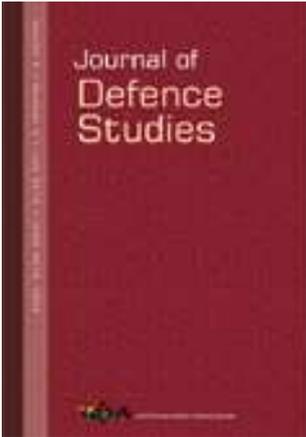


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South Asian Geopolitics

Has Pakistan Lost its Plot?

*Abhay K. Singh**

Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War, by C. Christine Fair, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 343, £27.99

Defeat is an Orphan: How Pakistan Lost the Great South Asian War, by Myra MacDonald, London: Hurst & Co., 2017, pp. 328, £25.00

'We can no longer be silent about Pakistan's safe-havens for terrorist organizations, the Taliban, and other groups that pose a threat to the region and beyond,' said US President Donald Trump, in the clearest criticism of Pakistan's policy of using jihad as instrument of its security and foreign policy during his much-awaited review of the United States' South Asia policy on 21 August 2017.¹ Trump singled out Pakistan, saying that the South Asian nuclear power had been duplicitous in its dealings with the US and needed to change its policies. He added: 'Pakistan has much to gain from partnering with our effort in Afghanistan. It has much to lose by continuing to harbour criminals and terrorists.' The US President essentially put Pakistan on notice indicating that military and other aid to Washington's nuclear-armed ally is at stake. He said, 'We have been paying Pakistan billions and billions of dollars. At the same time, they are housing the very terrorists that we are fighting...that will have to change. And that will change immediately.'² A day later, US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, told reporters that Washington would

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consider cutting aid to Pakistan, increasing the use of drone attacks within its territory, and stripping the South Asian country of its status as a major non-North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) US ally.³

The pressure on Pakistan to put a cap on the proliferation of terror from its soil has been on the rise in recent years, with numerous commentators pointing towards the need to constrain it regarding this. The US Department of State, in its reports on terrorism in 2015 and 2016, pointed out that Pakistan-based terrorist organisations have continued to threaten the US interests in Afghanistan.⁴ Further, Pakistan has not taken sufficient action against the Afghan Taliban, Lashkar e-Tayyiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), which have continued to operate, train, organise and fundraise in its territory. The US has been progressively tightening the screws on Pakistan. In July 2017, the US withheld \$50 million in reimbursements to Pakistan, adding to the \$300 million that had been already withheld in light of the above-mentioned US reports, due to insufficient action against the Haqqani Network group.⁵ Though Pakistan was expecting a rap on the knuckles, President Trump went further. He said the US would 'further develop its strategic partnership with India' and ask the latter to contribute more to stabilise Afghanistan.⁶

Diplomatic and military parity with India and strategic depth in Afghanistan have been the two enduring and existential challenges for Pakistan since independence.⁷ Due to its use of jihadi terrorism as the key instrument of state policy, Pakistan's fall from grace, from a major non-NATO ally to its indictment as a state sponsor of terrorism, seems to be complete. Pakistan, due to its fallacious approach, seems to have lost the trust of the US and diminished its equity in Afghanistan, while India has become its bigger nemesis with a more entrenched presence. The blame for this strategic debacle can be put squarely at the doorstep of the Pakistan Army, which has been at the helm of national policy from its independence, either directly or indirectly.

This narrative of Pakistan's strategic failure in resolving its key security challenge and the crucial role which Pakistan Army has played in this saga resonates in the two books under review here. The author of the first book, C. Christine Fair, has spent considerable time in Afghanistan and Pakistan. She has closely observed the Pakistan Army and in *Fighting to the End* she offers deep insights into its worldview, the policy options it believes it has, and the tools it believes are best to achieve these goals. The second, more recent book *Defeat is an Orphan*, is by Myra MacDonald, a former journalist with *Reuters*. MacDonald has

drawn from her first-hand experience and interaction with the key players in the region to provide for a compelling account of Pakistan's reckless revisionist approach for parity with India; its delusional obsession over Kashmir; its obsessive desire for strategic depth in Afghanistan; and fatal flirtation with Islamist proxies. While differing in their approach and articulation, both books establish the Pakistan Army's reckless policy as a causality of strategic failure.

AN ARMY WITH A STATE

Voltaire had famously remarked about Fredrick the Great's Prussia, that 'Where some states have an army, the Prussian army has a state.'⁸ Considering the predominance and preponderance of the power of the army in Pakistan, Fair argues that many Pakistani analysts have long ascribed the Prussian maxim to the army with more truth than hyperbole. This aphorism reflects the unfortunate history of Pakistan's floundering attempts at democratization (p. 34).

Fair posits the Pakistan Army at the locus of its strategic culture and ideological frontiers. She argues that the strategic culture of the Pakistan Army encompasses the collection of its corporate beliefs, values and norms as well as the accumulating weight of its historical experiences. She also attempts to provide an overview of Pakistan's strategic behaviour through the lens of the army's strategic culture, which is, in effect, the most dominant factor in Pakistan's internal and external policy framework. The book uses strategic culture as a heuristic tool to help explain Pakistan's enduring revisionism and proclivity for conflict. The author attempts to provide an understanding of the puzzling aspects of Pakistan's ostensibly inexplicable behaviour, namely, persistent irredentism and reliance on jihadist proxies. Unlike conventional armies which seek only to protect territorial boundaries, the Pakistani Army, Fair argues, has taken upon itself to protect the country's ideological frontiers as defined by Islam.

The book extensively quotes documents, articles and journal pieces authored by Pakistani military personnel over the decades. Fair's synthesis relies on a variety of Pakistan Army's professional publications that include the *Pakistan Army Journal*, *Citadel* (official Staff College publication), *Margalla Papers* (the National Defence University publication) and, last but not the least, the *Pakistan Army Green Book*, an annual collection of writings on professional issues by officers of the Pakistani military. While her arguments have been supported with illustrative references

from military publications, she derives her core arguments from an extensive survey of existing political and strategic literature on Pakistan.

Fair argues that the identification of India as an existential threat to Pakistan and the subordination of all other interests to the need to build an effective military have provided the armed forces with the means to strengthen their internal organisational coherence and establish an India-centric ideological worldview. It has also reinforced biases, inherited from the colonial tradition, which viewed civilian politicians as being incapable of dealing with the problems they confronted. Fair argues that the Pakistan Army's revisionist agenda is restricted not only to gain control of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) but also to prevent India's 'inevitable if uneven ascendance' in South Asia and beyond. Notwithstanding apparent lack of success in resolving Kashmir dispute in its favour, she surmises that defeat for the Pakistan Army does not lie in its failure to win Kashmir; defeat will be the point when it stops trying.

Unlike the generally held view that the concept of strategic depth in Afghanistan was enunciated by General Aslam Beg, Fair posits that this idea is a colonial legacy of the British Raj, which was carried forward by the successor state of Pakistan even though it did not possess the resources of the former. To facilitate covert operations against the Doud government of Afghanistan, training camps were established by Z.A. Bhutto to train the Afghan mujahideen as early as 1973. This also counters another oft-repeated myth by the Pakistani establishment that the mujahideen were created by the US to further its own geopolitical interests in Afghanistan.

In its search for strategic parity with India, Pakistan has constantly courted international benefactors, namely, the US, China, Saudi Arabia, and North Korea, and sought alliance partnerships. Fair contrasts the approach of Pakistan towards the US and China. She notes a familiar refrain in Pakistan military writings which highlight the US as a perfidious ally that uses Pakistan for its strategic ends and then abandons it. China, in contrast, is described as an enduring friend. Regarding China's failures to support Pakistan in crisis, Pakistani officials constantly devise various rationales for China's 'inability' (as opposed to 'unwillingness') to assist Pakistan. Fair argues that the army has developed this rhetorical strategy to exploit the US government officials' relatively short memory of US–Pakistan relations to obtain lucrative rewards such as grant assistance; foreign military financing; access to desirable US weapon systems; and other financial, military, diplomatic or political allurements.

On nuclear weapons, Fair argues that nuclear weapons have distorted Pakistan's perception of its own capabilities, encouraged it to think of itself as India's competitor on equal terms, and afforded a degree of impunity for its risk-seeking behaviour. Pakistan has not only pursued a policy of jihad under the nuclear umbrella but has also supported terrorism against India from its soil and sought to undermine the US strategic interests in the region. By keeping its nuclear doctrine ambiguous and not defining its nuclear threshold, it has achieved its twin objectives of deterring India from escalating the conflict as well as drawn international actors such as the US into limiting the conflict. Pakistan believes that being a nuclear power restrains the US from completely abandoning it.

The book highlights the implications of the changing recruitment pattern of the army, which has largely remained unnoticed so far. Based on her fieldwork, Fair has documented that the demographic profile of the Pakistan Army officer cadre is gradually transforming from a hitherto narrow base of predominantly Punjabi officers. She illustrates that in 1972 the army officers came from only a few districts of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), but by 2005 practically all districts of Pakistan were producing officers. She indicates that the 'core values' of the Punjabis that have dominated the strategic culture of the Pakistani Army may gradually evolve to become broader or even more Islamic than what exists at present. How this changes the nature of the discourse of strategic culture in the future remains to be seen.

According to Fair, the use of proxies has been a hallmark of Pakistani strategy right from the use of Pakhtun tribes in the invasion of Kashmir in 1947. She argues that Pakistan's use of militancy is not simply the ancillary product of broad social and political changes in the country. Supporting jihad has been one of the principal means by which the Pakistani state has sought to produce security for itself; and supporting jihadist proxies has been a core component of its grand strategy even before the Soviet Army crossed into Afghanistan. Pakistan has honed the art of using insurgents to foment rebellion, and its association with the US in the 1980s allowed it to perfect this technique. The use of jihadist proxies as an instrument of its state policy has progressively become a source of internal instability. However, this threat is being stubbornly ignored. Fair surmises that Pakistan is unlikely to abandon its support to jihadist elements, notwithstanding the existential threat they pose to the stability of the country.

Fair appears to take a pessimistic view and does not foresee any changes in the near or distant future. Dismissing the grand bargain theory she describes Pakistan as a 'purely greedy state', which is defined by Charles Glaser as a state 'fundamentally unsatisfied with the status quo, desiring additional territory even when it is not desired for security' (p. 15). Any appeasement of this 'greedy state' might aggravate the problem rather than solving it. She further argues that even if Pakistan undergoes a permanent democratic transition, it does not obviously follow that 'civilians will abandon the persistent revisionism with respect to India. This is because of the deep presence of Army's strategic culture, based on the ideology of Islam and two nation theory, within Pakistan's civil society, political culture and bureaucracies' (p. 221).

Fair has also discounted a reformatory impetus of a possible democratic transition of the governance system, again owing to the army's notion of 'strategic culture' being internalised within the state and society as a whole. She is similarly dismissive of the idea that increased economic ties could bring about a rapprochement, noting that any 'serious rapprochement with India would weaken the army's political position within Pakistan' (p. 223).

The book provides important policy prescriptions for both India and the US. She argues that the US should stop

attempting to transform the Pakistani army or Pakistan for that matter. It is unlikely that the United States can offer Pakistan any incentive that would be so valuable to Pakistan and its security interests that the army would abandon the varied tools it has developed to manage its security competition with India, much less consider a durable rapprochement (p. 235).

The realities for India are starker: 'The Pakistan army will continue to weaken India by any means possible, even though such means are inherently risky. In the Army's eye, any other course will spell true defeat' (Ibid.).

LOSING WAY IN A LABYRINTH OF BLUNDERS

While Christine Fair has used Pakistan Army's strategic culture as a prism to illustrate the country's strategic behaviour, Myra MacDonald's book is a normative description of India and Pakistan's enduring rivalry and conflicts which have remained rooted in its quixotic desire for strategic parity. MacDonald considers Pakistan as an insufficiently

imagined state, a state hostage to the idealisations of political leaders and defined in opposition to India. The focus of her book is Pakistan's reckless use of jihadist proxies post-1998, especially with the threat of nuclear weapons constraining India's conventional military response. MacDonald contends that Pakistan, since its inception, has looked upon Muslim proxy warriors as legitimate tools of the state given India's overwhelming advantage in conventional forces. She argues that India has had an upper hand in all its war with Pakistan: conventional to hybrid, conventional to unconventional, diplomatic and economic. She draws out several key moments in recent memory—the hijacking of IC 814, the Kargil operation, the attack on the Indian Parliament in New Delhi, the Mumbai attack and the ongoing nuclear stalemate—to build a case for 'how Pakistan lost the great South Asian war'. She postulates that while the causes of India and Pakistan's enduring conflict have been deeply rooted in the history, Pakistan's policy choice to use jihadist proxies post-nuclear weapon tests of 1998 was deliberate and *not* a happenstance of circumstantial imperatives.

Defeat is an Orphan opens with a compelling narrative about the hijacking of Indian Airlines flight IC 814 by Pakistan-supported terrorists in December 1999. It highlights Pakistan's Machiavellian approach in dealing with this crisis and its astute manoeuvring to maintain a posture of plausible deniability. The hijacking serves to frame and focus MacDonald's narrative of the ratcheting up of tensions between Pakistan and India—a process that had unfolded in fits and starts since 1947 and accelerated after both nations conducted nuclear tests in 1998. Historical narratives of wars and conflict from 1947 to 1998 provide the necessary background about Pakistan's constant endeavour to achieve strategic parity with India. She provides a balanced view of the Kargil conflict, a brilliant tactical operation by the Pakistani Army that rapidly degenerated into a strategic disaster.

MacDonald brings out the repeated urge of Pakistan's policymakers to settle a score with India by way of a misadventure that sought to exceed in scale the previous misadventure, repeatedly testing India's patience. She provides a ringside view of Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's efforts of rapprochement during the 2001 Agra Summit, even after India had comprehensively won the Kargil conflict. She compares and contrasts the approaches of Prime Minister Vajpayee and Pakistan's General Pervez Musharraf during the summit. Musharraf completely misread Vajpayee's generosity in inviting him for the summit. He

approached it with the same impatience and ideological myopia that had blinded him to the risks in Kargil. MacDonald argues that in displaying impatience Musharraf missed an opportunity to embark on a serious peace process with India.

The nuclear tests in 1998 were an ecstatic moment for Pakistan, promising strategic parity for the first time with its much larger neighbour. Emboldened by its newfound nuclear umbrella, however, Pakistan increased its sponsorship of militant groups—a policy that would eventually alienate the international community and undermine its domestic security. Pakistan had embraced proxy war as a viable strategy for decades in fighting India over the disputed border territories in J&K, and in fighting the Soviet Union and the Indian-backed Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. The US, not yet grasping the threat of international terrorism, supported Pakistan as a valuable Cold War ally. MacDonald further argues that Pakistan's 'reckless reliance' on proxies did not begin in 1998, but goes all the way back to 1948, during the first Kashmir war. Later, the use of Sikh militants who hijacked planes to Lahore in the 1980s or the D-Company that has lived in Karachi after the Mumbai blasts in 1993 were all part of a similar strategy.

Over time, though, the Islamist groups that Pakistan encouraged became a dangerous liability. Furthermore, Pakistan's militarised society proved self-reinforcing, impeding the peace process with India and prompting destabilising military coups. Indian interests, on the other hand, lay in improving relations with the international community (including a much warmer relationship with the US) and the growth of its economy. To some degree, MacDonald explains, the rivalry became one-sided: 'India had no need to win a war against Pakistan—Pakistan was doing enough damage to itself to lose the competition with its bigger neighbour it had once hoped to win' (p. 237).

The genesis of Pakistan's terrorism fetish, as has been correctly pointed out by MacDonald, is that blinded by competition with India and an unwillingness to recognise the changes wrought in part by its own security policies, it never formed a coherent clear-sighted strategy towards Afghanistan and its north-west. The result was a muddled, reactive policy that exacerbated the domestic upheaval caused by the Afghanistan War and gave it the illusion of a 'strategic depth' against India, but in reality encouraged the religious fundamentalist groups who could never be accommodated with the Pakistani state.

As the book ploughs through the political fabric of the Pakistani

state, it also provides a glimpse into the reasons for the ability of its army and militant organisations to regain public sympathy after wrong tactical calls that cost the citizens heavily. This is because there is no civilian national institution in Pakistan with the manpower, energy and organisational skills like the army—and to a lesser extent, Islamic militant organisations like Jamaat-ud-Dawa—in reaching out to those affected by national calamities like floods and earthquakes.

MacDonald argues that the more Pakistan continued to drag its feet on religious radicals and terrorist groups operating on its soil, the clearer it became that as a state it was unable to think of a compromise with India. This was vividly brought out by the painstaking negotiations between the two countries between 2004 and 2007 on a draft agreement on Kashmir, which came to naught when Musharraf was thrown out of power. Pakistan's continued denial of any involvement in the 2008 Mumbai attacks further convinced its citizens that their country can do no wrong, even as it continued to be affected by the terrorist violence.

Myra MacDonald also critiques the approach of the US towards Pakistan. She argues that the US, despite mounting evidence of the involvement of Pakistan in fostering terrorism as an instrument of state policy, continued to engage Pakistan in a naive belief that economic inducement and military engagement would lead to an appropriate change in its policy contours. The Mumbai attacks and the explicit involvement of the Pakistani security establishment in planning and perpetrating the conspiracy were overlooked by the US, in exchange for Pakistan's cooperation on Afghanistan. There was also a naive belief, as the author has brought out, that Pakistan could be convinced to change course, despite all evidence to the contrary.

MacDonald has argued that Pakistan essentially frittered away its opportunity to achieve a respectable recognition in international politics after its nuclear weapon status in 1998. Pakistan's pursuance of its disingenuous strategic policy has undermined security gains accrued by these weapons and now threatens to devour the very legitimacy of the Pakistani state. On the other hand, India, by following policies focused on economic development and social cohesion, has emerged as a 'leading power'. As she concludes, the progress India made between 1998 and 2016 is a victory that has many fathers but in Pakistan, torn between blaming its external enemies and the 'traitors' of its internal power struggle, defeat is an orphan.

ENDGAME PAKISTAN?

Taken together, both books surmise that Pakistan is unlikely to change its policy contours in South Asia regarding its use of terrorism as a tool of statecraft, notwithstanding its lack of success and the pernicious effect on the country's social fabric. Both books advocate a tougher stance by the US on Pakistan, since economic and diplomatic inducements have not worked in reforming its recalcitrant behaviour. Fair, with her usual flair for plain speaking, has argued that Pakistan has been simultaneously acting as 'the fire fighter, the arsonist and the vendor of a variety of propellants'⁹ in its Machiavellian game in South Asia. Both authors even remain sceptical about the country's policy transformation through a democratic model of governance since the army is too entrenched therein and will continue to exert a controlling influence over most of Pakistan's core state policies.

Trump's South Asia policy seems to be an endorsement of the approach recommended by the authors. However, Pakistan has responded with usual defiance and deflection. Denying that it provides safe havens to terrorists, Pakistan has blamed a 'complex interplay of geopolitics' and the pursuit of 'hegemonic policies' for tensions in South Asia.¹⁰ Experts commenting on Trump's policy have largely echoed the sentiments expressed by the authors of books under review and have pointed that

no matter the punishment, policy, or inducement, there's little reason to believe that Pakistan will change its ways. Pakistan has an unshakeable strategic interest in maintaining ties to militant groups like the Taliban because they help keep Pakistan's Indian enemy at bay in Afghanistan.¹¹

Notwithstanding American disenchantment, rather than being isolated in South Asia, Pakistan—being a key link in China's Belt and Road initiative—has entrenched itself with China, even bringing Russia into a closer embrace. Pakistan remains sanguine about its role in Afghanistan despite extant setbacks which it considers transient. The truism about geopolitical saga being devoid of denouement remains relevant. In an apt description of the vicissitude of Pakistan, Cyril Almeida has argued:

so change is here, we're already living it and the boys are struggling to cope. Which means, eventually, either they'll have to make choices or events will make the choice for them. When the rupture

does come though—when things break apart—it may not be the civilians who will get to collect the pieces and put Pakistan back together; it could be something far uglier. But that’s the risk. Because Zardari failed, Nawaz is failing and Imran is a failure. But, most of all, because the boys think failure is victory.¹²

NOTES

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