



In brief: Pakistan – probable disintegration or underlying resilience?

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Increasingly, it appears that the dominant public policy narrative about Pakistan in the West – and India – is that the country is in growing danger of disintegration. Among the factors cited are: increasingly powerful Islamist militants, some of them with significant links to the security establishment; a weak and fractious civilian government, which could increase the likelihood of another military coup to ‘save the nation’ from itself; a weak economy, further undermined by the devastating impact of the 2010 floods, in which the conditions of the poor are parlous and public provision in areas such as health and education extremely limited.

In January 2011, Stephen Cohen, a respected analyst of Pakistan, published a report for the Brookings Institution, “[Pakistan’s Road to Disintegration](#)”, which is particularly pessimistic about the future of the country. The report provides plenty of evidence and argument to back up Cohen’s conclusions. However, he summarised them colourfully in an [interview](#) that accompanied the launch of the report:

There is not going to be any good news from Pakistan for some time, if ever, because the fundamentals of the state are either failing or questionable. This applies to both the idea of Pakistan, the ideology of the state, the purpose of the state, and also the coherence of the state [...] I wouldn’t predict a comprehensive failure soon but clearly that’s the direction in which Pakistan is moving.

[...] Someone in the State Department was quoted in a Wikileaks document [as saying] that if it weren’t for nuclear weapons, Pakistan would be the Congo. I would compare it to Nigeria without oil. It wouldn’t be a serious state. But the nuclear weapons and the country’s organized terrorist machinery do make it quite serious [...]

Except for its territory, which is strategically important, there is not much in Pakistan that is of benefit to anyone. They failed to take advantage of globalization. They use terrorism as an aspect of globalization, which is the negative side of globalization. Go down the list of factors, they are almost all negative.

[...] We have to do what we can do and prepare for the failure of Pakistan, which could happen in four or five or six years.

However, there is another narrative about Pakistan which tends to receive less public attention – and which even allows itself occasional glimpses of optimism about the future of the country.

For example, in recent weeks former *Times* journalist and academic Anatol Lieven has published *Pakistan: A Hard Country*. In a [review](#) of Lieven’s book, Pankaj Mishra writes:

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[...] Lieven is more interested in why Pakistan is also "in many ways surprisingly tough and resilient as a state and a society" and how the country, like India, has for decades mocked its obituaries which have been written obsessively by the west.

Briskly, Lieven identifies Pakistan's many centrifugal and centripetal forces: "Much of Pakistan is a highly conservative, archaic, even sometimes inert and somnolent mass of different societies." He describes its regional variations: the restive Pashtuns in the west, the tensions between Sindhis and migrants from India in Sindh, the layered power structures of Punjab, and the tribal complexities of Balochistan. He discusses at length the varieties of South Asian Islam, and their political and social roles in Pakistani society.

[...] Approaching his subject as a trained anthropologist would, Lieven describes how Pakistan, though nominally a modern nation state, is still largely governed by the "traditions of overriding loyalty to family, clan and religion". There is hardly an institution in Pakistan that is immune to "the rules of behavior that these loyalties enjoin". These persisting ties of patronage and kinship, which are reminiscent of pre-modern Europe, indicate that the work of creating impersonal modern institutions and turning Pakistanis into citizens of a nation state – a long and brutal process in Europe, as Eugen Weber and others have shown – has barely begun.

This also means that, as Lieven writes, "very few of the words we commonly use in describing the Pakistani state and political system mean what we think they mean, and often they mean something quite different." Democratically elected leaders can be considerably less honest and more authoritarian than military despots since all of Pakistan's "democratic" political parties are "congeries of landlords, clan chieftains and urban bosses seeking state patronage for themselves and their followers and vowing allegiance to particular national individuals and dynasties" [...]

Lieven overturns many prejudices, and gives general readers plenty of fresh concepts with which to think about a routinely misrepresented country. Transcending its self-defined parameters, his book makes you reflect rewardingly, too, about how other old, pluralist and only superficially modern societies in the region work. "Pakistan is in fact a great deal more like India – or India like Pakistan – than either country would wish to admit," Lieven writes [...]¹

Cohen's report is certainly a valuable contribution to policy debate on Pakistan. Lieven's historically and anthropologically informed analysis arguably challenges some of the core assumptions of Western policy-makers. Both in their different ways illustrate the value of pausing from time to time, even amidst the heat of events, to ask 'bigger questions'.

Further reading

[Response of the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs to the Fourth Report from the Foreign Affairs Committee, Session 2010-11, *The UK's Foreign Policy Approach to Afghanistan and Pakistan* \(May 2011, CM 8064\)](#)

[Report by President Barack Obama to Congress on Afghanistan and Pakistan \(March 2011\)](#)

House of Commons Library Research Paper 07/68, [Pakistan's Political and Security Challenges](#) (September 2007)

House of Commons Library Research Paper 10/45, [The AfPak Policy and the Pashtuns](#) (June 2010)

¹ Another review of Lieven's book, on the website of the journal *Foreign Policy*, is available [HhereH](#).