

THE UNCERTAIN FUTURE OF AFGHANISTAN: SECURITY PERCEPTIONS IN INDIA & PAKISTAN

Shahzada Ashraf Maqbool *
Dr. Muhammad Badrul Alam **

Abstract: One of the key developments in the South Asian regional politics is under way in Afghanistan; and both India and Pakistan are making efforts to influence Afghanistan's future in their favour in order to address their perceived security concerns. To Pakistan, India has been making a palpable strategic investment in Afghanistan since 9/11 with a view to encircle Pakistan and reduce its strategic depth. From India's perspective, besides helping Afghanistan in its rebuilding process, India's current engagement in that country is aimed at preventing pro-Pakistan, anti-India Taliban assuming power. Pakistan, on the other hand, seems to cater its much desired objective of having a friendly regime across its western border to meet its security concerns that essentially stem from a perceived Indian threat. This paper is an attempt to understand the gravity of the security dilemma that an unsettled Afghanistan poses to India and Pakistan.

Keywords: Afghanistan, security perception, India, Pakistan, Taliban, Northern Alliance, security dilemma

Introduction

Ever since the emergence of India and Pakistan as two separate and independent sovereign states in August 1947, the regional security environment in South Asia has consistently remained hostage to the intractable rivalry that has characterized their bilateral relationship in the subsequent years. Despite sharing common history and geography and having very similar socio-cultural roots and many ethnic and linguistic affinities, the two countries have so far fought two major wars (in 1965 and 1971), two

* Shahzada Ashraf Maqbool is Research Scholar at Department Of Political Science, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi (Email: shahzadaashraf5@gmail.com).

** Dr. Muhammad Badrul Alam is Professor of Political Science at Department Of Political Science, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.

limited wars (in 1947–48 and 1999), several proxy wars, and countless border skirmishes. Moreover, eruption of periodic crisis brought the two countries on the brink of war on several occasions. The bitter rivalry has in turn nurtured an environment that remains resistant to the building of trust and confidence between the two countries. The feeling of distrust that the leaders of the two countries harbor towards each other has been preventing them to arrive at any consensus on the resolution of the key bilateral issues. All bilateral and multilateral attempts at addressing the key issues between the two countries have so far proved untenable, and peace between the two continues to remain precarious.

According to Stephen P. Cohen, India-Pakistan conflict is a typical example of a ‘paired minority conflict,’ which is rooted in perceptions held by important groups on both sides that they are threatened by the other side. He further notes that such conflicts “seem to draw their energy from an inexhaustible supply of distrust. It is difficult for one side to compromise even on trivial issues, since doing so might confirm one’s own weakness and invite further demands.¹ Not surprisingly, with every new development in the regional politics, this distrust informed environment has been triggering new suspicions and security dilemmas in both the countries. At present, one of the key developments in the regional politics is under way in Afghanistan. India and Pakistan are making efforts to influence Afghanistan’s future in their favour in order to address their perceived security concerns. To Pakistan, India has been making a palpable strategic investment in Afghanistan since 9/11 with a view to encircle Pakistan and reduce its strategic depth. From India’s perspective, besides helping Afghanistan in its rebuilding process, India’s current engagement in that country is aimed at preventing pro-Pakistan, anti-India Taliban assuming power. Pakistan, on the other hand, seems to cater its much desired objective of having a friendly regime across its western border to meet its security concerns that essentially stem from a perceived Indian threat. This paper is an attempt to understand the gravity of the security dilemma that an unsettled Afghanistan poses to India and Pakistan.

¹ Stephen P. Cohen, India, Pakistan, and Kashmir, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 25, no. 4 (2003): 32–60.

Security perceptions of India and Pakistan

Though India has been stronger than Pakistan in terms of its military resources, geographical in-depth, and at least since 1990s in terms of economic growth, yet obsession with security has remained a fundamental preoccupation of both the countries throughout the past 69 years. As a result, South Asia has today become one of the most militarized regions in the world. While military spending witnessed a decline in the industrialized world in the aftermath of Cold War, it has increased significantly in South Asia.² From the very beginning, Pakistan has perceived itself as an insecure state sandwiched between a giant hostile India on the east and an unfriendly Afghanistan on the west. An overwhelming Indian threat to Pakistan's integrity has remained a central influence in the formation of the country's foreign and security policy throughout its history. Pakistan's perception of a real Indian threat is actually rooted in the belief that 'India has never reconciled to partition of subcontinent and is committed to undermine the integrity and independence of Pakistan.

A strong and independent Pakistan is believed to be detested by India.³ The perception of many Indian elites regarding Pakistan after independence in 1947 was that it was, in the words of Mahatma Gandhi of India, "the vivisection of the motherland."⁴ Various Hindu leaders issued policy statements at the birth of Pakistan describing the division as a temporary phase in the history of the subcontinent. At that time, the Congress party passed a resolution that in the future Pakistan would come back under the folds of 'mother India.' Besides this opposition voiced by the leaders of Indian National Congress to the idea of Pakistan, the actions of India in Jammu and Kashmir, Junagarh, and Hyderabad in the immediate aftermath of partition as

² Mahmud Ali Durani, *India and Pakistan: The costs of Conflict and the Benefits of Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2.

³ Zachary S. Davis, "Introduction," in *The India-Pakistan Military Standoff: Crisis and Escalation in South Asia*, ed. Zachary S. Davis (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 6.

⁴ Stanely Wolpert, *Jinnah of Pakistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 103.

well as the tough stance that India maintained on the division of assets left by the British went a long way in cementing this belief and fear psychosis of Pakistan about a real Indian threat.⁵

Consequently obsession with this real or concocted Indian threat led all successive governments in Pakistan to accord topmost priority to working towards achieving military parity with India. Pakistani leaders have consistently believed that achievement of military parity with India will provide iron clad security guarantees to the country against any Indian adventure. As a matter of fact, immediately after the creation of Pakistan, its leaders sought to borrow power to achieve this parity with India through externally procured military capabilities and alignment with outside powers.⁶ The onset of Cold War allowed them to conveniently exploit the cold war strategic considerations of the United States to this end. While the US forged a series of defense agreements and alliances, like CENTO and SEATO, with Pakistan in the mid 1950s primarily with a view to exclude Soviet power and influence from the subcontinent, Pakistan used them as means to strength its military capacity vis-à-vis India.⁷ In the aftermath of the Cold War, Pakistan's quest for achieving military parity with India has led the country to achieve nuclear capability. Pakistan's alleged support for insurgency in India is attributed to the belief that it forces India to divert a huge portion of its military power towards countering insurgency. Daniel Merky remarks, Pakistani officials have justified their conventional armed forces, nuclear weapons, and even their investment in groups like Afghan Taliban by citing the threat posed by India.⁸

On the other hand, as noted earlier, despite being disproportionately larger than Pakistan in terms of population and

⁵ J. N. Dixit, "Introduction," in *The Pakistan Trap*, ed. Rajeev Sharma (New Delhi: UBS Publishers and Distributors, 2001), 3.

⁶ T. V. Paul, *The India-Pakistan Conflict: An Enduring Rivalry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 12.

⁷ Harold A. Gould, *Making of US Foreign Policy: Regional Imperatives and the Imperial Presidency* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 113.

⁸ Daniel S. Markey, *No Exit from Pakistan, America's Tortured Relationship with Islamabad* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 39.

geographical size as well as the economic and military resources, India has also remained obsessed with Pakistan throughout its post-independence history mainly on account of the threats that an anti-status quo Pakistan pose to India. During Cold War, India's threat perception vis-à-vis Pakistan basically stemmed from the latter's policy of forging alliances and procuring sophisticated weapons from America. In the after math of Cold War, Pakistan's tendency to expand its nuclear stockpile and support insurgencies against India has sustained India's threat perception vis-a-vis Pakistan. India's threat perception also takes the domestic politics of Pakistan into account. Thus military takeovers in Pakistan have always triggered security concerns in India. As a matter of fact, most of the wars have been fought between the two countries when Pakistan was ruled by the Army. Similarly, Pakistan's growing military ties with China and existence of religiously radicalized groups have naturally been causing significant security concerns in India.⁹

Pakistan and India's Afghan Policy and their Threat Perceptions

The perceived Indian threat and the Afghan claims over Pashtun majority territories of Pakistan have consistently provided fulcrum to Pakistan's Afghan policy. Knowing that all Afghan governments (except the Taliban regime) have questioned the validity of the Durand Line and demanded that the issue of 'Pashtunistan' comprising of Pashtun population on both sides of the border be settled, Pakistan has particularly been fearing an India friendly Afghanistan that offers space to India to exploit the issue of Pashtunistan to the detriment of Pakistan. Till the fall of Najibullah's government and its replacement by mujahidin in 1992 and later by Taliban in 1996, India had managed to maintain friendly relations with all Afghan governments. India had also previously welcomed, armed, and equipped Baloch insurgents at the end of 1970s.

Pakistan also fears that a pro-India Afghan government would be a threat during Pakistan's conflict with India.¹⁰ Consequently,

⁹ Rodeny W. Jones, "Nuclear Proliferation, Islam, the Bomb, and South Asia," *The Washington Papers* 9, no. 82 (1981): 40.

¹⁰ Ijaz Ahmad Khan, "Understanding Pakistan's Pro-Taliban Afghan Policy," *Pakistan Horizon* 60, no. 2 (April 2007): 141-57.

Pakistan has always been looking for a friendly regime in Afghanistan to avoid being trapped in its worst geostrategic situation of enemy encirclement on both sides. Pakistan's desire for having a friendly Afghanistan across its western border is also rooted in the belief that a friendly Afghanistan will greatly enhance Pakistan's ability to achieve military parity with India in so far as a friendly Afghanistan can provide the much needed strategic depth to Pakistan in the event of an Indian onslaught.

The involvement of superpowers in Afghanistan's internal affairs after the Soviet invasion in December 1979 provided a cogent opportunity to Pakistan to not only enhance its own military capabilities but also to strengthen its position over the issue of Pashtunistan and Duran Line. Pakistani think tanks sagaciously decided to support the Islamist groups who resisted the Soviet backed Afghan government. Pakistan's support for Islamist Pashtun parties in Afghanistan helped solidify the position of Pashtuns in Pakistan's military and civilian elites. In addition, Pakistan promoted the emergence of a government in Afghanistan that would reduce Pakistan's own vulnerability to internal unrest by helping to contain the nationalist aspirations of tribes whose territories straddle the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

The Taliban regime that came to power in Afghanistan in 1996, in many ways, represented the fulfillment of Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan. By espousing an Islamist rather than a nationalist agenda, the Taliban regime heralded an end to all the fears of Pakistan vis-à-vis Afghanistan. The departure of Taliban regime after 9/11 reinvigorated Pakistan's fears about an unfriendly Afghanistan as India managed to emerge as an important partner of Afghanistan that has been investing heavily in the rebuilding and reconstruction of Afghanistan. Since then the two countries have been trading charges of sabotage and terrorism. The opening of Indian consulates in Afghanistan, in particular, became a bone of contention between the two countries. On July 27, 2003, Pakistan's government officially expressed its deep concerns over Indian government's activities along the Pak-Afghan border. Islamabad viewed the Indian consulates having "less to do with humanitarian aid and more to do with India's top-secret intelligence agency, the Research and

Analysis Wing.”¹¹ Pakistan’s allegations against India have ranged from charges of printing false Pakistani currency to carrying out acts of sabotage and terrorism on Pakistani territory. Pakistan has accused India of setting up networks of “terrorist training camps” located inside Afghanistan, including at the Afghan military base of Qushila Jadid, near Gereshk in southern Helmand province; in the Panjshir Valley, and at Kahak and Hassan Killies in western Nimruz province. Pakistan has also been accusing India of fomenting trouble in Baluchistan and Waziristan by providing money as well as arms and ammunition to the rebels fighting against Pakistani military in these areas through its consulates in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

India and Pakistan are again fighting an emerging proxy war in still war-torn Afghanistan. While India’s current engagement in Afghanistan aims at strengthening the gains that accrued to it in the wake of post 9/11 in the form of removal of Taliban and the consequent increase of its influence in Afghanistan, Pakistan has been trying to counter this increasing influence of India in Afghanistan. Pakistan will certainly not like to see an Indian presence on both its eastern and western borders. The recent resurgence of Afghan Taliban is being seen as Pakistan’s effort to prevent this from happening. On the other hand, India will not easily allow the huge investments it has been making in Afghanistan to go vain and it will probably go to any extent in continuing its support to the Northern Alliance to forestall a resurgent Taliban from making too many encroachments into Afghanistan. Thus the India-Pakistan rivalry in Afghanistan is likely to continue till an unforeseeable future.

¹¹ Frederic Grare, “Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations in the Post 9/11 Era,” *Carnegie Endowment of International Peace, South Asia Project*, no. 72 (2006): 1–24.