**[An uneasy relationship](https://www.dawn.com/news/1626491/an-uneasy-relationship)**

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AFTER the reports that the US is scouting for new bases in Afghanistan’s neighbouring countries, the Afghan Taliban warned the latter against committing such a “historic mistake”. For Pakistan, the Taliban reaction appears more serious as it came at a time when the US assistant secretary of defence stated that Pakistan would continue to provide air and ground access to the US.

The Foreign Office in Islamabad responded promptly and rejected the speculations about the presence of any US military or airbases inside Pakistan. However, the US sees a bigger role for Pakistan for the future of Afghanistan and the presence of its military in the region. It is not yet clear what kind of role the US precisely expects from Pakistan apart from facilitation in the Afghan reconciliation process and basing of its military resources. But, as things stand, new challenges are emerging for both the civilian and military leadership of the country in terms of regional security and geostrategy and the relationship with the Taliban.

While the renewal of the US-Pakistan strategic relationship would be advantageous for both countries — also keeping the strategic equilibrium between India and Pakistan intact — it could be of concern to Chinese interests and engagement in Pakistan and the wider region. However, Pakistan will continue to base its focus and capital around its geographical proximity with Afghanistan and influence over the Taliban.

Pakistan’s influence over the Afghan Taliban may not be as comprehensive as many believe it to be.

This is despite the fact that the Taliban are emerging as a more critical component in this equation. Over time, they have not only gained legitimacy in regional politics but have also diversified their sources of material support. If their recent threat is directed at Pakistan, it certainly reflects their growing confidence, which has apparently reached a level where they can threaten even a country that has not gone against them since their inception, including in times of stress and turbulence.

The Taliban threat followed rumours of mounting tension between Pakistan and the Taliban. Interestingly, in a recent media interaction, Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani repeated the allegations that Pakistan maintains an organised system of support for the Taliban. However, recent developments and some independent commentaries show that Pakistan’s influence over the Taliban is not as comprehensive as many conceive it to be.

The recent upheaval between Pakistan and the Taliban started over the issue of the US-backed Istanbul conference, which was initially cancelled due to the Taliban’s non-participation. Pakistan has again tried to persuade the Taliban to send its delegation to the Istanbul conference and warned of consequences in case of refusal. The Taliban have agreed that they will take part in the conference on three conditions: the conference will be short; the agenda shall not include decision-making on critical issues; and a low-level Taliban delegation would participate.

The Taliban’s reluctance to attend the Istanbul conference was not understandable because they have attended such conferences in Moscow and elsewhere. Perhaps their hard stance or refusal to participate might have been based on the fear that the conference could overshadow their Doha deal with the US. However, international media is now also reporting that the US wants a Turkish garrison to secure Kabul airport, which has led to concerns within Taliban ranks about the possibility of Turkey playing an active military role in Afghanistan.

The Taliban would not like to have troops from any Muslim country on Afghan soil, even for the security of important installations, which can damage its legitimacy in case of a clash or attack. The Taliban are confident that Afghans can decide their affairs themselves and can deal with the world on their own terms, but Pakistan is a challenge for them. Their off-the-record interactions with mediapersons in different capitals show that they do not have a very comfortable relationship with Pakistan over several issues, including the intra-Afghan dialogue and the post-US exit scenario.

The Taliban are also aware of the consequences of upsetting ties with Pakistan, which could entail arrests of and travel restrictions on their members. But they also have their tools and assets to neutralise such consequences including in the form of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other international terrorist groups. Against this backdrop, one can easily understand the context of the Taliban threat to neighbouring countries of Afghanistan in case they provide military bases to the US.

The TTP has developed its physical infrastructure in Afghanistan with the consent and support of the Afghan Taliban as well as Al Qaeda. The Afghan Taliban have proved that they were not merely proxies but independent actors and a product of the complex sociopolitical environment of Afghanistan and regional security influences. When militants are perceived as proxies it becomes difficult to treat them as the rational actors they are. That strengthens the notion that they only follow the plans of others and do not enjoy the freedom to pursue their own objectives. The Taliban have taken advantage of this impression and camouflaged themselves in Pakistan’s doctrine of strategic depth.

The Taliban’s relationship with Pakistan may have been passing through a turbulent phase, but this does not mean that both are approaching a break-up point any time soon. The Taliban still need an ally like Pakistan, which can continue providing diplomatic support on international forums. Even Pakistan cannot think of completely disengaging with the Taliban because, with new strategic alignments, its edge over the Taliban is a crucial component of its ability to bargain with the rest of the world.

Both need each other, but Pakistan is a state, and it cannot afford the luxury of tactical manoeuvring like non-state actors. Pakistan has several compulsions and commitments to facilitating the peace process in Afghanistan and playing a critical role in regional stability, which is of course essential for the country’s internal security and economy. The complexities of geopolitics and great powers’ confrontations apart, major actors still agree that stability must be brought to Afghanistan. Pakistan extracts strategic and geopolitical advantages out of it while prioritising its interests.

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