No Pakistani in these books reads or thinks (other than about the Taliban and conspiracies) or paints or writes about poetry or raises a family, or even walks in the park

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➔ Pakistan, continued from 5

One cannot help but note that helicopters are of little use to a Pakistani civilian and not much help in what Riedel himself identifies as the three central problems facing Pakistan – rampant population growth, a diminishing water supply and a curtailed democracy. But they do solve a military problem – and the US-Pakistan relationship over the past 64 years is all about military solutions being offered as an answer to every problem. At least, that is the view from the mahogany conference tables in and around Washington.

Another official view comes via Maleeha Lodhi's edited volume *Pakistan: Beyond the Crisis State*. Lodhi is a former Pakistan ambassador to the US and collects a number of experts – academic, policy and business – to argue that Pakistan is not about to turn into the Islamic Emirate of Pakistan as Riedel fears. That assurance comes via a long list of GDP-growth specific essays as well as recommendations for growth of civic bodies and governance issues.

The authors are all Pakistani, so the volume arguably acts not only as a corrective but as a representative voice from inside Pakistan. Yet, in an unsavoury echo of Riedel, this volume's central audience is also the Washington elite, whose particular concerns hinder any clear-eyed examination of Pakistan's immediate past or future. The editor, for example, suggests in the conclusion that Pakistan ought to foster closer ties to the Arabian Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia. Still the central tenet of the volume, that Pakistan is not a failed state, is amply borne out by the evidence presented by the various contributors from the economic and public policy sectors.

Anatol Lieven is also convinced that Pakistan is not a failed state and that it can survive. But in his book *A Hard Country*, Pakistan is a "highly conservative, archaic and sometimes quite inert and somnolent mass". Lieven teaches at King's College in London and his perspective is a stark change from the insider-Washington accounts of Riedel and Lodhi.

Lieven has travelled widely in the region and brings a sly wit, an eye for the grotesque to his account and peppers it with quotes and thoughts from Pakistanis – mostly military or civil elite but often ordinary businessmen, taxi drivers and shopkeepers. The effect of these quotes livens up the narrative and at least gives a sense that the state of Pakistan is populated with human beings. Lieven focuses on the notion of "kinship" – a "horribly complex subject" that nonetheless is the "most important force in [Pakistani] society". He demonstrates this by means both silly ("Bhai-Sahib or Brother-Lord" as an everyday term) and profound (his discussion of the Sindhi landowning *pir* families).

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But where Riedel is concerned with war-gaming and the collapse of Pakistan caused by the Islamist presence in the Pakistan military, Lieven provides a vigorous defence of the armed forces. In a book in which almost every segment of Pakistani society gets a ribbing (the lawyers are dubbed "penguins in hell", Pakistani middle-class homes resemble "third-class cabins in the bowels of a cruise ship" because of tube lights), there is only one body that Lieven finds worthy of praise: the military. It is a "striking institution", he says, with discipline, efficiency and solidarity, and which provides "opportunities that the Pakistani economy cannot" by having their subsidised factories "ploughed back into its industry and not simply stolen".

Bruce Riedel, far left, attends a presidential press conference. Nicholas Kamm / AFP

Lieven acknowledges the pernicious effects of the Inter-Services Intelligence and that the actions in Balochistan are self-destructive, yet there remains the wonder – at the cleanliness of military hospitals (which he thinks remain unmatched by their civilian counterparts), the smartness of the soldiers, the high-regard for their service. The Pakistani army is, to Lieven, "the only element of a great society that has ever existed in Pakistan".

This romance would not be so unseemly if in his many interviews – and decades-long visits – Lieven had perceived the hundreds of thousands of grunt recruits who become orderlies, drivers, cooks, gardeners and nannies to the commissioned officers. With meagre salaries and near-bondage relationships to their "assigned officers", this vast underclass of the Pakistani army keeps the cantonments clean, the major happy and the cars washed. Their silence makes just as much a lie out of Pakistan's "great society" as the exploitative, self-immolating behaviour of the rest of the Pakistan military.

More broadly, both Riedel and Lieven, despite the differences between their expertise and their approaches to Pakistan, remain on the same page with regards to viewing the country as the sum of all its military parts. But there is a missing decade in these books.

In the past 10 years, US foreign policy granted a military dictator unprecedented power by endowing him with billions of dollars and no strings attached. Musharraf and the military regime used this money to swallow more swathes of Pakistani land and economy, and impose further militarisation of civil and social structures.

The Lawyers' Movement in 2007 did galvanise millions and force Musharraf from power – despite continued and vocal support of the White House. Yet, the military voice remains the only one that speaks for Pakistan. It matters little that Riedel and Lieven differ in their reading of the military – whether as an institution or as a politics or as a theology, the military is their central focus. But, insofar as this constitutes knowledge about Pakistan, is it enough to give us any understanding of the nation-state?

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For all the claims to explain and demystify Pakistan, there remains a fundamental assumption in all three books: Pakistan is illegible outside of the military. Now, there is little doubt that this remains the case from a geostrategic point of view but does that really exhaust all manner of living in that corner of the world? No Pakistani in these books reads or thinks (other than about the Taliban and conspiracies) or paints or writes poetry or sets up a new shop or raises a family, or even walks in the park.

This absence of culture serves a dual role. It validates, in some respects, the primary focus on the military and it distances complexities that would potentially undermine the analysis. Take, just as an example, the poet's voice – the reinvigoration of Habib Jalib or Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poetry in the past few years – which does explain something about Pakistan.

It explains the way in which a whole new generation (the majority are under 35) have discovered ways of understanding their cultural space and ways of reacting against both rank militarisation and Talibanisation. Or consider, the cultural effect of Coke Studio's musical series, which celebrates diverse musical traditions to almost universal audiences in Pakistan. Its popularity tells us as much or as little about contemporary Pakistani society as *American Idol* and *Big Brother* do about the US and UK. In either case, it remains an important cultural artifact to consider.

A decade after the events of September 11, we continue to know little and understand even less of Pakistan. This despite the fact that we are entering a golden age of production of knowledge on that same nation. But there is a critical distance between knowledge and understanding.

"They understand that they must not understand," commented Robert d'Humières on British imperial troops back from the fronts of Africa and Asia in 1905. The British soldier, he mused, was wary of bad analysis, of ill-perceived contexts – best to act; best to focus on ways to act. Rudyard Kipling, the prominent commentator on all things imperial before and after the beginning of the 20th century, agreed with d'Humières (he was Kipling's French translator) and wrote that "to understand everything may be to pardon everything, but it also means to commit everything".

There is a flexibility of action and intention that is possible only in the lack of knowledge. To understand fully is to be constricted, imperially speaking. The empire must not understand for that understanding carries with it a price that is simply too dear. Therein lies the distance between knowledge and understanding at the core of all imperial ventures. Knowledge is created, in heaps and mounds, by the empire – this is clear. However, understanding is something quite different.

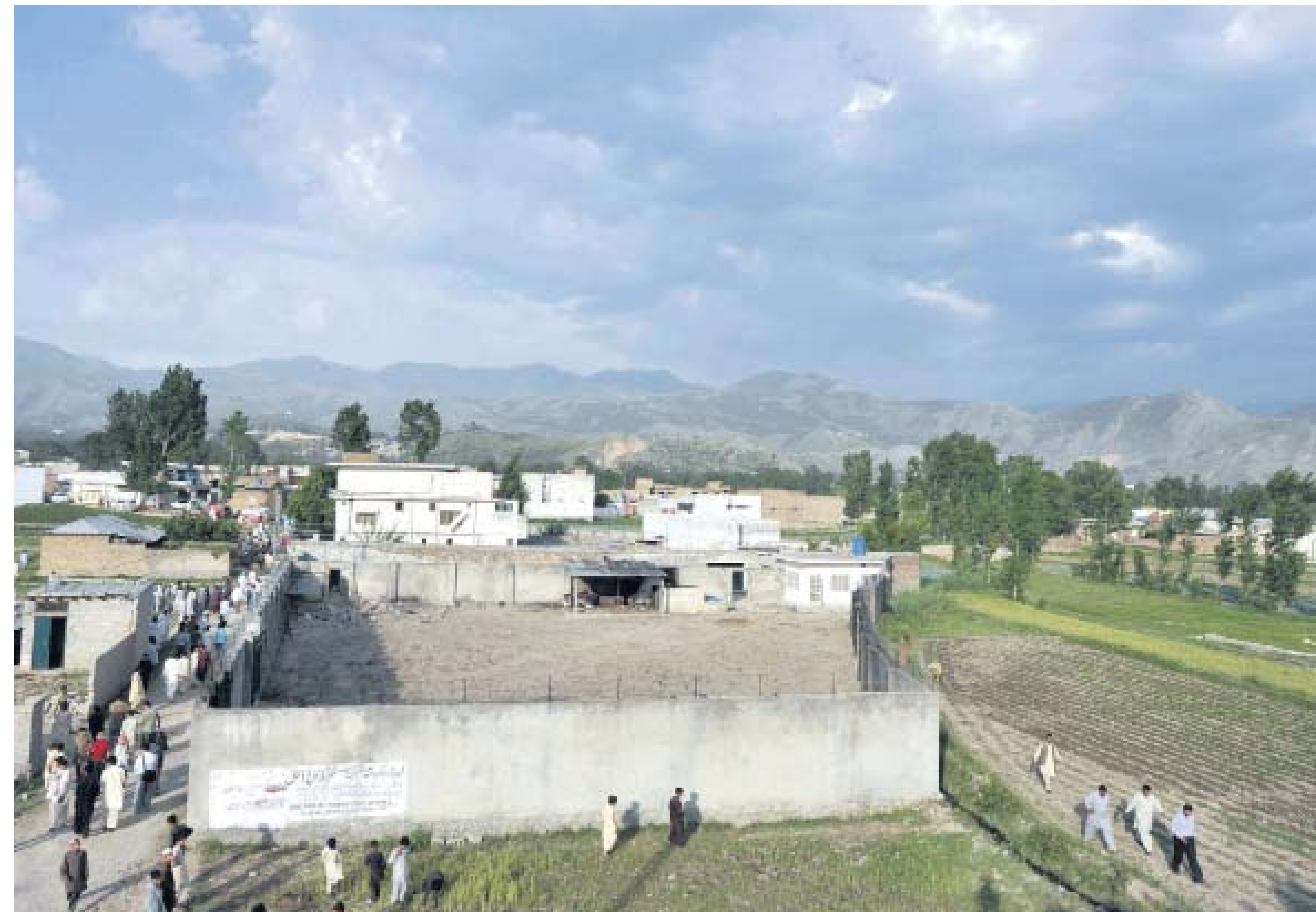
Kipling's warning is apt – if the empire understands the position of the colony, the condition of colonialism itself, it cannot maintain any lie about either its civilising mission nor its emancipatory one. Hence, the must of d'Humières. Understanding Pakistan requires an empathetic move that remains outside the bounds of knowledge production by the empire.

Manan Ahmed is a historian of Pakistan at Freie Universitat Berlin. He blogs at Chapati Mystery.

this week's essential reading

'Ten Things I Have Learned About the Sea' by Kasia Cieplak-Mayr von Baldegg, The Atlantic

You are a stressed-out film-maker who needs time on your own. What to do? I know, book yourself on a slow (cargo) boat to China and record the journey for posterity



The burnt-out compound in Abbottabad near Islamabad, where Osama bin Laden was found and killed by US commandos in May. Aamir Qureshi / AFP