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Intelligence Professional's Perspective on India's Strategic Environment: Pakistan and Afghanistan

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(This is a summary of a presentation made by the author at the Institute of Defence Studies, Delhi on 8th of March, 2013.)

I must compliment the Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis for this exercise. It displays a recognition that intelligence analysis plays a vital role in identifying strategic interests and suggesting options to deal with them.

A good intelligence analyst is an asset to the national security apparatus. Having worked for several years at the same desk he develops a much better insight and expertise in his field than those serving in other arenas, Government or public. When the analyst is tasked in the context of national security, his study is lifted out of the academic realm and becomes a basis for choosing a course of policy.

Pakistan has become a national obsession. But our policies with regard to this country have been consistently marked with failures. One single reason has been that such decisions were not based on studied analysis where different options could be considered. The decision to go to the UN on Pakistani sponsored tribal incursion into J & K in 1947 when the Indian army was poised to drive out the infiltrators and the Pakistani soldiers who had reinforced them, came out of the high idealism of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and the country is still suffering from its consequences. The decision to hand over Haji Pir back to Pakistan in 1966 by Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, much against the recommendations of the Indian army, was based on lofty compassion and a sense of fair play but the country lost a key vantage

point from where the infiltration routes into J & K could be comprehensively monitored. A golden opportunity to settle the Kashmir question on Indian terms was frittered away in Simla in 1973 when nearly one lac of Pakistani soldiers and officers held as prisoners of war were allowed to go back merely on a verbal assurance of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi who otherwise was a very astute political operative. The bus journey to Lahore by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was in the spirit of high moral faith, despite advice that nothing substantive would come out of it. Not only the three service chiefs of Pakistan refused to be present at Lahore to receive Vajpayee but Kargil followed like a stab in the back. Subsequently, we allowed Pakistani state engineered terrorism against us to be equated with terrorism in Pakistan against the state by the local entities. The assurances given about Pakistani territory not being used for terrorism against India have remained empty promises.

The simple truth is that we have not understood what Pakistan is all about. And so we will continue to make wrong judgments about Pakistan, as long as we do not scrutinize Islam in the Pakistani context. Such a study will reveal the impulses which guide policy making in Pakistan and influence public opinion there.

The Abrahamic religions, Islam being one of them, differ greatly from all the dharmic traditions of India, Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, or Sikh. Their core texts can only be reinterpreted never modified. Their truths are linked to historicity of specific events or the doings and sayings of an individual each. They have never integrated with one another. Their cultural and spiritual matrixes are different. Therefore, the Islamic perspectives can never accommodate non Islamic perspectives. Religious pluralism and its by product, universal harmony, have become unacceptable in Pakistan. The people of Pakistan, by and large, do not want to remember their Vedic, Hindu or Buddhist background. For most of them a non Muslim is an infidel and needs to be dealt with in accordance with scriptural dictates,

Some basic fundamentals of Islam, a great religion, followed by 1.3 billion of the world, which has invested dignity and self respect to countless people, need to be recalled in our context. Claims to lands, once added to a Muslim realm, cannot be renounced. A militant and violent course is one of the options of guidance available from traditions and pronouncements in the scriptures. There is no dichotomy between religion and state and the Prophet was simultaneously the religious guide and the ruler. Sharia which deals extensively with political philosophy and constitutional law lends itself to an interpretation that religious truth and political power are undeniably linked. Islam not only requires faith and practice but also provides identity, and demands loyalty. It also creates a mindset for some for hatred. Jihad has been bequeathed as a basic task and may inspire some to a moral struggle but many more to an armed struggle, thereby creating the obligation of war against infidels and apostates. Jihad is then to be seen as a religious imperative. The minorities in an Islamic region get seriously disadvantaged: they must either convert or accept a second class status with the requirement of paying Jizya or run the risk of expulsion or execution.

Islamic history is replete with Jihadi campaigns. It attracts people to this day. Consequently, Islam has bloody borders. Its territories have expanded by destroying kingdoms and empires, people and civilizations, traditions and culture. There is a strong belief held by quite a few that the religious task of disseminating Allah's revelations will be complete only after the whole world starts swearing by them.

Such a background justified the assumption of some that Pakistan started incubating when the first Muslim, an Arab, set his foot on the Indian soil in 712 AD. Mahmud Ghazni followed 300 years later. Mohd. Ghauri was the next major visitor at the end of the 12th century. With the Mughals, Delhi became a centre of Muslim power. Mughals ruled over vast numbers of non Muslims but could not bring about assimilation between the Muslims and non Muslims. There was fusion in the lower society, with increasing numbers converting to Islam but the upper classes of Muslims and non Muslims remained distant, preserving their separateness. In the Southern parts of India Hindu orthodoxy by and large remained immune as Muslim traditions failed to penetrate the area. Some Mughal rulers, notably Akbar, encouraged assimilation, through personal example and abolition of Jizya, but the trends that he sought to establish were reversed by his successors, specifically Aurangzeb, who reintroduced Jizya.

The collapse of the Mughal rule and its substitution by the British raj saw a widening of the split. Muslims were now smarting on account of the defeat of the Mughals. Muslims elsewhere in the world were also in a state of depression, with rising western imperialism and decay in their stature. A number of revivalist movements in Islam showed up. Shah Waliullah in the 18th century warned that the deterioration in their condition was the result of their moving away from Islam. Jamaluddin Afghani (1838-97), another influential thinker who opposed European imperialism, advised people that the same progress was achievable by adhering to the tenets of Islam. An Egyptian thinker, Mohd. Abduh, developed Afghani's thesis to claim that it was unnecessary for the Muslims to be influenced by western ways as all concepts of morality and ethics championed by western civilization could be explained within the frame work of Islam.

All such thoughts had reverberations in India, keeping intact the gulf between Hindus and Muslims. Individuals like Syed Ahmed Khan did try to penetrate the isolationism of Muslims and to introduce them to the rationalism of the 19th century Europe but he did little to bring the two communities together. Mohd. Iqbal, regardless of how he comes through his poetry, was no different. He also favoured the creation of a cultural bloc in the North West of India though he did not explicitly say that it should also be a sovereign bloc.

Earlier in 1857, India had encountered its first Jihadi war when Muslims arose against the British to reclaim the lost glory of the Mughal rule. We call this effort as India's first national struggle for independence against the British raj. The failure of the effort led to a great deal of introspection by Muslim community leaders. Out of their churning two set of traditions emerged, the Brelvi and the Deobandi. Both advised return to puritan Islamic doctrines but the Brelvi version had a Sufi element which had got embedded into it because of ground level interaction with local customs and practices. However, none advocated assimilation between the communities of Muslims and non Muslims. The gulf, therefore, remained as wide as before.

In this milieu appeared another die hard Islamic thinker, Maulana Syed Abul Ala Maududi, who founded the Jamait-e- Islami. The Maulana was against any compromise with any Islamic doctrine which reduced or relaxed rigid observance. Maududi rejected the modern principle of plurality. He did not believe that Muslims and non Muslims could live in harmony as equals.

The currents sent forth by such discourses led to separate electorates in India, establishment of the Muslim League, two nation theory and finally the creation of Pakistan in 1947. The new state was a monstrosity, its two constituents separated by more than a thousand kilometers, with no common language and no thread of binding nationalism. But its creation was certainly an inevitability after an Arab had set his foot on the Indian soil in 712 AD. Given the doctrines of Islam, Pakistan was eventually destined to be created.

It could be said the destiny's trajectory is still to reach a final culmination. In most Islamic nations, religion remains a major political determinant, far more in domestic affairs than in international or regional arenas. It becomes a potent symbol for mobilization. Paradoxically, in some countries the new political heroes who arose in the 20th century were generally secular and socialist, like, Kemal Attaturk, Nasser and Habib Bourgiba but ultimately their successors have moved right, engulfed by the might of religion. Another example is of Turkey, where most of the Generals, erstwhile guardians of the legacy of Kemal Ataturk, are currently in jail. A public poll in Islamic countries some years ago had revealed that Nasarullah of Hizbullah, Ahmedinijad of Iran and Osama bin Laden of Al Qaida were the most admired public heroes of the Islamic world. Pakistan followed the same pattern and was quick to shed the secularist philosophy of its founder, Mohd. Ali Jinnah.

A drive towards Islamisation soon took shape with demands for Shariarization later and now Talibanization seems on the cards. Islam became its ideological foundation. The first constitution of 1956 declared the state to be an Islamic republic as a concession to the religious groups that had entered the political fray. Two decades later militarization of Islamization had commenced.

Gen. Zia- ul- Haq placed an ideological overload of Islam, to ensure his own survival, on all functional systems of Pakistan, and effectively buried the remnants of secularity, inherited from the British raj. Earlier during socialist Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's term as President, the Qadianis had been outlawed from Islam through an act of Parliament which reflected how much the Pakistani society had travelled into the dark recesses of conservatism since 1947 when its ethos, as in India, had by and large been liberal and tolerant. Hudood laws were enacted on public demands.

Maududi's teachings and Deobandi traditions gained significant following among urban and business classes. Sections of society started accepting that Islam provided a perfect framework for all manner of moral and humanistic growth in mankind's consciousness and one need not look elsewhere for answers.

Support to Jihad against the Soviets became the official policy of Zia administration. It spawned a growth of sectarianism since this Jihad

was mostly a Sunni phenomenon, abetted by Saudi money and Salafi Wahabi fundamentalism. The Shias of Pakistan had been emboldened by the Khomeini revolution earlier. Growth of sectarianism did not evoke public alarm as public discourse could not imagine the end product. The moderate spectrum in Pakistani society including the media failed to scrutinize the fast increasing imbalance. The loss of liberal values in the body politic was a natural outcome of all issues of religion being left to be decided by the fanatic clerics.

The end product was a new thrust to religious extremism. The Madarssa system of education was in the meanwhile producing graduates whose xenophobia was an antithesis to modernity, pluralism, tolerance and scientific temperament. The religious political parties saw in the Madarssa trained an invaluable asset.

By the time the Talibans were driven out of Afghanistan by the US, the culture of religious zeal established by Zia-ul- Haq in Pakistan had been substantially transmuted into a culture of religious extremism and Jihad turned into an industry. The ISI which was deeply implicated had dreams of turning the Jihadi forces eventually against India in Kashmir and other regions in the world where Muslim interests were under pressure.

Certain events, notably the Lal masjid episode in 2007, marked a defining moment in Pakistani history. The police action at Lal masjid that killed over a hundred militants polarized the society, with extremists now targeting government organs. Public sympathy was with the extremists now as the govt. action on Lal masjid was viewed as an attack on religion and not as a measure to counter a strategic threat created by religious militancy.

Pakistanis are not fully radicalized yet but are inching towards it. Going by the experience of Arab societies in turmoil, it is probable that Islamists may be sent to the top in Pakistan also. The capture of power in the armed forces by Islamists at some future date also cannot be ruled out.

An individual Pakistani today differs vastly from those who lived in those regions before partition. Today he is highly receptive to dogma and finds refuge and security in his religion. He has no memories of the pre Islamic history of Pakistan. Forgetting his sub continental roots he can be said to be yearning for an identity within Ummah, It will be delusionary to think that he will ever be a friend of India. There are people in Pakistan like Hafiz Mohd. Saeed who freely intone that Islamic rule must be imposed on India. Saeed is a proxy for ISI. His announcements reflect the intentions of the Establishment there.

The Pakistani army has converted the country into a security state. Its credo includes the motto: Jihad fi Sabih Allah (Jihad for the sake of Allah). One of its former chiefs, Gen. Jahangir Keramat had remarked in an address in 2000 that "no real peace process has ever been started between India and Pakistan which could decide against a military option and in favour of peace". Pakistan's nuclear arsenal is meant for use only against India. If this arsenal falls in the hands of the Islamists not only India but the world could be doomed.

Does this imply that dialogue with Pakistan has no future? It certainly is handicapped by the absence of access to their armed forces that alone have the last word on every matter of importance on Pakistan.

In India we have been ignoring the real challenges of terrorism for too long for political considerations. The same mindset seems to govern

our official policies with respect to Pakistan. A meaningful change can dawn only if the educational systems in Pakistan stop teaching that India is the perennial enemy, if Pakistani army drop Jihad from its motto and if the two nation theory is given up.

Now, a few words about Afghanistan. The two most potent factors that operate there are Islam and Pashtun nationalism. They will determine the future shape of Afghanistan.

The country is not a nation state. Tribes predate the nation state. They fiercely guard their autonomous existence. No foreign power including the US has the capability to impose their will on them. Sooner or later they will have to quit the Pashtun territory. The tribes will then decide by consensus or otherwise the shape of their state structure.

The Islam in Afghanistan earlier had Sufi characteristics but the Taliban rule had grievously hurt them. Taliban follow their own version of Islam, derived from the Deobandi Salafi Madarssa training they had received in Pakistan. If they regain power in Kabul as they might, it will again be a Mulla dominated harsher version of Islam which will reappear. However, it is very difficult to predict what may happen there. The US will be most reluctant to leave the country without ensuring that all the gains made there in the direction of democracy do not evaporate. All neighbours of Afghanistan, with the exception of Pakistan, will share this outlook. Much will depend on the role carved out for Taliban either through consensus or the hand destiny plays there.

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