

As the Taliban Advance in Afghanistan, Pressure on Pakistan Grows

The United States and others want Pakistan to push harder for peace. But many Pakistanis see a Taliban victory as inevitable, and some are cheering for one.



By Emily Schmall

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The Taliban are claiming towns and territories across Afghanistan. With each victory, scrutiny is falling on the leaders of neighboring Pakistan.

For decades, Pakistan has served as a sanctuary for the Afghan Taliban, who have often crossed the countries' rugged, 1,660-mile border with ease. Officials have acknowledged that Taliban fighters maintain homes and families in Pakistan, at a safe distance from the battlefields.

Now that the American military has declared its part in the Afghan war over, and the Taliban increasingly look as if they can capture the country, Washington is applying pressure on Pakistan to push for a negotiated settlement.

While voicing support for a peaceful solution globally, however, the government of Prime Minister Imran Khan has been quieter at home. It has not spoken out against pro-Taliban rallies within Pakistan. It also hasn't condemned reported Taliban atrocities as the group marches toward Kabul.

The reason: A large number of Pakistanis, including military officers, describe a Taliban victory as inevitable. Some, including former military officials, are publicly cheering for one.

But a collapse in Afghanistan would carry risks for Pakistan, too, including a possible wave of refugees, and a boost to jihadist movements that target Pakistan's government for attack.

"Pakistan is really in a bind," said Elizabeth Threlkeld, a South Asia expert at the Stimson Center in Washington. "Even though Pakistan is really concerned about spillover violence and an influx of refugees, they want to keep the Taliban on side."

In an interview with The New York Times in June, Mr. Khan said Pakistan had used the "maximum leverage it could on the Taliban."

Pakistani officials deny helping the group militarily, insisting that during negotiations in Doha, Qatar, they pushed hard for peace talks with the Taliban. In public, they have echoed the line taken by the United States and other parties to the accord reached in Doha, warning that Afghanistan would become a pariah state if the Taliban took it by force.



Staff at a Chaman hospital treated men wounded last month as Afghan government forces tried to retake Spin Boldak from the Taliban. Asghar Achakzai/Agence France-Presse

But Pakistan has leverage that it is not bringing to bear, government officials in other countries say. It still allows Taliban leaders free movement into and out of the country and continues to serve as a safe haven where fighters and their families can receive medical care, they say.

Some critics, particularly in Afghanistan, accuse Pakistan of actively supporting the Taliban's offensive, saying that the insurgents could not have mounted such a large effort without assistance. On social media, the hashtag campaign #SanctionPakistan has gained popularity in Afghanistan and among the diaspora.

Officials in Islamabad, Pakistan's capital, have played down the idea that they can influence the Taliban. But the U.S. secretary of state, Antony J. Blinken, said during a trip to India last month that Pakistan must "do whatever it can to make sure that the Taliban does not take the country by force."

The U.S. special representative for Afghanistan reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, said this month that Pakistan bore special responsibility because of how many Taliban leaders resided within its borders, and that it would be "judged internationally" on whether it was seen to have done all it could to promote a political settlement.

Pakistan's tolerance of the Taliban has taken a diplomatic toll. Its archrival, India, which is currently presiding over the United Nations Security Council and also seeks influence in Afghanistan, says that logistical, technical and financial support for the Taliban continue to emanate from Pakistan. Afghanistan's president, Ashraf Ghani, claimed at a conference last month in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, that 10,000 jihadis had traveled from Pakistan to join the offensive, which Mr. Khan staunchly denied.



Prime Minister Imran Khan of Pakistan, right, with a Taliban delegation in December. Pakistan says it has pressed for a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan. Pakistan Prime Minister Office, via Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Privately, though, Pakistan officials say they have little power to stop Afghans who live in Pakistan from crossing the border to fight alongside the Taliban.

Pakistan's leaders may also be sensitive to the impact that a Taliban victory could have on its own insurgency. The Pakistani Taliban, or T.T.P., a banned terrorist group, has carried out hundreds of attacks on Pakistani security forces and civilians, including an assault on a school in 2014 that killed at least 145 people, mainly children.

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Until last year, the T.T.P. appeared to be crumbling. A series of leaders were killed in U.S. drone attacks. It suffered an internal rift. A sustained crackdown by Pakistan pushed the group into Afghanistan.

But last month alone, it claimed responsibility for 26 terrorist attacks in Pakistan. On Thursday the government said it was behind a July blast at a hydroelectric plant that killed nine Chinese workers and four others, a claim the group denied. The T.T.P. chief, Mufti Noor Wali, has described the Afghan Taliban's victory as one shared by all Muslims.

"Taliban's recent advancements in Afghanistan, doubtlessly, have boosted the T.T.P.'s morale and increased the group's strength," said Aftab Khan Sherpao, a former Pakistani interior minister who has survived three T.T.P. suicide attacks.

"It is the beginning," he said. "There will be a rise in terror attacks and it will be linked with Taliban advancement in Afghanistan."

Some former members of Pakistan's military establishment make their support for the Afghan Taliban clear.



Afghan government forces in the Spin Boldak area after it fell to the Taliban last month. M Sadiq/EPA, via Shutterstock

Ghulam Mustafa, a retired lieutenant general and defense commentator, recently described the Taliban insurgency as "a struggle of epic proportions" that would result in the "destruction of the 'free world's' way of life."

Another retired lieutenant general, Shafaat Shah, compared the Taliban's "swift justice" favorably to Pakistan's slow-moving judicial system.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

Their words may not reflect the views of Pakistan's top leaders, but they suggest the Taliban's position in the country has strengthened.

"I don't think the euphoria displayed by some ex-military officers is reflective of the mood in the armed forces as an institution to support the Taliban," said Asif Durrani, a former Pakistani diplomat.

"However, it is also a fact that the Taliban have proved their prowess and have emerged as formidable stakeholders, duly recognized by the immediate neighbors and other important capitals, including Washington."

The Afghan situation has once again complicated the relationship between Pakistan and the United States. Moeed Yusuf, Pakistan's national security adviser, and Lt. Gen. Faiz Hameed, the director of intelligence, recently visited Washington to discuss Afghanistan. Pakistan has said that it will not allow the United States to use its bases for any military action against the Taliban.

"The Pakistan-U.S. relationship is passing through a rough patch," Mr. Durrani said.



President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan, center, with Mr. Khan, right, in November in Kabul, the Afghan capital. Wakil Kohsar/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Still, said Ms. Threlkeld of the Stimson Center, Pakistan may be willing to accept the international community's opprobrium, as well as spillover violence and refugees, in exchange for greater influence in Kabul.

A friendly stance toward the Taliban could also score Mr. Khan political points at home. Many in Pakistan see the group as Islamic champions who are routing foreign interlopers.

When the Taliban captured the strategic border crossing of Spin Boldak last month, Islamists and students held a huge celebratory rally in the Pakistani city of Quetta.

In mosques along the border, many frequented by Afghan families who had fled to Pakistan, preachers called on worshipers to pray for Taliban fighters and donate money to their cause. Afghan officials say that the Taliban find rich recruiting grounds in those mosques and in religious schools in Pakistan. Pakistani officials deny that.

Some Pakistan lawmakers cast the Taliban as a useful ally against the threat of foreign powers as well as homegrown terrorism. Pakistani officials say that "anti-Pakistan elements" are funding at least two dozen militias operating along the border.

The Taliban "are playing the role of a protective wall for Pakistan," Mufti Abdul Shakoor, a member of an Islamist party, said in Parliament last month.

The last time the Taliban ruled Afghanistan, from 1996 to 2001, tens of thousands of refugees poured into Pakistan. In anticipation of a Taliban takeover, the Pakistani authorities have erected fencing along nearly 1,500 miles of border.

Still, the border remains somewhat porous — for those aiming to join the Taliban, if not those fleeing from it.

Khan Nazar, an Afghan refugee in Karachi, said that his brother's family of seven had fled Kunduz after the Taliban seized the city's main entrance in late July.

"It seems it will be difficult for them to cross the border this time," Mr. Nazar said.



The road connecting Spin Boldak to the Afghan city of Kandahar. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times