



Security Policy Working Paper, No. 1/2018

A Change of Heart in Pakistan?

New developments in counter-terrorism and shifting international influences in Pakistan

by *Stefan Lukas*

Relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have always been characterised by mutual rivalry and hostility. Over the past few years, however, some remarkable developments have opened up new opportunities to improve stability in the region and could advance the peace process between the actors involved. Lately, this has had less to do with US involvement (though not because of aid cuts announced by President Trump) and more with China, whose influence in the region is growing. This is reflected in current changes in the way Pakistan is dealing with the Taliban. Although it is not yet clear whether these trends will continue, new opportunities for stability in South Asia are already emerging.

Pakistan – a former supporter, now enemy of the Taliban

Almost 15 years ago, while Western troops tried to clear remaining Taliban positions during the US-led intervention in Afghanistan, fleeing Afghan Taliban fighters formed a new core group in Pakistan called Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). This fundamentalist group settled mainly in the Pashtun tribal areas on the Afghan–Pakistani border. It survived largely on donations via the Pakistani and Saudi bank accounts of ultraconservative Islamic foundations and associations. If Islamic fundamentalism had already spread through some sections of Pakistani society in the 1990s, it took on an entirely new dimension between 2002 and 2007, when the Pakistani Taliban established itself in the autonomous tribal areas and Baluchistan province.

At first, Islamabad was reluctant to react to these developments. After all, its own intelligence service, the ISI, had equipped and trained the Afghan Taliban for years. Furthermore, under former President Pervez Musharraf, a tolerance had developed towards conservative Islam, which gradually gained more influence on politics and the military through a growing number of Islamic schools (madrasas). From 2007, however, three trends became increasingly apparent. Firstly, Pakistani equipment intended for the Afghan Taliban regularly made its way back across the border to the Pakistani Taliban. This showed that, despite having different leadership and membership structures, the two Taliban groups could overcome minor disagreements and cooperate to some extent in pursuing their common goal of an Islamic Pashtun state. Secondly, in 2007 Islamabad began to accuse the Indian intelligence service of providing logistical support to the TTP in order to put pressure on the Pakistani government. And thirdly, the TTP has always been well-connected with Al-Qaeda, whose reputation for terrorist attacks on Pakistani state institutions goes back to 2001.

The main reasons for the continued radicalisation of the Pakistani Taliban were the use of drone strikes by US armed forces in the Afghan–Pakistan border area, beginning in 2002 and the logistical supply corridor for NATO forces in Afghanistan (leading from Karachi via Peshawar and the tribal areas into Afghanistan), which was widely resented in conservative Pakistani society and by most tribal leaders.

When the TTP carried out their first attacks in Pakistan in 2007, the central government responded half-heartedly at first, with occasional raids and military operations. After President Nawaz Sharif took office in 2013, Islamabad, bowing to pressure from its own conservative elements, tried to negotiate with the Taliban. But in 2014, after several devastating attacks and the execution of 23 Pakistani soldiers, Pakistan broke off negotiations and completely changed its position with regard to the Taliban. After another Taliban attack in June 2014 on the country's largest airport in Karachi, and under pressure from the US administration of President Obama, the Pakistani government seems to have had a change of heart – at least for now.

Pakistan's new approach to counter-terrorism

When, on 15 June 2014, the Pakistani military and other security forces began a large-scale offensive against Taliban positions in the tribal areas of western Pakistan, the international community was sceptical. Too often, Pakistani governments had promised decisive action against the Taliban and failed to deliver. However, when the operation was declared finished in April 2016 (over one and a half years later), clear results had been achieved. With the help of allied tribal fighters, Pakistani forces had freed most of the areas bordering Afghanistan, cleansed North Waziristan (a key border district) of Taliban and Al-Qaeda influence, and even secured the crucial Khyber Pass transit routes into Afghanistan. A follow-up operation, which lasted until February 2017, was aimed at driving out the various remaining terrorist sub-groups. Even US analysts called the operation a success, confirming that the Taliban in Pakistan had been scattered and any remaining TTP members had fled to Afghanistan, where most had joined a local branch of the Islamic State group (ISIL), which had formed there in 2015.

But will Pakistan sustain its new-found enthusiasm for counter-terrorism? Current evidence suggests that it will. In 2010, the government had many members of the Taliban's international leadership council arrested, freezing the bank accounts of the TTP and other organisations. Since 2014, Pakistan has largely reduced its support for the Afghan Taliban. In addition, it seems that the Pakistani military has successfully targeted the network named after the Afghan Taliban fighter Jalaluddin Haqqani. The Haqqani network forms the core of the Taliban's international network. It is responsible for many attacks in Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan, and until 2014 it maintained close contacts to Pakistan's intelligence service and Al-Qaeda.

Now, in early 2018, it seems that most of the 10,000 fighters of the Haqqani network have been killed in battle, fled to Afghanistan, or gone underground in the tribal areas. The military defeat of the Haqqani network has also weakened it politically, enabling rival, often more moderate branches of the Taliban to gradually gain more influence. Since the Haqqanis were always the fiercest opponents of compromise in the peace process, this development now presents fresh opportunities. Further evidence of Pakistan's change of heart is the fact that it is now officially willing to hold talks with Afghanistan, with a view to cooperation. Over the past few months, several rounds of negotiations have taken place between the two neighbours to establish a common policy regarding the Taliban and to end the funding of terrorism by both sides. A meeting in November 2017 even led to the creation of an Afghan–Pakistani counter-terrorism unit and a common data exchange system. Ultimately, the desire for stability appears to be bringing the previously hostile governments closer together, and this may provide new opportunities for cooperation.

Despite all this, there is evidence that Pakistan might not really be changing its approach after all – particularly when it comes to the Afghan Taliban. Incidents at the Afghan–Pakistani border continue to claim the lives of soldiers on both sides, to the detriment of relations between the two countries. Moreover, India and Afghanistan accuse Pakistan of supporting terrorist groups such as ISIL in Afghanistan and elements of the Taliban. It is true that financial donations to the Taliban come mainly from Pakistan. It should be noted, however, that less of this money now comes from state coffers than from private portfolios, which can often be traced to the Gulf States – especially to Saudi Arabia. But the greatest challenge to Afghan–Pakistani relations is the Islamic fundamentalist madrasa school system. Madrasas, and the religious foundations behind them, not only have considerable financial resources but often serve as recruitment centres for the Taliban, or even ISIL.

Shifting international influences on the Indus region

Most of the key players in the region have already been mentioned here, but in recent years another presence has established itself – one that exerts great pressure on Pakistan and now partially controls its destiny: China. As a result of the Chinese “One Belt, One Road” Initiative (the largest development programme since the Marshall Plan) and associated projects such as the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the main actors in the region have increasingly come under Chinese scrutiny, making it almost impossible for them to ignore Beijing when pursuing their own key processes. Indeed, it was partly due to Chinese influence that negotiations between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Taliban were resumed – the aforementioned negotiations of November 2017 being just one example.

Islamabad’s new attitude to counter-terrorism, then, was not brought about by American influence alone, but more recently by Chinese influence on the governments of Nawaz Sharif and his successor, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi. It goes without saying in all of this that Beijing has primarily its own objectives in mind, particularly with regard to its competitive neighbour, India. In order to implement its ambitious large-scale projects such as the CPEC, now worth 46 billion dollars, China needs a safe environment, and terrorist groups like the Pakistani Taliban or separatist movements in Baluchistan are a threat to this. Finally, Pakistan’s relevance to China’s own security should not be underestimated: the country has served as a safe haven not just for the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban, but also for the Turkistan Islamic Party – a terrorist group that is particularly active in the Xinjiang autonomous region of western China.

Another country affected by China’s new influence in Pakistan is the United States. Despite frequent tensions, Islamabad has been one of Washington’s key partners in the region for decades, receiving more than 33 billion dollars in security and development funds over the last 30 years. Pakistan is also of crucial importance for the war in Afghanistan (which has lasted for 15 years now) since the supply corridor for NATO forces in Afghanistan mostly runs through it. Beijing’s influence, then, not only interferes with America’s economic cooperation projects but also seriously harms its security interests. It remains to be seen whether Chinese influence will have any beneficial effects for the United States – in the form of added pressure on the Taliban, for instance.

Against this backdrop, US President Trump’s decision in January 2018 to withhold approx. 225 million dollars in aid to Pakistan should be regarded less as a criticism of the government’s counter-terrorism efforts than as pressure upon it to limit Chinese influence in the country. The fact that Trump’s decision could drive Islamabad even closer towards Beijing highlights the dilemma of the US government, which is gradually running out of options in the region. In view of its planned “One Belt, One Road” Initiative, China’s influence in the region will increase considerably in the years ahead. It remains to be seen whether this influence will have a consolidating or eroding effect on the governments of countries in the region. But from a Western foreign policy perspective it is already foreseeable that Beijing’s role will cause those countries to shift their focus eastwards – away from Washington, London or Berlin.

Opportunities to improve stability in the region?

It seems premature to predict that the near future will bring more stability and peace. Nevertheless, as already mentioned, there are a number of signs which suggest the situation will improve. Apart from the fact that negotiations between the main actors have so far been constructive, the frequency of major terrorist attacks, especially in Pakistan, has gradually declined, suggesting that key terrorist networks in the country have been successfully contained. The only group currently launching large-scale attacks in Pakistan and Afghanistan is an ISIL offshoot that has recently retreated to those two countries and is not yet firmly rooted there.

At least two factors will determine whether a lasting peace can be secured in the region. The first are Pakistani domestic conflicts, which have in several cases affected foreign policy. Among the greatest threats to domestic peace in Pakistan are the powerful conservative Islamic movements that have steadily grown in popularity in recent years. This was highlighted in November 2017, when the Justice Minister, Zahid Hamid, resigned over allegations of blasphemy. Wahhabi schools from Saudi Arabia will continue to play an influential role, having increasingly exported their ideology to Pakistan in recent years, along with material support. Much depends, therefore, on how Islamabad deals with its own extremist circles and whether it will bow to extra-parliamentary pressure from religious leaders. The second decisive factor for regional security will be Pakistan's foreign policy. This will be especially important if the Afghan Taliban decide not to demilitarise and are forced to retreat, once again requiring a safe haven. Under this scenario, the key question is whether Pakistan would tolerate the presence of the Taliban in its border region or stand firm in pursuit of its current counter-terrorism policy. The latter approach would be a positive development in Afghan–Pakistani relations and a chance to stabilise the wider security situation.

As with ISIL in Iraq and Syria, it will not be possible to completely defeat the Taliban's more radical elements in the near future. The Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan would go underground and, since they remain well-connected, would most likely conduct further attacks. However, a robust state – with outside help in the form of development and capacity building measures – could cope much better with the terrorist threat than fragile central governments currently do.

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