

## FOR PAKISTAN, A CHANCE TO TURN PAKISTANI TALIBAN INTO ALLIES

As relations between the U.S. and Pakistan continue to spiral downwards, Pakistan may be looking to build a new friendship instead of repairing an old one. In late September outgoing Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen told Congress the Haqqani terrorist network was a “veritable arm” of Pakistan’s intelligence service, the ISI. Since the Admiral’s remarks, Pakistan has engaged in a series of actions specifically designed to worry U.S. decisionmakers who are pursuing punitive action against state elements for their support of Afghanistan-focused terrorist groups. These actions have ranged from senior Pakistani officials warning of a full break in relations to a timely embrace of China as Pakistan’s all-weather friend.<sup>1</sup>

While much of the Pakistanis’ immediate response to the Admiral’s comments has been posturing, more troublesome developments may be brewing—a grand peace deal with the Pakistani Taliban (the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, or TTP) and its ultimate redirection towards Afghanistan. For Pakistan’s senior leadership, turning anti-state or “bad Taliban” into Afghanistan-focused or “good Taliban” would be a major achievement. For U.S. and coalition forces fighting to stabilize Afghanistan, it could have serious consequences.

The TTP is a loose confederation of militant organizations almost exclusively focused on targeting the Pakistani state, with the shared goal of overthrowing the government and imposing *sharia* law. Anti-state activities in Pakistan’s Federally-Administered Tribal Areas region have a long history, and as early as 2004, some militant groups began describing themselves as “Pakistani Taliban.” In late 2007, several anti-state militant commanders formally organized themselves as the TTP under the leadership of South Waziristan-based Baitullah Mehsud. Rather than a single, unified entity, the TTP is a movement composed of independent commanders and their allied fighters. Consequently, factions within the TTP sometimes compete for resources and differ in their prioritization of jihad against the Pakistani state or combating U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan. Pakistan’s senior military leaders have unsuccessfully tried to convince the TTP to shift their focus to the fight in Afghanistan—but that may be changing.

On September 29, Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gailani convened an All Parties Conference to address Pakistan’s national security situation following U.S. allegations of direct, state-sponsored support for Afghan-focused terrorist groups, such as the Haqqani network. Pakistan’s senior military and political elite, including Chief of Army Staff General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, Director General Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Lt. Gen. Ahmed Shuja Pasha, Pakistan Muslim League chief Nawaz Sharif, Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf chief Imran Khan, and Awami National Party leader Asfandyar Wali, attended the conference.

Rather than unifying participants against internally focused militancy, the conference produced a declaration seeking peace with militants throughout the tribal areas, even referring to militants as “our own people”—the same people that are largely responsible for more than 200 suicide attacks, killing at least 3,600 people since the beginning of 2008.<sup>2</sup> Awami Pakistan Muslim League leader Sheikh Rashid Ahmed stated that the consensus of the conference was that Pakistan would revisit national policy towards the War on Terror (a reference to U.S. actions in Afghanistan and Pakistan since 2001), and some participants called for a return to the pre-9/11 status.

Publicly, conference participants (and most notably Pakistan’s military) intend for their joint declaration to be a message to the U.S. that the Pakistani state is no longer willing to fight what they consider to be America’s

war within their own territory. Privately, the declaration reflects the military's long-held belief that even anti-state militants, such as the TTP, can be turned into proxies, a key component in the military's policy of state-sponsored exportation of terror in neighboring territories, such as Afghanistan.

Despite what many Western security analysts considered a concerted attempt to root out and destroy the TTP and other internally-focused militants, Pakistani military operations in the tribal areas have been limited in scope. These operations were focused on dividing and conquering the group's senior leadership in order to exercise an element of control over their fighting force and to stem the flow of Pakistani Taliban into new areas. Even as the Pakistani military prepared for what was thought to be a major offensive in the TTP's stronghold of South Waziristan, it was clear that Pakistan's military leadership had no intention of eradicating the TTP in Pakistan's tribal region.<sup>3</sup> In fact, in 2008, Chief of Army Staff, General Parvez Ashfaq Kayani openly professed that the Pakistani Army would not become a counterinsurgency force and would instead remain deployed along the Indian border in the event of an Indo-Pakistan war.<sup>4</sup> Referring to the TTP, Pakistani Army spokesman Major General Athar Abbas said, "These people are not our enemies. ... These people have been misguided."<sup>5</sup> Perhaps Abbas considered the TTP misguided because they were attacking the Pakistani state rather than fighting with their brethren across the border in neighboring Afghanistan.

Seth Jones and C. Christine Fair's analysis of six of the most significant Pakistani military operations in the tribal areas since 2002 demonstrated minimally successful efforts to clear militants from the military's area of operations, consistent failures to hold captured territory while simultaneously alienating the population through practices of collective punishment, and the failure to address local grievances.<sup>6</sup> From 2007 to 2009, military operations in Pakistan's northeastern Swat district concluded each year in a peace agreement with militants that they consistently breached. Militants finally succeeded in forcing the army's capitulation in 2009, resulting in a peace agreement known as the Malakand Accord. The agreement called for the end of military operations in Swat, the end of Taliban operations, and the imposition of *sharia* law, in the districts of Malakand, Swat, Shangla, Buner, Dir, Chitral, and Kohistan, a region that encompasses nearly one-third of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa—effectively constituting a miniature Islamic emirate.<sup>7</sup>

Despite what, at times, can be considered Pakistan's capitulation to the militants, the TTP is a weaker, less cohesive movement.<sup>8</sup> Continuous Pakistani military operations against numerous TTP factions since 2007 have strained the efficacy of the movement's operations. Persistent U.S. drone strikes targeting the network's key leaders and increased surveillance and intercept capabilities have made it much more difficult for the group to coordinate and plan offensives. The group's current leader, Hakimullah Mehsud, has been increasingly isolated from day-to-day activities due to security concerns, and he is rumored to be losing control over the various factions of the group.<sup>9</sup> Since Baitullah's death in August of 2009, Hakimullah Mehsud has led the TTP charge against the Pakistani state. Leaders of Afghan-focused insurgent leaders from the Taliban and Haqqani network, such as Mullah Omar and Sirajuddin Haqqani, respectively, have sought to convince the TTP to focus their efforts towards the fight in Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup> While these efforts proved unsuccessful in the past, it appears this might be changing.

Since the announcement of the All Parties Conference stating the Pakistani government's willingness to strike a deal with the TTP, nearly all senior TTP commanders have publicly announced their desire to explore this possibility. Faqir Muhammad, the TTP commander in Bajaur, welcomed direct talks but insisted that Pakistan reconsider relations with the U.S. and enforce Islamic law in the country.<sup>11</sup> Mullah Fazlullah, an insurgent leader in Swat, appeared open to the possibility of peace with the government but expressed a desire for the establishment of Islamic law in Malakand Division.<sup>12</sup> Waliur Rehman in South Waziristan did not respond publicly but is reportedly in favor of a peace deal.<sup>13</sup> Even Mehsud, perhaps sensing that he might be cut out of a deal with individual TTP commanders, has expressed a willingness to explore an agreement, albeit without formally surrendering to the army.<sup>14</sup>

The Haqqani network appears to be a driving force in the Pakistani government's recent efforts to explore a peace deal with the TTP. For years, the Haqqanis have served as critical interlocutors between the TTP and the Pakistani state.<sup>15</sup> Khalil Haqqani, the brother of Haqqani network founder Jalaluddin Haqqani, is reportedly encouraging key TTP elements to make peace with the Pakistani state. For the Haqqanis and elements of Pakistan's security establishment, the ultimate objective of a peace deal with the TTP would be to reorient formerly anti-state elements towards the fight against U.S. and international forces in Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup>

Currently, select elements of the TTP in North and South Waziristan operate in partnership with the Haqqani network in neighboring eastern Afghanistan.<sup>17</sup> Convincing a portion of the remaining TTP factions to do the same would be a win-win for the Haqqani network and the Pakistani security establishment. For the Haqqanis, a reoriented TTP would provide additional fighters, resources and expertise for their continued Afghanistan campaign. The Pakistani security establishment would be able to cease at least some operations against the TTP in tribal areas and devote more force to the border with India. Furthermore, increasing the pool of Afghan-focused proxy forces seeking territorial influence in Afghanistan while limiting Indian interference has been the primary objective of Pakistan's security services for much of the past ten years—in this respect, a grand bargain with the TTP could be an important step towards this objective.

Although a comprehensive peace deal with the entire TTP movement is unlikely given the considerable demands of each faction, any splitting of the alliance and a reorientation towards Afghanistan would be a victory for the Haqqani network and the Pakistani security establishment and would serve as a model for future engagement with other anti-state Taliban. For U.S. and coalition efforts to stabilize eastern Afghanistan, any sizable shift in TTP assets towards the fight in Afghanistan could greatly complicate their efforts.

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## NOTES

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<sup>5</sup> Tim Johnson and Jonathan Landay, “Pakistani Taliban grows bolder, taking fight to doorstep of frontier city,” *McClatchy*, January 28, 2008

<sup>6</sup> Seth Jones and C. Christine Fair, “Counterinsurgency in Pakistan,” *RAND*, 2010

<sup>7</sup> Bill Roggio, “Malakand accord ‘practically stands dissolved’-Taliban spokesman,” *Long War Journal*, May 4, 2009

<sup>8</sup> Majeed Babar, “Why are Pakistan’s militant groups splintering,” *RFE/RL*, October 5, 2011

<sup>9</sup> Zia Khan, “‘Isolated Hakimullah losing control of TTP,’” *Express Tribune*, July 5, 2011

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey Dressler, “The Haqqani Network: From Pakistan to Afghanistan,” *Institute for the Study of War*, October 2010

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<sup>12</sup> Mushtaq Yusufzai, “Malakand Taliban offer conditional talks to govt,” *The News*, October 6, 2011

<sup>13</sup> Qasim Nauman, “Pakistan Taliban considers peace talks: report,” *Reuters*, October 10, 2011

<sup>14</sup> Hamid Mir, “Haqqani network pushing TTP to make peace with Pakistan,” *The News*, October 5, 2011

<sup>15</sup> Don Rassler and Vahid Brown, “The Haqqani Nexus and the Evolution of al-Qa’ida,” *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, July 13, 2011

<sup>16</sup> Hamid Mir, “Haqqani network pushing TTP to make peace with Pakistan,” *The News*, October 5, 2011

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