

## PREAMBLE: THIRD PARTY ROLES AND INSURGENCIES IN SOUTH ASIA

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In 2014, I edited a book on counterinsurgency in South Asia (*Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in South Asia: Through a Peacebuilding Lens*). In comparing India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, the analysis identified a number of common threads across the case studies. Arguably the most politically controversial of these is the role of third party spoilers in insurgencies. Insurgent support from external actors – usually near and far neighbors of the insurgency-infested state – has been the norm rather than the exception in South Asia.

The finding is extremely consequential but not altogether surprising. South Asia suffers from an unfinished process of state and nation building. National identities and territorial boundaries are deeply contested and the contestation involves neighbors who often feel justified in manipulating the situation in pursuit of their preferred configuration on these questions. Massive organized violence in the forms of insurgencies often originate from domestic grievances linked to the contested issues and provide obvious opportunities for outside states to exploit them further. The normative concern about ‘sovereignty’ in statecraft is trampled in the process – it always has been in this region.

Both Daud and Semple have aptly captured the importance of this broader geo-politics for the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban insurgencies in their papers but without referring to this dynamic. The Afghan Taliban have benefited tremendously from the overlay of Machiavellian politics among regional and extra-regional actors with a direct stake in developments in the country. The U.S. (as an extension of the Afghan state given its central role in shaping the direction of post-9/11 Afghanistan) and Pakistan have been the most important actors. Their interests have never fully converged on the end state in Afghanistan. For the U.S., the ideal state in Afghanistan is a decisively defeated Taliban, an inclusive democratic political system friendly towards the West, and a strong security apparatus that can defeat and prevent the resurgence of any Islamist outfit. Since 9/11, this has translated into an expansive counterinsurgency effort, replacement of the Taliban with an ethnically diverse set up in Kabul, first under President Karzai and now Ghani, and a 350,000-plus strong Afghan security force.

Pakistan's approach to Afghanistan is a function of its rivalry with India. Throughout history, Pakistan and India have approached Afghanistan as a staging ground for their broader tussle for supremacy in South Asia history. For Pakistan, the post-9/11 developments in Afghanistan represented something far more worrying: The 350,000-plus force of stability for it was a new army that sees Pakistan as the principal long term rival; it internalized political diversity as an expansion of space and power for elements traditionally opposed to Pakistan, more wedded to border disputes with Pakistan, and closer to India; and it felt that the desire to fight to total victory in Afghanistan (or at least as it saw the U.S.'s campaign) was directly responsible for the militant backlash in Pakistan. The combination meant that Pakistan's security establishment (that controls the Afghan policy) saw itself as the net loser; to its mind, the U.S. approach was a problem more than a solution.

The fundamental problem in terms of the Afghan Taliban insurgency was that the success of the U.S.-led counterinsurgency effort was always implicitly predicated on its own efforts – both kinetic and non-kinetic – in Afghanistan *and* Pakistan's direct support in squeezing the space for the Taliban and its affiliates. And yet, given Pakistan's outlook, it was never clear how U.S. policies would change its calculus to its liking. The U.S. created multiple incentives but virtually all were linked to monetary rewards for Pakistan – and therefore irrelevant to the India question. At the same time, the U.S. was constrained in terms of raising Pakistani costs because of its dependence on Pakistan's supply route to Afghanistan and the risks of potentially destabilizing an already turbulent nuclear power. The Afghan state only complicated matters by exaggerating the 'Pakistan problem' to deflect attention from its colossal governance failures and subsequent challenges to legitimacy. Pakistan, on its part, articulated a vision for South Asia that demanded an even handed U.S. approach between India and Pakistan and strict curbs on India's role in Afghanistan. Neither was realistic given the U.S.'s interest in India's global rise and Kabul's inherent incentive to balance Pakistan's proximity with India's clout.

The U.S.-Pakistan-Afghanistan disconnect was therefore all but structurally embedded in South Asia's post-9/11 geo-politics. This was neither the driver of the insurgency nor, as Daud points out in his paper, would a turnaround in Pakistan's approach end it *per se*, but it did (and continues to) complicate matters significantly.

The regional aspect is also intrinsic to the case of the Pakistani Taliban. A multitude of factors led to the TTP's rise but what is clear is that sans the post-9/11 dynamics in Afghanistan, Pakistan would not have faced the FATA-based rebellion that eventually coalesced – helped significantly by the state's errors – into a full-fledged insurgency under the TTP banner. The rallying cry for anti-Pakistan militants was the Pakistani army's forays into FATA in support for the U.S. campaign. Of course, this is not an example of a third party spoiling role in that sense given that the U.S. never wanted this fallout to occur. However, in as much as Pakistan saw its presence as a contributing factor to its domestic insurgency, it further dampened the Pakistani security establishment's enthusiasm to oblige the U.S. on its asks against the Afghan Taliban. As the Pakistani insurgency took off, and the U.S. pointed to it to reinforce its view that Pakistan needed to deal with all militant elements decisively, Pakistan

felt that it was the fact that it did too much (not too little) to support the U.S. effort had led to this backlash in the first place. The wedge between the two widened further, to the Afghan Taliban's advantage.

More recently, the TTP has also benefited from the increasingly intense *realpolitick* game between Pakistan and the Afghan government. The TTP's operations from Afghanistan continue to prevent Pakistan from decimating the group, a fact that provides Afghanistan an important bargaining chip. As Semple suggests, this was one of the reasons some expected greater cooperation between the two sides. For now, the only impact of this dynamic has been to sour Afghanistan-Pakistan relations further. And there is little incentive for Afghanistan to change tack on this without getting something tangible in return from Pakistan.

## The Days Ahead

The experience of South Asian insurgencies shows that negative third party roles may eventually be altered in one of three ways: (i) counterinsurgency efforts demonstrate a decisive advantage, thereby prompting the third party to pull back; (ii) the insurgent turns on its third party patron for one reason or another; and (iii) the inter-state alignment changes such that the third party finds an incentive in changing its stance.

None of these are likely in Afghanistan's case. The recent change of heart in Washington about a swift troop drawdown is significant, in that it makes an outright defeat of the Afghan state highly unlikely. But the on-ground configuration does not seem to be poised to deliver a decisive victory either. In terms of the Taliban's relationship with Pakistan, the equation has always oscillated, but the costs of direct confrontation continue to be deemed prohibitive by both sides. Moreover, for the first time, Taliban have real alternative alignment options; countries like Iran and Russia are far more worried about the Islamic State presence in Afghanistan than the Taliban and have therefore reportedly begun to promote a far softer take on the Taliban. At the very least, this ought to make Pakistan even less likely to test the limits of its leverage over them. It also means that the impact of any decision on its part to go after the Taliban will be less consequential. And as long as these factors hold, the Af-Pak relationship will remain strained and competitive. This means Pakistan will be unable to get the concessions it wants from Afghanistan on TTP. If so, the insurgency will be saved the total decimation it faces if its leadership were still in Pakistan.

The Afghan and Pakistan Taliban insurgencies conform to the norm of third party roles complicating counterinsurgency efforts in South Asia. Conflicting state visions for the South Asian neighborhood and disregard for the normative concerns about sovereignty are blatantly evident. Also in keeping with the general trend of counterinsurgent behavior is Afghanistan and Pakistan's propensity to blame the other as the principal reason for their problems, while insisting that their own policies towards the other's insurgent outfits are peripheral. Neither is accurate. But none of this is about to change. Unfortunately, the status quo suggests more violence and more human suffering for the peoples of this region.

