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Deconstructing Pakistan's strategic culture

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In the contemporary arena, Pakistan is facing a host of issues ranging, from grave internal and external threats; regional isolation; descending global image; decades-long menace of religious extremism; historical alienation with its eastern neighbor (India), and western neighbor (Afghanistan); domestic institutional confrontations; and lastly, continued internal destabilization.

All these issues have a direct link with its strategic culture. Therefore, an overview of Pakistan's strategic culture is imperative to offer a casual analysis.

On a theoretical level, strategic culture does not have a concise and standard definition, but the most agreed definition was provided by Jack Snyder, an American political scientist. According to him: "The sum total of ideals, conditional emotional responses, and patterns of behavior that members of the national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation and share with each other..."

Likewise, Alastair Ian Johnston, a professor at Harvard University, in one of his research article, defined strategic culture as: "An ideational milieu which limits behavior choices." This ideational context is shaped by "shared assumptions and decision rules that in a degree of order

on individual and group conceptions of their relationship to social organizational or political environment.”

Both definitions help in describing the determinants of Pakistan’s strategic culture. One of the chief element of Pakistan’s strategic culture has been Indian centric. Since the partition of the sub-continent in 1947, both India and Pakistan have been shaded as arch rivals, and since then, India has occupied a central space in Pakistan’s national security and foreign policy. Such a view further aggravated, after the emergence of the Kashmir conundrum. Consequently, the historical baggage of adversary has dominated the strategic culture of Pakistan.

Our policy of armament, defense, internal and external threat perception, and our global and regional foreign attitudes are also influenced by this key determinant of Pakistan’s strategic culture. Such a dominated view has also affected the domestic narrative against India, where every internal security crisis is considered to be an Indian sponsored campaign. The presence of such a narrative helps the security and political regimes to get themselves acquitted from all their flawed policies.

Moreover, another illustration could be of our policy toward Afghanistan. It has been a well-understood fact that Pakistan’s approach toward Afghanistan has been Indian-centric. Our policy of strategic depth, formulation of proxy forces and Pakistan’s involvement in post 9/11 war on terror, also has an Indian angle. Thus, since its birth, India has been a continued threat, and in balancing this threat we have jeopardized the future of common masses. Additionally, another angle is of confronting Indian hegemonic desires. In Pakistan, it’s widely believed that India has hegemonic desires particularly within South Asia, so it’s our national security which would be jeopardized, therefore, every possible strategy has to be adopted to counter such Indian desires.

In addition to this, another defining determinant of Pakistan’s strategic culture is: The Two Nation theory and consideration of Pakistan as a “Fortress of Islam”, which has also helped in generating a sense of insecurity. Common acronyms like Yahood-o-Nisar, (Jewish and Christian) Gazwa-a-Hind, (military invasion of the Indian subcontinent) are the most favorite jargons to shift the blame to non-Muslims for our sufferings.

Many people still believe neither India nor the West has wholeheartedly accepted Pakistan as a leading and powerful Muslim nation. Therefore, they are jointly collaborating against Pakistan to destabilize it, and thus eliminate it from the map of the world. Such exaggerated and dramatized narrative not only has generated a sense of existential insecurity but, also has generated societal difference. Similarly, Pakistan social discourse and textbooks contain heroic chapters dedicated to well-known Arab invaders of the subcontinent – Muhammad Bin Qasim, Babar, Gaznavi and Ghauri. Nevertheless, the manifestation of such narratives has added fuel to the phenomena of religious extremism and civilizational clash.

Lastly, but the most important determinant of Pakistan strategic culture is the primacy of national security. The ideational and strategic confrontation with India; the consideration of Pakistan as the symbol of Muslim sovereignty and power; and historical genesis of existential threats to Pakistan have intensified the primacy of national security. This primacy has led the nation to acquire nuclear weapons and indulge in a continued arms race with India. Jargon such as national

security and national interest are deliberately blurred to support national security discourse. National security has often surpassed our foreign policy goals as illustrated in our policy toward our immediate neighborhood. It has also been a source of institutional confrontation within the state, and for the sake of national

National security has often surpassed our foreign policy goals as illustrated in our policy toward our immediate neighborhood. It has also been a source of institutional confrontation within the state, and for the sake of national security, the state has also compromised on democratic values and human rights. Ironically, in pursuance of our short-term national security goals, we have generated bigger challenges for us.

In summary, the contemporary issues of Pakistan are interlinked with its 70 years old strategic culture. With the emergence of new trends in regional and global politics, geo-strategy, geopolitics, geo-economic, Pakistan needs a fresh and revised strategic culture. Therefore, the need of the hour is to revise our strategic culture and explode clichéd ideological shells which have paralyzed Pakistan's growth. It's high time, where the state institution within their constitution limits should give Pakistan a fresh narrative which must be based on the need for an international political arena. Such a fresh narrative not only uplifts Pakistan's global image but would also help eliminate the menace of terrorism and promotion of a friendly region.