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PREAMBLE: AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN: A HISTORIC COMPARISON

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Despite their common heritage, demographic similarities and deeply shared interests as neighbours, Afghanistan and Pakistan today are two very different countries standing wide apart from each other on most measures of analysis. Notwithstanding some simplified aggregating characterizations, such as the US-coined “AfPak” grouping, Afghanistan and Pakistan present fundamentally different sets of issues and challenges to regional and global security. This distinctiveness is even truer when applied beyond security to other social, economic and political factors.

Socially, the two countries are undoubtedly linked by deep natural affinities. The Pashtun and Baloch populations in both countries are the two major overlapping communities that bind the two nations together. Beyond these demographic overlaps too, the two peoples enjoy historic, cultural, religious and linguistic ties. However, divergent historic experiences, and the evolving influence other social and political factors, have significantly contributed to the emergence of relatively distinct Afghan and Pakistani cultures, manifesting in distinct social mores among populations on both sides of the Durand Line.

Among the key cultural factors is the role of religion in the two societies. While enjoying a much more sophisticated civil society, advanced level of education and greater exposure to the outside world, the Pakistani society has treated religion as an inescapable political reality lying at the heart of its concept of nationhood. Afghanistan, on the other hand, has been a deeply religious society in the most traditional sense. As a result, it was mainly in Pakistan that we witnessed the birth and exponential growth of political Islam, including some of its extreme and violent manifestations. In Afghanistan, where a separation of the divine and the temporal spheres always existed in its most primordial form, political Islam was a purely imported phenomenon. Even today, several generations into the growth of political Islam in Afghanistan, Afghan Islamists look to Pakistani clergy and Madrassas as their collective ideological cornerstone.

Politically, the two polities have been shaped differently by their respective historic experiences. The colonial legacy, as well as the event of the creation of Pakistan, namely the Indian Partition of 1947, gave character not only to the Pakistani state but also to its society. Compared to Afghanistan's rudimentary state, which resulted from painstaking state-building efforts, Pakistan in 1947 inherited an evolved state structure with a functioning bureaucracy. However, the original imbalance between a highly developed military structure inherited from the British Raj and a less developed civil society quickly led to a distortion of the democratic polity in Pakistan. By comparison, in Afghanistan, where the deeply tribal nature of the society seriously inhibited the state-building process, the problem of civil military imbalance has rarely arisen. Other challenges aside, this bodes well for the future of its nascent democracy today.

Militarily, the two neighbours have very little in common. Inheriting a highly developed military establishment from its colonial precursors, Pakistan has always been considered one of the major military powers in the world. Its acquisition of nuclear weapon in the 1980s, further cemented that position on the regional and international level. Afghanistan, by contrast, received no colonial legacy and throughout its history struggled with development of its meager military capability. The military histories of the two countries have historically influenced the political and security orientation of both countries in very different ways, one acquiring an ambitious, expansionist outlook in the region, while the other becoming volatile, weak and generally inwardly focused.

Economically, the comparison between Afghanistan and Pakistan is determined above all by the huge disparity in population. Beyond the population factor too, the two countries are hardly on comparable grounds. Where Afghanistan has for centuries struggled as an economic backwater, Pakistan was – in the later half of the twentieth century – a dynamic developing economy. However, for two decades now, Pakistan has been afflicted by severe economic decline, which is underpinned by a host of systemic reasons, from the security-centric view of its dominant military establishment, to the insurmountable level of corruption in the civilian sphere. By contrast, Afghanistan, while still a long way from establishing a sustainable economic base, shows signs of modest promise. Needless to point out that economic regeneration and prosperity in both Afghanistan and Pakistan crucially depend on the extent to which both countries manage to deal with their menacing security challenges and foster regional economic co-operation.

Finally, on the global security front, where the "AfPak" characterization has helped cement the perception of Afghanistan and Pakistan as one of the epicentres of violent extremism, the fate of the two countries could hardly be more conflicting. It is true that both countries face and suffer alike at the hands of extremist and terrorist groups, including a trans-boundary Taliban network, but their responses to the threat of extremism are deeply contradictory. While Afghanistan has massively suffered as a victim, Pakistan has for years abetted and promoted Islamic radicalization, frequently using it as an instrument of policy. It continues to do so today. Pakistan is also one of the countries where the state's sponsorship of terrorism abroad has contributed instrumentally to the growth of radicalization and extremism in the entire region.

Having said the above, all the differences aside, Afghanistan and Pakistan cannot escape the overriding reality and necessity of working together. This is not only demanded by the plight of their people who, in another deep human bond, share the pain of suffering from similar challenges, but it is also something that the world as whole expects of the two countries. Indeed, seldom before were two countries of greater concern for the security of the world than Afghanistan and Pakistan today.

