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The Haqqanis as the Pivot in the Deteriorating US-Pakistan Relations

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Abstract

As the end game came to be played in so far as America's involvement in Afghanistan was concerned, the country's senior leaders decided to focus a great deal of their attention on the work of the Haqqani network that had strong bases in several Afghan provinces neighbouring Pakistan – in particular the provinces of Khost, Pakti and Paktika – as well as in the North Waziristan Agency of Pakistan. The network was implicated in a number of high profile acts of terrorism in and around Kabul including the attack on the US Embassy in the Afghan capital. Given the dynamics that was unleashed as a consequence of the announcement by President Barack Obama that the pullout from Afghanistan had already started and the American forces will leave the country by the end 2014, positioning and repositioning of the various forces operating in Afghanistan began in serious earnest. In the meantime a large Afghan security force will be trained to look after the interests of the Afghan state and the nation. There was considerable political pressure on Obama to abide by the timetable. The drain caused by the war on the US Treasury had become untenable. This led to the question as to what kind of Afghanistan Washington should leave behind. Ideally this would mean a country at peace with itself and its neighbours. But for this unlikely outcome to be realised, a number of things needed to happen. One of the more important of these is to have the powerful Haqqani network in the country's south and with a sanctuary in

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Pakistan to align itself with Washington's broad objectives. Would the use of force bring this about or would negotiations among different interest parties produce the desired result?

Of the many insurgent groups operating in various parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Haqqanis are not a shadowy network that acts in utter secrecy. They have worked mostly in the open. More is known about them than about many other groups and organisations that operate in what is sometimes called the “no man” tribal land that straddles the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Haqqanis are Pakhtuns, members of the Zadran tribe which was cut into two by the Durand Line drawn by Sir Henry Mortimer Durand in 1893 as the border between British India and Afghanistan. The border was forced on then King Amir Abdur Rahman Khan but was never formally accepted by the subsequent rulers of the country. This is one reason why Afghanistan was the only country in 1949 to vote against Pakistan's application to enter the United Nations as a member of the organisation. Kabul was of the view that it could not accept a geographic entity as a country with which it had such a large undefined border.

The dispute over the demarcation of the border was to sour relations between the two countries for decades. At one point Kabul wanted the creation of an autonomous unit of ‘Pakhtunistan’ that would unite all members of the large Pakhtun ethnic group that lived in both countries – about 25 million in Pakistan and 15 million in Afghanistan – within the borders of one political entity. The eastern border of this entity would have extended to the right bank of the Indus River and would have thus incorporated all of the North West Frontier Province, NWFP, of Pakistan. Kabul never made clear whether this political entity would become an independent state, remain a part of Pakistan or be merged with Afghanistan.

This conflict over the exact demarcation of the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan is one reason why it has remained a porous frontier with people from the same tribe or clan crossing it almost at will. Haqqanis' Zadran tribe is one such group that comes and goes between the two countries more or less unhindered. That said, Miram Shah, the main town of North Waziristan, is regarded as the clan's capital. This is where the senior leaders mostly live within the sight of the Pakistan army's installations that have existed for decades. There was a comfortable relationship between the Zadrans and other tribal groups and the state. The area was governed by an official called the Political Agent who did not interfere with the lives of the people. They followed their own tribal customs; regulated their inter-personal relations including the settlement of disputes; and managed their own relatively primitive economy.² It is only if there was a serious breach of relations with the state that the

² A rich literature exists on the ways of the Pathans, some of it written by Political Agents, British and Pakistani, who worked in the various areas where the many tribes live. Most notable of these works are Olaf Caroe, *The Pathans: 550 BC- Ad 1957*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1984. Akbar S. Ahmad, *Millenium and Charisma among Pathans*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976.

authorities, in the person of the Political Agent, used the Frontier Crimes Regulation, FCR, to reassert the state's role. The FCR, a draconian but not very frequently used law, was put on the books by the British. Its principal purpose was not to regulate the lives of the people but to maintain the authority of the state. The law remained in place until very recently. When applied, the FCR could make life very uncomfortable for the offending tribes. However, the Political Agent would settle the matter without using too much force.

This relationship between the tribes and the state essentially broke down with the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in 1979. When the United States, working with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, decided to fight a proxy war against the Soviets, the Zadran were one of the several groups of tribesmen who were encouraged to take the battle to the Soviets. Jalaluddin Haqqani, a tribal leader at that time, became one of the commanders of the seven *Mujahideen* groups who were trained by Pakistan's ISI and equipped by the CIA with lethal weapons, including the 'stinger missile', that could bring down the dreaded Hind Soviet helicopters. Saudi Arabia provided finance and indoctrination in the madrassas that were set up in Pakistani territory for Afghan refugees to wage the jihad in the Soviet Union-occupied Afghanistan. The Soviets were bled and decided to pull their troops out of the country; the last Soviet soldier left in early 1989.

However, with the Soviets gone, the mujahideen groups could not agree among themselves on the form of government that should be established in Kabul and how should power be shared among the seven groups. The result was a civil war that lasted for half a dozen years and was ended by the entry of another group, the Taliban (meaning students), based in the southern city of Kandahar. The group drew its name from the fact that its foot soldiers were the graduates of the madrassas that were set up in the Afghan refugee camps. While the Taliban were opposed by the northern commanders who merged their forces to form the Northern Alliance, they had the support of the Haqqanis. The Haqqanis were included in the government that ruled from Kabul for half a dozen years. When the Taliban regime was destroyed by the American forces who worked in association with the Northern Alliance, the Haqqanis slipped into Pakistan, setting up their operational headquarter in the North Waziristan town of Miram Shah. From this sanctuary, they began to launch attacks on the United States and NATO troops operating in the neighbouring provinces of Afghanistan. In an effort to have their presence felt as the post-conflict Afghanistan began to slowly emerge, the Haqqanis extended their operations to the areas in and around Kabul. It was the well-orchestrated attack on the US Embassy in Kabul on 23 September that drew a sharp response from Washington to Islamabad in the form of an ultimatum. The United States would like Pakistan to move militarily against the Haqqanis which the latter says it does not have the military strength to do or which would go against its strategic interests in the post-conflict Afghanistan.

In the last three decades when the Haqqanis took up arms to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan, the clan has put together a formidable organization that covers many fields. According to a

detailed investigative report done by *The New York Times*, the Haqqanis ‘are the Sopranos of the Afghan war, a ruthless crime family that built an empire out of kidnapping, extortion, smuggling, even trucking. They have trafficked in precious gems, stolen lumber and demanded protection money from businesses building roads, and schools with American construction funds...They secretly run a network of companies throughout Pakistan selling cars and real estate, and have been tied to at least two factories churning out the ammonium nitrate used to build roadside bombs in Afghanistan’.³ They also have economic operations in the provinces of Khost, Paktia and Paktika in eastern Afghanistan.

The groups’ organisational structure is built around the members of the Haqqani family. Jalaluddin Haqqani, was once called by the flamboyant Charlie Wilson, the late Texan Congressman who sponsored the case of the mujahidden in Washington and was responsible for having the shoulder-fired Stinger missiles delivered to them, a fighter who was ‘goodness personified.’ In one of several conversations with the author of *Charlie Wilson’s War*, Jalaluddin Haqqani talks glowingly about the assistance provided by the United States: ‘We stood alone at first against the invader with bare hands. It is the bravery of the Afghan people that has attracted the foreigner to help’⁴. Now sick, the old mullah has handed over the command of his band of soldiers to his oldest son, Sirajuddin Haqqani, while another son Badruddin Haqqani, is the operational commander. The group has operators in the UAE as well where they collect donations from sympathisers for their activities.

Several analysts are of the view that in spite of the ultimatum given to Pakistan to move against the Haqqani network or face the consequences, the United States may end up talking to them. This is one reason why Washington has not moved to declare the network a ‘terrorist organization’. According to newspaper report, a ‘former American intelligence official who worked with the Haqqani family during the Soviet occupation in the 1980s, said he would not be surprised if the United States again found itself relying on the clan. “You always said about them, best friend, worst enemy.”’⁵

The ultimatum delivered to Pakistan on 25 September 2011 about its alleged support of the Haqqanis is one of the few moves on the chess board that Afghanistan has become – especially since 9/11 but even more so after 1 December 2009 when President Obama first indicated that the surge of troops he was ordering would be a temporary one and the pull out of American forces will begin in July 2011. That scaling down of American troops has begun and will last until 2014 when America promises to be fully out of the Central Asian country. Many more moves will be made between now and then.

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³ Mark Mazzetti, Scott Shane, and Alissa J. Rubin, ‘A brutal Afghan clan bedevils the U.S.: Haqqani crime empire, an Islamist force, is seen as Pakistan’s proxy’, *The New York Times* (25 September 2011), pp.1 & 11.

⁴ George Crile, *Charlie Wilson’s War: The Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History*, New York, Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003, p. 474.

⁵ Mark Mazetti et al. Op. Cit.