[Mosharraf Zaidi](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/mosharraf-zaidi)

June 22, 2021

**Absolutely, definitely, maybe not**

Prime Minister Imran Khan’s “absolutely not” certitude about Pakistan’s plans to engage with the United States and partner up on a counterterrorism mission against Daesh, Al-Qaeda and the Taliban is not a surprise. For many, it feels refreshingly clear, direct and unambiguous.

Regardless of the merits or demerits of Pakistan’s decisions (which we will get to momentarily), PM Khan’s refusal to entertain the idea of American weapons, in American hands, being deployed against targets in a third country, from Pakistani soil, is anchored in two decades of political positions the PM has taken on the Afghan conflict.

The question of CIA ‘bases’ in Pakistan was presented by Jonathan Swan, the Axios correspondent that interviewed PM Khan for HBO, as a binary: Will you let the Americans have bases in Pakistan? Yes or no? But this binary is false. The Pakistani and American militaries enjoy a deep, expansive and long-standing collaboration that includes intelligence sharing. For twenty years, the Americans have kept drinking from the well that never dries: a Pakistan that consistently warned the world that the Afghanistan puzzle could not be solved militarily, and a Pakistan that supported efforts to solve it militarily. The simpleton will see this for what it seems to be: a contradiction, a pattern of hypocrisy, or as the Americans love to call it, a “double game”. “Absolutely not” is part of this continuum.

PM Khan’s position on the counterterrorism mission in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal has been completed on September 11 this year merits deeper scrutiny and examination. After two decades of being on the outside of decision-making about this issue in particular, PM Khan’s specific worldview on the Afghan conflict is now ostensibly shaping the official and unofficial, the formal and informal, and the overt and covert position and actions of Pakistan.

At its very core, PM Khan has a hugely romanticized view of the Pakhtun warrior mentality. Undefeatable on the battlefield, fuelled by an inexhaustible supply of honour, a word that is stronger than oak, or sheesham. Befriended and the warrior will defend you to the death. Wronged, or crossed, and the warrior will not hesitate to court death, in search of vengeance. The Taliban add a complex and somewhat rarefied new dimension to this image of the Pakhtun warrior that many urban Pakistanis, including PM Khan, have: religious asceticism.

In the mind of PM Khan, the Taliban then are a heady hybrid of the traditional Pakhtun warrior, dripping with honour and integrity, and doused in religious zeal, sans the trappings of material excess. The undefeatable nature of the Taliban, in the mind of PM Khan, is anchored in these qualities.

Take any of the signals and symbols, and PM Khan’s approach to the Taliban is rooted in this singular belief about the Taliban: undefeatable. An undefeatable force is not to be messed around with. Now pass his and his proxies’ various statements and positions through this filter. Why would Shah Mehmood Qureshi not call Osama bin Laden a terrorist, when given the chance? Maybe it would anger the Taliban and their ilk. Why would PM Khan be against drone strikes on suspected Al-Qaeda and TTP operatives? Maybe it would make the Taliban believe that Pakistan is also against them. Why would PM Khan be so unequivocal about supporting US counterterrorism activity in the region? Maybe it would turn the Taliban against Pakistan.

The pivot point, and primary determinant of every seemingly bizarre or awkward statement or position that PM Khan and his government take on Afghanistan or Afghanistan-adjacent issues is the pleasure of the Taliban. Now the question is, is this the right determinant or the wrong one?

If a leader is seeking peace and prosperity as the primary outcome for his people, which PM Khan and his cabinet clearly are, then the prevention of war, by any means necessary, is not only understandable, it is an admirable and robust way of going about the business of statecraft. As long as there is no war in Pakistan, and Pakistan’s economy can grow without molestation, why should Pakistan get into the business of whether the Americans hit or miss the blue dots in Afghanistan that they have circled on their Google Maps? Well, this is where the simpleton’s binary romance should begin to fall apart.

There is no such thing as the ‘Afghanistan’ map, in the global counterterrorism war room. There is a map, and the targets on it are all over it. Afghanistan maybe grand central, but the tentacles of that enterprise are multinational, cross border, and stretch deep into Pakistani territory and Pakistani cities and villages. We can blame a forty-year Afghan refugee presence in the country for it, or we can blame David Ignatius’s imagination, or we can blame ‘ground realities’ – but the idea that a counterterrorism regime that targets Daesh, Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, remains within the confines of Afghan territory is about as much a fantasy-fiction take, as America’s twenty-year mission in Afghanistan ever being successful was.

Worse still is the assumption that the violent extremist continuum of Daesh-Al Qaeda-TTP-Afghan Taliban will leave Pakistan alone, if Pakistan just somehow avoids participating in counterterrorism operations against that violent extremist continuum. Not a chance. In the last month, the TTP has struck not only inside the newly merged districts, multiple times, it has struck at least twice inside the Islamabad Capital Territory.

Pakistan’s steadily eroding media freedoms may enable the erasure of these facts, so that lazy, overweight armchair strategists can feel better about themselves as they watch too much TV. But that doesn’t mean that the facts don’t exist. From the Quetta Serena attack, to the multiple fatalities suffered in numerous intelligence-based operations throughout the country, to the targeted TTP attacks in the newly merged districts, in Balochistan and in Islamabad, Pakistan is already in the midst of its second ‘war on terror’.

The big gamble PM Khan and his team are now making is that a conciliatory and non-violent approach to the Taliban in Afghanistan, can help deliver a peaceful and stable Afghanistan – a necessary prerequisite to a regional connectivity driven geo-economic boom for Pakistan in the coming years.

If the PM is right, two things need to be true. The first is that the Taliban are capable of governance and peace. Because setting up the mainstreaming of the Taliban, only to learn that all the Taliban know how to do is fight, will be a big disappointment. The early signs on this front are not encouraging. As district after district in Afghanistan falls to the Taliban, the reward matrix for the Taliban skews further and further from ‘talking’ and ‘governance’, and closer and closer to all-out civil war.

The second is that the violent extremist continuum of Daesh-Al Qaeda-TTP-Afghan Taliban must not be a continuum at all, and that external actors like some of the terrorist-supporting strategists in South Block, aren’t all that potent and capable after all. The logic is straightforward. If an absence of occupation, and talking to the Taliban (instead of fighting them), is the solution to the wider violent extremist problem, then the TTP’s lifeblood, the support it receives from elements of the Indian deep state, should fail to sustain its attacks. In short, Pakistan’s efforts to avoid continued violence should be rewarded with less, not more terrorist attacks.

It is safe to say that the celebration of the ostensible clarity and unambiguity on the gotcha questions of the Western media is premature. ‘Absolutely not’ is a great meme to fuel the spirits of cult members, always left breathless by their leader’s incredible vision. It may not be as useful as an indicator of the future of Pakistani public policy. Pakistan’s relationship with Afghanistan, its counterterrorism doctrine, its handling of ethnic nationalism, its engagement with domestic extremism in the shape of the TLP, and its geo-economics led vision for being a hub for regional economic connectivity will require more than what sates the appetite of binary-loving audiences: from Axios on HBO, to the PM’s passionate supporters, to the wily Taliban themselves.

The writer is an analyst and commentator.