[**Understanding the Afghan Taliban**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1726798/understanding-the-afghan-taliban)

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A FEW events in quick succession — the [targeting](https://www.dawn.com/news/1724379/pakistan-embassy-attacked-in-kabul) of Pakistan’s ambassador at the embassy compound and the unprovoked attacks at the Chaman border, one of which [killed](https://www.dawn.com/news/1725806) eight Pakistani civilians — warrant review of our understanding and expectations of Pakistan’s relations with Afghanistan and, importantly, how we should respond to the increasingly disappointing Afghan behaviour.

It would be presumptuous to claim comprehension of all the factors that shape Afghan behaviour towards Pakistan at the individual or country level. Historically, the 1979 Soviet military intervention marked a watershed which pushed Pakistan into the role of a key player.

For good political reasons, Pakistan chose to resist the Soviet intervention, but soon the underlying motivation went beyond political considerations to incorporate ideological undertones. At the core level, those setting and handling the policy were only comfortable with hard-line Islamist groups.

These resonated with president Zia’s own Islamist outlook, showed will and could arguably be trusted to move away from the irritants of the Durand Line and Pashtunistan, which long troubled bilateral relations. In some measure, the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistan Taliban are the product of our policy preferences.

One early disaster for our Afghan policy came at the hands of extremist elements, who during the 1989 Jalalabad siege massacred over 100 defecting soldiers from Kabul’s army, showing utter disregard for discipline, planning and even common sense. We also failed to provide crucial guidance.

I was told by a former vice foreign minister in the Najibullah government that Najibullah had written off Jalalabad as indefensible and had plans to shield Kabul at Sarobi, but then the murder of the defecting soldiers turned the tables. Had the fall of Jalalabad materialised in 1989, it could have changed the complexion of the conflict.

There have been occasions when Najibullah and, after the American intervention, Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani reached out to Islamabad. The last two wanted Pakistan’s help to control the Taliban and create more political space for themselves. But the possibility of a more ‘dependable’ government in Kabul, with Taliban participation, proved seductive.

Although officially disclaimed, we remained attracted to such ill-conceived notions as finding ‘strategic depth’ and having a ‘friendly government’ in Kabul. Many educated Afghans, especially among the Afghan diaspora, blame Pakistan for foisting the Taliban on their country.

Today, our sights have been lowered to a minimal demand that the Taliban government restrain the TTP and other anti-Pakistan elements, something which the earlier Kabul regi­mes appeared ready to oblige. We trusted the Afghan Taliban on this score and are clearly disappointed.

Even if we cannot comprehend the pathology of Afghan hostility, we must have clarity in our response.

There is debate as to what lies behind the Afghan Taliban’s rancour, visible in the frequent provocations along the border and even in outbursts from the Taliban leaders. The fence obviously rankles the Taliban.

Have they hyped the issue to distract attention from failures at home? Are there disconnected free-wheeling elements within the Taliban? Do governments in Kabul draw political credibility in appearing to be standing up to Pakistan? Do they wish to push the TTP, the IS-K and other undesirable elements, who were once brothers-in-arms, into the (former) Fata region to disgorge the problem on to Pakistan, or still more sinister, change the complexion of the Pakistani tribal belt? We seem to be groping for an explanation.

Even if we cannot comprehend the pathology of Afghan hostility, we must have clarity in our respo­n­­se. First, the situation requires decisions involving the political and military leadership, the KP and Ba­­lochistan leaders, the Foreign Office and the intelligence agencies. A few thoughts readily come to mind.

We must take clear positions with the Pakistani Taliban and with the Afghan Taliban. No conflicted messaging. The Pakistani Taliban can return to Pakistan only if they surrender their arms.

Any country which tolerates armed autonomous groups on its soil is doomed. We should avoid hitting the TTP deep inside Afghanistan, where any action will inevitably result in civilian casualties, complicating the situation. We must, nevertheless, forcefully counter TTP militancy on the border and within Pakistan.

Kabul must be left in no doubt that we regard subversion against Pakistan by the TTP or other groups operating from Afghanistan as unfriendly acts which can oblige us to exercise self-defence. We should, however, not look to overt or covert foreign assistance for this purpose.

The TTP seeks to establish its sway in former Fata. There are reports that we ignored TTP elements returning to the area, in particular Waziristan. If true, this was a grave lapse.

Despite provocations, we need to deal with the Afghan Taliban with sensitivity. As Afghans, they are characteristically proud, resent being patronised and are uneasy about being reminded of favours done by Pakistan.

One guiding principle: the Afghans expect courtesy but respect firmness. We should avoid retaliatory steps that may hurt the Afghan people and continue with the facilitation we have been providing, and even accommodate reasonable new requests.

The Taliban worldview is blind to norms such as inclusive government, women’s education and the right to work. The resulting international censure hinders Pakistan (and Afghanistan) from exploiting the region’s geopolitical potential for economic development.

In an ideological sense, the Afghan Taliban do not see themselves aligned to Pakistan but to their brothers in faith in Pakistan, which partly explains their empathy with the TTP.

For them, other relations are essentially expedient. We are familiar with such thinking and have been ourselves tainted with religious irrationality (eg, we have perversely turned into a political tool the two Islamic virtues of ‘sadiq’ and ‘amin’). I will not venture further on this point.

The Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship is a unique one. We should be content with de facto Afghan acquiescence in treating the Durand Line as the border and allow it to remain soft.

There is no conventional threat across this border; no armies from the north will descend on Pakistan. We may recall that in 1965 and 1971, Kabul assured us peace along this border. The Pashtunistan issue died with the Soviet intervention decades ago.

The Afghan Taliban experience makes it clear, however, that we cannot transpose our aspirations on to the Afghans. Our dealings with Afghanistan should remain within the framework of a correct state-to-state relationship.

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