**Prisoner of culture, not geography**

On **Jul 29, 2022** [Muneeb Salman](https://nation.com.pk/authorpost/columnist/muneeb-salman/)

Pakistan, with around 220 million people, is the fifth most populous country in the world and is also home to one of the biggest youth bulges. The 100 million youth constitutes almost 46 percent of inhabitants and are one of the most tangible forces to be reckoned with. Moreover, its geo-strategic location is one of the finest as it sits on the crossroads of Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia, with an accessible sea outlet to the Arabian Sea. These features provide solid ground for rapid economic growth, which China, India, and Bangladesh have achieved since the early 21st century. Yet, Pakistan could not manage to rise as a powerful country due to continued involvement in numerous insurgencies and border tensions. This was largely due to the country’s indispensable and volatile geographical location. Many analysts consider Pakistan to be a ‘prisoner of geography’ for this reason. However, the challenges to Pakistan are not only geographical but also have a lot to do with history and culture. As James Baldwin said, people are trapped in history, and history is trapped in them. The point is that Pakistan is more a prisoner of culture than a prisoner of geography.
Scholars of strategic culture describe it as a set of images, beliefs, experiences, and preconceptions that are held by decision-makers of a country. These actors are socialised over some time into holding some particular concepts. Thus the decisions undertaken by government actors are rationalised in light of the previously held perceptions rather than taking into account the set of choices that may be available to them as rational options.
The preconceptions among Pakistani decision-makers regarding the role of Pakistan and threats to its survival were also the primary motivation for the country’s strategic outlook throughout its history. In Pakistan, the most comprehensive review of the country’s strategic culture was carried out by Hasan Askari Rizvi. He noted that the strategic culture of Pakistan is characterised by mistrust toward both Afghanistan and India in the wake of the partition. Afghanistan refused to accept Durand Line whereas India was involved in a dispute over Kashmir while attempting to block Pakistan’s due share in the division of assets and sitting at the mouth of shared water reserves.
Additionally, Pakistan also perceived a lack of strategic depth in case of war with India. Most of Pakistan’s population has always been concentrated around the eastern parts of the country along the Indus River. Vital infrastructure and industries are also situated along these zones. There are no natural defences or barriers like mountains, rivers, or jungles, on the India-Pakistan border, either.
Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema in his study of Pakistan’s defence policy shed light on another important aspect of Pakistan’s strategic thinking, which was the continuing historical uncertainty along the border with Afghanistan. The British Indian government was apprehensive of the Western frontier of India with Afghanistan throughout its history. This resulted in the formation of a separate North West Frontier Province (NWFP) carved out of the semi-governed tribal agencies and two Frontier commissionerships of Punjab in 1901. The British also signed the Anglo-Russian Convention in 1907 to cement the status of Afghanistan as a buffer state between the Russian and British empires. Underneath lay the anxiety that the area surrounding the NWFP had historically been used by almost all the invaders, who marched into India for varying exigencies. The only exception was European powers who came in through the sea route. When the Afghan government disputed the Durand Line at the time of partition, the collective memory of a vulnerable frontier border aroused the perception of a threat that remained consequential for Pakistan’s policy for decades to come.
When alternative hypotheses regarding Pakistan’s most consequential strategic decisions are presented, they often overlook the strategic cultural standing of the decision-making elite of Pakistan. However, if the decision-making is so influenced by the historical socialisation of actors, what is the way ahead? Despite all the socialisation, actors still consider alternative options when short of addressing the crisis at hand in the national context. For instance, despite the enduring perception of rivalry, Pakistan attempted to normalise relations with India during the governments of Ayub Khan and Pervez Musharraf.
The country’s recent shift towards geo-economics and a greater emphasis on regional cooperation suggests another attempt to give up on the perpetual sense of insecurity. Its quest to harness geopolitical vibrancy is a leap forward, and new thinking, indeed. How good it fares in the future is anybody’s guess. Will it change the cultural mosaic or remain hostage to the past is a million-dollar question.