To engage, or anti-engage with the Taliban?

- A comparative case study of Pakistan and India's policies towards the Taliban post-2001 in Afghanistan

Rafia Zaheer

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Abstract

After seventeen years of war in Afghanistan, there is an increasing recognition that a political solution with the Taliban is the only way to bring some much needed peace and stability to the country. Pakistan and India are regional stakeholders in the Afghan quagmire. This thesis seeks to outline Pakistan and India's engagement with the Taliban post-2001. The thesis attempts to answer the following research question: What have been Pakistan and India's policies towards the Taliban in Afghanistan post-2001 and throughout 2016? By applying an engagement and anti-engagement typology on the countries' policies towards the Taliban, this study analyses Pakistan and India's chosen line of interactions with the Taliban through three phases (2001-2007, 2008-2013, 2014-2016). The main findings suggest that Pakistan and India's Taliban policy has been susceptible to change, but overall Pakistan has chosen an engagement policy while India's preferred course has been one of anti-engagement. One country's policy has largely been a response to the other's.

Abbreviations

AAF	Afghan Air Force
ANA	Afghan National Army
ANSF	Afghan National Security Forces
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
FATA	Federally Administered Tribal Areas
IAE	The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan
ISAF	The International Security Assistance Force
IS	Islamic State
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
ISKP	Islamic State Khorasan Province
NA	Northern Alliance
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDA	National Democratic Alliance
NUG	National Unity Government
PML-N	Pakistan Muslim League – Nawaz
PPP	Pakistan People's Party
QCG	Quadrilateral Cooperation Group
RAW	Research and Analysis Wing
SAARC	South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation
TTP	Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan
UF	United Front
UN	United Nations
UPA	United Progressive Alliance

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I take full accountability for any errors or omissions in this thesis.

Rafia Zaheer
Spring 2018

Map of Afghanistan, Pakistan and India

A deadly triangle: Afghanistan, Pakistan & India – Brookings Institution

Content

Figures:

The Taliban [don't] exist anymore, they're defeated. They are gone.
- Hamid Karzai, February 2004

Chapter 1

1 Introduction

1.1 Pakistan and India's policies towards the Taliban

Afghanistan's location has put it at the mercy of multiple foreign powers; all of which would benefit from witnessing the country stabilize, but at the same time lose out if another country gets to dominate. Afghanistan's patrons are some of the world's fiercest geopolitical rivals, and each country has its favoured proxy. The Taliban is one of those prominent proxies. Seventeen years into the Afghan war, the Taliban's presence across Afghanistan is growing (The New York Times 2017a; The Guardian 2017). The uprising of Taliban gives life to the Afghan blame game, and it is heavily debated what the right approach to the Taliban is with regards to peace negotiations (Giustozzi 2010; Maloney 2010; D'Souza 2009; Waldman 2010). Although the Taliban gets the most of headlines, there are dozens of other militant groups operating in Afghanistan. Notwithstanding, the Taliban is the indisputable, most significant and vigorous insurgent group in Afghanistan (Dodge & Redman 2011, III).

Three neighbouring countries in the South Asian region – Afghanistan, India and Pakistan – have been referred to as "the deadly triangle" and together cover a dynamic and impactful strategic area (Dalrymple 2013a). Some scholars argue that the hostility between India and Pakistan lies at the heart of the current war scenario (Dalrymple 2013a, Dormandy 2007). Since Pakistan, India and the Taliban are all key players in Afghanistan, there are reasons to believe that, their conduct towards each other heavily influence the future of Afghanistan. India and Pakistan have mutual suspicions over each other's involvement in the country, which has caused conflicting priorities and competition for influence. Afghanistan has become an arena for India-Pakistan rivalry and zero-sum thinking, according to Dodge and Redman (2011, 174). This thesis traces Pakistan and India's approaches towards the Taliban in the period after the Taliban regime was toppled in 2001, and throughout the year 2016.

The research question stands as follows:

What have been Pakistan and India's policies towards the Taliban in Afghanistan post-2001 and throughout 2016?

1.2 Literature review

Literature on Pakistan and India's approaches towards Afghanistan over the last decade is limited, especially with regard to relations with rebel groups such as the Taliban. This is particularly the case with India. As Harsh Pant (2012, 33) notes, "more often than not, India is forgotten in the Western media analysis of the situation in Afghanistan, which largely focuses on the West and Pakistan." Although much of the current literature on India and Pakistan's foreign policy strategies and behaviour is generic and do not deal directly with Afghanistan, it can provide clues to comprehend the countries' approach toward Afghanistan. The literature on India and Pakistan's engagement with the Taliban is sparse, and the majority of the writings focus exclusively on the countries' foreign policy behaviour in Afghanistan without digging further into the countries' relations with the Taliban. There is to this date no existing study on India and Pakistan's foreign policy in Afghanistan post 2001 in a comparative perspective with emphasize on their approaches to the Taliban. This research study attempts to fill that gap. In the following sections, I will give a brief intro to the main existing literature that deals with Pakistan and India's positioning towards the Taliban in Afghanistan.

One of the most prominent scholarly works on Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan is Ijaz Khan's research. Khan (2007) argues that Pakistan's Afghan policy has been based on support for the Taliban since the group's emergence in 1994, until the aftermath of the events of 9/11, when it was altered. The main aim of this policy was to balance and counter Indian influence in Afghanistan (Khan 2017, 141). Another important piece is by Alexander Evans (2011), who contends that after the fall of the Taliban, Pakistan's policy of strategic depth in Afghanistan was forced to adapt. This vision of 'strategic depth' was adopted by Pakistan in the late 1980s and defined its objectives in Afghanistan throughout the 1990s. The policy aimed at rendering Afghanistan as a friendly state and had a two-pronged approach – to oppose Indian military and political influence in Afghanistan, and make sure that the government in Kabul would not provoke the Pakistani Pashtuns to seek territorial secession (Ahmad 2013, 3-4; Sial 2013, 2-3). Evans (2011) asserts that India, not Afghanistan, is at the core of Pakistani strategic foreign policy and this will continue to dictate the future of the region. The argument is that Pakistani strategists continue to see Afghanistan through Indian-shaped glasses. Marwin Weinbaum and Jonathan Harder (2008) have also explored Pakistan's Afghan policies and their consequences. They examine how Pakistan has opted for a two-track foreign policy toward Afghanistan that at times encompasses incompatible goals. At the

official level, good relations with Kabul are maintained and simultaneously close relations are sought with *jihadi* (self-styled holy warrior) networks operating in Afghanistan. The Indian scholar Aparna Pande (2011) explores Pakistan's foreign policy in its historical context in the book '*Explaining Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Escaping India* ' and also make a point of how Pakistan's foreign policy is India-centric. Another pertinent work on Pakistan's policy toward Afghanistan is by three Pakistani scholars, Raza Qazi, Naila Qazi and Sohail Ahmad (2016), who examine Pakistani foreign policy from 1973 till 2015. They argue that Islamabad has made a paradigm shift in its Afghan policy from that of cautious distance to Afghan affairs to pursuing a pro-active policy. What's common for most scholarly work on Pakistan's Taliban policy is that it argues that the policy has to be understood through an India-centric prism and the idea of strategic depth.

The majority of scholars that have written on India's relationship with the Taliban argue that New Delhi has traditionally been averse to the Taliban and unwilling to engage with the rebel group. Avinash Paliwal's (2017) work stands out by stating that New Dehli's view of the Taliban was contested during the 1990s, and India's anti-Taliban stand should therefore not be taken for granted. Sandra Destradi (2014) who also assesses India's links with pro-Pakistan factions, particularly the Taliban, disagrees with Paliwal (2017), and argues that India has traditionally been averse to pro-Pakistan factions in Afghanistan such as the Taliban. India expanded its support base among the non-Pashtun population, through lending its support to the *Northern Alliance*, NA, officially known as the *United Front*, UF, who fought against the Taliban in the late 1990s. This limited India's influence in Afghan politics during Taliban's rule and it lost its contacts among the Pashtuns, the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan. Destradi (2014, 108) argues that India has tried to increase its influence in recent years, by establishing linkages to all political forces and social groups in Afghanistan, including non-Taliban Pashtuns. Shashank Joshi (2014) mentions that the prospect of a security vacuum post-2014 may lead to Indian policymakers adopting more independent policies in Afghanistan, like it did in the 1990s after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghan soil. Other scholarly works focus more generally on India's objectives in Afghanistan post 2001, and try to explain its overall foreign policy approach towards the country. Pant (2010) contends that India has a range of specific interests in Afghanistan besides the more general one of expanding its regional influence; from countering Pakistan, containing Islamist terrorism and utilizing Afghanistan as a bridge to Central Asia. The South Asia scholar, Christine Fair, notes the same developments as Pant, and underscores that India's strategic

interests in Afghanistan are tied to its desire to be seen as an extra-regional power aspiring to achieve great power status (Fair 2010, 5-6).

1.3 Setting the scene

Before we proceed, a backdrop is needed to contextualize Pakistan and India's Taliban policy post-2001. The situation on the ground in Afghanistan has significantly changed since the US-led invasion, termed Operation Enduring Freedom by the Americans, began in 2001. The same year, United Nation's Security Council established *International Security Force Assistance*, ISAF. NATO took lead of the operation in 2003. The US-led coalition from 2001 toppled the predominantly Pashtun Taliban regime and replaced it with a Western-backed government in Kabul. This government discriminated against the Pashtun majority, which was largely excluded from power. It is therefore not surprising that the Pashtuns, primarily represented by the Taliban, began a sustained effort to overthrow the Afghan government, and this developed into a full-blown insurgency by 2006. During this period, the number of insurgency-initiated attacks increased by 400 per cent and the number of deaths from these attacks rose by 800 per cent. After nearly seventeen years, the Taliban shows no signs of slowing down their insurgency. The insurgency is widely supported, mostly in the Pashtun heartlands of the south and east. Meanwhile, the Afghan government has struggled to establish control over the territory. It has also been unable to provide basic services to the population and its security forces have proven to be too weak to establish law and order (Dalrymple 2010; Jones 2008, 7; Stratfor 2016).

Continued US military involvement in the country has led to the strengthening of Taliban, which now controls more land than what the movement did a year after the invasion. Over the course of the last decade, there has been a shift in the nature of warfare, and a more symmetrical warfare is now taking place between the insurgents and the central government backed by NATO in Afghanistan. With the withdrawal of ISAF troops from Afghanistan in 2014, it was stipulated that once the international forces were withdrawn, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) would take responsibility for the security and contain the Taliban-insurgency. There were considerable concerns regarding ANSF's ability to carry this responsibility, and these turned out to be justified. ANSF has struggled with low morale, high dropout and have leaned heavily on various forms of NATO support (Destrati et al. 2012; Council on Foreign Relations 2014; Frontline 2016a).

ISAF was replaced by a new, follow-on NATO-led mission called Resolute Support (RS), which was launched 01 January 2015 to provide further training, monitoring, military support, intelligence assistance to ANSF and support to the official Afghan authorities (NATO 2016). The current president of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, was sworn in as the head of state after a disputed election where he was backed by the US. Ghani's inauguration came under a cloud after a power-sharing agreement with the runner-up, Abdullah Abdullah, nearly fall apart (The Economist 2014; Foreign Policy 2015). The emergence of Islamic State (IS) in Afghanistan, also known as the *The Islamic State Khorasan Province*, ISKP, has further complicated the situation in Afghanistan. US-led coalition forces and the Taliban are both fighting against ISKP. Coalition forces provide significant military air-support to ANSF. Without this support, Taliban would probably be able to take control of even larger territories, even provincial heads (BBC 2017). Currently, the international military presence counts for 13,500 troops, 8,400 of whom are American. The commander of the American-led international military force in Afghanistan recently warned that the US and its NATO allies are facing a stalemate. He warned that they had a shortfall of a few thousand troops. Additional troops are expected to be deployed in the near future (The New York Times 2017b).

1.4 Relevance of the research question

Late August 2017, Donald Trump vowed to win the war in Afghanistan by committing more US troops, and he called on NATO allies to increase troop numbers in line with their own. By launching the new South Asia strategy, which calls for intensifying military actions in Afghanistan, Trump contradicted what he said during the election campaign. During the campaign he claimed that the Afghanistan mission was a waste of US efforts and pledged to pull troops out. Moreover, Pakistan came under criticism from US officials, who argued that Islamabad could have done more to combat the growth of extremism in the region. Trump's unprecedented request for India's help in Afghanistan in this regard, was welcomed by Indian officials and rattled Pakistan, although China flexing its military might in South Asia gave Islamabad more room to maneuver (The Telegraph 2017; The New York Times 2017c). The strategy to deploy more troops and expand air strikes in Afghanistan must be understood in light of Taliban gaining increasing foothold in the country. Taliban followed up Trump's

approval of sending thousands more troops with a warning of Afghanistan becoming a graveyard (Al Jazeera 2017).

Despite these recent developments, there is a rising awareness of the fact that peace negotiations with the Taliban, at some level or another, must be an integral part of the efforts related to counter insurgency in Afghanistan. An increasing number of analysts and observers have come to the conclusion that Taliban has to be included in a reconciliation process, and that resorting to more military warfare is counterproductive if the aim is to end a war that has caused and continues to cause tremendous human suffering. The fact that military means have been tried and tested with no apparent progress for the last 17 years, has contributed to this realization. NATO and US generals have also voiced this concern in the past; In 2008, the departing commander of the British forces in Afghanistan, Brigadier Mark Carleton-Smith, said that the Taliban was undefeatable and that the international community ought to focus on striking a political deal with Taliban militants (FFI report 2010, 75-76). The reality of the stalemate on the ground have even led the Afghan government and the US Department of Defense themselves to claim that ensuring lasting peace and security in Afghanistan can only happen through reconciliation and a political settlement with the Taliban (The Diplomat 2017a). The renowned Barnett Rubin, a leading expert on Afghanistan and South Asia, has voiced that Afghanistan and the Taliban need Pakistan for peace. Moreover, he has stated that Afghanistan's stability depends very much on its neighbors and a transition to regionally supported political settlement is the only viable solution to the Afghan war (Al Jazeera 2016a, Rubin 2017). In other words: The regional power dynamic and the balance of power within Afghanistan are intertwined and cannot be understood in isolation.

With this in mind, one of the factors that have arguably prevented a political solution to the conflict in Afghanistan is the differing view on the Taliban among the regional players. Whereas some have seen it as a legitimate political entity that has a role to play in Afghan politics, others have rejected it as an illegitimate terrorist group. Attempts at peace talks with the Taliban have been made at numerous occasions, but the diverging views among the different national and foreign stakeholders, have prevented them from bearing fruit. Given that Pakistan, India and Taliban are stakeholders in Afghanistan, their positions towards each other shape what Afghanistan was, is and will become. One may wonder then, why the research question is somehow retrospective in the sense that it seeks to describe how India and Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban has been for an extended period of time from

2001 and onwards. Put differently, it seeks to outline the *development* of India and Pakistan's relations with the Taliban, rather than just analyse what the countries' position was at a given and specific time. The rationale for this is that I believe it's necessary to understand the past in order to comprehend today's situation and identify possible pathways ahead. One has to appreciate what variables altered different stakeholders' position on an issue of conflict in the past, in order to assess what could possibly change these same positions in the future. At the very least, an understanding of whether past positions on a disputed issue have been dynamic or static, gives insight into what room there is for change in the future. It also helps us understand how countries seek to signal their preferences. I would argue that an enhanced understanding of how different relevant actors in the Afghan conflict view each other, would lead to a more knowledge-based discourse about where Afghanistan has been and where it's headed.

Many different conflict lines are undoubtedly playing out in Afghanistan, and this thesis does contend that the relationship between Pakistan and India on the one side, and Taliban on the other, is the only or even the most important one determining Afghanistan's future. What I would however maintain is that there is an urgent need to recognize that different lines of conflict are interrelated and influence each other. This academic work attempts to pull some of the regional and national conflict lines together in order to assess how they affect each other – and through this shed light upon the prospects for a peaceful resolution to a long-running war. My hope is that by undertaking an empirical comparative case study of Pakistan and India's approach to the Taliban, I will bring attention to some of the opportunities for and obstacles to a politically settled solution.

The Norwegian public and Norwegian policymakers have a stake in the situation in the "deadly triangle". Norway has been and continues to be a player in Afghanistan, both politically, intelligence- and military-wise. Norway was a significant contributor to ISAF, and continues to have a presence in Afghanistan through RS. It's estimated that Norway's costs relating to the military component of the Afghanistan is USD 1.83 billion, although the actual figure is likely to be higher (NOU 2016:8, 63). In addition, Norway has economic and political interests in Asia. Knowledge and awareness about the political and security related realities of Afghanistan and the surrounding region is therefore of great importance. This study must be seen as a relevant contribution in this regard.

1.5 The scope of the thesis

The dependent variable in this study is Pakistan and India's *policies towards the Taliban* from 2001 up until 2016. This time scope is set due to practical considerations regarding data collection and for the sake of delimitation of the research. In addition, the year 2017 marks a new era with the launch of the new South Asia strategy by the US. Two years into the post-ISAF period are considered to be sufficient.

Moreover, what is meant by policies*?* In a broader sense I am referring to the country's foreign policy posture towards an external non-state armed actor. In a more narrow sense, when referring to policies, it involves a policy of engagement or anti-engagement, which I will go into details in section 2.2 and 3.1.1. Posture, view, attitude, approaches and stance towards are among the terms that I will use interchangeably with the word policy. Foreign policy is often denoted as attitudes and activities towards actors outside the nation-state. These are activities such as the formal diplomacy of the state, negotiations, declarations issued in relation to specific problems, bilateral economic trade deals, infrastructure development projects, foreign aid and strategies the state uses to obtain its goals in relation with external entities (Hill 2003, 28; Carlsnaes 2012, 113-114). The Taliban is denoted as an external entity is this study. C.C. Rodee and others in *Introduction to Political Science* (1957) defines foreign policy as the formulation and implementation of a group of principles which shape the behaviour of a state while it negotiates with other states to protect and promote its interests (Ghosh 2016, 101). The behaviour of a state is implicitly its engagement or anti-engagement with a range of subjects, e.g. non-state actors, such as the Taliban. By attitudes towards the Taliban, the focus in this thesis will be on how Islamabad and New Delhi view the movement as an entity, as well as how they look upon negotiations and power sharing with it, channelled through what they say.

For the purpose of a systematic and thorough analysis, Pakistan and India's policies towards the Taliban in Afghanistan will in the main be described and discussed separately. When using the labels Pakistan and India or New Delhi and Islamabad, I'm referring to those in the respective countries that shape and make the foreign policy. The official government and its political leadership, with the head of state and key high officials in the foreign ministry, traditionally make foreign policy decisions. The military establishments, intelligence services; various think thanks, research institutes and leading media actors, however also contribute

into the decision-making and thereby shaping the process. The latter group exerts varying degrees of influence on the policymakers as 'behind the scenes' policymakers.

The timeline that is subject to the analysis, is divided into three distinct phases on the basis of two factors: Firstly, significant events affecting Afghanistan and the Taliban, i.e. the US invasion in 2001 and the end of the ISAF combat mission in 2014. Secondly, significant internal political changes in Pakistan and India, i.e. replacement of the government and a new head of state in both countries in 2008/2009 and 2013. It is reasonable to assume that Pakistan and India's Taliban-policies is influenced by political transitions within the countries as well as changes in the external environment. The first phase (2001-2007) represents the onset of the Afghan war, and the Taliban's initial defeat. In the second phase (2008-2013), the Taliban uprising is a fact, while the end of ISAF's operation is getting closer towards the end of the period. At last, the third phase (2014-2016) marks the post-ISAF era, where the Taliban's battle force is at its peak. By dividing the chronological timeline into three periods, not only does it strengthen the structure of the analysis, but it also makes it easier for the reader to keep track.

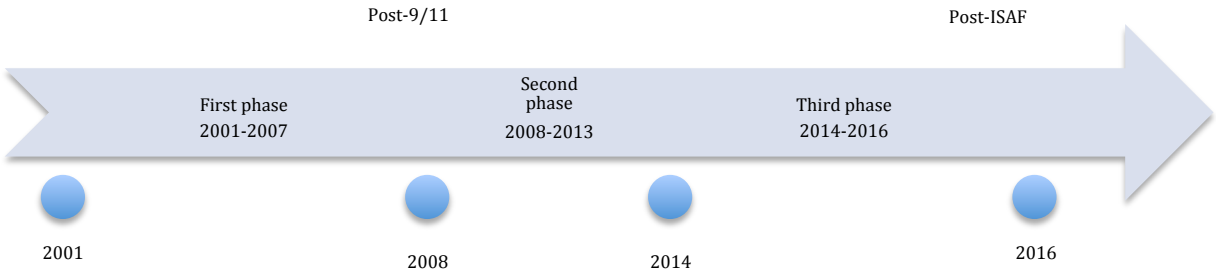


Figure 1: Timeline showing the period that will be subject to the analysis

1.6 Roadmap of thesis

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. *Chapter 2* outlines key concepts and the theoretical approach that will be applied to analyse Pakistan and India's Taliban policy.

The methodology for this study is introduced in *chapter 3*, in which the reader gets an insight into the methods employed to answer the research question.

In *chapter 4*, an account is given of the salient dynamics that have historically characterized and shaped Pakistan and India's Taliban policy in Afghanistan.

Chapter 5 and 6 consists of the separate, empirical analysis of Pakistan and India's Taliban policy post-2001, before concluding remarks are presented in *chapter 7*.

Chapter 2

2 Theoretical framework

This chapter outlines the theoretical perspective adopted to study Pakistan and India's engagement with the Taliban post-2001. In the first section, I will define some key concepts that are referred to throughout the analysis, such as the concept of non-state armed actors, Taliban, rivalry and proxy-war. Then I will proceed to introduce the terms engagement and anti-engagement, which constitutes the theoretical framework through which New Delhi and Islamabad's dealings with Taliban are examined.

2.1 Defining key concepts

Mutual rivalry and suspicion have typically defined relations between India and Pakistan. Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that the rivalry shapes their foreign policies, and thus a definition of rivalry should be provided. In recent years, there has been increasing talk about an Indian-Pakistani proxy war going on in Afghanistan, where both nations have ties to different rebel groups, this calls for a brief explanation of the concepts (Felbab-Brown 2015; Kugelman 2014).

2.1.1 Non-state armed actor – the Taliban

Due to the great variation among them, there is no clear definition of non-state armed actors. According to Hofmann and Schneckener (2011) non-state armed groups are defined as distinctive organizations that are willing to and capable of using violence to fulfil their objectives. Secondly, they are not integrated into formalized state institutions such as regular armies, presidential guards, police or special forces. This is why they have a certain degree of autonomy with regards to politics, military operations, resources and infrastructure (Hofmann and Schnekener 2011). Sometimes they are supported or used as instruments by state actors secretly or openly. Furthermore, at times state officials or state agencies are directly or indirectly involved in the activities of non-state armed actors for ideological reasons or personal interests. In other words, engagement with non-state armed actors is dependent on various factors. Some non-state armed actors might seek to change the status quo and others dominance, and they can be ideology-oriented. Concurrently, external actors, in this case

Pakistan and India, adjust to the movement's characteristics when choosing tools of engagement. Hofmann and Schnekener (2011) assert that state actors mostly employ realist instruments such as force, leverage and bargaining in international politics. There is a danger that arises from depending on realist instruments, which is that non-state armed actors may be pushed further into spoiling a violent behaviour because they are faced with an enemy that uses force against them. Moreover, they argue that under these circumstances non-state armed actors are coerced into defending themselves and retaliate. This lack of constructive communication between two parties reinforce a circle of violence and cause more extremism, and for this reason, they argue that state actors should use their institutional status and channels at their disposal to create public discourse and thereby putting pressure on other stakeholders involved (Hofmann & Schneckener 2011 1-3, 14).

By the abovementioned definition, Taliban can be characterized as a non-state armed actor and Pakistan and India remains external actors or involved stakeholders in the Afghan theatre. Taliban is directly translated to "those who seek", and is a name overall attributed to students in the religious seminaries or *madrasas* that can be found across Afghanistan and Pakistan. In its literal meaning the word Taliban lacks the connotations of militancy and political ambition. Nevertheless, the Taliban is usually seen as a political movement that emerged in Kandahar in 1994 and which controlled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 under the rule of Mullah Mohammed Omar. Today the diversity within Taliban makes it difficult to generalize about its vision, because in reality it's a complex movement consisting of a variety of different actors and allies and not a uniform organization. Taliban sees itself as a nationalist-religious movement, whose main mission is to resurrect the Taliban regime of the 1990s and bring various Afghan ethnic groups under its rule. Its agenda is national rather than global, since its primary concern is to promote Islam within the context of Afghanistan's borders and end foreign occupation (FFI report 2010, 3, 11; Abbas 2014, 2, 62; Gopal 2015, 11).

In this study, when referring to the Taliban, it is the Afghan Taliban that is the subject matter, not the Pakistani Taliban, *Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan,* TTP based in the tribal areas of Pakistan. The term Taliban is synonymous with the name "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" (IEA), meaning the insurgent organisation led by Hibatullah Akhundzada. The IEA was the official name of the Taliban regime that ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, and has continued to be that after 2001. The Taliban has tried to distance itself from insurgencies it doesn't approve of, in particular the TTP and al-Qaida's activities (Ibid.).

In recent years, the Taliban has become increasingly fragmented. Nevertheless, the movement is led by the *Quetta Shura*. This is a leadership council based in the Balochistan province of Pakistan. Pakistan has for the most part rejected claims about established safe havens on its soil. The Quetta Shura is the representative organ of the Taliban. Several commissions, offices and armed groups operate under the authority of the Shura. The *Miran Shah Shura*, composed exclusively of the *Haqqani network* and the *Peshawar Shura* composed of several small fronts recruiting from the eastern tribes, recognize the Quetta Shura's authority. They also agree on territorial partition of authority in Afghanistan. In addition, Taliban's political commission was established in 2011 in Doha in Qatar and has ever since been a facilitator of peace talks (Giustozzi 2017, 5-9; The Diplomat 2017b). The total manpower of the Taliban, including combatants and support elements is estimated to be over 200,000 (Ibid, 12).

2.1.2 Rivalry

Rivalry implies a perpetual state of competition, where states use a number of means to engage one another. Alliances, arms races, direct military confrontation and covert operations are some of the well-used means. Diehl and Goertz (2000, 19-25) state that rivalries consist of two states in competition that expects a future conflict, which resonates with a history of past conflicts According to this definition, it is fair to describe India and Pakistan as rivals. They have seemingly been on the brink of war on several occasions, apart from the four wars that have actually been fought (Colaresi et al. 2008, 7-8) Understanding the structure of the conflict between India and Pakistan is critical to comprehending why the rivalry between them is persisting (Paul 2005, 8, 37) – and in extension their foreign policies rivalry. Sumit Ganguly and Nicholas Howenstein (2010) are among those who argue that bilateral conflicts shape India and Pakistan's foreign policy behaviour in Afghanistan and come to the conclusion that these countries have 'proxies' there. Rubin (2013) also suggest that while Russia and Britain used to dominate Afghanistan's regional environment, today India and Pakistan play major roles. British historian William Dalrymple (2013b) states in an essay for Brookings Institution that India and Pakistan have expanded their decades-long conflict into Afghanistan, to the extent that the present and future relies largely on the South Asian rivals. New Delhi's aversion to the Taliban regime during the 1990s is often seen as a marker of this rivalry (Paliwal 2017).

2.1.3 Proxy war

Proxy wars have been defined as the product of a relationship between a benefactor, who is a state or non-state actor external to the dynamic of an existing conflict, and the chosen proxies who are the channels for the benefactor's weapons along with training and funding. In short, Mumford (2013, 40-41) asserts that proxy wars can be described as logical replacements for states seeking to further their own strategic goals yet at the same time avoid engaging in warfare that is direct, costly and bloody. This definition will be applied when referring to proxy wars in this thesis.

2.2 Engagement and anti-engagement

The terms 'engagement' and 'anti-engagement' are much debated in the field of international relations and security studies. This dissertation will lean on Paliwal's (2017) understanding of the terms. He explains the term *'engagement'* as a process whereby two political entities are involved in non-coercive diplomacy and have established covert or overt channels of interaction. Engagement does not imply giving legitimacy to the propounded ideas and undertaken practices by the specific entity in question. Neither does it necessitate engaging in military combat with an adversary. It simply implies dealing with a political faction without trying to contain its rise, or even if that is the case, not doing it militarily or by using selective or partisan engagement tactics. On the other hand, *anti-engagement, or containment,* implies partisan political support to one group over another and use of military means to communicate political objectives. It also means cutting diplomatic contact with the perceived adversary, but does not necessarily imply absence of contact with the actor in question (Paliwal 2017, 38-40). Paliwal draws the terms pro- and anti-engagement coalitions from the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), which is a method applied in both domestic and international policy domains, which suggests that a policy narrative has a setting, plot and characters that are inclined towards a preferred policy outcome. This framework offers terminology that opens up for the identification and articulation of the stances of pro- and anti-engagement coalitions within the policymaking circles in Islamabad and New Delhi (Ibid.)

Paliwal's (2017) reflections on engagement versus anti-engagement are not systematized into a coherent theory. A typology is a form of theory, and I have attempted to classify and

structure the characteristics of engagement and anti-engagement into a typology (Doty & Glick 1994). Said differently, from Paliwal's (2017) rather loose line of thinking I have endeavored to derive some defining features of two distinct categories of engagement. Paliwal prefers the term anti-engagement over containment, because he contends that India did not have the means to contain any military and political force in Afghanistan by itself in the 1990s. Thus, the term anti-engagement will also be used in this study.

Engagement	**Anti-engagement**
1. Diplomatic recognition is given to the entity being engaged with 2. Acknowledging a political faction's role without giving it diplomatic recognition 3. Covert or overt channels of interaction 4. Dealing with a political faction without aiming to contain its rise, and if so, not using military means or by using partisan engagement tactics	5. Is characterized by partisan political support to one group over the another 6. Using military means to express political intent is acceptable 7. Cutting diplomatic contact with the entity 8. Maintain relations with the country in question, except one/more particular group(s)

Figure 2: Based on Paliwal's (2017) understanding of the terms engagement and anti-engagement.

I will apply this theoretical typology to my analysis, since it allows one to analyze a state's approach to a non-state actor in another country in a systematized way using clarifying labels. To clarify, I will use the engagement and anti-engagement typology to analyze Pakistan and India's policies towards the Taliban post-2001 in Afghanistan. A simple format like this enables one to capture the big picture and not be distracted by minor details and complexities. States' relations to non-state groups are often complex, and to make sense of them, it is useful to apply a framework that has a fixed understanding of what engagement and anti-engagement is. When states' policies in any given case are lumped into two clear-cut categories, confusion is undoubtedly diminished.

Some points of caution should however be taken notice of. These have implications for *how* I chose to use the typology above: Firstly, the typology does not provide an exhaustive or detailed list of what characterises the two categories. A state's relationship with the group's counterparty or other actors who have a relationship with the group, could also be a part of the definition of engagement and anti-engagement. Perhaps a further development of the typology takes into account the relationships with third parties. It is clear that giving military aid to the ANSF to kill the Taliban is a much clearer sign of anti-engagement than giving the Afghan government a parliament building. ANSF is a clear enemy of the Taliban, while the Afghan government is not an equally direct and clear enemy. In this study, to keep matters simple, the characteristics in the engagement typology are not weighed against each other. Meaning that point one about diplomatic recognition is not a stronger indicator of engagement than point three, which refers to covert or overt channels of interaction with the group. In an attempt to expand the typology, I will analyze the countries' posture towards reconciliation with the Taliban, since it is plausible to assume that Pakistan and India's stances in the peace process can tell us something about their readiness to engage with the group in question or not. As mentioned, the model is a simplification of reality. When reality is simplified, nuances are lost. The two categories above do not for example distinguish between different forms of engagement and anti-engagement. Depending on a state's motive, engagement can for example be economic, political or military in nature.

Which brings us to a second and more serious limitation of the typology, a shortcoming that applies to many categorical models, namely that engagement and anti-engagement are not discrete units where you either engage or anti-engage. A categorization with strict boundaries is artificial and fits poorly with reality. To illustrate: A state's approach towards a non-state actor might have characteristics from both categories, for example point 2 and 6, which makes the country fall somewhere in between the categories rather than clearly within one of them. Sometimes it might also be unclear whether a particular feature is present. Because of the limitations connected to a rigid categorical model, I propose a dimensional model as a possible alternative that will hopefully provide a more valid description of a state's engagement with a non-state actor than a categorical model.

A dimensional approach would be more flexible and more accurate in that it acknowledges that there are degrees of anti-engagement and engagement. In a dimensional model, the 8

points listed up in typology serve as useful guiding points when assessing whether a state's policy can best be described as engagement or anti-engagement.

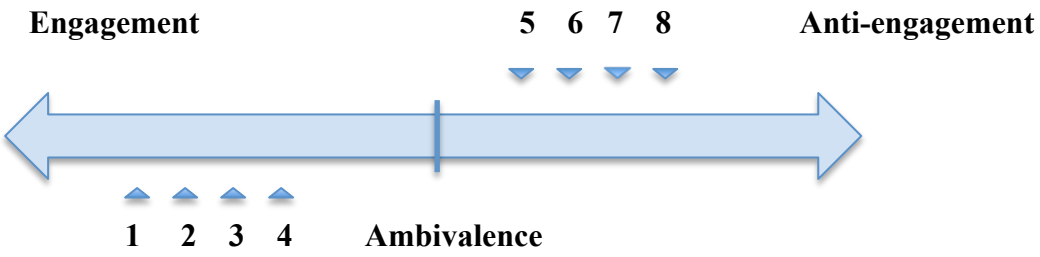


Figure 3: Dimensional axis of engagement and anti-engagement

The logic is that if a country's policy towards a group checks off more characteristics to the left (engagement), then the policy is characterized as more pro-engagement, and vice versa. To address the question raised earlier regarding if the same number of characteristics are met on both sides, if that is the case, than the policy is deemed as *ambivalent*. There exists no mathematical formula to pinpoint a country's engagement on this axis, but the dimensional axis is meant to be a guide and a tool. There is no answer key, but one has to use discretion in order to determine if a country tilts more towards engagement or anti-engagement.

Chapter 3

3 The methodology: Research design and methodical considerations

This chapter details the methodological approach and research design. In the first section (3.1), I will present the chosen research design for this thesis – comparative case study, followed by the operationalization of the research question (3.1.1). In the second section (3.2) details of the data utilized are provided, and at last (3.3), the methodical considerations related to the execution of the analysis are discussed.

3.1 Research design – Comparative case study

The most important consideration in selecting the research design is to ensure that the method is consistent with the research question that is to be answered (Yin 2009). To answer the research question of this particular thesis, qualitative method will be applied, more specifically a comparative case study. A comparative method is a non-statistical analysis of a small amount of cases (George & Bennett 2005; 151, Andersen 1997).

The term case study is defined differently by various actors, and therefore a specification is necessary. Levy's (2008, 2) understanding of a case study is an attempt at comprehending and interpreting a set of events in a limited time and space. He also contends that a good starting point is to ask what your study is a case of. King, Keohane and Verna (1994, 4) on the other hand define a case study as an analysis of a specific event, decision, problem or question. In this case, the topic for the study becomes the main area of interest. Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennet (2005, 17) define a case as "an instance of a class of events". It is evident from this that a case study can be defined in many ways. The research question in this thesis qualifies to a case study in accordance with all of the abovementioned definitions.

Yin (1994, 39-42) emphasizes three motives that rationalize why one should chose case study as research design. Firstly, the case study should be of momentous interest. The development of a theoretical framework becomes the main vehicle to create an in-depth understanding of the case. Secondly, the case should be unique to an extent that key elements in the established

theoretical model can be traced in the empirical case. At last, the case should be revealing a phenomenon (Andersen 1997, 68-70, 128). This particular study meets these requirements. In section 1.4, the relevance of the case is explained, and the theoretical framework employed is laid out in chapter 2, whereas the engagement terminology is applied in the empirical analysis. The purpose of the study is to contribute to increase the factual knowledge on Pakistan-India relations vis-à-vis the Taliban.

Within the comparative case study approach a case is usually referred to as either "most-similar" or "most-different" (Gerring 2007, 27). The research design of this study does not coincide with any of the classified methods, and thus a rigid systematic exercise will not be conducted. The motive to include two cases in a study, referred to as a small-*n* study, is not necessarily to explore similarities or inequalities, but to draw attention to interrelated dynamics between the two cases. Under section 3.1.1, I will return to why I believe a study of *two* cases is fruitful when determining the nature of India and Pakistan's relations with the Taliban.

Arendt Lijphart (1971, 691) distinguishes between six different categories of case studies: atheoretical, interpretive, hypothesis-generating, theory-confirming/infirming and the deviant. The first two types of case studies are chosen based on interest per se, while the last three focuses on theory building. Lijphart (1971) underscores that case studies are merely ideal types and a case study can combine more than one of the mentioned categories. To attain deeper understanding of Pakistan and India's Taliban policy, I will combine what Lijphart (1971, 692) classifies as *interpretive case study* with the comparative case study approach. What is peculiar about this type of interpretive case study is that the case selection is based on interest in the topic, rather than interest in the formulation of a general theory. I have chosen my research questions based on my interest for the India-Pakistan-Afghanistan triangle. The aim with conducting this type of case study is to shed light on the case, and not generalize the findings in any way (Ibid.). However, I take a step further by developing an engagement and anti-engagement typology and a dimensional scale that are derived from Paliwal's (2017) notion of engagement. This is used as the theoretical framework to analyse Pakistan and India's Taliban policies. This can be seen as a contribution to theory-building in that I through a process of interpretation and structuring have attempted to create a simplified model out of a complex phenomenon.

3.1.1 Operationalization of the research question

The research question is broad and can be interpreted in many different ways. An operationalization is therefore necessary, and will guide the analysis process by specifying which tracks to enter. Below each subordinate question or points, there are additional subordinate questions that serve as measurable indicators of the question above. The operationalization will make it possible to measure engagement and anti- engagement empirically. It should be noted that the boundaries between the different subordinate questions sometimes are weak, and that some indicators therefore overlap.

Did Pakistan and India tilt more towards engagement or anti-engagement in dealings with the Taliban from 2001 to 2016, and were there shifts during the period?

1. Did Pakistan/India give diplomatic recognition to the Taliban?
    - Did political officials publicly and directly express their support to the group?
    - Did the government formally acknowledge Taliban as a legitimate political entity?
    - Did the government sign agreements with the Taliban?
    - Did the government allow Taliban to establish diplomatic presence in the country, through consulates or other offices?

2. Did Pakistan/India acknowledge Taliban's role in Afghanistan without giving it diplomatic recognition?
    - Did the political officials, policymakers and analysts express views not fully disregarding Taliban's role in Afghanistan?
    - Did policymakers- and shapers express that Taliban should be accommodated into the Afghan political system?
    - Were policymakers- and shapers in favor or against including Taliban in peace and reconciliation processes?
    - Did the country facilitate or undermine peace and reconciliation processes where Taliban was a participant?

3. Did Pakistan/India have covert or overt channels of interaction with the Taliban?
    - Did the political or military establishment openly admit that they had established links or talks, whether covert or overt, with the Taliban?
    - Have revelations indicated covert links with the group?

4. Did Pakistan/India interact with the Taliban, without containing its influence, or if so, not using military means?

    - Did the countries interact with the Taliban through communication, material support or trade?

    - Did policymakers- and shapers express that Taliban ought to be contained?

- Did the countries use political, economic or social means, such as development aid, cultural influence and economic projects, to contain Taliban's influence?

- Did the countries contain Taliban by being in direct confrontation with the movement, through killing or arresting its members?

- Did the countries offer support to actors that tried to contain Taliban's influence?

5. Did Pakistan/India give partisan political support to other groups over the Taliban?
    - Did the countries express exclusive support to Taliban's adversaries?
    - Did the countries offer exclusive political support to other groups than Taliban in Afghanistan?

6. Did Pakistan/India give military aid to Taliban's opponents?

    - Did the countries offer military support, including logistical and intelligence support, to state and non-state actors participating in warfare against Taliban?

7. Did Pakistan/India cut diplomatic contact with the Taliban?
    - Did the governments denounce the Taliban?
    - Did the countries expel Taliban representatives from their countries?

8. Did Pakistan and India cut associations with the Taliban, and maintain only relations with the Afghan government?

Behind the choice to include both India and Pakistan in this study, instead of just examining one country's Taliban-policy in isolation, lies the following hypothesis: As mentioned earlier, Pakistan and India are rivals and it is reasonable to assume that their rivalry affects their foreign policy, including their policy towards the Taliban. In other words: My hypothesis is that India and Pakistan's choice of engagement or anti-engagement with Taliban, will to a larger or lesser degree reflect their relationship with each other. This hypothesis rests on the understanding that India's ties to Afghanistan are a significant component of its regional strategy, which is designed to sustain dominance over Pakistan in South Asia. By the same token, Pakistan's agenda in Afghanistan is to a large extent to confront and contain Indian aims. As touched upon in chapter 2, when states are rivals, they tend to interpret all sorts of conflict between them through a single narrative, from which it is hard to deviate (Diehl 1998). Put simply, the two countries' policies in the region are so interwoven and mutually reinforcing, that one risks overlooking significant dynamics if one only probes into one country's policy alone. Notwithstanding, even though the effect of rivalry between countries

should not be ignored, one should not overestimate it either. Perhaps my hypothesis overstates the significance of the Indo-Pak rivalry in explaining Islamabad and New Delhi's policy towards Taliban. There might very well be other, for example domestic, considerations that determine their stands. Additionally, Afghanistan is certainly more than just a playground for neighbouring powers' rivalry. Arguably, NATO and especially the US' choice of conduct effect the situation in Afghanistan more than India and Pakistan's approach to Taliban. Nonetheless, disregarding how important India and Pakistan's behavior in Afghanistan is in a comparative sense, there is little doubt that their policies towards the Taliban impact the political landscape in Afghanistan. That is the departure point for this thesis. By studying *two* cases in *one* study, my aim is to shed light to how Pakistan and India's relationship shapes their approaches towards the Taliban. In the process of answering the research question multiple factors that shape India and Pakistan's dealings with the Taliban will be taken into account, and the validity of the hypothesis thereby assessed. Towards the end of the thesis, I will make an overall evaluation of the soundness of the hypothesis. It should be emphasized that this is not the main purpose of the thesis to test this hypothesis; the main purpose is to answer the research question.

For the sake of a cogent, empirical analysis, the timeline will be divided into three phases for both cases, where Pakistan and India's Taliban policy will be detected in each phase. To round up, a summary of each phase will be given, before engagement and anti-engagement parameters and my operationalization of these are applied to determine if their policies were closer to engagement or anti-engagement. The questions in the operationalization will be referred to as points in section 5.4 and 6.4.

3.2 Data

The methodology used in this work consists of examining published work, both primary and secondary sources. It is recommended to rely on a multitude of sources, through triangulation, to strengthen the research design. Triangulation is perceived as good practice in qualitative research, since it may expose contradictions when reflecting back on the research process (Boolsen 2005, 197). I will use source triangulation as a method, to ensure a representative overview of the empirical material. Since the majority of the sources used in this thesis are written, document analysis will be the main method to answer the research question. Document analysis is particularly suited for case studies.

3.2.1 Document analysis

It is important to be aware of the fact that the written sources were formed with a specific intention within a given context, and at the same time bear in mind where the source originates from. In this study, I will base the analysis on both primary and secondary literature to get a nuanced overview of the topic concerned. Official policy statements, such as speeches held by political state leaders, interviews and press releases from relevant actors, as well as public documents from the government will form the backbone of the primary sources.

More specifically, the primary data I will use for the purposes of understanding India's foreign and security policy objectives in Afghanistan are the annual reports from the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and the Ministry of Defence (MOD). The MEA's annual report reflects the expressed objectives of the Indian PM's cabinet and his special advisors, who remain the true decision makers in the Indian foreign policy realm. Due to India's historical legacy of a professionalized but largely apolitical military, the Cabinet and the MEA are responsible for the formulation of foreign policy, and not the MOD. However, the MOD's annual reports are considered a crucial indicator for the implementation of policy. The MEA's annual report remains the central foreign policy document produced through an interagency process. While the MEA represents the diplomatic arm of the foreign policy apparatus, the MOD embodies the military counterpart. However, the annual reports don't necessarily reflect the government's real intentions, and this is why the official reports must be crosschecked or supplied with other sources. Think thanks, the strategic community, analysts and media form the group of peripheral actors in terms of decision making on Afghanistan in India. Routray (2013) argues that dependence of the MEA on the peripheral actors is more visible in the context of Afghanistan compared to other regions of the world. The secondary literature will constitute of books, online news articles, peer-reviewed articles and reports from various institutes and think tanks (Bagia 2011, 10-12; Routray 2013, 15-16).

Foreign policy-making is somewhat confidential, behind-the-scenes and classified. When compared to several other countries, existing literature on Pakistan's foreign policy making process is scant. A view endorsed by experts is that Pakistan's foreign policy debate is somewhat limited. Years of military rule have led the military and intelligence institutions in Pakistan to dominate foreign policy decision-making. A former Pakistani diplomat have

pointed out that the military's influence on Pakistani foreign policy is understandable, since they have played a substantial role in Pakistan's history (Pande 2001, 25). According to a former Pakistani Foreign Secretary the growth in the military's power and influence has given it a disproportionate say in defence and security related matters. Since 1979, Pakistan's intelligence agency, the *Inter-Services Intelligence,* ISI, has increasingly developed a virtual veto power on issues linked to external and security policy (Ibid.). One indication of influence of the military and ISI, on Pakistan's foreign policy is through the many postings of retired generals to diplomatic missions abroad. The ISI has remained in the international spotlight through its alleged support to the rise of the Taliban sine 2014 (Kiessling 2016, 11, 136; Coll 2004, 66). Primary- and secondary literature on the Pakistani Army and the ISI is pertinent because of the actors' influence on the foreign-and security policy, and will be used diligently. Due to the lack of (or access to) annual reports and primary sources regarding Pakistan's foreign policy in Afghanistan, I will rely on books, journal articles, news, reports, policy briefs and analyses on Pakistan's state behaviour and expressed interest in dealings with the Taliban.

As addressed above, some documents regarding Pakistan and India's foreign policy towards Afghanistan are undisclosed for the public. It is a difficult task to acquire inside information about how India and Pakistan's Taliban policy is shaped, and who is in charge behind the scenes. The lack of transparency also applies for the countries' policy in Afghanistan. The countries' real interests might be very different from their stated one, and many of their activities might be covert. Due to this phenomenon, to get an overview of the countries' postures vis-à-vis the Taliban, I have had to rely to a great degree on news articles. Moreover, the timespan for the articles used is from 1997-2017. The existence of multiple diverging descriptions and understandings of India and Pakistan's role in Afghanistan makes it difficult to give an account of the situation that everyone would agree upon. That is not my objective either. My aim, through a solid source critical approach and reliability considerations, is to give a fair and well documented as possible account of the reality and answer to the research question.

3.3 Methodological considerations

Since much information is classified and not imparted to the public, it could have been useful to conduct a fieldwork in India and Pakistan in order to get an all-encompassing

understanding of the case. In fact, I even went on a field trip to Pakistan. Midway through my trip, I decided to cancel the fieldwork, although I got hold of valuable information. There were mainly two reasons why; firstly, paying a trip to Pakistan meant that I had to do travel to India as well to get a balanced and nuanced picture. As my parents have Pakistani descent, that would not have been practically conceivable; it is nearly impossible to attain a visa to visit India if one has Pakistani roots. Secondly, time is valuable, conducting fieldwork requires and consumes a lot of time, access to specific networks and resources, which did not allow me to carry out the plans I had in mind. Even though this study falls short when it comes to having informants, I have used source triangulation, in the sense that various types of sources has been used to get a representative and credible overview of the cases.

The particular concept I am trying to measure in this thesis is difficult to map out and this constitutes a challenge to the internal validity. It is a tricky task to measure a country's policy towards a non-state group beyond the public image that is presented, especially when it is not fully transparent, as is the case with regards to Indian and Pakistani policy towards the Taliban. The limited access to primary sources that shows what actors are discussing behind the scenes, also constitutes a challenge. According to correspondence theory, a statement is true if it corresponds or reflects reality, and relativism theory states that there are only subjective realities. This thesis will take into account both perspectives by recognizing that there are different understandings of the reality, and at the same time bearing in mind that actors have an agenda when they describe things. Objectivity is an illusion, but integrity is scientifically something that should be strived for, and this thesis seeks to be fair in the sense that it allows a wide range of perspectives to be heard, and on this basis make a well-informed review of the information utilized. Through data triangulation, the internal validity is increased. This means that one uses alternative sources such as official documents, books, and reports from various research institutions, news articles, and public statements from relevant actors, existing literature and interviews. By using data triangulation, one enhances the quality of the inferences that are made (Bryman 2004, 274).

The reliability of the official documents and statements is reasonably high, and the same goes for the secondary sources, such as books, news articles and peer-reviewed journal articles. The reliability is strengthened through accurate references to sources, precise account of the theoretical framework that is the basis for data collections and inferences and by explaining the method that is employed in this study.

Chapter 4

4 Background: Prior to 2001

As a backdrop to India and Pakistan's relations with the Taliban post 2001, it is purposeful to recount some key elements of the region's political history pre-2001, including Pakistan and India's relationship with Afghanistan.

4.1 India-Pakistan partition: The partition and beyond

On August 15 1947, India and Pakistan gained their independence. India is far larger and more powerful than Pakistan, which is exacerbated by India's rising global strength coupled with Pakistan's political fragmentation and economic stagnation. Pakistan has however successfully curtailed and mitigated the power asymmetry through alliances with outside powers, acquisition of qualitatively superior weapons and nuclear arms since the late 1980s (Paul 2005, 5-6). Unresolved disputes over territory and water, especially with regards to Kashmir, remain the centrepiece of India-Pakistani relations. On numerous occasions, both nations have accused each other for destabilizing the region. India accuses Pakistan of supporting violent groups in Kashmir and India; Pakistan accuses India of supporting Baluch and Islamist militants in Pakistan (Harpviken & Tadjbakhsh 2015, 32). Beyond Kashmir, new arenas of competition have emerged, most notably Afghanistan. The western coalition and the regional actors contribute to reinforce the dynamics within the South Asian region, by being engaged along regional lines of amity and enmity. In this setting, Afghan terrain becomes a playground for projecting India and Pakistan's strategic ambitions (Ibid, 22).

4.2 Foreign meddling in the Afghan quagmire

Geographically, Afghanistan is surrounded by Pakistan in the south and east, by Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan in the north and northwest, by Iran in the west and by China in the northeast. India does not share borders with Afghanistan. In the nineteenth century, Britain and Russia sandwiched Afghanistan between them, declaring it was a buffer state between their empires. They were however active in meddling in Afghan affairs, and in 1919, the British went to war with Afghanistan to strengthen their control over the country. After the war, Afghanistan grew closer to the new Soviet Socialist Republics, which were the first

states to acknowledge its independence in 1919. During the cold war Afghans exploited the rivalry between the US and Soviet, and received aid and investments for Afghanistan's economic infrastructure from both. Until 1978, the Soviet aid was bigger than the combined aid Afghanistan obtained from the US, different agencies of the UN, other NATO countries and the World Bank. In addition, 96 per cent of the Afghan army's weapons were Soviet made. Gradually, Afghanistan fell into the Soviet orbit (Misdaq 2006, 70, 75- 77). During the roughly three decades of the cold war, neither India nor Pakistan participated directly, although Pakistan's alignment with the United States was significant, as was India's ties to Soviet. The Soviet army's takeover of Afghanistan in 1979 in the midst of Cold War, was a game changer, and established Russian military presence (Riencourt 1982, 423). As a result of the invasion, the region changed dramatically, and a large influx of Afghani refugees came to seek refuge in Pakistan. The Soviet invasion also altered the relations between India and Afghanistan; mainly because India was regarded as an informal Soviet ally in the region. Following the invasion, India tried to downplay its initial tacit support of the Soviet occupation. India was concerned that the military presence of Soviet troops on Afghan terrain would lead to greater US military support for Pakistan (Yadav & Barwa 2011, 106-107).

The end of the Cold War caused a sea of change in the international standing of India and Pakistan. As Afghanistan entered the 1990s, the superpower overlay was disappearing. India's strategic partner and major supplier of military hardware, the Soviet Union, dissolved. Pakistan's semi-allied status with the US in the Afghan war against the Soviets resulted in the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, but when the pro-communist Najibullah administration in Afghanistan was toppled in 1992, Pakistan lost all relevance for the US. India was successful in reviving its old claim to regional supremacy, but soon after Afghanistan was overtaken by a brutal ethnic warfare. Against this background, the Taliban movement emerged in 1994, consisting of many of the mujahidin (guerrilla fighters who fought against Soviet) that Pakistan had trained. Pakistan acted promptly and contributed with money, arms and military advice to this new actor. Pakistan's assistance played a pivotal role in Taliban's sweeping success, which culminated with its takeover of Kabul in 1996 (Sial 2013, 4-9).

During the 1990s Afghan civil war and beyond, India, Russia, Uzbekistan and Iran supported the NA against the Taliban. One of their reasons for backing the NA against the Taliban, was fear of the security challenges created by Arab, Central Asian and Pakistani militants groups sheltered in Afghanistan (Sial 2013, 4-9). The NA was composed of the Tajik-dominated

Jamiat-e Islami, the Uzbek-dominated *Jombush-e Milli* and the Hazara-dominated *Hezb-e Wahdat* (Reiter & Hazdra ed. 2004, 37; Harpviken & Tadjbakhsh 2015, 7-8). The international community, except for Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, did not formally recognize the Taliban regime. This does not mean that there was no interaction between the Taliban and the West. From 1995 and onwards the US oil company Unocal in cooperation with the US government was in talks with the Taliban, with Pakistan as intermediaries. The topic was building an oil and gas pipeline through Afghanistan that would provide the US access to oil fields in Central Asia without having to pass through Iran or Russia. A senior delegation from the Taliban accepted the invitation to visit the Unocal's headquarters in Texas in 1997, but in the end no deal was struck allowing the company to build a pipeline through Afghanistan After 9/11, the US demanded the Taliban to hand over Osama bin Laden. The Taliban was willing to cooperate on the basis of proof, but the US declined to provide evidence of bin Laden's involvement in the attacks. This gave the US enough reason to invade Afghanistan (Rashid 2000, 157-182, 239-242; Pfilger 2003; Cunningham & Warby 2004 51-54; Al Jazeera 2016b; BBC 1997).

After the US launched a war against the Pashtun-dominated Taliban regime in 2001, they put in place an Afghan government; Former Unocal consultant was installed as the interim leader and later president of Afghanistan. Despite the fact that Karzai is ethnic Pashtun, the government favoured the Tajiks, the Uzbeks and the Hazaras. This has led to resentment among large part of the Pashtun population who despise the Afghan government and accuse them of being the puppets of the US invaders. This has heavily contributed to the resurgence of the Taliban, as the movement is seen as the prime representative of the Pashtuns' interests (Ghosh 2012, 59-61; Cunningham & Warby 2004, 53).

4.2.1 Pakistan in Afghanistan

After the partition and independence in 1947, except for brief periods, Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan at the government level have been complicated and antagonistic. Pakistan's regional security perceptions have been shaped by an existential threat from India on one side, and irredentist ambitions of the Afghan state on the other side. Afghanistan was the only Muslim country to oppose Pakistan's membership of the UN and refused to recognize the international border – the Durand Line, which was drawn up in 1893 by the British. The Pak-Afghan border is porous and inhabited by Pashtuns on both sides. After 1947 Afghan rulers

laid claim on Pakistan's Pashtun border regions west of the Indus River and began sponsoring a Pashtun separatist movement – which led the two countries close to war several times until the early 1970s. In the wake of the Soviet invasion in 1979, Pakistan's premier intelligence agency, the ISI, operated training camps in the country's tribal areas in cooperation with the CIA. Pakistan trained the Afghan mujahideens together with the US. Along with those of Afghan and Pakistani origin, mujahideen from Arab, African and other countries were also placed in training camps in Pakistan and sent to combat Soviet troops in Afghanistan. The Soviet invasion ignited a refugee exodus down the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province in Pakistan (Ahmad 2013, 3-4; Sial 2013, 2-3).

The Soviet defeat left a political vacuum in Afghanistan, providing the Pakistani establishment with the opportunity to tackle a long perceived existential threat from India. By ensuring a Pakistan-friendly regime in Afghanistan, Pakistani policymakers seeked to avoid a two frontal war with the conventionally superior India. When the first mujahideen government of President Rabbani came to power in Kabul with Pakistan's help – it turned out to be pro-India. Hence, Pakistan's "Directorate S", the directorate under ISI, that works to enlarge Pakistan's sphere of influence in Afghanistan, backed up the more Pakistan-friendly Taliban logistically, military and politically and helped them conquer Kabul in 1996, and established them as the rulers until 2001. In 1999, through a military coup, General Pervez Musharraf came to power and under his rule, Pakistan continued to view Taliban rule as the best possible instrument to achieve its objectives in Afghanistan (Coll 2018, 47). Until the US intervention, Pakistan offered a channel for negotiations, where it tried to persuade the Taliban leaders into handing over Osama bin Laden to the Americans (Grare 2006, 10).

4.2.2 India in Afghanistan

After independence and partition, the Durand Line problem was transferred from British India to Pakistan. This gave India an advantage and an opportunity to maintain good ties with Afghanistan. The Cold War led to the states having similar foreign policy postures. While India was one of the founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement, Afghanistan tried to implement an independent foreign policy and for some time was able to effectively play one superpower against the other, thereby garnering economic assistance from both. India and Afghanistan also have a long-standing record of technical and economic cooperation in

various fields. Prior to 1979, Afghanistan was the largest partner in India's technical and economic cooperation program (Pant 2012, 8).

With Afghanistan there was *de facto* no border, so when Soviet forces entered the country in December 1979, India's response was more inclined towards the need to continue good relations with the Soviet Union than by what the future of Afghanistan would mean for its security and the neighbourhood. India was one of the first non-aligned states to acknowledge the communist regime installed in Afghanistan by the Russians. The Non-Aligned Movement was divided on this issue, but the antagonistic relations with Pakistan made India support Pakistan's adversaries in Soviet-backed Kabul. As the Cold War ended, India faced a plethora of challenges on economic and foreign policy fronts. However, following the Soviet's retreat, the relations between India and Afghanistan remained friendly. In the Afghan civil war phase, India, Russia and Iran decided to support the NA against the rise of the Taliban. This anti-engagement coalition had shared political interests, but had a limited capability to carry them out militarily. When the Taliban came to power in 1996, India was at loss to evolve a coherent foreign policy response. It had to shut down its Kabul embassy and cut all ties with the regime. India's ties with Afghanistan hit a nadir through Taliban's seven-year rule (Pant 2012, 5). India responded to Taliban's seizure of power by intensifying its support to anti-Taliban forces, principally the Tajik-dominated NA in tandem with other regional actors. Paliwal (2017, 36-37) argues that there were different views in New Delhi on how to approach different factions in a civil war torn Afghanistan to preserve India's strategic interests. Indian officials advocating for containment of the pro-Pakistan Taliban in Afghanistan got their will and the balance of power shifted in their favor.

Through Tajikistan, India facilitated the NA with high altitude warfare equipment and advised them in their operations combating the Taliban. Unlike with ISI, it is contested how much influence India's foreign intelligence organisation, the *Research and Analysis Wing*, RAW, asserts on India's foreign policy, but the agency did play a role in arming the NA (Council on Foreign Relations 2008).

Chapter 5

Analysis

5 Pakistan's Taliban Policy – Between a rock and a hard place

5.1 The First Phase: Musharraf's era 2001-2007 – a shift in Pakistan's pro-Taliban policy

After the Taliban regime was ousted and withdrew from Kabul, international efforts were set afoot to put together political and security institutions to fill the vacuum Taliban left behind. Pakistan once again became the frontline ally of the US – this time under the newly coined banner of the "global war on terror". When President Musharraf came into power after the military coup, he tried to persuade the West into accepting the Taliban. He argued that since they controlled most of the territory in Afghanistan, they should be acknowledged as the legitimate power holders in the country. The Musharraf administration's political support for the Taliban was grounded in the refrain that the group brought peace and stability to Afghanistan after a disastrous civil war had ravaged the country. For Pakistan, the developments in the wake of the US-led military intervention had no silver lining. Its policy of supporting and engaging the Taliban was at stake, and Taliban's nemesis, the NA, made its comeback in Kabul. Pakistan's support for the Taliban was causing the country international and regional isolation. In the hostile and polarised atmosphere of "either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" that president George W. Bush had initiated, Pakistan wanted to avoid being labelled an enemy of the West and a supporter of terrorism. This is also explains why Pakistan a few weeks after the intervention in Afghanistan, handed over former Taliban leader and the Afghan ambassador to Pakistan just before and after 9/11, Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, to American agents, who transferred him to Guantanamo (Khan 2007, 154-155, Coll 2010).

The Pakistani government cautioned US President Bush against the presence of NA troops in Kabul, since they would upset Pashtun sentiment. Musharraf made it clear that he did not want a Pakistan-hostile government to be installed in Kabul, and stated that both Pakistan and the US were in accord regarding a post-Taliban setup in Kabul. The warnings and ultimatums

that the Bush-administration presented Pakistan with placed the country between a rock and a hard place. Islamabad was forced to calculate the cost and benefits of difficult upcoming decisions, and take into account Pakistan's national interests at domestic as well as international levels. It was obvious that a rejection of the US policy toward the Taliban implied isolation and hostility from the US and its allies, most likely also economic sanctions and the withholding of aid. Meanwhile, religious political parties in Pakistan held large protest rallies against military intervention in Afghanistan. The prominent former ISI general, Hamid Gul, was very vocal in his support of the Taliban and deemed it a big mistake to join the US in its war on terror, and warned that Pakistan would be engulfed in the firestorm (Khan 2017, 156; Sial 2013, 4-9; Ahmed 2010, 105-106; UPI 2001).

In the wake of resistance and critical voices challenging the appropriacy of waging war against the Taliban, Musharraf consolidated his position by initiating changes within the army top brass. He replaced Pakistan's ISI chief, Lt. General Mahmud Ahmed, and the chief of general staff, Lt. Gen. Muhammad Aziz Khan, whom both had been his allies in the 1999 military coup and were known for their sympathies with the Taliban – with people he knew would support his chosen line, such as Ehsan ul Haq, who was appointed as the new ISI chief in 2001. The US put pressure on Pakistan to close the Taliban embassy in Islamabad. In reality, this meant that the Musharraf government had to reverse and abandon its engagement policy with the Taliban, and set aside its traditional policy of strategic depth in Afghanistan. Musharraf's decision to stand by the Americans led to a substantial clearing of the ISI, in order to create a new reputation for the service (Khan 2017, 156; Sial 2013, 4-9; Ahmed 2010, 105-106; Kiessling 2016, 177-185).

These developments were met with mixed response from the military. Many opposed the idea of discarding the long-standing Pakistani policy of supporting the Taliban without gaining any specific American concession. The Pakistani Army was the main facilitator and patron of the Taliban, and stressed how it provided Pakistan with strategic depth against aggression from India. The fear of losing strategic depth in Kabul was real, but the unspoken fear was that non-cooperation with the US meant stronger ties between the US and India, and enhancement of Indian power. The military was also concerned that a participation in the war in Afghanistan would lead to the weakening of the military's institutional power and its control over the civilian government (Khan 2017, 156; Sial 2013, 4-9; Ahmed 2010, 105-106).

President Musharraf tried to prevent Pakistan's isolation and secure political legitimacy and financial assistance to his regime by vocally denouncing the militants he formerly supported. Nevertheless, Musharraf was constantly accused by his Afghan counterpart of providing safe havens to the Taliban and other insurgent groups (Ibid.). The Pakistani government tried its best to prevent the NA from seizing power, since it could not afford a not-too-friendly Afghan regime, and this was partly linked to its severe economic compulsions (Ibid.; Khan 2011, 99-102; Brookings 2002).

While Musharraf was severely challenged by the developments after 9/11, he also saw the decision to side with the international coalition against terrorism as a door opener to revitalize Pakistani economy (Khan 2011, 99-102, Brookings 2002). He reiterated that his country would cooperate in the fight against terrorism, and in return, Pakistan would receive a great flow of US foreign aid. Pakistan provided extensive land, air and seaport accessibility, as well as a host of logistical and security-related provisions to the US. Moreover, Pakistan launched several counterterrorism operations on its own soil. Nonetheless, a NA official expressed that the US had to put pressure on the Pakistani government, more specifically the military, to stop its support to the Taliban. He asserted that Pakistan's pledges to aid the US in its war against the Taliban were unconvincing. Furthermore, the NA official made claims about the military intelligence controlling the foreign policy of Pakistan towards Afghanistan, not the civilian Pakistani government (CNN 2001). Pakistan had no option but to acquiesce the Bonn agreement signed 5 December 2001 and Musharraf formally extended congratulations to Hamid Karzai, the head of the interim government. Islamabad welcomed the Bonn agreement although it was worried about the NA dominance in the new political setup in Kabul and the underrepresentation of Pashtuns (Abbas 2014, 102; Khan 2011, 102-107).

Even though the warfare against and the removal of Taliban from all positions of power constituted a devastating blow, the group was not completely destroyed and found sanctuary in the tribal areas in Pakistan, known as the *Federally Administered Tribal Areas*, FATA. As early as 2004 there were speculations that a revival was brewing (Abbas 2014, 106-107, Khan 2011, 102-107). Musharraf was interviewed in 2004, and asked about the resurgence of Taliban in areas along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. When accused of allowing the insurgents to return to Afghanistan from Pakistan, he responded the following:

> This is a terrible thing to be accusing each other. We are fighting the same enemy. We are fighting al Qaeda, the Taliban and the rebels. If we start throwing blame on each other, we weaken our positions…

Former Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf in an interview at CNN

Musharraf went on to dismiss the claim about a resurgence of Taliban activity and said that there was no immediate threat from the group (CNN 2004). By early 2005 however, there were strong indications of a Taliban revival in Afghanistan as a result of Taliban's survival skills and the international failure to rebuild Afghanistan. In the early year's post-Taliban in Afghanistan, some high-ranking Taliban leaders had tried to reach out to Kabul to patch things up with the new government, but in vain. The US discouraged Karzai from offering any amnesty guarantees to the Taliban leaders that reached out to him. When the Karzai government began considering a more flexible approach towards the Taliban later, in connection with the parliamentary elections in September 2005, the Taliban refused any cooperation. The toxic influence of the ongoing war in Iraq introduced Taliban to information about innovative explosive devices – and suicide bombing gained a momentum. The use of suicide bombing to target government officials and international forces in Afghanistan escalated exponentially in the coming years (Abbas 2014, 117-119).

A question that kept haunting Washington and Kabul was about the linkage and association between the Taliban and the Pakistani intelligence. Mullah Omar was annoyed with Pakistani leaders for siding with the US in the military campaign in Afghanistan. Pakistan practically renounced the Taliban October 2011, and it is unlikely that Mullah Omar would be responsive to everything the Pakistani intelligence was telling him. However, it was a logical conjecture that the ISI at some point must have tried to regain the lost trust of the Taliban (Abbas 2014, 117-119). Senior Pakistani military commanders were probably not ready to eliminate the forces they had long invested in. India's increased influence in Afghan affairs manifested in growing intelligence and diplomatic presence through its consulates and growing prominence in Afghan infrastructure projects, increased Pakistani paranoia about the prospect of a hostile western frontier. In light of this, hedging against potentially unfavourable outcomes in Kabul by investing in Taliban appeared reasonable. Musharraf's personal attitude toward the Taliban remained complex and multifaceted however. He clearly detested the terrorist elements and foreign militants within the movement, but at the same time argued for peacefully integrating

Taliban's rank and file into civil society, a belief that was premised on the belief that these elements were misguided culprit rather implacable foes. While there was consensus among all senior Pakistani military officers that the al-Qaida presence in the FATA had to be eliminated, there were diverse views concerning the Taliban. Although President Musharraf and his corps commanders in principle settled on a strategy of eliminating the Taliban, implying disarming the leadership and the hardliners in the movement, they were reluctant about using assassination as an instrument against the group (Tellis 2008, 12-19).

5.1.1 Musharraf's ambivalence

On 15th September 2006, Musharraf admitted that 'the centre of gravity of terrorism' had shifted from al-Qaida to the Taliban. He further stated that the Taliban was a more dangerous element since it was more organised and had more popular support than al-Qaida (Behuria 2007, 531). Four days later, on September 19, 2006, Musharraf addressed the United Nation's General Assembly and stressed that a resurgent Taliban threatened Pakistan's effort against extremism and terrorism. He argued that the continuous influx of millions of Afghan refugees into Pakistan, some even sympathetic to the Taliban, created problems along the border regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan (UN 2006). Through this manoeuvre, Musharraf tried to detach Pakistan from Taliban, even though his credibility was under constant scrutiny by the international community. Throughout Musharraf's nine-year tenure, Pakistan was met with allegations of ISI cultivating Taliban to counter Indian action against Pakistan on numerous occasions. In an October 2006 interview, Musharraf responded the following when asked about the state of the alleged ISI-Taliban nexus:

> Now, nobody in the ISI helps. Now, there—I have some reports that some dissidents, some people, retired people who were in the forefront, in ISI, during a period of '79 to '89 may be assisting with the leaks somewhere here and there. We are keeping a very tight watch, and we'll get all of them if at all that happens.

President Musharraf denied any active links with the Taliban, but did point out that retired ISI operatives might abet the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan (NBC News 2006).

The manner in which the so-called global war on terror was fought had some serious consequences for Pakistan. Human rights concern were set aside under the pretext of fighting terror, which gave the military dictatorship opportunity to flourish and disabled the growth of the civil society. In the midst of this Musharraf was struggling to preserve his legitimacy as a political leader. Pakistan was in the eye of the storm as it approached Musharraf's final and highly turbulent rule in 2007-08. The president was increasingly loathed at home, while admired in Western capitals. The government faced criticism for allowing the situation in FATA to deteriorate, and strong voices put the blame on Musharraf's alliance with Bush's "war on terror". Moreover, the Lal Masjid or Red Mosque crisis marked a significant period in Pakistan's battle with Islamic militancy. The army's standoff and siege of the mosque resulted in trauma and bloodshed and gave life to a new class of extremists in Pakistan who were planning a backlash. The birth of the Pakistani Taliban, TTP, was another major turning point in the rise of insurgency in the northwestern Pakistan and the tribal areas. From 2007 onwards, suicide bombing, a relatively new phenomenon in a Pakistani context, became increasingly common. Many of the terrorists had affiliation with the TPP or were from the tribal areas, seeking revenge for American drone attacks or the Pakistani military's warfare against the TPP (Abbas 2014, 121-127; Khan 2011, 230-231; Dawn 2017).

Throughout Musharraf's tenure, efforts were made to prevent an anti-Pakistan government from forming in Kabul, and Pakistan insisted on including the moderate Taliban in the Afghan government. It became increasingly clear that Pakistan considered Taliban as a hedge against a possible US retreat from Afghanistan, against Afghan politicians whom the army despised and against growing Indian influence in Afghanistan. Internal pressures eventually forced Musharraf to resign as the President of Pakistan after nine years in power. He bowed to demands to step down, rather than facing impeachment charges related to violation of the constitution and gross misconduct. Following Musharraf's exit, he revealed that the US had threatened to "bomb Pakistan back to stone age" if the country didn't cooperate back in 2001. Ostensibly, this had made Musharraf reverse Pakistan's initial pro-Taliban stance. However, the accusations and the speculations that Musharraf had covertly allowed ISI to play a double game by pursuing Pakistan's interests for strategic depth in Afghanistan through its jihadi proxies, particularly the Taliban, stuck with him. Musharraf's greatest achievement was advancing peace talks with India, but the relations between the two nuclear-armed neighbours were once again to deteriorate after his exit from Pakistani politics (The Telegraph 2008a & 2008b).

5.2 The Second Phase: 2008-2014 – a continuation of Pakistan's ambivalent Taliban policy

In 2008 alone, Pakistan arrested 4,113 militants and the security forces launched 12 major military operations against the TTP and their rising militancy. Pakistan's security forces were at war with insurgents on its own territory and suffered 1,750 casualties, which was twice the number of the total casualties suffered by coalition forces of 41 nations in Afghanistan. Despite major efforts, security was not restored. Deep rifts were present within the government circles on the issue of how to best combat terror groups. Ambiguity had marked Pakistan's Taliban policy in the Musharraf era after the US invasion in Afghanistan. A multitude of statements were given by Pakistani military chiefs, the diplomatic community and political leaders, which came across as contradictory and also signalled a lack of commitment to the so-called war on terror (PIPS, 2009, 2). One of the reasons for this was probably that many in Pakistan considered only TPP, not Afghan Taliban, a terrorist group; whereas many in the international community lumped these two groups together under a broader Taliban terrorist-label. In spite of the Taliban and TTP's common interests in combating the US forces in Afghanistan, the Taliban repeatedly denied organizational ties with the TPP. In fact, Taliban criticized TTP for targeting the Pakistani military and its forces (FFI report 2010, 60).

The February 2008 elections resulted in the return of two major parties, *the Pakistan People's Party,* PPP*,* and the *Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz,* PML-N. Later that year, in September, the contentious head of the PPP, Asif Ali Zardari, was elected to the position of head of state of Pakistan. He faced the tough task of uniting a country divided over the American-led 'war on terror'. This was a task that was made more difficult by terrorism knocking on Islamabad's own door with the rise of militancy in the Pashtun belt. Zardari was a weak president. Allegations of corruption never left him alone, and his comeback in Pakistani politics stirred a lot of controversy. Some called his presidency accidental and a product of his wife Benazir Bhutto's assassination. The Army saw him as overly dovish, and didn't appreciate the president's attempts at imposing civilian oversight over the military. Zardari's dysfunctional relationship with the Army created a sense of uncertainty within the institution and the perception that the military's corporate autonomy and monopoly over shaping Pakistan's national security policy was under threat. It is widely believed that Zardari never controlled

Pakistan's security policy, which the Army and intelligence agency ISI instead did (Foreign Policy 2009).

President Barack Obama set a timeline for America's military involvement in Afghanistan and announced that the withdrawal would begin mid-2011. Numerous US officials saw Pakistan's relations with the Pashtuns of southern and eastern Afghanistan as a strategic asset that would help Islamabad gain influence in Kabul in a post-NATO Afghanistan. WikiLeaks revelations in 2010 brought to light US intelligence records that described ISI's links to militant groups fighting the NATO forces in Afghanistan and underscored the agency's double game. Pakistani officials denied any current support for the group. Analysts at that time generally suspected Pakistani support to the Taliban, though not to the same extent as in the past. Kathy Gannon, a journalist who covered the region for decades said that the Taliban didn't rely as much on Pakistan as a safe haven as before, since it had gained control of more territory inside Afghanistan (Brookings 2010; Council on Foreign Relations 2011; The New York Times 2010).

It is unclear how much control Pakistan's civilian government led by President Zardari had over the ISI. Army chief Ashfaq Parvez Kiyani replaced the ISI chief Musharraf had picked with Lt. Gen. Ahmed Shuja Pasha in September 2008. Some experts viewed this move as Kiyani trying to consolidate his control over the intelligence agency. ISI was a disciplined army unit with a reported staff of ten thousand at this time. There is reason to believe that they followed orders, but could push the envelope sometimes. Many of the ISI's agents had ethnic and cultural ties to Afghan insurgents, so they naturally sympathized with them. With the mushrooming of armed groups in the tribal areas in Pakistan, it was hard to decide which ones the agency controlled. There seems to be divisions within the ISI, and while some within the ISI sympathised with militant groups, others realized they couldn't follow a policy contradictory to that of the army, which was involved in counterterrorism operations against TPP. Furthermore, the ISI cooperated with the US in the arrest of militants in Pakistan, including Taliban's top military commander, Mullah Baradar, whom ranked second in influence, right below Mullah Omar. The participation of the Pakistan's intelligence service in the arrest could suggest a new development in Pakistan's approach to the Taliban, who had been ambivalent regarding efforts to contain the Taliban in the past. There were indications that the Pakistani military and ISI had finally started to distance themselves from the Taliban. It seemed like the Army chief, general Kiyani and senior leaders had gradually come to the

view that they couldn't support the Taliban since the risk of offsetting its relations with the West was way too great (Brookings 2010; Council on Foreign Relations 2011; The New York Times 2010).

5.2.1 Pakistan's persistent denial of links with the Taliban

During the time period 2008-2014 Pakistan was not on the best terms with the leadership of Afghanistan, mostly because of rhetorical clashes with Afghan president Hamid Karzai and scepticism of him forging stronger ties with India. Lingering suspicions about ISI's support for the Taliban continued to pose problems for Pakistan. In May 2009, Zardari denied any ISI links with the Taliban or al-Qaida. He remarked that all intelligence agencies have their sources in militant organizations and that does not translate to support. "Does that mean CIA has direct links with al-Qaeda? No, they have their sources. We have our sources. Everybody has sources", Zardari pointed out (Council on Foreign Relations 2011). According to Weinbaum, the Pakistani government had two sets of policies. One was the official policy of promoting stability in Afghanistan; and the other was an unofficial policy of engaging with jihadis to appease political forces within Pakistan. Weinbaum argued that the second policy undermined the first one. But it's not certain that the Pakistani government viewed their policy as contradictory in the same way as Weibaum. On the contrary, it might be that the government considered an Afghanistan without the presence of foreign troops and a strong Taliban represented in government, as most conducive to stability. The opposition leader, Nawaz Sharif from the PML-N, asserted that there were was ambivalence within the army in regards to support for the Taliban, but that it generally preferred not to deal with the Taliban as an adversary (Council on Foreign Relations 2011).

From 2009 and onwards, the PPP-led government devoted itself to support an Afghan-led and owned reconciliation process, where Pakistan and Afghanistan were to move towards the same objective to defuse bilateral tensions, evolve joint and regional frameworks to handle border security and counterterrorism and improve trade and cooperation. Pakistan released about a dozen detained Taliban members for the sake of political reconciliation in Afghanistan (Sial 2013, 7). Meanwhile, on the Afghanistan front, the Taliban was provided with a sense of empowerment. By 2010, Taliban had regained territories in the east and south of Afghanistan, though more in terms of influence than direct political control (Abbas 2014, 186). General Kiyani, the commander-in-chief of the army, addressed a press conference for

Western correspondents in Islamabad on February 1st 2010. Kiyani asserted that Pakistan did not want to see a Talibanised Afghanistan, since it was not in the current Afghan government's interest. Moreover, he said that strategic depth did not mean controlling Afghanistan, but to secure a stable, peaceful and friendly Afghanistan. The perceptions of Pakistan's foreign policy elite – retired civilian and military officials, analysts, journalists and civil society practitioners – were presented in a report focusing on Pakistan's outlook on the impending endgame in Afghanistan and its implications of its policies towards the country (Jinnah Institute 2011). In terms of the end game, the project participants were mostly concerned with three developments in Afghanistan. Firstly, a degree of stability in Afghanistan with a an inclusive government in Kabul was considered an imperative, and some of the opinion makers insisted that given the current situation, a sustainable arrangement between the main Taliban factions – specifically Mullah Omar's Quetta Shura Taliban and the Haqqani network – had to be a part of the new political arrangement. Secondly, they claimed that the longer meaningful talks with the Taliban were delayed, the more challenging it would be for the Pakistani security establishment to persuade the main Taliban faction to engage in peace talks. Thirdly, the Pakistani foreign policy elite perceived the present Indian engagement to be moving beyond development projects and called for more transparency on Indian objectives in Afghanistan (Sial 2013, 7-9; Jinnah Institute 2011).

At the same time, Pakistan's ambassador to the US, Sherry Rehman, stated that Pakistan's previous policy of strategic depth had changed along with its more positive attitude towards India. Over the years, the Pakistani embassy in Kabul reached out to non-Pashtun Afghans in an effort to display that Pakistan's Afghan policy was not entirely focused on Pashtuns. Pakistan's ambassador to Afghanistan made extensive visits to northern Afghanistan, where the majority are non-Pashtuns and inaugurated many Pakistan-funded development projects. Pakistan's foreign minister at the time, Hina Rabbani Khar, told journalists that Pakistan favoured no particular ethnic group in Afghanistan following her briefing on Pakistani-Afghan relations on 24th July 2012 to the Pakistani Parliamentary Committee on National Security. Pakistan's attempts at reaching out to northern factions in Afghanistan to better its image among different Afghan ethnic groups were met with some mistrust due its past support for the Taliban regime and the alleged sheltering of the militants who carried out attacks inside Afghanistan. However, there is little reason to question Pakistan's desire for peaceful reconciliation among the various ethnic factions in Afghanistan, including the Taliban, which represents Pashtun interest, in order to lower the level of violence and

militancy in the region. According to Sial (2013), Pakistan's inaction against the Taliban should largely be seen as an effort not to add to the internal threats it faces from a number of militants, rather than an intent to seek strategic depth in Afghanistan. Also, a return to a pure Taliban regime was not in Islamabad's 's self-interest, as it was aware of Afghan sentiments viewing Pakistan as a pro-Taliban factor, and that this could eventually push Afghanistan and its people further away from Pakistan and closer to its neighbour India. An International Security Assistance Force report from 2012 stated that the Taliban itself did not trust Pakistan. Sial (2013) asserts that the relationship between Pakistan and the Taliban from 2001 changed from a strategic alliance to a marriage of convenience (Sial 2013, 7-9; Jinnah Institute 2011).

5.2.2 The peace broker Pakistan

In June 2013, PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif was sworn in as the new head of state in Pakistan for the third time despite allegations of extensive vote rigging. During Sharif's second term as prime minister, in 1997, Islamabad had recognized the Taliban government. However, the ground realities and security dynamics were now very different. On the outset of Sharif's third term, he underlined that Pakistan wanted a stable Afghanistan. Pakistan's political elite was increasingly concerned that the continued insurgency in Afghanistan would pose a threat to Pakistan's internal stability after 2014. Pakistan's role as a peace broker bringing the Taliban to the negotiation table was indisputable in the region and beyond (The National Interest 2013).

In September 2013, Pakistani officials proclaimed that they had released former deputy commander of the Taliban, Mullah Baradar in an effort to bolster Afghanistan's struggling peace process. This was after the US and Afghanistan had long pressed Islamabad to free Baradar, a figure they believed would help persuade moderate Taliban leaders to come to the negotiating table as the US troops was planning on leaving Afghanistan at the end of 2014 (Al Jazeera 2013).

In early 2014, there were indications given by a top Pakistani official that a peace deal between Afghanistan and the Taliban was possible if the government in Kabul expressed flexibility. Again, the Afghan government accused elements within the Pakistani military of supporting the Afghan insurgency. Islamabad yet again denied any involvement. There was growing international concern that the Afghan security forces would not be able to prevent the

Taliban from recapturing power post ISAF. Pakistan's National Security and Foreign Policy Advisor, Sartaj Aziz, reassured the international community that there were 350,000 Afghan security forces and the anti-Taliban NA had also grown stronger, thus the Taliban would most certainly be looking for a way put to put an end to the conflict through political reconciliation. Furthermore, he stressed that it was up to the Afghan government to encourage the Taliban to join the peace process, and although the Taliban had already established its rule in some Afghan districts, it was Pakistan's assessment that the group would not be able to regain control of the whole country. To the surprise of many, Afghan President Karzai tried to reach out to the Taliban during his last full year in power and encouraged Pakistan to use its influence with the Taliban to bring them to the table for peace talks. The statements by Aziz were a pointer of Pakistan's unique position concerning the Taliban and even Karzai acknowledged it (VOA News 2014).

As the 2014 deadline for the Afghanistan transition came closer, the Afghan government wanted the new administration in Pakistan to formulate a clear policy towards brokering peace in Afghanistan. More specifically, the government wanted Islamabad to put pressure on or convince the Taliban leadership to talk with them; a leadership they claimed resided in Pakistan. The Sharif government reassured Kabul that efforts towards some sort of reconciliation following the withdrawal of the US would be made, and called for an inclusive political engagement with the Taliban as a key to lasting peace in Afghanistan. The PML-N emphasized that the peace process should be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned; Pakistan would only contribute as a facilitator. Notwithstanding, Pakistan was walking a tightrope (BBC 2013). On one side, Islamabad vouched for the moderate elements of the Taliban to be strong enough to get some share in the constitutional dispensation and political system of Afghanistan. On the other hand, Pakistan was aware of the dangers of the Taliban gaining too much strength as that might pose a threat to Islamabad. There was a strong apprehension within Pakistani establishment that once the international forces completely withdrew from Afghanistan, Afghan and Pakistani Taliban would join hands. Pakistan wanted to avoid affinity between the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, which could potentially lead to them conspiring against the Pakistani state. This was some of the rationale behind Pakistan's continued support of the Taliban and its reluctance to deny them sanctuaries, more precisely the Quetta and Peshawar Shuras, on its soil (PIPS 2014, 99-100; Qazi et al. 2016, 172).

5.3 The Third Phase: 2014-2016 – Pakistan's relation with both the NUG and the Taliban deteriorates

Pakistan was arguably the most crucial regional player in post-2014 Afghanistan. Its links with the Taliban gave it considerable advantage and influence over any sort of peace process. However, the support granted to Afghan insurgent groups over the past decade had unintended domestic consequences for Pakistan. The growing number of terrorist attacks, mainly by the TTP, posed a significant threat to Pakistan's internal security and stability. Therefore, there was fear linked with failure to reach a political settlement in Kabul, since it would ostensibly have a spill over effect that would further destabilize Islamabad's ability to contain extremist groups inside Pakistan. The concept behind Pakistan's policy of 'strategic depth' was as mentioned earlier to use Afghanistan as the country's backyard to hedge against Indian influence. However, the reality turned out to be much more complex. Not only was Islamabad unable to control the Taliban, but the emergence of the Pakistani Taliban in 2007, led to a shift in thinking in specific quarters of the policy establishment – in terms of emphasizing the importance of Afghan stability (EUISS 2014, 1-2).

Even though Taliban was on the offensive after ISAF withdrew from Afghanistan, their upsurge was stalled when a number of Taliban leaders were gunned down in Pakistan at the beginning of 2014. Washington, Kabul and numerous other capitols had long believed that Taliban received some level of state sponsorship from Pakistan, and the fact that high-level Taliban members were located in Pakistan strengthened their suspicion. In an ISAF report, the Taliban's mistrust of its Pakistani patron was mentioned: Taliban detainees expressed unhappiness about ISI's control over them, but admitted they had little choice but to accept it as long as they required a sanctuary in Pakistan. This suggested that Pakistan-based sanctuaries would continue to be a chief source of Pakistani leverage over Taliban. In the same time, media accounts suggested that Kabul, with some help from New Delhi, cultivated its own proxy – the Pakistani Taliban, TTP. Islamabad had long suspected much of India's diplomatic presence in Afghanistan to be a cover for RAW agents trying to destabilize Pakistan. Before this the accusations aimed at RAW have mainly been that they train and arm separatists in Pakistan's Baluchistan Province along the Afghan border. RAW has continuously denied these charges (Foreign Policy 2014; Pakistan Army 2014; Council on Foreign Relations 2008).

Former Pakistani president Musharraf disclosed some information about Pakistan's relations with the Taliban in an interview with *The Guardian* early February, 2015. He insinuated that Pakistan had supported the Taliban in a bid to counter the perceived influence of archrival India, and Afghan president Karzai had helped "India stab Pakistan in the back." Moreover, he asserted that the ISI cultivated the Taliban post 2001 since pro-India non-Pashtuns and officials dominated Karzai's government.

> Obviously, we were looking for some groups to counter this Indian action against Pakistan. That is where the intelligence work comes in. Intelligence being in contact with Taliban groups. Definitely, they were in contact, and they should be.

Musharraf added that he was convinced that India through its intelligence agency, RAW, backed regional separatists in order to break up and destabilize Pakistan. He called for an end to militant proxies in neighboring Afghanistan and suggested that the time had come to cooperate with Afghan president Ashraf Ghani (The Guardian 2015*). The National Unity Government,* NUG - with president Ghani as the leader – assumed charge in September 2014. Ghani's administration was off to a good start with Islamabad, and the constant blame game between the two countries was somehow lessened compared to during Karzai's term. There were a good number of high-level visits and exchanges between the countries that led to visible improvement in political relations and military-to-military ties. Pakistan expressed resolute support for an 'Afghan-led and Afghan-owned' peace and reconciliation process that included all ethnic groups. At this point Pakistani policymakers had fully realized that it had to establish relations with all the different ethnic and political groups in Afghanistan (Khan 2014, 28-35). The good relations between the two countries were put to the test when the level of violence worsened as a result of Taliban's annual spring offensive. The Afghan government was hoping that Pakistan's mediation would help dampen Taliban's offensive, before it halted President Ghani's efforts to repair relations with Pakistan and revive the spate of mutual allegations. Ghani expressed that Afghanistan was not a battleground for any proxy wars, and that he needed Pakistan to do more to promote peace with the Taliban. In response, Pakistani military and civilian leaders insisted that while Islamabad had some influence over the Taliban, it had no control over the insurgency. A little later, the Pakistani government made a concession to Ghani's government by publicly denouncing Taliban's spring offensive and urging it to engage in peace negotiations with the Afghan government (Vox News 2015). This was the first time the Pakistani government had officially condemned Taliban's

insurgency. It was followed up with a press conference in Kabul in May 2015, where Prime Ministerer Nawaz Sharif strongly condemned the surge in attacks by the Taliban under their Operation Azm, which Pakistan described as acts of terrorism. "All sanctuaries, when found, will be eliminated by direct action, and will be monitored by the existing mechanism", Sharif stated (Dawn 2015a). Sharif's accompanying delegation included Pakistani Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Raheel Sharif, who highlighted that Afghanistan's enemy will be treated as Pakistan's enemy. Nevertheless, the improvements in bilateral relations that occurred after Ghani ascended to power faced a setback because of the spike in violence (Ibid.).

President Ghani continued to request Pakistan to make efforts to facilitate talks with the Taliban. Pakistan had initially limited its role to endorsing peace talks and encouraged an 'Afghan led and Afghan owned' peace process. In response to persistent Afghan requests combined with the rise in Taliban's spring offensive, a change was detected in Pakistan's position to arrange talks and persuade the Taliban into dialogue with the Afghan government. These efforts culminated in the 'first officially acknowledged' round of talks in 14 years (ISSI 2015, 1-4).

These were the first direct talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, and is known as "2+1+2" or the Murree Peace Process". They took place in Murree in Pakistan from July 7-8, 2015. The Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), with high-level officials from Afghanistan, US and China, served as observers during the talks. During the talks, Sharif expressed that the talks were overt, not covert, and termed them as a breakthrough. It was reported that the Taliban also agreed to a tentative ceasefire if Pakistan and China could guarantee them some sort of inclusion in the Afghan government, and Afghan government officials agreed to the inclusion of their third-tier leadership. Subsequently, officials from Pakistan and China expressed their willingness to play a proactive role and in becoming guarantors of a potential peace deal between the NUG and the Taliban (ISSI 2015, 1-4).

Optimism turned to pessimism at the unexpected news of Mullah Omar's death. This event delayed the peace process and the second round of talks scheduled for July 31 2015 was cancelled and cast a shadow on the future prospects of talks. The recent improvement in relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan and the fair degree of progress made in reaching out to the Taliban turned out to be short-lived, and a surge in violence in Kabul additionally complicated matters. Furthermore, Mullah Mansour became the new successor of the Taliban,

and divisions ran deep in the Taliban over the peace process (ISSI 2015, 1-4). The Taliban was able to capture a number of areas from the ANSF and had its biggest success on the battleground in 14 years by conquering the northern city of Kunduz in September 2015 for a brief period. Many in the movement preferred that Taliban waited with negotiations until they had gained more power and territory, and could negotiate from a position of strength (Qazi et al. 2016, 173).

In the following months, tensions kept growing between Islamabad and Kabul over continued Taliban militancy. President Ghani angrily stated, "I no longer wanted Pakistan to bring the Taliban to the table, but instead wanted it to aggressively attack the group's sanctuaries on Pakistani territory." Even though he pushed for a Pakistan-brokered peace process, Ghani now wanted the process to be fully controlled by the Afghan government (ISSI 2015, 3- 4). Notwithstanding Ghani's outburst, the civil and military leadership in Pakistan continued making efforts to revive the peace talks. In this regard, the advisor to the Prime Minister, Sartaj Aziz, paid a visit to Kabul to attend a regional conference where he met with Ghani and other Afghan officials in an attempt to ease tensions and encourage the Afghan government to resume talks with the Taliban (Ibid.). Late October 2015, Prime Minister Sharif spoke at a Washington think tank a day after talks with US President Obama. He asserted that he had told President Ghani that Pakistan was prepared to help revive stalled Afghan peace talk, but it was impossible to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table and at the same time be asked to kill members of the insurgent group. Sharif didn't elaborate much further, but it was apparent that he was referring to US calls to eliminate militant sanctuaries within Pakistan (Reuters 2015). Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif visited Kabul in December 2015 for discussions on the reconciliation process, security-related matters and border management. A quadrilateral framework was in the works in an effort to end deadlock in the Afghan process, involving China and the US (Dawn 2015b). The first meeting of the Afghanistan-Pakistan-United States-China Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) was held in Islamabad January 11, 2016. At the opening session of the meeting, Advisor to the Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs, Sartaj Aziz, underscored that:

> …no preconditions should be attached to the reconciliation process... as the primary objective is to create conditions to bring the Taliban to the negotiation table and offer them incentives that can persuade them to move away from using violence a tool for pursuing political goals (ISSI 2016a, 2).

China, the US, Afghanistan and Pakistan held multiple rounds of talks to develop a roadmap for Afghan peace negotiations. They failed to convince the Taliban to participate in peace talks with the Kabul government. The four-nation group had their fourth meeting 23 February, 2016, in Kabul and the QCG issued an "invitation" to all Taliban members and other armed groups to engage through their authorized representatives in the first round of direct peace talks with the government in Afghanistan. It was expected that the talks would take place the first week of March 2016 (Afghanistan Analysts Network 2016).

5.3.1 A slight confession

A statement released by the Taliban in early march 2016, stated that it refused to sit in for direct peace talks with the Afghan government in the framework of QCG as long as US troops were deployed in Afghanistan and the airstrikes were going on (Reuters 2016). As a consequence, the US increased the pressure on Pakistan to convince the Taliban to take part in talks without pre-conditions and end fighting. These events were followed up with a statement made by Pakistani official Sartaj Aziz while in Washington:

> We have some influence over them [Taliban] because their leadership is in Pakistan and they get some medical facilities. Their families are here. We can use those levers to pressurize them to say, 'Come to the table (Al Jazeera 2016d).

Such admissions had never been made publicly before. Analysts perceived Aziz's comment as the most candid admission by a Pakistani official that Afghan insurgents resided in sanctuaries in Pakistan. His remarks raised questions about whether his views reflected those of the military establishment, but the military remained silent on this matter (Al Jazeera 2016c, BBC 2016a). In late April 2016, a Taliban delegation from the Qatar office arrived in Pakistan to discuss the prospects for peace talks; however, the timing was not favorable as Taliban's annual spring offensive, leading to one of the deadliest attacks in Kabul on April 19^{th,} was going on. A review of news and analyses displays that large parts of Afghanistan's political elite didn't endorse Ghani's pro-Pakistan policy overtures (Sial 2016, 2; PIPS 2016, 10, 52-53).

Pakistan's role as the main facilitator in the Afghan peace process began to look murky since it failed to convince Taliban to participate in the peace process. While Pakistan admitted having "influence" over Taliban, it cautioned that it didn't necessarily imply "control" over

the group. The "influence" in turn came from the presence of Taliban in Pakistan. The Pakistani government had to tread cautiously as they considered Taliban an important Afghan political stakeholder, and alienating them or pushing them too hard could make them hostile, willing to undermine Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan and add fuel to Pakistan's internal insecurity by joining hands with Pakistani Taliban. In May 2016, Sartaj Aziz asserted that the military warfare in Afghanistan was counterproductive and hadn't worked over the past years. Moreover, officials had publicly said Pakistan would not fight others' war on its own soil. All of these announcements were understood as a big "no" to Kabul's calls for action to counter the Taliban in Pakistan (Sial 2016, 2; PIPS 2016, 10, 52-53)

In the wake of the large Kabul attack in April 2016, Pakistan tried harder to exert its influence over Taliban's political commission in Doha, which led to a visit from Taliban delegates to Karachi. Although the meeting with the Taliban negotiators didn't pay off, Kabul – that had once praised Islamabad's role in bringing Taliban to the table – now interpreted the latest visit as a challenge to the Afghan government's legitimacy. The conventional blame game restarted, with President Ghani announcing in his parliament speech in April that his government would no longer seek Pakistan's assistance in the reconciliation process with the Taliban. One again, he asked the Pakistanis to take firmer action against the group. The Pakistani Foreign Office responded that force cannot resolve the issue and that it was counterproductive, a statement that was perceived as a refusal by Pakistan to employ force against Taliban (PIPS 2016, 53-58). Late May 2016, Taliban leader Mullah Mansour was killed, after the US targeted him in a drone strike in Pakistan. This incidence was followed up by a statement from Nawaz Sharif, stating that the attack was a violation of Pakistan's sovereignty and Islamabad was notified about the strike only after it had been completed (Al Jazeera 2016d). The militants quickly replaced Mansour with Haibatullah Akhundzada, a former member of the late Taliban leader Mullah Omar's inner circle, who served as the head of Taliban's religious council since 2011 (Foreign Affairs 2016). The Pakistani government expressed that Mansour's death was a setback for efforts aimed at restoration of peace in Afghanistan. Advisor to the PM, Aziz, contended that the death of the Taliban leader added to the complexity of the Afghan conflict, and he elaborated by saying:

> We believe that this action has undermined the Afghan peace process ... we believe this approach will further destabilize Afghanistan, which will have

> negative implications for the region, especially due to the presence of a large number of terrorist groups in Afghanistan (Dawn 2016a).

Notwithstanding Pakistan's reservations, it reiterated its commitment towards peace efforts and advisor Aziz underscored that a politically negotiated settlement via a QCG setting was the most viable option for bringing lasting peace to Afghanistan. He went on to argue that the US and Afghan government policy to achieve peace in Afghanistan was inconsistent; "On one side you want to start talks with them while on the other...you are killing them, which is not a consistent attitude," Aziz said (Dawn 2016a). He added that one couldn't simply infer that the ISI knew about Mansour's whereabouts, since it was a difficult task to keep an eye on each and every person (Ibid.).

Relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan hit an all-time low due to a series of clashes along the Pak-Afghan border in July 2016, which caused fatalities on both sides. The Afghan government accused Pakistan of "continuing to distinguish between good and bad terrorists". On July 9, 2016, Ghani spoke at the NATO Summit in Warsaw and claimed that despite of Pakistan's commitment to the QCG process, it continued to support the Taliban. Pakistan swiftly rejected Ghani's accusations and a spokesperson for the Foreign Ministry in Islamabad said it was unfortunate that Afghan leaders kept blaming Pakistan for all failures in Afghan. He also requested the Afghan leaders to deny sanctuaries to anti-Pakistan militants blamed for plotting cross-border terrorist raids (ISSI 2016b, 2-3; VOA News 2016).

In the following months, it was evident that the Taliban had managed to attain more territory in 2016 than at any time in their 15-year fight. Despite their uprising, reports surfaced in October 2016 of an alleged meeting between representatives of the NUG and the Taliban in Qatar. It was referred to as the first attempt at talks after the collapse of the Murree peace process of 2015. Pakistan was not involved in the talks, and Taliban stated that Pakistan was not aware of them until after they were over. Media outlets reported that after the meeting, three Taliban members travelled to Pakistan and held a series of meetings to brief Pakistani officials about the talks with Kabul. A senior Pakistani security official confirmed that talks had taken place and underscored that Islamabad was doing what it could to ensure peace in neighboring Afghanistan. Even though Pakistan was a key ally for the Taliban, there were some within the movement who resented Pakistani interference in their affairs. It was reported that the former head of the Taliban's political office in Doha, Muhammad Tayyab Agha, sent a letter to the head of Taliban, Mullah Akhundzada, urging the movement to leave Pakistan

and break ties with Islamabad. This episode indicated that Pakistan had limited control over the Taliban (Dawn 2016b; The Guardian 2016; ISSI 2016, 3).

Meanwhile, Pakistan appointed its new army chief, Qamar Bjawa, who had to deal with the deteriorating state of Pakistan's relations with its neighbors (BBC 2016b). In the trilateral Russia-China-Pakistan meeting held in Moscow in late December 2016, the troika warned of the increasing influence of ISKP in Afghanistan. They also agreed on a flexible approach to remove some Taliban figures from sanctions lists, in order to foster a peaceful dialogue between Kabul and the Taliban. The three countries agreed to invite the Afghan government to such talks in the future, but Afghan government officials were lukewarm in their response. Washington, New Delhi and Kabul expressed that they were being sidelined in the negotiations over Afghanistan's future, and uttered discontent with the trilateral gathering. Meanwhile, Pakistan Foreign Secretary, Aizaz Chaudhry, pointed out that the Afghan government had to build national consensus on the issue of promoting dialogue with the Taliban (Dawn 2016c; The Telegraph India 2016; The Times of India 2016). Pakistan's role as the neighbor next door and the broker-host in peace negotiations was increasingly questioned by other stakeholders such as the US, Afghan government and India, since it had failed to deliver in terms of engaging the Taliban in the peace process. The beginning of the Trump era was filled with much uncertainty.

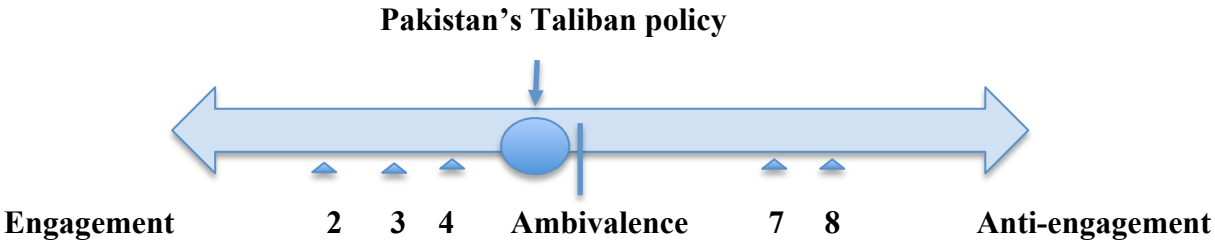
5.4 Making sense of Islamabad's Taliban policy post 2001 – engagement or anti-engagement?

The First Phase: Musharraf's decision to side with the US after the latter's decision to go to war in Afghanistan meant breaking ties with the Taliban. Once again, Pakistan became a frontline state combating the perceived enemy along with the US and this led to a U-turn in Pakistan's dealings with the Taliban, or at least it seemed like it on the surface. Pakistani officials routinely argued that they were a friend, and not a foe in the war against terror, when faced with allegations on its duplicity on terrorism. There was ambivalence about the Taliban at senior levels in the Pakistani military, which shaped the country's approach to the Taliban a great deal. Some military officials felt loyalty to their old clients, and under Musharraf's rule, the Taliban was allowed to regroup and reorganise on Pakistani soil. Pakistan used every conceivable opportunity to explain that giving more importance to Taliban's rival, NA, especially in the process of establishing a new interim government could end with disaster for

the US operations. There is reason to believe that Musharraf exercised firm control over the ISI until the end of 2007 as army chief and president. In 2014, Musharraf admitted that recognizing the Taliban regime was a blunder and that the Taliban had served as a proxy to hedge against Indian influence in Afghanistan. Although it appeared that Pakistan had minimized its engagement with the Taliban during Musharraf's regime, in retrospect the engagement was seemingly intact.

When applying the engagement typology, Musharraf did not publicly express support to the Taliban, nor did he formally acknowledge the group as a legitimate political entity. Moreover, no agreements were seemingly signed with the Taliban, and no official statements indicated that the group was allowed to establish consulates or other offices in Pakistan. Meaning that no *diplomatic recognition* was given to the group in the first phase, and question or point 1 in the operationalisation can be answered in the negative. However, Pakistan did *acknowledge* and made efforts to convince its allies of the role and importance of Taliban in the Afghan government *(point 2)* and it was later revealed that there *existed covert channels of interactions (point 3)* between Pakistan and the Taliban. However, Musharraf was very vocal in condemning Taliban's agenda when addressing European and American officials, and thereby officially denounced the group, by *cutting diplomatic contact and maintained only relations with the Afghan government (point 7 & 8)*. Taliban had economic, military and political ties to Pakistan before 2001. The big question is, was this the case post-2001? Perhaps the connections were not as clear as before, but there continued to be certain political ties, while any military and economic one were probably minimised or even totally cut off due to the risk of a backlash from the US. Since NATO and its Afghan allies portrayed Taliban as terrorists and aimed to destroy the group in the first phase, any potential Pakistani support to the Taliban during these years would logically be hidden. This makes it difficult to determine what Pakistani support for the Taliban meant in the first phase after 2001. Furthermore, Pakistan's Taliban policy was seemingly ambivalent. Despite its rough *public condemnation and reassurances of countering the Taliban* through offering land routes and logistical support to the Western coalition to capture the Taliban and handing over Taliban leader Zaeef *(point 4)*, Pakistani officials did what they could to minimize the influence of Taliban's counterpart, the NA. The Pakistani stance was questioned throughout this period; since it didn't fully endorse the role of the NA, by *not giving exclusive support or military aid* to Taliban's opponents, meaning that *point 5 and 6* cannot be answered in the affirmative.

After 9/11, Pakistan's pre-2001 engagement policy with the Taliban was put up to a test and Islamabad faced a difficult dilemma. It went from recognizing the Taliban regime, what could be labelled as overt engagement, to total overt rejection of the Taliban. Nevertheless, when using the terminology of engagement and anti-engagement as operationalized in chapter 3, Pakistan's overall policy in the first years after 2001 comes closer to *semi-covert engagement* than anti-engagement. This is because points 2, 3 and 4 attributed to engagement describes the policy issued and implemented by Pakistan in the first years post-2001, with elements of anti-engagement, point 7 and 8, since Pakistan kept denouncing Taliban and rejecting any links with the group. Ambivalence characterised Pakistan's engagement with the Taliban throughout the first phase.



Pakistan's Taliban policy (marked in blue circle) is located to the left of ambivalence on the dimensional axis. As evident, based on the engagement typology, there were more engagement parameters applied than anti-engagement parameters in the first phase. Disclaimer: The pinpointing is done on a discretionary basis and not a mathematical calculation. This applies for all of the graphs.

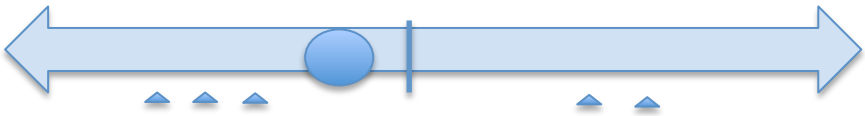
The Second Phase: Asif Ali Zardari was slightly disliked by the army and did not have the same authority as president as Musharraf. Consequently, his government had more limited control over Pakistan's foreign policy than the preceding one. Zardari echoed the same rhetoric as Musharraf when confronted with allegations of supporting Taliban. Nevertheless, many analysts and American intelligence officials believed that elements within ISI covertly supported the Taliban to retain an ally inside Afghanistan. The agency viewed Taliban as a reliable back-up force in case things went wrong in the country. Neither the Pakistani army nor the Taliban trusted President Zardari's government. During this phase, it seemed like Pakistan discarded or downplayed the concept of strategic depth, mainly because it was

preoccupied with domestic threats from the TTP and other anti-government insurgencies. Pakistani policy seemed more open to new ideas and strategies than before, which was demonstrated through Islamabad's outreach to other ethnic groups in Afghanistan, besides the Pashtuns. The engage-all ethnic groups approach was a new facet in Pakistani policy and stood contrary to Pakistan's longstanding policy of favouring the Pashtuns, represented by the Taliban. Perhaps the outreach to a broader number of ethnic groups was also a result of Pakistani worries that Taliban could grow out of their control. Even though Islamabad pursued a broader policy in terms of engagement with other Afghan ethnic groups, its engagement with the Pashtuns continued to triumph any other relationship. During the course of the second phase post 2001, Pakistan insisted that there was only a political solution to the Afghan conflict achieved through a peace and reconciliation process with the Taliban. This way Pakistan signalled that the Taliban was an imperative part of Afghanistan's future and held the key to attain peace and stability.

There were particularly two developments that deviated from the first phase: Firstly, Pakistani efforts to establish links with other ethnic groups beyond its conventional support to Pashtuns. Secondly, the emergence of TTP in Pakistan forced the Pakistani government to prioritize internal issues rather than securing strategic depth in Afghanistan and hedge against Indian influence. These elements triggered and introduced new elements that had a ripple effect on Pakistan's Taliban policy. The Pakistani government was deeply concerned about TPP's rise and a potential alliance between it and the Taliban. It seemed like Pakistani officials therefore shifted their focus from attaining strategic depth to attaining a stable and secure neighbourhood. The counter terrorism measures the Pakistanis launched were however primarily meant to contain the TTP, not the Taliban. It is unclear how the Taliban reacted to the news of Pakistan's latest outreach to other ethnic groups, including Taliban's opponent, the NA.

Engagement implies giving diplomatic recognition to the group, which was not given during the second phase either. Nevertheless, Pakistan continued acknowledging Taliban's crucial role in the Afghan calculus *(point 2)*, sustained covert and overt channels of interactions *(point 3)*, with no aim of containing the Taliban, even though it unintentionally did through facilitating NATO warfare *(point 4)*. Although Pakistan's ambiguous policy continued, its engagement with the Taliban was gradually becoming more visible, since it pushed for a peace process with the Taliban and expressed that it was only through a political settled

solution with the Taliban one would make peace. Even though Pakistan decided to engage with all ethnic factions in Afghanistan, including the dissolved NA *(point 5)*, its outreach was shallow, and not exclusively to irk the Taliban. Undoubtedly, Pakistan kept denying allegations of backing the Taliban, and reluctantly continued to aid NATO's war against the Taliban through logistical support and arresting Taliban high officials *(point 4 and 6)*. Pakistan carried out certain counterterrorism operations that negatively affected the Taliban, but this was partly due to domestic security concerns and partly to remain in the good book of the US, not a deliberate anti-engagement with the Taliban per se. Nevertheless, dialogue with the Taliban and peace efforts were intensified, and Pakistan became a facilitator. In the second phase, Pakistan's semi-covert engagement transitioned to *semi-overt engagement*.



Engagement 2 3 4 Ambivalence 5 6 Anti-engagement

In the second phase, Pakistan continued its ambivalent Taliban policy, but it moved slightly more to the left, mainly because of its facilitator role in the peace process.

The Third Phase: The allegations levelled against Pakistan on supporting the Taliban continued. Other stakeholders in Afghanistan kept highlighting Pakistan's ambivalent stance on Taliban, questioning whether it was a friend or foe in the fight against terrorism. The Pakistani government with Nawaz Sharif as the head of state was persistent in dismissing claims regarding its alleged double game. However, compared to the Musharraf and Zardari era, in this respective phase, Pakistan appeared more convinced to legitimise the role of Taliban and contributed to elevate its importance in the Afghan political calculus. Moreover, there was a notable shift in Pakistan's Taliban policy – from seeing the Taliban as a means to advance Pakistan's strategic depth, as it did in the 1990s, to perceiving the group as an instrument to counter security threats from domestic militants and from Pakistan's western border with Afghanistan. Notwithstanding, Pakistan did not endorse a Taliban takeover of Kabul, since this likely implied a reduction in stability and peace in Afghanistan and provided an impetus to Islamist militancy in Pakistan. Pakistan did not want the Taliban to ally with the TTP, under any circumstances, and this justified its current pro-Taliban policy. In 2016,

Pakistan finally also admitted that it had some "influence" over the Taliban, though not "control", due to the presence of the families of Taliban members. The shuras were not addressed by Pakistan. Pakistani policymakers argued that it could not bring Taliban to the negotiation table and at the same time act all-out against it. Islamabad was given the main role as facilitator and peace broker in Afghanistan and used its limited influence with the Taliban to convince it to engage in peace talks with the NUG. The breakthrough came with the Murree Process through the QCG setting, excluding India. However, the hope was short-lived, when the talks were disrupted because of the news of the death of the Taliban leader Mullah Omar. After the Murree Process, Pakistan was not able to convince the Taliban to join peace talks with the Afghan government, and Kabul became more hostile and impatient towards Islamabad in both rhetoric and behaviour. Since then, certain events suggested that the Taliban was not willing to strike a deal with Kabul on Pakistani terms. The forming of the Russia-China-Pakistan axis in Afghanistan to accommodate Taliban as a tool against IS, which was of great worry to other regional actors, was also a manifestation of Islamabad's role as a guarantor of Taliban. The entry of the IS-Taliban dichotomy into the Afghan equation gave Islamabad the extra incentive to declare that the Taliban was an imperative stakeholder if a political solution was to be reached in Afghanistan.

The third phase opened up for a diplomatic recognition of the Taliban issued by Pakistan *(point 1)*, as was not the case post 2001 and up until the end of the second phase. It became clear that Pakistan exercised some influence over the Taliban, after advisor to the PM, Aziz, made a statement in this regard. This was the first time an official had publically admitted relations between Pakistan and the Taliban. The Pakistani government was also very vocal in recognizing the Taliban's critical role in shaping Afghanistan's future. According to the engagement terminology, Pakistan acknowledged Taliban's political role in Afghanistan *(point 2)*, and it was revealed that it had both overt and covert channels of interactions with the group *(point 3)*. Pakistan's commitment to bring Taliban to the table was expressed, and thus also that containing the group was not an option *(point 4)*. Pakistan's engagement with the Taliban was more transparent during this period, and its alleged support to the group was explicitly expressed through the peace negotiations. Pakistan urged the principal stakeholders, the NUG and the Taliban, to revive the stalled peace talks at numerous occasions. However, Pakistan's failure to persuade Taliban to sit at the peace table after the Murree peace process, suggests that the influence on the group was constrained. To sum up, in the third phase, Pakistan's semi-overt engagement with the Taliban turned to overt engagement, when

applying the engagement typology. None of the anti-engagement parameters describes Pakistan's Taliban policy, apart from the fact that Pakistan still provided the US with logistical support through access to air space and supply routes *(point 6)*. Since much of the responsibility for ensuring security in Afghanistan was delegated to the ANSF, NATO also became less dependent on Pakistan.

Engagement 1 2 3 4 Ambivalence 6 Anti-engagement

During the third phase, Pakistan advocated more vocally for Taliban to become a part of the political landscape in Afghanistan, and anti-engaged less than before. In contrast to the previous phases, Pakistan gave the Taliban diplomatic recognition.

Chapter 6

6 India's Taliban Policy – No good or bad Taliban

6.1 The First Phase: 2001-2007 – a consolidation of India's anti-engagement Taliban policy

Ever since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, India has attempted to pursue a proactive Afghanistan policy. Indian influence in Afghanistan was only marginalized during the Taliban era, and the Indians took advantage of the opportunity provided by the US invasion and removal of the Taliban to re-establish and re-consolidate its influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia (Baloch & Niazi 2008, 15). In the wake of 9/11, the *National Democratic Alliance*, NDA, government immediately offered the US logistical support for military action aimed at the Taliban regime. To their dismay, the US instead decided to rely on the Musharraf regime to pursue their strategic goals in Afghanistan, while simultaneously working on improving relations with India (Ganguly 2012, 2-3; The Independent 2012; Fair 2010, 9-11). The ousting of the Taliban regime and the establishment of the Interim Administration of Afghanistan in November 2001 notwithstanding resumed the political interaction with the leadership of Afghanistan (Foreign Service Institute 2007, 549-550). During a television interview in October 2001 Jaswant Singh, the External Affairs Minister at the time, stated that the international community had to lend its support to the NA. He added, "India has never recognized the Taliban as a legitimate regime. We have continued to recognize the government of Afghanistan as represented by President Rabbani. They have formed the Northern Alliance. We have stood by the Northern Alliance…" (Gupta 2002, 98-99). With President Rabbani's NA government, Singh was referring to the government that was recognised by the UN and the international community during the Taliban rule. Singh explicitly declared India's partisan support to the NA and thereby its anti-engagement with the Taliban. He also made sure to point out that Taliban was the product of the machinery of Pakistan (Ibid.). The prime minister of India, Atal Bihari Vajpayee from the far-right Hindu nationalist *Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)*, made a statement November 10, 2001 regarding Afghanistan's future and promoted a strong Indian role in facilitating an effective post-Taliban settlement (Vajpayee 2001). With this statement, Vajpayee signalled that India aspired to play an even greater role in Afghanistan than it had previously played.

The statement given by Vajpayee could be interpreted as New Delhi's quest to get foothold in Afghanistan. In the wake of 9/11, the leadership in the BJP-led NDA-government reckoned that the only international relation that could potentially help or hinder India's long-term foreign policy in Afghanistan and beyond was its relationship with the US. This was at a time, when India and the US were tying a stronger knot, illustrated by Vajpayee's statement that the two countries were natural allies (The Hindu 2000). Arun Shourie, a former minister revealed that the Indian government recognized the inflexibility that marked India's foreign and defence policy due to its preoccupation with a Pakistan that was aligned with China and the US. This implied that India had to engage the US and get China to re-examine its stance towards South Asia, which would somehow narrow Pakistan's options (Sridharan 2006, 85).

It appeared that India's main focus in the initial post-Taliban period was to support the new Karzai-led Afghan government and the political process in the country as mandated under the Bonn agreement of 2001 (Pant 2012, 6). A group of Indian officials visited Afghan ministers, and an Indian embassy was established in Kabul on 22 December 2001. Indian policymakers expressed that India projected a holistic and positive approach for solving the crisis in Afghanistan, and this position was highlighted in talks with numerous world leaders. The notion of state-sponsored terrorism was condemned, and they explained that one of India's top national security objectives was to protect the country from extremism emanating from neighbouring states. In the MOD annual report 2002-2003 and MEA annual report 2001-2002, statements are made regarding Pakistan's motives in Afghanistan. The documents state that the Taliban regime was essentially a Pakistani product, and the latter has a vested interest in a weak and unstable Afghanistan. This would serve as an opportunity for Pakistan to meddle in the internal affairs of the country in pursuit of its quest for strategic depth vis-à-vis India and Central Asia. Furthermore, the documents portray the revival of jihadi activities supported by Pakistan as a direct security concern to India. They highlight that India is at the receiving end of Pakistan's policy of a proxy war against it, and the infiltration of terrorists into India from Pakistan is a great security concern. Taliban is not mentioned explicitly in this regard, but it's reasonable to assume that they are alluring to the movement Moreover, the documents assert that the Pakistani polity has repeatedly been hijacked by its military that have an interest in tension with India as it strengthens their supremacy in the Pakistani power structure. Against this backdrop, the mentioned official reports suggested that India must remain firmly committed to maintaining peace with its neighbours and stability in the region. Its defence policy and force postures would remain defensive in orientation, and its nuclear policy was

supposed to be known by minimal nuclear deterrence (Ibid.) Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee granted a wide-ranging interview with Arab media in 2001, where he revealed that that war against the Taliban was far from over. He referred to the increasing evidence that the Al Qaida and the Taliban continued to reorganize along the Pakistan-Afghanistan eastern and southeastern border. Vajpayee stressed that there was a huge infrastructure in Pakistan supporting and sustaining terrorism (MEA 2001).

An excerpt from the MOD annual report 2002-2003, 2, 1.7, indicates that Indian policymakers' threat perception is largely Pakistan-based:

> However, the single greatest threat to peace and stability in the region is posed by the combination of terrorism nurtured in and by Pakistan for its strategic objectives, and the ingrained adventurism of the Pakistani military motivated by its obsessive and compulsive hostility towards India. Virtually every terrorist act anywhere in the world today has a Pakistani fingerprint somewhere. It is the root and epicentre of international terrorism in the region and beyond.

It's evident from the excerpt that Indian policymakers perceived Pakistan as impeding India's rising capabilities. Hence, it is likely that India's preoccupation with its neighbour's behaviour have laid many of the premises for its foreign policy posture in Afghanistan. Afghan President Karzai, who is educated in India, visited India from 5-8 March 2003, where he met the president and PM along with other officials. Several bilateral initiatives were announced, which included a financial commitment of US$70 million for the construction of the 220-kilometer-long Zaranj-Delaram road in Afghanistan. This road was supposed to provide Afghanistan with access to the sea via Iran, and make available a shorter route for Indian goods to reach Afghanistan, making transit through Pakistan unnecessary. India also invested in the rebuilding of institutional capacity in Afghanistan by imparting training in various fields (such as teaching, diplomacy, journalism, law, female entrepreneurship, government administration and medicine), and provided multidisciplinary project assistance in areas of public transport, information technology, civil aviation, education, and health. During an international conference on Afghanistan in Berlin from 31 March-1 April 2004, where the objective was to secure substantial long-term aid commitments, India made a commitment of US$ 400 million over the time period 2002-2008. Indian policymakers

assessed the developments since 2001 positively, but noted that despite the progress, the Afghan government faced many challenges, the foremost being the threat to internal security from a revitalized Taliban (MEA annual report 2003-2004, 5, 11-12, 104).

Prime Minister Vajpayee stated that India would not negotiate with terrorists in the future, just as the world did not negotiate with Al Qaida and the Taliban at the 58th United Nations General Assembly session in 2003. There was no ambiguity regarding Indian's Taliban policy in the first period post-2001. The country opted for anti-engagement with the Taliban and expressed full support of the NA (SATP 2003). Indian analysts emphasized that India was the only country in South Asia that was in a credible position to rollback terrorism epitomised by the Taliban, through cooperation with the international community. However, some Indian analysts, such as Chandra (2005) suggested that India should build bridges with all major ethnic groups in Afghanistan, as India would benefit from balancing its relationship with both the Pashtuns and minority ethnic groups (IDSA 2005). Another Indian security policy analyst, D'Souza (2006) contended that India should not downsize its presence in Afghanistan, but rather continue build up its soft power image in the country. She argued that signalling less involvement in Afghan affairs would be interpreted as a victory by the Taliban, rejuvenate the group and encourage it to retaliate. Indian aid workers had been killed or held hostage by Taliban from 2003-2005, and these events were linked to the deterioration of security in Afghanistan. D'Souza argued that due to the support and sanctuary offered by Pakistan to the Taliban, president Karzai had little choice but to accommodate the "moderate Taliban" into the political mainstream (IDSA 2006). Interestingly, *Institute for Defence and Analyses*, IDSA, a think-tank closely affiliated with the Indian Ministry of Defence, showed a more pragmatic attitude toward the Taliban than the political leadership, acknowledging the Afghan government's need to include Taliban in the political mainstream.

6.1.1 India's soft power projection – a tool to contain the Taliban?

Bilateral relations between India and Afghanistan reached a new level of intensity during 2004-2005, and there were regular political meetings between the two countries' official representatives. The new Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, belonging to the Indian National Congress, visited Afghanistan in 2005, the first visit by an Indian head of government in 29 years. The visit aimed at reaffirming the commitment of both sides to reinvigorate their past ties and make room for a new partnership, and to mark the

consolidation of traditional bonds that were disconnected during the rule of the Taliban. India cautioned Afghanistan regarding the fragile security situation in the country, notably the continuing insurgency, drug production and challenges linked to the consolidation of the central government's power. Indian policymakers offered to fund the construction of a new Parliament building in Afghanistan and made sure that Singh's visit didn't remain a touch-and-go affair. India also piloted the move to make Afghanistan a member of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in November 2005, hoping that issues related to the transit and free flow of goods across borders would be addressed (MOD annual report 2003-2004, 6-13; MOD annual report 2004-2005, 8).

In the first years after 2001 New Delhi deliberately refrained from much military support openly to the Ghani-government and instead focused on civilian matters. By choosing this strategy, the Indians avoided any direct confrontation with the Taliban. In addition, they avoided giving substance to the Pakistani claim that there were ulterior military motives behind their engagement in Afghanistan. Instead Indian policymakers attempted at developing and leveraging India's so-called "soft-power" in Afghanistan, and downplayed any role in the military warfare. Even though India has never contributed with troops in Afghanistan, apart from placing paramilitary forces in the country to safeguard its infrastructure and buildings, there has been a military dimension to its dealings with the country. In 2004 India committed 300 military use vehicles for the Afghan National Army (Ibid.; IDSA 2006). While "soft" power projection is highlighted by the Indian government, the military aspects of their policies were not fully disclosed in the official documents, e.g. Afghanistan is not even mentioned in the annual report published by the Indian defence ministry from 2005-2006. Indian policymakers made a great point out of how India has been involved in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, and would refrain from military involvement, as illustrated by this statement in the annual report from MOD 2006-2007, 7, 1.17:

> While India will not get militarily involved in Afghanistan without a UN mandate, it has been fully involved in rebuilding Afghanistan's civil society, in the fields of transportation, health, education and industry, with a commitment of over US$ 600 million in assistance in these fields.

Indian policymakers expressed their concerns over the escalation of violence, and they were particularly concerned about the anti-Indian rhetoric being used by certain militant groups in

Afghanistan (MOD annual report 2006-2007, 7). Training soldiers, officers and other government personnel, whether in India or Afghanistan, gave India the opportunity to influence the hearts and minds of the security establishment and the Afghan government in becoming more India-friendly. Given the sensitivities of Pakistan regarding Indian involvement in Afghanistan, economic engagement seemed like the best option to project India in the region and the political salience of soft power was considered greater than any military involvement in Afghanistan (Pattanaik 2012, 572-573). However, Indian politicians and analysts were not only aware of, but explicitly stated that increasing Indian presence in reconstruction activity irked Pakistan and its Afghan protégés, such as the Taliban. To a degree, soft power was also used as a tool to contain the influence of Pakistan and the Taliban (Pant 2012, 7-10; MEA annual report 2004-2005, ii, 1-3, 111; MEA annual report 2005-2006, ii, 1-2, 114; IDSA 2005).

6.2 The Second Phase: 2008-2013 – India's dilemma-based Taliban approach

India's support for the NA against the Pakistan-controlled Taliban in the 1990s, paid off when Taliban was removed from power and a new government was installed. Several members of the NA became members of the Western-backed Afghan government and also held influential provincial posts. With time, New Delhi tried to engage a wider range of ethnic groups and political affiliations in Afghanistan, in line with what some analysts suggested. To demonstrate its keenness to foster close ties with Pashtuns, India used its vocal support for Afghan President Karzai, who as mentioned earlier, belongs to the Pashtun tribe as an entry point (Pant 2012, 7). There is no detailed information regarding India's ties with Afghan rebel groups and its military presence in Afghanistan in the annual reports published by the Indian Ministry of Defence in the period 2008-2013. Pakistan's role in Afghanistan is however frequently discussed in the reports.

Since many of the warlords belonging to the NA dispersed into the ruling government, Taliban's opponent was now the Afghan government. As India's image in Afghanistan improved, its adversaries intended on undermining India-Afghanistan relations, Pant asserts. Pant (2012, 11) recounts that the Taliban's resurgence corresponded with a rise in anti-Western sentiment among Afghans, and with support from Pakistan, Taliban was able to bounce back and reclaim the strategic space from which it had been ousted. The balance of power shifted in favour of Pakistan and its proxies, and Indian interests, personnel and

projects appeared as attractive targets. In July 2008, a bomb hit the Indian Embassy in Kabul, leaving 60 dead. In October 2009, a suicide car bombing outside the Indian Embassy led to the death of 17 people and several others were wounded. New Delhi and the US later concluded that the attack was perpetrated by the Pakistani-based Haqqani group, a Taliban-faction, and also indicated that the ISI was involved. This event demonstrated enmity between India and the Taliban. After the second attack on the Embassy in 2009, a top Afghan official openly blamed ISI for the terrorist attack (Ibid.). Indian policymakers claimed that these attacks demonstrated that some groups implacably opposed Indian efforts of reconstruction and development in Afghanistan. Furthermore, they stated that the safe havens for the militant groups in Pakistan contributed immensely to the deterioration of India's external security environment (MOD annual report 2008-2009, 5).

Despite security threats and attacks on Indian personnel, establishments and projects in Afghanistan, Indian authorities proclaimed that it maintained its commitment to the rebuilding of the country. Close consultations between India and Afghanistan on bilateral projects continued, even though the road ahead for New Delhi seemed though (MEA annual report 2007-2008, 1). With the announcement of deployment of additional US troops and the increase of deployment of other ISAF countries, the Indian government stepped up their support to the Afghan government. They claimed the security and stability of Afghanistan was critical to India's own security. Top officials in Afghanistan and India met to discuss matters related to defence cooperation. India suggested that an Afghan force should be trained to combat the Taliban, and that this force should work to undermine the support for the Taliban, and deal with Al-Qaida along the Pakistani border and the rest of Afghanistan (MOD annual report 2009-2010, 6).

6.2.1 India's humiliating setback

There was a general consensus in India that it would refrain from sending troops to Afghanistan. The traditional Indian stance had been that India helped the Afghan government in its reconstruction efforts, but it would not engage directly in security related operations – which became a principle that became harder to sustain as Indians and Indian infrastructure became targets of attacks. A debate emerged about whether India should add a stronger military presence to its civilian and economic presence in Afghanistan. The critics asked for how long India could continue with its present policy trajectory of seeking influence through

non-military means. These dynamics started to have an impact on US-India relations too. Some Indians argued that India for too long had relied on Washington to manage its neighbours (Pant 2012, 13).

At an international conference on Afghanistan in London in 2010 that advocated for talks with the Taliban, the Indian External Affairs Minister, S.M. Krishna, specifically said, "there should be no distinction between a good Taliban and a bad Taliban" (The Times of India 2010). This statement was totally out of sync with the majority view at the conference. New Delhi viewed this conference as a diplomatic backlash, and for this reason the conference is barely mentioned in the MOD and MEA annual report from that particular year. At this point in history an increasing number of people had begun to view Afghanistan as a quagmire, and the US-led NATO alliance had decided to exit the country. At the conference it was argued the time was due to woo the "moderate" section of Taliban back to power in Kabul. Indian officials interpreted this as a sign that Pakistan had persuaded the West into believing that it could play the role of mediator in dealings with the Taliban. Indian policymakers dreaded a possible comeback for the remnants of the Taliban backed by ISI and Pakistan's military. New Delhi was frustrated with India's isolation at the London conference on Afghanistan, and that its role was not fully appreciated. Islamabad and Kabul formalized a pact that allowed the Pakistani army a significant role in negotiating a possible reconciliation between Kabul and the Taliban, which was endorsed by the US. As a result of these events, New Delhi's marginalization seemed to increase, and it realized it had to alter its approach toward Afghanistan and Pakistan (The Times of India 2010; Pant 2012, 14-15).

6.2.2 India's expanding influence in Afghanistan

After almost a decade of a fairly consistent posture, changing ground realities pressured India to reconsider its foreign policy in Afghanistan. Military deployment was still not in India's national interests, and it continued to fear the consequences of talks with the "good Taliban" and the near future drawdown of US forces. In light of this New Delhi decided to implement or intensify a number of policy measures to prevent its marginalization. It was hoped that these measures would prepare India well for the conditions of a post-ISAF Afghanistan (MOD annual report 2010-2011, 166).

Firstly, Indian forces decided to offer training courses for Afghan National Army (ANA) personnel on a wider scale than before. India had previously been extremely reluctant to cooperate in the field of security for fear of upsetting the US and the Indian strategic community's traditional stand on non-intervention, the so-called "no boots on the ground" principle. The US did not wish for a larger Indian footprint in Afghanistan, which it believed would provoke Pakistan. This was mainly because of its continued dependency on Pakistan, who provided the Americans with logistical support. Accordingly, the *United Progressive Alliance,* UPA government in New Delhi was keen on continuing the Indo-US reapproachment, and thereby didn't challenge the US by downplaying their defence posture in Afghanistan (Destradi 2014, 109, 113). However, according to other sources, in addition to India's development activities, India quietly sought to bolster Afghanistan's security capabilities. One analysis suggests that India provided $8 million worth of high-altitude warfare equipment to Afghanistan and its clandestine foreign intelligence and counter-espionage organisation, the RAW, shared high-ranking military advisers and helicopter technicians. Moreover, during President Karzai's visits in May and December 2013, India made some concessions, like increasing the numbers of Afghan soldiers and officers receiving training in India. Any further security engagement would most likely meet huge domestic opposition in India (IDSA 2011; MEA annual report 2012-2013, iii, 1; Ganguly 2012, 3-4; Destradi 2014, 109-110).

Secondly, New Delhi decided to increase India's aid commitment to Afghanistan. In May 2011 the Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh visited Kabul and the future contours of India's assistance programme were discussed. In a rare honour, Singh addressed the joint session of the Afghan Parliament and announced US$ 500 million more in aid to Afghanistan. India's soft power projection reached new heights and Singh announced a number of new schemes that India would undertake in Afghanistan (BBC 2011).

Thirdly, and most significantly the Indian government decided to support Afghan government's efforts to reconcile with the Taliban. This was announced during Singh's mentioned trip to Kabul in 2011, and signalled an end to India's opposition to the Taliban being a part of any political solution to end the war in Afghanistan. The move must be understood as an attempt to avoid being excluded from a reconciliation process, as well as estranging a potential future power holder, the Taliban. The shift in its approach towards the Taliban might also be seen as an attempt by the Indians to please the US by appearing as a

compromising partner rather than an actor aggressively pursuing its narrow self-interest. Even though India now acknowledged that peace talks with Taliban could be feasible, it did not want its archrival Pakistan to lead any reconciliation process. India was the now the biggest regional donor to Afghanistan, and both countries' governments shared a mistrust of Pakistan (MEA annual report 2011-2012, i, iv, 1-2).

Later in 2011, the Strategic Partnership Agreement between India and Afghanistan was signed and it was deemed a landmark event. This particular agreement seemed to herald a major shift in India's policy, from being reluctant on involving itself in security matters, to a greater security engagement. Afghan National Security Forces would receive assistance in training, equipping and capacity building programmes. The agreement formalized a framework for cooperation in various areas, such as politics, defence, security, commerce, capacity development and education. The agreement also called for an enhanced focus on cooperation in the fight against terrorism and other security challenges (MEA annual report 2011-2012, i, iv, 1-2; Destradi 2014, 107).

6.2.3 Taliban strikes a cordial tone with New Delhi

New Delhi claimed that Pakistan was playing a "double game" in Afghanistan by covertly supporting Taliban on one hand, and at the same time receiving large paychecks from Washington for help in combating the insurgency in Afghanistan. Indian officials warned that Pakistan's zero-sum attitude to regional cooperation created many security dilemmas in the region, and highlighted that while the West was distancing itself from Afghanistan, India helped the country in nation building (Destradi 2014, 109).

Amidst it all, Taliban made a rather unusual comment stating that India had done well to resist US calls for greater military involvement in Afghanistan. In the statement, the Taliban expressed that they desired cordial relations with India on the basis of non-interference in each other's internal affairs (The Hindu 2012). The statement showed that India's strategy of anti-engagement without direct military confrontation with the Taliban had been a success. The policy had strengthened pro-Indian anti-Taliban forces, while at the same time steered India clear of any direct hostile confrontation with the Taliban.

In response to Taliban's statement, New Dehli asserted that the movement for the past couple of years had tried to reassure the international community that it didn't pose a threat to peace, and that their aim was limited to expelling foreign forces from Afghan land. Despite this accommodating official statement New Delhi remained sceptical of the idea that the Taliban had turned a new leaf, and held the movement's past history, linkages with international jihadist groups, relation with Pakistan and religious ideology against it. Very few high-level Indian officials chose to make any public comments about Taliban's remark. Many analysts from policymaking institutions in India were unimpressed by Taliban's statement and saw it as self-serving and insincere, and suspected that Pakistan was the mastermind behind the statement. They argued that Taliban and their Pakistani ally through the cordial statement tried to discourage any Indian military involvement in Afghanistan, because they knew Indian bolstering of anti-Taliban forces would prolong the war. Vikram Sood, a former RAW-chief, expressed that Taliban's messageheld an implicit warning for India to not mess around when the Americans left (The Express Tribune 2012).

Others construed Taliban's statements an endeavour to reach out to India, to signalize that it was not averse to balance Pakistan's influence with other powers' influence. This has to be understood in the context of the discordance between Taliban and Pakistan, described in chapter 5. If that is the case, the statement could be the first officially expressed message from the Taliban to their Pakistani patrons not to take them for granted. Taliban's softer tone towards Pakistan's arch-rival India could signal a more independent course. Direct talks with the US, which later on were suspended and the agreement to open a Taliban office in Qatar to proceed with peace talks were also signs of a more assertive stance by the Taliban (The Express Tribune 2012). In reality of course, as long as Taliban was embroiled in a fight against ISAF, it could not afford to fall out with Pakistan. More likely, the Taliban was trying to position itself and prepare itself for a post-ISAF Afghanistan where it held some degree of power. Taliban in all likelihood recognized that any future government in Afghanistan would have to interact with India, especially in terms of commercial relations. IDSA (2012) cautioned the government to be wary of the diplomatic repercussions of shaking hands with the Taliban, not to mention the security issues related to Taliban's support to jihadist groups and it serving as a proxy for Pakistan. On the other hand, if Taliban moderated its positions on a host of issues, and ended all support to international terrorist groups, there was a possibility that India could engage a Taliban controlled Afghanistan, IDSA (2012) asserted. It was

ground breaking that policy shaping circles in New Delhi were even willing to consider a potential relation with the Taliban in the future.

In November 2013, a complete U-turn decision was taken by India, when the domestic intelligence service reportedly were willing to offer former Taliban leader Zaeef a visa to India that would allow back-channel talks. This move was taken after Zaeef made an appearance at an event in Goa. The Indian intelligence agencies argued that India had to deal with the Taliban when ISAF forces would leave Afghanistan. Indian officials defended the visit by stating that it had to deal with elements of the Islamist force who were a part of Afghanistan's peace process. As Joshi (2014) points out, there are no sign that New Delhi took advantage of this potential opportunity to engage more substantially (Joshi 2014, 95, The Times of India 2013a, The Economic Times 2013).

6.2.4 India's dilemma

The prospects for cooperation between Pakistan, India and Afghanistan seemed doubtful, given the deep roots of distrust and hostility between India and Pakistan. However, recent developments offered some hope. The first was a breakthrough in trade relations between Pakistan and India in November 2011, where Pakistan's Cabinet, with the acquiescence of its military, granted India Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status. This development was a minor step in minimizing the longstanding tensions, but significant because the UPA government persisted in its efforts to improve relations with its neighbour. Despite the strong resistance from the Hindu nationalist and Pakistan-hostile opposition party BJP. Second, regional initiatives like the Istanbul Process, which were a series of meetings in early November 2011 between countries involved in Afghanistan, were organized. Even though they did not produce any substantial tangible results beyond promises of continued cooperation and further assistance, they provided a forum for many stakeholders to gather and discuss their concerns and interests (Destradi 2014, 103; Ganguly 2012, 6-7).

The presence of the US and ISAF in Afghanistan had secured a security umbrella for India. With the deadline of ISAF troops pulling out from Afghanistan rapidly approaching, an uncertainty was building up in India's policy circles about what the future held (Ibid.). The most pessimistic observers believed that the worst was yet to come. A small handful of members of India's policymaking circle rooted for a more extensive future Indian military

role in Afghanistan. The disastrous memories of the costs that India brought upon itself as a consequence of the deployment of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka in the 1980s still remained a clear memory within policymaking circles in New Delhi however. The misgivings related to the Sri Lankan experience swayed both parliamentary and public opinion against any new military intervention. Their biggest worry was a hasty and inordinate withdrawal and a fading interest in and commitment to Afghanistan on the part of the US and other international actors. A lack of international commitment would mean that India had to enter the fray itself to protect its investments and interests in Afghanistan. India's most urgent objective at this point was to prevent that Afghanistan become a haven for militias hostile to India, for example groups that would support separatism in Kashmir, and to hinder Afghanistan from becoming a Pakistani proxy. Indian policymakers were particularly sceptical about making concessions to Taliban, and expressed fear that this would undermine the democratic progress that had been made over the past decade. Indian research analysts assessed that the exit of ISAF troops could have both negative and positive side effects for India, and deemed it impossible to say which scenario that would materialize in Afghanistan (Destradi 2014, 106, 108-110; Ganguly 2012, 8-9; The Soufan Group 2013; IDSA 2013).

According to Pant (2012), in the post-Taliban era after 9/11, New Delhi recognized the need to coordinate more closely with states it shared convergent interests with vis-à-vis Afghanistan and Pakistan. Russia and Iran appeared to be on the same page as India, since they were not willing to accept a fundamentalist Sunni-dominated regime in Kabul or the re-emergence of Afghanistan as a safe haven for militant non-state groups that could target neighbouring states. India's gravitation towards Moscow and Tehran was also triggered by the fear of the US deciding to leave Afghanistan with Pakistan retaining its pre-2001 leverage. Tehran was particularly worried about the potential role of the nearly exclusively Sunni Taliban in the emerging Afghan political order, and encouraged New Delhi to provide NA controlled provinces in northern and western Afghanistan with more assistance (Pant 2012, 20-26).

6.3 The Third Phase: 2014-2016 – acknowledging the "good" Taliban

The inauguration of the long-stalled 1,735-km Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project in December 2015 was a milestone in terms of regional cooperation, and many hoped it could be for a catalyst for peace in Afghanistan. The pipeline is a regional project that successive Indian governments argued would enhance India's energy security. TAPI would run through some of the most lawless regions in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and it required protection from terrorism and sabotage. In that regard, the Taliban had to be consulted in the process of building it. Pakistan's Water and Power Minister Khawaja Asif reportedly said that Islamabad would utilize its influence over the Taliban to secure the TAPI project. This meant that New Delhi along with the other countries could find themselves in negotiations with the Taliban (Taneja 2015). In November 2016, the Taliban declared that it would back national projects like TAPI and the like, since they contributed to the development and prosperity of Afghanistan (The official site of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan 2016). Despite Taliban's decision to cooperate in this field, there was no response from New Delhi.

Simultaneously, ISKP's entry into the Afghanistan equation made it clear that Indian interests diverged somewhat from Russia and Iran's. The three powers acted in unison in supporting the NA to prevent the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001. Cooperation between the three countries continued in the overt domain and was evident after 2001 as well. In March 2016, India and Iran signed a bilateral deal to construct the Chabahar port that would provide Afghanistan an alternate route to the sea bypassing Pakistan. Later that year, in November 2016, India delivered a batch of four Mi-25 Russian combat helicopters to Afghanistan. These agreements gave rise to the belief that the countries had convergent interests with regards to Afghanistan in general and Taliban specifically. Great stir therefore occurred in India when Russia said that ISKP was a bigger threat than the Taliban in the region (The Wire 2016). Concurrently, Iran continued to make overtures towards certain sections of the Taliban. In contrast, India still regarded the Taliban and its sponsors as the bigger threats to the peace in Afghanistan. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson, Vikas Swarup, made a statement regarding the Taliban:

> They have to respect the internationally agreed red lines, give up terrorism and violence, sever all ties with al Qaeda, agree to follow democratic norms and not do anything which will erode the gains of the last 15 years. Ultimately it is for the government of Afghanistan to decide whom to talk to and how (The Wire 2016).

The three countries still seemed to agree that they wanted to settle for any Afghan-owned arrangement that would end the cycle of violence, but divergent views about *how* to achieve this and how to approach the Taliban crystallized. India saw it as the Afghan government's prerogative to determine if it wanted to talk with the Taliban. Russia and Iran on the other hand experienced a sense of urgency in the light of the war against IS in Syria heading towards a denouement, and feared that IS would instead seek foothold in their region. Russia's worry was terrorism in Central-Asia. Iran was concerned that an influx of Sunni ISIS militants from Iraq and Syria would create problems for the large Shia minority in Afghanistan along with its own security. These concerns made them more inclined towards approaching the Taliban. Hence, in this context, the Taliban was perceived as a local, Afghanistan-based movement – the lesser threat. India perception was based on the understanding that the ISKP consisted s of remnant factions of the TPP and the Taliban. According to Indian policymakers, India was left with three options. The first option was to back the Afghan government's peace efforts, which meant sustained collaboration with the US under the Afghanistan-India-US trilateral to strengthen the ANDSF and the Afghan economy. Secondly, India could become a part of Russia and Iran's efforts to engage the Taliban. The third option suggested that India established overt direct channels with elements in the Taliban that were not under Pakistan's influence (Ibid.).

6.3.1 Managing Pakistan's possible ascendancy in Afghan affairs

The coalition UPA government, led by the Congress party was replaced by a far-right Hindu nationalist coalition with Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister in May 2014. Prior to the election, the BJP had slammed the UPA government over its foreign policy in Afghanistan, asserting that India had no say in the on-going negotiations on Afghanistan at the time, whereas Pakistan did. Moreover, a BJP spokesperson alleged that India's foreign policy had stagnated under the UPA government, and pointed at the Indian finance minister's meeting with former Taliban leader Mullah Zaeef in Goa. Since Modi's Hindu nationalist ideology

departed from that of the former PM, Singh, many expected a more hawkish approach towards Pakistan and Taliban under the new government. Modi's appointment of a hawkish National Security Advisor, former Intelligence Bureau Director Ajit Doval, substantiated this conviction. In many ways however, BJP's anti-Pakistan and anti-Islam rhetoric primarily had bearing on India's domestic politics, rather than its foreign policy posture towards the Taliban, which remained fairly consistent (The Guardian 2014; The Times of India 2013b; Joshi 2014, 93; Frontline 2016b & 2017).

In December 2015, the Indian Prime Minister Modi paid an official visit to Kabul to inaugurate the 90 million USD Parliament building gifted to Afghanistan in 2005, while Taliban's largest offensive in years surged forward. New Delhi listened to Kabul's pleas for help by providing four ground-attack Mi-25 helicopters, and considered appeals for second-hand tanks, armoured transports and artillery, at the cost of irking Pakistan (The Indian Express 2015; MEA annual report 2015-2016, v). Modi made remarks that considered as a veiled attack on Pakistan, when he contended that there were some that did not applaud Indian presence in Afghanistan and the country would only succeed when terror would no longer flow across borders and when sanctuaries of terrorism were shut down (The Economics Time 2015).

Modi's gesture to stop by Lahore late December 2015 on his way back from Moscow and Kabul to greet Pakistani Prime Minister Sharif came as a surprise and signalled a positive development in Indian-Pakistani bilateral relations. However, simultaneously Indian observers saw the attack on the Indian consulate in Mazhar-i-Sharif in Afghanistan after Modi's Lahore visit in conjunction with what they deemed to be the Pakistani Army's long-term national security strategy to evade peace with India. Indian hardliners refused any talks with Pakistan until it fulfilled promises of dismantling the infrastructure of terrorism from its soil. They claimed that Modi had made concessions to Pakistan by agreeing to talks and the Pakistani Army saw this as a sign of weakness. Liberals underscored the necessity of talks to continue sending a message to the spoilers that their efforts to disrupt talks via terrorist attacks would not succeed. (Chakravarty 2016).

6.3.2 India increases support to ANSF

After 2014, Indian authorities continued to emphasize its contribution to the economic reconstruction of war-ravaged Afghanistan since 2001, and downplayed any contribution to the ANSF fighting against the Taliban. New Delhi was wary of losing the popular goodwill that had been generated for India through its development and economic assistance in Afghanistan. It did not want to find itself in a state where "Made in India" boxes of arms and ammunitions were caught in insurgents' hands or have its own troops visible on the Afghan ground. The rise of the insurgency, the strengthening of the Taliban and the worsened security situation, however, made New Delhi reconsider its policy options towards Afghanistan (D'Souza 2016; Mahalingam 2016).

In January 2016, it was announced that three of the four Mi-35 helicopters that India had donated to the *Afghan Air Force*, AAF, were assembled and operational to combat insurgency in the war-torn country. The transfer of the helicopters marked the first time New Delhi provided lethal military equipment to Afghanistan. India had previously supplied three Hindustan Aeronatic Limited Cheetal trainer helicopters to the AAF, and the Mi-25 agreement was announced in November 2015. The Indian transfer was not a game changer in terms of the war, but it was significant with regards to New Delhi's approach to Afghanistan and war against the Taliban. Despite close ties between India and Afghanistan, it was not until early 2016 that India delivered lethal weaponry to Kabul, mostly due to concerns that doing so would aggravate Pakistan – perhaps also the Taliban (The Diplomat 2016). Reconciliation with Taliban remained a critical element for the survival and political stability of Afghanistan but New Delhi deemed a successful reconsolidation process unlikely because of the lack of will and assertiveness on the part of the major powers in this regard (Mahalingam 2016, 91-92, 103).

The BJP government was therefore willing to take the risk of alienating and angering the Taliban, by providing its enemies, the ANSF, with attack Mi-25 helicopters, equipment and increased training. As a response to India's military aid to Ghani's government, Taliban issued a statement in September 2016, where it gave a warning and called on India to "stop exporting items of killing and destruction to Afghanistan" (The Indian Express 2016; The Diplomat 2017c). It also argued that providing the Afghan government with weapons was

against the will of the Afghan people and it condemned this action in the strongest terms (Ibid.).

6.3.3 India ignored in peace talks with the Taliban

Taliban's fierce and negative reaction to India's support of warfare against it, added to India's aversion to place boots on the Afghan ground. Moreover, it intensified discussions among Indian analyst about how Taliban should be approached politically. The discussions dwelled around options for engagement: Should India pro-actively take initiatives and promote dialogue with Taliban or wait for others to take the lead and deal with the situation accordingly as it evolved? New Delhi took notice of how many more countries were amenable for negotiations with the Taliban after the ISKP arrived in Afghanistan. New Delhi knew that the wind had changed, and that India was side lined in the peace talks due to its limited relationship with the Taliban. Indian analysts suggested that even though India had never officially recognised the Taliban, future talks with some elements of the Taliban had to be taken into serious consideration (The Hindu 2015a; D'Souza 2017). Bearing in mind India's gross social capital in Afghanistan, New Delhi should in consultation with Kabul and other stakeholders at least consider opening a channel to factions linked to Taliban's Qatar office, the argument went. After all, diplomacy was about selecting the lesser evil to serve the national interest. Others argued that India had to resist embracing the Taliban and only show support to the Afghan government and its attempt at an Afghan reconciliatory and reintegration process (Ibid.). The official stand of the Indian government was that they were supportive of the peace process, but not pleased with the Pakistani government hosting the talks. New Delhi said they had the impression that talks were ISI-controlled and ISI-led, rather than Afghan-owned. The country made no official statements about the first round of talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Unnamed officials in New Delhi told the media that with each round of talks, both Afghanistan and the international community were gradually accepting the Taliban (The Hindu 2015b). This openness to future talks with the Taliban and the peace process in general, suggested that New Delhi was heading towards a more flexible and pragmatic approach towards the Taliban. The signals from the BJP-leadership were mixed and ambiguous however. Despite showing larger acceptance for talks with the Taliban, and thereby admitting the movement some legitimacy as a political movement, Indian aversion against the Taliban continued to run deep. This became very apparent in August 2015, when Prime Minister Modi addressed a gathering of Indian expats

in Dubai, where he made negative remarks about the Taliban. He held a speech and said that there was no such thing as good Taliban or bad Taliban. Modi contended that the time had come for a decisive battle between those who supported terrorism and those who had a firm belief in humanity (Hindustan Times 2015). This view reflected the statements stated at the one-day conference in 2010, where India's Taliban stance was disharmonious with the international community.

6.3.4 No good or bad terrorism

At the same time as the BJP government continued to reject any distinction between "a good and bad Taliban", it held on to its claim that "there is no good or bad terrorism", indicating that it still considered Taliban a terrorist group. It remained unclear how comfortable New Delhi was in dealing with the Taliban at an official level. An Indian analyst, Taneja (2017), argued that India might not have been completely averse to certain sections of the Taliban, with a load of checks and balances to accompany. He asserted that India had active back channels intothe Taliban. An official and open negotiation would be something else however, with unwanted implications for its domestic policies. Official negotiations with the Taliban could spark demands to negotiate with militants groups in Kashmir, which was considered intolerable in Delhi. For one thing, US and European officials did no longer view India's role in Afghanistan as destabilizing, as it did earlier, fearing extensive Indian involvement would provoke Pakistan. This change in attitude was partly because of frustration with Pakistan's role in conflict. The US along with the Afghan government now encouraged India to commit to "boots on the ground" (Joshi 2014, 94; Taneja 2017).

However, India did face a dilemma with regards to the Taliban. On the one hand, the QCG-meetings, which excluded India, caused a debate on what role New Delhi could play in the reconciliation process with the Taliban. India looked at Pakistan's role in the peace process with great doubt. Indian policymakers were aware that India's policy options for Afghanistan would to a great degree be dictated by the security situation. Although New Delhi had a distrust of any potential political settlement with the Taliban, which it believed would compromise its interests and advance Pakistan's, it did not wish to be further marginalised and side-lined in the peace process. On the other hand, some voices in New Delhi had reservations against any future government that was headed or partly run by the Taliban. Indian fears arose from two foreseeable scenarios it believed would occur, if it agreed on a

political settlement with the Taliban. 1. If it engaged meaningfully with the Taliban, it would open up negotiations with other militant groups, i.e. in Kashmir, and 2. It would weaken the BJP government's credibility among Hindu nationalist hardliners in India, if it cooperated with entities that it labelled terrorists. It was argued that in order to protect Indian interests in Afghanistan, India had to engage with all ethnic and political groups in Afghanistan, including the so far neglected Pashtun groups. It was also suggested that the relations to the groups belonging to the erstwhile Northern Alliance had to be strengthened. As for the Taliban, India acknowledged that there is a need to maintain contact, but as long as the outfit was a proxy of Pakistan, the question of India recognising and formally engaging with it did not arise (Joshi 2014, 93-94; Mahalingam 2016, 106; IDSA 2015a & 2015b).

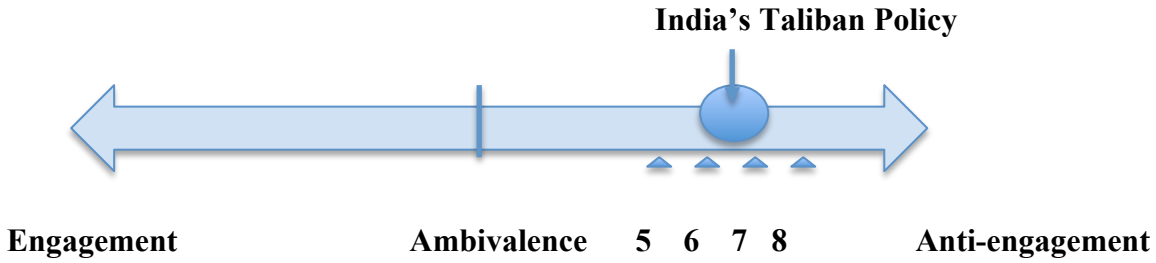
In December 2016, at the sixth Heart of Asia conference hosted by India, both Ghani and Modi lashed out at Pakistan for promoting cross-border terrorism. Modi stated that the international community had to counter terrorists and their sponsors. This was perceived as a veiled reference to Pakistan (DW 2016). India did find itself at a sweet spot due to the Afghan government's friction with Pakistan in the context of the Taliban conflict. It sided with the Ghani administration and emphasized that the reconciliation process had to be entirely Afghan-owned (Observer Research Foundation 2016).

6.4 Making sense of New Delhi's Taliban policy post 2001 – engagement or anti-engagement?

The First Phase: India intensified engagement with Afghanistan shortly after the Taliban regime was overthrown in 2001. In the first phase, India's stance on Taliban resonated with the international community. By stating that India had never recognized the Taliban regime and simultaneously pledging its full support to the NA, it thereby opted for anti-engagement with the Taliban. With time, the NA dissolved into various groups and parties that joined Karzai's administration. New Delhi maintained its ties with these groups that were represented by interest groups affiliated with the NUG post-2014. The tense relationship with Pakistan played a role in shaping India's policies in general, and India's Taliban policy was no exception, since Indian officials viewed the latter as Pakistan's proxy. Indian officials publicly stated that they would not negotiate with terrorists and there was no ambivalence in their approach towards the Taliban. To an extent, India used its soft power projection in Afghanistan to contain Taliban's influence. It was important for India to build up an

economic presence in Afghanistan and increase popular goodwill, and in the early years after the US invasion Indians were unwilling to compromise this by strengthening their military posture in Afghanistan.

Although, Indian analysts encouraged political leaders to engage with all ethnic groups, including the Pashtuns, they were coherent in their perception of the Taliban. Its approach to the Taliban was characterised by giving partisan political and military support to the NA-dominated government and denouncing the Taliban *(point 5, 6 and 7)* and thus maintaining its pre-2001 line of anti-engagement with the Taliban. India expressed no willingness to have associations with the Taliban, and gave its full support to the Afghan government *(point 8)*. In other words, India consolidated its anti-engagement with the Taliban in the first phase.



The anti-engagement approach described India's Taliban policy in the first phase.

The Second Phase: India's projection of soft power intensified in the second phase, simultaneously as the resurgence of Taliban. The rationale behind using soft power to an extent, was to fill up a space, that otherwise would be claimed by Pakistan and its protégé Taliban. Thus, India had to expand its influence, but within the limits of soft power. The increasing number of attacks on Indian interests in Afghanistan by the Taliban was a game changer, and it prompted Indian policymakers to review their policies. India's military presence in Afghanistan was heavily debated throughout this period, and India's military posture was strengthened when it decided to train Afghan forces to contain the Taliban. This is the first time India was given a formal role in Afghan security. India also became more involved in terms of economic deals with Afghanistan, but was still a bit reluctant to get deeply involved in the Afghan economy since it feared retaliation from Taliban. Indian policymakers and analysts feared that further instability in Afghanistan meant stronger terrorist networks operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan, groups that were likely to carry out terrorist attacks in India.

The most surprising event during this phase was perhaps Taliban's praise of India for not leaving a military footprint in Afghanistan. Despite Taliban's cordial tone, New Delhi was sceptic and rather than interpreting Taliban's statement as an invitation to establish contact, it saw it as a warning to refrain from expanding military involvement in Afghanistan. The strategic circle in New Delhi did review the possibility of talks with the Taliban, but was in unison of their perception of the Taliban and how it was incompatible with India's tenets. Based on Indian policymakers' statements and official documents, there were no indications of direct engagement with the Taliban.

India suffered a humiliating setback, when the international community rejected the Indian notion that there were no distinction between good or bad terrorism. Indians felt marginalized, and as a result, they decided to support an Afghan led reconciliation, which downplayed Pakistan's role. As the drawdown of ISAF forces got closer, the international community opened up for talks with the "moderate Taliban", yet India was not convinced. In this context, India's intelligence agencies took the bold step of granting visa to the former Taliban leader Zaeef, whom was arrested by the Pakistanis shortly after 9/11 and sent to Guantanamo, after he paid a visit to Goa. This gesture was unprecedented, but has been given little weight to. This signalled that the UPA government had some sort of interaction with the group. The worst possible scenario in the eyes of Indian policymakers continued to be a Taliban takeover and the formation of a fundamentalist Sunni regime. Nevertheless, it did try to establish good ties with non-Taliban Pashtuns and all political parties and social groups in Afghanistan.

To sum up the second phase in terms of India's Taliban policy; New Delhi did not give diplomatic recognition to the Taliban, nor did it acknowledge it. It maintained its line of "no good or bad terrorism", despite spite of being out of sync with the rest of the international community at an Afghanistan-themed conference and Taliban's cordial tone. Some Indian policymakers and analysts did suggest that India should consider softening its approach to the Taliban, as the date for the ISAF withdrawal got closer. This was contradictory to the first phase, where such considerations were not even a topic. The Indian government remained steadfast in its support to the Afghan government and emphasized several times that the premises of the peace process had to be dictated by it. Overall, India's Taliban policy was up to debate during this period, but remained sceptical of the Taliban and rather tilted towards a policy of containment, with the exception of the interaction with the Taliban cleric Zaeef

(point 4). India stayed on the anti-engagement course, by giving partisan political and military aid support to the ANSF and the Afghan government, meaning that the *points 5, 6, 7 and 8* were fulfilled. The second phase was a continuation of the first phase, even though the right approach towards the Taliban was more up to debate in policymaking circles than before.

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In the second phase, India continued to tilt towards anti-engagement with the Taliban. However, India's position moved slightly to the left on the axis compared to in the first phase, as policymakers began reassessing anti-engagement in light of ISAF pull-out approaching and the onset of the reconciliation process with the Taliban.

The Third Phase:

In the post-ISAF era, a number of developments sets the context for the Indian approach to the Taliban: New territorial gains by the Taliban, the Afghan reconciliation process, regional energy projects like the TAPI pipeline, new alliances and the growing presence of ISKP. Some developments suggested Indian interaction with the Taliban was in the making. The TAPI pipeline raised some security questions, and Taliban had to be involved in the preparation. Indian analysts predicted that talks with the group would be necessary. Even after Taliban made a statement, confirming it would back the TAPI project, it remained unknown if negotiations between India and the group took place.

Russia and Iran's tilt towards the Taliban after the ISKP gained foothold in Afghanistan, was of concern to New Delhi. Russia's positive statements about the Taliban were especially alarming, since India has historically considered Russia to be its closest defence partner. Russia and Iran's increased inclination towards approaching the Taliban, made India seriously reconsider its Taliban policy. The outcome of this reappraisal was a message to the Taliban, where New Delhi told the group to stop committing acts of terrorism, but also reiterated that it would back the Afghan government's stance on the Taliban.

The policymaking circle in New Delhi was concerned that India would be left out in the cold in the Afghan calculus, if it stuck with its anti-engagement policy with the Taliban. Therefore, some Indian analysts argued that the time was ripe to engage with some factions of the Taliban, such as the political commission in Qatar. Some unconfirmed sources asserted that India had back channels into the Taliban and were not averse to negotiations. Others objected this view, contended that India was better off with no engagement with the Taliban, and should exclusively support the Afghan government. State leader Modi rejected the 'good terrorist'-'bad terrorist' dichotomy explicitly during a speech to Indian expats. This was the official stance of India on the Taliban, and as long as Taliban was a proxy of Pakistan, India was unlikely to officially recognize Taliban.

India had since 2001 found itself on the horns of a dilemma regarding military commitment in Afghanistan. Under the BJP-government, India began to adhere to some military requests from the Afghan government. In response, Taliban issued a message where it warned India of getting further militarily involved. In 2014, "boots on the ground" was no longer an alternative, since the ANSF was responsible for the security in Afghanistan, rather than ISAF. India's aversion against engaging openly with the Taliban was evident through public statements. On the other hand, some elements in the policymaking circle in New Delhi did not flat out discard future engagement with the group. In summary, during the third phase, India tried to adjust to the fact that its allies Russia and Iran were pro-Taliban, in conjunction with the Afghan government's willingness to have peace talks with the Taliban. India did not have a say in the reconciliation process, but maintained its relations with the Afghan government and said it would endorse whatever stand it would take towards the Taliban. By doing this, India implicitly and pragmatically took its first baby steps in acknowledging Taliban's role in the Afghan political system, something that was unthinkable in the first two phases (*point 2)*. As Taliban was gaining strength, New Delhi wanted to keep all doors open. There are no proof of covert channels of interaction between New Delhi and the Taliban, however. In broad, therefore the anti-engagement parameters still apply to a large extent, as India gave its full support to the NUG and was not entirely willing to accept the existence of a good Taliban *(points 5 and 7)*. Moreover, New Delhi continued to provide the ANSF with military aid in terms of training and equipment *(point 6),* and still feared a Taliban takeover backed by its adversary Pakistan. India was persistent on its 'no good terrorist' approach, and remained hesitant in engaging with the Taliban. The third phase indicated a softening of India's anti-

engagement approach towards the Taliban, which was a result of a slow realization that the Taliban was not going anywhere.

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In the third phase, a breakthrough came when India acknowledged the Taliban with regards to the peace process. Deliberations on engaging with the Taliban in the future were more frequent, but despite moving more to the left on the axis, India's chosen Taliban policy still had more elements of anti-engagement.

Chapter 7

7 Concluding remarks

Peace in Afghanistan is largely linked to reconciliation with the Taliban. Both Pakistan and India are deeply involved in the Afghan quagmire, and the costs of engagement or anti-engagement with the Taliban continues to remain a pertinent debate in the policymaking circuits in Islamabad and New Delhi. The research question purposed in the beginning of the paper was the following: *What have been Pakistan and India's policies towards the Taliban in Afghanistan post-2001 and throughout 2016?*

Pakistan's approach towards the Taliban evolved over the course of the war after 2001 – it has not been static. Its links with the Taliban has to be understood in light of its past support to the group, and its role in creating and sustaining the movement. The Pakistani Army and the ISI are commonly viewed as the key foreign policy decision makers in Islamabad, and the Taliban is viewed as their trump card to use against any pro-Indian Afghan government. In other words, Taliban has been considered a Pakistani proxy. India's approach to the Taliban after 2001 has on the other hand been characterized by partisan support to anti-Pakistan and anti-Taliban forces, namely the NA, NATO and the US-installed Afghan government. At the outset of India's rekindling with the NA-dominated Afghan government, Indian officials underscored how the Taliban was Islamabad's proxy force. The partisan approach got an upswing in the first period post-2001, mainly because of the international community's uncompromising and stiff rejection of the Taliban as a legitimate entity in Afghanistan. Indian officials advocated containment and no diplomatic acknowledgement of the Taliban, through the bolstering of anti-Taliban elements. India maintained close political and to some extent military support to the NA in order to prevent pro-Pakistani Taliban from regaining strength and ensure that political actors in Afghanistan were favourably inclined to India, Hence, the NA can reasonably be classified as India's proxy in Afghanistan. With time, the groups compromising the NA were incorporated into the Afghan government. India cultivated relations with the government, and especially its NA elements. Thus, the Afghan government can also partly be described as an Indian proxy post-2001, although not a conventional proxy. This is an attempt at challenging the traditional notion of a proxy.

To some extent, the statements by higher officials in the respective countries reflect the sentiments of the governing institutions. Going by this, both Pakistan and India were in opposition to the Taliban in the first phase after 2001. The combined fear of isolation by the international community and increase of Indian influence in Afghanistan, in addition to pressure from the US, made Pakistan seemingly distance itself from its former client, the Taliban. This was however, a superficial distancing, as Musharraf would later reveal that engagement with the Taliban continued post-2001. India on the other side fully endorsed the NA and their entrance into the interim government, and condemned the Taliban. Indian officials also made a point of how terrorism stemmed from Pakistan. The anti-engagement approach was the chosen Indian Taliban-policy in the first phase after 2001. Pakistan's policy had a degree of ambivalence, and moved from overt engagement pre-2001 to restricted or covert engagement.

After 2008, when Musharraf was ousted from power, various actors pointed out that even though Islamabad kept declaring that it was a committed ally in countering the Taliban, the country had an ambivalent stance towards the movement. Confusion marked Pakistani posture towards the Taliban at this time. In 2010, Pakistan's Army Chief, Kayani, rejected the idea of strategic depth and expressed that Pakistan was standing in the crosshairs of domestic extremists, primarily those of TTP. Therefore, a stable Afghanistan was in the interest of Pakistan. Pakistani officials at any given opportunity denounced the Western media narrative that the Taliban insurgency was fuelled by the alleged double-faced ISI, a perception that was inflamed by the WikiLeaks in 2010. Simultaneously, India utilized its greatest asset, soft power, which generated goodwill in Afghanistan, but also made it a target for attacks. The resurgence of the Taliban forced the international community to reconsider the role of Taliban in the Afghan equation. India was reluctant to the idea of legitimizing the Taliban, and found it tricky and politically humiliating to develop links to a group it had denounced so harshly in the past. Eventually New Delhi realized that its stiff and uncompromising attitude towards the Taliban marginalized its role in peace and reconciliation efforts as well as in Afghanistan's future political structure. This paved the way for a slight departure from India's traditional policy of boycotting the Taliban, into a more pragmatic attitude. By 2011, India officially endorsed an Afghan led reconciliation with the Taliban, without Pakistani interference.

In the years close up to 2014, when NATO was supposed to withdraw its forces and transfer responsibility to the Afghan government army, both Pakistan and India underwent small shifts

in their approaches to the Taliban in order to prepare themselves for changed ground realities. Pakistan went from detaching itself from the Taliban-tag, to embrace the role as a peace facilitator in a reconciliation process. This development implied that Pakistan had to nurture its ties to the Taliban, in order to bring the group to the negotiation table. India's approach to the Taliban was somehow ambiguous because two policymaking circles with different perspectives shaped it: One group of Indian officials argued for a politically partisan approach that opted for an 'anti-engagement' policy with pro-Pakistan factions. The other group had a less aggressive outlook on the Taliban, and asserted that India should focus on projecting soft power in Afghanistan and tilted more towards an 'engage-with-all' policy.

Though Taliban did not seem to hold India's anti-Taliban past against it and the new situation on the ground in Afghanistan called for engaging the movement in new ways, New Delhi found it hard to carve out a unified and consistent approach towards the Taliban. This was partly due to the NUG's inconsistent approach towards the Taliban. After all, New Delhi followed the NUG's lead, and Kabul's posture vis-à-vis the Taliban was adopted by India. A few media reports suggested that the Taliban welcomed Indian development projects, although the group suspected the political intent behind the projects. Taliban warned India of getting further militarily involved in Afghanistan and even said there was a possibility of reconciliation, but not as long as the Indian government supported the presence of western forces. Nevertheless, India's fundamental approach towards the Taliban remained sceptical. The signing of the Strategic Partnership Agreement in 2011, even led to formalization of Indian military assistance to the war against the Taliban.

From 2008 to 2014, it seems like both Pakistan and India moved closer to engagement with the Taliban, although from two very different points of departure and the partisan and anti-engagement proponents continued to dominate the official discourse on Taliban. Pakistan moved from covert engagement to semi-overt engagement, while India was still closer to anti-engagement than engagement with the Taliban. New Delhi actually increased its support of military warfare against the group during these years, but concurrently and for the first time started to entertain the idea of engaging with the Taliban through talks. No concrete Indian initiatives were taken in the direction of giving Taliban diplomatic recognition, but it is clear as the withdrawal of ISAF troops was drawing closer, it caused uncertainty and reassessments of past policies and positions in both New Delhi and Islamabad. At the end of the second

phase, Pakistan and India's uncertainties about what Afghanistan would look like post-ISAF, made them more inclined towards engagement with the increasingly stronger Taliban.

Pakistan's Taliban policy after 2014 became more transparent, as the country's officials expressed great interest in facilitating peace talks with the Taliban. A significant confession was also made by a Pakistani official on the country's ability to exert influence on the Taliban in this regard. Pakistan wanted to help broker a peace accord that would lead to the political accommodation of the Taliban in the Afghan government. Islamabad was under great pressure and pulled in opposite directions by the international community in terms of its dealings with the Taliban: The country was asked to bring the Taliban to the negotiation table and simultaneously defeat and weaken the movement. Islamabad argued that the twin objectives of helping reconcile the Taliban leaders while attempting to get rid of them were inherently incompatible. Pakistani policymakers and analysts also argued that a peace deal with the Taliban was the only solution to end the turmoil in Afghanistan.

Post-ISAF, Pakistan has kept reiterating its support for Afghanistan-Taliban peace talks. The Pakistani national security establishment's reluctance of cutting ties with the Taliban could no longer predominantly be viewed in the context of regional conditions, domestic considerations also played in Islamabad feared that alienating the Taliban, would provoke retaliation in Pakistan and eventually lead to stronger cooperation between the TTP and the Taliban. Pakistan's intelligence service has more influence over the Taliban than any other country or intelligence apparatus. Pakistan has been associated with the Taliban since its formation in the mid-1990s, since the initial core members of the Taliban were mujahedin trained by the ISI and the Pakistani army. There are however limits to the Pakistani influence over the group, especially as it grows stronger and more independent The main impetus behind Pakistan's engagement with the Taliban after 2014 has been the assessment that the group will continue to be a relevant and significant proxy force and targeting it will cause backlash within Pakistan. Consequently, it is highly unlikely that Pakistan will stop its engagement with the Taliban in the near future.

The entrance of ISKP in Afghanistan in 2015 changed how Russia and Iran approached the Taliban. To New Delhi's dismay, Moscow and Tehran chose an engagement approach with the Taliban to contain ISKP from gaining stronghold. Even though New Delhi was frustrated that it was excluded from participating in the peace process with the Taliban, it abstained

from giving the group political legitimacy. Indian policymakers who advocated for anti-engagement with the Taliban argued that the parity between New Delhi and the Taliban on strategic interests was non-existent. Moreover, they saw the Taliban through anti-Islamic lenses and considered it a proxy for Pakistani agencies, with limited sovereign agency. There was no such thing as the good or bad Taliban, according to these people – who mainly belong to the Indian Hindu nationalist ideological circle (Hindustan Times 2015). On the other hand, by 2015 there were also some pragmatic Indian policymakers who backed broad-based engagement with the Taliban (Taneja 2017). They suggested New Delhi should reconsider its Taliban policy for a number of reasons. Firstly, defeating the group military seemed like an impossible task. Secondly, other countries that had previously chosen the path of anti-engagement had changed their approach towards the group. Thirdly, security of joint regional projects such as the TAPI depended on the Taliban. Fourthly, there was a risk that the Indian perspective would be ignored if India continued being sidelined in the peace process. To these policymakers the cost of anti-engagement was higher than the costs of engagement, and they had come to the realization that the Taliban was not a monolithic entity, and pragmatism was necessary. However, the Modi- administration officially remained firm on their "no distinction between good or bad Taliban", and has to date been averse to Pakistani-led peace talks with the Taliban.

In sum, it is reasonable to say that while Pakistan chose full engagement with the Taliban from 2014 to 2016, India in the main tilted towards anti-engagement, despite less rigidity in the official discourse about Taliban's role than before. The pattern has been that Pakistan and India has departed from opposite sides, where Pakistan has moved from semi-covert engagement to semi-overt engagement to full engagement, while India has gone from full anti-engagement to semi-anti-engagement. In this way, it seems like the countries have gradually and slightly moved closer to each other's positions on the dimensional axis. In this study, I have mostly analyzed Pakistan and India's perspectives, and not their so called proxies' perspectives. It is clear however, that neither Pakistan nor India have submissive proxies in Afghanistan they exercise complete control over. Pakistan's relation with the Taliban has been conflicting and tense, and India lacks control over Taliban's adversaries, the NUG and ANSF's actions.

Was it fruitful to include both countries in a comparative research design? This brings us back to the hypothesis laid out in section 3.1.1 that suggests that Pakistan and India's Taliban

policies are a reflection of their rivalry. This thesis does not aim to outline which factors explain Pakistan and India's engagement or anti-engagement towards the Taliban, and therefore the hypothesis has neither been satisfactorily tested nor properly answered. From the analysis however, there is sufficient evidence that points in the direction of the hypothesis being confirmed rather than rejected. The comparative analysis indicates that the countries' Taliban policy to a large extent mirrors their relations with one another. This is in line with Ahmad's (2013) assertion that both India and Pakistan regional policy amounts to a zero-sum game, where one side's gain is the other side's loss.

Both Pakistani and Indian officials have rationalized their positions by referring to the threat from each other. This has especially been the case for Pakistan, which because of its military inferiority has considered India more of a threat than the other way around. Pakistanis' fear of hostile encirclement by unfriendly states in a situation of war with India, explains much of their suspicion of Karzai and the NA representatives in the Afghan government as well as their worry that Indian consulates close to the border are used to gather intelligence (Fair 2011, 183-184). Both countries have accused each other of cultivating relations with proxies that undermine their respective state's interests. India accuses Pakistan of using Taliban to undermine and attack Indian interests in Afghanistan, as well as to create safe havens for militants that can attack Indian state interests within India and Indian occupied Kashmir. Pakistan accuses RAW of using its presence in Afghanistan to arm and support Baluchi insurgents and thereby destabilize Pakistan (Pant 2010, 140; Fair 2011, 183-184).

Nevertheless, it would be wrong and un-nuanced to say that *all* Indian and Pakistani policy choices vis-à-vis the Taliban can be accredited to the rivalry between the countries. In fact, I would argue that over the years an increasing number of other factors have emerged that shape their policies. During the time scope of 2001-2016, the growth in Pakistan's domestic security concerns has for example increasingly shaped the country's Taliban policy. For India, continued containment of Pakistan's influence and a strategic upper hand in the event of war is still relevant when choosing how to approach the Taliban. However, I would argue that other factors also shape India's desire for a friendly and stable Afghan regime: Chiefly intensified rivalry with China for influence in Asia as well as expanding economic interests.

The analysis has left unanswered some aspects of the research question. This is mainly due to the lack of access to classified documents, which has made accusations and speculations

nearly impossible to verify. There have for example been rumours of RAW having backchannels of contact with the Taliban, which if verified could alter the answer to the research question quite a bit. In order to detect covert channels of interaction, access to sources in the policymaking and intelligence environment in both countries is necessary. Whereas ISI has received a lot of attention and its covert actions are written quite a lot about, RAW's activities have avoided the same attention and consequently less is known about its covert operations. The theoretical framework has proved useful in analyzing and providing a comprehensive overview of the countries' policies towards the Taliban. Future studies can determine if it has utility for analysis of other states' relations with other non-state actors.

India-Pakistan-Afghanistan relations will continue to influence the prospects for peace in Afghanistan. Taliban's longevity as a fighting force in the Afghan political context has been against all odds. Recent developments suggest that a political settlement with the Taliban is far from within reach. Trump's anti-engagement posture towards the Taliban has emboldened India's anti-engagement stance. Moreover, the US' recent harsh rhetoric and accusations aimed at Pakistan for supporting terrorists have been echoed by the NUG as well. These developments suggest that Pakistan will most likely amplify its engagement with the Taliban. Peace talks with the Taliban seem like the only viable solution to break the bloody stalemate, and the "fight and talk" strategy endorsed by the Western coalition has proven to be detrimental in this regard. Pakistan and India's zero-sum approach to Afghanistan have also contributed to make matters worse. Hence, a reduction in Pakistan and India's rivalry and threat perceptions would be beneficial for Afghanistan's future. Future research should take these considerations into account when exploring how constructive peace efforts can be put in place.

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