

Book Review

Rana Athar Javed, *“Biting the Silver Bullet”*: The Role of Pakistani State Institutions in War on Terror. Lahore: Pakistan House, 2013.

“Biting the Silver Bullet”: The Role of Pakistani State Institutions in War on Terror is an important book and, given the uncertainties raised by the Americans’, NATO’s and ISAF’s impending “withdrawal” from Afghanistan in 2014, clearly a timely one. A Pakistani-Canadian, Rana Athar Javed is an analyst of note and talented journalist who has worked and studied in Canada and Copenhagen, and contributed weekly columns to *Pakistan Observer* and *Denmark Times*. At present he is the Administrative Director of “Danish International Dialogue” and is resident in Islamabad as Director of Pakistan House, a Danish-supported but independent “think-tank” on international and cultural affairs.

Firmly anchored in both East and West as he is, Rana Javed is perhaps uniquely suited to the task of explicating the concerns, not to say fears, of each to the other. Consequently, in *Biting the Silver Bullet* he makes a truly significant contribution to the ongoing and often acrimonious debate on Pakistan’s central role in Washington’s long-drawn-out War on Terror and the end-game of NATO’s intervention in Afghanistan. Based on his earlier newspaper columns, in his present book he employs the latest techniques of “discourse analysis,” and applies the “concept of risk societies” to the motives, policies and actions of the

United States and NATO on the one hand, and the responses of their regional allies *cum* clients on the other.

If readers uninitiated in the niceties of academic terms are put off by Javed's introduction, those who persevere will discover a concise discussions of a range of issues in a direct style that is devoid of scholarly pretence. This book is organized into eight logically consistent and interrelated chapters. These opens with a critical review of the contending definitions of modern terrorism, then applies this to the Afghan and Pakistani insurgents. He concludes that in a Pakistani context, it can be considered to be "a system of violence, which entails specific goals of regional/foreign powers, in order to achieve moral/superior authority over others, and impose an ideological position (e.g., religiously charged) that encapsulates personal and nefarious designs to dismantle socioeconomic structures – with a political domination to reject an already placed system of authority."

Less theoretically, he points that in the process of countering such movements, Pakistans's role as a frontline state has meant some 50,000 dead (including c. 7000 military and security personnel). In addition it costs over \$90,000 (US) in "direct foreign investment and net losses," and left the state in the grip of an economic crisis while its security services engaged in a round-the-clock struggle to secure both the population and its territory. This, of course, is hardly news to Javed's Pakistani readers, who will equally appreciate his sharp critique of the West's mixed messages to Islamabad. As he sees it, demands that Pakistan "do more" to combat its own militant outfits, be they Taliban or otherwise, are often negated by perceived acts "betrayals" (e.g., Salala) and failures in intelligence "sharing" (e.g., the Osama mission).

Of more interest to readers here, however, are his analysis of the confusing and often contradictory policies implemented by Washington as a result of American domestic debates and electoral politics. In this regard, Javed rightly points to the "opinions of a few in conservative and

neo-conservative factions in the US have created a permanent misunderstanding between the US and the Muslim world,” despite the obvious advantages of an alliance to both “civilizations.” Worse still, their views are frequently fanned by the largely ignorant “Pak-bashing” found in the Western press, the failure of Hamid Karzai to provide Afghanistan with visionary leadership, President Obama’s reliance on “the illegal drone campaign” and demands for greater action in North Waziristan, and, perhaps to a lesser extent, the machinations of India’s intelligence and propaganda agencies, and a host of other factors. All helps create an environment which impairs a fruitful settlement of the Afghan conflict and Pakistan’s own Taliban i.e. Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other insurgent outfits continue to thrive. For, this author warns, “fighting asymmetrical warfare is a complex and pains-taking affair” and, in this case, faces the immense “difficulty of interpretation, and thus generalization” of the situation in Pakistan.

All these themes (and others) are developed more fully in chapters one to seven, and then capped by a final concluding chapter which presents concrete policy recommendations for the West in general and Washington in particular. After all, Javed points out, the “emerging character of the war on terror” suggests that the present global strategy of the United States “is beyond even its resources.” He therefore worries that rather than devising a new “game plan”, American strategists are “attempting to institutionalize ambivalence, which will encourage a complex set of regional, sectarian, ethnic and political rivalries in Afghanistan and beyond,” and is especially critical of efforts “to foster each ethnic camp.” Yet if he accepts that Pakistan’s “vulnerabilities.... are a direct result of the US approach to the war on terror,” he does not see this as leaving Pakistanis as helpless victims or as absolving them of responsibility for acting for the preservation of their own nation.

In this regard, and in the context of Pakistan’s internal debates, Javed’s basic initial argument on the meaningful

distinction between the Afghan Taliban and TTP deserves attention. Whereas the former targets those they, not surprisingly, openly denounce as foreign occupiers of their state, their Pakistani fellows seek to destroy the existing state while blending their violence with “an extreme view of Islam.” They therefore openly target their more own moderate and rival co-religionists with equal vigour as they do to representatives of state authority. This “killing Muslims in the name of Islam” Javed unabashedly charges simply misrepresents “this great religion of peace,” and he warns that “supporting the cause of those who seek to create dissent within Muslims is a reflection of [a] similar ideology.” In fact, he considers such terrorist acts to be “crimes”, plain and simple. And faced with this threat to the very existence of the existing state, he insists Pakistan itself must develop its own “national consensus on countering extremism and terrorism.... so that a comprehensive and sustainable security strategy is implemented” before a possible new outburst is ignited by NATO’s Afghan withdrawal in the coming year.

Having proposed the drawing up of this National Counter Extremism and Terrorism Strategy (NCETS) Javed says its implementation be given to a revamped National Counter Terrorism Authority that with broad cross-government support (the provinces included)) is empowered as a governmental department, headed by a minister and responsible directly to the prime minister. In terms of practical measures, he recommends a series of reforms in Pakistan’s judiciary and legal procedures; the counter-intelligence establishment; the police and para-military forces; and both the madrassa and state school systems, accompanied by surgical military operations, media campaigns, a de-radicalization programme, and so on.

If it is perhaps a hopeful sign that the present government has taken some timid steps in this direction, it nonetheless seems wedded to its rhetoric of negotiation and conciliation. But while Rana Javed is not opposed to this course, like the Taliban leaders, he too has his conditions or

prerequisites. Firstly, such negotiations must begin with a “cessation of violence by the TTP and other foreign sponsored militants,” after which the actual negotiations “should be considered as a source to build trust and a realistic frame of disarming the militant outfits who do not accept state authority,” and the “criminal gangs” involved in “slaughtering our soldiers, police, and, civilian population must face justice.” Furthermore, given the experience of past truces, he insists that a “real peace deal” (as opposed to another “quick-fix”), that will not lower the military’s morale, is only possible if the TTP is made to “surrender to every demand of the government.” And this consideration aside, it may well be that it will be Pakistan’s ability to achieve a lasting internal settlement that defines its future as real nation state capable of fulfilling the hopes of Quaid-e-Azam Jinnah.

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