Interplay of Ontological (In)Security Management Routines: Phase Transitions in Pakistan’s Tribal Area amid Relations with Afghanistan

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Abstract

This paper discusses the ontological (in)security management routines of Afghanistan and Pakistan. It highlights how Afghanistan’s stable routines keep Pakistan in a reactive mode. It also notes that Pakistan has at least one stable routine: integration of Pashtun of settled districts in the state structure of Pakistan. Moreover, it emphasizes that the complex Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship could not be fully explained by theories so far used to study it and advocates for the use of new theories, such as complexity theory, to uncover unexplored aspects of the relationship.

Keywords: Ontological (In)Security Management Routines, Negative Feedback Loops, Self-Organization, Phase Transition, Pakistan, Afghanistan

Introduction

This paper discusses the following research question: who has ‘better’ ontological (in)security management routines: Pakistan or Afghanistan? In other words, which of the states employs ontological (in)security management routines that better serve as stable negative feedback loops for continuous social affirmation of its core self-identity?

The paper follows this structure: part one introduces the topic, while part two outlines the methodological approaches used. Part three discusses the theoretical approaches employed. Parts four and five delve into the historical context of the tribal area as a strategic space, both pre- and post-1947. Finally, part six presents the discussion, followed by the conclusion in part seven.

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Methodological Approaches

The relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan is intricately complex. Many scholars have examined this relationship using various theoretical frameworks. However, there is still much complexity left unexplored. To address this gap, the author is writing a series of papers to delve into the relationship using theories that have not been previously applied. The first paper of this series, published in 2022, examined the Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship through the lens of ontological security theory. This current paper serves as a continuation of the previous paper, now applying complexity theory to delve deeper into the complexities of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

The previous paper identifies a fundamental clash between the Islamic identity of Pakistan and the Pashtun identity of Afghanistan, compelling the two states to enact ontological (in)security management routines against each other. The present paper delves more into their ontological (in)security management routines to assess which state has been more successful in safeguarding its core self-identity up to the present moment.

This paper is mainly a conceptual analysis. It integrates elements from complexity theory with the theory of ontological security to shed new light on the prolonged tension between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Therefore, concepts from both theories will be interchangeably used, such as ontological (in)security routine – a notion from the ontological security theory; and negative feedback loop – a notion from complexity theory, will be interchangeably used. Moreover, the analysis uses relevant empirical information obtained during previous research.

Theoretical Approaches

Complexity theory is a theoretical framework for studying complex adaptive systems in natural sciences, such as biology, ecology, and mathematics. The application of complexity theory is not limited to natural sciences. Concepts derived from the theory have gained traction in the analysis of multifaceted social and political challenges. Scholars have applied concepts derived from complexity theory to understand international relations since early 1990s. The reason is that the increasingly complex social realities of the globalized world have rendered the traditional theories of international relations inefficient both at explanatory and action levels. Moreover, the complexity theory is increasingly being used to study warfare and conflicts. Militant groups, such as Al-Qaeda, have also been studied with insights from the
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complexity theory. The theory has also been used to study US policy on Pakistan-Afghanistan. However, there is a dearth of literature examining the contentious relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan through the lens of complexity theory. This paper is a contribution in this respect, offering fresh perspectives with help from complexity theory on their relationships.

Moreover, the paper benefits from insights from the ontological security theoretical framework, which explores why states need a stable sense of self-identity. Ontological security studies underscore that like humans, states are also rational and social actors that seek continued self-identity affirmation from other actors. When faced with anxiety over self-identity, states turn to self-identity-affirming routines or, according to Giddens, 'cocoons' of relationships with other actors that diminish doubts about self-identity.

This paper aims to delve into the ontological (in)security management routines of Pakistan and Afghanistan to explore, through the lens of complexity theory, the effectiveness of their routines in protecting their respective core self-identities. The ontological (in)security management routines of each state are its 'negative feedback loops' to protect itself against attacks on its core identity from the other side and vice versa.

To use the complexity theory framework, we need to identify a complex adaptive system that is in constant interaction with its surrounding environment. Moreover, there has to be a boundary between the system and its surroundings. Complex systems have ‘inherent fuzziness’ and are in continuous interactions with the surrounding environments. This makes it challenging to draw a clear boundary around the systems — an aspect important to understand the organization and function of complex systems. However, researchers studying complex systems can determine the system boundaries based on their research questions and methodologies.

Complexity theory is not a unified perspective. It is a broad range of concepts explaining that events, if left to happen without interference, will settle into a complex adaptive system. For this paper, three concepts of the complexity theory (self-organization, negative and positive feedback loops and phase transition) are especially relevant and will be used in addressing the research question being discussed in this paper.

For the purpose of this paper, Pakistan’s tribal area on border with Afghanistan – formally known as FATA, now legally integrated with the
Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province in 2018 – as a complex adaptive system was considered. A complex adaptive system exhibits several crucial features, including non-linearity, adaptation, a diverse range of actors, numerous interactions among these actors and with the surrounding environment, feedback loops, emergence, and self-organization. In the tribal area, a multitude of actors, such as its population, tribes, sub-tribes, tribal leaders, religious leaders, political actors, militant groups, and state agents (both civilian and military), engage in constant and multiple interactions among themselves and with the state, primarily Pakistan but also Afghanistan. These interactions extend to the surrounding Pashtun society in both countries, as well as with the wider society in Pakistan. The interactions that occur lead to nonlinear behaviors, prompting the society to adapt by self-organizing itself, sometimes critically, which triggers phase transitions within the society, as explained in the paper.

The reason for taking the tribal area as a complex adaptive system is that the area is a key target of Pakistan and Afghanistan’s ontological security management routines against each other.¹⁷ This has turned the area, as argued below, into a self-organizing complex adaptive system, which is a good point of departure to analyze which country has more effective routines for the protection of its core self-identity.

**Self-Organization**

Self-organization is the ability of a system to survive change by changing itself.¹⁸ It is in this sense (surviving the change by changing itself) that the notion (of self-organization) is discussed in this paper, whereby the tribal area is considered as a self-organizing system, with focus on its self-organization concerning key external interventions, i.e. ontological (in)security management routines of Pakistan and Afghanistan against each other, Afghanistan’s ambiguous stance about the tribal area, the Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCRs), its religious radicalization during the Afghan *Jihad*, among others.¹⁹

A related concept of the complexity theory is critical self-organization. It is a state when a complex adaptive system self-organizes itself to a barely stable state.²⁰ It is a state where even a small change can collapse or drastically change the system, such as the protest of a single Tunisian man, pushed several Arab states into the chaos of the Arab Spring.²¹
Feedback Loops- Negative and Positive

Self-organization is driven by feedback loops. Feedback loops serve as mechanisms through which initially random, local events can be magnified into emergent macro-level patterns of organization.22 In other words, feedback loops are events or processes by which the output of a complex adaptive system is fed back into the system as input, potentially altering the system’s behavior.23 Feedback loops are of two kinds: negative and positive, being discussed below.

Negative Feedback Loops

A negative feedback loop self-corrects a system in the face of changes to prevent it from falling into chaos or extinction. It represents a relationship of constraints and balance between two or more variables when one variable in the system changes in one direction, the other changes in the opposite direction.24 Nature evolves negative feedback loops (such as the human body’s ability to sweat or shiver to maintain a balanced body temperature in the face of large temperature changes in the surrounding environment) and human beings have to invent negative feedback loops to keep a system they made in safe bounds, such as the emergency cooling system in a nuclear power plant.25 Various negative feedback loops in the context of this paper are the key routines of Pakistan and Afghanistan’s ontological (in)security management against each other, such as Afghanistan’s non-acceptance of the Durand Line, the FCRs, the religious radicalization of the tribal area, among others, as discussed in the following paras.

Positive Feedback Loops

Positive feedback loops multiply specific dynamics or properties of a complex adaptive system. They are self-reinforcing where more begets more.26 They create an increase or growth that multiplies over time leading to erosion or collapse of a system, such as the more people catch flu, the more they infect other people, a situation leading to pandemic.27 If there is no effective negative feedback loop in the system (such as an efficient healthcare system) to arrest the spread of the flu (positive feedback loops), the system (society) will fall into extinction.

In case of the tribal area, Pakistan’s religious radicalization of the tribal area during the Afghan jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan (Pakistan’s negative feedback loop) eventually turned into a positive feedback loop, which rapidly radicalized the tribal area, paving the way for the Tehrek-
e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants to replace the Pakistan state control of the area with the TTP’s regime of terror on the area—a regime that Pakistan had to dismantle via military operations (Pakistan’s new negative feedback loop in the area).

**Phase Transition**

Phase transition is change in quantitative input variable that results in an abrupt qualitative change in the system’s overall state, such as transition of ice into steam or liquid water under specific temperatures. The tribal area went through dramatic phase transitions, under the ontological (in)security management routines of Afghanistan and Pakistan (that will be discussed later in this paper).

**Historical Context: The Tribal Area as Strategic Space of the British India**

At the arrival of the British in the Nineteenth Century, the tribal area was already a self-organizing complex adaptive social system. Traditionally, the tribal area has been outside the writ of states in the region and as a result, a poverty-stricken and fragmented (on tribal bases) society emerged. Many of the tribal communities were isolated from each other due to the difficult geographical terrain, for example, Mohmand visitors from the north were taken aback when they ‘discovered’ that Shia sect was being practiced in Orakzai in the west. Nevertheless, they were connected enough to co-evolve key common cultural norms and values, known as the norms and values of the Pashtun cultural code, i.e. *Pashtunwali*. The cultural norms and values acted as negative feedback loops, preventing the society from reaching a critical self-organized state—a state where even a tiny local event could collapse the entire society into violent chaos. For example, tribal disputes, often revolving around ownership of land or water resources, and revenge killings, had the potential to persist and multiply into positive feedback loops, leading to ever-escalating violence within the society. However, the *Pashtunwali*, guided by its principles such as jirga (tribal council), Nanawati (forgiveness), Tigga (truce), and lashkar (temporary armed groups), served as a regulatory framework, thus functioning as a self-correcting social mechanism (negative feedback loop) to prevent the society from descending into total violent chaos. The jirga, characterized by its relatively egalitarian tribal structure under the leadership of tribal elders, effectively mediated disputes both within and between tribes. Through the practice of Nanawati and the deployment of tribal lashkars, the jirga’s decisions were upheld, dissuading troublemakers and facilitating the restoration of peace. The British officers who interacted with the tribes at the time report that
crimes such as theft, burglary and rape were uncommon in the area, but revenge killings among and within the tribes were not uncommon, which were regulated through jirga.\textsuperscript{30}

Nevertheless, there were two tendencies in the tribal area that were a matter of serious concern for the British: one, due to lack of economic opportunities within the tribal area, some tribal groups used to raid the nearby (later called settled, and now in Pakistan) Pashtun districts in order to plunder them and second, they also participated in political uprisings in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{31} The British feared that turbulence in the area could have lured the Russians into the area, which would directly compromise the security of the British India. The area’s difficult geographical terrain made it exceptionally challenging for a regular army to mobilize. Consequently, the British first demarcated a border, called Durand Line, between the area and Afghanistan in 1892.\textsuperscript{32} Later, the British decided to control, but not govern the area and consequently in 1901 legally separated the tribal area from the adjacent settled districts (the Pashtun-dominated districts not adjacent to the border with Afghanistan).

The British imposed on the tribal area a legal order, called FCRs in 1901. The FCRs setup brought the area under state control, led by British political agents, and supported by handpicked tribal elders (\textit{Maliks}) and various tribal levies. It protected the British strategic interests in the area, while at the same time leaving the society to take care of itself in line with their own culture in terms of administration of justice and socioeconomic needs.

As discussed by Zamin Khan, the British codified in the FCRs some key tribal values and norms of \textit{Pashtunwali} such as nikat (hereditary and fixed share of a clan), riwaj (customs) and jirga.\textsuperscript{33} In this way, the British introduced a negative feedback loop (self-correcting system) in the society whereby the British used the tribal ontological (cultural) worldview, on the one hand, to keep the Russians out of the area, and also to hinder the tribal gangs from attacking the settled districts. On the other hand, it gave the impression to the tribesmen that the British respect their autonomy. The tribal leaders and tribal levies served as crucial leveraging points within the British-made negative feedback loop designed to stabilize the society. Their role was pivotal in controlling or eliminating any potential ‘trouble-makers’ in the local society who could have disrupted the British-made negative feedback loop, the FCRs-led sociolegal setup in the area. In return, they received state benefits and subsidies to maintain their role.
For the tribal society, the FCRs setup turned out to be a positive feedback loop that stagnated the natural evolution of the tribal cultural norms and values, i.e. the longer the FCRs setup remained in the area, the more culturally stagnated it became. Cultural norms and values naturally evolve and adapt to changing circumstances over time. However, when these norms and values are codified, they can become stagnant as their codified versions may discourage innovation within the culture, especially when the state is determined on the cultural status quo as the British were in this case because it suited their strategic interests. With state patronage, the institution of jirga became corrupt. The tribal identities, such as Wazir and Mohmand, intensified over time. Consequently, these tribal identities could not coalesce into a unified Pashtun identity, and the people remained divided in tribal lines. Similarly, tribal values, such as revenge, and hospitality also intensified. The society remained sociolegally isolated from the wider British India and even isolated from the adjacent settled Pashtun-dominated districts. In the meanwhile, the Pashtun of the settled districts evolved socioculturally by benefiting from the educational institutions and other modern state setup brought by the British to the districts.

Despite the FCRs setup operating as a positive feedback loop for the tribal society, the society avoided descending into chaos because this setup, by and large, prevented the society from critically self-organizing itself. Tribal leaders and levies, serving as facilitators of the negative feedback loop for the British within the FCRs setup, played a dual role in shaping their society’s dynamics. On the one hand, they helped prevent the society from gathering enough political momentum to challenge the FCRs setup and join the settled district Pashtuns, and the rest of British India, in a peaceful struggle for freedom against the British. On the other hand, they impeded the natural sociocultural evolution of tribal values and norms, resulting in a ‘cultural gridlock’ over time. This cultural stagnation emphasized individual survival reliant on strong family and tribal ties, sharpened tribal identities, and collaboration with the state-driven FCRs setup. Consequently, the area became akin to a ‘living breathing tribal museum’, culturally stagnant yet under the state control.

Post-1947 Context of the Tribal Area as Strategic Space

The Durand Line agreement was endorsed by the direct participation and consent of the ruler of Afghanistan. However, subsequent Afghan governments, particularly those after the partition of British India, consistently rejected the Durand Line as an international border. This issue has been deeply ingrained in the Pashto poetry and cultural expressions, with many Afghans,
particularly Pashtuns of the country, viewing the border as illegitimate and a result of colonial manipulation. As a result, it is very difficult for any Afghan government to recognize the line as an international border due to the significant public pressure against it. Consequently, Pakistan and Afghanistan find themselves in a constant clash of identity, leading both states to establish ongoing ontological (in)security management routines against each other, as they grapple with concerns about their respective core self-identity in relation to one another. These routines aim to prevent either state from compromising the ontological security of the other. Simply put, these routines create negative feedback loops (threat control mechanisms) to manage potential threats to the core self-identity of each state by the other. Frequently, the tribal area becomes the key ground for both states to implement their ontological (in)security management routines against each other.

**Afghanistan’s Ontological (In)Security Management Routines or its Negative Feedback Loops against Pakistan**

There are primarily five such routines:

1. Afghanistan’s non-recognition of the Durand Line as an international border;
2. its ambiguous position regarding Pashtun areas within Pakistan;
3. Afghanistan’s autobiographical narratives, often expressed through art forms like poetry and music, that tend to otherize Pakistan while glorifying the idea of Loya (greater) Afghanistan;
4. Afghanistan’s utilization of Pakistan’s tribal Pashtun for strategic purposes; and
5. the sheltering of anti-Pakistan militant groups, including TTP in recent times.

**Pakistan’s Ontological (In)Security Management Routines or its Negative Feedback Loops against Afghanistan**

Pakistan's routines can be summarized as the following. Firstly, Pakistan’s use of tribal areas as strategic spaces in various manners, such as its control over the area under the FCRs setup; the area’s sustained religious radicalization during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, among others. Secondly, Pakistan diplomatically engages with Western and Muslim nations to gain recognition of the Durand Line as its international border. Thirdly, public discourses on the Durand Line are notably absent from public forums in Pakistan. Finally, the integration of settled area Pashtuns into Pakistan's state structure.
Discussion

The tribal area of Pakistan underwent a profound phase transition as result of ontological (in)security management routines of Pakistan and Afghanistan against each other, as discussed below.

Phase Transition 1: Cultural Gridlock

Pakistan inherited the culturally-gridlocked tribal society from the British in 1947 when it succeeded the British authority in the tribal area. At that time the local society (except for Ipi Faqir in Waziristan) welcomed Pakistan’s creation in the name of Islam – a development on which the Afghan ambassador expressed deep concerns to the British.\(^{42}\) Pakistan had the option to legally integrate the area with the rest of the country but it chose not to do so due to Afghanistan's ambiguous stance on the Pashtun area of Pakistan and its Pashtunistan propaganda.\(^{43}\) These two (the ambiguous stance and the propaganda) are Afghanistan’s ontological (in)security management routines or its negative feedback loops to preserve its core self-identity as a Pashtun state vis-à-vis its own population.\(^{44}\)

These Afghan negative feedback loops could spring into positive feedback loops of secessionist tendency in Pakistan’s Pashtun area. Pakistan needed to prevent such an eventuality and chose to preserve the existing negative feedback loop, which had worked well for the British—the FCRs setup. At that time Pakistan needed to preserve the strong tribal identities to counter the Pashtunistan propaganda of Afghanistan. Afrasiab Khattak, a Pakistani Pashtun nationalist, compares the tribal area between Afghanistan and settled districts as a ‘bad conductor,’ blocking the flow of Pashtun nationalist sentiments between the two (similar to an insulator preventing electricity from passing between two points).\(^{45}\) This view is more clearly elaborated in a declassified CIA document citing Professor Tucci, Director of Italian Archeological Expeditions, that in the tribal area, the Pashtunistan issue had minimal impact due to strong tribal identities.\(^{46}\) However, Pakistan’s de-tribalization efforts in the tribal area could paradoxically weaken tribal influence, fostering Pashtun nationalist sentiments.\(^{47}\) This alignment with existing Pashtun nationalist sentiments in some parts in the settled districts could be exploited by the Afghan propaganda.\(^{48}\) Consequently, Pakistan chose to keep the British-made FCRs setup as one of its ontological (in)security management routines or negative feedback loops to protect its core identity. It worked well for Pakistan for some decades.
As cultural stagnation deepened under the FCRs setup, it paved the way for state-initiated religious radicalization of the region during the Afghan Jihad. The intensified tribal values, like revenge, became more prone to exploitation for violence in the name of religion, aligning with state foreign policy objectives. This trend was even evident during the US Secretary of State’s 1980 visit to the tribal area, where he used Islam to rally tribal civilians for the war against the Soviets. 49

Phase Transition 2: ‘Religious Radicalization’

The tribal area served as a crucial base for the West-supported Afghan Mujahideen’s guerrilla warfare against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Pakistan mobilized the religious identities of the culturally gridlocked and traditionally conservative tribal population to align them with the violent jihad in Afghanistan. 50 The region saw a proliferation of jihadi infrastructure (madrassas, mosques, jihadi training camps and ideological propaganda networks) offering ideological and combat training for Afghan fighters and motivating the locals to support the effort, morally and by participating in Jihadi attacks on the Soviets. The influx of foreign fighters and financial support from various sources, notably Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, further accentuated the religious character of the Afghan resistance in the eyes of the locals.

This complex web of support, ideology, and money emerged into positive feedback loops of radicalization for the society. As the madrassas, mosques, the jihadi propaganda and the funding increased, more religiously extremist ideas found more and more acceptance in the society. All that played a crucial role in further radicalizing the religious identities of the tribal society, leading to the second phase transition of the society: radicalization of tribal Islam. Amidst the era of radicalization, long before the 9/11 attacks, the region experienced unprecedented occurrences. These included incidents of public assaults on women, particularly NGO workers, and the intensification of Shia-Sunni tensions in Kurram. 51 Nevertheless, the FCRs-led setup was still functional and, by and large, successful in preventing the society from descending into chaos, and serving well Pakistan’s strategic interests. 52

Phase Transition 3: Fear and Disappointment

Post-9/11, the tribal area became a key battleground in the global War on Terror (WoT). It served as a refuge for Al-Qaeda and Taliban militants from Afghanistan, notably in Waziristan. The Taliban’s grip on Waziristan created
positive feedback loops of violence, amplifying their terror and power in the area. The militants, with the support of local militant leaders, embarked on a campaign to kill tribal leaders and impose a reign of TTP’s terror on the tribal society. The reign of terror effectively dismantled Pakistan’s negative feedback loop in the area, the FCRs setup, yielding to unbridled TTP authority. Pakistan tried to install another negative feedback loop in the area by entering peace agreements with the Taliban militants, which was tantamount to surrendering the state writ to the terrorists in the area. As the Pakistani state adopted a lenient stance towards the TTP activities, the terror group’s appetite for power and territorial control surged, accompanied by a disturbing escalation in their capacity for brutality.

Consequently, the local populace felt trapped in a terrifying ordeal under the TTP rule. The TTP made ‘Sharia courts’ to administer severe punishments, established training centers for child suicide missions, and imposed stringent taxes on the local population to finance their militant activities. Their reign was marked by gruesome acts, such as beheadings, targeted assassinations, and the publicly meting out harsh punishments, such as limb amputation for theft.

This was a new phase transition of the tribal society during the war on terror: living under the harsh rule of the TTP militants, without state support and devoid of tribal leaders or intermediaries to negotiate between society and the new TTP regime Taliban regime. The society had never collectively experienced any fear like this. The TTP rule left even those who had previously harbored sympathies for the Taliban militants in a state of shock, entirely at the mercy of a merciless regime that showed no leniency towards real or perceived adversaries.

This proved to be a deeply traumatizing experience for the society. At this juncture, the society was gripped by profound apprehension, fearing both the TTP militants and the intelligence operatives in the area. Confusion reigned as mutual distrust pervaded, fueled by fears of potential TTP or state espionage. The outside world had hardly any independent access to information from the area. In response, the tribal society self-organized by severely restricting its freedom of expression, encapsulating the society in a self-imposed state of social siege. The social siege here refers to a condition marked by the TTP regime’s induced fear, self-imposed limitations on freedom of expression, and the state’s inability or reluctance to intervene, resulting in a complete emphasis on survival amid pervasive threats.
In the meanwhile, the TTP-driven positive feedback loops (the TTP reign of terror) expanded exponentially. Their ambitions transcended the control of the tribal region; they sought to expand their control over settled districts and even posed a direct threat to the federal capital, Islamabad. Pakistan’s new negative feedback loop in the area i.e. peace agreements with the Taliban groups, quickly turned into positive feedback loop, expanding violence, power, and territorial control of the TTP militants. Faced with this escalating crisis, the Pakistan army initiated extensive military operations (Pakistan’s newest negative feedback loop) to break the TTP’s positive feedback loops—the TTP’s increasing power and violence) and salvage the area from the militants, which the army eventually did but at a huge human and material cost.

**Phase Transition 4: Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM)**

During the WoT-related military operations, the tribal society also suffered massive human rights violations, such as targeted killings, forced disappearances, mass scale internal displacements, among others. This generated silent public grievances and anger against the army operations. In the absence of necessary measures (negative feedback loops) to address forced disappearances, targeted killings, and other alleged rights violations by the armed forces, public grievances and anger silently multiplied. In other words, the grievances and anger created positive feedback loops of piling up frustration, leading the society into a critical self-organization, i.e. the stage where it is ready to openly call out the army for its alleged rights abuses. In a complex adaptive system this stage is susceptible to small events triggering significant consequences. The event occurred with the extrajudicial killing of Naqeeb Mahsud, a displaced fashion model from Waziristan, by a Karachi police officer. In response, young tribal men initiated a protest march to Islamabad, joined by war victims from other border districts. Upon arrival, the protest evolved into the Pashtun *Tahafuz Movement* (PTM), uniting all Pashtuns affected by the WoT. Led by Manzoor Pashtun, the PTM openly confronted the army over its alleged brutalities, gaining popularity beyond the tribal area to settled districts of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and a general goodwill across Pakistan. This posed a significant concern for the Pakistan army.

The Pashtun, especially from the settled districts are integrated in the Pakistan state structure, especially the military and bureaucracy. When a movement like PTM gains broad Pashtun support, the Pakistan army could not easily disregard it. Consequently, the army responded cautiously and began addressing some of PTM’s demands. Allegedly, hundreds of
disappeared persons came back to their homes and the practice of enforced disappearing and extra judicial killings of Pashtun slowed down. The behavior of armed force personnel, guarding army check posts, with people improved. The victims of landmines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) are now treated in military hospitals of Pakistan and Pakistan army sent teams to clear Waziristan of the landmines and IEDs.

However, one of Afghanistan’s protected negative feedback loop, its autobiographical narratives of hatred of Pakistan concurred with the narratives of some prominent people in the PTM. Some PTM members began openly endorsing Afghans’ anti-Pakistan narratives. Prominent PTM figures, including its leader Manzoor Pashtun, have digitally joined anti-Pakistan protests organized by Afghans in the Western countries, even in front of Pakistani embassies. The reasons motivating the PTM leaders to engage with social media platforms linked to anti-Pakistan Afghans are relatively unclear, underscoring the necessity for further research into their motivations. However, as of now, the PTM's narratives have placed it at odds with the establishment. More significantly, the PTM narratives have weakened its support among Pakistani Pashtuns, who initially backed PTM for its rights claims within Pakistan’s constitution but disagree with its association with anti-Pakistan Afghans. With declining Pashtun support for PTM, Pakistani law enforcement forces have become more assertive in suppressing PTM members, particularly those aligning with the anti-Pakistan Afghans on social media, and there is limited Pashtun public protest against this.

However, the period following the emergence of PTM in the tribal area signifies a phase transition for two key reasons. Firstly, it has empowered the tribal Pashtun public to break its self-imposed restriction on freedom of expression and openly denounce the armed forces for perceived or actual rights violations. Secondly, PTM’s popularity in parts of the tribal area remains intact, which, if not addressed by Pakistan through addressing the rights violations in the WoT, could potentially lead to a positive feedback loop of significant concern for Pakistan, in future.

Which State has Better Ontological (In)Security Management Routines?

Afghanistan maintains at least three stable ontological (in)security management routines. These include a deliberate ambiguity regarding its stance on the Pashtun area of Pakistan, a steadfast non-acceptance of the Durand Line as an international border, and the cultivation of
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autobiographical narratives that otherize and demonize Pakistan. These ontological (in)security management routines function as intricate negative feedback loops, consistently reinforcing the Afghan state’s Pashtun self-identity in the perception of its own population, notably the Pashtun. Thus far, these routines have proven highly effective in perpetuating a cohesive self-image for the Afghan state in the eyes of its own Pashtun population.

Significantly, these three established routines continuously generate positive feedback loops for Pakistan, keeping the state in a perpetual reactive mode. This dynamic compels Pakistan to dismantle some of its existing negative feedback loops, engender novel ones, and subsequently dismantle those as well. An illustrative example is the de facto dissolution of the FCRs setup in the WoT, replaced by peace agreements with the Taliban, inadvertently solidifying the TTP’s reign of terror in the tribal area. Consequently, Pakistan found itself compelled to break the TTP’s dominance through a series of large and small military operations (new negative feedback loop), resulting in widespread rights violations and massive human and material losses in the tribal area. These operations resulted in positive feedback loops of grievances against the armed forces within the area. This situation fostered anti-army sentiments among a large portion of the population in the tribal area. Anti-Pakistan Afghans, particularly via social media, attempted to intensify these sentiments into positive feedback loops of resentment against the Pakistan army across Pashtun civilian spaces in Pakistan. Although their efforts are far from successful at present, the grievances stemming from army operations have reinforced anti-Pakistan narratives in Afghanistan. This has bolstered Afghanistan’s stable negative feedback loop (its autobiographical narratives that underscore Pakistan as an anti-Pashtun state) by providing it with additional empirical information to draw upon.

Pakistan tried another negative feedback loop in the tribal area through its legal integration into the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province in 2018 that legally eliminated the FCRs setup, but the work remains unfinished. The promised administrative and financial infrastructure necessary for the socioeconomic development of the tribal people has not effectively materialized. This shortfall is exploited by anti-Pakistan factions in Afghanistan to assert that the ‘Punjabi state’ is indifferent to the development of Pashtun society, portraying the legal incorporation of the area into Pakistan as another means for perpetuation of the area’s ‘occupation’ by Pakistan. In essence, this negative feedback loop, essential for integrating the tribal area with the rest of Pakistan, is being transformed into a positive feedback loop for
Pakistan by leveraging discourses on inadequate human development of the area against Pakistan.

Pakistan’s newest negative feedback loop is not helpful either, i.e. the imposition of the Actions (in aid of civil power) Ordinance, 2019 on entire Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province. Under the law the security forces have sweeping powers to suspend human rights for indefinite period.\textsuperscript{68} It authorizes the use of force against anyone and to detain anyone without charge for an undefined duration while denying him/her any judicial remedy. This implies that the British-legislated FCRs, is now replaced with even more draconian law, which is geographically applicable to a much wider area (entire Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province) than the FCRs, which covered only the seven tribal areas.\textsuperscript{69} The ordinance may be relevant from a short-term physical security perspective but may not be helpful from the ontological security point of view. It provides material to the autobiographical narratives of Afghanistan to feed on, such as the narratives that the Pashtun area is not a ‘natural’ part of Pakistan, that is occupying it by brute force and weaponization of the law.\textsuperscript{70}

Pakistan’s most robust and stable negative feedback loop is the integration of Pashtuns from the settled area into the state structure, coupled with their socioeconomic ties in Punjab and Sindh. Afghans openly acknowledge that these integrated Pashtuns represent a formidable obstacle to Pakistan’s disintegration and the realization of a Greater Afghanistan dream. Much of the anti-Pakistan Afghan narrative is now more strategically directed at encouraging integrated Pashtuns to revolt against Pakistan. This is unsuccessful so far. The Afghan side viewed PTM, particularly when it gained popularity in the settled districts, as a significant opportunity to destabilize Pakistan. However, this opportunity diminished when Pashtuns in the settled districts distanced themselves from the PTM’s anti-Pakistan stance.

In other words, Afghanistan’s stable ontological (in)security management routine, or its negative feedback loop, i.e. its autobiographical narratives against Pakistan, initially appeared promising in generating positive feedback loops against Pakistan through PTM. These positive feedback loops, exemplified by increasing Pashtun public anger against Pakistan army for alleged human rights violations, seemed to gain momentum. However, Pakistan’s entrenched ontological (in)security management routine, characterized by the integration of settled district Pashtuns into the state, swiftly countered these positive feedback loops when the Pashtun public support for PTM waned due to its perceived ties with anti-Pakistan Afghans on social media. Once again, the integration of the settled district Pashtuns in
Pakistan’s state structure emerged as a stable negative feedback loop, shielding Pakistan against ontological (in)security threats from Afghanistan.

Despite this, PTM remains popular in its birthplace, Waziristan, presenting an ontological security concern for Pakistan, if the PTM continues to align itself with the anti-Pakistan Afghan narratives. Probably, to control the PTM popularity in the area where it is still popular, Pakistan introduced yet another negative feedback loop: the creation of an enemy image of the PTM within state narratives. Creating an enemy image of PTM through state narratives may be helpful in the short run but not in the long run. In the long run, Pakistan’s endeavors to rectify the rights’ violations in the WoT and foster socioeconomic integration of the tribal area with the rest of the country present the most optimistic prospect. This strategy promises a negative feedback loop that can sustainably benefit Pakistan.

**Conclusion**

First, Afghanistan has better, more stable routines (or negative feedback loops) against Pakistan. They keep the dream of Loya Afghanistan alive in the hearts and minds of Afghan population, especially the Pashtun, and have also made some ontological inroads into some of the Pashtun areas of Pakistan such as Waziristan, a situation that did not exist prior to the WoT. The routines also allow the Afghans to keep indefinitely enticing and taunting the Pashtun of Pakistan till the time they rise in revolt against Pakistan.

Despite being a more powerful state with better military and intelligence setup, Pakistan is constantly kept on alter and struggling to protect its Islamic self-identity from the Afghan ontological (in)security management routines. Nevertheless, Pakistan’s most effective ontological (in)security management routine or negative feedback loop is the integrated Pashtun of the settled district. Pakistan can strengthen this powerful negative feedback loop, if it expands the socioeconomic integration to the tribal area.

Second, contrary to the above conclusion, it can be derived from previous research that Pakistan has stable ontological (in)security management routines, while Afghanistan’s routines vary depending on the incumbent in power, whether nationalists or Islamists. The author arrived at this understanding through the lenses of the ontological security theory. But the result is the opposite, i.e. Afghanistan has stable ontological (in)security routines and Pakistan is kept on the move to protect its self-identity, during the author’s study of Pakistan-Afghanistan relation through the lenses of the
complexity theory. Moreover, various other theoretical frameworks applied by numerous other authors do not seem to have invited the authors to delve into the core identity clash between Pakistan and Afghanistan. This underscores that the complex Pakistan-Afghanistan relations need to be studied through multiple theoretical frameworks because no single theoretical frame can capture their complexity. In any case, theories are just lenses that explain and predict social and political challenges. Studying a social or political challenge through various theoretical frameworks, allows to observe different aspects of the challenge, which helps in forming a holistic understanding of the challenge and its possible solution. Pakistan-Afghanistan relation is a case in the point. The author suggests researchers to analyze the relationship between the two countries through various theoretical frameworks for its holistic understanding. In this regard, complexity theory is especially promising, because it offers a large range of concepts derived from natural sciences that can be applied to Pakistan-Afghanistan relations to highlight the previously unexplored aspects of the relations.

Notes


9 Cris Shackelford, "Propositional Analysis, Policy Creation, and Complex Environments in the United States' 2009 Afghanistan-Pakistan Policy" (PhD diss., College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Walden University, Minneapolis, 2014), https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1167&context=dissertations&httpsredir=1&referer=


12 Taj, "Clash of Identities: Ontological (in) Securities of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the Repercussions."


17 Taj, "Clash of Identities: Ontological (in) Securities of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the Repercussions."

18 Meadows, "Places to Intervene in a System (in Increasing Order of Effectiveness)."

19 Taj, "Clash of Identities: Ontological (in) Securities of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the Repercussions."


23 Meadows, "Places to Intervene in a System (in Increasing Order of Effectiveness)."

Meadows, "Places to Intervene in a System (in Increasing Order of Effectiveness)."


Meadows, "Places to Intervene in a System (in Increasing Order of Effectiveness)."


Such as the family of Ali Wazir (former member of Pakistan's National Assembly from Waziristan) participated in the rise and fall of governments in Kabul.

Lutfur Rehman, Revisiting the Durand Line: Historical and Legal Perspectives (Islamabad: IPS Press, 2024).

Zamin Khan, "FATA: From ‘Turbulent Frontier’ to Safe Haven (M.Phil. diss., School of Politics and International Relations, Quaid-I-Azam University, 2012).


The term 'living, breathing tribal museum' to describe the tribal area under the FCR is coined by Sangeen Khan, a lawyer and prominent political figure associated with the Pashtun nationalist Awami National Party (ANP).


Taj, "Clash of Identities: Ontological (in) Securities of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the Repercussions."

Taj, 2022.

Taj, 2022.

Taj, 2022.

The National Archives, "Reference-Fo 800/434. The Public Office Record, 16x."


Taj, "Clash of Identities: Ontological (in) Securities of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the Repercussions."

Afrasiab Khattak, prominent Pashtun nationalist leader from Pakistan expressed this view in conversation with the author in 2010.

See the attached annexure.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Fazal-ur-Rahim Khan Marwat, From Muhajir to Mujahid, Politics of War through Aid: (A Case Study of Afghan Refugees in NWFP) (Peshawar: Area Studies Center, University of Peshawar, 2005).


At that time some of the tribal leaders were also doing more than their due share to prevent the society from falling in total chaos, such as Khandam Mahsud, the tribal leader in Waziristan was constantly reaching out to mediate sectarian differences in Kurram, one of the two areas in the tribal area where the population is mix Shia Sunni.


AI, "As If Hell Fell on Me": The Human Rights Crisis in Northwest Pakistan" (London: Amnesty International, 2010).


Muhammad Ilyas, "Caught Between a Rock and a Hard Place? A Case Study of How News Media Operated in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) During the 'War on Terror'" (Cardiff: Cardiff University, 2022).


Manzoor Pashteen shared this information during my meetings with him in Islamabad and Peshawar.

Ibid. Nevertheless, many rights violations and material losses in the war on terror remain unaddressed.

Such as Dr Said Alam Mehsud, Ali Wazir, Wranga Loni, among several others.

It is unclear why do prominent PTM members align with anti-Pakistan Afghan sentiments, given the movement's assertion of operating within Pakistan's constitutional framework. Could their alignment stem from frustration over the lack of accountability, justice, and compensation for losses in the war on terror? Are they totally disillusioned with Pakistan's commitment to respect and protect their human rights? Or could it be a strategic move to pressure the Pakistani state into addressing the war on terror violations? PTM has not outlined a clear vision for the future of Pashtuns in Pakistan. All this underscores the need for further research into their apparent alignment with the narratives of anti-Pakistan Afghans.


Manzoor Pashtun has been in jail for weeks, yet there have been no significant Pashtun protests against it, even in most parts of the tribal area. PTM's popularity now mainly resides in Waziristan, its birthplace, and in some border areas of Pashtun regions in Balochistan.


The ordinance is now challenged in the Supreme Court of Pakistan by prominent political activists of Pakistan.


Taj, "Clash of Identities: Ontological (in) Securities of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the Repercussions."