

Pakistan on the brink

Pakistan is on the edge -- and we're all hanging with it. In the words of the nuclear power's president: 'If we lose, the world loses.' Mike Blanchfield explains what's at stake and why Pakistan can't be allowed to fall

BY MIKE BLANCHFIELD, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN MAY 10, 2009



Young Pakistani, Internally Displaced Person's (IDP's) from military operations in Swat, Buner and Lower Dir, sit as they queue for rations in a relief camp on May 8, 2009 in Mardan, Pakistan.

Photograph by: Daniel Berehulak, Getty Images

Waiting warily in her Islamabad home, as the Taliban insurgency raged 100 kilometres away, Saba Gul Khattak frets for the future of her two children, particularly for her nine-year-old daughter.

Khattak recalls an image of her mother cycling to university in the city of Lahore in the 1950s. A generation later, when she attended university, she covered her head in Peshawar, Pakistan's gateway to the Khyber Pass, where Osama bin Laden would one day invent al-Qaeda.

"My daughter, in the next years, may have to wear a burqa," Khattak says with a laugh during a long telephone call recently from Pakistan's capital. "Things are going back from where my mother had a bicycle." Khattak, a PhD in political science from the University of Hawaii, is underscoring a point, but she hardly has to. For weeks, Taliban insurgents have been fighting their way closer to Islamabad. The militants struck a truce with the government in February to lay down their arms if they were allowed to

implement Shariah law in the Swat Valley near the Afghanistan border. But the Taliban kept their weapons, and pushed into Lower Dir and Buner, 100 kilometres from Islamabad.

For Khattak, the distance represents a return to a medieval way of life that would enslave women. For the rest of us, the 100 kilometres points to a global nightmare: Pakistan falls, the Taliban take control and a modest arsenal of nuclear weapons comes under control of Islamic fundamentalists.

"We're as concerned as anybody else. ... We're the people that would have to live with that scourge regime from the Middle Ages ... an uneducated bunch of savages, who cannot even read the Koran," says Khattak, the executive director of the Islamabad-based Sustainable Development Policy Institute.

"So yes, for me, nuclear weapons are important." Pakistan is on a precipice, and the world is hanging with it. The fall of Pakistan, a nuclear power, would threaten not just the few thousand Canadian soldiers and diplomats toiling over the border in Afghanistan, or its less than stable Central and South Asian neighbours, but the world at large.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton says Pakistan's inability to beat the Taliban poses "a mortal threat to the security and safety of our country and world." But will Pakistan's nuclear arsenal really fall into the hands of Islamic extremists? The short answer? No.

Ultimately, for the West -- the United States, especially -- there is too much at stake. Pakistan can't be allowed to fall. But preventing the failure will be dangerous and deeply complex. History and deep-rooted anti-Americanism must be overcome, along with the inherent dysfunction that is 21st-century Pakistan.

"I don't know how loose the Soviet nukes were, but yes, this could, if things deteriorated, be that scenario. However, there's a long way to go. Pakistan is not an incoherent state, and it is in their interest to protect the nuclear arsenal," says Stephen P. Cohen, an author and Pakistan expert with the Brookings Institution.

The hope is that Pakistanis are beginning to get it. They've launched a massive military offensive to confront the enemy within, wrenching its national military focus away from longtime enemy, India, which has its own nuclear weapons and with whom it has fought three wars over the disputed Himalayan territory of Kashmir.

Having Pakistan deal with the Taliban is infinitely preferable to the West -- again, the U.S. -- riding to the rescue. In fact, if Pakistan reaches the point where it needs a foreign military bailout, it will likely be too late for us all.

"There are many wars around Pakistan. ... There are also wars within Pakistan," Jehangir Karamat, the retired Pakistani general and former U.S. ambassador, wrote last month. "The different threats for various reasons have morphed into one overwhelming and perhaps existential threat to Pakistan." The

time had come, Karamat said, "for Pakistan to rethink its response to face the threat that is unfolding." Stamping out these existential threats highlights larger issues: the need to destroy once and for all the terrorist safe haven that has taken hold in Pakistan as a base to attack NATO troops and civilians in Afghanistan, as well as ending Pakistan's role as the major exporter of terror across the globe. Terrorists with links to Pakistan were connected to the 7/7 London transit bombings, the Madrid commuter bombings, Canada's own brush with terrorism with the conviction earlier this year of Momin Khawaja in Ottawa, as well as numerous foiled plots in Germany, Britain and elsewhere.

Saving Pakistan is a two-step process: 1. Eliminate the existential threat. 2. Set the country on a course of democratic renewal.

Like Saba Gul Khattak, the majority of Pakistanis do not want to live under Taliban fanatics. There is a strong thirst for democracy in the country.

Pakistan's cure will cost billions. U.S. President Barack Obama has realized this, and that's why his strategy for the region includes a five-year, \$7.5-billion investment in development aid for Pakistan.

The U.S. wants other countries to contribute, including Canada. This country has been lucky with its terrorism wake-up calls. Khawaja, who allegedly attended terrorist training camps in Pakistan, was convicted and sentenced to 10.5 years for a plot to detonate bombs in Britain.

But our luck won't hold forever.

As Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari said recently: "If we lose, the world loses." Nuclear nightmare
The father of Pakistan's nuclear bomb was born in 1936 in Bhopal, India. Abdul Qadeer Khan would be forever marked by the ethnic violence that Hindus unleashed on his own native Muslims following Pakistan's 1947 Partition from India.

"By the time he emigrated to Pakistan in 1952, Khan had developed an interest in science and a loathing for India," says a definitive 2005 Time magazine profile.

A talented engineer and metallurgist, Khan wound up in the Netherlands, where he found his wife, as well as the expertise to make a nuclear weapon, while working for a European nuclear organization. In the late 1970s, he returned to Pakistan, with designs for the centrifuges needed to enrich uranium -- technology the Dutch say he stole -- and under the auspices of Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (Benazir's father), he went to work on Pakistan's bomb.

Over the years, Khan would amass properties at home and abroad, far beyond the means of his day job as a senior public servant in a developing country. He secretly sold technology and equipment for nuclear bombs to Iran and North Korea. Pyongyang has since joined the nuclear club, becoming the world's No. 1 rogue nuclear state, and Tehran is racing to catch up.

Khan travelled widely, across Africa, the Middle East, the Persian Gulf states. He may have also sold nuclear secrets to Saudi Arabia, or worse, al-Qaeda or some other arm of that or another terrorist organization.

Khan was arrested and forced to apologize on Pakistani television five years ago. He said he was sorry, that he'd acted alone and did not have the backing of the government.

But the damage was done, and everything A.Q. Kahn did was compounded by what was happening in Afghanistan while he was building Pakistan's bomb and selling the blueprints and spare parts to the highest bidders.

Frankenstein's children The Soviet Union's December 1979 invasion of Afghanistan and bloody 10-year occupation set off a chain of events -- the CIA-sponsored birth of the Islamic mujahedeen including Osama bin Laden to fight the Soviets, the implosion of Afghanistan, the rise of the Taliban, 9/11, and 118 dead Canadian soldiers.

In the early 1980s, then U.S. president Ronald Reagan needed an anti-Soviet ally in Central Asia and found one in Pakistan's new leader, Gen. Mohammed Zia un-Haq. With anti-Moscow Saudi Arabia matching the U.S. dollar for dollar, Reagan pumped in billions in military assistance, most of it managed by Pakistan's spy agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence, or ISI.

The ISI chose radical mujahedeen fighter Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and his Hizb-i-Islami (party of Islam) to do much of the fighting because "ISI officers insisted to CIA officials that Hekmatyar was the most efficient at killing Soviets," wrote the Cato Institute's Malou Innocent in her April analysis of Pakistan-U.S. relations.

Today, Hekmatyar, along with al-Qaeda, is part of the insurgency that targets NATO soldiers in Afghanistan.

In the mid-1990s, during the civil war that followed the Soviet withdrawal, the ISI backed the Taliban to keep the peace on its western frontier.

"These groups acquired a life of their own. In some cases they've turned into Frankenstein monsters because they've turned against Pakistan itself," said Cohen.

In 1998, Khan's work brought Pakistan equal to its archrival India in the nuclear age, as his country detonated its first atomic bombs.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (the location of some prime Khan real estate acquisitions) were the only countries to recognize Afghanistan's Taliban government. Events forced all three countries to abandon that piece of foreign policy folly on Sept. 12, 2001.

Nightmare prevention Estimates on the size of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal vary. Mohamed El Baradei,

the chief of the International Atomic Energy Agency, said last year Pakistan had "30 to 40 warheads" and that he was "worried that nuclear weapons could fall into the hands of an extremist group in Pakistan." As Innocent noted in her Cato study, it may have up to 50 actual bombs, but it could have enough fissile material to make 55 to 90 nuclear weapons.

Suppose the Taliban were able to storm into Islamabad; even so they wouldn't be able to unlock Pakistan's nukes.

The components -- the rockets, the warheads, the fissile material -- are spread out across six to 10 high-security military bases secured behind Permissive Action Links, or high-tech locks such as iris scanners and secret codes.

Also "because most terrorists possess only rudimentary training, it is unlikely that militants can fully assemble the nuclear components, even assuming, such weapons could be obtained," writes Innocent.

The United States has invested \$100 million to train the Pakistani military to guard their nuclear cache, a subject Obama suddenly wanted a deeper briefing on this past week.

"The U.S. has worked quietly with the Pakistanis to ensure the safety of its nuclear arsenal. This includes securing the areas where the weapons are positioned and perhaps helping them with PALs--permissive action links, which essentially render these weapons useless unless you have the codes to activate the warheads," said Fen Hampson, head of Carleton University's Norman Paterson School of International Affairs. "Problem is, that sites are in the northwestern part of the country and not far from the areas of trouble," he said.

"There is always the risk that an element of the military, which is sympathetic to the Taliban, could try to take control of a nuclear installation but this could only really happen if there was a complete breakdown in the political system and military chains of command." That leaves the ISI -- Pakistan's most dangerous wild card. No one knows for sure how much of the ISI is under central control, or how strong its rogue, pro-Taliban elements might be.

"To what degree the ISI authorizes or supports these groups, is not clear. But clearly the use of terrorists -- or what the Pakistanis would call war by other means -- the ISI is part of the process," said Cohen.

Is there a tipping point for the West to intervene, breach Pakistan's sovereignty to protect its nukes? "By the time that came, it would be too late -- Pakistan would probably be in chaos, and intervention would be ineffective," said Cohen.

He, like many others, believes Pakistan's military can turn back the insurgency.

"It won't 'fall,' but it might crumble around the edges. I'm less worried about a Taliban takeover than the

deterioration of the Pakistani state itself, including a remote possibility of dissension within the military," Cohen explained.

"It's way too soon to be worried about loss of control over nuclear weapons, although the present trend lines are worrying." Hampson said if Pakistan's nuclear installations were seized by rogue elements of the military, India would intervene.

"In this situation, it is far more likely that India would launch a preventive attack to destroy Pakistan's nuclear assets. This would probably lead to a major war on the Indian subcontinent. The threat is much greater to India than the U.S. The Mumbai bombings underscore the dangers," said Hampson.

"But I also think it is far more likely that Pakistan's military will intervene in Pakistani politics if the situation worsens. If the current government cannot control the unravelling political situation and Taliban areas of influence and control extend much beyond where they are now, the military will do what they have done before and take control of the situation." Curing a cancer The red and green banner hung across the entrance of the makeshift camp on the outskirts of Muzaffarabad, the main town of Pakistani Kashmir. "Medical Surgical Camps. Dry Food. Rescue Boat Across The River ... Dead Body Removal." It was October 2005, and the Himalayan villagers of this region were digging out from the rubble caused by a massive earthquake that killed more than 70,000.

"We are distributing, 24 hours, day and night. We are distributing milk, juice, medicine," Haji Javid Hassim, the camp's co-ordinator, said then. "We need tents and blankets only. Food, we have too much. Water, we have too much." Pakistan was struggling to meet basic needs, but Hassim bragged about his group's relief efforts -- 40 to 50 trucks were distributing food -- as he unleashed an unprovoked torrent of anti-American rhetoric, most of it aimed at then U.S. president George W. Bush. The banner above his head identified his group as "Jama-T-UD-Dawa." The more familiar spelling is Jamaat-ud-Dawa. It is a cousin of the terrorist group Lashkar-e-Tayiba, an organization nurtured to fight Pakistan's battles with India over Kashmir.

During the 2005 Kashmir earthquake, Jamaat-ud-Dawa shamed the Pakistan military, not to mention the world's top humanitarian agencies, by getting help first to these desperate people.

"Their relief efforts were better organized than those of the army. In fact, they were pulling injured soldiers out of the rubble. When I mentioned this fact to (Pakistan's former president) Gen. Musharraf a few months later at a Kashmir peace conference, he was very angry at me for publicly discussing a tabooed subject," Pervez Hoodbhoy, an Islamabad physicist and an outspoken peace advocate, told the German magazine Focus last December.

Whether here in North West Frontier Province, or in the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) that borders Afghanistan, or in the back alleys of the bustling Indian Ocean metropolis of Karachi, terrorists have grafted themselves into Pakistani life, winning hearts and minds of impoverished Pakistanis and exporting terror abroad.

They are filling a social vacuum: they provide schools, health care and other social services. Recipients get a dose of extremist Islamic doctrine. Saudi-based Wahhabism is drilled into impressionable minds in thousands of madrassas that serve as the farm system for al-Qaeda and Taliban recruiters.

Three years after the earthquake, Lashkar-e-Tayiba stood accused of orchestrating the terrorist raid on the Indian financial centre of Mumbai that left 170 dead.

The group, since banned by the U.S., was also blamed for the brazen 2001 armed assault on the Indian parliament buildings -- an attack that brought the two South Asian nuclear powers to the brink of what would have been their fourth war since Partition.

As the United States takes steps to help Pakistan's military meet the immediate dangers of Taliban militants that threaten their country and its nuclear arsenal, the Obama administration has already laid out an ambitious new plan that would target aid at Pakistan's schools and hospitals to undermine the social outreach of terrorist networks.

Obama's plan would see \$7.5 billion in development spending reach Pakistan during the next five years, a stark contrast to the \$10 billion in military aid the Bush administration gave to Pakistan's recently deposed president, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, in the years following 9/11.

Experts such as Cohen and Hampson agree this is the only way to exorcise Pakistan's terrorist demons.

"The best way to prevent this is ultimately to support economic development in a country that was one of the youngest and fastest growing populations of any Muslim country in the world. Until recently, Pakistan was doing well with growth rates in the seven-per-cent range," said Hampson.

"That is no longer true and poverty, lack of real educational opportunities for the lower classes, and tribal/regional splits will only exacerbate the problem of the radicalization of the lower classes." Educated Pakistanis like Saba Gul Khattak recognize their country needs help.

"Talk to the ordinary people; they may not want the United States or its troops to be there. But they do want development to be there. They do need schools; they do need health facilities, they don't enjoy dying while going on bumpy roads to give birth to a child in some other hospital they cannot access.

"Or a child dying because of diarrhea because they can't reach hospitals. Or children growing up without studying because the schools they have are not functioning because schoolteachers can't teach. No one wants life like that." Benazir Bhutto's father did not want a life like that for his people either when he founded his PPP political party four decades ago. The party's slogan, "Roti, Kapra, aur Makan," translates to "Bread, Clothing, Shelter." Today, the PPP has returned to power in its latest attempt to reverse decades of military rule. Asif Ali Zardri, the widower of Benazir Bhutto, won his country's presidency after his wife's assassination in December 2007.

Khattak has found herself wondering "what if" Benazir had come back to power. "If she had been around would we be in this wild mess we are in today? Maybe that's wishful thinking." These days, Khattak has sleepless nights thinking about the future. Her family has urged her to take her children and move abroad.

Late last month, Khattak's son celebrated his eighth birthday with friends at an Islamabad sports complex.

As a peaceful scene unfolded, Khattak hoped it was a sign of a better future.

"These young girls will come and play with them, soccer I suppose. You can see 17-year-olds, 18-year-olds, on the same team as boys playing together," she said.

"This is Pakistan. But I don't know how long it will continue." Mike Blanchfield, a former Ottawa Citizen reporter, is the senior international affairs writer for Canwest News Service. He has made more than a dozen trips to Afghanistan and Pakistan since Sept. 11, 2001, returning to Afghanistan's eastern border provinces with Pakistan last year, and travelling to Pakistan's North West Frontier Province and Pakistan's Kashmir region in 2005.

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Who are the Pakistani Taliban?

- Pashtuns: Most Pakistani Taliban fighters are ethnic Pashtuns from northwestern regions on the Afghan border. They support the Afghan Taliban, most of whom are also Pashtun and many of whom fled to the Pakistani Pashtun lands after U.S.-led forces ousted Afghanistan's Taliban government in 2001.

- The leader: Thirteen factions in northwest Pakistan have formed the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), or Taliban Movement of Pakistan, led by Baitullah Mehsud, based in South Waziristan on the Afghan border. Mehsud has been accused of being behind a wave of suicide attacks across Pakistan since the army stormed Islamabad's Red Mosque in July 2007 to crush a militant movement based there. When officials named Mehsud as the prime suspect in the assassination of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto in 2007, Mehsud's notoriety rocketed.

- In Swat: Taliban fighting in Swat are part of the TTP and are led by a commander called Fazlullah, the son-in-law of a pro-Taliban cleric who led thousands of tribesmen to Afghanistan to fight after the U.S. invasion in 2001.

- Links to Al-Qaeda? Intelligence and security experts say Mehsud is an al-Qaeda ally. He has given refuge to a large number of foreign militants, but the nature of his links with al-Qaeda's leaders, believed to be hiding along the Afghan-Pakistani border, is not clear.

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Previous

Next



Young Pakistani, Internally Displaced Person's (IDP's) from military operations in Swat, Buner and Lower Dir, sit as they queue for rations in a relief camp on May 8, 2009 in Mardan, Pakistan.

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