

## Pakistan: The Pivotal State

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In January 2008, following the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, an *Economist* editorial argued that democracy offered the best chance for bringing stability to what the magazine called “the world’s most dangerous place.” Pakistan’s intricate relationships with its neighbors’ make it particularly important as a pivotal state. Pakistan belongs to a group of second-tier countries, which though not being outright failures, are particularly vulnerable in certain aspects of ‘stateness’. Pakistan’s political system tends towards the bureaucratic authoritarian, with a largely untaxed middle class that benefit from a lax financial system, and a strong military apparatus that has proved the most capable of delivering emergency services. Various rankings have placed Pakistan in the top 20 fragile states in the world in most years during the past two decades.

On the one hand, as Pakistan’s inability to control internal conflict, environmental degradation and a highly unequal society increase over time, the legitimacy of the government continues to erode and challenges from within increase. Indeed, historically aid to Pakistan has been used to shore up a centralized authority structure, whether it was perceived to be legitimate or not. That reinforced authority structure, a kind of bureaucratic authoritarianism, has been in place since the 1950s.

On the other hand, the risks that Pakistan poses to its neighbors have been shaped by its historical rivalry with India. Pakistan’s behavior specifically in reference to Kashmir was, until it acquired its own nuclear weapons, formed by the need to counterbalance Indian military superiority. Beyond Kashmir, the news does not get any better. In addition to supporting separatist movements and terrorist attacks in India, Pakistan has provided sanctuary, training as well as arms to other hot beds of conflict throughout Asia, including Sri Lanka, Southern Thailand, and of course to the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan during the war against Russian occupation.

More fundamental analyses suggest that the risks Pakistan poses lay in the need to externalize internal tensions through territorial expansion and conquest - what MIT Professor Myron Weiner called many years ago *The Macedonian Syndrome*. This argument is based on the assumption that the only way to hold together an ethnically fractionalized and artificial country like Pakistan is through strong arm leadership. The key attributes are a highly centralized government, heavy investment in the military security apparatus and a very weak middle class.

In essence Pakistan’s problems are to a large extent self-created. An analysis of the country’s underlying risk shows that it faces significant performance challenges in all but a few of its core state functions. Of particular concern are its governance and human development scores, low even when compared to others in the region. It is both weak and unstable and ranks as the 3<sup>rd</sup> most fragile state in Asia. It is particularly weak in authority - ranked 4<sup>th</sup> in Asia - by our measurements because of security challenges presented by various armed militant groups, and this despite receiving massive military aid from the United States since the 9/11 attacks. Further the government has been unable to extend

control throughout the country, and faces secessionist movements from tribal and militant groups. State legitimacy is also problematic as attempts to retain control of the government and army draw protests from numerous quarters. The country has had an average of over 100 bombings a year over the last several years.

We can see that once Pakistan experienced internal violence over the last couple of years there is an effort to shore up existing authority structures, no matter how weak they were, as a bulwark against further decline. Such an emphasis, exemplified in the United States long term aid program for Pakistan (as a result of its support for allies in the Global War on Terror), has led to a distortion in both the selection of aid recipients in Pakistan, and the type of aid provided. The result is a deeply unpopular, nearly illegitimate regime, dependent on external aid that can be unstable over the long term. The negative reinforcement of Pakistan’s authority structures is achieved through an institutional system, political structure and popular media in Pakistan that collectively reinforce the identity of state-centric nationalism. The Pakistani state is not so much a subordinate to dominant ethnic groups but works in partnership with it. This partnership is reinforced when the state is challenged by regional minority groups, itself a response generated by assimilative pressures, policies on in-migration, economic competition and more recently political threats of secession.

The net result is a lethal “policy feedback” process in which the central government’s policies in Karachi, in the form of entitlements for the majority ethnic groups induce minority groups to organize for political action. This challenge in turn generates greater resistance to change from the state-centre. Simply put, the sequencing of Pakistan’s increasing fragility appears to begin with a deterioration in its authority structures which rather than being adaptively modified in a positive way are negatively reinforced, with the consequence of increasing instability over the short run.

If Pakistan fails the costs would be immense. Research has shown that ignoring fragile states can be extremely expensive in terms of development, as well as for neighboring countries and the international community. It is far more expensive to invest in rebuilding failed states than monitoring and taking appropriate preventive action in fragile environments. A strategy of reacting to events is clearly not sustainable in the long run. Pakistan is a good example where preventive strategies must be applied.

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