Aspen Institute
Berlin

WESTERN STRATEGY TOWARDS PAKISTAN: FILLING THE EMPTY SLOT

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Conference Paper I

Aspen Berlin Conference

"US and EU Relations with Pakistan: Problems and Prospects"

April 25-26, 2006 – Berlin, Germany

Pakistan, the empty slot within Western strategy

Over the last fifty years, the West has developed a rather simple, but useful politico-strategic imagination of world politics. It divides the international system into friendly and not so friendly nations, allocating single slots for individual countries, depending on their current geopolitical and economic importance, ideological orientation, political behavior, as well as other criteria. This well-founded imagination[1] does not simply serve Western interests. It provides a useful mental map for anyone familiar with world politics. It is, after all, a *flexible* scheme that has been able to accommodate for ideological conversions, dissent among Western allies on particular state-objects, and the integration of newcomers into the Western camp.

This Western imagination is still at work today. It has survived the end of the Cold War, and it has been able to accommodate new elites form former "hostile" states. And despite the disagreement over the Iraq war, it has provided a useful framework to deal with new threats like terrorism and WMD proliferation. There are, however, one or two countries that do not fit into it. In these cases, there is not just disagreement on *how* to deal with them, but a lack of clarity on the subject matter itself: Whom exactly are we facing? Within Western post-911 (or post-cold war) discourse, one country that occupies such an empty slot in the Western politico-strategic imagination is certainly Pakistan.

Consider: Countries like Iran, North Korea, Russia and Japan are culturally and politically not part of the West, but it is clear if and to which degree they share Western aspirations and values. Plainly speaking, it is obvious which side they are on. If, as I will argue throughout this paper, this is not the case with Pakistan, then not because of a split among the Western allies according to their interests, but because of a general *uncertainty* of Pakistan' s "real" intentions, strategies, principles, characteristics. Policy makers and analysts in the West never seem to be sure what to make of the country of 160 million inhabitants that at the same time supports the war on terror (by costly military campaigns on its own soil, for instance), undermines the nuclear proliferation regime, supports insurgents in Indian Kashmir and, arguably, still considers "moderate" Taliban a legitimate political force in a democratic Afghanistan. To be sure, no major Western government is prepared to admit nowadays that it has no *policy* towards Pakistan. There are surely a variety of tactical approaches and some of them quite successful, but is there an overall *strategy*?

To illustrate the uncertainty about Pakistan, I will mention four cases in point:

- *1. Regime type and political culture*: Ever since General Pervez Musharraf's 1999 coup d'état – which was welcomed by a substantial part of the population, particularly by the middle classes – there have been worries whether Pakistan will remain defiant to democracy and might even become the spearhead for a broader tendency against

[1] For the evolution of the West as a political concept, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Global Transformations. Anthropology and the Modern World*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

democratization,[2] or whether this has been just a temporary setback. Since then, Pakistan's limited exercises in democracy – or rather: exercises in limited democracy – have not given us a clue. Pre-election "engineering" by security agencies overshadowed the 2002 parliamentary elections for the national and provincial assemblies, according to EU observers. The presidential "referendum" of that year is viewed as an outright farce. The local elections of 2000 and 2005 were perhaps more fair, but they were held on a non-party basis – in an apparent attempt to weaken the power of the provincial as well as the national legislators.[3] Prime Minster Shaukat Aziz, a former international bank official, is popular in the West, but he lacks support in Pakistan's domestic constituency; and he has only limited power. What is more: Interlocutors in Pakistan still express their doubts whether the people of Pakistan are fit to govern themselves, particularly in a time of terror. -

- *2. Ideology and imagination:* The question is: Should we consider Pakistan an "enlightened" and "moderate" modern Muslim nation, as President Musharraf suggests, or do we face an Islamic State whose ideological foundation and moral-legal disposition militates against Western values? News accounts about "honor killings" and attempts by conservative religious sections to introduce a "vice and virtue" police force (in the North-West Frontier Province bordering Afghanistan) in order to root out un-Islamic behavior indicate at least a deep-seated clash of civilizations within Pakistan itself. Even Musharraf, the military leader who has reversed the pro-Taliban policies of his predecessors and who has made "enlightened moderation" his political credo, regularly stresses Pakistan's genuine commitment to "freedom struggles" in Palestine, Bosnia and, of course, Kashmir, as well as to the Islamic cause in general. The West demonstrates very little knowledge concerning the Pakistani people's vision, in particular of the middle class who should to be the driving force behind democratization and liberal reform. -

- *3. Strategy:* Some analysts doubt whether General Musharraf is sincere in his "unstinted support" in the War on Terror. And even if this were the case, the question arises if there are elements within the government and the army who still support the Taliban, or even Osama bin Laden. And if they do: Are they simply "rogue" elements, or should their actions be interpreted as an integral part of a long-term strategy that still builds upon the vision of strategic depth (through dominance over Afghanistan) vis-à-vis India? Furthermore: Even if we can trust Pakistan in this regard, are its *long-term* strategic interests in an Asia that, possibly, will be shaped by a rivalry between the United States and its allies on the one side and China and its allies on the other, a rivalry that some decision-makers in Pakistan even today call the "New Cold War", compatible with Western interests? -

- *4. Geopolitical position:* Nothing seems certain, not even Pakistan's "correct" geopolitical location. Ever since the "Broader Middle East" has been coined as a concept

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[2] See Larry Diamond, *Is Pakistan The (Reverse) Wave of The Future?* In: Journal of Democracy 11 (3/2000), 91-106.

[3] Cf. International Crisis Group, *Pakistan's Local Polls: Shoring Up Military Rule*, Asia Briefing No. 43, Islamabad/Brussels, November 2005

and a strategic tool to reshape the Islamic-Arab World, it has been unclear whether Pakistan should be considered part of it. Since it seems to share many features with Arab states (low level of education, aborted democratization, weak political culture, involvement in armed conflicts) should Pakistan be lumped together with the Muslim countries in the Middle East? Or should priority be given to the historical and structural factors that make Pakistan, as a successor-state to the British Raj, an integral part of South Asia? Should Pakistan envisage its future in accordance with India, the new hegemonic power of the Indian sub-continent? Should the West, therefore, give priority to the solution of the Kashmir conflict over its attempts to stabilize and democratize Afghanistan? -

Western approaches towards Pakistan: Time for a change?

For the people in Pakistan, these are not academic questions. When in 2002-2003 a new grand strategy against terrorism, WMD proliferation and other new threats unfolded, and when Pakistan came into the spotlight in cases such as Afghanistan (support for Taliban), North Korea (nuclear /missile proliferation), and Iran (nuclear proliferation), editorials and op-ed pages in Pakistan had only one question: *Is Pakistan next?* Will Pakistan's military government be the next regime to face intervention? The question held an implicit reference to Musharrafs own foreign policy doctrine, which at the time read "Pakistan first" – basically meaning: Kashmir and Islam second or third. With this doctrine Musharraf tried to sell his unpopular "turnabout" in Afghanistan (and later Kashmir) as a wise political maneuver that was in accordance with national interest. Many of his countrymen disagreed. The implication of "Pakistan next" was: This sellout to the West will not save him. One day, Pakistan's "dictator" – as he is steadily referred to by the opposition in the Pakistani press – will be dropped in favor of another General, or a technocrat, who then will act as a care-taker to prepare free and fair elections (as it happened under tutelage of the Pakistani Army in 1990 and 1993).

These scenarios are definitely unrealistic, but they give an idea of the expectation as well as the suspicion the West may face in the future. Till now, Western policy towards Pakistan has been determined by other policies: Afghanistan, Iran, and nuclear proliferation. Hardly ever have *internal* Pakistani developments received significant Western attention. It is striking to compare the significance given to domestic politics in countries like Russia, China, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, even Indonesia (not to mention Cuba) with the lack of knowledge of and curiosity for political processes and social change in Pakistan. This pattern has been upheld after the 1998 nuclearization of the sub-continent, the 1999 military coup, and the 2000/2001 Taliban crisis. Possibly, the complication of having a nuclear-armed military dictatorship supporting a radical Islamic movement with links to international terrorism has deterred observers of South Asian politics from asking the big questions. There is another explanation though. In more than 50 years of bilateral and multilateral relations, Western powers established an excellent working relationship on selected issues with Pakistan. To put it more

bluntly: Pakistan has been quite easy to use for the West, and, arguably, vice versa! The prompt reversal of its Taliban policy after September 11, 2001 *prima vista* upheld Pakistan's reputation as a reliable ally. Beginning with the anti-communist alliances of the 1950s (SEATO, CENTO) to the "joint jihad" (as some Pakistani analysts name it) against the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan of the 1980s, Pakistan has been a partner of the West, giving no reason to worry about its domestic affairs.

Having said that, the overall outcome of this collaboration has been mixed; especially for the Pakistani side. On their domestic front, the prime beneficiary has been the military establishment, at the cost of civilian institutions.[4] Even in terms of foreign policy the cooperation with the United States has been only of limited value for Pakistan - as the Indo-Pakistan crises of the 1960s and 1990s amply demonstrated, when the United States and other Western nations declined to take side against India. As it has become more apparent in recent years, the drawback for the West has been the propping up of the Pakistan Army as a corporate actor, giving tacit support to military regimes (1958-1969, 1977-1988, since 1999), and tolerating the built-up of a nuclear arsenal. Since the end of the cold war and particularly after September 11, 2001, these policies have come under increasing criticism, as they militate against principles central to Western values. Mostly those less informed about the former benefits from co-operation with Pakistan began asking "stupid questions" about nuclear tests, role of the military, Taliban policy, militancy within Pakistan (in particular the role of the *madaris*, or religious schools), and the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden.

Such well intentioned, but rather crude "Pakistan bashing" has been by and large issue-driven, following the business cycles of the international affairs and world media. In recent times, however, the critiques have become more frequent, more consistent, and more serious. Focusing more than ever on domestic issues, they target the very institution that has been in charge of Pakistan's foreign and domestic affairs throughout the last fifty years: the army. Some critics aim at President Musharraf in particular, who is certainly its most articulate spokesman in recent times. Against this background, they take issue with Western policies towards Pakistan, its army, and Musharraf. After six years of military rule, these analysts have serious doubts whether Musharraf will be different from any of his predecessors, neither of whom gave up power voluntarily. In view of parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for 2007, they call for strict conditionality in dealing with the military, and for an end to support an elected civilian government that acts mainly as a façade for the military. These critics say that Western governments should stop worrying about a potential takeover by radical Islamist forces, which have been nurtured and are still controlled by the military agencies. Instead of putting all eggs into one basket, so goes their plea, the West and in particular the United

[4] Hamza Alavi, *Pakistan-US Military Alliance*, in: Economic and Political Weekly (Bombay), August 20th, 1998, pp. 1551-1557.

States should support actors from civil society. The baseline seems to be: It is time to get serious with Pakistan.[5]

Why Pakistan is different

These arguments are all valid. As a matter of fact, the distorting effects of Western and in particular of U. S. policies are still underestimated. There are very few countries today where the military as an institution has been able to acquire such a dominance vis-à-vis society. Military supremacy has made Pakistan a post-colonial state in the literal sense: The men in khaki (at least those who have acquired officer rank) do not merely control the political process; they dominate all spheres of "civil" society and act as the new "brown sahibs" (i. e. indigenous colonialists).[6] Any critical analysis that exposes the bizarre consequences of Western policies[7] is most welcome – and any serious attempt to overcome our flawed policy design towards Pakistan even more!

Critical analysts, however, should not fool themselves. Even a flawed policy is there for some reason, sometimes even for good reason (for lack of alternative). Anyone who takes a long and comprehensive study of Pakistan will find out that there is no quick fix. Without going into too much detail, here are some domestic and international factors that have contributed historically to the military dominance: weak political institutions in the part of India that became Pakistan in 1947 (in particular political parties), lack of support for Pakistan's ideological base there (since the supporters and leading ideologues of the "Pakistan movement" came from regions that stayed with India), troubled relationships with both India and Afghanistan from day one, and the incorporation of the Indian-Pakistan and Afghan-Pakistan rivalries in the cold war. These and other factors have made the Pakistani military a strong institution and a coherent corporate actor. This led Western governments to the conclusion that it is better to work with the only political force that could get things done in Pakistan. It is important to note that within the South Asian context most of the historical factors that led to a militarized political culture are still relevant. As long as the internationalized civil war in Afghanistan (since 1978), the armed uprising in Kashmir (since 1989), the

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[5] Cf. Frédéric Grare, *Pakistan: The Myth of an Islamist Peril*, Washington D. C.: The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Brief No. 45, February 2006; Husain Haqqani, Pakistan. Between Mosque and Military, Washington D. C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005; International Crisis Group. *Pakistan: The Mullahs and the Military*, Islamabad/Brussels 2003 (ICG Asia Report 49).

[6] Cf. Ayesha Jalal, *The State of Martial Rule. The Origins of Pakistan's Political Economy of Defense*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990; Ayesha Siddiqa-Agha,, *Power, Perks, Prestige and Privileges: Military's Economic Activities in Pakistan*. Paper presented at the International Conference "Soldiers in Business", Jakarta, October 17-19, 2000.

[7] This is not to argue that is the West's fault alone – far from it! But since this paper focuses on Western strategy (as did the conference it came out of), these aspects are emphasized.

Indo-Pakistan conflict and other issues are not resolved, the breeding ground for the military *governmentality* that has shaped Pakistan's polity will remain.[8]

Having established NATO as a military force in South Asia for the time being, Western governments nonetheless have a unique opportunity to explore better ways in easing tensions not just in the Afghan-Pakistan borderlands, but also across South Asia in general. They should remember some lessons of the Cold War in Europe. The confidence- (and not just conference-) building measures of the CSCE process, the institution-building exercises within the European integration process and bilateral policies all contributed to a change in international political culture that rendered borders if not softer, then less natural and more political, i. e. contingent. Some of Musharrafs proposals concerning soft borders in both parts of Kashmir and certainly Indian designs for closer economic integration point in the same direction. Some recent geopolitical maneuvers in Asia, however, indicate that there are also ways that lead into the other direction. A rivalry between the United States and its allies on the one hand and China and its allies on the other is an uncomfortable prospect that will not make it easier to change the political culture in Pakistan, in particular if India comes into the equation. A New Cold War in Asia would be a convenient excuse for the politico-military class in Pakistan to extend their tenure *ad infinitum*.

Recent critics of the Pakistani military and its Western backers turn their back on arguments that have guided the analyses on South Asia for a long time, namely that there are no easy solutions in Pakistan as long as the geopolitical determinants remain the same. Although analytically (and morally) consistent, they fail to answer the question *how* policy towards Pakistan should be changed and *which* societal actors should step into the army's shoes (or rather boots) after the khakis have returned to the barracks. "Civil society" or "politicians" are no real choices. People have to be organized; they act as embedded actors, not as lonely agents. They need a corporate identity to have a lasting impact on society (and the military). Weak political parties, old (once) charismatic faces of the past, such as former Prime Ministers Benazir Bhutto (1988-1990, 1993-1996) and Nawaz Sharif (1990-1993, 1997-1999), or local NGOs propped up by international donors will not do it.

Pakistan is not a "trivial state"[9] and it requires a different strategy than cases like Iraq, Afghanistan or Haiti. Consider:

- 1. Pakistan harbors 160 million people, divided into five major ethnic groups (Punjabis, Pashtuns, Sindhis, Muhajirs, and Baluchis) and many more minor ones. Its people fall by and large into two major religious communities within Islam (Sunni and Shia), and many religious sects that have become more and more active in the last two decades – and more prone to religious extremism.

[8] Cf. Boris Wilke, *Boundaries of State and Military in Pakistan*, in: Klaus Schlichte (ed), The Dynamics of States. The Formation and Crisis of State Domination, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005, pp. 183-210.

[9] Stephen P. Cohen, *The Nation and the State of Pakistan*, in: Washington Quarterly 25 (2002), pp. 109-122.

- 2. In contrast to the aforementioned countries, Pakistan has a real army that actually fights – not (only) by proxy, as can easily be seen in the Afghan-Pakistan border area. This has obvious implications for any strategy that does not rule out forceful change. As already mentioned, Pakistan's military is an entrepreneurial class that will not easily give up its privileges. It has closely monitored the sometimes-forceful replacement process of state-socialist (or state-capitalist) elites in other countries. It will not be ready to abandon its position just like that.

- 3. Pakistan has become a nuclear power – as has its neighbor India. This fact alone calls for a totally different strategy towards domestic as well as international issues. It should be noted that although 1999 saw the military escalation of Kashmir conflict in the remote Kargil area, the nuclearization of South Asia has by and large contributed to the stability of the region. This should be taken as an opportunity to apply lessons from the Cold War in Europe.

- 4. There are numerous armed conflicts on Pakistan's soil, many of them going back to the 1970s: Baluchistan, Karachi/Sindh, Kashmir, the recent uprising in the Federally Administrated Tribal Area (FATA) close to the Afghan border, to name but a few. Each of them requires a distinct political solution, for which the military government is not prepared yet, and never may be. To solve them against the military's approval would require a very strong mandate by civil society. A more competitive political system (i. e. democracy), however, would not necessarily lead to a less nationalistic and more liberal political climate open to such an approach.

- 5. Pakistan is a very complex society. A breakdown in line with education standards would distinguish between small English-speaking elite sections, traditional tribal and "feudal" strata, an entrepreneurial middle class with professionals and bureaucrats, the lower middle class or petty bourgeoisie, and the lower classes. With the expansion of private print and electronic media, we can see the development of distinct but competing public spheres, split along regional languages, belief systems (secular, religious), and social strata. Until now, these dynamics haven been held back by the uniformity of Pakistan's political appearance and its weak political system. But any hasty attempt to shake this system, in order to reform it or to replace it, will lead to multiple cleavages that will not be easy to control.

Why Democracy matters, when and how

The previous section is a caveat, and not a rejection of an agenda for political change. Nor does it deny that there is a political constituency for radical reform in Pakistan. The recurrence of military coups should not be misread. It is true that back in 1999 many people especially among the middle classes welcomed a bloodless coup that had ousted a regime that could be described as a "democratically elected dictatorship." Even today many people recognize President Musharraf's leadership. But hardly anyone apart from

his entourage believes that the concentration of power in one person who is at the same time President of Pakistan, Army Chief and President of the majority political party is still adequate. Pakistanis are inclined to tolerate Military takeovers, but only for a limited time. They may accept an interim dictatorship to get a few things done, but not a dictatorship to re-write the rules.

If the time is slowly running out for the Generals, then it is because Musharraf has become a victim of his own success. In the last seven years, he presided over a massive process of modernization, which has transformed Pakistani society in many ways. Although sustainable growth like in India is still lacking, the social and political changes brought by the expansion of private print and electronic media are irreversible. Even if it is too early to say that this process has "coup-proofed" Pakistan, the transformation of the public sphere, which cannot be boiled down to a "media revolution", provides a suitable basis for the political transformation that must follow. However, if the developments in neighboring India are any guide, this will certainly entail the decentralization, regionalization and vernacularization of political culture. Regionally based parties will emerge; coalition government will become more the norm than the exception. As in India, this will raise the question of how to deal with religious identity in the political sphere. At least in some parts of Pakistan, in urban as well as rural areas, religious parties will become part of the political landscape. Since Pakistan still has to decide on who is the ultimate sovereign (God or the people) this may evoke further tensions around the demarcation of secular, religious and tribal laws. Any opening of the political field (and the judicial field as well) will bring religious forces to the fore.

If the West wants to promote democracy in Pakistan, it should not simply "allow" for such divergences, but actually encourage them – within the constitutional framework, of course. And as recent Pakistan critics rightly point out, it should refrain from evoking the Islamist threat to stability in Pakistan (or the region). Part of the overall rethinking of its strategy towards Pakistan should be to accept that Islam is not just part of Pakistan's identity; it has also become Pakistan's "trademark" in the international field. The West has to find a slot for Pakistan in its strategy that allows for some dissent, but not all kinds of problematic behavior. It should accept that some fragile states are more equal than others, because they cannot be ruled by remote control. This, of course, applies to the Pakistani rulers themselves.