

Nuclear talks complicate shifting South Asia alliances

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The trip to [Washington by Prime Minister Narendra Modi](#) and his well-received address to Congress may have cemented the growing US-India partnership, but it has driven a stake deep into the already fragile US-Pakistan relations. With Afghanistan also affected, the South Asia region faces new tensions and deteriorating relations as a result of major regional realignments.

US-Pakistan relations have been tense for several months. The Pakistan military believes that America is withdrawing from the region and wants to turn India into the regional gendarme. It is also furious that [Washington is sponsoring India to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group](#), which sets global rules for international trade in nuclear energy technology, and is promoting nuclear equipment deals with US companies while still considering Pakistan a nuclear pariah because of its earlier proliferation of nuclear technology. Neither India nor Pakistan have signed the nuclear non-proliferation treaty – an essential requirement before either state can join the 48-nation NSG.

China – a close ally of Pakistan – says it will veto India’s membership of the NSG, but that has only ratcheted up regional tensions. Other countries in the [group are being forced to take sides](#).

Meanwhile, the US is furious that the Pakistan military still allows terrorist groups safe haven on its soil, particularly the Afghan Taliban leadership and the al-Qaeda-linked Haqqani network. The army’s promised nearly two years ago to bring the Taliban into peace talks with the Kabul government but has made no progress. [The Quadrilateral Group](#) of China, US, Pakistan and Afghanistan, founded to further those talks, has become virtually redundant since an abortive meeting between the Quad and the Taliban in July last year.

For its part, the army has been angered by the US drone attack on Pakistani soil on May 21 that [killed the Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour](#), who was close to Islamabad. It was the first such attack on a Taliban leader inside the country but the US has hinted at more such attacks if the Taliban continues to be given shelter. Sartaj Aziz, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s adviser on foreign affairs, told a visiting group of senior US officials on June 10 that any such attacks in the future would be [detrimental to the relationship](#). A day earlier Mr Aziz had said that the US “abandons us when it doesn’t need our help, this has been happening for the last 60 years”.

One complaint made by the US and India jointly is that Pakistan has taken no steps to curb the Punjabi extremist groups operating close to Kashmir and the Indian border, which they consider a major security threat. The military has long used militant groups on its borders with both India and Afghanistan to maintain its influence and the regional balance of power.

The open US criticism of Pakistan comes as a relief to Afghanistan, whose leaders denounce Islamabad for continuing to host the Taliban. Senior Afghan officials have told me that US policy has decisively shifted against Pakistan on the issue. In recent months, the Taliban have notched up major hits on the regime and occupied more territory in their brutal war against soldiers and civilians. Yet Afghan officials also acknowledge that Islamabad can still hold the key to peace in Afghanistan if it puts pressure on the Taliban.

[China remains Islamabad’s closest ally](#) but is also becoming frustrated. It wants to build a \$45bn transportation and energy link to its [grand Silk Route project](#) through Central Asia, but first it wants the Pakistan military to use its political influence to end the civil war in Afghanistan and the insurgency in Balochistan province.

The army’s longstanding obsession with what it sees as India leading a vast conspiracy to undermine the country has gone further. It now believes India is lining up Afghanistan and Iran to oppose its interests in Afghanistan and isolate it.

This may be true, but Pakistan does not help itself much. One problem is that the military makes big foreign policy decisions with little input from the civilian government, the foreign ministry or parliament. It then becomes furious when the government does not support some of its demands and claims. The making of foreign policy is becoming increasingly dysfunctional.

Such was the case on June 8 when the military summoned key members of the cabinet to army headquarters to listen to their grievances about India and the US. The following day opposition politicians expressed outrage in parliament that civilian and democratic processes were being undermined by the army.

For its part, the Pakistan military is deeply frustrated by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who three years into government has not appointed a foreign minister and shows little interest in the changing shape of the region. He is still in charge of this crucial portfolio, even as he recovers from open heart surgery in London.

Some of the media, opposition politicians and intellectuals are extremely concerned at the direction Pakistan is taking. “Unless Pakistan clears areas under its control of all terrorists... and gives priority to diplomacy in the resolution of interstate disputes, [Pakistan is likely to be increasingly isolated](#),” said an editorial in the daily Pakistan Today.

With the region undergoing cataclysmic changes and realignments, it is imperative that Pakistan plays its role in ending terrorism and civil wars so the country can be part of a brighter, [more connected economic future in South Asia](#).