**Capabilities, Not Intentions**

Farzan Saeed Khan January 24, 2020

Pakistan has often been accused of acting like an irresponsible state, using its nuclear deterrence to act as a bully in a bid to change the status quo. At times the accusation was justified; however, more often than not, the accusation was not rooted in ground realities. Rather, Pakistan’s so-called paranoia with regards to India– which many believed was unfounded – has proven to be true time and again. Bear with me as I unfold my argument.

The year was 2010, General Kayani had been quoted by Bob Woodward in his award-winning book “Obama’s War” as being “India-centric”. The General received a lot of critique at home and abroad for these comments. Afterall, Pakistan was facing the brunt of global war on terror: almost 10,000 soldiers of Kayani’s own army had been injured or martyred fighting terror groups at home by the time he had made the above statement. Those were the years when a suicide blast was a common occurrence every Friday. Army officers used to travel in unmarked vehicles even in the provincial capital of Peshawar due to security reasons, and many army officials commuted to and from their offices in civilian clothes to avoid being identified in public. The human cost to Pakistan Army was much higher than that of ISAF and NATO in Afghanistan and Iraq, combined.

Yet, the General’s – and his DG ISI Lt. Gen. Ahmed Shuja Pasha’s – thinking revolved around India. The policies not only remained India-centric, but the Army kept preparing and training for a conflict in the plains of Punjab and Sindh (while simultaneously fighting WoT). All services of the armed forces successfully mobilized 50,000 troops for Azm-e-Nau exercises, with the aim of developing a cogent response to India’s cold start doctrine. At about the same time, Pakistan started developing tactical and naval nuclear weapons, with the aim of “developing nuclear triad” – the triad would disperse Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal and provide the nuclear program safety against a preemptive strike since a number of nuclear warheads would now be stored onboard naval vessels; and the tactical nuclear weapons would provide more credibility to the threats of Pakistan employing nuclear weapons in case of an invasion by India, thereby, strengthening the nuclear overhang.

But was the Army high command thinking too myopically? At the time, I tended to think so. Aman Ki Asha was the talk of the day.

The primary critique of the General revolved around: why would India sacrifice its economic growth? Why would India endanger its multi-million-dollar tourism industry? And why would India risk a conflict which could catapult Kashmir issue into limelight and challenge the status quo?

The critique made sense.

GHQ’s counter arguments involved: the bulk of India’s strike corps are deployed against Pakistan rather than China; and India is involved in fermenting terrorism and exploiting fault lines within the Pakistani polity. But the primary argument put forth by General Kayani was that Pakistan needs to prepare its defenses while keeping Indian capabilities in view, not intentions because “intentions can change”. And Indian intentions could not be trusted due to historic reasons, anyway.

The events of 2019, from Indian aggression on LOC and Modi’s re-election to ever increasing Indian diatribe against Pakistan on international forums are indicative of the threat Pakistan faces from its eastern neighbor. Kayani and his policy stands vindicated today. The Indian threat, be it in the form of internal security challenges or an armored strike into the Pakistani heartland, will continue to shape Pakistan’s defense and foreign policy long-after Modi is gone, for Modi has strengthened the view that “intentions can change”. Perhaps South Asia is cursed, perhaps perpetual confrontation is our future.