

Why Pakistan Matters

By Craig Hunter

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International attention has again turned to the security problems caused by instability in Pakistan. A few years ago, Pakistan was only in the peripheral vision of a world that was focused on conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. President Musharraf had heard George Bush's call that 'you are either with us or against us' and did an about face to reject the Taliban government in Afghanistan. Pakistan became an ally in the "war on terror". The United States quietly became banker to the Pakistan military to encourage measures against Taliban camps near the Afghanistan border and where Osama bin Laden was also hiding. Relations with India had warmed considerably, aided by the defensive threat of Pakistan's nuclear weapons. And the passage of time had allowed the world to develop a grudging tolerance of Pakistan as a nuclear power.

Much has changed. President Musharraf has been forced out. The military has taken the back seat to

again allow democracy to take the wheel of government – but not before the terrorist murder of former president Benazir Bhutto. As the war in Afghanistan grinds on with greater insurgent resistance, Pakistan's failure to control its western border region is now highlighted as a major weakness by NATO troops. The recent bombings in Mumbai, well planned and executed by terrorists who originated in Pakistan, are again testing the relationship between India and Pakistan. And the current financial and economic problems will further hurt Pakistan's weak economy, putting even more pressure on the country.

Pakistan is strategically important in many ways: because of its prickly relationship with India; its nuclear weapons produced from a program where technology was leaked to other unstable states; its impact on the insurgent war in Afghanistan; and because of the religious extremists who are willing

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to attack other countries. The world is again focussed on Pakistan, a country that exposes its own people and others to the dangers of its instability.

A Complex and Troubled Country

Since its independence under Partition in 1947 Pakistan has suffered from continuing instability. What is particularly troublesome is that this instability stems from many sources; governance problems, institutions that operate at cross purposes, a weak economy, social and economic marginalization of much of the population, regional disparity, and religious extremism.

Throughout its six decade history Pakistan has struggled for stability in governance as the country has alternated between civilian and military rule. Democratic institutions and the rule of law are weak. Those who are wealthy and have access to the use of force have controlled political power. The executive dominates the legislature and courts, with greater rule by decree than by acts of parliament. Achieving political power in Pakistan is a high stakes game, with the potential for significant reward with corruption so prevalent, but also the very real possibility of assassination. This tends to delegitimize the government and prompts resistance movements with a tendency towards violence.

One of the results of the poor state of governance has been a concentration of power in the military and the Inter-Services Intelligence directorate (ISI). In the past, the Government has used the ISI as a tool to pursue its interests clandestinely, both within the country and beyond its borders. The ISI in turn has encouraged extremist groups to act on its behalf, particularly relative to the conflict with India over Kashmir. It is now felt that the Government cannot properly control the ISI and that the ISI has created a Frankenstein's monster in the extremists, who pursue their own agendas. The current infamous example is Lashkar-e-Taiba, initially

supported by Pakistani intelligence and now deemed responsible for the latest terrorist attacks in Mumbai. Such militants are not supported by the Pakistani people as demonstrated in elections this year where religious radicals were largely ignored in favour of moderate candidates.

Although the economy began to do better in recent years the majority of Pakistanis are economically marginalised, with income disparity another significant contributor to instability. Pakistan has the resources to build nuclear bombs, but has difficulty delivering services (health care, education, sanitation, electricity, emergency support) in many parts of the country. As with other developing countries, the current financial and economic problems have hit Pakistan hard. Inflation has recently jumped to 30% while the exchange rate and foreign reserves have plummeted.

Regional disparity is a major problem. The Northeast is wealthier and derives greater benefit from the government, while the areas along the western border have suffered from neglect. In particular the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), a semi-autonomous region, remain largely outside the federal system. The FATA has strong Pashtun links with Afghanistan, hence the ability of Taliban militants to use it as a base for their operations into Afghanistan. While this may have served Pakistani interest in keeping Afghanistan weak, it has also resulted in an inability of the Pakistan government to enforce its laws in the FATA. The region has a long history of strong resistance to foreign intervention. Recent American incursions to target the Taliban have only increased this resistance.

At the same time, it must be remembered that the FATA region has never really been under British or Pakistani rule in the past. During British colonization, different rules were administered for the tribal population, and as Pakistan achieved its

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independence it indirectly adopted these rules as laws for the region. The key point here is to realize the enormity of the request that the international community is asking of Pakistan - to get rid of rising extremism within the FATA. This would require Pakistan essentially to change the nature of the country along with the rules and rulers that have been present in this region for many years. This change would have to take place gradually by having the Government of Pakistan and tribal populations come to a viable solution without making it seem an imposition by the West.

Violent radical extremism is also an increasing source of instability in Pakistan, marked by the number of suicide bombings, which jumped from one in 2003 to 48 in just the first eight months of 2008. While endemic poverty in much of the country can contribute to extremism, the country does not have a history of religious terrorism. This changed with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 when militants started using Pakistan as a base. Religious fervour became a useful tool to rally the resistance. The United States itself supported Osama bin Laden at that time and the ISI started funding and arming religious militants in the FATA.

At the same time the number of religious schools (madrassas) has risen from roughly 250 in the 1970's to over 25,000 today. As has happened elsewhere, many of these are centres for indoctrinating youth with extreme interpretations of the Koran. They find a fertile ground when there is so much poverty and unemployment. Further fanning the flames, roughly 6000 of the madrassas are funded from Saudi Arabia, home of the extremist Wahhabi sect. All of this has also led to a divide between the religious and secular in Pakistan, a split that often follows and accentuates the fault lines between regions and social classes.

In sum, Pakistan is a country with a complex and difficult inheritance of problems, an inheritance that

it has not overcome and that is a source of instability both for itself and for its region. It faces enormous challenges of its own, and for the world beyond its borders. One positive sign has been the relatively peaceful transfer of power from authoritarian military rule under President Musharraf to the current civilian government of President Asif Ali Zardari, husband of the late Benazir Bhutto. So far this new government has not been able to establish a strong presence and, given all of the problems besetting Pakistan, there is reason to be concerned about its success and longevity.

Pakistan and its Neighbours

Due to Pakistan's geographic location, on the crossroads between Afghanistan, India, China and Iran, the country's instability plays a major role in the security of the entire South Asian region. The weak authority of state institutions, lack of effective civilian control over the military and the ISI, and the diverse composition of society in Pakistan, are serious impediments to the emergence of a stable country. Many assert that the responsibility of achieving peace and security in South Asia lies with Pakistan, which needs to deal with its internal issues by taking effective action at home, and also resolve outstanding disputes with both Afghanistan and India. Such widely accepted notions, however, should not distract attention from the roles of other regional players in fostering the precarious and dangerous environment that has characterized the past several decades.

One of the main characteristics of the region is that governments use animosities between different groups for their own purposes. This was part of the British "Great Game" in the 19th century, where support of locals was used as a counter against threats from larger powers. Then, it was the British seeking balance against Russia. Now, it can be India offering support in Afghanistan or Iran to distract its Pakistan rival, or China's support of Pakistan while keeping its eye on India. At a more

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local level Pakistan has supported the Taliban as a way of keeping Afghanistan weak.

Afghanistan and Pakistan have a long history of tension with little outright conflict. The prior relationship between Pakistan and the Taliban government of Afghanistan complicates seriously its relations with the current Karzai government. The Durand line has never been accepted officially by Afghanistan as the legitimate border, since it leaves Pashtuns on both sides. Pakistan effectively accepts the border, as evidenced by its strong protests against any American incursions against Afghan insurgents. Pakistan's repeated denials about Al-Qaeda presence in the FATA region, despite evidence to the contrary, fuels on-going animosity with the Afghan government. In fact, the Afghan government has maintained that the ISI acted intentionally to destabilise the border region and still maintains ties with the Taliban. Afghanistan is well aware that Pakistan has made use of these militant groups to secure its own interests in the past, during Pakistan's wars with India. However, the new Zadari government has an opportunity to put relations on a better footing. There is even more reason for the Pakistan government to work to stabilise the region, as militants there are also blamed for many terrorist attacks within the country.

The insurgent safe haven in Pakistan is a major problem for NATO's military efforts to bring security to Afghanistan. There is very little official control at the border and the mountainous terrain gives the advantage to the insurgents. Against the public protests of the Pakistani government, American forces have resorted to ground and bombing raids into Pakistan with inevitable civilian casualties. However, there is little the Pakistan government can do directly since it does not have real control over the region itself. At the same time, tribesmen in Pakistan who suffer casualties react by supporting the insurgents.

India has viewed Pakistan with mistrust ever since Partition. This is hardly surprising, especially as Pakistan started most of the wars between the two countries and because of the terrorist acts by Pakistanis in India. India keeps two thirds of its military near the border with Pakistan. At the same time, Pakistan mistrusts India – for instance viewing Indian embassies in Afghanistan as acting against its interests. And people in Afghanistan and the United States believe the ISI had a role in a recent Indian embassy bombing in Afghanistan.

The dispute over the Kashmir area continues to fester. However, things have been much calmer there in the past few years, with some loosening of the border. There now appears to be a recognition that both would be better off if more normal relations were established between the two countries. This would include the possibility of pipelines from Iran through Pakistan to India. Ironically this easing of tensions can to a certain extent be traced to Pakistan's development of nuclear weapons, which make it feel more secure versus its much larger nuclear-armed neighbour. While the recent Mumbai bombings have threatened to push things backwards, India does recognise that Pakistan lacks full control over what happens within its borders. India may also take some comfort that Pakistan has arrested two leaders of the militant group implicated in the bombings.

China and Pakistan have enjoyed a very close and prosperous relationship. China is inclined to assist Pakistan as a counterweight to India, whose large size and potential is a concern for China. Recently, however, there have been indications of some deterioration in relations between the two countries. China has voiced suspicions that Islamic militants operating in its Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region have been trained in Pakistan's FATA region. A decline in relations between these two countries could prove to be very detrimental to Pakistan's economic future.

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Iran may wish to play a more prominent role in fostering bilateral ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan. In the past, the United States has made efforts to suppress Iran's importance in the region as part of its policy of containing Iran. However, with American influence being increasingly viewed as negative, Tehran may sense an opportunity to step in. This might well add more complications, especially given the volatile nature of Iranian politics.

Pakistan and Global Security

Has the world lost sight of the potential threat from nuclear Pakistan? The period when Pakistan was assisting other rogue countries with nuclear technology seems to be past. In addition, Pakistan has adopted its own Permissive Action Links to safeguard its weapons and keeps them in a disassembled state. Nevertheless, there is good reason to worry about a nuclear arsenal in such an unstable country. Pakistan's controls of its weapons and fissile material may not be sufficient, given the rivalries within the government and the resourcefulness of terrorists. Also, another war with India cannot be dismissed.

Whatever the nuclear concerns, religious extremism in Pakistan poses a serious continuing danger. Admittedly its main threat is within Pakistan itself. But al Qaeda leaders are still resident there, with the potential to organise terrorist attacks elsewhere, and not just in India or other nearby countries. There are also other extremist groups with recruits from Pakistan's madrassas who may choose to attack foreign targets, as evidenced by the Mumbai attacks.

Pakistan also has a major impact on global security through its effects on its neighbours, notably Afghanistan. Canada and other NATO countries are feeling this as the conflict in Afghanistan worsens, with the Pakistan border situation a significant contributing factor. Pakistan is also important as a NATO overland supply route -

transport trucks have frequently come under attack. And finally a portion of opium from Afghanistan finds its way to global markets through Pakistan.

While Pakistan is anxious for Western aid, it demonstrates a continuing resistance to taking the internal security measures that the West would like to see. In particular, anti-American sentiments are strong, bolstered by the attacks across the Afghanistan border. There is potential for these feelings to calm somewhat with the new U.S. presidency, but this is not certain as the American military commitment to Afghanistan is planned to increase.

Concluding Comments

The government of Pakistan has a plethora of problems. One of the most immediate will be to address the current security situation. In addition to co-operation with the military, the civilian government needs to gain better control of the ISI, both for its own internal purposes and to help improve relations with its neighbours. It also needs to continue to build support from moderates for a program to counteract the religious extremists. As part of this, they must act to reduce regional disparity and reach out to the western parts of the country, including the FATA.

Pakistan desperately needs to improve its governance and reduce the disparities among its people. Dialogue should be encouraged between the various factions – civilian, military and tribal – to help get them working together better. The military needs to work with the civilian government to help it become stronger and more effective, not just displace it at the first time of difficulty. Developing a better democratic government will take time, but will be worth the investment.

Regular and sustained dialogue between Pakistan and its neighbours is needed. These countries need to adopt new standards and new foreign policies towards one another. A crucial element in

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the dialogue must be the curtailing of the “if” conditions that they place on each other as preconditions for talking. Track-two diplomacy can be very useful in the South Asian context to start building bridges between people in unofficial ways. One of the biggest challenges for the Pakistani government is a lack of resources, particularly given the bad condition of the world economy. Canada provides considerable development assistance to Pakistan – including for governance and social development. Western countries need to consider providing more assistance. In particular there is a strong need for regional co-operation to help stabilise and develop the FATA. At least in the short term, this should be done through the existing tribal structures, rather than adding more instability by trying to also change the governance system there. Pakistan also needs to admit that it needs help in its western areas and be willing to accept assistance from other countries, particularly the United States. The change in the U.S. administration may provide a window of opportunity to allow this without an immediate anti-American outcry within Pakistan.

By itself Canada cannot have any great impact on Pakistan. But Pakistan is important to Canadian foreign policy, not only because of the mission in Afghanistan. Canada should do what it can to encourage a collaborative approach to the border issues between Pakistan and Afghanistan – from a development and diplomacy perspective, as well as the immediate military needs. There is a large Pakistani community in Canada, and Pakistan is one of Canada’s top five sources of immigrants. (In this connection the organizers of the October conference were surprised that there are very few Canadian experts whose work focussed on Pakistan.) While religious extremism in Pakistan has been focused internally and on Pakistan’s neighbours, Canada needs to measure the potential for it to be transferred to Canadian soil.

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