Book Review -I


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Revisiting a book written in 2005 is like reading the report of a Truth Commission. This review is a caution, because on every count Husain Haqqani’s observations 16 years ago were prescient. The work is intellectually durable and morally upright. Two points bear mentioning: the partnership between Islamists and Pakistan’s military remains strong, and Pakistan has not abandoned its asymmetric war against India.

Indians don’t have access to Pakistani archives and thus Indian scholarship on Pakistan is like climbing a dark alley. As Pakistani Haqqani proves a credible researcher, using primary sources which makes it difficult to refute his arguments. A former ambassador must be authentically Pakistani but a career in public life may never be retrieved because of the difficult subject he writes about. Even if you embrace only the passion and not the polemics, someone is watching over you.

Haqqani’s reasoned support for return to democracy sets him apart as a conscientious doubter. When many western-educated Muslims embrace religious rage, Haqqani, a cleric’s son, who attended religious schools, went in an unlikely direction, becoming a trenchant critic of the role of religion in politics. He works now from the Hudson Institute in the U.S.; a pity that such talent must remain outside a homeland that needs him.

Pakistan was a leap of imagination. “Few individuals significantly alter the course of history. Fewer still modify the map of the world. Hardly anyone can be credited with creating a nation-state. Muhammad Ali Jinnah did all three,” says Stanley Wolpert. The Pakistani state failed to live up to the idea of a Muslim homeland, yet the state endures. Pakistan’s failure to create a national idea drawing from its constituents is no surprise, for the Pakistani state has existed only for 75 years. Pakistan has not produced an emblematic figure after its founder, Muhammed Ali Jinnah. The idea of Pakistan is based on a blackout of pre-Islamic Pakistan, a ruthless censorship of history. The state of Pakistan resolutely tests its mettle against India.

Haqqani’s book skirts identity and focuses laser-like on the noxious partnership between “the mosque and the military” and the contest with India, with lesser sub-texts featuring. In the struggle between “Islam and Un-Islam,” Pakistan’s military and civilian leaders allowed religion to infect politics under the policy tripod of religious nationalism, confrontation with India and alliance with the West. “The development of an ideological state could not be left to the will of the people. Institutions of state had to control the process of building the new nation,” Haqqani asserts.
Sibling Rivalry

Haqqani is best in the account of jihad in Kashmir and Afghanistan and blames Pakistan for initiating all overt and covert wars against India, driven by “psycho-political, as opposed to physical insecurity.” He is not alone. Surf YouTube, and listen to Najam Sethi, or former Air Marshal Asghar Khan, or Ishtiaq Ahmed. The view that the 1965 war began on September 7 with the Indian push towards Lahore stands discredited even in Pakistan: “First came Gibraltar, that silliness of sending irregulars and radicalised civilians over into India-held Kashmir to foment revolution ... When revolution didn’t show up, we got into the business of Grand Slam — sending regular army troops over to wrest a bit of India-held Kashmir and win that most lusted after of victories, a strategic one ... Then came actual war across the border,” writes Cyril Almeida in Dawn.

After 1971, a weakened Pakistan pursued covert operations in Punjab, Kashmir, and the rest of India, as well as the Kargil incursion in 1999, all under the cover of peace diplomacy. The ISI “moved swiftly to organize and centrally control the Kashmir insurgency soon after the removal of the Bhutto government in August 1990,” Haqqani says. He darkly concludes that jihad in Kashmir will remain Pakistan’s weapon of choice. Given the continuation of terrorist incidents in Kashmir, and Pakistan’s mixed record of rounding up Islamists, Haqqani is right.

Pakistan’s role in the Kashmir insurgency is well documented, but Haqqani’s disclosures about meetings within the government to pursue terrorism in Kashmir are meticulously researched. In one such meeting only two participants questioned this policy (Foreign Secretary Sheheryar Khan spoke of “diplomacy and political action” in support of Kashmiris, rather than “setting off bombs.”). While official Pakistan continues to make India-Pakistan normalization contingent upon a settlement in Kashmir, Haqqani’s call for a status quo solution adds to the list of Pakistani skeptics who recognize the merits of engagement with India over confrontation.

A Marriage of Convenience

Haqqani forensically dissects ties with the U.S., arguing that Pakistan’s military rulers drove hard bargains to secure aid, even misleading the U.S. to view “military sales in return for Pakistani operational assistance for the US military as a major success of negotiation.” He is probably right, given the mixed benefits for the U.S. Haqqani wisely contends that the U.S. should nudge the Pakistani military to carry out internal reforms, reshape its view of the national interest, and support democracy to fight radical Islam. True, because the military in Pakistan has expropriated economic and political benefits at the cost of civil society yet held civil society responsible for Pakistan’s ills.

Haqqani does peek into an alternative vision of democracy that might allow religious piety to co-exist with secular governance, but rather than offering a plan, he merely chronicles the known reasons for political failure. He might also have dealt with Pakistan’s nuclear capability; its declining educational system; the influence of folk culture on the purist Islam of the clerics; its hobbling economy; the rise of youth; the influence of unofficial Pakistan on the “establishment,” and the impact of the social media and television. Possibly, he might then have arrived at less pessimistic conclusions about Pakistan’s future direction. Pakistan has artistic and intellectual
accomplishments. Its tactical feats in sending infiltrators into Kashmir in 1965 and army regulars into Kargil in 1999 are remarkable for a state that lacks the advantage of India, which, in 1947, inherited a settled history to fashion a strategic discourse for the new state.

A Modern Indus Being?
Despite the resolute certainty of its methods against India, Pakistanis like Haqqani recognize the need to move away from an extravagant perception of Pakistan’s strengths towards more achievable goals. This new confident Pakistani is willing to revisit his nation’s history, and some even question why they must shoulder the burden of an idea that was championed not by Pakistanis but by India’s Muslim minorities. Haqqani joins the small yet growing number of Pakistani doubters whose moderate vision must be heard for Pakistan to address its weaknesses. This is the great value of his book.

Pakistan has been diminished by its failures, yet it has regenerative powers. Indians are seduced by the belief that Pakistanis are no different from them, but Pakistanis are dissuaded and wary of such assertions. The Pakistan of the future will need to harmonize its disparate elements into a distinctive identity. Some Pakistanis think of themselves as modern Indus beings whose collective memory is as often linked to events west of the Indus River as to those to the east. Some now also want to make a hero of Raja Dahir who faced defeat to Muhammed Bin Qasim. The greatest challenge before Pakistanis is to fashion their togetherness into an entity that draws upon Pakistan’s kinetic Islam, but other traditions as well. Haqqani offers hope that Pakistanis are beginning to do just that.

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