

The Decades-Long “Double-Double Game” Pakistan, the United States, and the Taliban

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October 7th will mark the beginning of the eighteenth year of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan. On that date in 2001, the United States began intense bombing followed by an Army Ranger raid on Taliban-controlled targets in the southern Afghan city of Kandahar. A response to the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., these U.S. military actions were the opening salvo in a wider American global war on terrorism.

Nearly two decades later, a third consecutive U.S. administration completed another review of U.S. aims and activities in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Trump administration, led by a president known to be highly skeptical of continuing the long-term U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, arrived at a familiar conclusion: U.S. military and intelligence forces need stay.

In announcing a new South Asia strategy on 21 August 2017 at Fort Myer, Virginia, President Donald Trump tweaked the approach of his post-9/11 predecessors by lifting some of the post-2014 limitations on U.S. military rules of engagement. But Trump’s new strategy for sustained U.S. military and intelligence presence in Afghanistan again emphasized that U.S. counterterrorism aims remained paramount and yet unrealized in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Thus, in 2018, the United States finds itself facing a strategic conundrum that is little changed from the one it faced shortly after its 2001 Afghanistan incursion. To defend itself at home and its major interests abroad from the menace of catastrophic terrorism, America

cannot abandon its military and intelligence footprint in Afghanistan. Although the Taliban is gone from power in Kabul, the Afghan government and its security forces remain too weak to halt the Taliban insurgency or prevent large tracts of Afghanistan from becoming unfettered safe havens for menacing terrorist and extremist groups. At the same time, Pakistan’s national security narrative remains so hostile to India and so wary of nefarious Indian influence in Afghanistan that it steadfastly refuses to divorce from its Islamist militant groups with influence there—the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network (HQN).

The Trump administration has learned what its predecessors have well known. Pakistan continues to play a “double game” with the United States in terms of its counterterrorism partnership. Pakistan’s military and intelligence services view the Afghan Taliban and the HQN as the best—or perhaps the least worst—option to hedge against rise of threatening Indian influence in Kabul. At the same time, Pakistan often “plays nice” with the United States in achieving major international counterterrorism goals or shared aims against militant groups operating in Pakistan that directly threaten the Pakistani state.

From the Pakistan perspective, U.S. policies have increasingly undercut Islamabad’s perceived existential security struggle with India. Pakistan’s military believes the U.S. intervention into Afghanistan to have been naïve about the endemic ethnic chaos there and—worse yet—blind to the degree that U.S.-supported leaders in Kabul are capable of pursuing Indian security interests that put



Pakistan's survival at risk. Pakistan has wooed the United States to join in security partnership against India, but Islamabad laments that the United States has slipped Pakistan's embrace and pursued the siren's song of strategic partnership with India. For Pakistan, it is the U.S. side playing the double game—teasing Pakistan with the offer of counterterrorism partnership but never siding fully with Islamabad in its many grievances against India.

Properly understood, the Afghan Taliban is a symptom of the misalignment in U.S. and Pakistan security strategies for Afghanistan and the wider South Asia region. The Afghan Taliban and the HQN are actually symbols of the “double-double game” vexing U.S. security policy and annoying Pakistan's military and intelligence services.

The way forward for U.S. policy in Afghanistan and against the Afghan Taliban and HQN is best framed in context of the U.S.-Pakistan security relationship—the double-double game. This requires a review of the strategic backdrop of the U.S.-Pakistan security relationship. This article will frame the essential U.S. security objective

Nek Mohammad (*left*), a top Pakistani tribal warrior, and Pakistani paramilitary commander Khalid Usman chat 12 May 2004 at an army camp in Wana—the main town of Pakistan's South Waziristan tribal region. Mohammad and four of his comrades were later killed by Pakistani forces in an overnight raid in a remote tribal region bordering Afghanistan. (Photo by Kamran Wazir MK/BY, Reuters)

in Afghanistan and in South Asia since 11 September 2001. It will sketch Pakistan's main security imperatives and how its complex relationship with Islamist militant groups remains deeply imbedded in its security strategy. It will demonstrate that despite the incongruity between how the United States and Pakistan view the Afghan Taliban, counterterrorism cooperation has been successful where Pakistan's security aims have aligned with those in Washington and been disappointing where they have not. The review will conclude with recommendations for the least-worst U.S. strategic approach to Afghanistan and Pakistan in light of the double-double game. These

recommendations will stipulate that the strategic challenge of the Afghan Taliban continues to mean that the United States must pursue imperfect means to attain its most pressing security aim: denying international terrorists renewed safe haven in either Afghanistan or Pakistan.

The Essential Backdrop: Origins of the Double-Double Game

In the post-World War II era, American security interests in South Asia have been subordinated to international strategic aims. During the period of U.S. Cold War containment against the Soviet Union, Pakistan was a close partner with Washington, while India stood largely aloof from the global U.S.-Soviet Union clash.¹ After the Soviet Union's collapse, America's major strategic concern became that of nuclear weapons nonproliferation. Pakistan and India both defied Washington's strategic aims with development of nuclear weapons programs that accelerated into the 1990s. Both were chastised and sanctioned in a failed U.S.-led effort to get them to halt. Both openly tested nuclear weapons in 1998.

By the late 1990s, America's post-Cold War strategic focus turned fully toward counterterrorism. On 23 August 1996, Osama bin Laden declared war against the United States on behalf of his Salafi jihadist organization, al-Qaida, in a thirty-page fatwa, "Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places."² Bin Laden issued his fatwa within months after

moving to Afghanistan to live under Taliban protection. Al-Qaida's first major attack against the United States came in August 1998 with the bombing of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. These killed 224 people including twelve Americans. The United States responded with cruise missile strikes into Afghanistan (and Sudan) that killed six al-Qaida personnel but not bin Laden.³

India offered Washington rhetorical support and some intelligence information. Pakistan maintained a cautious approach toward the evolving U.S. global strategy. It did not object to the U.S. cruise missiles that flew over Pakistani airspace in the strike against al-Qaida in Afghanistan in 1998.⁴ It also shared intelligence on suspected al-Qaida operatives with U.S. agencies in the 1999–2001 timeframe.

After 11 September 2001, Pakistan pursued a dual-tracked policy—or double game. First, it accepted a role as a vital U.S. counterterrorism ally. Simultaneously, it maintained its affiliation with irregular Muslim militias (including the Afghan Taliban)

Table 1. Pakistan-India Key Comparative National Statistics (2015)

Country	Population	Gross domestic product (GDP growth)	Defense spending
Pakistan	189 million	\$217 billion (4.7%)	\$7.6 billion
India	1.309 billion	\$2.112 trillion (8.0%)	\$40 billion

(Table by author)

Table 2. Pakistan-India Key Comparative Military Statistics (2015)

Country	Active forces	Paramilitary forces	Reserve forces including paramilitary	Combat aircraft	Battle tanks	Surface combat ships	Patrol and coastal ships	Submarines
Pakistan	644,000	304,000	N/A	450	~2,500	10	18	8
India	1.346 million	1.403 million	2.14 million	881	~4,100	27	96	16

(Table by author)

in a manner that would not compromise Pakistan's national security concept against India.⁵

Pakistan Grand Strategy, Islamist Militants, and the Double Game

Pakistan does not publish a national security strategy. Yet, the parameters of such a strategy are clear. One threat dominates: India. India remains Pakistan's self-identified existential security threat and dwarfs all other security concerns. Antistate indigenous tribal Islamic militants, mainly based in western Pakistan, are Pakistan's other ongoing security challenge, but this is a challenge that Pakistan believes it can manage and now has under control. India and Pakistan fought four major wars between 1947 and 1999, and nearly came to blows in 2001-2002 and in 2008.⁶ Miscalculation set in motion the battlefield clashes.

Pakistan was born in 1947 with a population less than a quarter that of India. After the loss of East Pakistan in the 1971-72 war of Bangladesh succession, Pakistan has remained at a 6:1 disadvantage in overall population, as well as a proportional disadvantage in gross domestic product growth and defense spending (see table 1, page 66).⁷

These numerical disadvantages are reflected in Pakistan's chronic shortcomings in conventional military forces compared to those of India. India boasted a total military manpower strength (active, paramilitary, and reserve) of about five times that of Pakistan in 2015. It also maintains a sizable and rapidly growing numeric advantage in major combat weapon systems (see table 2, page 66).⁸

Acutely aware of its deficits, Pakistan has attempted to offset military conventional weaknesses by developing compensatory strength in the other two levels of conflict, subconventional and nuclear. Pakistan's strategic reliance on subconventional forces (a.k.a. Islamic militant groups) must be understood in this context. Although divisions do exist between Pakistan's civilian and military leaders regarding Islamic militancy and national security, in Pakistan, the military firmly controls security policies. Military commitment to an array of Islamist militant groups is firm.

From its inception in 1947, Pakistan has used Muslim tribal militants for security aims. Armed Pashtun (or Pathan) tribal outfits, or *lashkars*, were the first fighters to enter Kashmir in 1947 in an effort to stake Pakistan's claim to that princely state over that of

the claim by India during the violent 1947-48 partition of the subcontinent.⁹ The calamity of Indian intervention and Bangladesh succession in 1971-72 fueled a "return to Islam" as a key remedy (along with nuclear weapons and a warmer embrace of China) for national trauma and worry of further Pakistani dismemberment by Indian malice. The East Pakistan crisis inspired the Pakistani military to invest more heavily in Islamist militant groups—especially those from the far west of Pakistan—as a key component of national homeland defense.

Pakistan's manipulation of Afghanistan for its own security purposes began in the 1950s. Aggravated by Afghanistan's early refusal to recognize Pakistan's independence or the legitimacy of the Durand Line border between the two and animated by its belief that Afghan leaders were supporting Pashtun separatism across Pakistan and abetting an insurgency in Pakistan's Baluchistan Province, Pakistan's leaders helped establish the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami party as a player in Afghan politics.¹⁰ In the 1970s, Pakistan upped the ante with weapons and financial support to rebel Afghan Islamists—known as the "Afghan cell"—who aimed to overthrow Afghanistan's king.¹¹

Pakistan's military president from 1977 to 1988, Chief of Army Staff Gen. Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, oversaw the dramatic expansion of Muslim militant groups in Pakistan as the primary means to fight the Soviet Union in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989. With Gulf Arab money, and

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with U.S. and Chinese military hardware, Pakistani military and its Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) Agency tightly managed these jihadist “freedom fighters,” from a vast array of Afghan refugee camps and safe havens across western Pakistan.¹²

After the Soviet defeat, Pakistan’s military-intelligence complex sustained its oversight of these Islamist militants. Numerous jihadist outfits remained in Afghanistan

By the end of the 2000s, Pakistan’s military and intelligence services confronted an unpleasant post-9/11 reality: they must now deal with “good Islamist militants” and “bad Islamist militants.” Pakistan established a differentiated framework for dealing with divergent outfits. If an Islamist militant group put the state of Pakistan first and international Islamist causes second, then it would be supported. If the group prioritized international Islamist

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to fight in a half-decade of civil war that raged into the late 1990s.¹³ Many others were re-missioned for covert or proxy activities against “Indian occupation forces” in Jammu-Kashmir, against India proper, and against South Asia neighbors too amenable toward India.¹⁴

The 9/11 al-Qaida attack of the United States put Pakistan on the horns of a dilemma. America gave Pakistan’s president, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, an ultimatum: Pakistan could either become a partner in America’s new war against Islamist terrorist groups, or it could be branded an enemy and a state sponsor of terrorism.¹⁵ Musharraf took the offer of counterterrorism alliance. He saw it as problematic but far preferable to the possibility that the United States might forge a counterterrorism alliance with India and turn Pakistan into a target instead of a partner.¹⁶

In late 2001, Musharraf cautiously sent some Pakistani frontier paramilitary units to the Afghan border in a show of solidarity with American counterterrorist battles against al-Qaida and Taliban operatives fleeing Afghanistan. Subsequent Pakistani military and paramilitary incursions into western Pakistan in 2004, 2006, and 2008 fared poorly, with tribal militias embarrassing regular Pakistani troops in a series of engagements. Pakistan’s military struck peace deals that did not hold. Aggravated by what they saw as Musharraf’s treachery with the United States, several Islamist militant combinations went rogue in 2008, invaded Pakistan’s Swat District, declared jihad against Pakistan from North Waziristan, and unleashed terrorist strikes across a wide swath of Pakistan.¹⁷

causes but remained supportive or neutral in its approach to the Pakistani state, then it would be treated warily, but often with benign neglect. If the Islamist group threatened the Pakistan state or viewed international Islamist jihad as the highest order priority, then Pakistan’s military would fight it. In some cases, Islamist militant groups might shift from a low threat to a high threat, or vice versa. In such cases, Pakistan military-intelligence services would recalibrate an approach to that group.¹⁸

Since 2009, Pakistan’s military has been continuously fighting selected Islamist militant outfits who practice jihad against the Pakistan state: the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, the Pakistani Taliban, the Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi, and some others. Pakistan also has undertaken selective military action against foreign imports who are either enabling anti-Pakistan indigenous jihadists or who severely aggravate Pakistan’s international allies (e.g., China or the Central Asian states). Groups in this category include the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the East Turkestan Movement, the Islamic State, and isolated members of al-Qaida. From 2010 to 2017, Pakistan committed an average of about 140,000 of its 644,000 regular-duty army forces to counterinsurgent and counterterrorism operations in its western provinces—almost 25 percent of a force that army leaders would prefer to have arrayed against India.¹⁹

Pakistan also has alternately collaborated with or attacked Islamist factions that vacillate in their allegiance to the Pakistani state. These groups—which some scholars label “frenemies”—have included Lahskar-e-Jhangvi, Pakistani Taliban factions led by



Mualvi Nazir and Gul Bahader, and breakaway leaders from the Lashkar-e-Tayyibah like Ilyas Kashmiri.²⁰ This approach allows Pakistan's ISI to play Islamist factions against one another and to leverage differentiated groups to different advantage in varying types of external and domestic security conflicts.

Finally, Pakistan closely manages and often enables groups like Lashkar-e-Tayyibah, Sipha-e-Sahaba Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban, and the HQN. These groups have direct security utility in subconventional operations against India, Indian interests in Jammu-Kashmir, and in Afghanistan, and they do not launch attacks against the Pakistani state. The Afghan Taliban and the HQN are strongly ensconced in this security asset cluster.

Pakistan's military leadership repetitively claims that it is the major victim of the counterterrorism campaign "forced upon it" by the United States and other western states in 2001.²¹ Pakistan contends that it has lost over 4,100 soldiers killed and another 13,500 wounded since 9/11; and that the nation has suffered more than 80,000 civilian deaths and the loss of over \$120 billion.²² In stating these costs, Pakistan's military leadership draws attention to the fact that its "martyred" soldiers far

A Pakistani ranger (left) and an Indian soldier gesture to each other during a flag lowering ceremony 9 January 2017 in Lahore, capital city of Punjab Province, at the Wagah border between Pakistan and India. The dramatic daily flag-lowering ceremony attracts many visitors from both Pakistan and India. (Photo by Liu Tian/Xinhua/Alamy Live News)

exceed the 2,353 American military deaths reported in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014.²³

Pakistan's unhappiness with the war on terrorism notwithstanding, its fight against anti-Pakistan militants intensified in 2014 with a long-awaited, and long-telegraphed, counterinsurgent operation into North Waziristan. Known as *Zarb-e-Azb*, it concluded in late 2017. From the beginning of *Zarb-e-Azb*, Pakistan's civilian and military leaders claimed that they are now fighting terrorists in Pakistan without discrimination among groups.²⁴ But, Pakistan's policy of differentiated treatment toward Islamist militants remains unchanged.²⁵ There is no evidence in 2018 that the Pakistani security apparatus is now, or will in the future, move to dismantle Lashkar-e-Tayyibah, the HQN, the Afghan Taliban, or a score of other militant outfits that remain part of Pakistan's subconventional military arsenal.²⁶



American Strategy Post-9/11 and the Other Double Game: With Pakistan and Against Pakistan

The immediate U.S. strategic objective for Afghanistan in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks was the annihilation of al-Qaida. The Taliban Emirate of Afghanistan stood in the way of this objective by refusing to accept Washington's ultimatum on al-Qaida and its leader, Osama bin Laden. Thus, the Afghan Taliban had to be toppled. U.S. military forces working with Afghan anti-Taliban militias in late 2001 routed Mullah Omar's Islamic Emirate and its remnants fled into Pakistan. Throughout 2002 and early 2003, the U.S. military conducted concentrated military operations around Afghanistan to defeat al-Qaida remnants and Afghan sympathizers. Over the same two-year period, U.S. intelligence agencies worked closely with Pakistani intelligence and police to apprehend scores of al-Qaida leaders and operatives. The George W. Bush administration believed that the Taliban—vanquished in Afghanistan and in disarray in Pakistan—would be dismantled by Musharraf.²⁷

Supporters of the *Difa-e-Pakistan* (Pakistan Defense Council), an Islamic organization, burn a U.S. flag 8 November 2013 as they shout slogans to protest U.S. drone attacks against Pakistan in Karachi, Pakistan. (Photo by Athar Hussain, Reuters)

However, Musharraf was not committed to this course. The value of the Afghan Taliban and affiliated groups like the HQN to Pakistan security outweighed the costs of eliminating them. From 2002 to 2004, Omar reportedly kept a low profile in Pakistan. In turn, Pakistan kept a keen eye on Kabul and on the trajectory of U.S. policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Increasingly, Pakistan did not like what it saw. First, Pakistan saw a new Kabul government led by an ethnic Afghan Pashtun, President Hamid Karzai, but perceived by Pakistan to be dominated by other ethnic Afghan groups that Pakistan viewed to be hostile to Pakistani security interests and too cozy with Indian interlocutors. Second, it saw the United States as distracted in Iraq, itching to get on to the fight there and out of Afghanistan altogether. These fears

seemed confirmed in late 2004, when the United States announced that it would begin a phased handover of the lead for the Afghanistan mission to NATO that would culminate in 2005–2006.²⁸ Finally, Musharraf was alarmed by broader U.S. policy in the region. He felt betrayed by Washington's growing infatuation with India. The United States extended its diplomatic hand to New Delhi and finalized the details of a civilian nuclear power deal with India that was not offered to Pakistan. Musharraf viewed this as treachery with the enemy, and the United States as reverting to old ways—an unreliable partner ready to cut and run from Afghanistan and leave Pakistan vulnerable to the instability there. Pakistan saw the United States as playing its own double game with Pakistan.

By 2004, Omar had reorganized the Afghan Taliban's military and political command from inside Pakistan. Unsurprisingly, Pakistan had allowed it to regroup. In 2006, a resurgent Afghan Taliban infiltrated Kandahar and Helmand Provinces, threatening the U.S. plan to depart Afghanistan.

At the same time, the United States, England, and other west European intelligence agencies began to trace a disturbing number of complex and spectacular terrorist strike plots against respective homelands back to origins along the Afghan-Pakistan border. Egyptian bomb makers and Saudi martial arts trainers were identified working with British, American, and west European jihadists from sanctuary in western Pakistan to launch operations from 2005 to 2007 that could have produced devastating strikes against U.S. bridges and airports, and against British-origin airplanes.²⁹

Alarmed by the renewed international terrorism hub and the Afghan Taliban resurgence of 2006–2007, the United States conducted a pair of Afghanistan-Pakistan strategic reviews—one begun in 2008 under the lame-duck George W. Bush administration and a second in 2009 in the first months of the Obama administration. Both affirmed that while the United States had several strategic interests in the South Asia region, the counterterrorism objective remained paramount. Both concluded that Afghanistan and Pakistan remained a coveted location for international terrorist occupation and that, should the Afghan government fall or al-Qaida go unchallenged, the region would again become a safe haven for terrorists, “who want to kill as many of our people as they possibly can.”³⁰

America's 2008–2009 policy reviews generated an “Af-Pak” strategy and a U.S.-NATO military and civilian “uplift” from 2009 to 2012. The surge of U.S. military, intelligence, and diplomatic personnel into Afghanistan during this uplift period aimed at blunting the Taliban and buying Kabul time to develop a credible government and a military capable of defeating the Taliban on its own. The United States offered Pakistan military and economic inducements to become a full “strategic partner” in this effort. But, Islamabad never fully backed away from the Taliban. Informed by President Barack Obama's fateful line in his West Point Af-Pak strategy speech of 1 December 2009 that limited the time of a U.S. military surge, Pakistan warned the United States of risks to Washington's chosen course and held onto its own concept of a proper war against terrorists.³¹

Pakistan's limited post-2009 counterterrorism cooperation included intelligence sharing about international terrorists and a grudging acceptance of a U.S. drone campaign against terrorist leaders in the western part of Pakistan. At the same time, Pakistan prevaricated when asked to fully suppress or eliminate the Afghan Taliban or the HQN. Pakistan blamed incompetent Afghan leadership and ill-informed U.S.-NATO operations for what it argued (and continues to argue) is an indigenous Afghan Taliban insurgent movement that has its grievances stoked by Afghan ineptitude. The U.S.-Pakistan counterterrorism partnership from 2009 to 2014 produced mixed results: a noteworthy reduction in al-Qaida and other international terrorist group activities across western Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan but a frustratingly intractable Taliban insurgency.

After the U.S. Special Forces raid that killed bin Laden in May 2011 near a Pakistani military compound, the U.S.-Pakistan attempt at a strategic partnership spun inexorably downward. A once robust U.S. military train, equip, and advise for counterinsurgency force working in Pakistan that peaked above 650 in 2009 declined to about two hundred in mid-2015 and dropped to no more than sixty in 2017. U.S. military assistance for Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts became less generous and more conditional. U.S.-Pakistan military and economic partnerships declined precipitously from a level of \$3.5 billion in U.S. assistance during 2011 to less than \$1 billion in 2016 (and much of that was suspended in various U.S. conditional withholdings during 2016 and a Trump

tweet in January 2018).³² The United States continued to conduct drone strikes against suspected international terrorist and selected Afghan militant targets in Pakistan but with less frequency.

In 2013, Obama announced the U.S. intent to transfer the lead for anti-Taliban counterinsurgency operations to Afghan forces by the end of 2014 and withdraw all but a small counterterrorism force and an attaché office from Afghanistan by the end of 2015. This second attempted U.S. transition “out of” Afghanistan hit another speed bump in mid-2015. Then, Afghan national security forces struggled to hold territory against invigorated Taliban operations, and the United States discovered a disturbingly large al-Qaida training camp that had sprung up amid Taliban-controlled Shorabak District to the west of Kandahar. It took a two hundred-man combined U.S. and Afghan Special Forces operation in the fall of 2015 to destroy this al-Qaida site.³³

At almost the same time, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) made an appearance in Afghanistan. A small but vocal number of indigenous Islamist jihadists—most of them fragmented from disputes within longstanding local militant groups like the Pakistan Taliban—declared themselves to be ISIS affiliates, and branded their movement as ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K).³⁴ Obama took pause at these ISIS-K and al-Qaida developments. The United States halted its drawdown and made minor tweaks to its military rules of engagement. Another American effort to depart Afghanistan was thwarted by serious remaining terrorist concerns. Washington’s frustration with Pakistan hit post-9/11 lows, even as the Trump review of strategic options for South Asia began in 2017.³⁵ In Pakistan, military and civilian leaders took a “told you so” approach to this second reversal of a U.S. exit plan.

The post-2011 decline in the U.S.-Pakistan relationship has been paralleled by a fully blooming Pakistan relationship with China. A China-Pakistan Economic Corridor agreement announced in early 2015 is pumping an estimated \$50 billion over the next decade into an ever-fraught Pakistan economy for construction, infrastructure, and nuclear power development. Pakistan also is receiving more and more of its military hardware from China, growing less and less reliant on U.S. hardware and equipment.

Since late 2017, Pakistan’s evolving strategic status has been articulated in something known as the “Bajwa

Doctrine,” named for the Pakistan army chief of staff (and most powerful national leader) Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa. In his unwritten but oft-referenced doctrine, Pakistan is done receiving ultimatums from the United States and the world about how it must do more to eradicate terrorism in Pakistan. The rest of the world should be asking how it can do more to help Pakistan, not the other way around.³⁶ The Bajwa Doctrine confirms that there is little in the way of “leverage” the United States can now exert to get Pakistan to change its historic and immutable view of the Afghan Taliban and the HQN.

Essential Scope for Cooperation: Beyond the Double-Double Game

There remains, however, an important basis of mutual agreement on counterterrorism collaboration between the United States and Pakistan that gets lost in the growing recriminations between the two over the Afghan Taliban and the HQN. The United States and Pakistan have been—and seem likely to continue to be—able to agree on certain dangerous Islamist terrorist groups to attack and often on how to attack them. Past cooperation has included points of friction, but in general, bilateral counterterrorism cooperation has achieved significant mutual policy aims and the one consistent, overarching U.S. policy objective: preventing a devastating terrorist strike against the U.S. homeland or critical U.S. assets overseas. Amidst much often overlooked evidence, three primary examples of successful bilateral counterterrorism cooperation stand out.

First, Pakistan and U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies have coordinated the kill or capture of more than a hundred international terrorist leaders and operatives. This cooperation also has disrupted or prevented several dozen plots to conduct catastrophic international terrorism. From 2001 to 2003, cooperation produced scores of successful apprehensions and kills of top-level al-Qaida operatives and affiliates from other international terror groups. Many of these operations—like the one that led to the capture of al-Qaida 9/11 bombing mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammad—came during activities in Pakistan itself.³⁷ Other collaborative work gathered intelligence necessary from within Pakistan to disrupt and even dismantle Islamist terrorist groups in Indonesia, Malaysia, and elsewhere.³⁸ From the late 2000s through today, intelligence collected in Pakistan has inhibited or thwarted major planned international terrorist

Table 3. Covert U.S. Drone Strike Campaign in Pakistan

Years	U.S. administration	Number of drone strikes in Pakistan	Militants killed (estimated)	Pakistan civilians killed (estimated)	Notable terrorists confirmed killed
2004–08	Bush (43)	46	266	128	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Nek Mohammad (<i>Taliban</i>) · Abdul Rehman (<i>Taliban</i>) · Abu Khabab al Masri (<i>al-Qaida</i> [AQ])
2009–14	Bush (43) and Obama	342	2,064	143	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Sa'ad bin Laden (AQ) · Ilyas Kashmiri (AQ) · Baitullah Mehsud (<i>Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan</i> [TTP]) · Tahir Yuldashev (<i>Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan</i>) · Hakimullah Mehsud (TTP) · Maulvi Nazir (<i>Taliban</i>) · Badruddin Haqqani (<i>Haqqani network</i> [HQN])
2015–16	Obama	13	62	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Mullah Mansour (<i>Taliban Emir</i>) · Ustad Ahmad Farooq (AQ) · Adam Ghadan (AQ)
2017–18	Trump	12	45	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Abu Bakar Haqqani (HQN) · Abdul Raheem (AQ)
		413	2,437	275	

(Table by author)

strikes from jihadist groups and leaders. Such collaboration captured al-Qaida operative Younis al-Mauritani in Pakistan before his 2011 plot for spectacular terror strikes in west Europe could launch.³⁹ There is every reason to believe that Pakistan and the United States can continue to collaborate in these types of activities moving forward.

Second, the United States and Pakistan have cooperated in drone strikes against major international terrorist leaders and groups in locations throughout western Pakistan since 2004. This tacit cooperation frequently has been masked by a fractious public face. Pakistan's ISI covertly works with the United States to assist in most strikes of the campaign, frequently providing target details and damage assessments. For domestic reasons, Pakistan's military and political public relations spokespeople have denied involvement and protested U.S. strikes as a violation of Pakistani sovereignty.

The U.S.-Pakistan drone strike kabuki dance has evolved through four distinctive phases from 2004 to 2017: the 2004–2008 inception phase under Bush; the

2009–2014 Af-Pak Strategy phase under Obama; the 2015–2016 retrenchment phase under Obama; and the evolving phase of strikes under Trump in 2017 and 2018 (see table 3).⁴⁰

The campaign's more than four hundred known total strikes are believed to have killed almost 2,500 militants. Many of those killed were from key U.S. terrorist watch lists. Dozens of al-Qaida key leaders were killed in the early years of the campaign. So too were many leaders and operatives from international terrorist outfits like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), The East Turkistan Movement, and the Chechen jihadists.

The covert drone counterterrorism campaign also has helped Pakistan against several its most threatening jihadist groups including Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi. The covert action allowed Pakistan's military and intelligence agencies to maintain the façade of being non-complicit while harvesting the security benefit.⁴¹

By the end of the Obama administration, the United States and Pakistan had expanded cooperation to include strikes against mutually threatening groups like ISIS-K, and the United States continues to conduct limited drone strikes against Afghan Taliban and HQN leaders it identifies in Pakistani locations. Strikes against these groups are a source of friction between the two countries but have not yet led to any Pakistan ultimatum for the United States to stop or any threat to shoot down U.S. drones in Pakistani airspace. This suggests that they might be continued in a covert, prudent manner.

Third, there is circumstantial evidence that Pakistan plays a role in limiting the scale and scope of Afghan Taliban attacks against U.S. soldiers and other personnel in Afghanistan. Evident since 2001, Pakistan's role seems especially important since 2015. Pakistan's ISI almost certainly has helped deny lethal and provocative weapons to the Afghan Taliban arsenal. In more than seventeen years of ongoing aerial operations, U.S. and NATO coalition aircraft have never reported being engaged by a modern anti-aircraft weapon. There never have been reports of Afghan Taliban or HQN operations featuring heavy artillery or heavily armored vehicles (e.g., tanks or personnel carriers). The U.S.-Pakistan counterterrorism partnership has shown a major value in this reality—and this should be a value that continues if even a strained counterterrorism partnership remains in place.

More recently, annual U.S. military fatalities have declined remarkably since 2015—reaching historic lows in 2016 and 2017 (see table 4).⁴² Some of this

Table 4. U.S. and Afghan Deaths, 2001–2017

Year	Number of U.S. military deaths	Number of Afghan security force deaths (estimated)	Number of Afghan civilian deaths (estimated)
2001	12	N/A	N/A
2002	49	N/A	N/A
2003	48	N/A	N/A
2004	52	N/A	N/A
2005	99	N/A	800+
2006	98	N/A	1,000+
2007	117	1,012	1,523
2008	155	1,106	2,100
2009	317	928	2,412
2010	499	1,480	2,777
2011	418	1,950	3,021
2012	310	3,400	2,769
2013	127	4,700	2,969
2014	55	4,380	3,710
2015	22	7,000	3,545
2016	14	5,500	3,498
2017	17	5,200	3,438
Total	2,409	33,856	35,000+

(Table by author)

reduction can be explained by declining U.S. troop numbers across Afghanistan—9,800 for most of 2016 and 2017, about one-tenth of the number there in 2011—and by fewer U.S. military personnel assigned in remote locations supporting Afghanistan security forces' counterinsurgency operations around the country. But, the rather significant decline in successful Afghan Taliban direct targeting of U.S. military locations does not seem likely to have occurred spontaneously. Pakistan intelligence agency preferences

for limiting the U.S. military as primary attack targets seems very likely to have played a role. It is a role that the United States should be able to encourage Pakistan to continue into the future.

American Interests and Actions— From Deaf Ears to Sustainable Counterterrorism Collaboration

Sometimes additional pressure and confrontation with frustrating security partners can produce good strategic results. More often, policy makers do better on complex problems if they cooperate to attain minimally acceptable results.

The main—and minimally acceptable—aim for U.S. policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan remains what it has been since 12 September 2001, that neither location again become a hotbed for international jihadist organizations to plot, plan, and execute catastrophic terrorist strikes against the U.S. homeland or its major overseas interests. The United States actually has succeeded in this aim. There have been no catastrophic terrorism strikes against the U.S. homeland or its major overseas assets emanating from Afghanistan-Pakistan since 2001. Even the dangerous plots uncovered in western Pakistan during the 2004–2011 period were thwarted through collaboration. Despite obvious al-Qaida efforts in 2015, no new terrorist training center has returned to Afghanistan. U.S. counterterrorism cooperation with Pakistan has helped prevent Pakistan from reverting to an international terror hub. Sustained U.S. military and intelligence presence in Afghanistan has prevented any major resurgence of such a hub there.

At the same time, it remains highly unlikely that Pakistan will ever see eye-to-eye with Washington or Kabul on the need to permanently dismantle the Afghan Taliban or the Haqqani Network. Pakistan's recent self-defined success in suppressing its main domestic terrorist threats with Operation Zarb-e-Azb has reinforced a righteous perception of its counterterrorism approach. The main tenets of the Bajwa Doctrine make any greater U.S. pressure campaign toward Pakistan all but certain to fail. Pakistan's shoulder shrug response to Trump's 4 January 2018 tweet suspending \$900 million in U.S. security assistance, its snub of U.S. South Asia Principal Deputy Assistant Alice Wells in January when she tried to deliver another message of U.S. unhappiness, and the polite but

bemused smile on the face of Pakistan Prime Minister Abbasi in March 2018 when Vice President Mike Pence told him that Islamabad, “must do more to address the continued presence of the Taliban, Haqqani Network, and other terrorist groups operating in their country,” tells the story of futility that additional pressure on Pakistan now will produce.⁴³

The alternative for the United States is to maintain a prudent, low-level military and intelligence force in Afghanistan to inhibit any return of international terrorist entities there and to work professionally and deliberately to cooperate with the Pakistanis against terror groups in ways that Pakistan can tolerate.

The U.S. record of success in fighting terrorist actors in South Asia with Pakistan as an ally is far from perfect. But, the record of counterterrorism success without Pakistan's participation during the period from 1992 to 2001 is much worse. The delicate and still dangerous situation calls for some form of continuing U.S. military engagement with Rawalpindi (home of the Pakistani army headquarters), albeit at a reduced level from the past seventeen years. This approach is far more likely to meet U.S. baseline security needs than a total cut off of counterterrorism support or military-to-military interactions championed by some.⁴⁴

Despite the influx of Chinese money since 2015, Pakistan remains an extremely volatile state. It could miscalculate Indian intentions and get embroiled in a major cross-border war where its growing tactical nuclear arsenal might be used—with attendant catastrophic consequences. It is likely to continue relationships with an array of Islamist militant groups deemed important to advancing Pakistani security interests in Jammu-Kashmir, in Afghanistan, and against India. At the same time, Pakistan's military will continue a selective course of counterinsurgency operations against jihadist outfits declared as fighting against the Pakistani state. Overt and covert U.S. support for Pakistani efforts against its antistate militant groups should be sustained. The United States also should do more important work as a mediator between the Afghan and Pakistan militaries to limit border clashes between their forces—clashes that have become more deadly from 2016 through 2018 after U.S. military advisors and border monitoring posts were withdrawn.⁴⁵

As a minimum, capable and flexible U.S. bases at Kabul and Bagram, Afghanistan merit retention

and management for counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and as a strategic hedge for the worrisome possibilities in Pakistan.⁴⁶ Sufficiently resourced U.S. intelligence and special operations forces can acquire and attack the militants identified by Pakistan while recognizing that Pakistan cannot be expected to provide comprehensive targeting information on an array of other militant groups that will threaten Afghanistan itself. An autonomous American intelligence capability will be required to provide counterterrorism and other special information to U.S. assets that the Afghan intelligence services cannot provide and that the Pakistan ISI cannot be expected to share.⁴⁷

It remains unwise for the Trump administration to completely eliminate the U.S.-Pakistan counterterrorism military support framework. Instead, a prudent policy would be one that sustains limited bilateral counterterrorism collaboration with flexible annual authorities of up to \$750 million per year along with sustained economic-related support authority of up to \$500 million a year and another \$300 million a year in broader security assistance programs.⁴⁸ These amounts will not make the Pakistani military and intelligence services end their unhelpful relationships with any number of Salafi jihadist militant outfits. However, the sums will help sustain U.S.-Pakistani dialogue in both military-to-military and civilian-to-civilian counterterrorism forums and keep open the possibilities for critical terrorist information exchange and—if needed—crisis response.

At the end of the day, getting to and sustaining residual U.S. military security and strategic intelligence presence in Afghanistan is the best hedge against the inherent and significant security risks remaining from the many global terrorist groups operating in the region and often intermingling with militant outfits in Pakistan.⁴⁹ The Trump administration's August 2017 South Asia strategy seems to get the rebalance of U.S. force posture in Afghanistan about right—adding and remixing an additional four thousand military intelligence elements, Afghan unit advisors, and strike aviation assets capable of helping Afghan security forces keep the Taliban at bay and of preventing a return of al-Qaida or other international terrorist safe haven.

The U.S. must now recalibrate a less blunt, more nuanced, “goldilocks strategy” toward Pakistan—one not too hot and not too cold. Washington can continue to deter and disrupt major terrorism threats in Pakistan by working with the Pakistanis in limited, but mutually beneficial, counterterrorism processes that have shown important results over the last seventeen years.

Understood in full context, Pakistan's double game is actually a U.S.-Pakistan double-double game. It is frustrating for both sides but remains one that can be played by Washington in a way that continues to attain America's number one global counterterrorism strategic aim. ■

The opinions expressed in this analysis represent his own views and are not those of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

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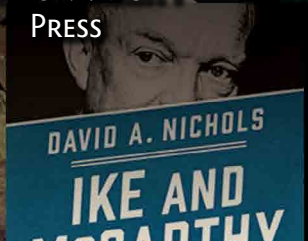
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