

Nov 04, 2016 by **Rob Asghar**

Reframing the Dinner Conversation between the West and Pakistan ^[1]

If Pakistan were a person, who would it be? Would it be Odysseus, undergoing a series of grueling tests in order to claim its true heroic identity? Would it be a hapless Sancho Panza, looking on with alarm as it's dragged into ruin by the misadventures of those around it?

As a Pakistani-American, I hope Pakistan someday turns out to be Odysseus. But for my money, Pakistan could best be characterized in 2010 as Uncle Leo of "Seinfeld" fame. Can you recall the "Shower Head" episode in which Jerry, on *The Tonight Show*, pokes fun of Uncle Leo's paranoid tendency to ascribe all sins against him as being fueled by anti-Semitism?

If you can't recall, I believe you need to spend less time worrying about global issues and more time watching TBS. Regardless, Leo fumes as his girlfriend laughs at Seinfeld's candor – and Leo in short order dumps her for this gross act of bigotry (never mind that Jerry, as a Jew, is the instigator of this supposed anti-Semitism).

There are countless Pakistani websites that offer the sort of 'conspiratizing' perfected by Leo, the conspiratizing you hear in a few too many dinner conversations around that nation. Here's just one from Kashmir Watch (bold emphasis is mine):

Since the U.S.-led NATO forces occupied Afghanistan after 9/11, stiff resistance of the Taliban militants against the occupying forces created unending lawlessness in the country which has become a most conducive place for India so as **to prepare conspiracy in order to fulfill its secret strategic designs** against Iran, China and especially Pakistan....

In the past, **emboldened by the tactical support of the US and Israel**, Indian RAW, based in Afghanistan has been sending well-trained agents in Pakistan, who have joined the ranks and files of the Taliban. Posing themselves as the Pakistan Taliban, they not only attack the check posts of Pakistan's security forces, but also target schools and mosques. They are continuously conducting suicide attacks in our country. In this context, India has also arranged some Madrassas in Afghanistan where highly motivated and RAW-paid militants are being trained with the help of Indian so-called Muslim scholars. Now, Indian support to insurgency in the Frontier Province and the Baloch separatism has become a common matter.

Hmm, maybe the original Uncle Leo did have reasons to be paranoid, given how Israel is implicated above and in so much international intrigue by frustrated nationalists in the greater

Middle East and South Asia.

Pakistani journalist Ahmad Quraishi, symbolizing much of the Pakistani nationalist journalism in vogue, assails the U.S. ambassador in Islamabad for believing that Pakistanis are overly and strategically negative toward the U.S.—a peculiar condemnation, given how his own site regularly accuses the U.S. of invading and destroying Pakistan.

But the West should recognize that the U.S. and Israel are in a sense secondary and tertiary in the minds of Pakistani nationalists, who currently dominate the debates on television and in living rooms across Pakistan. The U.S. is the most convenient devil, but much of Pakistani anxiety relates to real or perceived Indian machinations.

Many ordinary Pakistanis, not just nationalists, seethe about how India and the West accuse Pakistan of facilitating attacks such as the Mumbai catastrophe, while India is never questioned by the West for what may be similar behavior in Afghanistan or in Baluchistan or other Pakistani regions. Let me shift the metaphor from a wacky uncle to that of a sibling rivalry between a 7-year-old and a 17-year-old. Pakistan and India are caught in a game of “But, Mom, HE started it!” Pakistanis feel like the younger sibling, being sent fuming to his room, because Mom believes he’s the sole problem. India, for its part, seems to avoid criticism—and as it nears adulthood, it now has power that rivals that of the adult authority anyway.

In fact, in a notorious *Foreign Affairs* article last year, RAND expert Christine Fair and other experts speculated that Pak criticisms of Indian meddling weren’t merely paranoia, even if the criticisms were overinflated.

Fair at the same time has openly rebuked the Pakistani military for taking US money and handing it off to the Taliban, and for being the leading cause of instability in the region. That sort of criticism, while never welcomed by the accused, is only tolerable if it is balanced with the regarding the rivals of the accused.

Fair’s example should be emulated by Washington. Typical Pakistanis have yet to see the issue of Indian influence in Af-Pak “go public” in a visible way. Uncle Sam can’t calm Uncle Leo’s oversensitive nerves unless this happens.

It’s difficult to say who’s “more to blame” or “who started it” in the Pak-Indian mess. But that’s not the point, at the purely public-diplomacy level. At the PD level, a genuine interest in fairness—expressed both publicly and privately—is essential on the part of Washington and the greater West.
