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NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

THESIS

**DISRUPTING THE ISI-TALIBAN RELATIONSHIP: A
PRINCIPAL-AGENT APPROACH**

by

Christopher L. Hollingsworth and Joshua Sider

December 2018

Thesis Advisor:
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Michael E. Freeman
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**DISRUPTING THE ISI-TALIBAN RELATIONSHIP: A PRINCIPAL-AGENT
APPROACH**

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from the

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ABSTRACT

This study argues that principal-agent theory provides a unique perspective on the relationship between the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani state. This perspective assists in developing strategies to reduce, disrupt, or eliminate the support that the Taliban receive from Pakistan. Furthermore, the framework of this study can be applied to other state-sponsored terrorist groups, insurgencies, and proxies.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ANO	Abu Nidal Organization
COIN	counterinsurgency
FATA	Federally Administered Tribal Areas
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence
ISIS-K	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria—Khorasan province
JKLF	Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
TTP	Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan
U.S.	United States

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I. INTRODUCTION

On May 21, 2016, a man carrying a Pakistani passport with the name Wali Muhammad was returning from a trip to neighboring Iran. He noticed additional security on the Pakistani side of the small border town. Wali and he was stopped briefly, but he resumed his journey after a couple of hours of delay.¹ It would take eight more hours to travel from the Iran-Pakistan border to his destination and home in Quetta, most of which he spent calling several close family members. Wali Muhammad never reached Quetta. Six hours into the final leg of his travels, a United States (U.S.) drone strike—the first (and last, to date) in Balochistan—targeted his vehicle and the munition that struck the vehicle ended his life. The *New York Times* later reported that within minutes, Pakistani security forces arrived at the scene—suspiciously quick for such a remote area with normally limited visible presence of the Pakistani state. Pakistan’s official response was a muted protest to the U.S. about a violation of Pakistani sovereignty. Within 24 hours of the strike, it became clear that Wali Muhammad was traveling under a false name. The United States and Afghanistan announced that a leader of the Taliban, Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour, had been killed in the strike.²

Over the following months, details emerged about the period leading up to the death of Mullah Mansour. Sources within the Taliban organization described the leader as growing fearful of Pakistan. Mansour had rejected several demands from Pakistan and sought to diversify the organization’s sources of support to include other countries.³ His phone calls to his family were an indication that he knew something was wrong.

How could the leader of the Taliban fear one of the group’s largest sponsors? Why would Pakistan orchestrate or condone the killing of someone who had lived safely in Pakistan for years? How had their relationship deteriorated to this point? The answers to

¹ Carlotta Gall and Ruhullah Khapalwak, “Taliban Leader Feared Pakistan Before He Was Killed,” *New York Times*, August 9, 2017, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/09/world/asia/taliban-leader-feared-pakistan-before-he-was-killed.html>

² Gall and Khapalwak.

³ Gall and Khapalwak.

these questions are complicated, just as the relationship between Pakistan and the Taliban has been and remains.

A. BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

Pakistan's support of the Afghan Taliban has numerous layers that have morphed into the current relationship that exists today. This relationship originates from Pakistan's ties to the mujahideen who fought the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989. Following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, Afghanistan was thrust into a civil war between the Soviet-backed Najibullah regime and Afghan warlords who fought to govern the country. This conflict left Pakistan caught between its rival, India, and an increasingly unstable Afghanistan. When the Taliban formed from these mujahideen fighters in 1994, Pakistan viewed the organization as a possible method of stabilizing Afghanistan. Their support contributed to the Taliban rapidly seizing 90% of Afghanistan between 1994 and 1996.

The events between the Taliban's rise to power and today are well documented. The Taliban remained in control of most of the country until after the attacks on September 11, 2001. Since the U.S. and Northern Alliance removed them from power, the Taliban now control more territory than at any point since 2001. Many observers of the Afghan conflict have blamed poor security and governance in Afghanistan for the resurgent Taliban.⁴ The Taliban benefits from the government of Afghanistan's lack of control, but the support of Pakistan remains a significant source of their resurgence. Pakistan, through the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), has continued to support the Taliban post 9/11 for many reasons. Although the ISI has transitioned this support from overt to covert, Pakistan must hedge against an eventual U.S. withdrawal and prevent the establishment of any

⁴ Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Afghanistan's Terrorism Resurgence: Al-Qaida, ISIS, and Beyond," *Brookings* (blog), April 27, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/afghanistans-terrorism-resurgence-al-qaida-isis-and-beyond/>; Seth G. Jones, "The Rise of Afghanistan's Insurgency: State Failure and Jihad," *International Security* 32, no. 4 (2008): 7–40, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2008.32.4.7>; Roger Mac Ginty, "Warlords and the Liberal Peace: State-Building in Afghanistan," *Conflict, Security & Development* 10, no. 4 (September 1, 2010): 577–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2010.500548>.

government in Afghanistan that would be friendly to India.⁵ The U.S. has attempted multiple strategies to reduce Pakistan's support, including incentivizing actions taken against the Taliban and imposing punitive measures for inaction or aid. It is clear that these strategies have failed to produce long-term or significant change in Pakistan's behavior and without a reduction of Pakistani support to the Taliban, Afghanistan will continue to be in a warring state.

B. RESEARCH QUESTION

This project will answer the question: what actions can the U.S. take to disrupt the ISI-Taliban relationship? First, this project conducts an in-depth study of the relationship. Second, we examine the strengths and weaknesses of the relationship based on principal-agent theory. Third, we propose strategies for disrupting the relationship based on the analysis. These strategies could include all tools available to the U.S. but focus on actions that could be taken by the military.

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

State support for terrorist groups can take many forms, and its importance in the success or failure of a terrorist group has been debated. The type, quantity, and timing of the support may be critical to the success of a supported group, but drawbacks to this support have also been debated.⁶ Regardless of the dispute, examinations of counterinsurgency (COIN) efforts between 1978 and 2008 have concluded that no COIN campaign in this period has been successful without a substantial disruption to tangible

⁵ Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Why Pakistan Supports Terrorist Groups, and Why the U.S. Finds It so Hard to Induce Change," *Brookings* (blog), January 5, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/01/05/why-pakistan-supports-terrorist-groups-and-why-the-us-finds-it-so-hard-to-induce-change/>; Seth G. Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan*, Rand Counterinsurgency Study, v. 4 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND National Defense Research Institute, 2008).

⁶ Daniel Byman et al., *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements* (RAND, 2001), xiii, 83, 84–99, 100; David B. Carter, "A Blessing or a Curse? State Support for Terrorist Groups," *International Organization* 66, no. 01 (January 2012): 5, 24, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818311000312>; Christopher Paul et al., *Paths to Victory: Lessons from Modern Insurgencies* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2013), 151, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR291z1.html.

support that the insurgents require.⁷ To understand this support better, a closer examination of the relationship is needed. The principal-agent model, among other things, is a theory of incentives that can be used to examine state-sponsored terrorism and the possible weaknesses in the relationship generally applied to legal state and non-state institutions.⁸ Recently, the theory has been applied to conflicts in which some form of delegation occurs.⁹

1. Theoretical Reasons to Delegate

The principal-agent theory provides several reasons for delegation of authority to occur, thereby creating the principal-agent relationship. Allowing specialization and the benefit of comparative advantage is one reason.¹⁰ In other words, a principal will delegate to an agent that has a specialized skill that they are unwilling or unable to match. Empowering an agent to increase credibility in situations where short-term and long-term interests diverge is the second reason. By delegating to an agent, the principal is demonstrating a commitment since the agent may be less likely to back out of a promise than the principal. For example, many democratic governments have delegated interest rate management to a central bank. This situation prevents an elected official from manipulating interest rates for political purposes and demonstrates a commitment to controlling inflation. Ensuring that actions are taken in line with the principal's preferences after the principal's tenure has expired is the third reason why a principal will delegate. This act will ensure

⁷ Christopher. Paul, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Detailed Counterinsurgency Case Studies* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND National Defense Research Institute, 2010), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG964z1.html>.

⁸ Jean-Jacques Laffont and David Martimort, *The Theory of Incentives: The Principal-Agent Model* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009); Joe Felter et al., *Harmony and Disharmony: Exploiting Al-Qaida's Organizational Vulnerabilities* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2006), <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a459919.pdf>; Tyler G Van Horn, "The Utility of Freedom: A Principal-Agent Model for Unconventional Warfare" (2011), <https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/5624>.

⁹ Idean Salehyan, "The Delegation of War to Rebel Organizations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 54, no. 3 (June 1, 2010): 493–515, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002709357890>; Eric Rittinger, "Arming the Other: American Small Wars, Local Proxies, and the Social Construction of the Principal-Agent Problem," *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (June 1, 2017): 396–409, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx021>.

¹⁰ Daniel Byman and Sarah E. Kreps, "Agents of Destruction? Applying Principal-Agent Analysis to State-Sponsored Terrorism," *International Studies Perspectives* 11, no. 1 (February 1, 2010): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1528-3585.2009.00389.x>.

that the principal's policies will continue being enacted long after their power has subsided. Shared ideas and identities are the final motivation for delegation identified in the literature on principal-agent relationships. In other words, there is power in a shared ideology between the principal and agent. Plausible deniability is one motivation for delegation in state support of terrorism that is not identified in the literature on the principal-agent theory. This reason usually is present during illicit forms of delegation and needed when the principal fears some retaliation for an action. The lack of linkage in this principal-agent relationship allows the principal to benefit from the bad behavior without adverse reactions. A commonality among all these reasons for delegation is that the principal seeks to maximize the work done on their behalf by the agent.¹¹

2. Theoretical Reasons for Tension in the Principal-Agent Relationship

Principal-agent theory provides several explanations for tension in a relationship in which delegation occurs. Shirking behavior occurs when the agent engages in conduct that advances the agent's interests over the interests of the principal. Payoff structures and financial incentives can differ between a principal and the agent, increasing the probability of shirking behavior. Principal-agent relationships are often affected by differences in information between the principal and the agent.¹² For example, a state sponsor has access to numerous sources of information including military organizations, diplomatic channels, and intelligence agencies. A terrorist group (even one with a state sponsor) has much more restricted access to information due to the underground nature of the organization.

State sponsorship of terrorism results in many potential unintended consequences even if there is a convergence of preferences between the principal and the agent. The agent can fumble the execution, resulting in costs to the agent and the principal without any advancement of either's interests. Plausible deniability can fail if the state cannot deny claims made by the terrorist group. A consequence of enhancing the agent's capabilities is a reduction in the ability of the principal to control the agent. This lack of control can lead

¹¹ Byman and Kreps, "Agents of Destruction?," 3-6

¹² Byman and Kreps, 7.

to escalation by the agent. Finally, states have often employed terrorists as spoilers. An unintended consequence of using terrorists as spoilers occurs when the state's policy changes to seeking a settlement from preventing peace. When this happens, the spoilers become an obstacle to the principal's interests.¹³

3. Control Mechanisms in Principal-Agent Relationships

Control mechanisms within a principal-agent relationship seek to create a convergence between the agent's behavior and the principal's goal. The first control mechanism is to limit the scope of the delegation of authority. Second, the principal can engage in monitoring and auditing of the agent. Third, the principal can devote more resources to screening and selection procedures. One version of this control mechanism is utilizing multiple agents to provide a range of options to the principal. Another benefit of this method is that each agent can assist in monitoring the other agents and provide information to the principal. The fourth category of control mechanisms includes sanctions, punishment, withholding of resources, and the removal of a particular agent.¹⁴

4. Strategies for the Counter-Terrorist

Applying this theory to the relationship between a terrorist group and a state sponsor identifies four strategies for the counter-terrorists. First, the counter-terrorist could exploit the information gap between the sponsor and the supported group. Disinformation on the group's competence or information on the divergence between the group's agenda and that of their sponsor are examples of this strategy.¹⁵ Second, the counter-terrorist could increase the portrayal of the group as foreign agents to create a nationalist backlash against the group. This strategy turns the ideological convergence between a terrorist group and its state sponsor into a weapon that can be used against it.¹⁶ Third, the counter-terrorist could reduce a state's deniability of their support for a terrorist group to increase the reputation

¹³ Byman and Kreps, "Agents of Destruction?," 8.

¹⁴ Byman and Kreps, 9–12.

¹⁵ Byman and Kreps, 14.

¹⁶ Byman and Kreps, 14–15.

costs of the sponsor. This strategy is viable because one of the primary reasons to delegate to a terrorist group is plausible deniability. By removing this reason for delegation, the state may choose to seek other methods to pursue its interests.¹⁷ Finally, the counter-terrorist can inflict high costs on the terrorists, primarily as a result of the group's attacks on targets that benefit the sponsor. This increased cost could discourage the terrorist group and cause them to become disillusioned with their sponsor.¹⁸

¹⁷ Byman and Kreps, "Agents of Destruction?," 15.

¹⁸ Byman and Kreps, 15.

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II. HISTORY OF THE ISI-TALIBAN RELATIONSHIP

This chapter describes how the relationship developed between the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the Taliban and explains how significant events have shaped this affiliation. In particular, this chapter provides the historical context of how the Soviet-Afghan War affected Afghanistan and Pakistan and what conditions led to establishing the relationship between the ISI and the Taliban. It further examines how the ISI came to support the Taliban, how the United States (U.S.) has understood the relationship between the ISI and Taliban, how the U.S. has simultaneously fought the Taliban while maintaining a relationship with Pakistan and the ISI, and finally the actions the U.S. has taken to address ISI support of the Taliban.

A key point should be made to increase the clarity of our writing. Throughout the paper, we will use the term Taliban to refer just to the Afghan Taliban. While there are linkages between the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban, we do not treat these organizations as a unitary actor. The two groups have very different relationships with Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the United States.

It is also important to note that multiple relationships in the region exhibit symptoms of the principal-agent problem. For example, the U.S. acts in some ways as a principal with Pakistan as an agent in the counterterrorism fight in Afghanistan. Additionally, the ISI is an agent of the Pakistani government, the Taliban leadership is an agent of the ISI, and the majority of the Taliban organization in Afghanistan are agents of the Taliban leadership in Pakistan. All of these relationships present opportunities and challenges to stopping or reducing Pakistan's support of the Taliban.

A. THE SOVIET-AFGHAN WAR, 1979–1989

Pakistan first developed relations with Afghan proxies during the Soviet-Afghan war. This conflict was a bloody struggle that affected not only the Soviet Union and Afghanistan but sent significant ripples reaching the U.S., Pakistan, Asia, and throughout Europe. The U.S. and other nations relied on Pakistan to funnel aid to Afghan mujahideen to counter Soviet occupation in Afghanistan. It was during this period that Pakistan learned

that proxies could be utilized to further national interests. One organization that significantly changed during this period was the Pakistani ISI. The ISI transitioned from a discouraged unit within the Pakistani military to a sophisticated intelligence agency with access to the Saudi General Intelligence Department as well as the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, essentially becoming the most powerful institution within Pakistan.¹⁹ It is organized into departments or directorates with different responsibilities. One of these elements has been named “Directorate S” by American intelligence officials. This department has been responsible for supporting the Taliban, Kashmiri guerrillas, and other violent Islamic radicals.²⁰ In addition to institutional changes, billions of dollars and copious amounts of weapons flowed through Pakistan to the Afghan mujahedeen. The birth of this “Armaments Culture” took root in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the illegal arms markets are still present.²¹ From 1971 to 1988, the number of *madrassas* in Pakistan increased from merely 900 to approximately 8,000 official and 25,000 estimated unregistered religious schools. A significant portion of these schools was assembled along the Pakistan-Afghan border and heavily funded by the Gulf States.²²

The almost decade-long occupation by the Soviets was extremely destructive of Afghan political, economic, and societal institutions.²³ This included the killing of many of the members of the government prior to the creation of the communist regime. After the Soviet withdrawal, there were few people available to run the country. This destruction set the stage for future issues that Pakistan would soon need to fix. This damage prevented the Afghan state from functioning autonomously and led to the creation of the mujahideen and warlords as the new political power brokers. Economically, the war destroyed infrastructure that prevented Afghanistan from having any meaningful economy. Trade

¹⁹ Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 180.

²⁰ Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, First Edition (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 47.

²¹ Imran Ali and Xiaochuan Dong, “The Revenge Game: U.S Foreign Policy During Afghan-Soviet War and Afghan-Pakistan Falling Into Hell,” *Asian Social Science* 11, no. 27 (2015): 48–49, <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v11n27p43>.

²² Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 180.

²³ William Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 153–59.

deficits compounded with mounting debt led to crippling inflation. Additionally, from the political and economic damage, the conflict hurt the population as well. The rural areas were the least secured but housed the majority of the people. This lack of security led to over 6 million Afghan refugees residing outside of Afghanistan by the end of the war and a large number of the population internally displaced.²⁴ This cycle of conflict was vicious in that it was now more natural for people to continue war than to create and contribute to a thriving country.

B. AFGHANISTAN AFTER THE SOVIET WITHDRAWAL, 1990–1993

After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan began utilizing proxies to attempt to accomplish its national interest within Afghanistan. With their Cold War foe no longer present in this region, the U.S. transitioned efforts to Eastern Europe and left the burden to fix the spiraling situation in Afghanistan to Pakistan and ergo the ISI. The ISI had played a crucial role in training the mujahideen that led to the Soviet withdrawal and was poised with the capability and the desire to influence the Afghan government that would soon follow it.²⁵ The ISI was instrumental in the creation of a coalition of seven Afghan mujahideen parties known as the Tanzeemat and influenced the formation of the Afghan Interim Government to oppose the Soviet-backed Najibullah government in Afghanistan, but complete acquiescence to Pakistani national interests was unattainable.²⁶

Although they provided aid to the Tanzeemat, Pakistan learned how difficult aligning political interest was, not only between Pakistan and the Tanzeemat but with the ISI as well. This lack of alignment was first seen during Afghan reconciliation when Pakistan supported the idea of a broad-based Afghan government that included Najibullah, but the Tanzeemat leaders and the ISI rejected it.²⁷ ISI's lack of control over the Tanzeemat was later seen during their inability to facilitate the release of ethnic Russian prisoners to

²⁴ William Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars*, 153–59.

²⁵ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 172–75.

²⁶ Riaz Mohammad Khan, *Afghanistan and Pakistan: Conflict, Extremism, and Resistance to Modernity* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2011), 15–22.

²⁷ Khan, 20.

the Russian Vice President in December 1991.²⁸ Lack of cooperation among groups within the Tanzeemat was also rampant. Coordinated military action was continuously professed but never brought to fruition. Infighting among the mujahideen leaders was commonplace, and operations directed by ISI were usually reluctantly performed only after the threat to remove support.²⁹ While the Najibullah government lasted longer than most experts predicted, the Islamic State of Afghanistan was established on 26 April 1992 and with a large part due to the actions of the ISI. After the interim government was installed, multiple mujahideen groups continued to jockey for power. Third parties such as Pakistan, Iran, and the U.S. attempted to tip the scales to one leader or another, and this armed political struggle for supremacy continued to destabilize Afghanistan.³⁰

C. THE AFGHAN CIVIL WAR, 1994–2000

The constant state of civil war in Afghanistan ran counter to Pakistani national interests. A stable and friendly Afghan government would provide Pakistan with strategic depth vis-à-vis India, and the ISI was charged with helping to create these conditions. The Taliban offered yet another proxy in which Pakistan could accomplish its national interests but crediting the creation of the Taliban to the ISI is overstating reality. The truth is that the Taliban movement was created through the ten years of Soviet invasion and the five years of civil war that followed. They were produced in refugee camps and madrassas located in the FATA³¹ and the result of when Afghans became infuriated with mujahideen leaders who were not fulfilling their social promises to the population.³² The link connecting the Taliban to the ISI can be traced to an event near Kandahar in which an Afghan warlord intercepted a convoy of Pakistani goods. The Taliban, who controlled Kandahar at the time, rescued the caravan and earned the gratitude of the ISI. This small

²⁸ Khan, *Afghanistan and Pakistan*, 34–36.

²⁹ Khan, 36–39.

³⁰ Neamatollah Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil War, and the Future of the Region*, First Edition. (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 110–16.

³¹ Khan, 56–57.

³² Kamal Matinuddin, *The Taliban Phenomenon: Afghanistan 1994–1997* (Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 1999), 22–27.

group of Pashtuns, who merely wanted to bring order and peace to a local area, now had the chance to obtain more lofty goals. The additional defeat of a local warlord and the capture of an ammunition depot in Spin Buldak elevated the group to compete against more seasoned mujahideen leaders, even the ISI-backed Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and his group, Hezb-e Islami. At this point, the ISI recognized that Hekmatyar would not be the one to install a Pashtun-dominated, Pakistan-friendly government in Afghanistan and switched most of their support to the Taliban. The Taliban parleyed their skillful fighting with support from the Afghan people and a seemingly endless supply of human resources from madrassas in the FATA. The Taliban met little resistance as they began to push north and grew stronger as they accepted the enlistment of local warlords, but the expansion of Taliban control far from the historical Pashtun areas proved difficult. After an arduous back and forth of Taliban victories and defeats, the capture of Kabul occurred in September of 1996. At this stage the Taliban controlled 70 percent of Afghanistan.³³ The once local group of students now pursued a “pure Islamic state” throughout Afghanistan, which included the implementation of Sharia law.

Pakistan and the Taliban’s close relationship was demonstrated by several events. Pakistan was one of only three countries to recognize the Taliban-led Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.³⁴ The other two were Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. During the late 1990s, members of Directorate S supplied, armed, and trained the Taliban as part of an effort to legitimize them. Evidence suggests that this effort was to support Pakistani national interests. These interests included an end to the Afghan civil war and a Pakistan-friendly Afghan government. However, over time, intelligence reports suggested that some ISI officers in Directorate S believed in the ideologies of their clients.³⁵

Throughout this period of Taliban rule, Pakistan continued to learn the difficulties of aligning political interest with proxy forces. During the Taliban offensive to control Afghanistan, the ISI attempted to align the Taliban with other ISI elements such as anti-

³³ Khan, *Afghanistan and Pakistan*, 60–66.

³⁴ Bruce Riedel, “Pakistan, Taliban and the Afghan Quagmire,” *Brookings* (blog), November 30, 2001, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/pakistan-taliban-and-the-afghan-quagmire/>.

³⁵ Coll, *Directorate S*, 47.

Soviet mujahideen leader Dostum's Junbish-e Milli and the Jalalabad shura. This merger would facilitate the unification of the north and provide an additional ISI backed mujahideen leader within the winning side. The Taliban rejected the offer and conducted an offensive to secure the north, independent of other factions.³⁶ Later, the Taliban combined forces with Abdul Malik Pahlawan, a Pakistani backed mujahideen leader, and Dostum rival, to capture Mazar-i-Sharif. When he was only offered a deputy foreign minister post in contradiction with their previous agreement, Malik requested aid from the ISI to reconcile an issue with the Taliban in the settlement negotiations afterward. After ignoring ISI attempts to mediate the situation in Mazar-i-Sharif, the local population, who supported Malik, massacred thousands of Taliban and Mazar-i-Sharif was lost back to the Northern Alliance. Despite the challenges of controlling the Taliban during its rise to power, Pakistan had largely succeeded in achieving its national interests in Afghanistan. The Pakistani government was either not aware or did not concern itself with the fact that their proxy in Afghanistan was hosting a terrorist group that was about to conduct the most significant act of terror to date. The result of this attack would elevate the forgotten region to the world stage and derail Pakistan's pursuit of its national interests.

D. ISI-TALIBAN RELATIONSHIP DURING THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION (2001-2008)

After the attacks on 9/11, the U.S. identified al Qaeda operatives as the perpetrators and prepared to capture or kill the leadership of the organization in Afghanistan. To accomplish these operations, the U.S. demanded specific obligations from Pakistan.³⁷ A list of requirements was presented to Pakistan. Of particular note was a declaration that either Pakistan stands with the U.S. or against them, deny all logistical support from Pakistan to Osama bin Laden, provide all available intelligence about terrorist suspects, and be prepared to break diplomatic relations with the Taliban. In response, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf stated that Pakistan was America's friend but needed time to discuss the list of requirements with his advisors. Musharraf and his advisors feared that

³⁶ Khan, *Afghanistan and Pakistan*, 63.

³⁷ Coll, *Directorate S*, 52.

India would take advantage of the moment and create a narrative that Pakistan was a state sponsor of terrorism. To preempt this, Musharraf created a set of talking points. These points included that the Taliban and al Qaeda were not the same and that the Northern Alliance could not rule Afghanistan because they were not Pashtun. He also cautioned that the U.S. should watch for Indian initiated lies attempting to expose Pakistan and terrorists as the same.³⁸

Although Pakistan had pledged its allegiance to the U.S., it was not able to cut ties completely with the Taliban. One of the people in ISI who was suspected of sympathizing with the ISI's clients was its leader at the time of the 9/11 attacks, Mahmud Ahmed.³⁹ He had a personal relationship with the leader of the Taliban, Mullah Mohammed Omar. According to Ahmed, Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan were a peaceful Afghanistan and a reduction of poppy cultivation and opium production that was being exported to Pakistan. Mullah Omar had accomplished these goals for Pakistan. This opinion of the Taliban was not isolated to Ahmed and was expressed at numerous levels throughout the ISI. It would result in a new relationship based upon manipulation by Pakistan of both the U.S. and the Taliban. One that would meet U.S. demands while simultaneously achieving its goals in Afghanistan.⁴⁰

An example of the ISI supporting the Taliban at the expense of the U.S. can be seen during the initial phases of the war. The U.S. sought information from Pakistan on the number and locations of its officers and agents in Afghanistan. Pakistan reported that there had only ever been nine Pakistani agents in Afghanistan, but other estimates rose into the hundreds.⁴¹ In November 2001, Pakistan evacuated ISI and military personnel from the

³⁸ Coll, *Directorate S*, 56.

³⁹ Coll, 60.

⁴⁰ Coll, 64; Scott Horton, "Inside the Pakistan-Taliban Relationship: Six Questions for Ahmed Rashid, Author of *Descent Into Chaos*," *The Stream - Harper's Magazine Blog* (blog), July 30, 2008, https://harpers.org/blog/2008/07/inside-the-pakistan-taliban-relationship-six-questions-for-ahmed-rashid-author-of-_descent-into-chaos_/.

⁴¹ Coll, 88.

airfield in Kunduz.⁴² It has been alleged that this included Taliban leaders as well as members of other terrorist organizations.⁴³

The U.S. was limited in its ability to apply pressure to prevent Pakistan from supporting the Taliban in fear of losing their support and destabilizing the country. Therefore, after Pakistan agreed publicly to help the U.S. war on terrorism, the U.S. adopted an ambiguous policy toward the ISI.⁴⁴ Even though the U.S. promises to not distinguish between terrorists and their hosts or supporters, the U.S. exercised restraint in its dealings with Pakistan, assisted in increasing Pakistan's security and governance capacities and sought concurrence from Pakistan's government for actions in the region. This was far from the "with us or against us" mentality originally stated. The U.S. goal of a stable Afghanistan has been subordinated to the need for a stable Pakistan that could maintain strong control over its nuclear weapons. Additionally, preventing conflict between Pakistan and India remains important.⁴⁵

Pakistan took public actions that seemed to confirm its desire to support the U.S. President Musharraf promised to clean up the ISI. The head of the ISI, Mahmud Ahmed, was forced to retire.⁴⁶ This became a recurring cycle in U.S.-Pakistan relations after 2001. The U.S. engaged Pakistan and encourage change in the ISI. Pakistan promised change and reform. However, no significant change occurred. There have been some assessments of this predicament. One reason could be that Pakistan had enduring interests with enduring

⁴² Yaniv Barzilai, *102 Days of War: How Osama Bin Laden, Al Qaeda & the Taliban Survived 2001* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2013), 78.

⁴³ Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, "India's Response to Terrorism after 13 December 2001," *Conflict, Security & Development* 3, no. 2 (August 1, 2003): 277–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1467880032000126967>.

⁴⁴ Coll, *Directorate S*, 64.

⁴⁵ Felbab-Brown, "Why Pakistan Supports Terrorist Groups, and Why the U.S. Finds It so Hard to Induce Change."

⁴⁶ Coll, 87.

preference orderings and these are difficult or impossible to change.⁴⁷ Another reason could be that leadership, both civilian and military, is unable to make the change.⁴⁸

American and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intelligence revealed in 2007 and 2008 that Musharraf had authorized deniable support to the Taliban. This included retired ISI officers and other cutouts providing resources, up to but not including the flow of weapons to the Taliban.⁴⁹ Despite the presence of overwhelming evidence of Pakistani duplicity, the American intelligence community continued to maintain that the lack of organizational control of individual agents within the ISI was to blame for their support for the Taliban.⁵⁰ The belief was that individual officers and agents pursued their agendas and the military and civilian leadership were unable to stop them, but key members within the Bush administration were starting to doubt this lack of control.

A critical event in U.S. policy toward Pakistan and the ISI during the Bush administration occurred in 2008. As Bush neared the end of his term as president, a bomb was detonated near the Indian embassy in Kabul. Intelligence confirming Pakistan influenced the targeting infuriated Bush and hardened his opinion of ISI as supporters of terrorists.⁵¹ The administration considered its options in response to the attack. Ultimately, the administration decided that it would no longer seek concurrence for actions taken inside Pakistan such as drone strikes and that it would expand authorities for conducting these actions.⁵² However, the administration did not want to break the relationship with Pakistan because of Pakistan's strategic importance.⁵³ The administration's debate could be

⁴⁷ Felbab-Brown.

⁴⁸ Asad Durrani, *Pakistan Adrift: Navigating Troubled Waters* (London: Hurst, 2018); S. Paul Kapur and Sumit Ganguly, "The Jihad Paradox: Pakistan and Islamist Militancy in South Asia," *International Security* 37, no. 1 (2012): 111–41, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00090; Shuja Nawaz, "Who Controls Pakistan's Security Forces?" (United States Institute of Peace, December 2011), <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR%20297.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Coll, *Directorate S*, 289.

⁵⁰ Coll, 290.

⁵¹ Coll, 309.

⁵² Coll, 311.

⁵³ Coll, 312.

summarized as being between one group that favored more engagement with Pakistan and a second group that believed in applying pressure through sanctions or other actions.⁵⁴

Additional administrators within the U.S. government were also beginning to view Pakistan through a different lens. By 2008, intelligence reporting had shaped Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen's opinion on the competency of the ISI.⁵⁵ He concluded that the highest leadership of the ISI was held accountable by the military and civilian leadership of Pakistan. The middle of the ISI bureaucracy consisted of compartmented operations run by individuals with a variety of backgrounds. Finally, there was a portion of the ISI that was outside of the bureaucratic structure that included retired senior leaders with their relationships with militants. Admiral Mullen's continuity between the Bush and Obama administrations would ensure these beliefs would continue to shape U.S. policy.

Additionally, Eliot Cohen, counselor to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, questioned the U.S. relationship with the ISI. In late 2008, militants from an ISI proxy, Lashkar-e-Taiba, attacked several targets in Mumbai, India and killed 166 people. Intelligence concluded that members of the ISI had at the very least supported the attack. Analysts determined that ISI had direct involvement in the planning and execution. The attack was another exposure of Pakistan and the ISI as supporters of militants. After the Mumbai attack, Cohen stated, "I think in some ways we were actually fighting the ISI."⁵⁶ The Bush administration would end with a changed outlook on the relationship between the U.S. and Pakistan.

E. ISI-TALIBAN RELATIONSHIP DURING THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION (2009-2016)

When the Obama administration inherited the war in Afghanistan, the president initiated a review of the effort and its ties to American interests. In March 2009, President Obama announced a new strategy for Afghanistan and the region. The analysis identified

⁵⁴ Coll, *Directorate S*, 313.

⁵⁵ Coll, 322.

⁵⁶ Coll, 347.

defeating al Qaeda as the most significant U.S. interest in the area. Publicly, the president focused on this goal. In reality, the President continued the previous strategy of resourcing a counterinsurgency effort to degrade the Taliban while emphasizing the importance of defeating al Qaeda and ensuring Pakistan maintained control of its nuclear weapons.⁵⁷

In 2010, disagreement concerning the importance of Pakistan to the Taliban led the U.S. to pursue different policies toward Pakistan. General Stanley McChrystal (at the time commander of the International Security and Assistance Force) believed that the war could be won without addressing the Taliban sanctuary in Pakistan and pursued a strategy that would accomplish this.⁵⁸ The CIA used drone strikes against Taliban leaders within Pakistan as part of a broader leadership decapitation strategy. The State Department pursued talks with the Taliban and sought to influence Pakistan to align its actions better with U.S. interests. This lack of congruent policy prevented the U.S. from bringing to bear all instruments of national power in a focused manner.

In 2011, Operation Neptune Spear, the raid to kill Osama bin Laden, altered U.S.-Pakistan relations. The fact that the assault occurred in Abbottabad, near Pakistani military institutions, led many in the Obama administration to the hypothesis that Pakistan was either completely incompetent in its intelligence or willingly playing host to terrorist leaders. Information seized during the raid also caused the Obama administration to reassess the war in Afghanistan. This intelligence provided evidence that the Taliban had told bin Laden that he should not return to a future Afghanistan controlled by the Taliban.⁵⁹ It now appeared that the Taliban no longer wanted to play host to terrorists and therefore was not an enemy that the U.S. needed to destroy. This information provided the Obama administration with evidence to begin creating a withdrawal plan in Afghanistan.⁶⁰

An opportunity that arose during the Obama administration that had not seemed possible since 2001 was negotiations with the Taliban. There were many concerns in the

⁵⁷ Coll, *Directorate S*, 366.

⁵⁸ Coll, 438.

⁵⁹ Coll, 560.

⁶⁰ Coll, 556.

administration on engaging the Taliban in negotiation talks. First, there was the possibility that the Taliban's intent in proposing negotiations was to divide the NATO coalition fighting the war by appearing ready to compromise. Another fear was that the ISI would act as spoilers to any talks. There was also disagreement over whether talks with the Taliban should involve reintegrating low-level fighters first or focus on reconciliation with high-level leaders.⁶¹ A result of the discussions with the Taliban was that the Afghan and Pakistani governments could sense an end to or a reduction in U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. The Karzai administration felt that ISI's policy was to help NATO leave Afghanistan with honor.⁶²

F. ISI-TALIBAN RELATIONSHIP DURING THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION (2017-PRESENT)

In August 2017, the Trump administration revealed its new South Asia strategy.⁶³ While similar to the approach of previous administrations, there were several key differences including a conditions-based methodology, a long-term commitment to the region, and a focus on Pakistan's role as a safe haven to terrorist groups. In January 2018, President Trump announced that the U.S. had suspended military aid to Pakistan based upon information that the ISI provided direct military and intelligence aid to the Taliban that resulted in the death of U.S. soldiers. This has been described as the most significant punitive action toward Pakistan since 2001.⁶⁴ Although a unique punitive diplomatic reaction, the announcement only revealed the "new" strategy remains a continuation of previous administrations' policies of manipulating only a single lever to influence Pakistani actions: money. The U.S. could have applied pressure to Pakistan in numerous ways. For example, the U.S. could have removed Pakistan's status as a major non-NATO ally. An

⁶¹ Coll, *Directorate S*, 416.

⁶² Coll, 437.

⁶³ Donald J. Trump, "Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia," The White House, August 21, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-strategy-afghanistan-south-asia/>.

⁶⁴ Felbab-Brown, "Why Pakistan Supports Terrorist Groups, and Why the U.S. Finds It so Hard to Induce Change."

even more aggressive step would have been to designate Pakistan as a state sponsor of terrorism.⁶⁵

G. SUMMARY OF U.S. ATTEMPTS TO DISRUPT THE ISI-TALIBAN RELATIONSHIP

In summary, the U.S. has pursued a policy of: engaging and assisting Pakistan to expand its capabilities; restraint in the face of Pakistani sponsored attacks; and seeking concurrence on U.S. actions in Pakistan. Only the bin Laden raid and a short period of drone strikes violated this policy. Ultimately, the U.S. has been unwilling to degrade U.S.-Pakistan relations further. There are reasons for not taking more significant steps to coerce Pakistan that would result in a break in U.S.-Pakistan relations. The U.S. has substantial interests in Pakistan, including ensuring the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons, encouraging democracy, and preventing increased Chinese influence. Similarly, Pakistan has enduring interests in Afghanistan. Ultimately, the consistent policies on the part of Pakistan and the U.S. across multiple administrations may signal that it is not possible to manipulate these nations' preference orderings through incentives or punishment. In the words of President Obama, "Look, we know Pakistan is dysfunctional. I take that as a given, the baseline. Let's work at what we can do. And let's stop trying to change their minds about where Pakistan's interests lie."⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Felbab-Brown.

⁶⁶ Coll, *Directorate S*, 558.

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III. ANALYSIS OF THE ISI-TALIBAN RELATIONSHIP

This chapter analyzes the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)-Taliban relationship using aspects of principal-agent theory to identify exploitable weaknesses. In particular, this chapter examines the motivations that led the ISI to delegate to the Taliban, the sources of tension within the association, control methods utilized by the ISI on the Taliban, and how these friction points contribute to the overall weaknesses of the relationship.

A. REASONS TO DELEGATE / MOTIVATIONS

The motivations for a state to sponsor terrorism fall into two general categories: ideology and rational self-interest. Scholars argue that there must be some level of rational self-interest and that ideology alone has not been enough to maintain a relationship between a state sponsor and a terrorist group in most historical cases.⁶⁷ In the ISI-Taliban relationship, both ideological and self-interest motivations are present. Coll assesses that some members within the ISI have ideological connections to the Taliban.⁶⁸ These same individuals view the Taliban as the best method to achieve Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan.

Principal-agent theory identifies specialization and comparative advantage as reasons for the ISI to delegate to the Afghan Taliban.⁶⁹ By delegating efforts, the ISI relieves the Pakistani security apparatus of the need to develop forces specializing in unconventional and irregular warfare. Utilizing the Taliban allows Pakistan to dedicate the preponderance of its military resources to confront India as well as maintain internal security.

Demonstrating a commitment to Pakistani interests in Afghanistan and increasing the credibility that they will protect those interests is a third reason identified in principal-

⁶⁷ Byman and Kreps, "Agents of Destruction?," 12–13.

⁶⁸ Coll, *Directorate S*, 47.

⁶⁹ Byman and Kreps, 3–4, 10.

agent theory for the ISI to delegate to the Taliban.⁷⁰ This reason consists of two components. First, by creating a more viable Taliban, the ISI has ensured that a group inside Afghanistan will continue to look after Pakistan's interests even with changes in the civilian leadership of Pakistan and the possibility of changing policies toward the United States (U.S.) and Afghanistan. Second, after the attacks of 9/11, Pakistan could not realistically openly reject the previously-mentioned U.S. demands. Therefore, ISI would demonstrate Pakistan's commitment to the Taliban through the clandestine support of the group. The Taliban could then actively resist U.S. actions that undermine Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan while maintaining plausible deniability.

Furthermore, Pakistani demographics and domestic politics motivate the ISI to delegate to the Taliban.⁷¹ The Afghan Taliban enjoy widespread support among ethnic Pashtuns in Pakistan, who number over 30 million of Pakistan's population of approximately 205 million.⁷² If Pakistan removed its support from the Afghan Taliban, this action would likely create a domestic political backlash. At worst, there could be increased pressure by Pashtuns for an independent Pashtunistan. Pakistan would likely fear that its enemies would take advantage of this situation and support such a movement to weaken Pakistan.

Plausible deniability is not identified by principal-agent theorists as an important reason to delegate because the theory is normally applied to legal business transactions. However, given the illicit nature of terrorist activities, it is an important reason for state sponsors, including the ISI, to delegate.⁷³ The ISI requires the Taliban to conduct actions on behalf of Pakistan, but desires anonymity to prevent retaliation from the U.S. and other nations. The juxtaposition of requirements to this principal-agent relationship provides a weakness that could be exploited to disrupt the association.

⁷⁰ Byman and Kreps, "Agents of Destruction?," 4–5.

⁷¹ Byman and Kreps, 4–5, 12, 13.

⁷² "The World Factbook — Central Intelligence Agency," accessed October 3, 2018, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/pk.html>.

⁷³ Byman and Kreps, 6.

B. TENSIONS IN THE RELATIONSHIP

When delegation occurs, principal-agent literature has identified numerous reasons for tensions in a relationship. In this section, we will explore several of the theoretical tensions that we believe are present in the ISI-Taliban relationship. These include differences in payoff structures, differences in information, weakening control as a result of increased capabilities, and the possibility of the Taliban spoiling the Pakistani interests.

Differences in payoff structures based on differences in goals and priorities has caused significant tensions within the ISI-Taliban relationship.⁷⁴ For example, in the past, Pakistan has likely provided specific targeting guidance to the Taliban, such as in the attack on the Indian embassy in Kabul.⁷⁵ While the Taliban might also find some benefit in the attack by demonstrating the lack of security provided by the U.S. and Afghan governments, the killing of civilians risks backlash from the population of Afghanistan. This idea can be applied to other attacks such as the seizing of populated areas that often result in high civilian casualties. This tension is mitigated by the fact that the Taliban can deny responsibility if attacks go poorly and can place blame on government security forces for many civilian casualties.

Differences in information often lead to divergent preferences that negatively impact principal-agent relationships.⁷⁶ This tension can be mitigated by a close, information-sharing relationship between the principal and the agent. We assess that this is the case with the ISI and the Taliban. However, even different interpretations of the same information could lead to differences in preferences between the principal and the agent. For example, after the release of the Trump administration's South Asia Policy, the Taliban and Pakistan could have different assessments. Pakistan could assess the claim that the U.S. will remain in Afghanistan as long as needed to defeat the Taliban is credible. This assessment results in a preference to engage in peace talks. In contrast, the Taliban could determine that an indefinite U.S. presence in Afghanistan is not reliable and that the U.S.

⁷⁴ Byman and Kreps, "Agents of Destruction?," 6–7.

⁷⁵ Coll, *Directorate S*, 309.

⁷⁶ Byman and Kreps, 7, 10.

will likely leave at some point in the near future. This assessment results in a preference to continue the campaign of violence until the U.S. departs.

Loss of control resulting from increased capabilities of the Taliban is a third source of tension in the ISI-Taliban relationship.⁷⁷ Control mechanisms will be discussed later in this chapter; however, Pakistan has lost some of its control over the Taliban since 2001. At one time, Pakistan provided funding, lethal aid, advice, and guidance to the Taliban. As the Taliban took control of territory in Afghanistan, they developed new sources of financing from the areas they controlled. Their leadership also became more experienced at directing the insurgency. Their leadership developed enough legitimacy and credibility to negotiate with countries such as Iran and Russia to diversify their sponsors.⁷⁸

An additional source of tension in the ISI-Taliban relationship is a result of the Taliban acting as a spoiler while Pakistan has been interested in supporting the peace process.⁷⁹ In 2012 and 2017, high-ranking Pakistani government officials called on the Taliban to join peace talks to end the war in Afghanistan.⁸⁰ One could question whether these requests were authentic or just an effort to show the U.S. that Pakistan was attempting to end the conflict. If one assumes that they were genuine, Pakistan could have had several reasons to support peace. One idea would be that Pakistan assessed that the Taliban were in a position to receive significant concessions or political power through peace talks. If this was the case, the Taliban acted as spoilers to Pakistan's interests because the Taliban saw the situation differently. They saw an opportunity to win the war outright or stood to gain more from continued fighting.

⁷⁷ Byman and Kreps, "Agents of Destruction?," 8.

⁷⁸ Carlotta Gall, "In Afghanistan, U.S. Exits, and Iran Comes In," *New York Times*, August 5, 2017, sec. Asia Pacific, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/05/world/asia/iran-afghanistan-taliban.html>; Gall and Khapalwak, "Taliban Leader Feared Pakistan Before He Was Killed."

⁷⁹ Byman and Kreps, 2, 8–9.

⁸⁰ Richard Leiby, "Pakistan Calls on Afghan Taliban to Join Peace Talks," *Washington Post*, February 24, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/pakistan-calls-on-afghan-taliban-to-join-peace-talks/2012/02/24/gIQAGFZmXR_story.html; "Pakistan, Afghanistan Appeal To Taliban To Join Peace Talks," RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, December 26, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/pakistan-afghanistan-taliban-peace-talks/28939557.html>.

The domestic political costs that Pakistan's government sometimes faces for supporting the Taliban is a final source of tension in the ISI-Taliban relationship. The Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban or Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) are separate organizations, but they are not adversaries. Members of different groups travel freely through territory held by the other side, and there are some signs that they work together in certain situations. The TTP has carried out major terrorist attacks in Pakistan such as the Peshawar school attack that killed many children.⁸¹ When attacks such as these happen, Pakistani citizens are left to question why their government supports a group that is similar to the one that attacks them.

C. CONTROL MECHANISMS

In principal-agent theory, control mechanisms are methods that the principal can use to manage the agent. In the case of state sponsorship of terrorism, the principal and agent are balancing agent autonomy with agency losses.⁸² Increasing control of the agent risks exposing the clandestine nature of the support and risks alienating the agent by taking away their autonomy. The agent must balance accepting state support with the conditions that will be required by the principal. When considering control mechanisms in the ISI-Taliban relationship, it is best to study the history of the relationship in two periods.

During the period before 2001, the ISI had numerous control mechanisms to manage the Taliban. The lack of international attention on Afghanistan allowed Pakistan to support the Taliban overtly. The ISI could manipulate the resources it provided to the Taliban to encourage or discourage actions. These resources included direct advising of the Taliban by the ISI, funding, lethal aid, and a range of diplomatic options.⁸³ Other mechanisms that Pakistan used before 2001 included diplomatic incentives. As stated previously, Pakistan was one of only three countries to recognize the Taliban as the official

⁸¹ Declan Walsh, "Taliban Besiege Pakistan School, Leaving 145 Dead," *New York Times*, December 16, 2014, sec. Asia Pacific, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/17/world/asia/taliban-attack-pakistani-school.html>.

⁸² Byman and Kreps, "Agents of Destruction?," 6, 12.

⁸³ Bruce Riedel, "Pakistan, Taliban and the Afghan Quagmire."

government of Afghanistan.⁸⁴ Before official recognition, Pakistan tried to increase international support for the Taliban at a meeting in Herat with western ambassadors, including the U.S. ambassador.⁸⁵ The additional control mechanisms allowed the ISI to make smaller adjustments to the course the Taliban was taking at any time. This included leadership decisions and a push to get the Taliban to take the northern regions of Afghanistan, under Northern Alliance control at the time.⁸⁶

During the period after 2001, the ISI had far fewer control mechanisms at its disposal. Several factors caused this lack of options. Overt carrots or encouragement to the Taliban were no longer possible due to the U.S. attention on the region. Additionally, the Taliban during this period had options to diversify its sources of support to Iran and other nations that saw benefits in disrupting U.S. efforts and preventing the rise of other groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria—Khorasan province (ISIS-K).

After 2001, the most significant control mechanism that the ISI possessed was a result of allowing the Taliban leadership so-called sanctuary in Pakistan. By the nature of their presence (along with their families) in Pakistani territory, the ISI can apply pressure to the Taliban by withholding services or threatening expulsion.⁸⁷ Agent removal is an additional mechanism that involves the principal killing or capturing a leader who exhibits interests that are not aligned with the principal or other forms of shirking behavior. An example of this in the ISI-Taliban relationship was the death of Mullah Akhtar Mohammed Mansour, the leader of the Taliban after Mullah Omar. Mullah Mansour was killed in an airstrike in Pakistan. Many analysts believe that his death was engineered by the ISI to remove a leader who had lost their trust.⁸⁸ This trust may have been lost for several reasons. First, the Taliban leadership was divided after he assumed control with some supporting

⁸⁴ Olivier Roy, "The Taliban: A Strategic Tool for Pakistan," in *Pakistan: Nationalism Without A Nation*, ed. Christophe Jaffrelot (New York: Zed Books, 2002), 156.

⁸⁵ Roy, 155.

⁸⁶ Roy, 156.

⁸⁷ Abubakar Siddique, "Aziz Admits Pakistan Housing Afghan Taliban Leaders," DAWN.COM, March 2, 2016, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1243093>.

⁸⁸ Gall and Khapalwak, "Taliban Leader Feared Pakistan Before He Was Killed."

him and others disagreeing with the decision. Pakistan may have feared that the Taliban could splinter over this issue. Second, Mullah Mansour was seeking support from Iran and Russia, and Pakistan may have seen their agent moving further from their influence. Third, Mullah Mansour resisted numerous Pakistani demands on the conduct of the conflict in Afghanistan and was taking actions to reduce the Taliban's reliance on Pakistan. If the ISI supported or enabled the killing of Mullah Mansour, the ISI risked losing the trust of Mansour's supporters. Even those that did not support Mansour may now have to consider that the ISI would betray them in the future if they disagreed.⁸⁹

D. ASSESSING THE RELATIONSHIP

An understanding of the reasons to delegate, tensions between the principal and agent, and control mechanisms in the relationship allows a more thorough assessment of the ISI-Taliban relationship. The ISI and Taliban's motivations are both rational self-interest and ideology-based; therefore, the reasons to delegate are a strength of this relationship. Differences in payoff structures, the loss of control due to increased Taliban capabilities, and the Taliban spoiling Pakistan's efforts at successful settlement are weaknesses of this relationship. Most importantly, the lack of mechanisms that provide complete ISI control over the Taliban is the most significant weakness of the relationship.

⁸⁹ Gall and Khapalwak, "Taliban Leader Feared Pakistan Before He Was Killed."

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IV. OPTIONS FOR DISRUPTING THE ISI-TALIBAN RELATIONSHIP

This chapter focuses on developing options for the United States (U.S.) to reduce the Inter-Services Intelligence's (ISI) support of the Taliban. In particular, this chapter will identify actions that will exploit weaknesses within the ISI-Taliban relationship based upon the reasons that led the ISI to delegate to the Taliban, the sources of tension within the association, and control methods utilized by the ISI on the Taliban. These steps are intended as a menu of options that would be available to the U.S. to drive a wedge between the two organizations. With each strategy, we will seek to provide opportunities that would enable the approach to work, show examples of similar strategies being employed, and assess the risks involved in applying the strategy. Table 1, summarizes the recommended strategies based on the target and the goal.

Table 1. Strategies for increasing principal-agent problems

Target	Goal	Strategy
Reasons to Delegate	Remove or reduce	• Reduce deniability
Tensions	Increase	• Inflict costs on Taliban for receiving support • Disinformation • Emphasize nationalism concerns
Control Mechanisms	Remove	• Reduce presence of Taliban leadership in Pakistan

A. REMOVING OR REDUCING THE REASONS TO DELEGATE

Weakening the ISI's motivations to delegate to the Taliban is one method to disrupt the principal-agent relationship. Reducing the deniability of Pakistani involvement in the sponsorship of the Taliban would minimize or eliminate a primary reason for the ISI to delegate to the Taliban. The U.S. and Afghan governments should leak or publicize intelligence on ISI support of the Taliban. This inability of the Pakistani government to deny supporting the Taliban would create a backlash within the international community

and force Pakistan to choose between continued support of the Taliban or the Afghan government.

An example of how states that support terrorist groups can be exposed and forced to withdraw that support is the case of the Abu Nidal Organization (ANO). The ANO did not have a single state sponsor, but they developed relationships with some countries including several in eastern Europe as well as Syria. In these relationships, the ANO agreed not to attack their host countries if granted permission to operate there in some form. In some countries, they were conducting fundraising and recruiting, and in others, they conducted training and operational planning. The U.S. received information from allied intelligence agencies and threatened to expose these relationships. The countries chose to expel or shut down ANO operations within their borders to avoid the exposure.⁹⁰

Assuring Pakistan that its interests can be advanced through means other than insurgency and terrorism would reduce Pakistan's need to hedge against changes in U.S. policy by supporting the Taliban. Pakistan fears being excluded from any peace process or political solution that involves the U.S., GIRoA, and the Taliban.

Pakistan has withdrawn support for terrorist organizations in the past when the reasons to delegate have lessened. The ISI supported the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) in the 1980s and 1990s to apply pressure on India in the conflict over the disputed territory of Kashmir. In the 1990s, the ISI recognized that the JKLF's interests were not aligned with Pakistan's. The JKLF sought an independent Kashmir rather than a Kashmir joined with Pakistan. Additionally, the JKLF was not as successful militarily or compliant to the ISI's demands as other militant groups that began to emerge. Pakistan withdrew their support of the JKLF as a result.⁹¹

The example of the JKLF, as well as the earlier case of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, highlights some of the risks involved with these strategies. Pakistan's history and success with delegating to militant organizations mean that the ISI would find a different group

⁹⁰ Timothy Naftali, "U.S. Counterterrorism before Bin Laden," *International Journal* 60, no. 1 (March 1, 2005): 25–34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002070200506000103>.

⁹¹ Kapur and Ganguly, "The Jihad Paradox: Pakistan and Islamist Militancy in South Asia."

than the Taliban to support. This could be a portion of the Taliban willing to meet the ISI's demands and align their interests more with Pakistan. Additionally, Pakistan has other sources of leverage on Afghanistan that can cause significant problems for U.S. goals there. For example, Pakistan regularly threatens to expel Afghan refugees in Pakistan. If Pakistan followed through on this threat, Afghanistan would struggle to absorb millions of people into fledgling economic and governance systems.

B. INCREASING THE TENSIONS

Exacerbating existing tensions between Pakistan and the Taliban could disrupt the principal-agent relationship by increasing the chances that one or both sides will develop a negative view of their arrangement. First, the U.S. could inflict high costs on the Taliban that receive support from Pakistan relative to those that do not receive support. This action is meant to create doubts within the Taliban about the value of accepting or not accepting ISI support when compared to the costs. Current kinetic efforts are focused on elements of the Taliban that are deemed irreconcilable while efforts at peace talks and reconciliation are focused on reconcilable portions of the organization. A different strategy, aimed at increasing tensions, would be to target the individuals in the Taliban that are closest to the ISI. The effectiveness of this strategy would be increased if costs could be inflicted in response to actions taken by the Taliban at the direction of the ISI. For example, if the Taliban had suffered significant casualties after attacking the Indian embassy, they may have questioned whether it was in their interest to conduct attacks on Pakistan's behalf.

Second, the U.S. could spread disinformation to increase tension between the ISI and the Taliban. In particular, creating suspicion of infiltration has been a successful strategy targeting state-sponsored terrorist groups in the past. The ANO was fed disinformation that it had been infiltrated by spies. This campaign resulted in internal executions of over 300 members of the organization.⁹² Disinformation campaigns such as these can be designed to exploit the principal-agent relationship. The U.S. could feed information to the ISI to increase the credibility of the information in the eyes of the

⁹² Byman and Kreps, "Agents of Destruction?," 14.

Taliban. Another strategy would be to create suspicion whenever a Taliban leader is killed that it was the result of the ISI betraying them. The goal of the strategy should be to increase suspicion in both directions—in other words, Taliban suspicion of the ISI and ISI suspicion of the Taliban. A significant risk of this strategy is the harm that it could do to the relationships between the militaries and intelligence agencies of the U.S. and Pakistan.

Third, the U.S. could exploit nationalism concerns among Pashtuns in Afghanistan to increase tension between the ISI and the Taliban. Portraying the Taliban as tools of Pakistan because of the support they receive would delegitimize the Taliban to Pashtuns. Opponents of Lebanese Hezbollah have achieved some success by communicating a parallel narrative in Lebanon. In recent years, Hezbollah has participated in the Syrian civil war in support of the Assad regime, one of their sponsors and a fellow client of Iran. This participation has come with costs in blood and resources for Lebanese members of the group. These costs undermine Hezbollah's narrative that they are defenders of the Lebanese Shia and Christian communities.⁹³ A risk of this strategy is that it potentially increases divisions within Afghanistan. By emphasizing Pashtun independence from outside influence, the separation between Pashtuns and the other ethnic groups of Afghanistan is highlighted. It is not in Pakistan's interests for Afghanistan to be divided into two states for many reasons. It is also likely not in the interests of the U.S. or Afghanistan's other neighbors.

C. REMOVING THE CONTROL MECHANISMS

Lack of control mechanisms by the ISI is the most exploitable weakness within the ISI-Taliban relationship. Physical control of the Taliban leadership and their families in Pakistan is the primary control mechanism utilized by the ISI. Knowing their locations and providing the necessities, most notably security, balances the scales more in favor of the ISI. This mechanism is so important that losing this form of control over the Taliban would likely severely reduce or stop the ISI from providing support. To eliminate this control

⁹³ Loveday Morris, "For Hezbollah, Risks in Backing Syria's Assad," *Washington Post*, June 3, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/for-hezbollah-risks-in-backing-syrias-assad/2013/06/03/0c25202a-cc79-11e2-8f6b-67f40e176f03_story.html.

mechanism, the U.S. and Afghanistan could take multiple actions to influence the Taliban leadership to reside in Afghanistan. The U.S. could make Pakistan less secure for Taliban leaders by increasing targeting within Pakistan. As part of negotiations, a place in Afghanistan could be offered to the Taliban leaders and their families. This location would be safe from targeting efforts and limit Pakistani influence. General Abdul Raziq, the former police chief of Kandahar province who was killed in 2018 in an attack claimed by the Taliban, proposed a sanctuary for Taliban who wanted to reconcile. He established such an area and oversaw the return of several dozen former militants from Pakistan.⁹⁴ General Raziq's success in maintaining security in Kandahar province made him an important target for the Taliban. His efforts to have even farther-reaching effects on the conflict by bringing Taliban leaders out of Pakistan, may have made him a target for Pakistan as well.

The return of Taliban leaders to Afghanistan could be viewed as an intermediate step toward a political solution. A previous examination of including insurgents in political processes identified four key factors for success: (1) the population, government, and insurgents must believe that there is a stalemate or no military solution to the conflict; (2) the government should not require disarmament as a precondition in order to maintain the stalemate; (3) the government must recognize the legitimacy of the insurgency and its leaders; and (4) government institutions must be strong enough to manage the inclusion of insurgents.⁹⁵ Other studies have raised similar points.⁹⁶ An essential step to creating these conditions in Afghanistan is granting some level of amnesty to leaders to legitimize them and allow them to enter the political process. It would also demonstrate that disarmament of the entire organization is not a precondition for their political involvement.

One way to analyze the potential value of killing Taliban leaders would be to overlay Freeman's theory on terrorist leadership with our proposal to disrupt the principal-

⁹⁴ *Express Tribune*. "Afghan Strongman Shelters Former Taliban Insurgents." April 27, 2017. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1394856/afghan-strongman-shelters-former-taliban-insurgents/>.

⁹⁵ Heather S. Gregg, "Setting a Place at the Table: Ending Insurgencies through the Political Process," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 22, no. 4 (October 1, 2011): 644–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2011.599168>.

⁹⁶ Daniel Byman, "Talking with Insurgents: A Guide for the Perplexed," *The Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (April 1, 2009): 125–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01636600902775565>.

agent relationship. This combination of theories results in Figure 1. If the principal-agent relationship is good and the leader provides operational guidance and inspiration, the U.S. should concur and work with Pakistan to remove the leader. If the principal-agent relationship is not good and the leader does not provide operational guidance and inspiration, the U.S. should disrupt Pakistan's efforts to remove the leader. If the principal-agent relationship is not good and the leader provides operational direction and inspiration, or the principal-agent relationship is good and the leader does not provide operational direction and inspiration, the decision may have to be based on other factors. The decision would need to analyze the importance of the leader to the organization against the importance of the principal or the sponsor. Additional elements that would need to be considered including the likely successors to the leader and their relationship or standing with the principal. Additionally, an analysis of the positive and negative effects of the sponsor would need to be included. For example, the principal may provide little support and restrain the group significantly.

		Principal-Agent Relationship	
		Strong	Weak
Leader (Agent)	Provides inspiration and operational direction	Remove and disrupt PA relationship	Requires analysis of leader vs. sponsor
	Does not provide inspiration and operational direction	Requires analysis of leader vs. sponsor	Do not remove

Figure 1. Leadership targeting and principal-agent problems

D. CONCLUSION

The U.S. military viewed the killing of Mullah Mansour in the same way that other targeted killings of terrorist leaders have been viewed: an opportunity to remove a leader from an organization. Leaders generally provide inspiration and/or operational direction to their organization. Removing a leader who provides these functions is likely to be effective at causing disruption to the organization.⁹⁷ Furthermore, there is a possibility of causing conflict over the succession plan.

Unfortunately, in hindsight, the killing of Mullah Mansour may have had some unifying effects on the Taliban. The Taliban were not unified under Mullah Mansour. After it was revealed that Mullah Omar had been dead for years and the secret kept from the

⁹⁷ Michael Freeman, "A Theory of Terrorist Leadership (and Its Consequences for Leadership Targeting)," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 4 (2014): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2012.751912>.

world, including much of the Taliban, some leaders were upset with Mullah Mansour. The leadership had not chosen Mullah Mansour. Instead he assumed the position and then used the power of the position to consolidate his hold on the organization. During his leadership, the Taliban had begun to show fractures. His killing by the U.S. allowed the leadership to choose new leaders that brought back together some of the factions.⁹⁸

If the U.S. instead viewed the Mullah Mansour situation as an opportunity to increase principal-agent problems between the ISI and the Taliban, the strategy may have been different. The fact that Pakistan condoned or orchestrated the killing would be the indicator that during that time period these problems had increased. The strategy could have been to provide safe haven to Mullah Mansour inside of Afghanistan. Another option that could have been done in conjunction with his killing or with providing him safe haven would be disinformation campaigns. An option for this type of campaign would be to convince other Taliban leaders that Pakistan planned to orchestrate their killing. Another option would be to convince the Taliban leaders that their network had been infiltrated by sources providing information to the U.S. The U.S. could have also leaked information on Pakistan's knowledge of the Taliban leader's location. Pakistan consistently denies that it knows the location of the leaders of the Taliban.

E. FUTURE RESEARCH AND APPLICATIONS

The framework outlined in this project may apply to other state-sponsored terrorist groups, insurgencies, and proxies. Examining the reasons to delegate, reasons for tensions in the relationship, and the control mechanisms employed by the principal may provide strategies that make supporting proxies less attractive. As mentioned previously, there are risks with removing the support of a sponsor. In some situations, the principal uses the control mechanisms to moderate the actions of an extreme group and places an upper limit on the capabilities of the group.

⁹⁸ Hussain, Hamzah Rifaat. "Haibatullah Akhundzada and the Resurgence of the Taliban." *The Diplomat*. June 4, 2016. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/haibatullah-akhundzada-and-the-resurgence-of-the-taliban/>.

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