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Rethinking Counterinsurgency Efforts in Pakistan and South Asia

For Immediate Release

(Washington)—The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and Georgetown University Press (GU Press) are pleased to announce the publication of two seminal and timely volumes on insurgency and counterinsurgency in South Asia. Edited by Moeed Yusuf, the director of South Asia programs at USIP, *Pakistan's Counterterrorism Challenge* (GU Press/USIP Press) and *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in South Asia: Through a Peacebuilding Lens* (USIP Press) challenge conventional wisdom on counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations by offering perspectives from a wide group of South Asian scholars and policymakers.

Pakistan is the epicenter of international terrorism—home to militants attacking Afghanistan and the West and insurgents striking at the Pakistani state. Pakistan does not yet have a cohesive strategy against the Taliban, oscillating between pursuing talks and planning military operations. While many believe it is necessary to target the Taliban's stronghold in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, military force alone will not lead to stability.

In addition, significant challenges from armed insurgencies have plagued other South Asian countries, including Nepal, India, and Sri Lanka. Despite the seemingly intractable nature of these conflicts, the task at hand is to “grasp the context, jump in, time the intervention right, and ensure that these interventions have attractive enough incentives. This is no mean feat,” Yusuf contends. “But we must continue thinking creatively, for the alternative is often the unacceptable resort to greater violence.” Yusuf argues that counterterrorism is an aspect of a larger counterinsurgency strategy and that a broader analysis of both is necessary to achieve security in the region.

Pakistan's Counterterrorism Challenge (Georgetown University Press, April 2014) breaks new ground by approaching counterterrorism holistically, going beyond military tactics to consider the political, legal, financial, law enforcement, and technological issues at play in counterterrorism operations in Pakistan. “The Pakistani government has approved a national counterterrorism strategy that takes an ambitious approach, but a holistic understanding of the problem is missing from policy and politics,” says Yusuf.

Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in South Asia: Through a Peacebuilding Lens (United States Institute of Peace Press, May 2014) focuses on counterinsurgency in the larger South Asian region and explores how intrastate violence arises, transforms, and ends. Case studies on Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka evaluate the success—or failure—of armed and nonviolent intervention into insurgencies, and offer lessons on state responses, political settlements, and missed opportunities for peace.

*Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in South Asia
Pakistan's Counterterrorism Challenge*

Questions and Answers with Moeed Yusuf

How do you define insurgency and counterinsurgency (COIN)?

For the purposes of these volumes, I define insurgency as a major uprising directed against the state to achieve political objectives, ranging from regime change to secession from a state, and a counteraction by an established and recognized legal entity (usually the state) to tackle the threat.

Expressions like “asymmetric conflict,” “insurgency,” “guerrilla warfare” and “terrorism” are often conflated or used loosely. States and other powerful actors have found a political and legal incentive to declare sustained violent opposition as terrorism in order to gain international sympathy and open up heavy-handed policy options. Practitioners and academics will find careful definitions of these terms useful in communicating clearly about threats and solutions. However, problems in analytical clarity remain: where does an insurgency stop and terrorism start? In contemporary movements, does one exist without the other?

How does *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in South Asia* distinguish itself from other works on the subject?

Previous examination has often placed insurgencies and counterinsurgencies in discrete “silos,” limiting the opportunity to explore links between the causes and characteristics of particular insurgencies and between the states’ countertactics. Moreover, much of the literature in the South Asian context takes a “war studies” approach. This narrow analytical scope often focuses disproportionately on the types and tools of violence used by insurgents and on defense policy, strategic planning and tactical and operational aspects of the counterinsurgency campaigns. Much less attention is paid to deep-rooted structural problems enabling resentments and tensions to coalesce into a violent insurgency or to options for prevention or for a proactive, nonviolent state response.

The contributors focus not as much on tactical or operational aspects of insurgencies and counterinsurgencies as on those policy-relevant conclusions and lessons gleaned from the case studies that are pertinent to the discipline of peacebuilding. Contributors study the cases holistically so that the collective findings remain relevant across the entire “conflict curve.”

Unlike authors of a number of other works interested in peacebuilding, the contributors to this volume have not deliberately set out to underscore the importance of the peacebuilding concept or its virtues. Instead, the authors were asked to write case studies based on two central questions: What incentives led resentful groups to resort to armed insurgency against the state? And once insurgency was under way, how did the insurgents and the state go about managing it? This meant that the efficacy of nonviolent versus violent approaches was left as an open question and the authors were free to, and did, come out with different conclusions on the issue. And yet, by using the peacebuilding framework as the connecting thread throughout the volume, we were

able to glean lessons for peacebuilders and add to the present understanding of opportunities and means of preventing, managing and resolving conflicts without necessarily having to bank on a war studies approach.

What can policymakers learn about South Asian insurgencies and counterinsurgencies by applying a peacebuilding lens?

Instability in South Asia points to the need for a systematic examination of past insurgency and counterinsurgency campaigns in order to more successfully prevent or mitigate these conflicts in the future. This approach requires conceptual grounding in the discipline of peacebuilding, or conflict transformation that examines root causes, normalizes relations and works to build strong institutions and sustainable peace.

A collective reading of the case studies in the *Insurgency* volume not only provides insights into why insurgencies occurred and in what ways they were managed in South Asia, but also helps policymakers better understand what kinds of initiatives from within the peacebuilding toolkit are likely to be most effective in avoiding or minimizing violence. Policymakers will also be able to determine how the effectiveness of specific approaches differs as a conflict moves along its life cycle. Moreover, they will be left with a sense of just how important it is to focus on conflict prevention before insurgencies become excessively violent and of the exponential decrease in the set of options available to them if they miss opportunities to resolve tensions in the pre-insurgency phase.

Why did you select South Asia, and within that the country conflicts of India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka in the *Insurgency* volume?

Interestingly, whenever one traditionally thought of conflict in South Asia, the long-standing tensions and armed confrontations between the nuclear-armed giants India and Pakistan inevitably stood out as the most prominent. And yet, the reality is that South Asia's real curse in terms of violent conflict has been intra-state in nature. Both the number of intra-state conflicts and the casualties attributable to them dwarf any losses in inter-state violence. Also, a fair share of intra-state tensions inside South Asian countries have escalated to full-fledged insurgencies and ultimately required dedicated counterinsurgency campaigns.

The cases selected have arguably been the most serious insurgent challenges in the region in the past three-plus decades. Each of the four insurgencies was initiated by local groups against the state. The cases are all contemporary, and also provide significant diversity in their trajectories, allowing us to look at the conflict curve's full spectrum and identify potential variables that explain the different outcomes from a peacebuilding lens. They all represent protracted conflicts where ample opportunities for nonviolent interventions to achieve crisis objectives were theoretically available to both parties to the conflicts.

Among the four cases, differences across numerous key variables make the analysis even more interesting and significant. We have insurgencies under functioning democracy, troubled democracy, military rule, and monarchy. The included states also have a mix of secular and religious orientations in their formal stance on the division between church and state. India and

Pakistan have exceptionally strong militaries, whereas Sri Lanka and Nepal do not. Further, the studied cases mark Nepal's first major experience with counterinsurgency, whereas the others have faced earlier insurgent challenges. Finally, the cases represent conflicts that are predominantly internal and yet feature external involvement as an added complication.

How are terrorism and insurgency related? How might linkages between the two be useful in developing both counterterrorism (CT) and counterinsurgency campaigns?

As mentioned in the *Insurgencies* volume, terrorism should be considered a tactical subset of insurgency campaigns, or a tactic that insurgencies sometimes use but can also be used by other groups. *Pakistan's Counterterrorism Challenge* also frames terrorism in this way, explaining how this definition captures the situation in Pakistan in which the principal terrorist threats include both insurgent and non-insurgent groups using terrorist tactics.

Counterterrorism is viewed strictly as actions intended to *directly* prevent or respond to outfits or individuals employing terrorist tactics whether as part of an insurgency or otherwise. However, it is a mistake to consider counterterrorism so narrowly that it becomes another name for a tactical military response. Counterterrorism can include military and nonmilitary aspects, provided they aim to deal directly with a terrorist's activities and actions. Counterinsurgency then becomes a combination of counterterrorism and broader policy actions aimed at addressing root causes of sustained insurgent violence/terrorism.

Why did you find the need to produce *Pakistan's Counterterrorism Challenge*?

The book seeks to address a missing link when it comes to examining Pakistan's counterterrorism: a comprehensive examination of the issues that fall between tactical military operations and broader counterinsurgency analysis. Too often, the discourse in Pakistan has been about military action even though it has always been understood that the use of military force alone cannot solve the violent challenge posed by Pakistani Islamists. This book pays special attention to the nontraditional functions of force that remain central to Pakistan's ability to subdue militancy but have received the deserved attention neither from the Pakistani state nor from Western experts. In particular, this volume focuses on the weakness of political institutions, the role of policing, problems within the criminal justice system, efforts to choke financing for militancy, and regulation of the use of media and technology by militants. This is also what puts it apart from much of the existing literature on the issue.

Pakistan's Counterterrorism Challenge recognizes that the terrorism faced by Pakistan today is a symptom of a broader insurgent malaise with roots in state policies, societal inclinations, and regional realities. However, it still finds merit in treating this all important counterterrorism pillar of a COIN campaign holistically under the pretext that getting counterterrorism right is a necessary prerequisite for reducing violence to manageable levels and opening up space for the state to succeed in deeper and broader security, political, and economic reforms it would have to undertake as part of its long-term counterinsurgency strategy.

These books come out at a time when the Pakistani civilian government has just released the country's first-ever National Internal Security Policy (NISP) and the government is proceeding with talks with the Pakistani Taliban. Will Pakistani authorities benefit from reading these books?

Pakistan has been home to an assortment of Islamist militant groups and a ferocious and sustained insurgent-cum-terrorist campaign against the Pakistani state. The combination of extreme turbulence within its borders and its possession of nuclear weapons has led many to see Pakistan as one of the most dangerous places on earth. There is a great deal of pessimism about the Pakistani state's ability to overcome its counterterrorism challenges successfully. Identifying the target of counterterrorism operations is a difficult proposition to begin with, and carrying out strategies is made difficult by ambiguous or outdated laws and policies. Pakistan lacks a body capable of coordinating efforts across territories and jurisdictions.

These problems are well known and the first step to addressing them has been taken by producing a NISP. But the policy is still to be finalized and can benefit from specific suggestions in the *Counterterrorism Challenge* book. Its implementation plan that is to follow will also gain tremendously by comprehending what practitioners and experts are saying about these problems and how to go about addressing them. The key takeaway for the policymakers will be that unless they can address the military and non-military aspects of the counterterrorism challenge holistically and simultaneously, positive results are unlikely to be forthcoming.

From the *Insurgencies* book, Pakistani civilian and military decision-makers can determine under what circumstances talks with insurgents seem to work and whether Pakistan's current context fits the bill. They would recognize that the present equation is a prototype of a situation where insurgents are most likely to use talks as a strategic pause and come back stronger rather than making a sincere effort to attain sustainable peace. But they will also realize that a military operation of the kind they are contemplating will not be a silver bullet that delivers that sustainable peace. They are truly caught between a rock and a hard place.

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