

## **Pakistan's 'Regional Pivot' and the Endgame in Afghanistan**

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### **Abstract**

Pakistan's recent assumption of the role as a key facilitator of the Afghan reconciliation process signals a pragmatic shift in its regional security approach. Occurring essentially in response to NATO's military exit from Afghanistan, this shift entails a major compromise on its previous India-centric 'strategic depth' policy of dominating Afghanistan through Pashtun-Taliban proxies. It is a part of its broader "regional pivot" towards enhanced cooperation with regional states to secure long-term geo-economic gains such as increasing the level of trade with India, gaining access to Central Asian energy sources, and making Pakistan a corridor of trade and energy from Central to South Asia. Consequently, the country has reached out to traditionally hostile non-Pashtun Afghan leaders of the erstwhile Northern Alliance, proactively pursued peace process with India; and diversified regional and international relations — as manifested in rapid progress in its relations with Russia and Central Asian states, expanding strategic partnership with China and energy-centric amity with Iran. As the end-2014 deadline of the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan looms, it is important to recognize the evolving transformation in Pakistan's Afghan and regional approaches, especially its potential for Afghan peace and regional stability.

**Key Words:** Pakistan, Afghanistan, Taliban, Strategic Depth, Regional Pivot, NATO, HPC, TAPI

**A**fter a long and costly war, Afghanistan is on its way to an uncertain security and political transition ahead of NATO's military exit by the end of 2014. And hence the notion of endgame, which has as

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many meanings as the number of actors involved in Afghanistan. It is, however, unclear whether the 3,52,000-strong Afghan Army and Police will be able to deliver security. Even more uncertain is the prospect of Afghanistan's political transition, with April 2014 presidential polls getting closer and the reconciliation process making no headway. What is, however, clear is that states bordering Afghanistan have begun to hedge: uncertainties associated with Afghan transition amid Western withdrawal have compelled them to fear the consequences of a continuing Afghan conflict and undertake realistic initiatives to manage them effectively. Pakistan is Afghanistan's most important neighbour, since it shares with Afghanistan history, ethnicity, religion and geography in ways none of its other neighbour does. We can, therefore, reasonably expect Pakistan to be more proactively concerned with the Afghan situation at this critical stage and reshape its own Afghan outlook accordingly.

Generally, discussions on Pakistan focus on its role in the 'War on Terror,' whereby its support to Afghan Taliban is presumed as a given reality. In the process, any possibility of change in state approach to regional conflicts such as Afghanistan according to new circumstantial realities is often overlooked. Pakistan did pursue a policy of 'strategic depth' in the 1990s and faced international criticism for supporting Taliban during the current Afghan war. While such aspects of Pakistan's past Afghan policy deserve critical review, a question more relevant to the current context, and therefore worth examining, is how it is responding to the certainty of Western military exit from Afghanistan and corresponding uncertainties associated with the state of war and the prospect of peace in Afghanistan.

The evidence in the last few years, in the form of policy pronouncements by Pakistan's civil-military leadership and meaningful governmental initiatives, suggests the country has, indeed, taken a visible shift in its Afghan policy. What are its underlying motivations? Is this shift part of a broader transformation currently under way in Pakistan's regional priorities? And how far can it help in achieving sustainable Afghan peace and viable regional stability? Realism constitutes a more appropriate framework to answer these questions, since pragmatic considerations seem to underpin the evolving transformation in Pakistan's Afghan policy and regional outlook. However, its manifestations and motivations cannot be understood without a brief reference to Pakistan's past relationship with Afghanistan.

## Past Approach

After independence, Pakistan's regional security perceptions were shaped not only by an existential threat from India, but also irredentist ambitions of the Afghan state. Besides being the only Muslim country that opposed Pakistan's membership of the UN,<sup>1</sup> Afghanistan refused to recognize the international border (Durand Line), the 2,640-kilometre long, mountainous and porous Pak-Afghan border lived by Pashtuns on both sides, which was drawn in 1893. Arguing that it was a British colonial creation through coercion of the then Afghan regime, after the establishment of Pakistan in 1947, Afghanistan's rulers laid claim on Pakistan's Pashtun border regions west of the Indus river and began actively sponsoring a Pashtun separatist movement — which brought the two countries close to war several times until the early 1970s. Pakistan, in turn, began supporting Afghan opposition groups during the decade, thereby destabilizing the Afghan state. After the 1979 Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, Pakistan's pivotal role as a facilitator of the internationally sponsored anti-Soviet Afghan jihad in the 1980s put the lid on Afghan state's irredentism towards Pakistan.

The abandonment of Afghan jihad by the outside world following the Soviet defeat and the consequent security and political vacuum in Afghanistan provided another opportunity to the Pakistani state establishment: that of tackling the long perceived existential threat from India. For the purpose, it began pursuing the 'strategic depth' policy in Afghanistan that aimed to have a friendly, Pashtun-dominated government in Kabul as an insurance policy in Pakistan's rivalry with India. "This vision of 'strategic depth' surfaced in the late 1980s and defined Pakistan's objectives in Afghanistan throughout the 1990s. The policy amounted to rendering Afghanistan as a friendly state and had a two-pronged focus: Deny India military and political influence in Afghanistan, and ensure that the government in Kabul would not incite Pakistani Pashtuns to secede. Accordingly, Pakistan provided the Taliban logistical, military and political support, and helped them capture Kabul in 1996."<sup>2</sup>

Of course, Pakistan's ambitious approach towards Afghanistan did not evolve in isolation from other bitter realities of post-Soviet Afghanistan. The international abandonment of Afghanistan left intact tens of thousands of Afghan and foreign Mujahideen, who subsequently waged jihad in

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<sup>1</sup> Sadika Hameed, *Prospects for India-Pakistani Cooperation on Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Affairs, 2012), 5-6.

<sup>2</sup> Shehzad H Qazi, "Pakistan's Afghanistan Plan: Strategic Depth 2.0," *World Politics Review Briefing*, (November 3, 2011), 2.

Afghanistan and Kashmir. The first Mujahideen government of President, Burhanuddin Rabbani that came to power in Kabul with Pakistan's help — turned out to be pro-India, a country that stood on the Soviet side during the 1980s jihad. India was also very much part of the 1990s regional proxy war in Afghanistan. So were other countries in the region and beyond, including Iran, Russia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Russia and Saudi Arabia. Perhaps much of what happened during the decade was, thus, unavoidable.

However, the present relevance of Pakistan's previous Afghan policy arises primarily from its consequences. The strategic policy framework might have allowed Pakistan to maintain a semblance of regional military power balance with India for some time; ultimately it has cost the country dearly, especially in the domains of internal security, regional relations and international standing. The options for continuing with the 'strategic depth' policy are not there — or even if they are, exercising them in future can only produce further regional and international isolation, and worsen the domestic security quagmire. Thus, in the current cost-benefit calculus, the cost of not changing the policy course is far higher than the benefit accruing from continuing it — and hence the recent shift in Pakistan's Afghan policy.

### **Policy Shift**

This shift has evolved in tandem with the growing international preference for Afghan peace-making since the London conference on Afghanistan in January 2010. Since then, Afghan and other international leaders have emphasized Pakistan's crucial role for the purpose. During the time, Pakistani military and civilian leaders, including Army Chief, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, and former foreign minister, Hina Rabbani Khar, also attempted to articulate the new approach in several media interviews and public speeches.

For instance, *Washington Post* quoted General Kayani in February 2010 as saying: "We want to have strategic depth in Afghanistan, but that does not imply controlling it. If we have a peaceful, stable and friendly Afghanistan, automatically we will have our strategic depth because our western border will be secure, and we will not be looking at two fronts."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Pamela Constable, "Pakistan's Army Chief Seeks 'Friendly and Stable' Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, February 2, 2010. In an interview with this author on December 7, 2011 in Islamabad, General Athar Abbas, former Director General of Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), elaborated the same point while arguing that post-9/11 circumstantial realities have, indeed, led to

Taking clue from this report, Shuja Nawaz in a June 2010 report of the Atlantic Council argued, “the army is now moving to a view of India as the less immediate threat and sees Afghanistan offering Pakistan a different kind of ‘strategic depth’ through its stability rather than as a client state or a haven for Pakistani forces should India successfully invade Pakistan.”<sup>4</sup> Then, Steve Coll, in a March 2012 article in the *New Yorker*, referred to a ‘secret’ army policy document — which formed the basis of General Kayani’s speech at the NATO headquarters in September 2011 — stating Pakistan’s readiness to assist the Afghan reconciliation process as a facilitator not as a guarantor, since “ultimately it will remain Afghan responsibility.”<sup>5</sup>

Former foreign minister Khar reiterated the same argument in an address at the Chatham House, London, in February 2012, when she said: “We will support any and all initiatives that are all-inclusive that are Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-driven...Nothing is dear to Pakistan’s national interests than peace, stability and security in Afghanistan. But we will not lead, or pretend to lead. We will follow our Afghan brothers and sisters.”<sup>6</sup> Then, in a speech at the Asia Society in New York in September 2012, she termed Kabul as “the most important capital in the world” for Pakistan, while arguing, “The national consensus across political parties in Pakistan today is that Afghanistan deserves the same dignity and respect that Pakistan expects from other countries. And the best way for Pakistan to express this respect is to be a partner to whichever government the Afghan people choose to represent them. The practical effect of this turn of policy is an unprecedented outreach to the Afghan government, as well as to the entire spectrum of the Afghan political landscape.”<sup>7</sup>

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conceptual shift in Pakistan’s Afghan policy, whereby Pakistan wants to have a peaceful western border as a hedge against the traditional security threat from India in the east.

<sup>4</sup> Shuja Nawaz, *Pakistan in the Danger Zone: A Tenuous US-Pakistan Relationship* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2010), 16.

<sup>5</sup> Steve Coll, “What Does Pakistan Want?” *New Yorker*, March 29, 2012, <<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/comment/2012/03/classified-document-our-collective-experience.html>>

<sup>6</sup> See transcript of speech by former foreign minister Khar, “Pakistan in a Changing Regional and Global environment,” Chatham House, London, February 22, 2012, <<http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Meetings/Meeting%20Transcripts/220212khar.pdf>>

<sup>7</sup> Ms. Khar’s address at Asia Society in New York on September 27, 2012 is available in video format at its website <<http://asiasociety.org/video/policy/hinarabbani-khar-pakistans-perspective-complete>>

## Concrete Initiatives

Pakistan's rethinking on Afghanistan is not merely confined to official rhetoric. Its manifestation is visible from a host of visible initiatives the country has taken to facilitate the process of Afghan reconciliation and improve its regional standing. In fact, Pakistan had stressed the importance of reconciliation well before the Taliban insurgency started to gain momentum in 2006. In August 2007, for instance, it held a joint peace Jirga with Afghanistan in Kabul for the purpose.<sup>8</sup> However, it was only after the Afghan regime led by President Hamid Karzai launched the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme<sup>9</sup> and constituted the 70-member Afghan High Peace Council (HPC)<sup>10</sup> in 2010 that the two countries took the first step for institutionalizing inter-governmental cooperation to kick-start the reconciliation process. In January 2011, an HPC delegation led by former president Rabbani travelled to Islamabad and both sides agreed to establish a Joint Peace Commission to reconcile Taliban and other Afghan insurgent groups. However, before the Peace Commission could take any meaningful initiative, Mr. Rabbani was assassinated in September 2011. It was amid subsequent tension in Afghan-Pakistan relations that Pakistan started an extensive diplomatic outreach campaign in Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup>

Since early 2012, its civilian leaders and envoys have tried to cultivate goodwill among traditionally hostile Afghan leaders representing non-Pashtun minorities, including Afghan-Tajik leaders such as former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah and Ahmed Zia Masood, brother of late Ahmad Shah Masood, and Uzbek warlord Rashid Dostum. Pakistani attempt to placate members of the erstwhile Northern Alliance, which fought against the Pashtun-dominated Taliban government before the Afghan war began, indicates that Islamabad does not want to be seen as supporting exclusively the Pashtun majority or Taliban leadership. And it has produced positive results, especially in terms of overcoming past bitterness and building mutual trust. This is apparent from growing cooperation between the Afghan and Pakistani security services and their governments and signs of a genuine commitment from both sides to work to take the Afghan reconciliation process forward. Over the course of 2012,

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<sup>8</sup> See "Text of Pak-Afghan Peace Jirga Declaration," *Daily Times*, August 13, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Tazreena Sajjad, *Peace at all costs? Reintegration and Reconciliation in Afghanistan* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2010), 10.

<sup>10</sup> "Karzai sets up council for peace talks with Taliban", *BBC News Online*, September 4, 2010, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11188294>>

<sup>11</sup> "New Pakistan outreach could aid Afghan peace deal," *Associated Press*, October 27, 2012.

for instance, senior Pakistani and Afghan delegations met more than 20 times.<sup>12</sup> In November, the Joint Peace Commission between the two countries was also revived when the HPC delegation led by Salahuddin Rabbani, late president Rabbani's son, visited Islamabad.

On the occasion, Pakistan released 13 Taliban leaders from prison, as demanded earlier by the Karzai regime, so that they can participate in Afghan peace talks. Fifteen other Taliban leaders were released in December when Afghan foreign minister, Zalmay Rassoul, visited Islamabad.<sup>13</sup> Most importantly, Pakistan agreed to implement the Peace Process Road Map to 2015<sup>14</sup> — a five-step peace plan drafted by the HPC, which has given it a central role in the Afghan reconciliation process.<sup>15</sup> The very first step proposed in the plan calls for a “focus on securing the collaboration of Pakistan.” In particular, Pakistan is expected to “facilitate direct contact between the Government of Afghanistan” and identified leaders of “armed opposition groups.”<sup>16</sup> The plan aims to have a final peace accord and expanded regional cooperation in place by 2014. For the purpose, it proposes that in the first half of 2013, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United States work together “to agree on terms and conditions for delisting, safe passage, and other requirements of Taliban leaders willing to engage in peace talks.” Formal talks, beginning with efforts to proclaim a ceasefire, will take place in the second half of next year, and, according to the plan, will pave the way for the “transformation of the Taliban and other armed groups from militant groups to political movements.”<sup>17</sup>

With Pakistan assuming formal role as a key facilitator of Afghan peace in the HPC peace plan, the interaction between the two countries, especially between their army and intelligence officials, has increased. For

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<sup>12</sup> Daniel S Markey, “Is This Time Different?” *American Interest*, January 10, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> See Aryman Bhatnagar, “Pakistan Releases Taliban for Role in Afghan Peace Process,” *Atlantic Sentinel*, December 10, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> See “The Afghan High Peace Council Peace Process Roadmap to 2015,” (2012), <[http://www.foreignpolicy.com/files/121213\\_Peace\\_Process\\_Roadmap\\_to\\_2015.pdf](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/files/121213_Peace_Process_Roadmap_to_2015.pdf)>

<sup>15</sup> Mona K Sheikh & Maja T J Greenwood, eds. *Taliban Talks: Past, Present, and Prospects for Pakistan, Afghanistan and the US* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Relations, 2013), 18.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Also see Robert Dreyfuss, “Peace in Afghanistan: Will Pakistan Play Ball?,” *The Diplomat*, December 22, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> The Afghan High Peace Council Peace Process Roadmap to 2015, also see Rob Crilly, “Taliban ‘Could Govern Parts of Afghanistan’ Under New Peace Deal,” *Telegraph*, December 10, 2012.

instance, the acting head of the Afghan intelligence service, Hassamuddin Hassam, visited Pakistan in December.<sup>18</sup> In January 2013, Afghan defence minister Bismillah Khan Mohammadi visited the country and, in a meeting with General Kayani, expressed interest in training Afghan army officers in Pakistani military academies.<sup>19</sup> Their army and intelligence chiefs were also part of the third round of British-sponsored trilateral meeting on Afghanistan in the United Kingdom in February 2013. On the occasion, President Karzai and Pakistani President, Asif Ali Zardari, jointly pledged to adopt “necessary measures” to secure a peace deal with the Taliban “within the next six months.” They also called upon the Taliban to open an office in Qatar as a point of contact for peace talks with the HPC.<sup>20</sup>

The intended goals of HPC’s Roadmap 2015 may not be realized within the proposed time span and tensions may recur in Afghan-Pakistan relations. However, the fact that Afghanistan and Pakistan have officially joined hands for the sake of peace cannot be ignored. And this development has surely not occurred without each country reconsidering its priorities concerning the lingering conflict in Afghanistan, thereby paving the way for its amicable resolution. It is, however, true that following the February 2013 tripartite meeting, the two countries have approached the path to reconciliation differently. The Karzai regime insists the Taliban office in Doha will be used only as a point of contact between the Taliban and HPC, and not for any other purpose. Pakistan, however, does not see any problem in Taliban leaders using this office for talks with the US and other Afghan groups, including members of HPC.<sup>21</sup> Kabul has been particularly critical of Pakistan’s preference for realizing “intra-Afghan consensus on the peace process,” with “direct contact between Taliban and representatives from Afghanistan’s multiple ethnic groups.”<sup>22</sup> Of course, the mutual mistrust

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<sup>18</sup> Baqir Sajjad Syed, “Afghan Spy Chief Secretly Visited Pakistan,” *Dawn*, March 22, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Kamran Yusuf, “Deal in the Making: Pakistan Army Likely to Begin Training Afghan Forces,” *Express Tribune*, January 29, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Adil Shahzeb, “Afghan Endgame: Big Deal,” *Friday Times* (February 15-21), 2013.

<sup>21</sup> “Pakistan Alters Afghan Plan ahead of 2014,” *Oxford Analytical Brief*, March 15, 2013. Another contentious issue between Kabul and Islamabad as of spring 2013 pertained to Pakistan’s refusal to release former Taliban deputy chief Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, who was arrested in 2010 for unilaterally initiating talks with the Karzai regime. For its part, Pakistan expects the Afghan government to first conclude a Strategic Partnership Agreement.

<sup>22</sup> Patrick Quinn, “Afghanistan Relations with Pakistan at New Low,” *Associated Press*, April 4, 2013.

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between the two countries has a long history and, therefore, will take time to overcome.

### **Key Motivations**

As for motivations behind Pakistan's Afghan policy shift, they are not difficult to discern. First, Afghanistan's radically changed political, economic and security situation in the post-Taliban period leaves it with little choice but to pursue its Afghan interests along side other outside actors and without ignoring its new power wielders. Unlike the 1990s, the international community is deeply engaged in Afghanistan. Since the downfall of Taliban regime in late 2001, the UN has helped build the Afghan state. China has invested billions in its mineral wealth. Scores of other countries, including regional players such as India, Iran, Russia and Central Asian states have consolidated their relations with Kabul. NATO may be militarily exiting from Afghanistan in 2014, but the US has pledged to guarantee its security for a decade afterwards under its Strategic Partnership Agreement with the Afghan government. And the international community has also committed multi-billion dollar assistance to Afghanistan during the period. In addition, Afghanistan's internal reality has also significantly transformed in the last over a decade. The country has seen the emergence of new power elites in politics, bureaucracy, military and business, along with vibrant mass media and civil society. Particularly the salience of Non-Pashtun minorities such as Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras in Afghan power corridors cannot be overlooked. By facilitating Afghan reconciliation, Pakistan will remain relevant to the endgame in Afghanistan, improve its standing in the region, and enhance its international stature as a peacemaker

Second, Pakistan's recent Afghan rethinking is also an outcome of the significant transformation in its domestic politics, deteriorating economic situation and worsening security situation in recent years. No other regional state has suffered as much from recurrent Afghan warfare in the last over three decades as Pakistan. The human and material cost of the current war in Afghanistan has been exceptionally grave. As of March 2013, terrorism by local Taliban and their affiliates since 2001 had killed nearly 49,000 civilians<sup>23</sup> and security personnel, while economic losses are officially

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<sup>23</sup> Mudassir Raja, "Pakistani Victims: War on Terror Toll Put at 49,000," *Express Tribune*, March 27, 2013.

estimated to be around \$68 billion.<sup>24</sup> That Pakistan has paid the principal cost of the conflict in Afghanistan, especially during the current Afghan war, is a notion that is widely accepted in public opinion and shared across the board by political parties. Moreover, new powerful forces such as higher judiciary, mass media and civil society have recently emerged to reshape the country's domestic politics and regional postures. The consequent preference of Pakistani policy makers for securing a power sharing deal between Taliban and other Afghan groups is, therefore, understandable.

Pakistan is currently inclined to accept the establishment of an ethnically inclusive Afghan regime that is friendly towards it. A July 2011 report co-published by the US Institute of Peace and the Jinnah Institute, states that Pakistan does not want a settlement in Afghanistan to have negative fallout for it. This essentially means that any government in Kabul should not be antagonistic to Pakistan and should not allow its territory to be used against Pakistani state interests. These umbrella objects lead Pakistan to pursue three outcomes: "First, Pakistani interests are best served by a relatively stable government in Kabul that which is not hostile to Pakistan. Second, Pakistan wants a negotiated political settlement with adequate Pashtun representation, which means that a sustainable arrangement under current situation would necessarily require that Taliban are part of the new political arrangement. Third, in the view of Pakistani elites, while India has a role to play in Afghanistan's economic progress and prosperity, the present Indian engagement in Afghanistan, especially in the security domain, attempts to outflank Pakistan, which is unacceptable."<sup>25</sup> In the post-2001 period, one of the main causes of the Taliban-led insurgency against US-led coalition is believed to be Pashtun marginalisation in Afghanistan's security, political and economic

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<sup>24</sup> However, this figure is questioned by Mohammad Nafees, who argues that Pakistan's economy has experienced significant growth since 9/11, with manifold increase in foreign direct investment, exports and foreign remittances as well as \$13 billion US assistance. Thus, he adds, "The real losses of the war on terror are human lives and infrastructure. All other losses like uncertainty, decline in foreign investments, effects on trade, tourism, and other businesses are the result of the insecurity emanating from terrorists' acts of violence and the weakening of the law and order situation." See Mohammad Nafees, "Has Pakistan Lost \$68 Billion?" *Daily Times*, June 15, 2012.

<sup>25</sup> The Jinnah Institute, *Pakistan, the United States and the Endgame in Afghanistan: Perceptions of Pakistan's Foreign Policy Elite* (Islamabad: The Jinnah Institute, co-published with Washington-based US Institute of Peace, 2011), 12-13.

structure.<sup>26</sup> Ahmed Rashid in *Pakistan on the Brink* and Jonathan Steel in the *Ghosts of Afghanistan* also argue that Pakistan wants to see in Afghanistan a sustainable political setup that may be dominated by the Pashtuns but is not led by the Taliban.<sup>27</sup>

Besides putting an end to devastating fallout from the Afghan conflict, an inclusive peace settlement in Afghanistan will pave the way for the repatriation of nearly 1.9 million registered and one million undocumented Afghan refugees from Pakistan. The presence of these refugees has incurred grave security, economic and social cost for the country in the last over three decades. Approximately 40 per cent of Afghan refugees in Pakistan live in refugee camps and 60 per cent in rural and urban areas.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, progress in the Afghan peace process and resultant security in Pakistan's western borders with Afghanistan will allow its army and paramilitary greater ability to fight domestic insurgency and terrorism. Pakistan's counter-insurgency campaign has, indeed, made significant strides in Swat, South Waziristan and other restive tribal border regions with Afghanistan. Yet the danger posed by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its affiliates has not subsided. More recently, TTP has selectively targeted key security installations.<sup>29</sup> Pakistani security establishment, therefore, considers its "sub-conventional warfare" as posing an existential threat to the country.<sup>30</sup> General Kayani's Independence Day speech on August 14, 2012 also signalled the army's redefined priorities in combating domestic terrorism, when he said, "The war against extremism and

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<sup>26</sup> Shehzad H. Qazi, "Toward a Sustainable Peace in Afghanistan: part I," *World Politics Review Briefing*, May 22, 2012.

<sup>27</sup> For details, see Ahmed Rashid, *Pakistan on the Brink: The Future of Pakistan, Afghanistan and the West* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012) and Jonathan Steele, *Ghosts of Afghanistan: The Haunted Battleground* (London: Portobello Books, 2012).

<sup>28</sup> See Rainer Gonzalez Palau, *Displacement in Afghanistan: Post-2014 Origins, Current Situation, Potential Flows* (Norfolk, VA: Civil-Military Fusion Centre, 2013), 2.

<sup>29</sup> Dan Twining, "Has Pakistan's Afghan Policy Really Shifted?" *Foreign Policy*, December 21, 2012.

<sup>30</sup> See Anita Joshua, "Terrorists Replace India in Pak Danger List," *Hindu*, January 4, 2013. The author notes, "In what is being seen as a paradigm shift, the Pakistan Army has identified internal threats as the biggest danger to the nation—a dubious distinction thus far accorded to traditional 'enemy' India. A new chapter titled 'Sub-conventional Warfare' has been added to the Army Doctrine, also called the 'Green Book'."

terrorism is not only the Army's war, but that of the whole nation."<sup>31</sup>

While current Afghan and domestic realities have played an important role in shaping Pakistan's new Afghan approach, a final factor underpinning this policy shift pertains to its perceived fears about Afghanistan's future without reconciliation beyond 2014: the fear of the worsening of Afghan war and its debilitating consequences at home, and the fear of Afghan Taliban regaining absolute power to re-energize TTP.<sup>32</sup> As Frederic Grare argues, "The looming international troop withdrawal from Afghanistan brings considerable risks for the region in general and for Pakistan in particular. Islamabad fears that, come 2014, it will face an unstable Afghanistan and find itself isolated regionally and globally... There seems to be no doubt that the Western withdrawal from Afghanistan is generating a considerable amount of anxiety in Islamabad because it could affect the entire spectrum of threats Pakistan believes it is already facing."<sup>33</sup> Such an eventuality will not only worsen Pakistan's grave security quagmire, it may push another wave of Afghan refugees into the country.<sup>34</sup> Thus, given its unique ethno-geographical links with Afghanistan, the urgency of seeing the war-torn country move towards peace before NATO's military exit should naturally be felt more by Pakistan than any other regional state.

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<sup>31</sup> Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Kayani Renews Army's Resolve to Eradicate Terrorism," *Dawn*, August 14, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Mehreen Zahra-Malik, "Pakistan Sees Afghanistan's Karzai as Obstacle to Peace with Taliban," *Reuters*, March 24, 2013. The report quoted a Pakistani Foreign Ministry official as saying: "I have absolutely no doubt that there will be complete chaos in Afghanistan if a settlement is not reached by 2014. Afghanistan will erupt. And when that happens, Pakistan will have to pay."

<sup>33</sup> Frederic Grare, *Is Pakistan's Behaviour Changing?* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 30, 2013)  
<<http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/01/30/is-pakistan-s-behavior-changing/f76i#>>

<sup>34</sup> See Palau, *Displacement in Afghanistan*, The study looks at the post-2014 displacement of Afghans, and predicts: "Afghan refugees will rarely return to Afghanistan in large numbers. In fact, the number of refugees heading to Pakistan will increase, driven by tradition and seeking safety. Afghan new and already registered refugees in Pakistan will move away from borderlands to other parts of Pakistan, far from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. 70 per cent of Afghan migrants in Pakistan have born and raised there, therefore, migration back to Afghanistan is rather unlikely."

## Regional Pivot

Pakistan's Afghan policy shift has not occurred in isolation, but essentially as part of its broader 'regional pivot' towards increased transparency and cooperation with countries of the region. This policy, unveiled in 2009 during the tenure of the former civilian regime, focuses on the pursuit of economic diplomacy in South and Central Asia. As former foreign minister, Khar, stated in September 2012, Pakistan is "building and stabilizing relations within its immediate region, and pursuing policies that privileged enhanced trade relations and energy cooperation over zero-sum security competitions."<sup>35</sup> The "strategic pivot" has "four major objectives: normalization of political relations with India and Afghanistan, increased trade with India, access to Central Asian energy sources, and making Pakistan a land-bridge for trade and energy transportation from Central to South Asia."<sup>36</sup> These geo-economic ambitions cannot be realized unless Afghanistan is at peace. As in the case of the new Afghan approach, the broader transformation in Pakistan's regional outlook is motivated by pragmatic considerations: with economic growth at a standstill, the country has no option but to strive for new opportunities in regional trade and investment. Consequently, there exists consensus among political forces and convergence in civil-military interests about harnessing regional energy resources to overcome the country's acute energy shortage.<sup>37</sup> Mainstream political forces and commercial interests support the 'regional pivot' — which is evident from Pakistan's proactive pursuit of peace process with India, rapid progress in its relations with Russia and Central Asian states, as well as trade and energy-centric ties with China and Iran, respectively.

First, since the perceived threat from India was the main reason why Pakistan sought 'strategic depth' inside Afghanistan in the past, one way of assessing the meaningfulness of Pakistan's Afghan policy shift is to see how its relations with India have evolved in recent years. As discussed

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Shehzad Qazi, "Pakistan: Strategic Posture Review," *World Politics Review* (March 12, 2013), 4.

<sup>37</sup> The search for energy resources has recently emerged as a key strategic priority for Pakistan. As Danila Bochkarev points out, at least 48 percent of Pakistanis cannot access electricity regularly. Massive power cuts have also adversely impacted the economy. In fiscal year 2011-2012, natural gas and energy shortages limited the country's GDP growth by 2-4 percent, halving actual growth. See Danila Bochkarev, *India and Pakistan's Energy Security: Can Afghanistan Play a Critical Role?* (New York: East-West Institute, 24 October 2012) <<http://www.ewi.info/india-pakistan-energy-security>>

before, the post-Soviet anarchy in Afghanistan and the role of regional states during the period, particularly of India, created the context for the 'strategic depth' policy. However, subsequent developments, such as India-Pakistan nuclear tests in 1998, the US-led war in Afghanistan since 2001, and the start of India-Pakistan Composite Dialogue in 2004, significantly eroded the value of this approach. The India-Pakistan peace process has made significant progress since it resumed in early 2011. During the period, the two countries have moved considerably away from the era of heightened tension in their ties in the aftermath of the 2008 Mumbai attacks. They have taken important initiatives to increase the level of bilateral trade and travel.<sup>38</sup> In November 2011, for instance, Pakistan announced the decision to grant India the status of Most Favoured Nation (MFN), a goodwill gesture that reciprocated India's decision to this effect 15 years ago. In September 2012, the two countries also signed a new visa agreement easing restrictions on travel. Progress in both cases was, however, put on hold due to tension along the Line of Control in Kashmir in January 2013. That the two sides quickly managed to avoid escalation in the crisis indicates their mutual willingness to keep the peace process on track. Soon afterwards, Pakistan reiterated its commitment to grant MFN status to India.<sup>39</sup>

Economic objectives determining Pakistan's peaceful approach towards India include increasing direct bilateral trade, as opposed to relying on indirect transactions through third countries such as the UAE, as is presently the case.<sup>40</sup> In 2011, bilateral trade between India and Pakistan stood at around \$2.5 billion. Both countries aim to increase this to \$6 billion by 2015. Pakistan is also seeking the reduction of Indian non-tariff barriers on Pakistani goods.<sup>41</sup> "The complete liberalization of trade between India and Pakistan will be a long and arduous process, but Pakistan's granting of

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<sup>38</sup> See Iftekhar A. Chawdhury, "India-Pakistan Ties: Do Signs of Warming Indicate Climate Change?" *ISAS Brief*, no. 125 (September 13, 2012).

<sup>39</sup> "Pakistan Set to Award India MFN Status: Fahim," *Dawn*, January 31, 2013.

<sup>40</sup> According to Grare, *Is Pakistan's Behaviour Changing?* "Pakistan can no longer afford the type of triangular trade it has practiced with India in the past, shipping goods through third countries. Such a system costs it several billions of dollars every year...As Pakistan is unlikely to bring its economy back on track in the near future, its eagerness to forge closer trading ties with its old rival is likely to endure for some time." Also see Madiha Sattar, "Post-2014 Afghanistan: Pakistan's nightmare?" *Dawn*, February 18, 2013.

<sup>41</sup> For detailed analysis of the subject, see Mohsin Khan, *India-Pakistan Trade Relations: A New Beginning* (Washington, DC: New America Foundation, January 2013).

MFN status to India will be a good start. Higher levels of trade will bring economic benefits to both countries, but more so to Pakistan. Indeed, with India cementing its position as the region's engine of growth, Pakistan must hitch its wagon to the locomotive or risk getting completely left behind. The Pakistani government and the supposedly 'India-centric' military have finally come to recognize and accept this reality.<sup>42</sup> Thus, with the military also softening its India approach, the India-Pakistan peace process will most gain greater momentum during the Sharif regime.

As pointed out earlier, Pakistan also does not see any problem in India playing an economic role in Afghanistan.<sup>43</sup> This is clear from the October 2010 Afghan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement, under which Pakistan has allowed Afghan goods to reach Indian market by road. Further progress in India-Pakistan peace process could allow India to export its own goods by a shorter land route via Pakistan.<sup>44</sup> More importantly, the two countries are also part of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project. Upon completion, the pipeline would transport approximately 33 billion cubic metres of natural gas from Turkmenistan to India,<sup>45</sup> thereby overcoming Pakistan's acute energy crisis and sustaining India's rapid economic growth. "Bilateral cooperation between India and Pakistan — as well as trilateral cooperation among India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan — has the potential to increase trade, access to natural resources such as water, and regional security. Afghanistan could serve as a transit point between Central and South Asia, increasing the flow of goods and services between the regions."<sup>46</sup> Thus, India has as much to benefit from the peaceful end to the Afghan war as Pakistan, which necessitates that they reconcile their competing or conflicting interests in Afghanistan.

Second, increasing trade with the Central Asian states and gaining access to their energy resources have emerged as strategic objectives for Pakistan in recent years. It has cherished this aspiration since their independence over two decades ago, while perceiving itself as a potential corridor of energy and trade between Central and South Asia. Pakistan's quest for natural gas from Turkmenistan began in mid-1990s, eventually resulting in the successful conclusion of the \$7.5 billion TAPI project in

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>43</sup> US Institute of Peace and Jinnah Institute.

<sup>44</sup> Khaleeq Kayani, "Pakistan-Afghanistan Accord on Transit Trade," *Dawn*, July 19, 2010.

<sup>45</sup> Khaleeq Kayani, *Gas Pipeline: Regional Stabilisation Factor?* (Islamabad: Centre for Research and Security Studies, August 29, 2011).

<sup>46</sup> Hameed, *Prospects for India-Pakistani Cooperation on Afghanistan*, 34.

December 2010. The gas pipeline is part of the Central Asia South Asia Regional Electricity Trade Project, known as CASA 1000, which, if completed, will offer Pakistan access to electricity from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, besides natural gas from Turkmenistan.<sup>47</sup> The viability of these regional initiatives over which Pakistani and Central Asian interests converge, however, hinges on stability in Afghanistan. Likewise, Pakistan has cultivated strong ties with Russia in recent years in political, economic and security spheres. This is visible from enhanced interaction between their top civilian and military leaders. For instance, in 2012, President Zardari and General Kayani visited Russia separately and Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov travelled to Islamabad. Russia retains significant clout in post-Soviet Central Asia, and its energy giant Gazprom is committed to contribute financially to TAPI. Like Central Asian states, Russia's interest lies in stable Afghanistan — just as Pakistan's.

Finally, Pakistan's 'regional pivot' is also manifested in recent consolidation of its strategic relationship with China and improvement of ties with Iran, both of which share its aspirations for peace in Afghanistan. Pakistan considers China as its "most trusted" ally. With a Free Trade Agreement in place, their bilateral trade has significantly grown in recent years, so has cooperation in political and security fields. China's most notable project in Pakistan is the Gwadar port, which it now operates after having invested almost \$200 million.<sup>48</sup> China has helped develop other infrastructural projects as well, including highways and power generation plants. Future possibilities of economic and commercial cooperation include a rail link between Pakistan and China, oil and gas pipelines through Pakistan to connect Xinjiang and the rest of China with the Strait of Hormuz and West Asia via the land route, and a rapid increase in bilateral trade.<sup>49</sup> Pakistan's relations with Iran have also come of age since the 1990s, when the two countries vied for influence in Afghanistan by supporting respective Afghan warring factions. The Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline Project — which was officially launched by President Zardari and his Iranian counterpart, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in March 2013 — is their most important joint venture. Pakistan has gone ahead with the project, and China has agreed to partially finance it, despite the fact that Iran is under international sanctions due to its alleged nuclear weapons pursuits. The

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<sup>47</sup> Qazi, "Pakistan: Strategic Posture Review," 5.

<sup>48</sup> In February 2013, Pakistan decided to transfer Gwadar port operations from Port of Singapore to Chinese Overseas Port Holdings Limited. See Mohammed Jamil, "Gwadar Port to Become Fully Operational," *Frontier Post*, February 3, 2013.

<sup>49</sup> Javid Hussain, "Prospects of Pak-China Friendship," *Nation*, March 5, 2013.

pipeline, whose Iranian section is already built and Pakistani side is expected to cost \$1.5 billion, would enable the export of 21.5 million cubic meters of Iranian natural gas to Pakistan daily.<sup>50</sup>

The diversification of Pakistan's international relations, as visible from its preference for peace in Afghanistan and trade-energy quest in the region, will help lessen Pakistan's economic and security dependence on the United States.<sup>51</sup> Its relationship with the US did experience unprecedented deterioration from early 2001 to mid-2012 due to the arrest of US spy Raymond Davis, the killing of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and NATO's attack on Salala check post. However, the consequent suspension in US civilian and security assistance to Pakistan and the closure of NATO supply route through Pakistan was reverted through apt diplomacy by both countries. Since July 2012, the two countries have resumed Strategic Dialogue, which aims to expand Pakistan's capacity in over a dozen fields of civilian development. Trilateral "core group" meetings involving the US, Pakistan and Afghanistan have opened the door to a new round of negotiations with Taliban insurgents. In November 2012, for instance, when Pakistan released the first batch of Taliban prisoners during the HPC's visit, the news surfaced that the three countries "have identified nearly two dozen potential Taliban negotiators who are expected to be taken off the United Nations terror-list in a move that seeks to encourage insurgents to join the peace process."<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, the Obama Administration does not any longer pressure Pakistan to launch an operation in North Waziristan against the Haqqani Network, which was designated a Foreign Terrorist Organization in September 2012. As Daniel Markey notes, "Washington appears to have pulled away from pressure tactics with Islamabad. Whereas US officials had hoped to see Islamabad put the screws to Afghan insurgents on Pakistani soil, now Washington appears willing to settle for Pakistani-facilitated peace talks with those same insurgents. Yes, Pakistan has released Afghan Taliban prisoners and participated in conversations with US and Afghan officials about reconciliation. This could be called a

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<sup>50</sup> Zafar Bhutta, "Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline: In Snub to US, China Offers \$500 Million Loan," *AFP*, March 13, 2013.

<sup>51</sup> Simon Tisdall, "Iranian-Pakistan Gas Link Has Gains in Pipeline for Zardari and Ahmadinejad," *Guardian*, March 28, 2013. The author terms Pakistani President's move "as a deliberate attempt to emphasize Islamabad's growing freedom of action as the American regional presence declines with next year's withdrawal from Afghanistan."

<sup>52</sup> Kamran Yusaf, "12 Taliban Peace Brokers May be Taken off UN List," *Express Tribune*, November 19, 2012.

‘strategic shift’, but, crucially, most of the shifting has come on Washington’s side, where there is now more acceptance of Pakistan’s influence over the peace process than ever before.”<sup>53</sup> The goal of the Obama administration is to secure smooth withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan, for which Pakistan’s help is important. Its supply route ensures cheaper and speedier reverse shipment of NATO’s non-lethal military hardware. US dependence on Pakistan for NATO shipment and Afghan reconciliation, and Pakistan’s reliance on US security and economic assistance create a valid context for cooperative relations between them ahead of NATO’s exit. US-Pakistan interests also converge vis-à-vis the regional integration processes initiated at Istanbul and Kabul, envisioning Asia as it once was: “a prosperous and adventurous continent loosely united by a web of routes that enabled the exchange of goods, people and ideas.”<sup>54</sup> This vision is embodied by the Heart of Asia notion underpinning the Istanbul Process and the New Silk Road initiative undertaken by the United Nations.

### **Concluding Observations**

It is clear from the preceding discussion that Pakistan has visibly changed course in Afghanistan — from the previous ‘strategic depth’ policy shaped by perceived security threat from India to a new approach that aims to realize viable peace in Afghanistan as a means to harness its geo-economic ambitions in Central Asia. India still remains a factor in its strategic calculus. While Pakistan perceives India’s economic role as potentially compatible to its own future trade and energy interests in the region, it is concerned about Indian security engagement in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Rather being stuck in the past, Pakistan’s Afghan policy has pragmatically evolved in consonance with the existing circumstantial realities in Afghanistan, at home and in the wider region. Overcoming current and future security risks emanating from the Afghan conflict and benefiting from trade and energy opportunities in South and Central Asia in the long run are hallmarks of its Afghan rethinking and ‘regional pivot’ approach. It is within such currently and futuristically valid factors that Pakistan’s interests in Afghanistan and the region can be properly contextualized and explained. Given the prevalence of civil-military consensus over realizing these interests, the incremental evolution towards a peaceful Pakistani

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<sup>53</sup> Markey, “Is This Time Different?”.

<sup>54</sup> Radha Kumar & Kailash K Prasad, *Afghanistan 2012: A Way to the Future* (New Delhi: Delhi Policy Group, 2012), iv.

foreign policy will continue, whatever the outcome of the country's political transition during 2013 may be.

Afghanistan's security and political transition without reconciliation beyond NATO's military exit in 2014 entails unaffordable consequences for Pakistan's internal security, political stability and economic viability. Its economic ambitions in Central Asia are a hostage to the continuing Afghan conflict. Given that, ahead of Western withdrawal, Pakistan can be expected to proactively pursue peace diplomacy in Afghanistan, in accordance with the objectives laid out in the HPC peace plan. Beyond 2014, given the scale of international commitment for Afghan security and economic viability, it will have limited choice to act differently than what its new Afghan or regional outlook necessitates. Realistic interests underpinning this policy rethinking increasingly converge with those of the regional states involved in Afghanistan — including Iran, Central Asian states, China, Russia and even India — as well as outside powers such as the US. None of them wants the return of Taliban rule in Afghanistan. Like Pakistan, all of them have realized that peace in Afghanistan is not possible without reconciling Taliban and other Afghan insurgent groups. It will certainly not be possible without addressing the critical issue of Pashtun marginalization in post-Taliban Afghanistan's political setup and security structure.

However, the scope and success of Pakistan's Afghan or regional policy shift — grounded on the realization of an inclusive, ethnically representative regime in Afghanistan on urgent basis and the harnessing of regional trade and energy ambitions in the long run — will depend on a host of other factors, which are mostly beyond its control. For instance, while Pakistan's willingness to facilitate Afghan reconciliation by persuading Afghan Taliban to talk to HPC, even more crucial is its ability to do so. This is especially so in the wake of Pakistan's counter-terrorism alliance relationship with the US and recent outreach campaign to cultivate the former Northern Alliance leadership. Even otherwise, whatever support Pakistan extends to make the Afghan reconciliation viable; ultimately, it is the Afghans who will determine their destiny. How Afghanistan, India and the US — countries with which Pakistan's normal relations can be disrupted any time — respond in kind to its renewed peaceful regional approach will be another. In particular, how far the government leadership in Kabul is willing to address Pakistani security sensitivities arising from India's security role and TTP's support base across the international border? In this context, the conclusion of a Strategic Partnership Agreement between Afghanistan and Pakistan has crucial role. Finally, Afghanistan's security and political transition itself revolves around a host of ifs and buts:

Whether the international community will retain its current commitment to Afghan security and economy for a decade after 2014. Reconciling currently competitive but potentially conflicting security interests of India and Pakistan in Afghanistan is still another potent challenge, which the outside world, especially the US, has failed to address so far. Even while such factors of uncertainty continue to depict the Afghan enigma, the fact that at least Pakistan does not appear to abandon its recent pacifist quest in Afghanistan motivated by long-term economic ambitions in the region is, indeed, reassuring. ■