

ASPEN ATLANTIC GROUP

PAKISTAN: WHY IT MUST HAVE HELP AND HOW TO PROVIDE IT

Hilary Synnottⁱ

Pakistan's Internal Challenges

As a nuclear power with a population nearly six times that of Afghanistan, in the grip of violent insurgency, and a source of terrorism which spreads infection well beyond its borders, Pakistan is of major importance to U.S. and European interests. It is currently facing its greatest challenges since the country split apart in 1971. Because the roots of these challenges—political, economic, and security—extend back to Pakistan's turbulent birth 62 years ago, an understanding of its history and its peoples must underpin any successful effort to promote stability.

In contrast to India, whose national narrative included an ancient and proud history and whose overriding priority was to gain independence from the British Raj, Pakistan had no pre-existing national identity. Its priority was separation from Hindu-dominated India. Its disparate components—including different ethnic groups, Punjabis, Sindhis, Pashtuns, and Baluchis, each with separate languages, and differing strands of religion: Shi'a and Sunni Islam, the latter of whom include Deobandis, Barelvīs, and Sufis—had little reason to cooperate in any goal of state or nation-building. The British Raj had drawn on these peoples for its armies and they retain strong martial tendencies. Democracy did not come naturally: military leaders have presided for over half the country's history at the expense of elected institutions. At Independence/Partition, Pakistan received less than an equitable share of the Raj's patrimony which exacerbated the tendency to squabble over resources. The bloody carnage associated with the massive movement of peoples—Sikhs and Hindus eastwards and Muslims westwards—has remained vivid in national memories. In such circumstances the nation has always been susceptible to separatist tendencies, as evidenced by a Pushtunistan movement in the 1950s and cycles of violence in Baluchistan which continue today. With 60 percent of the population, Punjab has a disproportionate share of the country's wealth, dominates Pakistan's armed forces, and is deeply unpopular with the other regions.

It is the Army which has taken the lead in trying to forge a national identity which is intended both to protect against the threat of further separatism, following Bangladesh's

ⁱSir Hilary Synnott is a Consulting Senior Fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), and served as British High Commissioner to Pakistan from 2000 to 2003. He is the author of *Transforming Pakistan: Ways Out of Instability*, Routledge/IISS, August 2009.

secession in 1971, and to consolidate the Army's own interests and status. The main means to this end have been maintaining the Kashmir dispute with India, which Pakistanis call 'the unfinished business of Partition,' and the promotion and politicisation of the Muslim religion. General Zia ul Haq's military autocracy was unwittingly assisted in this latter objective by the U.S. and others during the 1979-1989 Afghan war when the Inter-Services Intelligence Department (ISI), benefiting from huge human and financial assistance, grew into a powerful internal political instrument.

The subsequent decade of almost total U.S. neglect saw 'the yo-yo years' of elected government which ended with Musharraf's popular coup in 1999. In this period the performance of each of the two prematurely terminated tenures of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif was worse than the last. In 1989, attention turned to Kashmir where local separatists received increased support from the ISI and engaged in both proxy and actual hostilities with India. India's disproportionate and inhumane responses, coupled with chronic election-rigging in Indian-administered Kashmir, made matters worse. The Kashmir operations culminated in the disastrously ill-judged 1999 Kargil offensive, masterminded by then Army Chief Musharraf a year after both countries had claimed nuclear weapons capabilities. Meanwhile, to the west, the ISI and the elected government had been busy cultivating and supporting the emerging Taliban in order to secure a puppet or at least a complaisant government in Kabul. The Pakistani leadership was induced to terminate this relationship only after 9/11 when the Taliban had apparently been defeated by the UN-backed coalition operations in Afghanistan.

Musharraf's decision to join this coalition led to a near-replay of the U.S.'s relationship with Zia 21 years earlier. U.S. military assistance poured into the control of a military autocrat while civil aid was minimal and the cause of democracy apparently neglected. As with Zia, however, Pakistan's interests were, and remain, by no means identical to those of the U.S. Musharraf and the ISI continued to support freedom fighters, regarded by the West as terrorists, as paramilitary reservists for use in the event of hostilities with India. Their potential value was highlighted during the 10-month military stand-off in 2001-2002 following a terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament. Musharraf made no secret of his distinction between al-Qaeda and other foreigners (whom he was ready to kill), and the Afghan Taliban and their Pakistani sympathisers, whom he was determined not to alienate for obvious reasons of political expediency. Such ambiguities inevitably gave rise to exasperation and anger on the part of the U.S., where some perhaps naively may have felt that Pakistan owed them gratitude for all the assistance being provided. The misuse of much of this assistance, for non-Afghanistan-related purposes or simply corruption, was a more substantial reason for exasperation.

However, Musharraf's double-dealing was not sufficient to maintain his position and he fell off his tightrope, albeit without personal injury. The greatest political shortcoming of his nine year tenure was the failure of his pledge to foster a new breed of non-military politician. Although under few illusions about their merits, but putting hope before experience, the country again swung back towards the two traditional parties. The U.S. failure, by its over-long reliance on Musharraf, to respond to this mood swing and its subsequent manipulations in support of Benazir Bhutto and Asif Ali Zardari added substantially to America's unpopularity (already low

for reasons of history and as a result of the 2001 and 2003 Afghanistan and Iraq operations). It is hard to exaggerate the extent of this anti-U.S. sentiment today.

Severely bruised by the unpopularity it attracted under Musharraf and more than preoccupied by its military operations in the Swat Valley and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the Army has now reduced its political profile and has checked some of its more conspicuous incursions into the civilian domain. But it remains unlikely that the Army will voluntarily give up significant amounts of wealth, privilege, and influence. Furthermore, it will continue to intervene on the political stage again if the elected politicians were to fail.

Some two years after the unusually fair elections in 2008, the performance of elected politicians offers little comfort. Zardari has struggled through his appallingly bad start. He has learned some of the language of international and national politicking and is now less prone to infuriate the Army in the interests of gratifying the U.S. He has been helped by IMF financial assistance. But he is in no position to deliver reform or prosperity, or to advance civilian ascendancy. His national popularity ratings are, with justification, dismally low. He is however helped by the fact that Nawaz Sharif, although far more popular, is in no hurry to take the reins of state when so many of its wheels are falling off. But there are also concerns about the prospect of Nawaz's leadership in view of his long-standing relationship with Pakistan's religious parties and his 1999 pledge to introduce Sharia law nationally.

What to do?

U.S. military interests and concerns in the region are well-documented and need little elaboration here. The issue of the technical security of nuclear weaponry is one for specialists. The motivations of Pakistan's high command and the influence of extremist tendencies within the Army call for crystal balls, although some judicious speculation is possible. Nor does this paper address specific civil sectors for support, about which much literature already exists. It is sufficient to say that the police, the judiciary, water, power, education, agriculture and general managerial capacity are all in desperate need of reinforcement.

Of perhaps the greatest importance in the longer term, however, is the context in which U.S. military/security interests are advanced. At least until recently there has been too much pursuit of tactical gains at the expense of disproportionate strategic costs. This may have been a result of insufficient appreciation of the differences between Pakistani and American interests. The emphasis on military operations and inaction to improve the well-being of the Pakistani people fostered a popular belief among the body politic and civil society that they were fighting and suffering from, 'Washington's War.' As a result they overlooked the threat to the Pakistani state from its home-grown insurgency and the emergence of a Pakistani neo-Taliban in about 2005. The present realisation of the magnitude of the internal threat, illustrated by the operations in Waziristan, offers an opportunity for the exercise of influence and the beginning of change. But the United States cannot hope to protect its interests by the manipulation of the Pakistani leadership in the face of opposition from the wider population.

The Approach

The two key imperatives now are to improve Pakistani sentiment towards the U.S., and to help rebuild Pakistan's civilian institutions by re-balancing the power and influence between the Army and elected bodies. This will entail, *inter alia*, encouraging a more realistic perception about external threats, e.g. from India. The achievement of these objectives will be neither swift nor easy. But it is essential if the country, with all its nascent threats to U.S. interests, is to be stabilised over the long term. Any supposed alternative of getting tougher with Pakistan—or renewing sanctions—is not an option, although a proper firmness about transparency and accountability is required and overdue.

These objectives are not at odds with other, more direct, activities to assist the war effort in Afghanistan and FATA, but the latter are not sufficient of themselves. A concentration of effort in FATA, for instance, will be seen to be linked to military objectives and will not swing Pakistani opinion. Ambitious as they may seem, progress towards these objectives could prove less costly in blood and treasure than would the consequences of further deterioration in Pakistan. A realisation in Pakistan that the U.S. approach has changed may itself lead to greater cooperation and stability, even before any more tangible results of such a changed approach become apparent.

The next imperative is to realise that it will be far from easy to implement a program which achieves the first two objectives. Conventional bilateral development assistance techniques will not suffice, not least because of the difficulties for foreign aid administrators in monitoring and assessing progress of development projects and programs. Simple budget support presents issues of accountability. Major headline projects, especially if they have a conspicuous U.S. label, risk becoming stuck or sabotaged as happened so often in Iraq. And attempts to create or regenerate industrial capacity risk failure because of inadequate managerial capacity and supporting infrastructure. Progress will require maximum use of indigenous human resources, and some devolution of managerial responsibility to expert third parties including, for instance, the World Bank and reputable non-governmental organizations. It must also be accepted that results will be slow in coming and will involve much slippage and inefficiencies until such time as Pakistan's institutional capacity develops.

The Role of Other Countries, Including Europe

U.S. action can leverage or influence others to assist. It is unreasonable to expect that all other countries can be brought to share U.S. approaches in totality. But others in the region share an interest in greater stability in Pakistan: India does not want a failed state on its border; China has concerns about its Muslim Uighur population, and is also Pakistan's traditional ally; Iran has concerns over narcotics traffic through Baluchistan; and Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries face an ongoing threat from Salafist extremism. While some countries in the region

might be persuaded to take a more proactive role, at the very least these countries must be encouraged not to make matters worse (e.g. by allaying concerns about Indian activity in Afghanistan and possibly Baluchistan, and Arab funding of noxious madrassas). A permanent solution to Kashmir will not occur until the Army's role is rebalanced. A *modus vivendi* may be attainable, but efforts to secure one should proceed in parallel with other actions, the results of which would otherwise be held up.

The EU's performance in Pakistan has in general been lamentable. Only the UK, for reasons of history has maintained any significant aid program, and this experience might usefully be tapped into. Others have little or no experience of working in the country and limited or no intelligence capabilities, all of which hampers their political analysis. The Friends of Democratic Pakistan risks becoming an excuse for inaction if it is limited to policy proposals and pledges of funding with little prospect of actual or effective disbursement. The U.S. must therefore lead the way in helping Pakistan help itself, and bring others with it.