

## Survival Games

Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury



*The Battle for Pakistan:*

*The Bitter US Friendship and a Tough Neighbourhood*

By Shuja Nawaz

Vintage, an imprint of Penguin Random House India, 2019

With the passing of Professor Stephen Cohen in 2019, the number of serious scholars focused on Pakistan in the United States (US), never large at any given period, dwindled even further. Around the time of his demise, the tome by Shuja Nawaz entitled *The Battle for Pakistan: The Bitter US Friendship and a Tough Neighbourhood* hit the market. This essay is meant to be an analytical examination of this important work. It was a follow-up on his previous volume on the same subject called *Crossed Swords: Pakistan, its army and the Wars Within*. It was now evident that Nawaz, from his perch at the Atlantic Council in Washington DC, was poised to fill the void!

Apart from his prodigious skills as an indefatigable researcher and an author of lucid prose, Nawaz, born a Pakistani but now an American, has the additional advantage of having equal access to the upper reaches of government and society both in Pakistan and in the US. Riding two horses at the same time can be daunting to most but Nawaz appears to undertake the challenge with commendable flair and finesse. He appears to use his connections on both sides to act as a conduit linking the two, to endeavour to salvage a 'misalliance', a term he borrowed from George Bernard Shaw's satirical dramatical rendition, *Arms and the Man*, on the class-battles in Victorian England. The alliance that binds the US and Pakistan is a kind of mis-marriage of unequals, not unlike that of in London of that age, brought together in a transactional love-hate relationship for the sake of convenience with the inevitable mutual recriminations that such links entail.

To complement Nawaz, I feel a bit of historical backdrop would facilitate greater understanding of this thesis. The US was already a great power on the global scene after World War II when Pakistan emerged as a state. Not quite a nation state at nascence, for Rounaq Jahan, a Bangladeshi scholar, has cogently argued that Pakistan was a rare case of a Westphalian entity where the nation was sought to be created *after* the state was born. Be that as it may, confronting a perceived existentialist threat from a much larger and more powerful India, Pakistan joined US-led military pacts during the Cold War such as the Central Treaty Organization and Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, not really to combat Communism, as what was the US aim, but to make-up for the power-gap with India. The seeds of misalliance were thus sown.

When General Ayub Khan first initiated military intervention in governing in Pakistan in 1958, a fact that has happened with relentless and disturbing regularity in the country, the dictator was extolled by American analysts as a Pakistani Solon or Lycurgus, the famed lawgivers of Classical Greece. Ayub's successor, General Yahya Khan, acted as a bridge

between the US and China during the Richard Nixon-Henry Kissinger era. A later military ruler, General Muhammad Zia-ul-Huq was of great support to the US in driving away the Soviets from Afghanistan, as was General Pervez Musharraf, another military successor, a partner in dismantling Taliban rule in that country. However, fondness for the brass, not always reciprocated as Zia once termed US aid as “peanuts”, had the unintended consequence of distancing the masses in Pakistan, who naturally harboured pro-democratic predilections, from the US leadership. This contributed to Pew poll results which showed Pakistanis as viewing the US as “enemy No 1”. The misalliance deepens.

Nawaz masterfully elaborates, phase by phase, through periods and personalities, as well as crises and conspiracies, what happens thereafter. His enormous contacts, also assisted in no small way by the fact of being a sibling of a well-regarded and respected head of the Pakistan Army, led him to data and documents, some of which were not in the public domain. This enabled him to better discern, in his own words, “who said what to whom and with what effect”. This, in turn, helped him knit together the story in this book in just over 400 pages, organised in 13 chapters. He covers mainly the years 2007 to date, from Barack Obama to Donald Trump in the US and from Musharraf to Imran Khan in Pakistan. However, the nature of his analyses and the extrapolations he arrives at provide the book and its contents a longer shelf-life than the years suggest. The ‘Battle’ he refers to, in Nawaz’s own explanation, is for the soul and future of Pakistan, between the centripetal forces bringing it together and centrifugal forces tearing it apart if appropriate attention to the periphery is not provided for the resolution of their needs. He urges that it be recognised that pluralism is a strength and not a weakness, and leaders cease to mislead the people by lying to them for their selfish political gains.

Nawaz fills the chapters with numerous anecdotes. A multitude of personalities, civil and uniformed, are brought into play on either side. The book’s pages are replete with examples of courage and cowardice, bromance and backstabbing, and rationality and rashness. Sometimes, it might appear that the woods may be lost for the trees! However, happily, that does not happen. In the end, the author comes through making good points on the basis of these detailed facts, such as the need for Washington to have a more definitive ‘Pakistan policy’, de-hyphenated from India or Afghanistan, and for better governance by the Pakistanis, with the requirement that the civil and the military be not only on the same page, as they have often claimed, but that the pages must also be of the same book. Some have interesting, though unintended at the time of his writing, relevance to current times. For instance, Nawaz narrates a story of Lieutenant General James Mattis’ bravery in penetrating Afghanistan to set up a forward base, which contradicts President Trump’s contention that Mattis, who criticised Trump’s policy of deploying soldiers to counter the ‘Black Lives Matter’ protests, is a most “overrated general”!

Nawaz remains an incurable optimist. This, despite the fact that a friend had reminded him that a pessimist is an optimist with an experience! One of Pakistan’s most accomplished diplomats, Jamshed Marker, once said Pakistan’s military budget is written in Delhi. This should not be so. The paranoia of India is unhealthy and unhelpful. Nawaz has the vision of a new “Grand Trunk Road’ of cooperation like the one of the past, leading from Kabul through Pakistan and India to Dhaka. This appears a tad unrealistic now, given that the Chinese ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ to which Pakistan is so deeply and unequivocally

committed, reflects just the opposite reality – from China through Asia and Pakistan connecting with the West.

Nawaz concludes with an aspiration, perhaps a dash lofty, “In the end”, he says, “Pakistan itself is key to its change and development. It has the people, the ideas, the strategic location and untapped resources to make it a peaceful hub for economic activity in South and Central Asia.” It might for now look like something beyond the rim of the saucer but it is still a possibility should saner minds prevail all around. The optimist in the author could still have his half-filled glass overflow!

. . . . .

Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury is Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University in Singapore (NUS). He is former Foreign Advisor (Foreign Minister) of Bangladesh. He can be contacted at [isasiac@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isasiac@nus.edu.sg). The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and the opinions expressed in the paper.