# DEEP DRIVERS OF SOUTH ASIAN GEOPOLITICS

*Ali Shah*

Afghanistan is a compression zone located in the South Asian shatter belt nested within the regional meta-ethnic frontier. The late American geographer, Professor Saul Bernard Cohen, described compression zones as sub-regional small areas that were characterized by intense internal conflicts and the interference of external forces. Shatter belts, a geopolitical concept and feature, are regions marked by chronic conflict, intervention of foreign powers, and instability.

According to the noted American historian and the founder of the branch of historical research known as cliodynamics, Professor Peter Turchin, meta-ethnic frontiers are areas where various ethnic and social groups live side by side often in intense competition. Out of this clash of conflicting group energies over time tends to emerge major civilizations and nations.

These nations or civilizations are driven by the a*sabiyya*or the group feeling of the leading social group that holds together different jostling groups and turns them into long-term consensual coalitions. Asabiyya or group feeling is the term used by Ibn Khaldun to denote the sentiment of cooperative spirit and solidarity that binds groups together in relations of mutual help and reciprocity.

The broad regional expanse from Kabul via Peshawar and Lahore till New Delhi has been an ageless regional meta-ethnic frontier. It has historically provided the geographical setting for the competition, cooperation, and struggles of various ethnic, social, imperial, and national collectivities. The crystallization and emergence in this region of three modern nation-states, namely, Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan, during the 20th century has further added a critical geopolitical dimension to longstanding historical pressures.

Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, and even Iran carry within their collective unconscious the repressed memories of the great empires of yore, namely, the Durrani Afghan empire, the Mughal Indian empire, the British Indian empire, and Nader Shah’s Iranian empire. This historical legacy of greatness jars discordantly with their relatively modest contemporary status. This is one of the major tacit sources of ongoing regional tensions.

While India, Iran, and Pakistan are still major regional powers, Afghanistan is not even that. Afghans are a great nation locked into the current reality of a small power. Memories of their past greatness and the excruciating consciousness of their contemporary helplessness must cause a massive cognitive dissonance. Perhaps, almost all the actions and choices of Afghanistan in recent history, including Kabul’s ambivalent relationship with Islamabad, can be seen to have been motivated by this explosive combination. In addition, Afghanistan’s traditional susceptibility to Indian and Iranian overtures is also a symptom of the feeling of vulnerability caused by this condition.

I have tried to explain in my book, *Pakistan in the Contemporary International System*(2020), the real reason behind the so-called foreign policy failure of Pakistan to forge positive relationships with Afghanistan, Iran, and India. I argue there that as their common neighbor, Pakistan inevitably finds itself facing their misplaced competitive drives. Locked in their great-power complexes, Afghan, Indian, and Iranian geopolitical visions remain incarcerated in the time warp of anachronistic dominance.

Their frustration elsewhere intensifies resentment against Pakistan. Iran faces stiff competition in the Middle East, India’s great-power ambitions cannot overcome the massive hard and soft power capabilities of China, and Central Asia is manifestly unsuited for the expression of Afghanistan’s great nation-small power trap.

Therefore, their stymied ambitions flow compulsively toward Pakistan. Add to this the interventionist actions of external powers and we get the classic South Asian shatter belt of chronic instability, self-defeating actions, and mutual suspicion. However, Afghanistan and Iran are in a better position than India to liberate themselves from its clutches.

In fact, Pakistan may be the only country in the region that, in recent times, has successfully escaped the seductive pull of self-aggrandizement. What has enabled Pakistan after all to free itself from this trap?

Pakistan is the only modern nation state out of the four which, thanks to the farsightedness of its founding father, was founded on the formulation of an expansive social contract that transcended the prejudice of events, ethnicity, and place. Unlike the Indian variety of nationalism, Pakistani nationalism is broad-based, inclusive, and multiethnic. This is a potentially irresistible force not even properly understood and harnessed by Pakistanis themselves.

It is true that this vision has been freighted with geostrategic exigencies and instances of poor leadership throughout its history, but the vitality of this vision has remained undiminished. Like love, it can surmount all odds, and like love, it continues to encounter countless internal and external challenges.

In the absence of an inclusive nationalism that welcomes and accommodates different social, ethnic, and faith-based expressions, the default mechanism of deriving psychological reward from past status will be invariably triggered leading in turn to an exclusive national and geopolitical vision. This is exactly what happens in the South Asian neighborhood, especially in India’s case.

Unfortunately, Afghanistan has been the greatest victim of this regional aberration of self-destructive geopolitics founded on narrow nationalism and moribund power aspirations. In the process, it has been robbed of its immense potential for greatness in internecine conflict and its creative energies have been wasted in a profitless friction with Pakistan.

Unless the vision of Afghanistan’s progress was decoupled from these negative competitive drives, others would continue manipulating it and delaying its peace, prosperity, and development. Both Afghanistan and Pakistan urgently need to realign their relationship on the basis of mutual respect, compassion, and mutual assistance.

In fact, a sincere Pak-Afghan cooperation, complemented with Iranian facilitation, may provide the only means to finally decommission the juggernaut of narrow nationalism and the zero-sum pursuit of dominance in South Asia.

**Brief note about the author:**

*Ali Shah heads research and analysis at the NUST Institute of Policy Studies (NIPS). He was previously the head of research and fellow of the Global Think Tank Network (GTTN). Ali is the author of the book, Pakistan in the Contemporary International System (2020), published by NIPS. He can be reached at* [*ali.shah78@gmail.com*](mailto:ali.shah78@gmail.com)*.*