

Pakistan and Its Neighbors: U.S. Policy Priorities

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Pakistan today faces something close to a perfect storm, with both domestic and international crises that could fundamentally change the character of the state. Domestically, it faces a crisis of state authority, the product of years of eroding institutions and more recently of the government's decision to cede substantial areas of government authority to Islamic insurgents. It also faces a leadership gap that affects both major political parties and in some respects the military. On the international front, its problems are deeply entangled with those of its neighbor, Afghanistan, where Pakistan's historical connections with the Taliban continue to complicate the task of stabilizing the Afghan state. India-Pakistan relations, which had been relatively stable, took a downward turn after the terrorist attacks in Mumbai in November 2008. Neither country is spoiling for war, but restoring effective communications has proved elusive. And the United States has become something of a tar baby, with politicians, army officers and many people blaming the U.S. for all Pakistan's ills even as both civilians and military try to maintain some level of funding and political support.

This paper will examine each of the threats in turn, and will then address the tools the United States and other international friends of Pakistan might be able to bring to the table. Gloomy predictions about Pakistan have been familiar fare for years. What makes today's lament different is the fact that the erosion of

state authority seems to be accelerating. We can take some comfort from the surprising flowering of Pakistan's civil society during the political crises of the past two years. But the biggest challenge of all for the United States is that the most fundamental aspects of Pakistan's present trouble lie in factors over which the United States has little influence. The U.S. has tools it can bring to bear, but they don't lend themselves to the normal way of dealing with crises in poor foreign countries.

Internal Crisis of the State

Pakistan has never had strong political institutions. It is a much fragmented society and state, with four linguistically and ethnically diverse provinces, a 15 percent Shia minority, major areas of feudal landholdings, and largely ungoverned areas near the Afghan border. The province of Punjab has traditionally dominated politics and the army; the other three provinces all have a history of separatism.

All of these divisions are of long standing. What is new, and what makes for a "crisis of the state," is the presence of an insurgency that has carried out record numbers of suicide bombings against the army, the police, other symbols of the state, politicians, and in some cases minorities (especially Shia religious institutions). Records for political violence were set in 2007 and again in 2008.

In February 2009, the government and the

army decided to end their effort to subdue a group of Taliban-style vigilantes that had taken over the scenic Swat Valley, and agreed to a “deal” under which Sharia law would be extended to the area. This is an unusual little region with a history of separate local administration of justice. But the deal nonetheless represented a substantial cession of government power to insurgents who had been slitting the throats of policemen in public. The insurgents are acting in the name of Islam—but a harsh and vengeful version of Islam that is quite different from what most Pakistanis would consider to be the spirit of their faith.

Other parts of Pakistan could be ripe for the same thing to happen unless both the military and the civilian wings of government start pushing back hard. After the announcement of the Swat agreement in February 2008, the Taliban moved into neighboring Buner, asserting control and then seemingly leaving the next day. Many Pakistani observers believe that other parts of the country are vulnerable to the same kind of loss of state authority. Frequently mentioned are the city of Mardan, and several parts of southern Punjab. What appears to be alternating assertions and removals of Taliban control are somewhat misleading. In Swat and apparently in Buner, the Taliban have operated by intimidating local residents who oppose them, assassinating both traditional authority figures and police. The fact that these areas are close to the capital, Islamabad, has been played up in the Western press—but this is not a column of tanks advancing on Islamabad. It is more like an increasing number of holes in state authority, like Swiss cheese, with the normal supporters of the government and the country’s leaders increasingly afraid to assert themselves. In this environment, criticizing anyone who professes to speak for Islam is politically, and sometimes physically, life-threatening.

Neither Pakistan’s civilian leaders nor its military have been effective in addressing this problem. At the provincial and local level, the failure of the authorities to reestablish a modicum of decent law, order, and governance after

an earlier military operation in Swat added to the intimidation factor.

At the national level, the elections in February 2008 brought hope that, now that the voters had actually rejected a political leader only recently removed from army uniform, a legitimate government would be able to galvanize the forces that make the state function. The initial multiparty coalition lasted barely a month. The Pakistan People’s Party government—both the prime minister and, following the exit of General Musharraf, the new president, Asif Zardari—has been preoccupied with political manipulation almost to the exclusion of governing. The army’s huge political role has preempted the role for which political institutions were intended.

At present, the army apparently does not want to take over running the country. It played a constructive role in facilitating the restoration of the Chief Justice and thereby resolving the political crisis that broke out in March 2009. Army brass have made public gestures emphasizing their desire to implement the decisions of the civilian leaders. At the same time, they have pulled strings to influence the outcome of political crises, and they did not accept the government’s publicly-announced decision to put the Inter-Services Intelligence under the authority of the Home Ministry instead of the army. The government, in other words, is able to work with the army, but not to enforce its will when the army’s top leadership strongly disagrees.

Nor is the government politically secure. The PPP has a plurality, but not a majority, of the seats in government. The Prime Minister is a relatively weak figure, in the shadow of President Zardari, Benazir Bhutto’s widower and thus the heir to the political party that was Ms. Bhutto’s father’s creation. The PPP’s major political opponent, the Pakistan Muslim League of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif (PML-N), controls Punjab province. Sharif’s brother Shahbaz was restored to his position as Chief Minister of Punjab (roughly equivalent to our Governors) following the showdown

over the Chief Justice. That crisis significantly enhanced the standing of the Sharif brothers and to a lesser extent of the Prime Minister. Zardari's somewhat erratic sense of how to maneuver through Pakistan's political minefield will make the system vulnerable to crises in the future, and at some point the army is likely to flex its muscles again.

Pakistan's Islamic political parties did not do well in the February 2008 elections. They lost control of the Northwest Frontier Province and saw their representation in the national parliament considerably reduced. One of them remains a coalition partner of the PPP government, giving it disproportionate importance in political maneuvering. Moreover, most of the Islamic parties support parts of the insurgents' agenda, notably the introduction of Sharia law, and they make it harder for the secular parties to stand up vigorously against the insurgents by painting these issues as "Islamic."

The international tangle

Pakistan is also beset by three sets of interlocking international problems. The first centers on Afghanistan, its neighbor to the West, with which it has close ethnic ties and traditionally difficult relations. At this point, both Pakistan and Afghanistan are destabilizing one another. The border areas of Pakistan are a sanctuary for insurgents from Afghanistan; the Afghan insurgents give aid, comfort and a megaphone to their Pakistani counterparts. Pakistani officials assert with some force that they are no longer working with the Taliban, but it is hard to believe that their intelligence services have severed their ties. Unfortunately, even persistent rumors to that effect effectively undercut our preferred strategy in Afghanistan, which is to build up a decent government and help Afghanistan build its future around that core.

The second international problem is India. For Pakistanis, and especially for the Pakistan army, this is the central problem, the existential threat. The army has trained for conven-

tional warfare on the plains of Punjab, not for counterinsurgency, one of the factors in its poor track record against today's insurgents. India-Pakistan relations had been in reasonably good shape from late 2003 until the attacks on Mumbai in November 2008. That incident, which monopolized the air waves for three days and left about 170 people dead, was carried out by people who came from Pakistan, and there is good evidence that it had the support at least of former Pakistani intelligence operatives. The Pakistan government hotly denies having been involved. But this incident shows how easy it is for a spoiler to knock India-Pakistan relations off course, and how deep the suspicion is on both sides. India and Pakistan are intermittently exchanging information and accusations on the Mumbai attacks.

The peace dialogue that India and Pakistan maintained from 2004 to 2008 made remarkable progress in discreet, back-channel talks, toward narrowing the gap on the painful issue of Kashmir. But they didn't eliminate the gap. In any case, neither government at this point is strong enough to bring the issue before the public or agree to a breakthrough solution. So for the immediate future, policymakers will have to assume that the India-Pakistan dispute will remain in roughly its present form.

The Pakistan army believes that India is single-mindedly working on Pakistan's destruction—through its consulates in Afghanistan, through subversion, and even through India's relationship with the United States. In fact, there is still a reasonably strong consensus among Indian policymakers that a stable Pakistan is better for India than a collapsing one. Incidents like Mumbai threaten that consensus, but for now, it still holds. What this means is that barring some new terrorist spectacular, India may be able to contribute at least a welcome silence to the effort at stabilizing Pakistan.

The final international problem is the one that concerns us most: relations with the United States. Pakistan and the United States have had a roller coaster ride for nearly sixty years. The two countries were closely allied in the 1950s, had a

falling out at the time of the 1965 India-Pakistan war, collaborated intensely in the 1980s against the Soviet army in Afghanistan, “divorced” again in 1990 on account of Pakistan’s nuclear problem, and relaunched a close relationship right after 9/11. As happened during previous periods of close engagement, the Americans and the Pakistanis have overlapping but not identical agendas. For the United States, eliminating the threat from Al Qaeda and securing the Pakistan-Afghan border is key; for Pakistan, eliminating Indian influence from Afghanistan and avoiding a domestic explosion are the critical factors. Pakistan’s effort to keep its options open in Afghanistan is a threat to what the United States wants to accomplish. Pakistanis, for their part, are convinced that U.S. involvement in the region has aggravated their domestic problems, and Pakistan’s political leaders are desperately trying to avoid looking like U.S. stooges. Most Pakistanis look back at the history of U.S.-Pakistan relations and conclude that the United States has always dumped Pakistan when it was no longer useful. Many wonder when the next “divorce” will come.

Nuclear risks

The major risk from Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal is miscalculation of the risk in some future crisis with India. India has a no-first-use policy; Pakistan, being the weaker power, does not, and sees its nuclear weapons as the way to neutralize India’s larger conventional force. Both countries are unrealistically confident that they can precisely calibrate one another’s red lines. That said, both are likely to be cautious if a crisis gets close to the threshold of war. India, after Mumbai, consciously decided not to take military action, largely because it had no good military options. Pakistan has acted recklessly, for example in sending troops across the line separating Indian and Pakistani-controlled Kashmir at Kargil in 1999; but their efforts to “push the envelope” have been limited to subconventional actions. Both take the nuclear risks more seriously than they are willing to say to Americans.

The security of Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal is as good, or as bad, as the Pakistan army’s control of its own facilities. At this time, that is probably quite good. However, if the government continues to allow its authority to be eaten away, and if the army continues to look ineffectual in dealing with internal security, it might become more vulnerable to a direct challenge. This should be a very high priority for intelligence collection.

What can we do?

The administration has tacitly taken the view that in the “Af-Pak” theater, Pakistan is the more critical, the more difficult, and the more strategically important of the two problems. This is correct.

- ***Keep economic assistance flowing.*** Economic assistance (Kerry-Lugar bill, formerly Biden-Lugar) is a good way of showing that we want a relationship with the people of Pakistan, not just with one leader. It probably needs to be combined with some new ways of structuring aid. Similarly, the Congress should pass the Reconstruction Opportunity Zones (ROZs) bill. It’s a good investment in the future, even though there is little production taking place now that would benefit from it.
- ***Get serious about the domestic threats,*** and help the Pakistani leaders get serious about them too. Here, what’s needed are NOT public statements, which get the Pakistanis’ back up, but “eyeball diplomacy,” with senior administration leaders conveying their urgency and seriousness in every one-on-one encounter they have with the Pakistani leadership. The message: your government will be eaten away if you don’t reestablish its authority. Congressional visitors can be an especially powerful source of this kind of message.
- ***Work with the opposition.*** Nawaz Sharif needs to get this message too, and to be part of the solution. He is personally bet-

ter disposed to Islamic politics than the PPP; he needs to understand that his own leadership is at risk and that appeasing the Taliban is a no-win strategy for him. His brother Shahbaz, the Chief Minister of Punjab, could be a key asset. He's a tough micromanager, and might be able to turn things around in Punjab.

- **Focus on areas at risk.** In the short term it may not be possible to reestablish government authority in Swat. But the people who want to take over Swat have showed their hand in Buner, next door in the Northwest Frontier Province, and may be threatening the nearby city of Mardan. And southern Punjab may also be ripe for trouble, especially since it has large areas with Shia feudal landlords and Sunni peasantry. These are the areas where the Pakistan government, and especially the provincial governments, need to parachute in extra government resources, judicial help, their top flight police officers, and development aid especially for health and education. Here again, Shahbaz Sharif may be a key ally.
- **Urgent need for policing.** The weakness of the police is one of the key gaps in Pakistan. We need to help. This may require legislative authorization (AID is precluded from funding police work).
- **Health, to change hearts and minds.** The United States has focused on education in its aid program, and that's sorely needed. But if we're looking for a way to change perceptions of the U.S. in the short term, health may be even more powerful, especially if we can link up with a couple of the

better local nongovernmental organizations. The landlords may be ambivalent about education, but no one is ambivalent about health.

- **Counter propaganda.** The insurgents in Swat got their start by beaming FM radio through the valley. They can't be allowed to dominate the air waves. There are Pakistani media institutions that could provide the necessary counterweight. An executive of Geo, one of Pakistan's private TV stations, recently told a small group in Washington that he wanted to put a reporter to work getting the stories of people who had been maimed, widowed or orphaned in some of Pakistan's suicide bombings. He was convinced, based on both gut feeling and polling data, that there was a lot of latent support for an orderly government out there that could be mobilized in this way. He argued that he needed at least a little help from the government, through such things as confirming the identity of the victims. We ought to be pushing for this.

Many of these steps are most effective when taken outside of public view. Where we need a public spotlight, however, is on the importance of Pakistan; on the civil society organizations that are trying to come into their own; and on the stakes for the United States. Congressional interest in the PML leadership (for example, when Codels visit Pakistan) could also help reinforce some of the messages we need to deliver to them. And of course the key starting points are legislative: the Kerry-Lugar bill, ROZs, and if necessary any amended authorization for aid activities focused on policing.
