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## Pakistan and the Taliban Team Up against Afghanistan

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5/8/2016



**The Afghan military is struggling in Kunar Province**

In response to a massive suicide attack [4] in Kabul that killed and wounded over four hundred people, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani made an unprecedented appearance before a joint session of parliament on April 25. During the impassioned speech [5], he rallied his countrymen to stand united against the threat, and promised to go all-out against the Taliban, no longer relying on

Pakistan to bring the insurgents to the peace table. What remains to be seen, however, is whether President Ghani will be able to make good on his promises. Recent battlefield setbacks at the hands of the Taliban and the Pakistani military, unfortunately, are complicating Ghani's ability to deliver.

There has been much in the Western press on the temporary loss of the province of Kunduz to the Taliban late last year. Government control over Kunduz [remains tenuous](#) [6]. More recently virtually all the gains made by U.S. and NATO troops in the key province of Helmand in the south have been lost, and the [Taliban are threatening](#) [7] to take control of yet more territory. Government forces have thus far [been unable to retake](#) [8] many of the lost districts. Getting virtually no notice in Western press, however, has been a significant deteriorating security situation in the eastern part of the country, particularly in Kunar Province.

In 2011 I was an Army officer serving in Afghanistan and traveled to Kunar Province, which abuts the Pakistan border, to assess the needs of several U.S. combat brigades in the field. I spent time at the two biggest bases in that area, Combat Outpost (COP) Bostick and COP Monti. [As I wrote](#) [9] in the *Armed Forces Journal* upon my return, the state of the war at that time was going poorly for U.S. and Afghan forces. But as I have recently discovered, the situation on the ground in Kunar and elsewhere in eastern Afghanistan has deteriorated dramatically since the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces in 2014. The Afghan National Defense Security Forces (ANDSF) are not solely to blame, however.

During my visit to COP Monti in 2011, I met an Afghan gentleman I'll call Mr. Salarzai (I am withholding his full name to protect him from Taliban reprisal) who was serving as a cultural advisor to U.S. forces in that area. We have remained friends via email and Facebook ever since. Earlier this week during a visit to Kabul I was reunited with Mr. Salarzai. I asked him what the security situation in the Kunar had been since the withdrawal of U.S. troops. What he told me was both shocking and disturbing.

"Right now the government only occupies about 30 percent of the province," Mr. Salarzai told me. "And of the 30 percent they occupy, they do not actually provide security to the people, because it's all they can do to secure themselves. Rarely," he continued, "do they even leave their bases." When I asked him why, he said it was because they had no choice. "These Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers are good guys. I know many of them," he said. But the bases they inherited from the United States have fallen into disrepair, the equipment is barely functioning and they have virtually no air support, he explained.

Three weeks ago, outside of a certain government checkpoint in Kunar province, a helicopter was landing to bring supplies. Mr. Salarzai told me the landing zone was maybe twenty meters outside the compound. "When the landing gear hit the ground, the helicopter blew up. It landed on an IED planted by the Taliban. If the government can't even secure twenty meters outside its own compound," he said in frustration, "how can they defend us?"

Those troops who occupy the bases, however, are at a major disadvantage to the Taliban. "When the U.S. was here and the Taliban attacked the base from the mountains overlooking the bases, the U.S. troops would call in airstrikes, and within minutes, F-16s or attack helicopters would come in and blow up the fighters. Now," he lamented, "there is no air support. So all the ANA guys can do is hide behind the barriers." I contacted the governor of Kunar Province, Haji

Wahidullah Kalemzai, and he confirmed much of Mr. Salarzai's account—but added more troubling, current information.

Near Ghaziabad, Kunar province, recent heavy rains washed out a major section of the road. The Taliban took advantage of the blockage and set up heavy machine guns on the high ground, the governor told me, and had taken the ANA and repair crews under direct fire when they tried to repair the roads. The mountain road is the only resupply route for the ANA in that area. "If we don't get air support to take out the Taliban on the high ground," Mr. Kalemzai said, "our troops will be in great danger as other Taliban troops move on them." This situation, however, isn't the only—or the most dangerous—threat facing government troops in Kunar.

Both the governor and Mr. Salarzai told me about recent incursions by the Pakistani military against Afghan border troops and police outposts. In recent months the governor said the Pakistani military had taken Afghan positions under rocket fire, artillery, and heavy machine gun fire. "Last month," Mr. Salarzai told me, "there was a big fight between the Pakistan military and the ANA near where I live. In this case, the ANA actually beat back the Pakistanis. That's not always the case, but still (this attack caused) three Afghan civilians killed and another thirty wounded." I asked Governor Kalemzai what Pakistan hoped to accomplish by these attacks.

"I don't know," he said with obvious frustration. "We've often asked them why, but they don't give any answer. We really want to know why ourselves." Frequent Pakistani attacks have been a source of much frustration to every Afghan official I spoke with. The former director of the National Directorate of Security (NDS), Amrullah Saleh, said it is clearly common knowledge in Washington that Pakistan's support for the Taliban is active and overt. Why the United States didn't put genuine diplomatic pressure on Pakistan, however, he couldn't understand.

"What is the definition of an enemy of the United States?" Mr. Saleh rhetorically asked. "A country which undermines U.S. interests? Yes. A government which kills its citizens? Yes. Harbors known terrorists," Mr. Saleh continued, "supports extremism? That is the very definition of Pakistan relative to the United States." A senior member of the upper house of the Afghan parliament, who requested anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject, said he had been in private conversations with his counterparts in the Pakistani parliament who flatly told him if Afghanistan would agree to certain demands, Pakistan would pull the plug on support for the Taliban.

The demands would require Afghanistan to surrender some of its sovereignty, the Senator said, which no one in Kabul will consider. If Pakistan doesn't cease its support, however, the Afghan government is prepared to take the matter to the UN Security Council. "We've got strong proof of Pakistani support for the Taliban," he continued. "We've even got some Pakistan military we've captured in our jails. Our UN diplomat is already staffing the document in preparation to submit it to the Security Council." Whether Kabul can wait that long for diplomatic efforts to bear fruit is uncertain because the situation continues to deteriorate in other areas of the country. These developments place the United States in a precarious situation.

On one hand, the United States continues to deploy combat power on the ground to help the ANDSF fight the Taliban. But the other hand seems inexplicably passive, with regard to putting diplomatic pressure on Pakistan to cease its support for the Taliban and outright attacks against Afghan troops along the border. In the [Consolidated Appropriations Act](#) <sup>[10]</sup> of 2016, Congress

demanding that before providing funds to Pakistan, the secretaries of state and defense had to certify that the government of Pakistan would cooperate

\*\*\* “with the United States in counterterrorism efforts against the Haqqani Network, the Quetta Shura Taliban, Lashkar e-Tayyiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed, Al Qaeda, and other domestic and foreign terrorist organizations, including taking steps to end support for such groups and prevent them from basing and operating in Pakistan and carrying out cross border attacks into neighboring countries . . .”

Yet as evidenced by current and frequent attacks by Pakistan against Afghan troops, and considerable support for the Taliban within their country, no such certification can be made. Why the administration, with apparent acquiescence by Congress, is unwilling to enforce existing U.S. law is unclear. Inexplicably, it appears that by failing to abide by the terms of the law, the United States is deploying the military to help battle the insurgents on the ground in Afghanistan while turning a blind eye to the primary source of the conflict: support from the territory of Pakistan. President Ghani was emphatic in his demands of Islamabad during his April 25 speech.

He said [11] he expected Pakistan to “to keep the promises they made” to “carry out military operations against those who, according to our intelligence organizations, the intelligence organizations of our international partners and senior Pakistani officials, have centers inside Pakistan and whose leaders are residing inside Pakistan.”

The time has come for Congress to hold the secretaries of state and defense accountable for the law they passed, and either withhold funding from Pakistan for its support of insurgent groups in Afghanistan or ensure that Pakistan ceases its overt support. But the U.S. government must stop deploying U.S. combat troops to stop an insurgency, while turning a blind eye as an erstwhile ally perpetually undermines the military’s efforts. The lives of our troops and the success of our mission to provide stability in Afghanistan depend on it.