Pakistan on the Brink: Regional Perspectives and Implications

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South Asia has emerged as a strategically pivotal region, from the counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency campaign in Afghanistan to the emergence of India as an economic and military power. The current political crisis in Pakistan—with President Pervez Musharraf suspending the constitution and declaring an emergency on November 3—threatens core interests of South Asia’s major political actors, including the United States.

There are two distinct conflicts within Pakistan’s polity. The first is between rebels along the Afghan border and the Pakistani state, and the second is between pro-democracy forces and Musharraf’s military dictatorship. The outcomes of both struggles will affect the rest of the region, with some implications potentially being felt globally. Who is affected by Pakistan’s turmoil, and why?

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The army has been the country’s key political player since the 1950s, combining a focus on India with a domestic-political role as guardian and governor. The army is the most cohesive and well-organized institution in the country. Its involvement in political life is so embedded that a true withdrawal from politics is highly unlikely. Since Musharraf’s coup in 1999, the army has further expanded its reach into society and the economy, sidelining political parties and civil society organizations.

Musharraf’s decision to unseat the chief justice of the Supreme Court, Iftikar Muhammed Chaudry, in March 2007 outraged lawyers and pro-democracy activists who took to the streets in protest. These protests put pressure on Musharraf to move toward some kind of democratization, with a focus on fashioning a power-sharing deal with exiled former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. This further encouraged pro-democ-
Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

ration forces and the country’s judiciary to stand up to Musharraf. The specific trigger for the November 3 imposition of a state of emergency was apparently intelligence reports that the Supreme Court was going to rule that Musharraf’s re-election in October was unconstitutional.

This would be enough drama for most countries. But Pakistan is also sorely pressed by the rise of radical Islamist violence and tribal revolt along its western border with Afghanistan. Pakistani rulers’ decisions during the 1980s and 1990s to back militants in Afghanistan and Kashmir have boomeranged to devastating effect. The ruling establishment now faces spreading radicalization, accelerated by easy availability of weapons and a plethora of militant organizations, which are starting to seep into the country’s urban core. The Pakistan army is extremely hard-pressed in these border regions, suffering high losses and shocking instances of surrender and desertion that have raised serious alarm among informed observers. Recent reports suggest that even the elite strike corps usually intended for action on the Indian border are being re-deployed into the Afghan border regions.

This pair of conflicts, and Musharraf’s response, is deeply troubling to the other major actors in the region. Pakistan also is the site of a simmering tribal revolt in the southwestern province of Balochistan, and ethnic tensions in Karachi and the southern province of Sindh. Now we need to consider how the current instability in Pakistan affects these states. The international and domestic politics of South Asia’s states are tightly intertwined, and so spillover from Pakistan’s politics cannot be easily isolated or contained.

The Neighbors

Afghanistan. Hamid Karzai’s government in Kabul has consistently sparred with Musharraf’s Pakistan. The resurgent Taliban are primarily based in Afghanistan’s south among the Pashtun community. The Durand Line separating Pakistan and Afghanistan artificially divides Pashtuns who can be found on both sides of the border. The Taliban have been greatly assisted by these cross-border ties. Moreover, many American and Indians officials allege that the Pakistani government did not crack down on the Taliban as hard as it should have after the overthrow of the Taliban regime. There is powerful suspicion that Pakistan’s dominant security elites see the Taliban and Pashtun rebels as their key tool of influence within strategically crucial Afghanistan and thus have continued to at least tacitly support them.

Pakistan’s political situation holds two severe risks for Afghanistan’s current regime. The first is that the Taliban will continue to grow in strength. Taliban-linked elements have successfully imposed costs on Pakistani security forces and carved out territorial control in the hills and valleys of Federally Administered Tribal Areas and North-West Frontier Province. This provides a sanctuary to continue the fight against Afghan government forces, as well as U.S. and NATO forces. These counterinsurgent forces are already facing a severe challenge, and emboldened Islamist and Pashtun forces in Pakistan will not help matters.

Second, and at a more structural level, growing Pashtun assertion threatens Afghanistan’s territorial cohesion. Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic state, and its current rulers draw heavily from the country’s non-Pashtun north. There has been sentiment in the past for a “Pashtunistan” that would carve out a separate territory for Pashtuns out of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The precedents of East Pakistan and Balochistan suggest that action by a Punjabi-dominated Pakistani military can spur further separatism and regional resentment. If the Pakistani military’s offensives in the northwest heighten separatist tendencies, this is sure to influence at least some Afghan Pashtuns toward separatism.

India. Pakistan’s neighbor and arch-rival India is watching the current situation with growing alarm. The government’s subdued response to emergency rule suggests that it does not want to rock the boat one way or another. The costs of sustained tension with Pakistan are a huge external check on India’s continued rise, necessitating money and policy-makers’ attention that could be far better spent on other social, economic, and military priorities. The current crisis holds the potential to further inflame this relationship in three important ways.

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Iran. Iran is affected by Pakistan’s politics in two ways. The first
relates to Afghanistan, where the Iranians (and Indians) are
heavily involved in advancing their interests through consulates,
development money, alliances, and intelligence services. The
Iranians were foes of the Taliban in the 1990s, and have been
backing Shia Hazaras in Afghanistan. Further destabilization of
Afghanistan will result in an intensification of Iranian effort, at
a time when Iran already has more international complications
than it can handle. It is unlikely that further Iranian involve-
ment in such a context would contribute to peace and stability
in Afghanistan.

A second possible spillover from a Pakistan in turmoil comes
from Baloch armed groups, who also straddle the Pakistan-Iran
border. There have been acts of violence by Baloch separatists
in eastern Iran, and so a weakening Pakistani central state may
everse Baloch regional sentiments in a multiethnic Iran.

The Future

This analysis has focused on the regional implications of a con-
tinued status quo or deterioration in Pakistan’s political situa-
tion. The worst may not come, and Musharraf’s recent actions
highlight the limits of American influence in Pakistan—
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even if emergency rule was imposed despite direct opposition from Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and CENTCOM head
Admiral William Fallon.

The U.S. is profoundly affected by Pakistan’s turmoil. First,
and most obviously, it is now even more completely reliant on
the cooperation of a few key security elites in Islamabad in containing Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Other centers of
central power and influence are being repressed by the military regime, or have
been co-opted by the military rulers. The United States has not broadened its
constituency in Pakistan, and it is now
too late to do so. American policy-mak-
ers will have to take what they can get in
terms of Pakistani security cooperation,
but given Pakistan’s other strategic comp-
ulsions it is simply not clear what form
such cooperation will take.

Second, this loss of influence will
courage voices in the United States
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forces and airpower into Pakistan’s
northwest to hunt for high-value tar-
gets. The logistical challenges remain
immense, but the previous counter-argument
that American intervention would
undermine ally Musharraf have been
weakened by Musharraf’s defiance of
the U.S. wishes.

Third, the overall thrust of American strategy in South Asia
is under growing pressure. Pakistan and Afghanistan are obvi-
ously two of the key frontlines of the war against Al Qaeda.
The bolstering of India as a strategic partner has involved huge
effort, but both Indian and American attention may be diverted
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an Indo-American alignment, but it may prevent the U.S. and
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be stilled together a transition to some form of power-sharing
and elections in 2008. But states with interests in the region
are actively contemplating how they would be influenced in
both status quo and worst-case scenarios. For better or worse,
Pakistan’s politics will have a major impact on both the inter-
national politics of the region and the internal politics of its
neighbors.
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