



## Should AF/PAK Hands be South Asia Hands? How the India-Pakistan Relationship Shapes the War in Afghanistan

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Seeking to develop a community of regional experts in local languages and cultures, and with the intent to sustain the deployment of those experts to the Afghanistan/Pakistan theater, the Department of Defense recently announced the creation of the “AF/PAK Hands” program. While this program demonstrates a laudable commitment by DoD towards building the intellectual capacity within the military to win the fight in Afghanistan, the focus of AF/PAK Hands on the languages and culture of Afghanistan and Pakistan (in particular the Pashtun border region) demonstrates a lack of strategic awareness of the decisive role that larger South Asian relationships (particularly that between India and Pakistan) play in the ongoing war in Afghanistan. Most importantly, while Pakistani cooperation is necessary for the defeat of al Qaida and the Taliban in Afghanistan, Pakistani attitudes towards India may prevent that full cooperation in Afghanistan. The war in Afghanistan cannot be won if Pakistan does not shift its national security efforts from deterrence of India towards defeating its own internal Islamist insurgency. As currently proposed, the Pashtu, Dari, and Urdu speakers trained as part of AF/PAK Hands will not be able to provide commanders with critical insights into the strategic aspects of the India-Pakistan dynamic.

The Navy’s announcement of its participation in the new Afghanistan Pakistan Hands (APH) Program in September 2009 stated that “the objective of the APH program is to identify, select, train, and manage a cohort of experts in order to bring greater unity and cohesion to the fight in Afghanistan.” Selected from “a mix of designators and ratings” and “specifically selected to capitalize on, or further develop, proficiencies in counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine, regional languages, and culture,” the program is designed to place personnel with tailored regional expertise “in positions of strategic influence to ensure progress towards achieving U.S. government objectives in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.”<sup>1</sup>

This essay will not address whether devoting U.S. military manpower (or encouraging and rewarding participation in this program) to fight a war in the hinterlands of Afghanistan and Pakistan is wise. It seems reasonable to assume that the expertise and real-world operational experience gleaned by all DoD personnel, even those in the sea services, participating in this war

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<sup>1</sup> NAVADMIN 280/09, Afghanistan Pakistan Hands Program, 242337Z SEP 09.

will be directly applicable to their jobs when they return to their respective branches of service and will enhance the U.S. military's overall war-fighting capacity.

While those above arguments have merit, and explain why participation in AF/PAK Hands is probably a good idea for interested personnel, they do not address the program's primary flaw; a skewed perception of the war that is common not just within military circles, but also the larger American culture as well and in particular the media. Americans have generally failed to place the war in Afghanistan within its larger regional context, not recognizing that its roots lie not just in U.S. efforts to defeat al Qaida since 2001, or even Afghanistan's role as a theater for U.S.-Soviet conflict during the Cold War, but its centrality in the rivalry between India and Pakistan. Any proposed solution to the defeating the insurgency in Afghanistan or al Qaida in the region which focuses strictly on operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan will likely fail if it does not address the underlying and long-standing hostility between India and Pakistan.

One reason why the conflict in Afghanistan has been framed as an "AF/PAK" problem is because senior al Qaida leaders are generally assessed to have fled across the border into Pakistan after the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. Unable to actively pursue these al Qaida figures into sovereign Pakistani territory (in which the Pakistani military or security services themselves have little real power) the U.S. has been forced to rely on armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) to strike suspected al Qaida targets. Some of these attacks have struck innocent civilians, making their use exceptionally unpopular amongst the Pakistani public.

Despite the Taliban's defeat in 2001, the situation in Pakistan and Afghanistan has deteriorated in several ways since the U.S. invasion. Although the al Qaida senior leadership was forced across the Pakistani border, a resurgent Taliban has once again established its power over much of the country, helped in large part by the failures of Hamid Karzai's Afghan government to establish effective state institutions, as well as popular distrust of the Karzai government due to its (generally well-deserved) reputation for pervasive corruption and linkages to illicit narcotics smuggling networks. Events within Pakistan are also on a downward trajectory. The reestablishment of democratic government with elections in 2008 has been overshadowed by the rapid emergence of terrorism, with Pakistan's own "Taliban" and other extremist Muslim groups responsible for bloody attacks across the country which have made it one of the most dangerous places in the world.

These factors have made it clear that events in Afghanistan and Pakistan are interlinked, but the relationship between Pakistan and India also plays a decisive role over events in all three countries. Insurgents in Afghanistan definitely seem to believe that India plays a critical role, with the Indian Embassy in Kabul being the target of deadly and high profile attacks in 2008 and 2009 (Pakistan's Interservices Intelligence, or ISI, has been accused of complicity in the 2008 attack).<sup>2</sup> India is one of the largest donors of foreign aid to the Afghan government (it has pledged \$1.2 billion in aid, only the U.S., U.K., Japan and Canada have pledged more).<sup>3</sup> A deep

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<sup>2</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, "Behind the Indian Embassy Bombing," *The Atlantic*, August 1, 2008, <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200808u/kaplan-pakistan> (accessed November 6, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Peter Wonacott, India Befriends Afghanistan, Irking Pakistan," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 19, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB125061548456340511.html> (accessed November 6, 2009).

comprehension of larger South Asian regional issues and the impacts of the rivalry between India and Pakistan is necessary to shape one's understanding the "AF/PAK" crisis.

Americans are accustomed to viewing the Afghan mujahideen insurgency of the eighties through the lens of the Cold War, with both the Afghan rebels and Pakistan's military/intelligence services serving as American proxies. However, an important reason for Pakistani support of the Afghan rebels was their own fear of a Soviet-supported communist state on Pakistan's northwest border. In that worldview, an Afghanistan which was a Soviet satellite would provide territory that would allow India to encircle an isolated and vulnerable Pakistan on both its western and eastern frontiers.<sup>4</sup> India was the sole state in the region to recognize Afghanistan's Soviet-backed communist government. Pakistani leaders have historically not just wanted to keep India out of Afghanistan; they have viewed Afghanistan as a resource vital for use in potential conflicts with India, particularly because it would provide narrow Pakistan with "strategic depth" against potential Indian attack.<sup>5</sup>

The ethnic composition of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region has also made Afghanistan an important venue of India-Pakistan competition. Because Afghan governments of the fifties and sixties had called for the establishment of a "Greater Pashtunistan" composed of Afghanistan and the Pashtun dominated border regions of Pakistan, Zia ul-Haq, Pakistan's military dictator during the eighties, believed that Pakistani support for (and therefore control over) the Afghan mujahideen (and any "pliable" mujahideen dominated government following Soviet withdrawal or defeat) would eliminate future claims by a grateful Afghanistan against Pakistani territory.<sup>6</sup> In that view, India was presumably responsible for any attempted partition of Pakistan and threats against Pakistani territorial integrity, demonstrated in particular by the role played by India's military in the 1971 war which won Bangladesh's independence.

Finally, Afghanistan provided a training ground and base for the insurgency that Pakistan supported against India in Kashmir.<sup>7</sup> Radical groups that Pakistan's military and intelligence services supported in Afghanistan to fight the Soviets were also part of a larger web of groups that Pakistan later used to attack Indian forces and institutions in Kashmir after the defeat of the Soviets. Groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LET) are widely assessed as responsible for various terror attacks in India such as the 2001 attack on the Indian parliament in New Delhi, the 2006 attacks on the Mumbai train system, and the deadly 2008 attacks in Mumbai. While Pakistan's government or security services were probably not directly involved in or responsible for those particular attacks, Pakistan's role in the birth and growth of these groups, as well as the potential for continued relations between these groups and the Pakistani security services, color many Americans' views towards Pakistan. If maintaining the capacity to strike against India is so important to Pakistan (or powerful members of Pakistan's military and intelligence services) that it prevents the achievement of American objectives such as defeating al Qaida and establishing a stable Afghanistan, then Pakistan will not be able to serve as a viable U.S. and NATO ally. Understanding why or how Pakistani attitudes towards India shape the fight in Afghanistan should be one of the most important tasks for AF/PAK Hands.

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<sup>4</sup> Kaplan.

<sup>5</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban* (New Haven: Yale Nota Bene, 2000), 186.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

The history of American engagement with Pakistan demonstrates two consistent themes: a Pakistani view that India is the primary enemy and most important foreign policy concern, and a willful American misinterpretation of Pakistan's foreign policy goals, resulting in good relations when American and Pakistani intentions are aligned, and significant breakdowns in that relationship when the U.S. no longer needs Pakistan to achieve a particular objective. The American military perspective on the relationship between India and Pakistan is exemplified by how it has organized the world. India is located in Pacific Command's (PACOM) area of responsibility, while Pakistan is included in Central Command (CENTCOM), making India part of "Asia" and Pakistan part of the "Middle East," an interesting view of two states who see each other as their primary security rival. It should surprise no one that Pakistan may view the U.S. as not particularly loyal because it has quickly dropped Pakistan as an ally in the past when no longer useful. It should also surprise no one that Pakistan seems reluctant to redirect its foreign policy priority from one of countering India to that of stabilizing Afghanistan, even when it seems to Americans that chaos resulting from the situation in Afghanistan is threatening to undermine the existence of the Pakistani state itself.

The fluctuating relationship between the U.S. and Pakistan can be demonstrated by shifting U.S. attitudes towards Pakistan's nuclear weapons program. "Since 1979, Pakistan's nuclear program has repeatedly brought the country under U.S. sanctions, which have been intermittently waived as a result of developments in Afghanistan."<sup>8</sup> The U.S. government was willing to ignore Pakistan's nuclear program as long as Pakistan was the key logistical support node through which the U.S. could arm the Afghan mujahideen. When the conflict with the Soviets had receded, however, Pakistani noncompliance with global nuclear nonproliferation norms was used to justify blocking the delivery of advanced military technology such as F-16 fighter aircraft throughout the nineties. Pakistanis can rightfully feel abandoned by a U.S. which was quick to act as an ally when Pakistan was a useful tool in implementing its anti-Soviet policies, but was then shoved aside and ignored when engagement in the region was no longer a U.S. priority, all during a period when the India-Pakistan relations remained tense.

Following the terrorist attacks of 2001, the U.S. returned to a close relationship with Pakistan which resembled the earlier friendship of the eighties. President Bush waived sanctions against both India and Pakistan "citing the need to work with both governments in the fight against terrorism."<sup>9</sup> The U.S. also waived "democracy related sanctions" imposed against Pakistan after General Pervez Musharraf's 1999 coup which had overthrown the civilian government of Nawaz Sharif.<sup>10</sup> Even these events demonstrate what Pakistanis can perceive as unequal treatment by the U.S. towards the South Asian powers, however. While U.S. pressure against Pakistan regarding its nuclear program has receded after 2001, there has been no acceptance of the legitimacy of that program either by the U.S. or the international community. Meanwhile, the U.S. has recognized the legitimacy of India's nuclear program despite it (like Pakistan) not having signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Pakistani skeptics may have some ground to feel that their nuclear program will make them international pariahs again in the future when

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph Cirincione, Jon B. Wolfsthal and Miriam Rajkumar, *Deadly Arsenals: Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Threats* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005), 244.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

the U.S. no longer needs Pakistan to fight in Afghanistan, while the similar program of their mortal enemy has been validated by the world's sole superpower.

While Pakistan may be one of the most important actors capable of driving events in Afghanistan, the relationship between India and Pakistan has been the central element in shaping Pakistani actions in Afghanistan. Pakistan was created from the Muslim-majority parts of British India. It was torn in half in when Bangladesh achieved its independence during Pakistan's 1971 war with India. While the role of religion has fluctuated throughout Pakistani history, with many leaders of the state (particularly within the military) secularly oriented, and Islamist political parties never having assumed control of the government, religion still plays a central role as the justification for Pakistan's very existence, and serves as an important unifying element in a multiethnic and multi-lingual state. Pakistan's military and intelligence services have used religion to shape the violent insurgencies that it has supported in Afghanistan against the Soviets and in Kashmir against India. While at this writing militants have conducted a wave of attacks against Pakistani military personnel (ostensibly in response to the recent army campaign in South Waziristan), it may still prove difficult for Pakistan's military and intelligence elites to shift course and make fighting Muslim extremists such as al Qaida and the Pakistani Taliban the state's primary security concern if an India which is perceived as anti-Muslim is seen as a more formidable enemy.

The United States cannot solve Pakistan's internal problems without Pakistan's own political and military leaders making their priorities clear and acting upon them. The likelihood of such a decision being made is minimized by the current political instability in Pakistan. While democracy has been restored, relationships between the military and civilian political elites are strained, and infighting between the two main political factions, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP, currently led by former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's widower and Pakistan's current President, Asif Ali Zardari), and former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PML (N)) continues.

The U.S. and NATO cannot win victory through either counterinsurgency or counter-terror operations solely in Afghanistan. Nor can they win the war through a crackdown against insurgents in Pakistan's rugged border region. Victory in both states requires a strong, coordinated effort with Pakistan. The decisions necessary to undertake such a step, however, are not those that the U.S. can make on behalf of Pakistan. If the procurement of advanced weapons for use in potential future wars against India is more important to Pakistani leaders than fighting Muslim enemies within or in Afghanistan, then U.S. expectations that Pakistan will act as a useful ally in Afghanistan will not be fulfilled. The decision between those two courses of action is not one that can be made by American leaders.

It is unclear whether Pakistan, a complex state dynamically shaped by a variety of factors including ethnic conflict, strained civil-military relations, incomplete democratization, and uneven economic development featuring both rapid growth and deep poverty, has decided upon (or is capable of deciding) a straightforward future foreign policy and security course regarding its neighbors. It is also unclear whether the current state of events in Pakistan, no matter how traumatic, will stop Pakistan's military and civilian decision-makers from viewing India as the primary threat to Pakistan's existence. These are the questions that the individuals who will

serve as AF/PAK Hands need to try to answer in order to advise U.S. and NATO military and political leaders. Cultural and linguistic expertise in Pashtun and the border area is important, but the experts that DOD plan on cultivating need to be able to understand and explain the larger issues that will determine whether the war in Afghanistan can be won through the application of military force. That expertise can only be learned through a deep immersion in South Asian regional history, politics, and culture.

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