

Spy Chiefs as Policy Wonks

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AS Dulat, Asad Durrani and Aditya Sinha
The Spy Chronicles and Illusion of Peace
Harper Collins, 2018

Written as a product of the authors' interactions on the sidelines of Track-II Indo-Pak' dialogues, *The Spy Chronicles: RAW, ISI and Illusion of Peace* develops on the basic themes and issues that the two spy chiefs' had previously covered in their joint papers of written in 2011 and 2013. In those articles they had explored avenues of cooperation in the fields of intelligence and Kashmir. One of the rationales put forth by them in jointly authoring a book of this nature is the acute dearth of literature from intelligence operatives in India and Pakistan, compared to the extensive accounts written by former officials of CIA and other western spy agencies.

The book's narration, though in the form of light hearted conversation sprinkled with confessions, anecdotal references and interpretations of contentious issues, necessitates in depth analysis, both from academic as well as security perspectives.

The book could be broadly interpreted as an attempt to take the Indo-Pak discourse out of the structural and ideological prisms currently driving and contributing to the acrimonious relationship over the last many decades. Suggestions made by the two authors on collaboration between the two spy agencies reflect more on their hopes that even spy agencies could become active agents of promoting India-Pakistan confidence building efforts. Viewed in that limited context, the objectives are laudable but the key question is whether it's realistically attainable and sustainable. This perhaps remains largely unanswered.

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The reason for this can be traced to the very issues that predominantly define the current state of all-round hostility between the two countries. And these have been thoroughly engaged with, and even potential prospects of cooperation have been discussed.

The fact that two former spy chiefs could collaborate on such a joint venture does give hope for possible institutional cooperation on a larger scale, provided such initiatives set the stage for meaningful reduction in bilateral irritants, leading to warming up of ties. Despite his critical references to India's policies, Durrani lists out some positives in the Indo-Pak relationship, which include the Indus Waters Treaty, the "gentlemanly wars" of 1965 and 1971 and establishment of a hotline after 1998 nuclear tests.

Differences in their respective narratives however come in the open on how the two authors look at the current state of bilateral ties. Unlike Dulat, who displays relatively higher level of optimism, Durrani believes that India favours status-quo on Kashmir to avoid any 'uncontrollable' developments. For him, the relationship would continue to remain structurally hostile and even a well-intentioned leader like Vajpayee could - at best - act as a 'good manager' and not a problem solver.

Given the professional backgrounds of the authors and nature of issues delved into, the publication of the book raises some critical questions from the point of view of the sensitive nature of Indo-Pak relationship. These are: whether it is right for two former intelligence chiefs to discuss such issues, even if it is in a lighter vein, and how would the views expressed in the book influence or contribute to the prevailing public discourse on national security?

Given the sensitivity of any public debate on core issues of national security, particularly the roles and perceptions of their respective intelligence establishments, assessing the import of the candid discussions between the two former chiefs would naturally raise ethical dilemma. To start with, Durrani's stated perception that Prime Minister Modi and NSA Doval were 'incapable of doing positive things to stabilize the relationship', and Dulat's assertion that Doval is someone who does not trust anybody, do not contribute positively to the author's over all agenda to promote better understanding, nor to creating a favourable back drop for intelligence driven engagement.

Similarly, Dulat's reservations on Modi government's ability to control escalation in crisis situations - citing populist pressure and the government's muscular image, completely ignores the spirit behind the government's multiple efforts till the Pathankot incident, to reach out to the Pakistani leadership unconditionally.

The book's impact, if any, on the national security discourse will be only by virtue of the personal statures and backgrounds of the authors and will be limited to their respective interpretation of intelligence related issues. It is important to highlight this since in some instances, the authors did end up with contrarian perspectives vis-à-vis their respective nations' policies. Dulat's views that Indians have not been honest with the Kashmiris and that the Kashmir dispute was indeed the "core" bilateral issue between the two nations, may be his personal thought, but runs counter to well-articulated Indian position that Kashmir was an integral part of India and that the only unresolved part of the legacy of partition was the integration of Pakistan occupied Kashmir with Jammu and Kashmir.

On the other hand, Durrani's assertion that the Baloch unrest would continue just as it does in Kashmir, amounts to a sort of confession from the one of the top former officials of Pakistan's inability to quell the Baloch rebellion, which has raged on since Balochistan was annexed into Pakistan. Furthermore, Durrani accepted Pakistan's complicity in appeasing and bribing Baloch dissidents.

The authors' views on New Delhi's handling of the terror problem vis-à-vis Pakistan, similarly run counter to New Delhi's official position that terror and talks cannot go together. With an entire chapter in the book devoted to discussions on the rationale of continuing talks irrespective of continuing incidence of terror, the authors have suggested inevitability of maintaining communication at the official level as well as with hostile non-state actors in the hope and belief that such engagements are essential from intelligence agencies' perspective.

On terrorism, Durrani's assertion that the terrorist groups operating in Kashmir were not completely controlled by Pakistan, will not find many takers either in Kashmir or in New Delhi. Even in the context of the inordinately delayed judicial proceedings against Hafiz Saeed and others involved in the

Mumbai terror carnage of 2008, Durrani categorically rules out any action against him, citing political costs of prosecution which the state was not willing to incur. Obviously, it would be a bit unrealistic for anyone to expect two private individuals, not constrained by the responsibilities of the offices they held long time back, to continue to follow the government line, yet, on issues of core national concerns, some degree of convergence could have been in order.

In a minor aside, some factual errors seem to have cropped up in the author's discussions on late Amanullah Khan, the founder of JKLF. His daughter, Asma Khan in an article published in the Indian Express (June 2, 2018), contested her father being described "Amanullah Gilgiti" and his being earlier part of National Conference, or about his role in the valley's Plebiscite Front. These, even if true, have only been mentioned here for record.

Conclusions

The initial sense of near 'outrage' among the purists in the intelligence and strategic communities, at least in India, seems to have since waned. One of the panelists at the book launch event reassured the audience that state secrets were not compromised, a view that has not yet been contested.

The general perception now seems to be veering around to a more acceptable view that such discussions could, at least to a limited extent, even contribute to developing better understanding of the respective positions of the two sides on each other's core interests. How and to what extent and in what point in time, this can help in promoting better relationship, have been discussed by the authors, detailing several positive ideas and potential ice-breakers. These are left for the policy framers to take a final call on.

That intelligence services can contribute significantly to creating vital openings, particularly when the going is not smooth, is widely recognized. Strategic and intelligence experts maintain that regular structured interactions between intelligence establishments has been an accepted normal even among countries having close relations at all levels. Such intelligence dialogue between countries that do not have smooth relations, becomes vitally more important not only in terms of preventing any untoward and unintended escalation of even minor misunderstandings, but also for creating fresh

openings and opportunities for promoting better understanding on core issues. But, is there any meeting ground on the core issues of bilateral concerns?

It may also be clarified here that the deniable channel of communication carries some attendant limitations. To name just a few, the issues discussed and agreements arrived at do not normally get reduced into any record of discussions; the channel works as part of a larger agenda; it basically plays the role of enabler and facilitator and most importantly, it has a limited shelf life restricted by the tenures of its principals, namely the heads of governments of the time.

Be that as it may, in the context of India-Pakistan relations, as seen in recent times, the back channel interactions have proved their relevance and significance, indeed desirability. Based on media reports, it is widely believed that some of the major initiatives of the Modi government in bilateral confidence building, were significantly contributed to by the back channel interactions between the two National Security Advisors. Some in the strategic community would like to view the Dault-Durrani enterprise as a positive initiative to break the frozen ice. Can this be built upon? That's for the two governments to decide.

Before we end, a word about the narrator Aditya Sinha would be in order. He deserves complements for surviving, what must have been a unique experience for anyone, the long hours of heavy verbal cross-fire unleashed by two very likable but thorough professionals and convert it into a very readable narration. He had recently done it with Dulat for his earlier book 'Kashmir-The Vajpayee Years'. This one must have been a vastly different experience.