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What's the Problem With Pakistan?

Ashley J. Tellis, Stephen Cohen, Christine Fair, Sumit Ganguly, Shaun Gregory, Aqil Shah
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Summary: The Pakistani army needs to recognize the dangers of inaction against terrorism and confront it squarely.

Part I: Who Rules? Who holds power in Pakistan today? What is the relationship among the government, the army, and the intelligence services?

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Sumit Ganguly: Is there any doubt about that? The army, for all practical purposes, has been and remains in charge. It has steadily increased its power since the first military coup in 1958. The military has a veto over most critical decisions affecting both foreign and security policies, and during the Zia era, it expanded its reach into some areas of domestic politics as well, fomenting, and then containing, ethnic discord in the Sindh and pandering to religious zealots in social policy. Civilian governments in Pakistan are of transient significance. The military, the higher echelons of the civil service, and the intelligence services are the permanent features of the state. There is little or no evidence that the civilian government has any meaningful autonomy.

Shaun Gregory: I agree with Sumit on this. The civilian government is very weak. The Pakistani army retains de facto control of foreign policy, defense policy, internal security, and nuclear policy, and will defend its expanded economic interests -- which mushroomed under Pervez Musharraf. On the relationship between the army and the ISI [Inter-Services Intelligence]: in 2006, Musharraf told the London Times that the ISI "is a disciplined force . . . doing what the [military] government has been telling them." I think we should accept his word. I don't buy the idea that the ISI is a "state within a state," or that it is always "rogue" elements doing various nefarious things. Broadly speaking, the ISI is under the control of the Pakistan military and serves as its instrument.

Ashley Tellis: Sumit has it dead-on. The army rules on all the critical issues important to it: the nuclear program, the budget, security policy, relations with key foreign partners. Although civilian governments have room to play in other areas, their choices are crowded out by prior military preferences. I think the view that the ISI implements military preferences is by and large correct. ISI can conduct activities that the GHQ [General Headquarters] may not be aware of, but I don't believe that any such autonomous actions can ever be sustained if they are seen to be against military interests.

Aqil Shah: The military has withdrawn from exercising direct government power by passing the baton to elected civilians, as it has done several times in the past, but it would be naive to expect it to loosen its control over what it sees as its legitimate "structural" missions, including Afghanistan, India, and the nuclear weapons program. The intelligence services work directly under the command and control of the army chief of staff, even though the ISI is formally answerable to the prime minister. It is hard to determine the presence or extent of factionalization within the military-intelligence complex, but there is little credible evidence to suggest that the military does not operate as a coherent organization. Once the army chief signs off on a policy, the costs of disobedience can be prohibitively high.

Stephen Cohen: The ISI is part of the government, and especially the army, but it is not certain that either exercises sovereign control over all of Pakistan. The weakening of central authority would not be of much concern to outsiders, however, if some groups did not operate beyond Pakistani borders or threaten the fabric of Pakistan itself. In the long term, the weakening of the Pakistani state itself will be a problem, not just its loss of territory or control over radical elements. The army cannot govern Pakistan but won't let anyone else govern it either. It's a chicken-egg situation, worsened by the total collapse of the economy and the withering away of state institutions. Right after Musharraf took over (in a coup that I thought was necessary), I suggested to him that the best course for the military would be to reset the system, allowing the Pakistani people to decide who governs them. He obviously rejected this and other advice.

Aqil Shah: I disagree with Steve that the 1999 coup -- or any past coup, for that matter -- was "necessary." There are two assumptions underlying this observation. One, that the military has the competence and the capacity to "reset" the system, and two, that military intervention is the default option when civilian governance falters. In fact, the military has neither such competence nor such capability, and coups are more often made by armed men who think they have the duty to "sort civilians out" whenever they deem it appropriate.

Sumit Ganguly: The military in Pakistan is bloated beyond all reason. Curbing its influence and inducing it to become a

activities, and end its support to jihadis of every stripe.

Christine Fair: I am dubious about this posited U.S. leverage so long as Washington depends on Pakistan for help with the war in Afghanistan. Russia's willingness to permit passage of nonlethal goods is a welcome development, but Russia doesn't share a border with Afghanistan, and there are also lethal goods that need to be shipped into the theater. These supplies can be airlifted, but it's costly. The bottom line is that the United States needs new regional partnerships to make its demands to Pakistan more persuasive. It also needs a new assistance paradigm that envisions the kind of Pakistan that is desired to emerge over the next 20 years and works to make that a reality. The United States and the international community need to invest in civilian capabilities in Pakistan. Domestic insurgencies are defeated by police forces with armies in support -- not by armies themselves. Yet the U.S. approach has been to support the army while spending little on civilian institutions, which only perpetuates and exacerbates the problem.

Stephen Cohen: Christine raises a critical issue, that Pakistan controls two vital choke points: access to Afghanistan from the south and east, and intelligence cooperation regarding jihadis who commute between Pakistan and other places (notably Europe). Past administrations in Washington were unwilling to forego Pakistani cooperation on security issues, something that gave Islamabad powerful cards. Will the Obama administration be able to develop alternative routes to Afghanistan that make it less dependent on Pakistani cooperation? Not anytime soon.

Ashley Tellis: The cruel fact is that there are only two efficient supply routes into Afghanistan, through Pakistan and Iran. The northern routes are too long and convoluted and run through too many independent states.

Sumit Ganguly: I think the argument that Washington needs Pakistan to supply Afghanistan is wearing a little thin, even if it is technically true. Let's face it: the Pakistani state is in hock. It cannot afford to give up the substantial rents that it earns from the supply routes. What would replace them? With global oil prices down, the Gulf states are hurting badly, so Saudi Arabia will not bail out Pakistan with any substantial infusion of cash. Nor is China likely to dole out huge sums of money.

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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20036-2103

Phone: 202 483 7600
Fax: 202 483 1840

Contact By Email