

# The Future of India's Lost Frontier: India, Pakistan, and the Hindu Kush

August 2019

- On August 23, 2019, Brookings India hosted a Foreign Policy & Security Seminar on Raghvendra Singh's recently published book, "India's Lost Frontier: The Story of the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan."
- **Mr. Raghvendra Singh**, former Director General, National Archives of India, and former Secretary, Ministry of Textiles and Ministry of Culture presented his work on the North Western Frontier Province.
- **Amb. Shivshankar Menon**, Distinguished Fellow, Brookings India, and former National Security Advisor (2010-2014) and **Dr. Shanthie M. D'Souza**, Founder and President, Mantraya, and Member, Research and Advisory Committee, Naval War College, Goa, served as the lead discussants. **Dr. Constantino Xavier**, Fellow, Foreign Policy, Brookings India, moderated the seminar.
- In attendance were officials from various diplomatic missions, representatives from several inter-governmental organisations, two former foreign secretaries, scholars from India's leading think tanks and universities, members of the media and civil society.

## India's lost frontier

Raghvendra Singh presented his recently published book, 'India's Lost Frontier' – an exhaustive study of the erstwhile North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) based on historical archives and newly declassified material. The book argues that the NWFP served as a strategic bulwark for India which negated Muhammad Ali Jinnah's 'two nation' theory, given that the province was overwhelmingly Muslim with an elected Congress government in 1946. However, in engaging the attention of British political figures, NWFP ultimately fell to Partition.

In his presentation, Singh covered the decision-making process behind NWFP joining Pakistan. He argued that India's negligence and in particular, the Congress which "very knowingly let this province go to Pakistan" was critical in allowing India to lose this province. To support this argument, Singh questioned Jawaharlal Nehru's decision in April 1947 to

hold elections in the province "on the same issue of Pakistan that was held in 1946," where the Congress, led by its leader Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan, came to power with a comfortable majority. He explained that the Chief Minister of the province was called to Delhi with an idea of giving it a "veneer of consultation" – evident in Lord Mountbatten's report to Whitehall which mentions that "Nehru wanted it that way." The decision to hold elections (later converted to a referendum), put Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan in a position where he could not owe his allegiance to India.

Singh also quoted an excerpt from his book in which the then Congress President Acharya Kripalani admits that the 'Congress had no intention of sending anyone from outside the province to influence the voters there for the referendum' and advised Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan to 'avoid electioneering speeches'.

## Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Durand Line

Following the author's presentation of this history, the discussion also examined the book in light of present Indian policies towards Pakistan and Afghanistan, particularly after the abrogation of Article 370. What lessons does India's past approach to NWFP currently hold for New Delhi's interests in the wider Hindu Kush region today, in particular issues surrounding the Durand Line as India's security frontiers expand again and Afghanistan prepares for the American withdrawal?

Lead discussant Shanthie M. D'Souza observed that there was a gap in research when studying the ethnographic details of this area. She noted that "this book fills in that critical gap." She also found the lack of research on the Durand Line surprising given the contentious nature of the boundaries and the historical legacies associated with it. D'Souza said "the Durand Line remains a problem area, for one it has divided the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, the Pashtuns, into two."

Further, D'Souza highlighted Pakistan's deliberate role in "using the Pashtun Ghats to its advantage to affect Afghan trade in the 1960's... as a result, India could not trade with South and Central Asia." She said, "this area remains very underdeveloped, I believe this has been a deliberate policy and this has affected the security and trade dynamics in the region."

Constantino Xavier raised the issue of Pakistan's development priorities in the region, in particular, CPEC and the larger China-Pakistan nexus. Menon observed, "CPEC was the third attempt by Pakistan to divorce itself from South Asia." He argued that this attempt stems from a larger sense of Pakistan losing out on the immense economic growth experienced by its South Asian neighbours. Menon further noted that, "Pakistan has NWFP, Baluchistan, and Afghanistan in between itself and the rest of the world, which is why CPEC projects have had to be renegotiated."

## Afghanistan now: Should India wait and watch?

Exploring India's current policy towards Afghanistan, D'Souza traced the key priority areas India would need to focus on going forward, "primarily, India would have to deal with the interim government in Afghanistan and secondarily, the upcoming elections." She highlighted, "although Indian projects have generated a lot of goodwill, its soft power approach compounded by a lack of strategy has not translated into ground impact."

She further emphasised that beyond rhetoric, India should have done more to build capacity in Afghanistan. Opinions were split

on this issue, Menon weighed in and defended India's efforts at supporting stability in Afghanistan by providing attack helicopters to the Afghan army, in addition to its long history of training Afghan security forces. He also referred to the American pressure exerted on India to limit its security cooperation in the region.

On India's future options in Afghanistan, Menon noted that "we are not a part of this, this process [which] will collapse under the face of reality. Once the Americans are out, then we will deal with it [and] other people will need us too."

## Declassifying history "Indian-style"?

The discussion also touched upon the importance of an archival study of India's history, particularly in regard to this region.

Menon shed light on the Ministry of External Affairs' (MEA) steady progress in declassifying old records and making them accessible to the academic community. He noted, however, that documents pertaining to "live" issues cannot be declassified. He said, "there would be very little chance of political approval for declassification of issues such as the India-China border."

During the Question and Answer round, audience members pointed to the lessons India could draw from the process of declassification followed in other countries, particularly in the West. Menon responded by saying that this was a misconception since other countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom do not declassify everything, however, thousands of MEA files have been made accessible since the 2000s, and openness is improving, albeit slowly.



(From L to R) Dr. Constantino Xavier, Fellow, Foreign Policy, Brookings India; Raghvendra Singh, former Director General, National Archives of India; Dr. Shanthie M. D'Souza, Founder, Mantraya, & Member, Research and Advisory Committee, Naval War College; Amb. Shivshankar Menon, Distinguished Fellow, Brookings India & former NSA.

*This event summary was prepared by*  
**Nidhi Varma**  
*Research Assistant Foreign Policy.*  
*Email: [nvarma@brookingsindia.org](mailto:nvarma@brookingsindia.org)*



@BrookingsIndia



Brookings.India



Brookings India



[www.brookings.in](http://www.brookings.in)