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## Why Pakistan Won't Go After Afghan Taliban

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Voice of America

Pakistan is hesitant to take action against the Afghan Taliban on its soil because of concerns the group will re-direct its violence against Pakistan and Afghan intelligence will support it, a senior Pakistani official said.

“We have to think twice before taking action. Anybody we take action against is immediately supported from the other side,” the official told VOA on the condition of anonymity.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani recently demanded that Pakistan either take military action against Taliban commanders on its soil or arrest them and hand them over to Kabul.

Hiding in Afghanistan

Pakistan has often complained that when it launched military operations in Swat and South Waziristan in 2009, militants belonging to Pakistani Taliban took shelter in Afghanistan and started using it as a base, with the help of Afghan intelligence, to carry out operations against Pakistan.

As recently as the start of the current operation in North Waziristan in 2014, the Pakistani official said, the Afghan government issued refugee cards to militants who escaped to the other side.

Senior journalist and regional expert Rahimullah Yousufzai said the leadership of several Pakistani Taliban groups, including Mullah Fazlullah, the head of Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan, was hiding in Afghanistan.

He added that one of the militant leaders, Omar Khalid Khorasani, whose group Jamaat-ul-Ahrar claimed responsibility for an Easter bombing in Lahore in March that killed more than 70 people, was supposed to be getting support from the Afghan intelligence agencies.

Afghanistan's ambassador to Pakistan, Hazrat Omar Zakhilwal, however, rejected the assessment of the Pakistani official.

"It's easy to avoid responsibility and blame someone else for it," he said, adding that militants like Fazlullah and Khorasani were part of the Pakistani Taliban, who were an "outcome of policies that are still the status quo."

#### Enabling the Taliban

Pakistan, he said, had created an environment that enabled the presence of both the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban.

In addition, he said, Pakistan scuttled opportunities presented by Afghanistan for mutual cooperation in order to change this situation.

"Didn't the Afghan intelligence help with the capture of the Army Public School in Peshawar attackers?" he asked, mentioning a devastating attack in December of 2014 in which more than 130 school children were killed.

In return, he said, Pakistan did not take any steps against the Haqqani Network, an Afghan Taliban group that officials at NATO's Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan have described as one of the "most lethal" groups in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan and the United States allege the network has ties to Pakistan's intelligence agencies and its leadership operates out of Pakistan.

Afghan officials recently said the group has effectively taken battlefield control of the Afghan Taliban. They also blame the group for a deadly attack in Kabul in April that killed nearly 70 people.

Zakhilwal said the network remains a "core irritant" between the two countries and the lack of action against them contributes to the trust deficit.

Relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan have deteriorated over the last year, after a burst of warmth in early 2015. Officials on both sides acknowledge that they do not trust each other.

### Improving Relations

Zakhilwal said President Ashraf Ghani, after his election, took the first step towards improving relations with Pakistan but did not get anything in return. He expected Pakistan to help bring the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table.

The first official contact between the Taliban and the Afghan government occurred in Murree, near Pakistan's capital Islamabad, in July of 2015. By that time, Zakhilwal said, the trust "had already been broken."

A second round, scheduled for the end of July, was cancelled when news broke that the Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Omar, who was supposed to have blessed the talks, had been dead for a few year.

Efforts to rejuvenate the talks resulted in a four nation Quadrilateral Coordination Group, with representatives from the United States and China joining Afghanistan and Pakistan. The group adopted a roadmap with steps leading to a reconciliation process for peace in Afghanistan. That effort, Zakhilwal said, will also fail if Pakistan continues with its inaction.

"The QCG will die down if the road map is not followed," he said.

The road map, he added, included pressure tactics to be used if Taliban refused to negotiate with the Afghan government—measures like "closing down their facilities, arresting them if they are wandering around freely, disrupting them."

Pakistan, he indicated, was not doing any of that.

Pakistan's foreign policy adviser, Sartaj Aziz, on the other hand, has said that according to the road map, if peace talks do not materialize, action against the Taliban would require consensus among all QCG members. He has also said that Kabul is frustrated because of the delay in the start of the process but acknowledges such things take time.

Pakistan insists it is continuing its efforts to facilitate talks. A delegation of the Afghan Taliban visited Islamabad from Qatar late last month as part of those efforts.

That visit seemed to have left the Afghans more unhappy. Zakhilwal complained that Afghans found out about the delegation from their own intelligence sources.

"Why weren't we informed?" he asked, adding that Pakistan has still not told Afghanistan why the delegation was in Islamabad.