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2009-10-26

Paranoia Over Pakistan

Is Pakistan really in danger of falling into the hands of the Taliban? Asks **Manan Ahmed**.

The Taliban are "60 Miles From Islamabad," declared an alarmist editorial in the New York Times on April 27. A report that month from General Petraeus implied Pakistan was in grave danger. Pakistanis, according to the conventional wisdom at the time, were simply unable to understand their existential peril. Hence, the imperative rested with the United States to force the Pakistani army into action, and to redouble its own efforts to strike at the Taliban threat. After some dithering, and an appropriate amount of new military aid, the Pakistani army finally launched Operation Rah-e Rast (Operation Righteous Path) in Swat, which halted the Taliban "advance" but in actuality has resulted in millions of internally displaced civilians and a widening humanitarian crisis.

Simultaneously, the United States increased its unmanned drone missile strikes on specific targets, resulting in measured success (the reported killing of Baitullah Mehsud in August) but exacting a growing list of civilian casualties and widespread condemnation of the United States across Pakistan. Neither the Pakistani military operation in Swat nor the US drone attacks have produced any improvement in the stability or security of Afghanistan, while Pakistan is now mired in one of the most substantial humanitarian crises of its history.

Let us return, however, to earlier this year. Was Pakistan really in danger of falling into the hands of the Taliban -- a danger averted only by the assault on Swat? Reading the reporting from the region (the Pakistani army is operating under a media blackout) and published testimonies from displaced citizens, the clear answer is no. The Taliban operating in the north and southwestern regions were and are still an amorphous, ill-defined lot, ideologically and politically diverse -- from jihadists to secular subnationalists to tribalists. There was no logical path by which they would have been able to overwhelm a nation of nearly 180 million, a standing army of more than 600,000, vibrant mega-cities and an established civilian infrastructure.

Similarly, the history of Pakistan was given short shrift in the rush to declare it a faltering state about to become a radicalized, failed state. Even cursory analysis would show that the citizens of Pakistan, given the few opportunities, have kept conservative Islamic parties to less than 10 percent of the seats in any election. This even though Pakistan endured a decade of the Islamization policies of Gen. Zia ul-Haq, who did his best to radicalize and militarize his citizenry in an effort to wage jihad in Afghanistan and India. Yet Pakistan emerged from that dark era and embraced the largely secular policies of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif.

But perhaps the most egregious oversight was that the Obama administration ignored Pakistan's recent past. It has once again become a democratic nation. Since 2007 a vibrant and peaceful movement for the rule of law has fought the autocracy of Gen. Pervez Musharraf -- the military man Washington supported. In the 2008 elections, Pakistanis rejected religious parties in all provinces and propelled the party of the assassinated Benazir Bhutto to power. This was the beating heart of democracy in the Muslim world. While America once stood next to the dictators of Pakistan, it now had a chance to stand next to the people of Pakistan -- to support them in their fight against the horrifying terrorism on their soil, to support them in building up their judicial and civilian infrastructure and transforming a militarized economy into a twenty-first-century global economy.

Instead, we turned again to the military and demanded that it wage a domestically destabilizing war. We increased our reliance on drone attacks. We failed to include significant powers in the region -- India, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia -- in the discussions on Afghanistan. Predictably, the results undermined our aims. The civilian government has no viable domestic agenda to fight the many challenges it faces. It offers no solution, political or civil, to the grievances of the people in Swat, nor any plans to address that existing humanitarian crisis. It is increasingly seen as weak and under American influence.

The military, after declaring "success" in Swat, has now launched an offensive in Waziristan -- Operation Rah-e Nijat (Path to Salvation) -- to combat the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan. The operation comes after eleven days of terrorist attacks across Pakistan, including on the military headquarters, by the TTP. Once again, there are no indications of what will constitute success, how the state will cope with the civilian exodus from the region or, most important, what will happen when the TTP flee into the neighboring and highly volatile province of Baluchistan. Surely the military will have no choice but to declare Waziristan a "success" and move into Baluchistan, where a separatist movement has waged its own war since 2004.

We ignore histories and realities in our quest to fight "the war of necessity." Swat, Waziristan and Baluchistan are symptoms of a truncated civil society, enveloped in poverty and illiteracy and ripe for exploitation by religious extremists. We need more than military hardware to fight these symptoms. We need a strong, legitimate civilian government that is accountable to its people -- all of its people.

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