

# Pakistan, the United States and the End Game in Afghanistan:

Perceptions of Pakistan's Foreign Policy Elite



A Jinnah Institute  
Research Report



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Perceptions of Pakistan's Foreign Policy Elite



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Rehman lectures widely on strategic security challenges facing Pakistan, and is a key member of the Legislative Councils that govern both Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan. Rehman's background as a senior professional journalist for twenty years has given her wide media outreach as an incumbent second-term law-maker with a frontline public position against religious extremism. Her most recent awards include formal recognition as "Democracy's Hero" by the International Republican Institute, US, and the Jeanne Kirkpatrick Award for Women in 2011.

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Yusuf taught at Boston University's Political Science and International Relations Departments as a senior teaching fellow. He has published widely in national and international journals, professional publications and magazines. He writes a column for Dawn, Pakistan and regularly appears as an expert on U.S. and Pakistani media. He recently testified before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee on U.S.-Pakistan relations.

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In 2010-11, Yusuf was the Pakistan Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (Washington D.C.) During her fellowship, she researched the impact of the independent Pakistani media on politics, foreign policy (particularly US-Pakistan relations), and society for a forthcoming book.

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Ahmer Bilal Soofi	President, Research Society of International Law; Advocate, Supreme Court of Pakistan
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Najam Sethi	Editor-in-Chief, The Friday Times
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## About the Jinnah Institute

Jinnah Institute is a non-profit public policy organization based in Pakistan. It functions as a think tank, advocacy group and public outreach organization independent of government. JI seeks to promote knowledge-based policy making for strengthening democratic institutions and building public stakes in human and national security discourse. It remains committed to investing in policies that promote fundamental rights, tolerance and pluralism.

## Jinnah Institute's Strategic Security Initiative (SSI)

Jl actively seeks to articulate independent national security strategies for Pakistan that incorporate the country's stated policy imperatives while making room for voices from civil society, parliament, academia and media experts. Jinnah Institute's SSI also encourages constructive engagement between the international community and local policy and opinion makers on key national security interests, with the goal of seeking broad strategic convergences in multilateral and bilateral forums.

Jinnah Institute runs one of the leading peace initiatives with India through sustained Track II engagement. It has been at the forefront of bringing together stakeholders from India and Pakistan to develop bilateral strategies for regional security and stability.

Jl is committed to broadening Pakistan's stake in pursuing informed and inclusive policies on regional and global relationships with India, Afghanistan, South and Central Asia, China, the EU, UK, and the United States.

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# Foreword

The importance of Pakistan's role in Afghanistan and as a U.S. partner in South Asia is indisputable. However, the perceptions and interpretations of just what role Pakistan is able and willing to play remains a matter of intense debate and controversy around the world. The disconnect in policy perceptions is most obviously manifest in the Pakistan-U.S. relationship. Despite having worked extremely closely over the past decade, the relationship remains marred with deep-seated mistrust and mutual suspicions about each other's intentions.

As the 2014 deadline for the Afghanistan transition approaches, Pakistan's role is likely to become even more important. This realization prompted us to brainstorm ways in which the intellectual capacities of our Institutes could be put to use to help improve mutual understanding between Pakistan and the United States. We were concerned that tensions in bilateral ties, heightened as they were due to the Raymond Davis affair when we were considering this project, may prevent the two sides from complementing each other's efforts to attain a peaceful settlement in Afghanistan. We agreed that an exercise that would allow both sides to comprehend the other's interests and policy choices better would be an important step in addressing some of the prevailing mistrust.

The result was a United States Institute of Peace (USIP)-Jinnah Institute (JI), Pakistan co-convened project, funded by USIP, aimed at gathering and articulating informed Pakistani opinion on the evolving situation in Afghanistan. This report outlines the major findings of the project. We hope that the product will be a valuable step in understanding how Pakistan's foreign policy elite see their country's policy preferences evolving in Afghanistan. As a next step, we recognize the need for an identical exercise to bring about a better understanding of U.S. policy and perceptions among Pakistanis.

We are grateful to all those who have helped make this project a success. The program staff at USIP and Jinnah Institute rendered invaluable support. We owe special gratitude to Salman Zaidi at Jinnah Institute for managing the project. We are also grateful to Huma Yusuf who was brought in as a consulting author on the report and to the Research Society of International Law for providing a venue to host the round table discussion in Lahore. Most important of all, we wish to thank our project participants who took the time to share their perspectives on the subject. Without them, the project would have been a non-starter. Finally, a special note of thanks is in order for Lt. Gen. (Rtd.) Asad Durrani, Ejaz Haider, Dr. Rifaat Hussain and Amb. Humayun Khan, who agreed to attend multiple roundtable sessions held under the project and to review our report to ensure that it was representative of the views expressed by project participants.

As the report stands, it attempts to reflect the views of Pakistan's foreign policy elite on select dimensions of the evolving situation in Afghanistan. It is not a consensus report and does not represent, or necessarily conform to, the views of all participants. It also does not necessarily reflect the views of the authors or the authors' respective organizations.

Moeed Yusuf  
United States Institute of Peace  
Project Director

Sherry Rehman  
Jinnah Institute  
Project Director

# Executive Summary

This report outlines the perceptions of Pakistan's foreign policy elite – retired civilian and military officials, analysts, journalists and civil society practitioners – about Pakistan's outlook towards the evolving situation in Afghanistan, its interests and strategy in the impending "end game", and the implications of its policies towards Afghanistan for the U.S.-Pakistan relationship. These perceptions were captured as part of a project, convened by the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) and Jinnah Institute (JI), Pakistan, aimed at better comprehending Pakistan's outlook towards the situation in Afghanistan. The project drew on the expertise of 53 Pakistani policy elite with established expertise on Afghanistan and/or with knowledge of the modalities of policymaking in the United States, and senior politicians.

## Pakistan's Objectives in Afghanistan

In terms of the end game, Pakistani policy elite see their state as having defined two overriding objectives:

- The "settlement" in Afghanistan should not lead to a negative spillover such that it contributes to further instability in Pakistan or causes resentment among Pakistani Pashtuns; and
- The government in Kabul should not be antagonistic to Pakistan and should not allow its territory to be used against Pakistani state interests.

Translated into actionable policy, these umbrella objectives lead Pakistan to pursue three outcomes:

*A degree of stability in Afghanistan:* Project participants felt that Pakistan's interests are best served by a relatively stable government in Kabul that is not hostile towards Pakistan. There was across the board realization among the participants that persistent instability in Afghanistan will have numerous and predictable consequences for Pakistan that it is ill-prepared to tackle.

*An inclusive government in Kabul:* Pakistan prefers a negotiated configuration with adequate Pashtun representation that is recognized by all ethnic and political stakeholders in Afghanistan. Some of the opinion makers insisted that given the current situation, a sustainable arrangement would necessarily require the main Taliban factions – particularly Mullah Omar's "Quetta Shura" Taliban and the Haqqani network – to be part of the new political arrangement.

*Limiting Indian presence to development activities:* Pakistani foreign policy elite accept that India has a role to play in Afghanistan's economic progress and prosperity. However, many participants perceived the present Indian engagement to be going beyond strictly development. They wish to see greater transparency on Indian actions and objectives.

## Views on U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan

Pakistani policy elite involved in the project perceived America's Afghanistan strategy to date to be inconsistent and counterproductive to Pakistan's interests. The most scathing criticism was targeted at the political component of the strategy, which is largely seen to be subservient to the military surge. Not many among the participants were optimistic about the prospects of the surge. While there was recognition that operations over the past year have degraded the Taliban's capacity, virtually no one was convinced that this would force the main Taliban factions to negotiate on America's terms.

Pakistani policy elite see the prospects for a successful end game in Afghanistan as bleak also because of the belief that the United States would want to retain some long-term security presence in Afghanistan, which will likely create unease among the Afghan Taliban and countries in the region, including Pakistan. In terms of Pakistan's role in the end game, project participants believed that the United States would continue to push the Pakistan military to "do more" to stamp out militant sanctuaries while Washington tries to open up direct channels for talks with the Taliban—with an eye on reducing reliance on Pakistan's security establishment in the political reconciliation process.

Regardless, there was no support for a breakdown of the Pakistan-U.S. relationship. Project participants, however, felt that greater clarity in U.S. and Pakistani policies was crucial in order to avoid failure in Afghanistan, to convince the Taliban of the validity of a power-sharing agreement, and to urge regional actors (including Pakistan) to stop hedging and to play a more constructive role.

## Pakistan's Afghanistan Policy: Reacting to the United States

Project participants suggested that Pakistani policy faces a dilemma vis-à-vis the U.S. On the one hand, U.S. military operations in Afghanistan are believed to be causing an internal backlash in terms of militancy and deepening the state-society rift within Pakistan. On the other hand, Pakistani policy elite appreciate that a premature U.S. troop withdrawal would lead to added instability in Afghanistan.

Participants felt that from Islamabad's perspective, the longer U.S. military operations continue without a clear path for political negotiations, the tougher it will become for Pakistan to manage its internal security balancing act. Islamabad therefore favors an immediate, yet patient effort at inclusive reconciliation.

Pakistani policy elite we spoke with tended to believe that a genuine intra-Afghan dialogue will inevitably allow a significant share of power to the Pashtuns and thus produce a dispensation in Kabul that is sensitive to Pakistani interests. Based on their perceptions about the current realities on the ground in Afghanistan, those tied to this narrative see any attempts to alienate Pashtuns in general, and the Taliban in particular, as shortsighted.

Nonetheless, the Taliban's perceived utility for Pakistan does not translate into a desire for a return to Taliban rule in Afghanistan. A bid to regain lost glory by Mullah Omar's Taliban would end up creating conditions in Afghanistan which run counter to Pakistani objectives, most notably stability. The Pakistani state is no longer believed to be interested in a return to complete Taliban rule akin to the 1990s.

## Other Impediments to Successful End Game Negotiations

Project participants saw the following aspects as additional hurdles in ensuring successful negotiations and a durable settlement in Afghanistan.

*Viability of a regional framework:* A regional framework which seeks neutrality and non-interference from countries in the neighborhood received in principle support during the discussions held under the project. However, Pakistani elite are unsure of how a regional agreement will be enforced. Some participants worried that just the entrenched expectation of interference by others will prompt countries not to honor the arrangement in the first place as each seeks 'first mover's advantage' in establishing its influence in Afghanistan.

*Taliban's willingness to negotiate:* Pakistani policy elite claim a lack of clarity about the Afghan Taliban's willingness to participate in a political

reconciliation process, or even to communicate directly with the United States beyond a point. Notwithstanding, they feel that the longer meaningful talks are delayed, the more challenging it will become for the Pakistani security establishment to persuade the main Taliban factions to come to the negotiating table.

*Political situation in Afghanistan:* Afghan President Hamid Karzai, while acknowledged as a legitimate leader, is also seen as having lost credibility among Afghan citizens. This is believed to be generating additional support for the insurgency and forcing Afghan groups opposed to his government to delay serious negotiations. A major challenge in this political environment lies in identifying representatives who could mediate and speak on behalf of different Afghan stakeholders.

*Future of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF):* Pakistani policy elite remain wary of the future role of the ANSF. Participants perceived the bloated size of the Afghan National Army (ANA) to be unsustainable and a threat to Pakistan's interests. In terms of ANA's ethnic composition, the presence of non-Pashtun officers in key positions was highlighted to suggest that the makeup is more likely to fuel ethnic hostility than to maintain peace in Afghanistan.

## The Post-Osama Bin Laden Calculus

Because most of our conversations with Pakistani foreign policy elite predated the May 2, 2011 killing of Al Qaida leader Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan, the project team subsequently requested participants to reflect on the impact of this development on the Afghan calculus for Pakistan and the United States.

Most respondents believed that bin Laden's death had no bearing on Pakistan's strategy in Afghanistan. As for the United States, there was a sense that bin Laden's departure will make it easier to create a 'narrative of victory' against Al Qaida and perhaps, to negotiate directly with Afghan Taliban leaders. A greater emphasis may be laid on distinguishing Al Qaida from the Taliban to facilitate the process further.

That said, the growing mutual distrust between Pakistan and the United States, as exposed during the May 2 U.S. unilateral raid that killed bin Laden, has raised doubts about the ability of the two countries to collaborate in attaining a peaceful settlement in Afghanistan. The state of the bilateral relationship, it was feared, may end up overshadowing the otherwise considerable overlap on the issue of reconciliation between the American and Pakistani positions. Some of the respondents disagreed with this view, arguing that the Obama administration will continue reaching out to elicit Pakistan's support in nudging the main Afghan Taliban factions to the negotiating table.

# Introduction

On June 22, 2011, U.S. President Barack Obama announced a withdrawal plan for U.S. troops deployed in Afghanistan. The plan marks a major step in the drawdown of the international security presence from Afghanistan, leading to the transfer of primary security responsibilities to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The December 2014 deadline for this transition, now accepted by the troop-contributing countries, increases the pressure on the international coalition and the Afghan government to find an amicable solution in Afghanistan in the interim.

While an internal consensus among Afghans is undoubtedly the most crucial element of any settlement, regional players also have an important role to play in facilitating progress towards durable peace in the so-called “end game” in Afghanistan. Among the regional players, Pakistan’s role stands out. It is often described as the most influential actor whose support will be pivotal in ensuring a peaceful Afghanistan. Despite its importance however, the evolving direction of Pakistan’s Afghanistan policy is often not well understood in many of the world’s important capitals. While there is somewhat greater clarity on past actions, Islamabad’s outlook towards the Afghanistan end game and policy preferences to that end remain a matter of intense debate. Too often, the Pakistani view on Afghanistan is taken as a monolith, with little attention being paid to the many competing narratives that affect official decisions directly or indirectly. Interestingly, even Pakistani foreign policy elite and policy makers do not always fully comprehend the multiplicity and range of opinion on key foreign policy issues within the country.

Given Pakistan’s centrality to the Afghanistan equation and the need to ensure that Islamabad’s policy complements that of other actors seeking viable peace in

Afghanistan, a better understanding of how Pakistani foreign policy elite perceive the situation in Afghanistan is needed. For all those seeking to promote a durable peace settlement in Afghanistan, it is crucial to understand also how Pakistan's policy elite view Pakistan's interests and concerns during the end game, what they consider realistic options in pursuit of these interests, and what areas of overlapping versus competing interests exist between Pakistan, the United States, Afghanistan, and other actors.

This report captures the findings of a project, convened by the United States Institute of Peace and the Jinnah Institute, Pakistan, aimed at better comprehending Pakistan's outlook (as perceived by the country's foreign policy community) towards the evolving situation in Afghanistan. The interplay of the Pakistan-U.S. relationship and the respective interests of the two countries in Afghanistan was also a key area of focus of the project.

Specifically, the project focused on four key themes:

- (i) America's evolving strategy in Afghanistan;
- (ii) Pakistan's short-term and long-term interests in Afghanistan, and how Pakistan *is* pursuing these interests;
- (iii) In light of America's strategy and its implications for Afghanistan and the region, how *can* Pakistan best pursue its interests going forward; and
- (iv) Policies that the United States, Afghanistan, India (and other regional actors) would have to pursue/accept for Pakistani objectives to be met.

To examine these themes, the project drew on the expertise of a wide spectrum of Pakistan's foreign policy elite – retired civilian and military officials, analysts, journalists, and civil society practitioners – with established expertise on Afghanistan and/or with knowledge of the modalities of policy making in the United States. These opinion makers attended roundtable discussions aimed at exploring the themes; a few were interviewed directly. Senior politicians representing the major political parties in the country were also interviewed during the project.

The project was conducted in the spring of 2011 and updated after Osama Bin Laden's killing on May 2. In total, 53 opinion makers and politicians participated in the project. They were selected in order to capture opinions from across the spectrum and to be able to present conclusions that were representative of the views prevalent among opinion makers in the country. Only participants with direct expertise – practical policymaking involvement, on-ground experience in Afghanistan, or an academic understanding of the issue at hand – were invited. While inevitably, a few influential opinion makers were unable to participate – we originally invited 70 individuals – the project team is not aware of previous undertakings on the subject which managed to summarize the views of such a diverse group of Pakistani foreign policy elite in a systematic manner.

**Box 1**

## Methodology

The project proceeded in two phases. Pakistani foreign policy elite were brought together in off-the-record roundtable discussions in March 2011. Six roundtables, involving 39 individuals, were held; four were held in Islamabad, and one each in Lahore and Peshawar. Each roundtable was restricted to 6-10 individuals to keep the discussions interactive and manageable. The mix of experts for each roundtable was carefully selected to ensure some level of diversity (as we anticipated) of views. We directly interviewed four opinion makers who were invited but could not attend any of the roundtable discussions.

The second phase of the project entailed off-the-record, one-on-one interviews with seven politicians representing major political parties of Pakistan.<sup>1</sup> The interviews were meant to solicit perspectives of the political parties on the subject at hand. These were conducted between March and July 2011.

The project directors added an additional component to the project after Osama bin Laden's killing on May 2, 2011. Since all the roundtables and most of the interviews were conducted prior to the incident, we felt a need to solicit views of participants on the impact of this development on the Afghanistan calculus. We reached out to all roundtable participants via e-mail and requested answers to two questions:

(i) How do you think bin Laden's death will change the U.S. end game in Afghanistan?

(ii) Will bin Laden's killing change Pakistan's strategy vis-à-vis Afghanistan?

We received responses from 17 of the 39 roundtable participants. Their views are reflected in the post-script to this report.

Methodological robustness was ensured through an innovative project design. All roundtables were conducted in quick succession to ensure that the policy environment and realities surrounding the issue remained constant.<sup>2</sup> Also, in order to confirm that the authors were able to capture the key themes discussed during the project and that the report was representative of the roundtable discussions, the project team requested four participants, chosen carefully to ensure a diversity of views among them, to attend multiple sessions and subsequently review the report for errors. Between them, they attended all six roundtables.<sup>3</sup>

The body of this report captures the essence of the viewpoints expressed and conclusions drawn during the roundtable discussions and interviews with the foreign policy elite. The findings from the interviews with representatives of the political parties are encapsulated separately in box 3 in the report. Responses to questions on the impact of Osama Bin Laden's killing on the Afghanistan calculus are reported in the post-script to the report.

The authors of this report have refrained from conducting any independent analysis or additional research. The report is merely a reproduction of the key themes and findings that emerged from the discussions. As such, the report can be considered an objective rendering of a wide spectrum of informed Pakistani views on the conflict and possible end game in Afghanistan.

To be sure, the authors make no claim that the elite perceptions reflected in the report are always factually accurate or objective; nor have the authors injected their own views on what this elite outlook means for the evolving situation in Afghanistan. The report simply lays out these perceptions as views that must be known and understood before informed, contextually grounded policies can be devised by stakeholders seeking Pakistan's cooperation in the Afghanistan end game. The report is not a consensus document and does not represent the entire range of views on every issue. In fact, while every effort has been made to faithfully represent the content of the discussions, owing to the diversity of opinions expressed, the report cannot claim to have effectively articulated the opinions of all participants.

Section II of the report discusses elite perceptions of Pakistan's objectives in Afghanistan. Section III reflects participants' views on U.S. strategy in Afghanistan. This is followed by a discussion of how Pakistani opinion makers view their own country's policy towards Afghanistan. In section V, we outline participants' views on a regional framework for an Afghan settlement. Section VI lists what the policy elite highlighted as some of the key impediments to successful end game negotiations. In section VII, we outline the main steps project participants believed the United States, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and other regional actors could take to contribute to peace in Afghanistan. This is followed by a post-script which focuses on elite perceptions of the impact of Osama Bin Laden's death on the Afghanistan equation.

# Pakistan's Objectives in Afghanistan: The Ideal versus the Achievable

## The ideal

A distinction ought to be drawn between what Pakistan's foreign policy elite see as their country's long-term vision for relations with Afghanistan and what the Pakistani state will seek to achieve in the impending end game.

Pakistani foreign policy elite are generally critical of their country's traditional, security-centric approach to Afghanistan. The security establishment, which has dominated the country's policy throughout, is seen as being overly concerned about an antagonistic Afghanistan. This fear has led it to interfere in sovereign Afghan affairs over the years. Especially since the Afghan resistance against Soviet occupation in the 1980s, there has been an urge to micromanage developments within Afghanistan in a bid to prop up pro-Pakistan governments in Kabul. The Pakistani military has persistently sought a friendly Afghanistan to avoid a 'two-front' situation which would entail a hostile India to the east and an antagonistic Afghanistan to the west.

Project participants contended that even as the Pakistani state reached out to seek amenable partners, it approached Afghanistan largely from an ethnic rather than a political or economic lens. Its policy has therefore focused virtually entirely on the Pashtun political factions in Afghanistan. For the longest period, the Pakistani state has believed in a strong feedback loop between Pakistani and Afghan Pashtuns; the state has been fearful of an ethno-nationalist Pashtun movement triggered by developments in Afghanistan that are unfavorable to the Pashtuns in Pakistan. The country's official policy towards Afghanistan has been influenced, in no small part, by this fear.

Pakistan's security-centric approach has caused the state to lose goodwill among Afghans even though the ethnic Pashtun ties at the people-to-people level have remained strong. Pakistani experts and political leaders we talked to were acutely aware of the fact that their country is widely reviled and mistrusted in Kabul while countries like India are viewed positively. Some policy elite however argued that the anti-Pakistan sentiment is confined to the northern, non-Pashtun parts of Afghanistan and that the international media has been unnecessarily hyper-sensitive to this concern.

Nevertheless, most project participants agreed that Pakistan's interference in Afghanistan's affairs over the past two decades has left many Afghans alienated and resentful of what they view as Islamabad's hegemonic tendencies. This troubles many, especially those who argue that Pakistan's geographical, ethnic, historical, and cultural links with Afghanistan gives it an inherent advantage in terms of ensuring interdependence between the two countries. A less overbearing approach, project participants felt, would have highlighted Pakistan's indispensability while retaining strong goodwill among Afghan citizens, both Pashtun and non-Pashtun. Support to Islamist forces in Afghanistan is especially criticized and is blamed for having accentuated Pakistan's problems of radicalization within its own society.

Most members of the policy elite included in our discussions held the view that Pakistan's long-term interests are best served by expanding the framework of the bilateral relationship with Afghanistan beyond security to include trade, energy, and reconstruction projects. Rather than seeking influence in Kabul through groups such as the Taliban alone, Pakistan ought to have pursued enhanced trade ties and joint investments for leverage. Indeed, the scope and strength of Pakistan's current economic and educational ties with Afghanistan is substantial and often underestimated. The Pakistan-Afghanistan bilateral trade increased from \$169.9 million in 2000-01 to \$1.24 billion in 2007-08 and further to approximately \$1.75 billion at present.<sup>4</sup> However, much of these ties have developed without any holistic, visionary state policy to optimize benefits on Islamabad's part. Greater attention towards this aspect is seen as critical by Pakistani policy elite; presently, the informal and societal links dwarf progress at the interstate level.

## A reality check

Notwithstanding what the Pakistani foreign policy elite would have liked their state to achieve, or what they see as the preferred long-term vision, there is a fair bit of realism that the end game in Afghanistan does not allow the luxury to chart an ideal course. It was largely agreed among project participants that achieving the above-recommended course would require no less than a wholesale transformation of Pakistan's traditional thinking vis-à-vis Afghanistan.

Between now and 2014, Islamabad's positioning in the Afghan reconciliation efforts will be dictated by the country's security establishment. And despite the criticism of a security-centric approach, there is a firm belief among the policy elite that Pakistan has strong interests and concerns in Afghanistan which the international community – read the United States – has often ignored over the past decade.

Pakistani policy elite believe that there has been a gradual evolution in the security establishment's thinking, hastened in recent years by the fast pace of change in the situation in Afghanistan. In terms of the end game, Pakistani elite see their state as having defined two overriding objectives:

- The ‘settlement’ in Afghanistan should not lead to a negative spillover such that it contributes to further instability in Pakistan or causes resentment among Pakistani Pashtuns; and
- The government in Kabul should not be antagonistic to Pakistan and should not allow its territory to be used against Pakistani state interests.

Participants believed that translated into actionable policy, these umbrella objectives lead Pakistan to pursue the following outcomes in the end game in Afghanistan:

### **(i) A degree of stability**

There is broad recognition among the policy elite of the intrinsic link between stability (or lack thereof) in Afghanistan and Pakistan. A failure to evolve an amicable solution to the Afghan conundrum, and the resultant persistence of high levels of instability, will have numerous and predictable consequences for Pakistan: continuing unrest in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA); a surge in illegal border crossings leading to another Afghan refugee crisis; a surge in drug trafficking and weapons smuggling; an upswing in Pashtun nationalism seeking to support their Afghan brethren in a tussle against non-Pashtuns in Afghanistan; a reversal of the direction of the insurgency, whereby anti-Pakistan militants seek sanctuary in the large swaths of misgoverned spaces in Afghanistan; further strains in the India-Pakistan relationship as both continue to compete for presence in Afghanistan; and courtesy of this, continued dominance of Pakistan’s security-centric approach towards Afghanistan. Pakistan’s interests, project participants felt, are thus best served by a relatively stable government in Kabul that is not hostile towards Pakistan.

### **(ii) An inclusive government in Kabul**

Pakistani foreign policy elite believe that only a truly inclusive government in Kabul can usher in an era of relatively efficient and stable governance in Afghanistan. Most participants defined this as a politically negotiated configuration with adequate Pashtun representation that is recognized by all ethnic and political stakeholders in Afghanistan. While far from a consensus, some opinion makers insisted that given the current situation, a sustainable arrangement would necessarily require the main Taliban factions – particularly Mullah Omar’s “Quetta Shura”<sup>5</sup> Taliban and the Haqqani network – to be part of the new political arrangement. Specifically, a decentralized system of governance is more likely to be sustainable than an overly centralized one. Such an inclusive dispensation, it is believed, will view the relationship with Islamabad favorably and be sensitive to Pakistani concerns.

The desire to see an inclusive government in Afghanistan also signals Pakistani opposition to a return to Taliban rule in the country akin to the 1990s. Most participants agreed that the Pakistani security establishment and civilian leadership is no longer seeking to support a return to Taliban rule. The policy

pursued in the second half of the 1990s which saw the Taliban as instruments of Pakistan's regional agenda received scathing criticism from policy elite across the opinion spectrum. Moreover, there is a realization that an Afghan Taliban<sup>6</sup> government would not be acceptable to the Afghan population or to the international community.

### **(iii) Limiting Indian presence to development activities**

The implications of Indian activities in Afghanistan is a hotly debated issue and while a consensus was far from forthcoming, there was concern about Indian activities which could undermine Pakistan's security and stability. Most participants agreed that India, as the largest economy in the region, has a role to play in Afghanistan's economic progress and prosperity. There is also a fairly candid admission that the Pakistani security establishment exhibits paranoia when it comes to Indian activities in Afghanistan. However, many believe that the present Indian engagement goes beyond strictly development, and thus raises legitimate concerns in Pakistan. From Pakistan's perspective, this needs to be addressed as part of the end game settlement in Afghanistan. As the Pakistani security establishment sees the dynamic, reluctance on the part of the Afghan government or the United States to address Pakistani misgivings increases the likelihood of a growing Indian footprint, and in turn, New Delhi's greater ability to manipulate the end game negotiations and the post-settlement dispensation in Kabul.

# Views on U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan

Perhaps the greatest convergence in Pakistani views is on the impression of U.S. policy towards Afghanistan. The policy to date is largely seen as unclear, inconsistent, and confused. It is also perceived to be counterproductive not only for Pakistan's interests, but also for durable peace in Afghanistan. The strongest criticism is targeted at the political component of U.S. policy, which is largely seen as subservient to the military surge. Hardly anyone accepted Washington's official position that the two aspects are working in tandem. The Obama administration is aware, Pakistani elite believe, that an outright military victory in Afghanistan is not possible, but it is politically compelled to find a face-saver to justify the decade-long conflict to American taxpayers and the international community. This compulsion is playing to the advantage of those who remain opposed to reconciliation talks.

Participants identified several aspects of the U.S.'s Afghanistan policy as problematic from a Pakistani perspective. Each of these directly or indirectly stems from what they saw as lack of clarity of U.S. designs in Afghanistan.

## Civil-military disconnect

A disconnect between the Obama administration and the U.S. military's approach to Afghanistan is blamed for what are seen as contradictory or, as one participant called it, "perpetually evolving" preferences. Broadly, the civilian administration is perceived to favor political reconciliation while the Pentagon, seen as having excessive influence over the Afghanistan-Pakistan security policy,<sup>7</sup> still prioritizes the need to make greater military gains. Some argued that this divisive thinking prevented the Obama administration's December 2010 Afghanistan policy review from being an honest evaluation or re-think of U.S. strategy. This was otherwise a good opportunity to recalibrate the aims towards more modest ends.

Pakistani policy elite view initiation of a serious, inclusive political reconciliation process as the most viable means of achieving a sustainable solution in Afghanistan. During our conversations, many participants

appreciated U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's February 18, 2011 speech at the Asia Society in which she stated that the United States was open to political reconciliation with the Taliban in pursuit of an integrated military-civilian-diplomatic strategy.<sup>8</sup> Most, however, were not convinced that there is enough support in Washington for serious reconciliation efforts to take off just yet. Pakistani opinion makers feel that electoral pressure in the run-up to the 2012 U.S. presidential elections will lead President Obama to gradually begin imposing his vision on the military. However, since he is also in search of a 'narrative of victory', he will not undercut the military surge prematurely.<sup>9</sup> This inevitable delay in outlining a clear policy dominated by inclusive political negotiations among Afghans is seen as counterproductive to Pakistani interests, and to the prospects of peace in Afghanistan.

Finally, there was general skepticism among the participants in terms of U.S. patience and the domestic public support to pursue a long, drawn-out Afghan reconciliation process once it commences. It was often pointed out that the United States may be approaching negotiations with a view to meet the drawdown target of 2014. However, the internal reconciliation will have to continue much beyond this deadline before political stability can be expected in Afghanistan. The U.S.'s post-2014 commitment to the process remained unclear to project participants.

## Failure to clearly identify the target of the military campaign

Pakistani policy elite feel that the United States is failing to define clearly the principal target of the military surge in Afghanistan. The goal posts have changed frequently as has the narrative around what the United States is ultimately after. Is Al Qaida what Washington ultimately wishes to eliminate, participants wondered? If so, just how many Al Qaida members are left in Afghanistan? Is the United States pursuing a moving target which is not easily identifiable and whose total annihilation is likely impossible? Or does the United States still consider the leadership of the main Taliban factions and other Al Qaida-affiliated groups to be primary targets as well? Until there is clarity on these questions, the United States will be unable to determine when it can consider the mission accomplished.<sup>10</sup>

Despite President Obama's pronouncements reflecting a desire to limit the objectives to Al Qaida, Pakistani policy elite are not convinced that U.S. policy adequately distinguishes between Al Qaida and Afghan Taliban factions like the Haqqani network and Mullah Omar's "Quetta Shura".<sup>11</sup> A sizable number of the participants believed that the U.S.'s strategy was still conflating the two groups, and warned against making this mistake. Participants suggested that the Pakistani state considers the Afghan Taliban political actors and part of a major ethnic group; silencing the Taliban-led insurgency through military force was considered to be impossible. In fact, many participants saw excessive use of force as generating greater sympathy for the Taliban.

## Bleak prognosis of the military surge

The question of the efficacy of the military aspect of President Obama's "surge" elicited skeptical responses. The understanding of the on-ground situation in Afghanistan is that the Taliban's capacity has been degraded in the southern part of the country where the U.S. military has concentrated over the past year. However, virtually no one was convinced that this can put an end to the insurgency or that it can force the main Taliban factions to negotiate on America's terms. To substantiate this claim, experts cited the lack of precedence of such a development in Afghanistan and a belief that the United States is committing many of the same mistakes the Soviet Union made during the 1980s (and those who tried to occupy Afghanistan before it) by depending on military force and powerful, but highly tainted and corrupt strong-men and militias as partners in Afghanistan.

A sizable proportion of the policy elite present in the discussions took issue with what is perceived to be a shift towards a more heavy handed U.S. military strategy in Afghanistan under General David Petraeus, commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan at the time of the roundtable discussions.<sup>12</sup> The aim of killing as many insurgent fighters as possible and tactics like aerial attacks and night raids are believed to be counterproductive. The opinion makers argued that the surge has resulted in the widespread destruction of villages, and has therefore spurred fresh Taliban recruitment and brought turmoil even to previously peaceful areas. Others pointed out that the U.S. military is focusing on stabilizing and fortifying urban areas while neglecting the Afghan countryside. This strategy is considered unsustainable given the traditional importance of the Afghan countryside in politics and will likely result in increased insecurity in the wake of U.S. troop withdrawal.

## The debate about America's post-2014 footprint

There was a sense among the participants that the United States would want to retain some long-term security presence in Afghanistan. Opinions varied on the U.S. objectives behind this desire. While some were convinced that the United States views this presence in strategic terms and wants to establish a physical foothold in the South Asian region,<sup>13</sup> others argued that the mandate in Afghanistan is likely to be limited to ensuring that Afghan territory is not used for attacks against the United States in the future. For those who agreed with the latter, the United States would retain its military bases and use these as launching pads for a counterterrorism-dominated strategy after the 2014 transition. The aim would principally be to hunt down Al Qaida leaders and other high-value targets in Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, skeptics considered even this limited agenda to be problematic from a Pakistani perspective. As they saw it, it would amount to U.S. presence in a relatively peaceful northern Afghanistan, leaving Pakistan to deal with the fallout from the country's turbulent eastern and southern provinces.<sup>14</sup>

There are also divergent views among Pakistani foreign policy elite on how public knowledge of America's desire for a long-term presence in Afghanistan may impact the political reconciliation process. At the very least, it is viewed as an additional challenge and is likely to make not only the Afghan Taliban, but also regional countries like Pakistan, Iran, China, and Russia uneasy.

The Afghan Taliban's position on foreign troop presence is somewhat contested. Some participants tended to take the Taliban's stated position of "no foreign troops" at face value. They saw no possibility that the major Taliban factions would accept foreign troop presence as part of the end game settlement. Therefore, if the United States is unwilling to commit to total withdrawal, the reconciliation process could be stillborn. Those who held this view also tended to believe that the opposition to long-term U.S. military presence goes beyond the Taliban and extends to a number of moderate Afghan groups, both Pashtun and non-Pashtun. Others disagreed however, and argued that the Taliban's demand for complete troop withdrawal is a starting position which is aimed more for the consumption of their own rank and file than as a non-negotiable condition in talks with the United States. Ultimately, they may accept a plan for phased withdrawal as long as there is firm commitment that all foreign troops would pull out at a specified time in the not-so-distant future.

## U.S. view of Pakistan's role in the reconciliation phase

Uncertainty and skepticism about U.S. policy leads to a sense of nervousness in Pakistan. The growing mistrust between the United States and Pakistan in the context of the Afghanistan strategy is front and center of Pakistani thinking. Hardly anyone among the project participants believed that the United States would willingly adjust its Afghanistan strategy to incorporate Pakistani concerns. In fact, many argued that Washington views Pakistan as a nuisance that cannot be relied upon in the negotiations phase in Afghanistan.

Pakistani policy elite believe that Washington would continue to push the Pakistan Army to "do more" to stamp out militant sanctuaries in Pakistan while it tries to open up direct channels for talks with the Taliban – thereby minimizing Pakistan's role in the negotiations, or, at the very least, signaling a willingness to explore avenues that lessen dependence on Pakistan's security establishment for reconciliation talks.<sup>15</sup> Not many participants were convinced that this is a viable strategy; most believed that it would undermine the prospects for successful reconciliation.

# Pakistan's Afghanistan Policy: Reacting to the United States

## Lack of clarity in Pakistan's policy

Pakistani opinion makers involved in the project discussions saw their country's strategy towards Afghanistan as largely reactionary; it is seen as having responded to U.S. actions in a manner that ensures continuation of the Pakistan-U.S. partnership while securing Pakistani national security interests, as defined by the security establishment. Reservations about the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan have prevented the Pakistani state from complementing America's actions outright. While the experts accepted that this amounts to divergent policies – “double game” as it is known in Washington – they also highlighted that Pakistan has to look after its own interests first and foremost. Nonetheless, there is recognition that Pakistan's outlook on Afghanistan has been unclear and ambiguous. While Islamabad has been critical of the lack of clarity in U.S. policy, it has itself failed to articulate a coherent plan towards Afghanistan that allows for long-term engagement on multiple levels – political, economic, and security-related.

## A dual approach towards the United States

Project participants suggested that Pakistani policy faces a dilemma vis-à-vis the United States. On the one hand, U.S. military operations in Afghanistan are believed to be causing a backlash in terms of militancy and deepening the state-society rift within Pakistan. Militant groups such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) are using the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, and Pakistan's support in the fight against terrorism, as justification for attacking Pakistani state interests. On the other hand, Pakistani foreign policy elite appreciate that a premature U.S. troop withdrawal would lead to added instability in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has tried to balance these two competing aspects in its policy. It has continued to provide counterterrorism and strategic (principally, the supply routes and military bases) support to the United States to ensure that Washington continues to engage Pakistan as a partner. Moreover, Pakistan's support keeps U.S. costs in Afghanistan from becoming prohibitively high, which could potentially increase political pressure in Washington for an abrupt troop withdrawal, or short of that, force the U.S. military to prematurely retreat to its

bases in Afghanistan and pursue the counterterrorism-heavy approach amidst deteriorating security in the country. As explained earlier, neither is seen to be in Pakistan's interest.

Simultaneously, Pakistan has refused to succumb to U.S. pressure to aggressively target the Afghan Taliban and other Pakistan-based groups operating against U.S. interests from Pakistani territory. Indeed, Pakistani policy elite are fairly candid in acknowledging the presence of Haqqani network fighters in North Waziristan and of the "Quetta Shura" Taliban, although the influence and reach of the latter is believed to be exaggerated by western accounts. That said, Pakistani policy elite agree that Mullah Omar's cadres do not, for the most part, conduct violent operations inside Pakistan and are therefore not targeted by the Pakistan military.

## Box 2

### Why is Pakistan holding out on the sanctuaries?

Several reasons were discussed for Pakistan's refusal to target militant sanctuaries being used to attack the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) presence and the Afghan troops. The debate can be summed up as one between lack of 'capacity' and lack of 'will'. While there was agreement that both feature in the Pakistan military's decision, views differed on which of these is the primary factor.

- Those who see the reluctance to target sanctuaries as primarily a "will" issue argue that the decision stems largely from Pakistan's concern about being sidelined in the reconciliation phase in Afghanistan, which could result in a manipulated process that works to the advantage of elements hostile towards Islamabad. For instance, the main Taliban factions may be left out, or certain individuals within them may be bought out to accept an outcome unfavorable to the Pashtuns.

Pakistani intelligence links with the Afghan Taliban and the presence of these groups on Pakistani soil are seen as leverage points which more or less guarantee Islamabad's involvement in the end game. Presence of these groups in the post-transition power-sharing arrangement in Kabul also provides Pakistan some sense of security in that they will not allow Kabul to adopt an overtly anti-Pakistan policy.

- A number of strong voices disagreed with this outlook. They argued that the "will" narrative reflects the traditional thinking of the Pakistani security establishment, which is no longer valid. They emphasized the need to acknowledge an evolution, however slow, in the security establishment's thinking. Those who support this narrative cite the less-than-harmonious relationship, induced as it was by Pakistan's post-9/11 offer of support to the

U.S. mission in Afghanistan, between the main Taliban factions, including their leadership, and the Pakistani intelligence outfit, the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI). No longer does the ISI hold the kind of sway over the Taliban groups as it once did. Some take it one step further by contending that there is a significant amount of distrust between the Afghan Taliban and the ISI which will manifest itself once the Taliban's compulsion to use Pakistani territory disappears. Therefore, while the Taliban may still be the friendliest option for Pakistan, there is little to say that they would be willing to do Pakistan's bidding. We were also reminded that even in the 1990s, the Pakistani state's relations with the Mullah Omar-led Afghanistan were seldom without problems.

This narrative views the reluctance of the Pakistani military to target the sanctuaries as principally a capacity issue. The Pakistan Army does not have the capacity to open up new battlefronts given that it remains overstretched with its commitments against anti-Pakistan militant outfits. An incomplete or ineffective military campaign against the sanctuaries could lead Afghan insurgent groups, especially the Haqqani network, to back groups like the TTP against the Pakistani state. Those wedded to this argument doubt the Pakistan military's ability to manage such an onslaught. They believe a massive backlash in Pakistan's heartland to be inevitable. The possibility of fresh Pashtun resentment in FATA and adjacent areas in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province is also not lost on these strategic thinkers.

Those favoring the "capacity" narrative also seek to correct the misperception that the Pakistani security establishment is unaware of the growing linkages between the Afghan Taliban and Pakistani militant groups. However, they argue that while the current links remain limited, it is precisely the fear of these growing into full-blown operational cooperation and coordination that prevents the Pakistani state from targeting Afghan insurgent groups on its soil. Moreover, the security establishment is able to take advantage of the present linkages between these groups from time to time by persuading the Afghan Taliban to pressure the TTP and other North Waziristan-based militants to curtail their activities.

## Support for political reconciliation in Afghanistan: Here and now

Pakistani foreign policy elite deem the strategy to support the U.S. presence in Afghanistan on the one hand, and resist pressure to target militant sanctuaries on the other, as costly in terms of the backlash Pakistan is facing from within. Project participants believed that from Islamabad's perspective, the longer U.S. military operations continue without a clear path for political negotiations, the tougher it will get for Pakistan to manage its internal security balancing act. Pakistan therefore favors an immediate, yet patient effort at inclusive reconciliation in Afghanistan. Pakistani policy elite admitted that little progress will be made until a

fundamental disconnect between Pakistani and American perceptions is addressed: most Pakistani decision makers believe that large-scale military operations against militant sanctuaries in FATA are not in their national security interest. As long as the military views the situation as a stark choice between ensuring security within Pakistan and taking actions to aid the U.S. mission in Afghanistan, a divergence of policy, and indeed a high level of mistrust will remain. Project participants were also of the view that Pakistan will not cease a certain level of interference in Afghanistan until a credible reconciliation process takes off. There was a virtual consensus though that this challenge can only be addressed within the framework of well-articulated, long-term Afghan policies by Washington and Islamabad.

Indeed, the need for U.S. and Pakistani positions to converge on the end game in Afghanistan is well understood. There was a belief among the participants that what Pakistan is seeking in Afghanistan is not necessarily opposed to U.S. interests; there is considerable overlap which ought to be explored rather than allowing bilateral mistrust to overshadow the opportunity. Pakistan hopes that the United States would pursue reconciliation talks more proactively and sincerely in the coming months, but do so through an Afghan-led process that also takes regional actors into confidence. An inclusive government in Kabul, participants agreed, would inevitably emerge from an Afghan-led reconciliation effort which was genuinely representative and not manipulated by any external actor.

Pakistani foreign policy elite however tend to draw a distinction between manipulation of an intra-Afghan process and facilitation by external parties. They see their country as an important and potentially effective facilitator which could nudge the main Taliban insurgent groups to join and approach the negotiations process sincerely. That said, there was a fair bit of skepticism regarding the ability of outside parties – Pakistan and the United States included – to resist the temptation of meddling in the negotiations process rather than simply facilitating the presence of all major Afghan factions on the table. The concern about the others' meddling, most participants feared, would in turn incentivize each external actor to interfere itself, thereby undermining the potential for an intra-Afghan settlement.

To be sure, the discussions about the 'inclusiveness' of the reconciliation process and the post-2014 transition government in Kabul took the presence of the main Taliban factions in the framework for granted. Rather interestingly, while there was frank admission that the Pakistani security establishment sees the Taliban's involvement in reconciliation in Pakistan's interest, and thus will insist on it, project participants sought to clarify that this should not be seen as Pakistan's ploy to artificially impose its preferred outcome. Instead, they argued that Islamabad believes that a genuinely intra-Afghan dialogue will naturally produce an outcome which would provide the Taliban some role in the power-sharing arrangement. Based on their perceptions about the current realities on the ground in Afghanistan, members of the Pakistani elite tied to this narrative saw any attempts to alienate Pashtuns in general, and the Taliban in particular as shortsighted and impractical.

Project participants believed that the Afghan Taliban's presence in the reconciliation phase and their acceptance of the dialogue process would satisfy a number of Pakistani interests. For one, the on-ground realities and the Taliban's strength as an insurgent group imply that any attempt to isolate them would prolong the insurgency, and instability in Afghanistan. In this regard, Pakistan's support for their role in Afghanistan's future political set-up is believed to make it a force for stability.

Moreover, even if the main Taliban factions do not completely trust the Pakistani security establishment, they are not seen as groups who would actively undermine the Pakistani state's interests either. Their ethnic ties to Pakistan and long-standing relationships with Pashtun-centric right-wing Pakistani political parties will militate against this outcome. They may however, seek to chart a course that is less dependent on Pakistan than during the 1990s, which according to some participants, ought to be considered a blessing in disguise for Pakistan.<sup>16</sup> Next, the Taliban's acceptance of a negotiated settlement, or at the very minimum, sufficient progress in talks for them to be comfortable with ceasing violence, would lead to voluntary relocation from sanctuaries in Pakistan. Finally, a truly inclusive political dispensation, most among the project participants believed, will eliminate the possibility of an overtly pro-India dispensation or one that is outright insensitive to Pakistani concerns.

A reconciliation process that leaves out the Taliban, on the other hand, may confirm the Pakistani security establishment's worst fears. It would be seen as an effort to sideline Pakistan's importance and some in the establishment may even view it as an effort to install an anti-Pakistan – read pro-India – political dispensation in Afghanistan. The Taliban leadership may see no reason to relocate to Afghanistan and will continue to keep the pot boiling; Pakistan will remain under pressure to “do more” and will be portrayed negatively in the international media if it resists. Pakistani Pashtuns would also be resentful of the outcome and the TTP may use this sentiment to increase recruitment and justify continued attacks against the Pakistani state.

It is important to note that even as project participants acknowledged that at present, the Taliban may be the friendliest option for Pakistan, a number of them were quick to underscore that this is a result of the state's myopic approach towards Afghanistan over the years. It is Islamabad's failure to broaden its contacts with other moderate Pashtun, and even more so the non-Pashtun groups, that has forced Pakistan to tolerate the Taliban. The policy has come at significant cost in terms of international condemnation and mistrust with much of the western world. It has also led to greater exposure of the Pakistani society to the Taliban's radical ideological outlook than would have been possible otherwise. There is a strong feeling of being 'stuck' with the Taliban; the state is 'forced' to fall back on the Taliban groups as its principal leverage.

## The flip side: Avoiding a return to the 1990s

While some opinion makers remained unconvinced, for most, the Taliban's perceived utility for Pakistan does not translate into a desire for a return to Taliban rule in Afghanistan. The Pakistani policy of the 1990s is believed to have lost support even in the strategic establishment, not least because of the realization that Afghan citizens and the international community would not accept any such effort. Moreover, a bid to regain lost glory by Mullah Omar's Taliban would end up creating conditions in Afghanistan which run counter to Pakistani objectives, most notably stability.

Pakistani policy elite recognize that no elements within the current political set-up in Afghanistan will willingly cede power to the Afghan Taliban. Large pockets of Afghan society, especially in the north, have seen the benefits of international presence over the past decade and will not accept wholesale regression to the 1990s. Pakistani foreign policy elite are cognizant that the Taliban's obscurantist, extremist views have made them extremely unpopular in Afghanistan. They are aware that what seems to be support for the Taliban in Afghanistan at present stems from the frustration and resentment towards the failure of effective governance by the Karzai regime. While this frustration may generate support for the insurgency as the only means to push back against the status quo, participants felt that it would be a mistake for the Pakistani state to see it as a desire among the Afghans to return to Taliban rule.

Experts involved in the discussions argued that any attempt by the Afghan Taliban to impose their rule will be met with fierce resistance from non-Pashtun and moderate Pashtun groups. The non-Pashtuns will now be able to draw on their improved organization, bolstered capacity, and access to sophisticated weaponry through the ANSF<sup>17</sup> to prevent such a development. Afghan Taliban, on their part, do not have the military capacity to take on this opposition on their own. In fact, it was often pointed out that the Taliban are no longer a monolithic entity and the various factions may well have clashing preferences in terms of the end game and beyond. In essence, a serious attempt to return the Taliban to rule Kabul on their own could spark widespread insecurity, or even outright civil war, in Afghanistan.

Participants referred to Pakistan's attempts in recent years to reach out to more moderate Pashtun factions in Afghanistan and to forge better links with the Karzai government as evidence of the desire to broaden the scope of Pakistani contacts across the Durand Line. Islamabad's preliminary efforts to quietly reach out to former members of the Northern Alliance, some of them highly critical of Pakistan, were also seen favorably by most participants.

The Pakistani state's sympathetic view towards the Afghan Taliban and yet its averseness to a return to the 1990s raises an interesting question about just how much support the state apparatus is extending to the main Taliban factions. There

was a lively and inconclusive debate on this issue among the policy elite. Some argued that the military's policy is to 'tolerate' Taliban presence and that the ISI does not actively train or materially support the Afghan Taliban factions present on Pakistani soil. Others however held the view that while this may generally be true, from time to time the ISI extends material support or directs certain actions. Yet others – this was the least common view – went a step further to state that they did not rule out the possibility that the ISI has continued to equip and actively fund some of the Afghan insurgent factions over the past decade.

### Box 3

## The Afghan conundrum from the perspective of Pakistan's political parties\*

Representatives of the major political parties in Pakistan echoed much of the concerns and opportunities highlighted by the country's foreign policy elite. While there are a number of consensus points on which parties from across the political spectrum broadly agree, there is also a discernible difference in outlook between right and left wing parties on some issues.

Views on Pakistan's objectives in Afghanistan underscore the criticality of ensuring positive ties with Afghanistan. The fact that the stability of both countries is interdependent is recognized, as is the fact that the present situation in Afghanistan bodes ill for Pakistan. There is a general sense that Pakistan should approach the relationship with Afghanistan more holistically. A more multi-layered engagement, built around common and stable economic goals and capacity building of Afghanistan's governance and security sectors should be pursued. The military's predominance over the Afghan policy elicits significant criticism and most parties, especially those left-of-center, desire a re-balancing of geo-strategic interests towards goals that privilege gains from economic interdependence.

In terms of the evolving end game in Afghanistan, Washington is seen as part of the problem to a large extent. America's over-reliance on military force in Afghanistan is considered to be a major flaw, one that is undermining the prospects of successful reconciliation. A more aggressive political approach is believed to be essential for durable peace in the country. There is a sense that the military surge has weakened the Taliban but that rather than pushing further in pursuit of the elusive goal of 'victory', the present U.S. advantage should be used to initiate serious dialogue with all Afghan factions.

The impact of Washington's troop presence in Afghanistan is a matter of some debate. Most see military presence leading up to a political transition as essential to avoid a further deterioration of Afghanistan's security. However, a long-term international security presence is not seen nearly as

favorably. The right-of-center parties remain wary of America's long-term interests and intentions for the region and remain opposed to permanent military bases or a sizable force post-2014.

Political parties profess strong support for a regional framework to ensure sustainable peace in Afghanistan. Views on how a regional framework would be developed and which countries would play the central role are not always fully thought out. While most parties would like to see an approach led by the regional states with involvement from the United States, others argue that the United States would inevitably want to dictate the process. In general however, the idea – the practicality is debatable – of Pakistan playing a pivotal role in bringing together countries like Iran, Turkey, and China to consolidate their efforts to push for reconciliation attracts Pakistani political leaders. Most still acknowledge though that India will have to be included as a legitimate stakeholder, not least because U.S. and Indian interests align closely in Afghanistan; Washington would want to see India's interests protected to some extent. Pakistan's moves to reach out directly to Kabul and to other regional actors are seen positively; this could tilt the equation back in Pakistan's favor to some extent.

On India's role in Afghanistan, there is sharp divergence of opinion. The left-of-center parties are of the view that Pakistan's Afghanistan calculus should not be dictated by a phobia of malign Indian designs. While there is little agreement even among these parties on how to incorporate Indian presence in Pakistan's calculus, they do not see India's role as a major impediment in ensuring peace in Afghanistan on terms that safeguard Pakistan's interests. The traditionally right-of-center parties however, do view an Indian presence in Afghanistan as worrisome. India is seen as using Afghanistan to further its strategic goals in South Asia, which are perceived to be contrary to Pakistan's. According to this narrative, Indian clout in Kabul is inversely proportional to Pakistan's ability to ensure a friendly neighbor. Therefore, limiting India's presence to purely development objectives is seen as a priority.

\* Based on interviews with members of seven major political parties: Khurshid Ahmad (Jama'at-e-Islami); Ahsan Iqbal (Pakistan Muslim League-N); Malik Amad Khan (Pakistan Peoples Party); Afrasiab Khattak (Awami National Party); Maulana Atta-ur-Rehman (Jamiat-e-Ulema Islam-F), Waseem Sajjad (Pakistan Muslim League -Q); Farooq Sattar (Muttahida Qaumi Movement).

## Regional diplomacy

Project participants believed that skepticism about U.S. policy has also led the Pakistani official enclave to 'hedge' at a different level. Much like the rest of the region, Pakistan is also exploring "what if" scenarios: what if the United States continues to remain incoherent in its outlook?

A parallel track aimed at energizing regional diplomacy even as the United States struggles to better define its future approach has been initiated. The aim: to forge an understanding on how reconciliation could best be entertained by regional countries. The strategy is seen not as much a means to sideline the United States – hardly anyone saw this as wise or even possible – but to signal that regional actors need to (and can) generate a momentum of their own to a certain extent. Pakistan's efforts to reach out to Afghan President Hamid Karzai and recent conciliatory overtures between the two sides were seen as positive developments that need to be continued. In the same vein, high-level Pakistani visits to Central Asian republics<sup>18</sup> and visits to China and Russia<sup>19</sup> (upcoming at the time of the roundtables) were welcomed as means to better understand how regional parties are approaching the issue and what overlaps and differences exist in their respective positions. A greater Chinese role had special resonance among most observers, although there was recognition of the tensions overtures towards China create vis-à-vis the United States. An overly aggressive approach towards Beijing was opposed for the fear of worrying Washington and prompting it to actively seek to limit Islamabad's access to Kabul in response.

# A Regional Framework: Views on Neutrality and Non-interference in Afghanistan as a Viable Option

A regional framework which seeks neutrality and non-interference from countries in the neighborhood was often underscored during our conversations as a key ingredient of any plan aimed at achieving future Afghan stability. There was support for the idea in principle; normatively, the need both to pledge non-interference in Afghanistan's affairs and a region-wide agreement on the same was recognized. Some members of the roundtable discussion groups went further to state that an absence of a regional understanding would inevitably prompt neighbors, including Pakistan, to carve out their own spheres of influence in Afghanistan. This could quickly revert to a proxy war situation whereby Pakistan, Iran, India and other regional players compete with each other, to Afghanistan's detriment.

That said, there was also a sense that any understanding of "neutrality" in the Afghan context cannot ignore the varying interests and linkages different regional actors have with the country. Pakistan stands to gain or lose most from developments in Afghanistan by virtue of its geographical location and societal linkages. Pakistan's concerns can therefore not be weighted equally to those of other, one-step-removed parties. By the same token, participants believed that Pakistan's proximity and ethnic ties will naturally allow it greater interaction and influence over Afghanistan, but this ought not to be conflated with active efforts at interference, which Pakistan has admittedly been guilty of in the past.

If done right, Pakistani policy elite believe that the approach can produce substantial peace and development dividends for the region. In terms of foreign policies, a successful political reconciliation process in Afghanistan couched within a regional framework could potentially offer Pakistan significant breakthroughs. Pakistan and India could cooperate economically and politically in Afghanistan, thereby helping to normalize one aspect of their relationship. Conversely, a breakdown of a regional bid could quickly lead to a proxy situation between the two sides. There will be potential gains in the Pakistan-Iran relationship as well. Project participants believed that Iran and Pakistan are presently competing for political influence in Afghanistan. Iranian support for Hazaras and Tajiks is limiting Pakistan's ability to reach out to non-Pashtun groups. Moreover, some participants feared that Iran's involvement in Afghanistan could

stoke sectarian tensions within Pakistan, as Islamabad, unlike Tehran, is not engaging Shi'a groups in Afghanistan successfully. A regionally-backed resolution to the Afghan conflict, the policy elite felt, could eliminate this competition to a great extent.

In terms of development benefits, Afghanistan's emerging markets and energy resources and the transit corridor through Afghanistan were repeatedly highlighted as high potential avenues, but ones that can only materialize if a successful end game settlement brings stability to Afghanistan. Countries may still compete but in such a transformed scenario the competition would be commercial rather than security-dominated. For instance, the need for Pakistan to take advantage of its location to become a transit hub for energy inflows from Central Asia was noted. Also, China's growing economic interests in Afghanistan are seen positively in Pakistan. Project participants tended to see the warmth of the Sino-Pakistan relationship as an advantage in seeking joint investments and placement for Pakistani labor.

The normative appeal and understanding of potential gains aside, when asked whether the regional approach is likely to work out in reality, Pakistani policy elite came across as broadly skeptical. For one, there were few, if any, who believed that countries like the United States would be truly neutral in creating a regional framework. The U.S.'s long-term interests and tensions with countries like Iran would force it to seek considerable influence over Afghanistan's behavior. Moreover, a sense of discrimination prevails in Pakistan when it comes to the India-Pakistan equation vis-à-vis the United States. In the view of most of our project participants, Washington is more likely to favor India in the Afghan context, not least because the interests of the two countries align more neatly.

#### Box 4

### The power to spoil: Pakistan's concerns about Indian presence in Afghanistan

Indian presence in Afghanistan was presented as Pakistan's single biggest concern when it comes to accepting a regional framework of non-interference. Project participants explained the Pakistani state's fears that expanding Indian influence over a primarily non-Pashtun government in Kabul could lead the latter to be increasingly hostile towards Islamabad.

Pakistani foreign policy elite are cognizant that their state must reconcile with the prospect of a long-term Indian development presence in Afghanistan. However, in return, Pakistan seeks assurances from New Delhi, Kabul, Washington, and the international community that India's interests in Afghanistan are of an economic, rather than strategic or political nature. The potential repercussions of leaving Pakistan's concerns

vis-à-vis India unaddressed is not lost on the policy elite: they believe that Pakistan's strategic establishment is fully aware that their country's geographical location gives them an unmatched advantage in the eventuality that they need to compete with Indian strategic presence in a subversive manner.

Current Indian activity patterns worry Pakistani policy elite. The Indian desire to train parts of the ANSF, the presence of the Border Roads Organization, which is partly staffed by Indian Army officers, as a road construction contractor in Afghanistan, and the location of a number of major Indian development projects in relatively close proximity to the Pakistani border raises Pakistani sensitivities. The international community's reluctance to nudge India to be more forthcoming on the issue was also raised frequently during the discussions; it is seen as being consistent with the overall discriminatory treatment towards Pakistan. Indeed, the India question continues to be seen in the context of Indian encirclement by Pakistani opinion makers. Washington's decision to isolate the India-Pakistan equation from U.S.-"Af-Pak" ties is seen as evidence of America's decisive tilt towards India. Some from among the policy elite take seriously the notion that India's Afghanistan presence is part of a regional strategy to counter China, and in that sense, it complements long-term U.S. interests in the region. For this cohort, Indian presence in Afghanistan will remain a major sticking point in the Pakistan-U.S. bilateral relationship even after 2014.

Second, and more discernible, participants were unsure on how a regional agreement would be enforced. Can any government or international body be tasked and trusted to guarantee non-interference? What mechanism would determine whether or if regional actors transgress, or who does so first? The Afghan state itself is seen as too weak and divided to be able to deter undesired interference. The long history of outside interference in Afghan affairs also does not generate confidence in the viability of such a regional understanding. Some participants worried that just the entrenched expectation of interference by others – as opposed to actual violation of the understanding by any party – will lead countries not to honor the arrangement in the first place. Each will seek a 'first-mover's advantage' in establishing its influence in Afghanistan. This is especially true given that regional conflicts remain active and that the foreign policies of key actors like Pakistan, India, and Iran remain competitive to varying degrees.

# Other Impediments to Successful End Game Negotiations

U.S. policy towards Afghanistan and Pakistani skepticism about the viability of a broad regional framework have already been highlighted as major impediments to successful reconciliation in Afghanistan. Project participants also pointed to other hurdles in ensuring successful negotiations and the transition to a durable settlement in Afghanistan. These cast further doubt in the Pakistani mind over prospects of the success of the U.S. mission in the country, and in turn, make the Pakistani state even less keen to conform to Washington's desires.

## Political situation in Afghanistan

President Karzai, while recognized as a legitimate ruler, is increasingly seen as corrupt and ineffective. Some among the project participants even saw him as a liability for America's Afghanistan strategy, arguing that his loss of credibility is generating additional support for the insurgency and forcing Afghan groups opposed to his government to delay meaningful talks. Some participants also saw the present political government in Kabul as being compromised due to its close contacts with lobbies of status quo beneficiaries – those who have gained most from foreign assistance, reconstruction contracts, and lawlessness. These are the people who cashed in on the perverse incentives set up by the flow of international assistance and flawed aid utilization policies of international actors; they are the very vested interests that the international community sought to hold accountable but ended up empowering beyond control.

According to the Pakistani policy elite, a major challenge in this political environment lies in identifying representatives who could mediate and speak on behalf of different Afghan stakeholders. The Karzai regime will want to be seen as representing all Afghan factions in talks with the Taliban. This however, is unlikely to be acceptable to a number of political groupings. Even the High Peace Council was described by many participants as ineffective and lacking credibility and inclusiveness. While its members include former Taliban or those sympathetic to them, these individuals are no longer believed to be acceptable the Afghan Taliban leadership as interlocutors.

Looking ahead, participants suggested that the U.S. role will be important in nudging the Karzai regime to enhance its legitimacy by becoming more transparent, accountable, and effective in governance. By the same token, the United States will have to ensure that status quo beneficiaries are not allowed to hijack the reconciliation process. Under the present circumstances, Pakistani policy elite contend that the Karzai government cannot be expected to establish truly inclusive parameters for reconciliation in Afghanistan.

## Taliban's willingness to negotiate

Setting the parameters for reconciliation talks and ensuring sincere participation from all Afghan groups is not a problem limited to the mainstream outfits. The Afghan Taliban's negotiating behavior and their desired role in the post-transition Afghanistan remains an even bigger question mark.

Pakistani policy elite dismiss the idea that the Pakistani security establishment can force the Taliban's hand into accepting specific U.S. demands. At best, it can get the major Taliban factions to the negotiating table. Even there, Pakistani opinion makers claim lack of clarity about the Afghan Taliban's willingness to participate in a political reconciliation process, or even to communicate directly with the United States beyond a point. This confusion is attributed to the group's evolving composition and ideological and political outlook. However, there was considerable agreement among participants that the Taliban are no longer a monolithic entity and that one should expect different, even divergent, approaches to the reconciliation process from within Taliban ranks. Different Taliban factions could lay down their own sets of conditions in the reconciliation process.

There are a number of specific aspects which lack clarity: what is the precise nature of the links of the various Afghan Taliban factions with Al Qaida? What will it take for them to divorce all links? What are Afghan Taliban's current ideological ambitions: is the group looking to impose its hard-line views on the Afghan public; or has it revised its opinion on various socio-political matters such as girls' schooling? Just how sincere will Taliban factions be during talks is not entirely clear either: will they use the talks to secure the exit of foreign troops and then seek to re-launch a violent campaign to neutralize opposing Afghans; or will they settle for a power-sharing arrangement? Pakistani policy elite opinion is divided, although there was broad agreement that definitive answers will not be forthcoming until serious talks actually commence with the Taliban.

Regardless, participants warned against envisioning reconciliation talks with the Taliban as smooth and swift. They see reconciliation as necessarily being a long, drawn-out process with many twists and turns, and with no guarantee of success. However, it is a commonly held view that negotiations will only succeed if Afghan stakeholders, the United States, and the Taliban remain open to engagement, do not impose rigid preconditions unacceptable to the adversary, and refrain from manipulating the process to mould outcomes. Notwithstanding, in line with the desire to see a reconciliation process commence urgently,

Pakistani policy elite feel that the longer inclusive talks are delayed, the more challenging it will become to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table (implicit here is the pervasive belief that the military surge will not be able to tilt the balance decisively towards the United States).

## Afghanistan's fragile economy

Afghanistan's post-end game stability is intrinsically linked to the country's economy and its ability to generate revenues. Pakistani elite see the bulk of the current economic infrastructure as a consequence of an inflated war economy and international support. In 2009-10, more than 70 percent of the Afghan budget came from foreign sources. And while Afghanistan had an \$11.4 billion economy in 2010, a \$4.4 billion segment was attributed to services dominated by trade, transport, and government support – agriculture amounted to \$3.3 billion, and mining only to \$52 million, or one percent of the overall size of the economy.<sup>20</sup>

As such, while the improvements in the Afghan economy and infrastructure as a result of the U.S.-led reconstruction efforts post-9/11 are recognized by Pakistani foreign policy elite, the real gains are not seen to be commensurate with the claims the international community has made during its decade-long presence in Afghanistan. The most skeptical among our participants pointed to deep-rooted structural anomalies in the Afghan economy, some of which have, according to them, been exacerbated in the past decade even as the macro-economy has continued to improve. Moreover, the Afghan government's revenue collection capacity is seen as modest, corruption levels high, job creation remaining dependent on external financing, and public infrastructure projects much too slow to take off. President Hamid Karzai's lack of credibility is seen as an additional impediment in ensuring good governance.

The international community would have to continue substantial monetary support for years after the 2014 transition to avoid an economic collapse in Afghanistan. While most participants expected such support to continue, some remained skeptical given the economic conditions in many of the donor countries and the increasing number of western voices calling for a cutback on the commitment in Afghanistan. Regardless, the perfect storm from Pakistan's vantage is a collapse of the Afghan economy once the international troops have pulled out. Not only would Pakistan's own economic investments in the country be jeopardized, but the country would be faced with a fresh influx of Afghans escaping renewed violence and seeking livelihood opportunities.

Such a possibility brings back the bitter memory of the 1980s for Pakistanis when their country had to housed over three million Afghan refugees, with attendant affects on Pakistan's economy, society, and law and order. This time round, Pakistan's own internal turbulence and weak economy leaves it ill-prepared to absorb a new refugee spillover and the possibility of increased drug trafficking and weapons inflow. Some participants pointed to already increasing tensions

between Pakistanis and Afghan nationals present on Pakistani soil. Afghans have begun to face discrimination in recent years, partly as a reaction to the anti-Pakistan sentiment in Afghanistan. Moreover, there are repeated allegations of involvement of Afghans in criminal and smuggling gangs, which further stereotypes their presence in Pakistan.

## The future of the Afghan National Security Forces

Pakistani foreign policy elite remain wary of the future role of the ANSF. Few participants expected the ANSF to be ready to become the principal custodians of Afghanistan's security by the 2014 transition. The improvement in their performance was acknowledged but it is considered insufficient to prevent Afghanistan from regressing into an anarchic state, should political reconciliation fail, or unravel. Former Pakistani military officials included in our discussions were particularly skeptical. They pointed to the absence of senior officers with any noteworthy track records in the ANSF, unstable ranks of the forces, and the disadvantages of operating without an air force for the Afghan National Army (ANA) as structural problems that are unlikely to be addressed satisfactorily in the medium term. Moreover, Pakistani policy elite perceive ANSF's bloated size to be both, unsustainable given Afghanistan's meager resources and a threat to Pakistani interests. Participants feared that absent organized demobilization, any efforts to prune the forces may lead to resentment among the ranks.

The ethnic composition of the ANSF was also brought up frequently. The claim that the forces are ethnically balanced was rejected for the most part and the presence of non-Pashtun officers in key positions was highlighted to suggest that the makeup is more likely to fuel ethnic hostility than to maintain peace in the country. The Pashtuns in Pakistan, and some argued even Afghanistan, have begun to see the ANA as an anti-Pashtun force. While there are varying opinions on the future trajectory of the ANSF, a sizable proportion of the participants believed that the forces may split up along ethnic lines and their rank and file could feature on opposite sides of a fresh civil war, this time with an abundant supply of highly sophisticated weapons. The spillover into Pakistan, and indeed, involvement of elements from Pakistan's Pashtun belt in the Afghan turmoil would then destabilize Pakistan further.

# Moving Ahead: Key Countries and their Role in Promoting Peace in Afghanistan

While participants were not asked for specific recommendations on the way forward per se, they did spend some time examining steps (from a Pakistani perspective) that the principal regional actors would have to take to stabilize Afghanistan. The main observations made by participants (by country), not all encompassing by any means, included:

## Afghanistan

(i) While President Karzai is still seen as the best available choice to work with in Afghanistan, his regime's dwindling credibility in the eyes of Afghan citizens is considered to be a major problem and one that he and his team must work to rectify. Only then will they be able to win the trust of Afghan factions that have to be brought on board for a successful political reconciliation process.

(ii) The Afghan government needs to identify representatives who can mediate on behalf of and across all ethnic and political groups in Afghanistan. President Karzai will have to appoint credible representatives beyond the High Peace Council to work with the Afghan Taliban as well as members of the Afghan civil society. Various Afghan political groups also need to articulate their preferred framework for an Afghan-led reconciliation process.

(iii) The Afghan Constitution should be used as a basis to develop a framework for political reconciliation. However, an unconditional acceptance of the current text should not be held out as a precondition for a negotiated settlement with the Taliban. Clauses within the constitution should remain negotiable through an internal process that seeks the consent of all Afghan stakeholders.

(iv) Afghanistan must focus on developing the capacity and ethnic diversity of the ANSF. The officer cadre of the ANA that wields much of the power must be more representative, with larger Pashtun presence. Moreover, the numerical strength of the ANA should be rationalized at levels that will be sustainable after the 2014 transition.

(v) The Afghan government and business elite have to seek ways to make the

Afghan economy sustainable without the present levels of foreign monetary inflows. Notwithstanding, the international community, on its part, should continue supporting the economy well beyond 2014.

### United States

(i) From Pakistan's perspective, participants felt that the United States has to articulate a coherent Afghan strategy, particularly with regard to the impending political reconciliation process. Greater clarity on the political aspect of the strategy could help avoid failure in Afghanistan, convince the Taliban of the validity of a power-sharing agreement, and urge Pakistan and other regional actors to stop hedging and play a more constructive role.

(ii) Washington's policy is viewed as opaque; more transparency is deemed beneficial in generating trust among regional partners. Pakistan would like Washington to be forthcoming on the role it envisions for Islamabad and guarantee that attempts will not be made to sideline it.

(iii) There is a need to remain open to negotiating with all relevant actors. Rejecting talks with specific power-wielding individuals or factions among the Afghan Taliban would prove counterproductive. For example, many participants wondered how the United States plans to negotiate with the "Quetta Shura" Taliban or the Haqqani network if it was intent on isolating, or even targeting, Mullah Omar and the Haqqani network leadership. Pakistani foreign policy elite also warn against the imposition of multiple preconditions for political reconciliation, arguing that the United States would have to remain flexible in order for negotiations to succeed. Finally, Pakistani opinion makers are unconvinced that the United States has the patience to work through a challenging and uncertain reconciliation process; they therefore seek reassurances that Washington will not abort the plan midway if things do not seem to be progressing towards a smooth linear transition.

(iv) The United States would have to concretely address the issue of its long-term security presence in Afghanistan, and explain what future role it envisions for its military bases. In addition to articulating what a bilateral strategic partnership with Afghanistan would entail,<sup>21</sup> the United States should take all regional stakeholders into confidence regarding its long-term physical presence.

(v) The state of the U.S.-Pakistan bilateral relationship was seen as intrinsically linked to the two countries' ability to cooperate on Afghanistan. Pakistanis wish to see a more consistent and dependable partnership which ceases to view Pakistan solely from a terrorism prism. Continued mistrust, participants feared, may well force both sides to overlook a convergence of interests on certain aspects of reconciliation in Afghanistan.

## Pakistan

(i) Pakistan's own policy requires coherence and clarity. While U.S. strategy in Afghanistan will affect how the Pakistani strategic establishment behaves, a purely reactive policy has severe demerits in terms of negative backlash in Pakistan and continued uncertainty within the country.

(ii) Pakistan and the United States need frank and candid discussions on the reconciliation phase in Afghanistan; each other's expectations need to be fully comprehended and reservations expressed to avoid a constant blame game and fear on Pakistan's part that it may be sidelined in the reconciliation negotiations.

(iii) Internally, there needs to be clarity on what role the security establishment is able and willing to play in terms of bringing the Afghan Taliban factions to the negotiating table. It may be dangerous for Pakistan to commit too much and then fail to deliver. Conversely, continuing to insist on a role without articulating what specific support the Pakistani security establishment can offer in reconciliation will only force outside actors to seek a course that is less dependent on Pakistan.

(iv) In terms of the regional framework, Pakistani opinion makers involved in the discussions were partial towards a post-2014 security presence led by Muslim countries. A greater role for the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and countries like Turkey was mentioned, as was the need to acknowledge the Saudi and Iranian influence in Afghanistan. In general, there was support for Pakistan reaching out more actively to regional countries like Iran and the Central Asian Republics along with China to generate regional activism.

(v) A prerequisite for a healthy regional process, however, is greater trust and collaboration between Kabul and Islamabad. Increased and sustained diplomatic contact, participants believed, would help Kabul and Islamabad reach a consensus on the shape and outcomes of the reconciliation dialogue. The need to engage Kabul continuously was stressed; Pakistan's civilian leadership is believed to be best placed to do so even as the security establishment takes the lead on implementing Pakistan's Afghanistan strategy.

(vi) Participants had an interesting take on the Durand Line.<sup>22</sup> While some vehemently disagreed, most argued that this border would remain porous and un-policed even if it were formalized owing to the close ties between Pashtun communities on both sides. And while formalization is seen as being in Pakistan's interest, there was little support for making this a major hurdle in the reconciliation talks. The status quo is considered to be a *fait accompli* for the time being. Without disagreeing with this contention, those who stressed the economic dimension of the relationship nonetheless suggested the need for relatively better policing of trade activity to curtail the massive smuggling and drug trafficking that takes place across the border, with its attendant damaging effects on the Pakistani economy and society.

(vii) As a long-term vision, Pakistan needs to aggressively pursue policies of

inclusion in Afghanistan and terminate its continuing preoccupation with maintaining exclusively Pashtun ties. Even in the reconciliation phase, Pakistani policy may gain by increasing efforts, thus far marginal, to engage non-Pashtun factions in Afghanistan to assuage their concerns about Pakistani designs. There is a desire to see Pakistani policy move over time from one of interference to neutral support for intra-Afghan dialogue and peaceful co-existence.

(viii) The civilian government in Pakistan does not escape criticism from the policy elite for what is seen as a virtual abrogation of its responsibility to deal with tough foreign policy questions. Civilians need to take ownership and reclaim some of the space from the security establishment since it is politicians and diplomats who are best placed to bring about the 'de-securitization' of Pakistan's Afghanistan policy, a long-term vision which receives across the board support.

### India

(i) From a Pakistani perspective, India-Pakistan competition in Afghanistan can best be avoided if there is greater transparency regarding India's activities in Afghanistan.

(ii) The two countries need to develop bilateral mechanisms to keep Islamabad informed about New Delhi's interests in Afghanistan and clear misperceptions about the nature and intent of specific activities: for example, a regular exchange of a fact-sheet on India's presence and actions in Afghanistan with Islamabad will be helpful. There was a specific call for closer intelligence sharing with regard to Indian activities in Afghanistan, and even to address Indian concerns about anti-India militants based in Pakistan.

(iii) Some participants were of the view that discussions on Afghanistan should necessarily be seen as part of a broader India-Pakistan dialogue on bilateral ties. Those who proposed this tended to see collaborative initiatives and dialogue on Afghanistan as a confidence building measure which could help move overall bilateral ties forward.

## Iran

(i) U.S.-Iran tensions are another stumbling block in the end game in Afghanistan. Pakistani policy elite are willing to recognize Iran's legitimate interests in Afghanistan and also admit that Iran's preferred outlook is a moderate, inclusive government, but one that is not Pashtun-dominated or with excessive Taliban presence. This position is fairly close to Washington's except that bilateral tensions between these two countries have masked this obvious convergence. A need to rectify the situation through quiet dialogue on the issue found support in the project discussions.

(ii) Pakistani policy elite also see a need for Iran and Pakistan to engage more actively on the issue of Afghanistan and to identify the overlap in their positions. Iran's lingering concern that Pakistan may end up backing the Taliban to rule Afghanistan again needs to be assuaged through proactive diplomacy.

# Post-script: Does Osama Bin Laden's Killing Impact the Afghanistan Calculus?

**O**n May 2, 2011, Al Qaida leader Osama Bin Laden was killed in a U.S. raid in Abbottabad, Pakistan. The unilateral raid was conducted by U.S. Special Operations Forces, led by the Navy SEALs in the early hours of May 2. The assault teams flew in from Afghanistan, conducted a successful 45-minute operation, and returned swiftly. Bin Laden was subsequently buried at sea. The Pakistani civilian and military leadership was uninformed about the raid.

The roundtable discussions and most of the interviews conducted during this project were completed before the May 2 episode. However, given the enormity of this development and the potential for it to impact American and Pakistani policy towards Afghanistan, the project team reached out to the roundtable participants and requested them to reflect on the implications of bin Laden's killing. A response to the following two questions was elicited (between June 1 and June 18) via email:

- (i) How do you think bin Laden's death will change the U.S.'s end game in Afghanistan?
- (ii) Will bin Laden's killing change Pakistan's strategy vis-à-vis Afghanistan?

We received responses from 17 of the 39 roundtable participants and thus these observations are not necessarily representative of the views of all those who participated in the roundtable discussions.

## The impact of bin Laden's death on U.S. strategy in Afghanistan

Respondents to these questions suggested that Osama Bin Laden's killing will not fundamentally alter the U.S. end game in Afghanistan, as the goal of denying sanctuary to Afghanistan – and Pakistan – based militant outfits plotting to strike American targets has yet to be achieved.

Most respondents however, expected the Obama administration to use bin Laden's killing to its political advantage. One of America's stated goals in Afghanistan is to "defeat and dismantle Al Qaida", and bin Laden's killing, most respondents felt, helps achieve this in a symbolic, if not operational, context. Therefore, President Obama could now reduce a substantial number of troops before the next U.S. presidential elections; troop withdrawal commensurate with this perceived success will give him additional political mileage during his re-election bid.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, the impetus for U.S. troop withdrawal will gradually shift the emphasis to a negotiated political solution. With Al Qaida significantly weakened – bin Laden's death will be capitalized to underscore how severely Al Qaida has been dented – the United States will reemphasize that it is willing to negotiate with the Taliban who accept Washington's red lines. These demands may be more seriously entertained as bin Laden's killing has given the Obama administration an opening to create a narrative of victory that can counter perceptions that the U.S. military envisions an open-ended war in Afghanistan.

On the other hand, respondents were also concerned that Washington may overcompensate and, for political reasons, seek to rapidly broker an agreement in Afghanistan without laying the necessary groundwork. Some worried that this may lead the United States to conduct talks with low-level Taliban who are not truly representative of the core of the insurgency. Not only will such a deal be unsustainable, but it will also cause the leadership of the main Taliban factions to continue perpetrating violence.

In the near future, in order to facilitate the dual goals of hastening a political solution and accelerating troop withdrawal, most of the responses predicted that the United States will increase pressure on Pakistan to crack down on groups that continue to launch attacks against ISAF and Afghan forces from Pakistan's tribal belt.

## The U.S.-Pakistan relationship after bin Laden

The discovery of bin Laden in a garrison town in Pakistan put the state on a diplomatic defensive. Responses reflected an acute awareness that the Pakistani state had been embarrassed and cornered, with the world viewing bin Laden's presence in Pakistan as proof that it is Pakistan, not Afghanistan that remains the center of gravity of the problem. This has enhanced concerns that the United States, while putting pressure on Pakistan to "do more", will also seek to hold out the option of sidelining Pakistan during the negotiations. Islamabad is increasingly suspicious about Washington's intentions regarding Pakistani involvement in the Afghan reconciliation process. The mutual mistrust between the ISI and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and between the two militaries, exposed as it was during the May 2 raid,<sup>24</sup> has raised doubts about whether the United States and Pakistan can collaborate towards a solution in Afghanistan. Respondents were also cognizant that the ISI is widely reviled by foreign actors and that it is seen as holding up progress on

an Afghan settlement. Should the status quo persist, the blame would continue to fall on the ISI and it will make the United States even more adamant on sidelining the Pakistani security establishment. In essence then, the state of the bilateral relationship is being seen as an impediment to allowing the two sides to work together in the Afghan reconciliation process.

The anticipated pressure on Pakistan to “do more” is seen as an additional cause for bilateral tensions in the coming months. Responses pointed to renewed pressure on Pakistan to launch a major military operation in North Waziristan - being built up at the time most of the responses came in - and to cooperate with the United States to eliminate other militant leaders such as Ayman al Zawahiri as a trend that will continue. Some believed that the United States may even use the opportunity to underscore the importance of a broader counterterrorism approach which targets all militant groups that threaten the West. This would include not only the Taliban but also groups like Lashkar-e-Tayyaba. Worse yet, some feared that the United States will gradually turn its attention to Pakistan itself and bank heavily on unilateral measures such as drone strikes and intelligence presence in Pakistan to go after high-value targets in the country. Pushing Pakistan to act against the whole gamut of terrorist groups, let alone greater reliance on unilateral actions, will, however, strain bilateral ties further and may impact Pakistan’s ability and willingness to play a positive role in the Afghan reconciliation process. The result, as seen by most respondents, would be a more challenged negotiation process and continued instability in Afghanistan, and indeed, Pakistan.

Notably, there are views which disagreed and suggested that despite growing mistrust, the United States realizes the importance of the Pakistani security establishment in achieving peace in Afghanistan. Suspicions aside, they argued, the Obama administration will continue to reach out to elicit Pakistan’s support in nudging the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table.

## Bin Laden’s influence on Pakistan’s security calculus in Afghanistan

Respondents suggested that bin Laden’s death had no bearing on Pakistan’s national interests in Afghanistan. Islamabad would continue to seek an inclusive government in Afghanistan that has adequate Pashtun representation and cedes some power to the Afghan Taliban. To this end, Pakistan will continue to support a political process that leads to a representative regime in Kabul. Strained ties with the United States will however strengthen the voice of those who back a more proactive regional approach without the United States.

Separately, a few respondents pointed out that bin Laden’s presence in Pakistan and retaliatory terrorist attacks within the country following his killing have exposed domestic fault lines in Pakistan’s national security strategy. In the run-up to the 2014 Afghanistan transition, the Pakistan Army and intelligence agencies

will have to address homegrown militant networks and the threat posed by militant infiltration into the security apparatus. Internal threats will further strengthen Pakistan's desire to see a stable Afghanistan that cannot be used by militant outfits as a launching pad for attacks against the Pakistani state.

That said, there is still a belief that Pakistan cannot afford to follow U.S. dictates in terms of opening new military fronts. An all out operation in North Waziristan continues to find opposition. Lack of capacity and the high likelihood of a serious backlash in Pakistan from the Afghan Taliban-TTP combine worried most of the respondents. Further, as the United States renews efforts to broker a political solution in Afghanistan, groups like the Haqqani network will be approached for negotiations. Pakistan's ability to bring them to the table will be dented if an offensive is launched against them. Also, as discussed at length, these groups provide Pakistan leverage in the end game and are still Pakistan's friendliest option in Afghanistan in any post-transition scenario.

## The impact of bin Laden's death within Afghanistan

Respondents also reflected on the impact bin Laden's departure would have on the Afghan Taliban and within Afghanistan. Judging by the responses, it is clear that bin Laden's killing is not synonymous with the demise of Al Qaida, let alone the Taliban factions. Moreover, some Taliban groups like Mullah Omar's no longer had as active a funding and training relationship with Al Qaida as it did once or as the Haqqani network may have even today. In essence, the Afghan Taliban's operational capabilities will remain more or less intact. However, symbolically, the killing is a blow to the insurgency. There was a sense that bin Laden's removal and the subsequent narrative of victory against Al Qaida may make it easier for the Afghan government and/or the United States to negotiate directly with Afghan Taliban leaders. A greater emphasis may be laid on distinguishing Al Qaida from the Taliban to facilitate the process further – a welcome step from the Pakistani perspective.

In terms of the Afghan government in Kabul, the bin Laden episode was seen as having provided President Karzai and his beleaguered security forces the opportunity to blame their failures against the insurgency on Pakistan's security policies. At the same time however, President Karzai is believed to realize Islamabad's importance in ensuring stability in Afghanistan and the futility of attempting to isolate Pakistan from the scene. His efforts to improve bilateral ties with Pakistan in recent months, the desire to work towards a bilateral and regional solution to the conflict (manifested by multiple official visits to Islamabad and efforts to invigorate the Afghanistan-Pakistan Joint Commission for Reconciliation and Peace), and to give shape to a power-sharing arrangement are seen in this stead. That said, some of the respondents also acknowledged that tensions remain in the relationship nonetheless, and that there is still a long way to go before Kabul and Islamabad could fully coordinate efforts to bring about an acceptable negotiated settlement, and in turn, relative stability to Afghanistan.

# Endnotes

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- 1 In this phase, we also held conversations with the military's official spokesperson and at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to better understand the Pakistani state's official position on the subject.
- 2 The roundtable in Lahore was held on March 2, 2011, the one in Peshawar on March 5, and the four in Islamabad on March 8-10.
- 3 We requested Lt. Gen. (Rtd.) Asad Durrani, Ejaz Haider, Dr. Rifaat Hussain and Amb. Humayun Khan to serve as the "cross-checkers".
- 4 Historical data reflects official Pakistani figures (converted from Pakistani Rupees) released for the cited years by the Federal Bureau of Statistics (Government of Pakistan). There is a discrepancy in the current trade figures released by various governments and international sources but all approximate the cited figure.
- 5 Mullah Omar's group of Taliban is popularly referred to as "Quetta Shura" in recent literature and by the international media due to the outfit's alleged presence in the Pakistani western city of Quetta. Our use of this term is merely driven by the desire to maintain consistency with existing literature and for the ease of readers familiar with it.
- 6 For the purposes of this report, "Afghan Taliban" refers to all major and minor insurgent factions fighting under the Taliban moniker, including Mullah Omar's "Quetta Shura" and the Haqqani network. Specific groups are referred to individually where a distinction is sought between the various Afghan Taliban factions.
- 7 The general sense is that the U.S. military has usurped significant policy space on the "Af-Pak" question in Washington. Some participants even drew parallels between the U.S. military's current clout in this context and the Pakistan military's hold over its country's security policy.
- 8 See "Clinton to Taliban: Dump al-Qaida or 'Face Consequences,'" Inaugural Holbrooke Lecture, *Asia Society*, February 18, 2011, <http://asiasociety.org/policy/strategic-challenges/us-asia/clinton-taliban-dump-al-qaida-or-face-consequences>.
- 9 These views were shared in March 2011, before U.S. President Barack Obama announced a withdrawal timetable for U.S. forces from Afghanistan on June 22, 2011. According to the plan, 10,000 U.S. soldiers will be withdrawn from Afghanistan by the end of 2011, and a total of 33,000 will exit by summer of 2012. A steady decrease in numbers will continue thereafter till the transition is complete in December 2014.
- 10 One participant suggested that this lack of clarity was intentional and was meant to provide U.S. decision makers flexibility in changing the future course if needed. This view however did not resonate with the others.
- 11 After Osama Bin Laden's killing, a period not discussed in this part of the report, there has been fresh debate on this issue with some in Pakistan contending that bin Laden's departure makes it easier for the U.S. to define its mission as Al Qaida-centric.
- 12 General David Petraeus has since been appointed the Director of the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).
- 13 Some participants saw the United States as having an eye on the Afghan mineral wealth and as having an interest in using its presence in Afghanistan to counter Iran and the expansion of Chinese interests into West Asia.
- 14 A mention was made of the possibility of a de facto north-south division of Afghanistan in line with former U.S. Ambassador Robert Blackwill's proposal (See Robert D. Blackwill, "Plan B in Afghanistan: Why a De Facto Partition is the Least Bad Option," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.90, No.1 (January/February 2011)). However, participants dismissed this as unrealistic and unacceptable to the Afghan people and key regional actors.
- 15 These views predate Afghan President Hamid Karzai's statement of June 18, 2011 confirming that there have been direct political contacts between the United States and the Taliban. The then U.S. Defense Secretary, Robert Gates subsequently confirmed these contacts. Although the contacts were characterized as preliminary, Pakistan expressed its displeasure at being kept out of the loop by the United States. See Emma Graham-Harrison and Hamid Shalizi, "U.S. in Peace Talks with Taliban, Karzai Confirms," *Reuters*, June 18, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/06/18/us-taliban-peace-talks\\_n\\_879680.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/06/18/us-taliban-peace-talks_n_879680.html); and "Pakistan Upset at Being Left Out of US-Taliban Peace Talks," *Press Trust of India*, June 27, 2011, <http://www.ndtv.com/article/world/pakistan-upset-at-being-left-out-of-us-taliban-peace-talks-115094>.
- 16 Participants holding this view believed that it was their state's obsession with treating the Taliban government in Kabul during the 1990s as a mere proxy which allowed the latter to penetrate Pakistani society and to run a number of its fund-raising and ideological campaigns from Pakistan itself. The implications for Pakistani society in terms of greater susceptibility to radical Islamist ideologies were immense according to this narrative.
- 17 For the purposes of this report, the ANSF refer to all civilian and military forces, including the Afghan National Army (ANA), the Afghan National Police, and all the branches that fall under these.

- 18 Bilateral exchanges between Pakistan and Central Asian countries took place in spring 2011. On March 7-10, 2011, Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon met his Pakistani counterpart Asif Ali Zardari in Islamabad. Soon after, on March 15-16, 2011, Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani visited Kyrgyzstan. President Zardari also visited Turkey on April 11-14, 2011 and met with the Turkish leadership.
- 19 President Zardari visited Moscow on May 11-12, 2011, where he met with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and signed agreements on agriculture, aviation, and energy cooperation. The visit was Zardari's first high-profile foreign trip after the killing of Al Qaida leader Osama bin Laden in Pakistan by U.S. Special Forces on May 2, 2011. The following week, on May 17-20, Prime Minister Gilani visited China to seek stronger support from Beijing. The trip was significant, and controversial from a U.S. perspective, because it came at a time when already strained U.S.-Pakistan ties were being further tested by the bin Laden episode.
- 20 Ben Arnoldy, "Can Afghanistan Economy Thrive Without Poppy?" *Christian Science Monitor*, March 5, 2010, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2010/0305/Can-Afghanistan-economy-thrive-without-poppy>.
- 21 Kabul and Washington had already initiated conversations about a bilateral strategic partnership when the roundtable discussions were held. The strategic partnership seeks continued U.S. access to some military bases in return for a U.S. commitment to continue providing assistance to the Afghan government.
- 22 The Durand Line is the 1610-mile-long contested border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Marked by the British colonial rulers in 1893, the Durand Line was declared invalid in 1949 by the Afghanistan Loya Jirga as they saw it as ex-parte on their side. Kabul still claims the Pashtun territories in Pakistan that comprise FATA and parts of KPK province. Pakistan, however considers the Durand Line as an international border. In practice, the border remains porous owing to ancient tribal connections between Pashtuns that transcend the Line. Thousands cross over every day, both legally (tribes divided by the Line have Easement Rights) and illegally. In recent years, the Pakistan military has blamed part of its counterterrorism shortcomings on lack of support for its proposal to fence the Durand Line and install biometric facilities to keep better track of cross-border movement.
- 23 These responses were received before June 22, 2011, when President Obama announced his withdrawal timeline for U.S. troops in Afghanistan (see footnote 9).
- 24 The unilateral strike by the United States against Al Qaida leader Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad heightened concerns within Pakistan about a growing U.S. intelligence footprint within its territory and consequent threats to its national sovereignty. This friction manifested itself on May 14 2011, when, in response to the raid, a joint session of both houses of the Pakistani parliament passed a unanimous resolution to defend Pakistan's sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity against U.S. military actions. For the past few months, the U.S.-Pakistan relationship, particularly ties between the countries' powerful intelligence agencies, the CIA and ISI, had been in a downward spiral: in December 2010, the name of the CIA station chief in Islamabad was leaked; in March 2011, Pakistan's army chief General Kayani condemned a drone attack that reportedly killed 41 people—he also hinted that his force could shoot down drones in Pakistani territory, suggesting that CIA-ISI cooperation in the drone program has been reevaluated; in April 2011, Director General of the ISI, General Ahmed Shuja Pasha, met with CIA Director Leon Panetta in Washington to demand more control over U.S. spy programs within the country; more recently in May-June 2011, Pakistan decided to expel U.S. military trainers from the country, only to see Washington hold back monetary assistance earmarked for the training program and related activities.





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