

COMMENT 199 - Intra-Afghan-Peace Talks (I): Pakistan's growing influence in Afghanistan

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If one is to believe both those involved as well as relatively distant international observers, Afghanistan is currently witnessing an ‘[historic opportunity](#)’ to end an endless war. However, whether a sustainable peace process is feasible depends on numerous factors. One concerns whether neighbouring states will be able to play a constructive role in the process – or whether they will continue to spoil intra-national reconciliation. It is common knowledge that Pakistan has the longest record of interference in the internal affairs of its western neighbour. As discussed in an earlier [SADF publication](#), the [Doha peace agreement](#) between the U.S. and the Taliban dated February 29, 2020 offered new opportunities to Pakistan. Ongoing Intra-Afghan Peace Talks (or Negotiations, IAN) between the Taliban (TB) and the Afghan government (GIROA) under President of Ashraf Ghani are constantly facing new challenges. These are leading to slowdowns - if not to an actual stalemate, thus providing Pakistani authorities with additional room to manoeuvre and ultimately extend their leverage over Afghanistan. In fact, Pakistan intensified and even broadened its engagement in Afghanistan through a twofold strategy: continuing its close collaboration with the TB through both military and political-diplomatic means, and reaching out to other political and militant actors within Afghanistan.

Traditionally, Pakistan has been the [main sponsor of the TB](#), which it instrumentalises so as to achieve specific goals within Afghanistan. The

immediate aim seems to be to install an interim government with a TB participation. However, it must be noted that neither the Pakistani military nor Afghanistan's civilian government actually favour a government in [Kabul dominated by the TB](#). Instead, Islamabad [prefers a balanced, 'power-sharing model'](#), leading to an inclusive interim administration – with a TB just influential enough to ensure the protection of Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan. Pakistan's most powerful security sector agents, the army and the Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), seem interested in collaborating with actors capable of both supporting and countervailing TB's power (including militant groups such as Islamic State in Khorasan/IS-K, Hizb-I Islami groups, or TB splinters). Although Pakistan's facilitation of the U.S.-TB negotiations (including the current IAN) is internationally recognized, there are reports that both the Pakistani military and ISI are deeply involved in the surge of violence after signing the Doha agreement. This is further substantiated by [reports](#)¹ on the ISI's involvement in the delivering of military equipment to the TB² and other militant groups – forging and disturbing alignments between different armed actors.³ For example, the ISI spent efforts to convince the TB to break up ties with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), especially after the [reported resurgence](#) of this group and the increased threat of TTP attacks within Pakistan orchestrated from Afghan soil. Moreover, Islamabad accuses India of supporting⁴ the TTP (and other militant groups⁵) so as to conduct terror attacks. Antonio Giustozzi states that Pakistani 'are outing pressure on other jihadist groups to sign protocols with the Taliban, stipulating

¹ See also: <http://mofa.gov.pk/transcript-of-the-press-briefing-by-spokesperson-on-thursday-07-january-2021/>;

<https://www.facebook.com/AmrullahSaleh.Afg/posts/3531461553628725>.

² Afghanistan's 1st President Amrullah Saleh [claims](#) that Pakistan delivers materials to TB (military level explosives and remote controls) for effecting explosions.

³ It is also [debated](#) whether Pakistan, more concretely the ISI, is behind the increasing cases of 'target killings' of eminent civilian actors.

⁴ Through its diplomatic representations in Afghanistan in the form of '[active planning, promoting, aiding, abetting, financing and execution of terrorist activities against Pakistan](#)' - [allegedly conducted in terror camps on Afghan soil](#).

⁵ For example, the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and the Jamaatul Ahrar (JuA).

Furthermore, PAK claims that IND is behind the resurgence of the TTP – that is, that IND played a role in uniting breakaway factions of the TTP, namely the Hizbul Ahrar (HuA) and the Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA.) Moreover, PAKMIL/ISI is accusing Indian intelligence (RAW/ Research and Analysis Wing and DIA/Defence Intelligence Agency) of attempting '[to establish a consortium between the TTP, BLA, BLF \(Balochistan Liberation Front\) and the BRA \(Baloch Republican Army\)](#)'.

to operate under Taliban command and to abstain from taking part in attacks outside Afghanistan’⁶.

As part of its policy to reach out to key Afghan parties within the Afghan peace process, Islamabad not only welcomed (16-18 December 2020) representatives of the Taliban Political Commission (TBC), headed by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, but also hosted in October 2020 [Gulbuddin Hekmatyar](#), Leader of Hezb-e-Islami – as well as a delegation of [Hezb-e-Wahdat-e Islami](#) under the leadership of Ustad Mohammad Karim Khalili in January 2021. It seems that these efforts by Pakistan to reach out to Afghan leaders and powerbrokers are being successful (particularly as regards those actors [critical of the Doha talks](#)) and are thereby supporting an interim government. By applying this combined approach, Pakistan is gaining more leverage among political and militant actors in Afghanistan, at the expense of the GIROA. This process is largely catalysed by Ghani’s ‘personalised style of governance’⁷ (Ghani [rejects apriori](#) any kind of interim government) and provides Pakistan with an increased support base to push for an interim government perceived as conducive to Islamabad’s interests. Islamabad expects that its new leverage in Afghanistan will strengthen its position not only vis-à-vis the GIROA (particularly to push attempts towards the imposition of an interim government) but also vis-à-vis foreign actors involved in Afghanistan, foremost US/NATO.

In sum, Pakistan has not changed its parameters/priorities in its Afghan policy: gaining as much influence as possible over Afghanistan’s internal and external affairs, and keeping India out of its western neighbourhood – or at least reducing New Delhi’s role to a minimum. The apparent rapprochement in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, as well as Islamabad’s engagement in the context of the IAN, are to be seen above all as means to attain these partisan goals. Despite its official rhetoric ‘[supporting an inclusive, broad-based and comprehensive political settlement](#)’, and despite the claim that ‘[a negotiated political settlement is the only way forward for a peaceful and stable Afghanistan](#)’, Pakistan continues to create destabilising effects for both the peace process and the GIROA.

⁶ Stated by Antonio Giustozzi in a personal interaction with the author, January 13, 2021.

⁷ Through retrenching or replacing military top brass and key figures of this administration based on personal loyalty towards Ghani.

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