

## Tickets to the endgame

*Pakistan wants a say in ending the war, and it knows how to ask.*

A HIGH-LEVEL delegation of Pakistanis is due to sweep into Washington for the restart on March 24th of a "strategic dialogue" with America. The Pakistanis have muscled their way to the table for what looks like a planning session for the endgame in Afghanistan. The recent arrest of the Taliban's deputy leader, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, and a clutch of his high-ranking comrades, has won them a seat.

The Pakistani team, led by the foreign minister, will include both the army chief and the head of the army's spy agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). America has upgraded its own representation at the talks, last held in mid-2008, from deputy-secretary to secretary-of-state level. The dialogue is supposed to cover the gamut of bilateral issues, including help for Pakistan's fragile economy, and even, on its ambitious wish-list, civil nuclear technology.

But the future of Afghanistan is the most pressing topic, and in Pakistan that issue is always controlled by the powerful army and the ISI. Pakistan believes that the Americans are coming to understand its fear of encirclement: a rising India to the east, uncertain relations with Iran to the west and growing Indian influence in Afghanistan to the north-west.

Whereas some see in Pakistan's arrest of Mr Baradar hints of a strategic shift against its old jihadist proxies, it seems depressingly more likely to be an attempt by the ISI to grab control of the Taliban's negotiating position. Mr Baradar had been making overtures directly to Hamid Karzai's government in Kabul—bypassing Pakistan.

According to a senior Pakistani official, the detention of Mr Baradar is a double victory for Pakistan. It has captured a Talib who had become troublesome. And it hoped to win plaudits for cracking down on the insurgency's leaders, meeting longstanding demands from the NATO-led coalition and Afghan government.

Instead, it finds itself criticised anew, despite dropping the denials it has maintained since 2001 that Afghan Taliban leaders were on its soil, and despite having acted against one of them. By some accounts Mr Karzai is angry that his favourite Talib was locked up. Other regional powers, such as India, Iran and Russia, are said to be alarmed that Pakistan is putting itself in the driving seat in the Afghan negotiations. According to Ahmed Rashid, a veteran observer of Afghanistan, Pakistan's reinvigorated interference in its neighbour's affairs risks setting off a regional competition for influence that could push Afghanistan back into the sort of civil war it endured in the 1990s, between proxies backed by outside powers.

Pakistan's position has evolved. Rather than seeing the ethnic-Pushtun Taliban as its best hope of a friendly government in Kabul, its policymakers would now prefer the Taliban to be part of a broader-based Afghan government. Perhaps it has realised at last that extremists wielding unbridled power from Kabul tend to export disaster across the porous border they share. So Pakistan also needs links with non-Taliban elements in Afghanistan.

America is taking a harder line than most of its partners, Britain included, in seeking to weaken the insurgency, perhaps even inducing some rebel commanders to defect, before considering talks with the Taliban leadership. But as America plans to start drawing down its forces next year, the jostling for a political settlement is well under way. Pakistan's basic demand is that any future regime in Kabul must be Pakistan-friendly, by which it means not too close to India. The Pakistanis believe they are close to convincing America that they hold the key to stabilising Afghanistan.

But the cost of their Afghan policy at home has been huge. In recent days the Pakistani Taliban, essentially a copycat movement, has resumed its terrorist campaign across the country. And though Pakistan's army has faced down the home-grown Taliban in the North-West Frontier Province and the tribal areas, Pakistan's heartland continues to be plagued by their extremist fellows, such as Jaish-e-Muhammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba. Security forces have pursued them, but the "mainstream" jihadist groups which spawn the domestic terrorists continue to be tolerated.

Nurtured in the shadows where the ISI operates, Pakistan's role in Afghanistan remains murky. Opinion polls show that ordinary Afghans still deeply resent its interventions. Pakistan may think it is manoeuvring the American superpower into striking a deal to its liking; but that might make it even harder to allay the suspicions felt towards it by ordinary Afghans.

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