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Strategic rethink needed

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FOR years, the United States has miscalculated Pakistani strategic interests in Afghanistan, which continues to involve tactical and operational support for some sections of the Taliban.

It is now becoming clearer how Pakistani interests are driven not only by 'strategic depth' — military doctrine oriented towards India — but also by concerns of regional encirclement and hedging against expected western withdrawal.

In part due to western misconceptions of Pakistani interests, threat-perceptions and capacities, Pakistan has possessed far more bargaining power in its relationships with the US and Afghanistan than conventional estimates of relative power predict. In the near-term, Pakistan has significant leverage controlling routes for most Nato supply lines, commanding influence over various militant networks, and signalling greater resolve in its commitments. But this asymmetric leverage may soon erode.



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Part of strategic assessment is projecting a range of trends, even if they currently seem unlikely. If Pakistani leaders continue to ignore emerging trends in the Central Asian and northern Afghan theatre and fail to update their beliefs and bargaining strategies, particularly with the US and Nato forces, they risk overplaying their hand. The irony is that the current Pakistani strategy that hedges on militant ties may eventually lead to the very isolation and encirclement it has sought to avoid.

Pakistan has not paid enough attention to the present and future economic shifts in Afghanistan that could potentially shake up the regional balance of power. Afghanistan has long depended on its southern neighbour for its primary source of trade, transport and communications. Its ties and border with China were narrow, its links to its Central Asian

cousins (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) were obstructed by the Soviet Iron Curtain, and despite strong cultural ties to Iran, Afghanistan's economic insignificance and series of hostile governments inhibited this relationship.

As a result of Afghanistan's isolation, Pakistan has commanded tremendous political and economic influence over Afghanistan, and, by consequence, seemingly unfettered leverage over the US/Nato occupation since 2001. But emerging economic trends can precipitate shifts in power, alliances and geopolitical leverage.

The first real shift is China's entrance onto the scene. China's \$3bn investment in Afghanistan's Anyak copper mine will require the construction of a new railroad between Afghanistan and China's Xinjiang province and an electricity station. Once online, investments in other critical resources like coal, iron, aluminium and marble will rise and induce even more trade linkages between the two countries. This is even without prospecting for other game-changing resources like oil and gas that have long been suspected to be in abundance in Afghanistan.

Second, northern Afghanistan's links to Central Asia will continue to deepen. Thanks to an Indian-constructed bridge in 2007 linking Afghanistan and Tajikistan, trade through that route increased sevenfold within a year and Afghan land values along that route shot up dramatically. Not to be outdone, Russia too has offered to facilitate a rail transit corridor linking Europe to Afghanistan via Uzbekistan. Increasing Afghan involvement in Central Asia can spin off and spill over, positioning it to capitalise on its natural endowments and become the regional hub of water resources, energy distribution and hydroelectric power.

Third, Afghanistan is developing an alternative southern route to the Arabian Sea. While in the past, landlocked Afghanistan depended on Pakistan to transport its goods through the port of Karachi, Indian completion in 2008 of the 135-mile road from Nimroz province to Iran's Chahbahar port provides an efficient transport corridor for goods between Central Asia and the Persian Gulf.

With the Khyber Pass under constant attack, this insurgent-free route could provide an alternative for supplying western troops with non-lethal goods and aid to the Afghan government. This would cost Pakistan economically as well as geopolitically since currently 75 per cent of non-lethal supplies are transported through the port of Karachi. If the US is able to reopen its base in Uzbekistan as planned, Pakistan's influence will erode even further.

Not all Afghan economic trends are bypassing Pakistan. Projects to build high-transmission power lines and natural gas pipelines connecting South to Central Asia are being funded. But the violent instability of southern Afghanistan and Pakistani tribal areas threatens these projects by driving up transaction costs and sowing distrust. If Pakistan cannot demonstrably control these regions and contain militants, other regional integration paths will attract states and investors, eventually locking in with repeated use, and locking out Pakistan.

Exclusion from the regional economic future is hardly the worst part. China's rising long-term investments in Afghanistan and expanding influence will make it increasingly intolerant of Pakistani-supported Taliban elements, especially those that prove disruptive to its economic interests or foment and support Uighur militancy in Xinjiang, as the

Taliban did in the 1990s. This could cost Pakistan an arms supplier, a great-power patron and its wedge strategy with the US.

The most disturbing consequence for Pakistan is that these economic trends are creating conditions for a de facto partitioned Afghan state. The more stable north and west — with international linkages, economic growth and acceptance of the Afghan central government and western troop presence — can emerge self-sufficient and defensible while pockets of insurgency engulf the south and east.

Pakistan's support for certain Taliban elements that underwrite this territorial partition could result in a Pakhtun rump state that galvanises nationalist separatism in Pakistan's tribal frontier. Rather than providing a zone for strategic depth, this 'blowback' scenario could redirect militant networks against the Pakistan state, thus compounding its security dilemmas, overstretched military and economic fragilities.

Shortsighted Pakistani strategy may eventually result in a Pakistan engulfed in militant fires while surrounded by unfriendly states after years of Pakistani complicity with militant externalities. In other words, regional economic and political trends shaped by Pakistani policy could lead to the very isolation and encirclement it most fears.

For these reasons, as Gen Kayani has recently intimated, Pakistan needs to begin recalibrating its position on Afghanistan, before it is too late. This requires a serious reappraisal of its militant ties, credible Pakistan buy-in that marries its own geo-strategic interests with Afghan and regional stability, and real accommodation of some US and Nato interests.

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