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**A domestic, not foreign, challenge**

Is the situation in Afghanistan a foreign policy challenge or a domestic policy conundrum? At the heart of the conversation initiated by Ejaz Haider in ‘The Friday Times’ is really this question.

The debate over whether Pakistan should conduct cross-border counterterrorism operations on Afghan soil is really part of a wider reset that is necessary in the Pakistani strategic community’s understanding of the country and its place in the world, in the age of cybercrime, fifth generation warfare and unceasing, borderless conflict.

I feel Pakistan should eschew offensive counterterrorism measures, especially if they require cross-border kinetic action. Mr Haider feels the option must not only be available but be exercised when needed. We agree on many things, as Mr Haider notes in his excellent, most recent piece. Rather than treating the conversation as a tit for tat, I want to draw readers’ attention to some more foundational questions that must be explored before coming to any kind of conclusion. There too, as Mr Haider rightly notes, no one has conclusive answers. Anyone that thinks she or he does, is unwittingly boxing themselves into a cul-de-sac. Remember this. It is important.

The Pakistani security sector and its foreign policy deal with Afghanistan (and Iran) as ‘foreign relations’ issues. The problem is that both Afghanistan and Iran, whilst fully sovereign and external from a legal standpoint, represent internal, domestic challenges for Pakistani policymakers. Until the Pakistani state is able to develop the code-switching capacity to deal with Afghanistan (and Iran) as both internal and external challenges, it will struggle to prepare for change in those countries, as Pakistan struggles today: trying to prepare for a post US withdrawal Afghanistan in which a civil war and the rise of extremist ideology both seem inevitable.

How Pakistan manages Iran and the impact of its expansionist, revolutionary and revisionist national posture merits a separate and more detailed treatment. Today, let’s break down exactly how the Afghanistan conundrum is at once both external and internal.

It is external for obvious reasons. Afghanistan is a sovereign country with deep and organic national institutions. Even at the height of conflict, Afghan identity is largely uncontested, with only the very bold trolls shooting their shots on a ‘break up’ of the country or challenging the sustainability of its ethnic diversity. Pakistan has to deal with the country with the same tools as it does in any bilateral relationship. The situation in Afghanistan however represents not just a foreign policy or external challenge to Pakistan, but a fully internal or domestic one. How? There are five key ways in which the situation in Afghanistan represents a domestic challenge for Pakistan.

First, displacement and migration. From at least 1979, Afghans have sought refuge in Pakistan. Refugee flows from Afghanistan have ebbed and flowed over the last four decades, but the impact on the fabric of local communities is inescapable. Peshawar and Quetta have graduated from dusty small towns to thriving, throbbing metropolises – with Afghans helping drive property prices and rents up and fuelling the growth of consumption in these cities and their extended regions in a way that was inconceivable prior to the displacement of Afghans that began in 1979. This displacement is intergenerational and has had knock-on effects. The post-2007 TTP war on Pakistanis, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has generated massive Pakhtun migration from KP to the rest of the country. Karachi and Islamabad may today arguably be as Pakhtun in character and composition as Peshawar and Kabul.

Second, nationalist political expression. The displacement and migration triggered by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the TTP’s war on Pakistan has altered notions of urban identity, altered local urban economies, and changed how nationalist politics manifests itself in many parts of Pakistan. Baloch nationalists lament being outnumbered in their own province, and Mohajirs lament fertility rates that pale in comparison to the growth in Pakhtun communities in Karachi. These are both knock-on impacts of four decades of turmoil in Afghanistan. Pakhtun nationalism has been impacted by events in Afghanistan even more profoundly – with the traditional hierarchy of Pakhtun leadership being displaced by a generation of passionate, highly educated, and uncompromising leaders like Mohsin Dawar.

Third, anti-modern notions of governance. The governance model of the Taliban was (and continued to be) seen as a great solution for the corruption and dysfunction of both Afghan and Pakistani elites. Don’t forget that the Pakistan Army was finally drawn into the first Pakistani war on terror in Swat after the relatively popular uprising that sought to replace broken and delayed courts systems with what was on offer from Sufi Mohammad’s TNSM and his son in law, the TTP’s Fazlullah. As recently as 2009, Pakistani civil servants, parliamentarians, generals, journalists and thought leaders were advocating engagement and acceptance of the TNSM as a viable ‘GOVERNANCE’ innovation. The Taliban’s 1996 takeover of Afghanistan was the founding kernel for the wild imaginations that prompted the war for Swat. What wild YouTube video sermons from excitable idiots in the Pakistani discourse may emerge as the Doha Shura runs circles around American negotiators? Certainly, nothing that deepens federalist, constitutionalist or democratic values.

Fourth, violent extremism. The freedom enjoyed by violent extremists in Afghanistan has not been foundationally altered since the early 1990s. Across large swathes of Afghanistan, before September 11, Al Qaeda was a warmly welcomed guest. Not a lot has changed – as the TTP and Daesh have both occupied a lot of the space that was once afforded to Al-Qaeda. Who is behind which terrorist group? It doesn’t matter. What matters is that both Pakistan and foreign terrorists find safe haven in parts of Afghanistan – they always have, and this creates a dynamic flow of terrorism, or terrorism-adjacent people and activities between the two countries.

Fifth, and perhaps most important, is microeconomics. At the Chaman-Spin Boldak border last year, several people were killed during a riot that erupted due to a border-crossing management issue. That border crossing remains incredibly explosive. The reason isn’t RAW or NDS. Nor is it the FC or Rangers. Nor indeed is it any kind of politics. The reason is that security-driven decision-making that treats border crossings as an issue of international relations will always forget that the act of crossing the border is, for most of those that cross, an economic one.

Pakistanis that live in Chaman have shops in Spin Boldak. Afghans that live in Spin Boldak have family, doctors and schools in Chaman. These kinds of issues become political, or ethnic, or religious only when the economics of the act of crossing is compromised. People have to eat. If you take away their means of livelihood, you will eventually end up with riots.

A security sector dominated approach to Afghanistan – one that is entirely informed by Pakistani concerns about counterterrorism, or about what the US wants from Pakistan, or about why Ashraf Ghani continues to troll Pakistan on ‘Durand’ – will be incapable of managing the domestic implications of decisions made about Pakistan’s Afghanistan policy. Should Pakistanis chase and kill terrorists that target Pakistanis – anywhere and everywhere? On principle: why not? But the question of such capability needs to be balanced with the implications of a security-only approach, or worse, an insecurity-only approach.

As the Doha Shura laughs all the way to the bank, serious Pakistani strategists should be reflecting on the costs of a discourse in which mention of the PTM, engagement with disobedient Afghans, exploration of the impunity of some elements of the state, and the shameful practice of missing persons continue unabated.

It is not evil or hatred that has informed Pakistani vulnerability. It is almost always the blindside. The only path to avoiding being blindsided? An inclusive, Jinnahist, constitution-first, federalism-always approach to problem-solving both internal and external puzzles. Let us start with Afghanistan.

The writer is an analyst and commentator.