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Khan, Hassan Feroz

Monterey, California. Naval Postgraduate School

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Strategic Insight: South Asia

Pakistan's Challenges and the Need for a Balanced Solution

by Brigadier Feroz Hassan Khan, The Brookings Institution

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August 10, 2002

Pakistan's Challenges: The Problem of Militancy

The recent crisis between India and Pakistan has been very narrowly defined as a problem that can be resolved if the United States places heavy pressure on Pakistan, or more specifically, Pakistani based militant groups and their infiltration into Kashmir. This viewpoint tends to undermine the complexity of the situation at hand while also reflecting the agenda of New Delhi.^[1] As complex as the Kashmir problem is in its political context, the issue of militancy in Pakistan (which is also tied to the Kashmiri freedom struggle) is even more complex. To understand this complexity, and realize the difficulty that Musharraf faces, it is important to closely examine the many faces of Islam in the region.

At the outset, one has to come to terms with the fact that no doctrinally homogeneous Islam has existed for many centuries, especially in the South Asian region. A constant play between varying levels of orthodoxy, each offering respective ways in which Islamic doctrine can be understood and interpreted, has always existed. Such variance in interpretation has had a large impact on the way in which Pakistan has approached the task of resolving certain modernization challenges. Generally there are two tiers of discussions that can be discerned in South Asian Islam. At one level there is the debate between the strict Orthodox (legalistic) and the Sufi (or mystic) Muslims. This debate essentially pits rigid traditional interpretations of Islamic doctrine against more expansive, innovative and syncretistic ones. The result is not necessarily a clash on fundamental principles but a tendency to preach differing dogmas. The second level of debate revolves around certain modernization challenges and their impact on the essentials of faith. This debate, in particular, has a peculiar significance to the creation of Pakistan.^[2]

Pakistan was created under the vision of its founders Iqbal and Jinnah, who subscribed to a modern, progressive non-theocratic track that was meant to guide Pakistan into a pluralistic, secular, and prosperously democratic society. Until the time Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was removed in 1977, Pakistan remained on this track. In the decade thereafter, however, a series of events in the region including Zia ul Haq's rule in Pakistan, revolution in Iran, and Soviet invasion in Afghanistan (particularly the role of Mujahidin in that war) affected Pakistan's domestic society, pushing the country and its institutions, including the army, away from its original plural modernistic track and towards a definitively more conservative form of policy making.^[3] Pakistan's present day domestic situation is a legacy of these factors.^[4]

Ever since his ascension to power in 1999, Musharraf's goal, irrespective of India, Kashmir, Al-Qaeda, etc., was to put back on track a Pakistan which in his own words should be "a liberal, tolerant, progressive, dynamic and strong Islamic state where theocracy has no place."^[5] However, because of the complexity of Islam as well as the intricacy involved in dealing with domestic affairs, he has not yet been able to take many of the revolutionary steps he envisioned.^[6]

Musharraf himself categorized Islam in Pakistan into three different classes: Sufi (known as Mushaiks, who form about three quarters of Muslims in Pakistan who are especially prevalent in rural areas);

Orthodox (Ulema); and Political Islam (Religious political parties). He identified the third element as the greatest problem in terms of the advancement of domestic politics he envisioned.[\[7\]](#)

Different breeds of Islamic groups and militants in Pakistan have had a wide-ranging set of objectives and agendas. Though it is difficult to cut fine between agendas of each Islamic group, there are broadly four sets within which they can be grouped. The first set is composed of groups whose agenda is to bring about domestic changes ranging from the establishment of traditional Sharia laws to banking system changes within Pakistan or within their constituency. This set is not focused on foreign policy issues. Jamiat -Ulema - Pakistan (JUP) is an example. The second group has a larger set of interests with external foreign policy agendas towards regions from Kashmir to Palestine to Chechnya. Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and Jamiat -ul Islam (JUI) are examples of this category in Pakistan. A spillover of this group comprises militants expressing external outrage against the West. Some of them have had links with Taliban and Al-Qaeda. The third set comprises radical groups born out of conflict in the region (Afghanistan/Kashmir) and the arrival of mercenaries and zealots. These groups in particular have supported and waged an insurgency against India in the name of liberating Kashmir. Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e- Mohammad and the Harkut-ul-Mujahideen are typical major groups involved in the India specific struggle. The fourth set consists of radical sectarian groups inside Pakistan such as Lashkar- Jhangvi and Sipah-e-Muhammad. The main agenda of these groups is to destroy the other sectarian groups (Shia vs. Sunni) within Pakistan. Saudis and Iranians are alleged to have funded these parties who have menaced Pakistan by waging an ideological turf war for decades now. Typically, groups in the fourth set show no concern or regard to Pakistan's external issues.[\[8\]](#)

This complex landscape makes it extremely difficult for Musharraf to crack down across the board on "Islamic militants," even though he knows that "they (political Islamists) do not command widespread support within the country."[\[9\]](#) Further, Musharraf has been forced to grapple with four mindsets- Pakistanis, Kashmiris, Indians, and the United States. "I have to take the country forward in spite of the militancy to the west, to the east and in the center" he observed. "I have to do this balancing act and it is not an easy job."[\[10\]](#) Pakistan's security, however, remains the foremost objective for Musharraf, along with ensuring that he stays on the modernizing course to which he has put his country.[\[11\]](#)

Pakistan's Objectives and Dilemmas

President Musharraf had four major considerations when he decided to put Pakistan firmly behind the international coalition in the war against terrorism: Pakistan's diplomatic position and prestige; the potential impact on Kashmir; the effect on the country's nuclear assets; and the effect on his domestic and economic revival agenda. While economic revival and nuclear deterrence will remain critical to his national security vision, his immediate and most challenging problem is to preserve the struggle in Kashmir while supporting the war in Afghanistan.

Strategic thinkers in Pakistan were clear that since the arrival of Bin Laden in Afghanistan in late 1997 -- and especially after his operations against the U.S. Embassy in East Africa and the USS Cole in Yemen - - Pakistan's objectives in Afghanistan had become embroiled in deep complexity.[\[12\]](#) By the late '90s, Pakistan faced "strategic overextension" from Kabul to Kashmir. Meanwhile, those supporting the Kashmiri struggle worried that Bin Laden may have also buried the Kashmir cause in the rubble of the twin towers in New York.

When September 11 provided him the opportunity, Musharraf's first step was to jettison Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and international terrorist groups from Pakistan. In the process he attempted to create a "firewall between U.S.-led anti-terrorist operations in Pakistan and Pakistan's support for the legitimate struggle in Kashmir."[\[13\]](#) Musharraf's decision to disassociate Pakistan with the Taliban followed by his ban of two political Islamic groups (Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad) as well as two sectarian groups did little to assuage the ongoing crisis in Kashmir. By neutralizing groups that had foreign policy agendas and by declaring that no party could conduct policy in the name of Jihad (essentially limiting them to internal politics alone), Musharraf enacted a landmark attempt to curtail certain kinds of militancy within Pakistan that no prior government had been able to do.

Thus, we must ask why violence over Kashmir has persisted. There are a number of anti-India religious groups based in Pakistan who have waged struggle and may have continued regardless of the delicacy of the international environment. Additionally, there are "individual cells-angry cells-[who] are the bad boys of these groups [and who may have splintered from their parent groups and formed] loosely organized clusters made up of the most dangerous of all these groups."^[14] Such elements on the loose may have conducted operations regardless of their impact on Pakistan's security objectives or perhaps in defiance of government for its support of the United States. Pragmatism and prudence demanded that such groups should have eschewed the policy of violence, curtailed or eliminated their operations and provided no chance for India to advance its objectives. Instead, in their exuberance and possible sympathy with the Al-Qaeda and Taliban, to whom some were beholden in the past, they resorted to violent means that could very clearly be defined as acts of terrorism against innocent civilians culminating in the December 13 attack on the Indian parliament in New Delhi.

Here, however, the situation becomes somewhat foggy. Many in Pakistan believe that Indian intelligence agencies are quite capable of masterminding and staging horrific events in order to seek justification for aggressive designs. Vivid in Pakistan's memory is the 1971 Ganga hijacking case that was masterminded by India to find a pretext to ban flights between East and West Pakistan in order to isolate the Pakistan garrison in East Pakistan. The second case was the killing of 35 Sikhs in Kashmir during the visit of President Clinton in March 2000. These cases--ghastly and tragic as they were indeed-- nevertheless seem made to order in underscoring the prevalence of militancy for diplomatic mileage and fodder to the media.

The Road Ahead

Regardless of who is responsible for the recent attacks on India, a larger overriding predicament is clear. Ending cross-LoC terrorism will neither be sufficient to pacify the Kashmiris nor will it bring an end to tensions between India and Pakistan. The underlying problem is the oppressive military occupation in Kashmir, which the Kashmiris have opposed and resisted for the last fifty years and which will continue to stir tension until a fair and legitimate political resolution is reached. Incidents will continue to occur despite Musharraf's or anyone else's best efforts to curb infiltration. The fundamental question is whether allegation of infiltration or of "terrorist incidents" in or on behalf of Kashmir will provide a pretext to wage a limited strike in the Pakistani portion of Kashmir (in the so called militant training camp areas). So long as there is no agreement between the two sides on an acceptable verification arrangement, India's allegations of cross-LoC infiltration will continue. With no substantial change in the physical mobilization of troops that remains in tact, a mere shift of intentions does not imply de-escalation. In essence, India is reserving the right to be the prosecutor, jury and executioner -- a posture that Pakistan considers typical of India's arrogance. Pakistan, meanwhile, will not lower its guard. Beyond a certain point Pakistan may prefer war to backing down.^[15] Of grave concern in this circumstance is the risk of inadvertent escalation. A "Guns of August" situation with nuclear weapons in the background is something the world has never before seen.

Though it is India's policy not to tolerate outside intervention, given the recent dangers involved, the need for a third party facilitator is now more prevalent than ever. The United States must jump-start a process of genuine de-escalation. "Once it becomes clear that Pakistan is working to shut down infiltration into Kashmir, India should begin a phased demobilization of its troops in Kashmir and should move to the negotiating table."^[16] The United States must recognize that irrespective of Pakistan's role in previously supporting cross-LoC infiltration, there exists a legitimate grassroots resistance within Kashmir. As Stephen P. Cohen describes, "Kashmir is the most important single conflict in the subcontinent, not just because its territory and its population are contested, but because larger issues of national identity and regional power balances are imbedded in it. 'Solving' the Kashmir dispute means addressing these larger concerns and they cannot be addressed without new thinking on Kashmir and Kashmiris."^[17] Thus, a political process of conflict resolution that involves the Kashmiri people and their cause is needed to create a long-term solution.

The process should include dividing issues between India and Pakistan into three separate tracks -- political, strategic and economic -- which should be pursued simultaneously. The political track must encompass all political dialogue including issues of terrorism, human rights violations in Kashmir and territorial/boundary disputes (Kashmir, Siachen, Sir Creek/maritime boundaries and water disputes). The strategic track should address issues involving nuclear arsenals, missiles and conventional forces. Though this would include arms control and confidence building measures, the immediate concern would be interim arrangements to avoid dangerous military practices. The last track should focus on economic, trade and cultural exchanges. Both India and Pakistan should acknowledge each other's trade related concerns in a realistic manner. India should accept Pakistan's role in resolving the energy supply to India from Central Iran and Asia. There is also ample scope for mutual cooperation in poverty alleviation programs.

Progress on the bilateral track between India and Pakistan is improbable in the foreseeable future. The United States needs to step in as a facilitator, given the history of distrust between the two countries. With the assistance of the United States, a pathway for conflict resolution can be constructed. For now, the United States should consider appointing a special Presidential envoy like it did in 1962 when Ambassador Harriman was sent to the region.

Single-handed pressure on Pakistan by the United States and other G-8 countries to give up its support of the freedom struggle in Kashmir without reciprocal pressure on India to stop violating the human rights of Kashmiris is unlikely to resolve any of the issues at hand. It will neither end the violence in Kashmir that has claimed 50,000 lives since 1989, nor will it bring stability to the region. A series of dialogues between Pakistan, Kashmiris, and India held under the aegis of a U.S.-led international effort is the only pathway that will bring durable peace and security to the region.

****See the companion piece to this Strategic Insight: [Emerging Reconciliation Amidst Continuing Military Impasse](#) by Surinder Rana ****

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