



STRANGE OR ESTRANGED BEDFELLOWS? DISCERNING THE TALIBAN- PAKISTAN RELATIONSHIP

Raghav Sharma¹

O.P Jindal Global University

Abstract:

The Afghan Taliban and Pakistan are often touted as two sides of the same coin, given the latter's pivotal role in supporting the movement since its emergence in 1994, and subsequently in resurrecting it as a potent insurgent force against NATO. It was believed that this would enable Pakistan to exert considerable influence on events across the Durand Line. However, developments over the last five years belie this claim. Drawing on historical and geopolitical context, this paper argues that Rawalpindi's motives in supporting the Taliban are deeply embedded in its historical experience and vulnerabilities, as well as being influenced by the actions of other state actors in the region. Drawing on the work of K. J. Holsti, Alvin Rubenstein, and Rafael Beirmann, the article argues that, whilst the relationship between Rawalpindi and the Afghan Taliban displays patron–client characteristics, it is difficult to view it as a linear, reductionist relationship.

Keywords: Pakistan, Afghanistan, Afghan Taliban, India, TTP, Influence, patron, client

Title in Spanish: *¿Aliados extraños o distanciados? Análisis de la relación entre los Taliban y Pakistán*

Resumen:

A menudo se presenta a los talibanes afganos y a Pakistán como las dos caras de una misma moneda, dado el papel fundamental que ha desempeñado este último país en el apoyo al movimiento desde su surgimiento en 1994 y, posteriormente, en su resurgimiento como una potente fuerza insurgente contra la OTAN. Se creía que esto permitiría a Pakistán ejercer una influencia considerable sobre los acontecimientos al otro lado de la línea Durand. Sin embargo, los acontecimientos de los últimos cinco años desmienten esta afirmación. Basándose en el contexto histórico y geopolítico, este artículo sostiene que los motivos de Rawalpindi para apoyar a los talibanes están profundamente arraigados en su experiencia histórica y sus vulnerabilidades, además de estar influenciados por las acciones de otros actores estatales de la región. Basándose en los trabajos de K. J. Holsti, Alvin Rubenstein y Rafael Beirmann, el artículo sostiene que, si bien la relación entre Rawalpindi y los talibanes afganos presenta características de tipo patrón-cliente, es difícil considerarla una relación lineal y reduccionista.

Palabras Clave: *Pakistán, Afganistán, talibanes afganos, India, TTP, influencia, patrocinador, cliente*

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¹ Raghav Sharma is Professor at the Jindal School of International Affairs and Director, Centre for Afghanistan Studies, O.P Jindal Global University

E-mail: <raghav@jgu.edu.in>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.31439/UNISCI-275>



1. Introduction

“Don’t worry, everything will be okay”²

The statement by the then head of Pakistan’s notorious Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed³, in Kabul on 04th September 2021, coming at the cusp of the Taliban’s military offensive against the last opposition holdout in Panjshir was seen as a testament to the historic ‘influence’ Rawalpindi⁴ wielded over the Afghan Taliban which with Pakistan’s patronage galloped back to power twenty years after being toppled by the US.

Influence may be broadly defined as a process through which ruling elites in one state seek to change the behaviour of another state in order to accrue policy advantages. Notably Holsti adds a critical caveat in seeking to gauge the influence of a state which he asserts is not merely a function of the capabilities a state possesses but it is tied to its external policy objectives. Moreover, the exercise of such influence is multilateral, such that the state seeking to influence another in order to attain a policy outcome to its advantage, does so due to the actions of the other states in the system⁵. Consequently, a number of important implications flow. Foremost, the motives of state actors in seeking to exercise influence are underpinned by the larger historical and geo-political matrix, a critical engagement with which becomes seminal in discerning the motives belying the exercise influence. Second, the asymmetric nature of such relationships notwithstanding, the fact that the exercise of influence is multi-lateral, enables us to see recipients of patronage not merely as passive clients. Particularly significant is patronage to non-state actors whose role has proliferated as conflict patterns shift from classic inter-state to intra-state and internationalized intra-state conflicts⁶.

Rafael Beirmann’s work offers insightful interjections on patronage to non-state actors, specifically situating patron-client relations⁷ in situations of contemporary conflict. He identifies four characteristic features of such relationships. Foremost, they are underpinned by “cooperative resource exchange partnerships”, wherein the patron and client engage in a voluntary exchange of tangible and intangible resources such as loyalty, money etc. The

²Hameed, Faiz.: *X. Channel 4 News*, 4 September 2021 at <https://twitter.com/Channel4News/status/1434181768454754305>

³³ In an ironic twist of fate on 12th August 2024 Hameed became the first chief of the ISI to face a court martial on charges of corruption, abuse of power and indulgence in political activities. See Hindustan Times: “Pakistan: Ex-ISI chief Faiz Hameed indicted on multiple charges, including engaging in political Activities”, *Hindustan Times*, 10 December 2024 at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/pakistan-former-isi-chief-faiz-hameed-indicted-on-multiple-charges-including-engaging-in-political-activities-101733832652983.html>

⁴ Pakistan’s Afghan policy is dictated by the army in Rawalpindi as opposed to the civilian government in Islamabad. This was lucidly underscored when Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani in 2014 on his maiden state visit to Pakistan, undertook a major political gamble by driving down to the General Head Quarters, Rawalpindi to engage with the then Army Chief, General Raheel Sharif. See Gul, Ayaz: “Ghani’s Trip Fuels Hopes for Better Afghan-Pakistan Ties”, *Voice of America*, 17 November 2024, at <https://www.voanews.com/a/afghanistan-ghani-trip-to-islamabad-fules-hopes-for-better-afghan-pakistan-ties/2523053.html>

⁵ Rubenstein, Alvin Z. (1977): *Red Star on the Nile: The Soviet Egyptian Influence Relationship Since the June War.*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, p.xiv; Holsti, Kalevi. Jaakko: “The Concept of Power in the Study of International Relations”, *International Studies Association*, Vol.7, n° 4 (February 1964), pp. 179-194.

⁶ UCDP Definitions, 29 May 2024, Uppsala Universitet, at <https://www.uu.se/en/department/peace-and-conflict-research/research/ucdp/ucdp-definitions>

⁷ The emergence of patron-client relationships pre-dates the emergence of modern system of international relations, its origins being traced back to ancient Rome with social relations structured under the institution of *patrocinium* and *clientelae*. By the fourth century B.C this came to permeate Republican Rome’s relations with weaker client states on the fringes of empire wherein a powerful Roman state hoped to conserve its forces in guarding the frontiers of empire where its control could be assured without having to use its own forces; and these states would form a cordon *sanitaire*, protecting the core of the empire from the initial shock of armed confrontation with an external power. See Roniger, Luis: “Modern patron-client relations and historical clientelism: Some clues from ancient Republican Rome”, *European Journal of Sociology*, Vol 24, n° 1 (1983), pp. 63–95



patron's superior resources enable it to shape the trajectory of conflict yet its engagement with the client is a relationship of exchange in order to access some of the client's resources such as access to strategic territory. Significantly these relationships are characterised by elements of manipulation but not overwhelming dominance. Second, power asymmetry, induces a conflictual character and is clearly discernible through the superior resources at the disposal of the patron, enabling it to enhance its bargaining power as it seeks to exercise power over the latter. Notably the asymmetry notwithstanding the exercise of power by the patron is issue specific with the value of the relationship diminishing when patrons scale back access to resources. Third, patron-client relationships entail "diffuse obligation" i.e. they are based on private, informal understandings, leaving considerable scope for parties to choose the scope and intensity of their commitment. Fourth, such relationships are 'enduring', manifested in a range of transactions over a prolonged period of time with both parties "maintaining accounts" and paying back at a "time" and manner of their choosing⁸.

Pakistan's patronage of the Afghan Taliban has been documented in graphic detail.⁹ Consider in this context the stinging public indictment of Pakistan by Admiral Mike Mullen who described "the Haqqani network...as a veritable arm of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence"¹⁰ (Mullen, 2011). Attempts by Rawalpindi to influence the Afghan political landscape, was attested to in private conversations, such as the one between the then US Ambassador to Afghanistan, Ryan Crocker and head of the ISI, General Ashfaq Pervaiz Kayani who in responding to demands for cracking down on Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan candidly and almost prophetically asserted

"You know, I know you think we're hedging our bets, you're right, we are because one day you'll be gone again, it'll be like Afghanistan the first time, you'll be done with us, but we're still going to be here because we can't actually move the country. And the last thing we want with all of our other problems is to have turned the Taliban into a mortal enemy"¹¹.

Thus, the Taliban's return to power on 15th August 2021, was seen as a "victory" for Pakistan. Detractors of the Taliban and political commentators alike reiterated the enduring, asymmetrical but symbiotic nature of the relationship which had allowed Rawalpindi to wield considerable 'influence' over the Taliban. Noteworthy in this regard is the propaganda unleashed by the *Daesh*¹². Drawing attention to the "*Murtaden* (apostate)

"Taliban unsavory relationship with foreign powers, it depicted, the Taliban's supreme leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, suspended from strings controlled by a hand colored

⁸ Biermann, Rafael: "Conceptualising patron-client relations in secessionist conflict. A research agenda", *Territory, Politics and Governance*, Vol.13, n° 1 (2025), pp.3-7.

⁹ Abbas, Hassan (2014): *The Taliban Revival: Violence, Extremism on the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press; Mutma'in, Abdul. H. (2019): *Taliban: A Critical History from Within*, Berlin, First Draft Publishing. Rashid, Ahmed (2002). *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*. London: I.B Tarius.

¹⁰ Mullen, Mike: "US envoy links Haqqani militants to Pakistan government.", *BBC News*, 17 September 2011 at <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-south-asia-14961234>

¹¹ Whitlock, Craig (2021): *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War*, New York, Simon and Schuster, p.168.

¹² It's widely speculated that the *Daesh* received patronage from the ISI, which hoped to instrumentalize the group against a recalcitrant Afghan Taliban. The participation of several defectors from the TTP and factions of the Afghan Taliban at the leadership and cadre level, and the fact that the first four *Emirs* of the group were Pakistani nationals added weight to speculations. See Misra, Arnab: "ISKP Links within Pakistan", 25 June 2024, Indian Council of World Affairs at https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=1&ls_id=11001&lid=6993; Ehsan, Ehsanullah: "ISIS leadership enjoying hospitality of Pakistan agencies", *The Sunday Guardian*, 10 December 2023, at https://sundayguardianlive.com/top-five/isis-leadership-enjoying-hospitality-of-pakistan-agencies#google_vignette



in the American flag, donning military fatigues with a Pakistani military patch, asserting that the *Murtadeen* of Taliban don't have the guts to displease *Taghoot* [tyrannical] ISI...Taliban didn't even spare those who were good to them only to please their masters in Pakistan"¹³.

Although this makes for good political rhetoric it doesn't capture the convolutedness of the Taliban–Pakistan relationship. Existing body of literature, with the notable exception of the memoirs of two key Taliban figures Mullah Abdul Salaam Zaeef and Abdul Hai Mutamai' in–while outlining lucidly Rawalpindi's role in pivoting the Afghan Taliban to the political centerstage doesn't dwell on how can we discern the Afghan Taliban display of agency vis-à-vis. their patron, despite the asymmetry, coercion and manipulation that characterize the relationship? Moreover, while Pakistan's support to the Taliban is etched out in graphic detail it is done so without necessarily bringing it into pointed conversation with the larger geo–political and historical matrix.

Herein it's argued that the relationship cannot be viewed from a linear, reductionist trope. Insightful in this regard are developments in the four odd years since the Taliban's return to power which would cast relationship with Rawalpindi as being chequered at best and a "pyrrhic victory" at worst. Particularly telling has been the resurgence of the *Tehrik-i-Taliban* Pakistan (TTP), with attacks staged by the group registering a secular increase since August 2021. This throws into sharp relief questions pertaining to the motives of patron in investing in the Afghan Taliban as also the agency of client vis-à-vis. its patron? Why does this relationship endure despite the power asymmetry and elements of conflict and manipulation?

In answering these questions this article will begin by drawing upon the historical context which is instructive in helping discern Rawalpindi's rationale in patronizing the Afghan Taliban, hoping to instrumentalize patronage for influencing developments across the Durand line. Pakistan's policy choices it will be demonstrated were deeply embedded in the larger historical context and informed by actions of other actors in the region. Thereafter the article brings literature on Pakistan–Taliban relations into conversation with interjections of K.J Holsti, Alvin Rubenstein and Raffael Biermann to demonstrate that despite the power asymmetry in the relationship the exercise of influence remains "multilateral"; patronage has accrued some incremental gain for Pakistan, but it has not necessarily led to tangible increments in influence or to desired policy outcomes. This is underscored by Pakistan's inability to realize its core policy objectives in Afghanistan, namely: blunting the historical challenge posed by Pashtun ethno–nationalism; acquiring 'strategic depth' by installing in Kabul a 'friendly' government in order to curtail Indian influence; and acquire unfettered access to Central Asia. Furthermore, this enduring relationship by virtue of being asymmetrical and entailing 'diffuse obligations' is also characterized by conflict. Arguments put forth are anchored not only in the theoretical interventions and historical literature but also draw on expert interviews conducted by the author with scholars and practitioners from India, Pakistan and Afghanistan using a semi-structured, open-ended questions which enriched the analysis by drawing attention to issues not covered in the literature.

¹³ "To be Absolved Before your Lord: Fighter of Ansar Ghazwat ul-Hind", *The Voice of Hind*, n°5, 23 June 2020.



2. The Past as a Prologue?

“...constant Indian propaganda [that] Pakistan could not survive as a separate state. The Afghan rulers believed this to be true and staked claim to our territory...In this way the idea of an artificial state of Pakhtoonistan [*sic*] inside our borders was made an issue by Afghan rulers...In this claim the Afghans were backed by India whose interests lay in ensuring that in the event of a war with us over Kashmir, the Afghans should open a second front against Pakistan...They also reasoned that if they had this understanding with Afghanistan, we would not be able to use Pathan tribesmen against them. The Indians thought that they would be able to hem us in and embarrass us by a pincer movement”¹⁴.

The above statement of General Ayub Khan, Pakistan’s first military dictator, off Pushtun descent, encapsulates in large measure, the rationale underpinning Rawalpindi’s strategic outlook and choices across the Durand line since August 1947. The pursuit of an irredentist agenda by Kabul, purportedly with encouragement from Rawalpindi’s perceived existential enemy, New Delhi and subsequently Moscow, animated Rawalpindi’s security concerns which would burgeon following the secession of East Pakistan in 1971. However, added to this was yet another critical historical fact which is that the political trajectory of the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) did not align with that of the Pakistan movement spearheaded by the Muslim League. Notably despite the instrumentalization of faith by the Muslim League, it failed to muster support in the Muslim majority NWFP where Hindus constituted only 3 per cent of the population. In fact, the idea of Pakistan officially espoused by the League in its Lahore Resolution of 1940 found virtually no takers in NWFP where the focus was on enhancing the socio-economic and cultural advancement of the Pathans within the framework of a quasi-federal independent India as opposed to an ideologically focused state of Pakistan. Pushtun affinity, predicated primarily along lines of tribe and ethnicity¹⁵, was stronger across the Durand line than with Indian Muslims in the sub-continent and this partially explained their cold response to the idea of a separate Muslim state in the sub-continent. Added to this was the perception of the League as being close to the British and this acquired currency in light of the British permitting the League’s leader, M.A Jinnah to visit the frontier’s tribal areas in 1936 whilst denying the same to a native of the frontier, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, who founded the non-violent but fiercely anti-colonial *Khudai Khidmatgar* (KK) or Servants of God) movement in 1929 which emerged as M.K Gandhi’s steadfast ally. However, as Pakistan’s creation appeared imminent, Ghaffar Khan and his followers jockeyed for independence and subsequently greater autonomy within Pakistan, setting the stage for a fraught relationship with Pakistan¹⁶. Khan’s persistent demands for greater cultural autonomy for the Pashtuns within Pakistan were met by the League’s firm dismissal of the same. By 1948 the *KK* would be banned and Khan spent over a decade and half in Pakistani jails and subsequently in exile in Kabul¹⁷.

¹⁴ Ayub Khan quoted in Fair, Christine. C. (2014): *Fighting to The End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p.112.

¹⁵ The significance of custom and tribal affiliations in Pushtun society, overriding perceived call to faith is not without precedence. The Pathans despite pledging themselves to *jihad* under Sayyid Ahmad of Rai Bareilly against the rising power of the Sikhs and recognizing him as *Amir-ul-Momineen* (commander of the faithful) eventually turned against him. Incensed by his “...imposition of Sharia at the expense of customary law...tinkering with marriage laws”. They rose up in revolt, with some joining hands with the Sikhs and contributing to his decisive defeat at the hands of the Sikhs in Balakot. See Jalal, Ayesha (2008): *Partisans of Allah: Jihad in South Asia*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, pp.101–103.

¹⁶ Dupree, Louis (1980): *Afghanistan*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, pp. 488-489.

¹⁷ Banerjee, M. (2000): *The Pathan Unarmed: Opposition and Memory in the North West Frontier*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp.167-191; Tendulkar, Dinanath. G. (n.d.): Badshah Khan, Gandhi Sarvodaya Mandal & Gandhi, Peace Foundation, at <https://www.mkgandhi.org/associates/Badshah.php>



These developments set the stage for embittering relations between Pakistan and Pashtuns internally, and Pakistan and Afghanistan externally. Casting the Pashtuns as the “most potent internal security threat”, Rawalpindi sought to counter Pushtun nationalism. Apart, from muzzling the *KK* and Badshah Khan; Pakistan retained the colonial Frontier Crimes Regulation Act (FCR) as a ploy to keep the region backward and isolated; withdrew units of Pakistan army deployed in tribal regions; integrated Pashtuns closely into civilian and military structures. Consider for instance the fact that Pashtuns were over-represented in the Pakistan army. Comprising 15.42 per cent of the population, they constituted 19.5 per cent of the Pakistani army as early as 1948 –stemming in some measure from the British policy of recruiting from amongst the “martial races” and a desire to dampen the appeal of ethno-nationalism. By the 1960’s 19 out of 48 senior most military officers were Pashtuns. The significance of these figures cannot be emphasized enough in light of the fact that the army has governed Pakistan for much of its history, exemplified by the ascendance of Ayub Khan, a Pashtun, to the post of Commander in chief in 1951 and subsequently as President of Pakistan in a coup in 1958. He was succeeded by yet another Pashtun, General Aga Mohammad Yahya Khan. Externally Pakistan sought to dampen the effect of Kabul’s irredentist agenda, throwing its support behind Afghan ethno-centric movements based in Quetta in 1970’s, alongside the Islamists muzzled by Daud Khan’s¹⁸ regime in Kabul. With Rawalpindi’s backing in 1975 the Islamists staged simultaneous uprisings in Panjshir, Herat, and Laghman while the *Sittam-i-Milli*—with a predominantly ethno-centric agenda— opened a front in Badakshan. Although crushed by Daud these developments signalled to Kabul the potential blowback of territorial irredentism¹⁹.

A turning point in Rawalpindi’s attempts to dampen ethno-political nationalism through instrumentalization of religion came in the 1980’s. General Zia-ul-Haq, who had seized power in a coup in 1977, sought to buttress his military regime’s legitimacy through an alliance with Islamists. His efforts got a serious fillip following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. Moreover, with the February 1979 Islamic Revolution in neighbouring Tehran plucking out the principal US ally in the region, provided Zia an opportunity to position Rawalpindi as a frontline ally in the fight against the USSR. He not only managed to obtain from the Reagan administration a US \$3.2 billion package but also got Washington to water down criticism on democracy and tolerate nuclear proliferation. Spelling out Rawalpindi’s desired policy outcome from patronage of the anti-Soviet *jihād*, Zia unequivocally asserted

“We have earned the right to have [in Kabul] a power which is friendly towards us . . . we will not permit a return to the pre-war situation marked by Indian and Soviet influence and Afghan claims on our own territory. The new power will really be Islamic, a part of the Islamic renaissance which, you will see, will someday extend itself to the Soviet Muslims”²⁰.

Consequently Rawalpindi sought to consciously deny space to royalist and nationalist Afghan groups who although opposed to the Soviets had pursued an ethno-nationalist agenda. Instead Pakistan consciously nurtured a Sunni-Islamist constituency, amongst the Pushtuns, who it believed were best suited to realize its foreign policy objectives²¹. Drawing attention to

¹⁸ He was the cousin of the last Afghan monarch, Zahir Shah under whom he served as Prime Minister (1953–1963). His vociferous embrace of Pushtun nationalism—seen in his strident support for Pashtunistan and linguistic nationalism strained relations with Pakistan. Forced to rescind power in 1963, in wake of the economic crisis triggered by Pakistan’s closure of border trade, he eventually toppled Zahir Shah in a bloodless coup in 1973 and established a one-party Republican state.

¹⁹ Fair, *op.cit.*, pp.112–114; Sharma, Raghav (2016): *Nation, Ethnicity and the Conflict in Afghanistan: Political Islam and the Rise of Ethno Politics (1992-1996)*, London, Routledge.

²⁰ Zia-ul-Haq quoted in Coll, Steve (2004): *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan and Bin Laden*, London, Penguin Press, p.175.

²¹ Holsti, K.J., *op.cit.*, p.185.



Pakistan's strategy of instrumentalizing religion, a retired, senior Indian intelligence official who engaged the Taliban opined "...one reason why they [Pakistan] are pushing religion - Deoband, particularly, as it could dilute *Pashtunwali*."²²

Cleverly playing on the Sunni–Pashtun card, Rawalpindi initially supported Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a Ghilzai Pashtun, in order to exploit tribal cleavages, pitting them against the former ruling line of the Durrani's²³. Following the collapse of Najibullah's government in April 1992, coupled with a meltdown of the *mujahideen* government that followed, the gates for wielding of political influence by external actors seen as inimical to the interests of Pakistan were thrown wide open and this would "...create the perfect storm that becomes the Taliban."²⁴ The Taliban not only capitalized on support of a war fatigued populace and financial support from traders and truckers on both sides of the Durand line, but added to its momentum by receiving support of an initially skeptical Rawalpindi which was weary of backing Hekmatyar who was losing ground militarily and had failed to rally Pashtuns around him. Moreover in the emergence of the Taliban, Pakistan also foresaw the possibility to realize grander strategic objectives, namely: a potential to secure a much desired land transit for trade with the newly emergent Central Asian Republics; acquiring "strategic depth" in the Afghan hinterland in event of a prolonged armed conflict with India; and the possibility of relocating terror training camps for militants operating in Kashmir to Afghan soil providing Rawalpindi plausible deniability against the charge of supporting terrorism. Consequently it permitted an estimated 30,000 of students enrolled in *Jamat Ulema-i-Islam madarssas* to join Taliban ranks; instructing provincial governments in Baluchistan and the frontier provinces to quell anti–Taliban political activity. Particularly telling are US declassified documents which describe Pakistan as not only supplying the Taliban with "fuel and food" and "munitions" but also playing an "overbearing role in planning and even executing Taliban political and diplomatic initiatives"²⁵. However realization of Pakistan's goals was torpedoed in wake of the 9/11 attacks which led to a toppling of the Taliban by the US by December 2001. Pakistan emerged as a diffident partner if not duplicitous partner in Washington's 'global war on terror' given a fundamental dissonance that has underpinned the nature of this alliance. Whereas Rawalpindi saw alliance with Washington as a hedge against the fear of Indian hegemony in the sub-continent, Washington hoped that use of coercion and its "military supply relationship" would engender a closer alignment of interests. Threatened by the distribution of power under the Bonn agreement of 2001, skewed in favor of the opposition Northern Alliance backed by India, Russia and Iran, Pakistan chose a temporary, tactical alliance with Washington. Faced with a resurgence of Indian influence in Afghanistan manifested in the forging of close strategic and political ties, an increasingly confrontational government in Kabul and a growing proximity between Washington and New Delhi, Pakistan was convinced that obliterating the Taliban offered little by way of strategic benefit²⁶.

²² Author's Interview with Senior Indian Intelligence Official, 16 October 2024,.

²³ Sharma, Raghav (2016): *Nation, Ethnicity and the Conflict in Afghanistan*, *op.cit.*, p.56.

²⁴ Authors interview with Baheer, Obaidullah, 11 October 2024.

²⁵ Abbas, *op.cit.*, pp.67-68; Rashid, *op.cit.*, pp.26-29; 73-88; 186; Sharma: *Nation, Ethnicity and the Conflict in Afghanistan*, *op.cit.*, p.135; Mutmai'in, *op.cit.*, pp.47,61; *Cable "[Excised]/Pakistan Interservice Intelligence/Pakistan (PK) Directorate Supplying the Taliban Forces"*, State Department, 22 October 1996, at <chrome-extension://efaidnbnmnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB227/15.pdf>. Mori DocID: 800277 Secret, Noforn [Excised - Released by U.S. Central Command], National Security Archive. (n.d.), at <chrome-extension://efaidnbnmnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB227/8.pdf>

²⁶ Haqqani, Hussain (2013): *Magnificent Delusions: Pakistan, United States and an Epic History of Misunderstanding*, New York, Public Affairs pp.176; Siddique, Abubakr: "Resolving the Pakistan Afghanistan Stalemate", in Rubin, Barnett. R (ed.) (2013): *Afghanistan from the Cold War Through the War on Terror*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp.372-373.



Thus, despite US pressure Pakistan continued to hedge its bets on the Taliban. Pakistan's ability to intervene in the Afghan theatre, acquired receptive niche in light of certain key developments. Foremost the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 would lead to a diversion of resources and personnel to Iraq, enabling the Taliban insurgency to acquire momentum²⁷. Second, pervasive corruption coupled with growing political fragmentation following deeply flawed elections since 2009 shook up confidence in the government in the face of an increasingly resilient Taliban insurgency. Third, the post Bonn set up in Afghanistan empowered strongmen accused of grave abuses in the past, casting a dark shadow on the legitimacy of the political process and institutions of governance²⁸. Finally, Rawalpindi's maneuvers mapped onto a growing divergence of interests with Washington whose frosty ties with the Afghan leadership in Kabul alongside a widening chasm with key players in the Afghan theatre. The first to pivot away from the US intervention in Afghanistan was Iran which as early as 2002 was cast by Geogre Bush as part of the 'axis of evil' in his State of Union address. This coupled with intensifying pressure on Iran's nuclear program would see Tehran forge 'anatonistic cooperation' with its erstwhile nemesis, the Afghan Taliban. Notably, Iran also positioned itself as an important conduit for Moscow's outreach to the Taliban²⁹ as its uneasy de-entente with Washington unravelled in wake of Moscow's support to the Assad regime in Syria; NATO's expansion into the former Post Soviet space as also the perception of Washington having engineered political changes here through the sponsorship of a series of 'color revolutions'. Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014 only accentuated the divide. By 2015 Moscow, alongside Beijing and Tehran forged a convergence of interests with the Afghan Taliban, particularly on combating narotics and the Islamic State³⁰. Beijing, which through its close ties to Pakistan had long enjoyed warm relations with the Taliban, developed a distaste for prolonged US led military presence in its backyard. The consistent shift in military ground in favour of the Taliban convinced Beijing of cosying upto the group which it foresaw as an effective counter terror partner in light of challenge posed both by the Islamic state as well as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)³¹. Moreover, Moscow's growing dependence on Beijing in light of its incresingly strained tied with the West, as well as Beijing's friction with Washington over trade and technology since 2018 reinforced this realignment³².

Thus Pakistan's provision of succour to the Taliban acquired momentum in light of the chnaging geo-political alignments. It unabashedly provided shelter, medical facilities, political, military and diplomatic support to the Taliban enabling their formiddable resurgence. The Afghan Taliban leadership in this period refrained from engaging in a critique of Pakistan's

²⁷ Jamal, Ahmad Shuja and Maley, William (2023): *The Decline and Fall of Republican Afghanistan*, London, Hurst & Company, pp.110-111; 239

²⁸ An Asia Foundation survey of Afghanistan in 2019 which states 84 per cent Afghans surveyed aw corruption as a major problem and 29 per cent said they had little faith that the government would bring to justice those accused of crimes, whereas 14 per cent had no confidence whatsoever; "A Survey of the Afghan People: Afghanistan in 2019", Asia Foundation, 2019, at https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Afghanistan_2019-Survey-of-the-Afghan-People.pdf; "Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction: Why the Afghan Government Collapsed", SIGAR, November 2022, at <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-S-PURL-gpo220710/pdf/GOVPUB-S-PURL-gpo220710.pdf>

²⁹ Sharma, Raghav (2025): "The Rise Fall and Rise of the Taliban", in Inukonda, Sumanth, Boyd- Baret, Oliver and Lengel, Lara Martin (eds.) (2025): *"Propaganda, Communication and Empire: Western Intervention in Afghanistan"*, New York, Routledge, 2025, pp.128-129.

³⁰ Sharma, Raghav and Belousova, Tatiana: "Embracing the Taliban: Deciphering Russia's Afghan Policy", *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, Vol.12, n° 4 (December 2025), pp.5-6.

³¹ Sharma, Raghav: "The Rise Fall and Rise of the Taliban", *op.cit*, pp. 130-131; Sharma, Raghav: "Decoding China's Taliban Gamble" in Sengupta, Anita and Singh, Priya (ed.) (2024): *"China in India's Neighborhood: Shifting Regional Narratives"*, New York, Routledge, pp.90-94.

³² Horowitz, Julia: "Huawei arrest: This is what the start of a tech cold war looks like", *CNN*, 9 December 2018, at <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/12/08/tech/huawei-cfo-tech-cold-war>



Afghan policy, despite Pakistan turning in senior Taliban leaders to the US in 2001; incarcerating senior leaders such as Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and Mullah Obaidullah who died in a Pakistani prison in 2010. Instead they routinely attacked Indian developmental projects and diplomatic outposts in Afghanistan seemingly furthering Pakistan's strategic objectives³³.

3. Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban: Strange or Estranged Bedfellows?

Taliban are my strategic reserve, and I can unleash them in tens of thousands against India when I want³⁴.

What is happening in Afghanistan now, they have broken the shackles of slavery³⁵.

The abrasive statements made nearly two decades apart by Pakistan's then martial law administrator, General Pervez Musharraf in 1999 and subsequently by then Prime Minister Imran Khan in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban's return to power in August 2021 respectively, was touted as yet another testament to the enduring nature of the relationship and the perceived unilateral character of influence Pakistan exercised over the Afghan Taliban³⁶.

Pakistan's seminal role in the resurrection of the Afghan Taliban was predicated on the belief that once in power the Afghan Taliban would be benevolent and this would accrue favourable policy outcomes. This fructified partially as the return of the Taliban has arguably allowed Rawalpindi to establish a more robust presence and penetrate the regime, having acquired unparalleled access to structures of power, testifying to Biermann's assertion of such relations being both enduring and underpinned by a 'cooperative exchange of resources'. Consider in this context the following fact:

³³ Mutma'in, *op.cit.*, pp.204–205; PTI: "2008 Indian embassy attack in Kabul sanctioned by ISI, new book claims", 23 March 2014, *Economic Times*, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/2008-indian-embassy-attack-in-kabul-sanctioned-by-isi-new-book-claims/articleshow/32548268.cms?from=mdr>; Government of India External Affairs Lok Sabha: Starred Question n°361 Answered on: 21.04.2010, Attacks on Indians in Afghanistan, 2010, at <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnncnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://eparlib.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/582190/1/86605.pdf>; Zaef, Abdul. S. (2011): *My Life with the Taliban*, London, Hurst.

³⁴ General Pervez Musharraf quoted in Abbas, *op.cit.*, p.96

³⁵ Imran quoted in Sharma, Kadambini: "Taliban Has Broken Shackles Of Slavery, Says Pak PM Imran Khan", 16 August 2021, *NDTV*, at <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/taliban-has-broken-shackles-of-slavery-says-pak-pm-imran-khan-2511573>

³⁶ The Afghan Taliban isn't a monolith, there being least three principal factions: the Kandahari's led by Hibatullah Akhundzada; the Haqqani network comprising primarily of the Zadran's from *loya Paktika*—considered to be the most proximate to Pakistan— and a faction led by Mullah Baradar. "The Taliban have within them elements that have interacted with the outside world, that have interacted with Afghans beyond their own movement, and they've come to the realisation that there needs to be some sort of accommodation of the larger public will... But then there are within them others that are much more traditional, partially from the old guard. They are the *Amir* and his close aides, who believe that ultimately, it's about appeasing God and their movement...the thing isn't about is there a [Taliban] 1.0 or 2.0? 1.0 and the 2.0 are coexisting at the same time within the movement" (Authors interview with Baheer, Obaidullah 2024).

These divides are visible on the ground. Recalling a recent visit to the *Arg*: "A friend of mine told me there are three different barricades, the first is off the Defense Ministry of Mullah Yacqub; second is of old NSA and Karzai's house which has the national security apparatus [now controlled by the Haqqani's] and there is a third. Everything is divided". (Authors interview with Senior Indian Intelligence Official 2024). Also see Bijlert, Martine. Van: "The Focus of the Taleban's New Government: Internal cohesion, external dominance", *Afghan Analyst Network*, 12 September 2021, at <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/the-focus-of-the-talebans-new-government-internal-cohesion-external-dominance>; Jackson, Ashley: "The Ban on Older Girls' Education: Taleban conservatives' ascendant and a leadership in disarray", *Afghan Analyst Network*, 29 March 2022, at <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/rights-freedom/the-ban-on-older-girls-education-taleban-conservatives-ascendant-and-a-leadership-in-disarray/>



“...the old Minister of Health was from Paktika, Qalandar Ebad...is now living in Pindi, he has a Pakistani *shinakhti* [identity] card³⁷, his family and businesses are there...When he was removed, he went back to Pindi...The new guy, Noor Jalal, is from Kunar. *Afghanistan International* published his *shinkahti* card and passport from Pakistan... Shakib is the [Taliban] ambassador in Pakistan, he holds a Pakistani *shinkahti* card, he is a Pakistani, he was brought up there and detained there. Once they [Pakistani’s] have Taliban in power, they have all the data coming through such Taliban...Who is Siraj [Haqqani]? He lives in Pakistan. His uncles, his family members, live in Pakistan. Whatever he is doing it is going directly to Pakistan...In the past 20 years Pakistan couldn’t do that... Pakistan’s human resource presence in Afghanistan is much easier and more acceptable. Now you have more Pakistani doctors around the country, more engineers, more trust foundations, more schoolteachers, we have more communication than ever! So, all these things in the twenty first century having access to data, and information is the best tool for power and occupation. Its neo-colonization and Pakistan is very happy having all these problems on the surface I think, but beneath the surface, Pakistan is better off having the Taliban in power”³⁸.

It is worth drawing attention to Rubenstein’s inferences on the nature of influence exercised by a state in an asymmetrical relationship based on his study of the Soviet–Egyptian relationship in the 1970’s. Foremost, influence building is issue and situation specific and states try and avoid actions that by undermining the internal base of the ruling elite risk inviting a counter-reaction that will jeopardise realization of goals that motivated support in the first place. Second, inputs by a state are merely used as instruments in the hope of attaining influence but do not necessarily translate into increments in influence. Finally, an extensive presence on the ground is important towards building influence and enabling access to key decision makers but by itself it is not a guarantee of influence³⁹.

A close reading of Rawalpindi’s attempts at building influence across the Durand line, not only bears out assertions put forth by Rubenstein above, but also attests to the assertions put forth by Holsti and Raffael Biermann’s concerning the multi-lateral nature of influence as also the ‘diffuse obligation’ such relationships entail

“...Mullah Omar, although he had been trained in Pakistani *madrassas*, there is no evidence that Pakistan itself created him. But once he showed evidence of having greater control of territory, they put their lot behind him... but you will see this control is not a perfect control at all times... So Mullah Omar for instance didn’t concede on the request of handing over Osama Bin Laden. Yet we know that when America was attacking, it was the ISI chief, General Mahmood who advised him to hide, go through the tunnels and get to safety. Mullah Omar didn’t concede on the Durand line⁴⁰, for

³⁷ Pakistan’s stamp on the Afghan Taliban leadership is pervasive, with many leaders continuing to hold Pakistani documents. See Gupta, Shishir: “Mullah Baradar's passport reveals Pak support for Taliban”, *Hindustan Times*, 10 September 2021, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/mullah-baradar-s-passport-reveals-pak-support-for-taliban-101631288533940.html>; Dutta, Sharangee: “Taliban minister fishes out Pakistani passport at airport, and then...”, *India Today*, 7 December 2023, at <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/taliban-interior-minister-sirajuddin-haqqani-afghanistan-pakistani-passport-qatar-travel-doha-talks-2473167-2023-12-07>

³⁸ Authors Interview with Zaland, Faiz.M, 11 October 2024.

³⁹ Rubenstein, *op.cit.*, pp. xiv-xix; 335-336.

⁴⁰ Authors Interview with Dr. Ayesha Siddiq, Research Associate, SOAS, 21 November 2024. Dr. Siddiq draws attention to the fact that from the perspective of the Pakistani military establishment, the Durand line “...is not a problem solved but is a problem which has been partly solved. I remember 2016, my first and only visit to Afghanistan...There was an informal dialogue between the Pakistani team which I was a part of and the Afghan team...I remember clearly General Asad Durrani said ‘look the Durand line, the problem has been solved from



its also a Pashtun issue and at the end of the day the Taliban may be a religious element but they are also Pashtuns...So there are issues on which they are not going to cooperate, there are other issues on which they will”⁴¹.

Second, while Rawalpindi acquired unprecedented presence on the ground, not seen during the twenty years of the Republic, this hasn't translated into realization of policy objectives. Consider the developments over the last four years. Foremost, brazen over-reach by Pakistan in the very early days of the Taliban's return to power, at a time when they were in the process of cobbling together a government, generated a counter reaction from elites who felt this would provide a leverage to their rivals and undermine their domestic credibility, as

“...Pakistan tried to do it all too fast...images of Faiz Hamid in Kabul...of Mansoor, the ambassador in cabinet meetings, Qureshi, the Foreign Minister sitting at international conferences, talking as if he represents the Afghan state...I am personally off the opinion that one of the reasons the Taliban actually opted for an all exclusive Taliban cabinet, despite having spent weeks thinking about an inclusive set up, including identifying people and talking to them from Karzai, Abdullah Abdullah and Hikmatyar's camps...partially owed to Faiz Hamid coming in and reassuring all these different sides that you will have a seat on the table...the *Amir* eventually made sure that that it is not the case....the Pakistanis thought that they owned the show and the Taliban showed them that they needed to back off”⁴².

Thus, whilst the Taliban's return offered incremental advantages to Rawalpindi, the Afghan Taliban haven't shied away from drawing “red lines beyond which they are unwilling to accept patron interference”⁴³ If there is one thing that is very popular in Afghanistan today is anti-Pakistan sentiments.

“...since they've [Taliban] come to power, they are trying to show themselves the strongest against the Pakistani establishment...which not only helps them strategically, but also creates popularity within the population”⁴⁴.

Moreover, the Taliban haven't deviated from position of earlier regimes on the Durand line. Infact, like the 1990's, Pakistan's “victory” in Kabul might turn out to be a pyrrhic one. Taliban ascendance in the 1990's had sucked the region along the frontier into fundamentalism—manifested in rise of Islamist groups such as the one led by Sufi Muhammad who mimicked the Taliban's agenda and eventually found sanctuary under them in 1998; spurt in drug trafficking and centrifugal tendencies. The Taliban's resurrection of their Emirate, with Rawalpindi's backing, has electrified the ranks of Islamists, particularly the TTP which emerged in 2007 and is keen to acquire ‘reverse strategic depth’ in Pakistan. Sharing close ties with the Afghan Taliban, since August 2021, TTP attacks in Pakistan have surged, from 282 in 202 to 881 attacks in 2023— a 300 per cent jump⁴⁵. This isn't surprising given that the TTP and the

our perspective....they fenced the Durand line...on the main points they have now the capacity to check who is coming and going...so the border is much more controlled than it was ever before. So while the problem continues there is much better control.”

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Authors interview with Baheer, *op.cit.* Even during the Taliban's first stint in power (1996-2001) relations were characterized by a degree of distrust and disdain. See Mutmai'in, *op.cit.*, pp.114, 133; Zaeef, *op.cit.*

⁴³ Biermann, *op.cit.*, p.4

⁴⁴ Authors interview with Baheer, *op.cit.*

⁴⁵ Ansari, Mantasha: “Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) Attacks in Pakistan More Than Tripled Between 2021 And 2023, Following Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan”, 19 January 2024, MEMRI, at <https://www.memri.org/jttm/tehreek-e-taliban-pakistan-ttp-attacks-pakistan-more-tripled-between-2021-and-2023-following>; Sajid, Islamuddin: “Pakistani, Afghan border forces clash over check post construction”, Anadolu Agansi, 6 September 2024, at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/pakistani-afghan-border-forces-clash-over-check-post-construction/3321848>; Rashid, *op.cit.*, p.194. Pakistan used these attacks to frame itself as a victim of



Taliban are cut from the same cloth, share tribal and ideological linkages, the TTP provided safe haven to the Taliban when it fought against NATO and above all it provides the Taliban leverage over Pakistan—yet again underscoring the multilateral nature of the exercise of power. As the Haqqani-mediated peace talks between the TTP and Pakistan falter, attempts by the Taliban to assuage Rawalpindi’s concerns on TTP safe havens in Afghanistan by offering to re-locate TTP fighters away from the Pakistan border to the North⁴⁶ are unlikely to secure Pakistan’s interests⁴⁷ given the profundity of the challenge at hand as

“...ideology is something else, which mostly comes from scriptures you believe in, you are brainwashed by them. That ideology comes from *madrassas* and...from the religious interpretation that Taliban are believing in and that is something which brings reverse strategic depth to Pakistan because ideologically the Taliban, many of them have been to *Haqqania* and *Banauria madarssas*, across the Durand line [in Pakistan]. Now that rootedness, makes them to go back to those areas and claim power in those areas...this is more of a theological; religious and sociological phenomenon”⁴⁸.

These developments have sharpened the “conflictual dimension” of the relationship, manifested in the deportation of Afghan refugees in the hope of coercing the Afghan Taliban to act against the TTP; incidents of border shelling and frequent closure of trade⁴⁹. The ‘diffuse’ nature of obligations in such relations profoundly underscored by the friction over the TTP leading Rawalpindi to take recourse to airstrikes in Afghanistan in March 2024 and December 2024, purportedly targeting the TTP which resulted in civilian casualties in Afghanistan, adding to Pakistan’s unpopularity⁵⁰.

terrorism from Afghanistan. On two occasions the author engaged in closed-door interactions with a Special Envoy to Afghanistan of a regional grouping who stated that, ‘Pakistan was extremely worried about developments since the Taliban’s return to power, especially the rise and growth of the TTP’. However, developments on the ground paint a far more convoluted picture, lucidly underscored in rare protests by the police in Lakki Marwat, wherein they publicly denounced the Military Intelligence and ISI’s interference in their work, enabling the TTP to fester. See “Police Block Pakistani Highway Over Military, Intelligence Meddling”, *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, 9 September 2024, at

<https://www.rferl.org/a/pakistan-police-intelligence-protest-khyber-pakhtunkhwa/33113095.html>.

⁴⁶ This is likely to be viewed with concern in the Central Asian Republics (CAR’s) which has long feared contagion of radical Islam from Afghanistan. Moreover with the emergence of groups like the *Tehrik-i-Taliban Tajikistan* (TTT) and the *al Qaeda* affiliated *Jamat Ansarullah*, considered to be an offshoot of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), dedicated to the overthrow of the government in Dushanbe, the CAR’s fear these groups could be used as potential leverages against them, particularly Tajikistan which provides sanctuary to Afghan opposition figures from the National Resistance Front (NRF). See Ramachandran, Sudha: “Tajikistan Faces Threat from Tajik Taliban”, *Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, (27 March 2023). <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13750-tajikistan-faces-threat-from-tajik-taliban.html>; Roggio, B. : “Pakistani and Tajik Taliban open training camps in Afghanistan”, *Foundation for the Defence of Democracies*, 13 February 2025, at https://www.fdd.org/analysis/op_ed/2025/02/13/pakistani-and-tajik-taliban-open-training-camps-in-afghanistan/

⁴⁷ Sharma, Discerning Taliban 2.0 and Afghanistan’s Political Landscape, *op.cit.*, p.14.

⁴⁸ Authors interview with Zaland, *op.cit.*

⁴⁹ “Traders end monthslong protest at Pakistan-Afghan border crossing”, *Voice of America*, 25 July 2024, at <https://www.voanews.com/a/traders-end-monthslong-protest-at-pakistan-afghan-border-crossing/7712792.html>; Pandey, Swati: “Torkham Border Closure: Trade Between Pakistan And Afghanistan Suspended”, *News X*, 2 August 2024, at <https://www.newsx.com/world/torkham-border-closure-trade-between-pakistan-and-afghanistan-suspended/>; Farhney, Megan: “Why Pakistan Is Deporting Afghan Migrants”, Council on Foreign Relations, 15 December 2023, at <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/why-pakistan-deporting-afghan-migrants>

⁵⁰ “Pakistan carries out strikes inside Afghanistan: What is happening, and why”, *The Indian Express*, 19 March 2024, at <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-global/pakistan-strikes-inside-afghanistan-why-9221302/>; Hussain, Abid: “Pakistan air strikes in Afghanistan spark Taliban warning of retaliation”, *Al Jazeera*, 25 December 2024, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/25/pakistan-air-strikes-in-afghanistan-spark-taliban-warning-of-retaliation>; Biermann, *op.cit.*



The Taliban's subsequent retaliation against Pakistan seen in its targeting of "Several points beyond the hypothetical line"; and the support it elicited from New Delhi which unequivocally condemned "any attack on innocent civilians"⁵¹ underscores limits of influence and serves as a prudent reminder of the context as well as the multilateral state in which influence is exercised

"...with the freedom from US restraints, the Taliban seem to be much more free to navigate the regional space, they continue the legacy of the Republic, which was the Chahbahar as an alternative corridor...improving ties with Russia and China, all create outlets for Afghanistan, one of the leverages that Pakistan always had was trade and they've used this against us...that has reduced"⁵².

Notably despite Pakistan having inked several trade and transit agreements since 2021 with the Central Asian Republics, trade volume with the region plummeted by 17 per cent and trade deficits have widened⁵³. Thus, the Afghan Taliban's return hasn't translated into realization of Pakistan's core policy objectives as the Durand line, albeit relatively better controlled, continues to remain unrecognized; unlike the 1990's archrival India has embarked on a tenuous engagement with the Afghan Taliban; trade volumes with the CAR's remain underwhelming on account of logistical and security challenges; and Pakistan's Pushtun heartland is convulsed by ferment manifested in two diametrically opposed developments, namely mass, non-violent mobilization of Pashtuns under the banner of the *Pushtun Tahfuz Movement* (PTM) on the one hand which casts itself in the mold of the KK's and the virulent rebound of the TTP on the other. Rawalpindi's response of attempting to muzzle the former whilst vacillating between negotiations and use of force vis-à-vis the latter⁵⁴ providing it justification for its continued involvement in Afghan affairs

"...the TTP is not monolith. It has two elements— one with sanctuaries in Afghanistan and the other, not more than 200 or so, under the control of the Pakistan army. The Pakistanis are duplicitous. They use one group to give the impression that the TTP is a major threat...giving Pakistan a *raison d'être*, to legitimise its continuing involvement in Afghanistan"⁵⁵.

Thus, the Afghan Taliban's return to power whilst enabling some cooperative exchange of resources and facilitating for Pakistan access to strategic territory, information and shoring up its presence on ground has not translated into a realization of Rawalpindi's core policy

⁵¹ Official Spokesperson's response to media queries regarding airstrikes on Afghan civilians, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, at https://www.mea.gov.in/response-to-queries.htm?dtl/38889/Official_Spokespersons_response_to_media_queries_regarding_airstrikes_on_Afghan_civilians; "Afghan Taliban hit 'several points' in Pakistan in retaliation for attacks", *Al Jazeera*, 28 December 2024, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/28/afghan-taliban-hit-several-points-in-pakistan-in-retaliation-for-attacks>

⁵² Authors interview with Baheer, *op.cit.*

⁵³ "Pakistan's exports to Central Asia drop 17% despite transit trade agreements", *Profit*, 6 February 2025, at <https://profit.pakistantoday.com.pk/2025/02/06/pakistans-exports-to-central-asia-drop-17-despite-transit-trade-agreements/>; Rafiq, Muhammad: "Kazakhstan, Pakistan Launch Trans-Afghan Multimodal Transport Corridor", *The Astana Times*, 14 August 2024, at <https://astanatimes.com/2024/08/kazakhstan-pakistan-launch-trans-afghan-multimodal-transport-corridor/#:~:text=The%20transit%20potential%20of%20the,Trans%2DAfghan%20Multimodal%20Transport%20Corridor>

⁵⁴ Siddique, Abubakar: "Pakistan's Ban On Prominent Civil Rights Group Will 'Alienate' Pashtun Minority", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 12 October 2024, at <https://www.rferl.org/a/pakistan-ptm-pashtun-tahafuz-movement-jirga/33155241.html>; Shinwari, Ibrahim: "PTM jirga deploras militancy, sense of deprivation", *Dawn*, 14 October 2024, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1865043/ptm-jirga-deploras-militancy-sense-of-deprivation>

⁵⁵ Authors interview Anonymous, *op.cit.*



objectives. Infact it would not be far-fetched to argue that the return to power of the Afghan Taliban has truly been a “pyrrhic victory” for Pakistan which has witnessed a secular increase in attacks by the TTP since the Taliban’s return to power in August 2021 with attacks surging from 89 in 2021 to 699 in 2025.⁵⁶ Bulk of the violence is concentrated in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province abutting Afghanistan and targets the Pakistani state and its symbols. Pakistan alleges that the group receives “logistical and operational” support from the Taliban rulers of Kabul, who not only see the group as leverage against a more powerful Pakistan but will also find it hard to rein in the group given that the two are cut from the same cloth, the TTP backed the Taliban in its fight against NATO. Acting against the TTP is likely to upset the Taliban’s own rank and file and add credence to propaganda by groups like the Islamic state. Pakistan’s mounting frustration with regards to its inability to make the Afghan Taliban fall in line has led it react to these developments by taking recourse to coercive measures⁵⁷ ranging from the forced repatriation of millions of Afghan refugees; closure of border; to multiple airstrikes and a declaration of “open war” by February 2026. These measures have not resulted in the elimination of the TTP leadership, but the resultant loss of civilian life has helped reinforce anti-Pakistan sentiment in Afghanistan, enabling the Taliban to rally people around the flag⁵⁸. A more inadvertent consequence of the Taliban’s return to power and their crackdown on opium cultivation and trade has been the migration of poppy farming to Pakistan. The UNODC notes that the area under opium poppy cultivation in the country has risen from a mere 27 hectares in 2020 to 380 hectares by 2023⁵⁹.

4. Conclusion

Thus, the trajectory of the relationship between the Afghan Taliban and Rawalpindi whilst asymmetrical has been anything but linear. The historical and geo-political context which has long animated Pakistan’s strategic landscape and consequent channelization of enduring patronage of the Afghan Taliban has not only not translated in the realization of external policy objectives or into incremental policy advantages for Pakistan but as escalating levels of violence by the TTP within Pakistan since August 2021 have served to cast this as a “pyrrhic victory” for Pakistan. Furthermore, Pakistan’s recourse to coercive measures in its aftermath have only served to reinforce anti-Pakistan sentiments in Afghanistan and galvanized efforts by the Afghan Taliban to rally people around the flag. Therefore, the Afghan Taliban’s receipt of patronage from Pakistan hasn’t prevented them from drawing new “red lines” for Rawalpindi on issues that are perceived as casting a shadow on their domestic credibility. This is lucidly underscored in their stance on formation of the interim government; the continued non-recognition of the Durand line as the international border; the Afghan Taliban reluctance to act

⁵⁶ PIPS Database: An Independent Database Mapping Pakistan’s Conflict and Security Landscape, Pak Institute for Peace Studies, at <https://www.pakpips.com/>

⁵⁷ At a political level to build pressure Pakistan has sought to signal to the Taliban, its willingness to ally with its nemesis in the opposition camp who were previously backed among other by India. See Laskar, Rezaul H: “Pakistan military backing conference to bring together Afghan opposition figures”, *Hindustan Times*, 27 August 2025, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/pakistan-military-backing-conference-to-bring-together-afghan-opposition-figures-101756302061916.html>

⁵⁸ Rehman, Zia Ur: “Taliban regime deepens Pakistan’s internal security woes”, *Deutsche Welle*, 14 August 2025, at <https://www.dw.com/en/taliban-regime-deepens-pakistans-internal-security-woes/a-73638665> ; “The battle for the borderlands: The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan Challenges the State’s Control”, ACLED, 6 October 2025, at <https://acleddata.com/report/battle-borderlands-tehreek-i-taliban-pakistan-challenges-states-control>

⁵⁹ Bjelica, Jelena and Himmat, Nur Khan: “Migrating poppy cultivation: Afghan poppy farmers in Baluchistan”, *Afghan Analyst Network*, 23 February 2025, at <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/economy-development-environment/migrating-poppy-cultivation-afghan-poppy-farmers-in-balochistan/>; Foschini, Fabrizio and Bjelica, Jelena: “The Fourth Year of the Opium Ban: An Update from two of Afghanistan’s Major Poppy Growing Areas”, *Afghan Analyst Network*, 27 June 2025, at <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/economy-development-environment/the-fourth-year-of-the-opium-ban-an-update-from-two-of-afghanistans-major-poppy-growing-areas/>



against the TTP and receptivity to step up engagement with India, most vividly underscored by the visit of the visit of the Taliban's interim foreign minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi to India in October 2025, embittering relations with Pakistan further, whilst shoring up the Taliban's ability to play to the domestic gallery.⁶⁰ In fact in an ironical twist of fate, Pakistan has lost its former position as a coveted gatekeeper to the Afghan Taliban, a development lucidly underscored by the fact that while in the 1990's Rawalpindi acted as conduit between the Taliban and Beijing, today

“... the Chinese have offered the Pakistanis to be intermediaries with the Afghan Taliban and that offended the Pakistani establishment, saying we're the ones who introduced you, the Taliban and now you want to mediate between us?”⁶¹.

Clearly, the channelization of resources for patronage is only a potential means of exercising power but doesn't necessarily fructify in the exercise of power by patron over the client across issues in the relationship⁶². These developments also underscore the fact that the exercise of influence, remains “multilateral”, influenced by a complex interplay of the historical and the contemporary geo-political contexts. Furthermore patron-client ties although asymmetrical remain dynamic with the latter not shying away from displaying agency on issues of core importance, particularly once in a position of strength, as the Afghan Taliban have done. For Rawalpindi the Taliban's behavior, reminiscent of their first stint in power, should serve as a poignant reminder that patronage may be instrumentalized to influence the direction of events, but it doesn't necessarily yield envisioned policy outcomes. Rawalpindi's strategy of supporting factions such as the *Hezb-i-Islami* led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar among the *mujahideen*, to switching support to the Taliban 1.0 when he failed to deliver to supporting Taliban 2.0 against the Afghan republic and now to factions within the Taliban as well as flirtation with opposition groups is unlikely to help it secure its policy objectives, making the Taliban and Pakistan strange but not yet estranged bedfellows.

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⁶⁰ An incensed Pakistan is speculated has reverted to its old playbook of undermining the regime in power by flirting with the opposition National Resistance Front (NRF) whose factitious leadership has shared a largely strained relationship with Rawalpindi. See Chaudhary, Dipanjan. R.: “Pakistan eyes anti-Taliban tie-up with Tajik president”, *Economic Times*, 1 January 2025, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/pakistan-eyes-anti-taliban-tie-up-with-tajik-president/articleshow/116844837.cms?from=mdr>; “We Support Tajiks Against Taliban Under New Policy, Says Senior Pakistani Expert”, *Aamaj News English*, 4 January 2025, at https://x.com/aamajnews_EN/status/1875450395033792991; Ojha, Nishikant: “Pakistan's shift from Taliban to regional realignment”, *The Pioneer*, 28 January 2025, at <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2025/columnists/pakistan--s-shift-from-taliban-to-regional-realignment.html>. This feeds into Pakistan's larger strategy of keeping “Afghanistan weak and unstable to maintain its influence and prevent any future Afghan government from challenging the Durand line” Authors interview Anonymous, *op.cit.*.

⁶¹ Authors interview with Baheer, *op.cit.*

⁶² Biermann, *op.cit.* p.4



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