

Afghanistan/Pakistan

Principal protagonists



Government of Afghanistan; NATO forces actively engaged.



Taliban, Al Qaeda, and other Islamist militants.



Pakistan Government (officially allied to US/NATO. Elements of government and security forces ambivalent).

Nature of conflict

Full-scale conflict between Islamists and Afghan government/NATO forces; Cross-border insurgency between Afghan and Pakistani borders; Clashes between pro- and anti-Taliban groups in FATA..

- ☪ Pakistan: Muslim/Christian. Routine harassment of Christians by the authorities and attacks, including murders, by Islamic militants.
- ☠ Uncertain. 5,000-8,000 civilian casualties estimated.
- 👤 2.4m Afghan refugees in Pakistan.
- ☪ Afghanistan: Significant narcotics (opium poppy) production.

Population/ethnic composition

Afghanistan: 31m. Pashtun 42%, Tajik 27%, Hazara 9%, Uzbek 9%. Religious mix: Sunni Muslim 80%, Shia Muslim 19%.

Pakistan: 165.8m (of which 3.3m in Federally Administered Tribal Areas). Punjabi 52.6%, Pashtun (Pathan) 13.2%, Sindhi 11.7%, Muhajir 7.5%, Balochi 4.3%.

Territorial extent

Afghanistan: 652,090 km².

Pakistan: Federally Administered Tribal Areas (including the 'Islamic Emirate of Waziristan'): 27,220 km².

Timeline

See opposite.



Afghanistan has long been a country that is notoriously difficult to rule – either by foreigners or by the Afghans themselves. Since 1979 the country has experienced virtually continual civil strife and foreign intervention. Following the implication of the ruling Taliban of involvement in the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, Afghanistan's troubled history entered a new phase, with the overthrow of the Kabul government by US-led forces. Efforts at creating a genuinely national government continue to flounder on the rocks of tribal and ideological animosities and the contradictory ambitions of international players.

Central to an understanding of the current conflict is an appreciation of the cross-border nature of ethnic politics in the region. Pashtuns, who form the largest single ethnic group in Afghanistan and comprise the majority in the Pakistani border areas, have provided the ethnic bedrock of Taliban support, despite the movement's claims regarding the universality of its creed. Despite denials by Islamabad, there is ample evidence that elements within the Pakistani security apparatus are continuing to provide critical assistance to the Taliban, the movement they were instrumental in creating in the 1990s.

A strict Sunni Muslim movement, the Taliban was formed in 1993 at the instigation of the Pakistani military and intelligence services, probably with covert support from the Americans, as a vehicle for exerting pressure on the then Afghan govern-

ment. Many of its early recruits were Afghan Pashtun refugees then living in Pakistan who were radicalized in *madrassa*, or Islamic schools – hence the name 'Taliban', which means 'students'. From the US point of view at least, this programme backfired disastrously. By 1996 the Taliban, which drew its support overwhelmingly from the Pashtun population both in Afghanistan and Pakistan, was in control of 80% of Afghanistan and out of control as far as its original mentors were concerned. In 1997, the Taliban proclaimed the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, under its leader Mullah Mohammed Omar. This state achieved recognition only from the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and – significantly – Pakistan. The Taliban instigated a draconian rule in those parts of Afghanistan under its control. Dancing and music were banned, women were forced out of paid employment and girls were banned

from schools and universities. Minor infringements of Islamic dress codes by women were summarily punished by public flogging. The Taliban further gained international opprobrium by the destruction in March 2001 of the historic Bamiyan Buddha statues on the grounds that they were graven images.

Osama Bin Laden moved to Afghanistan following his expulsion from Sudan in 1996, and rapidly forged a close alliance between his own Al Qaeda organization and the Taliban. Following the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and other targets in the US, the Taliban continued to shelter Bin Laden. On 7 October 2001, the United States, supported by NATO allies, launched air attacks against Taliban/Al Qaeda targets in Afghanistan and commenced direct land support to the Northern Alliance, the coalition of anti-Taliban forces that had continued to resist Taliban rule. Although both Bin Laden and Mullah Omar escaped capture, the Taliban regime was effectively overthrown by December 2001.

Following the defeat of the Taliban, attention turned to the creation of effective central government institutions for Afghanistan. A national *Loya Jirga* (council of elders) was convened in 2002. This established Hamid Karzai as Interim President of Afghanistan and was followed in 2003 by the ratification of a new constitution. In October 2004 Karzai was elected President in a nationwide election, and legislative elections were held in September 2005. However, the reality on the ground remained discouraging and 2006 was, in fact, marked by an upsurge in rebel activities, particularly in the southern Helmand province, where NATO forces, particularly the British, continue engage Taliban forces.

Critical to gaining control in Afghanistan is suppressing the cross-border insurgency from Pakistan. But, for any government, effective control of the frontier district between Pakistan and Afghanistan has historically proven all but impossible. The Durant

Line – the border arbitrarily demarcated by the British in 1893 – has been a bone of contention between the two countries since its creation and one that has, moreover, been largely ignored by the semi-nomadic Pashtun and other communities on both sides of the line. For many years, Afghanistan pressed an irredentist claim over the Pakistani regions of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and the North West Frontier Province. Pakistan, in turn, has supported Islamist Pashtun movements in Afghanistan both to counterweight Pashtun agitation within its own borders and to exert influence over its neighbour. The creation of the Taliban was thus part of long-standing political tradition on the part of Islamabad.

Until 2006, authority in the borderland Federally Administered Tribal Areas derived from the colonial era Frontier Crimes Regulation introduced in 1901 and carried over into independence, with Islamabad agreeing not to station troops in the tribal border areas. The FCR combined traditional patterns of governance and crime prevention with the central state reserving interventionist powers that bypassed the legislative processes applicable in other parts of the country. The FCR vested practical authority in the hands of a Political Agent who headed the local administration of each FATA agency. The Political Agent in turn worked through local proxies, granting tribal elders the status of *malik* and a financial stipend in return for suppressing crime and generally supporting the government. While this structure was suitable for a colonial system of indirect government, it was open to widespread corruption and poor governance and proved inadequate for dealing with modern security needs. In 2004 Pakistani troops, for the first time, moved into the FATA region (prompting clashes with local tribal militias) and in April 2006 President Musharraf announced plans to end the FATA system.

In September 2006, following two years of conflict, the Pakistani government agreed a truce with mili-

tants of the self-styled 'Islamic Emirate of Waziristan' in the Waziristani districts of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. A key element of the agreement was a prohibition on the use of the territory for cross-border operations into Afghanistan and some commentators argued that this would facilitate the interception of Taliban insurgents crossing the border from Pakistan. Speculation continues that Osama Bin Laden and Mullah Omar have found sanctuary in these regions, possibly under the protection of elements of the Pakistani security forces, and mounting evidence that the Pakistani authorities are turning a blind eye to an increasing number of cross-border incursions and move-

Timeline

- 1893: British demarcation of Afghan/Pakistani border – the 'Durant Line.'
- 1901: British establish Frontier Crimes Regulation as mechanism for indirect governance of the then North West Frontier Province. Still applied by Pakistani government to Federally Administered Tribal Areas.
- 8 Aug 1919: Modern Afghan state proclaimed. (Recognized by Britain 22 Nov 1921.)
- 14 Aug 1947: Pakistan achieves independence from Britain.
- 25 Dec 1979-15 Feb 1989: Afghanistan occupied by the Soviet Union.
- c 1993: Taliban created at instigation of Pakistani security forces.
- 26 Oct 1997: Taliban-led Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan proclaimed. Resistance by Northern Alliance continues.
- 11 Sep 2001: Terrorist attack on World Trade Center, New York, claims over 3,000 casualties. Taliban implicated.
- 7 Oct 2001-Dec 2001: US-led forces in conjunction with the Northern Alliance overthrow Taliban rule.
- 2004: Pakistani troops occupy FATA. Local fighting ensues.
- 5 Sep 2006: Pakistan signs truce with 'Islamic Emirate of Waziristan'.
- 18 Feb 2008: Pakistan Peoples' Party leads new government in Pakistan.

Current status

Widespread fighting continues.

ments of weapons led to increasing American disquiet. The US continued strikes on specific targets in Pakistan, usually under the pretence of 'joint action' with Pakistani forces. In one particularly well-publicized incident in October 2006 US forces attacked a madrassa in the extreme north of the FATA region, allegedly targeting high-ranking Al Qaeda officials, but resulting in significant civilian casualties. In January 2008, two forts in Waziristan were reported as having been taken over by the Taliban, having been abandoned by their Pakistan army defenders.

Following its election in February 2008 (*See Pakistan's political problems, 5.26*) the new Pakistani government has adopted a more aggressive approach to militants in the FATA region, moving some 30,000 troops into South Waziristan, whilst simultaneously encouraging dialogue with tribal leaders. Clashes between Pakistani regular forces and the Taliban have become more marked, such as the fierce fighting, including the use for the first time of artillery by government forces, around Peshawar in June 2008.

The policy of co-opting tribal leaders builds upon the indications that Pashtun groups are tiring of the association between their communities and the Islamist cause. In November 2006, a unique jirga of Pashtun groups in Peshawar complained that authentic Pashtun voices were in danger of being drowned out by the violence of the insurgency. The legitimacy of Taliban claims to speak for the Pashtun people was called into question, with leaders arguing that the Taliban is the creation not of the Pashtun people but of the Pakistani military. Fears were also expressed about the creeping 'Talibanization' of Pashtun governmental and civil society. This trend is also manifest in Taliban attacks against tribal leaders, such as the kidnap and murder of 22 members of the Bhattani tribe in the South Waziristan town of Jandola in June 2008 by pro-Taliban Mehsud tribesmen. (The Mehsud, led by Baitullah Mehsud, is the dominant tribe in South Waziristan.) Traditional Pashtun society revolves around the *masjid* (mosque) and the *bujra* (the seat of the tribal chief) and this separation of powers between the religious and political spheres is anathema to the Taliban. The notoriously independently minded Pashtun may reassert their resentment of any kind of central authority, whether imposed by the Taliban or Islamabad.

See 5.26 for summary of the overall political situation in Pakistan.

NATO and 9/11

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was created in 1949 as a defensive alliance against the possibility of a Soviet attack on Western Europe. Central to the Alliance's doctrine is the concept of collective security, enshrined in Article 5 of the NATO Charter, which decreed that an attack on one member of the Alliance was to be deemed an attack on all. This was principally to assure European members (and the Soviet Union) that the United States would intervene immediately in any emergency in Europe.

At the end of the Cold War NATO's original *raison d'être* became largely redundant. In 1999, three of NATO's former potential adversaries, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland, became the first former Communist bloc states to join the Alliance.

It is one of the ironies of history (but also arguably a testament to the success of NATO as a peacekeeping alliance) that Article 5 has only been invoked once by a member state – and that member was the United States. The US invoked Article 5 within hours of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks against US cities. On 4 October 2001 NATO confirmed that the 9/11 attacks were a legitimate *casus belli* that did indeed fall within the terms of the North Atlantic Charter. The first (and so far only) NATO military exercises to be conducted under the terms of Article 5 – Operation Eagle Assist and Active Endeavor – were air surveillance operations carried out over the continental USA by NATO aircraft. Crews from 13 NATO countries participated.

The military attack on the Taliban in Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom) was technically not a NATO operation, although many of the Alliance's members contributed. (The designation operation Enduring Freedom also covered counter insurgency actions against Al Qaeda targets in the Philippines and in the Horn of Africa.)

On 11 August 2003, NATO took over formal command of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, the first time NATO forces were actively deployed outside the European theatre. NATO operations in Afghanistan continue.