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Pakistan: Switching Enemies

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The 1947 partition of the subcontinent was traumatic for both Pakistan and India, resulting in hatred on both sides. Kashmir was the focal point of this enmity and almost immediately the object of a bitter war with a subsequent partition along a line of control which remains to this day. For Pakistan, India was not just a hypothetical or potential enemy, but a very real one. The third Indo-Pakistani War resulted in the loss of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh); Indian preparations with Soviet backing to invade and crush West Pakistan were apparently averted only by forceful objections and military moves by President Nixon. The region settled into an uneasy peace. India was the clear strategic threat.

Under these circumstances, building a strong Pakistani army was natural and necessary, and the decision to “eat grass” if need be in order to develop nuclear weapons was certainly understandable. Depending on your point of view, economic development was held hostage to military development, or economic development was necessarily postponed due to pressing national security threats. In any case, economic and social development languished.

Pakistan became a quasi-military dictatorship. For decades it was either ruled by strong military leaders, or by weak civil governments fronting for strong military leaders. The military became the key economic player in the nation, running a widespread network of commercial operations for its own benefit. It had a vested interest in maintaining an Indian enemy, the key element which justified its dominating position in the nation. Whenever a burst of patriotism was needed, it could be quickly generated by raising tensions in Kashmir and reinvigorating the specter of the Indian enemy.

The army developed what Leon Hadar termed a strong “military-mosque” nexus, providing measured support to more radical Islamic groups to reduce their

potential for internal disruption. Afghanistan, seen as providing strategic depth, was threatened by the Soviet invasion, particularly in view of the close Soviet ties with India. So Pakistan readily cooperated with the United States in undermining the Soviet position. In doing so, the army's Inter-Service Intelligence Agency (ISI) carefully controlled the flow of US support to selected groups, typically the radical Islamic ones who were most effective against the Soviets. When the Soviets left and the United States lost interest, Pakistan supported the takeover of Afghanistan by radical Taliban elements. Through the 1990s, Pakistan consolidated its position in Afghanistan and significantly expanded its missile and nuclear weapons programs. Incursions in Kashmir in May, 1999, threatened to escalate into a full scale war with India. Although Pakistan was pressured to back down, tensions there remained high. A military coup by General Pervez Musharraf on October 12, 1999, closed out with decade with another military government in place.

By 2000, the army's position had reached a zenith. It controlled the government, had a newly acquired arsenal of modern weapons, supported a client regime which almost totally controlled Afghanistan, and maintained a high state of tension in Kashmir, underlining the immediacy of the Indian threat.

This position of strength began to unravel with the World Trade Center attacks in September, 2001. Acceding to U.S. pressure, General Musharraf supported efforts to dislodge the Taliban and promote a Western-oriented government in Kabul. In doing this, he dismantled ties with radical Islamic groups which had been carefully built up over a 20-year period. Sections of the army, particularly the ISI, resisted these efforts and continued to provide support to radical Islamic elements both inside Afghanistan and in the Pakistani border areas. The extent to which General Musharraf covertly supported this continued support is unclear. But what is clear is that as U.S. attention to Afghanistan dwindled, the Taliban regrouped, radical Islamic elements took refuge in the Pakistani border regions and from there conducted increasingly effective operations within Afghanistan.

The situation in the Pakistan border areas became increasingly unstable. Struggles with the Soviets and then the Americans radicalized the border tribes; their leaders had no interest in being part of a democratic Pakistan, but rather in preserving their traditional independence from Islamabad. The existing cooperative administration by the army and tribal chiefs was replaced by more radical anti-government and fundamentalist control. The United States pressured General Musharraf and then the emerging civilian government of Yousaf Raza Gillani to take control of the border areas; more recently with some degree of tacit support from the Pakistani army or government, the United States has carried out a series of missile strikes against the radical elements with Pakistan.

With brutal tactics, and support and encouragement from al Qaeda, fundamentalist tribal groups in the border area have successfully repulsed army efforts to exert control. They have continued to support Taliban activities in Afghanistan and have expanded their actions into Pakistan proper. Most notably, they have taken effective control of the Swat Valley, negotiating an agreement with the Pakistani government to allow local government under Islamic sharia law. They

have also been directly involved in violent actions within Pakistan proper. This includes their apparent organizing of the assassination of Prime Minister candidate Benazir Bhutto in December, 2008. Much of the border area remains exempt from parliamentary authority. Political reform to incorporate the region into Pakistan proper is essential, extending Pakistani election laws and political activity to the region.

These events have significantly undermined the leading position of the army in Pakistani society. Instead of stressing the Indian threat, it has been ineffectually conducting an unpopular effort against tribal groups in the border area, undermining its position as protector of the nation. It has suffered real casualties and real costs while public attention has been diverted from India. A massacre in Mumbai in January, 2009, orchestrated by the Kashmir-based Lakshar-e-Taiba did bring new attention to India, but also resulted in the Pakistani government very reluctantly admitting that Pakistani elements had been involved. Rather than building more public outrage against India, the incident underlined the ability of radical groups to destabilize the international situation. A following suicide attack against a police academy in Lahore in March, 2009, further demonstrated the ability of radical elements to destabilize the internal situation in Pakistan.

The struggle against radical Islamic groups is widely seen as an American-inspired effort. For sixty years, the U.S. relationship with Pakistan has been purely transactional – the United States provided assistance when it needed Pakistani support (particularly against the Soviet in Afghanistan), then turned and pressured Pakistan when support was no longer required. The U.S. assistance was invariably to the military; the lack of democracy was decried and then ignored. There was minimal U.S. attention to Pakistan's own socio-economic development. With the attack on the World Trade Center, the United States again needed Pakistani support, again provided wide support to a military dictator, again ignored Pakistan's own needs. Indeed, there is even a widespread belief in Pakistan that the World Trade Center attack was orchestrated by the CIA to promote its anti-Muslim agenda. Radical insistence that U.S. actions are motivated by anti-Islamic sentiments, reinforced by depictions of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, resonate strongly with many Pakistanis. To put it mildly, there is strong public skepticism of Washington's motives. So the September, 2008, bombing of the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad which killed 55 people and wounded more than 200, increased concerns that the alliance with the United States is spurring the attacks. At that point, one survey showed that 64 percent of Pakistanis considered the United States as the greatest threat facing the nation.

Yet strategically, there has been a gradual transition as the overall situation has morphed to one in which India is no longer the primary threat. India has become much more focused on internal development; a real peace is possible. But this would seriously undermine vested interests who need the threat from India to justify their own position. Internal radical elements have become the primary threat to Pakistan itself, a threat to a prosperous, democratic, civil Pakistan. But not everybody wants a prosperous, democratic, and civil Pakistan. Vested interests in the military are wary of the democratic element, the loss of focus on an Indian enemy, and a consequent diminishing of the army's role

as the protector of the nation. Radical elements draw sympathy for a more dogmatic state, and with brutal actions silence many moderates. The main political parties focus on domestic squabbles. The current global economic recession further complicates this dismal picture by providing few positive examples of what cooperation with the West can bring. The public is left with competing ideological views and little vision of what Pakistan could be.

So India remains the main strategic focus, while actions against radical Islamic elements proceed in fits and starts. The public is simply not ready to acknowledge that these elements have become the core threat to Pakistan. They are highly suspicious of U.S. motives, hopeful that radical elements can be dissuaded from spreading violence into Pakistan proper, still very wary of India, and protective of Islamic values. It is difficult for the government, especially a weak government, to reverse sixty years of strategic orientation to promote befriending India and attacking Muslims. So strong government action against radical elements in the border area is unlikely. Indeed, it would probably solidify anti-government sympathies in the border regions and spread atrocities into Pakistan proper; the United States would inevitably be blamed for such violence. This is a situation which has developed over decades and will not be resolved by short-term changes.

The core challenge is to develop a vision of a democratic, prosperous Pakistan, outline credible steps toward this goal, and provide visible evidence that the nation is moving in that direction. Projected U.S. aid now includes a significant element focused on domestic development. Such development could not only build support for the civilian, democratic government, but could also moderate and eventually change the broadly negative views of the West in general and the United States in particular. This effect was clearly visible from U.S. humanitarian aid after an October, 2005, earthquake in Kashmir; unfortunately that aid was soon discontinued without any systematic follow up.

The importance of public diplomacy cannot be overestimated, the need to build a public opinion which focuses on positive social development and rejects the excesses of fundamentalist intolerance and brutality. Radical elements have been very effective at building a picture of a rabidly anti-Muslim United States, at depicting U.S. actions against radical elements as insults to Pakistani sovereignty, and at intimidating moderate leaders – Bhutto's assassination being only the most prominent example. And their efforts to provoke India distract attention from internal Pakistani challenges.

But the radicals have also overstepped their appeal. Brutal attacks, including the attack on the Lahore police academy (which radicals publicly claimed responsibility for) have increased public concern that actions in the border areas will spread violence into Pakistan proper. But the attacks are a two-edged sword, also demonstrating the threat which radical elements pose to Pakistan proper and vividly displaying their indiscriminate brutality. Similarly, much of the Pakistan public has been appalled by a widely distributed video of the public flogging by the Pakistani Taliban of a young woman in the Swat Valley.

Stabilizing Pakistan and developing effective anti-radical policies in the border areas requires a long-term effort promoting Pakistan's socio-economic

development, strengthening democratic and legal systems, and building a recognition that the core threat to a prosperous, democratic Pakistan is no longer India, but the extreme radical elements within the country.