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The New Great Game: Pakistan's Approach to Afghanistan after 2014

Larry P. Goodson

A modern day Great Game is playing out in Inner Asia once again. Like the Great Game of the nineteenth century, it centers on Afghanistan, a land that falls outside every state's sphere of influence and has always been intensely hostile to foreigners, making it a perfect playing field. China, India, Russia, and the United States are the major powers embroiled in competition in and around Afghanistan, but Pakistan is also very much in the game. As the most significant front-line state, as well as the country of first asylum to the largest number of Afghan refugees (and largest refugee population in the world from 1982 to 1997), Pakistan correctly saw itself as having invested much in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation in the 1980s. This investment cost Islamabad a great deal, however, even as it provided a great opportunity. Afghan *mujahideen* operated from Pakistani soil to attack Afghanistan, causing retaliatory attacks by the Soviet and Afghan governments that accompanied all the ills that millions of refugees can inflict on a poor state. At the same time, Pakistan's Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) used the Afghan war of the 1980s to refine its strategy of leveraging asymmetric actors to influence events in hostile or less-governed spaces in the country's immediate neighborhood. This goes to the heart of the security dilemma facing Pakistan today, which also helps explain its problem with India and how Afghanistan after 2014 fits into that relationship.

The Great Game construct offers much to our understanding of post-2014 Afghanistan and the factors that will likely drive the competition there. This essay articulates Pakistan's primary national interests in Afghanistan and how those interests can be expected to play out in the context of the interests of the other major actors that are also engaged there. It will conclude with some predictions about Pakistan's post-2014 approach to Afghanistan.

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NOTE The views expressed in this essay do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or U.S. government.

Pakistan and Afghanistan: Historical Context

Even before the partition of 1947, Pakistan's security consciousness has been dominated by the perceived threat posed by its larger neighbor India, with which it has fought four wars and numerous smaller conflicts. India's sheer size has helped it prevail in all these military exchanges, prompting Pakistan to invest more and more in its military over time. Today, Pakistan has a large and very professional military with a poor track record against India's military, a large nuclear arsenal with robust delivery systems (postured against India's Cold Start conventional strategic doctrine), and an active use of asymmetric actors (guerrillas, insurgents, irregulars, and terrorists), especially in the contested area of Kashmir. This "strategic triad" both reflects and reinforces the fixation of the Pakistani military on India, motivates Pakistan's spending and strategic doctrines, and causes it to focus increasingly on building, funding, training, and running asymmetric actors outside Pakistan.

In the 1990s, after the Soviet Union collapsed and the United States extricated itself from Afghanistan, only Pakistan remained deeply engaged there. Russia, the United States, China, and India all had other priorities: modern Russia was a weakened successor to the Soviet Union, the United States was focused on the Persian Gulf and Eastern Europe, China was reeling from the Tiananmen Square uprising, and India was set adrift from its treaty arrangement with the Soviet Union in the wake of the latter's collapse. The United States left Afghanistan largely in the hands of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, with a decade of increasingly virulent Islamism and destructive civil war as the result. In the latter half of the 1990s, Iran also became engaged in supporting its clients in western, central, and northern Afghanistan, deepening the civil war into ethnic-sectarian cleansing.

The Afghan war that erupted after September 11, 2001, changed the regional equation. Today, the United States plays the dominant role, but a rising China, emerging India, re-emerging Russia, troubled Iran, and other regional players all are actively involved in Afghanistan, as are multilateral and nongovernmental organizations. Naturally, national interests vary and in some cases are divergent. Pakistan views each country's involvement in Afghanistan through the lens of its own interests.

Pakistan's National Interests in Afghanistan

Pakistan has four major national interests in Afghanistan. First, Pakistan is home to over half of the world's 50 million Pashtuns, who

are primarily divided between Pakistan and Afghanistan by the Durand Line. As the Pashtun people are famously tribal in organization and straddle the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, they provide a mechanism by which both governments can meddle in the other's affairs. In the nineteenth-century Great Game, this resulted in "war by proxy," whereby the major contenders, Great Britain and Russia, kept costs down on the far-flung edges of their empires by using local levies. Today, Pakistan views elements of the Afghan Pashtuns as possible proxies, just as it used the mujahideen in the 1980s and Taliban in the 1990s. Primarily because of the Pashtun factor, Pakistan and Afghanistan have shared a tumultuous history since Pakistan's creation in 1947. As the larger and stronger country, Pakistan sees itself as having a stake in Afghanistan's internal affairs. And as the country that took in the most Afghan refugees during the dark days of the 1980s, with significant deleterious effects on its economy and society, Pakistan sees itself as being owed a favorable outcome in Afghanistan today.

Second, as the Afghan war of the 1980s was winding down, Pakistan's military leadership began to propagate a strategic doctrinal shift in approach that came to be known as "strategic depth." The concept was that Afghanistan could provide some territorial depth for Pakistani forces in a conventional struggle with India. (After all, Islamabad is less than 80 miles from the border with India.) Pakistan still sees Afghanistan—especially the Pashtun tribal belt along the border—as an area of influence. Since 2002, however, India's Kautilyan "mandala strategy" of befriending the Afghan government to eliminate Pakistan's strategic depth has directly threatened this national security interest and will undoubtedly lead to more bloodshed as the United States reduces its presence in the region.

Third, Afghanistan's natural resources and transit corridors also have attracted Pakistan's interest. Afghanistan is a linchpin of regional trade, as it connects Central Asia, China, Iran, and Pakistan. Whether by pipelines, power lines, road networks, or railroads, raw materials and consumer goods alike must cross Afghanistan if regional trade is to function. Pakistan has a growing need for the resources of Afghanistan and Central Asia, as do its regional rivals. The recent discovery of substantial and varied mineral deposits in Afghanistan has only made the country more attractive to outside powers as a source of valuable raw materials. Since 1950, the Pakistan-Afghanistan Transit Trade Treaty—subsequently renegotiated on several occasions, most recently in 2010—has provided landlocked Afghanistan with access to a port (Karachi). Yet despite the

treaty, Afghanistan has been a source of many illegally smuggled goods into Pakistan, typically into the Federally Administered Tribal Areas that abut the Durand Line.

Fourth, Pakistan fears the other regional powers and recognizes that if there is a new, zero-sum Great Game in the region, it could lose everything as it faces off against India. Thus, Islamabad intends or at least hopes to control the transition in Kabul in 2014 by placing its own preferred candidate on the throne (applying another traditional Great Game technique, diplomacy by intrigue).

*Pakistan's Relations with Other Regional Actors:
Prospects for a New Great Game*

In the modern-day Great Game emerging in and around Afghanistan, regional actors are following the paramount rule of the traditional Great Game, which is “never play to win—always play not to lose.” Afghanistan is too remote and rugged for major countries to commit their primary military assets or national resources to defeating their rivals there. When these countries have attempted to do so, they have often lost (Great Britain twice in the nineteenth century), and sometimes lost with disastrous consequences (the Soviet Union). As was evident in the nineteenth-century Great Game, Afghanistan can provide a useful arena for regional or global competitors to play out their rivalries.

India. Pakistan and India have been engaged in a long-running rivalry that will continue to play out in Afghanistan. India now has a broader and deeper relationship with Afghanistan, having signed a strategic partnership in 2011 and sponsored Afghanistan's membership in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) since 2006. It has also built roads in Afghanistan and Iran, as well as the Chabahar port in Iran, to weaken Afghan dependence on Pakistan for access to the outside world. Indian companies have invested more than \$2 billion in Afghanistan, most notably the successful bid for the bulk of the Hajigak iron ore in Bamiyan. The deal stands as the centerpiece of an expected \$10.7 billion in Indian investment over the next 30 years as well as more than \$1 billion in aid since 2002.¹

Pakistan has neither the resources that India possesses nor the same strategic approach toward Afghanistan. Islamabad wants a government in

¹ Bhashyam Kasturi, “India's Role in Afghanistan,” State of Pakistan, web log, February 20, 2012 ~ <http://www.stateofpakistan.org/indias-role-in-afghanistan>.

Kabul that will not pursue policies that it considers inimical to its interests, and it definitely considers a government engaged in a strategic partnership with India to be counter to its interests. As discussed above, Pakistan cannot fight India directly, as India's large army is postured so close to the Pakistan border, especially in Kashmir, and its readiness to deploy rapidly under Cold Start can only be countered through the threat of nuclear deterrence. The 2008 Mumbai attacks by the Pakistani terrorist organization Lashkar-e-Taiba, which turned out to have been supported by the ISI, are a classic example of the asymmetric actor leg of Pakistan's strategic triad. Realistically, asymmetric actors are the only offensive tool for confronting India that is available to Pakistan's national security establishment. The Mumbai attacks, however, pushed India to the edge of a military response, meaning that similarly spectacular attacks by ISI-sponsored actors on Indian territory (with the exception of Jammu and Kashmir) will almost certainly not be allowed to take place again without Indian retribution. Pakistan will thus likely continue to employ ISI-directed asymmetric actors to achieve its ends inside Afghanistan and hopefully keep its conflict with India to a simmering or even lower level.

The United States. The United States has had a long on-again, off-again transactional relationship with Pakistan, aligning with Islamabad when it could advance U.S. interests, such as during the 1980s, and turning elsewhere when those interests had been achieved or abandoned. In September 2001 the United States was in off-again mode, having imposed sanctions on Pakistan following its nuclear tests in 1998. All of that changed with the events of September 11. The United States convinced Pakistan to abandon the Taliban, at least somewhat, and made it a "major non-NATO ally" in return for the ability to use Pakistani territory for the primary supply routes to sustain U.S. and other troops in Afghanistan. However, a trust deficit exists between Washington and Islamabad. Pakistan has continued to support various Taliban and Islamist factions, most notably by harboring Osama Bin Laden. The United States, for its part, has pursued a strategic dialogue with India over the past decade that has included both the U.S.-India civil nuclear agreement in 2008 and a deepening strategic partnership that Pakistan views as directly threatening its interests.

China. If the United States has been Pakistan's "far away, fair weather" friend, China has always claimed to be Pakistan's "all weather" friend. Islamabad and Beijing developed a close strategic partnership in the early 1950s, and since the 1960s China has been engaged in clear competition with India. In the 1970s, China and Pakistan built a highway through Pakistan's

Karakoram Mountains to directly link the two countries, and in the 1980s China helped Pakistan develop its nuclear program. In this century, China has built the Pakistani port of Gwadar (which it also manages), engaged in joint production of fighter aircraft and tanks, and established a free trade agreement with Pakistan. China has also invested at least \$3.5 billion in Afghanistan to date, primarily in the Aynak copper mine and in winning bids to develop oil tracts in Faryab and Sar-i-Pul, where its commercial presence provides a counterweight to India's growing investments there.²

Other regional states. Similar to Islamabad's interests in the areas of Afghanistan that border Pakistan, Iran wants to preserve its influence in western Afghanistan, a region that was culturally and historically part of greater Persia. Many Afghans from the Herat area are closer to Tehran than Kabul, and there is not a strong enough warlord in Herat to contend for power or power-sharing in Kabul. As mentioned above, Iran has helped develop its own route into Afghanistan in concert with India to offset Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan's southern and eastern Pashtun belt. Russia has less direct influence in Afghanistan but fears that another resurgence of militant Islamism there could affect its extensive investments in the oil and gas infrastructure in the Central Asian states north of Afghanistan. Russia also fears the expansion of Chinese influence in Central Asia. Thus, both in response to the present-day Islamist threat and because Pakistan and China are aligned, Russia's interests in Afghanistan diverge from Pakistan's.

Conclusion: A Threatened Pakistan Must Play the New Great Game in Afghanistan

Pakistan views all of this regional activity in and around Afghanistan as distinctly threatening to its own national interests. It would be bad enough if a China-Pakistan-Saudi Arabia nexus were to square off against an India-Russia-Iran nexus of like-minded countries, but the situation is not nearly that simple. Thus, Pakistan has had to present itself to Afghanistan as a friend that is committed to peace and stability there, while continuing to support proxy warriors who directly undermine that peace and development. Pakistan wants an Afghan government that is favorably disposed toward Islamabad and cool toward New Delhi. Although the Pakistani leadership does not wish for an open war against India, especially in Afghanistan, it

² Nicklas Norling, "The Emerging China-Afghanistan Relationship," *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analyst*, May 14, 2008 ~ <http://old.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4858>.

will not accept stability on Indian terms. Thus, we can expect a continuing insurgency in Afghanistan, directed by the hidden hand of the ISI, to allow Pakistan to thwart Indian advances. If the post-Karzai government continues to pursue a strategic partnership or deeper relationship with India, or if the United States leverages India to be its regional partner in Afghanistan, then Pakistan will continue to utilize asymmetric actors inside Afghanistan in pursuit of its national interests there.

In 2001, I published a book entitled *Afghanistan's Endless War*. I intended it as a history and primer for the situation in Afghanistan at the time. I did not realize that its title would describe the country's long-term future as well. ♦