



# Afghanistan as Seen from Pakistan

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Situation Review **1**

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Afghan situation: Responses from Pakistan's military and foreign policy strategists

-Umer Farooq

Afghanistan, Pakistan and the regional narcotics trade

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**PAK INSTITUTE FOR PEACE STUDIES (PIPS)**

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# Afghan situation: Responses from Pakistan's military and foreign policy strategists

*Umer Farooq\**

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## Key findings

- Since the 9/11, the Afghan society has given birth to considerable swathes of and emerging middle class with a global outlook and international linkages.
- Extremism, conflicts, refugees, and proliferation of narcotics and weapons in Afghanistan have always negatively affected Pakistan.
- The fear of India making inroads into Afghanistan has pushed the Pakistani military to seek 'strategic depth' through seeking a friendly government in Kabul.
- The current Taliban takeover of Kabul has dented India's influence in the country.
- Pakistan is nervous about two potential scenarios: first, large-scale refugee influx; and secondly, resurgence of anti-Pakistan militant groups.
- Reports suggest the Afghan Taliban have worked with Russia and Iran to tackle the ISIS threat. The Taliban are not threatening Russia, which is willing to use force to protect its Central Asian allies in case of threat from Taliban. China is also willing to work with the Taliban if its economic engagements are secured and the Taliban don't allow the ETIM to operate from Afghanistan.
- What will make the Taliban unacceptable to the regional powers is their continued links with Al-Qaeda and affiliated groups including the TTP. As late as 2020, a UN team report said there was no evidence the Taliban broke ties with Al-Qaeda. The Taliban give Al-Qaeda protection in exchange for training and resources.
- Right now, there is no clarity as to how the Pakistani military is viewing the evolving situation in Afghanistan.
- The Taliban are the new product of the Deobandi revivalist movement that originated in British India. The Taliban have had no exposure to western and secular education.
- The Strategic Depth: General Aslam Beg believed in physical and military strategic depth, while General Kiyani talked about political and diplomatic strategic depth in Afghanistan.
- Two elements in Pakistan's Afghan policy do not change: first, keeping India out of Afghanistan; secondly, creating a centralized Afghan state with Islamist Pashtuns at the helm.
- Pakistan and the US had divergent views on Afghanistan right from the start. Pakistan wanted India out of Afghanistan, while the US wanted to engage India in Afghan reconstruction.

- India sees the Afghanistan-based militant groups as a threat to its security. The groups can join hands with Kashmir-centric militants to attack India.
- Large-scale civil war is unlikely in Afghanistan at present largely because the regional states are apparently not in a mood to support anti-Taliban rebellion. But the protests in Afghanistan show that political instability may not be ruled out.
- The Taliban have relations with Iranian and Russian security establishments. Experts believe the Taliban regularly consult these states before taking any major step or decision.
- Pakistan has no intention to break with the US on Afghanistan.
- A destabilized Afghanistan would be a public relations disaster for the US, but the US also does not want a Taliban-exclusive government. Pakistan should help incorporate moderate and pro-West elements in the Taliban government.

## 1 Introduction

During the past forty years of incessant war, Afghan society has transformed from a traditional and isolated tribal society to the one with considerable swathes of an emerging middle class, which has a demonstrable global outlook and international linkages. In the early 1990s, the country suffered a brutal civil war as the anti-Soviet mujahidin plunged into infighting (Farooq, 2021). Almost all countries in the region had a proxy inside Afghanistan to which they were providing weapons, training, finances and intelligence and logistical support.

Pakistan has always been at the receiving end of all that went wrong in Afghanistan. Afghan military conflict, refugees, ideological and social strife, drugs and narcotics and spread of small weapons all affected Pakistani society deeply. Political trends like the rise of fundamentalist religious-political groups, formation of militant outfits and the spread of militancy and extremism have been affecting both Afghan and Pakistani societies since the Soviet-Afghan war.

The forty-year political and security instability in Afghanistan has shaped Pakistan's strategic thinking and policy towards its western neighbor. Many believe the threat of India making inroads into Afghanistan promoted the Pakistani military strategists to expand Pakistan's strategic depth through a friendly government in Kabul (Qaiser, 2020). In the post-9/11, India established a strong economic footprint in the war-torn Afghanistan with \$3 billion investment in different development projects. During this period, Pakistan repeatedly accused India of using Afghanistan to perpetuate security instability in Pakistani provinces bordering Afghanistan i.e. Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

The situation in Afghanistan and in the region has undergone another dramatic change after the US troops' withdrawal. Apparently, the Taliban takeover of power in Kabul has negatively affected the Indian influence in



Afghanistan. At least this is general belief being discussed both in India and in the international community (Kuchay, 2021).

On the other hand, Pakistan's military leaders have also displayed nervousness with regards to the possibility of increased violence in Afghanistan. Such a scenario will have two adverse implications for Pakistani society. First, it could lead to large-scale displacement in eastern and southern Afghanistan leading to an inflow of refugees to border areas of Pakistan. Secondly, it could give a 'boost' to Pakistani militant groups, whose power, as Pakistani military claims, has been decimated by successive military operations.

However, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan doesn't present a clear and neat strategic scenario for the Pakistani security establishment. It is not like the mid-1990s-scenario when Taliban's military victories created euphoria in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. This time the Taliban's military advances gave Pakistani security planners a headache — one of the concerns was that if the Taliban's military advances in northern and eastern Afghanistan were not welcomed by regional players including Russia, Iran and China or if the Taliban failed to receive the tacit approval of the regional players, then the emerging military situation inside Afghanistan could add to Pakistan's isolation at the international level. Also, in the mid-1990s, the Pakistani military establishment was not engaged in a campaign to attract Washington's support for its efforts to present the country as a hub of regional connectivity (Farooq, 2021a).

There is a clear realisation in Pakistan's foreign policy circles that the US's unilateral decision to withdraw from Afghanistan indicates that Washington is no more fixated on terrorism related issues, which for all practical purposes means a dwindling strategic importance of Islamabad. Coupled with this is Islamabad's inability in sustaining the financial and political assistance from country's chief patrons like oil rich Arab states, whose leaderships no longer seem to be in a mood of supporting so-called 'Islamic causes' all over the world.

There were, however, 'signals' emanating from regional capitals that Pakistani security establishment's 'strategic assets' — as the Afghan Taliban have often been referred to in international media — enjoyed strong support of the regional countries like Russia, Iran and China. During the peak of the US's military presence in Afghanistan, the US intelligence had reportedly presented the US administration with the information that Iran and Russia were providing weapons, intelligence support and finances to the Taliban for attacks on US forces inside Afghanistan. The information also said that the Afghan Taliban, at the behest of Russians and Iranians, had carried out operations against Daesh affiliated groups in northern and eastern Afghanistan, in the period between 2014 and 2016, when there was a sudden rise in the profile of ISIS in Afghanistan. Pakistan's premier intelligence agency ISI even hosted the intelligence chiefs of Russia, Iran and China in Islamabad for a conference in July 2018 where it was agreed that the four intelligence services would coordinate their efforts against the rise of ISIS in Afghanistan.

Does that mean that Russia and Iran have developed a working relationship with the Afghan Taliban? Does it also mean that for regional players the Taliban are more acceptable than the radical ISIS and other Salafi groups, which, according to reports, were emerging inside Afghanistan? No clear answers to these questions so far exist in the public realm. Iran has welcomed withdrawal of foreign troops and Russia has indicated willingness to use military force to protect its regional allies like Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Taliban are not mentioned as a threat in any of the Russian statements, though it is obvious that increased violence and instability will be disliked by these states.

A series of formal talks and visits of the Taliban to regional capitals including Moscow, Beijing, Tehran, Tashkent and Islamabad might have changed the image of the religious militia. But the Taliban behaviour in the days to come will influence these countries' future policies and actions towards Afghanistan. Most international experts predict that a civil war is likely in post-US Afghanistan. What will make the Afghan Taliban unacceptable to

the regional players is their continued links with Al-Qaeda and affiliated groups including the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, and East Turkistan Islamic Party, among others.

In its 2020 report, a UN team said the Taliban still have strong ties with Al-Qaeda. The Taliban provide Al-Qaeda with protection in exchange for resources and training. Between two hundred and five hundred Al-Qaeda fighters are believed to be in Afghanistan, while several of its leaders were also killed there. The Taliban 'regularly consulted' with Al-Qaeda leaders during its negotiations with the United States, providing 'guarantees that it would honour their historical ties,' the UN monitor reported. Al-Qaida is affiliated with a large number of terror groups originating from Chinese Xinjiang and Central Asian states. At the end of the day, Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan will be strongly shaped by attitudes of regional players. Similarly, the Pakistani security establishment until recently was pitching the idea of Pakistan as a hub of regional connectivity to Washington. A civil war in Afghanistan will not be conducive to the success of this idea. Similarly, Pakistan's too much reliance on the Afghan Taliban can utterly spoil its move to project itself as a connectivity hub, unless it could convince the Taliban to enter into a power sharing agreement with other Afghan groups.

Very little public information is available about the thinking in Pakistan's foreign policy establishment and Pakistani military on their policy attitude towards the developing situation in Afghanistan. There are some isolated statements from senior officials, as well as public acts and decisions like providing evacuation facilities to western diplomats and NGO workers fleeing the chaos in Afghanistan and high-level meetings of civil and military leadership to discuss the Afghan situation. So far, Pakistan has not extended diplomatic recognition to the Taliban government in Kabul. The day the Taliban captured Kabul, Pakistani diplomats received an Afghan delegation of senior politicians and members of parliament in Islamabad who arrived in the capital city to discuss the Afghan situation. Still there are a lot of facts about Pakistan's Afghan policy which are not publicly known: for instance,

we don't know whether or not Pakistan is still actively pursuing a reconciliation policy to bring different Afghan groups within the folds of Afghan political system.

This paper will answer certain key questions about Pakistan's Afghan policy in a historical perspective. It, however, will also place a larger focus on Pakistan's current policy towards the developing situation in Afghanistan. The paper will answer the following questions: a) How ideology, geography and strategic interests have defined Pakistan military's attitude and policy orientation towards Afghanistan? b) How has the Pakistani military historically perceived the Afghan situation? c) What is the history of these relations? d) What are the current dynamics of these relations?

Now that the Afghan Taliban are back in Kabul, there is a pertinent question as to what kind of relations Pakistan's security establishment wants to have with Afghanistan led by a ragtag militia. At the cultural level, very little is common between the modernist state machinery of Pakistan and Taliban militia with a culture based on 19th century religious ideology.

## **2 Ideology, geography and strategic interests**

From the early decades after independence, Pakistan's ruling elites and state machinery had been oriented or pressed toward introducing Islamic modernity in the state affairs. There was a parallel trend of Islamic revivalist movements, which continuously attempted to put pressure on the state and influence its policies. But these trends remained in a relation defined by friction as well as cooperation to strengthen the centralised state structure that the elite constructed in opposition to the centrifugal forces of ethnic-nationalist elites marked by their marriage to popular religions of Sufi and shrine traditions (Verkaaik, 2004: 30-31).

Islamic modernists and revivalists, meanwhile, cooperated on establishing and strengthening a centralized state, making Islam a dominating presence in public life. To this day, Pakistani elite and state machinery appear inclined

towards Islamic modernist traditions — this Islamic modernism helped the elite setup developmental goals for the state under tutelage of western powers in the Cold War era. This also helped in defining the cultural acceptance and to some extent cosmopolitanism in Islamabad and its officialdom, where the state officials, bureaucrats, generals and political leaders did not feel any inhibition in pursuing an alliance with “Western infidels” from America and “Islam conservatives” from Saudi Arabia and Iran at the same time.

The Islamic modernist and Islamic revivalist trends, which Pakistani state and society inherited at the time of independence, took birth in British India, after an encounter between traditionalist religious elites and Muslim elites or leaders having Western education and outlook. The modernists and revivalists reinterpreted Islamic precepts in the context of Western education and philosophies. While modernists argued that Muslims ought to reinterpret Islamic teachings in the light of new discoveries and inventions in Western societies, the traditionalists undertook to safeguard the teachings of Quran and Sunnah from outside influences.

The question is whether this Pakistani state machinery, which is imbued in a modernist culture despite having relied incessantly on religious ethos for political purposes, is compatible with a religious-traditionalist movement like Afghan Taliban? The Afghan Taliban, according to popular perception, are a product of Deoband school of thought, a prominent revivalist movement of the British India. But that hardly changes the fact that the Taliban never had any systematic exposure to Western education and their contact with cosmopolitan culture is restricted to encounters with the diplomats and officials of Westerns and neighbouring countries. They belong to lower strata of traditional Afghan society, which is in struggle with the modernist segments of the Afghan society. Afghan society produced its own modernists and revivalists after state modernisation and expansion programs under King Amanullah Khan in the 1930s.

The stories of modernism and revivalism in Afghan society are similar to the stories of Western educated Muslim elites in the British India except that the Afghan state went into the Soviet orbit in the 1950s and hence produced communist or Marxists elites as modernists under the educational program sponsored by Moscow's communist government.

Those leading the Taliban movement didn't undergo trainings in the West-funded educational institutions in Kabul in the 1950 and 1960s. Islamic revivalists, who in fact underwent training in these modern educational institutions, led the Afghan struggle against the Soviet Union in the 1980s and 1990s. The revivalists like Hikmatyar, Rabbani and Ahmed Shah Masood cooperated with Pakistani military generals, who were influenced by the revivalist as well as modernist tendencies, during the times of "Afghan Jihad". Even in those days there were powerful voices from Pakistani civil society that advocated against imposition of revivalist-traditionalist Islam on Pakistani society.

The Taliban lifestyle is completely incompatible with the culture of Pakistani officialdom, even though the latter have absorbed revivalist traditions more deeply in the last few decades. The present culture of officialdom in Islamabad is an incomplete and pragmatic (read opportunistic) synthesis of revivalist and modernist traditions. But it could be described as cosmopolitan culture, which is diametrically opposed to the Taliban lifestyle; the Pakistani foreign minister's recent description of Taliban as being 'world-savvy' does not change that fact. This cultural difference is not an easy thing to forget in the strategic and military relations that some in our state machinery want to build with the Taliban-led Afghanistan.

Even the revival of the old dream of attaining strategic depth cannot remove the horrors of Taliban lifestyle from Pakistan's collective memory. The two army chiefs that defined this concept in their own terms were putting forward different ideas; the military and physical strategic depth as propounded by General Aslam Beg, and political and diplomatic nature of the strategic depth as propounded by General Kiyani were distinctly noted

by observers in the region. General Aslam Beg was more interested in physical and military strategic depth in Afghanistan, whereas General Kiyani talked about extending Pakistan's political and diplomatic influence in Afghan society.

The physical/military version of the strategic depth may be an outdated concept even within the power corridors of Islamabad and Rawalpindi, but the political and diplomatic version of strategic depth may see revival of a kind in Islamabad as the Taliban's position in the security architecture of the region becomes well entrenched. But the cultural differences will continue to trouble the relations between the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Pakistani security establishment (Farooq, 2021b).

### **3 Perceptions of Pakistan's military & foreign policy establishment**

Two elements in Pakistan's Afghan policy have remained unchanged: First is to keep India out of Afghan chessboard; and second is related to the establishment of a centralised state dominated by Islamist-nationalists representing the Pashtun. Pakistan views its security interests in Afghanistan predominantly through the prism of its regional rival and neighbor India. To avoid a two-front situation in which Pakistan would be facing an enemy at both of its eastern and western borders, Islamabad has sought to develop "strategic depth" in Afghanistan by backing friendly governments in Kabul while limiting New Delhi's influence.

Afghanistan blames Pakistan for much of the violence it has suffered over the past decades, alleging Pakistan for initiating proxy wars in the country. Pakistan in turn accuses Afghanistan and India of cross-border disturbance in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan and for supporting anti-Pakistan religiously inspired and ethno-nationalist militant groups. While Afghan-supported Pashtun separatism had added to Pakistan's security concerns instantly after the independence, the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan brought an India-allied superpower on Pakistan's western border. This

exacerbated the ongoing tit-for-tat proxy war between Pakistan and Afghanistan that had started in early 1970s. Later, the US and Saudi Arabia also joined the fray. After the Soviet withdrawal, “Pakistan initially supported Hezb-e Islami in the civil war that followed the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 but switched its allegiance to the Taliban as the group rose to prominence in the mid-1990s. The Taliban maintained close ties with Pakistan and remained hostile to India both because of religious differences and because of its provision of military and financial support to the competing Northern Alliance, a multiethnic coalition of opposition political and military leaders” (Threlkeld & Grace, 2021).

Many believe that the Pakistani military continued to support the Taliban even after Pakistan was formally allied with Washington in its war against terrorism in Afghanistan. Others argue that Washington was clearly inclined towards giving India an oversized role in Afghanistan due to which India established strong economic footprints in Afghanistan during 20 years of US presence there. This aggravated Pakistan’s threat perception and added to its sense of insecurity from a perceived two-front situation that its military planners had perennially feared (Sudarshan, 2019).

Islamabad’s and Washington’s views diverged on Afghanistan’s future right from the very beginning of US presence in the war-torn country. Pakistan always saw Afghanistan’s future from its regional security prism and thus always wanted India to be out of the Afghan game at every cost. Americans were, nevertheless, reliant on those military forces inside Afghanistan, which were perceived by the Pakistan military to be pro-India. Similarly, Washington right from the very beginning wanted to give India an oversized role in the Afghan's reconstruction process.

Pakistan’s complaints over Indian presence in Afghanistan grew with the passage of time. Pakistani security establishment have always been accusing Indian presence in Afghanistan to be the cause of instability in Pakistan. Pakistan accused Indian intelligence of using Afghanistan as a



staging ground for sabotage activity in Balochistan and providing financial and cross-border backing to the Baloch separatists (Khan, 2015).

The situation has markedly changed inside Afghanistan with the Taliban's takeover as the Afghan government collapsed after Taliban's military advances. India evacuated all its diplomatic, intelligence officials and citizens from Afghanistan after the situation turned chaotic in the wake of US decision to withdraw completely from the country (BBC, 2021).

#### **4 India's strategic fear**

In February 2020, during his only visit to New Delhi, former US president Donald Trump reportedly offered Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi certain guarantees about the US decision to reconcile with the Afghan Taliban. "India need not worry" is how one Indian official, as reported in Indian media, described the US President's message to the Indian government as the US started to plan its withdrawal from Afghanistan. Later, the US administration continued to make efforts to assuage the fears of Indian officialdom with regards to the security nightmare that US withdrawal would likely bring for India economic assistance and intelligence operations in Afghanistan.

According to Indian media, Indian officials believe that the US-Taliban agreement amounts to sell out and indicate US willingness to leave Afghanistan at the mercy of Taliban and Pakistan, something that causes great anxiety in the officialdom of New Delhi.

Indian fears are not restricted to what will happen to its \$3 billion investment in the development of Afghanistan or what will happen to Indian economic interests in the country, but are much wider in scope. We can sum up these strategic fears under two headings in the light of what we gleaned from Indian media and papers written by strategic and foreign policy thinkers.

India perceives most of the Sunni militant and terror groups based in Afghanistan as a threat to its security. There has been a lot of mixing up of ideas and techniques among the militant groups based in Afghanistan which can be described as regional as well as global. For instance, Daesh is based in eastern and northern Afghanistan and has interacted thoroughly with Pakistan-based militant groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi Al-Alami, which is now based somewhere in southern Afghanistan and had carried out multiple high-impact sectarian attacks in Pakistan including in Sindh and Balochistan.

Similarly, Indians fear that the remnants of Al-Qaeda, which are shadow of their former self according to US officials, might get emboldened and try to become instrumental in terror attacks in Indian held Kashmir where there is a lot of indigenous political unrest going on. India also perceives Afghan Taliban to be a highly anti-India force. Indian officials have been visiting Tehran and Moscow recently after US withdrawal was announced in a bid to muster support against the threat of rise of Sunni militancy in Afghanistan. Reportedly, Taliban representatives were also present when Indian officials visited these capitals, indicating that India would be facing a different political situation and might face difficulty in building an anti-Taliban consensus in the regional capitals. But that doesn't change India's perception and strategy of projecting Sunni militancy as a brainchild of Pakistani ISI and trying to build a regional consensus against Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban.

India's second strategic fear is related to Pakistan's potential to be in controlling position in the post-withdrawal Afghanistan. The fear stems from their perception that Pakistan's security apparatus is able to dominate Sunni militancy and terror emanating from Afghanistan. The Indian government has made massive investment in surface communication sector in Afghanistan in order to ensure its access to the landlocked country through Iranian ports, but it also has plans to get access to Central Asian oil and gas rich economies. In this way, India's strategic planners aim to undercut Pakistan's strategic importance. Now with Afghanistan drifting

towards a total military control of Taliban, India's heavy investment in roads and communication in Afghanistan is likely to be trashed—or so Indian officialdom fears.

Indian media and strategic thinkers feel that India has a lot of goodwill among the Afghan population. They think that they made the right investment and in the right country, but not at the right time. In the post-2014 situation the rise of the Taliban was clearly written on the wall; this was the year when the US and Western intelligence and diplomatic officials started engaging Afghan Taliban in backchannel talks. The reports about these engagements started to make headlines in newspapers and media outlets across the world. The Indians simply ignored these leaks and continued to pose themselves as the most potent advocate of anti-Islamic militancy and terror.

One continuous indication of this advocacy role was reflected in their media and strategic thinkers' writings and blogs, where they started to put all their focus on American military power, South Asian regional politics and their propaganda efforts against Sunni militancy and terror.

Now that the US has made a deal with a paragon of Sunni militancy in our region, i.e. the Afghan Taliban, and has left the region militarily, India has been completely left high and dry. It will be alone, at least militarily, to feel the heat of remnants of Sunni militancy left in Afghanistan, which, according to Indian fears, could reach their territory within no time.

However, clearly, there is not much for Pakistan either in this situation and it should not try to exploit the situation. We have been and would be the first victims of Sunni militancy if this menace attempts to reach Indian territory. It would be better if we become advocate of a regional solution to meet this threat. Unfortunately, there is a sea of mistrust between the two countries that will prevent them from making a joint effort in this regard (Farooq, 2021c).

## 5 Euphoria and fears in Islamabad over Taliban's 'victory'

There appears to be a sense of elation in Islamabad's power corridors over the victory of Taliban in Afghanistan. Self-congratulatory statements, which reflect a sense of vindication, are coming out of Islamabad (*Dawn*, 2021).

There seems to be a palpable sense of euphoria over the fact that "India has been completely excluded from the power game in Afghanistan." But this is not the end of Pakistan's Afghan worries. The Pakistani military and foreign policy establishment will clearly be looking at the possible scenarios which could have huge security implications besides entailing an enormous humanitarian crisis for the country. Most probable of these are as follows:

- A civil war in Afghanistan or political unrest, which can send a large number of refugees towards Pakistan besides emboldening anti-Pakistan militants;
- A humanitarian crisis including possibility of large-scale spread of COVID-19 and food shortages due to drought, which again can send large number of refugees towards Pakistan; and
- Spoiler's violence, as Western security experts have feared, in which hostile intelligence agencies can use remnants of terror groups for terror attacks and sectarian violence inside Pakistan.

Large scale civil war seems unlikely in Afghanistan at present, but the possibility of political unrest could not be ruled out. There were several political protests in Afghanistan's cities after the Taliban took over government powers in Kabul. These protests were peaceful in nature, however the Taliban in some cases resorted to use of force to quell these protests. A civil war also seems unlikely because none of the neighbours of Afghanistan seems willing to feed a rebellion against the Taliban. The regional response to the Taliban's military takeover of the government in Afghanistan is mostly supportive. Iran has described withdrawal of US troops and subsequent events as good omen for the national reconciliation

in Afghanistan. Russia doesn't perceive any threat for itself or its Central Asian client states from the Taliban being in power. China wants to develop diplomatic relations with the Taliban-led government. And people in Pakistani state machinery are euphoric over their "strategic assets" taking over the reign of power in Afghanistan. This evolving regional response is highly favorable to the Taliban primarily because in the past civil wars in Afghanistan had always been fueled by one or more of the neighbours of this war-torn country by providing weapons, training and finances to the one or the other side. Now it seems all the neighbours are unfazed by the rise of the Taliban as a dominant military force in the country.

A report by Washington-based CSIS, titled "Taliban takeover: Humanitarian implications and recommendations for the United States," paints a dismal picture of the impending humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan for which the Taliban appear ill-prepared. Forced displacement, refugees returning from Pakistan and Iran, COVID spread, and drought like conditions all could add up to a multilayer humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan (Kurtzer, 2021). The report also alludes to the government structures that are completely in disarray and there is hardly anyone on the ground to take care of Afghan people, raising concerns in neighboring countries especially Pakistan that the direction of any future exodus will be towards them.

In what Western intelligence officials are describing as spoiler's violence, the neighboring countries of Afghanistan could use the remnants of international terror groups still hiding in different parts of Afghanistan to settle their scores with their rival countries. Indeed, there are dreadful forecasts about what transnational terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), and ISIS could do in the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan if the post-withdrawal Afghanistan plunges into a military chaos or anarchy. In this regard, Western intelligence is specifically mentioning the names of Pakistan, India and Afghanistan as countries whose security apparatus or intelligence agencies could initiate a new proxy war in Afghanistan.

American officials and leaders have variously described Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan as a shadow of its former self or very weak to carry out terror attacks in mainland America. ISIS saw its peak in Afghanistan in the period between 2014 and 2016 when there was a sudden rise in its profile and groups and bands from Afghan Taliban were defecting to join ISIS. ISIS in Afghanistan has also seen a significant decline in its strength and operational capability in recent years.

The spoiler's violence could take the form of terrorist attacks inside Pakistan. If Western intelligence experts are to be believed, Indian intelligence could be instrumental in using remnants of Afghan-based terrorist groups against Pakistan. This doesn't seem far-fetched when seen in the light of Pakistani allegations that Indian intelligence has penetrated Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and was instrumental in pushing the militant group to carry out terror attacks inside heartland Pakistan. There are countless reports indicating the webs that link TTP with international terror groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Similarly, this spoiler's violence could take the form of Pakistan using terror groups to carry out terror attacks against Indian interests in Afghanistan. The bitter memories of the US administration holding Pakistani intelligence responsible for the terror attack on the Indian Embassy in Kabul are still fresh in national as well as international memory.

This is another aspect of the Afghan conflict which festers like a bleeding wound. Pakistani and Indian security apparatuses don't have some settled "rules of the game" to protect their interests in Afghanistan. Pakistanis are nervous Washington wants to give India a disproportionate role in post-withdrawal Afghanistan. Indians are nervous that their bitter enemies in the shape of Taliban could disrupt their economic interests in Afghanistan. Spoiler's violence is not at all a far-fetched threat in this scenario.

Spoiler's violence has antecedents on the Afghan land. One can look at how the US administration accused Russia and Iran of supporting Afghan Taliban to carry out violence against American troops in Afghanistan. Russia

indirectly accused Americans of bringing and settling ISIS fighters in northern Afghanistan close to the borders of Central Asian states, which Russia considers within its security perimeters.

The remnants of Al-Qaeda and ISIS in Afghanistan are hosting terror groups which originated in Central Asian societies, and which have been engaged in military conflicts with the Central Asian governments. The Chinese are no less concerned about the developments in Afghanistan. They know that the Chinese separatist elements are in alliance with the ISIS, the Taliban and Al-Qaida. Some of these Chinese separatist elements are also in alliance with Pakistani Taliban and were being hosted by the latter until recently. So, the fears of spoiler's violence reaching Chinese territory are real. Pakistan's military establishment believes that a centralised Afghan state is necessary to control this threat. The international community must ensure that the regional countries don't play dirty and don't try to push forward their own proxies in Afghan power struggle (Farooq, 2021d).

## 6 Conclusion

A new regional response towards Taliban's victory in Afghanistan is taking shape. This response is led primarily by Russia but also includes other important regional countries like Iran and China. According to Pakistani officials and experts, Russians are particularly concerned about the rise of ISIS in northern Afghanistan close to its border with Central Asian states including Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Russia still considers the security of Central Asia as its prime responsibility. However, Russians have been discussing this problem with Taliban leaders and view the Taliban as a potential ally against ISIS and other extremist groups emerging in northern Afghanistan.

Can Pakistan afford to go along with this developing and favorable regional response to Taliban's military takeover of Afghanistan? Pakistan's foreign policy establishment is confronted with a much more complex set of challenges in which Afghanistan is just one piece of the jigsaw puzzle.

Taliban's victory cannot overshadow all other aspects of Pakistan's foreign policy and it is unlikely that it will get carried away and act under the sway of this victory of their strategic allies in Afghanistan. First, Pakistan has to take care of the viability of its financial situation, for which it always counts on the "yes" vote of Washington for funding processes of the IMF and World Bank. And this would remain a dominant factor in determining the country's foreign policy directions and its position in the geo-political chessboard in the regional power struggles in the foreseeable future.

Pakistan cannot afford to fully align with the emerging regional block of Russia, China, Iran and Central Asia, which seem to be moving in the direction of completely excluding America from influencing events in Afghanistan and Central Asia. China and Russia are deadly opposed to any move to provide bases to US forces in Central Asia. At the political level, the protégés of Washington have been squarely defeated in Afghanistan's power struggle and these pro-American forces are in complete disarray. The Taliban, who are in political ascendance, are in very thick relations with Iranian and Russian security establishments. Experts say that the Taliban leaders regularly consult Russian and Iranian officials before taking any major step or deciding on a new course of action.

One clear element that demonstrates that Islamabad doesn't seem to be in the mood of completely breaking with Washington on Afghanistan is the latest Foreign Office comment on Afghan situation in which the mandarins of our foreign policy thought it appropriate to mention human rights and women rights as a determining factor in its policy and attitude towards the new Afghan government. Human rights and women rights are not a factor in responses of any of the regional countries including Russia, China and Iran towards the Taliban. This is exclusive to Washington and its Western cousins. How far Islamabad will go to implement its statement on human and women rights as its policy is difficult to predict but for the moment, we can say that Islamabad doesn't seem to completely ignore Washington's concerns.



There is also a possibility that Washington itself wanted the regional countries to take responsibility for managing the security of Afghanistan as it would have appeared natural for anyone making guesses about Afghanistan that the vacuum left behind by the withdrawing American forces would be filled by the regional powers. The regional powers now seem to be providing support to the Taliban's military takeover by awarding them political legitimacy in the form of acceptance of their advances and victories. There are very strong voices in Washington accusing rising powers like China to be "free riders" as Americans sacrificed in blood and hard cash for providing regional security to their economic rise.

The objective that Afghanistan should not become a hot bed of terrorism and Sunni militancy is shared by all the regional players including Pakistan, Russia, China and Iran as well as the United States of America. An uncomplicated analysis would suggest that the future scenario would only see a change of guards in the region; previously it was American military handling the security in and around Afghanistan and now the regional militaries and security apparatuses would act as interlocutors of security in Afghanistan with Taliban acting as a surrogate of regional powers. All the regional powers have an interest in not letting Afghanistan become a hub of terrorism and militancy.

The last scenario may be hypothetical now, but the Pakistani security establishment will hit a goldmine if this materialises. Pakistani, Iranian, Russian and Chinese intelligence services have been coordinating their efforts in Afghanistan to prevent the rise of ISIS since 2018. Will that mean Pakistan be playing a central role in the regional efforts to prevent the rise of ultra-extremist Sunni groups in Afghanistan? That is possible for two reasons. First, Pakistan has more than normal influence on the Afghan Taliban, a factor which will make Islamabad an effective player. Secondly, Pakistani security apparatus has amassed demonstrable experience in tackling the militancy and terrorism in the region. Not surprisingly, both Russia and China have expressed the interest in learning from this experience.

The task before Pakistani foreign policy establishment will be to make all this acceptable for Washington. A destabilised Afghanistan will be a public relations disaster for Washington as well. However, a scenario in which the Taliban as winners take all is unlikely to be completely acceptable for Washington. Pakistani security establishment should aspire to achieve some kind of national reconciliation in Afghanistan where pro-American political forces are given legitimacy within the new Afghan system.

That means Pakistan would again be a frontline state with Beijing and Moscow assuming the larger role of the US. Will the wolf of Sunni militancy again turn against Pakistan? Not very difficult to guess, though.

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# Afghanistan, Pakistan and the regional narcotics trade

Safiya Aftab\*

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## Acronyms

AML	Anti Money Laundering
ANF	Anti Narcotics Force
ANDSF	Afghan National Defense and Security Forces
APG	Asia Pacific Group
CFT	Combating the Financing of Terrorism
CNS	Control of Narcotics Substances
FATA	Federally Administrated Tribal Area
FATF	Financial Action Task Force
FIA	Federal Investigation Agency
FMU	Financial Monitoring Unit
INCB	International Narcotics Control Board
KP	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
LEA	Law Enforcement Agency
MSA	Maritime Security Agency
NMD	Newly Merged District
PCG	Pakistan Coast Guard
PWID	People Who Inject Drugs
UNDCP	United Nations Drug Control Program
UNODC	United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime

## Executive summary

The narcotics trade is thought to have yielded significant revenue for dealers and political elites in Afghanistan, but its impacts are very much apparent in Pakistan as well; the latter being both a transit and destination country for opiates. This paper focuses on the following questions.

- How has opium and heroin production developed (or otherwise) in Afghanistan over the last decade? Further, what does research say about the production of methamphetamine?
- What is the evidence from Pakistan regarding drug trafficking through the country (transit traffic) and as an end use destination? And lastly:
- What has Pakistan done recently to counter the narcotics trade as well as the flow of funds from the trade?

### ***Production***

As of now, about 75 percent of the estimated global cultivated area for opium poppy lies in Afghanistan. Opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan already covered more than 120,000 hectares of land in 2009, but the cultivated area began to increase significantly after 2013 (when it almost doubled) and peaked in 2017. In the very first press conference held by the new Taliban administration on August 18, 2021, the government's spokesman announced curbs on the narcotics trade. However, there was no announcement of an immediate ban on the cultivation of opium poppy. Based on estimates of acreage, the UNODC assessed global *potential* heroin manufacture at a maximum of about 694 tons in 2020.

Afghanistan's role as a leading producer of opiates has been well established for some time, but more recent research links the country to the production of ephedrine and methamphetamine (more commonly known as meth). Over the last two or three years, meth production has commenced in Afghanistan, using ephedrine extracted from the ephedra plant which grows wild in the highlands.

### *Drug use and trade in Pakistan*

The most recent comprehensive study on drug use in Pakistan took place eight years ago in 2013. The study found that 6.7 million people in Pakistan were using illicit substances, and of these, just over 4 million could be considered drug dependent. The most commonly used drug was cannabis, with about 4 million users. Heroin had about 860,000 regular users, while about 320,000 persons were found to be regular users of opium. The 2013 survey was also the first to find meth users in the population, although numbers were very small at only about 19,000.

Opium seizures in Pakistan represented 4 percent of global opium seizures, and 9 percent of global heroin seizures. Although the ANF has not published data post 2019, evidence from Iran suggests that meth trafficking has increased significantly in the region in the last two or three years.

About a decade ago, the UNODC estimated that 40 percent of the Afghan opiate trade transits through Pakistan. A recent UNODC study, based on information from a small sample of traffickers in Afghanistan, also confirms that Pakistan is a major transit/destination, along with Iran. With the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan now having been fenced from the Pakistan side, it is unclear whether unofficial crossings are still widely used. More than a third of the traffickers reported traveling to other countries, including Pakistan, to sell drugs or to negotiate deals. Many traffickers use legitimate business visas, as they run documented enterprises alongside the narcotics deals.

Pakistan is also used as a transit country for precursors. The INCB estimated, based on data from the Government of Afghanistan, that about 15 percent of the precursors used in heroin manufacture in Afghanistan entered through Pakistan in the period from 2011 to 2014. Law enforcement officials in Pakistan believe that a large part of the chemical is sent to Afghanistan through mislabeled containers which form part of the cargo of Afghan Transit Trade. Pakistan's legitimate import of acetic

anhydride and other similar products has been falling over the years, and diversion from legitimate use in Pakistan is likely to be rare.

### ***Successes and challenges***

Pakistan was declared a poppy free country by the UNDCP in 2001 and has since maintained its status. This is due, in no small measure, to the extensive law enforcement operations that have taken place in the border districts of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. There is also little to no evidence of heroin manufacture in Pakistan.

In June 2018, Pakistan made a commitment to work with the FATF and the Asia/Pacific Group on Money Laundering to strengthen its anti-money laundering (AML) and combating the financing of terrorism (CFT) regimes. Over the past three years, the country has enacted significant primary and secondary legislation (passage of, and amendments to more than 15 laws, and more than 30 rules and regulations). As of June 2021, Pakistan had addressed 26 out of 27 actions that it agreed to three years earlier.

In terms of challenges, it is important for policymakers in Pakistan to have reliable data on drug abuse, and types of narcotics in use, to formulate a policy to counter the use of narcotics. The existing data is outdated. With an evidence-based policy in place, the country will be in a better position to request assistance and resources from international agencies experienced in counter narcotics operations.

Pakistan has worked closely with FATF to control money laundering and terrorist financing. However, if the narcotics trade continues to grow or diversify, the country's financial monitoring systems will continue to face pressure, and legitimate trade and commerce can be negatively affected. Similarly, the performance of law enforcement agencies can potentially come under increased scrutiny from the international community. The growth of the illegal economy in general, and the narcotics trade, in particular, have implications for Pakistan's internal security and political stability, given the links between the trade and organized crime, as well as terrorism.

## 1 Introduction

As of end August 2021, the Taliban have taken power in Afghanistan, after a lightning offensive of just over one week. It is too early to comment on the form that the Taliban's 'Islamic emirate' will take this time around, 24 years after its first manifestation. What is clear though is that Pakistan once again finds itself dealing with turmoil on its western border. As efforts continue to forge a consensus on the governance structure in Afghanistan, Pakistan is trying to position itself as a mediator across different groups and is also trying to convince the international community to work with all stakeholders to establish an inclusive government in the country.

However, it is a rocky road ahead, and peace in Afghanistan still seems somewhat elusive in the short to medium term. Recent signs of the re-emergence of the Islamic State, this time in the form of IS-Khorasan, render the situation even more complex and dangerous.

The Taliban began to re-emerge as a force to be reckoned with in 2005-06, and had, within a few years, established control over much of rural Afghanistan. By 2019, the group had gained in strength to the extent that the US had started high level talks with their representatives in Doha. The re-emergence of the Taliban after a decisive loss, and the group's ability to sustain a long-term insurgency has raised many questions, particularly about how they managed and financed their operations over more than a decade. Their recent offensive, (beginning in May 2021, and gaining momentum in August), has been characterised by the capture of arms and ammunition as well as sophisticated equipment from the retreating Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). But the long struggle before that also required significant monetary resources. Available evidence suggests that most of these were acquired through local taxation (in districts where the group had established control), mainly taxes on goods transport, on commerce, and on local land and agricultural production. In some districts, the Taliban derived additional income from taxation of mining operations as well as trade in minerals. But another possible source

of funding that has been extensively mentioned in the literature, is taxation of the narcotics trade, specifically trade in opium, heroin, and cannabis.

The narcotics trade is thought to have yielded significant revenue for growers and dealers, as well as the Taliban, and other political elites in Afghanistan. However, this is a regional issue, and its impacts are very much apparent in Pakistan as well; the latter being both a transit and destination country for opiates in particular. The effects of the trade have manifested themselves in different ways in Pakistan, from an increase in addiction levels (mainly cannabis, but also heroin, and lately, synthetic drugs), to the rise of organized crime, and the proliferation of informal money transfer mechanisms. Attempts to launder the proceeds of the trade may have compromised the banking system, before more stringent controls were enacted recently. Funds are also thought to have made their way into key sectors such as the real estate market, and even the stock exchange, essentially distorting these markets. One reason why Pakistan faced significant pressure from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) was its perceived inability to control the flow of funds from illicit trade into formal sectors of the economy.

This paper will build upon an earlier analysis completed in 2014 (Aftab, 2014), and focus on the following questions.

- a) How has opium and heroin production developed (or otherwise) in Afghanistan over the last decade? Further, what does research say about the production of methamphetamine in that country – a new trend that appears to be picking up pace?
- b) What is the evidence from Pakistan regarding drug trafficking through the country (transit traffic) and as an end use destination? And lastly:
- c) What has Pakistan done recently to counter the narcotics trade as well as the flow of funds from the trade?

This paper is largely based on secondary sources besides relying on firsthand information collected from some experts, and provides an overview of the state of the regional narcotics trade as of August 2021.

## 2 Production of narcotics

### *Poppy cultivation*

There is a perception in Pakistan that the Taliban had banned poppy cultivation throughout their years in power. In fact, the group came to power in 1996, and opium poppy cultivation was not banned till July 2000 (UNDCP, 2001). The 2001 opium poppy season was the one year where cultivation decreased dramatically. In 2000, the opium poppy crop covered an estimated 82,172 hectares, but this acreage had fallen to 7,606 hectares in 2001 (ibid). As such, the ban was not only announced, but was also effectively enforced. However, there is no evidence that dry opium stocks were destroyed during this one year, or at any time before. Once the Taliban were deposed, opium poppy cultivation began again, and gained strength in traditional poppy growing areas like Helmand and Kandahar. Over the years, cultivation of opium poppy gained strength, including in areas where the Taliban insurgency was active, as well as in rural areas which were under the control of the group.

As of 2021, about 75 percent of the estimated global cultivated area for opium poppy lies in Afghanistan, as shown in the figure below. Thus, for the current year, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated that almost 300,000 hectares of land across mainly west and southeast Asia was under poppy cultivation, and 224,000 hectares of this was in Afghanistan, with the remaining area lying mainly in South-east Asia (UNODC, 2021: Table 6.2.1).<sup>1</sup>

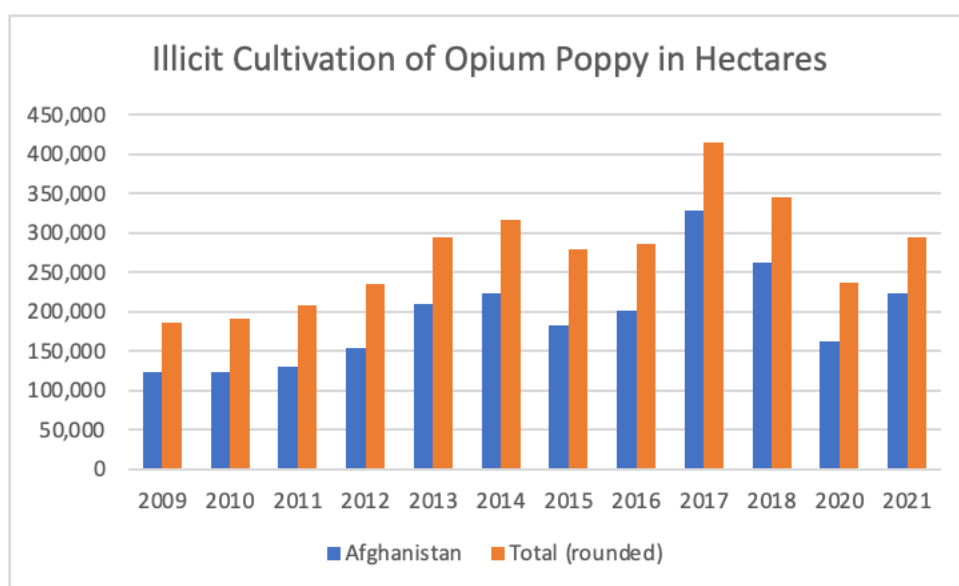
As the figure shows, opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan already covered more than 120,000 hectares of land in 2009, but the cultivated area began to increase significantly after 2013 (when it almost doubled), and peaked in 2017, when the crop covered 328,000 hectares. Afghanistan is primarily a pastoral country and has only about 7.7 million hectares of

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<sup>1</sup> Until 2018, the UNODC conducted on the ground surveys on poppy cultivation in the country, but in more recent years, it has relied on estimates based on satellite imagery.

arable land.<sup>2</sup> In any given year, about half of the arable land is cultivated in actual. This would mean that, as per UNODC estimates, about 8 percent of the available cultivable land was used to grow poppy in 2021. Pakistan, in contrast, was declared “virtually poppy free” by the UN Drug Control Program (UNDCP) in 2001 and has since maintained its status. Although poppy fields have since been identified in Pakistan, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan, these have typically been destroyed before the crop matures.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 2.1: Illicit cultivation of opium poppy (hectares)**



Source: Data from: UNODC. (2021). World Drug Report. Table 6.2.1.

In the very first press conference held by the new Taliban administration on August 18, 2021, the government’s spokesman announced curbs on the narcotics trade. However, there was no announcement of an immediate

<sup>2</sup> World Bank data for 2018. Downloadable at: <<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.LND.ARBL.HA?locations=AF>>

<sup>3</sup> In 2016, the last year for which data is available, the Anti-Narcotics Force in Pakistan destroyed 1470 hectares of poppy fields in KP, Sindh and Balochistan. Only 129.5 hectares in KP remained unaccounted for. See <http://anf.gov.pk/ns.php>



ban on the cultivation of opium poppy. Instead, the spokesman invited foreign governments to assist the new administration to introduce alternatives to the poppy crop to Afghan farmers.<sup>4</sup> It is, as yet, too early to predict how the situation will evolve.

While the Taliban have previously (during their first term in government) demonstrated the resolve to crack down on poppy farming, they have also allegedly benefitted from taxes on production of and transportation of opiates over the last decade. Recent research suggests that revenues from land tax on poppy fields and transportation of illicit substances are dwarfed by the Taliban's taxation of the movement of licit goods (Mansfield & Smith, 2021).<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, an immediate crackdown on poppy cultivation does not seem likely. The Taliban derive considerable support from the rural heartland and are unlikely to jeopardise their relations with key constituents until they have consolidated their hold on power. According to the UNODC, the farmgate value of opium, which is an indicator of the income that farmers derive from the crop, was about \$350 million in 2020 (UNODC/NSIA, 2020). Although prices of opium had fallen in 2020, this still represents substantial revenue for poor farmers.

### *Production of heroin*

#### **Box 2.1: From opium poppy to heroin**

The moisture in raw opium has to be removed before the product can be smoked or consumed. Opium is typically dried and packed into “bricks” before further processing. The UNODC has devised a detailed methodology for the estimation of extraction of oven-dry opium from the estimated poppy crop in Afghanistan (UNODC, 2020). They estimated the production of oven-dry opium in Afghanistan in 2020 at 6,300 tons

<sup>4</sup> See transcript of the first press conference of Zabiullah Mujahid at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/17/transcript-of-talibans-first-press-conference-in-kabul>

<sup>5</sup> See David Mansfield's definitive work on Afghanistan's illicit economy.

(as a best estimate within a band of 5,400 tons to 7,200 tons) (UNODC, 2021: Table 6.2.2). A part of this is consumed as is, while some is converted into morphine and not processed further. The remaining opium is first converted into morphine, and then processed into heroin using a simple technique. This last step involves the use of precursors – most notably acetic anhydride. Overall, heroin manufacture is a relatively simple and inexpensive process, using basic tools and not much expertise. Further, heroin laboratories are highly portable and can be packed up and relocated at short notice.

Based on estimates of acreage, the UNODC assessed global *potential* heroin manufacture at a maximum of about 694 tons in 2020 (UNODC, 2021: Table 6.2.4). Not all of this would have been consumed – some could be stored, some wasted or destroyed, and some seized by drug enforcement officials across the world. Nevertheless, the UNODC estimates that about 340 tons of heroin ends up being consumed globally, and a significant proportion of this is trafficked from Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> At street prices of about \$58 per gram (the average for the US) ((UNODC, 2021: Table 8.4),<sup>7</sup> this translates to an expenditure of approximately \$18 billion on heroin consumption in the world in one year.<sup>8</sup> Only a small proportion of this revenue is likely to have found its way back to Afghanistan. But in a country where the total GDP was estimated at about \$20 billion in 2020,<sup>9</sup> even small flows would have had an impact on the local economy.

### ***Diversification into methamphetamine***

Afghanistan's role as a leading producer of opiates has been well established for some time, but more recent research links the country also

<sup>6</sup> For details, visit: <<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/drug-trafficking/index.html>>

<sup>7</sup> The UNODC reported a weighted price of \$57.8 for 2019.

<sup>8</sup> One ton has 907185 grams. The value of a ton of heroin at \$58 would be over \$52 million. Thus the value of 340 tons would amount to close to \$18 billion.

<sup>9</sup> Details can be seen here: <<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=AF>>

to the production of ephedrine and methamphetamine (more commonly known as meth). Meth is typically a synthetic drug and requires the extraction of ephedrine from medication such as cough syrup. Meth cooking using syrups and medicines requires a level of expertise that is not easily sourced. However, over the last two or three years, meth production has commenced in Afghanistan, using ephedrine extracted from the ephedra plant which grows wild in the highlands. Initial research suggests that ephedra, earlier harvested for sale to pharmacies, or used as household fuel, has, for the last four or five years, been sold to traders who are supplying ephedrine producers and meth cooks in provinces like Farah and Wardak (EMCDDA, 2020).

The same research study found that the wholesale price of meth in Afghanistan was around \$286 per kilogram in Afghanistan in 2019, compared with \$3,062 per kilogram recorded in Southeast Asia the same year (Ibid). If the growth of meth production remains unchecked, it is only a matter of time before this price differential is exploited by more dealers, and greater quantities of meth and its variants find their way from Afghanistan to overseas markets.

### ***Smuggling of precursors***

As mentioned earlier, manufacturing heroin from opium requires the use of precursors, like acetic anhydride, trade in which is internationally regulated. The UN Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (1988) requires signatory states to prevent diversion of certain industrial chemicals, like acetic anhydride, to illicit uses. The International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) is responsible for monitoring governments' control over precursors.

Afghanistan banned the import of acetic anhydride in 2009, given that it has no industry that would require the chemical as an input.<sup>10</sup> As such, all acetic anhydride used in Afghanistan for heroin manufacture would have had to

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<sup>10</sup> Acetic anhydride is used primarily in manufacture of paints and plastics.

be smuggled in. The price differential makes this illicit trade very attractive – the average price of acetic anhydride is \$1 per liter, whereas in Afghanistan, the average price of a liter was estimated at \$257 in 2017 (UNODC, 2018). The UNODC estimates that the manufacture of 1 kg of heroin base requires 1 liter of acetic anhydride, and that up to \$144 million worth of the chemical was used in Afghanistan in 2019 (UNODC/NSIA, 2019: 16, 74).

### **3 Pakistan – The counter narcotics regime and drug use**

Pakistan is both a transit and an end use country for opiates from Afghanistan. It is the first stop in the infamous Balkan route for heroin smuggling from Afghanistan to Western Europe.<sup>11</sup> In this section, we briefly explore Pakistan’s policy, legislative, and institutional anti-narcotics regime, and also touch upon drug use in the country.

#### ***Policy and institutional regime***

Pakistan is party to three UN drug control conventions, including the Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988, and the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961 as Amended by the 1972 Protocol. The Conventions place strong focus on fighting organized crime responsible for trafficking and production of narcotics, but the 1988 Convention also mentions the need for governments to prohibit possession of drugs for personal use.<sup>12</sup> Further, the 1988 Convention requires signatories to regulate trade in precursors such as acetic anhydride, which have primarily industrial uses, but are key inputs to the manufacture of narcotics.

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<sup>11</sup> This route encompasses Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and then on to the Balkan states and eventually, Western Europe.

<sup>12</sup> See Article 3 of the 1988 Convention. However, this Article can be interpreted as requiring bans on possession only to the extent that possession relates to trafficking.

The Government of Pakistan formulated a new anti-narcotics policy in 2019, which delineated three priorities: Interdiction; Prevention and Treatment; and Regional and International Cooperation. In terms of actions to be supported, the policy aims to continue enforcement of the ban on cultivation of opium poppy in Pakistan; enhance border management and law enforcement systems including controlling the diversion of licit pharmaceuticals and precursors; and improve international cooperation, particularly in the form of intelligence sharing with neighboring countries to check trafficking. The policy also recognizes the need to control online trafficking management systems. Of late there is increased awareness in Pakistan of drug use in educational institutions and amongst young people in general, and the policy lays out plans for communications campaigns and awareness drives for these groups.

A number of institutions are responsible for enforcing Pakistan's anti-narcotics policy, including the Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF), which is the lead drug trafficking control agency in Pakistan. The Force was established in 1995, and has the primary responsibility of interdiction, systems for collecting intelligence on drug traffickers (including maintaining a fund for informers) and conducting raids for drug seizures. In addition, Pakistan Customs has specialised drug units located at international seaports and airports. Other institutions such as the Coast Guards, Maritime Security Agency, and all law enforcement agencies are part of the anti-narcotics institutional framework. The federal Ministry of Narcotics Control oversees the operations of the ANF, but it does not have jurisdiction over the other law enforcement agencies. As such, coordination of efforts could be an issue.

The key anti-narcotics legislation in Pakistan is the Control of Narcotic Substances (CNS) Act, 1997. The Act prohibits the cultivation, production, manufacturing, extraction, preparation, transportation, possession, trade, financing and trafficking of narcotics and psychotropic or controlled substances except for scientific, industrial or medical purposes. The Anti Money Laundering Act 2010 has created the institutional structure and provided the legislative basis for monitoring financial systems to detect

money laundering, which is integral to tracing narcotics related transactions. The Financial Monitoring Unit (FMU) at the State Bank of Pakistan also helps in implementation of legislation on money laundering by investigating suspicious transactions reported by commercial banks.

### **Seizures**

In 2019, the last year for which data is published on its website, the ANF seized 27,184 kg of opium, 7,682 kg of heroin and 37,897 kg of cannabis, in addition to a 193 kg of meth and a host of other drugs and precursors.<sup>13</sup> In terms of global rankings, opium seizures in Pakistan represented 4 percent of global opium seizures, and 9 percent of global heroin seizures ((UNODC, 2021: 89).<sup>14</sup> The UNODC data shows that in 2019, total global seizures of heroin amounted to 93 tons, of which 12 tons were seized in Pakistan and Afghanistan (8 in Pakistan and 4 in Afghanistan).

Although the ANF has not published data post 2019, evidence from Iran suggests that meth trafficking has increased significantly in the region in the last two or three years. In 2019-20, 17 tons of meth was seized in Iran – a more than 200 percent increase over the previous year’s level (EMCDDA, 2021). Iranian officials allege that the bulk of this comes from Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The ANF’s prosecution of drug offenders has improved in recent years, and the conviction rate in lower courts is over 80 percent.<sup>15</sup> The proportion of decisions in favor of the state tends to fall as cases move through higher courts, as is only expected. However, the caseload of the so-called CNS courts (which were constituted under the Control of Narcotic Substances Act), is very high, and disposal of cases is slow (Sahoutara, 2019).<sup>16</sup>

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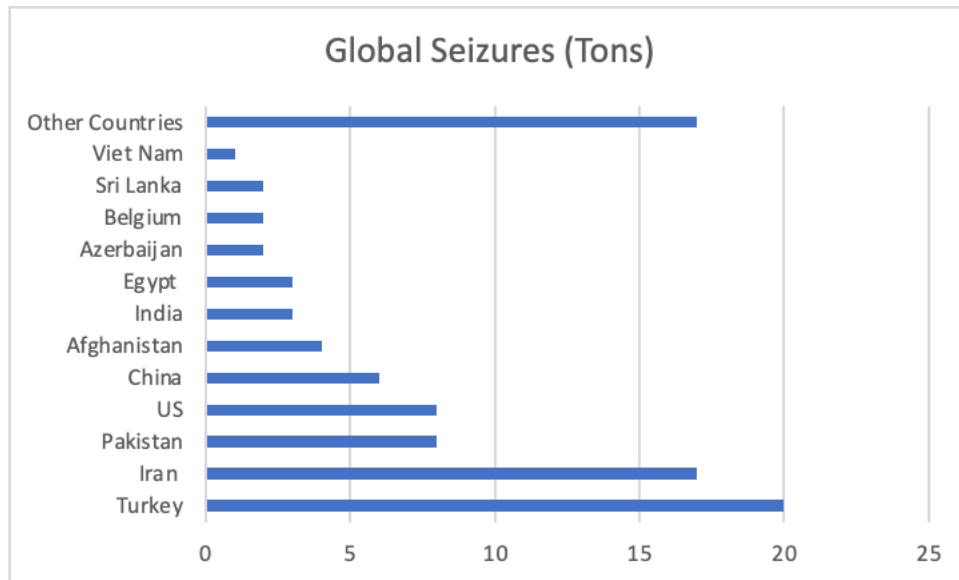
<sup>13</sup> See <http://anf.gov.pk/ns.php>

<sup>14</sup> About 90 percent of total opium seizures worldwide were in Iran, while Turkey and Iran collectively accounted for 39 percent of global heroin seizures.

<sup>15</sup> Data derived from multiple issues of ANF Quarterly Bulletins.

<sup>16</sup> According to the report, there were over 7000 cases pending before two CNS courts in Karachi alone in 2019. The report does, however, point out that conviction rates for the Karachi CNS courts were about 91 percent.

Figure 2.2: Global seizures of heroin in tons



Source: Data from: UNODC. (2021). World Drug Report. Data from Booklet 3, Figure 71.

### *Pakistan as a transit country*

About a decade ago, the UNODC estimated that 40 percent of the Afghan opiate trade transits through Pakistan (UNODC, 2011). A recent UNODC study, based on information from a small sample of traffickers in Afghanistan, also confirms that Pakistan is a major transit/destination, along with Iran (UNODC, 2020). Traffickers from Afghanistan mentioned using both official and unofficial border crossings for the drug trade, although some clarified that official crossings were only used when requisite “arrangements” had been made (UNODC, 2020: 20). With the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan now having been fenced from the Pakistan side, it is unclear whether unofficial crossings are still widely used. More than a third of the traffickers reported traveling to other countries, including Pakistan, to sell drugs or to negotiate deals. Many traffickers use legitimate business visas, as they run documented enterprises alongside the narcotics deals.

Pakistan is also used as a transit country for precursors, although to a lesser extent. The INCB estimated, based on data from the Government of Afghanistan, that about 15 percent of the precursors used in heroin manufacture in Afghanistan entered through Pakistan in the period from 2011 to 2014 (INCB, 2016).<sup>17</sup> Most of the acetic anhydride smuggled through Pakistan originates in China, which is a key manufacturer of the chemical in the region, along with India. Law enforcement officials in Pakistan believe that a large part of the chemical is sent to Afghanistan through mislabeled containers which form part of the cargo of Afghan Transit Trade (NIOC, 2020). Pakistan's legitimate import of acetic anhydride and other similar products has been falling over the years, from about 240,000 kg in 2005 to barely 6000 kg in 2020.<sup>18</sup> As such, diversion from legitimate use in Pakistan is likely to be rare.

### ***Drug use in Pakistan***

The most recent comprehensive study on drug use in Pakistan took place eight years ago in 2013 (UNODC, 2013). Based on surveys covering all four provinces and Azad Jammu and Kashmir, the study found that 6.7 million people in Pakistan were using illicit substances, and of these, just over 4 million could be considered drug dependent. The commonly used drug was an opiate, cannabis, which was estimated to have about 4 million users. Heroin was relatively less commonly used, with about 860,000 regular users, while about 320,000 persons were found to be regular users of opium. The 2013 survey was also the first to find meth users in the population, although numbers were very small at only about 19,000 (Ibid). Since then, media reports suggest, meth use in Pakistan has increased significantly, and the drug is particularly popular amongst young adults and students. There is, however, no definitive figure of the number of people

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<sup>17</sup> About 85 percent of precursors were estimated to enter through Iran.

<sup>18</sup> See UN Comtrade – Pakistan's imports of saturated acyclic monocarboxylic acids and acetic anhydride (Code: 291524). Downloadable at: <<https://comtrade.un.org/Data>>



addicted to crystal meth or ice, as no comprehensive survey has been carried out since 2013.

## **4 Successes and challenges in countering narcotics**

The narcotics trade can permeate the economy, politics, and society in countries which are points of origin for the trade or are significant transit routes. A failure to control narcotics smuggling, or the financial flows from the trade, can have grave repercussions for a country and its dealings with the international community. Some of the ways in which Pakistan has been affected, and ways in which the issues are being addressed, are discussed in this section.

### ***Successes***

Pakistan was declared a poppy free country by the UNDCP in 2001 and has since maintained this status. This is due, in no small measure, to the extensive law enforcement operations that have taken place in the former federally administrated tribal areas (FATA), now the newly merged districts of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. There is also little to no evidence of heroin manufacture in Pakistan. In 2013, the last year when UNODC reported on heroin manufacture by country, Pakistan was estimated to be the site of manufacture of less than one ton of heroin (UNODC, 2013a).

In June 2018, Pakistan made a commitment to work with the FATF and the Asia/Pacific Group on Money Laundering to strengthen its anti-money laundering (AML) and combating the financing of terrorism (CFT) regimes. Over the past three years, the country has enacted significant primary and secondary legislation (passage of, and amendments to more than 15 laws, and more than 30 rules and regulations). As of June 2021, Pakistan has addressed 26 out of 27 actions that it agreed to in June 2018, and it has pledged to make progress towards achievement of the one remaining action, which is related to investigation and prosecution of leaders of UN designated terror groups. As of August 2021, the country has also achieved

compliance (or is largely compliant) with 35 out of 40 recommendations in the APG Action Plan (APG, 2021).

Pakistan will remain on the “enhanced follow up” or so called “grey list” till it meets the one remaining requirement of FATF, as well as the five remaining requirements of the APG. Nevertheless, it has made substantial progress.

While many of the FATF/APG requirements relate to terrorist financing, the increased surveillance of financial flows and efforts to combat money laundering are expected to have a significant impact on flows from the narcotics trade in the medium to long term.

### ***Challenges***

The data on drug abuse in Pakistan is outdated, and in the last seven years, there has been no comprehensive survey on the drug use in the country. The last survey, conducted in 2013, found an estimated 6.7 million drug users in the country, of which about 4.5 were thought to be addicted (UNODC, 2013). However, that survey predated the rise of the “meth culture” and the proliferation of party drugs. These seem to have made inroads into educational institutions, and amongst urban youth in recent years, and the extent of their use has not been adequately assessed. The production of meth in Afghanistan, which is a recent phenomenon, can potentially exacerbate this issue.

It is important to note here that while the prevalence of use of “soft drugs” such as cannabis, is lower in Pakistan than in many western countries, the prevalence of heroin use is high, with over 1 percent of the population aged 15 to 64 estimated to have used the drug.<sup>19</sup> Similar high rates exist in only a few other countries, notably Russia, the US and Australia. Further, Pakistan has a high proportion of people who inject drugs (PWIDs) – three countries, Russia, China and Pakistan, account for 34 percent of PWIDs

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<sup>19</sup> Calculated using number of heroin users in 2013 and the estimated population in the relevant age cohort.

worldwide (UNODC, 2021: 41). The implications for the spread of HIV and hepatitis C are obvious. It is important for Pakistan to have reliable data on drug abuse, and types of narcotics in use, to formulate a policy to counter the use of narcotics. With an evidence-based policy in place, the country will be in a better position to request assistance and resources from international agencies experienced in counter narcotics operations.

Pakistan has worked closely with FATF to control money laundering and terrorist financing. However, if the narcotics trade continues or grows or diversifies, the country's financial monitoring systems will continue to face pressure, and legitimate trade and commerce can be negatively affected. Similarly, the performance of law enforcement agencies can potentially come under increased scrutiny from the international community. The growth of the illegal economy in general and the narcotics trade in particular, also has implications for Pakistan's internal security and political stability, given the links between the trade and organized crime, as well as terrorism.

## **5 Conclusion**

The future of the regional narcotics trade is closely tied to developments in Afghanistan. If peace prevails and a broad-based government is formed, there can be progress on counter narcotics operations in the short term. If the situation remains unstable, or a civil war erupts, the narcotics trade is likely to flourish as warring factions will rely on the trade to generate financing. The second scenario has grave ramifications for Pakistan. The coming few months or even years could be critical.

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