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## ***Resolution of Kashmir Dispute is Key to Afghanistan***

U.S. involvement in Afghanistan is futile. To the extent that a goal can be ascertained—which may now be to militarily weaken the Taliban enough to exercise suitable leverage over it for eventual diplomatic talks—it cannot be achieved through prevailing strategies of counter-insurgency and bombings. As a result of the invasion, the Taliban has come to be viewed as a representative of Pashtun nationalism, the latest episode in a bitter and venerable story of resistance to outside efforts to dictate their politics and purchase their allegiance.

Even our mainstream commentators cannot help but see the obvious. In 2011, Aryn Baker, the Middle East bureau chief for *Time*, raised some sensible—therefore, ignored—questions concerning how, after 10 years of war and occupation, the Taliban “simply melted into the population,” coming to be seen not as merely a repressive, terrorist cell, but a genuine abettor of Pashtun interests. The fluidity with which tribal and religious fundamentalisms morph into a pose of self-determination is well-known. As the late historian of Africa Basil Davidson repeatedly stressed, tribal societies often seek an exit from imperial domination by appealing to the West’s avowed affection for more modern political arrangements. “‘If you want,’ said the nationalists to the Europeans, ‘we Africans were tribes yesterday. But today we are nations. And you yourselves say that nations must be free.’” These arguments, the Europeans “found hard to answer.” Equally hard to answer are the incessant calls by Afghan activists, unrelated to the Taliban, for reconciliation and peace, predicated on U.S. withdrawal. On the twelfth anniversary of the U.S.-NATO

invasion, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) condemned in a press release the manner in which the U.S. “used the terrorist attacks of 9/11 as a pretext to change the regime in Afghanistan and pave the way for its long-term military presence in the region,” and “promised our people liberation and freedom, but practically turned our country into a narco-state and the center of their longest-running criminal war.” RAWA also lambasted the composition of the Afghan government as the “misogynist terrorist gangs of the Northern Alliance.” The “murderers” and “criminals” of the Taliban were led by a man considered by RAWA to be an “emblem of misogyny,” Mullah Omar. But this rejection of repressive forces, in *all* forms, is reviled by the counter-insurgents, who will spare no expense in convincing the host country of the munificence of its own efforts.

“I studied Afghanistan in great detail and from every conceivable angle,” President Trump said in his highly anticipated address on Afghanistan last August. Poring over the pages of the Mongol sweep of South Asia, the lethal stalemate of the Great Game, and the charnel house set up during the Soviet invasion, which led to the welcomed Taliban takeover of the mid-1990s yielded the following prescription: “We are not nation-building again. We are killing terrorists.” He did leave open the possibility that “perhaps it will be possible to have a political settlement that includes elements of the Taliban,” but, crucially, only “after an effective military effort” aimed at weakening them, such that they will be forced to accept their fate as determined in Washington. Nowhere, in his massive study of Afghan history, society, and military resolve did he come to learn that “every previous invader has enjoyed an advantage over the Afghans in technology, resources, and organization—from Alexander’s hoplites to the Mongols’ recurved bows to the Soviets’ Hind gunships—yet the Afghans own advantages—impassable terrain, veritable invisibility among the mountains or population, and unlimited time—have allowed them to ultimately turn the tables on occupying powers.” A further fact that would have undoubtedly jumped out at the studious Trump would be former Vice President Joe Biden’s candid admission to Hamid Karzai, that “Pakistan is *fifty*times more important for the United States than Afghanistan.”

### **Pakistan as Keyholder**

Other than the fact that “U.S. thinking on Pakistan is just as muddled as before,” driven by its utterly arrogant belief that the U.S. can destroy the Taliban, the preeminent Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid warned also of the dangers of underestimating “Pakistan’s near-fatal obsession with India,” particularly in the realm of Kashmir, where the essential

dynamic of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)-sponsored harassment of the Indian military presence largely explains to current impasse in Afghanistan. Hence, without the pretext of Kashmir, Pakistan could theoretically end the self-perpetuating cycle of sponsorship and blowback. “Kashmir,” notes Pakistani journalist Salman Haqqi, “is the reason Pakistan started utilising militant groups as not only proxies, but more specifically as ‘weapons’ against India, in what is commonly known in security circles as Pakistan’s ‘*Bleed India*’ campaign.” Its deep alliance with China is further evidence of this drive. According to strategic specialist Yossef Bodansky, Islamabad has “consciously linked its own strategic vision to that of Beijing, whose present and near-future grand strategy considers the revival of the Silk Road as a primary regional strategic entity.” In short, in the background is a resource war, split along the lines of a Pakistan-China and India-Russia-U.S. alliance. It is, of course, no secret that Pakistanis have suffered most acutely from their government’s support of the Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba, the Haqqani network, and others. However horrifying, this is a direct and predictable consequence of the mercenary nature of extremist elements, who exploit their benefactors’ lavish provision of aid driven by overarching, geopolitical considerations, then commit atrocities inside the benefactors’ territory whenever that aid freezes or declines. Another, broader fact represented by recent events in Pakistan is that states regularly overlook the security of their own populations in pursuit of higher objectives. Yet, in the face of mounting domestic death-tolls, the support continues. Examples abound. To take a recent case, since 2011, Turkey, whose “role has been no less significant than Saudi Arabia’s in aiding ISIS and other jihadi groups,” has worked to overthrow the al-Assad government in Syria. Later, in September 2014, under growing international pressure, Erdoğan’s government nominally signed onto an anti-ISIS military coalition that included the United States. “In response,” writes specialist Fawaz Gerges, “[ISIS] released a propaganda video calling on the Turkish people to rise up and overthrow ‘Satan,’ a reference to Erdoğan, who made his country ‘a slave to the crusaders.’” What followed were a series of devastating terrorist attacks inside Turkey directed against both Kurds and Turkish civilians. Nevertheless, as the new phase of the Syrian civil war demonstrates, Turkey remains committed to jihadi groups in their collective campaign to eradicate a mutual enemy: the Kurds.

Unlike ISIS, however, Taliban fighters are essentially drawn from local Pashtun areas, and therefore enjoy a high degree of legitimacy in contrast to the Northern Alliance government, which is viewed as an American quisling. This view may change under Ashraf Ghani, who has been more forceful in his calls for talks, at which he insists the

Afghan Taliban be given a seat. But his diligence may not survive. The Saudi Arabian siege of Qatar, where the Taliban has its only diplomatic offices, is meant partly to retard these efforts. The combination of the siege and the unwillingness of the ISI to contain the Afghan Taliban has fueled calls by President Ghani to close the offices. Trump's subsequent approval of the proposal "so enraged some senior state department officials who work on South Asia that they have filed a rare internal dissent cable disagreeing with [President Trump] and urging that the US launch more intensive efforts for peace talks." With Tillerson went this minor annoyance.

The notion that the U.S. cannot negotiate with the Taliban on the grounds that it commits terrorism is completely frivolous. It certainly has not been averse to it in the past, even at the exact moment when the Taliban was being accused at the UN of sheltering Osama bin Laden. In May 2001, for example, Colin Powell welcomed the Taliban's professed determination to cut back on rural opium production, and delivered \$43 million in aid to help it do so. Later, the U.S. ignored credible warnings that the Taliban was largely self-financed through drug cultivation, likely because its own allies in the Northern Alliance government were similarly bankrolled. And we need not revisit the hapless story of the UNOCAL pipeline, which saw direct negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban over investment terms.

Additionally, we are confronted with the plodding comportment of the Modi government of India. The bigotry associated with the rise of Hindu chauvinism, while disastrous for Indian Muslims, matters little in the realm of Afghanistan or Kashmir, stemming from the obvious fact that any conflict over these territories may quickly escalate into nuclear war. Rajesh Basrur writes in a British journal that although New Delhi has moved closer to Washington and can invoke the pretext of the "War on Terror" even more effectively than before, "no Indian government, whether 'Hindu nationalist' or not, has been able to respond differently under the shadow of nuclear weapons." With a military resolution of either Afghanistan or Kashmir out of sight, we can speculate on how an eventual diplomatic settlement may turn out.

### **Power and Diplomacy in Kashmir**

The government of India is well aware of its own power relative to Pakistan's in the region, as exhibited by its latest flouting of the World Bank's Permanent Indus Commission, which is supposed to relegate the use of the country's six rivers. The tributaries of the Indus River, which, according to the Commission, are designated for Pakistan, have been selected by India as a site for the construction of two major

hydroelectric plants, against the protests of the Abbas government. While it is indisputable that the Indian government is responsible for the vast preponderance of atrocities and controls more of the territory of Kashmir than does Pakistan, it is the latter power that, from the early days, shifted the ultimate resolution of the dispute from one of a possibility of Kashmiri independence to one of accession to either side. As late as 2003, Gen. Musharraf, then the beleaguered president of Pakistan, informed the press that his government had “left aside” all UN resolutions regarding Kashmir, and that, as a “Pakistani,” would never give up Kashmir.

India, in control of the most aesthetically luxurious sections of the territory, both its summer and winter capitals, and the beneficiary of a tourism industry undeterred by ceaseless political turmoil has made no haste for negotiations. Its Supreme Court, in full support of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) yearnings, has recently ruled that the infamous Article 370 of India’s constitution, which only recognizes Jammu and Kashmir’s “special status,” is a permanent fixture of the situation on the ground, affirming that the territories are effectively Indian provinces. The 2014 legislative elections in J&K, despite loud Hurriyat calls to boycott, ended in sweeping gains for both the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) and the BJP, made possible by huge voter-turnout. The PDP, in the words of its own party platform, “is not presenting a solution; nor does it pretend to have one,” but instead advocates for what it calls “Self-Rule,” an awkward compromise between full independence and regional autonomy that aims to “integrate the region without disturbing the extant sovereign authority,” meaning without offending the Indian occupation. J&K, in other words, are now under the governance of forces quarrel little with the Indian presence.

Recent public opinion data of Kashmir, though extremely sparse, reveal a complex picture, but some form of autonomy appears to be most preferred. The sparseness is attributable to a willful ignorance of the Kashmiri struggle by Western politics and academia. “Throughout their struggle,” wrote Victoria Schofield in her standard history of the conflict, “the Kashmiri activists regretted the unwillingness of the rest of the world to assist them in what they perceived to be a ‘just’ cause.” The massive aid for Afghan militants in their fight against the Russians, the support for Kuwait in its expulsion of Saddam’s tanks, and the intervention on behalf of Kosovar-Albanians all stood in stark contrast to the cricket-chirps that complement almost any mention of Kashmir in U.S. foreign policy discussion. The empty hope that an armed struggle could corral international attention to the problem, or even outside insistence on mediation, soon

mutated into the terror of Lashkar-e-Taiba, which, in turn, spawned a heavier Indian military presence. Surely, the “considerable anti-western feeling” that has taken root among Kashmiris enraged about reflexive U.S. support for the Indian status quo will render any effort to alter it partly a conquest of suspicions.

A May 2010 study by Robert Bradnock of Chatham House found that, in both the India- and Pakistan-administered parts, independence is “the most popular option overall,” with basically equal percentages in favor on both sides of the Line of Control (LoC). (One counter-analysis by an Indian think-tank claims to have exposed flaws in Bradnock’s methodology, and that, when corrected for, more respondents actually support accession to India.) Approximately 90 percent of Muslims in the Kashmir valley, where the insurgency is widespread, support independence. But Bradnock’s other findings show how territorial and administrative concerns are eclipsed by more practical ones. Attitudes regarding unemployment and militarization are “among the few that united opinion in nearly all the sampled districts on both sides of the LoC,” irrespective of religion or national loyalty, according to a *BBC* summary. Seventy-six percent regard unemployment as a major concern, while high majorities are also even willing to live with the LoC, provided that it is relaxed and can alleviate economic straits. In any event, the future of Kashmir is for Kashmiris to decide; their actual aspirations cannot be determined unless both Pakistan and India stand back and allow a free and fair plebiscite.

Though difficult to prove, it is conceivable that Islamabad is less diffident about holding a plebiscite than India since it believes that, no matter what its outcome, it will end up with substantial influence in Kashmiri politics and economics. As evidence, they rely on their shared Islamic identities, but, as in Afghanistan, local populations harbor ambitions of their own, based on distinct cultural identities—Kashmiriyat in J&K and Pashtunwali in Afghanistan.

### **American Obduracy**

The Trump administration has been, so far, ineffective in disrupting the rhythm. While Trump bemoans the pervasive and elusive chaos and lawlessness that, he alleges, characterizes Afghanistan, specialists see little coincidence. Geoffrey Swenson, in a detailed article in the MIT journal *International Security*, finds that, “From the beginning, however, the institutional arrangements of governance were not particularly conducive to the rule of law.” By ignoring the existing judicial avenues, like tribal *jirgas*, the new U.S.-Northern Alliance union succeeded in not only stoking suspicions of the presence of yet

another foreign power seeking to establish institutional control, but also spoiling whatever legitimacy it hoped to gain.

Within a few years, this had even become apparent in elite circles. Former Reaganite legal advisor Thomas Carothers argued in an important 2006 essay in *Foreign Affairs* that U.S. aggression and exceptionally rampant human rights abuses in Iraq and Afghanistan had undermined its own stance as a promoter of democracy. In particular, “the damage that the Bush administration has done to the global image of the United States as a symbol of democracy and human rights by repeatedly violating the rule of law at home and abroad has further weakened the legitimacy of the democracy-promotion cause.” He lists the international U.S.-run torture network (“extraordinary rendition”), illegal detainment of prisoners at Guantanamo, and unlawful surveillance practices used domestically as causes of the “incalculable harm to the United States’ image in the world.”

In accordance with this patternized hypocrisy, Swenson writes, the U.S. chose to empower a “network of warlords” that “became a long-term, destructive fixture of the Afghan political scene.” The Karzai government immediately instituted an “unrepresentative system for parliamentary elections that offered strong disincentives for the creation of political parties.” Later, the level of centralization of USAID programs was “stunning,” while “Supreme Court judges had little incentive or ability to foster the rule of law, particularly if it involved challenging executive power.” “Avoidance of the courts was entirely rational,” following from the fact that “Taliban justice came to be well regarded, particularly in the Pashtun heartland.”

“The international community, and particularly the United States, bears significant responsibility for these poor institutional choices.” Today, the Taliban controls a third of the Afghan population. What is more, the U.S. has lost a significant portion of its former leverage over Pakistan and other relevant regional governments, meaning that it is losing power with which to affect change on the ground. As is usual, this situation is largely the consequence of self-inflicted wounds. “America has no diplomatic dialogue with Russia or Iran,” both of whom are now, as Ahmed Rashid alleges, supporting the Taliban as a barrier to ISIS expansion into South Asia. “It has poor relations with Pakistan, which it is now threatening with sanctions. And it is suspicious of China, which has so far been helpful in trying to initiate regional talks. The US’s only friend in the region is India, which is not a direct neighbor of Afghanistan and whose participation in Afghan affairs Pakistan will not tolerate.” Indeed, the Pakistani military stirs in exasperation over Indian control over large parts of Kashmir, to which, apparently, the Trump administration is at

least acquiescing. Pakistan's National Security Adviser, Nasser Khan Janjua, has lamented in the Indian press that the U.S. is "speaking India's language," in the way that it is "following the Indian policy on the longstanding Kashmir dispute." Janjua went so far as to warn of the possibility of nuclear war, resulting from the disturbance of the "delicate balance" of power in the region, in which the U.S. traditionally emphasized, however softly, diplomacy between India and Pakistan to defuse the Kashmir dispute. Now, it has allied with India as a counter to Chinese economic expansion vis-à-vis Pakistan, suspending large sums of aid to the latter.

In the background looms the question of whether or not a suspension of aid even has the capability to alter Pakistan's support for the Haqqani network. Indeed, U.S. military aid to the country has already fallen significantly in recent years, with little noticeable effect. To the contrary, Pakistan has responded to the most recently announced suspension by fueling a new scourge of Taliban terror inside Afghanistan, targeting both Afghan security forces and civilians. Vanda Felbab-Brown reports in a recent Brookings Institution publication that, "Overall, U.S. military aid to Pakistan decreased by 60 percent between 2010 and August 2017, without a significant impact on Pakistan's behavior." Its ability to secure aid from other regional allies less concerned with the Taliban, including its traditional patron, China, further offsets the U.S. reduction. "Thus, Pakistan can easily believe that it can ride out tensions with the United States."

Deprived of a military option, the ability to coerce by a withdrawal of aid, and facing newly forging regional alliances, the U.S. must turn to what it has always sternly prohibited: honest diplomacy that includes the Taliban. In two important papers, Sajjad Ahmed of Osaka University observes that it is the "political reconstruction that the U.S. and the Afghan government have implemented" that accounts for the "the gloomy state of affairs in the country." The enormous hemorrhaging of cash has yielded almost nothing in the way of weakening the Taliban militarily. "Whereas outright victory for both the U.S. and the Taliban remains far off ... the Taliban are not negotiating from a position of weakness," he writes. Ahmed cites the startling statistics of independent reporter Matthew Nasuti, who finds that, for each dead Taliban militant, \$50 million are spent, and given the rough estimate of 35,000 total Taliban fighters, the U.S. would have to spend \$1.7 trillion in order to satiate its avowed lust for full eradication. The original sin of excluding the overthrown Taliban from the 2001 conference in Bonn, which hosted an astonishing instance of U.S. *diktat*, has bedeviled all subsequent American administrations, according to Ahmed.



Pakistan's National Action Program, on its "rocky rutted path ... has had mixed outcomes of success and pitfalls to counter terrorism in the country." Monitoring the activities of known terrorists, disrupting their communications infrastructure, and interdiction of militant groups at their headquarters have all borne some remarkably positive results, Ahmed begins. But the approach to terrorism in Pakistan remains dangerously concentrated in the hands of military authorities, at the expense of civil administration. Further, Ahmed opines, to combat the appeal of jihadi elements, it is "indispensable to dismantle their hatcheries," namely, the *madrassas*, whose funding traces overwhelmingly to Saudi Arabia. Recent diplomatic skirmishes between the U.S. and the Kingdom reveal that such pressure can be exerted on the greatest purveyor of international jihadism, but, much like what the saga in Afghanistan reveals, the gulf between sensible strategies and actual policies cannot be bridged by addressing isolated snags or quandaries.