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The India-Pakistan Rivalry in Afghanistan

By Zachary Constantino



Afghan President Ashraf Ghani arrives in Islamabad on June 27, 2019, for a meeting with Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan. (Photo by Press Information Department via AP)

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Summary

- India and Pakistan pursue mutually exclusive objectives in Afghanistan and leverage sharply different tools to achieve their respective goals. Pakistan utilizes militant groups, including the Afghan Taliban, as strategic proxies, while India places considerable weight on its soft power influence among Afghans.
- India and Pakistan view the intentions and capabilities of each other through an adversarial lens. Pakistan, however, vastly misreads and exaggerates India’s activities in Afghanistan.
- Pakistan is the regional actor with the most influence in Afghanistan

owing to its patronage of a resilient Taliban insurgency, though the Pakistan-Taliban relationship is replete with tension. India believes supporting the existing Afghan system best serves its interests, a policy informed by the lack of plausible alternatives. New Delhi is unlikely to acquire, let alone deploy, the military power necessary to generate conditions favorable to Kabul.

- Pakistan may decide to punish India in Afghanistan over India’s decision to mainstream the disputed territory of Kashmir. The incentives for Islamabad to intensify proxy warfare against India’s presence in

Afghanistan would sharply increase should the United States decide to abruptly withdraw from Afghanistan without a broad-based intra-Afghan peace deal in place.

- Confidence-building measures constructed around transparency and economic cooperation are not likely to improve India-Pakistan relations. Nevertheless, an inclusive Afghan settlement should at least reduce prospects for violence between India and Pakistan in Afghanistan, though means for Pakistan to conduct proxy violence against India are likely to persist.

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report explores the dynamics underpinning the India-Pakistan rivalry in Afghanistan. The interests, fears, and strategies of New Delhi and Islamabad are situated within the context of the Afghan war, developments in Kashmir, terrorism, and proxy violence. The study was supported by the Asia Center at the United States Institute of Peace.

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TO THE PEOPLE OF AFGHANISTAN FROM



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, left, and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani at the June 4, 2016 inauguration of the Indian-funded Afghan-India Friendship Dam. (Photo by Omar Sobhani/Pool Photo via AP)

“A Deadly Triangle”

Afghanistan has long been the epicenter of great power and regional rivalries. Externally backed coups, proxy violence, and the arming of client groups have collectively exacted a heavy toll on Afghan stability and state formation. The most consequential competition is the contest between India and Pakistan. The hostility between India and Pakistan long precedes the Afghan conflict and is rooted in contrasting visions of nationhood—embodied in the ongoing and insoluble dispute over Kashmir—that emerged at the end of British rule over South Asia. Afghanistan soon became entangled in this regional contest as Pakistan suspiciously eyed Indo-Afghan ties as a threat to its territorial and ethnic integrity. The historian William Dalrymple succinctly describes the dynamics among Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India as “three countries caught in a deadly triangle of mutual mistrust and competition.”¹

This deadly triangle weighs on US diplomatic efforts to forge an interim agreement with the Afghan Taliban that reduces violence and jump-starts intra-Afghan negotiations as a means to ending the long Afghan war. The external dimension of the war is as critical as the internal drivers of violence, more so if outside interference from Afghanistan’s neighbors spoils prospects for a comprehensive peace. The situation is further complicated by recent developments in the disputed region of Kashmir, different parts of which are administered by India or Pakistan, which amount to a parallel crisis that may increasingly converge with the conflict in Afghanistan.

India has traditionally relied on a loose network of mainly nonethnic Pashtun leaders to maintain political influence in Afghanistan and worked to broaden its sway among Pashtuns during the Karzai presidency.

In exploring the most salient dynamics underpinning the India-Pakistan rivalry in Afghanistan, this report situates the interests, fears, and strategies of New Delhi and Islamabad within the context of the Afghan war. The influence of terrorism and proxy violence on the perceptions and policy preferences of the rivalrous countries is a central topic, as these issues are not only sources of enduring hostility be-

tween India and Pakistan but also significant areas of concern for US policymakers. As the United States pursues negotiations with the Taliban and considers the future of its military presence in Afghanistan, Washington's choices will affect the long struggle between India and Pakistan.

India in Afghanistan

India's objectives in Afghanistan are threefold: to promote a stable democratic order, counter Pakistani influence, and prevent Islamabad-backed militants from using Afghanistan as a platform for terrorism that could threaten Indian interests. New Delhi sees each goal as interconnected. Indian leaders view a sovereign and plural Afghan government as a natural ally and a reliable bulwark against militancy. Indian officials go to great lengths to underscore the necessity of preserving Afghanistan's constitutional system, which they see as integral to advancing India's political and security aims. In November 2019, New Delhi's ambassador to the United States, Harsh Vardhan Shringla, avowed, "Democracy and constitutional order in Afghanistan are the major gains achieved in the last eighteen years, and we believe these are worth preserving."²

Soft-power tools form the mainstay of India's influence in Afghanistan. New Delhi has committed \$3 billion in economic assistance since the fall of the Afghan Taliban in 2001, supporting infrastructure and human resource development across multiple sectors. Among its landmark projects, India built the Afghan-India Friendship Dam (formerly known as the Salma Dam) in the western province of Herat and Kabul's national parliament building, and developed trade corridors that bypass Pakistan.³ Indian soft power also extends to supporting Afghanistan's initiatives in health, agriculture, education, water management, housing, sports, and tourism. New Delhi trains Afghan civil servants, soldiers, and law enforcement personnel and offers educational scholarships to one thousand Afghans annually.⁴ Though it has no forces deployed to Afghanistan, partly to avoid provoking Pakistan, India has augmented the Afghan military with a small yet symbolic number of attack helicopters.⁵ The 2011 Strategic Partnership Agreement between India and Afghanistan further commits New Delhi to "assist, as mutually determined, in training, equipping and capacity building programs for Afghan National Security Forces."⁶

India has traditionally relied on a loose network of mainly nonethnic Pashtun leaders to maintain political influence and worked to broaden its sway among Pashtuns during Hamid Karzai's presidency (2004–14), concentrating small-scale development schemes in predominantly Pashtun areas.⁷ Afghan chief executive officer Abdullah Abdullah, an ex-foreign minister of mixed Pashtun-Tajik lineage, is in a political struggle with incumbent Ashraf Ghani, a Pashtun, following a disputed and inconclusive presidential election in September 2019. Either candidate

MAP OF AFGHANISTAN, INDIA, PAKISTAN, AND DISPUTED AREAS

Artwork by Lucidity Information Design.



Boundaries and names shown on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance on the part of the United States Institute of Peace.

would be acceptable to New Delhi as president; Abdullah, however, is reportedly closer to India. His experience with India, where his family resides, extends back to the late 1990s, when he served as the liaison between New Delhi and the umbrella group of Afghans opposed to Taliban rule.⁸ India's popular standing extends beyond elites to ordinary Afghans as well. A 2016 survey conducted by BBG-Gallup found that nearly 62 percent of Afghans held a favorable view of India. In the same poll, Pakistan was viewed favorably by only 3.7 percent of respondents, fewer than viewed the Islamic State favorably (5.8 percent).⁹ These numbers are unsurprising in light of the deep cultural affinities between Afghanistan and India.

INDIA'S TERRORISM CONCERNS

It is difficult to overstate the depth of India's opposition to Afghanistan-based militancy that bears a Pakistani signature, and India's corresponding commitment to fortify Kabul as a counterterrorism partner. The era of Taliban rule (1996–2001) was the nadir of India-Afghanistan relations. India had reasonably good ties with Afghanistan's monarchist, republican, and communist regimes preceding the Taliban's ascendancy. New Delhi hastily evacuated its embassy after the Taliban swept into Kabul in 1996, and the Taliban, with military backing from Pakistan, forced India's Afghan allies to retreat into an embattled northern redoubt. Veteran journalist Abubakar Siddique writes that Pakistan's military establishment envisioned the emergence of the Taliban "as a fortification against India to the east."¹⁰ Under the Taliban, Afghanistan became a training ground for Islamabad-sponsored militants waging a guerrilla war in Indian-administered Kashmir. During the late 1990s, Pakistan's principal intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), relocated many of its Kashmir-focused proxies into eastern Afghanistan to evade US pressure on Pakistan to curb militant infiltration.¹¹

The last publicly known negotiations conducted between the Taliban and New Delhi in 1999 also cast an enduring shadow over Indian perceptions of the group. At the time, militants affiliated with the Pakistan-based outfit Harakat-ul-Mujahideen hijacked an Indian commercial plane, eventually forcing it to land in the Afghan province of Kandahar.¹² The Taliban government mediated a hostage exchange that led to the release of extremist leader Masood Azhar—a swap that continues to haunt India to this day. Shortly after his release, Azhar founded Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), a group that attacked the Indian parliament building in December 2001.¹³ In 2016, JeM reportedly carried out a major attack on an Indian air base, and in February 2019 it claimed responsibility for the worst terrorist act committed in Indian-administered Kashmir in three decades.¹⁴ The UN later sanctioned Azhar for supporting terrorism, yet he remains at large in Pakistan and probably shielded by its security agencies.¹⁵ JeM plays a minor role in the Taliban's war against Kabul, and the group splintered soon after Pakistan backed the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Still, JeM's long association and ideological kinship with the Taliban remain of grave concern to India. Years after the hostage exchange, Ajit Doval, one of the Indian negotiators involved and who is now India's national security adviser, lamented, "Nobody should have been swapped, least of all Masood Azhar."¹⁶

Moreover, India is alarmed by the presence of another anti-Indian terrorist group in the Afghan conflict, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT). LeT, a loyal proxy of the Pakistani military more cohesive and lethal than JeM, was forged in the crucible of the anti-Soviet war. In 2008 the group carried out multiple attacks in India's financial capital of Mumbai that left 166 dead, including six Americans. In Afghanistan, LeT has attacked Indian diplomatic facilities, government employees, and aid workers.¹⁷ LeT augments the Taliban's capabilities with expertise and fighters. Yet LeT does not claim responsibility for the violence it perpetrates in Afghanistan to avoid provoking international pressure on Islamabad, according to former State Department intelligence analyst Tricia Bacon.¹⁸ Stephen Tankel, another terrorism specialist, writes that in addition to striking Indian interests, LeT's influx into Afghanistan enables ISI to gather intelligence on the "militant state of play across the border."¹⁹ Indian security officials estimate "hundreds" of LeT militants are fighting in Afghanistan.²⁰

INDIA'S APPROACH TO NEGOTIATIONS

India has warily eyed events in Afghanistan since Ashraf Ghani's ascent to power as Afghanistan's president in 2014. Ghani tilted his foreign policy in Pakistan's favor during the first year of his administration, gambling that improved relations with Islamabad would incentivize the Pakistani military establishment to pressure the Taliban to join peace talks with the Afghan government. India was disquieted when Ghani pressed for a memorandum of cooperation between the intelligence services of Pakistan and Afghanistan while soliciting a more significant role for Pakistan and China in Afghan peace talks.²¹ Ghani's outreach to Pakistan was so controversial that his first spy chief resigned in protest.²² Ghani later revived ties with New Delhi following a resurgence of Taliban violence and Islamabad's apparent unwillingness to curb militant havens on Pakistani soil, cementing stronger Indo-Afghan relations through a series of high-level visits.²³ Ghani's noticeable pivot away from Pakistan reassured India. Still, he has never been accorded the level of confidence that New Delhi placed in his predecessor, Hamid Karzai, who often spoke of his time as a student in India with a degree of reverence and nostalgia.²⁴

Significantly, the launch of US-Taliban negotiations in 2018, jettisoning prior demands that substantive talks had to include the Afghan government at the outset, unsettled India. From New Delhi's viewpoint, the policy shift legitimized the Taliban at Kabul's expense, empowered Pakistan, and endangered nearly two decades of sustained investment in Afghanistan. In June 2019, India's permanent representative to the United Nations cautioned against US "timelines which are, perhaps, not intrinsic to the needs of the Afghan people," and, in a veiled swipe at Pakistan, underlined the imperative of combating "[militant] support and safe havens."²⁵ After the United States temporarily suspended negotiations with the Taliban in September 2019, a former Indian ambassador to Afghanistan who sits on New Delhi's National Security Advisory Board bluntly judged, "Afghanistan has been saved from being thrown under a bus for the moment."²⁶ Indian officials continue to reiterate their concerns about Pakistan and terrorism following the resumption of US-Taliban talks.²⁷

Of note, India has established discreet channels to the Taliban since at least 2008, according to scholar Avinash Paliwal.²⁸ The release of Indian engineers held captive by the Taliban in October 2019 suggests that clandestine overtures continue, at least to address short-term tactical needs.²⁹ A grudging yet pragmatic attitude toward the Taliban also exists among some elements of the Indian bureaucracy—a prospective constituency to champion accommodation, however fraught.³⁰ Russia and Iran, India's closest regional allies, have already established precedents for New Delhi to follow as well. Moscow and Tehran openly engage Taliban representatives, a tacit acknowledgment from both powers that the Taliban may yet prevail in the Afghan conflict.³¹

Nonetheless, the likelihood of India warming to a final settlement that is not broad-based and that favors the Taliban is slim. India sees the Taliban as too closely aligned with anti-Indian terrorist groups and unlikely to abide by its oft-mentioned yet vague pledge to prevent "anyone from harming others from Afghan soil."³² Instead, New Delhi prefers that the Taliban join the existing Afghan system as a mainstream political party, effectively constrained by other Afghan factions.³³ From the Taliban's perspective, the group has publicly expressed its desire for good relations with all of Afghanistan's neighbors, including India, while specifically criticizing New Delhi's support of Kabul.³⁴ Interestingly, one of the Taliban's senior negotiators received military training in India during the 1970s.³⁵ It is not beyond the pale to conceive of a scenario in which the Taliban welcomed India's



Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, left, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi wave to the media before the start of their official meeting in New Delhi on October 24, 2017. (Photo by AP)

aid and expertise, should the group regain power. Still, such an outcome is remote. Islamabad would swiftly block any Taliban-India rapprochement, and India's policymakers are unlikely to set aside their profound reservations over the Taliban's links to terrorist groups and Pakistan.

Washington's lack of clarity over the future of its military presence in Afghanistan further magnifies Indian anxieties concerning terrorism and Afghan stability. The United States is already reducing its forces, and additional reductions are likely in 2020. Indian policy in Afghanistan has long operated on the assumption that another "friendly power" would do the heavy lifting in providing security, thereby enabling New Delhi to focus on soft-power tools, according to Paliwal.³⁶ India's lack of easy access to Afghanistan and sparse expeditionary capacity further reinforce New Delhi's reluctance to embrace a military role in the Afghan war. In September 2017, India's then defense minister was categorical in reaffirming a long-standing policy of "no boots on the ground" in Afghanistan.³⁷

New Delhi may reconsider its military options if the United States abruptly departs without a comprehensive peace deal. The withdrawal of US forces, including critical airpower, intelligence, and logistical assets, would pave the way for a sweeping Taliban advance. However, the probability of India dispatching forces to fill the void left by a US exit remains low. The Indian military can neither replicate the US capabilities and funding provided to Afghan units nor sustain

troops in a hostile war zone like Afghanistan. Deploying soldiers would incur prohibitive costs, and maintaining resupply lines would be all but impossible with a belligerent Pakistan separating India from Afghanistan. Alternatively, India could rely on standoff assets, such as air and missile platforms, to strike Afghanistan-based terrorists. However, this would be as unworkable as an armed mission to Afghanistan because India likely does not possess the real-time intelligence networks to “fix and finish” militant targets, and Pakistan would deny India use of its airspace.³⁸ Ultimately, New Delhi has few options at its disposal other than supporting the current Afghan system to address its interests.

Pakistan’s Concerns

Pakistan’s contentious history with Afghanistan reflects an overriding fear of encirclement. Islamabad’s objectives in Afghanistan have remained broadly consistent since the 1970s and entail securing a balance of power in Kabul that advances Islamabad’s interests while diminishing India’s role. Analysts typically refer to this policy as the Pakistan Army’s quest for “strategic depth.” A retired Pakistani diplomat with extensive Afghan experience posits that the original conception of strategic depth as a military strategy was impractical from the start and remains outdated, particularly because of the infeasibility of using Afghanistan as a buffer against India in the event of a conflict.³⁹ Various Pakistani Army chiefs and civilian leaders have attempted to soften the outward appearance of strategic depth with innocuous language, for example by referring to the policy as merely a desire for “good relations” with Afghanistan or by claiming that it was dropped as policy altogether.⁴⁰ Yet stripped to its fundamentals, and irrespective of doctrinal labels, there is a broad consensus that Pakistan aims to promote an Afghan structure that maximizes both its influence and hostility toward India. On this issue, Islamabad minces few words. In January 2019 a spokesperson for Pakistan’s Foreign Office tersely declared, “India has no role in Afghanistan.”⁴¹

At the heart of Islamabad’s calculus is a long-standing fear that India, in league with Kabul, is using Afghanistan as a springboard to weaken Pakistan’s territorial integrity, particularly by stoking unrest among its ethnic Baloch and Pashtun populations. Assessing the validity of these claims is difficult, primarily because of the absence of credible evidence, a scarcity of reliable sources, and pervasive conspiracy theories that enshroud the intelligence services of both India and Pakistan. However, reasonable deductions are still attainable. As a general proposition, Pakistan vastly exaggerates the reach and capabilities of India’s external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW). Unlike Pakistan, which has practiced clandestine warfare since its creation, no comparable tradition exists within the Indian system. With the notable exception of R&AW’s backing of insurgents in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) before its war for independence in 1971, there is no other period in the service’s history when it played a comparably influential paramilitary role.⁴² The R&AW division responsible for conducting offensive operations against Pakistan was dismantled in 1997 in a bid to improve bilateral ties, embittering veterans of the agency while inflicting lasting damage on its covert action capabilities.⁴³ Reflecting on this deficiency after a decades-long career in intelligence, Ajit Doval acknowledged in 2010 that the logic of clandestine action “unfortunately bypassed India,” culminating in a failure to “develop capabilities and a viable national response.”⁴⁴

Despite persistent tensions between Islamabad and the Taliban, the Taliban's survival, consolidation, and growth as an insurgent organization could not have been possible without Pakistan.

Another way to gauge whether India is fomenting Pakistan's internal turmoil is to consider the origins of Pakistan's numerous rebellions. The insurgent violence that Pakistan faces in its Baloch- and Pashtun-majority areas is incontrovertibly the result of decades of state repression. Pakistan has been fighting insurgencies in its restive province of Balochistan since the country's founding.⁴⁵ Rather than address the polit-

ical and economic grievances fueling Baloch alienation, various Pakistani governments have resorted to extreme force to suppress dissent. A study of Pakistan's response to one of the most intense periods of rebellion in Balochistan in the 1970s found scant evidence of Pakistan's neighbors channeling decisive support to Baloch insurgents because of structural barriers that remain unchanged—Afghanistan's weakness and India's lack of geographic access.⁴⁶ Hamid Karzai temporarily sheltered a prominent Baloch activist during his tenure in office, but there are no indications Ghani maintains this policy.⁴⁷ In a rare admission, a former head of ISI conceded to an ex-R&AW chief, "I've always felt we are overplaying India's involvement [in Balochistan]," and criticized "ill-informed" Pakistanis who inflate the number of Indian consulates in Afghanistan.⁴⁸ Sponsoring Baloch secession also makes little strategic sense from India's perspective because such activities would threaten its trade corridor to Afghanistan and undermine its crucial relationship with Iran, which struggles to quell Baloch insurgents on its side of the border.⁴⁹ The most credible explanation for Indian involvement with Baloch nationalists, assuming operations are unfolding in the covert space, is that these efforts probably amount to low-level nuisance activities. At most, this conduct may involve secret contacts and influence peddling, with outreach likely concentrated among marginal exile groups because of India's inability to reach Balochistan, let alone sustain operations there.

The genesis of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a group that has been waging war against the Pakistani state since 2007, parallels the Baloch experience—a heavy-handed state spurring a backlash. The TTP coalesced as a reaction to a series of punitive military operations and poorly managed nonaggression deals in the now-former tribal areas. Its resilience stems from the ability of its disparate networks to tap into a popular vein of Pashtun anger.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, Pakistan fixates on what it regards as the external drivers of the TTP, highlighting instances of official Afghan support. In 2013, US forces detained a senior TTP commander, who was secretly accompanied by Kabul's intelligence agents.⁵¹ Additionally, the TTP has sanctuary in select areas of eastern Afghanistan, though the extent to which the availability of this haven is the by-product of a coordinated Afghan government strategy or is mainly attributable to localized factors, such as cross-border tribal allegiances and routine corruption, remains a subject of debate.

Whether R&AW, owing to its long-standing relationship with its Afghan counterpart, sanctions Kabul's links to the TTP is unknown. As a practical matter, the likelihood of R&AW backing the TTP seems at best questionable. The TTP's amorphous structure, dispersed across highly volatile regions of Pakistan, diminishes its utility as a malleable proxy against Islamabad. Moreover, in recent years the Islamic State's regional affiliate has attracted significant defections from TTP factions; in such an entangled environment, India would be hard-pressed to find reliable surrogates.⁵² Still, perception matters, and the mere specter of an Afghan intelligence hand and its previously exposed ties to the TTP is, in Pakistan's estimation, sufficient evidence of Indian perfidy.

TALIBAN ARE KEY TO PAKISTAN'S AFGHANISTAN STRATEGY

To counter what it regards as an Indo-Afghan nexus to encircle and weaken Pakistan, Islamabad has pursued a dual-track strategy, seeking ties with Kabul while shielding the Afghan Taliban's leadership and enabling the group's haven inside Pakistan. Though not explicitly anti-Indian in its declared goals and mistrustful of the ISI, the Taliban's dependence on Pakistan for sanctuary and alliances with terrorist organizations implacably hostile to New Delhi effectively mean the group is an asset in Islamabad's calculus. While Pakistani officials effusively deny providing aid to the Taliban, the categorical rejections of the past have given way to occasionally candid admissions. In 2015, Pakistan's former military ruler Pervez Musharraf acknowledged that Pakistan supported militant "proxies" because Hamid Karzai "helped India stab Pakistan in the back."⁵³ Musharraf's successor as army chief, General Ashfaq Kayani, who also led the ISI, was equally blunt. He once told a US diplomat, "If you think we are going to turn the Taliban and Haqqanis [a prominent Taliban faction] and others into mortal enemies of ours and watch you walk out the door, you are completely crazy. Are we hedging our bets? You bet we are."⁵⁴

Pakistan, through the ISI, does not control the Taliban, and, much to Pakistan's frustration, the group oscillates between compliance and obstinacy. When the Taliban ruled as a government in the 1990s, the organization repeatedly rebuffed requests from Pakistan to recognize the contested border with Afghanistan.⁵⁵ In 2010 the Taliban relocated their diplomatic representation to Qatar to develop channels free of Pakistani meddling, thereby flexing the organization's political autonomy. Furthermore, the expansion of territory controlled by the Taliban inside Afghanistan has reduced Pakistan's ability to coerce the group. The environment has grown so hospitable that some senior Taliban leaders reportedly leave Pakistan for occasional forays into Afghanistan.⁵⁶ The Taliban also complain about the long shadow the ISI casts within the Taliban's Pakistan-based sanctuary, including occasional roundups of select leaders for not toeing the line.⁵⁷ Before his death in a 2016 US airstrike, Taliban leader Akhtar Mansour had reached out to Iran, partly to lessen the group's dependence on Pakistan, according to a former Taliban commander.⁵⁸

Paradoxically, despite the persistent tensions between Islamabad and the Taliban, the Taliban's survival, consolidation, and growth as an insurgent organization could not have been possible without Pakistan. Pakistan enabled a battered Taliban leadership to recuperate and reorganize inside a safe haven after the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001. The Taliban's national commissions charged with essential functions, such as military planning and the provision of medical services for fighters, and its regional leadership councils first emerged in Pakistani cities, where they continue to orchestrate operations, allocate resources, and appoint personnel.⁵⁹ Many Taliban insurgents are "commuters" who effortlessly and repeatedly cross the border through checkpoints operated by friendly Pakistani forces.⁶⁰ As the military academician Theo Farrell notes, "There is considerable evidence that the Pakistan Army also has continued to provide direct assistance with funding, training, logistics, and military advisers."⁶¹ Collectively, this amounts to Pakistan playing the role of an influential landlord, and this power is unlikely to disappear, even in the event of a negotiated Afghan settlement, because Taliban leaders would continue to rely on a protected sanctuary as a hedge against a fragile agreement.

The shift in US policy to negotiate directly with the Taliban absent Kabul aligns with Pakistan's interests in promoting a leading Taliban role in a future Afghan government. For years, Washington

pressed Islamabad to dismantle the Taliban's sanctuaries, but elicited at best cosmetic gestures and obfuscation. Taliban commanders were caught and released or surreptitiously forewarned to avoid Pakistani Army operations.⁶² The demands from the United States have now favorably moved in Pakistan's direction. Islamabad need only facilitate talks with the Taliban rather than extirpate the group, which affords Pakistan wide latitude to sidestep the sanctuary question. To satisfy US requests, Pakistan has thus far taken modest, low-cost actions to advance negotiations, such as releasing Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Taliban's top envoy, in 2018 and convening other engagements between the Taliban and US diplomats.⁶³

Pakistan's military establishment will undoubtedly draw a measure of vindication from the strategic wisdom of its carefully calibrated hedging strategy. Despite pressure from three successive US administrations, Islamabad hedged by selectively supporting Washington while accommodating the Taliban's sanctuary—and maintaining this insurance policy has paid dividends. The Taliban insurgency is unified and powerful, a fact underscored by the group's success in depressing Afghan voter turnout during the September 2019 presidential election.⁶⁴ And despite recurring friction in Pakistan-Taliban ties, the relationship endures. Consequently, Pakistan is well positioned to influence events in Afghanistan through the Taliban if talks never bear fruit, and, should negotiations reach a settlement, Pakistani cooperation may be pivotal to ensure that any deal holds together.

The Role of Kashmir in Three-Country Tensions

New Delhi's decision to revoke Jammu and Kashmir's semi-autonomous status and incorporate the now former state into India's constitutional mainstream has sharply escalated tensions with Pakistan.⁶⁵ Though it may not have been a principal consideration behind its Kashmir power play, India was and remains troubled by the potential for a less than favorable Afghan deal to inaugurate a fresh wave of cross-border violence.

After the anti-Soviet war concluded in 1989, a revolt erupted in Indian-administered Kashmir. Islamabad did not generate the grievances that fueled the rebellion. Instead, Pakistan used the military resources and expertise in asymmetric warfare accrued from backing the Afghan mujahideen in the 1980s to transform an unorganized Kashmiri resistance into an organized insurgency.⁶⁶ The perceived potential for history to repeat itself weighed on New Delhi's thinking in the summer of 2019. In August, a spokesman for India's ruling party asserted that the government needed to "take full control of the security apparatus" in Kashmir in anticipation of militants reigniting conflict there in the wake of an anticipated US-Taliban agreement.⁶⁷

Predictably, Pakistani leaders are challenging India's gambit in the diplomatic arena because they fear New Delhi will succeed in creating a new normal in Kashmir that irrevocably removes the territory's disputed status from any future negotiations. Thus far, India's strategy appears to be paying off as New Delhi faces no serious domestic or external pressure to alter course, and its sweeping clampdown on Kashmir has thwarted widespread unrest.⁶⁸ Though anti-government demonstrations over a controversial citizen law are roiling India's politics, these protests



Indian soldiers examine debris after a February 14, 2019 bombing in the Pulwama district, Jammu and Kashmir, India. Responsibility for the attack was claimed by the Pakistani-based militant group Jaish-e-Mohammad. (Photo by Younis Khaliq/Reuters)

are unlikely to compel New Delhi to shift its policy on Kashmir. Many opposition parties welcomed the integration of Kashmir into the Indian Union, limiting their objections to the lack of consultation with political stakeholders and the severe security measures put in place. Even China, usually Pakistan's stalwart ally, has limited its interventions in Kashmir to expressions of solidarity with Islamabad while relegating the issue to a strictly bilateral concern between India and Pakistan.⁶⁹ Kashmir was conspicuously absent as an agenda item during the October 2019 summit between Indian prime minister Narendra Modi and Chinese president Xi Jinping.⁷⁰

In the near term, Pakistan has few options at its disposal. Islamabad's diplomatic offensive to rally world opinion against New Delhi has achieved anemic results. If Pakistan attempts to intensify cross-border militant attacks in Kashmir or mainland India, it risks incurring international opprobrium and financial isolation as it struggles with a faltering economy at home or, worse, a full-scale war with India. The Indian airstrike launched during the Indo-Pakistani standoff in early 2019—the first aerial incursion into mainland Pakistan since 1971—most likely failed to establish a lasting deterrent against Islamabad's support for militancy. At the same time, the raid illustrates the danger of rapid escalation. Additionally, a campaign of Pakistani-instigated terrorism could backfire in terms of boosting sympathy for India while shifting media attention away from New Delhi's crackdown.

If Pakistan attempts to intensify cross-border militant attacks in Kashmir or mainland India, it risks incurring international opprobrium and financial isolation or, worse, a full-scale war with India.

Nevertheless, the internal pressure within Pakistan to aggressively confront India is inescapable. Pakistan is likely to reconsider its current approach if New Delhi effectively consolidates its reorganization of Kashmir. Ever since the first India-Pakistan war (1947–48), fought over Kashmir, Pakistan has nurtured ambitions of wresting the contested region from India. Islamabad's long-standing popular narrative

frames the dispute in stark and uncompromising terms—calling Kashmir Pakistan's "jugular vein" and the "unfinished agenda" of Partition.⁷¹ Therefore, the Pakistan Army can ill afford domestic perceptions of passivity or tacit acceptance of Indian policy after decades of promoting Kashmir as integral to Pakistan's founding identity. The army's unchallenged claims regarding national security will likely endure scrutiny if the situation remains unchanged, while media reports continue to highlight Pakistan's lack of traction in international forums alongside continued human rights concerns in Kashmir. Ayesha Siddiqi, a longtime observer of Pakistan's ties to extremist groups summed up the army's dilemma: "Either Pakistan does something, or if it doesn't, the military risks becoming very unpopular. . . . There will also be unimaginable pressure from hawks within the institution."⁷²

How Pakistan Could Punish India in Afghanistan

If the United States precipitately withdraws from Afghanistan without a broad-based peace deal, the country may again become the battleground of choice for Pakistan's military. In such a scenario, Pakistan's incentives to alleviate domestic pressure to retaliate over Kashmir and roll back what Islamabad already perceives as malign Indian activities would significantly sharpen, and three essential factors would facilitate proxy operations:

Deniability. The sheer volume of violence in the aftermath of a rapid US drawdown would significantly expand, thereby obscuring, if not entirely concealing, a proxy attack orchestrated by Pakistan. Establishing attribution is particularly challenging in the Afghan conflict, where multiple and organizationally diffuse groups operate, share resources, and sometimes eschew immediate claims of responsibility. For instance, when LeT militants attacked the Indian consulate in Herat province in 2014, the group, in keeping with its modus operandi, did not claim credit for the strike.⁷³ Public attribution of LeT's role surfaced only after Western intelligence reportedly shared information identifying LeT as the culprit. The US State Department officially confirmed LeT's role a full month after the attack.⁷⁴ New Delhi may reflexively assert a Pakistani hand in all terrorist acts against its diplomatic facilities and personnel, regardless of the evidence. Still, it is difficult to justify a punitive response when blame resides in a gray zone. Additionally, a US withdrawal would inevitably lead to a reduction of most, if not all, of its intelligence resources, impeding efforts to uncover terrorist plotting.

Permissiveness. Pakistan has borne no substantial costs for its role in sponsoring militant attacks against Indian citizens and diplomatic posts in Afghanistan—a consideration that may encourage Islamabad should US forces quickly depart. The deadliest of these attacks occurred

in July 2008, when the Haqqanis bombed the Indian embassy in Kabul, killing fifty-four people, including India's defense attaché. The bomber was trained by LeT militants, a prime example of the cross-fertilization that often takes place among militant networks.⁷⁵ After the bombing, senior US officials confronted Pakistani leaders with compelling information indicating that the ISI coordinated the attack.⁷⁶ In response, the ISI implemented personnel changes but no institutional shift in its policy of leveraging and protecting proxy assets.⁷⁷ The Indian embassy sustained another, less catastrophic bombing in 2009, with no consequences befalling Pakistan.

Retaliation not assured. Pakistan's willingness to intensify proxy violence in Afghanistan hinges on India's probable response as well. The political context of the embassy attacks matters in any analysis. India's ruling party at the time was willing to show restraint—including refraining from retaliating against Pakistan for LeT's role in the far bloodier Mumbai attacks just a few months after the first embassy bombing—to give Pakistan's weak government breathing room.⁷⁸ Pakistan's then-civilian leaders sought improved relations with India. None of these conditions exist today, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi probably is less inclined to tolerate terrorism irrespective of where it takes place. Unpredictable factors, such as the scale and media profile of an attack and US signaling, also will shape the severity of an Indian response. Even so, India's ability to impose costs on Pakistan has not substantially improved since 2008, a fact underscored by the negligible results of its airstrike in 2019 and previous ground incursions into Pakistan-administered Kashmir, which inflicted minimal damage.⁷⁹ The airstrike may be a harbinger of a more muscular response to terrorism. Yet thus far, the operation has proven to be a singular event rather than a trend, and the role of unique preelection incentives in propelling Modi's decision to strike was likely considerable.⁸⁰ The lack of options engenders a degree of risk aversion within New Delhi, which Pakistan factors into its calculus, and Islamabad probably is confident that it can parry the limited coercive measures that New Delhi has so far employed.

Terrorism in Afghanistan also tends to retain less political salience within India when compared to attacks against the mainland or Kashmir. The remoteness of Afghanistan may diminish domestic pressure for military reprisals. Moreover, unlike prior militant attacks against Indian interests in Afghanistan, the casus belli for the 2019 airstrike was a headline-grabbing terrorist attack in Kashmir publicly, and undeniably, claimed by JeM.

COMPREHENSIVE DEAL ESSENTIAL BUT NOT SUFFICIENT CONDITION TO CURB PROXY VIOLENCE

Even if the United States secures a broad-based peace agreement in Afghanistan, attractive pathways for Pakistan to conduct proxy violence against India are likely to persist, and a settlement would not address the underlying motives for a strike. Any final deal that includes the Taliban will unavoidably incorporate a US troop withdrawal and the attendant loss of counterterrorism capacity. Hard-line Taliban splinter elements would be expected to press the fight and could defect to the Islamic State or other irreconcilable groups. Nevertheless, an inclusive deal that distributes power across a multitude of Afghan constituencies would likely constrain spoilers seeking to inflict violence and cause disruption. The bulk of a mainstreamed Taliban movement countenancing the terms of a settlement would be particularly crucial since groups like LeT and JeM depend on Taliban hosts for their survival in Afghanistan.



A Pakistani soldier stands guard at the Line of Control, the unofficial border between India and Pakistan that runs through Kashmir, on September 6, 2019. (Photo by Saiyna Bashir/New York Times)

It is also reasonable to expect that a broad agreement that includes the consent of Kabul and Afghan factions fearful of a resurgent Taliban would insist that US forces draw down in phases tied to the achievement of specific benchmarks or milestones, including prohibitions against violence and terrorism. Gradually removing US forces as conditions permit would act as an additional check on violent actors. Finally, it is sensible to presume that a comprehensive agreement would likely create some mechanism to maintain the flow of US and international aid to Afghan security forces—assistance that would assuredly prioritize the fulfillment of continued counterterrorism objectives, among other conditions.

This analysis does not suggest that a campaign of Pakistani-initiated proxy warfare is inevitable should the United States leave Afghanistan. For the moment, Pakistan seems consumed by its internal tumult and economic woes. Moreover, groups such as LeT may not need much encouragement to ramp up violence against Indian personnel and facilities in Afghanistan, and India could unilaterally remove the bulk of its presence as a precautionary measure. Nonetheless, it can be stated with a high degree of certainty that chaos would ensue in the wake of a hasty US withdrawal; that chaos in turn would be expected to generate conditions favorable to Pakistan hurting India through asymmetric means. Pakistan's militant surrogates may not require explicit guidance or direction.

Yet the arsenal of the Pakistani military affords critical resources to its armed clients to magnify the scope and scale of anti-Indian terrorism, and these groups benefit from the protection afforded by Pakistan. For these reasons, the embassy attacks serve as an ominous warning for the future.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Washington's engagement with the Taliban has increased tensions between India and Pakistan because New Delhi sees the process as granting the Taliban and Pakistan outsized roles. In fairness, the negotiations are deliberately narrow in scope to more quickly bridge differences between two of the principal parties to the Afghan conflict. Once those differences are resolved, negotiations may proceed to a broader and more comprehensive set of talks that includes the Afghan government, non-Taliban factions, and Afghanistan's neighbors. "Regional governments have been reluctant to express views on what the substantive outcomes of an Afghan peace process should be," writes former US diplomat Laurel Miller and political scientist Jonathan Blake.⁸¹ An all-inclusive peace process may finally elicit from India and Pakistan, among other states, a clearer sense of what they would regard as the precise and minimum requirements of a durable peace. But a "grand bargain" that encompasses Kashmir and the more extensive set of issues bedeviling the India-Pakistan rivalry is likely a bridge too far. India, as a status quo power, sees little benefit to normalizing relations with Pakistan, and Pakistan is unlikely to relinquish its militant proxies because they compensate for the growing imbalance of power with India and are crucial to shaping conditions conducive to Pakistani interests.

Critically, though Afghan peace talks cannot alleviate the hostility between India and Pakistan, reaching a broad-based peace deal among Afghans probably would diminish prospects for a deadlier collision in Afghanistan. Conversely, rapidly removing US troops without a comprehensive peace agreement in place would open the floodgates of violence and engender conditions more conducive to Pakistan intensifying proxy terrorism. For its part, India could revert to its prior pattern from the 1990s of supporting its partisans with lethal aid. These developments would collectively accelerate Afghanistan's fragmentation.

Some analysts argue that India demonstrating transparency with regard to its presence and activities in Afghanistan could assuage Pakistan's strategic anxieties. Such a result seems unlikely. Other than a small police contingent to protect its workers, India has never deployed its military to Afghanistan and is unlikely to do so in the foreseeable future.⁸² Yet, even though no Indian troops are in Afghanistan, Pakistan continues to facilitate the Afghan Taliban's sanctuary and has encouraged violence against Indian personnel and facilities. Islamabad blames R&AW and its Afghan counterpart for waging a campaign of subversion within Pakistan, but these claims outstrip the available evidence. Requesting that India be transparent about activities it may not be doing is a nonstarter. Furthermore, Pakistan would likely seek a standard of proof unacceptable to India, such as the closure of India's two consulates closest to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, to verify the absence of nefarious activities.

Other analysts have advanced the idea that encouraging regional connectivity through trade and other sectors could produce shared interests among India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

However, as far as India and Pakistan are concerned, geopolitics tend to eclipse economic cooperation. Trade is another weapon that each country deploys to counter the other, though India enjoys a stronger advantage because of the sheer size of its economy. As former Indian high commissioner T. C. A. Raghavan has written, “Implementing a policy of trade and economic normalization for a government in Pakistan is even more difficult now than ever before as the economic gulf between India and Pakistan continues to widen.”⁸³ After India incorporated Kashmir into the Indian Union in August 2019, Islamabad suspended trade ties with India.⁸⁴ India, likewise, withdrew Pakistan’s most-favored nation trading status following the JeM bombing in Kashmir in early 2019.⁸⁵ Pakistan forbids Afghanistan from overland trade with India. While the Iranian port of Chabahar remains underdeveloped, India’s rationale in using it is a strong desire to circumvent Pakistan. Similarly, from the Afghan viewpoint, access to Chabahar is crucial to reducing Afghanistan’s economic dependence on Pakistan.

In the end, the likelihood of reducing tensions between India and Pakistan in Afghanistan remains slim so long as the broader rivalry between both countries simmers and episodically boils over. There are no panaceas, and, barring a sudden and dramatic turn of events, the probability of returning to the status quo ante with respect to Kashmir is virtually nil. India has effectively telegraphed to Pakistan that it intends to end the decades-long dispute over Kashmir on its terms. Pakistan, however, will never accept such a challenge to its national identity and will continue to search for ways to undermine India. In other words, Afghanistan is a theater of competition bound to the more significant dynamics driving the India-Pakistan conflict, which show no sign of abating.

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