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Smoke Gets in Your Eyes

Pakistan in 2010

This paper is part of the AAN Policy Briefing Series. This series aims to provide in-depth analysis of specific political problems related to Afghanistan and the region.

While the world is discussing strategies to exit Afghanistan, the crisis in neighbouring Pakistan is deepening. What the silent majority of Pakistanis voted for in the elections of February 2008 – a secular democracy – is proving elusive. The army has since reemerged as a major political actor and the Taliban are gaining ground. This paper by Ann Wilkens, former Swedish Ambassador to Pakistan and Afghanistan (2003-07), current President, Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA) and member of the AAN Advisory Board, addresses this deficit in attention.

1. INTRODUCTION: TWO FAMILIES

In November 2009, I found myself in Pakistan to catch up with friends. It was amazing how much the atmosphere in Islamabad had changed in the year which had elapsed since my last visit. It was not only the road blocks, the searches, the sand-bags, the scarcity of people at markets, the empty evening streets, there was also something more intangible: fear perhaps, or the rejection of fear, and resilience, a determination to be resilient, not to give up or to give in.

One family comes from Swat. They had experienced the gradual talebanisation of their district and its horrors - then the military intervention and its horrors. They did not feel it was sufficiently safe to return and they did not have to; they are privileged to also have a house and a life in Islamabad. Their 17-year-old daughter's college in Islamabad was soon to be reopened after its closure due to security threats. Among other incidents, a package containing a shroud of the kind used to swathe dead bodies and

the message, 'This is a present for the girls,' had been received at the college gate. The family was traumatized. They knew that such things could happen in Swat but they had not imagined they were possible in Islamabad. They feel that the situation could be sliding out of control and that refuge inside Pakistan may soon be difficult to find.

Another family had spent Eid Ull-Adha in their home, an hour's drive from Islamabad. One night, they were awoken by gun-shots. In the morning, six bullet holes were found on the wall of one of the bedrooms. No get-away car had been heard; no empty shells were found on the ground – the attack seemed to have been professionally planned. This suspicion was confirmed that afternoon when an unidentified caller warned that this event was merely 'a trailer' and that the full movie might also be shown. When the man taking the call, himself a former officer but now the author of a critical column in one of the country's largest newspapers, asked why this was

happening, he was told that 'one does not spit in the plate one eats from'. In his submission to the police, the man named 'an agency' as the most likely suspect.¹

2. BACKGROUND: THE ELECTION IN FEBRUARY 2008

What my friends were experiencing – threats from the Taleban, threats from security agencies – were precisely the two phenomena that the Pakistani people had reacted against in the election of 18 February 2008. In spite of well-founded fears of rigging, this election in actual fact proved to be one of the fairest conducted in Pakistan's short history. Its result was a resounding 'no' to military rule as well as a clear rejection of religious fundamentalism. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP), whose leader Benazir Bhutto was assassinated on 27 December 2007, received more than 30 per cent of the votes while the Pakistan Muslim League (Q) (PML-Q), which had been in power under President Pervez Musharraf, realised less than 20 per cent. The alliance of religious parties, Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), lost its power in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) to a coalition led by a secular Pashtun party, Awami National Party (ANP). In its other stronghold, Balochistan, the MMA also lost its influence in the Provincial Assembly.

The election had been preceded by rising political turmoil as the opposition had positioned itself to unseat an increasingly unpopular government, which had originated via a military coup in 1999, while the government was intent upon clinging to power. On 9 March 2007, President Musharraf had tried to oust Pakistan's Chief Justice, Iftikhar Chaudhry, who had initiated several legal processes targeting the government or people close to it. This proved to be not the first but possibly the Musharraf regime's most blatant miscalculation of its own strength. Chaudhry refused to accept the invitation to resign presented to him by the government and moreover did not bow to the threats accompanying it. This relatively simple act transformed a seemingly uncharismatic civil servant into a symbol: resistance was indeed possible. His refusal triggered a movement of lawyers which channeled much of the population's

existing pent-up frustrations with developments, or the lack of them.

Street fights between security forces and activists are a recurrent sight in Pakistan, yet this time the demonstrators being clubbed by the police were dressed in suits and ties. The message was clear and hopeful: justice may be inaccessible to the common man, but the idea of justice was not dead and there were people prepared to fight for it.

Following the restoration of democracy and the reinstatement of Chaudhry as Chief Justice on 21 March 2009, however, this pro-justice movement fizzled out. The lawyers had differing political affiliations; the basis for a new political party did not exist. The upbeat mood characterising the immediate post-election period petered out as well. Political bickering became normative and the coalition between the PPP and the other election-winner, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML-N), broke down. In the NWFP, where attacks by religious extremists became an almost daily phenomenon, the ANP also failed to live up to expectations.

3. ARMY POWER REEMERGING

The fact that a relatively fair election could be conducted in February 2008 was a sign that the Pakistani army, under its new Chief of Army Staff (COAS) and earlier head of the Directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani, had decided to read the writing on the political wall and to step back from its position as the de facto executive power of the country. This position seems to have been sustained in spite of the nostalgia for strong (that is, military) leadership that has reemerged both inside and outside Pakistan as the weakness of the civilian government has become more obvious and obstructive. However, General Kayani seems inclined neither to grab power in the manner of several of his predecessors nor to take orders from the civilian government. A decision by the government in July 2008 to put the ISI under the control of the Ministry of Interior was revoked within hours.

Instead, using the power of the purse, the task of putting a lid on the army's free-wheeling activities was assumed by the US Senate. In the 'Enhanced Partnership With Pakistan Act of 2009', popularly referred to as the 'Kerry Lugar Bill', the US committed itself to a sustained partnership with the Pakistani people, emphasising good governance, economic development and education – in short, doing what many people thought had been sorely lacking in the US-Pakistani relationship of the Bush years.

¹ A full account of this incident can be found at: <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/the-newspaper/columnists/kamran-shafi-in-it-up-to-our-necks-129>

However, the civilian assistance offered through this legislation, namely USD 1.5 billion per year over a five-year period, did not come without conditions. The bill contained a number of benchmarks, some of which were very detailed (such as the provision of free meals at schools). A more important irritant, at least to the army, were the limitations set on the continuation of security assistance: the security forces must make concerted efforts to prevent al Qaeda and related groups from operating in Pakistan, prevent the Taliban and associated groups from using Pakistan as a sanctuary, and they must not materially interfere in the political and judicial processes of Pakistan.

The initial reaction of the army was that this was 'a cadeau empoisonné', which ought to be rejected. For that to happen, the PPP-led government, perceived to be in collusion with the US, had to be circumvented. In a press release from the Corps Commanders Conference on 7 October 2009, the following piece of advice was put forward:

Kerry Lugar bill also came under discussion...The forum expressed serious concern regarding clauses impacting on National Security...[I]n the considered view of the forum, it is the Parliament, that represents the will of the people of Pakistan, which would deliberate on the issue, enabling the Government to develop a National response.²

While the Corps commanders' lack of respect for the elected government may be surprising, the negative reaction by the army as such was, of course, to be expected. But the indignation went much deeper and wider; the stipulations of the bill fell onto soil already fertile with anti-American sentiment and it seemed that the whole Pakistani nation had been humiliated. Opinion-makers who for years had been asking the US for a less security-oriented approach to the problems of Pakistan were equally upset, perhaps not with the content as such but with the wording and presentation of the bill, which, it was felt, amounted to a declaration of the incapacity of the Pakistani state. As ever so often, particularly in its relationship with Pakistan, even when the US sought to do right, it turned out to be wrong. And it gave the army yet another chance to come out as the guardian of national pride that was being squandered by a corrupt and glib government.

A parallel development in the same direction can be found in reactions to the 'AfPak' concept coined by Washington's new administration (which now

seems to have abandoned the term). While a truly regional policy approach, incorporating India, would have been welcomed by most, virtually no Pakistani sees his country as being on par with Afghanistan. Pakistani institutions may not be working perfectly, but they are there, and at least one of them (the army) is highly developed. Again, there was a feeling of being bullied by the super-power whose own actions had, at the same time, been at the root of some of the problems Pakistan is grappling with, notably the increase in domestic terrorism accompanying Pakistan's participation in the 'Global War on Terror' (GWOT). Instead of receiving praise for its role as frontrunner in the GWOT, and compassion for the high price Pakistanis are paying in this context, the country was humiliated once again, this time by the incoming Obama administration.

4. DETERIORATING RELATIONS WITH INDIA

Fighting in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) or NWFP was never a comfortable role for the armed forces of Pakistan, whose *raison d'être* has been the threat, perceived or real, emanating from India. Pakistani soldiers have been trained to fight Hindus, not Muslim 'brethren'. And while pressure is on Pakistan to redirect much of its fighting capacity to the Western border region, problems have been mounting also on the Eastern border. Concretely, the relative lull prevailing in Kashmir for the last couple of years has been broken by a number of incidents in the beginning of 2010³ and skirmishes have also occurred across the border between Pakistan and India.

³ In the first two weeks of January 2010, more than six encounters with militants took place in Jammu and Kashmir, in which more than one dozen militants were killed. The terrorist attack at the beginning of January at Lal Chowk in central Srinagar was perhaps the most spectacular. An intercepted telephone conversation between one of the terrorists there and his Pakistan-based handler contained congratulations from the latter on the success of reviving 'the dead horse' of terrorism in Kashmir. An increase in the number of infiltration attempts across the Line of Control (LoC) has also been reported, at a time when the Indian army had reduced its troops in Jammu and Kashmir by around 30 000 men. Indian officials have alleged that Pakistan is sending captured Taliban militants to fight in Kashmir, giving them the option of 'jail or jihad'. Incidents have increased in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir as well, giving rise to similar finger-pointing across the border. In a suicide attack outside army barracks close to Rawalakot in early January, three soldiers were killed and 11 injured. 'Given that the areas of Azad Kashmir [Pakistan-controlled Kashmir] are very much sanitized one can

² No 396/2009-ISPR Dated: October 7, 2009.

On a political level, much of the territory gained, inch by inch, in what was never a rapprochement - but at least a movement - in Indo-Pakistani relations, went up in smoke after the terrorist attack on Mumbai on 26-29 November 2009. The composite dialogue initiated in January 2004 was stalled and over a year later had not been resumed, despite recurrent Pakistani proposals to do so. At the beginning of February 2010, however, signs of an upcoming ice-breaking exercise were appearing as India offered foreign secretary-level talks with Pakistan, to be followed apparently by a bilateral meeting between the interior ministers in connection with a SAARC⁴ conference in Islamabad on 26 February. Shortly after this announcement, on 13 February, a terrorist attack hit a popular café in Pune, not far from Mumbai. The immediate reaction from Hindu nationalist leaders was to urge the government to call off the scheduled meetings, a demand which was dismissed.

India has conditioned a resumption of the talks on effective action by Pakistan towards the leaders of the militant group, Lashkar-e-Tayba (LeT), said to be involved in the Mumbai attack. Pakistan claims no legal grounds have been provided for it to do so and points out that attacks perpetrated by non-state actors cannot be blamed on governments. If that were the case, Pakistan would have ruptured relations with a number of countries whose citizens have been involved in terrorist acts on its own territory.

Consequently, when the Indian army chief, General Deepak Kapoor, was reported to have stated, in a closed-door seminar in New Delhi towards the end of December 2009, that India is capable of battling both China and Pakistan at the same time, there was no dialogue mechanism in place to limit the damage. A chain reaction of ever more indignant reactions was triggered in Pakistan: the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Shah Mohammad Qureshi, described the statement as 'irresponsible', the Foreign Office spokesman commented that it 'betrayed a hostile intent as well as a hegemonic

assume that these rogue elements are coming in from outside the country,' commented Talat Masood, a retired Pakistan Army general and political analyst, according to an article in Hindustan Times. Within weeks, another attack followed in the same area. On 18-19 January, firing across the LoC was again reported. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/Blowback-PoK-rocked-by-mystery-terror-attacks/H1-Article1-495428.aspx>

⁴ SAARC, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, was established in 1985. Its initial members were Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. In April 2007, Afghanistan became its eighth member.

and jingoistic mindset that was out of step with the realities of the times', the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee warned that 'any misadventure against Pakistan will be a strategic mistake and amount to putting itself [India] on the road to destruction', and PML-Q Secretary-General Mushahid Hussain urged the Pakistani government to take up the issue with the UN Security Council 'so that the whole world should know who stands for peace and who is the enemy of peace in the region'.⁵

Thus, building confidence between Pakistan and India has proven to be an arduous and time-consuming task while progress can be annulled within a matter of days. Considering the Pakistani state's lack of control over the plethora of militant movements that have grown and strengthened in recent years, another very large attack similar to the Mumbai disaster could happen at any time,⁶ the reaction to which would start from a substantially higher level of tension between the two nuclear-armed states. In spite of the enormous risks at stake in a nuclear-armed region, Indian voices have been warning that the 'restraint' exercised after the Mumbai attack might not be mobilized a second time, a line of reasoning which seems to have been accepted by the US.⁷

5. RUMOUR-MONGERING AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

For the Pakistani public, the ongoing battle of words between India and Pakistan underlines the need for a strong army. Consequently, among the

⁵ Newspaper clippings dated 4 January 2010 published at the website of NewAgeIslam. <http://www.NewAgeIslam.org>

⁶ In the beginning of 2010, the Center for Preventive Action of the Council on Foreign Relations, an American think-tank, said in its Contingency Planning Memorandum: 'India faces the real prospect of another major terrorist attack by Pakistan-based terrorist organisations in the near future.' <http://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/americas/US-analysts-warn-of-Pak-terror-attack-on-India/Article1-499156.aspx> This prediction came true in Pune on 13 February, with at least nine persons killed and 57 wounded.

⁷ In connection with his visit to the region in January 2010, US defence secretary Robert Gates was reported by the Indian newspaper *Mail Today* to have stated to the Indian press: 'After the Mumbai attacks, India had showed great restraint and statesmanship. But if attacked again, it will be unreasonable to assume that India would show the same patience.' www.newageislam.com/NewAgeIslamicWorldNews_1.aspx?...

conspiracy theories permeating Pakistani-Indian relations is the idea that this tension, or elements of it, is intentionally caused by the Pakistani army through the more opaque layers of the ISI. But there is also the opposing view that attacks such as that in Mumbai are secretly abetted by the Indian security service in order to embarrass Pakistan. In the same vein, India is accused of plotting attacks in Western Pakistan from Afghan soil and, in particular, of using its consulates and political offices in Afghanistan in an effort to destabilize Balochistan and the NWFP.⁸

The degree of truth in these mutual accusations is difficult to ascertain but the perceptions are strong and in politics, perceptions count as much as facts. This is all the more true in a society in which the education sector has been sorely neglected and only around half of the population is able to read and write.⁹ Together with what might be described as routine lying in public affairs, it makes for an environment in which the sky is the limit in the realm of rumour-mongering. For instance, according to a report in the Urdu newspaper *Nawa-i-Waqt* on 3 December 2009, Blackwater, a CIA contracting firm now operating under the name of XE Services, RAW, the Indian security service, and Mossad, the Israeli security service, have been cooperating to carry out terrorist bombings all over Pakistan which can be blamed on the Taliban. It is further claimed that a large chunk of territory not too far from Islamabad has been given over to the Americans by the government in order to facilitate this cooperation.

⁸ A distinct example of this type of publicity was found on the website of the newspaper *The Nation* on 28 December, 2009: 'According to well-placed government and defence sources, RAW [the Indian intelligence service] has sponsored a number of major terrorist activities in Pakistan including the one at Meena Bazaar, Peshawar, in October last and another earlier in Lahore where the Sri Lankan cricket team was subjected to terrorist attacks in March this year. Sources informed that RAW, through Afghanistan, had executed the terrorism incidents through Afghans by providing them money and weapons for the set targets. It was further learnt that three terrorist attacks targeting offices of Pakistan's premier intelligence outfit ISI [Inter-Services Intelligence] in Lahore, Peshawar and Multan were part of the sequence of terrorism being perpetrated by RAW. India had also been involved in terrorism in Balochistan province and had killed more than 300 people in the country through well-organised terrorist acts.' Reproduced at the BBC Monitoring Afghanistan news.

⁹ A literacy rate of 49.9 per cent is given in the Human Development Report 2007/2008, published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

6. THE ARMY'S RED LINE

During the Musharraf regime, professional journalism was at the centre of critical discussion within civil society. Since the change in government, the press seems to have become generally less responsible. But there are multiple problems - not only are serious mass media drowning in a sea of rumours, they also continue to be hampered by security restrictions. During the operations of the Pakistani armed forces in Bajaur, Swat and South Waziristan, independent journalists have been efficiently barred from accessing these conflict areas. Existing information comes either from the army or is based on second-hand accounts.

Hence, the army is given great leeway to shape the narrative of its interventions in these areas. At the same time, it is now riding on a wave of support from the public. A switch in public opinion came about when the Taliban expanded their activities as close to the capital as Swat and their terror tactics became more widely felt. The public flogging of a young girl who had left her home without a male guardian, which was filmed by a bystander on his mobile telephone and immediately hit the internet, served as an eye-opener to many who had earlier been ambivalent vis-à-vis actions towards domestic Taliban.

When it comes to North Waziristan, however, an area which is crucial to the destabilization of Afghanistan and thus prioritized by the US, the Pakistani army has refused to expand its offensive against the Taliban into this agency. During the 124th Corps Commanders conference in the middle of December 2009, 'the foreign pressure' to expand the operation was rejected. According to a newspaper report, it was stated that 'the armed forces, while taking into account the requirements of national interest and needs, would take action against terrorists under their strategy and will.'¹⁰ Again, the army came out as the body in charge of national interest, while the government

¹⁰ Report by Pakistani Urdu newspaper *Ausaf* on 18 Dec 09, pp 1, 4, published by BBC Monitoring Afghanistan news. This position was repeated during the visit of US defence secretary Robert Gates to Islamabad on 21 January 2010, as Maj Gen Abbas, head of public relations for the Pakistan army, stated: 'We are not going to conduct any major new operations against the militants over the next 12 months. The Pakistan army is overstretched and it is not in a position to open any new fronts. Obviously, we will continue our present operations in Waziristan and Swat.'

Full report at:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8471789.stm

was perceived as more inclined to cooperate with 'foreigners'.

There are several possible reasons why the army chose to draw its red line at North Waziristan, among them the fact that it was indeed already highly stretched, had suffered substantial losses in Swat and South Waziristan, and was unwilling to redirect forces from the Eastern border. But the decision was also interpreted as a sign of a lack of interest to deal with threats mainly influencing the situation in Afghanistan, and, further along this line, a wish to hold on to 'assets' which could be instrumental in ensuring 'strategic depth' on Afghan territory – that is, a sign that the old policy behind Pakistan's instrumental role in the build-up of the Taleban regime in Afghanistan is still intact: Why give it up now that a date has been set for the withdrawal of the US troops? There is not that much time to go and, so far, time has hardly been on the side of the international intervention.

Predictably, this halt in action by the Pakistani army has led to an increase in US drone attacks in the FATA, in particular in the North Waziristan agency where the Haqqani network operating in Eastern Afghanistan is reported to be based, thereby further exacerbating the anti-US sentiments already rampant among Pakistanis. A Gallup Pakistan-Al Jazeera opinion poll conducted in the middle of November 2009 showed that in the course of the last couple of years, the US has taken over India's leading role in threat-perceptions among the Pakistani public. Answering the multiple-choice question, 'Who do you think is the greatest threat for Pakistan?', 59 per cent chose the US, while 18 per cent opted for India and only 11 per cent for the Pakistani Taleban.¹¹

Since this poll was conducted, there has been a further escalation in drone attacks in the FATA, with a spike after the suicide attack originating in the FATA that killed seven CIA operatives in their base in Khost, Afghanistan, on 30 December 2009.¹² This escalation is accompanied by

¹¹ Dr Ijaz Shafi Gilani, Chairman Gallup Pakistan, 'Numbers, stats and causes' Friday Times 13-19 November 2009.

¹² On 24 January 2010, the Indian Express reported: 'Beginning the day after the attack on a CIA base in Khost, Afghanistan, the agency has carried out 11 strikes that have killed about 90 people suspected of being militants, according to Pakistani news reports, which make almost no mention of civilian casualties. The assault has included strikes on a mud fortress in North Waziristan on January 6 that killed 17 people and a volley of missiles on a compound in South Waziristan last Sunday that killed at least 20.'

speculation that drone attacks will soon be expanded to Balochistan, where the so-called Quetta shura is based.¹³ While public resentment is on the rise, it should also be noted that these attacks have in fact succeeded in killing a number of the people targeted, which suggests cooperation from people in Pakistan at some level, not excluding military circles. The double-dealing that characterized Pakistan's participation in the GWOT since its inception during the Musharraf years seems to have survived the change of regime, now working in several directions at the same time:

- Secret cooperation with the US relieves the army of unpopular action against Muslim 'brethren', who nonetheless constitute a real threat to the Pakistani state;
- The public anger over drone attacks strengthens Islamic radicalism supported by elements within the armed forces;
- Continued, secret cooperation with elements within the insurgency in Afghanistan serves to keep the door open for continued influence in a future setup in Afghanistan;
- Continued Taleban activity in parts of the FATA serves as a spring-board for attacks on Indian interests in Afghanistan.

Embarrassing evidence that the government and the army are indeed cooperating more closely with the US than officially announced hit the headlines on 3 February 2010 when three US soldiers were killed by a roadside bomb on their way to inaugurate a girls' school in the Lower Dir area, which had been rebuilt with American assistance. The soldiers turned out to be part of a Special Operations team tasked with the training of Pakistan's paramilitary Frontier Corps in counterinsurgency techniques.¹⁴

7. TALEBAN GAINING GROUND

The turning point marking the surge of Taleban terrorism in Pakistan can be pinpointed to 10 July 2007, with the army attack on the Red Mosque in Islamabad. After half a year of mounting provocations, the army finally decided to flush out the religious extremists who had created what

<http://www.indianexpress.com/news/CIA-deaths-prompt-surge-in-US-drone-strikes/571000>

¹³ The Quetta shura is a war council led by Mullah Muhammad Omar, his deputy Mullah Baradar and his military commander Abdullah Zakir.

¹⁴ http://thenews.com.pk/top_story_detail.asp?Id=27048

amounted to an occupied zone around the Red Mosque in the middle of Islamabad, not far from the ISI headquarters. This action constituted a rupture with the reluctance to actively take on militant groups, which had until then characterized the position of the government. It resulted in a series of revenge attacks mainly directed against security forces which came on top of already recurrent sectarian clashes, more general political violence and occasional targeted attacks on political figures, such as the two attempts to assassinate President Musharraf in December 2003.

Before the attack on the Red Mosque, attempts by the army to fight the expansion of the Taleban in the FATA had ended in negotiations, most notably with Taleban groups in the agencies of South and North Waziristan. Peace deals with these groups were concluded in February 2005 and September 2006 respectively. In spite of the fact that negotiated truces had unfailingly been broken and misused by the Taleban, in May 2008, another such truce was initially attempted to solve the situation in Swat after which the Taleban moved even closer to Islamabad. In retrospect, the tactic of agreeing to truces served to give the Taleban the respite they needed to rest, regroup, expand, and proliferate. From the FATA, they have gradually moved into the NWFP and on to the southern parts of Punjab, where a new hub of extremist activity seems to have been established. What the recurrent truces also furthered are lingering suspicions that the commitment of the army remains selective and that the opaque web linking the military, or elements within it, with the religious extremists, or elements within them, is still intact.

In the two and a half years which have elapsed since the attack on the Red Mosque, Peshawar, the provincial capital of the NWFP, has turned into a beleaguered city, under constant pressure from Taleban groups and now a no-go area for Westerners. After numerous attacks on transports along the Khyber pass route, international forces in Afghanistan are trying to redirect their supply lines through Central Asia. In other main urban areas such as Islamabad/Rawalpindi and Lahore, movements are obstructed by ever-present security measures. Until recently, Karachi, traditionally fraught with political turmoil, enjoyed rare status as the safest of these megacities but the political unrest that brought this economic hub to a virtual stand-still in the 1990s seems to have reemerged.

The overall environment is hardly conducive to much-needed foreign investment and common people have been hit hard by domestic inflation

and global recession. Poverty, which was already wide-spread, is growing.¹⁵ As in other countries, the government is the first scapegoat when purchasing power shrinks. The militant movements, while causing the turmoil stunting economic growth, tend not be blamed for it. In fact, they thrive on poverty and ignorance.

8. NUKES ON THE LOOSE?

Much has been written about the risk that religious extremists might take control of the nuclear weapons possessed by Pakistan's army. In Pakistan, this is interpreted as selective concern – India's nuclear weapons are accepted without much ado – or even as the beginning of a plot to rob Pakistan of its nuclear capacity, which remains one of the few sources of national pride. In the lively, sometimes tumultuous, debate which characterizes Pakistan's political life, voices opposing the country's nuclear capacity are few and far between.

The nuclear weapons are, by all accounts, well protected by the armed forces, with very little say from the civilian setup. The army is not dysfunctional – it is in fact overfunctional. Where people are undernourished, the army is well fed; where people are illiterate, the army is well educated; where people are crowded in slums, the army has lots of green grass at its disposal. The army is also known for its discipline. It is not in the Pakistani army that extremists start shooting indiscriminately at their colleagues – it is in the US army.¹⁶

Thus, in a situation where there are plenty of reasons to worry about developments in Pakistan, a break-down in army control over its most valued asset does not seem to warrant a place at the top of the agenda. The risk that these weapons would be used as intended, that is, in a situation where tension with India escalates out of control, seems closer at hand.

¹⁵ According to a report based on data from the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), '[t]he recent increase in the international prices of food commodities has had a significant impact on Pakistan's poor people. It is estimated that about 17 million people have joined the ranks of the 60 million people who are food insecure. And many more are at risk. About half of the country's population lives in a condition of food insecurity.
<http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/web/guest/country/home/tags/pakistan>

¹⁶ On 5 November 2009, army psychiatrist Major Nidal Hasan, shouting 'Allahu Akbar', started a shooting spree inside a Soldier Readiness Center at Fort Hood, Texas, which left 13 people dead and 30 wounded.

9. CRACKS IN THE NATIONAL HOME

If the vision for Pakistan was that of a national home where Muslims of the subcontinent could escape discrimination, mind their own business and develop in peace, today there are noticeable cracks in this structure. Internal harmony - between provinces, between the rich and the poor, between city and countryside, between men and women, between Sunni and Shia - was never attained and against the back-drop of general turmoil, the divisions are increasing. While the two western provinces, NWFP and Balochistan, tend to be ever more drawn into the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, the two eastern provinces, Punjab and Sindh, continue to look more towards the east.

From the perspective of national cohesion, Balochistan stands out as the most vulnerable spot. A low-intensity conflict between Baloch nationalists and the government has plagued the province for decades. It revolves around the division of resources, with the Baloch nationalists demanding a better share of the national budget¹⁷ and, in particular, better reimbursement for the resources extracted from the province, notably natural gas, though oil is also on the map. While many governments, including the Musharraf regime, have opted to crush this movement by military means,¹⁸ the Zardari government has produced a 'package' to be discussed with the Baloch. This may prove to be too little, too late for radicalized Baloch nationalists,¹⁹ who have become increasingly separatist as state repression has dragged on. A first step to prove the good will of the government could be to procure information on Baloch nationalists who have disappeared, presumably into the realms of security agencies. While the exact number of the missing persons is unknown, the nationalists claim that as many as four to eight thousand Baloch have disappeared

¹⁷ Balochistan remains the least developed of the four Pakistani provinces.

¹⁸ On August 26, 2006, Nawab Akbar Bugti, a prominent Baloch leader, was killed in a clash with the army at Kohlu, about 150 miles east of the provincial capital Quetta. This provided the Baloch nationalists with a martyr and led to further radicalization.

¹⁹ When Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gillani visited the port city of Gwadar in Balochistan at the end of December 2009, a month after the Balochistan package was announced, he was greeted by a shutter-down strike and a protest rally by relatives of the disappeared, according to Baloch Hal, a Baloch e-newspaper. <http://thebalochhal.com/2009/12/editorial-gillani-and-shutter-down-strike-meet-in-gwadar/>

during the past five years and that disappearances have continued under the current government.

The Baloch protest movement is based on the feeling that the Baloch are exploited by the dominant Punjabi population. These are complaints that resonate with other ethnic groups as well - the Sindhis, the Seraikis and a number of smaller groups²⁰ - while the Kashmiris have their separate problem of national identity. Pakistan has not become a successful melting pot and, to make the problem worse, a large part of its national borders - the Durand line, the Line of Control - is not officially settled and internationally recognized.

When hard times are on, divisions tend to increase. But when external threats are perceived, nationalism still tends to take over. So, in a way, the focus on conspiracy theories in the political discussion serves a purpose: it diverts attention from domestic problems. However, it does not solve them.

10. CONCLUSION

The linkage between Afghanistan and Pakistan is widely recognized. In order to curb the spread of the Taleban in Afghanistan, their access to safe havens in Pakistan has to be checked. However, the Pakistani Taleban are also feeding on the situation in Afghanistan, inspired by the difficulties encountered by the international troops there and strengthened by fighters with Afghan experience. A relevant question, as the theme of peace talks is moved higher up the Afghanistan agenda, concerns the consequences of such reconciliation for the Pakistani Taleban who are generally deemed to be more radicalized, violent and internationally oriented than their Afghan counterparts. If they are not curbed in a parallel development, there is a strong possibility that they will rather be encouraged to step up their quest for an Islamic Emirate in all or parts of Pakistan, while also being strengthened by elements too radical to fit into the widened, Afghan fold.

At the same time, the problems in Pakistan go well beyond the havoc created by the Taleban movement. There is a web of militant groups with varying focus, some of them linked to Kashmir or India, others looking towards Afghanistan or mainly active on the domestic scene. There is a

²⁰ According to the US Library of Congress, 59.1 percent of Pakistanis identify themselves as Punjabis, 13.8 percent as Pakhtuns, 12.1 percent as Sindhis. 7.7 percent as muhajirs (urdu-speakers), 4.3 percent as Baloch, and 3 percent as members of other ethnic groups. <http://countrystudies.us/pakistan/31.htm>

lack of transparency in the relations between these groups, or some of them, and the Pakistani armed forces, or parts thereof. There are also problems of sectarian fighting, increasing intolerance,²¹ disparities between provinces and population groups, the non-delivery of services normally expected from a government, and recurrent natural disasters. On top of this, economic hardship is spreading and deepening.

According to a report from the Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS),

a total of 2,586 terrorist insurgent and sectarian related incidents of terrorism were reported across the country [in 2009] that killed 3,021 people and injured 7,334...If the casualties in terrorist attacks, operational attacks by the security forces and their clashes with the militants, intertribal clashes and the cross-border attacks of the US and NATO forces in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan (FATA) are counted, the overall casualties amount to 12,632 people dead and 12,815 injured.²²

It goes without saying that such carnage has a great impact on the spirit of a nation, even a nation as severely tested as Pakistan. It should also be kept in mind that only some four years ago, around 80 000 Pakistanis perished in an extensive earth-quake, a natural disaster which a number of clerics interpreted as God's punishment for a lack of religious zeal.

While the call for a stronger international engagement with Pakistan is undeniably there, the conditions surrounding it would be different from those prevailing in Afghanistan, especially the Afghanistan of 2001. The West, in particular the US, is unpopular to the point where anything perceived as coming from the West tends to backfire. Yielding to pressure from the US is a

cardinal sin by any government. The Pakistani population may feel beleaguered by hostile neighbours but it is also hell-bent on managing its own affairs. At the same time, the road to the sort of regional harmony that could untie these knots seems very long. However, starting at least on an exercise to approach the problems of the region in a holistic manner could go a long way, especially if other Muslim countries could be constructively involved. Festering conflicts like the one in Kashmir need to be approached, even if India, the emerging regional power, would certainly be challenged. The Balochistan problems are another example of transborder conflict, touching directly on Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan and, again, with India as a big factor in the background. The Pashtunistan question, entailing the lack of recognition by Afghanistan of the Durand Line as a permanent border, remains unsolved and will hardly disappear of its own accord. The agenda is daunting and dealing with it would require international resolve of a kind that is rarely seen. The US, however unpopular, would have to be there to take the lead.

A great asset of Pakistan remains its own people. When given a chance to express themselves, as in the election of 2008, the silent majority has opted for moderation and democratic values. There is a huge number of highly politicized Pakistanis who provide for a vibrant civil society and there is great potential in the diaspora. Therefore, however unpalatable current politicians may be, it is crucial to respect and support the fledgling democratic process that is now in place. Given the history of Pakistan, the risk of a return to military rule when domestic problems seem overbearing is always present – but history also tells us that this exacerbates problems in the longer term. It is time to give civilian Pakistan a chance to develop and to get its act together. At the same time, the difficulties it must tackle are awesome, calling for international understanding, sensitivity and support. Much remains to be done, on all sides.

²¹ On the eve of 24 December 2009, Christian worshippers gathered in a church around 125 km from Islamabad were attacked by 'a mob of the extremists' who 'injured around 65 women and children'. In September 2009, a report from Pakistan-controlled Kashmir stated that 'the situation has become extremely dangerous for the local Ahmadi population as the local clerics are issuing regular Fatwas pronouncing that all Ahmadis are 'Wajibul-Qatl' which means they can and should be lawfully killed due to their beliefs'.
<http://www.pakistanchristianpost.com/headlinenewsd.php?hnewsid=1609>
<http://www.punjabnewline.com/content/view/19224/38/>

²² PIPS, Pakistan Security Report 2009.

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