

## **The Geopolitical Importance of Pakistan**

### **A Country Caught between the Threat of “Talibanisation” and the Return to Democracy**

**by Dr. Heinrich Kreft**

The murder of Benazir Bhutto on 27 December focused world attention on a country which is generally overshadowed by its large neighbour and regional rival – India, a country with which Pakistan has repeatedly been involved in armed conflict.

Pakistan's geopolitical importance is underestimated, though it is an important factor in the stability of South and Central Asia. Neither a resolution to the Kashmir conflict nor lasting peace in Afghanistan will be possible without Pakistan playing a major role. And international terrorism can only be effectively fought through close cooperation with Islamabad. At the same time, not only is Pakistan the only Muslim nuclear power – it is also facing the threat of state collapse due to Islamisation, hence the view pronounced by *The Economist*, and shared by others, that Pakistan is "The world's most dangerous place".

#### **Military Dominance in State and Society**

When General Pervez Musharraf came to power by means of a coup d'état on 12 October 1999, he was continuing a long tradition of direct military leadership in Pakistan. Of the 60 years since its foundation, Pakistan has only had a civilian leadership for 23 years. It was not until 1970 that the first free elections took place.

The Pakistani military, which is held in relatively high esteem by the population, is not only politically dominant; it also wields a strong influence over large sections of the business world and other areas of society. The army's importance stems from the difficult situation when the state was founded in 1947 and the ongoing conflict with India over Kashmir.

Even a crushing defeat like the one suffered in 1971 in the conflict with India, resulting in the secession of East Pakistan as Bangladesh, only interrupted this tradition for six years. In 1977, General Zia-ul-Haq overthrew Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in a military coup and subsequently ordered his execution.

In 1979, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan placed Pakistan on the front line of the Cold War. It received extensive American military support and its secret services, the Inter-Service Intelligence, or ISI, trained mujaheddin for their fight against the Soviet invaders in Afghanistan. Since then, Pakistan has wielded considerable influence over its western neighbour.

## **Strategic Interests and a Difficult Neighbourhood**

Ever since its independence, Pakistan has been confronted with territorial claims from Afghanistan on parts of its Northwest Frontier Province; Afghanistan has never accepted the inclusion of this area in Pakistan following a referendum in July 1947. And Afghanistan, with its Pashtun majority, has never accepted as the Pakistani border the Durand Line demarcated by the British, which divides the area inhabited by the Pashtun people.

Jammu and Kashmir are the Alsace and Lorraine of South Asia. Ever since Indian and Pakistani independence, the issue of which country these regions belong to has been at the epicentre of political tensions in South Asia. The intensity of the dispute over this region, with its majority Muslim population, stems from the strong symbolic importance it has for both sides: for the Pakistanis it is the identity of their state as the country of Muslims which is at stake, whilst, for the Indians, the region symbolises the secular constitutional nature of the Indian Union.

Yet the conflict between Pakistan and India has also always been about power politics. The Pakistani elite has never been willing to accept Indian hegemonic ambitions in South Asia and has thus sought to ally itself with foreign powers – first with the US and later with China.

Pakistan is considerably smaller and weaker in economic and political terms, as well as in military terms. Following its disastrous defeat by India in 1971, it began to work on its own nuclear programme. When India exploded a total of 5 nuclear devices on 11 and 13 May 1998 and declared itself to be a nuclear weapon state, Pakistan was hot on its heels. Thus, the Pakistani-Indian conflict had gained a nuclear dimension. Yet the nuclear balance has not really served as a deterrent, since armed conflict between the two states was perpetuated through the use of non-state players. This was the case in the Kargil crisis in 1999, when Pakistani fighters infiltrated the Indian part of Kashmir and were brutally forced out by the Indian army.

When the trail of the terrorists responsible for the December 2001 attack on the Parliament in Delhi led to Pakistan, a renewed crisis erupted between Pakistan and India in the summer of 2002, bringing with it the threat of possible nuclear escalation.

Recently, though, the relationship between Pakistan and India has improved tangibly. In autumn 2003, both sides agreed on a ceasefire and, in February 2004, they entered into a "composite dialogue". Both sides have given a lot of ground. In April 2005, President Musharraf and the new Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh declared the peace process to be irreversible.

## **Afghanistan and the Fight against Terrorism**

Following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan was concerned about the prospect of a nationalist Pashtun government in Kabul, which would renew its claims to the areas inhabited by its ethnic brothers in Pakistan and might once again cultivate good relations with India to this end. In order to counter this threat, Islamabad sought to install a Pakistan-friendly government in Kabul – also in order to provide greater strategic depth in the event of a new conflict with India.

With this purpose in mind, Pakistan set up and supported the Islamist Taliban from the beginning of the 1990s, aiming to counter Pashtun nationalism with a religious fundamental ideology. It is therefore not surprising that Pakistan was one of the few countries to recognise

the new Afghan government when the Taliban took power in Kabul in 1996. Yet, in the wake of the attacks of 11 September 2001 in New York and Washington, which were planned in Afghanistan, Islamabad was forced to abandon its protégé regime in Afghanistan and cooperate with the US in the fight against transnational terrorism.

The presence of the US and the international community in Afghanistan remains highly important for Pakistan in geostrategic terms. Were they to withdraw – either having succeeded in their mission or as the result of an escalation of violence – Pakistan's strategists fear the forging of a new alliance between Kabul and Delhi. That is why the Pakistani leadership is extremely worried by the fact that India has established a large number of consulates in Afghanistan, particularly close to the Pakistani border. Such fears lend plausibility to accusations that Islamabad is not ready to wholly relinquish the Taliban card completely.

Relations between Islamabad and Kabul are currently characterised by deep mistrust, particularly on the Afghan side. The Karzai government accuses Pakistan of having allowed the Taliban to regroup following their defeat and escape to Pakistani territory, and of failing to prevent them infiltrating Afghanistan. The areas used as safe havens and supply routes by the new Taliban groups operating in Afghanistan are mainly in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) along the Pakistani-Afghan border.

In response to pressure from the US, the Pakistani armed forces carried out comprehensive military operations against militant groups there in spring 2004, resulting in considerable losses on the Pakistani side. The traditional tribal structures which existed there had become increasingly radicalised due to decades of influence from religious extremists. In the tribal areas of North and South Waziristan and the bordering areas of the Northwest Frontier Province, Islamist groups were carrying out a policy of "Talibanisation" - which is now seen by some observers as a threat to Pakistan's very existence.

### **Growing Islamisation and Threat of Terrorism**

In the areas bordering Afghanistan, Islamism has taken hold and is expanding its influence. Its supporters are ready to use violence and model themselves on the Afghan Taliban. This "Talibanisation" has now spread via the numerous religious schools (madrasas) to Pakistan's cities, as demonstrated by the lengthy disputes concerning the Red Mosque in central Islamabad last summer. The bloody storming of the mosque was followed by numerous attacks on the security forces. It seems likely that conflict between Islamist and secular/liberal forces will intensify further in the years to come.

In this sense, Pakistan is reaping what was sown by General-President Zia-ul Haq and several of his successors, including Musharraf. These leaders supported an Islamisation of Pakistan in the hope of cementing the legitimacy of their own regimes and using religion to counter Pashtun nationalism, which posed a threat to the country's cohesion. On a number of occasions, President Musharraf has proved unwilling to take more rigorous action against radical Islamist organisations until coming under international pressure.

This was the case, for example, following the bloody attacks of 7 July 2005 in London, when the trail of the bombers led to Pakistan, and it was also the case with the failed attacks in Germany last summer. Although President Musharraf has decreed that Pakistan's 50,000 to 80,000 madrasas will be subject to the same controls as state schools, this edict has only been half-heartedly translated into action.

Yet the threat of "Talibanisation" of the whole of Pakistan of which there has been so much talk should not be exaggerated, since particularly in the country's two most important provinces – Punjab and Sindh – the opposing secular forces are strong. This was demonstrated by the robust public support for Benazir Bhutto on her return from exile, as well as for Nawaz Sharif - both of whom stand for a moderate form of Islam. Even the moderates amongst Islamist political activists have now rejected jihad as a instrument of foreign policy and are endeavouring to achieve their goals within the existing legislative framework.

Yet it is important to halt, and as far as possible reverse, Talibanisation of the Pashtun border areas, in order to banish the risk of destabilisation of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The key to bringing peace to the Tribal Areas near the border is to ensure their economic development and political integration. Indeed, this is something which has been recognised by the Pakistani government and the international community, and the international community has now provided considerable resources to this end. Yet, as on the other side of the border in southern and eastern Afghanistan, implementation of such development projects and programmes is hindered considerably by the poor security situation.

### **Return to Democracy or Talibanisation?**

President Musharraf had dominated the political scene in Pakistan after his coup in 1999. Yet, from the spring of 2007 he has come under increasing pressure from a heterogeneous opposition, which may succeed in forcing him to resign this year. His decision in March 2007 to suspend the Chief Justice, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, who was a thorn in his side politically, triggered an unexpected mass movement in support of judicial independence; the protests led to one of Musharraf's first major defeats, when the Chief Justice had to be reinstated.

President Musharraf achieved re-election by the two chambers of the national parliament and the four provincial assemblies on 6 October. Yet, faced with the probable annulment of his election by the Supreme Court, he was only able to cling to power by declaring a state of emergency on 3 November. This led him, among other things, to fire the Supreme Court judges, replacing them by compliant judges who promptly rejected the constitutional complaint filed by the opposition.

On 28 November, in reaction to pressure from the international community, he handed over command of the army to the former head of the ISI military secret services, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, a personal ally. On 16 December, and partly against the background of the parliamentary elections scheduled for 8 January, he ended the state of emergency, though he did not reverse all the measures taken to shore up his power.

Last autumn, in reaction to pressure from the US and UK, a rapprochement began between Musharraf and the popular ex-Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, who had returned from exile. The Pakistan Peoples Party was expected to win the elections and a power-sharing arrangement between the President and Benazir Bhutto as Prime Minister was widely expected. The assassination of Bhutto and the subsequent bloody unrest were taken by many to be a portent of the country's descent into political chaos, with Islamist groups, supported by sections of the army and secret services infiltrated by Islamists, able to gain power. This apocalyptic scenario of a geopolitically important atomic power with access to delivery systems falling into the hands of extremists and terrorists – in other words the Talibanisation of Pakistan – was beginning to take shape.

Yet it would seem that the rapid decline in popularity of President Musharraf, who is seen by a majority of the population as being partially responsible – at least indirectly – for the death of Benazir Bhutto, is scarcely benefiting the Islamists. Instead, it is the traditional parties and civil-society groups calling for a return to democracy which are gaining ground. A poll carried out by the US International Republican Institute (IRI) in November found that 35% of those questioned supported Bhutto's PPP, whilst 25% supported Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League. If the elections due to take place on 18 February are free and fair, both these parties can count on an additional sympathy vote, whilst the radical Islamist parties are seen as having little chance.

The elections will be decisive in determining whether there can be a successful return to democracy. The West must do everything possible to allow democratic elections, by dispatching an adequate number of electoral observers and exerting sufficient pressure on President Musharraf. Musharraf's political survival depends on whether his alliance with the PPP can come about without Benazir Bhutto, which seems doubtful.

Bhutto's widower, Asif Ali Zardari, is now the PPP's most influential figure. He spent considerable time in prison under Musharraf on corruption charges and shares a deep aversion to the President with Nawaz Sharif, who was toppled from power and forced into exile by Musharraf's coup in 1999.

This makes a coalition between the PPP and the Muslim League possible, something which would not have been possible prior to Benazir Bhutto's death. This coalition might be successful in achieving a two-thirds majority in Parliament on 18 February, allowing it to reverse Musharraf's constitutional amendment and thus force him out of office. The army too, anxious to protect its reputation, might have an interest in withdrawing from civilian life. In a scenario of this sort, it would then only have to be hoped that the new democratic majority, having removed Musharraf from power, would be able to build the stable government needed to tackle the country's urgent problems, which are driving a section of the population towards extremism. This is something which both democratic and military governments have failed to do in the past.

*Remarks:*

*Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.*



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