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Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that define U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Michelle Nhuch (NHUCH@MIT.EDU, 617.253.1965)

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?

Pakistan on the Brink

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, Iftikhar 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-

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racy 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 Indian 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.

First, a Pakistani state focused on fighting for domestic power may be less willing and able

to control the many militant organizations that have targeted India from Pakistani bases. Organizations like Lashkar-e-Toiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed have launched dramatic terrorist attacks throughout India in recent years, while also operating in Indian-administered Kashmir. A further fracturing of the monopoly of state power may unleash a wave of violence against India. Indian economic growth hinges on relative domestic stability, which would be badly undermined by an upsurge of terrorism in key urban centers.

Second, there is always the possibility that the beleaguered Pakistani regime may try to mobilize support at home by raising tensions with India. In the current context this is unlikely, as the Pakistani military is in no position to credibly play a game of brinkmanship with an increasingly-powerful India, but the future contingency remains. An extraordinarily deep distrust of Pakistan is embedded in the world-views of many Indian security elites, and so all Pakistani moves will be viewed with profound suspicion.

Finally, the worst-case scenario of a collapsing Pakistan would pose enormous challenges to India. The most direct result would be a massive wave of refugees, like the deluge that streamed out of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) during Pakistani counter-insurgency operations in 1971. This social and logistical burden would be joined by uncertainty over the control of Pakistan's nuclear weapons and the political future of Pakistan's provinces and power centers. Far more would have to happen before this disastrous situation arises, but it is being openly discussed in Delhi.

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 involvement 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 encourage Baloch regional sentiments in a multiethnic Iran.

The United States

Much of the coverage of the current crisis has focused on the

U.S. reaction. This is because the U.S. has provided approximately \$10 billion in aid to Pakistan since 2001 and views Pakistan as a front-line state in its battle against Al Qaeda. The U.S. also has a long history with Pakistan, most importantly as a backer of military rulers to advance American strategic interests during the Cold War. Musharraf's recent actions highlight the limits of American influence in Pakistan—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 political 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-makers will have to take what they can get in terms of Pakistani security cooperation, but given Pakistan's other strategic compulsions it is simply not clear what form such cooperation will take.

Second, this loss of influence will encourage voices in the United States calling for the introduction of special forces and airpower into Pakistan's northwest to hunt for high-value targets. 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

U.S. wishes.

Third, the overall thrust of American strategy in South Asia is under growing pressure. Pakistan and Afghanistan are obviously 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 to dealing with fallout from Pakistan. This will not undermine an Indo-American alignment, but it may prevent the U.S. and India from focusing on forward thinking and bold policy initiatives.

The Future

This analysis has focused on the regional implications of a continued status quo or deterioration in Pakistan's political situation. The worst may not come, and Musharraf and Bhutto may still cobble 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 international politics of the region and the internal politics of its neighbors.

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