



ASPEN INSTITUTE INDIA

# Time to talk to the Taliban?

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# Foreword

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Is it time for India to talk to the Taliban? Without a doubt strategic decision-makers in New Delhi have already debated that question before they decided to continue relying primarily on a humanitarian and development aid programme for retaining Indian influence in Afghanistan. That aid programme goes alongside New Delhi's successful political engagement of the Karzai government, and its traditional links with the Northern Alliance groups. Over the last five years, the Pashtun community has also been addressed through numerous village level development programmes<sup>1</sup>, and through a concerted outreach to Pashtun tribal leaders. But New Delhi is painfully aware of continuing vulnerabilities as the clock ticks away towards 2014, when Kabul will be handed over full responsibility for security in that country. Adding to the uncertainty is President Karzai's recent statements that he will not seek re-election in 2014. New Delhi, therefore, faces complex changes in Afghanistan and must mitigate its risks by broadening its engagement with emerging power centres in that country, particularly the Taliban.

Given India's \$1.8 billion aid programme to the Afghan people and New Delhi's backing of Indian corporations' bids for massive Afghan mining contracts, India no longer has the option of shutting down shop in Kabul, as it did when the Taliban captured power in 1996. In those days, when the Taliban phenomenon was less well understood, New Delhi might have been justified in assuming that the Taliban was Islamabad's tool and, therefore, beyond the pale. Today, however, there is ample evidence that the Taliban is a relatively independent actor with independent concerns. This paper will rebut New Delhi's idealistic assumptions about the Taliban. It argues that Indian interests in Afghanistan are best protected in the short and medium term, and sustained in the long term, by establishing a working relationship with the Taliban. A realistic examination of the Taliban's key drivers leads to the conclusion that these are entirely compatible with Indian interests in Afghanistan and with New Delhi's broader foreign policy goals.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Ministry of External Affairs has allocated numerous "Small and Community-based Development Projects" or SDPs to a village or a cluster of villages in the most insurgency-affected areas. These are "small-scale, quick-impact projects" worth less than US \$1 million each and are executed by the villagers themselves. SDPs include schoolhouses, small bridges or tube-wells. See*

*<http://mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=8400>*

Furthermore, given New Delhi's gloomy assumption that a Taliban presence in Kabul is tantamount to Pakistani remote control, an India-Taliban dialogue track would be an absolute game-changer. This would allow a more confident New Delhi to move India-Afghan ties into a long-term framework, instead of remaining mired in a zero-sum competition with Pakistan, where the opponent holds all the trumps.



## Dialogue in Motion

The Kabul<sup>2</sup> street is currently buzzing with political gossip about the unfolding Taliban dialogue. Last February, Secretary Hillary Clinton publicly declared that the U.S. was part of the consensus to have a dialogue with the Taliban insurgency and seek peace via a political process. President Karzai has, in several conciliatory speeches, reached out to the Taliban, calling them his “angry brothers”. The Afghanistan government has set up a High Peace Council (HPC) through the National Consultative Peace Jirga (NCPJ) of June 2010, thereby providing a mandate, a mechanism and an official channel for Kabul to reconcile with the Taliban. Kabul's initiative has global support, including from India; in Jeddah, in March 2011, the International Contact Group fully supported the High Peace Council's plan for reconciliation. Last month, the UN Sanctions Committee struck off the names of 14 former Taliban from its blacklist, indicating that rehabilitation into the mainstream was possible for the Taliban. Dialogue with the Taliban is now a mainstream initiative.

So far, the Taliban has apparently rebuffed Kabul's High Peace Council, while being more open to dialogue with the United States of America. Taliban representatives including Tayeb Agha – who was known to be very close to Mullah Omar – have talked with American representatives on three occasions. In late August 2011, feelers

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<sup>2</sup> *The author has visited Kabul twice since December 2010, including a five-day trip in June that was dedicated to interacting with former Taliban, now over-ground.*

have been received purportedly from Mullah Omar himself<sup>3</sup>. According to German newsmagazine, Der Spiegel, Germany's special representative to AfPak, Michael Steiner, brokered the talks, three rounds of which have taken place in Qatar and in Germany. However, Tayeb Agha's presence at the dialogue does not necessarily imply that Mullah Omar would back whatever Agha commits to<sup>4</sup>. But that is Mullah Omar's reclusive style. He would never participate personally at such talks; and he would not formally authorize someone to represent him in such a situation. The canny Taliban chief would always retain deniability and uncertainty.

Rumours are emerging about the options on the table<sup>5</sup>. Individuals close to the Taliban recount that two options are being discussed. **Option 1** broadly centres on a Taliban acceptance of the current government in Kabul. Recognising the Taliban's aversion to the current constitutional framework, the insurgent leadership would have the opportunity to make it more palatable by suggesting constitutional changes, e.g. relating to the adoption of Shariat law. After the agreed changes are validated by the Loya Jirga, the Taliban would join the government.

**Option 2** would recognise the Taliban's effective control of areas in south-eastern and southern Afghanistan and allow them to legitimately govern those areas in whatever way they deem appropriate, including the imposition of Shariat law. The Taliban's Islamic government would enjoy a federal arrangement with the central government in Kabul, which would control northern, central and western Afghanistan. This arrangement would continue for 2-3 years, after which Afghanistan would have a countrywide referendum to allow the people to choose their form of government.




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<sup>3</sup> A high-ranking US diplomat who directly handles the dialogue process revealed to the author that an email received by the US administration on 28th Aug 11, which appeared to be from Mullah Omar, expressed interest in the dialogue process.

<sup>4</sup> Opinion of sections of the over-ground Taliban, especially Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, formerly Taliban minister and ambassador with close access to Mullah Omar.

<sup>5</sup> The detailed options have been recounted by Waheed Mujda, a former Taliban foreign ministry official, now with the Kabul Centre for Strategic Studies.

# Dilemma for India

In this nebulous and fast-changing situation, does New Delhi have a choice but to abandon its conservative political approach<sup>6</sup> and initiate its own dialogue track with the Taliban? India's deeply internalised arguments against engaging the Taliban in dialogue are broadly as follows:

- » Hasn't the Taliban cold-bloodedly targeted India in Afghanistan? Remember the two bombings<sup>7</sup> of the Indian Embassy, and the killing of Indians at a Kabul guesthouse<sup>8</sup>?
- » Isn't the Taliban hand in glove with Al Qaeda? That makes it a supporter of international terrorism, which also affects India.
- » The Taliban is not an independent entity; it is a mere instrument of Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI).
- » But the Taliban is inherently anti-Indian... what about its role in the hijacking of an Indian Airlines flight to Kandahar<sup>9</sup>?
- » And last but not least... the Taliban is not interested in talking to India and would never be permitted to do so by the ISI.

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<sup>6</sup> *New Delhi's traditional formulation has been "there is no good Taliban and bad Taliban; the Taliban is a terrorist organisation. Period."*

<sup>7</sup> *The first, a suicide car bomb attack on 7th July 08, killed 58 people and injured 141, the bulk of them local Afghans. Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was widely blamed for the attack, including by US intelligence. A second suicide car bomb attack, this one on 8th Oct 09, killed 17 and wounded 84.*

<sup>8</sup> *On 26th Feb 10, eighteen people, including nine Indians, were killed in a suicide attack on a Kabul guesthouse popular with Indian aid workers.*

<sup>9</sup> *Five Pakistanis hijacked an Indian Airlines flight, IC-814, on 24th Dec 99 while flying from Kathmandu to New Delhi. After touching down at Amritsar, Lahore and Dubai, the aircraft was flown to Kandahar, where Taliban officials brokered a deal between Indian officials and the hijackers. Eventually, 162 passengers were released in exchange for three Pakistani terrorists in Indian jails. India, however, suspects the Taliban of complicity because Taliban fighters surrounded the aircraft, eliminating the possibility of rescue by Indian Special Forces. Furthermore, the Taliban provided safe passage into Pakistan for the hijackers and the released terrorists.*

## The Case for Engaging the Taliban

This paper argues that each of these arguments rests on erroneous assumptions, and will rebut them with the following counter-points:

**Firstly**, it will be argued that Indian interests in Afghanistan are not being targeted by a monolithic Taliban, but by one component of a significantly fractured organisation. The internal fault lines of the Taliban will be scrutinised in detail to identify the factions that India can engage with. These factions would be separate and distinct from those elements that target India.

**Secondly**, it will be argued that the Taliban's relationship with Al Qaeda was always ambivalent, often conflictual and seldom smooth. This paper will present historical evidence that indicates continuous low-grade friction between Al Qaeda and the Taliban ever since the latter captured power in Kabul in 1996.

**Thirdly**, it will be argued that the Taliban was never a complaisant handmaiden of the ISI, by presenting evidence of the often-bitter acrimony between the two. While the ISI unquestionably assisted the Taliban's rise to power, its subsequent attempts to drive the Taliban's agenda engendered deep-seated resentment and disharmony.

**Fourthly**, it will be argued that the Taliban's anti-Indianism is not ideological, but a geo-political consequence of their historical positions on opposite sides of recent Afghan fault lines. India's backing of the Afghan communists; then the Soviet occupiers; then the much-reviled *mujahideen*; and finally the Northern Alliance --- all of them hate-figures for the Taliban --- caused obvious discord. But ample scope exists today for reversing the tide of Cold War geopolitics that brought India and the Taliban into conflict.

**To conclude**, this paper argues that the Taliban see substantial benefit in engagement with New Delhi. India represents a potent relationship to countervail the Pakistani establishment's discomfiting dominance over the Taliban. Also, a cordial relationship with India would bring the Taliban in line with the near-unanimous approval of India amongst the Afghan people, including the Pashtun tribes.



## Sources & Methodology

This paper is informed by multiple visits to Afghanistan as a journalist and commentator, and by conversations during these trips with Afghans of every stripe --- from policymakers and legislators to the common citizen. The Taliban perspectives were obtained during a five-day period of focused conversations with over ground Taliban in Kabul in June 2011. The descriptive “over ground Taliban” is deliberately used rather than “former Taliban”, because evidence points to their continuing relationship with the Taliban, and also sympathy for the Taliban cause. Amongst the Taliban I spoke to were the former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, Abdul Salam Zaef; former Taliban Foreign Minister, Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil; the Taliban’s former points person to the UN, Abdul Hakim Mujahid; and a former senior Taliban foreign ministry official, Waheed Mujda. Also canvassed were other over ground Taliban whose relative invisibility and junior status did not stop them from airing their views confidently and perceptively.

A key source of information about intra-Taliban dynamics was Afghanistan’s National Directorate of Security (or NDS), which claims to run its own sources at mid levels within the Taliban. The NDS also tracks the various dialogue approaches to the Taliban.



## Taliban Fault Lines: Opportunity for India

The key internal dynamic within the Taliban is the growing friction between the Quetta Shoorā and the Haqqani group. The Quetta Shoorā, headed by Mullah Omar, includes most of the Taliban’s senior leadership from the 1994-2001 period. Mullah Omar’s worldview and personal philosophy stems from a powerful combination of Islamic fundamentalism with nationalism. His overriding aim has always remained the eviction of foreign forces from Afghanistan, and the establishment of an Islamic emirate with a full implementation of Islamic lifestyle and law.

Omar, who is widely admired for his simplicity, honesty and forthrightness, also holds the potent politico-religious title of *Amir-ul-Momineen* or “commander of the faithful”. This gives him a powerful symbolic authority across the Taliban that is acknowledged even by rivals.

In his battlefield conduct and tactics, Omar could best be described as “old-school *mujahideen*”. Quetta Shooraa commanders and fighters, who come mainly from southern Afghanistan, are conventional guerrillas. They seldom stage suicide strikes and bombings, preferring to replicate their Soviet jihad experience by staging direct attacks on coalition and Afghan government forces with guns and IEDs. Their funds come mainly from tax collection from local businessmen, transporters and highway construction companies. While religion is central to the Quetta Shooraa’s worldview, and is an important motivational and mobilisation tool, their immediate political agenda is a nationalistic one: the expulsion of non-Afghan forces from their country.

The Haqqani network is a radically different kettle of fish, which the ISI has cultivated, equipped and financed as a counterbalance to the Quetta Shooraa<sup>10</sup>. The network operates from Miranshah, the capital of North Waziristan, which was also Jalaluddin Haqqani’s headquarters during the Soviet jihad. The Haqqani network has close links with Al Qaeda; Jalaluddin’s marriage to a United Arab Emirates princess rendered him ideologically receptive to Arab-style Salafi/Wahabbi groups, even though he is himself – like Mullah Omar and much of the Taliban – a Deobandi. Jalaluddin’s son and current Haqqani group leader, Sirajuddin, was born from this Arab mother. These ideological connections have created cordial interfaces between the Haqqani network and the two Salafi/Wahabbi organisations that set off alarm bells everywhere: Al Qaeda, and the Lashkar-e-Toiba<sup>11</sup>. In contrast to this ideologi-

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<sup>10</sup> *The Haqqani network’s close links with the Pakistani establishment have been extensively documented by intelligence agencies, including the CIA. Washington now publicly states this. On 16th Aug, at the National Defense University in Washington, US Defense Secretary (and former CIA chief) Leon Panetta, while outlining the differences between Washington and Islamabad, included Pakistan’s links with the Haqqani network.*

<sup>11</sup> *An excellent study of the theological and ideological linkages between the various jihadi groups in the AfPak region is by Stephen Tankel, “Lashkar-e-Taiba in perspective: an evolving threat”, New America Foundation, Counter-terrorism Strategy Initiative Policy Paper, February 2010.*

cal flexibility, Mullah Omar's Deobandi roots present a theological barrier to cooperating with Al Qaeda and the LeT.

The Haqqani network's West Asian linkages and its ties with Al Qaeda have created within it the culture of suicide attack. According to the Afghan NDS, more than 90% of all suicide attacks inside Afghanistan are traceable to the Haqqani network. This includes both the Indian embassy bombings in Kabul and the attack on a guest house that housed Indian humanitarian aid workers.

For the ISI, the Haqqani network is a godsend, a convenient instrument to deploy against Indian assets in Afghanistan and to balance the stubborn Mullah Omar and the Quetta Shoorā. Although the Haqqani network pays nominal obeisance to the Amir-ul-Momineen, the ISI ensures that the Haqqani network remains financially and operationally independent from Mullah Omar. In this divide-and-rule arrangement, the ISI draws on its experience during the anti-Soviet jihad, when it ran seven independent mujahideen networks. Playing them off, one against the other, the ISI ensured the maintenance of its leverage in Afghanistan.

Rawalpindi also benefits from the Haqqani network's linkages with the virulently anti-Pakistani Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which is fighting the Pakistan Army in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province. The Haqqani's powerful tribal network – they are from the powerful Zadran tribe, which sprawls across both sides of the AfPak border – ensures that the TTP listens to them. For the ISI, therefore, the Haqqani network also serves as a communications channel with the TTP.

The third grouping within the Taliban is called the Peshawar Shoorā. Based, as the name implies, in Peshawar and headed by Maulvi Kabir, this is the Quetta Shoorā's diplomatic and propaganda wing. The Peshawar Shoorā is not technically Taliban, but scholars<sup>12</sup>. While not a combat force, they are hardly gentle greybeards. They produce and distribute CDs and DVDs of beheadings of "traitors" and "American spies", of successful operations against the coalition forces, and motivational videos to encourage potential recruits. The Peshawar Shoorā includes the Taliban's team of spokespersons: Zabihullah Mujahid, Qari Yusuf Ahmedi, and their compatriots.

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<sup>12</sup> "Talib" means "a seeker of knowledge". The Peshawar Shoorā is composed mostly of "Aalims", or "men of knowledge", theologically distinct from the Taliban.

The fault line within the Taliban between the Quetta Shoorā and the Haqqani network delineates the thrust of an Indian engagement. The Haqqani network, which has been shaped and employed by the Pakistani establishment for attacks on Indian interests in Afghanistan, is too closely controlled by the ISI to present India with a realistic dialogue opportunity. Instead, New Delhi must initiate an outreach to the Quetta Shoorā and to Mullah Omar in particular. Given his temperament, his nationalistic outlook and his growing restiveness against the ISI control, clearly Mullah Omar presents the best opportunity for India.

This would also present New Delhi with less of an ethical dilemma and significantly less political risk. The Haqqani network is regarded internationally as a terrorist organisation with a pan-Islamic agenda. Mullah Omar on the other hand is regarded as a nationalist, albeit a fundamentalist, who would be guided by the interests of Afghanistan rather than those of the Ummah at large.



## The Taliban's *Al Qaeda* Links

The Taliban is often tarred because of its alleged closeness to Al Qaeda. A common throwaway line used to condemn the Taliban is: “Osama bin Laden planned the 9/11 attacks from Afghanistan, did he not?” And Mullah Omar’s refusal to hand over bin Laden to Washington after the 9/11 attacks only reinforces the perception of closeness.

The reality is more complex. The historical truth is that the Taliban didn’t invite bin Laden to Afghanistan. Osama had moved to Afghanistan from Sudan in 1996, when the mujahideen government, led by Burhanuddin Rabbani, controlled power in Kabul. When the Taliban forces took Jalalabad in September 1996, setting the stage for their capture of Kabul, they effectively inherited Osama who was living in the Tora Bora area at that time. Before September 1996, there were no relations between Osama and the Taliban.

An account of their coming together is available, courtesy Wikileaks, from the diplomatic cables despatched from the US consulate in Peshawar to Washington at the end of 1996 and early 1997<sup>13</sup>. As the Taliban moved on Jalalabad, there was regular

contact between the US Political Officer in Peshawar and Mullah Abdul Jalil, the Taliban's deputy foreign affairs advisor. At that stage, and for some days after capturing Jalalabad, the Taliban had no idea that Osama was living close by. Mullah Jalil assured the American diplomat that "the Taliban did not support terrorism in any form and would not provide refuge to bin Laden."

But then bin Laden threw himself at the mercy of the Taliban, declaring himself a guest and a mujahid who had fought the kaffirs (meaning the Soviets). The local Taliban commander granted him refuge; but Mullah Omar reportedly warned bin Laden not to use "Afghan territory for anti-Saudi government activities." Relations between Mullah Omar and bin Laden were strained from the start; Omar could see that bin Laden's presence would inevitably embarrass the Taliban.

Mullah Omar's assessment turned out to be prescient. International pressure was piled on the Taliban after a series of bin Laden media interviews that threatened strikes on the US. The Taliban chief was furious when Al Qaeda's terror attacks in 1998 on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania triggered American missile strikes on Afghanistan<sup>14</sup>. But bin Laden was not to be deterred. In continuing strikes, Al Qaeda staged a successful attack on the USS Cole in Aden in 2000, killing 17 US navy personnel and injuring 39.

A concerned Mullah Omar ordered Osama (who was still operating from Tora Bora, near Jalalabad) to move to Kandahar where the Taliban could keep close tabs on him. To rein in bin Laden, Mullah Omar also ordered the shutting down of a key Al Qaeda training centre near Kabul. He did, however, give Al Qaeda another training area near Kandahar, which came to be called Al Farooq<sup>15</sup>.

By 9/11 the Taliban was clear that Al Qaeda was a serious liability, whose global terrorist agenda was gravely endangering the Taliban's localised agenda of running

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<sup>13</sup> Cable numbers 842 and 843 dated 19th Sept 96; number 849 dated 14th Oct 96; number 854 dated 11th Nov 96; number 871 dated 27th Mar 97; number 872 dated 28th Mar 97; and number 876 dated 14th Apr 97 deal with the Taliban's early relationship with Al Qaeda.

<sup>14</sup> The retaliatory US strikes, a part of Operation Infinite Reach, saw about 75 cruise missiles launched at four training camps in Afghanistan. This included Zhawar Kili al-Badr camp, which was often visited by bin Laden and other Al Qaeda leaders.

<sup>15</sup> Interview in Kabul with Waheed Mujda, former Taliban foreign ministry bureaucrat.

Afghanistan according to Islamic law. Mutawakkil says he himself asked Osama several times to pipe down. “You’re our guest,” he told Osama, “but please don’t destroy the guest house.”

There was little more that the Taliban felt it could do; the Pashtunwali code imposed on a host the duty to protect a guest regardless of the repercussions. Mullah Omar, a stubborn individual and leader was not going to go back on that, particularly under pressure from the US. In the wake of 9/11, when Washington conveyed an ultimatum through Islamabad – hand over bin Laden to face justice in the United States, or bear the consequences – Mullah Omar negotiated seriously for a face-saving compromise, proposing a trial for bin Laden in an independent Islamic country<sup>16</sup>. With Washington unwilling to accept anything less than the trial of bin Laden in a US court, and the US public mood for retaliation in September 2001, a compromise was never likely. The cost he paid was the war that led to the Taliban’s ouster.



## Taliban-Islamabad: A Relationship of Distrust

The unquestioned belief across India that the Taliban is synonymous with the Pakistani establishment and that there is a deep strategic congruence between their respective interests is hardly validated by their troubled history. Any traveller to Afghanistan, particularly one who engages the man-on-the-street in conversation, would encounter a near-universal distrust of Pakistan, a resentment that Afghans seldom hesitate in vocalizing. The Taliban fully reflects that widespread feeling, which has been amplified within that organisation over the last decade by its irksome dependence on the Pakistani intelligence establishment, which does not hesitate to

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<sup>16</sup> An account of the Taliban’s attempt to negotiate a compromise for bringing bin Laden to trial is provided in Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, *My life with the Taliban*.

manipulate the Taliban leadership to serve Islamabad's ends.

For the fundamental Islamic Taliban, and especially for Mullah Omar, Pakistan is hardly a Muslim state. The Taliban is convinced that Islamabad serves a western agenda, cynically mobilizing Islam and genuine Muslims as political tools to serve its ends. Pakistan's geopolitical and strategic aims, and its close linkages with Washington, contrast poorly in the Taliban's perspective with its own religious (and, therefore, pure) agenda. Successive Pakistani regimes, from Musharraf to the current dispensation, are regarded as US lackeys that manipulate the Taliban as a bargaining chip. Islamabad is not just an Islamic sell-out, the Taliban's political and religious leadership believes, but also a regional hegemon that meddles in Afghan affairs through the unscrupulous ISI.

Mullah Zaeef, the Taliban's former ambassador to Pakistan<sup>17</sup> details in his autobiography numerous examples of Islamabad's egregious behaviour, where it has treated the sovereign Afghan nation as little more than a subordinate client state. And the Taliban has not hesitated to convey its displeasure. Zaeef recounts that Mullah Omar sent Musharraf a personal letter in 2001 calling on him to implement Islamic law and to give Pakistan an Islamic government<sup>18</sup>. Pakistan's interior minister, Moinuddin Haidar, wanted the Taliban to hand over Pakistani fugitives who had allegedly taken refuge in Afghanistan, Mullah Omar turned him down. Then Islamabad presented Kabul with a list of 27 such fugitives, upon which the Taliban informed Islamabad that any exchange of fugitives would have to be done on a reciprocal basis, after negotiating a bilateral treaty between the two countries<sup>19</sup>.

Talking to me in Kabul recently, Zaeef stated in his measured manner, "The Taliban have more anger against Pakistan than even against America. Pakistan is playing a double game... telling the Muslims that we are Muslims and we are looking at your interests... but actually they are working for American interests. Thousands of Taliban are in jails as Talibs in Pakistan."

The arrests of hundreds of Taliban in Pakistan, including top-level leaders like Mullah Zaeef, and their handing over to the United States creates a simmering bank of anti-

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<sup>17</sup> *Zaeef was a founding member of the Taliban and is well-respected in the organisation even today*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid, p. 120*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid, pp. 119-120*

Pakistan resentment within the Taliban. Dozens of them, including Zaeef and Mullah Zakir, the current head of the Taliban's military wing, spent years in Guantanamo Bay before being released and returning to AfPak. Given the deliberately inflicted humiliation of Guantanamo, it is hard to imagine that a Talib would come back from imprisonment and forgive those who sent him there. Zaeef says there are no such people.

Arising from such resentments, and aggravated by the Pakistan government's pressure on Mullah Omar to enter a dialogue with the US government, a major fault line has developed between the Quetta Shoorā and Islamabad. For Mullah Omar a dialogue would not just be a humiliating climb down but also bad strategy: he believes that he's three goals up in stoppage time and simply needs to play out the time remaining in order to win the game. But for Pakistan, a clear Taliban victory would not be a desirable outcome; it wants to have shaped the end state in Afghanistan, if only by facilitating the dialogue process. Islamabad does not relish the prospect of having to deal with a confident, assured Taliban in power in Kabul, led by Mullah Omar, a man who had burnished his Soviet jihad credentials by defeating a second superpower.

This dissonance between the Taliban and Islamabad has played out in the arrest of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in February 2010. Baradar, second only to Mullah Omar in the Quetta Shoorā, was effectively the Taliban's CEO, handling matters as diverse and central to the Taliban as military operations and tax collection. The conventional account<sup>20</sup> of Mullah Baradar's arrest is that this was engineered by the ISI because Baradar was opening up a direct dialogue channel between Mullah Omar and Washington, cutting Pakistan out of the proceedings.

The Taliban's version of Baradar's arrest is notably different<sup>21</sup>. Taliban sources say that Baradar, a Popalzai tribesman like President Karzai, was arrested by the Pakistani establishment for three major reasons: Firstly, he was increasingly anti-Pakistani, and as Mullah Omar's powerful and popular No. 2, the Pakistanis wanted a pliable alternative in case they needed to dispense with Mullah Omar. Secondly, just like Omar,

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<sup>20</sup> This was largely played out in the western press, which heavily analysed Mullah Baradar's arrest after it was first reported in *The New York Times* on 15th Feb 10.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/16/world/asia/16intel.html?pagewanted=all>

<sup>21</sup> This version was recounted by multiple Taliban interlocutors, including Waheed Mujda and Mullah Zaeef, during the author's visit to Kabul in June '11.

Baradar strongly resisted the notion of entering talks with anyone. And thirdly, Mullah Baradar had launched a drive to make the Taliban financially independent of Pakistan. He was fine-tuning the Taliban's existing system of tax collection from security companies, highways, farmlands, mobile phone companies and construction companies.

But Pakistan's immediate rationale for manoeuvring Baradar's arrest, according to the Taliban account, was specifically anti-Indian. After learning about Baradar's outreach to Iran, the ISI invited him for a meeting in which he was asked what would be the Taliban's stance towards the various regional powers. Baradar is reported to have told the ISI that Pakistan would always have a special relationship, but the Taliban would also have good relations with other regional powers like India and Iran.

Less relevant than the truth of this account is the ease with which it is gaining currency amongst the Taliban. That would point to a growing unease with Pakistan's proclivity to control and direct the Taliban and the growing acceptability of India and Iran as useful regional partners.

Before Baradar's arrest by Pakistan, Al Samood, a Taliban-published Arabic language magazine, interviewed the Taliban number two. In that interview he said that "anyone who is not crazy understands the damage that we have suffered from Pakistan, it was much bigger than what we suffered at the hands of the Americans".

Mullah Baradar's arrest has only provided impetus to rising anti-Pakistanism within the Taliban. This is evident from the three individuals appointed to replace him – Mullah Hassan Akhund<sup>22</sup>, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor<sup>23</sup>, and Mullah Zakir Qayum<sup>24</sup> – all three reputedly as wary of Pakistan as Baradar<sup>25</sup>. Mullah Zakir, particularly, is virulently anti-Pakistani, having been arrested in Pakistan and handed over to the CIA to be incarcerated in Guantanamo Bay.

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<sup>22</sup> Mullah Hassan is responsible for the dispensation of Islamic justice, including the implementation of mobile courts.

<sup>23</sup> Mullah Akhtar is responsible for relations between the Taliban's field commanders and the Islamic Emirate, which at this point is the Quetta Shoora.

<sup>24</sup> Mullah Zakir is chief of military committee of the Taliban, responsible for all military operations.

<sup>25</sup> The importance of Mullah Baradar is evident from the fact that Mullah Omar appointed three persons to handle his portfolio, each of them responsible for a different subject. Omar also believed that distributing the portfolio between a larger number of leaders would mitigate the impact of any more arrests in Pakistan.

The Taliban unquestionably remains dependent upon Pakistan for various kinds of support, especially physical refuge today. But the common Indian assumption that this makes the Taliban a submissive instrument of Pakistan disregards the Afghan national character; Mullah Omar's stubbornness, independence and self-assurance; and, most importantly, the Pashtun history of distrust of Pakistan. This distrust is especially strong along the Durand Line where Pashtun tribal identities are deeply threatened by the creation of Pakistan and the recent emphasis on the sanctity of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border<sup>26</sup>.

The most authentic and detailed English language account of Taliban attitudes to Pakistan is Mullah Zaeef's autobiography. Here is a sample: *Now, as then, the ISI acts at will, abusing and overruling the elected government whenever they deem it necessary... The wolf and the sheep may drink water from the same stream, but since the start of the jihad the ISI extended its roots deep into Afghanistan like a cancer puts down roots in the human body; every ruler of Afghanistan complained about it, but none could get rid of it*<sup>27</sup>.



## Taliban: Inherently Anti-Indian?

The ample evidence of the Taliban's distrust of the ISI and the widening fault lines between them, do not necessarily translate into a Taliban readiness to engage in a dialogue with India. There arises, therefore, a legitimate question: Why would the Taliban want to talk to India?

The Taliban and India indeed have a history of opposition. A former Taliban official describes it succinctly: "India has, in fact, always supported outside interests in Afghanistan. First they supported the communist regime; and then they supported the Soviets. When practically the whole of Afghanistan supported the Taliban, India supported the Northern Alliance. Even today they are supporting these people (the North-

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<sup>26</sup> A not uncommon response from Pakistani Pashtuns who live in FATA to any question about their identity is, "I've been a Pakistani for just 65 years, a Muslim for 1300 years, but a Pashtun for thousands of years."

<sup>27</sup> Zaeef, "My life", p.

ern Alliance)... Amrullah Saleh, Abdullah Abdullah... and other enemies of peace<sup>28</sup>.”

But the Taliban is keenly aware that much of Afghanistan, including the Pashtun heartland that forms its core constituency, regards India as a natural friend and Pakistan as a predatory neighbour. In that sense, there is growing awareness of the need to bring the Taliban’s relationships into alignment with broader Afghan attachments. For the immediate future, as long as the ongoing military conflict with the US-led coalition prevents the Quetta Shoorā from becoming the Kandahar Shoorā, Mullah Omar has no choice but to toe the Pakistani line, howsoever sullenly. But this current “battlefield imperative”<sup>29</sup> will inevitably change once the Taliban gains a greater degree of independence.

The change will also be driven by the increasingly felt need to balance the influence of Pakistan. A relationship with New Delhi, say former Taliban leaders, would provide that comfort and also ensure the continuation of the Indian humanitarian aid programme that is important to an increasing number of Pashtuns. New Delhi could also play a vital role in helping the Taliban build a working relationship with the non-Pashtun groups, which India holds significant influence over.

Says Zaeef, “The belief in New Delhi that the Taliban are looking at India as an enemy... the conception of India always is not clear (sic). They are thinking that the Taliban are working for Pakistan and they are against India. This is not the reality. Why they (New Delhi) are not sitting with the Taliban? Why they are not meeting them, talking to them?”



## Conclusion

Peeping behind India’s sterling record of humanitarian aid in Afghanistan, New Delhi has an almost unblemished record of backing the losing horse:

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<sup>28</sup> Abdul Hakim Mujahid, former Taliban, now a senior member of the High Peace Council, an Afghan government body that oversees reconciliation with the Taliban.

<sup>29</sup> Phrase used by a former Talib to describe the dependency on Pakistan.

first the communists, then the Soviets, then the mujahideen, then the Northern Alliance and now the US-backed Karzai regime. The only brief break with this tradition came after 9/11, when India found its protégé, the Northern Alliance, in a winning position in Kabul. But that turned out to be a temporary reprieve since an Afghanistan strategy is only viable if credible Pashtun participation renders it suitably broad based. The presidency of Hamid Karzai has never been anything more than a stopgap arrangement to create the impression of Pashtun participation. But while the US-led coalition is tied up in day-to-day fire fighting, New Delhi can afford to take a longer-term view. From that perspective, Mullah Omar and the Quetta Shoorā provide a dominant Pashtun leadership, and India must begin the process of engaging with that group.

That New Delhi has realised the need to reach out to the Pashtuns is evident from the new direction of its aid flows and its direct engagement with local Pashtun leaders. But the new Indian policy is insufficiently focused and is too little, too late. Initiating a dialogue with Pashtuns who are not “Pakistan-contaminated” restricts this outreach to non-Taliban leaders. The need is to initiate a dialogue directly with the Taliban.

New Delhi’s immediate quandary in opening such a dialogue would be the same as that faced by the Taliban’s other hopeful interlocutors, viz contacting people that have been placed by the Pakistani establishment in deep hiding. The significant difficulties posed by this issue might well resolve themselves shortly. The Taliban’s potential dialogue partners have already initiated the processes that would bring a section of the Taliban over ground, perhaps by inducing it into opening a representative office in a neutral country like Turkey. However that plays out, the tail cannot be allowed to wag the dog. The difficulties of establishing contact with the Taliban cannot decide the question of whether that dialogue should happen at all.

During the 2001 Bonn Conference, India snatched a place at the high table because of Ambassador Satinder Lambah’s deftness in bringing the Northern Alliance to accept a Karzai-led government. This December, with the waters considerably muddier – and the Northern Alliance far less central to the outcome – India’s position at the Bonn Conference would be hugely enhanced through a dialogue track with the Taliban.



## About the Author

**AJAI SHUKLA**, a journalist and former TV news anchor, is the Consulting Editor (Strategic Affairs) for Business Standard newspaper. Ajai specialises in security policy and diplomacy. Earlier, Ajai had worked for NDTV as a war correspondent, reporting extensively from Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Kuwait, and from India's insurgency-ridden areas like J&K. Ajai was the only Indian journalist to cover the entire Afghanistan war in 2001, when the Taliban was evicted from Kabul. He continues to cover Afghanistan and has visited that country twice this year, most recently in July.



Before his career as a journalist and analyst, Ajai was in the Indian Army, retiring as a colonel after serving for 26 years in various places, including J&K, Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Punjab and Rajasthan and a year with the UN Mission in Mozambique. Ajai has an MA from King's College, London. Whilst in the army, he completed the Defence Services Staff College course in Wellington and the Senior Command course in the Army War College, Mhow. He did his schooling from The Lawrence School, Sanawar.







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