

The Neocons on Pakistan: Neat, Simple, and Dangerously Naïve

Analysis by Najum Mushtaq | November 30, 2007

Just as a flicker of hope emerged to bring back elected civilian rule to Pakistan, the ideological warriors of neoconservatism are up in arms to douse it. Having supported Pervez Musharraf as the stalwart general in America's "war on terror," U.S. neoconservatives are panic-stricken at the prospect of his political demise. No sooner did he decide to relinquish his army post to become a civilian president than fear of Pakistan's collapse and of loose nuclear weapons gripped Musharraf's backers in the United States. Neoconservative analysts are hatching plans to raid the country and nick the nukes before it sinks into chaos. Others, less inclined to use the military option just now, have come up with puerile analyses of how a "Westernized core" of the military and Pakistani civil society can be used to thwart the worst-case scenario of Islamists taking over the country and, with it, the dreaded weapons.

An exasperated Charles Krauthammer attempts to untie Pakistan's "tangled knots" and wonders, "What is America to do about Pakistan?" He mumbles through an ill-informed analysis of a post-General Musharraf Pakistan, where he says, "Islamic barbarians are at the gates" ("How To Untie Pakistan's Knots," Redding.com, November 10, 2007). Frederick Kagan, a leading light at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), and Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution, foresee Pakistan's collapse and propose two fantastic methods of direct military intervention to secure the country's nuclear arsenal, which should ideally be shipped to "someplace like New Mexico" ("Pakistan's Collapse, Our Problem," *New York Times*, November 18, 2007). (Why New Mexico? Because "given the degree to which Pakistani nationalists cherish these assets, it is unlikely the United States would get permission to destroy them" in Pakistan.)

And speaking at an AEI forum to launch his new book, *Surrender is Not an Option*, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton described the security of the Pakistani nuclear arsenal as "the principal American strategic interest." Conceding that the Pakistani president "is no Jeffersonian democrat," Bolton insisted: "We should

support Musharraf. His control of the army is most likely to hold the nuclear arsenal in a secure place" (November 13, 2007).

Three basic assumptions underpin these writers' opinion that Pakistan's nuclear arsenal is in jeopardy. One, that Pakistan without Musharraf and the military at the helm is bound to disintegrate and likely to be taken over by Islamic extremists. Two, that Pakistan's polity consists of three active factions: the Taliban-like religious zealots, and "the two most Westernized, most modernizing elements of Pakistani society—the army ... and the elite of civil society, including lawyers, jurists, journalists, and students," as Krauthammer puts it, also asserting that the Taliban "are waiting to pick up the pieces from the civil war developing between" the last two elements.

The third, equally ill-founded premise of the neocon view of Pakistan is that military intervention by the United States and its allies would not only ensure security of the nuclear arsenal, but also help the military "hold the country's center"—Islamabad and populous areas like Punjab—in Kagan and O'Hanlon's words.

Let's take these three assumptions one by one and see if these Pakistan "experts" have any contact

with the reality of the country whose future they would shape.

The Myth of Barbarians at the Gates

The argument pushed by Bolton and others that if not for Musharraf and the military, Pakistan would have fallen into the hands of al-Qaida and the Taliban, is a beaten, much repudiated idea. Nothing displays the neocons' ignorance of Pakistani society and politics more clearly than this drummed-up fear.

Facts point in the opposite direction. It is under military rule like Musharraf's that militants gain ground and prominence. Whenever the people of Pakistan have had the opportunity to express their will, they have voted overwhelmingly for mainstream political parties, and they are likely to do so again in January 2008, when the next general elections are scheduled to be held.

Pakistan's religious parties are bitterly divided along sectarian lines. Furthermore, practitioners of Islam in Pakistan, as indeed elsewhere in the world, are not a homogenous, monolithic entity. The Taliban represents a marginal group within a minority Sunni sect. The clergy of the rest of the Muslim sects are as staunch in their opposition to the Taliban as they are anti-America. Even when they are united—as they were under the banner of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) in the 2002 elections—they could not bag more than 11 % of the total vote. The electorate has always chosen parties like the Pakistan People's Party of Benazir Bhutto, the Muslim League of Nawaz Sharif, and other regional parties—none of whom are religious extremists or pro-militancy.

It is true that incidents of terrorism and the power of the sharia movement have increased during the eight years of the Musharraf regime. But still, religious extremism remains on the fringes of both Pakistani society and polity. There are pockets of support for the Taliban in the Pashtun tribal areas, but even there, if and when elections have been

held, traditional tribal elders or moderate (relative to the Taliban) religious leaders win. The best bet to countering the Taliban and extremism in general is continued elected civilian rule, not protracted dictatorship of the generals.

Few other countries have suffered more at the hands of religious terrorists than Pakistan. Yet, the people have refused to succumb to the threat. Nor have they been forced into subscribing to the extremist ideology of al-Qaida. But instead of investing in the democratic process and waiting for the Muslim electorate of Pakistan to give its verdict on what kind of government it wants, impatient neoconservatives are rushing to conclude that without the military in power, the country will slide into an abyss and fall apart. If Washington wants to see a stable Pakistan, it must not lose sight of the fact that instability has grown during Musharraf's rule. More of Musharraf and his generals would bring more of the same.

Fallacious Faultlines

Another insult to common sense and to Pakistani citizens' intelligence is Krauthammer's three-way distribution of the country's body politic. His biased neocon perception sees in Pakistan, on one side, the Taliban and, on the other, two "Westernized" groups of the military and civil society. Appearing on Fox News in early November, he stated this ignorant view: "[T]he catastrophe is that the two Westernized elements are now attacking each other as the Islamists sit and watch and wait to either attack or cause chaos or take more terrorism action." Neat and simple, but also dangerously naïve.

As mentioned above, not all religious parties and Muslim sects are pro-Taliban. And very few of the so-called core of the military and elite civil society are Westernized. In fact, calling the military an agent of Westernization and modernization, as Krauthammer does, is risible. Has he forgotten the Reagan era Pakistan policy of the United States? The military had gone through a long process of

Islamization under the previous Republican-sponsored military regime of Gen. Zia ul-Haq. And the military remains an Islamized institution. Superficial changes and unpopular policy somersaults by Musharraf have done little to reduce the impact of that indoctrination. Religion is the main motivation of the soldiery. In any case, the military's institutional and corporate interests remain paramount and trump any ideological consideration, which is why it had first orchestrated an Islamic jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s and was then able to do a *volte-face* under Musharraf. It is the generals' appetite for power and control over civil institutions that dictates the military's alignment with the United States. What the military ought to be doing in the wake of Musharraf's abdication from his army post is returning to the barracks under a semblance of subservience to civilian control.

Even among the civil society of journalists, students, lawyers, politicians, and nongovernmental organizations, Islamic-minded people are heavily represented. It is, after all, a Muslim-majority country. To label all the protesting lawyers, journalists, and students under the heading of "Westernized, modern" segments of society is the ultimate intellectual lethargy. These Pakistanis' protests against Musharraf are not motivated by ideals of a Western-like liberalization or by a desire to see an unbridled wave of modernity. It is the denial of political freedom, the purging of the judiciary, and the suppression of freedom of expression that have caused them to retaliate against Musharraf. To equate that with a movement for Westernization and modernization is to ignore the diversity within Pakistan's civil society. There are many more ethnic, sectarian, political, and cultural fault lines that run through Pakistani society. The best way to manage that diversity is through democratic means. But those who have President George W. Bush's ears are itching for military action, whether by backing Pakistani generals or direct U.S. military intervention—or both.

Mad Military Methods

The neoconservative position on Pakistan is redolent of the Cold War times when Washington had supported another military dictator, Zia ul-Haq. As Krauthammer puts it: "The logic [of backing dictators] was simple: The available and likely alternative—i.e., communists—would be worse." Replace communists with terrorists, you have the crux of the neocon ideology exposed for what it really is: fear-mongering to conjure up excuses for exhibition of U.S. military power.

Failing to learn from the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, analysts like Kagan and O'Hanlon would have Washington embroiled in another potentially catastrophic military mission in Pakistan. "One possible plan would be a Special Forces operation with the limited goal of preventing Pakistan's nuclear materials and warheads from getting into the wrong hands. Somehow, American forces would have to team with Pakistanis to secure critical sites and possibly to move the material to a safer place," suggest Kagan and O'Hanlon.

They also have another alternative: "So, if we got a large number of troops into the country, what would they do? The most likely directive would be to help Pakistan's military and security forces hold the country's center—primarily the region around the capital, Islamabad, and the populous areas like Punjab Province to its south. ... Pro-American moderates could well win a fight against extremist sympathizers on their own. But they might need help if splinter forces or radical Islamists took control of parts of the country containing crucial nuclear materials. The task of retaking any such regions and reclaiming custody of any nuclear weapons would be a priority for our troops."

So fixated are these analysts on a military solution to every problem that the normal procedures of ensuring nuclear weapons do not even cross their minds. The answer to these fears is not a military invasion of Pakistan, which will pitch the entire population and the military against U.S. forces. What is needed is a better structured, more transparent,

well-codified command and control system. Pakistan's nuclear arsenal has been under military control; civilian political leadership, even when in power, has been kept out of the nuclear loop. This needs to change. The command and control structure can be further improved by introducing more openness into the process. Whatever civilian government Pakistan gets after the January 2008 elections, it should be given a say in managing the country's nuclear assets.

America and the rest of the international community ought to intervene in Pakistan, but not for the wrong reasons, and certainly not through military means. President Musharraf and the military must be put under pressure to ensure genuine, credible elections in January 2008. Military aid and other perks for military officers such as training, joint

exercises, and academic courses should be made contingent upon continuity of a democratic process. The new generation of post-Musharraf generals will have to learn to live under civilian leaders, despite the flaws of the politicians. Instituting democracy and a culture of civilian supremacy is a long haul and will take decades of uninterrupted electoral exercise and peaceful transitions of power. But the alternative to this, in the name of stability, antiterrorism, and nuclear safekeeping, would spell disaster for Pakistan as well as for global security.

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