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The Haqqani network

Snake country

The Pakistani army's complex relationship with jihadists

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CLUTCHING a glass of distinctly un-Islamic whisky, a retired senior Pakistani official explains at a drinks party in Islamabad, the capital, that his country has no choice but to support the jihadist opposition in Afghanistan. The Indians are throwing money at their own favourites in

Afghanistan, he says, and the Russians and Iranians are doing the same. So Pakistan must play the game too. "Except we have no money. All we have are the crazies. So the crazies it is."

Chief among the crazies is the Haqqani network, an Islamist militia with a 30-year history of fighting foreign occupations of Afghanistan. In mid-September the network struck in the heart of Kabul, launching a 20-hour assault on the American embassy and other targets. A week later, the leader of President Hamid Karzai's efforts to make peace with the insurgents, Burhanuddin Rabbani, was assassinated in Kabul. The suicide bomber is suspected by some to have been linked to the Haqqanis.

Just after this Mike Mullen, chairman of America's Joint Chiefs of Staff, declared that the Haqqani network was a "veritable arm" of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) spy agency, part of the country's all-powerful army. A raft of other American officials, incensed by recent attacks on Western targets in Afghanistan, joined the verbal assault on Pakistan.

Perhaps because he is retiring this week, Admiral Mullen seems to have overstated things. It is not clear that the Americans have, as he claimed, a smoking gun linking the ISI to the ordering of strikes in Afghanistan. More to the point, America's abilities to influence Pakistan's army are limited. Admiral Mullen's comments are likely only to worsen relations with Pakistan, and to fuel anti-American sentiment among ordinary Pakistanis.

The Haqqani network is based in Pakistan's North Waziristan region, part of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), which border on Afghanistan. The border is porous. American officials say that the district capital, Miranshah, houses compounds used by the Haqqanis under the noses of Pakistani intelligence. Pakistan angrily denies that it supports the Haqqanis, whom it po-facedly insists are based in Afghanistan, not Pakistan at all.

In an Afghan or Pakistani tribal context, Jalaluddin Haqqani (pictured), founder of the group, is a supremely successful guerrilla commander, once lauded by America for his services as a CIA-backed *mujahid* repelling the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Mr Haqqani, now said to be bedridden, was a minister for border and tribal affairs when the Taliban ruled Afghanistan. To their supporters in Afghanistan today, the Haqqanis are fighting an occupying force, just as they did the Soviets before, says Saifullah Mahsud, of the FATA Research Centre, an independent think-tank in Islamabad.

The chief help that Pakistan gives the Haqqanis takes the form of sanctuary, and perhaps guidance. Little suggests any direct Pakistani role in Haqqani operations. Pakistan's generals believe that, with an unfriendly government in place in Afghanistan, they need proxies to represent their interests there. Pakistan prefers to make common cause with ethnic Pushtuns, who straddle the border, to guard against Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras, whom the generals regard as close to India, their arch-enemy. The Pakistani army's paranoia is fed by scenario planning in which a hostile Afghan government, with a growing army now trained and equipped by the Americans, joins India to mount a two-front war against Pakistan, sandwiched between the two countries.

To the ISI, which has had a relationship with him since the 1970s, Jalaluddin Haqqani is a more reliable proxy than the Taliban ever were. Since Pakistan formally abandoned its support for the Taliban under great American pressure following the September 11th attacks, distrust has reigned on both sides. The Haqqani network has demonstrated its willingness to hit targets in Afghanistan that please Pakistan's military men most—especially Indian ones, including its embassy, in 2008, and Indian construction companies.

The Haqqani and the Taliban are operationally separate, with the first handling eastern Afghanistan and the second focusing on the south. But the Haqqani network appears to recognise the Taliban leadership, based in the Pakistani city of Quetta, as the authority guiding the insurgency. If the Taliban reconciled with the government in Kabul, says Mr Haqqani's son, Sirajuddin, not entirely convincingly, his group would too.

Amazingly, America has until now not designated the Haqqani network as a terrorist organisation. Meanwhile, it will probably hope to increase missile strikes in North Waziristan by its drone aircraft. The drone campaign has been less successful against the Haqqani than against other groups, especially al-Qaeda. Perhaps Pakistan does not share much intelligence on the Haqqanis. However, America will be pulling its front-line troops out of Afghanistan by the end of 2014. Pakistan will have to live with the jihadists it promotes.