

## AT THE BORDER OF PAKISTAN AND AFGHANISTAN: THE GRAND GAME AGAINST TERRORISM

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*'It is a formidable challenge to turn the page in Afghanistan and in Pakistan. This can be achieved only through concerted national, regional and international action. It will require that there be an Afghan Government which is responsive and responsible. . [...] The conflict in Afghanistan cannot be resolved without dealing with complex issues in Pakistan. [...] A stable and democratic Pakistan is of strategic importance for the future development of the region. Any international approach must take into account the differences between Pakistan and Afghanistan, but must also reckon with the need for complementarity and consistency between the two.'*<sup>1</sup>

This is how the EU Political and Security Committee analyses the situation in Afghanistan and in Pakistan in its document dated 21 October 2009 to COREPER<sup>2</sup>. Nearly 10 years after the first NATO troops set foot in Afghanistan, how is it that such a situation developed and how has 'Afghanisation' come to extend beyond the borders of the country? Relying on the remedy that made it possible to pacify Europe and judiciously singling out the key role of Pakistan-Afghanistan interaction, the solution recommended by the European Union follows directly from its policy of *soft power*<sup>3</sup> and essentially takes the form of economic assistance and regional cooperation. Relevant as that may be, when putting a hypothetically stable Afghan state on its feet and neutralising the Taliban one cannot choose to overlook an effective and consistent security strategy, particularly in the tribal areas at the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan, a territory where a frontier established in 1893 by the British diplomat Sir Henry Mortimer Durand and the Afghan Emir Abdur Rahman Khan artificially separates tribes of this mountainous region.

While NATO is getting ready to launch a major offensive to again take the initiative in Afghanistan and while American *Predator* drones are operating in the border areas of Pakistan, we must recall that the stability of the region and the security of the world is playing out as well in the steep-sided valleys.

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<sup>1</sup> *Strengthening EU Action in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, PSC, 21/10/09, <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/09/st14/st14064.en09.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Committee of the Permanent Representatives.

<sup>3</sup> The ability of a political actor to indirectly influence the behaviour of another actor through non-coercive means (economic, cultural or ideological, for example).

## **I. Roots of the problem**

### **1. *'The swathe of a sword through the mountains'*<sup>4</sup>**

Exercising strategic control of these tribal areas at the Afghan-Pakistan border on horseback has for centuries been an issue and a major difficulty for the powers which were deployed there: the Persians, Greeks, Arabs, Mongols, British, Russians and now the Westerners in a coalition under the NATO banner. It is not without reason that ancient Bactria is sometimes called 'the cemetery of empires.'

Recent historic events show up this nickname in a particularly raw light. The Khyber Pass, one of the most important strategic routes between today's Afghanistan and Pakistan, was also the focal point of the Grand Game which was played out between Russia and the British Empire for control of Central Asia and India in the 19th century. How can we fail to mention the bloody episode of the First Anglo-Afghan War in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the British Empire, conqueror of India and master of the seas, saw its ambitions dashed by the ferocity of the Pashtun warriors? This defeat constituted a major blow to the prestige of the English Army in Asia which was only surpassed by the fall of Singapore a century later.

### **2. *The Soviet invasion and Afghan resistance (1979-1989)***

This bloody episode was not the only one in recent history where a superpower was destabilised by the local tribes. The Soviet invasion of 1979 was another. On the one hand, that invasion mobilised the United States against the Soviet Union, due to the proximity of the hydrocarbon resources of the Persian Gulf. On the other hand, because the regime of the Shah of Iran fell at the same time, in 1979, and was replaced by a theocratic government profoundly hostile to the Americans, this reinforced still more their determination to contain the Soviet advance in this region.

In the midst of the Cold War, the intervention of the Red Army in Afghanistan, nearly a century and a half after the British, became ensnared in an endless guerilla war which cost it 15,000 men and resulted in a million victims on the Afghan side.<sup>5</sup> This war on the sidelines of the East-West conflict and the choices which were made by the warring parties at the time still shape the strategic and security situation in the region today.

### **3. *Pakistan: sanctuary of Islamic resistance***

In order to counter the Soviet Union, Pakistan, a neighbouring country to Afghanistan which has people of the same ethnic stock in its border areas, became the rear base and arsenal of those opposing the Soviet occupation. American support for the Mujaheddin who left from refugee camps in Pakistan in order to tear apart the Red Army, became apparent when the Afghan militia were equipped with ultra-modern American war materiel: *Stinger FIM 92-A* ground-to-air missile launchers which ravaged both Russian planes and helicopters.

One key ally in the resistance to Soviet presence was the President of Pakistan Muhammad Zia ul Haq, who was installed as head of the country in 1977 through a coup d'état by the military and assassinated President Zulfikar Bhutto. Playing the card of religion to the limit and determined to 're-Islamise' Pakistan, he encouraged the wearing of the veil for women, imposed bank and court systems based on the Sharia and created dozens of Madrassas (religious schools) which educated multitudes of militant Islamists. By these actions, he encouraged a culture of Jihad which is still continuing today in Pakistan.

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<sup>4</sup> The words used by Rudyard Kipling to describe the Khyber Pass.

<sup>5</sup> CNN, *Soldiers of God, Documentary*, 2001.

In the conflict which tore Afghanistan apart, Zia ul Haq in fact had his own agenda and ardently wanted his neighbour to fall into the hands of an Islamist regime, which he hoped it would be easy for Islamabad to manipulate. Pakistan, which controlled education, the distribution of assistance and of arms to the Afghan rebels, tried to use this to attain its objective of turning an Islamic Afghanistan into a satellite. Thus, Islamabad clearly promoted the extremist Islamist Gulbuddin Hekmatyar<sup>6</sup> at the expense of other groups, including that of Commander Ahmed Shah Massud.

### ***3. The Afghan civil war and the Taliban regime (1992-2001)***

In 1989, the Red Army withdrew without enjoying victory after it proved unable to reduce the resistance of the Afghans, who were receiving massive logistical and material support from the United States and its allies. The pro-Soviet Democratic Republic of Afghanistan collapsed in 1992 and the country went through a period of civil war during which the Taliban (students of religion) educated in the Madrassas of Pakistan progressively conquered the country with the help of the Pakistani Army, except for the Tajik area, which remained in the hands of the Northern Alliance (led by Commander Massud). The Taliban finally took power in Kabul in 1996, installing a totalitarian and reactionary Islamist regime led by the Mullah Omar. They imposed on the Afghan population an absurd theocracy which destroyed its historic pre-Islamic legacy (in particular, the Buddhas of Bamyan), mutilated, executed and stoned people to death in the name of the Quran, and also prohibited the wearing of white socks, music, dancing, shaving of beards and keeping photographs.

They were finally driven from power by the NATO intervention which was a military reaction to the attacks of 11 September. The support and the hospitality which the Taliban offered to the head of Al-Qaida Osama Ben Laden and his followers naturally made them a target. The fall of the Taliban and the capture of Ben Laden were the declared objectives of the Westerners' military action.

## **II. The 'Afghanisation' of Pakistan**

### ***1. The tribal areas of Pakistan: 'The number one terrorist centre of the planet'***

After being driven from power in Afghanistan by the Western forces, the Taliban naturally took refuge in the Pakistani tribal areas where they came from and where they reconstituted their networks thanks to the benevolence of the Army intelligence services (ISI). It is estimated that 3,000 Al-Qaida combatants crossed the border to establish themselves in Pakistan.

These 'Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) located in the Northwest of Pakistan and bordering Afghanistan are the most rural in the country and have regularly been in conflict with the central government. They are divided into seven districts - Khyber, Kurram, Bajaur, Mohmand, Orakzai, North Waziristan and South Waziristan – and five border regions. These mountainous and arid regions on the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan were always left to themselves and have today become, according to the Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid, an expert on the Taliban movement, the number one 'terrorist centre' of the planet.

In fact, when considering the Islamists who had taken refuge among them, the Pakistanis at first continued to keep two irons in the fire: hunting down the leaders of Al-Qaida and thus giving proofs of sincerity to Washington, but discreetly encouraging the Taliban to prepare to

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<sup>6</sup> The same one who more than 20 years later claimed to have arranged the ambush of Subori in August 2008 where 10 French soldiers lost their lives. He has been sought by the United States as a terrorist. Source : [20080929-afghan-warlord-hekmatyar-claims-ambush-french-troops-afghanistan](http://www.20080929-afghan-warlord-hekmatyar-claims-ambush-french-troops-afghanistan)

take over in Afghanistan, since they are convinced that the Westerners will end up leaving the country.<sup>7</sup> But, as the Westerners saw, following the retreat of the Soviets from Afghanistan, the Pakistani authorities and the ISI quickly lost control over what they had created.

When the Pakistani military headquarters and intelligence services finally realised what had happened and under Western pressure decided to smash the Taliban even within Pakistan, it was too late. Unable to achieve its goal, the security apparatus tried to set up non-aggression pacts with the Taliban in certain areas, hoping that they would be satisfied with this. But they didn't play along, since they did not really need ISI support. They were already receiving help from other groups, which were themselves allied to the intelligence services but 'demobilised': the Kashmir Islamist militia.

In fact, in 2004, Pakistan President Musharraf decided to 'warm up' relations with India and interrupted the infiltration of extremist Pakistani militants into Kashmir, a territory which is disputed by the two countries. From that point on, 100,000 activists trained in guerrilla warfare by the ISI found themselves unemployed.

The Pakistani government didn't undertake anything to disarm these groups or find an alternative activity for the militia. The Taliban and Al-Qaida seized the opportunity which presented itself to gather together experienced and high-performance combatants and to turn them against their former masters: the Pakistani state. This is how, beginning in 2005, extremist groups which were now allied with the Taliban and Al-Qaida decided to launch a Jihad in Pakistan and to take power in Islamabad.

### ***1. The Pakistani offensive against the Taliban***

In December 2008, the Taliban took under their control the Swat Valley, situated in Northwest Pakistan. They imposed their law there, prohibiting women to leave their houses unaccompanied or to go out not wearing the veil, destroying more than a hundred schools for women, banning all criticism of Islam and hunting down those who listened to music or sold DVDs.<sup>8</sup>

The Swat Valley is a strategic place, a communications nexus. It provides access to two main areas of conflict, Afghanistan and Kashmir. Situated 100 kilometres from the capital and until recently a holiday location for the elite, its road infrastructure is of good quality. It is also a region rich in emerald mines which the Taliban deal in, just as they engage in drug trafficking. The Pakistani Taliban also finance their activities by kidnapping and by the money they receive from wealthy 'sponsors' in the oil sheikdoms. Thanks to all these resources, they can buy arms and high-performance vehicles, as well as pay their men between 200 and 300 dollars per month, i.e., much more than the salary of a soldier in the Pakistani Army.

After some prevarication and attempts at compromise, at the end of April 2009 the Pakistani government launched a military offensive aimed at retaking control of the Swat Valley. The Pakistani Taliban in this valley were truly unable to resist the military superiority of the Pakistani Army, but some of them managed to flee the area for other territories hostile to the line of Islamabad such as the districts of South Waziristan and the Orakzai. In October 2009, the Pakistani Army declared an end to its operations in Swat and directed its firepower at South Waziristan, where it also gets material and air support from the United States.

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<sup>7</sup> *The Taliban is Engaged in Pakistan [L'engrenage Taliban au Pakistan]*, L'Express, Dominique Lagarde with Eric de Lavarène, published 23/09/2008.

<sup>8</sup> *The Pakistani Taliban impose the Sharia in the Swat Valley*, NetLex Focus, April 2009, <http://www.netlexfrance.net/07/04/2009/les-talibans-pakistanais-imposent-la-charia-dans-la-vallee-du-swat/>

Between October and December 2009, the offensive in South Waziristan was going full force, creating in its wake thousands of refugees and a wave of attacks and reprisals directed against the Pakistani metropolises: Lahore, Islamabad and, above all, Peshawar. The militant Islamists went so far as to attack the headquarters of the Army in Rawalpindi in November 2009. While according to observers the operational structure of the Taliban was hit, still many militants were able to flee this area for the North and other regions of the tribal belt on the Afghan border, North Waziristan and Orakzai. The latter region was the fiefdom of the new head of the Pakistani Taliban, Hakimullah Mehsud<sup>9</sup>, who was probably killed in January 2010 by *Predator* drones.<sup>10</sup>

After South Waziristan, one might have thought that the Pakistani would concentrate its operations on the district of Orakzai, another tribal region close to Afghanistan, as was announced in December 2009 by Prime Minister Yussuf Raza Gilani. However, at the end of January 2010, the Pakistani Army announced via its spokesman that no major offensive against the Taliban would take place for the coming 6 months to one year, The official reason given was to allow them 'to consolidate the military gains.'<sup>11</sup> But perhaps there were other less official reasons.

## **2. The growing American involvement in Pakistan**

Ever since the summer of 2008, the United States has been getting more and more involved in Pakistan and especially in the tribal areas. This shadow war is being carried out with a minimum of forces on the ground. Starting from Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada and under CIA control, *Predator* drones target refugee terrorists in the valleys of Pakistan. For Washington, these attacks are a direct corollary of the military action underway in Afghanistan. However, because they take place on Pakistani territory, they cannot avoid creating a certain tension with Islamabad.

The first mission of attack drones in this area dates from 2004, but since the end of the presidency of George Bush and the arrival of Barack Obama in the White House, this tactic has been at the core of American military initiatives against the Taliban. The number of strikes has gone from 36 in 2008 to 53 in 2009 (around one per week). And 2010 has seen a reinforcement of this trend: at the end of January 2010, the number had already reached 11 strikes, i.e., one every two days. The turning point was the attack of 30 December 2009 on the Chapman Base in Khost, an Afghan city close to the border with Pakistan, when 7 CIA agents were killed. This base has strategic importance for the Americans and plays an important role in collection of information on targets to be hunted down in Pakistan.

Nearly all the drone attacks have been aimed at North and South Waziristan, where, apart from Pakistani Taliban leaders, about fifteen Al-Qaida leaders have been killed, in particular, Saleh Al- Somali, and many foreign volunteers (Palestinians, Uzbeks, Philipinos...). This demonstrates, if proof were needed, the way Al-Qaida has put down roots in the area. Thanks to these successes, it is likely that the United States will stress use of this type of equipment, which is flexible, effective and does not result in any loss of life for American soldiers.

Although the Pakistani leaders are protesting very quietly about the American intrusions into their air space and the actions which result from this, it seems, despite everything, that Islamabad sees that its cynical game vis-à-vis the Islamists is being upset by American military activism. On the one hand, the Pakistani leaders are pleased that the CIA *Predators* are targeting the Tehrik-i-taliban movement (Pakistani Taliban, TTP) in South Waziristan,

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE5BB0WI20091212>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSSGE60DoBH> .

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/25/world/asia/25waziristan.html>

which turned against them. On the other hand, they are worried that groups linked to the security apparatus of Islamabad and intended for the fight in Afghanistan are also targets in Waziristan: in the North of the province, respectively, the Haqqani network (named for the veteran Afghan from the war against the Soviets, Jalaluddin Haqqani) as well as the organisation of Gul Bahadur and, in the South, the group of Mullah Nazir. More than half the strikes have targeted them though these groups are considered to be 'good Taliban' by Islamabad and are linked to the Pakistani security apparatus by non-aggression agreements. As we see, the drones raise questions about the spider's web of arrangements set up by the Pakistani secret services. One would not be surprised to find that one of the main demands of the Pakistanis will be to have control over this technology transferred to them.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, Washington is stepping up its economic assistance to Afghanistan and to Pakistan, which will share 7.1 billion dollars of American aid in 2011. The objective of this manna - 4 billion for Afghanistan and 3.1 for Pakistan -, which will only be a part of the civilian American financial assistance, is to 'beat Al-Qaida by increasing assistance to the two countries and providing funds for governance, reconstruction and development.' This is a symbol of the growing importance of Pakistan in the regional equation: these funds represent a doubling of the credits from the Department of State allocated to Pakistan and a slight reduction for Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup>

### **III. Conclusion: are we going to see the Taliban in power in Islamabad?**

Despite everything, the Pakistani Army, which employs a half million soldiers, remains the bastion against the Taliban and seems determined not to let it go too far, even if some of the troops are rather favourably inclined to the Islamists. However, one must not ignore the capability of the Taliban to be a nuisance or the groups claiming to be Al-Qaida, which have nothing further to prove in this regard.

They could further destabilise Pakistan and the region, thereby creating an explosive political, economic and social context where everything becomes possible. Due to the conflict between the Army and the Taliban, as well as the economic crisis, Pakistan could face the prospect of millions of refugees and massive unemployment<sup>14</sup> which would in turn provide fertile ground where radical Islamism can prosper at its leisure. The future of a stable Pakistan depends on the relations which the political authorities and society can maintain with the Muslim religion, which has too often been used, either by ultra-violent terrorist groups or by politicians who are calculating how to pull the strings from the sidelines.

The Pakistan of Pervez Musharraf and of his successor Asif Ali Zardari is definitely an inescapable element for the West in its fight against Islamic terrorism, notwithstanding the double game played by the Pakistani secret services vis-à-vis the Taliban, which ended up costing the country very dearly. Whether they succeeded in driving back the Jihadi threat or not, the military offensives will remain without long-lasting effect if the authorities in Pakistan continue to handle this unstable explosive of armed Islamism according to their supposed interests.

The situation is difficult for President Zardari whose ability to act is becoming more and more limited. While democratic institutions sink into powerlessness, Pakistan may turn

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<sup>12</sup> [http://www.lemonde.fr/asia-pacifique/article/2010/01/26/au-pakistan-la-guerre-secrete-americaine-orchestree-au-dessus-des-zones-tribales\\_1296811\\_3216.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/asia-pacifique/article/2010/01/26/au-pakistan-la-guerre-secrete-americaine-orchestree-au-dessus-des-zones-tribales_1296811_3216.html)

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2010/02/01/01011-20100201FILWWW00690-afghanistanpakistan-7-mds-d-aide.php>

<http://www.topnews.in/usa/obama-seeks-31-bn-aid-pakistan-defeat-al-qaeda-23372>

<sup>14</sup> *Pakistan: the Taliban Danger*, an interview with Ahmed Rashid, *Nouvel Obs*, 18/6/2009, <http://hebdo.nouvelobs.com/hebdo/parution/p2328/articles/a403854-.html>

towards an actor which is considered to be better suited to bring stability and order: the Army. Chief of staff, General Ashfaq Kayani is well viewed in Washington and is the principal talking partner of the American administration. Even if he is excluded from playing any political role, the importance of General Kayani will surely grow if instability continues in Pakistan.<sup>15</sup>

What started out 30 years ago mainly as a strategy to push back a Soviet invasion in Afghanistan has degenerated into a long regional and international conflict for which no one can predict the consequences or the final result. But by coddling radical Islamism for years, Pakistan has risked playing the sorcerer's apprentice and completely losing control of the situation.

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<sup>15</sup> *Pakistan in a Precarious Equilibrium*, Romain Bartolo, 8/1/10, Affaires Stratégiques-infos, <http://www.affaires-strategiques.info/spip.php?article2600>