

A photograph of a young boy in a blue shirt looking up at a soccer ball in the air, with a large, damaged building in the background. The scene is set in a dusty, open area, possibly a schoolyard or a public square. The building in the background has several windows and arches, some of which are missing or broken, suggesting it has been damaged by war. The sky is clear and blue.

BETWEEN WAR & PEACE

THE AFGHANISTAN ESSAYS

A History of Errors
Riaz Mohammad Khan

The Afghanistan Essays

This 2018 short-essay series by the Jinnah Institute (JI) reflects a range of Pakistani thought leadership on Afghanistan and its complex history with Islamabad. With the region in the current crosshairs of a seemingly intractable conflict, these essays attempt to spur old and new thinking on the history of Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan and existing challenges. The essays cover a range of subject matter on Afghanistan-Pakistan including efforts for peace and reconciliation, threats to security, the broader geopolitical dynamic, and the role of civil society and economy.

The first essay of this series titled 'A History of Errors' provides context to the bilateral relationship by highlighting the choices made by Kabul and Islamabad at significant historical crossroads. The essays by no means attempt to be a comprehensive commentary on the subject, nor do they claim to offer definitive conclusions. All views are attributable to the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute.

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A HISTORY OF ERRORS

Riaz Mohammad Khan



Unpacking the Conflict

There are two ways to look at the instability in Afghanistan. The first views the present-day conflict a result of the socio-economic and political struggles that a closed society faces when confronted with the modern world. The second, views the current predicament a result of misguided policies, foreign interventions and errors of judgment – in short, the retributions of a “March of Folly.” Put differently, should we look at present-day turbulence in Afghanistan as a predictable sequel to the turmoil that followed in the wake of Amanullah Khan’s abortive reforms; Daud’s attempt to replace monarchy with a republic; the Saur Revolution; the Soviet intervention and the enforcement of the Bonn Process under US intervention?

Or is it possible to imagine a different unfolding of events? Had the Soviets not taken the fateful step in December 1979; if the international community had not abandoned Afghanistan following Soviet withdrawal; had the United States not considered the Taliban and Al Qaeda as extensions of one overarching ideology; if the US had not intervened in Iraq shifting focus away from Afghanistan; if Pakistan had acted differently? The truth may lie somewhere between the two hypotheses, but this chapter will focus only on the second set of possibilities. The analysis contained herein will cover three phases: The Soviet intervention (1979-89), the mujahedeen and Taliban interregnum, and post-9/11 Afghanistan. Finally, the essay will briefly review the conundrum of Pakistan’s Afghan policy.

The March of Folly

Soviet Politburo records that became public in 1995 suggest that Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 was meant to save the Saur Revolution. Concerned with the growing resistance to Hafizullah Amin’s hard-line reform policies, Moscow decided to introduce a softer face, Nur Muhammad Taraki. But in the ensuing struggle, the wrong man was eliminated. In an agonizingly divided Politburo meeting that December, General Secretary Brezhnev decided to militarily intervene, forcibly removing Hafizullah Amin and installing in his place Babrak Karmal. It was assumed that the Soviet army could withdraw in six months after stabilizing the situation. The rest is history. The fateful decision has shaped much of what followed in succeeding decades.

To many in Pakistan, Soviet action is often read as the historically debated Soviet desire to reach “warm waters.” The policy to resist the intervention was, however, based on a more practical

argument: namely, that Moscow's consolidated military presence next door would eventually exert pressure on Pakistan to join the fray. Soviet intervention catapulted the beleaguered and ostracized General Zia-ul-Haq into international prominence. In Washington, embarrassed by successive setbacks around the globe, President Jimmy Carter made public America's resolve to reverse the Soviet advance while others saw an opportunity to avenge Vietnam. Thus, the stage was set for the last front of the Cold War.

Even at this early stage, given the presence of many Afghan refugees, Islamist groups and segments of the Afghan political elite had moved to Pakistan following the Daud Coup and the Saur Revolution. Pakistan concluded that it had to shape the Afghan resistance. Unfortunately, King Zahir Shah lacked initiative and wanted Pakistan to prepare the ground first. Islamabad was also wary of promoting a united front, such as the PLO, that might likely stay on its soil for the foreseeable future. Partly by default, and partly out of preference, the seven Tanzeemat emerged.

The next inflection-point came with the ascension of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985. Fuelled by a new vision for the Soviet Union, Gorbachev decided to pull out of Afghanistan. He began with a gesture to Pakistan to which Islamabad's leadership failed to respond. In December 1986, Vice Foreign Minister Yuri Vorontsov hinted at possible cooperation for a broad-based government in Kabul to facilitate Soviet withdrawal. In Islamabad, friction between the President and the Prime Minister prevented the necessary policy focus while Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) dismissed the Soviet overture as tactical. General Zia realized the seriousness of the Soviet proposal only when in November 1987 Gorbachev publicly announced a one year time frame for withdrawal and called for the signing of the Geneva Accords. General Zia's efforts to persuade Moscow to agree to an open-ended dialogue for a broad-based Afghan government were swept aside by the swift current of events.

Even the Tanzeemat leaders had now set their eyes on a post-Soviet Afghanistan; 1987 was thus a critical year and possibly the last moment when a change of course could have made a difference. But too much was stacked against such an option for it to effectively materialize. Following the Geneva Accords, hard-line Tanzeemat leaders rebuffed the UN Secretary General's special envoy Diego Codovez, who had been designated to discuss the formation of a possible broad-based government in Kabul.

Between Miscalculation & Isolation: What Went Wrong

The siege of Jalalabad in April 1989 should not have had Pakistan's support, especially given the options for success. The siege was squandered mainly because of an absence of planning and partly because of a lack of enthusiasm for the operation, especially from Gulbuddin Hikmatyar and Ahmed Shah Massoud who wanted to conserve their resources for the anticipated battle for Kabul.

Why Jalalabad? Upon completion of the Soviet withdrawal in February 1989, the ISI began to push for the recognition of an Afghan Interim Government (AIG). Pakistan's Foreign Office insisted that the AIG must first locate itself inside Afghanistan; even President Zia had not agreed to recognize an Afghan government on Pakistan's soil, which would pose obvious complications. Despite Pakistan's flawed tactical calculations in expecting battlefield success from the mujahedeen, the Jalalabad operation failed mainly for a different reason. The fate of the operation was sealed when, at the early stages of the siege, two batches of defectors were executed and their bodies reportedly displayed by Salafist elements under Yunus Khalis. One of Najibullah's vice foreign ministers, while passing through Alma Ata in 1993, told me that Najibullah had written off Jalalabad and had

planned to defend Kabul at Sarobi, but that the murder of defectors left no choice for government troops but to dig in. Thus, the siege dispersed. To encourage defectors is an elementary tactic for the success of any siege. The episode revealed the glaring lack of preparations for the siege. Furthermore, mujahedeen control of Jalalabad could have proven critical. An established AIG could have moved to Kabul after the fall of Najibullah, saving the carnage that later visited the capital. And we may have witnessed a very different history.

Following Soviet withdrawal, the abandonment of Afghanistan by the United States, the European powers and the international community at large was unfortunate. First the failure of mujahedeen groups to unite and dislodge Najibullah or be responsive to any peace efforts for a government of national reconciliation deterred the erstwhile supporters of the Afghan jihad in the West. Najibullah's exit resulted in a fratricidal conflict that destroyed Kabul and fragmented Afghanistan among various warlords. And, of course, world attention shifted to the momentous changes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Had the international community remained engaged in a post-Soviet Afghanistan with the resources and resolve it had mustered and provided during the Afghan jihad, it might have made a difference. Admittedly, however, expecting such a commitment under these transformed circumstances was rather unrealistic.

The Afghan Taliban were, on the other hand, viewed in the West as an abomination. Still, international presence on Kabul could have had a salubrious impact. When in April 1998 former governor of Arizona Bill Richardson met Taliban President Mullah Rabbani in Kabul, the latter agreed to open a few girls' schools provided the Americans could offer some economic assistance. In any event, international presence could or should have noticed the gathering of Arab and non-Afghan militants and monitored their activities in the country. Afghan isolation became more acute when the Saudis pulled out of Afghanistan in September 1998, following a bitter exchange between Mullah Omar and Prince Turki al Faisal over the issue of Osama Bin Laden's extradition. For its part, Pakistan, one of only a handful of countries to remain in contact with the Taliban leadership, was at best complacent and displayed little capacity to exert real pressure on the Taliban to alter their hard-line behaviour, be it over the Bamiyan Buddhas, peace efforts or the issue of Osama Bin Laden. Afghanistan became a magnet and a haven for extremist militants from across the Muslim world, and its isolation would prove costly.

An inconclusive scheme merits a mention. Reportedly, in 1999, the ISI and the CIA contemplated organizing a special force to pick up Osama Bin Laden from inside Afghanistan. The plan turned cold following the October coup in Pakistan. Had it succeeded, it may still not have been able to prevent 9/11 given that planning for the attack took place outside Afghanistan. However, the American retaliation against the Taliban could have been significantly less severe.

Deus ex Machina: A Failure in Counterinsurgency

The Afghan Taliban dispersed under the rain of Daisy Cutters. Instead of entrenched resistance, in the age-old fashion of Afghan warfare, the Taliban retreated to their redoubts in southern Afghanistan. Many crossed over into Pakistan, melding with the new wave of refugees generated by the US military intervention. General Faheem, leading a non-Pashtun military force under the banner of the Northern Alliance, entered Kabul in the trail of America's military triumph. As the victor and occupying power, the United States called the shots, even though the coalition included UN and EU representatives, members of the Afghan diaspora and the Northern Alliance. These groups initiated the Bonn process for the political, military and economic reconstruction of Afghanistan. The objective was unexceptionable, but it suffered a serious flaw. The Americans

overlooked the ethnic sensitivities of Afghanistan and the impact of Kabul's control passing into Tajik hands under their watch. A basic error was thus committed at the onset of an otherwise well-intended process.

The error was compounded when the Afghan Taliban were lumped together with Al-Qaeda and declared a terrorist outfit, despite the obvious fact that the Taliban leadership had never been accused of planning or abetting 9/11 or any other terrorist activity against the United States or other outside powers. They were party to a civil war and a part of the political landscape of Afghanistan. Pakistan cautioned the Bush administration on both counts, suggesting that reconcilable Taliban be brought into the fold of the Bonn process, and that Afghan forces controlling Kabul be ethnically balanced. But, following 9/11 and the precipitous collapse of the Afghan Taliban, Pakistan had lost its voice in international diplomatic efforts aimed at settling the Afghan conflict. The Americans and the Europeans were heavily swayed by the point of view and concerns of the Northern Alliance and diaspora elite, which collectively blamed Pakistan for inflicting the Taliban on Afghanistan.

To treat the Taliban as terrorists revealed the incoherence in the approach to reconciliation, a much-bruited aim of the Bonn process. It continues to remain a hurdle to any peace effort contingent on eliciting Taliban cooperation. As for ethnic balance within the Afghan National Army (ANA) and security forces controlling Kabul, the realization came far too slowly. Its need was first conceded at the 2006 London Donors Conference, but even this was a case of too little too late. The Afghan National Army remains largely dysfunctional in the Pashtun south and southeast of the country. President Obama's hope for military disengagement as the ANA developed into an effective force to counter the Taliban proved elusive. The Taliban resurged and expanded their activities.

The reconstruction effort experienced other failings, too. Undoubtedly visible successes were seen in the provision of education, urban amenities and on gender issues on which Taliban attitudes were abysmal. However, progress on building a sustainable economy and job creation was less impressive. Today there is little to show on the ground in terms of infrastructure, agriculture or job creation. The economy essentially remains a war economy dependent on the constant infusion of external funds. Afghanistan also experienced the arrival of an army of contractors interested in profiteering. Corruption notwithstanding, there was notable absence of planning, coordination and accountability. Afghanistan needed the focus of a Marshall Plan, on the same level of commitment the United States had shown in Europe, Japan or South Korea. Instead, the country appeared to have turned into an arena of fortune seekers looking to siphon off aid funds.

There would have been a chance to rectify some of the identified failures, but for US misadventures in Iraq. It proved too much even for the sole superpower to manage war on two fronts. Colossal political mistakes in Iraq threw the entire region into turmoil. Consequently, Al-Qaeda revived and other extremist and militant forces emerged which continue to bedevil the Greater Middle East. The immediate impact on Afghanistan was a shift of focus and the diversion of resources to Iraq.

As a case in point, take the US military presence in Afghanistan. Under Operation Enduring Freedom, the United States maintained around 14,000 troops in the initial years; this was slowly raised to nearly 30,000 troops by 2008. Following a review in 2009, the new Obama Administration initiated a time-bound surge program and raised the number of US troops to nearly 100,000 by 2011. Although the success of the surge proved temporary, Washington maintained its decision to start bringing troops back from Afghanistan in 2013 and to end active operations by end 2014. Meanwhile, in Iraq, the United States committed an average of over 130,000 troops from

early 2003 to 2010 when the US started winding up its active military engagement. If the United States had not been encumbered by its intervention in Iraq, it could have spared enough troops to pacify the Taliban insurgency despite the incompetence, indiscipline and lack of capacity of the ANA which remains wanting even after having soaked up hundreds of billions of dollars. In short, following Iraq, Afghanistan was relegated to low priority. Failures in Iraq served to reinforce failures in Afghanistan. Sixteen years on, having spent nearly one trillion dollars and lost nearly 2,500 troops and 20,000 wounded, the question is still being asked: can the United States defeat the Taliban?

Recovering From a Fractured Legacy

Should Pakistan have acted differently? Did we have better options given the circumstances in which key decisions were made? This analysis has already dwelt on pre-9/11 developments; this segment will briefly focus on post-9/11 policy challenges faced by Pakistan.

It is important to begin by addressing the canard that Pakistan's "double game" is responsible for trouble in Afghanistan. This essay has already shed light on policy errors made at the outset of US intervention that were bound to court disaster. Labelling the Taliban terrorists and allowing the Northern Alliance to march on Kabul was no less grave in impact than the blunders committed in Iraq where the entire security apparatus was thoughtlessly disbanded. Iraq was thrown into an even greater mess than Afghanistan, and it would be unfair to place blame at the doorstep of Pakistan or its intelligence agencies. Pakistan has also made policy mistakes, but these are comparatively circumspect. Furthermore, Pakistan's circumstances are complex and the country has suffered the consequences of its mistakes.

General Musharraf's decision to accept American demands in the wake of 9/11 is still debated in Pakistan. Realistically, there was no alternative. Pakistan could not have blocked its airspace to B-52s flying from Diego Garcia to bomb the Taliban. In the 1980s, we could not interdict Russian planes regularly crossing our airspace, without permission, to supply military equipment to Ethiopia. Denying land transit to NATO would have entailed a huge cost in sanctions, which Pakistan could not afford. Pakistan could have negotiated better terms, for example quantifying and asking compensation for the use of airspace and of roads and three airbases, rather than reimbursement for troop deployment in FATA under the Coalition Support Fund which turned into a permanent headache and a justification for perennial demands to "do more." Nonetheless, this dereliction is an issue of secondary importance.

True, Pakistan's Afghan policy suffers from a lack of clarity on the issue of the Taliban and other allied groups such as the Haqqanis. Influential segments in the Pakistan Army had long toyed with the notion of gaining "strategic depth" and having a friendly government in Afghanistan – both of which were thwarted by 9/11. Since then many viewed the Taliban as an asset mainly for two reasons. First, US objectives in Afghanistan remain unclear to Pakistan: is the US in Afghanistan for the long haul, or will it abandon Afghanistan as it has done in the past? The Afghan Taliban contained the most reliable pro-Pakistan elements in a fragmented Afghan polity. Second, the Taliban appear to be the only counter to India's rising influence in Kabul, an anathema to Pakistan and especially to the Pakistan Army, raising the spectre of a possible two-front situation.

Both premises are questionable. Today Kabul is alienated and frequently hostile, and there is increasing evidence of collusion between Indian and Afghan intelligence agencies to stir trouble in Pakistan. Moreover, American frustration leads to blaming, albeit wrongfully, Pakistan's

complicity with the Taliban for all the troubles in Afghanistan. Pakistan's relations with both Kabul and Washington are in shambles, because the Taliban leadership is known to enjoy sanctuary inside Pakistan. The incipient emergence of Daesh in Afghanistan may soften the attitude of international players in the region, particularly China, Russia and Iran, but such a development will not bring relief to either Afghanistan or Pakistan.

Reconciliation has been a seductive prospect even though it has defied meaningful progress. The principal parties, namely the National Unity Government in Kabul and the Taliban, do not believe in any mutually acceptable power sharing agreement. Islamabad and Washington have no clear ideas beyond the procedural stage. Here, too, Pakistan burnt its fingers in 2014 and became the target of criticism by both Kabul and Washington when on the eve of the abortive quadripartite dialogue it transpired that Mullah Omer had died more than a couple of years ago. In fact, Pakistan claiming a role only reinforces accusations that it is protecting the Taliban.

Pakistan cannot hound the Afghan Taliban out of Pakistan for cultural and political reasons. But it must credibly ensure that its territory is not being used for military operations against Afghanistan. Conversely, Pakistan must demand that Afghan territory is not used for subversion against Pakistan as well. Fencing and managing the border is a necessary but insufficient step in that direction.

Pakistan has limited capacity to influence the Taliban. Pakistan should avoid taking responsibility for the Taliban. If asked, Pakistan should play its part provided that other players clearly understand its limitation. Candid and forthright conversation is necessary with both Kabul and Washington. If this can happen, Pakistan should be willing to cooperate with any initiative for peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan – whether bilaterally or multilaterally.

Finally, Pakistan needs to reset its relations with Afghanistan consistent with the norms of state-to-state relations. Islamabad must deal with Kabul, even if only to check Indian influence and activities directed against Pakistan. Transit arrangements for landlocked Afghanistan require a positive approach, and situations in which these are leveraged against Kabul should be avoided. The Afghan conflict will not end overnight and will continue to impose burdens on Pakistan, but it is important to start moving in the right direction. A critical asset for Pakistan is the unique people-to-people connection that the citizens of the two countries enjoy, rooted in common history, geography, tradition and demographics.