

PAKISTAN

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# Real and Imaginary Risks

**Risk analysts are getting it wrong in Pakistan. Fears of an Islamic state, or loose nukes – the capture of the nation's arsenal by extremists – will only come about if the west makes policy mistakes. Instead, long-term issues like climate change and population growth are the real threats.**



**P**AKISTAN IS A FASCINATING BUT disturbing example of risk assessment by the western media and policymakers, especially when it comes to developments in the Muslim world. There is an enormous amount of public and private discussion of the supposed extreme dangers stemming from Pakistan – sometimes described, as by the United States nuclear proliferation expert Joe Cirincione – as ‘the most dangerous place on earth’.

Fears are concentrated on the twin threats of Islamist revolution and of the state losing control of its nuclear deterrent to terrorists. In fact, these eventualities are very unlikely; or

rather, they could only happen as a result of US military intervention in Pakistan. We need to turn our risk analysis of Pakistan on its head and assess it, above all, in terms of US policy.

Meanwhile other, far greater long-term threats to its viability as an organised state and society are completely ignored, not just by the media and policymakers, but by most area specialists. These relate above all to the potentially catastrophic coming together, several decades in the future, of population growth and the effects of climate change on water supplies.

The fact that the greatest short-term risk of geopolitical disaster in Pakistan comes from US intervention means the effects of western

misinterpretation and exaggeration of risks in that country contribute directly to increasing those very risks, by making the likelihood of a US attack greater.

The western media's portrayal of the short-term dangers in Pakistan also encapsulates a whole set of wider problems in reporting and analysis: an obsession with attention-grabbing headlines; an indifference to careful research and the gathering of facts; and an inability or unwillingness on the part of analysts and journalists to think themselves into the shoes of political and military actors from other cultures – even when these are as close to traditional western thinking, as are most Pakistani generals.

## REVOLUTION THAT NEVER WAS

To take the two perceived threats: successful Islamist revolution anywhere in the Sunni Muslim world should be seen as unlikely, for the simple and logical reason that it has never occurred. The country that came closest to it in modern times was Algeria in the early 1990s, but that was via the ballot box. Even there the Islamists were crushed by the military, although with a hideous price in blood and atrocity.

Everywhere else, Islamist revolutionaries have so far been either defeated, or – in Turkey – have dropped their revolutionary agenda. The only major Muslim country which has experienced a successful Islamist revolution is Iran – and its combination of Shiism and nationalism make it very different from any Sunni majority country.

In Pakistan, every election result and opinion poll has demonstrated extremely limited Islamist support. Fifteen per cent of the vote was the Islamist parties' combined total at the last elections, ten per cent is the historical norm. You cannot carry out a revolution with such a small base, at least as long as the other state and political forces – and especially the military – retain any degree of determination and coherence.

Only in the Pashtun areas of the North West Frontier Province and northern Baluchistan has the Jamiat-e-Ulema party emerged – perhaps temporarily – as the largest, and that is very much the result of Pakistani Pashtun's ethnic sympathy for the real or perceived sufferings of their brother Afghan Pashtuns, and for the Taliban struggle. In the Pashtun areas, and especially the wild, indirectly governed tribal frontier, Islamist extremists really have made serious

inroads and taken over large areas.

Elsewhere in Pakistan, the extremists are nowhere near achieving this – and when they have tried, as in the attempt to turn the Red Mosque in Islamabad into an armed base, they have sooner or later been crushed by the military. They obviously pose a real threat of terrorism, as former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto learned to her cost – but while they can attack the state they cannot overthrow it.

## NUKES ARE SECURE

By the same token, there is no chance that Islamist extremists will be able to seize control of the country's nuclear forces, let alone that they will be given them by the military. To believe this is to misunderstand the entire character of the army, and the purpose for which it developed those weapons in the first place. Military history demonstrates the strength of its corporate identity and internal discipline; coups have without exception been carried out by the high command, not by mutinies of junior officers.

The strength of the army's collective identity is demonstrated, among other things, by the radically different characters and personal cultures of the country's various military leaders and chiefs of staff. Ayub Khan, who was President in the 1960s, was a secular aristocrat; General Zia ul Haq, who seized power a decade later was a deeply religious lower middle class Punjabi; General Pervez Musharraf is an educated Mohajir from India. All, however, were first and foremost shaped by their military service and loyalty.

Pakistan's nuclear weapons were developed by successive governments, from Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the 1970s on, not for 'Islamic' purposes, but as the last line of defence against a vastly militarily superior India, which was working on its own nuclear weapons. The same logic led NATO to prioritise nuclear forces during the Cold War with the Soviet Union.

AQ Khan, who led the Pakistani programme, and secretly acquired the necessary international technology and supplies, is not an Islamist but a secular nationalist. As for the idea that the military would give away its nuclear weapons to terrorists, or allow them to be seized by force, this is an absurd fantasy. As a Pakistani general put it to me, 'Do you think we'd cut off our own crown jewels?'



**Chatham House is organising a conference on the New Politics of the Global Economy: A World Without Rules on March 10 and 11. Professor Anatol Lieven will speak at this annual conference on political risk.**

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## TOUGH RESPONSE

By the same token, however, the military would fight hard if the US attempted to seize those weapons. As for a major and prolonged US military incursion into the tribal areas to crush Taliban support, Musharraf himself warned in January that this would bring a tough Pakistani military response.

If the Pakistani high command failed to order this, then in the view of friends with close links to the military, there would indeed be a strong likelihood of military units mutinying to go to fight the Americans themselves. At that point, of course, military-backed Islamist revolution and loss of control over nuclear weapons would come a giant step closer – but the immediate precipitant would be US action.

## CLIMATE THREATS

As for the much greater long-term threat from climate change and water shortage – set out in a sober but frightening World Bank report of 2004 – the objection can obviously be made that since these threats will only come to full fruition some two generations in the future, they are not worth bothering about now. At the very least, it may be argued, the danger is so far beyond the normal timeframe of government planning as to make international responses impossible. This is seriously mistaken.

In the first place, national and international action to limit climate change is intended to be implemented over many decades, and to avert threats that will only become truly disastrous generations from now. It is equally necessary to begin long-term action to mitigate those effects of climate change that are already visibly and undeniably occurring – in the case of Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, the melting of the Himalayan glaciers, with an inevitably severe effect on the future flow of the Indus, Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers, on which hundreds of millions of South Asians depend.

Quite apart from the direct threat to India from climate change, it is extremely unlikely that the Indian state could survive in its present form if the even more endangered states of Pakistan and Bangladesh on either side collapsed. At this point, every western,

international and Indian hope it will develop as a prosperous democracy would be swept away – along, perhaps, with India itself.

The ‘war’ on terror is also now being spoken of by western leaders, including US President George Bush and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, and by military staffs, as a conflict that will last for decades. The British Defence Secretary, Des Browne, has talked of a British military presence in Afghanistan continuing for thirty years or more. If this is so, then two generations down the line, when an existential water crisis risks kicking in, Pakistan will still be critical to western security, will still contain Islamist extremists – and will still possess nuclear weapons.

## DANGEROUS POLITICAL ANIMAL

The western failure to address the threat of water shortages also deprives aid donors of the chance to kill two birds with one stone in their approach to Pakistan. At present, far too much aid is either frittered away on small unconnected projects or going to try to improve education.

These are perfectly laudable aims, but they ignore a critical political factor, observed in the case of Al Qaeda and many previous Communist movements: better education can actually be counter-productive if not accompanied by measures intended to create large numbers of new jobs. There is no more dangerous a political animal than the unemployed or disappointed graduate. A massive programme of repairing and extending Pakistan’s water infrastructure to reduce the present appalling level of waste would create numerous jobs for unskilled labourers, as well as middle class engineers.

As Stephen Philip Cohen has written in his 2004 book, *The Idea of Pakistan*, ‘The Pakistani people must see tangible evidence that the government’s tilt in favor of the United States brings significant benefits to all socio-economic strata. Most aid is invisible to the average Pakistani, who cares little about debt relief or balance of payments problems. Without being obtrusive or boastful, the message should be that America is vitally concerned about Pakistani economic progress.’

As things stand, what most Pakistanis hear too often from US media and political sources – not from the Bush administration – are denunciations and threats – and worse still, these are threats that Washington would be crazy actually to implement.

