

The Taliban and Pakistan's National Security Policy

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The national security policy of Pakistan is formulated and implemented by the intelligence services, the military, and the foreign office. The theme that has underpinned the calculations of Pakistan in this most critical area of statecraft is an Indo-centricity based upon hard geographic, strategic, economic, and diplomatic realities. It is evident from India's policy towards its smaller South Asian neighbors, inclusive of Pakistan, that it sees itself as a legitimate great power with spheres of dominance (South Asia) and influence (S. E. Asia, Middle East, Central Asia, East Africa). Pakistan is, as fate would have it, located within what India considers its sphere of dominance. Consequently, Pakistan has been engaged in an unequal and highly draining struggle with a country that has an economy and population seven times larger.¹

Pakistan's defiance has cost it dearly. In 1971, for example, Pakistan was dismembered by Indian military intervention in East Pakistan, ostensibly precipitated by civil war and a refugee crisis. In spite of losing half its population, a great part of its foreign exchange earning potential, and a fifth of its territory, Pakistan redoubled its efforts to acquire the means to effectively counter Indian capabilities. The sense of urgency that animated the Pakistani establishment post-1972 can be understood if cognizance is taken of the disparity in conventional force ratios. In 1974, the year India conducted its first nuclear test, India's defence budget

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1 India's GDP for 2000 = \$ 500 billion, population = 1 billion. Pakistan GDP = \$ 70 billion, population = 140 million.

was thrice that of Pakistan.² A decade later, when American aid began to pour into Pakistan to counter the Soviets and support the Afghan *mujahideen*, India was spending \$ 6.9 billion a year on defense compared to the \$ 1.83 billion spent by Pakistan.³ More ominously for Pakistan, however, was the fact that India had placed orders for 1600 T-72 battle tanks, 101 high performance combat aircraft, 165 MiG-27s, six submarines, one aircraft carrier, two destroyers, and two frigates.⁴ India has at present embarked upon a vigorous program of expansion and spends more than \$ 15 billion a year on its armed forces while Pakistan has made a diplomatic virtue out of dire economic necessity and unilaterally frozen its defense spending at \$ 2.75 billion.⁵

Successive Pakistani leaders have tried to put a brave face on the situation by issuing public assurances to the effect that the official policy is one of 'minimum credible deterrence'⁶ and that every possible effort is being made to achieve self-reliance in the field of defense production and boost the relevant sectors of the economy. The rhetoric notwithstanding, it has been apparent for at least a generation that unless something is done to check India's increasing capabilities, its intentions will sooner or later become redundant and Pakistan will be confronted with the unenviable choice between existence as a captive market and Indian satellite or risking a confrontation at a time of maximum Indian ascendance.

Unable to confront India directly on the Kashmir dispute, Pakistan relies on Islamic militancy to generate pressure. Doing so requires that the Pakistani State rely on the services of religious

2 Stephen P. Cohen, (ed.), *The Security of South Asia: American and Asian Perspectives*, (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1987), p.249.

3 *Ibid.*, p.245.

4 *Ibid.*

5 The dollar values are somewhat misleading as they mask much larger increase in real military spending, especially on personnel, which is made in local currencies that, until the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, were steadily depreciating vis-à-vis the American dollar.

6 For example, On August 16, 2003, President Gen Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Jamali stated that 'Pakistan was not involved in any arms race but would take all possible steps to maintain minimum credible deterrence which had been quantified in terms of comparative strength, weaponry and force levels'. <http://www.dawn.com/2003/08/17/top3.htm>

fanatics who are armed, trained, and infiltrated into Indian occupied Kashmir. The militants, for all their bravado and ardor, have, in fourteen years of insurgency, been unable to exert sufficient military pressure on the Indian government to compel it to move closer to Pakistan's revisionist stance on Kashmir.

Pakistan's attempts to alter the status quo through asymmetric means while the balance of power continues to evolve in favor of India, are fraught with risks. Pakistan rends its social fabric, sustains powerful armed-groups of religious fundamentalists, involves itself in an interminable conflict, and provides India with a standing pretext to impose a symmetrical conflict. Pakistan, however, has little hope of winning such a conflict if it stays within conventional bounds. Should there be an escalation to nuclear weapons the consequences would be far more catastrophic for Pakistan. Heroic as the Pakistan's defiance may be, one cannot help but be alarmed by the persistent inability to understand basic long-term interests, coupled with an overabundance of tactical savvy, that characterize the decision-making and policy-formulation processes in Islamabad. Pakistan's policy towards the Taliban regime and the impact of the chosen course of action upon external relations and the institutions that formulate them were both logical outgrowths of Indo-centricity and the warped internal dynamics of the foreign policy establishment.

At one important level India and Pakistan confront a similar security dilemma. Both countries are faced with credible security threats on their eastern and western borders. For India, the threat emanates from Pakistan and China. For Pakistan, the dual hazard comes from India and Afghanistan. China's military and economic support for Pakistan is a relatively inexpensive way for it to keep India occupied on other fronts. India and Afghanistan, meanwhile, have territorial disputes with Pakistan. As Pakistan's position relative to India deteriorated it became increasingly imperative that the threat from Afghanistan be neutralized. With the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, the temptation to use the Islamist guerrillas, that had harried the Red Army for nearly ten years, against the pro-Moscow regime of Najibullah, proved too great for Pakistan to resist. The decision to interfere was taken in the face of the bilateral agreement between Afghanistan and

Pakistan under the Geneva Accords, which entered into force on May 15, 1988, that bound the two neighbors:

...to respect the sovereign and inalienable right of the other High Contracting Party freely to determine its own political, economic, cultural and social systems, to develop its international relations and to exercise permanent sovereignty over its natural resources in accordance with the will of its people, and without outside intervention, interference, coercion or threat in any form whatsoever.⁷

The Accords had also made it incumbent upon both parties, backed by a joint Soviet-American guarantee

...to refrain from the promotion, encouragement, or support, direct or indirect, of rebellion or secessionist activities against the other High Contracting Party...

...to prevent within its territory the training, equipping, financing and recruitment of mercenaries from whatever origin for the purpose of hostile activities against the other High Contracting Party...⁸

In plain English, the deal was that Afghanistan would give up its irredentism and Pakistan would stop supporting the Islamist guerrillas. In this context, General Zia-ul-Haq's 'vision of a rightist Muslim government in Afghanistan' contradicted not only 'the strategic interests of the USA and the USSR'⁹ but also Pakistan's treaty obligations and clearly indicate that Pakistan regarded the Geneva Accords as a temporary encumbrance rather than a sound basis for the conduct of relations with Afghanistan.

With the Soviets no longer present in Afghanistan, the Americans lost interest and, by attempting to peaceably coerce Pakistan into abandoning its nuclear weapons programs, rapidly alienated its former comrade-in-arms. The Soviet Union, racked by internal crisis since the summer of 1991, ceased to exist on December 25 that same year – exactly twelve years after the Red Army had crossed the Oxus into Afghanistan to prop up a faltering communist regime. Even before the Soviet Union's terminal crisis was complete, 'high-level Iranian, Turkish and Pakistani delegations were touring Central Asia' engaged in a 'fierce

7 Quoted from Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.390.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Khalid Mahmud Arif, *Working with Zia: Pakistan's Power Politics: 1977-88*, (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.408.

competition with each other to woo the new governments'.¹⁰ The Great Game had begun again, and the competition would grow fiercer as the years wore on and each side pinned ever-greater hopes on the energy resources, strategic benefits, and prosperity, that were to accrue to the winners.

The newly emerging states of Central Asia inherited their institutional structures from the Soviet Union and were secular, dictatorial, one-party regimes – much like Najibullah's government in Afghanistan. Like Najibullah, the Central Asian leaders were wary of political Islam and the threat it posed to their rule. That in about a year of the Soviet Union's disintegration Najibullah had been overthrown by Pakistan-backed Islamist guerrillas was one indication that the threat was quite real. Other indications soon followed. By one estimate, more than four thousand Islamic militants passed into Tajikistan from Afghanistan in 1993, with a similar process of infiltration repeating itself in Chinese Turkestan and Azerbaijan.¹¹

Successful as these holy warriors had been in making life miserable for the Soviet forces in Afghanistan and toppling the Najibullah government, they were utterly unable to govern and the country descended into a many-sided civil war with different factions aided by a diverse array of backers including Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and India. The murderous variant of musical chairs was put to an end by a new force that swept through the country between 1994 and 1996 and occupied nearly two-thirds of it without a serious fight. These were the Taliban, rural in origin, highly orthodox in their interpretation of Islam, which shared many features of Wahabism and the Deobandi movement.¹² Though inexperienced, the Taliban 'demonstrated enormous single-mindedness in focusing on the military campaign, on the eradication of corruption and on the achievement of law and order'.¹³ The population was disarmed, the warlords were crushed

10 Ahmed Rashid, *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism?* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.208.

11 William Blum, *Rogue State: A Guide to the World's Only Superpower* (London: Zed Books, 2000), p.36.

12 Peter Marsden, *The Taliban: War, Religion and the New Order in Afghanistan*, (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.44.

13 *Ibid.*, p.45.

or otherwise pacified and an austere, misogynistic interpretation of Islam became the law of the land. Here, at last, was a regime that could command the support of the countryside and maintain peace and security. The question was, however, whose interests did the Taliban really serve? How had they accomplished the conquest and pacification of a land that had defied the Soviet Union, Afghan communists and Islamist guerrillas? Last, but certainly not least, where did these Taliban come from?

The only honest reply to the above queries, critical as they are to an understanding of the relationship between the Taliban and the foreign policy establishment of the Pakistani State, is that we do not know. Perhaps fifteen or twenty years from now the relevant documents lying in the foreign offices and intelligence agencies of regional powers and the United States will be opened to academic scrutiny by historians and experts in diplomacy and from that investigation will emerge a proper, authoritative, understanding of the place of the Taliban in the greater scheme of things. Though there is no guarantee that a Central Asian or South Asian¹⁴ equivalent of William L. Shirer can or will emerge in due course of time¹⁵ one can certainly say the present information about the Taliban and Talibanization is based on three principal sources.

The first includes official public pronouncements on the subject. The second covers what one may call journalistic sources (first-hand reports, interviews, news reports of events). The third source is hearsay. Official pronouncements are unreliable because each country projects its own interest as being based upon objective truth. Journalistic sources, though helpful, lack perspective and are often inaccurate. Hearsay, such as knowledge gleaned from living room conversations with officials (confidential sources, speaking off the record) are notoriously unreliable, misleading, and, most importantly for the serious scholar, unverifiable. To further complicate matters, the phenomenon of

14 The records of the Afghan State have been destroyed or displaced by some twenty-five years of unrelenting warfare.

15 William L. Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany*, was originally published in 1959-60 and was based upon the extensive archival evidence left by the Nazi regime through which Shirer himself sifted for nearly five years.

Talibanization has caught the eye of the general reading public in the West with the result that there are fortunes to be made by catering to the demand for intellectual fast-food. Even the best works on the subject currently available contain an unfortunately large component of unsubstantiated polemic.

There are, however, certain hard realities that must be taken into consideration. One is that there seems to be general agreement that the rise of Taliban in Kandahar in October 1994 coinciding with the passage of a Pakistani truck convoy to Central Asia is highly suspicious given Pakistan's past involvement, interest in opening up Central Asia, and securing its western flank. It is possible that Naseerullah Babar, then the Pakistani Interior Minister, desirous of claiming credit for a policy success, 'privately' told 'journalists' that the Taliban were Pakistan backed and under its tutelage.¹⁶ The second major point is that Pakistan was one of only three countries to recognize the Taliban regime once it took Kabul in 1996¹⁷ and the only country to have established full diplomatic relations with the new regime. The third crucial point is that soon after the new group had secured control of bulk of Afghanistan, Pakistani tutelage became more of an ornamental extravagance than a substantive process of controlling the Taliban to better serve Pakistan's interests – a point that was made embarrassingly clear when Pakistani demands to hand over sectarian terrorists seeking refuge in Afghanistan were repeatedly spurned. In 2001, as American military intervention loomed in the aftermath of the terrorist strikes on the World Trade Center towers, Pakistan's inability to modify the Taliban's behavior once more demonstrated the illusory nature of Pakistani control.

Our conjectural assessment of the impact of the Taliban on the institutional complex responsible for the formulation and execution of Pakistan's foreign policy has three interlocking dimensions:

1. The impact of the Taliban on Pakistan's relations with the United States and regional powers directly involved with Central Asia.

16 Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000), p.29.

17 The other two were Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

2. The impact of the Taliban on the security policy of Pakistan in the context of its structural Indo-centricity.
3. The progressive weakening of the ability of the Pakistani leadership to make its writ run, control its own intelligence apparatus, and react creatively to changes in international opinion.

What is striking about the Taliban regime is that it managed to antagonize every regional power and drastically increased Pakistan's liabilities towards its neighbors. A case in point is the crisis that erupted in September 1998, following the murder of at least nine Iranian diplomats by Taliban forces when they marched into Mazar-i-Sharif in Northern Afghanistan. Iran deployed some 70,000 troops on its border with Afghanistan and planned war-games that would have increased the number of troops deployed to 200,000. Iran was involved in the civil war raging in Afghanistan and lent support to the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, which at that time clung to a bare one-tenth of the country. The Taliban accused 'Iran of arming its opposition' while the 'militia' was 'widely believed' to have been 'armed and aided by Pakistan, Iran's rival for influence.'¹⁸

1998, was also the year of the embassy bombings in East Africa and the US response in the form of cruise missile attacks on the suspected hideouts of Saudi dissident and leader of the al-Qaeda terrorist network, Osama bin Laden, who was at that time hiding in Afghanistan. Pakistan had already been placed under the most stringent American sanctions following the nuclear tests of May 1998. The perception in the United States was, and perhaps still is, that rogue elements of Pakistani intelligence shared bin Laden's and the Taliban's affinity for militant Islamism. That the United States and its allies had aided and abetted the terrorists now striking at them during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan has been noted by several observers.¹⁹ Peter Tomsen, Ambassador in Residence at the University of Nebraska, Omaha, and former Special Envoy to the Afghan Mujahideen during the first Bush

18 Anwar Faruqi, Associated Press, Sept. 13, 1998 www.onlineathens.com/1998/091398/0913.a4iran.html

19 Jessica Stern, "Pakistan's Jihad Culture", *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2000, p.121.

administration, does not mince words and expresses an opinion held by important individuals in the American foreign policy establishment:

American policy has not kept pace with the growing challenges to multiple U.S. interests posed by the international Muslim extremist network now rooted in Afghanistan. The next U.S. administration should adopt an approach that will more effectively realize these interests. They range from the positive — revival of the natural, ancient trade routes connecting Central Asia, South Asia, the Persian Gulf, and the Middle East through a stable Afghanistan — to the negative — reversing the dangerous trends of Islamic extremism, terrorism, opium production, arms trafficking, and human and gender rights violations sourced to Afghanistan that are now menacing every world region.

The international Muslim extremist network in Afghanistan was created by Pakistan and Osama bin Laden during the Soviet-Afghan war. Western, including U.S., disengagement from Afghanistan in the 1990s after the fall of the Afghan communist regime permitted Pakistan, bin Laden, and their radical Muslim allies to establish the Taliban in Kabul. The extremist network's secretive tentacles have since consolidated their international reach, most recently demonstrated by the terrorist attack on the USS Cole. The network has subjected Afghanistan itself to another form of tyranny every bit as pernicious as the bloody string of Soviet-supported communist rulers during the 1980s.

Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), under the direction of Pakistan's military rulers, coordinates the Islamist network's political and military operations inside Afghanistan. This is accomplished through hundreds of ISI intelligence officers deployed to Kabul, other Afghan population centers, and to Taliban and Arab extremist military units. ISI operates the network's military training camps inside Afghanistan. It also plans and orchestrates military offensives by the network against Afghan groups resisting Taliban rule...²⁰

...The next American administration should recognize that Pakistan's post-Soviet occupation attempt to establish its own hegemony in Afghanistan is counterproductive to U.S. interests and cannot, in any case, succeed. The international extremist network inside Afghanistan, which Pakistan has spawned and nurtures, damages

20 Peter Tomsen, "Untying the Afghan Knot", *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, Winter 2001, p.17.

critical American interests. Pakistan's own stability is gradually being undermined by its costly intervention in Afghanistan.²¹

Thus, Pakistan presented itself as a country with a successful nuclear weapons program, at war with itself and its neighbors, raising armies of religious fanatics, and presiding over the medievalization of its formal institutions, world-view, and society. The contradictions imposed by its support of militant Islam had upset the social balance between Sunnis and Shiites within Pakistan and enabled Saudi Arabia and Iran 'to fight a proxy war on Pakistani soil, with devastating consequences for the Pakistani people'.²²

The expansion of Pakistani influence into Afghanistan following the Soviet withdrawal was presented as a quest for strategic depth against India. The idea itself is fairly simple. Pakistan has a long border with India and most of its population and industrial centers lie on the plains bordering India. In the event of a war, therefore, Pakistan's armed forces lack the option of withdrawing and using delaying tactics by trading space for time. Having a friendly regime in Afghanistan, viewed through the prism of strategic depth, should enable Pakistan's armed forces to stage a possible retreat into Afghanistan. The problems with this doctrine are many.

One wonders if Pakistan's main strategic assets, namely the nuclear facilities and weapons, armor, artillery corps, and hundreds of thousands of infantry, can, in the face of an Indian assault, be withdrawn to Afghanistan? Even if the forces covering the retreat fight like Viking berserkers and enough of Pakistan's forces escape to Afghanistan, the question of maintenance will arise. Can a desolate, starving, war-torn land like Afghanistan support the presence of the Pakistan army? What is to prevent the Afghans from turning their guns on their unwanted guests and striking a deal with India, which will have occupied the main cities and economic assets of Pakistan? Evidently, the historical fact that warm food-producing plains fed by navigable rivers, are defended

21 *Ibid.*, p.19.

22 Stern, "Pakistan's Jihad Culture", p.125.

at their borders or not at all, appears to have eluded the Pakistani establishment.

One is obliged to concur with Ahmed Rashid's observation that the veritable 'forward policy' pursued by Pakistan by supporting the Taliban is arguably the 'worst example of imperial overstretch by any third world country in the latter half' of the twentieth century.²³ The Central Asian states are less, not more, likely to accept the existence of a religious fundamentalist movement that threatens the internal cohesion of their societies and challenges the legitimacy of their regimes. This jeopardizes 'Pakistan's plans for accessing pipelines and communications routes across Afghanistan from Central Asia'.²⁴ What is particularly alarming for the Central Asian states is that the Pakistani leadership, though modernist in its aspirations, has badly hurt its own state by supporting and arming religious fundamentalists. Thus, the danger exists that Pakistan may too succumb to a Taliban like regime and plunge the entire region into unprecedented chaos and instability.

India, of course, is what lies at the center of Pakistan's entire effort to favorably influence Afghanistan, use militants to contest control of Kashmir, while simultaneously asserting that South Asia is a nuclear flashpoint and will remain so until the international community weighs in on the side of justice and compels India to live up to its commitment to implement UN Security Council resolutions on Kashmir. The greatest flaw in Pakistan's logic is not, however, the support it lends to Islamic militants operating in Kashmir. It is the failure to realize that even if Kashmir were to become a part of Pakistan in its entirety after a long, protracted, struggle in which the Pakistani State expended its very substance, the balance of power in South Asia would not be changed in any appreciable way. Pakistan would, on the contrary, be confronted by a vengeful Indian behemoth on the outside and victorious Islamist militants within. Furthermore, in the post 9/11/2001 scenario, semantic hairsplitting, and 'commonsense' explanations of the differences between militancy for the attainment of self-determination

23 Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*, p.210.

24 *Ibid.*, p.211.

on the one hand, and true terrorism or state terrorism, on the other, such as the one presented by Tariq Osman Haider, Pakistan's former Ambassador to South Korea, are not likely to cut much ice with the international powers that be.²⁵ Given that both Russia and China are faced by Islamic militant threats in their own territory, it is highly unlikely that either will buy Pakistan's line of argument. The two regional powers, however, may use the present opportunity, like India, to crush such liberation movements as do exist, under the cover of anti-terrorism.

Whatever the future may hold, however, for now the Taliban regime is gone, and al-Qaeda no longer has a state sponsor. For Pakistan, however, the situation remains perilous. It has recently come through a tense nine-month military standoff with India and religious fundamentalists, riding the wave of anti-American sentiment following the assault on Afghanistan, have secured control of two of Pakistan's four provinces – the NWFP and Balochistan. Pakistan's foreign policy establishment need understand that the reprieve granted to Pakistan following its abandonment of the Taliban in October 2001, is contingent upon its ability to act as an effective instrument against militant Islam. Should this ability be compromised and the Kashmir policy remain unchanged there is little doubt that Pakistan will find itself left to India's tender mercies with a hostile Afghan government stirring trouble on its porous north-western border.

25 Tariq Osman Haider, "Kashmir: Self-Determination versus State Terrorism", *The Korean Journal of Defence Analysis: Special Issue on Terrorism*, March 2003, pp.141-174.