

## SADF COMMENT

19 February 2020

Issue n° 168

ISSN 2406-5617

**Dr. Siegfried O. Wolf** is the Director of Research at SADF (Coordinator: Democracy Research Programme); he was educated at the Institute of Political Science (IPW) and South Asia Institute (SAI), both Heidelberg University. Additionally he is member (affiliated researcher) of the SAI as well as a former research fellow at IPW and Centre de Sciences Humaines (New Delhi, India).



Avenue des Arts 19

1210 Brussels

[info@sadf.eu](mailto:info@sadf.eu)

[www.sadf.eu](http://www.sadf.eu)

## A US-Taliban deal in sight: Will there be a change in Pakistan's approach towards Afghanistan?

Siegfried O. Wolf

During the last months, the international community once again stepped up its engagement to find ways of ending the war in Afghanistan, or at least to initiate a 'reduction of violence' in the war-torn country as a starting point for a broader political solution. Current negotiations within the larger framework of the Afghan Peace Process are featured by the US-Taliban talks (Doha Process) as well as by other initiatives such as the ones undertaken by China (Aljazeera, 2019, September 23; RFE/RL, 2019, October 28), or Iran (Aljazeera, 2019, September 17). Here, it is important to point out that - besides the earlier Tashkent Process of 2018 (Casaca, 2018, March 23) - not one of these before-mentioned initiatives included representatives of the Afghan government in their official capacity. Instead, the Taliban insisted that Afghan officials can only take part in the talks as ordinary citizens of Afghanistan (Gannon & Riechmann, 2020, February 12). Another crucial feature is that Pakistan - as the main sponsor of the Afghan Taliban (and other militant oppositional forces) - appears to play a key role in maintaining the insurgent group involved in the bargaining processes. This second phenomenon seems to be embedded within an overall warming of US-Pakistan relations (The White House, 2020, January 21). In this context, numerous experts are now focusing on a potential change in Islamabad's policy towards Kabul. More concretely, the issue regards whether Pakistan is willing to give up its predominantly security-orientated view on Afghanistan and take on a more constructive function - instead of continuing its destabilising efforts intended to undermine any significant political or socio-economic consolidation in the country.

In addressing this puzzle, one needs first to state that despite Islamabad's engagement in these various peace initiatives, Afghanistan-Pakistan relations are deteriorating further. This finds its most visible expression in the persistently recurring border skirmishes between the Pakistani Armed Forces (PAF) and Afghanistan-based militants as well as between the PAF and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Indeed, both countries are locked in a diplomatic wrangling of accusations and counter-accusations (Latif & Saif, 2019, August 28). One of the major reasons of contention is a unilateral border project by Pakistan aiming at the fencing and mining of the border with Afghanistan. This has severe consequences for their bilateral relations. Besides improving border protection and management, the fencing clearly aims at turning the Durand Line, the 'de facto border' not officially recognized by Afghanistan, into a 'permanent border'<sup>1</sup>. This constitutes a severe source for both present and future tensions. Indeed, there is no indication that Pakistan is changing its policy towards and interests in Afghanistan - an evaluation supported by several other trajectories.

There is a remarkable shift in the political decision-making power from civilians towards the Pakistani military (Dawn, 2019, December 19) during the last months. This took shape through both formal institution-building and informal communication. Regarding informal communication, the most remarkable example is the PAF's negotiations with the main oppositional parties (Pakistan People Party/PPP and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz/PML-N) intended to convince them to accept the Pakistan Army (Amendment) Act 2020 (Wolf, 2020, January 6) in the context of the 'Chief of Army Staff/COAS extension case' (Wolf, 2019, November 29). Achieving the suspension of the death sentence of former army head Pervez Musharraf (Wolf, 2019, December 19; Dawn, 2020, January 23) and the suppression/undermining of political protest movements against the PM Imran Khan administration such as the 'Azadi March'<sup>2</sup> or the 'Pashtun Tahafuz (Protection) Movement' (Afzal, 2020, February 7) constitute other examples. Furthermore, there is a build-up of an increased formal, institutionalized role of the military in the political administrative system of the country. The major instrument for the PAF to gain more political leverage is the establishment of the China-Pakistan

---

<sup>1</sup> The 2,640-kilometer (1,640-miles) long border was established in 1893 in line with an agreement between India under British colonial rule and Abdur Rahman Khan, the then ruler of Afghanistan (Latif, 2017 April 17). Since then, no Afghan government including the Taliban regime ever accepted the Durand Line as border.

<sup>2</sup> The 'Azadi March', a major anti-government protest movement led by Fazl-ur-Rehman (a hard-liner, right-wing and Pakistani politician, Chief of the conservative Assembly of Islamic Clerics [Jamiat Ulema Islam-Fazl/JUI-F] party, and known to be a sympathizers of the Taliban), was called off after the PAF made clear that it will not withdraw its support for PM Khan and his administration. As it became clear that the/a "siege of Islamabad" failed to topple the government, Fazl-ur-Rehman announced the start of a 'Plan-B' aimed at crippling the country's roads so as to challenge PM Khan (Aljazeera, 2019, November 13).

Economic Corridor (CPEC). Here, the current creation of the CPEC Authority – a civil-military hybrid apex institution (Wolf, 2019, October 22) – serves as evidence. In this context, civilians seem to have lost their last level playing field in political decision making (namely, social and economic public policy), as the military made clear that PM Khan’s government depends on their support. In other words, Imran Khan is only the civilian face of a military-backed government – a face without decision-making power in crucial policy fields. Against this backdrop, it remains highly likely that Pakistan’s foreign policy will continue to be dominated by a security paradigm designed by the PAF at the expense of bilateral trade and economic activities.

One needs also to take into account that the India-Pakistan crisis reached a new peak after Indian PM Modi withdraw the autonomous status of Indian-administered Kashmir. As a result, we observe an increase in ceasefire violations at the LoC (TNN, 2019, December 18) as well as large-scale Pakistani diplomatic activities intended to internationalise the Kashmir case. This also has ramifications for the Afghanistan-Pakistan relations since Islamabad will continue to see Afghanistan through an ‘Indian lens’ (Ibrahimi, 2019, December 6).

Despite a latest statement by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) pointing at some progress regarding reforms and economic policies in Pakistan (Sajid, 2020, February 14), there are still numerous indicators emphasizing the abysmal conditions of the country’s economy. Most noteworthy is that at the end of the fiscal year 2019, the total debt and liabilities have increased by about 35pc (Kiani, 2020, February 1). This situation pressures Pakistan to support the US-Taliban peace talks so as to ensure financial assistance from both the US and Saudi Arabia. However, it does not imply that Pakistan will change its overall approach towards Afghanistan. Until now, besides the deepening of its military and defence cooperation with China, Pakistan has not been able to benefit economically from the CPEC, which instead is creating economic distortions and a gain in political leverage by Beijing.

In sum, one should not expect a change in Pakistan’s Afghanistan policy - which aims to avoid a strong, reconciled and unified state administration and society in Afghanistan and/or a India-friendly government in Kabul that could come to criticize Islamabad. Indeed a weak, destabilized and especially factionalised Afghanistan is still perceived by Pakistan’s military and intelligence establishment as more conducive to the country’s national interests, foremost as regards territorial integrity and border security. In consequence, one must anticipate that Pakistan will continue to give protection, training,

strategic planning, financial assistance and equipment to terrorist and insurgency groups aiming to destabilize Afghanistan.

The recent escape of Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan's (TTP) spokesman Ehsanullah Ehsan - who claims that he made a 'secrete deal' (Mehsud & Abi-Habib, 2020, February 7) with the state security agencies - from Pakistani custody (Siddique, 2020, February 10), or the reported sudden missing of internationally designated terrorist Masood Azhar (Singh, 2020, February 16), can be seen as strong indications that Pakistan is not willing to give up its close cooperation with terrorists. Here, one needs to wait and see whether the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) will consider - during its currently ongoing session in Paris - Pakistan's whole strategic agenda towards Afghanistan, or if Islamabad's delegation is once again able to whitewash the country's sponsorship of terrorism in its neighborhood.

### **References:**

Afzal, Madiha (2020, February 7). *Why is Pakistan's military repressing a huge, nonviolent Pashtun protest movement?* Brookings.

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/02/07/why-is-pakistans-military-repressing-a-huge-nonviolent-pashtun-protest-movement/>

Aljazeera (2019, November 13). *Pakistan anti-government protesters call off Islamabad sit-in.*

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/pakistan-anti-government-protesters-call-islamabad-sit-191113174506016.html>

Aljazeera (2019, September 23). *Taliban in China to discuss Afghan peace after US talks collapse.*

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/09/taliban-china-discuss-afghan-peace-talks-collapse-190923090323341.html>

Aljazeera (2019, September 17). *Taliban delegation visits Iran to 'discuss latest developments'.*

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/09/taliban-delegation-visited-iran-discuss-latest-developments-190917140942411.html>

Casaca, Paulo (2018, March 18). *The Tashkent Forum: a new hope for Afghanistan's future.* SADF Comment, No. 119. Brussels: South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF).

<https://www.sadf.eu/comment-119-the-tashkent-forum-a-new-hope-for-afghanistans-future/>

Gannon, Kathy and Deb Riechmann (2020, February 12). *US, Taliban close to 'reduction in violence' agreement.* *AP News.*

<https://apnews.com/e2de40ae1c9bdfc5e05e8cc4fc55a944>

Dawn (2020, January 23). *Lahore High Court moved to review annulment of Musharraf's conviction.*

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1529936/lahore-high-court-moved-to-review-annulment-of-musharrafs-conviction>

Dawn (2019, December 19). *Musharraf verdict*.

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1523149/musharraf-verdict>

Ibrahimi, Said Sabir (2019, December 6). Pakistan Sees Afghanistan Through India's Lens. *Tolo News*.

<https://tolonews.com/opinion/pakistan-sees-afghanistan-through-india%E2%80%99s-lens>

Kiani, Khaleeq (2020, February 1). Pakistan's debt surges by 40pc in 15 months. *Dawn*.

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1531822>

Latif, Aamir (2017, April 17). Pakistani army begins fencing border with Afghanistan. *Anadolu Agency*.

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/pakistani-army-begins-fencing-border-with-afghanistan/798995>

Latif, Aamir and Shadi Khan Saif (2019, August 28). Pakistan, Afghanistan locked in diplomatic wrangling. Kabul accuses Pakistani troops of killing 3 children in cross-border shelling. *Anadolu Agency (AA)*.

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/pakistan-afghanistan-locked-in-diplomatic-wrangling/1567526>

Mehsud, Ihsanullah Tipu and Maria Abi-Habib (2020, February 7). Taliban Militant Flees Prison, Claiming Deal With Pakistani Security Forces. *The New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/07/world/asia/taliban-malala-yousafzai-pakistan.html>

RFE/RL (2019, October 28). Report: Taliban Delegation Touches Down In China For Peace Talks. *Ghandara/Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)*.

<https://www.rferl.org/a/report-taliban-delegation-touches-down-in-china-for-intra-afghan-peace-talks/30239673.html>

Sajid, Islamudding (2020, February 14). IMF says Pakistan's economy on track, inflation to ease. *Anadolu Agency*.

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/imf-says-pakistans-economy-on-track-inflation-to-ease/1734514>

Sharif, Sayed (2019, November 27). Taliban Delegation Visits Iran to Discuss Afghan Peace. *Tolo News*.

<https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/taliban-delegation-visits-iran-discuss-afghan-peace>

Siddique, Abubakar (2020, February 10). Former Spokesman's Escape Highlights Pakistan's Taliban Ties. *Ghandara/Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*.

<https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/former-spokesman-s-escape-highlights-pakistan-s-taliban-ties/30427152.html>

Singh, Vijaita (2020, February 16). Masood Azhar and family missing, Pakistan tells terror financing watchdog FATF. *The Hindu*.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/pakistan-claims-masood-azhar-family-missing/article30830015.ece>

The White House (2020, January 21). *Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister Khan of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan Before Bilateral Meeting, Davos, Switzerland*. Washington, D.C.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-prime-minister-khan-islamic-republic-pakistan-bilateral-meeting-davos-switzerland/>

TNN (2019, December 18). Situation along LoC can escalate any time: Army chief Bipin Rawat. *Times of India*.

[https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/situation-along-loc-can-escalate-any-time-army-chief-bipin-rawat/articleshow/72872824.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/situation-along-loc-can-escalate-any-time-army-chief-bipin-rawat/articleshow/72872824.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst)

Wolf, Siegfried O. (2020, January 6). False start for democracy in Pakistan. *SADF Comment*. No. 165; Brussels: South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF).

<https://www.sadf.eu/comment-165-2020-false-start-for-democracy-in-pakistan/>

Wolf, Siegfried O. (2019, December 19). Musharraf: Pakistan's Pawn Sacrifice? *SADF Comment*. No. 163; Brussels: South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF).

<https://www.sadf.eu/musharraf-pakistans-pawn-sacrifice/>

Wolf, Siegfried O. (2019, November 29). Pakistan's 'COAS Extension Case' – How to interpret it? *SADF Comment*, No 161. Brussels: South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF).

<https://www.sadf.eu/comment-161-pakistans-coas-extension-case-how-to-interpret-it/>

Wolf, Siegfried O. (2019, October 22). Towards a Leviathan? The Establishment of a new Authority for the CPEC. *Column 'On the Asian Century, Pax Sinica & Beyond'*, No. VII, published as SADF Comment, No 156. Brussels: South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF).

<https://www.sadf.eu/comment-165-2020-false-start-for-democracy-in-pakistan/>