

# THE FORGOTTEN HISTORY OF AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN RELATIONS

by Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Tara Vassefi

Pakistan's historical and contemporary support for jihadi groups has caused US policy prescriptions over the past decade to focus prominently on the need to change Pakistan's strategic orientation. In this article, the authors explore one aspect of Pakistan's strategic calculations that has received insufficient attention in public debate: the degree to which Afghanistan's aggressions against Pakistan have helped to shape the latter's support for religious militant groups.

Lately there have been intense strains in the relationship between the United States and Pakistan. As one commentator put it at the end of 2011, the year was “an *annus horribilis* for Pakistani-US relations, beginning in January with the Raymond Davis affair, the dispute over the elevated US drone attacks on Pakistani territory, the May 2 Special Forces attack on bin Laden's compound at Abbottabad in central Pakistan, the September attacks by a Pakistani-linked terrorist group against the US Embassy in Kabul, and finally the November 26 cross-border clash in which NATO forces killed two dozen Pakistani soldiers.”<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, US officials have become more strident in their criticisms that Pakistan's military intelligence agency (the Inter-Services Intelligence agency, or ISI) supports Islamic militant groups in Afghanistan. In late September 2011, for example, Admiral Mike Mullen, then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, argued that the ISI had “played a direct role” in the aforementioned attack that Afghan insurgents launched against the American embassy in Kabul.<sup>2</sup> The following month, President Obama told a news conference that Pakistan was tied to “unsavory characters” who prolonged the Afghan insurgency.<sup>3</sup> These assessments of Pakistani complicity in the insurgency, and in violent non-state attacks beyond that context, are not new. For example, the ISI was implicated in a deadly suicide bombing that rocked India's embassy in Kabul in July 2008. Thereafter, the CIA's deputy director

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traveled to Islamabad to confront Pakistani officials with information about the ISI's ties to extremists.<sup>4</sup>

Internal US government assessments and reports produced by non-governmental institutes further elaborate on Pakistani ties to the insurgency in Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> As a result there have been many calls – particularly as the United States looks ahead to its military withdrawal from Afghanistan – to change Pakistan's strategic orientation. These calls are also nothing new; they have been a part of the US's strategy toward South Asia for much of the past decade. This can be seen, for example, in the manner that US pressure prompted Pakistan's then-president Pervez Musharraf to announce that the country would undertake a dramatic about-face

in January 2002, declaring that no Pakistani group “would be allowed to indulge in terrorism in the name of religion.”<sup>6</sup> This was a significant announcement given that previously, Pakistan had harnessed such groups as proxies in its conflict with India over the Kashmir region, and had also used them for other purposes.

Musharraf's January 2002 about-face did not hold up, and Pakistan is now widely viewed as a key supporter of Afghan insurgent factions. Thus, as the war in Afghanistan winds down, diminishing Pakistan's support for violent non-state actors – and productively managing relations with that critical country – requires a solid understanding of the reasons that Pakistan has chosen its current path. Some of these reasons are prominent in the literature, such as concerns about its arch-rival India, and relationships that developed between ISI officers and religious militants during the Afghan-Soviet war. But there is a key foundational reason behind Pakistan's support for Islamic militant groups that is virtually ignored today, even though it was well known thirty-five years ago. That reason, which this article explores in detail, is not only Afghanistan's demand for an independent “Pashtunistan” that it believes should be carved out of Pakistani territory, but also a series of aggressive actions taken by Afghanistan that ultimately prompted Pakistani support for violent Islamist groups in response. This historical background forms an important part of what policymakers and military leaders must keep in mind as they consider future efforts regarding Pakistan.

### **Pashtunistan and the Creation of Pakistan**

Afghanistan's eastern border was settled in 1893. At the time, Britain had considerable strategic interests in the region because of its perceived need to protect the jewel in its colonial crown, British India. The amir of Afghanistan, Abdur Rahman, opposed Britain's proposal for the Afghan-Indian border, which would force him to relinquish “his nominal sovereignty over the Pashtun tribes in the region” outside the border favored by the British.<sup>7</sup> The strength of Abdur Rahman's objection to splitting up the Pashtuns in this manner should not be understated. Historically, the idea of being “Afghan” was tied to being from the Pashtun ethnic group. As James Spain, a former cultural affairs

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officer at the American embassy in Karachi, has written, the Durand Line that demarcated the border between Afghanistan and British India left “half of a people intimately related by culture, history, and blood on either side.”<sup>8</sup> Yet Abdur Rahman was forced to agree to this border by the threat of economic embargo. He relied on British subsidies to maintain his central government’s dominance, and was in particular need of it when the border was set because he was then engaged in warfare against the Hazaras.

Afghanistan has never accepted the legitimacy of the Durand Line, named after its architect, Sir Henry Mortimer Durand. However, the country had little recourse when faced with a global superpower like Britain. This changed with the creation of Pakistan. Afghanistan had long been recognized as an independent state by the time Pakistan was created in 1947, and there was no particular reason to think that Pakistan was built to last. Pakistan’s lack of cohesion is signaled even by its name, as it is an acronym for the areas encompassed within the state: Punjab, North-West Frontier Province (Afghan Province), Kashmir, Sind, and Baluchistan. Additionally, Pakistan was born of a bloody partition with India – something that produced not only the two states, but also an arch-rivalry that persists to this day. Just as many Indian leaders thought the new state of Pakistan might not survive,<sup>9</sup> so too did Afghan politicians.

Immediately after Pakistan emerged, Afghanistan put forward a demand for the creation of an independent “Pashtunistan,” meaning “land of the Pashtuns.” The idea was that Pakistan should allow the Pashtuns in the northwestern part of their country to – if they so chose – secede and become an independent state. Though the size of the envisioned Pashtunistan differed over time, Afghanistan’s proposals frequently encompassed about half of West Pakistan, including areas dominated by Baluch majorities.

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Though these demands were framed as supportive of Pashtun national independence, they were in fact irredentist. If Pashtunistan came to exist, it probably wouldn’t remain independent for long, as it would be a fragile and essentially defenseless state. The historical linkage between the Pashtuns and Afghanistan would likely dictate a merger of Pashtunistan into Afghanistan. And even if Pakistan never acceded to the Pashtunistan demand, Afghanistan had essentially staked its claim to that area if the Pakistani state were to fail. The incorporation of Pashtunistan and the majority Baluch areas into Afghanistan would, in turn, solve one of Afghanistan’s major strategic weaknesses – the fact that it’s a landlocked state. The Baluch majority areas would give Afghanistan access to the Arabian Sea.

From a legal perspective, Afghanistan’s claim about the illegitimacy of its border with Pakistan was rather weak.

Though Afghanistan claimed that the border had been drawn under duress, it had in fact confirmed the demarcation of this international frontier on multiple occasions, including in agreements concluded in 1905, 1919, 1921, and 1930.<sup>10</sup> But the weakness of Afghanistan’s legal case took a backseat to the historical connection it felt to the Pashtun areas, and the strategic benefits it would derive from expanding its territory.

This brings us to the episodes in the history between Afghanistan and Pakistan that have so often been missing from contemporary discourse: not only do the two countries have a disputed border, but Afghanistan has rather aggressively pursued actions designed to expand its territory at Pakistan's expense.

### **Afghanistan's Early Incursions into Pakistan**

Less than a decade after the birth of the new state of Pakistan, James Spain noted, "relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have come to be centered on one issue."<sup>11</sup> That single issue was Pashtunistan. It was Afghanistan rather than Pakistan that chose to make this border dispute, and the issue of Pashtunistan, so central to the two states' relations.

At the outset, Afghanistan was the only country to vote against Pakistan's admission into the United Nations, justifying this vote with the argument that Pakistan's northwest frontier "should not be recognized as a part of Pakistan until the Pashtuns of that area had been given the opportunity to opt out for independence."<sup>12</sup> Pakistan was admitted despite Afghanistan's objections. But thereafter Kabul launched a series of low-level attacks against Pakistan, maintaining some degree of plausible deniability throughout (as Pakistan would later do when non-state actors that it sponsored struck at India, Afghanistan, US forces, and others).

George Montagno, who served as a visiting professor of American history at the University of Karachi, has noted that for years after Pakistan's creation, Afghan agents operated within the Pashtun areas, "distributing large amounts of money, ammunition and even transistor radios in an effort to sway loyalties from Pakistan to Afghanistan."<sup>13</sup> Another of their obvious goals was to build support for an independent Pashtunistan. At the same time that Afghanistan worked to build support within Pakistan's Pashtun areas, it also escalated its attacks into Pakistan proper.

Pakistan claimed that on September 30, 1950, its northern border was attacked by Afghan tribesmen, as well as regular Afghan troops, who crossed into Pakistan 30 miles northeast of Chaman in Baluchistan.<sup>14</sup> It didn't take long for Pakistan to repel this low-scale invasion, and its government announced that it had "driven invaders from Afghanistan back across the border after six days of fighting."<sup>15</sup> For its own part, Afghanistan claimed that it had no involvement in this attack, which it said was comprised exclusively of Pashtun tribesmen agitating for an independent Pashtunistan. But given Afghanistan's later use of irregular forces dressed as tribesmen, Pakistan's claims that the aggression had emanated from Afghanistan's government seem credible.

Tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan rose markedly in 1955, when Pakistan announced that it was consolidating its control over its tribal areas. In response, Afghan prime minister Mohammed Daoud Khan criticized Pakistan's actions over the airwaves of Radio Kabul on March 29, 1955. Demonstrations that were reportedly inspired by the Afghan government flared up in Kabul, Kandahar, and Jalalabad. S.M.M. Qureshi of the University of Alberta noted that "Pakistan flags were pulled down and insulted and the

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[Pashtunistan] flag was hoisted on the chancery of the Pakistan Embassy in Kabul.”<sup>16</sup> This incident caused the two countries to withdraw their ambassadors, and relations weren’t fully restored until 1957.

The next crisis in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations came in 1960-61. Khurshid Hasan, at the time a member of the department of international relations at the University of Karachi, recounts, “In 1960, fresh border clashes took place. Afghan irregulars and Army troops dressed as tribesmen were reported to have penetrated the Pakistan side of the Durand Line with the sanction of the Afghan Government. Two other raids took place in May and fall of 1961.”<sup>17</sup>

News reports from that period corroborate Hasan’s account. In late September 1960, an Afghan lashkar (irregular forces) crossed into Pakistan’s Bajaur area. Pakistan’s government announced that the lashkar “clashed with loyal tribesmen and fled after suffering heavy casualties.”<sup>18</sup> But Pakistan alleged that conventional Afghan military resources, including tanks, had also massed on the Afghan side of the border near Bajaur.<sup>19</sup> What Afghanistan’s

official news agency described as “a major battle” eventually broke out between the two sides.<sup>20</sup> Pakistan bombarded Afghan forces using its airpower; rather than escalating the conflict, this quelled hostilities, at least for the time being.

The May 1961 clashes occurred in the area of the Khyber Pass. Pakistani president Muhammad Ayub Khan announced that regular Afghan forces had attacked Pakistani posts at the border. The Pakistani air force strafed Afghan positions in response.<sup>21</sup> On May 22, Pakistani warplanes struck again, attempting to wipe out a base of raiding Afghan troops in Baganandail.<sup>22</sup> With this aerial strafing, alongside police patrols, roadblocks, and even bombs going off, the *New York Times* noted in late May that “relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan appear to have reached a new low, and no relief is in sight.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, after the next skirmishes broke out in the fall of 1961, Afghanistan and Pakistan formally severed diplomatic relations.<sup>24</sup>

These broken relations had acute economic consequences for both countries, particularly for landlocked Afghanistan. The shah of Iran helped to mediate a détente between the two neighbors in 1963. The resulting peace lasted about a decade, until Mohammed Daoud Khan (who served as Afghanistan’s prime minister during the 1955 crisis between the countries) deposed his cousin, King Mohammed Zahir Shah, on July 17, 1973.

### Daoud’s Legacy: A Rivalry Reignited

Daoud was an ardent supporter of the Pashtunistan concept, and his passion for the matter produced the collapse of détente. He referred to the border dispute almost immediately upon assuming power, and the independent state for which he agitated included not only Pakistan’s majority Pashtun areas but also its majority Baluch areas. Daoud’s regime provided sanctuary, arms, and ammunition to Pashtun and Baluch nationalist groups. Pakistan saw this as a significant challenge because its Baluch

regions had been in “virtual revolt,” requiring the intervention of Pakistan’s military even before Daoud began to support Baluch separatism.<sup>25</sup> Even as Daoud fomented ethnic insurgency inside Pakistan, his regime simultaneously condemned Pakistan before the United Nations for being “genocidal” in its treatment of ethnic minorities.

This escalation came at a time when Pakistan had already lost nearly a third of its territory, as East Pakistan seceded in 1971 and became Bangladesh. Rizwan Hussain, a research scholar at The Australian National University, writes that Afghanistan’s actions “posed the greatest threat to Pakistan’s integrity since the secession of East Pakistan.”<sup>26</sup> Obviously, this called for a response.

Pakistani president Zulfikar Ali Bhutto—a secular reformist whose rule included several questionable decisions that unwittingly empowered Islamist factions<sup>27</sup>—fashioned a two-part responsive strategy. One part was to suppress nationalist uprisings in Pakistan’s Frontier. A second part was a “forward policy” that supported violent Islamist factions inside Afghanistan. This was symmetrical with the manner in which Afghanistan had supported violent nationalist groups inside Pakistan.

A.Z. Hilali, an assistant professor of political science at the University of Peshawar, notes that Bhutto’s government “found many Afghan Islamists who were useful as a counterweight to the pro-Indian and relatively pro-Soviet policies of Daoud’s government.”<sup>28</sup> Afghan Islamists who received covert aid from Pakistan during this time included Gulbuddin Hikmatyar and Burhanuddin Rabbani, both of whom were destined to become important figures during the Afghan-Soviet war and beyond.<sup>29</sup> (After the communist-leaning regime of Mohammad Najibullah collapsed in 1992, Hikmatyar became Afghanistan’s “prime minister,” and shelled the capital city held by “president” Rabbani on a daily basis.)

There were strategic reasons behind Pakistan’s support for these Islamist factions. For one, Pakistan believed that groups whose primary identification was religious might be less likely to support ethno-nationalist demands of the kind that drove Afghan policy toward Pakistan’s Pashtuns and Baluchs. It also seems that Pakistan believed Islamist groups in Afghanistan were more likely to be hostile toward India. This calculation proved to be correct: The only time since Pakistan’s creation that Afghanistan has had warm relations with Pakistan while simultaneously being hostile to India was during the Taliban’s rule in the 1990s.

Thus, Pakistan’s initial support for violent Islamist groups in Afghanistan was spurred directly by the Afghan government’s sponsorship of separatist groups in Pakistan under the Daoud regime, as well as aggressive Afghan actions that had preceded Daoud. Pakistan’s support for such groups would of course grow during the 1980s, which saw the Afghan-Soviet war grip the region, and also during the 1990s, when Pakistan supported the Taliban during Afghanistan’s civil war.

### **Conclusion: Af-Pak History and Contemporary US Policy**

Overall, the factors driving Pakistan’s support for violent Islamist groups in Afghanistan represent a tangled web. There are, of course, strategic calculations behind Pakistan’s support for these groups—strategic calculations that began with Afghanistan’s escalating aggression against Pakistan, but also came to encompass the need for “strategic depth”

in Pakistan's rivalry with India. Personal relationships would develop between Pakistani officers and the non-state actors they supported. There were also changes to Pakistan's military culture, which – though the precise degree to which this occurred has been debated by scholars – clearly underwent some degree of “Islamization.” This process began under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto,<sup>30</sup> but escalated markedly under Gen. Muhammad Zia ul Haq, who deposed Bhutto in a July 1977 military coup.

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Zia brought a number of changes to the Pakistani military after his coup. These included incorporating Islamic teachings (such as S.K. Malik's *The Qur'anic Concept of War*) into military training, incorporating religious criteria into officers' promotion requirements and exams, and requiring formal obedience to Islamic rules within the military. At the same time Zia implemented these policies, the demographics of the officer corps were shifting. The first generation of officers from the country's generally secular social elites was replaced by new junior officers from Pakistan's poorer northern districts. Pakistani journalist Zahid Hussain notes that “the spirit of liberalism, common in the ‘old’ army, was practically unknown to them. They were products of a social class that, by its very nature, was conservative and easily influenced by Islamic fundamentalism.”<sup>31</sup>

So the potent mix of motivations impelling Pakistan's support for Islamist groups in Afghanistan included strategic calculations, personal relationships, and changes to the organizational culture of Pakistan's military. This mix of motivations was underestimated by American planners in the early stages of the US war in Afghanistan. Following US deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage's now-infamous post-9/11 threat to bomb Pakistan “back to the Stone Age” if it didn't reorient itself away

from the Taliban,<sup>32</sup> Musharraf executed the about-face to which we referred at the beginning of this article, announcing that Pakistani groups would not be allowed to engage in terrorism. We noted that the announced changes did not hold up. The reason lies in the fact that, as Zahid Hussain has written, “Musharraf's decision to forge a partnership with America meant taking Pakistan to war with itself.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, one of the biggest problems lies in the fact that American planners didn't realize the utter likelihood of this failure. The mistaken belief that Pakistan's turn away from supporting stateless Islamist militants in 2001–02 might be permanent helped to seriously retard the US's development of a coherent policy dealing with the many problems emanating from Pakistan.

But the legacy of this forgotten period in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations – the period of Afghan aggression against Pakistan over the Pashtunistan issue – continues to be relevant today. Put simply, some issues will resonate more deeply with Pakistan than Americans believe. Bellicose Afghan statements following major attacks in their country may be justified, but these statements may also strike a chord that reminds Pakistanis of days when they were neither the stronger of the two neighbors, nor the more aggressive

one. Further, when the United States pursues cross-border tribal unity to try to stabilize Afghanistan – as it has done, for example, in Nangarhar province – it may trigger concerns on the Pakistani side about a possible Pashtun uprising. This forgotten history, and the tangled web of motivations that it helped produce, makes clear how truly difficult a simple-sounding proposition like “change Pakistan’s strategic orientation” can be.

None of this is meant to forgive the pernicious role that Pakistan currently plays within Afghanistan. But one clear problem of the past decade has been a failure to appreciate Pakistani strategic calculations. Fully comprehending the period in the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan outlined in this article may be an important part of forging more appropriate policies moving forward. **Y**

– Charles Faint served as Lead Editor for this article.

## NOTES

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