

Asia-Pacific Security Studies



Pakistan's Transformation: Why It Will Not (and Need Not) Happen

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Key Findings


Pakistan's reputation is receiving a battering from its numerous American critics as brutal as any suffered in its past.

The battering focuses on four categories of Pakistan's strategic behavior: Islamic extremism and terrorism, democratic restoration and reform, nuclear proliferation, and Kashmir and India-Pakistan relations. Pakistan's critics demand fundamental change in all of them.

Its critics notwithstanding, Pakistan's radical strategic transformation is most unlikely to happen because it would sacrifice Pakistan's vital national interests. More importantly, to sustain a cooperative and mutually beneficial U.S.-Pakistan relationship, Pakistan's strategic makeover is not necessary.

There are three main reasons why Pakistan's strategic overhaul need not happen. First, the matter of Pakistan's transformation has far too often been cast in the most extreme terms. Second, there are ways to achieve U.S. objectives in the region short of requiring Pakistan's fundamental makeover. Third, there are reasons to consider modification of U.S. regional objectives themselves.

In sum, the "transform or else" attitude that underlies criticisms of Pakistan needs replacement by a pragmatic point of view that measures Pakistan's policy performance not by its conformity to a set of ideal behaviors but in terms of its immediate and tangible contributions to American policy objectives.



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Pakistan & Its Detractors

In his maiden public address as Pakistan's newest envoy to Washington, Ambassador Jehangir Karamat told a Brookings Institution audience on 15 December 2004 that there was a "major strategic reorientation" underway in Pakistan, that Pakistan under President (General) Pervez Musharraf had made a decisive break with its past, and that it was time for Pakistan to be let off the hook of its calamitous history. He was disarmingly frank about his country's past policies: They had included "active interference and destabilization of Afghanistan," "hostility and confrontation with India," "appeasement and political expediency with extremist religious elements," and pursuit of "a clandestine nuclear program with proliferation consequences"-all done under the sponsorship of "vendetta oriented political leaderships and dictatorial regimes ...". The reorientation, he insisted, wasn't "eye wash"; it was "for real" and "irreversible."

Karamat, who at one time commanded the Pakistan Army, appeared to have been well briefed on the image of Pakistan-a country seemingly teetering on the brink of rogue statehood-most likely to be present in the minds of many of the event's attendees. The reason for the image's widespread acceptance was simple: Mainstream America, in spite of Pakistan's enlistment in the anti-terrorist coalition in October 2001, had been fed since then a steady diet of alleged Pakistani misdeeds along with gloomy assessments of the potential for reform. In fact, the year just ended witnessed a battering of Pakistan's reputation by its numerous American critics as brutal as any suffered in its past.

The battering came from the media, prominent academics, penetrating reports of prestigious think tanks and NGOs, as well as from both the congressional and executive branches of government. Their criticisms did not carry the same weight. Pakistanis might be able to dismiss as mere partisan polemic, for example, such articles as appeared in the April 2004 issue of *Current History*-one by Alyssa Ayres ("Musharraf's Pakistan: A Nation on the Edge") referring to Pakistan "as an unstable, untrustworthy mess," another by Sumit Ganguly ("Pakistan, the Other Rogue Nation"), rebuking Washington for its "craven" acquiescence to Pakistan's nuclear weapons program and "the seemingly uncritical American coddling of yet another squalid dictator."

But Pakistanis could not so easily dismiss the bluntly-phrased criticisms of their country's recent policies contained in the officially-authorized and widely read 9/11 Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, released in July 2004. The Report, many of whose comments on Pakistan were repeated almost verbatim in the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act signed into law by President George Bush on 17 December 2004, warmly commended Musharraf's endorsement of a strategy of "enlightened moderation," and it also expressed the Commission's belief "that Musharraf's government represents the best hope for stability in Pakistan and Afghanistan"-but not before it had chided Pakistan for fence straddling when it came to confronting Taliban remnants and other Islamist extremists, the hazardous bartering away of its nuclear technology, and noticeably sluggish progress in the restoration of democracy. Given the clear implication that a fun-

damental change in Pakistan's behavior was expected, Pakistanis could not avoid concluding from the Report that Washington's commitment to them was conditional in nature and that their government had been put on tacit probation.

No one depicted Pakistan's probationary status and the expectation of comprehensive transformation that went along with it more bluntly than Ashley J. Tellis, erstwhile senior advisor to Washington's previous envoy to New Delhi, Ambassador Robert Blackwill, and now Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. In an article entitled "U.S. Strategy: Assisting Pakistan's Transformation" published in the Winter 2004-05 issue of *The Washington Quarterly*, Tellis summarized the shortcomings in Pakistan's policies and then identified measures that Washington could take to assist in their transformation. His critique of Pakistan was blistering; and he acknowledged more than once his deeply rooted pessimism that its current leadership was capable of ushering in a genuine transformation. In fact, Tellis seemed to be arguing less for Pakistan's transformation, which was up against Herculean odds, than for U.S. policymakers to brace for continuity in Pakistani behavior, to take a more skeptical view of Pakistan's commitment to reform, and thus to set their sights prudently on a far more limited relationship with Pakistan than its designation on 16 June 2004 as Major Non NATO Ally (MNNA) might have warranted.

Transformation's Limits

There are compelling reasons why Pakistan's comprehensive strategic makeover will not happen. Observers generally define the makeover as embracing four broad categories of the Pakistan government's policy behavior: Islamic extremism and terrorism, democratic restoration and reform, nuclear proliferation, and Kashmir and India-Pakistan relations. Radical overhaul of policies falling under even just one of these headings would clearly entail huge risks. Attempting to overhaul them all at once would ensure that changes would come, at best, in small increments and at a snail's pace. That Pakistan's transformation has its natural limits is thus a widely conceded truism. How to define these "natural limits" is controversial.

Islamic Extremism & Terrorism

Musharraf has been unequivocal in his public denunciation of terrorism. Moreover, Pakistan under his leadership can rightfully claim to have played a role in the global fight against terrorism at least as constructive as that of Washington's other allies. Musharraf also stands out among the world's Muslim political leaders for the political audacity he has displayed in seeking to move Pakistan in the direction of what he terms "enlightened moderation"-a progressive interpretation of Islam that would have a very low threshold of tolerance for religious fanaticism. Top U.S. officials have repeatedly showered praise upon him for taking these stands. In January 2004, the Commander of the U.S. Central Command, General John Abizaid, offered the remarkable testimony that "Pakistan has done more for the United States in the direct fight against Al Qaeda than any other country." Official

accolades notwithstanding, nothing Musharraf has said or done in regard to terrorism or religious extremism in the last three years appears to have made much of a dent in the deep distrust-bordering sometimes on downright hostility-characterizing American thinking about Washington's reliance on him.

The depth of Pakistan's public image predicament when it comes to terrorism becomes apparent even in the seemingly objective analyses produced by America's leading think tanks. Witness the RAND Corporation report written by Christine Fair (The Counterterror Coalitions: Cooperation with Pakistan and India), published at the end of 2004. In a 55 page chapter entitled "Pakistan: An Uncertain Partner in the Fight Against Terrorism"-the most knowledgeable discussion to date of U.S.-Pakistan relations from the perspective of the war on terrorism-Fair deftly catalogues a host of reasons for regretting Pakistan's partnership in the war on terrorism. They include: (1) divergences in American and Pakistani threat perceptions and objectives, including, notably, "only a slight agreement as to who is a terrorist and what constitutes terrorism," and a conspicuous gap in how Washington and Islamabad react to India and the intractable conflict over Kashmir; (2) serious shortcomings in Pakistan's law enforcement and internal security measures, including a dilatory approach to the collection of firearms, failure to suppress financing of terrorism, highly selective targeting of terrorist organizations, and extremely halfhearted efforts at education, including madrassah reform; (3) powerful domestic political constraints in Pakistan, including rampant anti-American sentiment and the existence of a large and dangerous pool of committed militants; and (4) a host of liabilities arising "from Pakistan's fiscal weakness and pervasive dearth of resources, including human capital, facilities, infrastructure, and effective bureaucratic culture."

Adding immeasurably to the uncertainty apparent in Fair's account about the longer term fidelity of Pakistan's leadership to the anti-terrorist struggle is the belief that Pakistan's Army is in bed with the country's religious conservatives-that it depends heavily on them not only for its domestic political legitimacy and for the street power they can mobilize, when needed, against the military's natural enemies, the mainstream and religiously moderate liberal forces, but also for the material support they give to the military's adventurous regional foreign policies. The religious conservatives, even though a marginal force at the polls, are thought nonetheless to wield exceptional influence in the country's ruling circles, especially within the intelligence bureaucracy. Musharraf and his overwhelmingly secular Establishment allies necessarily pander to the extremist elements, in other words, constantly nurturing the bonds they have built with them even as they, from time to time, vilify extremism in public. The result of this military-mullah marriage of convenience has been to turn Pakistan, in Fair's eyes, into a nesting ground for religious militancy bearing an unsettling likeness to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. According to her, if it "cannot stem the current trend, Pakistan will become the next safe haven for terrorists operating in the region. Jose Padilla's sojourn in Pakistan (Brooklyn-born Padilla is imprisoned on suspicion of having conspired with al Qaeda to build a so-called dirty bomb) demonstrates that to a considerable extent Pakistan already has become the next best thing to the Afghanistan ruled by the al Qaeda-Taliban complex." Clinching

the case for Fair and many others that Musharraf is a "marginal satisfier" who will do the bare minimum expected of him is the seeming timidity his government has shown when it comes to education reform, especially of the religious madrassahs. They are widely reviled as the main breeding ground for extremists, and, hence, a major obstacle in the path of Pakistan's desired transformation to model Islamic statehood. No theme has been given greater publicity by Pakistan's critics. The result has been to raise substantially the bar of expected Pakistani behavioral change in regard to madrassahs. Many observers appear to agree wholeheartedly, in fact, with Fair's judgment that "the only long-term solution to stemming the trend toward conservatism in Pakistan is to aggressively reform and co-opt the madrassah system, so as to create a literate Pakistani polity with viable employment prospects in a rehabilitated economy." But to put the issue as sweepingly as this is clearly, as Fair herself admits, to delay the solution for a generation or more.

The problem highlighted in Fair's work is that Pakistan's fidelity to the counterterror coalition is measured largely in terms of the country's indigenous shortcomings, what some call its cultural pathologies. As countless others have contended before her, Fair argues that religious fundamentalism is what is driving Islamist violence; shut down the institutions promoting religious fundamentalism and you will also be shutting down the violence. This is, of course, a convenient way to describe the problem. It relieves one of the need to consider the possibility that the Islamic jihad has little to do with religion and a lot to do with the political and strategic interests-some local, some global-that have been clashing fiercely in the region in the past several decades. "Ascribing the violence of one's adversaries to their culture," observes Mahmood Mamdani in a recent review essay in *Foreign Affairs*, "is self-serving: it goes a long way toward absolving oneself of any responsibility."

No wonder, then, that the "unprecedented levels of cooperation" between Pakistan and the United States reported in December 2004 in an updated Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report for Congress fail to impress many observers. Set against the startling accounts of Pakistani misdeeds on the extremist-terrorist front narrated in both Fair's book and Tellis' "U.S. Strategy" article, published in the same month, the prosaic CRS findings that "Islamabad [since October 2001] has captured 550 alleged terrorists and their supporters, and has transferred more than 400 of these to U.S. custody, including several top suspected Al Qaeda leaders," and that "Pakistan also has been ranked third in the world in seizing terrorists' financial assets" inevitably-and unfairly-fall on deaf ears.

Democratic restoration and reform

On 20 December 2004, Freedom House released *Freedom in the World 2004*, the latest in its annual survey of political rights and civil liberties. Pakistan, for the first time in well over a decade, found itself placed in the 'Not Free' category-a public relations debacle reserved this year for 49 of the 192 countries in the survey. On 30 December, as if to confirm the survey's ratings, Musharraf told the nation in a televised address that he would stay on as Chief of Army Staff, breaking a pledge he had given the Pakistan parlia-

ment a year earlier to hang up the uniform by year's end.

Musharraf's action sparked renewed insistence that greater weight be assigned to democratic reform in the U.S.-Pakistan equation. Tellis' "U.S. Strategy" article, published on almost the same day as Musharraf's announcement, helped set the parameters of debate. In the article, Tellis calls to task the 9/11 Commission, asserting that its conclusion that Musharraf's government represents the best hope for stability in Pakistan is "deeply problematic." Democracy promotion, including pressure on Musharraf to relinquish the position of Army chief at an early date, says Tellis, must be a priority in Washington's relationship with Pakistan's current rulers. Musharraf's decision to remain at the head of the Army, which Tellis anticipated, should not deter Washington. "If Pakistan," he says, "is to become a moderate Muslim state that exists in peace with itself, its neighbors, and the international community, its political process must be reformed."

Musharraf's decision not to relinquish his military role was, of course, merely the most recent in a steadily lengthening list of actions by his government-including, for instance, the harassment of opposition politicians and journalists, amendments to the constitution giving him sweeping power to sack both parliament and the prime minister, erosion of the judiciary's independence, and rigging of elections-that had drawn earlier fire from pro-democracy advocates. The defiant and uncompromising tone in which he delivered his decision appeared to foreclose any quick or major transfer of power to the civilian government elected two years ago. His defense of his decision on grounds that it would ensure the smooth running of democracy; that it was the opposition itself, in trying to make political capital of the issue, that was "threatening the democratic process"; and that, in staying on as Army chief, he was only bowing to the will of the majority in parliament unquestionably had Orwellian associations. To the chagrin of his political opponents, Musharraf gave every indication that he neither expected nor feared any major backlash from his decision, whether from Pakistanis themselves or from the international community.

The decision Pakistan's critics have taken to elevate democratic reform to a key position among the criteria of dependable strategic partnership is arbitrary. It ignores the potential costs to Pakistan's regional security of a downsizing of the military; and it also ignores the possibility that the Musharraf regime's democratic successors might be more beholden to public opinion-and under more pressure, therefore, to draw back from close collaboration with Washington-than was its Army-dominated predecessor.

In any event, the military possesses, and appears utterly determined to retain, a commanding role in the country's political setup. Functioning civilian-led democracy is clearly on hold in Pakistan; and it is highly unlikely that it will advance beyond that category in the foreseeable future-whatever may be the mood of distrust about Pakistan found among many American observers.

Nuclear Proliferation

On 23 November 2004, the Central Intelligence Agency posted on its website an unclassified report to Congress in which it identified the principal culprits involved in the covert global sale and acquisition of technology relating to weapons of mass destruction.

The report discreetly avoided implicating Pakistan's leadership directly. However, it fingered "the A. Q. Khan network" repeatedly as an important supplier of nuclear technology to Libya, Iran, and North Korea. On 30 December 2004, the same day on which Musharraf announced his decision to remain in uniform, an editorial appeared in the Boston Globe with the title "Pakistan's Secrets." It voiced the complaint of many in America that Musharraf's pardon of Dr. Khan, the effect of which was to shield him from impartial interrogation, "exacerbates a global security threat." Invoking the by-now common description of Dr. Khan's activities as "the world's worst case of nuclear proliferation," the editorial declared: "It is ultimately more important to prevent nuclear proliferation than to maintain a veneer of good relations with Musharraf."

Musharraf's government has fought back against attacks of this sort by labeling the assertions of proliferation critics as "insinuations and unproven allegations" and by citing the "strong custodial measures" it has taken to preclude any further proliferation episodes. In his Brookings Institution address, for example, Ambassador Karamat offered the reassuring statement to his audience that "national regulatory and command authorities are in place with clear chains of command. Compartment and separated storage have increased security. Human, technical and surveillance measures are in place for security. Personnel reliability programs have been implemented. There are fool proof accounting and audit arrangements. Legislation has brought in export controls.... There is total cooperation and the emphasis of investigations is now on the international network that made proliferation possible."

Assurances of this kind were up against a wall of disbelief, however, in the face of persistent questioning of how Dr. Khan could possibly have made a profession of international nuclear salesmanship without the military establishment's knowledge and tacit consent. Musharraf's pledge, in a face-to-face meeting with President Bush on 4 December 2004, that all information about the Khan network's nuclear dealings would be turned over to the Americans gave promise of Pakistan's cooperation in shutting down the international nuclear black-market; but it could not undo the fact that the country's premier nuclear research facility-the A. Q. Khan Research Laboratories-had been mercilessly exposed as an accomplice to the marketing of lethal nuclear technology. That, plus the fact that the India-Pakistan nuclear arms and ballistic missiles rivalry had lost none of its intensity, made it virtually certain that Pakistan would remain for some time under a nuclear cloud of suspicion.

Kashmir & India-Pakistan Relations

On 7 January 2005, Pakistan's Secretary of Water and Power Ashfaq Mehmood told a news conference in New Delhi that a third and final day of bilateral dialogue with his Indian counterpart over the controversial Baglihar dam on the Chenab River in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir had ended in stalemate. It was Pakistan's intention, he said, to invoke a never-before-used provision in the 1960 Indus Water Treaty with India calling for World Bank mediation. Scheduled to go into operation as early as

December 2005, the Baglihar hydroelectric project has drawn official Pakistani protests ever since it was begun in 1992. Pakistan claims the design, height, and storage capacity of the dam violate the 1960 treaty; India claims they do not.

Though relatively minor in comparison with other issues dividing Indians and Pakistanis, the long-running conflict over Baglihar may hold some revealing lessons about prospects for resolution of the Kashmir dispute and about improvement in India-Pakistan relations in general. The Baglihar dam is in the final stages of construction. For India to back down now would mean it would have to absorb substantial material (not to mention domestic political) losses. It seems apparent that New Delhi is unwilling to do that. It is equally apparent that Pakistan, which is already in the early stages of a monumental water resource crisis, is not inclined to trust New Delhi's word when it comes to safeguarding its rights to the waters of the three rivers guaranteed for its future use by the 1960 treaty. Viewed against this backdrop, the many bilateral measures India and Pakistan have taken in the past year or so to build the foundations for permanent peace between them—including a successful ceasefire on the Line of Control, reductions in force deployments in Kashmir, restoration of air, rail and bus ties, and people-to-people exchanges—share a common Achilles' Heel: Their vulnerability, quite unlike the changes Pakistan demands in design of the Baglihar dam, to reversal in the twinkling of an eye. These agreed measures are not trivial; but neither do any of them put at risk either side's fundamental national interests. Were the "comprehensive dialogue" now in progress between India and Pakistan suddenly to develop signs of extensive trespass on such interests, as perhaps happened in the case of Baglihar dam, one may wonder whether the rival governments' seeming enthusiasm for it would long survive.

The most important lesson of Baglihar, in other words, may well be that, when fundamental national interests are at stake, bilateralism is a dead end. The inescapably lopsided power balance in the region, with India by far the mightier state, sees to that. Accordingly, a fundamental transformation in their relationship is, at best, a distant prospect. It is easy to declare, as Tellis does, that "the core challenge in the strategic realm is to mitigate the Pakistani military's perception of permanent, inevitable conflict with India" and then to call for an "accommodation with New Delhi that both preserves Pakistan's dignity and resolves the vexing dispute over Kashmir." It is a whole lot harder to bring this about.

Making Do With Realism Rather Than Transformation

Having said that Pakistan's comprehensive strategic transformation will not happen, it remains to point out the reasons why—in so far as sustaining a cooperative and mutually beneficial U.S.-Pakistan relationship is concerned—it need not happen.

First, the matter of Pakistan's transformation has far too often been cast in the most extreme terms. This applies whether the focus has been on the rogue state model—statehood "on the edge"—from which Pakistan is expected to flee, or the model statehood toward which it is fervently urged to advance. Neither rogue states nor model states are much in abundance on the planet. The vast

majority of states, including Pakistan, fall somewhere in between. The scale of change demanded of Pakistan in discussions driven by the transformation perspective is often breathtaking. "[T]he transformation of Pakistan as a state," says Tellis, "requires not only strategic, economic, and political reform but also the revitalization of Pakistani society.... [to include] correcting gender inequalities, containing ideological mobilization, improving civil society, and selectively expanding state control." Minimally, he says, these aims will need "regulating, restructuring, and controlling the madrassas ...; slowly beginning dewatering in accordance with the army's post-1990 plans; investing in targeted health care and in the education of women, especially in rural areas; working with nongovernmental organizations ... to invest in programs to strengthen political parties, student organizations, press and media organizations, and governmental institutions; and initiating rural and infrastructure development programs for the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, ..." These solutions, he adds, "only touch on the actions required to assist Pakistan's transformation into a modern state."

Transformations on this scale have been witnessed in few, if any of the world's fifty odd Muslim states; and the societal overhauls implicit in them have almost never been realized—certainly not in a time span reckoned in anything less than decades—anywhere else in the non-Western world. Reckoned in terms of current policy-relevance, Pakistan is thus bound to come up short. Washington, unless it is prepared to cut off relations, has no choice but to settle for less, considerably less, than model Pakistani statehood. It is urgent, to put the matter simply, to lower the bar of expectations to more realistic levels.

Second, there are many ways to achieve U.S. objectives in the region. Pakistan's transformation is one of them; India's is another. Unfortunately, transforming either of them presents insurmountable obstacles. Washington has yet to give a convincing demonstration of its ability to wean Pakistan from its Kashmir policy, for instance, and, as for transforming India's, Tellis is correct to point out that "the United States has neither the incentives nor the capability to compel India to alter its goals in Kashmir." Rather than focusing upon either state's unlikely transformation, therefore, Washington would be better advised to use its policy assets to transform the relationship between them. More carefully balanced conventional weapons sales are one obvious way to do this. Support for interstate collaborative projects that take advantage of the region's interlinked energy and water resource futures is another. For starters, however, Washington needs to jettison, once and for all, the poorly advised determination, inherited from the Clinton administration, to "decouple" its relations with India and Pakistan. As Fair points out, "[r]elations with these two bitter rivals cannot truly be decoupled in practice until the major source of security competition between them is resolved—that is, the disposition of Kashmir." Decoupling, in other words, is not a realistic prospect. It must not be permitted to distract Washington from lesser but more achievable goals.

Third and most important, there may well be reason to consider modification of U.S. regional objectives themselves. Having South Asian regional policy pivot around the war on terrorism asserts a priority for counter-terrorist operations that is absolutely

not shared by the publics of either India or Pakistan, and that the two governments naturally reinterpret anyway to suit their local circumstances-whether or not their interpretation is in harmony with Washington's aspirations. Pakistan has been put in a position by America's overarching focus upon the global war on terrorism that virtually guarantees a major gap between Washington's goals and Pakistan's compliance. Pakistan cannot be expected to give unconditional support to a war on terrorism seen by most Pakistanis as a war on Islam. Insistence on terrorism's primacy, in

other words, almost guarantees the policy behavior engaged in by Pakistan fueling the arguments of its American detractors. In sum, the "transform or else" attitude that underlies many of the arguments of Pakistan's makeover advocates needs replacement by a pragmatic point of view that measures Pakistan's policy performance not by its conformity to a set of utopian ideals but in terms of its immediate and tangible contribution to American policy objectives. About this, there is plenty to debate; but at least the outcome of the debate will not already have been decided.



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