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The west should not underestimate Pakistan's stability - or test it unnecessarily. By Jo Johnson



Pakistan: A Hard Country
by Anatol Lieven

Allen Lane £30, 576 pages

Take any investment bank's list of the top 10 geopolitical risks compiled at any point over the past decade and state failure in Pakistan will feature prominently. This is partly because it is a nuclear power, has one of the largest armies in the world and has been a source of numerous terrorist plots unleashed in the west. It is also because of its strategic location at the junction of Iran, China and India, its ability to influence the outcome of the west's decade-long war against the Afghan Taliban and its sheer size. With more than 180m people, its population is six times that of Afghanistan, twice that of Iran and almost two-thirds that of the entire Arab world.

By the middle of this century, according to the World Bank, Pakistan's population might reach 335m - 10 times the level recorded in the 1951 census. With such numbers, the consequences of state failure would inevitably cross borders, to the detriment of India and the rest of south Asia, home to a fifth of humanity, but also to the west and China. Long after western forces have departed Afghanistan, they will retain a vital interest in the stability of Pakistan. As the floods of 2010 showed, the challenges for Pakistan extend far beyond the Islamist insurgency: the devastating effects of ecological change pose an equally serious existential threat.

Yet it is always a mistake to underestimate the resilience of Pakistan. This struck me forcefully in the aftermath of Benazir Bhutto's assassination. The People's party had lost its princess and Washington its best hope for a civilian veneer over military rule, but predictions of state collapse, of the country's fragmentation along ethnic

or sectarian faultlines and of a jihadi take-over of the nuclear arsenal were overblown. The next day, for its prime lunch-time slot, the main English-language television station, Dawn News, could offer viewers nothing more exciting than a talk-show debate on Karachi's transport system. Pakistan, as Anatol Lieven explains in this thorough analysis of the internal sources of this resilience, will not disintegrate easily.

He deftly tackles the misperception in the west that Islamist groups might easily sweep through Pakistan, introducing an extreme version of sharia law ill-adapted to the modern world. The appeal of sharia has its roots in a dysfunctional and corrupt court system that denies the poor access to justice and creates a demand for the simple and rapid rulings meted out by pragmatic local leaders in rough accordance with Koranic precepts. But support for the kind of fundamentalist sharia pushed by the Taliban is limited to the north-west frontier region. Elsewhere, Islam fails to present a coherent and unified alternative to the modern state and its legal structures. Sectarian divisions prevent different Islamist groups from agreeing on which form of sharia law might actually be valid.

The real question, according to Lieven, is not why Islamist parties are so strong in Pakistan, but why they are so weak. Across much of the Muslim world, Islamist parties are in the ascendant. They are in power in Turkey and Gaza, and significant forces in Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan and Syria. Yet, with brief exceptions, the Islamist parties in Pakistan have always performed poorly at elections and seem unlikely to create a mass political movement capable of commanding a parliamentary majority. Religious divisions represent a significant barrier to the spread of Islam as a political force. While Iran has a monolithic form of Shia Islam, Pakistan has not just a Sunni-Shia divide but also many different forms of Sunni Islam, which limit the scope for Islamist revolution.

A professor of international relations and terrorism studies at [King's College](#), London, Lieven argues that a revolutionary



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takeover by Islamist extremists would be most likely in the event of a direct military intervention in Pakistan by US ground forces or a US air attack on Pakistan's nuclear facilities. Such action might be triggered, Lieven speculates, by a terrorist attack of suspected Pakistani origin on US soil that caused Washington "to lose its collective wits". Faced with such direct encroachment on Pakistan's sovereignty, Lieven believes that the Pakistani army would mutiny and itself become radicalised. However great the provocation, the US must exercise restraint; with the exception of an invasion of Saudi Arabia, an attack on Pakistan would be "the shortest road to victory for al-Qaeda".

That means accepting the limits on Pakistan's involvement in the war against the Afghan Taliban, which Islamabad has continued to shelter along the Durand Line border that cuts through the Pashtun tribal area. The unwillingness of the Pakistani military and intelligence service to take serious action against them on America's behalf stems from the fear that this would both sharpen the Pashtun insurgency in Pakistan and erode the value of the Afghan Taliban as a proxy force with which to contain Indian influence in that country. Lieven describes a Pakistani security establishment convinced that the west will quit Afghanistan and that, in the ensuing civil war, India will seek an alliance with non-Pashtun groups of the former Northern Alliance to encircle Pakistan strategically.

In the short term, western policy towards Pakistan may be shaped by that conflict, but Lieven argues powerfully that this immediate priority is no substitute for a long-term engagement with a country that is more important and potentially dangerous than Afghanistan; the west, furthermore, should accept that Pakistan's goals in Afghanistan are in part legitimate. More than half of ethnic Pashtuns live in Pakistan. A successful exit strategy for Afghanistan must therefore recognise the Pakistani insistence both on substantial Pashtun representation in any Afghan regime and on Islamabad having a share of influence.

New Delhi's fear is that it will end up paying for the cost of exit in the form of a return to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the diminution of its influence in the region and the freeing up of Pakistan-backed militant resources to wage jihad in Kashmir. It is an impasse with the potential to drag on indefinitely. The challenge for the west is to devise an exit strategy for

Afghanistan that is not a zero-sum game for Delhi and Islamabad. Progress in resolving the core Kashmir dispute, an underlying cause of Indo-Pakistan hostility, would dramatically improve the situation. One way or another, Pakistan will stay at the top of the geopolitical risk lists for many years to come.

Jo Johnson is MP for Orpington and an FT contributing editor. He was south Asia bureau chief from 2005 to 2008

Pedro Ugarte/AFP/Getty



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Vigilant Pakistani soldiers guard a mountain overlooking the Swat valley, after taking the area back from Taliban control Pedro Ugarte/AFP/Getty

