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S U M M A R Y

The risk of an Islamist takeover in Pakistan is a myth invented by the Pakistani military to consolidate its hold on power. In fact, religious political parties and militant organizations are manipulated by the Pakistani Army to achieve its own objectives, domestically and abroad. The army, not the Islamists, is the real source of insecurity on the subcontinent.

Sustainable security and stability in the region will be achieved only through the restoration of democracy in Pakistan. The West should actively promote the demilitarization of Pakistan's political life through a mix of political pressure and capacity building. Enlarging the pool of elites and creating alternative centers of power will be essential for developing a working democracy in Pakistan. ■

Pakistan: The Myth of an Islamist Peril

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The fear of an Islamic threat has been the driving force behind most Western countries' foreign policies toward Pakistan in recent years. The possibility that violent Islamists will kill President Pervez Musharraf, throw Pakistan into turmoil, take over the country and its nuclear weapons, and escalate regional terrorism has dominated the psychological and political landscape. Such fears have usually led to support of the Pakistani military as the only institution able to contain the danger.

But the Islamist threat is neither as great nor as autonomous as many assume. True, Pakistan has experienced more than its share of religious violence, both sectarian and jihadi. But serious law-and-order problems do not mean the fate of the state is at stake. No Islamic organization has ever been in a position to politically or militarily challenge the role of the one and only center of power in Pakistan: the army.

On the contrary, the Pakistani Army has used Islamic organizations for *its* purposes, both at home and abroad. Islamist organizations balance the power of rival mainstream political parties, preserving the army's role as national arbiter. The army has nurtured and sometimes deployed violent Islamists in Afghanistan (with U.S. support at first), Kashmir, and other hot spots on the subcontinent.

Although the army's control is solid, the situation is not without risks: a few of the militants have turned against the army because of Pakistan's "betrayal" of the Taliban and cooperation with the United States in Afghanistan and in the "war on terror." Moreover, the infrastructure that supports regional sectarianism and Kashmir-Afghan jihadi activities can be hijacked for international terrorism, as demonstrated by the July 2005 London bomb blasts. The risk of a nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan, triggered by attacks similar to the ones carried out by the terrorist group Lashkar-e-Toiba in Delhi after the October 2005 earthquake, cannot be dismissed either.

Yet evidence is scant that these organizations pose an uncontrollable threat. Also, a Pakistan headed by an Islamist party would not necessarily be unstable. In fact, in the existing power setup, politico-religious organizations have often been used to channel popular resentment in a socially and politically acceptable way, preventing unrest.

What the West perceives as a threat to the regime in Pakistan are manifestations of the Pakistani Army's tactics to maintain political control. The army uses its need for modernist order to justify its continued claim on power and, with



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it, a substantial part of state resources. This de facto army monopoly on power is preventing the emergence of a truly democratic, economically sound Pakistan.

The Pakistani military is the main source of insecurity on the subcontinent, making it necessary to challenge the common perception and policy in the international community that stability and security depend on not pressuring military sovereigns such as Musharraf. Orderly army retrenchment is a necessary but insufficient condition for progress, hence the need for new approaches and alternative policies.

Myth of an Islamic Threat

A distinction should be made between religiously inspired political parties and organizations, and sectarian or jihadi groups. Political parties participate in electoral politics and seek power and influence through democratic means; jihadi groups resort to violence. Links exist between the two: jihadi groups are often (but not always) the fists of political organizations. Notwithstanding occasional mutual reinforcement, politico-religious parties play legitimate roles and will be important to Pakistan's democratization, but sectarian or jihadi groups behave outside legitimate bounds of any civilized polity.

Politico-Religious Parties:

Real but Limited Popular Support

Any analysis of the electoral weight of Pakistan's religious parties needs to note that, unlike in many Arab states, they do not operate in a political vacuum. No matter how manipulative the Pakistani military has been in its dealings with mainstream political parties, it has been careful not to destroy them. The left-leaning Pakistan People's Party (PPP) is constrained in its ability to oppose the government, yet it still functions as the single most important political party in the country. The Pakistan Muslim League may have become a puppet organization whose unique *raison d'être* is to generate support for Musharraf's policies, yet it occupies a defined political space and prevents the Islamic parties from filling that space. Other organizations play similar roles.

When Islamic organizations develop rivalries and compete in elections, they perform according to their perceived capacity to answer voters' demands. Religious parties have been integrated within the traditional political game, but the competition keeps their appeal and power balanced. Political competition arose naturally as well as at the behest of the army, which recognizes the value of being able to balance multiple forms of opposition. By keeping all parties weak and allowing a plurality of parties to compete, the army insinuates itself as the indispensable arbiter of politics.

No objective observer believes that Pakistan's Islamic parties have a chance to seize power through elections in the foreseeable future. Historically, when the Islamic parties have participated in elections, they have captured between 5 percent and 8 percent of the vote, with the notable exception of 1988 when they reached 12 percent. In the 2002 elections, the alliance of religious parties called the Muttahida Majlis Amal (MMA) collected 11.1 percent of the vote. As impressive and worrying as this total appears to some, the Islamist vote remains limited to slightly more than one-tenth of the electorate despite heavy manipulations in its favor by the state machinery.

Islamism, Stability, and Security

When Islamic parties gain local power—usually by political manipulation as in parts of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Baluchistan, stability and security are no better or worse than in areas controlled by their secular alternatives. When Islamic parties are in opposition, they are used by the regime as a vessel to receive and channel popular dissatisfaction. The religious parties' low mass appeal makes them less threatening to the military establishment than the more popular PPP.

Demonstrations organized by the MMA during the Iraq War, for example, bolstered a Pakistani government caught between popular opinion hostile to the war and the government's need not to alienate the United States. Most observers in Pakistan believed in 2003

that the Iraq War would unleash a series of protests and terrorist attacks. Preparations were made and security was reinforced, yet, not a single incident occurred.

Musharraf, representing the dominant army, got the government's message out, and the leaders of the large Islamist political parties and even key terrorist organizations followed it. Before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Musharraf told a group of businesspeople in Lahore that Pakistan would be the next target of U.S. military punishment if it continued to be perceived as a state supporting terrorism. Pakistan's possession of nuclear weapons only raised the likelihood of a U.S. strike. It was time for radical groups in Pakistan to lie low and go along with the state's cooperation with the United States. Qazi Hussein Ahmad, leader of the Jamaat-e-Islami, and more radical players such as the Lashkar-e-Toiba, followed along. The remarkable calm showed the sunny side of the patron-client relationship between the Pakistan state establishment and key Islamist parties and forces.

An Islamist Army?

The Pakistani Army, which largely controls the major Islamist organizations, could be infiltrated by Islamist actors who could then seize leadership through a coup d'état or regular promotion. Although the military remains opaque, there is so far no evidence that it has been widely infiltrated, much less controlled, by the Islamists. It seems that the army reflects the society: Although Islamists are undoubtedly present, there is no reason to believe that their numbers are significantly greater than in the rest of Pakistani society.

Even if the top echelons of the army hierarchy were to be occupied by Islamists, it would be extremely unlikely to change the course of Pakistan's foreign policy. Islamic parties often provide no more than an Islamic rationalization of existing foreign policies on which a convergence of interests already exists. For example, the Islamic parties provided an Islamic rationale for fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan. The similar quest to control Muslim-majority parts of Kashmir, or

at least to deny Indian sovereignty over Kashmir, is constant in both the modernist and Islamist discourses. When Islamic parties get close to power, they often adapt their discourse to political realities, and sometimes they just drop Islamic rhetoric. Pakistan's rapprochement with the United States following September 11, 2001, for instance, was criticized by religious parties on geopolitical grounds, not ideological ones: Islamist parties argued that siding with the United States would alienate China and Iran, more important friends to Pakistan.

By focusing on only Islamist militancy, Western governments confuse the consequence and the cause: The army is the problem.

Sectarian Violence and Stability

Religious violence, in particular sectarian violence—distinct from religious political parties—is sometimes seen as a more serious source of instability in Pakistan. Sectarian violence is indeed a serious problem with deep social, political, and geopolitical roots. It is a consequence of the 1947 partition of the subcontinent, which deeply affected the demographic balance of some areas in Pakistan. Migrants who went to what is now Pakistan's Punjab province simply moved from the eastern portion of what had been the united Indian Punjab. The vast majority were Sunni, uneducated, and either serving in the armed forces or working as farm laborers. Many landless laborers started working on the farms of Shia landlords. Their poverty led to deep resentment, and this marginal group, deprived of both resources and political representation, soon became angry.

If conditions on the ground formed the kindling of sectarian violence, General Zia ul-Haq lit the match. Fearful of Shia activism following the 1978–1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, Zia inflamed Sunni fears and mobilized Sunni militants. With the notable exception of

Nawaz Sharif, all successive Pakistani governments have continued to manipulate sectarian tensions for political purposes. With the support of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the Pakistani government also found in the sectarian organizations the unofficial manpower it required to sustain Pakistan's interests in the conflicts in Afghanistan and Kashmir.

As sectarian conflict has intensified in Pakistan, the army has been accused of having created an Islamic Frankenstein it could no longer control. Yet, careful examination shows that the army, including the ISI directorate, has always been able to maintain violence at an "acceptable" level by dividing

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groups, generating infighting every time an organization became too important, and sometimes physically eliminating uncontrollable elements. Azam Tariq, leader of the Lashkar-e-Janghvi, the most lethal sectarian Sunni terrorist organization, was assassinated on October 5, 2003, for example.

The army nevertheless cannot maintain total control. In December 2004, two suicide attackers nearly succeeded in assassinating Musharraf. Some extremely militant groups have become so estranged by the army leadership's turn to the United States that they are beyond the government's control. In November 2003, when Musharraf banned fifteen to seventeen violent sectarian organizations, other similar organizations that are useful in Afghanistan and Kashmir were merely kept on a watch list. Although sectarian violence is a serious law-and-order problem, it is not a threat to regime stability in Pakistan.

Legitimizing the Army's Political Role

There is more than simply an "objective alliance" between the military regime and the

religious organizations, be they political or militant. Both are integral parts of the military system of dominance.

The perpetuation of a party system in what is otherwise an authoritarian regime is not the consequence of army benevolence or a sudden conversion to democracy following Zia ul-Haq's death. The military knows that the appearance of formal democracy is essential as it deals with the West. Democratic facades also provide the military the opportunity to withdraw behind the scenes while still holding the reins of power and letting civilians deal with the difficulties of running a government.

The presence of Islamic parties is a useful foil to reinforce the regime's legitimacy abroad and to pressure secular parties domestically. In Pakistan's October 2002 elections, after the fighting and removal of the Taliban from power in Afghanistan, the MMA won political countrywide representation far beyond its real political support. Having failed to secure the support of the PPP, the military systematically favored the MMA by redefining electoral districts and rigging the election whenever necessary. Military representatives later suggested that the result went beyond their initial expectations.

The MMA's rise to power in the North-West Frontier Province, in particular, enabled the Musharraf regime to point to the mullahs and tell the United States, in effect, "If you don't listen to me and give me what I need, the mullahs will take over. And if you push me too hard to change, I will be thrown out; and then you will be sorry." Yet, the MMA did not create a meaningful domestic political constraint for the government. On the contrary, the relatively strong presence of the MMA in Parliament allowed Musharraf to pass the constitutional amendments necessary to transform the parliamentary system into a presidential one and institutionalize the political role of the army through the creation of the National Security Council.

Simultaneously, the violence generated by the sectarians gives credence to the existence of an Islamic threat and reinforces the army's role

as the only institution able to physically control it. In that sense even the tiny fringe of sectarians that is in open rebellion against the regime unintentionally helps to legitimate it. By threatening individuals, they reinforce the regime.

Potential events such as an assassination of Musharraf have to be considered in this perspective. His death would not significantly shift the power center of the country. Pakistan would most probably experience the brief uncertainty inherent to all transitions, but the nature of the regime would not be fundamentally altered, be his successor military or civilian. Instead of being sidelined, the army would feel violated as an institution and most probably would react most energetically.

The external constraints that affect Pakistan today would remain unchanged or would even increase as the new leadership would be an object of intense scrutiny on the part of the international community and, in particular, the United States. The temptation, already there, of a change of policy on Kashmir or Afghanistan would persist, but changes would be just as difficult to implement as they are now. Similarly, the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons would not be altered because the army, as an institution, is responsible for it. One should not exaggerate the danger implied by the possible disappearance of Pakistan's current head of state, notwithstanding the human tragedy of such a loss.

Policy Implications

This analysis does not mean everything is well in Pakistan or that the terrorist threat should be dismissed. It simply means that by focusing on only Islamist militancy, Western governments confuse the consequence and the cause: The army is the problem. Whatever the nuisance capabilities of sectarian and jihadi groups, they were a creation of the army and remain by and large under the army's control. These groups were first offered a role in the management of the country's foreign policy, particularly in Afghanistan, during Zia ul-Haq's dictatorship, but their role—in Kashmir, Tajikistan, and elsewhere—was perpetuated by Zia's successors as suited the needs of the military establishment.

Moreover, the army never confuses abstract ideological considerations with geopolitics. In its bid to control Afghanistan, for example, the army supported in succession two ideologically different organizations, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami and the Taliban, whose only similarity was their Pashtun character. When it was expedient, the army drew a clear distinction between internationalist organizations such as Al Qaeda, whose impact on Pakistan's foreign policy was negative and whose members could be traded for Western goodwill, and regional organizations whose usefulness in Afghanistan or Kashmir had to be preserved.

Three consequences follow:

- Western governments should not let fear of an Islamist threat distort their dealings with Islamabad. Neither in Kashmir, where infiltrations had resumed before the recent earthquake, nor in its Afghan policy is the Pakistani Army constrained by majority public opinion or any specific constituency, be it Islamic or anything else. Changes in policy merely reflect changes within the army (that is, the balance of power among the leading generals), not domestic pressures or Islamic influences. It is unwise and unnecessary to heed arguments that one should not press the Pakistani president hard to crack down on militants in Kashmir and Afghanistan for fear of causing his overthrow by extremists.

- Western governments may believe that arms sales will buy the army's participation in the West's campaign against terrorism and also perhaps more Pakistani cooperation in blocking proliferation, but such sales will also increase the Pakistani military's leverage to block major internal reforms. Arms sales are understood as implicit approval, or at least consent, for the military's policies and diminish incentives for reform. From a security point of view, arms sales will be at best neutral if they do not affect the current balance of power between India and Pakistan, but they are in no way the solution to Pakistan's domestic security problem.

- Western governments undermine their own interests by invoking the "Islamist threat" to

justify support of military regimes. This approach has contributed to the perception in the Muslim world in general, and in Pakistan in particular, that democracy is something to be applied selectively. Restoring democracy in Pakistan should be a priority.

Alternative Scenarios?

The real question is whether true demilitarization of Pakistan's polity can be achieved.

Historically, the Pakistani Army has occasionally withdrawn behind the scenes whenever it could not fulfill the economic, social, and political expectations of society or when international pressures were too strong. However, the army never really gave

up power. The withdrawal was always accompanied by a redefinition of the political system through changes in the constitution, cooption of the political elite through economic policy, and the distribution of key civilian jobs to retired generals whose link with the army remained decisive (see box below). Thus, the army has been able to control the main levers of power while civilians have had to bear the burden of day-to-day government.

After they are in government, civilians face the almost impossible task of balancing the imperatives of civilian politics with the sensitivities of the military's top commanders, a task exacerbated by civilian leaders' lack of

Snapshot of Pakistan Army Influence

PAKISTAN ARMY: **550,000**

GENERALS IN PAKISTAN: **770-940** (including Brigadiers)

U.S. ARMY: **502,000**

GENERALS IN THE U.S: **881**

Military and Education Expenditures in Pakistan, 2000-2004 (as a percentage of GDP)

Expenditures	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004
Military	4.50	4.70	4.70	4.40
Education	1.96	1.98	2.14	2.70

Cabinet Post Held by Retired General

- Minister of Education: Retired general, former director general of Inter-Services Intelligence

Administrative Training Institutions Run by Retired Generals

- National Institute of Public Administration at Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar, Quetta
- Pakistan Administrative Staff College, Lahore

National Universities Controlled by Retired Army Officers

- Air University, Islamabad
- Bahria University, Islamabad
- Baluchistan University of Engineering and Technology, Quetta
- Lasbela University of Agriculture and Marine
- National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad
- National University of Science and Technology, Rawalpindi
- Punjab University, Lahore
- Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad
- University of Engineering and Technology, Lahore
- University of Peshawar

Military-Affiliated Foundations

- **Army Welfare Trust.** Banking, insurance, real estate, cement, pharmaceuticals, shoes
- **Bahria Foundation.** Commercial complexes, shipping, pharmaceuticals, bread manufacturing, boat building, engineering work
- **Fauji Foundation.** Fertilizers, power generation, breakfast cereals, sugar mills, natural gas
- **Shaheen Foundation.** Air cargo, TV broadcasting, real estate, knitwear

SOURCES: *The Military Balance 2005-2006* (London: International Institute of Strategic Studies/Routledge, 2005); military expenditures: *SIPRI Yearbook 2005* (Stockholm: SIPRI/Oxford University Press, 2005); education expenditures: Ministry of Education (Islamabad: Government of Pakistan).

governmental autonomy. They have not and could not have performed better than the military. This, in turn, discredited democratic politics in Pakistan. A formal transfer of power to a civilian head of state who, in principle, is acceptable to the military institution is a necessary yet insufficient step toward real democratization of the country.

Strong internal and external political pressures will be necessary to reform the regime because the army will not voluntarily empower civilian institutions. Countries whose assistance, arms, and counsel Pakistan needs should condition economic and military aid on steps toward genuine democratization and development. Such conditionality is often claimed but rarely enforced; it is time to get serious with Pakistan.

Sustained progress can come only through enlarging the pool of elite talent and power in Pakistan. Today, access to the levers of political, economic, and social power runs entirely through military channels. Alternative channels of bringing qualified people into power must be opened if the army is to return to its barracks.

To achieve what can only be a long-term objective, Western governments should engage now with the Pakistani government in a massive and sustained effort of capacity building to reinforce Pakistani institutions in the country's social, economic, and political life. Education at all levels (including higher education) and administration are prime targets for a concerted international effort.

But here again, Western governments must insist that they and their money not substitute for what is primarily the Pakistani government's responsibility. The approach here matters as much as the amount spent. The Pakistani government should be made to assume its responsibilities through the West's policy of strict conditionality: Objectives must be measurable, and not a single dollar or euro should be spent for Pakistan's development without some substantial financial and human resource commitment by the Pakistani government (or the private sector with government incentives). Pakistan's government has always managed to induce the

international community to pay for a substantial part of Pakistan's development expenditures, while most of the state budget has been spent on military expenditures and debt reimbursement. It is essential to ensure that government money be spent for the benefit of Pakistan's people and at the same time maintain the constraint of sound financial management of the country.

The army will be tempted to resist this effort if it perceives that it is aimed at marginalizing the army. But the army is caught in a dilemma as it also realizes that the weakness of Pakistan's human capital is undermining the country's technological capabilities and economy and therefore its effort to narrow the gap with India. The army is likely, ultimately, to accept conditionality, believing that it will be able to control its scope and direction.

This effort, if accompanied by sustained economic investment, will favor over time the development of a substantial middle class that is likely to demand more participatory governance.

Enlarging the pool of civilian elites and developing the middle class will not be sufficient, however, if these transitions are not accompanied by an equally strong effort to develop a true democratic culture in Pakistan. Again, a mix of political pressure and capacity building is essential. The army must be pressed to stop interfering in the media and in political life, but political parties themselves must be pressed and encouraged to adopt democratic practices. Foreign governments should make a point of not inadvertently adding to the irrelevance of opposition parties, and official foreign visitors should consider opposition parties as legitimate interlocutors whenever they visit Pakistan.

As difficult, as protracted, and as expensive as this strategy may be, it is important to remember that constant support to the Pakistani Army and to regimes whose legitimacy is questioned by Pakistan's population has led to resentment and suspicion of the West and has not significantly improved either Western or South Asian security. ■

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