Pakistan, Conflict Prevention, and the Case for an Early Warning System

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Pakistan, Conflict Prevention, and the Case for an Early Warning System

"Is it safe to travel between Lahore and Islamabad today" were the kind of posts that many of us would have seen on social media platforms after the conclusion of talks between the government and the hitherto proscribed Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). This highlights the information gap that exists at the societal level because of scattered and limited information. The problem was not the non-availability of information regarding the intensity of violence by TLP but the enormous outflow of videos and posts on social media and no credible source of information to verify the exact status and location of the conflict. The question, however, arises is this: when in the age of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), information is less costly and easily available, why decision-makers and the masses do not have access to this when required the most? One of the possible ways to overcome such information gaps is through the establishment of a national integrated public early warning and early response system (EW&ERS). However, this requires a shift from reactive conflict management to a proactive conflict prevention strategy for ensuring positive peace in the country. Emerging security challenges necessitate the development of such a system. Experiences in Kenya and Sri Lanka suggest that a well-functioning and sophistically-designed EW&ERS can avert the probability of armed conflicts and promote peace. In the case of Pakistan, employment of ICT for peacebuilding purposes would not be arduous given the Internet penetration rate and the number of Internet users in the country.

Conflict is not a negative aspect, rather it is a reality of human interaction. For instance, conflict of views between two prominent schools of thought would lead to a constructive academic debate, adding new perspectives to the literature. That said, it becomes a challenge only when it turns violent, for violence begets violence. At such a point, the state and society can only attempt to contain the conflict, and by then it is already too late as precious blood is lost, scarce resources wasted, and long-held values tarnished. Moreover, conflict management is an enormously costly enterprise, as identified by the World Bank's Pathways for Peace report in 2019. Besides, ensuring peace after normalization does not necessarily lead to reconciliation and stability.

Nonetheless, a change in approach from reactive conflict management to proactive conflict prevention can save blood, values, and money by averting the likelihood of violent conflicts. The United States Institute of Peace defines conflict management as "efforts to prevent, limit, contain, or resolve conflicts, especially violent ones while building up the capacities of all parties involved". Whereas, conflict prevention, which goes beyond conflict management, as defined by the United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Boutros–Ghali as the avoidance of new armed conflicts, containment of existing armed conflicts, and non-recurrence of ended armed conflicts. The latter strives to establish sustainable positive peace which is defined as "the attitude, institutions, and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies". This is a concept contrary to negative peace that interprets peace as merely the absence of violence.

Historically, Pakistan's approach towards peace has been of negative peace and conflict management, rather than of a proactive conflict prevention strategy for attaining positive peace. Anatol Lieven argues that Pakistan is not oriented towards the prevention of conflict but towards containment to prevent an all-out disorder. Hence, instead of proactively preventing armed conflicts, the State

machinery generally reacts slowly to an outbreak of violent conflicts, and that too by relying on kinetic force. Far worse, the gains made after the employment of brute force are not consolidated, and post-conflict peacebuilding measures are ignored.

A myriad of emerging traditional and non-traditional security challenges haunt the country presently that necessitate the transition towards conflict prevention from reactive conflict management practice. For instance, the volatile political situation in Afghanistan after the takeover by the Taliban in August 2021 and the merger of splinter groups of Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in August 2020, and the ensuing violence have highlighted the fragility of hard-gained peace in the erstwhile Federal Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan. There is a visible spike in the average number of terrorist incidents 14 months preceding the merger of the TTP and 14 months succeeding the merger unification of TTP factions. The average number of terrorist attacks has almost doubled between June 2019 to July 2020 and September 2020 and October 2021. Moreover, the spillover from Afghanistan in the future can prove to be deleterious as well.
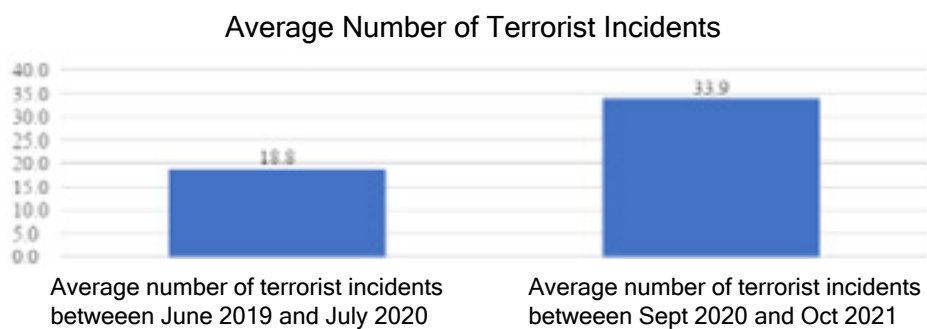
Similarly, rising extremism and the overall risk of future civil unrest in the country are considerably high, as is highlighted by the Global Peace Index 2021. The report also highlights that the country has moved down two places to 150th place than the preceding year. Moreover, the emergence of violent vigilantes such as TLP highlights the limitations of the State's capacity to impose its writ to maintain law and order situations. On multiple occasions, the organization has brazenly attempted to block the north-south connectivity, the economic lifeline of the country, to blackmail the government to acquiesce to its demands.

Further, the country faces a multitude of emerging non-traditional security threats which require a multilateral conflict prevention approach. Peacebuilding is an integrative process that goes beyond the traditional security paradigm and attempts to address the attitudes, institutions, and structures conducive to violent conflicts. Ultimately, it supports human security – freedom from fear, freedom from want, and freedom from humiliation. Hence, conflict prevention, being a holistic process, brings the stakeholders from the security, health, education, climate, and food sectors, among others, with a view to devising a holistic, all-embracing policy.

Viewed from this lens, there are several threats that the country would face if it does not take appropriate actions. They include rapid unplanned urbanization, unemployed youth, skyrocketing unemployment combined with high inflation, and deteriorating food security. United Nations Development Program's (UNDP) Resident Representative, Ignacio Artaza, has also identified how maldevelopment and stagnant economies can harm the prospect of peace.

According to UNDP, Pakistan is one of the rapidly urbanizing countries and by 2025 more than half of the country's population would be living in the urban areas. However, most of the urbanization is taking place in the peri-urban or slums which remain largely ungoverned. Migrants are forced to live in squalid conditions; hence, Pakistani cities are "becoming hubs of gross inequality and unlivable for many people". On top of that, urbanization also results in fierce competition over scarce resources, such as land and water, that causes grievances against the state and resentment towards people of 'other' communities, as has been observed in turf battles in Karachi where Muhajir communities and Pashtuns have long fought over resources. Therefore, metropolises with ungovernable spaces, higher inequalities, and grievances against the State and community are not only a development challenge but a security concern as well.

Further, sluggish economic performance combined with rising unemployment, record-breaking inflation, increasing food insecurity, climatic vulnerabilities, and a fragile health system, if not addressed, can become a security challenge in the future. Pakistan has a youth bulge and unemployment among urban educated youth is also rising. Dawn reported in 2020 that the number of unemployed grew to 6.65 million in 2020. Above this, skyrocketing inflation has ballooned the prices of essential items to a seventy-year high. Despite being an agrarian country, 38% of Pakistan's population is food insecure and the country has recently become a net food importer. Moreover,

Average Number of Terrorist Incidents

Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal (Data up until 22nd October 2021)

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Pakistan is the fifth-most climate-vulnerable country and ranked as the 14th most water-stressed country in 2019. Additionally, the country ranks significantly lower at 105th place among 195 countries according to the Health Security Index 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted the fragility of the health system in the country.

All of the above-pointed indicators were the vulnerabilities that Arab regimes, especially Egypt and Syria, faced right before the Arab Spring. The fire of protests against non-inclusive dictatorial regimes ignited by the spark of the self-immolation of Mohammad Bouazizi, a Tunisian fruit vendor, affected all the Arab countries, the ramifications of which can still be seen in the Middle East. All of this highlights the pressing need for a paradigm shift towards conflict prevention and peacebuilding approaches.

Although making a transition towards conflict prevention is a tall order, one that is resource-intensive as well, the employment of ICT can be helpful and a cost-effective solution towards making such a transition. In this regard, developing a well-integrated Internet-based public early warning and early response system at the national level can be the first step towards that direction. A conflict early warning system "aims to identify as early as possible a risk or a situation that we desire to prevent, so that the necessary prevention means may be implemented."

Such systems have been experimented with, worldwide, and are delivering promising results. Foremost being Uwiano Platform for Peace @108 (UWIANO@108), which is an open-source nationwide violence reporting and conflict early warning and response system housed at the National Steering Committee of the President Office, in Kenya. Similarly, the pan-African inter-governmental Continental Early Warning System has been in use by the Peace and Security Council of the African Union. Sri Lanka has also employed a citizen-based conflict early warning system which places human security at the forefront. All of these early warning and response systems have been in use for years and serve satisfactorily by saving lives, values, and dollars.

To make a transition towards conflict prevention, Pakistan must also establish a public early warning and early response system. The Hourglass Model of conflict resolution argues that the freedom of action to deal with conflict is at its widest at the early stage of pre-violence prevention and the last stage of post-violence peacebuilding. In this regard, the early warning system shall predict the outbreak of violent conflicts, provide actionable early response, and dispense credible information in the event of an armed conflict. Lavoix argues that such a system shall be housed in the highest office of any country so that early warnings generated by the system shall also translate into actionable and appropriate early responses. Moreover, the system shall be integrated with the security forces, intelligence agencies, LEAs, and district administrations.

The establishment of an early warning system would not only help avert conflicts but would also provide additional benefits. Firstly, it would help improve the resilience of the Pakistani state and society. A peaceful Pakistan would attract foreign direct investment which would significantly strengthen the country's economy. According to the GPI 2018, every 1% increase in positive peace leads to a 0.9% strengthening of the domestic currency. Furthermore, a peaceful Pakistan will be a key driver of regional connectivity, as envisioned in the economic diplomacy initiative of the country, which would ensure the socio-economic development of the country as well.

Besides, the establishment of such a system using ICT shall not be a difficult task as some of the government entities have already been using early warning and surveillance systems. For instance, Punjab's Primary and Secondary Healthcare Department (P&SHD) has employed a dengue surveillance system that is working quite satisfactorily. Moreover, the employability of such a system would not be arduous as there are 186 million cellular services subscribers, and the Internet penetration rate stands at 49% in the country, according to Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA). If Kenya could establish its early warning system when merely 5.2% of its population used the Internet in 2008, surely Pakistan is better placed to embrace such technology today when its percentage of the population using the Internet is more than 17%.

In sum, Pakistan faces a multitude of emerging security threats– conventional and unconventional– and tackling these can be a daunting challenge if the current approach of conflict management prevails. To overcome the emerging challenges and establish positive peace in the country, the country needs a transition towards a more proactive approach to conflict prevention. In this regard, the development of a public early warning and early response system is the first step. Towards that, the utilization of ICT can be helpful as is illustrated by the experiences of Kenya and Sri Lanka. Such a system would not only avert conflicts but would also ensure sustainable development and a resilient society and State.