

Wonders of Pakistan

First Blog on Heritage, Culture and Tourism in Pakistan

Afghanistan is developing into a political proxy war between India and Pakistan.



How far a destabilized Pakistan suits India!

by HK

With 30,000 more United States troops on their way to Afghanistan, it is getting clearer now that they will not suffice and that larger challenges loom. Afghanistan is also increasingly developing into a political proxy war between India and Pakistan.

Pakistan, which backed the mujahideen against the Soviets in the 1980's and offered a safe haven, a breeding ground to the Taliban in the 1990's, is now looking askance at the government of President Hamid Karzai in Kabul, which it sees as pro-India. Conversely, India has fond memories of the time when Kabul was firmly under Moscow's hands and out of Islamabad's fist – and worries that the present American strategy will hand Kabul back to Pakistan.

India is also worried about US's diplomatic warming with China, the latter being Pakistan's long-time ally. US President Barack Obama's recent visit to Beijing was a major success – despite some criticism – and set in motion a higher phase in bilateral ties.

Moreover, China is pressing in around India. It backed the peace process between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Colombo government this year, thus gaining new leverage in Sri Lanka. Nepal's neo-Maoists are fashionably pro-Chinese, and sympathy for the Chinese government can be found in the neo-Maoist rebels active in about a third of India's territory.

Further, on the eastern front, there is Myanmar, where New Delhi may gain ground but Beijing's interests are firmly entrenched. If the new American policies in Afghanistan let Islamabad increase its clout in Kabul, New Delhi could rightly feel it is caught in a vice in which China – with American help – is pressing the levers.

United by History and Loyalty

The Pashtun ethnic group is spread through both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Its strong tribal code explains much about regional alliances and politics.



However, this perception might be wrong. Afghanistan and Pakistan are not unstable domino tiles that can be moved at will in a careful balance of weights and counterweights, as in old political power games. Pakistan and Afghanistan are part of a more complex balancing act that is both domestic and international and in which we also find China and India. It is no mystery that the Afghanistan wound has festered to the point of poisoning Pakistan's body.

Parts of Pakistan are subject to tribal rule. That is, tribes straddling the border have brought their rule to Pakistan, and Islamabad, vying for its own state legitimacy, has to cope with them. In other words, Afghanistan's falling apart puts Pakistan in jeopardy, as the latter could also crumble, split between tribal and national interests: Pashtuns versus Punjabis or Sindhi or Balochi. The problem has become so big that the real issue now is no longer to simply stabilize Afghanistan, but to also stabilize Pakistan and prevent its fall into anarchy, as many pundits see it as an almost failing state. Thinking of Pakistan as a failing state does not help its recovery, and it further fuels the flames of chaos.

From the simple view of looking for a power play, India should rejoice in the weakening or even the disappearance of its major regional rival, Pakistan. If Pakistan fails, its large territory could fall under New Delhi's brotherly embrace, as happened with Bangladesh. Thus, modern India could recover de facto the borders of the former British Indian Empire. It would be a major geopolitical victory for New Delhi – or would it?

The "new India" with Pakistan would add some 180 millions Muslims. Adding the some 145 million Muslims in Bangladesh and about 160 millions Muslims in India proper, the subcontinent has about half a billion Muslims out of a total population of 1.5 billion. That is, one-third of the total population of a united subcontinent would be Muslim and planted with the seeds of radicalism born out of the long Afghan war and the despair at the loss of a "pure" Pakistani state.

The objective weight of Islam and extremist Islam would be bound to increase in New Delhi, even if it managed to keep Pakistan and Bangladesh separate from the rest of the body of the potential Indian union. This could easily incense already inflammable radical Hindu nationalist parties, presently backing or defending frequent, violent anti-Muslim or anti-Christian protests in India.

In other words, more radical Muslims would create space for more radical Hindu nationalists, which could then start a vicious circle of tension. These would not be the only elements of the dangerous powder keg. Neo-Maoist guerrillas threaten a third of the territory and would also be rallied by growing religious confrontations; differences from north (Indo-European) and south (Dravidian) India could flare, spiced by caste and pro-independence struggles.

In other words, the fall of Pakistan – even if we were naive enough to believe that it could be managed in an orderly way – would inevitably bring about massive destabilization in India, home to about one-fourth of the world's population. The world – scared enough of the destabilization of Afghanistan, home of 44 million Muslims – would be confronting the nightmare of the destabilization of some 500 million Muslims in the Indian subcontinent. Is New Delhi ready for it? Hardly. China may have reasons for supporting Pakistan to contain India, but India could be totally destabilized by the destabilization of Pakistan. India has more to lose than China out of the loss of Pakistan – it could jeopardize its own country.

Thus, New Delhi has an objective interest in stabilizing Pakistan. In other words, to forestall its own destabilization, India should help stabilize Pakistan. This could be something new in Indian politics – it could propel India out of 60 years of zero-sum politics with Pakistan and help India and Pakistan find common political ground for the subcontinent.

Within this general logic, India and Pakistan have a common interest in envisaging a political solution for Afghanistan. Will they do it? Will they understand the long – and medium term dangers of a narrow geopolitical vision?

Certainly, America, with troops on the ground and eager to withdraw them, and neighboring China, with a restive Islamic minority of its own and concerned about ensuring peace and development at its borders to guarantee its own, have a keen interest in finding a political solution in Afghanistan.

This solution is bound to consider the broad, long-term interests of India, Pakistan and the subcontinent. All of them need economic development, thus market stability and freedom as well as political and social peace as preconditions to cure their own domestic grievances.

If one experience can be drawn from the past 30 years of Chinese development, it is that for three decades Beijing has decided to shelve – partly or totally – its geopolitical gripes and ambitions in order to achieve the higher goal of economic development. That approach by itself cast all geopolitics in a different light. This ought to be also the recipe for Afghanistan, Pakistan and the whole Indian subcontinent.

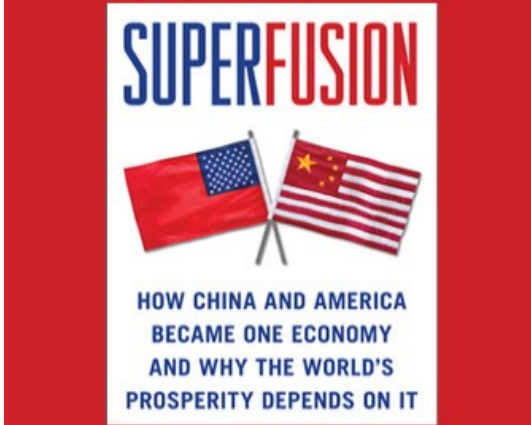
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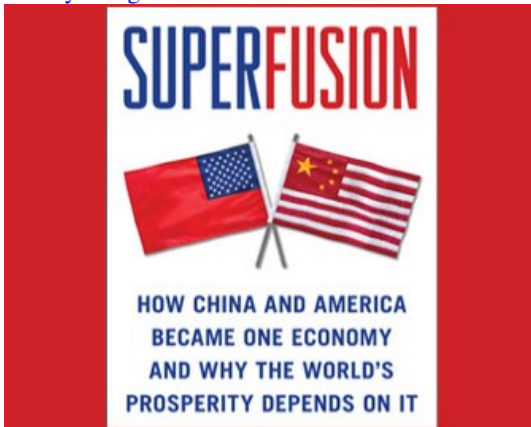
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