

review

the week

the big idea



The Taliban, who number in the low tens of thousands, face a Pakistan army with an active force of more than 500,000 personnel. Asif Hassan / AFP Photo

Legends of the fail

Manan Ahmed examines the decades-old tradition of experts predicting that Pakistan is sure to collapse any day now

Times are bleak for the state of Pakistan, if the international media is to be believed. For the past six weeks, the world's newspapers have charted the apparently unstoppable march of the Taliban toward Islamabad – with daily reminders that their forces are “only 100 miles” and then “only 80 miles” and then “only 60 miles” from the capital. That Pakistan is a “failed state” or “on the brink” no longer even requires elaboration: it is the universal consensus among pundits and “area experts” alike.

In the United States, the news articles have begun to game out the fall of the regime: the *New York Times*, hardly alone in its hyper-ventilating, has run two stories in as many weeks about America courting the opposition leader Nawaz Sharif as a replacement for Pakistan's prime minister, Asif Ali Zardari. The counterinsurgency guru David Kilcullen, a former adviser to General David Petraeus, has suggested in print that the state could fail within six months, while Petraeus himself warns that the next two weeks will be decisive, and that the army may have to return to power to prevent a total collapse.

The notion of Pakistan as a “failed state” has roots far deeper than the last few years; it was first deemed to have “failed” in the early 1960s, and this framework has dominated discussion of Pakistan in America from the days of the Cold War to the War on Terror. The surprisingly long history of the rhetoric of failure reveals that America's engagement with Pakistan has rarely, if ever, transcended narrow strategic aims – and that, for the United States, the solution to Pakistan's problems has always been, and will always be, the strong hand of a military ruler.

It was that under the rule of the military usurper Field Marshal Muhammad Ayub Khan that Pakistan was adopted as a Cold War ally and held up as a model “developing nation”. During Khan's tenure, Pakistan was said to enjoy the benefits of a so-called “developmental dictatorship” – many dams were built and much cement was poured.

The US even helped Ayub Khan engineer an election victory in 1965. But shortly thereafter, he foolishly went to war with India; his popularity plummeted, and his flashy foreign minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, began a national campaign for a democracy based on socialist principles. Bhutto's rise ran afoul of the “domino theory” intended to check the spread of Communism; it was in this context that Pakistan was first crowned a “failed state” – giv-

ing rise to decades worth of books and studies with titles like *The Failure of Democracy in Pakistan* (1962), *The Failure of Parliamentary Politics in Pakistan, 1953-1958* (1967), *Pakistan: Failure in National Integration* (1968), *Ethnic Conflict and the Failure of Political Integration in Pakistan* (1973), *Pakistan, Failure in Nation Building* (1977) and *Pakistan On the Brink* (2004).

By 1979, when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, another military dictator, Zia ul-Haq, ruled Pakistan, and the country once again became a pivotal US ally, funnelling arms and funds to the mujahideen across the border. The billions in US military aid during that decade of armed conflict had two direct consequences for the present situation. First, the Pakistani army became a monster on steroids, stacked against the fragile civil and bureaucratic state. And second, the guerrilla-trained militias that ejected the Russians found themselves in charge of the country next door. But Zia's demise in 1988, and Pakistan's return to democracy, rendered it a “failed state” all over again.

The “failed state” rubric dominated the 1990s, as Pakistan became a nuclear power while stagnating economically under the burden of crippling foreign debt. But the attacks of September 11 brought Pakistan back into the American fold as a “close ally in the War on Terror”, under the leadership of Pervez Musharraf, who took power in a 1999 coup. If Pakistan was on the brink

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of failure, few in America wanted to talk about it – at least until 2007, when Musharraf's firing of the chief justice sparked street protests that eventually led to his resignation. The exiled leaders Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif returned to contest the state's first democratic elections in more than a decade. Now the floodgates opened: *Newsweek* cover story in October 2007 dubbed Pakistan “the most dangerous place in the world”, nicely setting the tone for everything we've heard since.

This decades-long tendency to reduce Pakistan's complexity to either “failure” or “stability” reflects, above all, a glaring poverty of knowledge about the real lives of 175 million Pakistanis today. Since 2007 alone, they removed a dictator from military and civilian power without firing a single shot, held the first national election since 1997 – in which right-wing radical parties were soundly rejected – and launched a secular movement for justice.

None of this matters, we are told, because Pakistan is facing “an existential threat” from “violent extremists”, as a State Department spokesman said on Monday. US generals and media commentators are hinting that a military takeover may be the only way to arrest the imminent “failure” – to combat the “Talibanisation” of Pakistan and keep the dreaded nukes from “falling into the hands” of terrorist groups.

A comically exaggerated version of reality underpins such concerns. There are roughly 400 to 500 Pakistani Taliban fighters in the Buner region (the area deemed to be threateningly close to Islamabad) and 15,000 to 20,000 operating in the region between Peshawar and the north-west borders of Pakistan. Meanwhile, the number of active Pakistani army personnel ranges around 500,000, supported by an annual budget of approximately \$4 billion. In comparison, the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan make an estimated yearly revenue of around \$400 million from the heroin trade – only a fraction of which makes it to the Pakistani wing in the rural north-west of the country. As a threat to a large and diverse nation-state, 40 per cent of whose population lives in urban centres like Karachi (with its 18 million residents) the rural Taliban fighters are not terribly intimidating.

Pakistan is neither Somalia nor Sudan, nor even Iraq or Afghanistan. It is a thoroughly modern state with vast infrastructure, a fiercely critical and diverse media, an active, global economy and strong ties with regional powers such as

China and Iran. It is not a “failed state” – it even has met its debt payments to the World Bank and IMF at the expense of providing electricity to its citizens. It has a deeply entrenched civil bureaucracy. The “failed state” rhetoric obscures these realities. It hides the fact that religious-based parties have never garnered more than 10 per cent of the seats in any election. According to its 1973 constitution Pakistan is an Islamic state, but it is home to multiple forms of religious expression, and the majority of Muslims in Pakistan embrace a model of Islam more syncretic than the Deobandi Salafism of the Taliban. The majority province of Punjab is ethnically, linguistically, politically and economically far more diverse than the northwestern valley of Swat – and it is home to a well-entrenched landed elite unlikely to cede authority to the Taliban. Sindh has its own landed elite – as well as a powerful urban political party, MQM – neither of whom show any inclination to welcome the Taliban.

Even if Pakistan is not going to capitulate to the Taliban, it does face grave dangers, and the “failed state” rhetoric – dangerous in its own right – forces our attention away from them. In Baluchistan, as a direct result of Musharraf's heavy-handed military policies, a civil war has been brewing since 2005, and there is no military solution to that unrest. At the same time, anti-Americanism is rising across the country in reaction to the campaign of missile strikes from unmanned US drones, which have killed nearly 1000 civilians since August 2008. The drones have emboldened religious conservatives who decry “US imperialism” at work in Pakistan, and they are gaining strength with every tally of civilian casualties. The Tehrik Taliban-e Pakistan control in Swat is less a victory for that ragtag militia than a demonstration of the Army's unwillingness to fully engage them.

The monotonous drone of “failure” implies that the fragile democracy currently in place is not worth preserving. It encourages the marginalisation of the civilian government and boosts the claims of both the military and the militants. Pakistan's salvation has never been and will never be in the military's hands. The country's future lies with the millions of Pakistanis who are working to sustain democracy – and what must be defended is their resilience and strength, to prevent the self-fulfilling prophecies of failure.

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the tangled web

Pak general wants drones grounded in Taliban ceasefire deal

A top Pakistani general wants the US to stop sending drones and troops after the militants undermining the governments in Kabul and Islamabad. It's a suggestion that's unlikely to be met warmly in the White House or the Pentagon, where frustrations are growing with Pakistan's limp response to domestic radicals. Just this week, Islamabad's army took its sweet time responding to a Taliban offensive that put the militants in temporary control of a district just 60 miles from the Pakistani capital.

Pakistani military and political leaders have begged, over and over again, for an end to the US killer drone campaign credited with taking out dozens of militants. But this is, to my knowledge the first time a leading official has called for stopping the drone war – as well as the larger conflict against the Taliban.

“Offer the Taliban a cease fire,” the Pakistani general counselled in a presentation to Washington opinion-leaders this week. “Suspend UAV [unmanned aerial vehicle] attacks in Pakistan so long as the cease fire is maintained.”

Next week, Pakistani and Afghan officials will gather with American leaders in Washington, to discuss new strategies for putting down the hydra-headed insurgency. This general's presentation – it was not-for-attribution, sorry – shows just how differently Islamabad views the situation, and its possible solutions.

Americans may think that the Pakistani military hasn't done enough to tackle the Taliban. But the Pakistani military has had 1,500 troops killed in action since 2002, and another 3,700 wounded, the general notes. Which is why, in addition to calling off the drones and declaring a cease fire, he wants America to “stop maligning and discrediting Pakistan's Army and Intelligence Agencies”. (Never mind those agencies' long-standing role in supporting the Taliban.)

Noah Shachtman
Danger Room
wired.com/dangerroom



60 drone hits kill 14 al Qaeda men, 687 civilians

Of the 60 cross-border predator strikes carried out by the Afghanistan-based American drones in Pakistan between January 14, 2006 and April 8, 2009, only 10 were able to hit their actual targets, killing 14 wanted al Qaeda leaders, besides perishing 687 innocent Pakistani civilians. The success percentage of the US predator strikes thus comes to not more than six per cent.

Figures compiled by the Pakistani authorities show that a total of 701 people, including 14 al Qaeda leaders, have been killed since January 2006 in 60 American predator attacks targeting the tribal areas of Pakistan. Two strikes carried out in 2006 had killed 98 civilians while three attacks conducted in 2007 had slain 66 Pakistanis, yet none of the wanted al Qaeda or Taliban leaders could be hit by the Americans right on target. However, of the 50 drone attacks carried out between January 29, 2008 and April 8, 2009, 10 hit their targets and killed 14 wanted al Qaeda operatives. Most of these attacks were carried out on the basis of intelligence believed to have been provided by the Pakistani and Afghan tribesmen who had been spying for the US-led allied forces stationed in Afghanistan.

The remaining 50 drone attacks went wrong due to faulty intelligence information, killing hundreds of innocent civilians, including women and children. The number of the Pakistani civilians killed in those 50 attacks stood at 537, in which 385 people lost their lives in 2008 and 152 people were slain in the first 99 days of 2009 (between January 1 and April 8).

Of the 50 drone attacks targeting the Pakistani tribal areas since January 2008, 36 were carried out in 2008 and 14 were conducted in the first 99 days of 2009. Of the 14 attacks targeting Pakistan in 2009, three were carried out in January, killing 30 people, two in February killing 55 people, five in March killing 36 people and four were conducted in the first nine days of April, killing 31 people.

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The News
thenews.com.pk

Dwarf helicopter sniffs out cannabis plantations

Police in the northeastern Achterhoek region have begun using an unmanned miniature helicopter to track down the illegal cultivation of cannabis, which often takes place indoors. The so-called “canna-chopper” is fitted with cameras and a sniffer to take air samples out of ventilator shafts and chimneys. A dedicated gas analyser is able to recognise traces of weed smell in the air samples.

Police say they are not breaking the law because the samples can be taken without entering the building. The unmanned dwarf helicopter can stay airborne for a maximum of eight hours. It was designed and built by Dutch police engineers.

Police spokesman Anton de Ronde told Radio Netherlands Worldwide that the first flight on Tuesday morning had already led to the discovery of a cannabis drying shed and a plant cutting facility.

Radio Netherlands
radionetherlands.nl



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