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## Planning the End Game: The Bonn Conference and Pakistan's perceptions

### Bonn 2001 – Bonn 2011

Ten years ago, at the beginning of December 2001, an international conference was held in Bonn to delineate a road map for the political and institutional reconstruction of Afghanistan, racked by decades of civil war and recently "liberated" (or so it seemed at the time) by the Taliban. The evaluation of what has been accomplished since then is mixed: the steps decided in Bonn were all implemented: national and presidential elections were held, a new Constitution was introduced, and the financial system and security apparatus were restructured. Reforms introducing civil and political rights have been introduced, the most heinous restrictions to women have been rescinded, health and education indicators have improved, and the introduction of a democracy has fostered internal debate and democratic practice. But critics point out that the new political system is marred by corruption and inefficiency, legislative reform has mostly remained on paper, women's condition is still abysmal and poverty widespread. Security has also not improved: the Taliban, who at the time of the first Bonn conference appeared defeated, subsequently reorganized from their Pakistani bases, recruited new volunteers and launched military operations in the Pashtun areas of Afghanistan, allying with a heterogeneous array of groups, from the Haqqani network, to the Hezb-e-Islami, to narco-traffickers. Despite the increasing presence of international troops under ISAF and OEF<sup>1</sup>, with US forces making major gains in 2011 in "clearing" districts previously held by the Taliban, the anti-government insurgency has not been wiped out and still controls large swaths of territory in the south, south-east and south west. Attempts by Pakistani, the US and Saudis to persuade the Taliban to come to the negotiating table, after renouncing violence and severing links with al-Qaeda, have been increasingly recognised as a key to

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<sup>1</sup> The number of troops in Afghanistan have gone from approximately 89,000 NATO-ISAF troops and 215,000 Afghan security forces in March 2010, to a total of 131,000 NATO-ISAF troops and 266,000 Afghan police and army in February 2011: ICOS, *Afghanistan in transition. Dangers of a summer drawdown*, February 2011, [http://www.icosgroup.net/static/reports/afghanistan\\_dangers\\_drawdown.pdf](http://www.icosgroup.net/static/reports/afghanistan_dangers_drawdown.pdf).

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### Abstract

As the withdrawal of international troops approaches, the cooperation of Pakistan appears as one of the keys to the stabilisation and consolidation of the gains made in 2011 in southern Afghanistan.

And yet, recent surveys show that the Pakistani establishment continues to be dominated by geostrategic priorities that emerged in the 1970s, and that lack of mutual trust continues to characterise the three main actors involved in the Afghan quagmire – the US, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

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(\* The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

peace but have so far failed, to a great extent a consequence of the conflicting interests dividing different groups of the insurgency and the mediators themselves.

On 5 December 2011, ten years after the first Conference, officials from more than 100 countries and international organizations met again in Bonn to discuss the future of Afghanistan, with a particular emphasis on the sustainability of reforms and the realisation of security beyond 2014, when US forces will complete their withdrawal. All actors involved realise that the small gains made in the last few years are fragile and reversible, and cannot be consolidated and enlarged unless more attention is paid to the training of Afghan forces, peace deals with the insurgency, economic development, and the cooperation of neighbouring countries. Three main topics were discussed in Bonn: the transfer of responsibility that should accompany the withdrawal of international troops, the political process that should lead to a negotiated settlement of the Afghanistan conflict, and long-term development strategy that will sustain social gains made in the last decade. Two important players in the Afghan scene however were not present: the insurgents, who have so far refused to sever links with Al-Qaeda and renounce violence, and Pakistan, which has decided not to participate in protest of the NATO strike that last November killed 24 Pakistani soldiers. And yet, it is precisely Pakistan, of all the countries surrounding Afghanistan, that should most be involved in the solution of the Afghan quagmire.

### **Pakistan as a key to success**

It is well-known that Islamabad is an important part of the problem in Afghanistan, which is why it also has to be part of the solution. Since the 1970s Islamabad has supported Afghan Islamist dissidents. This strategy was followed to first pressure Kabul to drop the Pashtunistan issue and recognize the border, the so-called Durand Line, thus settling a dispute that has long marred their bilateral relationship, and second to stop fomenting ethnic separatism within Pakistan. Kabul was in fact accused by Islamabad of hosting and supporting Baluchi dissidents opposing the predominance of Punjabis in central and provincial institutions. After the secession of East Pakistan in 1972 the prospective of losing further territory was ominous, as it threatened to spark the disintegration of the country. Losing Baluchistan would have been particularly undesirable, as this province, albeit poor and underpopulated, is crucial in energy and geostrategic terms<sup>2</sup>.

Islamabad suspected that behind Kabul's policy of fomenting Pashtun and Baluchi nationalism there was India, which was closely allied to Kabul. Breaking this special relationship became of primary importance to Islamabad. To this end in the 1980s the Pakistani military developed the doctrine of strategic depth: controlling the Afghan territory would provide Islamabad with territory (that is, mainly military bases) in case of a war with its much bigger southern neighbor and prevent India from surrounding and isolating Pakistan. Installing a client government in Kabul would also presumably prevent Indian encroachments. In the 1990s, natural resources were also an important strategic consideration: controlling Afghanistan meant controlling pipelines from central Asia, where lay great gas and oil supplies, much needed by the Pakistani industry and its fast growing population. These priorities drove Pakistan's policy of support first to the mujaheddin and then to the Taliban. The doctrine of strategic depth was actively pursued both by military regimes (i.e., Zia ul-Haq and Pervaiz Musharraf) and democratically elected governments (i.e., Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif).

Despite Musharraf's apparent distancing from the Taliban after the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001, these policy considerations continued to animate the Pakistani leadership, particularly in military circles. Many analysts have pointed an accusatory finger at the military, assuming that a civilian government would reconsider and reverse the policy of interference in Afghanistan. But since the return to a civilian government in 2008 the situation has not changed. One could argue that the military still dominates policy-making on a number of issues, including Afghanistan, and that the solution lies in

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<sup>2</sup> ICG, *Pakistan: the forgotten conflict in Balochistan*, 2007, [www.scribd.com/doc/25362744/Baluchistan-conflict-ICG-2007](http://www.scribd.com/doc/25362744/Baluchistan-conflict-ICG-2007); S. FAZL-E-HAIDER, *Gwadar: An Emerging Centre of the New Great Game*, «ISPI Policy Brief», October 2009, [http://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/PB\\_162\\_2009.pdf](http://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/PB_162_2009.pdf).

confining the military to a more limited role under the purview of the civilian leadership. This author has long argued that this is not the solution<sup>3</sup>, as the policies implemented by Pakistan towards its northern neighbour are to a great extent supported by civilian policy-makers and the public at large.

A report recently prepared by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and the Jinnah Institute<sup>4</sup>, confirms this impression. The report, based on discussions and interviews with senior politicians, military officers, academics, journalists and former diplomats, whose positions can be considered as representative of the establishment's thinking, indicates that the attitude of the Pakistani establishment towards Afghanistan does not differ considerably from that usually attributed exclusively to the military and which has been implemented in the last decades.

The Pakistani establishment figures interviewed for the report indicate that the stabilization of Afghanistan is desirable: reconstruction means business for Pakistan, while a collapse would cause a fresh influx of Afghans seeking livelihood opportunities and escaping renewed violence. But they think that stabilisation should not be pursued at the expense of Pakistani interests. This means in their opinion, first, that the government in Kabul should be inclusive of Pashtuns; although the marginalization of this ethnic group in the Afghan state apparatus and government, visible in the interim and provisional post-Taliban administrations, has been largely corrected in the last few years, the perception by Pashtuns of being sidelined persists in the south of the country and might destabilize northern Pakistan, which is predominantly inhabited by Pashtuns. Another point raised by those interviewed is that Indian presence in Afghanistan should be downsized and limited to development activities only. Since 2001 India has provided significant support to the reconstruction of Afghanistan, becoming the first regional donor and the fifth globally. It has opened an embassy in Kabul and four consulates, two of which are in the south, and has recently concluded a partnership agreement that gives to Indian troops a role in training the Afghan forces. These developments have understandably greatly preoccupied Islamabad, whose foreign policy has always been dominated by concerns about India and the search for strategic parity.

The points raised by the establishment figures interviewed highlight what has been the main element that has driven Islamabad's regional policies since the 1970s: the attempt to forestall what are seen as Indian attempts to manipulate to its own advantage irredentist claims, both in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

### **US-Pakistan-Afghanistan: a relationship of mutual distrust**

From the USIP-Jinnah study emerges a deep-seated suspicion of U.S. intentions. The US are suspected of wanting to keep military bases in Afghanistan after 2014 and are accused of insisting too much on military gains rather than political solutions. It is also believed that the US are trying to open up direct channels for talks with the Taliban in order to disrupt the role of Pakistan's security apparatus in the reconciliation process. The increase in pressure on Pakistan to "do more" against Afghan insurgents and Islamists in general is also seen as exacerbating bilateral tensions. A fear that is not expressed in the study but that surfaces periodically in the Pakistani media is that the priority given to security and counter-terrorism in US relations with Pakistan might also be weakening the civilian elected governments that the US wants to ostensibly prop up. The presence of US military and intelligence personnel in Pakistan and their privileged relationship with their military counterparts might delegitimizes in fact civilian decision-makers and keeps them subservient to military strategies.

The US reciprocates Pakistani suspicion. The State Department, the White House and the Pentagon have all expressed increasing frustration over the inability of Pakistani security forces to halt the flux of materiel and militants through the Afghan border and over the apparent collusion of members of the military and intelligence establishment in the Afghan insurgency. Pakistan says it is doing its best to fight extremism

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<sup>3</sup> E. GIUNCHI, *What is missing in Obama's strategy towards AfPak?*, in «International Spectator», 45, 10, 2010, pp. 5-15; E. GIUNCHI, *La democrazia pakistana: limiti e prospettive*, in D. AMIRANTE (a cura di), «Altre» democrazie. *Problemi e prospettive del consolidamento democratico nel subcontinente indiano*, Milano 2010, pp. 163-175.

<sup>4</sup> USIP, Jinnah Institute, *The United States and the End Game in Afghanistan: Perceptions of Pakistan's Foreign Policy Elite*, 2011, <http://www.usip.org/files/resources/PB100.pdf>.

and points to the thousands of soldiers it has lost since 2001 in the war against terrorism. It also stresses the impossibility of controlling the border, which is traditionally porous and stretches along a territory that has historically enjoyed vast autonomy. These justifications have not made an impression. Calls to punish Islamabad for failing to act against militant groups have gradually increased, particularly since the US raid that killed Osama bin Laden in May 2011. A recent indication of the deterioration in US-Pakistani relations is the decision taken on 13 December 2011 by a joint congressional panel to suspend \$700 million in aid to Pakistan. The suspension is aimed specifically at pressuring Islamabad to disrupt the movement into Afghanistan of ammonium nitrate produced in Pakistan as a fertilizer, but which is used by militants to make improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The cutback is a small proportion of the billions in civil and military US aid received by Pakistan (some \$20 billion in security and economic aid since 2001), but might be a sign of further cuts and it is sufficient in any case to further antagonize Pakistani public opinion.

The US-Afghanistan relationship is also marred by problems. US criticism of the corruption and inefficiency of the Afghan government has irritated Karzai and pushed him towards less critical partners, *in primis* the Chinese, who are keen on investing in the country without raising issues of good governance and human rights. Afghanistan is in turn very critical of US military operations. Afghanistan criticizes US insensitivity towards the local population and the civilian victims of aerial bombings, and requests in particular that “night raids” by Special Operations Forces are terminated. A survey conducted by ICOS in Afghanistan in April 2011 in 13 districts and at Kabul University reveals that resentment towards the international presence and NATO-ISAF forces is widespread, particularly in Pashtun areas: 72% of Afghan men interviewed by ICOS in Helmand and Kandahar said that foreign forces disrespect their religion and traditions. The slow progress (or lack of progress in many areas) in development and reconstruction also diminishes local trust in the international community<sup>5</sup>.

Afghan - Pakistan relations also continue to be difficult. The two countries have long been divided by the border issue, with Kabul refusing to recognize the Durand Line and Islamabad insisting that it is an international border. Karzai has repeatedly accused Pakistan of being the source of extremism in the country, while Pakistan accuses Kabul of fomenting Beluchi extremism. Relations have been complicated by India’s increasing political and economic presence in Afghanistan. Pakistani attempts to conduct peace negotiations with Afghan insurgent groups independently have also been a cause of concern and criticism in Kabul and induced Karzai to publicly accuse Pakistan of trying to sabotage the peace negotiations on the eve of the Bonn meeting.

## Conclusions

The members of Pakistani establishment interviewed by USIP-Jinnah Institute think that Pakistani policy on Afghanistan should continue to be driven by fear of ethnic fragmentation and India’s machinations, as has been the case since the 1970s. This policy however seems as unrealistic as ever today: is it realistic to imagine that India would restrict its activities to development aid only? And that members of Pashtun militant groups, should they decide to join the government and renounce violence, would necessarily pursue Pakistani interests? They would most likely limit Indian presence and influence, and downplay Pashtun irredentism in the name of a common religious identity, but they might fuel anti-establishment forces within Pakistan. The insistence on Pashtun inclusion in the Afghan government is in any case a dangerous path to walk on for two reasons: first, when advocating an “adequate Pashtun representation” many interviewed by USIP-Jinnah Institute mean the Taliban and the Haqqani group, a prospective that is not liked by India, and might intensify New Delhi’s attempts to influence the Afghan political leadership, in turn increasing fears of encirclement in Islamabad. Second, attention to ethnic representation is fraught with dangers for Pakistan, which is made of several ethnic groups and is confronted by several nationalist movements opposed to Punjabi predominance in state institutions.

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<sup>5</sup> ICOS, *Afghanistan in transition: the death of ben Laden and local dynamics*, May 2011, <http://www.icosgroup.net/static/reports/bin-laden-local-dynamics.pdf>.

There is no clear-cut solution to the complex web of issues driving the Afghan insurgency and to the lack of trust between the main actors involved. Part of the solution may however lay, first, in addressing the multifaceted disputes that divide Pakistan and India, and particularly the Kashmiri issue, and increasing cooperation on trade and terrorism to build mutual trust. This implies a comprehensive internationally-supported diplomatic effort building on the “composite dialogue” to address the various geostrategic issues separating India and Pakistan, along the lines proposed by Obama at the beginning of his mandate. A commitment on the part of Pakistani authorities to change the “language” around the Pakistan-India relationship would help; revising textbooks and political rhetoric might in particular be central to changing attitudes towards India<sup>6</sup>. Second, settling the border issue with Afghanistan would ease Pakistani fears of disintegration and may deter Islamabad from trying to influence Afghanistan. In exchange for its recognition of the Durand Line as an international border, Kabul could be given an outlet to the ocean, possibly through a port in Baluchistan connected with Afghanistan by a corridor which might be leased, a request that was made by Afghan authorities to the British Raj in 1944 and repeated in subsequent years to Pakistani authorities to no avail<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> E. GIUNCHI, *Rewriting the past: political imperatives and curricular reform in Pakistan*, in «Textbooks Controversies in India and Pakistan/Schulbuchkontroversen in Indien und Pakistan» (Internationale Schulbuchforschung/International Textbook Research), 29, 4, 2007, pp. 375-388.

<sup>7</sup> Note on informal discussions on frontier policy, 20 November 1944, IOR L/PS/12/1811.