
Thirty Years after 1979: Is Pakistan Changing Its Strategic Paradigm?

Jean-Luc Racine

While the partition of the British Raj was supposed to offer the Muslims of India, along with a new country, the solution to their problems, the first war between India and Pakistan started as early as 1947, under the guise of what later became one of the classic modes of operation of the State of Pakistan: “free” militias supposed to fight on their own to liberate Kashmir. After two more wars (in 1965 and 1971), Kashmir constantly was defined as “the core issue” to be resolved before the relationship between India and Pakistan could be normalized. Beyond Kashmir, the trust deficit between the two countries is fed by the ideological legacy of the “two nations theory,” which provided the rationale for a separate Muslim homeland free from Hindu supremacy and by the controversies about common goods, particularly the Indus waters. The mistrust was deliberately entertained in textbooks, and it increased when Indian support of Bengali insurgents compelled Pakistani troops to surrender in Dhaka, before East Pakistan seceded in 1971, becoming Bangladesh. The loss of its Eastern province brought more coherence to a now-diminished Pakistan centered on the Indus valley, but increased a lasting sense of vulnerability. On both fronts, in fact, Pakistan had uneasy neighbors, for Afghanistan has never formally recognized as an official border the Durand Line, which was inherited from the British and cuts across Pashtun territory. The first Indian nuclear test conducted in 1974 increased this sense of fragility, and pushed the Pakistani Army to redefine its strategic paradigm: in order to counter India’s superior conventional forces, Pakistan had to search for “strategic depth” and henceforth increase its influence in Afghanistan, in order to reduce the risk of being squeezed between India and an eventually pro-India regime in Kabul.



Jean-Luc Racine is Senior CNRS Fellow at the Centre for South Asian Studies, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris

In this context, the entry of the Soviet forces in Afghanistan in late 1979 offered General Zia ul-Haq a wonderful opportunity to gain — in the short run — on all fronts. Turning Pakistan into a frontline state against the Soviets, Zia gained the active support of the United States to help the Afghan *mujahidin* fight the Red Army in what was to become the last major Cold War theater before the collapse of the USSR. The execution of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was forgotten. Provisionally forgotten as well was the clandestine Pakistani nuclear program. When Soviet troops left Afghanistan ten years later, Zia had died in a suspect plane crash, but his policy endured. The Inter Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI) was now the most powerful tool in the hands of the army for deploying a strategy of extending Pakistan’s influence across borders. When a genuine local insurgency emerged in 1989 against Indian rule in Kashmir, Pakistan helped the Kashmiri insurgents fight Indian forces. Success was uncertain, and Islamabad decided

in 1993 to inject irregulars who had been recruited by Islamist militias protected by the ISI, such as the Laskhar-e Taiba, in India-governed Kashmir. On the West, when the Islamabad-supported *mujahidin* (particularly the Hezb-e Islami of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar) failed to control Kabul for good, Islamabad launched a new militia, the Taliban, recruited from the *madrasas* of Afghan refugees that had been established in Pakistan. They took over Kabul in 1996, and welcomed to their emirate a veteran of the anti-Soviet war, Usama bin Ladin.

September 11 changed the rules of the game, although not completely. The new strongman of Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf, made Pakistan a pro-US frontline state again — this time against the Taliban. While Musharraf arrested a number of top al-Qa'ida leaders, he allowed the Taliban to establish sanctuaries inside the Federally Administered Tribal

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Areas (FATA) after the fall of their regime in Afghanistan. He did condemn the terrorist attacks against the Indian Parliament in December 2001, and even declared in January 2002 that Pakistan did not support the concept of jihad across borders. If he restrained the jihadists operating in Kashmir, he did not dismantle their camps or their organizations. This policy of ambiguity attempted to preserve the established strategic paradigm under the constraints of the new international context. Musharraf moved on Kashmir, “pushing aside” the old UN resolutions calling for an improbable referendum, and opening a “composite dialogue” with India. However, he did not accept the Line of Control (LOC) as a possible border. On his western flank, Musharraf sent the Army into the FATA for the first time. He tried to strike

deals with local chieftains against the foreign allies of the Taliban, but not against the Taliban themselves. These half-baked measures were too much for Islamist radicals, who tried to kill Musharraf twice in 2003, but too little for India and for the Bush Administration, who were concerned about the Taliban revival in Afghanistan in 2005-2006.

The new civilian government elected in early 2008 and the new Army chief selected by Musharraf in 2007, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, face the same dilemma as their predecessors, but in a much degraded context. A new force has emerged on the front of radical Islam: the Pakistani Taliban, strongly established in the FATA with Beitullah Mehsud's militia in South Waziristan, and in the Swat valley under the leadership of Fazlullah. The delay with which Musharraf reacted during the siege of the radical Red Mosque in Islamabad in 2007 was matched by the delay with which Kayani (and new President Asif Ali Zardari) reacted to the challenges raised by the Pakistani Taliban and by the terrorist networks striking across Pakistan. When the odd agreement struck in February 2009 with Sufi Mohammad, a relative of Fazlullah, collapsed in May, the Army finally decided to act in Swat, under strong pressure from Washington, and at the cost of a million refugees.

For more than six decades, Pakistan has defined India as a structural threat. For three decades, Islamabad has used Islamist fighters as instruments for the sake of its strategic paradigm: the Afghan *mujahidin* in the 1980s, then the Pakistani jihadists in Kashmir and the Afghan Taliban in the 1990s. Today, this policy is unsustainable for three reasons. First, a

segment of the old jihadist networks has turned against the state and indulge in terrorist attacks targeting the country's civilians and security forces. Second, the new Pakistani Taliban have built up strongholds they are trying to expand in territories where the primacy of the state is negated. Third, Washington has become impatient with Pakistan's weak (or inefficient) resolve to fight the extremists, particularly since the Obama Administration defined the new "AfPak" concept.

A few years ago, General Musharraf was the first military chief to concede that the major threat to Pakistan was now "internal." It remains to be seen if the Army has fully accepted this judgment, and has drawn from it the right conclusions. As long as the answer to this question is not clear, India will not redefine with full confidence its relationship with Pakistan, particularly after the terrorist attacks launched in Mumbai in November 2008. The US administration alone will not be able to break the deadlock. The 60-year-old partition syndrome might weaken. Many Pakistanis would accept better relations with India. But turning the page opened by Zia ul-Haq 30 years ago is another challenge, whose key is still in the hands of the military.