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## 'Strategic depth' at heart of Taliban arrests

By Shibil Siddiqi  
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Pakistan has recently arrested a number of top Taliban leaders, including the second in command, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, and many of the Quetta shura. It also killed in a drone attack Mohammad Haqqani, a leader of the powerful Haqqani network that Pakistan had been loath to target. Many commentators, including influential think-tanks such as the Carnegie Endowment, have struggled to explain Pakistan's motivations behind the arrests and have hoped they embody a volte-face in its policies towards Afghanistan.

In actuality the arrests are far from representing a paradigm shift in Pakistani thinking. Pakistan's approach to Afghanistan can be boiled down to two words: "strategic depth", the holy grail of the nation's strategic policy for more than two decades. Strategic depth remains the central pillar in Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan. However, the concept itself is being reinterpreted by Pakistan's security establishment as a consequence of the sliding balance of opportunities and threats, both foreign and domestic.

### Strategic depth

The military concept of strategic depth refers to the distance between actual or potential frontlines and key centers of population, logistics and industrial and military production. Having such depth allows a country to withstand initial offensives and enables it to regroup to mount a counter-offensive.

Pakistan's geographic narrowness and the presence of key heartlands and communications networks near its borders with its mortal enemy India means that lack of strategic depth has long haunted its military planners. It was identified as a grave concern by General Arthur F Smith, the chief of general staff in India, as early as 1946 when an independent Pakistan existed only on the Imperial drawing board. The possibility of a friendly - or better yet, a pliant - Afghanistan providing this much vaunted depth in relation to India has long been a mantra for the unimaginative Pakistani generals that have long controlled the country's defense and foreign policy direction.

However, Pakistan's early years, marked by nearly constant internal crises, international isolation, foreign policy disarray and military weakness, meant that this remained a pipe-dream. The language of a "common defense posture" cropped up in the late 1950s and 1960s, couched in both strategic and ideological, ethno-religious terms. But Afghanistan remained both strongly allied to India and within the Soviet Union's sphere of influence.

The opportunity to furnish a friendly government in Kabul remained elusive until the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the seemingly imminent mujahideen victory in the late 1980s. It was then that strategic depth through a client government in Kabul was adopted as official military doctrine. This fueled the vicious Afghan civil war in the 1990s and drove Pakistan to help install the Taliban in power in 1996.

The Taliban victory was seen in Islamabad as a strategic coup. Pakistan had managed to install a friendly government while excising nearly all remnants of Indian and Russian influence from most of the country. Afghanistan also became an important center for Pakistan's proxy war against India in the disputed territory of Kashmir. At last, Pakistan had seemingly attained the conception of strategic depth that had animated its Afghanistan policy for nearly two decades.

The attacks on the US on September 11, 2001, and the subsequent American occupation of Afghanistan resulted in the loss of Pakistan's primary influence. It brought many changes to Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan. However, giving up on the idea of pliable Afghanistan dominated by Islamist Pashtun (read Taliban) was not one of them. While reprising its role as a frontline American ally, Pakistan maintained some important links to the Taliban, banking on them emerging as the eventual victors when North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces withdrew.

But change has been brewing. For weeks now the Pakistani Foreign Office has talked about the need for a "pluralistic" government in Kabul, the first time that Pakistan has discussed the political order in Afghanistan in such terms. But the decisive shift from the real players - the army's general headquarters - came only recently.

In a rare press briefing on February 1, Pakistan's army chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kiani hinted at the contours of an updated policy. "We want strategic depth in Afghanistan but do not want to control it," said the general, "A peaceful and friendly Afghanistan can provide Pakistan strategic depth."

Talking against wanting a Talibanized Afghanistan, he added, "We can't wish anything for Afghanistan that we don't wish for ourselves." The statements are unprecedented for a Pakistani leader, no less the chief of its hawkish army. The general also reiterated that he was ready to mediate between the Americans and the Taliban, an offer he had also made earlier on his visit to NATO headquarters in January.

### Shifting

reality

At least two related factors have caused the shift in the way Pakistan views strategic depth. The first is the belated realization that even though the Taliban would almost certainly be able to outlast NATO, it is no longer possible for them to win an outright military victory and rule the country like they did from 1996 to 2001.

There are numerous reasons for this, the most salient being that the Taliban are no longer a unified fighting force, nor are they the unknown and idealized quantity of their original incarnation. Further, many former mujahideen commanders have substantial investments of various shades to protect and therefore, have a vested interest in the status quo, as do Afghanistan's non-Pashtun minorities that are now far better organized and entrenched both politically and militarily.

And the Taliban have hardly ingratiated themselves to the West or Afghanistan's neighbors. Any Taliban attempt to extend control beyond the Pashtun belts to the non-Pashtun central and northern areas of the country are likely to result in a grinding stalemate - one that would continue to destabilize Pakistan while bleeding it economically.

Another overlooked factor in Pakistan's evolving strategy in Afghanistan is that a victory for the Taliban is no longer a desired outcome for Pakistan's security establishment. The economic, political and diplomatic cost of bringing and sustaining the Taliban in power would be far too high. Nor can Pakistan afford to leave the Taliban unchecked in Afghanistan when it is struggling with its own Islamist insurgency with barely checked shades of Pashtun nationalism lurking below the surface.

"It makes no strategic sense for Pakistan to support radical Islamists in Afghanistan when it faces a full-blown Islamist insurgency at home," Kamran Bokhari, the Middle East and South Asia director for Stratfor, said in an interview with Asia Times Online. "By watching the melon, even the cantaloupe catches color," Bokhari said, using a popular Urdu aphorism to refer to the material and ideological support that the Taliban would engender for anti-state groups in Pakistan.

The Taliban are still the main vehicle for Pakistan to exert influence in Afghanistan. But, according to Bokhari, "It doesn't want them running the show." Accordingly, for the first time Pakistan has opened channels to non-Pashtun groups in Afghanistan. It is also making an increasingly successful bid via Washington to become more involved in training the Tajik-dominated Afghan National Army (ANA). Combined with the fact that the Pashtun Taliban are the largest political and military force in the country, Pakistan would be in a commanding position in Afghanistan even if it did not attain the posture it sought in Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal.

## Reassessing Pakistan's arrests

Enter the recent arrests of Taliban leaders in Pakistan. The arrested leaders - Mullah Baradar in particular - are suspected of pursuing their own agenda independent of Pakistan. It is believed they participated in dialogue with the US, the government of President Hamid Karzai in Kabul and the United Nations by using back channels that bypassed Pakistan.

The Pakistani arrests have abruptly shut these channels down. They have also given Pakistan physical control of high-level leaders who potentially can represent the Taliban in future talks - or even scuttle them if need be. The arrests are meant to be a clear signal to the US, the Afghan government and the Taliban that Pakistan will not go along with any negotiations in which it doesn't have a place at the table.

In Kiani's words, "[Pakistan's] strategic paradigm needs to be fully realized." Both the Americans and Karzai are persisting in their efforts to minimize Pakistani influence. But given the breadth and depth of its involvement and its indispensability to NATO's occupation and plans for withdrawal, they are unlikely to succeed.

The arrests also signal to the Taliban that they do not have carte blanche in running their insurgency in Afghanistan. They need to accommodate Pakistani interests or risk being completely isolated. By forcing them to negotiate, Pakistan is sapping the Taliban's greatest asset - time. As with any guerrilla force, the Taliban exhibit a preference for long-term attrition over short-term victories. This is why most successful insurgents consistently lose battles and win the war.

By forcefully imposing itself as a mediator between the Taliban and the US, Pakistan is attempting to shape the outcome of negotiations in a way that will preserve the imperative of strategic depth. Accommodation with other ethnic groups in Afghanistan will also keep the Taliban off-balanced enough to prevent their encroachment on Pakistan through ties with the Pakistani Taliban and other extremist Islamist organizations. This will serve to isolate the Pakistani Taliban from their comrades in Afghanistan. Pakistan's insurgency will become less cross-border than it has been, allowing it to force similar settlements on some insurgents while critically weakening and eliminating others.

Too much, too late?

Pakistan's retreat from a maximalist position is a welcome one. But there are lots of moving parts in the strategic machinery that it is setting into motion. Distrust between Afghanistan's ethnic groups today is matched only by their distrust of Pakistan. Its recent moves can only further isolate Pakistan from the Taliban and the Pashtun in general, while non-Pashtuns have long looked askance.

These elements may crystallize into enough opposition on the ground to ultimately limit Pakistani influence. It is also worth remembering that in the 1980s Pakistan overplayed its hand by refusing to negotiate over a future Afghan government. Pakistan had hoped to prolong the Red Army's agony as well as Western support to extract the best possible terms, but failed to

anticipate the speed of both the Soviet withdrawal and the West's loss of interest. It may now make the same mistake vis-a-vis the American occupation.

Iran's, India's and Russia's distrust of Pakistan and the Taliban has grown after the two met with a view to a common platform on Afghanistan. But the US, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey axis may be able to browbeat an agreement that allows an American withdrawal from Afghanistan with some pretence of having left a stabilized country behind.

Ultimately, Afghanistan's stability and Pakistan's elusive strategic depth will continue to rest on the knife's edge of continuing accommodation and understanding between Afghanistan's various ethnic groups on the one hand, and its unruly neighbors on the other. It is a tall order.