

Cut the Af-Pak Knot - Change Pakistan*

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Assume that, for the US, the minimum acceptable sustainable end-state in Af-Pak is: (1) An Afghanistan that does not operate as a safe-haven for any group that carries out terror acts outside its territory; and (2) A Pakistan that does not use Afghan territory to train and export terrorists, and does not use its own territory for the same purpose. This would, for America, be a good solution.

That's it. No nation building in Afghanistan, no introduction or reinforcement of democracy, no attempt to improve governance, nothing. With the above end-state in mind, what course of action will allow the US to extricate itself from the Af-Pak imbroglio to declare victory and take the vast majority of its troops home? First, let's rewind a little...

1 The Background

Why are American troops in Afghanistan? Visualise that day in September 2001, when the images of those two iconic buildings crumbling into dust created an immediate sense of alarm, unease and uncertainty across the world. Some, of course, rejoiced.

The American war-machine swung into motion in fairly short order and targeted Afghanistan, because it was obviously complicit. The country was then controlled by the Taliban movement which, under the leadership of Mullah Omar, provided sanctuary to the perpetrator of 9/11: Osama Bin Ladin. (Note now that the Taliban were ruling Afghanistan because Pakistan put them there, and that Bin Ladin was in Afghanistan because Pakistan facilitated his presence there).[1]

At this stage, Pakistan was offered a choice: get on side with the US quickly, or prepare to return to the stone age. Perhaps stunned that they were being offered a choice at all, the regime of Gen. Pervez Musharraf did not take long to agree to everything America initially demanded. [2]

Soon enough the might of the American military ensured that the Taliban were ousted from power in Kabul. But, and this is key here, not before the Pakistanis (a) secreted a large number of top Taliban leaders and their ISI advisors out of the country in what became infamous as the "Kunduz Airlift"[3] , and

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subsequently (b) facilitated the escape into Pakistan of Osama Bin Ladin, Mullah Omar and a number of their closest followers from Tora Bora in Afghanistan. In other words, the key players in 9/11 were moved to Pakistan[4]. (Someone in the Bush administration and/or the Pentagon needs to be brought to book for allowing this to happen, but that is now beside the point).

In Afghanistan, a civilised, tribally acceptable and generally popular gent, Hamid Karzai, was installed as president with considerable support from virtually all the countries involved. Except Pakistan, which felt that its control over Afghanistan, which Islamabad's Punjabi elite regards almost as a birthright, had been ended in favour of the US, India, Iran, Russia – countries that had long supported the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance whose ground forces had spear-headed the push to oust the Taliban from Kabul. It did not take long therefore, for the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) directorate of Pakistan to reorganise and infiltrate the Taliban into Afghanistan to do what they were good at – terrify the rural population into submission through violence and socio-economic disruption.

Now the Taliban is expanding its grip across Afghanistan. The US is unable to do much about it because the Taliban have safe-haven and logistical support within Pakistan. The Pakistani side of the border remains closed to American ground forces, while Pakistan's military leadership refuses to tackle the Taliban hubs within its own territory. They do this under the umbrella of their nuclear capability, as the generals feel that the US is neither positioned nor inclined to escalate pressure to the point where Islamabad will have to bare its nuclear teeth.

This leaves Pakistan in the strategically enviable position of facilitating the logistics of the two main warring parties in the Af-Pak theatre – the Taliban and the US-led forces – while ensuring that the militarily weaker side does not lose. It keeps the war going, keeps the money from the US to Pakistan flowing, keeps the drug trade lifeline of the Taliban (and their Pakistani handlers) operating, and keeps Pakistan's nuclear-varnished Islamist credentials intact, as more NATO troops get killed, to further fan Islamic radicalism in the rest of the world. It's a nice little racket.

The questions are: (a) how did the US, after making Pakistan an offer it could not refuse, end up letting that country's generals determine the course of play in the Af-Pak theatre (which is what led to 9/11 in the first place); and (b) for how long are the Americans prepared to play the sucker?

2 Facing Realities, Understanding Impulses

Before getting to the question of how to “solve” the Af-Pak conundrum, some of the key ground realities need to be outlined, and some of the impulses driving the violence must be recognised. Answers to the questions below set the overall perspective:

1. Does the US want to pull out of Afghanistan? If the media is anything to go by, the American people and their government would wish to pull out

the vast majority of their troops from that country as quickly as possible; perhaps leaving behind a skeleton military presence – supplemented by drone power to take out designated trouble-makers at will. What will that mean, i.e. effectively extending US dependency on the Pakistani military, is that one cannot look forward to anything other than greater catastrophe for Afghanistan.

2. Can Pakistan create a more stable and prosperous Afghanistan? The answer has to be, at best, that the world cannot expect an Afghanistan that is better off in per capita and socio-economic terms than Pakistan is today. And that's not a good place, by any measure. But that's the best the generals in Islamabad can manage. Pakistan today is no example of anything to anybody, unless you look at it as a case study of how to take a country from relative prosperity and strength to a state on the verge of failure[5]. The more realistic scenario, therefore, is that Afghanistan will be worse off than it is today if the US effectively hands over Afghanistan to Pakistan's not so tender mercies.
3. If the US leaves the field open in military terms, which ironically is what both Pakistan and Iran desire, what will happen in Afghanistan? The answer to this is quite clear. It will leave Afghanistan open to a resumption, and intensification, of the sort of proxy wars that plagued the country in the period between the Soviet withdrawal and the US invasion. These wars will be fought on the basis of loose alliances formed and broken on a "case-by-case" basis – depending on the exigencies of local tribal, ethnic, sectarian or commercial impulses. In parallel, the major internal players (and their external supporters) are likely to coalesce along the lines of the Northern Alliance vs Taliban divide which emerged in the 1990s.
4. Is Afghanistan actually the central problem? It needs to be recognised that Afghanistan is only a real problem for the US so long as its core players (the dominant power in Kabul) function as a malevolent proxy of Pakistan. If Pakistan ceases to meddle in Afghanistan, the latter will simply cease to be a problem country for the US. The Taliban have no regional or global ambitions. It is the Pakistani military that does, which complements the Al Qaida agenda. Conversely, if the US cuts its level of engagement in Afghanistan without ensuring non-interference from Pakistan, then the latter will continue to use the country as a stage from where it will, with "plausible deniability", implement its dangerous policy of spreading its interpretation of Islam through the world – with the connivance of a few other Islamic countries. The problem is that the US cannot ensure non-interference by Pakistan.
5. What about Afghanistan's other neighbours, will they not interfere at Pakistan's expense? It is a certainty that Afghanistan's neighbours will seek influence in the country through their preferred ethnic, sectarian or mercenary proxy. What is not a certainty is whether they will be doing

it at Pakistan's expense. None of these neighbours are in a position to determine the central authority in Kabul. Their primary objectives are largely convergent with that of the US, i.e. that no terrorism spreads into their own territories, and to maximise the commercial potential that is abundant in Afghanistan. With the possible exception of Iran, none of Afghanistan's immediate neighbours (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, China) have any antipathy towards Pakistan. For its part, Iran is in no position to have a dominant influence in Kabul; Pakistan's extensive linkages with the majority Pashtun community in Afghanistan are much too strong. Iran's primary objectives vis-a-vis Afghanistan are to safeguard the Shiite community there, and to stop the flow of drugs into its territory.

6. Will India not use its influence with any Afghan government to undermine Pakistan's stability? Though it certainly has the capacity to do so, there is no evidence that it has any inclination to do so – so far anyway. This is despite the gravest of provocations, including a systematic targeting of Indians working in Afghanistan[6] and a suicide bomb attack against its embassy in Kabul[7] . The focus of New Delhi's Afghanistan policy so far has been developmental, something which has been acknowledged and encouraged by virtually every country in the region and by the key major powers directly involved in Afghanistan. Given the role that India has chosen to play, and has stuck to despite the provocations, it is highly unlikely that New Delhi will reverse course should Pakistan itself play a much more responsible role in Afghanistan than it is doing now.
7. What, then, drives Pakistan? The fact is that Pakistan is not a status quo power. Pakistan's Islamic identity is built around antagonism towards "Hindu" India, and its obsession with military parity and strategic equivalence – a quixotic posture at the best of times, now bordering on the deranged. At the same time, Afghanistan is not happy with the status quo either – with powerful Pashtun nationalist impulses refusing to die down; note that even under the Taliban there was no inclination among Afghans to settle their dispute with Pakistan over the Durand Line, the notional border dividing the two countries. The Pashtuns think the border should be well to the east of where it is today, something which has given Pakistani strategists indigestion ever since the country was created – and more so now, given the Pashtun nationalism being fanned since the US invasion of Afghanistan. Moreover, in the popular Pakistani construct, Afghanistan is "more Muslim" than Pakistan – partly because the Afghans were converted earlier, are closer in many senses to the Arabs and Persians whom the Pakistanis look up to, and the majority of Pakistan's people think that the Taliban are closer to true Islam than anyone else. The key historical heroes of Pakistan are all invaders who went on to ransack India from or via Afghanistan. So it is a strange love-hate relationship that Pakistan has with Afghanistan, not dissimilar to the "biting the hand that feeds it" relationship that it has with America. Pakistan has no means,

other than extreme militaristic ones, to change the status quo. And its elite has neither the imagination, nor the capacity it would increasingly seem, for a positive give and take relationship with the country's neighbours based on a long-term calculus.

3 What Now?

Left to its own devices, Afghanistan is no threat to anyone but itself. How its people choose to live and govern (or misgovern) themselves is nobody's problem but their own. What is a problem is the fact that Afghanistan has allowed itself in the past to be used as a safe-haven for terrorists who launch attacks on other countries. But Afghanistan only became a safe-haven for the terrorist groups under the Taliban. And the Taliban is a creation, and remains a reluctant pawn, of Pakistan's intelligence agency, the ISI.

The solution to the Af-Pak problem lies not (or not only) in bombing Afghanistan or trying to change the way of life of its people. The solution lies in forcefully deterring those who would use Afghan territory as a plausibly deniable platform from which to launch attacks against their adversaries, calculating that a weak Afghanistan, unstable and perennially at war with itself, gives them "strategic depth".

3.1 Reality 1 – The Taliban Are Not a Problem Outside Afghanistan

There was not a single Afghan among the terrorists who were involved in the 9/11 attacks, and one would be hard pressed to find one – or even a direct link to one - among those who perpetrated the numerous attacks since then in Madrid, Mumbai, London, or Bali, to name just the most prominent of the scores of terror incidents since 2001.

Why is it, then, that Afghanistan is the country that has faced the brunt of American action since 9/11? What, really, have the Afghans done to the US or to anyone else for that matter to deserve this? The Taliban gave sanctuary to Osama Bin Ladin and his cronies. But it was neither wholehearted, nor something of their own choice. Taliban leader Mullah Omar is on record as saying that Bin Ladin is like a "bone stuck in our throat"[8], something he could neither swallow nor spit out (because traditional Pashtun hospitality demands absolute loyalty to a guest).

Now recall that after the anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s, Bin Ladin left Afghanistan for Saudi Arabia and then Sudan. How did he end up back in Afghanistan? Who brought him back? The answer to this, like to a lot of other questions that relate to Afghanistan, lies with the ISI. It was the ISI that brought Osama back to Afghanistan. The ISI facilitated (a) the emergence of Al Qaida in Afghanistan, (b) the linkage between Al Qaida and the Taliban, and (c) primed the ground for events that led to 9/11, including the assassination of Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Masood. Recall that former ISI Director

General Hamid Gul was in Afghanistan for weeks in August 2001. He has now been identified as a key mentor behind the Taliban/Al Qaida leadership [9].

It is out of Pakistan's misbegotten concept of "strategic depth" that the Taliban was birthed and continues to be sustained today. The idea is that the Taliban, wielded as the shadow sword arm of Pakistan, will enable the military establishment in Rawalpindi to use the territory of Afghanistan as it deems fit, without having to take the responsibility for the regional consequences or the global ramifications. But, as such things go, matters haven't developed entirely as the Pakistani generals envisaged.

Elements of the Taliban, mostly Pashtun from both sides of the Durand Line which separates Pakistan from Afghanistan, detest the ISI's machinations. Taliban leaders in the field know what has happened to Afghanistan and they know better than anyone else why it happened, because they are the ones who were obliged to make it happen on behalf of the generals in Rawalpindi. There was not much else they could do, as many of their leaders (and their families) have lived in Pakistan since they anti-Soviet Jihad and have become dependent for their survival on the carefully calibrated distribution of patronage by the ISI. Those who went against the diktat from Islamabad did not last long in this world, and there were plenty of those.

3.2 Reality 2 – The Epicenter of Terror is Pakistan

Pakistan is at the most three degrees of separation away from virtually every successful terror attack linked to Al Qaida since then, and most of the unsuccessful ones as well. There is, for lack of a more accurate phrase, an "evil impulse" coursing through the veins of the Punjabi Muslim dominated body politic of Pakistan. And this impulse is given nourishment, and is nurtured, by the ideological Islam promoted by the military establishment through its proxy jihadi militias.

Everyone who needs to be is aware of the problem, meaning the elected leaders of all those countries whose soldiers are fighting in Afghanistan, and others directly affected by Pakistan-inspired or instigated terrorism. Repeated comments, both attributed and unattributed, by soldiers involved in the ISAF coalition as well as their commanders, indicate that they are dealing with the consequences of this evil impulse on a daily basis. This has been buttressed by investigative news reports and reams of confidential intelligence documents released to the public by Wikileaks.

Every regional power, as well as the major powers involved in Afghanistan, recognises that the source of the strife and instability in Afghanistan is Pakistan and the ambitions of its military leadership. The concept of "strategic depth" (essentially code for holding Afghanistan in Pakistan's thrall) has resulted in Pakistan implementing a series of policies since the late 1980s that has left Afghanistan in the state that it is in today [10].

Pakistan's rulers do not see Afghanistan as a separate country in its own right, but rather as an appendage to be used (or abused) as its "strategic depth" requirements dictate. The Pakistani elite regards Afghanistan as a pawn to be

used to achieve their goals, which are not limited to assuaging its South Asian “insecurities”. Its aggressive and irresponsible use of proxies in and around the region does not suggest “insecurity”. Rather it indicates ambition in keeping with its self-image as the citadel of global Islam, a self-image made whole by its status as the only Islamic nuclear state.

3.3 Reality 3 – What Lies Behind the Security Threat to the Region & The World

Afghanistan is not, therefore, the real problem. This is gradually sinking into the minds of those who are militarily engaged in that country. It must be noted that the shift in perceptions has been underway for some time. By 2007-08, the fact that Pakistan was at least a part of the problem was recognised. It took the Obama administration to come up with the term “Af-Pak” to describe the linkage. More recently, however, it is being openly stated that the problem is Pakistan. It is only a matter of time before the people in NATO countries – who sometimes seem ahead of their politicians as far as this issue at least is concerned - start demanding a solution.

A decision making segment of the Pakistani ruling elite, particularly the military establishment, at some point in the 1980s made a conscious decision to use Islamic terrorism as an instrument of state policy, and they have since been supported in this by the bureaucratic and political elite to varying degrees - depending on whether they are in or out of favour with the powers that be in the military establishment du jour.

The Taliban and other proxies like the Lashkar-e-Taiba or Jaish-e-Mohammed are not reactive creations resulting from Pakistan’s insecurity, but pro-actively formed to destabilise both Afghanistan and India; and they were fairly successful for some years. It is only now that Pakistan is beginning to face blowback. And we can be fairly certain that the blowback is occurring primarily because of the over-reach that was represented by 9/11, dragging the US into the region.

By playing both (or all) sides in the Af-Pak theatre, Pakistan’s generals are acting in what they perceive to be the country’s interests. In fact the interests of the military elite and the country have become inseparable in their eyes. And these interests involve fomenting instability in Afghanistan, in India, and in the rest of the region, and it works against the larger security of the US and Europe.

4 What Next?

Recognise that the problem is Pakistan and act accordingly. And while defining the problem as Pakistan, identify the Pakistani elite as the core of the problem. The way forward then is quite simple: managers of the Pakistani state must be told that the country must change from within, or that it will be changed from without.

The question is whether Pakistan can change from within, whether the military/bureaucratic/civilian elite is capable of making the ideological and concep-

tual adjustments necessary to effect these changes. While one could say the jury is out on that, it would probably be prudent to recognise that change generated from within is not likely, given the experience of the past three decades.

Pakistan is not the way it is by accident. It is the result of deliberate, considered policy and action across the board – from education to constitutional amendments and political platforms. It is also the natural consequence of its founding as an Islamic state, of and for Muslims, and of its self-image as a citadel of the faith. And the elite includes many powerful figures who firmly believe in the country's Islamic calling. It is not chance that has made it so difficult for the US to find Osama Bin Ladin, Mullah Omar and their cohorts. It is the protection that can only be provided with the infrastructural, financial and technical resources of a government and its intelligence agency.

On the other hand, change from without can have one of two outcomes: (1) the transformation of Pakistan into a state that is socio-economically and politically virtually unrecognisable but geographically intact, or (2) the break-up of Pakistan into smaller states that pose less of a threat to its neighbours and to the world at large.

Outcome One is possible if the Pakistani elite co-operates in the venture. If sufficient pressure is applied, through the appropriate channels and methods, it is conceivable that such co-operation can be obtained. Those external powers involved in imposing the change may, for instance, consider the fact that so many of the Pakistani elite have dual nationality, live for extended periods overseas, and have children or other relatives studying, living and working abroad.

A considerable amount of pressure can be brought to bear, discreetly, on these individuals to impress upon their own relatives back home about the dead-end nature of their policies. The ways and means of applying such pressure will vary from country to country, but the option is one of the fastest and most effective ways of getting through to the people in charge in Pakistan. (So far, it appears, the Pakistan-based elite has been using the diaspora to convince host countries of their secular credentials and positive intentions).

Squeezing the cashflow is equally vital. As long as the Pakistani leadership perceives that there is money in its policy approach of running with the Americans and hunting with the Taliban/Al Qaida, the military and politicians will continue with this policy. There should be strong financial disincentives, and these should be made clear and should have a notable personal impact on the people involved. There should be no inclination towards favouritism in the imposition of these punitive measures.

Apart from financial and psychological pressures, other more direct methods may also be selectively applied.

There is no certainty, however, that this approach will solve the problem permanently. In fact it appears elements of this approach have already been tried without much success. One reason is the difficulty of getting sustained co-operation from the Pakistani elite. The democratic cycle in the countries likely to apply such an approach, combined with tactical policy adjustments for the purposes of immediate political gain, will inevitably result in trade-offs where Pakistan will have improved leverage. Seasoned observers are well aware of the

fact that the Pakistani elite are great at tactical co-operation, while ensuring that long-term objectives are never met, especially if there is a steady cash-flow involved in return for “co-operation”.

Outcome Two, while appearing the least politically palatable of the options available, is the only one which can ensure that Pakistan cannot pose a problem to the world in the long-term. A Pakistan divided on the basis of its provinces will pose no threat to anyone, simply because there will be no massive military establishment left to carry out the policies that are a danger to the world.

The groundwork for such an eventuality is already very much in place. Pakistan itself claims that it barely controls the Federally and Provincially administered tribal agencies. Its hold on the province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (a name change from North West Frontier Province – a sop to the Pashtun minority) is tenuous. Baluchistan is in revolt and is being held down with a very harsh military stick. Sindh is unhappy about everything, from the sharing of resources to overwhelming Punjabi influence on its economic wellbeing (or otherwise), not to mention efforts to change the ethnic balance within the state.

Ethnic Punjabis, who form the majority of the people of Pakistan, tend to view all of Pakistan as their birthright. In a divided Pakistan, Punjab will be a land-locked country which will have to negotiate and reach a modus vivendi with Sindh and Baluchistan in order to thrive. The Punjabi elite will thus have much else to focus on, other than global jihad.

The troublesome manufactured identity of Islamic Pakistan will disappear into the more sustainable ethnic identities, which will nevertheless be underpinned by the Muslim faith, but of a more diverse nature. Except in pockets, the new state entities will over time revert to the less confrontational type of Islam that prevailed in the area, diluted of the Deobandi-Wahhabi blend that has turned Pakistan into such a menace.

Then there is, of course, the nuclear issue. The countries that will form out of Pakistan will no longer have an anti-India justification – particularly Sindh, Baluchistan and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa – and thus will no longer be able to claim that an India-specific Pakistani nuclear deterrent is necessary for their survival. Countries currently engaged in the Af-Pak theatre - particularly the US and Britain with help from India, Russia, Germany and France – can leverage their existing knowledge of Pakistan’s nuclear facilities and capabilities to minimise the risk of complete weapons systems being transferred to the Al Qaida/Taliban combine. (The risk is, in any case, much higher in the current set-up with the military establishment chock-full of Islamist minded officers – and that tendency is only going to worsen). The new entities that emerge, led by people currently on the margins of the politico/military establishment, will be more flexible in terms of co-operating with the West and its partners in order to start from a clean slate, and no doubt to receive economic and other aid.

Pakistan is now entering a threshold moment in its existence. What remains to be seen is whether its leaders have the sagacity to see the writing on the wall and act to save the country in its current form, or whether they will remain blinkered and leave the international community with no choice but to set in motion the alternative of partition.

There is little to suggest that the current Pakistani elite – whether military, political or bureaucratic – is capable of such a change. The focus remains on the eternal enemy India, on regional ambitions beyond their economic or military means, on increased hyper-defensive religiosity, and on the hope that the Americans and their partners will keep providing the money which will keep the Pakistani economy from collapsing and its leaders’ financial expectations fulfilled. It is not a sustainable situation. Not if the world does not want a repeat of 9/11, Madrid, London, Bali, Mumbai, etc.

A leading expert on the region, Harold A. Gould, visiting scholar at the University of Virginia’s Centre for South Asian studies[11], recently came to a similar conclusion , observing: “Islamic fanaticism, conjoined with military authoritarianism, has ripped Pakistan to shreds and soon will provoke its political disintegration. What alternative is left for US, NATO and Indian strategic policy in the face of a Pakistani political meltdown?”

References

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