

INTRODUCTION

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A Regional Perspective*

At the time when the idea of a policy research project on Afghanistan and Pakistan arose in 2011, there had been little or no focus on analysing the impacts of the situation in Afghanistan and the declining security situation in Pakistan on the region; nor on what were the interests of the most-involved regional powers vis a vis the two countries, and how these might impact on domestic “flash points” in each. Analysis of Afghanistan and Pakistan had predominantly been emanating from the US and the UK, and it was considered that CIDOB, an independent European think tank located in Barcelona, was well placed to present a neutral, objective analysis of what was going on in the region. It was a key premise from the outset, that this “missing link” analysis should be firmly rooted in the region itself, and not be yet another superimposition of western analysis of eastern problems. Therefore, whilst the project has benefitted from the inputs of many international experts on the region, it is predominantly the voices of those from the region itself that have shaped the focus of attention of the project, and its outputs.

An important additional new paradigm that determined the project’s focus was the decision to examine the sources of domestic tension (SoTs) in Afghanistan and Pakistan, that had dimensions that go beyond the purely internal, and which had implications for the main five interested regional actors (India, Iran, China, Russia, Saudi Arabia) as well as internationally. Furthermore, events in one of the two countries has implications for the other. What happens in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) or Balochistan, does not stay in KP or Balochistan. In Afghanistan, the Taliban have become more than solely a national problem, drawing in international involvement and affecting regional interests as well, with inevitable blowback on Pakistan. The impact of the SoTs is thus deepened domestically and beyond, specifically because of the interests by concerned regional actors in how they play out. Afghanistan and Pakistan, though at times mutually hostile, are strongly inter-connected with one another, and both of them are the focus of regional interests whose strengths ebb and flow according to prevailing geopolitics, and the state of the SoTs themselves.

In order to make sense of these sources of tension and their regional dimensions, it was necessary to look to the region and its actors, to widen the picture and to bring in players without whom there could be no way forward, and few – if any – sustainable solutions. Enhancing the understanding of the interests of the regional powers and bringing into the picture those entities behind the apparent contenders for contested space, is an important analytical optic. This is because the way in which these different sets of interests intertwine with certain internal problems in both countries – which, it should be emphasised, are genuine, deep-rooted domestic issues that need to be addressed in and of themselves – is key to seeking constructive ways forward.

As noted in 2012 in the project document *Mapping the Sources of Tension and the Interests of Regional Powers in Afghanistan and Pakistan* “..... *the very sources of tension that have for many years defined the internal dynamics of both countries are once again in flux.Tensions surrounding governance, social and economic issues, the conflict in Afghanistan, ethnicity and sectarianism, radicalisation and militancy have defined the relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan and with the rest of the region throughout the last decade. In both countries, state institutions have been strained in responding to these challenges..... A growing realisation on the extent of the challenges at hand and their interconnected nature with the region’s stability, has led to increased dialogue and interaction between a range of concerned actors and communities.*”

Five years on, this still remains the case: in some ways, little has changed. What has changed is that the impact of geopolitical events taking place beyond the region are making themselves felt even more strongly at the domestic level in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Five main sources of tension with regional dimensions, experienced in both countries, were identified at the start of the project:

- Governance
- Radicalisation and militancy
- Socio-economic issues
- The conflict in Afghanistan
- Ethnicity and sectarianism

From the outset, the value-addition of the project’s policy research has been that it is inter-disciplinary. It is not, and was never intended to be, a security project alone. From this perspective, no one single dimension or SoT prevails. Indeed, it is the multi-dimensional interplay between regional geopolitics and local realities which enhances the understanding of the challenges faced by the two countries, the region, and further afield. From this enhanced understanding, it is hoped that positive ways forward can be identified, as will be discussed in the Conclusion section, and in the preambles to the various chapters of the monograph. Dialogue, voice, seeking out the positive, and building on it, are part of this process.

The evolving interests of China towards security and not purely its economic interests, in a key position to play a strong role in the peace and state-building process in Afghanistan, due to its longstanding friendship with Pakistan. The latter’s common need for energy – something shared with India - has also the potential for either positive engagement between the two countries,

or more negative outcomes, depending on how these and other broader geopolitical factors play out. Iran's economic cooperation with Pakistan is increasing, and its proxy war with Saudi Arabia has so far – remarkably in some ways – specifically avoided fanning the flames of sectarian Sunni-Shi'a violence in Pakistan. To date, notwithstanding its longstanding, deep-rooted alliance with Saudi Arabia, Pakistan has consistently steered clear of being too closely associated with the Saudi-led alliance of Sunni states collaborating against Houthi rebels in Yemen, and then against the Syrian regime. Russia's concerns over Da'esh and the apparent allegiance to it sworn by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) have reportedly even led it to consider financing the Afghan Taliban (denied by all concerned parties however). In Pakistan, a previously somewhat adversarial relationship has evolved into military cooperation, investment opportunities and engagement in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

At the close of the project in 2016, four main sets of interlinked issues stand out:

- (i) The Taliban movements in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the added overlay of the reported presence of Da'esh (Islamic State) in both countries, with a reported presence in Afghanistan in 25 out of the 34 provinces;¹
- (ii) The outflow of refugees from Afghanistan (the second-largest in number after Syria) in some instances transiting through Pakistan and Iran, and the effects of the resultant "brain drain" on the human capital of Afghanistan, its neighbours, and the wider world
- (iii) Governance issues in both countries, at the macro and the micro levels
- (iv) The cross-cutting issues of the regional economy, both for the good – regional economic integration; and for the bad – the drug economy that flows across both countries and on into their adjoining neighbours and beyond.

In particular, the effects of a lack of good governance or in some areas, or indeed of any writ of the state at all, resonate strongly. Inadequate governance has multiple bad effects, including facilitating the sort of chaos that violent extremists and those profiting from the black economy adeptly exploit. The renewed push by the Taliban in Afghanistan, the appearance of the Pakistani Taliban and the appearance of Da'esh's are outcomes, not causes, of lack of governance. Militancy and corruption thrive on a governance vacuum, supported by a growing radicalisation of society and in particular, its youth, though not necessarily a violent radicalisation. The domestic and regional economies cannot thrive until this vacuum is addressed. As long as physical insecurity, conflict and lack of economic opportunity prevail, the disillusioned and the desperate will continue to seek refuge elsewhere. The impact on Europe of the 2015 refugee outflow, including from Afghanistan, though primarily from the wars in Syria and to a lesser extent, Iraq, need no further discussion here.

This edited compilation therefore focuses on thirteen selected papers from the sixty three STAP RP products (2012-16), which best "tell the story" of these key themes as identified during the five years of the project. The 2016 perspective on the selected themes is reflected in the preambles by eminent analysts and the afterwords from the authors themselves, as an "epitaph" at the close of the project.

1. See STAP RP Overview Report of the Regional Powers in 2015, section 4.3. [LINK TO OVERVIEW](#)

Importantly, all the STAP RP papers, including this volume, constitute a deliberate match between the scope of the topic at hand and the players analysing it, using an interdisciplinary approach demonstrated by the range of eminent analysts, members of the project's network of experts, from different countries, different fields and areas of expertise, who have collaborated with it. Extensive efforts were consistently made to identify and work with the best analysts from and on the region, and the project has benefitted immensely from their inputs, as well as from the annual discussions with the project's network of experts, which helped shape the focus of the project ([LINK TO EVENTS](#)). The project website lists all those who participated in the project ([LINK TO EXPERTS LISTS](#)), who are too numerous to list here. But without all of them, we could not have done it.

Most importantly, we thank the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway, whose support and belief in the project has made this project possible over the past five years. We also thank the Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF), who not only provided the initial seed funding, but who generously gave their intellectual support and collaboration, throughout the project life.

Finally, while many experts contributed to the findings presented, the final responsibility for the content is that of CIDOB alone.