

Pakistan in its Labyrinth

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By Ahmed Rashid

LAHORE, Pakistan — There is a bit of a hermetic feel to Pakistan these days, as if the country that lies on the ancient road from the West to Asia, a natural bridge, had somehow contorted itself into a self-imposed isolation. The border with India, dividing the Punjab, lies not far from this great city. It is a barrier rather than a gateway. The border with Afghanistan is problematic in its nonexistence. The beast nurtured in the name of Islamabad's policy of "strategic depth" (whatever that may be), the Taliban in its Pakistani iteration, massacred 134 children at Peshawar's Army Public School late last year. Not surprising then that tourism is down to a trickle. I made my way to the Badshahi Mosque and the Lahore Fort — high-walled, dusky-red, magnificent in extent. There was not a foreigner in sight, not a camera clicking.

President Obama goes to India and Pakistan is way down on his agenda — if it is there at all. Nobody in Washington frets any longer about balancing visits to New Delhi and Islamabad. Oh, yes, Afghanistan, American treasure and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence directorate (ISI), or top spy agency: Well, the less said about that, the better.

India is a democracy and a great power rising. Pakistan is a Muslim homeland that lost half its territory in 1971, bounced back and forth between military and nominally democratic rule, never quite clear of annihilation angst despite its nuclear weapons, its prime ministers as susceptible to a violent end as Henry VIII's wives, struggling to define its identity almost 68 years after it came into being. The fog of war is rivaled only by the fog of Pakistan, in which Osama bin Laden lived and paced for several years.

But perhaps something new is stirring in the penumbra. There is much chatter about Beijing. China needs Pakistan to keep India busy; it does not want an India freed of its Pakistani headache. So Beijing helps Pakistan with military technology. It builds nuclear power stations. (The Saudis help Pakistan with big gifts, too, widely seen as informal insurance of protection with those Pakistani nukes if ever needed by the Royals or Riyadh.)

Interests shift, however. China needs Pakistan on another front now. This month a Uighur suicide bomber killed as many as eight people in the volatile Chinese region of Xinjiang, near the border of Pakistan. It was the latest in a series of attacks by Muslim Uighurs resentful of domination by the Han Chinese. Some Uighurs have embraced jihadi Islam, an ideology for which plentiful schooling and terrorist training is available in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. In this light, reining in the Taliban looks a little more attractive to the Chinese than it once did. And, as the United States learned long ago, if you want to do something about the Taliban, you'd better do something about Pakistan.

All this forms the backdrop to an interesting question: Does rising China make its formal entrance to the world diplomatic stage by trying to mediate talks between the Afghan Taliban, the Afghan government of President Ashraf Ghani, and a Pakistani ally sobered by the very belated realization that the Taliban it has fostered for "strategic depth" (which may mean the fanciful notion that a semi-controlled Afghanistan could give it maneuvering room against India) is also a mortal danger to Pakistan itself? Is it here that President Xi Jinping's China begins to punch its strategic weight?

It is past time. The United States cannot carry the weight of the world; it has other priorities right now. China could be helpful as American combat troops withdraw. Ghani wants to begin talks with the Taliban. An Afghan-Pakistani thaw has begun since he took office. That Peshawar school attack has focused minds on the costs to Islamabad of imagining there could be a "good Taliban" in Afghanistan and "a bad Taliban" in Pakistan: One of course feeds the other. China is talking to the Taliban. It has leverage over Pakistan.

Skepticism is in order. The Afghan war is a long story now. But the change in American strategic priorities, the change of government in Afghanistan, the change of mood in Islamabad, and the change of needs in China have created space. This is an issue on which President Obama and President Xi can find common cause.

Pakistan will not extricate itself from dysfunction through an Afghan resolution, but it would help. The nonsense of "strategic depth" must give way to the wisdom of commercial breadth — and not just on the western border. Chinese-Indian pragmatism can be a beacon for Pakistani-Indian pragmatism — maybe.

There is a wealth of talent and energy in Pakistan. A Taliban suicide bomber killed five people in Lahore this month. The people of Lahore responded by bravely hosting the Lahore Literary Festival, a wonder of creativity, eclecticism, ideas and dialogue. Openness is what Pakistan needs. It is time to emerge from the fog and lay to rest outdated ghosts.