



ANALYSIS

Neither friend nor foe: Pakistan, the United States and the war in Afghanistan

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LOWY INSTITUTE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In a speech announcing his administration's Afghanistan policy, President Trump singled out Pakistan saying that the United States "can no longer be silent about Pakistan's safe havens for terrorist organizations". But the likelihood that increased US incentives or threats will change Pakistan's policy in Afghanistan are low. If anything the goals of the United States and Pakistan in Afghanistan have moved further apart.

The military is the key player in Pakistan's policy in Afghanistan. Interviews with a range of current and former military officials underline a deep distrust of the US and its approach to the war there. While there is a willingness to still cooperate with the United States where its interests coincide with those of Pakistan, military officers fear their country will be a scapegoat for the US failure in Afghanistan. At the same time, they continue to see some of the terrorist groups the United States is targeting as strategic assets in the region.

When, after a ten-year search, US intelligence agencies finally located Osama bin Laden hiding in plain sight in a city hosting Pakistan's most important military academy, it raised awkward questions about how committed and reliable an ally Pakistan was in the fight against international terrorism. These questions were not new. They had been raised before, and have continued to be raised since. In a recent speech outlining his Afghanistan and South Asia policy, President Donald Trump saved his harshest words for Pakistan. Washington, he said, "can no longer be silent about Pakistan's safe havens for terrorist organizations ... We have been paying Pakistan billions and billions of dollars at the same time they are housing the very terrorists we are fighting. But that will have to change."¹

Washington... "can no longer be silent about Pakistan's safe havens for terrorist organizations..."

Despite the United States' considerable investment of blood and treasure in Afghanistan over more than a decade and half, which has achieved mixed results at best, the Trump administration seems willing to at least continue that investment in the short term, and perhaps even to increase it modestly. It is therefore critical to understand how Pakistan is likely to react to these continued investments, given its history of both supporting the US intervention in Afghanistan and at the same time backing groups in Afghanistan against which the United States and its allies have been fighting, chief among them the Haqqani Network.

President Trump's speech also reflects increasing talk within the US Congress of imposing sanctions on Pakistan as a result of its support for terrorist groups, and not just in Afghanistan. Pakistan has also been repeatedly blamed for sponsoring acts of violence in India including the deadly Mumbai attacks in 2008 and more recently the Pathankot attacks in 2016.

For US and Western policymakers, the question remains: is Pakistan a friend or foe in the fight against terrorism? And if it is a foe, what will it take to change its behaviour? To answer these questions, it is critical to understand the thinking of Pakistan's military and of key individuals and institutions within it, including a clique of retired military officers. The military has historically managed the country's foreign and security policy and, given the way that Pakistan's civilian political leadership has become embroiled in corruption scandals, this is unlikely to change any time soon.

This Analysis examines how Pakistan's military, and key elements within it, most notably the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) agency, views the fight against terrorist groups, including within Afghanistan. It looks at their perception of the United States and argues that its mistrust in US foreign policy gives rise to Pakistan's reluctance to cross the terrorists. It draws on face-to-face interviews with serving and retired members of

Pakistan's security establishment, including individuals from the military, intelligence, bureaucracy, and the political elite.

HOW THE PAKISTAN MILITARY VIEWS THE UNITED STATES

In order to understand how the Pakistan military views the fight against terrorist groups it is first necessary to understand its perceptions of the United States. Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger famously commented that "To be an enemy of America can be dangerous, but to be a friend is fatal". After decades of interaction with the United States, that comment would certainly find approval within the Pakistan military.² This ambivalent attitude towards the United States was reinforced by two historical episodes: the US failure to support Pakistan during its two wars with India in 1965 and 1971; and the abrupt withdrawal of the United States from Southwest Asia after the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan. In 1990, the military's distrust of the United States deepened after economic and military sanctions were imposed on Pakistan over its nuclear enrichment program under the Pressler Amendment.³

Relations were restored out of necessity by the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 following the September 11 attacks. Pakistan's government and military supported the US-led coalition's effort to destroy al-Qaeda, although it was more ambivalent about its plans to remove the Taliban from power. The Pakistan military grew frustrated with the unwillingness of the United States to strike a political deal with the Taliban early in the war in Afghanistan and then felt abandoned once the Bush administration shifted its focus from the war in Afghanistan to the invasion of Iraq. There were also other irritants in the relationship. They included US unwillingness to share information about its intelligence operations in Pakistan, and pressure from Washington to pursue policies that were unpopular at home such as the operation in North Waziristan, a safe haven for militants operating across the border in Afghanistan. Pakistan was reluctant to open a new front in North Waziristan for fear of a backlash across the country.

One reason why the relationship between Pakistan's military and the United States has been so difficult is because it is so transactional. Pakistan and the United States have always lacked a strategic partnership between the two countries and their civilian leaderships. While Pakistan and the United States developed close ties, at least superficially, as a result of cooperation through two wars in Afghanistan, mutual suspicion continues to run deep in the military and intelligence communities of both countries.

The absence of a genuine strategic partnership between the United States and Pakistan has been thrown into even starker relief by the deepening of Islamabad's relationship with Beijing in recent years. China

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is considered an 'all-weather friend' by the Pakistan Army. China has backed Pakistan in turbulent times through major arms sales and the provision of nuclear technology and economic assistance. More recently, the multi-billion dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) program of investments in Pakistan has further cemented the relationship.⁴ Over US\$35 billion has been allocated for energy projects to be completed by 2018,⁵ with many of the coal-powered and solar projects already inaugurated. A further US\$11 billion has been allocated for infrastructure and connectivity projects, including the expansion of the deepwater port in the city of Gwadar at the tip of the Arabian Peninsula. For an energy-starved and investment-deprived country like Pakistan, China has become a source of prosperity and economic stability.⁶

Moreover, China does not interfere in Pakistan's internal affairs or push Pakistan on its support of militant groups. The Pakistan Army is more comfortable pursuing its national security policies despite US threats to cut military and economic aid as long as it has a stable and secure partnership with China. In other words, China is viewed by Pakistan as everything that the United States is not — a reliable partner, especially when it comes to the regional power equation with India. For instance, China has repeatedly blocked India's bid for entry to the Nuclear Suppliers Group,⁷ and at the United Nations vetoed India's appeal to declare Jaish-e-Muhammed chief Masood Azhar as a terrorist.⁸ Masood lives in Pakistan and is known to have the support of the Pakistani security establishment.

BETWEEN MISTRUST AND NECESSITY

There is a view among many officers in the Pakistan Army that the United States is a reckless power that has a history of destabilising foreign countries. This sentiment runs so deep in Pakistan's military and intelligence establishment that it limits its willingness to cooperate with the United States. Of the 23 interviews the author conducted with senior Pakistani military and intelligence officials,⁹ none saw the United States as a positive player in its region or an actor that could be completely trusted. Yet all 23 officials also understood the importance and advantages to Pakistan of its strategic ties with the United States.

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According to a senior military officer in the Pakistan Army, Pakistan does not have a lot of faith in US policy in its region. This was one reason, they said, why Pakistan has hedged its bets on the war in Afghanistan¹⁰ by supporting the US war in Afghanistan, but also ensuring that the Taliban leadership survived so that there would be someone to negotiate with when the war ended.¹¹ Indeed, from the perspective of the Pakistan military, the United States repeatedly squandered opportunities to strike a political settlement in Afghanistan. According to senior Pakistan military and intelligence officials, Pakistan pushed the United States hard to strike a deal with the Taliban in 2002–2004.¹² But US officials ignored the opportunity out of a belief that they could win the war militarily. There

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is a serious fear within the Pakistani security establishment that Pakistan will end up having the same fate as Iraq or Syria due to American adventurism.

Commenting on the growing instability in the region, one senior military official noted: “The last thing we want to see is the US turning Af-Pak into another Iraq.”¹³ Another similar concern that came out of interviews with intelligence officials was a fear that the United States was applying ‘chaos theory’ in Pakistan to destabilise the country to a point where ‘taking out’ Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal, a technological accomplishment prized by both the Pakistan military and the Pakistani people, might be rendered justified.

There is also concern within the Pakistan Army that even today, the United States does not have a real plan for the war in Afghanistan. According to General Ahsan Saleem Hayat, former Vice Chief of the Pakistan Army, the US war strategy is shackled by its domestic politics. He maintains that, “Wars are not won if you’re concerned about the political timelines”.¹⁴ Another senior official within the intelligence services of Pakistan argued that “the United States has the best technology, institutions and human resources to win the Afghan War, but what it lacks is a political will, which undermines US credibility”.¹⁵

Similarly, a Pakistan intelligence officer who was posted in Afghanistan argued that the US conduct of the war in Afghanistan was too heavily influenced by its domestic political considerations in Washington DC. “The United States was in a hurry in Afghanistan; that’s what messed up the situation, and gave an advantage to the Taliban.” The same official also noted “the United States lost the war in Afghanistan due to its own political failures and distractions, but then finds it convenient to blame Pakistan and its so-called support for the Taliban as the reason for its failure”. He added: “Even if we agreed that the failure in Afghanistan was Pakistan’s fault, what then explains the failure in Iraq?”¹⁶

More generally, Pakistan military officers interviewed for this Analysis felt that Pakistan sacrificed the most in the fight against terrorist groups, and yet was punished for failures in US policy. “We are constantly told to do more and threatened with aid cuts and sanctions. There comes a time when we say ‘to hell with you’”, said a retired Pakistan Army General who led operations against militant hideouts in Pakistan.¹⁷

There is obviously a self-serving quality to many of these critiques of US policy by Pakistani military officers. One can question, for example, whether Pakistan’s military kept the Taliban leadership alive because it wanted to preserve the option of a negotiated settlement of the war in Afghanistan, or simply because it wanted to protect a useful instrument of its own policy in Pakistan. Equally, however, no one should be surprised that Pakistan, like other countries, would pursue its own interests. As a former head of Pakistan’s intelligence agency ISI explained to the author: “US foreign policy is guided specifically by its

national interest, yet it doesn't expect Pakistan to have the same principle. It expects Pakistan to give up its national interest for the US national interest, which is a non-starter."¹⁸

Nevertheless, despite operational and strategic differences with the United States, most of the author's interlocutors underlined the importance of US ties for Pakistan's military. According to General Hayat, "the United States has helped tremendously to modernise the Pakistan Army through training and military equipment".¹⁹ Likewise, despite being very critical of the United States, another senior military official noted the significance of US relations to the Pakistan Army: "While Pakistan likes to play the China card, dependence on the United States in terms of military technology and support is unlikely to change Pakistan's view of the importance of military-to-military relations."²⁰

PAKISTAN'S USE OF TERRORIST GROUPS IN AFGHANISTAN

As the Trump administration considers its strategy in Afghanistan, experts in Washington have been debating how best to manage Pakistan. A key aim is to stop Pakistan supporting the Haqqani Network and other terrorist groups that are targeting US interests in Afghanistan. Some experts argue that the United States should punish Pakistan's support for terrorist groups by imposing economic and security sanctions and possibly declaring Pakistan a state sponsor of terrorism.²¹ Others argue that the United States should continue to engage with Pakistan and take greater account of its strategic interests, especially with respect to its anxieties about India. This, they argue, would make Pakistan more amenable to supporting US goals in Afghanistan.²²

What both sides of the debate miss, however, is the way in which Pakistan's approach to terrorist groups has evolved and is unlikely to be shifted by either new threats or inducements. Pakistan's policy towards terrorist groups in Afghanistan has passed through three phases.

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MUJAHIDEEN AS ASSETS

The mujahideen came to be seen as assets to the security establishment in Pakistan out of both immediate security concerns in post-Cold War Afghanistan, and strategic ambitions of neutralising Indian hegemony in the region. There was, however, an unrealised by-product of this mindset: the brewing global jihad.

America's sudden withdrawal from Afghanistan at the end of the Cold War left Pakistan to sort out the mess there with no international support. Afghanistan had quickly descended into a full-scale civil war that was adversely affecting Pakistan through the influx of millions of refugees into the country. Pakistan was already hosting over two million refugees who had fled the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan. With the United States

enforcing sanctions on Pakistan under the Pressler Amendment due to Pakistan's nuclear ambitions, the country was facing a desperate economic crisis. Stability through whatever means became the cornerstone of Pakistan's policy to use mujahideen in Afghanistan.

The Pakistan intelligence agency ISI brokered a deal between different militant groups in the country. It established the Taliban from among Afghan refugees in Pakistan as a way to end the civil war in Afghanistan in a way that also served Pakistan's interests.²³ But to Pakistan's dismay, the vast majority of the international community did not recognise the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan, leaving Pakistan together with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to support the struggling Taliban regime in Kabul.

Beyond supporting mujahideen for stability in Afghanistan, Pakistan had interests in using them as strategic assets in the region against India.

Beyond supporting mujahideen for stability in Afghanistan, Pakistan had interests in using them as strategic assets in the region against India. US and Pakistani support for Afghan mujahideen during the insurgency against the Soviet Union in the 1980s had tremendous results. Not only did the mujahideen defeat the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, it did so at a fraction of the cost of a conventional military operation. According to one retired senior military officer interviewed by the author, this new style of low intensity warfare had a profound impact on Pakistan's military.²⁴ It quickly became the military doctrine of the Pakistan Army and a new breed of mujahideen recruited from Punjab and Kashmir were trained by Pakistan as assets that could be deployed against India in Kashmir and elsewhere.²⁵ Lashkar-e-Tayyaba — a militant outfit headed by Hafiz Saeed and operating on the Indian side of Kashmir — came out of this era.

Pakistan, however, was not alone in seeing mujahideen as assets. The mujahideen who had been mobilised from all over the Muslim world also saw themselves as indispensable. Having defeated the Soviet Union, the mujahideen realised that even the mightiest of powers could fall in this new age of unconventional warfare. The Soviet defeat became the most active recruiting advertisement for militant groups. Over the course of the 1990s, the tribal belt between Afghanistan and Pakistan became a training ground for militants from over 40 countries who would take jihad back to their home countries.²⁶

A former Director-General of ISI noted that it was during the 1990s that Pakistan lost control of the various terrorist groups and militants that were crossing into Afghanistan from Pakistan.²⁷ This was in contrast to the very tight control that Pakistan exercised over militants crossing from Pakistan into Kashmir.²⁸ The number of terrorist and militant groups in Afghanistan rapidly increased, making surveillance difficult for Pakistan's military and intelligence service. It was in this period that al-Qaeda emerged, made up of Arab volunteers involved in Afghanistan who pledged their support to Abdullah Azam and Osama bin Laden, with the aim of overthrowing what they saw as Westernised and American-backed regimes in the Middle East.²⁹

Although wary of Arabs and Uzbek militants taking refuge in the region, Pakistan continued to tolerate the presence of foreign fighters in the country. It turned a blind eye to the development of this militant market, partly because it also benefitted its cause in Kashmir against India but mostly because at that time mujahideen did not pose an existential threat to Pakistan or the Western world. Some of these mujahideen, according to a former Director-General of ISI, had developed close and personal friendships with members of the security establishment in Pakistan.³⁰ These friendships last to this day. Essentially, some mujahideen were assets, others friends, and there were many more that Pakistan ignored. Some of those to which Pakistan turned a blind eye went on to carry out the 9/11 attacks, officially launching the global jihad.

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GOOD TALIBAN VS BAD TALIBAN

The events of 9/11 forced Pakistan to re-evaluate its strategy of using militant groups for both defensive and strategic interests in the region. According to a senior military officer interviewed by the author, Pakistan began to differentiate between three different types of militants.³¹

First, there were those militants who posed a threat to both Pakistan and the United States. Al-Qaeda fits into this category. Second, there were groups such as Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan that posed a threat to Pakistan only and not the United States. Third, there were those groups that posed a threat to the United States, and/or India, and were not considered a direct threat to Pakistan. This group included the Afghan Taliban, the Haqqani Network, and Lashkar-e-Tayyaba.

There was agreement between the United States and Pakistan on how to combat the first two categories of militants. Pakistan supported the elimination of al-Qaeda, and the United States actively helped Pakistan to destroy the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan. There was less agreement, however, on combatting the third category. Pakistan did not see these groups as a threat to the country and did not want to provoke them into becoming a threat. As one senior Pakistani military officer noted to the author: "It was not in the national interest of Pakistan to take on militants who were not a threat to Pakistan but might become a threat if Pakistan pursued action against them."³²

According to a former Pakistani general, the United States was essentially fighting two wars. One was the war on terrorism against al-Qaeda to which Pakistan was fully committed; the second was the war against the Taliban, which Pakistan saw as a misguided war against the 'sons of the soil' that could have been avoided through a political settlement.

In the opinion of the former Director-General of ISI, General Ehsan ul Haque, "there was no reluctance over joining the war on terror; instead the reluctance was over the strategy and method of achieving the American goals".³³ Pakistan wanted the United States to distinguish

between what it saw as good Taliban and bad Taliban — that is, Taliban that wanted to strike a peace deal and Taliban that wanted to continue fighting.³⁴

Over the course of the war, Pakistan took steps to ensure that the Taliban leadership survived the US assault. General Ehsan ul Haque was of the view that such a strategy was needed to ensure that there was a logical end to the war and that Afghanistan did not become a bigger mess than it already was with the vacuum in local leadership.³⁵ The Pakistan Army believed that once the initial military operation was concluded, Afghanistan would require a new government and reconstruction for which the Taliban leadership might be useful. There was also a vested interest in saving a group that Pakistan had trained and nurtured for over a decade. It was an investment that Pakistan wanted to protect.³⁶

The real shift in Pakistan's attitudes towards the United States came with the invasion of Iraq. It was then that the Pakistan military reassessed the US commitment in Afghanistan.³⁷ From 2003 to 2008, when the United States was preoccupied in Iraq, Afghanistan again became ravaged by insurgencies and suicide bombings. The Taliban were able to take back control as US legitimacy in Afghanistan eroded.

Pakistan's unwillingness to stand up against the Taliban and other militant groups in Afghanistan undermined support for it in Washington. It also came at a security cost in Pakistan. Rising acts of terrorism and sectarian violence in Pakistan due to the spread of the Taliban's strict Islamic and political ideology in the country led to the development of new militant outfits including Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. This led to the third and current phase in Pakistan's approach to terrorist and militant groups.

STAYING RELEVANT IN AFGHANISTAN

In discussions with members of the Pakistani security establishment, there was a strong sense that the United States does not have the capacity or credibility to reach a long-term, durable settlement of the war in Afghanistan. If anything, the Pakistani security establishment sees China as playing a major role in the Afghan peace process³⁸ — something with which Pakistan would be comfortable.

China has recently seen a rise of terrorism in the Muslim-majority Xinjiang province, which shares a border with Afghanistan and has a direct stake in the Afghan peace process. China is also a member of the quad group working on the Afghan peace process and has been directly negotiating with the Taliban.³⁹ Also, China's plans to extend its Belt and Road Initiative into Afghanistan means it is viewed by both Afghanistan and Pakistan as bringing stability to the region.

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As a result, there appears to be no indication on the part of Pakistan to strike a deal with the United States regarding the Haqqani Network. There was a time when Pakistan supported the Haqqani Network out of uncertainty that the United States may abandon the region. Now the Pakistan military and intelligence establishment views the Haqqani Network as the only leverage it has in Afghanistan — especially when the United States inevitably, in its view, fails to deliver. The Haqqani Network makes up the largest and most lethal insurgency group in Afghanistan against the NATO forces. Founded by Jalaluddin Haqqani, the Network played an active role in defeating the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Its leadership and members received their early education in Darul Uloom Haqqania, and enjoyed cordial relations with the security establishment in Pakistan. The continued US push on the Haqqani Network is seen by the Pakistani security establishment as a means to cut Pakistan out of the Afghan peace process. However, it is unlikely to force Pakistan to change its behaviour, as it goes directly against its perceived national interest.

The view in the Pakistani security establishment is that almost all players in Afghanistan have their preferred militant proxies. Why, then, should Pakistan give up its long-held assets? Also, with the growing Chinese presence in the region, there is a belief that Pakistan does not need the United States as much as it used to.⁴⁰ This is not to say Pakistan doesn't want good working relations with the United States or the continued transfer of military technology. But it is less willing to accommodate US requests than it once was.

The United States and Pakistan may have the same goal of bringing about an end to the conflict in Afghanistan, but they certainly have different ideas about the nature of that peace. What US policymakers will increasingly have to confront, however, is a situation in which the United States has neither the leverage nor the credibility to exert much influence on Pakistan's national security policies.

CONCLUSION: FRIEND OR FOE?

Pakistan has never been exclusively a friend or a foe of the United States. Much like the United States it has always pursued what it perceives to be its national interests. Sometimes these coincide with US interests, and sometimes they conflict. What is changing, however, is the way in which Pakistan's military has grown increasingly anxious about the relationship with the United States and especially the US role in Afghanistan. It appears increasingly likely that Pakistan will move further away from the US position on Afghanistan, perhaps leveraging its growing relationship with China. This does not mean that Pakistan will actively attempt to sabotage US interests in Afghanistan. But neither is it likely to support them when they are in conflict with its own.

The United States and Pakistan may have the same goal of bringing about an end to the conflict in Afghanistan, but they certainly have different ideas about the nature of that peace.

Despite the difficulties in the relationship it would not serve US interests in Afghanistan for Washington to isolate Pakistan from efforts to end the conflict in Afghanistan. For the United States and Pakistan to move forward on Afghanistan, the best course of action is to have realistic expectations of each other, and to have regular and frank conversations about policy and practice. To achieve stability in Afghanistan, Pakistan doesn't need to be a friend or foe. Both countries need to work in those areas where they continue to have common interests. Pakistan wants to continue a positive relationship with the United States, but perhaps not as much as the United States would like it to and certainly not under the full terms and conditions that the US demands. The question is, can the United States live with what it perceives as a frenemy? And can Pakistan afford to tread on a dubious path that will isolate it in the region?

NOTES

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⁹ Confidential interviews with 23 senior Pakistani and military officials were conducted over the period of February 2016 to December 2016.

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¹¹ “Is Pakistan Backing the Taliban?”, al Jazeera, *Inside Story*, 2 February 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/insidestory/2012/02/2012227163094221.html>.

¹² Confidential interview with the author, Islamabad, Pakistan, August 2016.

¹³ Confidential interview with the author, Islamabad, Pakistan, June 2016.

¹⁴ Interview with General Ahsan Saleem Hayat, former Vice Chief of the Pakistan Army, Lahore, Pakistan, May 2016.

¹⁵ Confidential interview with the author, Lahore, Pakistan, May 2016.

¹⁶ Confidential interview with the author, Islamabad, Pakistan, August 2016.

¹⁷ Confidential interview with the author, Islamabad, Pakistan, July 2016.

¹⁸ Confidential interview with the author, Islamabad, Pakistan, August 2016.

¹⁹ Interview with General Ahsan Saleem Hayat, former Vice Chief of the Pakistan Army, Lahore, Pakistan, May 2016.

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²³ Ahmad Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

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³⁰ Confidential interview with the author, Islamabad, Pakistan, July 2016.

³¹ Confidential interview with the author, Islamabad, Pakistan, June 2016.

³² Confidential interview with the author, Islamabad, Pakistan, August 2016.

³³ Interview with General Ehsan ul Haque (retd), Islamabad, Pakistan, August 2016.

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³⁵ Interview with General Ehsan ul Haque (retd), Islamabad, Pakistan, August 2016.

³⁶ AbuBakar Siddique, "Aziz Admits Pakistan Housing Afghan Taliban Leaders", *The Dawn*, 2 March 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1243093>.

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