



PERSPECTIVES FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

Pakistan & Afghanistan:  
Worst-case Scenarios  
Are Not Unlikely

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# Pakistan & Afghanistan: Worst-case Scenarios Are Not Unlikely

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*An implosion of Pakistan, with its 170 million inhabitants and nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles, is a real possibility that would have dire consequences not only for Pakistan, but for Afghanistan as well. The United States must chart different possible outcomes emerging from this scenario, including contingency planning and several policy options.*



After the swift ouster of the Taliban regime in 2001 and a period of lull, the war in Afghanistan took a dangerous turn because our nominal ally Pakistan continued its decades-old policy of controlling its neighbor by fanning the flames of war there, at whatever cost to the Afghans, the region, and itself.

The State of Pakistan, the Army and the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), that are indistinguishable for all practical purposes, have persisted in their support for the Taliban's and allied tribal insurgents in the FATA and the Northwest Frontier province, as well as in the pursuit of jihad against India. Pakistan is the chief destabilizer of the entire region from Iran's eastern borders to the Central Asian Republics, Bangladesh, and of course India.

In the eyes of the ruling Pakistani elites—the Army in the first place—the jihad for Kashmir, and the weakening/destabilizing of India, are Pakistan's Islamic *raison*

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*d'être*. This has in turn preempted the resources of the Pakistani state and made all other considerations secondary. After thirty years of accelerated Islamization, literacy levels are in free fall, hardship attends legitimate business, corruption is triumphant. The state is bankrupt. It only survives as a rentier state paid by nations interested in Pakistan and Afghanistan for their various geopolitical and georeligious reasons.

But in the end, Pakistan is a failed state whose death-pangs threaten the entire region. It has been intent on spreading to its neighbor the diseases that have put it on the road of disintegration, chiefly militant, radical Islam.

Pakistan—garrison state, rentier state, jihadi state—has been kept alive by massive injections of funds from the IMF, the World Bank, the United States, Saudi Arabia, the other Gulf petro-monarchies, and China. But while many outside donors hoped to stabilize Pakistan, and contribute thereby to a stabilization of the region, they in fact were funding further insurgency and the spread of destructive creeds: the Pakistani Army and ISI are past masters at manipulating outside donors for their own purposes.

Central government writ is scorned in the NWF and FATA (and major bombings have shaken major city centers under the nose of the authorities). An implosion of Pakistan, with its 170 million inhabitants and nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles, is a real possibility.

The U.S. must chart different possible outcomes emerging from an implosion of the country. Some possible scenarios are:

- A democratic revolution carried out by Pakistani civil society. While greatly weakened by the last decades of dictatorship, Islamization and underhanded manipulation, this outcome is not impossible, though least likely to occur;
- A fragmentation of the country into original component parts, with chaotic conditions especially in the NWF and FATA, rampant tribal warlordism and vicious power grabs among rival forces and appeals to foreign forces;
- A desperate attempt by Army forces to “rally the nation” and unite it in war against India, with attendant risks of nuclear war.

Each of those scenarios has implications for Afghanistan. Likewise, could we preempt the worst-case scenarios by orchestrating a harsh regime of financial sanctions against Pakistan by the key donors and supporters? Pakistan’s donors and supporters, the U.S. in the first place, but including Saudi Arabia and China, hold

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the key to the situation in Islamabad, which in turns holds the key to the situation in Afghanistan and farther afield, in the region, from Mumbai to Dushanbe.

The risk is elevated that the worst scenarios just referred to may unfold quickly. Contingency planning and policy options need to be developed to cope with the different scenarios. Reactive policies will fare no better than the recent years' make-believe wishful thinking. ■

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