Futures 101 for the Top Guns

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The first thing which you notice in the room is the number of "wrist watch" participants in the room (it's been a long time since I have seen a group of young men wear wrist watches). But this has to do both with punctuality as well as the banning of mobile phones (during duty) by the air force. Military establishments around the world are struggling to find a way to monitor and prevent their acting soldiers from "becoming broadcast stations" (Be'er, 2013). For the Pakistan military, the challenge is multifold; it has external enemies as well as an increasingly hardened foe in the shape of terrorism, which is hitting Pakistan hard. As a security precaution, the Pakistan Air force has responded by banning all forms of social media like Facebook (at the time of writing, YouTube is banned in Pakistan).

A two day workshop on Foresight, was conducted with Pakistan Airforce pilots in Islamabad. The workshop started out with a primer of how the rules of the game are changing in an ever-changing world. Some of these images of the changing world resonate all too well with the Air force, albeit in a troubling manner. Population is a source of concern, globally; for the Pakistan Air force, it is a source of concern as overcrowding and the indifference of city planners has towns/villages sprawling right beside military base perimeters. It has not helped that many of the attacks in recent years on military bases across Pakistan have sprung from these adjacent shanty towns.[1] On July 6 2007, as General Pervez Musharraf's aircraft took off from the Islamabad airport, militants fired anti-aircraft weapons at it from the rooftop of a house in an adjoining area of the Islamabad airport. He was however unhurt in the incident (Masood & Nizza, 2007). Another concern has been the kites and vultures in the airbase adjacent to these sprawling towns providing a potential bird-airplane strike hazard.

Another changing image is the human resource which is filtering through the military ranks. About fifteen years ago, the top career choice for any youngster would have been a fighter pilot; and the best & the brightest in Pakistan would have found their way into the PAF. But as in other developing countries, with better economic opportunities elsewhere, a paradigm shift from loyalty -based employment to greener-pasture nomadic employment and with Pakistan's involvement with the war on terror; some of the brightest minds have chosen careers outside the military. With the Crème de la crème not interested, the PAF has had to accept the best of the rest. Another demographic shift over the last decade has been the geographic source of recruitment. Recruitment in the military had been predominantly from the Punjab and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces, but now there is an emerging

trend of recruitment from the Baluchistan province.

A resonating theme throughout the workshop was the war on terror and the impact it is having on Pakistan and inevitably the last line of defence- on the military. This war as well as the withdrawal of Allied forces from Afghanistan has forced a shift from a traditional India-centric policy to a diversion of attention and resources towards the Afghanistan border. It is interesting to note the difference in approach towards terrorism between civilians and the military establishment. In previous workshops involving civil society groups and civilians, the emphasis has been on education and employment as the panacea to the terrorism issue. With the military defenders of Pakistan, a major part of the remedy is governance and pragmatic provision of justice. For them, proper policy, dialogue and a swift judiciary is important if Pakistan is to emerge victorious in the decade long war.

Another interesting issue which emerged during the discussion was about the shifting image of women in the Airforce. In 2006, during the Enlightened Moderation era of General Pervez Musharraf, the Pakistan Air Force inducted female cadets as potential future pilots. After spending considerable amounts of resources, the female inductees exist but none have cleared the final hurdle of actually flying as a war ready pilot. (On June 13 2013, Ayesha Farooq became the first female war-ready pilot of Pakistan (Dawn, 2013). This marks a paradigm shift in image for women in Pakistan). Details are few but cultural sensitivities and the physical demands of being a fighter pilot are being put to blame. No wonder that in neighboring India, where women comprise nearly 10% of the Indian Air Force (IAF) (IANS, 2012), it is still being debated whether to induct female fighter pilots or not. In 2009, the IAF Vice Chief Air Marshal P K Barbora announced that the IAF was planning to have women fighter pilots in the future, but they would be inducted with a pre-condition of not bearing children until they have put in 13 to 14 years in the IAF (Indian Express, 2009).

After spending the first day "decolonizing" the present and "re-thinking the way we think, the second day was devoted to dreaming and "fantasizing" about the future. The creativity and impishness of the young pilots was on full display. The preferred future of Pakistan was re-enacted as a spoof of a popular TV program, "One day with Geo" with a businessman character in 2035. In the "preferred future", the Chief Ministers do daily pickup service leaves without him, Lahore becomes a horizontal garden city, presidents in western countries have to make prior appointments with the Pakistani premier and the PAF has its own fleet of Shahbaz fighter planes, which it imports from other countries. The participants then were introduced to a wide range of methodological scenarios - and on my curious inquiry about a pilotless future, a double variable scenario was plotted. While many variables were considered such as the rise of AI (Artificial Intelligence), global trends, cost of operation, globalized nature of conflicts, etc; the most defining variables (order/judgment vs extremes of situation awareness) were used to plot the future of pilotless warfare. The first quadrant (built on order and awareness) sees a Nintendo future where the best joystick handler gets to win and the advantage is with drones. The second quadrant (built on judgment and awareness) is a more level-playing field where both man and machine have their distinct advantages, especially in situations demanding split-second decision-making. The third quadrant is an extension of the present drone war being played out in the war against terrorism. The advantage is with the drones but there are tremendous legal and international

implications. The fourth quadrant envisages the war in the shadows (judgment and unconscious) – the humans win outright. And given that the wars of the future will be fought in the shadows involving uncertainty, I personally think that a human presence in aviation conflicts is assured.

Figure 1. Double Variable Scenario Method – A Pilotless Future

The last part of the foresight exercise involved Causal Layered Analysis (Inayatullah, 2004) and deconstructing images and trends. One group working on Pakistani politics and terrorism visualized it with the metaphor of an octopus wrecking havoc; the solution was to tie up four of its arms, before there is anything left to destroy. The second group working on Pakistan's economy got stuck on the metaphor, "Nothing can be done" and could not come up with a solution in such grim conditions. It made perfect sense, living in a country in depression mode, in which every living day is a challenge and ends with gratefulness for surviving one more day. Their worldview composed of news in the media about Malala Yousafzia, Bin Laden's assassination, suicide bombings, Hazara massacre, etc. So this group was asked to think about an even worse scenario; the metaphor which emerged was "we have not hit rock bottom yet". The worldview, the systemic view and the litany which emerged from this metaphor are too toxic to be put on paper, but they did get the group into overdrive mode, over how to prevent such a bizarre catastrophic future.

The workshop ended with a close-eyed visioning of the future and a vote of thanks. The impression through all the foresight process was of Airforce pilots with their ever-present smile and a cool attitude towards anything academic or in the arena of fantasy (in case of this particular workshop). Having spent some time, preaching foresight to academics and NGO's, the top guns have perhaps the best absorptive capacity that I have come across. Makes you wonder, pilots would make much better futurists instead of these ever-debating and non-flinching academicians.

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Notes

1 Pakistan Air Force (PAF) base in Kamra was attacked by the Taliban on August 16, 2012. Pakistan Naval Station Mehran in Karachi was attacked by terrorists on May 23, 2011

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