

## Nightmare Scenario

**2012** US ends the Afghan war. Its allies have all pulled out and casualties have soared to 1,000 a year. Looking at reelection, Obama announces that because 11 years have passed without attack since 9/11, Al Qaeda is no longer a threat. US begins withdrawing.

**2014** With the US gone, the Taliban sweep through south Afghanistan and capture Kabul. Within a year, other than a few Northern Alliance strongholds, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is back. Mullah Omar rules again, with Hikmatyar and Haqqani as his deputies.

**2015** The Afghan Taliban regime provides support to the Pakistan Taliban — who already control much of the North West Frontier Province. The latter launch waves of terrorist attacks across the Punjab and Sindh. Pakistani PM is killed by a suicide bomber, martial law is declared. Economy collapses.

**2018** Pakistani military dictator announces a ceasefire with Baitullah Mehsud. Under its terms, Sharia is imposed nationwide, women wear Afghan burqas, Shias are persecuted. Bombings stop, but Taliban begin placing their men in local government positions, often at gunpoint.

**2020** Younger Pakistani military officers stage a countercoup and call on Mehsud to become the country's emir. US and Israel activate contingency plans and carry out aerial bombing of Pakistan's nuclear facilities. Indian Air Force joins in. However, no one is able to recover the dispersed fissile material.

**2021** Islamic Emirate of Pakistan declared. Durand Line abolished as an "infidel" construct. An ageing Osama bin Laden emerges from hiding and is anointed spiritual advisor to both Kabul and Islamabad.

**2025** Taliban-ruled Pakistan announces it has sufficient fissile material for a nuclear deterrent. Bin Laden calls for jihad to restore Islamic rule in Delhi. Faced with 10 million Pakistanis fleeing across the border and daily terrorist attacks, New Delhi depopulates and fortifies its entire western border, imposes a naval blockade.

# The border that may not exist a decade later



A barbed wire fence and Pakistani flag mark the border between Afghanistan and its neighbouring country. The Durand Line, on which this fence is, is likely to be history if AfPak becomes a reality

## Status Quo

The US and the Afghanistan Taliban slug it out without either side gaining any advantage. An abortive Al Qaeda plot against the US mainland in 2011 bolsters public support for an Obama hardline. US annual casualties steady at about 500 as the swollen Afghan army does more and more of the fighting.

Pakistan's leaders, military and civilian, continue to give safe haven to the Afghan Taliban. Give us a "Pakistan-friendly" regime in Kabul and a favourable Kashmir settle-

ment, they tell Washington, or else we cannot take action against jihadi groups on our soil.

But not taking on the Afghan Taliban means having to tolerate the Pakistan Taliban. Islamabad therefore continues to cede bits and pieces of the Northwest Frontier Province to Mehsud and others, though bursts of military aggression lead to some areas being recaptured.

By 2025, the AfPak region has settled down into what analysts call a "Forever War" with an annual toll of four thousand dead and five billion dollars.

## Turnaround

The US's surge tactics and the new Afghan army begin to turn the tide against Afghan Taliban. Over five years, a mix of security on the ground and reconstruction efforts restore the credibility of the Kabul regime.

In the meantime, the confinement of the Afghan Taliban to the Pashtun lands along the Afghan-Pakistan border and Mehsud's increasingly violent inroads into the Pakistani heartland trigger a popular backlash against the ineffectual establishment. While broadly

Punjabi nationalist in nature, to ensure the support of both some Islamicist and military support, the new political movement is religiously conservative, but anti-Taliban. A huge clampdown on groups like Lashkar e Tayyeba leads to the purging of thousands of madrasas and the trial of many terrorist ideologues. By 2020, the Taliban on both sides of the border are a fading force. The confirmed death of bin Laden and capture of other Al Qaeda leaders paves the way for the US to begin its military withdrawal. Two traditional, but democratically elected, Islamic republics have their capitals in Kabul and Islamabad.