

Pakistan's Strategic Depth

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Introduction

It is axiomatic that ensuring the security of a nation is paramount for the people and the government of that nation. For nations which suffer from security paranoia the need for absolute security becomes an over-riding priority of the governing class.

The key aspect of adequate security is strategic depth which nations strive to achieve in a variety of ways. When Hitler invaded Russia, in addition to lebensraum, he was looking for strategic depth. During World War II, the gallant but poorly armed and ill equipped Polish Armed Forces were decimated and the nation perished quickly as it lacked strategic depth. In a sharp contrast even after the French forces were defeated, the nation survived because it had strategic depth available to it which provided time and space for organising resistance and counter moves against the Germans.

With reference to Pakistan, the topic of strategic depth was extensively debated by the intelligentsia and the strategic community on both sides of the divide during 1980s and 1990s. Then, in the next decade this issue got relegated and was removed from the radar screen and is now beginning to fade from memory. This leads to missing out the rationale for some of the actions/policy initiatives taken by Pakistan.

Aim

The aim of this article is to review Pakistan's search for strategic depth along with its relevance considering the latest developments in the region.

Analysis of Pakistani Concerns

Basic to national security is adequate strategic depth for the nation. In some cases this depth is geographically configured - Russia, China, India and the USA. Other nations have to contrive to achieve it - case in point being Israel and Pakistan. Very soon after inception, Pakistan developed insecurities - some real, some imagined - vis-à-vis its more powerful neighbour.¹ As a safeguard, it began to seek strategic depth. The term is open to a variety of interpretations. For Pakistan it implies territorial security, and as well as economic, socio-political and diplomatic security. The search for strategic depth has been a continuous process in Pakistan and was given impetus by successive military rulers. Strategic depth has wider implications than merely military connotations. For the military, strategic depth is provided by a buffer state or an ally which can provide it enough time to secure its vital interests and to enable its armed forces to implement its strategic plans. At national level it is more complex and is obtained by international relations both political and economic. Pakistan's security perspective has been centred on its search for iron clad guarantees to ensure permanence of the Pakistan dream.

A nation's need for strategic depth is an amalgam of its own threat perception, combined with its perception of its adversary. Here, basically the problem lies in Pakistan's geography and configuration. The core of the country is Punjab, which in the perception of the ruling elite, needs to be well protected. To the north, within North West Frontier Province (and Southern Afghanistan) are the Pakhtuns. Strategic depth in this direction implies that even in the face of initial reverses Pakistan would be able to continue the war from Pakhtun areas along with low intensity war in Punjab.³ To the west of the core area lies Baluchistan. Pakistan needs a stable and strong Baluchistan for its strategic depth in the west. Little wonder then that Pakistan is sensitive to developments in that region and accuses India of fomenting trouble there. In so far as the East of the core is concerned, the need for strategic depth explains the proxy war in India's Punjab and Kashmir. One of the reasons for the 1947- 48 war was to create strategic depth for Pakistan's National Capital Region that abutted Kashmir. At Shimla in 1972, it is believed that India was willing to convert the Line of Control as the International Border, tacitly accepting Pakistan's need for strategic depth (probably under Soviet advice). It is understandable as to why India was willing to be accommodative. Vital national interests of a weaker neighbour need to be considered in order to give peace and development a better environment. Possibly, this could have been an additional reason for Mr Nehru to call off further offensives in 1948 so as to leave a modicum of depth for Pakistan. But so deep seated was Pakistan's unease that they were unable to respond and went on to vitiate Indo-Pak relations.

Israel was in a worse situation - embattled from the very day of its creation - its need for strategic depth was even greater than Pakistan's. Its response was an alliance with western countries, technological superiority, its doctrine of counter attack in anticipation, its mobilisation technique and the elitism of its air force and armour. Pakistan - equally desperate for strategic depth - resorted to a variety of stratagems and policy moves. In its quest, it joined military pacts, bartered away real estate, emphasised the doctrine of offensive defence, meddled in Afghanistan, followed the controversial Islamisation policies, carried out proxy war, supported the mujahideen and accepted widespread fundamentalism. After some success, wide cracks began to appear to augment Pakistan's political and strategic predicament. Its support for Taliban and terrorism has resulted in world wide loss of credibility. Among others, Russia, Iran and some Central Asian States now regard Pakistan with apprehension. Internally, Pakistan is on the verge of a civil war with sectarian violence and terrorism engulfing the country.

In this concept, there is specificity to a prevailing environment and would depend on Pakistan's threat calculus and hence the security needs of the country.⁶ Such a hedge is sought against a known/ envisaged adversary. Pakistan's search for strategic depth has always been India specific given its geophysical vulnerability and the proximity of its major cities and its lines of communication to the International Border. She sought to achieve strategic depth with Iran, Jordan, Turkey, Central Asian States, Islam, proxy war and terrorism. The last two forming part of war by other means. Some other examples of strategic depth are: strategic depth provided to Israel by Golan Heights, Hitler's need to seize oil and grain rich areas of Russia (economic), NATO's eastward pressure and the British policy of buffer states.

Though, while from the outset Pakistan sought strategic depth to counter a stronger India, this was specifically formalised under Mr Bhutto, whose emphasis was only on strategic depth eastward.⁷ So insecure was Pakistan that it ceded 5000 sq km of Kashmir territory to China to ensure its security. After Bhutto, Pakistani rulers followed a similar policy and subsequently developed a strategy of containment of India by proxy (in the hope that Indian occupied Kashmir would fall under her influence and thus create strategic depth for her) and of gaining strategic depth westward by supporting Taliban.⁸ The latter was to enable Pakistani control of Afghanistan and thereby preclude Pakhtun nationalist sentiment arising as a threat on either side of the controversial Durand Line.

Despite Pakistan's need for strategic depth in the west, relations with Afghanistan were bedevilled with suspicion. Afghanistan has denounced the Durand Line. The potential demand for Pashtunistan under Afghan influence fills Pakistan with unease.¹⁰ The Soviet invasion substantially changed the whole geo-political situation of the region. Pakistan became a 'front line' state and the rise of religious fundamentalism accelerated. A host of developments followed. American peanuts became pistachios; Zia acquired international legitimacy; Pakistan's hopes rose for its aim to acquire enough influence in Afghanistan to solve the Durand Line and Pashtunistan problems; and as well reduce/end Indian influence there.¹¹ This would subserve its interest of strategic depth in the region.¹² With this Pakistan also hoped to develop stronger political and economic links to Central Asia.¹³ Pakistan now felt close to its key objectives, i.e. gaining leverage against a powerful neighbour by obtaining strategic depth in the west, in order to have greater security and having the option to concentrate forces on the Indian border.

Concept of strategic depth found maximum articulation when General Mirza Aslam Beg was Pakistan's Army Chief. The doctrine called for the need for dispersal of Pakistan's military assets in Afghanistan, beyond the Durand Line, and well beyond the reach of Indian military's offensive capabilities. To give effect to the doctrine, Pakistan needed the ability to field its military assets at a time and place of its choosing, which in turn required not just neutral areas around the Durand Line but also Pakistan dominated areas well within Afghanistan. The purely military aspect of strategic depth also attained full clarity post Exercise ZARB - E- MOMIN.¹⁴ This offensive defence exercise was designed to test Pakistan's concept of strategic depth by extending the war into India by a combination of covert and conventional means and by having a pliant Afghanistan in the west.¹⁵ In the eyes of Pakistani Army this exercise confirmed the military rationale of and ability to acquire strategic depth.

Withdrawal of the Soviet Forces

With the withdrawal of the Soviets and their subsequent collapse, Pakistani leadership saw even brighter lights at the end of their strategic tunnel. But events took a turn quite different from what had been anticipated by Pakistan. Civil war led to the collapse of the Afghan State. Eastern Europe assumed higher priority for western countries and this area became an open field for regional power play. India, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey and some Central Asian States were embroiled in the Afghan mess. Out of this turmoil Taliban rose and began to take control of most of Afghanistan. And in Taliban, Pakistan saw a perfect solution for its India centric religion based strategic culture policies in Afghanistan.¹⁷ Pakistan now felt closer to each of its objectives: strategic depth against India, access to oil and gas resources of Central Asia, solving the problem of Durand Line, negating Afghanistan claims of Pakistan's Pashtun majority areas, undermining Iran's influence in the region and obtaining recruits for the insurgency in Kashmir. In case of a war with India, such irregular forces could be used against India. Also, Afghan airfields and territory would be available for basing Pakistani wherewithal in case the situation so warranted.

Strategic depth in the east, though obtained at a cost, was beneficial to Pakistan. Its desire for strategic depth in the west received an impetus with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.¹⁸ Pakistan garnered immense support from the USA to exert a westward pressure. But tables turned against Pakistan post Soviet exit from Afghanistan. In the turmoil which followed Pakistan nearly lost control over the situation, the situation getting compounded with the Taliban coming under the influence of Arab fundamentalists (Though this was partly by design as well). Pakistan's search for strategic depth in Afghanistan resulted in Pakistan itself becoming strategic depth for the Taliban, with considerable damage to the nation.

It was in 1989 that the situation became highly favourable for Pakistan in its quest for strategic depth. The Soviet Union was pushed out of Afghanistan, Iran had fought back the Iraqis and democracy had been restored in Pakistan. The three countries gravitated towards each other in an attempt to form a unit with common interest to deter (and if the need arose to defeat) their enemies.²⁰ This aspect of collective security provided the essential element of strategic depth to each of these countries. However, civil war in Afghanistan temporarily stayed the idea. Policy makers in these countries though deterred, continued to work to evolve the Pakistan-Iran-Afghanistan Union (PIAU) to provide strategic depth to each of the constituents of the union.

Current Situation

Pro tempore India is developing her relations with Afghanistan, Iran and the Central Asian States, while Pakistani diplomacy faces serious challenges in combating India's growing influence in the region.²² Pakistan's ambitious

strategic design for Central Asia to achieve her geo-political goal of gaining strategic depth vis-à-vis India, seems to be in tatters as of now.²³ This is in contrast to her earlier success. Linkage with Central Asia was an important aspect of policy for General Zia. He raised the slogan of Islamic fraternity with certain Muslim states in order to attain influence. Leaders of Pakistan have striven to retain control over south-east Afghanistan in the achievement of this goal.²⁴ Alternatively, a federation of Pakistan and Afghanistan would provide this strategic depth. In this quest Pakistan went a step further. It attempted to make Afghanistan a pliant state under its protégé, the Taliban.

For the present - other than strategic depth in the East and Islamic support - Pakistani effort in this regard is facing road blocks. But such international situations are ephemeral. It is known that Pakistan had moved or planned to move certain unspecified assets to Iran, Saudi Arabia, Jordan or Turkey. This option still remains. International law does not permit a strike on such targets. And even if it did, international opinion would not countenance such a strike. Besides, how would India solve the problem of target acquisition and collateral damage - something which the USA with all its technology has not been able to overcome in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Post Nuclearisation

The issue which comes to the fore now is: would the availability of nuclear weapons with Pakistan affect the requirement of strategic depth for that country in any way? The answer can only be a resounding “No”. In this case the purpose of the strategic depth would be to protect this vital asset, till an appropriate moment when the use of these weapons is considered inescapable. This would have greater applicability with reference to India’s strategy of cold start. At the same time, if nuclear armed Pakistan were to slip into uncharted waters, the rest of the world would react sharply.

The emergence of nuclear weapons has not made conventional forces lose relevance. Nor have traditional military principles been affected. Use of a nuclear weapon is not like firing an artillery barrage. It is a fateful decision which even strong American Presidents have balked at exercising. Pakistan’s strategic partners will step in to stop Pakistan’s first strike, knowing what consequences would follow. In fact, it is likely that Pakistan’s proclivity in insinuating a low level of nuclear threshold is for blackmail and for the benefit of the USA and China. Obviously, a nuclear conflict initiated by Pakistan would have global overtones.

Even an irrational military leadership must ponder on a nuclear response in the face of India’s arsenal. Pakistan’s National Command Authority which controls nuclear weapons would hesitate. There may be mating problems. Where is the nuclear trigger? (Possibly with China). Pakistan’s airspace is controlled by the USA. Apropos to these issues, strategic depth would be required all the more.

Crystal Gazing

Which road should India take now that the whole region appears to be imploding and the environment lugubrious?²⁶ India and Pakistan are joined at the hip and each cannot wish away the other. We need a crystal ball to predict the full spectrum of possibilities in that hapless country and assess what would suit us better. A strong Pakistan which is militarily equal to India; or a weak, wounded, embittered and vengeful Pakistan; or a country caught in the throes of civil war; or a country in endless turmoil; or a balkanised Pakistan; or finally a stable Pakistan which does not fear to engage with India. To deal with any of these eventualities, India’s strategic preparations cannot be patchy or irresolute.²⁷ Here one may either adopt a soft approach or a tough line. But it must be kept in mind that a smaller country which is assured security from a large powerful neighbour, would not need to seek strategic depth in order to preserve its strategic and economic independence. Hence, the two countries must shed the “enemy image” of each other. However, if the weaker or smaller country perceives threat to its national security, it will evolve national doctrines to defend its sovereignty - whatever be the cost.²⁸ While deciding on which approach to adopt, it must be borne in mind that a US Congressional Research Service Report has credited Pakistan with having nuclear parity with India. At the same time our pre-requisite for a no-first-use policy, i.e. a credible second strike capability, remains a question mark.

If as a more mature nation India were to understand Pakistan’s fear psychosis and respond with sagacity, we could create a better world. After all Mexico, despite its juxtaposition with the world’s greatest power, does not seek strategic depth. What do we bequeath to the coming generations; a ten per cent GDP growth or a possible holocaust. Can India and Pakistan not work together towards our common concerns? Form a confederacy? Prima facie this does sound utopian and inconceivable; yet a study of recent world events does point to the plausibility of such a proposition coming to pass.

Here perhaps one may recall the famous and well flogged quote, “...if you know yourself and know the enemy, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles....”. It is true that Pakistan has been hitting out at us. By and large our response has been effete, probably because we could do no better. Public opinion in both countries should now ponder: for how long must this go on and to what purpose? Jingoism which was unbridled during pre World War I is dead and buried. Today is the age of rapprochement between nations. Besides, can India really deny that Pakistan does verily require strategic depth to ensure its survival and would pay a heavy price for it. As a larger and a better endowed nation, can India not give adequate guarantee to Pakistan so that it would realise that the price they have paid and would pay in the future to acquire strategic depth could not be justified. This would help India as well because the fallout of Pakistan’s quest impinges on the security of the whole region. What is required is deft diplomacy to harvest the advantages which have accrued to India, so that Pakistan’s strategic depth is adequately shrunk.

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