



Reimagining Pakistan's Militia Policy

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If ever a turning point seemed inevitable in Pakistan's militia policy, it was in the aftermath of the Peshawar school massacre in December 2014. Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) killed 152 people, 133 of them children, in the bloodiest terrorist attack in Pakistan's history.¹ The carnage sparked an unprecedented national dialogue about the costs and contradictions of the Pakistani political and military establishment's reliance on violent proxies, such as the Afghan Taliban (from which the TTP originates), for security.

Pakistani leaders vowed to take serious measures to ensure that such a tragedy would never happen again. Those measures include a military crackdown in the tribal areas, reinstatement of the death penalty, establishment of a parallel system of military courts to try terrorism cases, and enlisting the help of the Afghan army. Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif promised that his country would no longer differentiate between "good" and "bad" Taliban.² In return, Afghanistan began tracking down individuals suspected by Pakistan of being involved in the Peshawar attack.³

1 "Peshawar Attack: Schools Reopen after Taliban Massacre," BBC News, January 13, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-30773120>.

2 "Pakistan's Prime Minister Promises Day of Reckoning with Militias," *Guardian*, December 17, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/17/pakistan-prime-minister-reckoning-militants>.

3 Hamid Shalizi, Jessica Donati, and Katharine Houreld, "Five Pakistani Men Held in Afghanistan Over School Massacre: Officials," Reuters, January 18, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/01/18/us-afghanistan-pakistan-idUSKBN0KR0DL20150118>.

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Pakistan's post-Peshawar collaboration with Afghanistan signals a willingness to halt the long-standing policy of nurturing and sending violent proxies across the border. However, this breakthrough makes all the more conspicuous the absence of a similar arrangement with India. What Sharif did not include in his to-do list for "the war against terrorism till the last terrorist is eliminated"⁴ is a crackdown on the anti-India militias operating with impunity on Pakistani soil.

Lashkar-e-Taiba leader Hafiz Muhammad Saeed vowed on Pakistan's national television to take revenge on India for the Peshawar massacre. Lashkar-e-Taiba is a leading anti-India militant group headquartered near the Pakistani city of Lahore. It carried out the 2008 Mumbai attacks that killed 164 people and wounded over 300. Indian television network NDTV noted that not a single Pakistani politician condemned Saeed's statements.⁵

4 "Pakistan School Attack: PM Sharif Vows to End 'Terrorism,'" BBC News, December 17, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-30517904>.

5 "Hafiz Saeed on TV Threatens Terror Attacks against India," NDTV, December 17, 2014, <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/hafiz-saeed-on-tv-threatens-terror-attacks-against-india-714518>.

What explains the persistence of Pakistan’s differentiating approach to militias in the face of the Peshawar massacre? What are the costs of playing the good-bad militia game? What can be done to end Pakistan’s dependency on armed nonstate groups?

Conventional wisdom regarding Pakistan’s security policy emphasizes the country’s ideological and historical idiosyncrasies. However, in doing so, it obscures rather than illuminates the strategic logic behind states’ use of militias. The enduring security dilemma underlying the Pakistan-India relationship motivates both sides to rely on unconventional means to achieve their policy goals. Government-backed militias are likely to remain pervasive in South Asia until the broader issues of regional security are addressed.

Causes

Pakistan’s militia policy attracted considerable attention in Washington when, in 2007, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) discovered that its “staunch ally” had all along been supporting the Taliban.⁶ With the discovery that Osama bin Laden had been in hiding near the country’s equivalent of West Point, understanding Pakistan acquired an unprecedented sense of urgency. American strategists felt betrayed and needed answers, which their Pakistani counterparts were unwilling to provide. What followed was a surge in expert explanations. Most of them blamed the country’s distinctive history, culture, or ideology.

The leading accounts of Pakistan’s betrayal have pointed to the country’s “obsession” with India, insatiable geopolitical appetite, national identity crisis, powerful and opportunistic military, and weak and corrupt civilian institutions. Historian Ayesha Jalal notes that a “national paranoia” is taking hold of a country that has yet to develop “historical consciousness.”⁷ Political scientist T.V. Paul observed that, in addition to Pakistan’s strategic circumstances (i.e., the geostrategic curse), the country suffers from a political and military elite that based its calculations not on prudence and pragmatism, but rather on hyper-realpolitik assumptions and deeply held

6 Carlotta Gall, *The Wrong Enemy: America in Afghanistan, 2001-2014* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), p. 159.

7 Cited in Maleeha Lodhi, *Pakistan: Beyond the ‘Crisis State’* (London: Hurst & Company, 2011), p. 11.

ideological beliefs.⁸

Author Ahmed Rashid describes Pakistan as “an abnormal state” for using “Islamic militants—jihadi groups, nonstate actors—in addition to diplomacy and trade to pursue its defense and foreign policies.”⁹ Other epithets range from the more generous “hard” and “warrior” to the less generous “ideological,” “rentier,” and “failing.” Pakistan was critical to the success of the US war in Afghanistan. But specialists and insiders are now warning Washington that its relationship with Islamabad had always been based on misunderstanding and ambiguity—or, as Pakistan’s former ambassador to the United States Husain Haqqani put it, “magnificent delusions”¹⁰—rather than shared values. At the heart of the Americans’ misperception of their Pakistani counterparts, according to the emerging conventional wisdom, is the false assumption that Pakistan is a normal country.

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM REGARDING PAKISTAN’S SECURITY POLICY EMPHASIZES THE COUNTRY’S IDEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL IDIOSYNCRASIES. HOWEVER, IN DOING SO, IT OBSCURES RATHER THAN ILLUMINATES THE STRATEGIC LOGIC BEHIND STATES’ USE OF MILITIAS.

Pakistan’s history and culture are indeed distinct, as are those of other countries. Militia sponsorship and diplomatic double-dealing are global, not Pakistan-specific, practices. The use of nonstate proxies is a staple of unconventional warfare, which has long been practiced by countries ranging from Great Britain and the United States

8 T.V. Paul, *The Warrior State: Pakistan in the Contemporary World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

9 Ahmed Rashid, *Pakistan on the Brink: The Future of America, Pakistan, and Afghanistan* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013).

10 Husain Haqqani, *Magnificent Delusions: Pakistan, the United States, and an Epic History of Misunderstanding* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013).



Two girls head back to school in Peshawar, Pakistan, January 2015. Schools across Pakistan were closed after a December 16 attack on Peshawar's Army Public School in which 152 people were killed. *Photo credit: Reuters/Khuram Parvez.*

to Mozambique and Afghanistan. A recent study counted 332 pro-government militias operating in nearly every region of the world between 1982 and 2007, with at least 64 percent of them under the aegis of a state institution.¹¹ The US Special Operations Command defines unconventional warfare as “activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area.”¹² In other words, militias are a key component of covert operations conducted below the surface of regular military and diplomatic dealings. Solving the puzzle of Pakistan’s relationship with militias requires recognizing the banality, ubiquity, and strategic logic of violence outsourcing.

11 Sabine C. Carey, Neil J. Mitchell, and Will Lowe, “States, the Security Sector, and the Monopoly of Violence: A New Database on Pro-Government Militias,” *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 50, no. 2, March 2013, pp. 249-258.

12 US Department of the Army, Special Forces Unconventional Warfare, Training Circular 18-01, November 2010, p. 1.

Pakistan’s unwillingness to crack down on all terrorist groups is more a product of cold calculation than ideological shortsightedness. While the United States has been waging a war on terror, Pakistan has been fighting to maintain and expand regional power. A retired senior US counterterrorism official summed up the logic behind Pakistan’s use of Taliban militants: “Part of it was to keep the situation in Afghanistan off-balance so that Pakistan could play a larger role in deciding what happened ultimately in that part of the world . . . their [Pakistani strategists’] approach was not to rely on diplomacy or engagement as the key way to resolve issues. Their approach was to operate using chaos as a principal weapon.”¹³ When US officials requested that Pakistan restrain cross-border infiltration by militants, Pakistani officials complained of a lack of resources and military capacity.¹⁴ These maneuvers (i.e., “hiding order beneath the cloak of disorder,” “concealing course under a show of timidity,” and “masking

13 Gall, *The Wrong Enemy*, op. cit., p. 162.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 160.

strength with weakness”) are far from new. They are basic principles laid out over two millennia ago by Sun Tzu in *The Art of War*.

American observers are particularly disheartened by Pakistan’s willingness to jeopardize its partnership with Washington for the Afghan Taliban—to prioritize Islamist radicals over an alliance with a democratic state. However, from the Pakistani perspective and experience, the United States is no less of a fair-weather friend. In the stag hunt of international politics, the United States is as likely to be the proverbial rabbit-snatcher¹⁵ as any of the other hungry hunters. As Council on Foreign Relations expert Daniel Markey put it, “Ever since Pakistan gained independence from British India in 1947, Washington has viewed the country as a means to other ends, whether that means fighting communism or terrorism. When Pakistan was helpful, it enjoyed generous American assistance and attention. When Pakistan was unhelpful, the spigot was turned off.”¹⁶ This made relying exclusively on the United States counterproductive to Islamabad’s position in the region. Cooperation with Islamist militants enabled Pakistan to play a more significant role in regional politics, and to secure its national interests.

Pakistan’s preoccupation with India strikes most observers as puzzling and baseless—a convenient excuse for the army to maintain its grip over Pakistani society. There is certainly some truth to this view, as there is to the claim that India has historically “antagonized Pakistan without compromise or compassion.”¹⁷ However, there is no reason to dismiss the more prosaic explanation of inter-state rivalry: the security dilemma.

Political scientist Robert Jervis’ example of Britain and Austria after the Napoleonic Wars illustrates how states—even those located in the same region and similarly powerful—can experience the security dilemma differently. Britain was geographically isolated and politically stable. This made possible its more relaxed attitude toward

disturbances in Europe.¹⁸ By contrast, Austria was surrounded by strong powers and any foreign revolution, be it nationalist or democratic, could spark domestic insurrection. Austria’s structural position made it appear more sensitive—demanding immediate regulation of all disputes and the right to interfere in the internal affairs of other states. This is because, for Austria, the security dilemma was far more acute than it was for Britain. Consequently, “in order to protect herself, Austria had either to threaten or to harm others, whereas Britain did not.”¹⁹

The security dilemma presented by India is far more acute for Pakistan than it is for most other countries, including the United States. It is made all the more severe by the unwillingness of outside powers to help resolve the two countries’ seven decades-long conflict over Kashmir. While nuclear capability has made an Indian invasion of Pakistan unlikely, it does not preclude sponsorship of insurrections in an already unstable country. Fear of the latter is not without historical precedent—in 1971, India helped Bengali rebels gain independence from Pakistan and establish the new state of Bangladesh—and is further boosted by the “well-founded belief that India is supporting Pakistan Baloch nationalist rebels via Afghanistan.”²⁰

The logic driving Pakistan’s relationship with Lashkar-e-Taiba is not far from that which drives US alliances with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, or, for that matter, Pakistan. Pragmatism trumps ideology and shared values. In the eyes of Pakistan’s strategists, Lashkar-e-Taiba has not yet done anything to threaten Pakistani security. India has. The policy may not make sense to American policymakers, but, then again, one state’s irrational obsession is another state’s security dilemma.

Costs

Pakistan’s militia policy has certainly not been without significant costs. Using militias as an instrument of security involves gambling with two resources fundamental to the modern state—legitimacy and survival.

15 For more on the stag hunt analogy, see Kenneth N. Waltz, “International Conflict and International Anarchy,” in *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp. 167-183.

16 Daniel S. Markey, *No Exit from Pakistan: America’s Tortured Relationship with Islamabad* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 2.

17 Haqqani, *Magnificent Delusions*, op. cit., p. 2.

18 Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics*, vol. 30, no. 2, January 1978, p. 173.

19 Ibid., pp. 173-74.

20 Anatol Lieven, *Pakistan: A Hard Country* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011), p. 8.

A state's legitimacy may be disaggregated into three levels: domestic, regional, and global. At the global level, Pakistan has become a pariah. Since the beginning of the US war on terror, it has continually ranked among the three countries suffering most from terrorism. Nevertheless, the international community has come to view Pakistan not as one of the world's biggest victims of terrorism but as "the world's largest assembly line of terrorists."²¹ The *Economist* described it as a "snake country" that sends "crazies" across the border because it has little else to export.²² The discovery of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad was the final straw for the American public. If the United States had to invade Afghanistan all over again, Pakistan would unlikely make the list of allies.

AS A NUCLEAR-ARMED FRAGILE STATE NO LONGER SEEKING THE WEST'S APPROVAL, PAKISTAN WOULD MAKE FOR A TRULY DANGEROUS PLACE.

The sharp decline of Pakistan's prestige in the West, and the corresponding rise in US-India diplomacy, has compelled Islamabad to build partnerships with other prominent outsiders, most notably Russia.²³ Pakistan has traditionally positioned itself as the go-to country for the West. In addition to helping to bring down the Soviet Union in the 1980s, it played a key role in the US rapprochement with China. As a nuclear-armed fragile state no longer seeking the West's approval, Pakistan would make for a truly dangerous place. It would become precisely what the West fears of Iran.

In contrast to Pakistan's loss of legitimacy at the global level, the state's domestic and regional image has experienced little change. Hafiz Saeed's latest declaration of war against India certainly did not catch New Delhi off guard. It knows how the game is played. India has a rich history of not only fighting off Pakistan-supported militias but also sponsoring its own. In addition to assisting the

21 Ayesha Jalal cited in Lodhi, *Pakistan: Beyond the 'Crisis State'*, p. 7.

22 "Snake Country," *Economist*, October 1, 2011.

23 Tim Craig, "As Obama Visits India, Pakistan Looks to Russia for Military, Economic Assistance," *Washington Post*, January 28, 2015.

aforementioned Bengali and Baloch insurgents in Pakistan, India has supported Tamil separatists in Sri Lanka²⁴ and Tibetan dissidents in China.²⁵ It has also used former rebels as counterinsurgents in Kashmir. Pakistan's relationship with militias may have surprised Washington, but not New Delhi. The continued border violence in Kashmir suggests that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi did not count on the Peshawar massacre to turn Pakistan against all terrorist organizations, especially not those directed against India.

The relatively modest level of legitimacy the Pakistani state enjoys inside its borders has not been seriously jeopardized either. Fewer than half of Pakistan's lawmakers pay their income taxes.²⁶ Millions of Pakistanis, not only in the tribal areas but also in big cities like Karachi, are effectively stateless; they lack access to the most basic state-provided public services, such as clean drinking water, electricity, justice, and policing.²⁷ The Peshawar massacre shook the entire country. Some political insiders privately acknowledged the link between the state's militia policy and what became widely referred to as "Pakistan's 9/11." However, most Pakistanis do not readily see the connection.

Pakistan is widely viewed as a weak state with a strong army. However, the latter is currently unable to solve what political scientists Sumit Ganguly and S. Paul Kapur call the "sorcerer's apprentice" problem.²⁸ The Peshawar attack may have been a sign of the army's success in weakening Tehrik-e-Taliban in Pakistan.²⁹ It may have been the organization's final desperate act of vengeance. Nevertheless, the army's inability to prevent the

24 Paul Staniland, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Insurgent Fratricide, Ethnic Defection, and the Rise of Pro-State Paramilitaries," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 56, no. 1, February 2012, p. 30.

25 Daniel L. Byman, *Keeping the Peace: Lasting Solutions to Ethnic Conflicts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2002), p. 42.

26 Katharine Houreld, "Nearly 70 Percent of Pakistani Lawmakers Don't File Taxes—Group," Reuters, December 12, 2012; Katharine Houreld, "Half Pakistani Lawmakers Say They Do Not Pay Tax—Report," Reuters, December 23, 2013.

27 Steve Inskeep, "Cities Beyond the Law," *New York Times Sunday Review*, December 3, 2011.

28 Sumit Ganguly and S. Paul Kapur, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice: Islamist Militancy in South Asia," *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 1, January 2010, p. 48.

29 Adnan Naseemullah, "Why the Pakistani Taliban's Massacre of Children Reveals Its Weakness," *Washington Post*, December 18, 2014.

massacre from happening in the first place shows that, when it comes to engaging militias, even success can be unbearably costly.

Allying with nonstate actors is not the same as allying with states. As anarchical as the international system may be, international norms and institutions do exist. Most states do not run for rabbits, but instead work together to catch stags. Most militias exist in direct opposition to the existing system of rules. Even those that endeavor to become states one day are not held accountable at international forums. Their leaders do not have the embarrassing task of leaving the G20 summit “to sleep” hours before close because they were snubbed by their peers.³⁰ Also, unlike states, militias can change their address (e.g., al-Qaeda), or reopen for business under a different name (e.g., Jamaat-ud-Dawa).

Recommendations

Convincing Pakistan’s military and political elite to abandon the long-standing militia policy will require repairing the US-Pakistan relationship, introducing significant changes to the regional security calculus, and constructing norms of unconventional warfare. The issue at the heart of the security dilemma facing Pakistan and India is the fate of Kashmir. In 1948, Kashmir was divided into Indian and Pakistani-controlled territories following the first India-Pakistan war over the former princely state. However, its status was left pending a plebiscite of its people.³¹ Nearly seventy years later, Kashmir remains a thorn in the India-Pakistan relationship. Holding that long-overdue plebiscite would give voice to the Kashmiri people who deserve a say in their own future. Rather than getting directly involved, Washington could collaborate with Beijing to address the Kashmir issue.

As Pakistan played an important role in repairing the relationship between the United States and China in the early 1970s, China could help to bring the leaders of Pakistan and India (and Kashmir) to the negotiating table. Pakistanis are

China’s strongest supporters in Asia,³² and India may be persuaded by its mutual affiliation in the BRICS club. BRICS membership has recently gained currency with the inauguration of the New Development Bank, headquartered in Shanghai. By providing the ground for India and Pakistan to address the Kashmir issue head-on, China would signal its willingness and ability to play a constructive role³³ in the international community.

THE UNITED STATES CANNOT PLAY A CONSTRUCTIVE ROLE IN THE REGION WITHOUT REPAIRING ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH PAKISTAN, WHERE ANTI-AMERICANISM IS RAMPANT.

The Obama administration should encourage more economic integration between India and Pakistan by making public statements about its value at various international forums, such as the G20 summit and World Trade Organization (WTO) Public Forum. Despite impressive growth rates, South Asia remains one of the world’s least integrated regions.³⁴ Economic integration in Europe was an important catalyst for lasting peace on the continent following World War II. If it worked for a region as war-prone as pre-1945 Europe, there is no reason to think that it could not work for South Asia.

The United States cannot play a constructive role in the region without repairing its relationship with Pakistan, where anti-Americanism is rampant. Pakistan is now the only Asian country in which less than half the population sees the United States favorably.³⁵ Meanwhile, less than one-fifth of Americans view Pakistan in a favorable light.³⁶ An important step in addressing the gap in US-

30 “Putin Walks Out of G20 Summit ‘to Sleep,’” Al Jazeera, November 16, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia-pacific/2014/11/putin-walks-out-g20-summit-early-201411164322920220.html>.

31 Victoria Schofield, “Kashmir’s Forgotten Plebiscite,” BBC News, January 17, 2002, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1766582.stm.

32 See “How Asians View Each Other,” in Pew Research Center, *Global Opposition to U.S. Surveillance and Drones, but Limited Harm to America’s Image* (July 14, 2014), <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/14/chapter-4-how-asians-view-each-other/>.

33 Stewart Patrick, “Irresponsible Stakeholders? The Difficulty of Integrating Rising Powers,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 89, no. 6, November-December 2010, pp. 44-53.

34 Sadiq Ahmed, Saman Kelegama, and Ejaz Ghani, eds., *Promoting Economic Cooperation in South Asia* (New Delhi: World Bank and Sage, 2010).

35 Pew Research Center, *Global Opposition to U.S. Surveillance and Drones, but Limited Harm to America’s Image*.

36 Ibid.

Pakistan relations would be to improve people-to-people contacts. Washington should invest in increasing business, academic, and cultural ties between the two countries.

Increasing the number of opportunities for cultural exchange between Americans and Pakistanis is an important first step toward repairing the US-Pakistan relationship. Reaching out to Pakistanis who are not fluent in English and facilitating the travel of American citizens to Pakistan would be particularly productive steps. The security environment and visa regime make travel to Pakistan for ordinary Americans and travel to the United States for ordinary Pakistanis nearly impossible. The negative stereotypes many Americans hold about Pakistan are a product of “if it bleeds, it leads” news and entertainment, such as the television series *Homeland*. Addressing misperceptions by both Americans and Pakistanis requires more opportunities for ordinary citizens to experience first-hand connections to each other’s countries and peoples.

Building strong people-to-people ties also requires tackling the copious conspiracy theories circulating in Pakistan that distort the citizens’ perceptions of the outside world. Organizations such as the American Institute of Pakistan Studies, the United States Institute of Peace, and the Atlantic Council are already promoting greater dialogue and cultural exchange between the two countries, and the US State Department could further expand and deepen these efforts. To communicate more clearly how Western scholars see and interpret Pakistani culture, history, and politics, the leading US and European works on Pakistan should be translated into Urdu. Transcending language barriers in order to explain how the informed public in the West sees Pakistan would help dispel some of the more pernicious theories. More overt displays of good will toward the Pakistani citizens would also help. A large and highly visible project, such as the building of an American university in one of Pakistan’s major cities, could play a positive role in the rebuilding of the US-Pakistan relationship.

Finally, violent nonstate proxies are not a Pakistan-specific problem. Getting states to abandon militias will require instituting rules of unconventional warfare—which, by design, is difficult to monitor and examine. This does not mean that scholars or policymakers should ignore it. Ultimately, for

outsourcing of violence to militias to become taboo,³⁷ powerful countries, including the United States, would need to lead the way.

³⁷ For causes and mechanisms of warfare-related taboos, see Nina Tannenwald, “The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Normative Basis of Nuclear Non-Use,” *International Organization*, vol. 53, no. 3, Summer 1999, pp. 433-468.

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