**Colonial frontier**

BY A A S I M S A J J A D A K H T A R 2021-06-25

FOR hundreds of years, the western `frontier` of the Indian subcontinent has been the staging ground of a bloody game without end.

Chroniclers have called it the Great Game. I do not think there is anything great about a game that has taken the lives of unnamed millions.

Only those privy to the dark smoky rooms inhabited by spymasters and other profiteers of war could equate `greatness`with strategic control of territory. For the ruling class, both past and present, the lives, well-being and future of the peoples who have occupied these territories for centuries has always been of marginal significance.

Usman Kakar is the latest son of this brutalised soil to have his life taken away in a mist of intrigue, like so many other Pakhtun, Baloch and Hazaras before him. The shock and grief which followed his mysterious death which his f amily is claiming was no accident-metamorphosedinto amammoth funeral in his native Muslim Bagh, a forceful cry for both justice for the departed, and a lasting peace for the region at large.

Usman Kakar was of course one of the few mainstream politicians who dared to speak the truth about the games our strategic planners play. This is why he has in death secured the adulation of so many who cannot dare to ask for accountability of our rulers and their imperial patrons.

Today we are at yet another historical crossroads that brings together Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, China, US, India and Central Asian states like Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in a cynical competition for bloody spoils.

Afghanistan is the primary staging ground, and while it has not seen lasting peace for decades, the dramatic spike in violence portends even worse to come. But the rest of the region is hardly a haven for peace.

A combination of ethnic and sectarian conflict af flicts Iran, Pakistan, India, China and Russia. Not all of these notionally internal conflicts are directly connected to the fires engulfing Afghanistan. But all these states are autocracies with visions of regional and even global assertion, and their shared desires for `greatness` mandates perpetuation of bloody conflicts at the expense of ordinary people.

I do not think that the Pakistani state is any more or less cynical than any other actor in today`s version of the `Great Game`. Propeople and emancipatory principles do not inform the policies of the vast majority of contemporary states or the capitalist worldsystem as a whole. The resurgence of ideological justifications and support for the Afghan Taliban in the Pakistani mainstream must therefore be set against the backdrop of the US agreeing to acknowledge the Talibanas a major stakeholder in Afghanistan and Washington wanting military presence in Pakistan to monitor the post-withdrawal phase.

Let us not forget the militant religious right wing is a mainstream force in India too, one of Washington`s prized allies. Progressive Indians are challenging the xenophobic Modi regime despite untold repression. Pakistani progressives are tasked with the same in our own country. To push back against Shah Mahmood Qureshi`s ambiguous take on Osama bin Laden, and recent speeches welcoming the Taliban by PTI lawmakers in the KP Assembly is necessary and urgent.

But nuance is essential. Restricting ourselves to binaries by insisting that Osama bin Laden be called a `terrorist` and not a `martyr` reinforces the hegemonic mainstream. It cannot be stressed enough that `terrorism` remains a bogey that all states deploy to serve their own cynical interests; every day the state slaps anti-terrorism charges against dissidents whilst suppressing peaceful pro-testers like at Jani Khel. The sufficient longterm condition for a lasting peace in Pakistan and the region at large is for ideologies of hate to be blunted at source.

The state, needless to say, isnot about to spearhead this effort. The carryover of selective history and exclusionary notions of citizenship into the Single National Curriculum make this clear. With a handful of notable exceptions, the corporate media apes the `of ficial` narrative. This leaves progressives to use social media platforms and other offline forms of organising to slowly make a dentin whatis a pervasive ideological apparatus.

There is no shortcut, no quick-fix `counterterrorism` operation that will disappear all of the bigots and guns, thereby bringing peace to our country and the region at large. A progressive political project for our times must recognise that we are in an establishmentshaped quagmire long in the making, and so we too must dig in for the long haul.

Banking on other states to do our work, especially those with imperialist intentions, is a non-starter. As the stakes in the Washington-Beijing rivalry increase, courting either or both in this game without end will compound the miseries of the people of the colonial frontier.  The writer teaches at Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad.