

# Pakistan's existential threat

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WHEN searching for the 'elusive truth', it is useful to not rely solely on the so-called experts but also seek out the poets and novelists. A brilliant new novel, *The Wasted Vigil* by Nadeem Aslam, a British author of Pakistani origin, more than the myriad expert accounts may help us better understand the conflict raging in our region.

The book, set in Afghanistan, has one of the main characters, a man named Marcus, talking about the country. He says, 'The entire world it seemed had fought in this country, had made mistakes in this country, but mistakes have consequences and we don't know whom to blame for those consequences. Afghanistan itself? Russia? The United States? Britain? Arabia? Pakistan?' Another telling

line from the book is: 'Only the dead have seen the end of war.' In the wake of the horrific Taliban killings of innocent civilians and attacks even on mosques, that quote brilliantly captures the mess that we face in Afghanistan and Pakistan today. Until the two countries themselves decide to sort out their affairs, no amount of external assistance will help do the job.

In Pakistan, it would be a disservice to look at this current conflict solely as an Afghanistan issue because Pakistan too faces the same wars within. There is a continuous battle between what the government of Pakistan wants, irrespective of its complexion, and what the people of Pakistan want. Our history clearly indicates that whenever we have experienced long periods of autocratic rule, particularly military rule, the result is a stunting of all democratic systems and institutions of civil society.

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It is equally critical that we factor in the economic crisis affecting Pakistan today. In a highly urbanized society where the poorest strata spend up to two-thirds of their income on food, an inflation rate in the double digits constitutes a near insurmountable challenge for the government. In addition, the country is facing power, water, and even sugar shortages, as oligopolist cartels ensconced in government and in parliament maintain their hold on scarce resources at the expense of the common person.

**A**utocracy stunts democracy in Pakistan: unfortunately, any civilian government that inherits power from an autocratic regime in Pakistan too ends up acquiring all the trappings of autocracy that preceded it and is loath to part with them. That is exactly the situation in Pakistan today. General Pervez Musharraf had hijacked a parliamentary system and made it into a presidential system. The current regime essentially continued that system and only now is slowly being forced to shed those powers. But until that autocratic system is fully reversed, normal political development in Pakistan will remain a dream.

I am reminded of Yogi Berra's famous aphorism that when you get to a fork in the road, take it! That is the Pakistani situation. We are forever at that fork and we are forever taking it, not knowing where we might end up. It is ironic that it was the Pakistan Army that helped stage a free and relatively fair election in 2008 and has now been elevated to the rank of most respected national institution in a poll done by the International Republican Institute. As the most organized and disciplined agency in the land, the army exerts enormous power in all spheres, especially on the Afghan war, the fight against internal militancy, Kashmir, and nuclear issues. That army is now

under direct attack by the militant Tehreek-e-Taliban and its partners.

As for Afghanistan, it is now quite clear that the United States went in without a comprehensive plan for winning the war beyond the military ouster of the Taliban. This was evident in its shift of focus from Afghanistan to Iraq, a completely unnecessary war. There was no concerted effort at ensuring the socioeconomic rehabilitation of the country after decades of war, or even on forming a coalition with all the countries in the region, including India, China and Iran to help stabilize the situation.

Further, the US failed to proactively help Pakistan transform its own army and Frontier Corps into a counterinsurgency force by equipping and training it for that purpose. Having been in a kind of reactive mode since 2001, it is only recently that it realized that it did not even know what was happening to all the money it had given to Pakistan.

**A**nother point worth remembering is that the insurgency inside Afghanistan, or the civil war as some call it, is in part fuelled by some internal issues. For instance, Afghanistan has so far not shown any willingness to address the grievances of the Pakhtoons against the excesses of the Northern Alliance in the wake of the US invasion. That is a deep hurt which apparently still affects thinking in the Pashtun belt of Afghanistan and Pakistan, enhancing support for the Taliban on both sides of the Durand Line.

It should by now be evident to all that the United States cannot win the war in Afghanistan without the full and willing participation and support of Pakistan, its army, and its general population, especially with the new civilian administration in place inside Pakistan. But equally, the US must remember that it cannot win by align-

ing itself to any single party or any single individual, as was evident in the misplaced reliance on General Musharraf after 2001. Simultaneously, we must keep in mind that neither capitulation to nor confrontation with US interests in Afghanistan, and especially in FATA, is the right approach. Rather, engagement and a joint effort to eliminate the causes of militancy inside both Afghanistan and Pakistan are far more likely to work.

Another point – and this comes from my own visit to FATA and NWFP – is that the Pakistan Army is seen as an alien force inside FATA. With the Frontier Corps having lost its efficacy over the years, both the army and the Frontier Corps appear ill-equipped and ill-trained for counterinsurgency warfare. What compounds their difficulty is that they are now operating against their own people.

We also need to admit that the traditional system of governance inside FATA, the Federally Administered Tribal Area that abuts Afghanistan, which involves the government's political administrators and the largely compliant tribal *mullahs*, has failed. It has been displaced and supplanted by a different system under which new renegade leaders and religious leaders have assumed greater importance. We must recognize that the old system cannot be restored in its entirety, and if it is at all to be used, can only be as a finite and transitional mechanism.

**F**inally, no plan for FATA will work unless it involves the local people and they are given a responsible role in the implementation of the plan. Simultaneously, we have to ensure that all efforts are made to stem the leakage of funds or resources by the privileged few, and that there is equitable sharing of opportunities and finances. On my visit to North Waziristan I had the

opportunity to speak with 23 tribal *maliks* in North Waziristan and it was amazing how clear-headed they were on their needs. Their needs are very basic and no different than the needs of people living in the United States or China or India or Pakistan: water, education, and primary health care. All they want is an equal opportunity to be able to order their lives.

On the military side, let me begin by quoting General David Petraeus, a key person engaged in evolving a new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan that might allow the United States to exit the area with honour. 'You cannot shoot your way out of an insurgency. You have to recognize that the military-civil equation is 20 per cent military and 80 per cent civil and political.' So whatever the focus of the US relationship with Pakistan, it must not allow the military-to-military relationship to overshadow the relationship with the civilian government on the one hand and with the people of Pakistan on the other. If it only concentrates on the government and loses the support of the general population of Pakistan, as it has over the last few years, then whatever the approach taken, it is doomed to failure.

In the absence of a national consensus on what Pakistan wants and what kind of society the people of Pakistan want to have, the only option before the government – once the Tehreek-e-Taliban (the homegrown version of the Taliban in Pakistan) came into being and started attacking the military and civilian administration in FATA as well as in the settled area of Swat, Dir and Chitral – was to send in the army. The policy continued even after the new government took over, even though the military had briefed the civilian government on what had happened in the past and asked them for direction about the future.

But in the absence of an overall civilian direction, the army was sent in almost as a default option, moving in the equivalent of six infantry divisions into FATA and Swat. But the Pakistan Army is a conventional force, whose posture has always been to be prepared for an eventual war with India, in case India – choosing its new strategy of 'cold start' – decides to shoot first and ask questions later. In having to move six infantry divisions from the strike force that faces India, the Pakistan Army suddenly felt vulnerable, a fact that must be recognized.

Further, the army did not have all the necessary tools for its operations. The Frontier Corps had over time deteriorated, no longer attracting the best officers from the Pakistan Army. And of course, all the soldiers are locally recruited. Thus, while they may be suitable for minor policing, when used in a war-like situation to fight people from their own tribal system and their own tribes, the result is ambivalence. Although efforts have been made to improve the Frontier Corps, poor training and morale affects performance. And in the face of a well-paid cadre of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), possibly their emoluments too need to be enhanced.

Also, the locals impressed on the Frontier Corp soldiers that they were fighting on behalf of the infidels. Many of the officers in the army that I spoke to saw themselves as an alien force, not surprising given the demographics of the army. Though Pakistan has an army that represents all the provinces, but since the Punjab has the largest population, 60 per cent of the military force in Pakistan is Punjabi. In my travels in North Waziristan, for instance, it struck me that even army officers posted there for over two years still did not speak

any Pashto. There was a clear disconnect. Nevertheless, despite these handicaps, the Pakistan Army has rapidly adapted to the emerging situation and learnt on the move.

In the Swat district, which is part of the settled area of Pakistan, the army has been learning by doing. Yet, it is very difficult for a military institution to change. Even the United States Army has taken a long time since the invasion of Iraq to learn many of the lessons of counterinsurgency. One such lesson is to engage insurgents and militants on all fronts, without ceding any intellectual or physical space. A military operation launched in Swat was called Mountain Viper. The name might as well have come out of the Pentagon; it meant nothing to the local population, nor the soldiers. It essentially ceded religious ground to the militants who claim to speak for Islam, wanting to bring shari'a (the Islamic code of ethics and law) into this area. However, nobody countered them by stating that this was not shari'a; that the militants were introducing a convoluted version of Islam; that they were mixing local custom and calling it shari'a. Shari'a is what we know to be Islam and what the majority of Pakistanis want it to be!

Subsequently, the commander of the first division sent into Swat launched a new operation. He used a Farsi and Urdu term, Rah-e-Haq, for that operation, which meant that it was part of the true faith or the truth. He publicized it in order to tell people that the army was acting on behalf of a government that believed in Islam and the true faith and that the insurgents were miscreants who were following a heretical path. The operation was far more successful. The lesson is clear: we have to fight using both brains and guns.

The other interesting development is that local people have now understood that the militancy and the presence of Al Qaeda, foreign fighters, as well as Afghan and local Taliban, is creating economic costs, besides causing death and destruction of their property. This has led to a spontaneous upsurge against the militants, in part primed by money from the government, and the setting up of 'lashkars' of local tribes. Historically, such lashkars have been drawn upon by the administration either at times of civil unrest or to quell criminal activity, because traditionally it has been the responsibility of the tribes to resolve such issues. So the political agent would approach the tribal mullahs who would then form a group to resolve the problem.

In Bajaur, we saw an instance of such spontaneous formation, particularly among the major Salarzai tribe. Mullah Zaib Salarzai, the leader of the tribe said, 'The Taliban fighters and commanders are of humble background and thus not in a position to challenge the lashkar. They will be eliminated in a few days.' He promised the army that if these people (the Taliban) did not leave their area, they would be killed and their property destroyed. To me this appears a good way to approach the problem—encourage the local population to take care of it.

The Pakistan Army was initially slow and took time to acquire the necessary knowledge about counterinsurgency. A favoured strategy was to isolate the militants and the insurgents from the rest of society. Normally this would involve placing the military with the population and providing security from within, not remaining in fortresses and camps outside. Instead, the army in Bajaur asked the people not involved with militancy to evacuate.

Thus anybody who chose to stay behind was by default seen as a militant. The trouble with such an approach, however, was that it created unhappiness among the displaced people, more so since not enough planning had been done by the civilian agencies to accommodate them in the middle of winter, to provide them with shelter, food and clothing or to rehabilitate them when they eventually return to their homes. This is now a key element, a kind of doctrinal shift within the Pakistan Army, from a tactical use of counterinsurgency measures to forging a combined strategy with the civilians.

Earlier this year, when the Taliban's atrocities in Swat provoked a major military operation, the army was prepared: it coordinated its efforts with the air force, identifying and pounding targets before the land forces moved in. Meanwhile the local population was evacuated. However, here too, a lack of planning was evident and only some 200-300,000 of the two million internally displaced persons were accommodated in official camps. The population at large housed the rest privately. Though a testimony to the strength of civil society, it exposed the weakness of civil administration.

A similar approach was followed later in the year in South Waziristan, the headquarters of the TTP. For one week the Pakistan Air Force attacked some 140 plus identified targets. Then the army moved in and ousted the TTP. It has since followed up with attacks in Orakzai, Kurram and Khyber, reducing the ability of the Tehreek to regroup in other parts of the border region. The TTP in turn has taken suicide attacks to the heart of the country and directly to army headquarters, even attacking mosques where militiamen and their children pray.

We also need to recognize the abiding fear inside Pakistan, as well as in its army, of a powerful India to the East and particularly its potential of becoming a regional hegemon. Until that issue is resolved, there will always be ambivalence about fighting the war within: should we retain our conventional force or should we be concentrating on unconventional approaches and weapons?

The army also strongly feels that the United States has been niggardly in its support, denying them the equipment they require. The night-vision goggles originally provided by the US were of mid-20th century vintage. They only operated ten nights of the month, failing to work in bright moonlight. This has now been rectified. The helicopters needed to move troops rapidly over this vast area, an arc that goes from South Waziristan all the way up to Dir and Chitral, were not forthcoming. Only one squadron was initially equipped by the US for that purpose. Though 27 Cobra helicopters were promised, not all were delivered with alacrity. Another squadron was recently produced for the Waziristan operation but some are already out of service due to lack of spares. Meanwhile, when additional US forces were recently deployed in Afghanistan, hundreds of helicopters suddenly became available and were seen as critical to overcome the problem of rough terrain and mobile warfare. None of this went unnoticed by the Pakistani Army, adding to the distrust between allies.

Over time, there is a need to move away from a purely military solution and strengthening the military alone. There is a need to adopt an approach that will engage the United States with the civilian population of Pakistan and, through them, with the

government of Pakistan. This alone will allow economic development in Pakistan to be kick-started. In this regard, President Obama's new Afghanistan strategy of December offers some hope. As its operational details become clear and if they address Pakistan's concerns that the US will not simply be pushing the Taliban into Pakistan and then attacking them with increased drone attacks, we may see progress.

The Pakistan Army is already overstretched fighting the domestic Taliban. It cannot open up a new front against the Afghans who flit between Afghanistan and Pakistan's border region. Pakistan is especially concerned about the drone attacks moving to Balochistan, an action that may inflame public opinion and put the country on another collision course with its American friends as the US demands that Pakistan do more and Pakistanis react that the US wants them to 'do all'.

Centcom Commander General David Petraeus, in an interview with National Public Radio on 4 December, provided a clear understanding of the situation: 'There are limits to how fast we can expect or perhaps demand that Pakistan can take certain actions. The fact is that they have shifted a substantial amount of their military capability, for example the Indian border, from other locations, to deal with this extremist threat. And I think you cannot underestimate how important the steps they have taken in the last nine or 10 months are. They have also taken very significant casualties in these fights with the extremists. And their civilians have suffered severe losses as well, as these extremists have fought back.'

Such an understanding may yet help restore balance to the US-Pakistan relationship. Equally important is

the need for India to show, in the words of Canadian scholar Peter Jones, 'strategic altruism' towards Pakistan. Pakistani fears and concerns about Indian involvement in Afghanistan and even Indian support of some disruptive activity in Balochistan need to be addressed by India directly. The terrorist attack on Mumbai on 26 November 2008 was successful in derailing the Indo-Pakistan attempt to collaborate against terrorism. A year later, seven persons have finally been brought to trial in Pakistan for involvement with the attack. Hopefully, a greater openness between the intelligence agencies of both countries will allow them to remove each other's paranoia. US scholar Christine Fair's comments about Indian intelligence activities on the western frontier of Pakistan have added to the paranoia inside Pakistan about its neighbour to the East.

The external and internal situation in Pakistan is interconnected. It is important for Pakistan to address its domestic economic and political situation rapidly so that the civilian system remains robust and transparent and can be rid of corruption. Externally, a normalization of relations with India will allow it to concentrate on the war within. An equal responsibility for this rests on India and the international community. The US and the NATO coalition will need to ensure that it does not abandon Afghanistan in a precipitate manner, as some of the initial reports about the Obama strategy appear to indicate. The entire region is deeply intertwined economically and politically. The solutions will not be simple or short-term, but a start needs to be made by all countries involved.

President Obama in his West Point speech of 1 December 2009 observed:

'In the past, there have been those in Pakistan who've argued that the struggle against extremism is not their fight, and that Pakistan is better off doing little or seeking accommodation with those who use violence. But in recent years, as innocents have been killed from Karachi to Islamabad, it has become clear that it is the Pakistani people who are the most endangered by extremism. Public opinion has turned. The Pakistani Army has waged an offensive in Swat and South Waziristan. And there is no doubt that the United States and Pakistan share a common enemy.'

'In the past, we too often defined our relationship with Pakistan narrowly. Those days are over. Moving forward, we are committed to a partnership with Pakistan that is built on a foundation of mutual interest, mutual respect, and mutual trust. We will strengthen Pakistan's capacity to target those groups that threaten our countries, and have made it clear that we cannot tolerate a safe haven for terrorists whose location is known and whose intentions are clear. America is also providing substantial resources to support Pakistan's democracy and development. We are the largest international supporter for those Pakistanis displaced by the fighting. And going forward, the Pakistan people must know America will remain a strong supporter of Pakistan's security and prosperity long after the guns have fallen silent, so that the great potential of its people can be unleashed.'

But American support alone will not solve Pakistan's problems. Only Pakistan holds the key. 2009 was a 'year of decision' inside Pakistan, as the people and the army took the battle to the insurgents. 2010 will show how far a cohesive national effort can be formulated to win this war in order to secure Pakistan's very existence.