

The shifting sands in Afghanistan

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Mullah Akhtar Mansour.

With Mullah Mansour's killing, much will now depend on the contours of the new Taliban leadership, and the extent of control Pakistan exerts over it

Three major developments during the last 10 days are likely to have significant implications on the future of the Afghan peace process — the unsuccessful conclusion of the Afghan Quadrilateral Coordination Group's (QCG) talks in Islamabad, the U.S. Congress's conditions on Pakistan to do more on Afghanistan to receive any further American aid, and the killing of [Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour](#) in Balochistan by an American drone.

Did one development cause the other? Or did they take place simultaneously, and is the sequencing just a coincidence? Either way, they have serious implications for the Afghan peace process. A fourth development, though not totally outside the above three, is a formal understanding between the Afghan government and [Hezb-e-Islami](#) Gulbuddin of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. This agreement, though more likely to strengthen the internal peace process within Afghanistan, would have its own repercussions on the QCG dialogue.

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The floundering Afghan talks



The fifth meeting of the QCG, comprising Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the U.S., and held on May 18 in Islamabad, was a disaster before it could even begin. It took place in a difficult environment with developments in Kabul and Washington setting a tough tone. The earlier Taliban [suicide attack in Kabul in April](#) killing more than 28 people vitiated the atmosphere; Afghan President Ashraf Ghani took a tough posture *vis-à-vis* Pakistan. In Washington meanwhile, a development in April further strained U.S.-Pakistan relations. U.S. lawmakers made it clear that they would not sanction the administration's attempt to offer Pakistan a loan under the Foreign Military Financing programme to buy eight F-16 fighter aircraft from the U.S. Foreign Military Fund unless Pakistan did more on Afghanistan, Taliban and the Haqqani Network. Immediately, there were a series of responses in Pakistani media informing the Americans about "Pakistani sacrifices" in the War on Terrorism, and the need for F-16s. The debate also revived the animosity over "American treachery" and getting influenced by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Leaders in Islamabad even issued a warning that if the Americans didn't subsidise the sale, they would look elsewhere (meaning Russia).

The QCG meeting on May 18 took place against this background. Though the discussions inside have not been made public, the joint press release at the end highlighted what was achieved. It merely stated: "The QCG reiterated that violence serves no purpose and that peace negotiations remain the only option for a political settlement. In this respect, QCG countries reaffirmed to use their respective leverages and influences." Nothing more could be achieved than concluding "to advance the goal of an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace and reconciliation process" and that "the next QCG meeting will be convened as mutually agreed". Clearly, the meeting was a failure.

For the QCG to succeed and make any meaningful contribution to the Afghan peace process there has to be success at the following four segments: U.S.-Pakistan, Pakistan-Afghanistan, Pakistan-Taliban and intra-Afghan. There is a "Great Dirty Game" within all four segments, impacting each other. Nothing is what it appears.

American pressure

If the refusal to subsidise the [sale of eight F-16 fighter aircrafts](#) by the Congress set the tone in April 2016, another U.S. Congress Bill passed immediately after the Islamabad QCG meeting further tightened the noose on Pakistan. The new National Defense Authorization Act categorically asked for the Secretary of Defense to certify on three issues before disbursing the \$450 million aid that "(1) Pakistan continues to conduct military operations in North Waziristan that are contributing to significantly disrupting the safe haven and freedom of movement of the Haqqani Network in Pakistan; (2) Pakistan has taken steps to demonstrate its commitment to prevent the Haqqani Network from using North Waziristan as a safe haven; and (3) the Government of Pakistan actively coordinates with the Government of Afghanistan to restrict the movement of militants, such as the Haqqani Network, along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border."

Pakistan needs both the F-16s and the larger American aid. Outside these two, there is a larger dialogue on the nuclear front as well; Pakistan has also formally applied for membership into the [Nuclear Suppliers Group](#) (NSG). The eighth round of U.S.-Pakistan dialogue (held recently) on Security, Strategic Stability, and Non-proliferation should have made it clear that the latter is not likely to get a nuclear deal from the former similar to the India-U.S. deal. While Pakistan can count on Chinese support, it cannot become a member of the NSG without the American push.

The killing of Mullah Mansour by an American drone attack in Balochistan has to be viewed in this context. If it is an independent development, then it should have been a curious coincidence. Most of the American drone attacks have been focussed on the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, and they had hardly spilled over into the Pakistani mainland — either in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or in Balochistan.

ISI-Taliban matrix

Whether there was collusion between the U.S.’s Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence that led to the killing of Mullah Mansour is still conjecture, with no sufficient literature in the public domain. However, like that of its relationship with the CIA, the ISI’s links (whether “control” or “influence”) with the Afghan Taliban have been extremely nebulous in recent years.

[Pakistan-Taliban relations](#) are nuanced. It is widely believed that the Afghan Taliban leadership, especially its Qatar office, has been suspicious of the ISI as well. It is also believed that the Afghan Taliban would want to hold an independent dialogue (with Kabul and the U.S.) outside the Pakistani frame. While the Afghan Taliban were apprehensive about Pakistan, they needed the latter’s safe haven, especially in Balochistan, to fight in Afghanistan. Without that support, they would not be able to keep their surge in the Afghan soil that would keep them relevant, perhaps give them an upper hand in the dialogue.

Pakistan should be well aware of the Afghan Taliban’s apprehension as well. Though it has been fighting the Pakistani Taliban and acting against al-Qaeda remnants, it would still want to provide space to the Afghan Taliban in Balochistan. That is the only way the ISI could exert influence.

Now the killing of Mullah Mansour should change the basic equation at the ground level. Will there be another war of succession within the Afghan Taliban? Mullah Mansour did have competition when he took over. Will Pakistan be able to find a replacement for him, or will the new Afghan Taliban chief be outside its hands? Whatever the outcome, it is going to undermine the Afghan peace process further.

Ghani’s U-turn against Pakistan

One of the biggest problems for the peace process has been Mr. Ghani’s U-turn against Pakistan. Initially after his election and becoming the President in 2014, he did try to pursue a balanced approach with Pakistan. His predecessor [Hamid Karzai](#) had a rocky relationship with Pakistan’s political and military leadership.

Mr. Ghani seemed to be making inroads during the initial phase. There were a series of bilateral (with Pakistan) and trilateral (with Pakistan and China) meetings at Track I and Track II levels during 2015, successfully leading to the formation of the QCG in early 2016. However, somewhere along the line, Ghani seemed to have run out of trust *vis-à-vis* Pakistan.

Whatever may be the reasons, the Ghani-Pakistan relationship is strained today. On the other hand Pakistan has been accusing Kabul of not doing enough to curb the Tehreek-i-Taliban’s Pakistan bases and activities within Afghanistan.

The quadrilateral process would go nowhere unless there is positive movement in Pakistan-Afghanistan ties. The latter, in turn, would shape the intra-Afghan dialogue and internal peace process within Afghanistan. Pakistan is thus in the middle of both the Afghan peace processes.

What next after Mullah Mansour?

Much will depend on what happens to the Afghan Taliban. Will there be a power struggle again, following the killing of Mullah Mansour? And will the new leader want to prove he is the right choice by unleashing another wave of suicide attacks? Or will the Afghan Taliban collapse from within?

Much will also depend on Pakistan. Will it push hard to have another “friendly” leader at the helm of the Taliban? Or will it try to push the Haqqani Network harder and ensure they take over the entire Taliban leadership? Will the Haqqanis be willing to do what Mullah Omar did in the 1990s for Pakistan?

The “Afghan-led and Afghan-owned” peace process will not achieve much without positive movement on the aforementioned two factors. Unless the Americans push sufficient carrots backed by sticks and the Pakistani military leadership sees every Taliban with the same eyes, the peace process unfortunately will remain an Afghan chimera.

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