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RELATIONS BETWEEN AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN AND THE PEACE PROCESS WITH THE AFHGAN TALIBAN

Less than a year before of the withdrawal of US and ISAF forces from Afghanistan and in the middle of an ongoing peace process with the Taliban that is not fully taking off, this paper provides insight into Pakistan's interests in its neighbour and its capacity for influence on the future of the region. Additionally, the paper will examine the state of the peace process in Afghanistan, as well as its future prospects, accounting for the interests of the different actors involved

Pakistan, Afghanistan, Taliban, terrorism, insurgency, negotiations.

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1. Introducción

Nearly 12 years have now elapsed since the US invasion of Afghanistan and Pakistan's connection with developments in its neighbouring country remains as palpable as it was in 2001. Northern Alliance troops, with the support of US forces, then overthrew the Taliban regime, whose rise to power had been promoted and backed by Islamabad, with continued support provided until US pressure forced a change in policy.

With the first NATO drawdown operations marking the start of the long withdrawal from Afghanistan, which is to be extended until at least 2014, war in Afghanistan has, on balance, hardly had a positive outcome. The Taliban continue to be a relevant force in considerable areas of the country, while the government in Kabul, with Hamid Karzai in office since 2002, does not enjoy great popularity.

Much of the failure of the US and NATO to stabilise Afghanistan and remove the threat of the Taliban has been blamed on the role played by Pakistan. Despite officially being a close ally of Washington, relations between Pakistan and the US can be classed as strained; on occasions, they reach breaking point. This is the case chiefly due to repeated US allegations accusing Pakistan of harbouring Afghan insurgents on its territory as well as of providing more direct assistance on other occasions. The most common complaint expressed by the US over the course of its 11 years of intervention in Afghanistan was that Pakistan was not doing enough to assist the country in its "war on terror".

The upper echelons of the Afghan Taliban, headed by Mullah Omar, are to be found in Pakistan, apparently in the Quetta area in Balochistan, from where they operate a kind of government in exile. The other organisation creating problems for US and Afghan troops is the Haqqani clan, whose bases are located in North Waziristan in the tribal areas of Pakistan, and who have enjoyed important links with the army and the Pakistani state since the 1970s. Both organisations are able to carry out their work and cross the border with Afghanistan without too much trouble from the Pakistani authorities, if not with their complicity. It thus appears that US accusations are not entirely baseless. As such, Pakistan exercises a certain degree of influence over the Afghan insurgency.

What is more, the first attempts to begin talks with the Taliban came about in 2009, first of all those made by the government in Kabul, as well as subsequent US attempts, aiming to reach any form of agreement that would break the deadlock of the war in Afghanistan. It would appear that both parties came to the conclusion that they could not win the war militarily; plus the confirmed withdrawal of Western troops in 2014 compounds the need to bring about some form of agreement with the Taliban movement in order to stabilise the country beyond this date.

The talks were affected by a number of developments including Pakistan's efforts to safeguard its interests. It is these interests that this article seeks to analyse, with a view to understanding the rationality underpinning Pakistani policy towards Afghanistan, with regard to their common history and, primarily, within the broader regional context of India-Pakistan rivalry which has characterised Pakistani policies for more than 60 years.

With this aim in mind, the history of relations between both countries will be analysed below, as will the peace process with the Afghan Taliban until the present day.

2. A bad start to relations between new neighbours

Relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have been marked by mutual hostility and distrust ever since the creation of the Pakistani state. Afghanistan was the only country to oppose Pakistan's admission to the United Nations in 1947. In the General Assembly of the United Nations on 30 September 1947, the Afghan delegation declared that:

"*The Afghanistan delegation does not wish to oppose the membership of Pakistan in this great organisation, but it is with the deepest regret that we are unable at this time to vote for Pakistan. This unhappy circumstance is due to the fact that we cannot recognize the North-West Frontier as part of Pakistan so long as the people of the NWFP*[1] *have not been given an opportunity free from any kind of influence [...] to determine for themselves whether they wish to be independent or to become a part of Pakistan.*"[2]

Afghanistan became the first and only country in the world to lay territorial claims to Pakistan. According to the position of the Afghan government, all Pashtun people,

1 North-West Frontier Province. It is one of the two Pakistani provinces that border Afghanistan. With a mainly Pashtun population, there is complete ethnic, linguistic and cultural continuity with the Afghan part on the other side of the border. Since 2010 it has been called Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This article will use either of these names depending on the period in history being referred to.

2 JALAZAI, Musa Khan, *The foreign policy of Afghanistan*, Lahore, Sang-e Meel Publications, 2003, p. 210.

whether they reside in Afghanistan or Pakistan, form one and the same nation and should be united under the government of Afghanistan. Based on the idea of Pashtunistan[3], the Afghan government claimed the right to self-determination for the Pashtun population in the Pakistani NWFP and in Balochistan[4]. The demand was made public immediately after the British announced their plans to partition India. The then Prime Minister of Afghanistan, Mohammad Hashin Khan, stated that, if Pashtunistan were not created, the NWFP should be incorporated into Afghanistan.[5]

Afghan hostility to the new State of Pakistan represented a serious threat to the latter given the constant snag of India in East Pakistan and the eastern border of West Pakistan[6].

Troubled relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan are underpinned by the ambitions of the former as regards the two western provinces of the latter. Afghan leaders have based their claim on historical arguments since these regions were conquered by the founding father of Afghanistan, Ahmad Shah Durrani (1747-1773). His successors lost their sway over these provinces in successive wars against the Sikhs and the British.

Moreover, the border between both countries, known as the Durand Line, has not been ratified by Afghanistan, which, even today, still refuses to recognise it. The Durand Line[7], negotiated in 1983 between the British Empire and the then Emir of Afghanistan, Abdur Rahman Khan (1880-1901), was to split Pashtun and Baluchi tribes in this border region into two. What is more, it transformed Afghanistan into a buffer state between the British and the Russian Empires, who were at that time embroiled in a complex race known as the Great Game whereby they vied for influence in Central Asia. In 1947, Afghanistan refused to recognise the validity of the treaty signed with the British Empire, arguing that the new Pakistani state had not ratified the agreement with Afghanistan. Pakistan maintains that, as successor to the British

3 Pashtunistan represents the concept of a state uniting all territories inhabited by populations of Pashtun ethnicity, namely, approximately half of Afghanistan, the Pakistani province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the north of the Pakistani province of Balochistan. As Afghanistan had traditionally been governed by Pashtuns, the idea of integrating these territories under the control of the government in Kabul was promoted despite the varied ethnic make-up of Afghanistan.

4 Balochistan is the south-western province of Pakistan. The north of this province, which borders Afghanistan, is predominantly inhabited by Pashtuns.

5 JALAZAI, 2003, p. 210.

6 After its creation in 1947, the State of Pakistan consisted of two wings separated by some 2,000 kilometres: West Pakistan, today Pakistan, and East Pakistan, which gained independence as Bangladesh in 1971.

7 Named after Sir Henry Mortimer Durand, Foreign Secretary of colonial British India between 1884 and 1894.

Empire in India, it upholds the agreements and treaties signed by its predecessor.

In the 1940s, the opportunity arose for the Afghan government to take over control of the region. The British retreat opened the door to Kabul's demands. However, it soon became clear that the inhabitants of Balochistan and the NWFP had no interest in becoming part of Afghanistan. In light of this, the Afghan government advocated the idea of an independent Pashtunistan to include the former states of Dir, Swat, Chitral and Amb within the NWFP as well as Kalat, Kharan, Makran and Las Bela in Balochistan, based on the common Pashtun ethnicity of their inhabitants.[8]

Together with the participation of British India, a referendum on the five districts of the NWFP was held in 1947. The result was overwhelmingly in favour of joining Pakistan. In tribal areas, it was impossible to hold a referendum given the lack of state organisation in the region. Instead, Sir George Cunningham, governor of the NWFP, carried out a series of interviews with the assemblies of each tribe (*jirgas*) which confirmed wish of the majority to become part of Pakistan maintaining the same conditions in place as under the British Empire. The Pakistani government subsequently confirmed this agreement. The states of Dir, Swat, Chitral and Amb also chose to join the new state.

During the Afghan monarchy, relations remained more or less stable with some tenser moments, such as the call for self-determination for Pashtunistan and Balochistan to the United Nations put forward by the Afghan representative in 1972.

3. The rise of pakistani interventionism. the "strategic depth" doctrine

In Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government (1971-1977) followed a policy of rapprochement with Afghanistan, whilst also promoting major development programmes in Pakistani tribal areas with a view to bringing the population into line. The overthrow of the Afghan king (1933-1973) by his cousin Sadar Mohammad Daud (1973-1978) in 1973 saw relations between both countries begin to worsen again. Nevertheless, successive bilateral contact prompted first by Bhutto, and then subsequently by his successor General Zia ul Haq (1977-1988), helped to defuse tensions anew. This process of mutual understanding came to an end when the Communist Party came to power in Afghanistan after a violent revolution in 1978.

It was in the mid-seventies that Pakistan began to intervene more directly in Afghanistan's affairs. After the coup d'état by Daoud in 1973, the Bhutto government received Afghan dissidents in its border regions. These included various individuals

8 EL HAQ, Noor, KHAN, Rashid Ahmed and NURI, Maqsudul Hasan, "Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan", *Islamabad Policy Research Institute Paper* No. 10, March 2005.

who would go onto be relevant Islamists and known Mujahideen such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Jalaluddin Haqqani, Yunus Khalis, Abdul Rab Rasul Sayyaf, Burhanuddin Rabbani and Ahmed Shah Massoud. These first Afghan insurgents received training and supplies from the Pakistani Frontier Corps.[9]

In turn, the new communist power that emerged in Afghanistan in 1978 kindled calls for an independent Pashtunistan with a view to garnering the support of nationalist Pashtuns and winning over the conservative tribes along the Pakistani border who were reluctant to back the new regime. Among other things, the Afghan intelligence services backed acts of terrorism in the NWFP as well as the small nationalist Pashtun movement in the region.

In the eighties, the presence of the Soviet army in Afghanistan meant that relations with Pakistan took a different turn. The Afghan government became a satellite state of the USSR, whilst Pakistan aligned itself with the Afghan Mujahideen and the US. Over the course of the eighties, Pakistan was deeply involved in Afghanistan's internal affairs. During the fight against the Soviets, Pakistan provided supplies and a safe haven for Afghan fighters, channelled US aid through the Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI, one of the Pakistani military intelligence agencies).

The involvement of Pakistan in the Afghan conflict was conditioned by various factors: the traditional animosity between both countries; a real fear of communist control in Afghanistan, which, in practice, would place Pakistan at the border of the Soviet Union; the conservatism of the regime of General Zia ul-Haq who was to promote the idea of war against Afghanistan as a religious struggle throughout the 1980s, thereby fostering resurgence and consolidation of a jihadist ideology; and, last but not least, the new strategic concepts of the Pakistani army which were developed in the 1970s and 1980s and which were based on "strategic depth".

The concept of "strategic depth" was to mark the foreign policy of Pakistan in regard to Afghanistan until the present day. Nonetheless, its origin or justification does not lie in Afghanistan, but instead in Pakistan's obsession with its Indian neighbour.

Following the loss of the eastern wing of the country, now present-day Bangladesh, after a bloody civil war in 1971[10], the Pakistani army was forced to rethink its position with respect to its giant of a neighbour. Reduced to the western wing, Pakistani generals considered their country to be a narrow strip of land along the plains of the Indus

9 PETERS, Grettchen, "Haqqani network financing: the evolution of an industry", *Combating Terrorism Center*, Harmony Program, July 2012, p. 14. The Pakistani Frontier Corps is a paramilitary force made up mainly of Pashtuns. Its sphere of activity comprises the territories bordering Afghanistan and it is composed of some 80,000 troops under the command of the army.

10 Towards the end of the conflict, the direct intervention of the Indian army conclusively tipped the balance in favour of the secessionists.

River that could be severed into two by a deep-hitting attack carried out by the Indian armoured forces. They believed that in such a scenario, Afghanistan could form an area of retreat and regrouping for Pakistani forces from where to launch their counter-attack. Irrespective of the strategic merit of such a premise, it would require a friendly Afghan government that would allow its territory to be violated if a new war between India and Pakistan were to flare up. At the very least, the Pakistani military sought an Afghan border that would not prove to be a cause for concern if the country did enter into conflict with India.[11]

Over the course of the eighties and nineties, this purely military way of understanding "strategic depth" would give way to a more civilian concept. At the end of the eighties, the Pakistani army, concerned about the widening economic gap between the country and India and the potential impact on military capacity, discovered a form of unconventional struggle to reduce this disadvantage. The success of the jihad pursued by the Afghan Mujahideen against Soviet troops in Afghanistan, together with a timely popular uprising against the Indian government in the Kashmir Valley in 1987, led the Pakistani military to contemplate using the same methods against India.

The plan, which would be implemented from 1988-89, was the infiltration of Mujahideen of Kashmiri origin into Indian Kashmir. These were veterans the Afghan jihad who in turn would provide support to the local insurgent groups who were beginning to emerge at the time. The aim was to make the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir ungovernable, as well as luring as many of the Indian forces to the region as possible, tying them to a struggle against local insurgency and thereby reducing their availability in case of conflict. In order to be able to deny Pakistani involvement in the insurgency with a certain degree of credibility, a large proportion of the jihadist training camps were set up in Afghanistan. This would require the Afghan government to be collaborative, and as would initially be the case, incapable.

The prerequisite of a friendly regime in power in Kabul, as envisaged in the idea of "strategic depth", led to a broadening of objectives during the eighties to encompass control or eradication of Pashtun nationalism in the North-West Frontier Province. A circumstance that when combined with the Islamisation policies implemented by General Zia ul-Haq, and boosted by an increase in the Pashtun's share of power within state institutions, was wholly accomplished.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the appearance of the Central Asian Republics added a new objective to the concept of "strategic depth": a friendly regime in Afghanistan would open up the door for Pakistan to the energy products and markets of Central Asia whilst also being a hurdle for India.

11 KRONSTADT, K. Alan, KATZMAN, Kennet, "Islamist militancy in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region and U.S. policy", *Congressional Research Service*, CRS Report for Congress RL34763, November 2008, p. 8.

After the definitive fall of the communist regime in Kabul in 1992, Pakistani hopes of achieving a friendly regime in Afghanistan were dashed. Civil war immediately broke out between different Mujahideen groups and left the country in a state of disarray that, though it did facilitate the establishment of training camps to bolster the jihad in Kashmir, did little to advance Pakistan's aspirations in Central Asia. This is why, when the obscure Taliban movement emerged in the area surrounding Kandahar in 1994, Islamabad backed this new group in the hope of obtaining a certain level of stability its neighbouring country. When the Taliban finally occupied Kabul in 1996, Pakistan was one of the few countries to recognise the regime, along with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Towards the end of the 1990s, despite the ongoing fighting in Afghanistan with the Northern Alliance, supported by India and Iran, Pakistan finally achieved its aim of "strategic depth" in Afghanistan. The Taliban regime owed its rise to power to Pakistani support and largely depended on Islamabad. Nonetheless, the Taliban did not abandon the traditional Afghan claim to Pakistani tribal areas, nor did they recognise the Durand Line, proving not to be the docile ally that Islamabad had hoped for.[12]

4. Changes triggered by 9/11

Pakistani joy at its foreign policy success did not last long. In the wake of the attacks of 11 September 2001 in New York and in Washington, General Musharraf, who had held power since 1999, was forced to make a U-turn concerning the foreign policy of his country. The US pressure that was brought to bear led Musharraf to break off relations with the Taliban regime and join the coalition led by the US as part of its "war against terror". Pakistan afforded information and logistical support to the US to help overthrow a regime that, only a few years before, it had helped to install in Afghanistan.

Subsequent to the fall of the Taliban regime, President Musharraf (1999-2008) declared his unconditional support for the new Afghan government led by Hamid Karzai. The Pakistani government that formed following the elections of 2008 has showed its readiness to continue with policies supporting Afghanistan and the US in their efforts to tackle terrorism.[13] Nevertheless, since 2001, an exchange of accusations has taken place between both the Musharraf government and the Pakistan People's Party government and Hamid Karzai's government in Afghanistan concerning the

12 HUSSAIN, Zahid, *Frontline Pakistan*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007, p. 30.

13 SINNO, Abdulkader H. and RAIS, Rasul Bakhsh, "Post-September 11 Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations: Prospects for Counter-insurgency Cooperation", *The National Bureau of Asian Research,* NBR Analysis, Volume 19, No. 5, December 2008, p. 10.

continuous flow of Islamist militants from the Pakistani side of the Durand Line.[14]

Following the military defeat of the Taliban regime, thousands of its fighters crossed the Pakistani border and found refuge in the tribal areas of the country. Over the years, these regions have become a real sanctuary for the Taliban forces who engage in combat against NATO and US forces on the other side of the border. The existence of this safe zone for the Taliban poses a serious threat to the stabilisation of Afghanistan.[15] The US administration itself recognised the link between the Afghan conflict and Pakistan when Richard Holbrooke, US Special Envoy for both countries, introduced new Af-Pak policy in 2008.

In recent years, the US, India and Afghanistan have levied accusations that Pakistan's secret services, the ISI, are behind various terrorist attacks in Afghanistan, in particular those against Indian interests. Examples of such attacks include the repeated attacks against the Indian embassy in Kabul in 2008, 2009 and 2010 or those against its consulates in Kandahar in 2006 and in Jalalabad in 2007. Furthermore, Afghan leaders frequently accuse the ISI of aiding attacks against Afghan security forces and of providing cover for Taliban leaders to operate from Pakistani territory.[16]

Although General Musharraf's government did indeed pursue Al Qaeda members on Pakistani soil and launched military operations against the Pakistani Taliban, it seems that it did little to combat Afghan Taliban members who had found refuge in its territory. The Afghan government under Hamid Karzai is perceived as weak and corrupt in Islamabad and it is believed that it stands little chance of surviving once international support disappears. On the other hand, a growing Indian presence in Afghanistan could have led Islamabad to maintain relations with the Taliban as a way of exerting its influence over an Afghanistan that might be too close to India in the future.[17]

In this regard, the Taliban continue to represent an additional tool for Pakistan as part of its efforts to secure "strategic depth". The Pakistani elite who, if one analyses those who define foreign policy, are primarily from the military, consider Afghanistan to be an extension of and another battlefield for their long-running conflict with India.

Efforts taken to improve relations between the governments of Pervez Musharraf and Hamid Karzai proved to be more symbolic than practical. The US and Turkey

14 KRONSTADT, K. Alan, "Pakistan-U.S. Relations", *Congressional Research Service*, CRS Report for Congress RL 33498, February 2009, p. 34.

15 GRARE, Frédéric, "Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations Post-9/11 Era", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, Carnegie Papers no. 72, October 2006, p. 5

16 FAIR, C. Christine, HOWENSTEIN, Nicholas, THEIR, J. Alexander, "Trouble on the Pakistan-Afghanistan Border", *United States Institute for Peace*, Briefing, December 2006.

17 SINNO, Abdulkader H. and RAIS, Rasul Bakhsh, 2008, p. 18.

hosted various high level meetings between representatives of both countries with a view to smoothing out differences of opinion. In August 2007, Karzai and Musharraf met at a *jirga* (tribal assembly) for peace in Kabul where they agreed to set up working groups in order to improve relations between the two countries, although this did not bear much fruit.[18]

If for Pakistan it is important to be able to reckon with a friendly, and preferably obsequious, Afghanistan, for India it would be desirable to have an Afghanistan under its control, with the aim of focusing part of Islamabad's attention on its western border. It would also provide India with a base from which to provoke instability, both in the Pashtun areas of the Pakistani border and in the province of Balochistan, whose secessionist insurgency is backed by India, according to repeated accusations made by the Pakistani government.

At the end of the 1980s, while Pakistan supported the Afghan Mujahideen in their struggle against the Moscow-backed communist regime, the government in New Delhi maintained excellent relations with the Afghan leader Mohammad Najibullah (1986-1992). In view of the chaos and instability in Afghanistan after the fall of Kabul in 1992 and Taliban successes from 1994 onwards, India opted to give financial backing to Commander Ahmed Shah Massoud. Massoud, an ethnic Tajik, was the commander of the Mujahideen group Jamiat-e-Islami (an Islamic group) that fought against the Soviets in the eighties. After the Taliban had seized power, Massoud became the leader of the Northern Alliance, which towards the end of the nineties saw itself limited to the Panjshir Valley in the north-east of the country. Be that as it may, thanks to support from India, Iran and Russia, the Alliance was able to face up to the periodic Taliban offensives. The possibility of India having a greater presence in Afghanistan opened up from 2001 onwards.

India had contributed considerably to financing the Afghan government and to rebuilding the country. Islamabad views this as an attempt to increase Indian influence in the region, a not unreasonable argument. Moreover, the fact that Indian consulates have been opened in Jalalabad and in Kandahar, both cities close to the Pakistani border, is seen as a threat by Pakistan. India is currently the second largest donor of funds to Afghanistan and in October 2011 both countries signed a strategic partnership agreement.[19]

Of late, Pakistan has also been negotiating a strategic partnership agreement with

18 MARKEY, Daniel, "Securing Pakistan's Tribal Belt", *Council on Foreign Relations,* Council Special Report No. 36, August 2008, p. 13.

19 PHADNIS, Aditi, "Regional Splash: Amidts discord with Pakistan, an accord with India", *The Express Tribune*, 4 October 2011. The text of the agreement may be consulted at: http://mfa.gov.af/Content/files/Agreement%20on%20Strategic%20Partnership%20between%20Afghanistan%20and%20India%20-%20English.pdf

Afghanistan and there has even been talk of the Afghan Armed Forces receiving training from the Pakistani army[20]. This is proof of attempts over the last year to bring Afghanistan and Pakistan closer together. It is, however, precisely the obsession that Pakistan has with obtaining a friendly regime in Kabul that forms the main obstacle to achieving normal relations between both countries.

Although it is possible that the Pakistani line of thought has evolved, perhaps leading to it abandon the concept of "strategic depth", as asserted by the new US ambassador in Islamabad, Richard Olson[21], its links with the Taliban uphold its essential role in its neighbour's future, as stated by General McChrystal[22] himself in his recent book *My share of the task*[23]. General Kayani defines the aim of "strategic depth" as: "A peaceful, stable and friendly Afghanistan, no more and no less"[24]. Although he does not go on to say what cards Pakistan may have up its sleeve in order to achieve this aim. At any rate, faced with future peace talks with the Taliban, which would shape the future of Afghanistan after 2014, Pakistan has shown that it intends to defend its interests, including by rendering these talks impossible if necessary.

5. Attempts to negotiate with the afghan taliban

The much-debated possibility of holding talks with the Taliban existed since the fall of their regime at the end of 2001. Despite being an option favoured from the outset by the Afghan president himself, Hamid Karzai, the US dismissed this possibility until the arrival of the Obama administration in the White House. Growing Taliban activity in Afghanistan as of 2006, and their consolidation as a power in the country since 2008, would have led the US to contemplate a negotiated way out of a war that is increasingly seen as impossible to win. On the other hand, the economic cost of the war in Afghanistan, combined with the financial crisis and the growing weariness of Western societies as regards the presence of their soldiers in the Central Asian country, made the leaders of the international coalition, in particular the Europeans, more receptive to the option of talks.

20 YOUSAF, Kamran, "Deal in the making: Pakistan Army likely to begin training Afghan forces", *The Express Tribune*, 29 January 2013.

21 APP, "Pakistan has moved away from strategic depth approach", *Dawn*, 1 August 2012.

22 US General Stanley A. McChrystal was commander of NATO troops in Afghanistan from 2009 to 2010.

23 IQBAL, Anwar, "Pakistan has role in Afghan solution: retired US general", *Dawn,* 11 February 2013.

24 GUL, Imtiaz, *The most dangerous place. Pakistan's lawless frontier*, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 2010, p. 10.

While the last decade has seen various organisations and international representatives come into contact with the Taliban, these have been on an informal basis and on no account can be classed as negotiations. The first serious contact between the Taliban and the Karzai government occurred in 2009 in an attempt to ensure that the presidential election of that year took place peacefully. Rapprochement efforts were brokered by the brother of the Afghan president, Ahmed Wali Karzai, who at that time was governor of Kandahar province.[25]

A short while afterwards, in February 2010, the Taliban leader Mullah Baradar[26] was arrested in Karachi as part of a joint operation between the ISI and the CIA that proved to be quite controversial in the media.[27] The Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, accused Pakistan of sabotaging attempts to bring about a negotiated peace in his country. Following Baradar's arrest, contact with the government in Kabul ceased. The Taliban's rapprochement with the government in Kabul was carried out behind Pakistan's back, which did not sit well with the ISI. The detention of Baradar, number two of the Taliban movement ranked only below Mullah Omar, has widely been construed as an ISI warning to the Taliban that they were not going to tolerate any negotiation attempt without their direct involvement.

Western interest in entering into negotiations and the difficulty of contacting genuine contacts within the Taliban movement were highlighted in November 2010 thanks to revelations made by the *New York Times*[28]. These revealed that NATO and the Afghan government had maintained contact for months with an individual who they supposed was a Taliban representative. This person, who passed himself off as the successor to Mullah Baradar and number two in the movement, Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour, had held three meetings with high-ranking Afghan and NATO officials, as well as pocketing a considerable sum of money. The contact with the supposed Taliban leader had been supplied by the British intelligence service MI6 in what proved to be a major intelligence flaw.[29]. At the time, it was rumoured that

25 BOONE, Jon, "Taliban chiefs agree ceasefire deals for Afghan presidential elections", *The Guardian*, 13 August 2009.

26 Other relevant leaders from the Taliban movement were arrested together with Baradar: Maulvi Abdul Kabir (Taliban governor of the province of Nangharar); Mullah Abdul Qayoum Zakir (military commander of the Gerdi Jangal shura); Mullah Muhammad Hassan (ex-foreign minister of the Taliban government); Mullah Abdul Rauf (ex-commander of the Peshawar shura); Mullah Ahmad Jan Akhundzada (ex-governor of the Zabul province); and Mullah Mohammad Younis (ex-head of police in Kabul during the Taliban regime).

27 See the articles published by Syed Saleem Shahzad in the *Asia Times Online* between 23 February and 2 March 2010.

28 FILKINS, Dexter and GALL, Carlotta, "Taliban leader in secret talks was an impostor", *The New York Times*, 22 November 2010.

29 BORGER, Julian and BOONE, Jon, "US general McChrystal approved peace talks with fake

the ISI might have been involved in the whole affair as a way of assessing the state of negotiations and the position of NATO and the Afghan government, though this has not been proven.

In spite of all this, attempts by the Taliban to negotiate continued. The end of November 2010, thanks to the mediation efforts of the German intelligence service, the BND[30], which had better luck than its British counterpart, saw the first meeting between a representative of Mullah Omar, Mullah Syed Tayyab Agha, and US negotiators. In addition, representatives from the BND and the Qatari royal family participated in the meeting. There were four rounds of talks between November 2010 and August 2011.[31]

One of the outcomes of these talks was the removal of a good number of Taliban from the United Nations sanctions list imposed on individuals and groups associated with Al Qaeda[32], at Washington's request. The resolution would subsequently be modified, separating members of the Taliban movement from those collaborating with or belonging to Al Qaeda.[33] The Karzai government, in turn, released various Taliban prisoners who remained in Kabul's prisons. The negotiations also addressed the establishment of a permanent representation for the Taliban in Doha, with a view to continuing talks.

In May 2011, the talks, which had hitherto been kept strictly secret, were made public when they were leaked to German and US media. This revelation helped to worsen relations between the US and Pakistan further, which were already complicated enough following the incident concerning CIA agent Raymond Davis[34] at the start of 2011 and the death of Osama bin Laden at the beginning of May as part of a CIA operation in Abbottabad. The ISI and the Pakistani army did not take kindly to the fact that Western intelligence services had kept them on the sidelines of talks with the

Taliban leader", *The Guardian,* 26 November 2010.

30 *Bundesnachrichtendienst*, Federal Intelligence Service.

31 RASHID, Ahmed, *Pakistan on the Brink. The Future of Pakistan, Afghanistan and the West*, Allen Lane, New Delhi, 2012, pp. 113-136.

32 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1267 of 15 October 1999. Available at: http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1267%281999%29

33 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1989 of 17 June 2011. Available at: http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1989%282011%29

34 Raymond Davis, a CIA agent, killed two people in Lahore on 27 January 2011, after apparently being threatened by them. A third person died after being run over by a CIA car sent to provide backup to Davis. He was detained by the Pakistani police under whose custody he remained until he was released on 16 March 2011 after a payment of "blood money" was made to the families of the victims. This case became a major diplomatic incident between Islamabad and Washington as well as giving rise to mass protest in Pakistan with calls for the American to be executed.

Taliban. Similarly, they were tremendously angry with them for demonstrating that they were not fully under Pakistani control.

In view of what has occurred hitherto, it is understandable that Pakistan is suspected of being involved in the assassination of Burhanuddin Rabbani, leader of the Afghanistan High Peace Council[35], on 20 September 2011. At any rate, one should not fail to take account of the mutual obsession that exists between Pakistan, India and Afghanistan. If in Pakistan any incident or problem is attributed to the activities of the Indian, US or Israeli secret services, in India and in Afghanistan, the blame for virtually everything that happens is laid at the door of Pakistan, even by public authorities. Although at times this verges on the absurd, given the track record, Indian and Afghan suspicion of Pakistan is understandable.

In the case of Rabbani's assassination, however, it is possible that one of the Taliban groups was responsible. Whether the intention was to undermine potential peace talks or to provoke ethnic tensions in the Afghan government, which would have further isolated the Pashtun Karzai[36], the assassin who detonated an explosive hidden in his turban approached Rabbani before doing so and identified himself as a Taliban representative. Additionally, a spokesperson for the Taliban, Zabibullah Mujahid, initially claimed responsibility for the assassination in a statement sent to the news agency Reuters which soon after he denied doing.[37]

Despite being put on hold after Rabbani's death, talks continued between the US and the Taliban until these came to a halt in March 2012. This time, the Taliban decided to withdraw from negotiations when the United States refused to release two Taliban leaders from Guantánamo. These were to be exchanged for the only US soldier held captive by the Taliban, Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl who had been captured in 2009.

Pakistan finally only broke this deadlock at the end of 2012 and the beginning of 2013 with the release between November and January of 26 Taliban leaders. These had been detained in preceding years for their willingness to hold peace talks without Pakistani supervision. In January 2013, it was the Afghan government who freed 80 Taliban prisoners from the military prison in Bagram. Both countries declared that they would soon free further Taliban to thereby create a basis of trust for a negotiated way out of the conflict. Nonetheless, Pakistan kept hold of Mullah Baradar, the most

35 The Afghanistan High Peace Council was established by President Karzai to conduct talks with the Taliban. The successor to Rabbani as chair of the institution will be his son, Slahuddin Rabbani.

36 The Afghan government is primarily made up of Tajiks, the ethnicity to which Rabbani pertained, who are generally less willing to negotiate with the Pashtun Taliban. The majority of Afghan army officers are also Tajik despite the fact that the ethnic group only represents 26 % of the country's population, compared with the Pashtuns who make up 42 %.

37 GABBAY, Michael, "The Rabbani Assassination: Taliban Strategy to Weaken National Unity?", *Combating Terrorism Center*, Sentinel Volume 5, Number 3, March 2012.

relevant Taliban detainee and the one who would have most to contribute to a peace process.

Parallel to these events, relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan appear to be improving considerably after different meetings between their respective presidents in Ankara in December 2012 and London in January of this year. These meetings have primarily focused on working towards Pakistani participation in the peace process. Likewise, Pakistan declared its support for the establishment of a Taliban permanent representation in Doha as well as facilitating travel for leaders in its territory so that they could take part in peace talks.

In February 2013, when the leader of a Pakistani religious party that is closely aligned with the Taliban and particularly influential in the Pashtun regions abutting Afghanistan, Maulana Fazl ur Rehman[38], travelled to Qatar, he revealed that the Taliban were prepared to establish their permanent representation in Doha.[39] His visit to meet with leaders of the Taliban movement was seen as a mission, with the agreement from Pakistani authorities, to persuade the Taliban to resume talks.

In turn, one caught a glimpse of how Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan was evolving. Even though the ultimate objective of securing itself a friendly neighbour on its eastern border might have remained unaltered, the methods employed to achieve this aim may indeed have changed. If Pakistan no longer views the Taliban returning to power in Afghanistan as something to be desired, it may endorse a power-sharing solution in Kabul that would see Taliban representatives involved, as well as seeking to curry favour with other non-Pashtun ethnic groups in its neighbour.

At any rate, it begs the question of to what extent the Taliban have a genuine interest in peace talks. When reflecting upon a peace process with the Taliban, the interests and aims of at least four actors must be considered: the US, the Afghan government, Pakistan and the Taliban themselves.

According to what has transpired from talks held thus far, the US would have placed three demands on the table: that the Taliban renounce violence and pursue their objectives by political means; that they recognise the Afghan Constitution; and commit to not providing any form of support to Al Qaeda. Washington's aim is to obtain a relatively stable Afghan regime after the withdrawal of international troops enabling them to justify and emerge successfully from a war that has been going on

38 Maulana Fazl ur Rehman is the leader of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Fazl (JUI-F), a Pakistani religious party whose vote base is largely the Pashtun population of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. JUI-F has maintained close links with the Taliban movement since it emerged in 1994.

39 The office finally opened in June 2013 only to be closed again the following month. Karzai's government remonstrated about the use of emblems such as the Taliban flying the flag of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. US pressure forced the Qatari authorities to remove the flag, provoking anger from the Taliban who decided to close their office and once again bring talks to a standstill.

for more than 10 years. The US has experienced problems in pursuing this policy due to its own internal opposition to engaging in negotiations, seen by some quarters of the US administration as unjustifiable after the long period of war and the losses suffered. Nevertheless, the Obama administration has opted for negotiations, initiating a process of self-persuasion in which the enemy that attacked the US is Al Qaeda and not the Taliban.

The Afghan government seeks to utilise the negotiations to establish a political process under its control that would ensure that the elite who are currently in power would remain in government in the future. There are also divisions within the Afghan authorities as to talks with the Taliban and it is generally the Pashtuns who are more favourable than the other ethnic groups. Hamid Karzai could see himself evermore isolated as he defends the option of talks within his government. It is also possible that Kabul's position will alter depending on how the ability of the Afghan armed forces to tackle the Taliban after the withdrawal of Western troops is perceived.

As for Pakistan, as readers have already seen in the first part of this article, it seeks the same thing it has always sought: a friendly Afghanistan that will secure its western border in the case of conflict with India. This implies that Pakistan wants a front row seat at the talks, in order to keep track of the entire process, as well as wanting Indian presence and influence in Afghanistan to be reduced to the bare minimum. Pakistan is counting on its support for the Afghan insurgency to use as a bargaining chip in this respect. Nonetheless, the Afghan Taliban have shown signs of wanting to shake off ISI control as well as harbouring a certain feeling of having been betrayed by Islamabad after 9/11 and the US invasion of their country. A further factor is the opposition of all non-Pashtun Afghans who have endured Pakistani intervention in support of the Taliban from the nineties onwards, in addition to the support provided by Islamabad to the most religiously radical Mujahideen groups during the eighties. Whatever the case may be, its capacity for intervention and influence in Afghanistan will allow the country to remain a key actor in any peace process that takes place in Afghanistan. This very influence may lead the Afghan government to make the choice of ensuring that Pakistan gets what it wants by means of some form of agreement that would envisage diminishing India's role in the region.

The Taliban position is perhaps the hardest to decipher. From what can be gleaned from talks held thus far, the Taliban have made dialogue conditional on the following: the withdrawal of all foreign troops from the country; the release of all Taliban prisoners held by Pakistan, the US or in Afghanistan itself; the international community's recognition of the Taliban movement and the lifting of sanctions imposed by the United Nations in 1999. For the time being, they have refused to enter into direct negotiations with the government in Kabul and have insisted that these take place with American involvement.

That said, Taliban interest in negotiating just two years after the withdrawal of Western troops is questionable. It is possible that the Taliban have reached the same

conclusion as the US and have decided that this war cannot be won. Another possibility is that they are using the offer of talks as a way to buy time and ease the military pressure on their forces so that they are in a position to fight against Afghan government troops from 2014 onwards. Both of these scenarios are feasible if one considers that the Taliban movement, far from being a monolithic organisation, may consist of different groups with varying interests.

At least three different schools of thought may be identified within the Taliban movement[40]. There are those who believe that it would be difficult to impose a regime based on Islamic law across the whole of Afghanistan and who fear that civil war could break out after the withdrawal of NATO troops. These more pragmatic elements might be more favourable to peace talks that would give them a certain level of international recognition and a role in a future Afghan government. There are also those who basically see the negotiations as a way in which to conserve their strength and consolidate their power in the south of the country and, finally, those who want nothing to do with negotiations and see themselves as part of a global jihad movement. These would primarily be the new generations of Taliban fighters from refugee camps in Pakistan who have adopted part of the discourse and ideology of Al Qaeda. Even though Mullah Omar remains the indisputable leader of the movement, and it is conceivable that all Taliban groups abided by his orders, he himself has not clearly spoken out either in favour or against talks. His speeches are characterised by marked ambiguity seemingly aimed at keeping all ideological undercurrents happy.[41]

On the other hand, one should not lose sight of the Taliban's track record in diplomatic negotiations. During their rise to power in the 1990s, there were many examples of negotiation that the Taliban deemed to be an additional way of achieving their military objectives.[42] On many occasions, steps made towards negotiations concealed military operations or were simply attempts to buy time in moments of weakness. Proposed prisoner exchanges were habitually used as confidence-building measures. Maybe the most blatant case of Taliban betrayal took place in 1995 when a recently concluded alliance with the Hazara militia (Shia), who had been victimised at the hands of Ahmed Shah Massoud's troops in districts of Kabul, was dismissed by the Taliban after they had occupied Hazara positions and captured their heavy weaponry.[43]

40 BARRETT, Richard. "Talking to the Taliban", *Foreign Policy*, 20 August 2012.

41 Mullah Omar's speeches can be found on the official site of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan: http://shahamat.info/

42 SEMPLE, Michael. "Talking to the Taliban", *Foreign Policy,* 10 January 2013.

43 An event that will forever mark the enmity between the Taliban and the Afghan Shia was the death of the Hazara leader Abdul Mali Mazari whilst in the custody of the Taliban, RASHID, Ahmed, *Taliban. Militant Islam, Oil & Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2001, p. 35.

Contact at international level with the Taliban regime towards the end of the nineties highlighted, on the one hand, their almost medieval nature and their lack of understanding of the world and of diplomacy, and, on the other hand, a Machiavellian knack of pursuing their own interests as part of talks.

They also see less need for a certain level of honesty in talks with third parties due, essentially, to religious considerations that place them in a superior position in terms of truth and moral justice. The Taliban have exhibited considerable aptitude for justifying grounds for breaking off talks that could at the very least be considered treacherous, calling their opponents "heretics" in the case of Shia and "atheists" if describing former Communists in Afghanistan or "hypocrites" in the case of other Mujahideen groups. It should come as no surprise if during the current round of talks the Taliban do not deem it necessary to deal with the Western "infidels" and their "puppets" in Kabul in a spirit of honesty. The same, incidentally, could also be said of the Pakistanis.[44]

6. Conclusions

If one analyses relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan since 1947, it is clear that these have not exactly been the best of neighbours, with Pakistan having cause for concern ever since taking its first steps as an independent state. When one combines this state of affairs with the rivalry, which one could say borders on obsession, of Pakistan with its huge Indian neighbour, it becomes easier to fathom why the country wishes to have a friendly neighbour at its western border. Pakistan's right to pursue its national security objectives at regional level is irrefutable. As to the way in which it endeavours to do so, its activities have been far more questionable. Pakistan lives in a dangerous neighbourhood, though it could be said that the most problematic neighbour is Pakistan itself.

The stability that Afghanistan could achieve after 2014 depends on how able the Taliban are to continue the fight against the government in Kabul. This, in turn, will depend first of all on them maintaining their rear-guard bases in Pakistan and thereafter on the support of the ISI and the Pakistani army. This support, like in the nineties, would not necessitate direct intervention of Pakistani forces, but instead a steady provision of supplies, advisory support from the army and that the flow of fighters from Pakistani border areas could continue to swell Taliban ranks.

This is one of the options available to Pakistan in order to promote its interests in its neighbour Afghanistan. Another, perhaps the most evident, would include establishing

44 SCHAFFER, Howard B. and SCHAFFER, Teresita C. *How Pakistan Negotiates with the United States. Rolling the Roller Coaster*, Washington, United States Institute for Peace, 2011, p. 39.

honest diplomatic relations that would reinforce mutual trust with the government in Kabul. This, however, would preclude the control that Pakistani authorities seem to seek in their relations with Afghanistan. As a matter of fact, Pakistani authorities have raised serious doubts as to the legitimacy of the Afghan government and its chance of survival.

A halfway house solution would include Taliban participation in any government formed from 2014 onwards. This would supposedly afford Pakistan a certain degree of influence in Afghan affairs that could be deemed satisfactory. The internal conflict that Pakistan endures with its own local Taliban movement should not be forgotten. A situation could arise where if Afghanistan were to once again to come under Taliban control, the country could in that case become a safe haven for their Pakistani brethren. This is clearly not an option that would please the Pakistani authorities, who may plump for reconciliation with the government in Kabul, while in turn pushing for Taliban inclusion therein.

Hitherto, Pakistan has made it clear that it intends for any negotiation attempts to pass through its hands and that it has the means at its disposal to at least make negotiations a great deal more complicated. Be that as it may, this option assumes that Pakistan has clout and control over a Taliban movement that is tricky to determine with certainty. The relationship between the Taliban and Islamabad has never been a particularly comfortable one, not even in the nineties. Since relocating to Pakistan in 2001, the Taliban leadership has made itself more vulnerable to Pakistani pressure, something that may displease the higher levels of the movement.

On the other hand, Taliban willingness to negotiate should not be taken as a given, in spite of their participation in the ongoing peace process in Qatar. As observed, the Taliban have not shown themselves to be extremely gifted in the arts of diplomacy over their 19-year history, their talent for deception in furtherance of their objectives notwithstanding. The possible internal divisions within the Taliban movement are another factor that will carry weight when talks are considered. In this case, it would probably be hard to identify the interlocutor.

Finally, it is conceivable that Western diplomacy is not particularly prepared, in spite of many years of ties with Afghanistan in the eighties and in the last decade, to deal with Taliban "diplomacy". Perhaps it would be more practical to make certain that any negotiations that do take place remain wholly in the hands of the Afghans. If, as clearly seems to be the case, Pakistan is the regional element that may offer the greatest potential for the stabilisation of Afghanistan, the parties involved must do their utmost to get the country on board. This would entail a series on guarantees, in particular one to practically expel India from Afghanistan, which the international community may be loath to propose.

Pakistan might draw on its ability to stir up trouble in Afghanistan -in fact, it could be said that it is already doing so- in a similar vein to North Korea's usual policy

apropos its nuclear programme: by using it as a bargaining chip for negotiations on other issues. As concerns Pakistan, these issues would boil down to relations with India and the dispute over Kashmir or otherwise the matter of continued international aid, in particular from the US, without which financing its armed forces might prove to be rather problematic.

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