to exploit China's increasing interest in facilitating a reconciliation process with the Taliban. For many years, China appeared indifferent to the international effort in Afghanistan, acting as a casual free rider on the security provided by international forces. Now that the United States has expressed its intent to keep to its troop withdrawal schedule, China (and Pakistan) have become more concerned about the possible effects of instability in Afghanistan after the U.S. withdrawal.³⁴

China is increasingly worried that instability in Afghanistan and in Pakistan's tribal areas will allow the training of Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) insurgents, who are already present in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region and are more and more active in China's restive Muslim-majority Xinjiang province, an autonomous territory in northwest China that is home to several ethnic minority groups.³⁵ Beijing appears to be belatedly waking up to the reality that the ETIM is increasingly integrated into global jihadist networks, and its cause is now finding its way into statements of groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda.³⁵ China also recognizes that an unstable Afghanistan provides the best opportunity for these Uyghur separatists to forge relationships with other Islamist groups.

With core interests at stake, China has signaled its intent to move beyond its traditional engagement with Afghanistan, which, for all practical purposes, until recently was channeled through Pakistan. China's stance on reconciliation continues to echo Pakistan's preference for talks between Kabul and the Taliban. But in the last year or so, Beijing has taken a direct interest in facilitating a dialogue with the Taliban.³⁷ China not only has the advantage of being seen as a relatively neutral actor, it is also the only country with real influence over the Pakistani security establishment, particularly demonstrated in the past by Pakistan's extreme responsiveness to Chinese demands for action against Uyghur militants in Pakistan.³⁸

At the same time, Pakistan will feel far more comfortable with a Chinese presence and Chinese guarantees regarding the protection of its interests in Afghanistan than it ever did with the U.S. presence and guarantees. In fact, Pakistani, Chinese, and U.S. interests appear to have converged on the need to cooperate more effectively to bring about a stable Afghanistan. These factors also help explain Ghani's proactive diplomacy with Islamabad and Beijing. Part of Ghani's calculation is that China will exert pressure on Pakistan to play a more active role in bringing stability not only to Afghanistan but the region as a whole.

Ghani's Delicate Balance

Ghani's outreach strategy is really about forging a strategic relationship with Pakistan to replace the traditional state of mutual distrust and tactical tit for tat. But this break from the past has generated severe criticism at home. Ghani's critics have called him naïve for trusting Pakistan.³⁹ Their case is bolstered by the fact that so far, Ghani has received little in return for his conciliatory efforts. Afghan Taliban-led violence has drastically increased following the April 2015 launch of the most vicious and geographically dispersed Taliban spring offensive since 9/11, with spectacular attacks against Afghan police, army, government officials, and civilians. Afghans see this violence as evidence of a continuing ISI policy to destabilize Afghanistan. Ghani has persisted with his approach despite widespread domestic opposition and the Taliban violence, though his tone has gradually but noticeably hardened toward Pakistan—requesting plainly, for example, that Taliban sanctuaries not be allowed to remain operational.⁴⁰

This persistence owes not to naivety but to the lack of realistic alternatives. The imperative to get the Taliban to reject violence and join the political order is even stronger today than it was when Karzai was in power, and Ghani, unlike Karzai, does not have the luxury of banking on more than one hundred thousand international troops to fight the insurgents for him. Moreover, attrition rates have reached dangerous levels among the ANSF, despite greatly improved cohesiveness and tactical capacity.⁴¹ Given these realities, the Ghani administration has begun rearming militias to help fight the Taliban—a sign not only that the official security forces are reaching their limits but also of the growing weakness of the state.⁴²

Ghani also recognizes that Afghanistan is no longer the most urgent priority for the West, for the rising threat of ISIS has forced the United States and its allies to turn their attention and resources to the Middle East. Ghani can therefore neither hope to continue fighting the Taliban endlessly nor depend on the West to bankroll the Afghan government forever. Nor can Kabul expect the United States to increase the pressure on Pakistan to help Kabul's cause, as the United States has clearly signaled its intent to mend fences with the Pakistan military.⁴³ These factors have forced Ghani into his policy of accommodation, if only by depriving him of alternatives.

The counterargument to Ghani's approach, and one espoused by many in Kabul, is that improved governance itself will lead to stability, and therefore Ghani should focus on governance rather than on appeasing Pakistan. But the contention that better governance alone takes the momentum away from insurgents is not upheld by the experience of other South Asian countries. Much stronger countries, such as India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, have tried and failed to improve governance amid turmoil, despite having far greater resources than Afghanistan.⁴⁴ Better governance helps stability, but a minimum level of stability is needed to allow space for good policies to have the desired impact. In Afghanistan, even the resources necessary to attempt a major governance and economic turnaround are dependent on the government's ability to attract foreign investment or aid, gain rents from regional economic activity, and reduce expenditures on the ANSF. Each of these initiatives requires a serious reduction in, if not an end to, the perennial state of conflict in the country.

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Realpolitik versus Reality

The soundness of Ghani's realpolitik may be unquestionable, but it is one thing to conceive of a grand strategic design and another to get other players to cooperate. Ghani has made the best pitch yet to achieve normalized Afghanistan-Pakistan ties, but precisely because his success hinges so heavily on Pakistan's reaction, his is truly a leap of faith. Moreover, failure may still occur despite Pakistan's best intentions and efforts.

Pakistan's willingness to deliver is the greatest unknown factor. Pakistani policymakers have acknowledged through conciliatory statements that they now see supporting Ghani to be in their best interests. At one level, Pakistan seems to have responded. Afghanistan saw a temporary lull in violence between mid-December 2014 and the end of April 2015, a development attributed to Pakistan at least momentarily staying the hand of the Haqqani network. Afghan and Pakistani officials, with Chinese assistance, remain in regular contact about finding ways to initiate talks with the Taliban. Since late 2014, senior Taliban representatives have visited China for meetings, with and without accompanying Pakistani intelligence officials.⁴⁵ Reports also suggest that Sun Yuxi, China's special envoy to Afghanistan, met Afghan Taliban leaders in Peshawar after President Ghani came to power.⁴⁶ Most recently, former Afghan Taliban officials reportedly met Masoom Stanekzai, head of the secretariat of the Afghan High Peace Council, and Afghan representatives close to CEO Abdullah Abdullah at a meeting in Urumqi facilitated by Pakistan's ISI and with Chinese support.⁴⁷ Progress seemed real enough for a while that Afghan and Pakistani officials expressed their belief that they were getting close to initiating formal talks with the Taliban.⁴⁸

There has also been a shift in Pakistan's declared policy toward the Taliban, with the Pakistani prime minister categorically stating as recently as mid-May 2015 that Afghan Taliban attacks would be viewed as terrorist acts and promising that the Taliban would be "outlawed and hunted down."⁴⁹ Responding to requests from Ghani for more tangible results, the Pakistani state also conveyed to the Taliban to halt their offensive in Afghanistan or face serious consequences—though what those consequences might be remains unknown.⁵⁰ The Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Pakistani parliament recently also made the unprecedented move of publicly calling on the government to hand over the Afghan Taliban to Kabul.⁵¹ If these statements are translated into action, this would be a major policy shift for Pakistan. For now, however, all this activity amounts to little more than confidence building.

That is all the good news there is. On the whole, Ghani has been in an extremely precarious domestic situation for some time. The increase in violence across the country since the onset of the Taliban spring offensive presents an existential threat to his effort. Ghani's vulnerability was exposed when a controversial ISI-NDS memorandum of understanding (MoU) seeking intelligence cooperation and direct coordination between these mutually distrusting institutions was leaked in Afghanistan, prompting what a former spokesperson for President Karzai described as a "deep and unfortunate rupture" between the current president and his predecessor.⁵² Up until then, Karzai, still an influential figure in Afghanistan, had voiced his support for the national unity government, even though he had always criticized its Pakistan policy.

Ghani responded with a tough letter to the Pakistani leadership.⁵³ His specific demands included taking real measures to deny the Taliban sanctuary, putting Taliban leaders under house arrest, exchanging Afghan and Pakistani Taliban prisoners, investigating and arresting all those being treated in medical facilities in Pakistan, controlling the sale of materials used for manufacturing improvised explosive devices, and agreeing to simultaneous operations on both sides of the Durand Line to squeeze both Afghan and Pakistani Taliban. Ghani also signaled his fallback option of becoming a "war president,"⁵⁴ perhaps a hint at his ability to use the TTP sanctuaries in Afghanistan more strategically in case Pakistan failed to deliver.

Ghani's lack of constructive options is evident from the fact that he had communicated essentially the same demands to Pakistan in April after Pakistan had failed to convince the Taliban not to launch their spring offensive.⁵⁶ Pakistan had shared its actions and the progress it was making at the time with Kabul and pleaded for the Afghan president's patience.⁵⁶ Ghani's letter, revealed in early June, gave Pakistan two weeks to respond, but the supposed deadline passed without any indication from Ghani that a change in his strategy was imminent, leaving many wondering whether Pakistan is either unable or unwilling to exert influence on the Taliban.

Spoilers and Obstacles to Conciliation

Ghani's persistence may also be a function of a more nuanced and realistic understanding of the significant complexities involved in Pakistan getting the Taliban to talk meaningfully. Ghani may well have grasped this reality and be willing to live with a longer timeline, perhaps beyond the current fighting season, for Pakistan to take specific actions.⁵⁷ There is also the question of Pakistan's ability to draw the Taliban into negotiations even if it truly wants to. Exactly how much sway Pakistan has over the Taliban has long been debated by Afghanistan and Pakistan analysts. The conventional wisdom is that the ISI has far more influence over the Haqqani network than over the Quetta Shura but that it is the Shura that needs to be wooed to talk since it is the core of the movement. While Islamabad could push the Shura to the negotiating table, under the existing paradigm that defines their relationship it cannot force the Shura to make concessions that the Taliban perceive to be against their core interests.

Pakistan's influence over the Taliban has likely diminished further in recent years as evidence has emerged of growing splits within the movement.⁵⁸ For some time there have been indications of the existence of a pro-fighting wing and a pro-negotiation wing within the Quetta Shura. As long as it is not clear what the negotiation process can deliver, the militant voices, who may see themselves within reach of defeating a second superpower in three decades, will probably win most of the internal arguments. The fear of internal fracturing is one reason why the Taliban continue to deny that any of the meetings involving them have been about starting formal talks.⁵⁹ In private conversations, Pakistani officials have revealed that the Taliban are unhappy about the leaks regarding talks already held, such as the recent round in Urumqi, as this leaves the pro-talk factions more open to internal criticism.⁶⁰

The reported presence of a large number of Central Asian militants who have fled Pakistan's North Waziristan operation against the TTP complicates matters further, as these groups have no stake in the Taliban movement itself and thus no interest in accepting any political directives not to fight.⁶¹ Their presence also makes the pro-fighting camp within the Taliban less dependent on the pro-talking faction to contribute to their battlefield strength. Finally, those who oppose talks can point to the fragility of the Kabul national unity government. The best chance of getting the Taliban to talk meaningfully may be a strong demonstration from the unity government and ANSF of their ability to stand up to the Taliban's offensive. For this reason, any real talks would be more likely to occur after the end of the fighting season this year rather than during it.

In recent months, a further split has begun to emerge within the Taliban as a number of fighting-level factions have reportedly declared their allegiance to ISIS. The presence of such violent spoilers will make it harder for the Taliban to implement the terms of any agreement (for example, a cease-fire) if one were to be reached.

Pakistan must also wonder about President Ghani's ability to control his security establishment. Although he demonstrated his ability to get the NDS to apprehend the Peshawar attack suspects, the fallout from the leaked ISI-NDS MoU could not have gone unnoticed.⁶²

The best chance of getting the Taliban to talk meaningfully may be a strong demonstration from the unity government and ANSF of their ability to stand up to the Taliban's offensive.

The Ghani government's ability to function as a unitary actor is crucial for Pakistan to maintain a real interest in supporting him. Pakistan's response to Ghani's own demands hinges largely on this factor. For instance, simultaneous operations on both sides of the border require real-time intelligence sharing, which presupposes that intelligence agencies trust that their opposite number will act in the spirit of this arrangement. If the chain of command on the Afghan side is fungible, Pakistan may be reluctant to cooperate, especially in light of the deep-seated mistrust between the ISI and NDS. Pakistanis also privately admit the merit in Ghani's prisoner exchange proposal but remain reluctant to execute it, under the pretext that when Pakistan has handed over arrested Taliban to Afghanistan in the past, their "confessions" about working with the ISI have been used to inflame anti-Pakistani feelings in Afghanistan.⁶³ Many of these dynamics are of Pakistan's own making, the result of its long-standing double game, but they are complications nonetheless that underscore the importance of ensuring there is no disconnect between Ghani's strategic vision and his security establishment's tactical actions.

Thus far, no tangible Pakistani action demonstrates with certainty that Pakistan has given up its old tactics with respect to Afghanistan and is sincerely trying to help Ghani achieve peace.

Be that as it may, Ghani's threshold for domestic criticism is not unlimited, and he has conveyed as much to Pakistan directly and through emissaries. Pakistan must recognize that he needs more than verbal reassurances, ministerial visits, and controversial MoUs. Thus far, no tangible Pakistani action demonstrates with certainty that Pakistan has given up its old tactics with respect to Afghanistan and is sincerely trying to help Ghani achieve peace. Pakistan's failure to deliver tangible outcomes will be self-defeating and devastating for the two countries' long-term relationship, perhaps closing off forever the possibility of a long-term, mutually beneficial, strategic relationship.

The Way Forward

Ghani's outreach initiative is beset with uncertainty. Yet in the absence of viable alternatives, his approach remains the best hope for peace in Afghanistan and deserves support from all quarters.

Tasks for Pakistan

Most important, Pakistani civilian and military leaders must recognize that President Ghani has offered their country the best possible opportunity to protect its interests in Afghanistan. Their failure to deliver on his most basic demand, to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table, will sooner or later force him to give up his policy of conciliation and try to salvage whatever political capital he can at home. This retrenchment would inevitably involve criticizing Pakistan, which in turn would reinforce the already strong Afghan and international perception that Pakistan does not want peace in Afghanistan.

To date, Pakistan has done little more than nudge and verbally threaten the Taliban to enter into a dialogue with Kabul, only to find out that it had overestimated its own clout with the Taliban opposed to talks, as they have reportedly refused to oblige.⁶⁴ Pakistan must immediately accept its responsibility to change paradigms or else risk a perpetuation of instability, perhaps descending into all-out chaos in Afghanistan, which would open up even greater space for the TTP and its affiliates to operate and strike from across the Durand Line.

The list of demands laid out in Ghani's letter to Pakistan are all realistic next steps that would buy both sides time and perhaps also begin to influence the Taliban's strategy. The most prudent approach would entail Pakistan targeting its strategy disproportionately to the pro-fighting groups among the Taliban, raising their costs and weakening them while giving those in favor of dialogue an opportunity to move quickly toward formal negotiations—and

conveying that failure to do so would have real consequences. Specifically, Pakistan should undertake the following actions:

- immediately shut down financial flows to Taliban fighters participating in the spring offensive;
- start making life uncomfortable for Taliban fighters' families if the fighting faction remains unresponsive to Pakistani demands to reconsider the use of violence;
- begin to arrest Taliban fighters and agree to Ghani's offer of Afghan and Pakistan Taliban prisoner exchanges;
- exert greater control over the border through real-time intelligence sharing, with or without a formal MoU.

If these efforts do not begin to show positive results within a reasonably short time frame—within weeks, and by the end of the summer at the latest—Pakistan must then make the difficult decision of initiating direct action against those operating from the sanctuaries and opposed to talks with the Kabul government. Because the Taliban are believed to be present in and around the heavily populated cities of Quetta, Peshawar, and Karachi, this would entail a series of targeted law enforcement (police and paramilitary)-with-intelligence operations. A law enforcement approach is also recommended over a larger military offensive because even if the latter were tactically viable, it would inevitably push the Taliban into Afghanistan and add to the ANSF's burden.

All along, Pakistan must continually hold before the Taliban the possibility of forced expulsion from Pakistan or the arrest of their leadership. Conducting such direct actions without first exhausting other measures would terminate any prospects of talks, and such moves should be considered only as a last resort. But Pakistan must be willing to countenance and execute such direct actions should the situation warrant them. A graduated approach primarily targeting the pro-fighting faction of the Taliban would also avoid forcing the entire Taliban movement to turn violent against the Pakistani state—a long-standing Pakistani concern. To counter the growing suspicions among Afghans that Pakistan lacks serious commitment to the cause of peace, the Pakistani leadership should provide tangible evidence to the Kabul government as it undertakes each of these moves.

Laying the Groundwork for Negotiating with the Taliban

The substance of the actual conversations with the Taliban is important to work out. All interlocutors need to prioritize requests and focus on the most important ones first. This means that engagements between the Taliban and Afghan representatives need to move quickly beyond exploring confidence-building measures. The best use of future meetings would be to scaffold all conversations with the Taliban on the fundamental issue of achieving a cease-fire on the ground in Afghanistan. The Taliban understandably do not want to give up their trump card of violence completely without having a guaranteed quid pro quo in place. Discussions must therefore be aimed at identifying the minimum prerequisites on all sides that would allow a cease-fire to take effect, and a formal negotiation process to begin thereafter.

The Ghani government also needs to have a better grasp of the multiple channels now in existence for talking to the Taliban and provide guidance. Even as the Chinese track is being pursued, Taliban representatives sit in Doha awaiting the formal opening of the Taliban office. It is unclear how the Qatar option intersects with what is being pursued by other channels within the region.⁶⁵ Other track 1.5 processes are ongoing in parallel, without anyone having a clear sense of the impact they might have on formal negotiations and in the absence of any real guidance from the Ghani government on what type of discussions in these meetings would be most useful to the more direct conversations being pursued.

Ghani's Tasks

Meanwhile, Ghani has two important tasks if he wants his initiative to succeed. First, to buy himself time, he needs to manage the politics around his Pakistan outreach more astutely than he has to date. While he may have taken key actors in the unity government into his confidence with regard to his Pakistan policy, he has done little to explain his reasoning to the public or to build a broader political consensus on the issue. With these lapses, he has ceded crucial media space to his critics and fueled ill will. In retrospect, a quieter courting of Pakistan might have not only prevented the constant criticism—perhaps even given Ghani space to take bolder steps behind the scenes—but also could have left him with plausible deniability had the effort failed, and the option of taking credit for it if tangible progress was made. The best he can do now is to avoid unnecessary crises such as the one provoked by the leak of the ISI-NDS MoU, while more generally but carefully explaining the logic of his policy to his people. The current atmosphere also requires that he adopt a less conciliatory tone toward Pakistan in public and in a way that projects firmness, at least until Islamabad is able to deliver something tangible.⁶⁶

The second and more important task is for Ghani to demonstrate that his government is able to function. The power-sharing construct that resulted from Afghanistan's contentious 2014 presidential election has frustrated decision making. Nine months after the government's inauguration, the cabinet is still not complete, and two-thirds of the country's governors have not been appointed. A government that is perceived as weak will encourage Taliban hard-liners to believe that it can be toppled through fighting and will discourage pro-negotiation Taliban (and Pakistan) who might fear that the Ghani government will not be able to implement its commitments. The unity government's success in holding out in the face of the Taliban offensive this year may well be key to opening up space for a meaningful dialogue.

Ghani's political opponents must also recognize that the status quo can only destabilize the Afghan state apparatus, which is increasingly incapable of defending or sustaining itself, let alone improving the lives of its citizens. Great damage is being done through premature leaks about developments linked to Ghani's Pakistan policy. It is not only setting back progress but also giving Pakistan room to transfer the blame for its failure to deliver the Taliban to the table and strengthening the hand of the Taliban still seeking total victory. Rather than charged critiques that seek to put Ghani down or pose determined opposition to Pakistan's role, Ghani's critics could contribute constructively by offering suggestions on how to elicit greater support from Pakistan, China, and other interested actors.

China's Role in Afghanistan-Pakistan Conciliation and Taliban Mitigation

Though China's diplomatic style is typically noninterventionist, China should lean more heavily on Pakistan and apply greater pressure directly on the Taliban leadership to enter negotiations in earnest, for mere prodding has not succeeded in moving affairs along fast enough to ensure Ghani's political survival. For their part, Ghani and the United States need to remain proactive in trying to mobilize Chinese influence. The United States, China, and Afghanistan are now engaged in a trilateral dialogue on Afghanistan, but this channel is more bureaucratic than action-oriented. Kabul and Washington need to more aggressively convince China to develop a sense of urgency in its dealings with Pakistan and the Taliban.

The Role of the International Community

Finally, the United States and the rest of the international community must not see Ghani's Pakistan outreach and China's growing involvement in Afghanistan-Pakistan conciliation as a substitute for the need to stay the course in Afghanistan. Perhaps the biggest blow to Ghani's efforts at this point would be a further reinforcement of the perception that the

The unity government's success in holding out in the face of the Taliban offensive this year may well be key to opening up space for a meaningful dialogue.

West has given up and that the unity government and ANSF will collapse. The United States must convincingly demonstrate its continued support of Afghanistan to counter the perception that it is disinterested in the country's long-term future. It would also be advisable to formally reopen the debate in Washington about the U.S. military's drawdown schedule and support role. Leaving a window open for the next U.S. president to choose his or her own course would not only allow a possible recalibration based on the situation at the time but would also help assuage any concerns that Afghanistan is about to be abandoned again. Strong signals of support from the international community are crucial to disincentivize hedging strategies by Afghan political actors—which could make the collapse of the unity government a self-fulfilling prophecy—and to avoid giving the pro-fighting Taliban groups even greater opportunity to convince the movement that total victory is in sight.

Conclusion

Time is of the essence. The longer Pakistan waits to make a more concerted effort against the Taliban, the less likely it is that the Afghan government will be able to continue operating with a single voice. It would be a mistake on Pakistan's part to believe that the solution is to leave Ghani to manage his domestic political opponents rather than to deliver, and soon.

President Ghani has undoubtedly taken a gamble, but it is a calculated one that has the potential to bring serious dividends in terms of Afghanistan's, and the region's, stability and economic progress. The international community can help by more effectively aligning their diplomacy behind him. Most of all, though, success for Ghani depends heavily on what Pakistan is willing and able to deliver within the next few months. Pakistan's failure to seize the offer of strategic cooperation offered by Ghani would precipitate a nightmare for Afghanistan—but no less for Pakistan itself. There is hope, but it is fading rapidly.

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57. Author's (S.S.) conversations with Afghan officials, June 2015. In one rather interesting statement to an Indian TV channel just before his trip to India in April, President Ghani hinted at testing Pakistan's resolve "this year" instead of the much shorter time frame most believe Pakistan has to deliver in. NDTV, "Don't Make Us a Proxy War Battleground." Pakistani interlocutors also perceive their understanding with Ghani to be on a longer time frame as long as they are able to show incremental progress and success. Author's (M.Y.) conversations with former and current Pakistani officials, March–June 2015.
58. Antonio Giustozzi and Silab Mangal, "Violence, the Taliban, and Afghanistan's 2014 Elections," *Peaceworks* no. 103 (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2015), www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW103-Violence-the-Taliban-and-Afghanistan-s-2014-Elections.pdf. For a slightly contrary view, see Michael Semple, "Rhetoric, Ideology, and Organizational Structure of the Taliban Movement," *Peaceworks* no. 102 (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2015), www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW102-Rhetoric-Ideology-and-Organizational-Structure-of-the-Taliban-Movement.pdf.
59. See, for example, Alessandria Masi, "Afghan Government, Taliban Clash on Peace Talks Rumors," *International Business Times*, February 24, 2015, www.ibtimes.com/afghan-government-taliban-clash-peace-talks-rumors-1826574.
60. Author's (M.Y.) conversation with senior Pakistani officials, June 2015.
61. Sudarsan Raghavan, "Foreign Fighters Pushed Out of Pakistan Now Helping Afghan Taliban," *Washington Post*, April 15, 2015, www.stripes.com/news/middle-east/foreign-fighters-pushed-out-of-pakistan-now-helping-afghan-taliban-1.340403; Abubakar Siddique, "The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Overshadows Afghan Battlefield," *Gandhara*, May 12, 2015, <http://gandhara.rferl.org/content/afghanistan-imu-role-in-fighting/27011645.html>.
62. Saleha Soadat and Shakila Ibrahimkhail, "Abdullah Demands MoU Amendment," *Tolo News*, May 20, 2015, www.toloneews.com/en/afghanistan/19616-abdullah-demands-mou-amendment.
63. Author's (M.Y.) conversation with senior Pakistani officials, June 2015.
64. Hekmatullah Azamy, "The Future of the Taliban," *Foreign Policy*, June 23, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/23/the-future-of-the-taliban/>.
65. Ghani was scheduled to travel to Qatar in late-May to discuss precisely this issue with the Qatari authorities but had to cancel his trip owing to the political furor caused by the ISI-NDS MoU negotiated just days earlier. Sharif Amiry, "Ghani's Trip to Qatar Cancelled amid Debate Over NDS-ISI MoU," *Tolo News*, May 28, 2015, www.toloneews.com/en/afghanistan/19742-ghanis-trip-to-qatar-cancelled-amid-debate-over-nds-isi-mou.
66. Some of this is already happening, as Ghani has taken a visibly sterner line on Pakistan in public amid the furor over the ISI-NDS MoU. For instance, in a recent statement during a visit to Kandahar in the second week of June, President Ghani accused Pakistan of having waged war against Afghanistan for thirty-six years. He was equally clear, though, that the solution lay in ensuring a peaceful relationship with Pakistan. Amini, "Peace First."

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