

Abrogating the Inimical Discreteness of Af-Pak-In

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Summary

As the endgame approaches in Afghanistan and analysts around the world assess the tactical and operational flaws and policy failures, one key question is conspicuous by its absence. The question of Pakistan's disintegrating domestic realm and the watershed ramifications of this on national security calculi has not been factored, sui generis, in the post-withdrawal phase as the probability of military responsibilities to be undertaken by regional actors, including India, becomes real. The extent of India's role in building up the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF)-hitherto remaining circumscribed to a training capacity in India-and transforming it into a viable, professional and legitimate institution is dependent on how accurately the impending shift in Pakistan can be read. While political consensus within India advocates zero on-ground military agency in Afghanistan, some voices in the strategic community, muffled mostly, acknowledge the stability dividend that would arise in the case of a self-assertive, activist India. One of the aims of this issue brief is to elucidate how the regional conflict structure and its current permutation facilitates a more activist foreign policy for India as Pakistan crumbles under itself. And yes, the Good Taliban/Bad Taliban distinction is a shadow sight of Pakistani hawks fooling themselves.

The synchronised series of offensives that shook Kabul and its bordering regions in mid-April 2012 and the recent Taliban suicide attacks in May forebode a stringent draw-up of all fronts and Kabul – hitherto safeguarded – as a surprise theatre. Conditions in Afghanistan cannot be said to be reaching a zenith of direness, though. The cycles of violence – penetrated here and there by something like semblances of stability – have been there from the get-go. Still, concerns that the NATO withdrawal would precipitate civil war are well-founded. The principal reason is that the ANSF is in no condition to function with the efficacy and professionalism – specifically, to be both conventionally strong and a COIN force – required by a state like Afghanistan.

Taking into consideration that few states in the world would need more keenly well-oiled and apt security forces as Afghanistan does, the condition of ANSF becomes all the more glaring and disturbing omission in the roadmap from here to 2014 and beyond. The singular opacity on the part of the US may at a glance speak of bewilderment and electoral bullying. Considering the US' clear interest in the region it appears more likely that it is done to inculcate the further trajectory with a malleability that allows for revisions without loss of face and the unapologetic usage of covert operations. It stresses the unpredictability of the US as an actor in the region, warranting strongly that an alternative, more controllable course of action be commenced by regional actors for whom a non-pro-Islamabad peace in Afghanistan is imperative. The possibility of achieving this, to take on the task for which there all along has been an urgent need for action in Pakistan, appears now less convoluted in impossibilities. The window of opportunity is made up of the Pakistani state project facing implosion as state-carrying institutions disintegrate and socio-religious and sectarian violence escalates, while simultaneously, an externality-packed endgame in Afghanistan draws near. The regional realm in the solution-crafting process and Pakistan's integral role herein is the conundrum to be solved, speedily and wisely. For this India – being an antecedent cause for the Pakistani machinations vis-à-vis Afghanistan and a regional actor for whom the trumpet-tongued COIN is tried-and-tested – is nothing less than instrumental.

Ideological-ideational lenses casting India as either a regional hegemon *in spe*, regional handler of conflicts or merely a resourceful first among equals, are not pertinent to the issue at hand; what informs it is a pragmatic and empirical assessment stripped of political narratives. Geographic proximity stipulates that India would not escape the fallout of destabilised northern neighbours – the effect of externalities would here be multitudinous. Refugee flows, Islamic radicalism brimming over, but also, a hindrance to its regional and global aspirations would bog India down. It is thus in India's interest to achieve sustainable stability in Afghanistan. The point of departure of this analysis is the fact that the regional question pertaining to Afghanistan continues to be marred by anachronistic caveats that hinder an honest debate on what Pakistan stands to gain or lose in Afghanistan today. The argument advanced here aims to highlight the incongruences that have arisen between reality and the ossified mental maps security analysts and policy-makers travel

along, even after shifts in the former have occurred or are occurring.

There have been—and continue to be—critical constitutive linkages between Pakistan's security project of 'strategic depth' and the continuing failure of state-building endeavours in Afghanistan. Time's passing restructures, however, and so the question of what Pakistan wants is worth reiterating at this point. So is its kin question of how the endgame in Afghanistan can lead to stabilisation. Plastered on *Dawn* and other websites are expert decipherments, yet the necessary questions remain unasked—at best, grazed—and more importantly, the discreteness of the two issues has yet to be abrogated. In tweaked syllogistic terms the reasoning goes like this:

1. Pakistan's nullifying zero-setting of progress in Afghanistan by means of the 'Good Taliban' speaks of the still salient, tacit incessancy of India's role in Pakistan's security calculi.
2. The historic, dispositional and cultural affinities make the Indo-Afghan relationship, and its possible strengthening, more than a minor threat to Pakistan.
3. So even though a militarily sound stance cognizant of COIN's importance will stress the inevitability of an Indian role in the security-setting and institution-building tapestry of Afghanistan, Pakistan's 'two-front aggression' fears being promptly fed is a reason to steer clear of that.

This used and once viable argument finds itself—through a series of paradoxes—effectively negated today. After a period of contingent incubation where reconfigurations of allegiances have matured, Pakistan stands faced with a self-made *fait accompli*, the seeds of which were sown with the politicisation of Islam. The two-pronged strategy was given a variety of institutional expressions—the initial force of which gave way to powerful path dependencies—and that made of it a formative juncture in the politico-societal trajectory of Pakistan's history. This stealthily transformed the Pashtuns in the porous border region from constituting, if politicised, a secondary existential threat to the western flanks of Pakistan, into an instrument countering Pakistan's perceived primary existential threat, India. As ingenuous a plan as this seemingly is—employing ideologically, and thus distracting, the secondary existential threat to counter the primary existential threat—it had an inbuilt, time-released flaw. The Durand Line's penetrability causes this defect—again a paradox—as this feature was vital in enabling the instrumentalisation that a politicised Pashtun insurgency cadre came to constitute. The Taliban-borne radicalisation meant for Afghanistan could, in virtue of the border's penetrability, brim over and right back into Pakistan, leading it to exacerbate and consolidate the current shape that Zia's institutional legacy has taken, helping to further undermine the state. It is giving way to what gradually is crystallising as a new existential threat to the state of Pakistan, this time one that emanates from within. It's an *all-bombs-are-at-home-but-triggers-are-outside* situation and the finger on the trigger is, paradoxically, that of Pakistan's own extended arm.

It is this state of being strategically cornered by past policies that may, ironically, present a trump card to India, Afghanistan and, ultimately, an objectively survivalist Pakistan itself. The explanation lies in an explosive point of intersection where tendencies unfolding in tandem within the domestic realm in Pakistan conjunct; namely, the conjunction of state-carrying actors (from different segments of the armed forces) with state-negating ones (radicalised groups) – the current two-pronged expression of Zia’s legacy. Specific cases worth noting are those of Brigadier (retd.) Ali Khan, and the murders of Salman Taseer and Shabaz Bhatti. The aftermath revealed the confluence of radicalisation and a newer expression of Islamisation’s intransigence. What these events – the underlying motivation for the al-Qaeda attack on the PNS Mehran naval air station in Karachi, the popular support for Malik Qadri and Kayani’s inadequate condemnation of the killings – have in common is that they all mark a next decidedly self-unravelling phase in the Pakistani project.

Graver than the sweeping, deep-rooted radicalisation of the population is the consummation of the muddled Army-Islamists nexus – manifested for example in the convergence of their respective recruitment pools – born from the path dependencies of Zia’s Islamization. These path dependencies precede and predispose, and are continuously being *reproduced* in important state-carrying institutions, while being *upheld* by individual carriers. Where radicalised Islamists alone are state-negating in the sense that they pursue and project to the population ideas and visions that are – if not exactly state-negating – then, at least, transformational to an extent that it would alter the nature of the state if pursued collectively in movements, the new nexus entity is nestled in the constitutive core of what makes the state a state in the Westphalian sense. The state-negating potential is absolute. The societal upheaval born from the Army’s incapacity to act as a monolithic actor will bring to the abstract undermining of the state a very tangible dimension.

It is in the hardening contours of this that the inimical and artificial discreteness of the domestic states in Afghanistan and Pakistan is contouring up. Put simply, the ‘start’ state in Afghanistan post-2014, a future of ever more instability as the previous weeks forbode, could – coupled with the chain of events of a state-building failure – make of the Pakistani situation a veritable 1:1 mirror of the situation in Afghanistan. While ethnic tensions in Afghanistan do not axiomatically lead to disintegration, it very well could, when combined with the *de facto* cessation of a *de jure* political centre in Kabul, result in centrifugal movements and, ultimately, in the establishment of regional centres. If this transpires, the resurfacing of regional identities could bring to fore Pashtun irredentism. This point is held to be an alleged myth in Pakistani scholastic circles, but regardless of the Pashtunistan issue being pertinent or not, the density of linkages makes it unlikely that Pakistan would escape the fallout from fragmentation in Afghanistan.

This dynamic raises a number of questions. The pressing, blatant one pertains to the necessarily changed nature of Pakistan’s security calculi. The value of a stabilised Afghanistan outweighs at this temporal-spatial topography the gains of having strategic

depth. Now, a sort of stability has been fought for even in the outwardly aimed Islamisation, but the young army/radicals nexus entity has altered the premises. This reconfiguration effectively renders the good Taliban/bad Taliban distinction, and the beliefs associated with it, unviable. Self-deluding Pakistani hawks may well envisage the Afghan endgame to be a clarifier of distinctions, but this does not change the dynamics of an exacerbation of internal direness by a reverse influx on the country's western flanks.

So, why does the Pakistani state continue to pursue a self-undermining strategy? Two interlinked conditions explain the salience: the first is the aforementioned path dependency mechanisms and the other is inter-elite fissures. The strife-laden, asymmetric concurrence of hardliners and moderates in the policy-formulating elite has created a powerful gridlock. A gridlocked establishment cannot be expected to device by own state faculties its own extrication. It certainly cannot be expected to stabilise a neighbouring state whose continuous unravelling has become the work of a self-created, unleashed beast.

All things equal, it is this Frankensteinian *monster-without-leash* syndrome that beleaguers Pakistan today to a point where its existence in the modern *statescape* – the world's community of states – is threatened. But it is also this very feature which facilitates a daring newness in post-withdrawal planning as far as the Indo-Afghan equation is concerned. Any force in Afghanistan that is able to effectively counter the insurgencies, and win – by virtue of its civil-military efforts' affinities with the native population – the local populace, should be endorsed by Pakistan. Stabilising Afghanistan stabilises Pakistan. And it is this new reality's topography that has to be glimpsed through all the ossified discursive reiterations that current outlooks and policies are based on. Afghanistan – much more than an Asian interregional buffer state – constitutes with Pakistan and India a cohesive geopolitical entity bound together by the reality and promise of rippling externalities, potently transformational. Abrogating the discreteness of the three states in terms of security-setting hinders the counterproductive – if not directly destructive – (paradigmatically consequential) tendency to respond to threats as though they were contained in impervious silos. And this, despite the banality of the perception that threats emanate and spill over; something underlining all talk of regional solutions to Afghanistan and the appellation of regional actors as 'stakeholders'. This discordance between perception/issue identification and response policies thereto, is a direct result of aforementioned anachronistic discourses. The latter's continuing prevalence in India speaks either of how salient and parochial the political interests upholding them are, or of the extent of inertia – be it inadvertent or not – within Indian state institutions.

The Chicago Summit's final communiqué stipulates that the fledgling ANSF will be transferred full security responsibility from ISAF by mid-2013. This is a problem. How will ANSF cope with the insurgency if a highly advanced military force such as ISAF could not? Although the strategic level (Petraeus' COIN Field Manual) contains correct ideas and objectives, these are not adhered to at the tactical level in the US Army's Afghanistan campaign. This raises further concerns about the condition of the ANSF as

an organisation primed by the trainers and instructors from the US Army. Effectively, the lacunae that blocks strategic thinking from being properly operationalised into on-ground tactics could have been inadvertently inculcated in the ANSF.

ANSF is a fledgling organisation afflicted by high AWOL rates, a lack of a real NCO corps, soldiers' carelessness with arms, low educational level, and flawed morale – lacunae that increase the likelihood of a 'rogue' culture surfacing. The emergence of the latter would be not merely of intrinsic detriment as its legitimacy – especially where it counts in COIN operations, the eyes of the civil populace – will be corroded and its efficacy harmed, but also of another, greater harm. Anything less than a tightly disciplined, stringently high-morale ANSF could be conducive for ethnic chasms and animosities being reproduced within an organisation incapable of eliminating them. This is where the Indian Army – and the benefits of abrogating the security discreteness of the three states – become apparent. Its own experience with consolidating a strong and well-functioning multiethnic military organisation is but one of several valid reasons why it should be advocated that the Indian Army – circumscribed now to a training role – takes on additional tasks in the Afghan security sector. Another powerful argument pertains to the nature of the combat missions in Afghanistan. The Indian Army has had continuous experience with, and has thus, extensive expertise within the field of COIN, long pre-dating the doctrinal 'awakening' of the US Army.

One of the key metrics of success in COIN operations is the dispositional proximity between soldier and civilian, the establishment of trust and a certain familiarity that cements the legitimacy of the former, helping him 'win the hearts and mind' of the latter. The US Army in Afghanistan has repeatedly had its legitimacy corroded by transgressions spanning from cultural *faux pas* to massacring sleeping families. The unwillingness to discontinue night raids and other violations of female privacy take on a very grave character in a society where the family's honour – paramount – is inextricably linked to the woman's honour. Transgressions and rigidities on the part of foreign troops have obstructed their own efforts more than the insurgents themselves could have.

Adding to the commensurability of the Indian Army and Afghanistan as an operational theatre is the primacy of the soldier-citizen dispositional proximity factor in the success metrics of COIN. Historically, Afghans and Indians have been friendly towards one another, and a multitude of linguistic and cultural affinities tie the two nations together. While staunch voices within the strategic community may maintain that an out-of-area operation for the Indian Army in Afghanistan would require a UN aegis, it is – given the nature of affairs in Pakistan – realistically, no longer warranted. The occasion for both Afghanistan and India is piled high with difficulty, but it is not viable to interpret and rationalise events with archaic lenses. As Abraham Lincoln noted in an address to the US Congress in 1862: *'As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country'*.