Intelligence and security — perspectives from Pakistan

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Intelligence and security — perspectives from Pakistan

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Abstract

During the period 2006-2010, the author was based at a higher education institution in Peshawar close to the Afghan border. From this position, he was able to observe (and sometimes directly participate in) and evaluate the wider political events which shaped the drastic deterioration of security in the region. Although this has improved to some extent recently, the security situation was at its worst from 2007 until the end of the author’s tenure, during which time Peshawar was in the eye of a storm of bombings, assassinations, and kidnappings. To understand these events fully – and therefore to suggest appropriate responses and long-term solutions – it is essential to appreciate the historical factors that shaped the timing and character of the unrest and other relevant factors such as the role of the intelligence agencies. Of these, the most important were the consequences of Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 and the growth of the Taliban following their withdrawal 10 years later. Much of what follows in the latter part of this article is anecdotal, but may nonetheless be helpful to those attempting to get beneath the surface of much that is published in the media about events in the Pak-Afghan region.

Introduction

Between 2006 and 2010, the author was principal of Edwardes College, a prestigious higher education institution in the University of Peshawar. He was able to observe and experience some of the worst terrorist incidents in the Pak–Afghan region at this time and had direct dealings with the intelligence agencies and a representative of the Taliban leadership. The following account covers some of this, but needs to be evaluated against the background of historical events throughout the Pak–Afghan region.

Regional antecedents

Accounts of what happened in relation to the Russian occupation of Afghanistan during the period 1979–1989 differ in detail, but there is a consensus about the main elements. According to Ahmed Rashid, author of Taliban,

I [...] watched the first Soviet tanks roll in. Teenage Soviet soldiers had driven for two days [...] to Herat and then on to Kandahar along a metalled highway that the Soviets had themselves built in the 1960s. Many of the soldiers were of Central Asian origin. They got out of their tanks, dusted off their uniforms and ambled across to the nearest stall for a cup of

1 Parts of this article are an updated version of a report commissioned for the US Defense Secretary in March 2011. The report as a whole and others are published in Stefan Halper, ed., The Afghan Endgame (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2011). The author’s copy of this report is classified and not paginated.
sugarless green tea — a staple part of the diet in both Afghanistan and Central Asia. The Afghans in the bazaar just stood and stared.\textsuperscript{2}

Why the Soviets came and left almost as abruptly 10 years later is much debated. Suffice to say that although the Afghan government in Kabul at the time of the Soviet incursion was Marxist with strong leanings towards Moscow, the rest of Afghanistan was much more traditional, Islamic, and ethnically varied. This contrast was highly significant in relation to what happened in the region.

Even before the Soviets entered Kandahar and Kabul, the US government had started supplying aid to Islamic and predominantly rural insurgents known as *mujahideen* (“those who struggle in the name of Allah”). Thus the Cold War was extended into the Pak–Afghan areas with major consequences throughout central and south Asia.

A graphic account of the departure of the Soviets from Afghanistan in 1989 has been given by Stefan Halper in his submission to the US Defense Secretary, Robert Gates, shortly before he left office.\textsuperscript{3} Halper’s contribution is based on interviews conducted with the Russian military. The Soviet forces in Afghanistan sent an advance party ahead of their departing tanks to offer villagers anything they wanted — improved roads, a school, irrigation, etc. — and they would be given them. But if, during the exit of the tanks, a single shot was fired then they would turn back and raze every village to the ground. This exit strategy was extremely effective.

In order to appreciate some of the security issues subsequent to the Soviet exit, it is necessary to appreciate the demography of the Pak–Afghan border area. There has never been a census in Afghanistan, but estimates of the major groupings are approximately as follows:

- Pashtuns (Pathans) \(\sim 40\%\)
- Tajiks \(25\%\)
- Hazaras \(19\%\)
- Uzbeks \(6\%\)

The Pashtuns are located in the south, with pockets elsewhere, including Kunduz in the north-east. They also extend across Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) into the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province (formerly the North-West Frontier Province). The tribal character of many parts of the Pashtun areas considerably influences their societal characteristics, such as the role of elders, the use of *jirgas* as a highly devolved form of local government, and the Pashtunwali, a harsh legal code which is often mistaken for the Islamic Sharia. The tribe and the family are the building blocks of much of Afghan society, the FATA and Balochi areas of Pakistan and beyond. The implications of this are that the future of these areas must lie in the empowerment of local communities especially via education and especially for women.

**Pakistan’s porous frontier**

The frontier boundary between Afghanistan and Pakistan is defined officially by the Durand Line. This was established following an 1893 memorandum between Mortimer Durand of British India and the Afghan Amir. The porous nature of this frontier can be seen by the fact that students from the author’s college in Peshawar were able to cross and recross it without travel documents.

The implications of this situation are to some extent exemplified by a similar one in Ireland. On both sides of the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, the people are ethnically the same (i.e. Irish); on both sides of the Durand Line they are Pashtun. Historically, the Irish struggled together against British colonial rule. But then the British left. One part of their Irish

\textsuperscript{3} Halper, *The Afghan Endgame*. 
former opponents established a new government for the Irish Republic while others campaigned for full independence for the north — the latter became the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

In Pakistan, the mujahideen struggled together against the Russian occupation of Afghanistan, assisted by the Pakistan military and encouraged by the mullahs. Then the Russians left and the Taliban emerged from the resulting vacuum. But some elements in the Taliban had formerly worked with the army, making it difficult for the latter to crack down on their previous associates. Similarly, the Irish Republic was constantly accused by the British of condoning IRA terrorism.

Two years prior to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, in July 1977, General Zia-ul-Haq staged a military coup against Z. A. Bhutto’s democratically elected Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) government. Zia carried forward Bhutto’s Islamist policies, strengthened the mujahideen with funds from the USA and Saudi Arabia, and expanded Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to become the main intelligence agency of Pakistan’s military. He died in an air crash, generally presumed to be sabotage, in August 1988, shortly before the Soviets left Afghanistan, and at approximately the same time as major disturbances were taking place in Kashmir between the Indian army and insurgents. And in these disturbances, Pakistan was supporting the insurgents with weapons and volunteers from Islamist militant groups. Following Zia’s death in November 1988, Benazir Bhutto swept to power in elections as leader of the PPP.4

There are conflicting accounts of the relationship between the mujahideen and the emergent Taliban following the Soviet withdrawal, of how the Taliban came to host al-Qaeda, and what precisely happened in Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks on the USA. The Taliban was deposed, and many of its members fled into the FATA areas inside Pakistan’s porous borders. The USA put pressure on President Musharraf to destroy them, but this has proved exceptionally difficult and the militants’ backlash against soft targets in Pakistan remains ongoing.

It is against this historical background that the anecdotal material in what follows needs to be understood.

Pakistan’s intelligence agencies

Following Pakistan’s independence from India in 1947, several intelligence agencies were created. These were primarily the Intelligence Bureau (IB), which to all intents and purposes is the equivalent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in the USA and MI5 in the UK, and which is responsible to the Prime Minister. The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) was also set up in 1947 but did not acquire its present name until 1974. The FIA is the main investigative agency designed to combat national or foreign elements working against the national interest.

In 1948, the Directorate for ISI was set up. Its main task was to consolidate and assess intelligence and to present its findings to senior government and military officials. As of 1971, the ISI was under the Prime Minister, who appoints its Director-General from the military intelligence services, especially those associated with the army.

There are three active-duty uniformed intelligence services, of which Military Intelligence (MI) is the most important. Its tasks include opposing counter-insurgency and eliminating sleeper and foreign agent cells; it is under the Chief of Army Staff and was set up in 1947–48. During the 1948 war between Pakistan and India, MI was felt to have failed to co-ordinate intelligence between the three military agencies, and the ISI was expanded to compensate for this perceived failure.

By the 1980s, MI had re-established itself sufficiently to undertake operations against the Pakistan Communist Party and Indian intelligence personnel. They were also active in the so-called Kargil war in Kashmir in the summer of 1999. However, their involvement the same year in the ousting of

4 A concise chronological account of these events is found in Anatol Lieven, Pakistan: A Hard Country (London: Penguin [Allen Lane], 2011), 512–515.
the democratically elected government of Nawaz Sharif and his replacement by General Pervez Musharraf damaged their reputation.

**Religious extremism**

The negotiations over the birth of Pakistan in 1947 did not give undue prominence to Islam. The leaders at that time, including Muhammad Ali Jinnah (Quaid-e-Azam, “Father of the Nation”), were a fairly liberal elite who wanted a new state where they could create an identity without interference from the assertive Hindu majority — the Nehrus and the Gandhis — in particular. General Ayub Khan and Z. A. Bhutto were strong leaders who did much for national development. But Bhutto was cruelly executed by General Zia-ul-Haq who promoted an officially Islamic rule. The army and the mullahs worked together, and the West, especially the Central Intelligence Agency, encouraged and financed the Pakistan/Afghan jihad against the Russians following their occupation of Afghanistan.

ISI became the chief intelligence agency of Pakistan. Opposition to the Russians was spearheaded from camps where talibs (i.e. religious students often recruited from madrasas) were trained. These were located along the borders of Chaman in Balochistan, North Waziristan, Parachinar, and Bajaur. They were well constructed in isolated locations and have subsequently become convenient places for anti-NATO militants to train (including some British citizens). Osama bin Laden initially took refuge in one of these mountain hideouts at Tora Bora before moving south along the Waziristan border.

Osama bin Laden was among a number of Arabs who were encouraged by the West to come to the Pak–Afghan area to oppose the Russians. From 1984, he lived in Peshawar, where his former associates have told the author that he was very close to Abdullah Yusuf Azzam, a Palestinian Sunni Islamic scholar who preached defensive jihad. Azzam was killed by a bomb in 1989, by which time the Russians were leaving Afghanistan, and bin Laden was on his way to the Sudan, having been refused re-entry into Saudi Arabia.

The mujahideen contributed to the emergence of the Taliban and ruled all but one of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces from 1995 to 2000; they were led by mullah Muhammad Omar, a former talib from Hangu in Pakistan. Of the five Afghan leaders who were in the ascendency when the Russians left, Ahmed Shah Masoud presided for some time over a single province, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (leader of Hizb-e-Islami) went to Iran after temporarily becoming President (following Rabbani), Najeebullah was killed by the Taliban, and Dostan and Rabbani were sent into exile.

Pakistan’s ISI allowed Hekmatyar to live in Peshawar in 1993 as a puppet Afghan President in exile, but he lacked credibility within the tribal belt which separates the settled areas of the then North-West Frontier Province (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and the Afghan border. When the ISI realized their mistake they took advantage of the presence of the Taliban in the tribal belt and gave themselves a strong Islamic tag which enabled them to overcome the traditional tribal mistrust of Pakistan’s urban centres of power. It also made it easier for them to help the Taliban to capture Kabul in 1996. This is significant because the support of the tribal groups on both sides of the border (the nebulous Durand line) is vital if there is to be any enduring peace in Afghanistan.

**Encounters with extremists**

The author met the most senior Taliban leader in Pakistan, Sufi Muhammad of Timergara, during the Sufi’s incarceration in Peshawar Central Jail in September 2009. He had been in prison from 2002 to 2008, following his activities in relation to Afghanistan. He was released as the result of an extraordinary deal between the leading provincial Awami National Party (ANP) and the Taliban. Although the ANP is secular and leftist, and the PPP, which backed them, is liberal — Benazir
Bhutto having twice been elected from their ranks as prime minister — it was agreed that Sharia law should be enforced among the 1.8 million people living in the Swat Valley.

Following the author’s brief but cordial meeting with the Sufi, with his two sons interpreting in the prison hospital, he went to the boys’ section where some 150 boys aged between 11 and 18 were detained (some were unsuccessful suicide bombers). On learning that the author had been talking to Sufi Muhammad, a ripple of excitement went round the hall. They saw him as a great leader who in his younger days (he is now more than 90 years old) had led 12,000 jihadis across the mountains to fight the invaders.

In mentioning the importance of charismatic leaders in the eyes of young people, it must not be forgotten that 45% of Afghanistan’s population of 28 million are under the age of 15. The first suicide bomber to blow herself up in Peshawar close to where the author worked was 19 years old. Two teenagers blew themselves up on a motorcycle on Christmas Eve, 2009 — the head of one was found in the grounds of a Roman Catholic primary school. An MI representative came to the author’s office one day to tell him that an 11-year-old boy with a bomb was targeting the college; he never arrived, so presumably they caught him or he changed his mind.

Other encounters with extremists between September 2006, when the author assumed the principalship of Edwardes College, and the summer of 2010, when he left, were as follows. On 31 October 2006, Prince Charles was scheduled to visit the College and deliver his longest speech on Muslim/Christian dialogue during his official visit to Pakistan. He never came because on the previous night an unmanned US drone killed 85 seminary students at a madrasa in Bajaur. The Prince received two death threats delivered in London, and Pervez Musharraf, then President, stated that the Pakistan army was to blame for the incident. But students from Bajaur were categorical that this was done by an unmanned US missile. By the end of the week, the author had closed the College for fear of an attack by an extremist mob.

The College closed again following unfortunate remarks by the Pope in which he used the word jihad out of context and by January 2007 there had been nine bomb blasts in the city, one of which killed a police deputy inspector general. Rocks were fired on city targets from two neighbouring tribal districts. These were probably the work of Mangal Bagh, a former bus ticket collector who became a powerful “warlord” with strong Taliban sympathies, though not recognized as Taliban by senior figures such as Sufi Muhammad.

By May 2007, The News reported that there had been 16 bomb blasts in Peshawar claiming 52 lives and seriously injuring many more. The targets were mainly the police, public buildings such as the airport, and ANP officials. On 21 October, three rockets from the tribal areas were fired at the US Consulate, one of which fell short and almost hit Edwardes College. On 8 November, leaflets in Urdu threatening to suicide-bomb the author were distributed around the College. Peshawar’s first suicide bomber blew herself up on 4 December, there was a threat to Elizabeth College and all similar (i.e. Christian) institutions on 13 December, and on 27 December, Benazir Bhutto was killed — resulting in arbitrary violence just about everywhere.

In 2008, the violence continued, the largest incident being the blowing up of the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad in August. Six hundred kilograms of explosives in a truck produced a crater 6 m deep. The same month the US consul in Peshawar had her car sprayed with bullets. In June 2009, the Pearl Continental Hotel in Peshawar was blown up; in the autumn, a huge bomb estimated at 800 kg of explosives blew up the ISI building in Peshawar; and in March 2010, five bombs exploded at

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7 The two-page death threat was from Captain Halifah. He accused the author of promoting co-education, being a non-Muslim (using the term kafir, which is incorrect) and of not letting students out of lectures on Fridays in time for the jum’a prayers, which we did. For these “crimes” against Islam the author was to be suicide-bombed. Nothing happened.
or near the US Consulate in Peshawar — militants jumped out of a vehicle and tried to storm the Consulate. There were also some huge bomb blasts in crowded bazaars, especially in Shia areas.

Major bomb incidents occurred in Lahore, Islamabad, and Karachi, but Peshawar bore the brunt of the violence, possibly on account of its proximity to the Afghan border (the Khyber Pass), probably also because of the Taliban’s hostility to the regional ANP Party once the Sharia enforcement agreement in the Swat Valley had fallen through and the army had started their operation to clear the valley of militants. Once the military operation in Waziristan got underway, it was claimed that militant attacks on soft targets in the cities were intensified. Shia mosques and communities were particularly targeted, Christians less so, though church institutions in Peshawar received threats, the Director of Bannu Christian Hospital was kidnapped (but released after a few weeks without a ransom), and rockets were fired into Pennell Christian High School in Bannu in November 2008. The timing of this appeared to coincide with a US drone attack 70 km inside the provincial border in a settled area (i.e. it had crossed completely over the tribal belt).

These events deserve careful analysis. What began with crowds of protesting extremist students became progressively more organized and focused on government officials (e.g. the police), high-profile buildings (e.g. hotels and a bank used by members of the Combined Military Hospital), and Shia and other minority community centres. Officials and buildings belonging to the USA were very much targeted, but whenever this happened, government commentators and the press were at great pains to deny that this was deliberate. Thus, when the Marriott Hotel was blown up, it was immediately announced that the President and Prime Minister had been due to dine there. Later, the hotel manager denied this, but by then the international press had lost interest (except in Scotland). When the car of the US Consul in Peshawar was sprayed with bullets, it was quickly explained that the miscreants were trying to kill a prominent politician who lived next door, but they had made a mistake. Very little publicity was given to the shooting of a US aid worker and his driver outside the American Club.

Students and academic staff at Edwardes College had no sympathy for Taliban and al-Qaeda killings; one student suffered incredibly when, first, his father, a police superintendent in Lakki Marwat, was killed by a suicide bomb, and when the student went to the family village in Swat for the funeral, a second bomber killed half the rest of the family. Equally, though, some students had lost family members to the US drones.

The ISI and the Taliban

More details of the security incidents which occurred in and around Peshawar are given in Frontier of Fear. In September 2013, more than a hundred worshippers were killed at All Saints’ Church, Kohati Gate, by two suicide bombers. Just over a year later, 145 people, mostly children, were killed by gunmen at the Army Public School, and in January 2016, there was an attack on the Bacha Khan University near Peshawar which left about 20 dead. On Easter Day 2016, a bomb attack in Lahore killed approximately 80 people in an amusement park.

To some extent, the attacks on “soft” targets could be correlated with the activities of the army in the Swat Valley and Waziristan. The All Saints’ Church bombing was attributed by the Taliban to the activity of US drones in the FATA areas, and a general increase in security incidents followed the Government’s storming of the Lal Masjid mosque in Islamabad after its occupation by extremists. The Army Public School killings may also have been a response to the death of the Taliban leader, Hakimullah Mehsud, who was killed by a drone en route to a peace meeting.

However, there have also been allegations of complicity between sections of the Taliban and both the army and its adjunct, the ISI. These reached their climax with the killing of Osama bin Laden

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inside Pakistan’s borders in May 2011. Many western commentators felt it inconceivable that he could have been in Pakistan without the knowledge of the authorities, especially the ISI.

This issue has been discussed in more detail by Carey Schofield, who offers a plausible account of events which do not implicate the Pakistani military authorities.\(^9\) The matter is also discussed in *Frontier of Fear*.\(^10\) But underlying the accusations of Pakistani complicity is the persistent belief among more hawkish western observers that Pakistan has been economical with the truth about its dealings with the militants.

The Pak–Afghan situation resembles that of Ireland in that a large proportion of the population on both sides of the border are ethnically and linguistically the same — Pashtuns — and the border itself is extremely porous and ill-defined. Collectively the Pashtuns were united in opposing Russian military ambitions in Afghanistan — with the ISI playing a leading role. But once the Russians had left, the Pashtuns were divided between those who were part of or close to their respective Afghan and Pakistani military establishments and the emergent Taliban. It is therefore not surprising that the Pakistani army and the ISI had difficulty maintaining law and order, and the constant demands of western governments to crack down harder and harder on dissidents have either fallen on deaf ears or have proved too difficult to achieve.

**Conclusions**

In order to understand, interpret, or make provision for security-related events in the Pak–Afghan area, it is essential to appreciate the history of the region as a whole. To some extent, this is true of every part of the world with a colonial past, but in this particular area, the extension of the Cold War between the West and the Soviet bloc into Afghanistan played a unique part not only at the time but also in shaping the ongoing sequence of events. This has had major unresolved implications for security.

In addition to recent history, the geography of the border region is also significant. The terrain of the FATA areas is uniquely suited to the tribes which inhabit them, and yet these tribes are being forced to acclimatize to transitions which took generations to accomplish elsewhere. This could well be a factor in what one distinguished Muslim scholar has described as the “ferocious activism” of many young Muslims:

> What attracts young Muslims to […] ephemeral but ferocious activism? One does not have to subscribe to determinist social theories to realise the almost universal condition of insecurity which Muslim societies are now experiencing. The Islamic world is passing through a most devastating period of transition. A history of economic and scientific change which in Europe took five hundred years, is, in the Muslim world, being squeezed into a couple of generations.\(^11\)

Add to these insecurities, poor educational opportunities, unemployment, neighbourhood hostilities, and intermittent drone attacks, and it isn’t difficult to understand why young Pashtuns and others resort to violence. Fundamentalist Islam may fuel violence, but it does not appear to be the main cause of it.

The recent historical context of the Pak–Afghan region is also responsible for some of the ironies whereby, for example, the Pakistan military and the ISI are constantly being urged by the West to crack down on their former *mujahideen* associates who eventually threw in their lot with the Taliban. The Pakistan army has suffered enormous losses in doing precisely this, and in return the


militants have hit back hard against soft civilian targets. And is there not an even greater irony when Pakistan calls upon Islamic militias in its proxy struggle against India in Kashmir?

But in spite of these ironies and the attendant tragic losses of life on all sides, Pakistan rumbles on towards a sustainable democracy more or less free from military interference. We conclude on a positive note with the following optimistic assessment by Farzana Sheikh:

The identity of Pakistan, once predicated on opposition to India (suiting the politically dominant military), is being re-evaluated. The media are emancipated, the legal fraternity are strong, the artistic community is vibrant, historians and human rights activists are in the forefront of new trends. Pakistan is becoming an integral — not exclusive — part of South Asia.12

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