

Disrupting the ISI-Taliban Relationship: A Principal-Agent Approach

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Reflecting the same kind of sentiments conveyed in the U.S. President Donald Trump's January 2018 tweet accusing Pakistan of giving the U.S. nothing but "lies" and "deceit" as well as of providing safe havens to the anti-U.S. "terrorists," this short book is a study aimed at offering recommendations to the U.S. government on how to disrupt the relationship between the Pakistani state and Afghan Taliban using the principal-agent theory.

The study begins with a concise account of the history of the relationship between Afghan insurgents and the ISI beginning during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. After the Soviet defeat, and against a backdrop of civil war, clashing mujahideen leaders, disunity, and a lack of cooperation among their various factions, the Afghan Taliban emerged as ISI's preferred Pashtun force in Afghanistan during the 90s. Described by the authors as a "proxy" but refraining to describe it as an ISI production, Pakistan sought to fulfil its national interests through the Taliban. The Taliban took Kabul in September 1996 and Pakistan was among the only three countries to recognise their government, the other two being Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Links between the ISI and Taliban were retained following 9/11 too despite Pakistan's outwardly sympathetic position toward the U.S. that the U.S. was not able to prevent.

The book describes Pakistan's relationship with the three U.S.

administrations after 9/11: The Bush administration (2001-2008), the Obama administration (2009-2016), and the on-going Trump administration, in all of which ISI's dealings with the Taliban at the expense of the U.S. surfaced as a problem.

The ISI began cheating the U.S. from the outset of the war in Afghanistan during the Bush administration, suggest the authors, providing the Kunduz airlift of November 2001 as an example where alongside ISI employees, Taliban leaders were alleged to have also been evacuated by Pakistan. Again, in 2007 and 2008 American and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intelligence disclosed authorisation by the then President Pervez Musharraf of deniable support to the Afghan Taliban. When it was discovered that the 2008 bomb detonation near the Indian embassy in Kabul was influenced by Pakistan, it served to produce a more critical opinion of the ISI with Bush. Nonetheless, Pakistan's strategic importance meant that the administration could not afford to sever ties.

Then the raid at Abbottabad in 2011, which resulted in the killing of Osama bin Laden during the Obama administration caused some in the administration to believe one of two possibilities: either Pakistan was incompetent at intelligence or was willingly hosting terrorists. In January 2018, during the current Trump administration, what the authors write as being described as "the most significant punitive action toward Pakistan since 2001" took place where the U.S. suspended military aid to Pakistan as a result of the deaths of the U.S. soldiers, which were said to have been caused by the ISI military and intelligence aid to the Afghan Taliban.

The book goes on to attempt to identify potential weaknesses in the ISI-Taliban relationship that may be exploited and provides options for disrupting the relationship. Firstly, motivations for the ISI to delegate to the Taliban must be reduced or removed. If the U.S. and Afghan governments leak intelligence on the support received by the Taliban from the ISI thus sparking outrage from the international community, suggest the authors, it would force Pakistan to abandon its support for the group since one of

Pakistan's motivations to delegate to the Taliban is plausible deniability. Secondly, tensions should be increased between the Taliban and the ISI such that "one or both sides will develop a negative view of their arrangement" thereby disrupting the principal-agent relationship. This can be achieved through punishing those members of the Taliban that receive Pakistani support by spreading disinformation e.g. by inducing suspicion among the Taliban of an ISI hand behind the killing of their leaders (Mullah Akhtar Mansour's death in 2016 was thus an ideal opportunity) and by exploiting Pashtun nationalism in Afghanistan. And finally, the control mechanisms used by the ISI over the Taliban must be removed by having Taliban leaders take up residence in Afghanistan instead of Pakistan by, for example, making the latter less safe for them.

Overall, the framework provided by this study is one of first studying the reason for the principal to delegate to the agent, potential tensions in the principal-agent relationship and understanding the control mechanisms employed by the principal. On this basis, solutions may be produced as to how to disrupt the principal-agent relationship.

The authors rightly recognise that using money alone to encourage or discourage Pakistan's actions in relation to the Afghan war may not be wholly effective as demonstrated by the policies of the previous U.S. administrations after 9/11. Apart from using money, therefore, the authors have suggested that the U.S. also, for example, remove Pakistan's status as a major non-NATO ally or designate the country as a state sponsor of terrorism which may negatively influence the country's perceived support for the Taliban.

Suggesting that exposing an ISI-Taliban relationship could result in Pakistan's outright abandoning of support for the Taliban may also be overstating the matter as accusations and condemnations of the like have endured for years with little effect and levelled by top US officials, whether by counsellor to former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Eliot Cohen, saying, "I think in some ways we were actually fighting the ISI,"

or Joseph Biden's public acknowledgement that "...the terrorists we're fighting and the extremists the Pakistani fear are not one and the same" or the current US president's own Twitter remarks.

The authors state that Pakistan ought to be assured its interests can be met by other than "terrorism," yet the Afghan Taliban are not a designated terrorist organisation by the U.S., in fact are sought out for negotiations. The authors also failed to provide an alternative actor in Afghanistan through which Pakistani interests could be achieved if Pakistan were to abandon its claimed support for the Taliban, as the U.S. desires. Perhaps things come down to Obama's advice here: "...let's stop trying to change their minds about where Pakistan's interests lie."

In conclusion, the study is a useful insight into possible strategies adopted by the U.S. to disrupt the ISI-Taliban relationship.