

Atlantic Council Report on Pakistan: A Distortion of Reality

by Ramtanu Maitra

March 12—At the time of writing, the lawyers’ protest march organized by Pakistan’s former prime minister Nawaz Sharif has been launched from the port city of Karachi. Reports trickling in indicate that police clashed with thousands of protestors and many of them have been detained. Although the demonstrators are formally demanding that President Asif Ali Zardari reinstate the judges sacked by former President Pervez Musharraf, Nawaz Sharif, based in Lahore, has upped the ante by issuing a call to the people to take to the streets to usher in a “revolution” and dethrone the Zardari government. In all likelihood, the scene will get much uglier in the coming days.

Pakistan is undergoing an extreme level of instability on its western front bordering Afghanistan. In this large swath of landmass, broken up into the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), and Baluchistan, Islamabad’s writ is vanishing fast, and the Pakistani military, no longer capable of restoring order, has been paralyzed. In addition, northeast of this troubled region, Islamabad has allowed militants to take over the Swat Valley and impose Sharia (Islamic tenet) laws, violating Pakistan’s Constitution.

Meanwhile, in order to chart the future course in Afghanistan, the Obama Administration is getting ready to issue a policy review on Afghanistan and Pakistan. A series of meetings between senior officials of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the United States have taken place in Washington recently. Those in the Obama Administration who are involved in evolving the new policy have been speaking at many forums. A number of U.S. think tanks are busy producing reports with the objective of influencing the policy review. One such report, “Needed: A Comprehensive U.S. Policy Towards Pakistan,” by the Washington-based Atlantic Council, has drawn

many experts’ attention. The report paints a dire picture of Pakistan, but also says that “given the tools and the financing, Pakistan can turn back from the brink.” But it is evident from what has been unleashed in Pakistan, thanks to Washington’s ally Saudi Arabia, that the “tools” that are being provided—such as bad advice from the Atlantic Council and others—will only lead Pakistan to destruction, and not turn it back from the brink.

A Saudi Offensive

The gravity of the situation in Pakistan has stirred things up. On March 11, while President Zardari was on a March 10-11 visit to Tehran to attend a conference, Chief of the Armed Services Gen. Ashfaq Pervez Kayani met with Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani.

On March 12, President Obama’s “man Friday” on Afghanistan-Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, telephoned Gilani, expressing his concern about the political turmoil and urging the prime minister to exercise restraint.

Earlier, U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan Anne Peterson met opposition leader Nawaz Sharif to listen to his concerns and to details about the latest government crack-down.

The internal upheaval in Pakistan is a byproduct of the ongoing confrontation between Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) leader President Zardari and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) leader Sharif, since the democratically elected government came to power almost a year ago. This feud, and the worsening of relations between the two top parties, is bound to have very serious ramifications for Washington’s planned policy in this area. The most disturbing aspect is the active role of Saudi Arabia to encourage, and, in fact, push, Nawaz Sharif to topple the government. This move by Riyadh,



GNUFDL

Former prime minister Nawaz Sharif (right) is trying to bring down the Pakistan government. An advocate of imposing Islamic law in the country, who has accepted Taliban rule since 1998, he is the most powerful politician in Pakistan today. He and his brother, Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif (at microphone), had a highly secretive meeting recently with a top Saudi official.

if successful, will paralyze Washington's policy vis-à-vis Pakistan and Afghanistan.

On Feb. 25, *The Daily Times* of Lahore cited a local TV channel showing Nawaz Sharif and his brother, Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif, receiving a "VVIP" from Saudi Arabia at Lahore Airport. According to the channel, this important figure, accompanied by two other Saudis, were taken to the Sharifs' residence in Raiwind. The channel's sources identified the guest as Sheikh Saeed, adding that he had played an important role in taking the Sharif family to Saudi Arabia after the military coup in 1999, and in their return to the country last year. The meeting between Nawaz and Sheikh Saeed was highly secretive, and not even Nawaz's personal aides were allowed in.

As one observer pointed out in the Hong Kong-based *Asia Times*, Nawaz Sharif's prior history in building his power base has done much harm to the nation already. He adopted a divisive scheme of pandering to two primary groups. "The first group, the Punjabi, were

the focus of his corrupt patronage largess and a toxic mix of hardline religious nationalism. The second group is religious extremists and terrorists like the Taliban. Sharif is on record stating he would prefer Pakistan to be run like the Taliban ran Afghanistan, and we all know how well that turned out. Sharif's reckless embrace of religious extremism led him to try and impose Sharia (Islamic law) on Pakistan in 1998, and declare himself 'Amirul Momineen' (Leader of the Faithful/Believers)," the observer noted.

A Well of Good Wishes

The Atlantic Council report, dated Feb. 25, 2009, contains a prescription of what to do, in addition to being heavy on Pakistan's economic woes. In the executive summary, the report recommends a total package of \$4-5 billion above the (Biden)-

Kerry-Lugar proposals, beyond the International Monetary Fund's loans and other loans from the United States and other sources. Of this, about \$3 billion should go to the economic and social sectors directly, it suggested. The (Biden)-Kerry-Lugar proposals call for enhancing aid to Pakistan three-fold to \$1.5 billion annually for five years, for humanitarian purposes.

In addition, about \$1 billion of fresh or redirected funds would go to security forces—both military and law enforcement. Of this \$1 billion, approximately \$200 million would be applied to recruiting, training, and deployment of an additional 15,000 police within the next six months, forces which are essential to bringing long-term law and order to all of Pakistan, the report suggested.

Over a number of years, the architects of Pakistan's economy showed significant growth by utilizing the cheap labor-induced outsourcing by Western nations. Now that that financial bubble has burst and the financial collapse is upon this world, Pakistan's economy is in dire straits. During President Pervez Musharraf's

regime, Pakistan achieved a significant growth rate, but so did Iceland, to name a country which is now bankrupt and had to go back to its traditional economic practice: fishing.

Pakistan is bankrupt now because it did not invest adequately in its infrastructure and agro-industries, and did not consider the majority of its population as potential producers. One government after another chose to invest in projects that enhance exports, but not to develop its domestic market of 150 million-plus people. That was done to build up foreign exchange reserves and pay the foreign debt—a policy well appreciated in Washington at the time.

Islamabad's past economic policies, always guided to a large extent from Washington, did not even open up its tribal areas (FATA) for investments, and as a result, that large land area bordering Afghanistan has remained alienated from mainstream Pakistan. Whether Washington wanted Pakistan to open up these areas is irrelevant; the fact is, that the tribal areas have remained virtually in the same economic state as they were in the days of the British Raj. This is one of the reasons that the terrorists have succeeded in taking over these areas.

The report's recommendation to pump in more money to an ally is commendable; however, it may also turn out to be highly frustrating. Economic aid produces positive results in a country when that country possesses strong institutions and a development program that prioritizes the build-up of its physical infrastructure. In the absence of that, as it is so apparent in Pakistan, money does not do much good, other than enriching a handful. The report's recommendations in the economic area may at least help some American lawmakers to get rid of the guilt that they are burdened with.

Barking Up the Wrong Tree

In the sections "What To Do" and "Recommendations," the Council points out that the Obama Administration should develop a strategy whose prime objectives are the stability of that country and the improvement of relations between the U.S. government and the government of "the citizens of Pakistan."

The mention of the "citizens of Pakistan" is interesting. Since the beginning of bilateral relations, the United States was always engaged with and supported a single government or individual in Pakistan. How

that can be done in the short term, since the security situation is such that a long-term approach of any kind is dicey, needs exploration.

The report also stresses the importance of having a U.S. special regional representative, who will "not only be charged with responsibility for advancing U.S. policy with Pakistan and Afghanistan, but also should take into account the relationships with and influence of India, Turkey, Russia, China, Iran, the Gulf States and Europe, and help Pakistan resolve its differences with neighboring countries."

The roadblock that one would face in trying to implement this policy, is the "Pakistan" that could explain with clarity its differences with the regional countries. This would be a tall order under the conditions that prevail in Pakistan today.

Another tall order is the Council's recommendation that the "U.S. should engage in consultations with other relevant governments, including India, China, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States and Europe to maximize efforts to promote a deeper economic and political relationship with Pakistan and thus to help ensure the country's economic and political stability over the longer-term."

To begin with, New Delhi shows little interest in third-party involvement in its dealings with Pakistan. Whether that is acceptable to Washington or not, the fact remains that New Delhi considers such involvement as basically intended to undermine the 1972 Shimla Agreement, signed by the heads of states of two nations, designed to resolve all disputes, minor or major, *bilaterally*.

In other words, this Atlantic Council recommendation is dead in the water.

The report, however, does not leave it at that. It goes on to make umpteen recommendations emphasizing the improvement of India-Pakistan relations, and also Pakistan's relations its neighbors, and such far-flung areas as Europe. If the upcoming U.S. policy review has to make an impact in the short term to boost President Obama politically, this recommendation of the Council seems more like a wish list, than an actual strategy.

Another item on the wish list, particularly in the context of what is going on in Pakistan today, and its decades of political history, is the following recommendation of the Council: "The U.S. must reinforce Pakistan's efforts to strengthen democracy, engaging with political parties across the spectrum and support-

ing programs that strengthen political participation and civil society. The U.S. should encourage the Pakistan government to more actively work to build a strong and wide base of support its current economic, political, and military strategy and an informed civil-military dialogue.”

The Disconnect

There is a disconnect here, and it could be due to the lack of clear insight on the part of the writers. One of the main reasons that a concept of Pakistani nationalism never existed in an adequate form among Pakistani citizens, including the elite, is that they are burdened with an “anti-India nationalism.” Pakistan has been defined historically as “not-India”—its very identity is negative. The dominance of this “anti-India nationalism” explains why the Pakistani military became such a domineering force, and Pakistani democrats remained dormant. Even today, when the Pakistani military, divided and a shadow of its old self, chooses to flex its muscles, it exudes nothing but the same old “anti-India nationalism.”

By contrast, a clear commitment to Pakistani nationalism would have pushed Pakistan’s powers-that-be into making serious efforts in the past to integrate East Pakistan (which became Bangladesh in 1971, after a civil war), instead of using it for jute-and-tea-generated cash to build up an anti-India Pakistan Army. The same understanding of nationalism would have prevented air strikes against the Baloch tribes in the 1970s, and would have pushed Islamabad to strengthen Baluchistan and the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan.

In addition to these shortcomings, what strikes one the most is the blindfold that the Council report puts on, while describing Pakistani society. Dripping with optimism, it goes on to say that “despite the considerable difficulties facing the country, it would be wrong to regard Pakistan as doomed to go down the path of violent Islamism. In this context, the diversity of the country described earlier is also one of its strengths. Although the vast majority of Pakistanis are Sunni Muslims, there are minority Shia and Ismaili communities as well as Christians and Hindus. There is also diversity among the Sunni, including members of Deobandi and Barelvis sects. Far from being sympathetic to the cause of radical Salafists, the predominant Sunni influence has been the Sufi tradition, which is unaggressive and tolerant, and enriched by poetry, song, and

dance. The great majority of the much maligned madrassas, or religious schools, fulfill an essential social service by providing food, clothing and shelter to children of the poor when the state’s primary education system has been severely weakened through neglect and corruption by successive governments. It is the recalcitrant minority of such schools who actively support the Taliban and which need firmer control. . . .”

This observation is a deliberate distortion of realities. It is true that a minority of Pakistani citizens are Salafists, or supporters of the Taliban; however, the fact remains that the Salafists have gained muscle rapidly in the last few years. It happened that way because the Salafists, funded from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and elsewhere in Arabia, have begun to wrest power in many areas from the Army. If the Salafists’ power is a figment of people’s imagination, the Council will have to explain how it is that the Swat Valley is now under the control of the Salafists, and how could they impose Sharia, wholly disregarding Pakistan’s Constitution.

It is also surprising that the report ignored the fact that as far back as 1998, Nawaz Sharif, who is now active in bringing down the government, was trying to impose Sharia in Pakistan, and was crowing about his acceptance of Taliban rule in his country. Nawaz Sharif is not a fringe politician like Imran Khan. Following the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, he is surely the single-most-powerful politician in Pakistan, backed by Saudi Arabia, the exporter of Salafism.

The report’s statement that “in this context, the diversity of the country described earlier is also one of its strengths. Although the vast majority of Pakistanis are Sunni Muslims, there are minority Shia and Ismaili communities as well as Christians and Hindus,” has little to do with reality. The Hindu and Christian populations are so small that the report mentioned this only because the Council wanted to conceal the fact that Pakistan is an Islamic nation, and has little tolerance for its non-Muslims, including its own Muslim Shias.

Pakistani society is in deep trouble, whether the Council admits it or not. It is getting worse by the day. What is important is to accept reality and work towards strengthening the elements in Pakistan who are not seeking to become a part of the *Ummah*, or dancing to the tune of the British, seeking a break-up of Pakistan.