The Pakistan conundrum

The most important means to make Pakistan a normal state is to end its army’s obsession with India, says DEEPAK LAL

With the Pakistani state having surrendered Swat to the Taliban, the future of Pakistan as a normal functioning modern state is in question. As the former Pakistani ambassador Zafar Hilaly noted in a recent column, “The fear that extremism may overwhelm Pakistan has been replaced by the certitude that it will. Lives are being planned accordingly and so too are investments.” This potential jihadi takeover of a nuclear-armed Pakistan poses India with a serious conundrum. Given its sensible restraint in the face of the LeT-sponsored Mumbai outrage, could India live with a jihadi nuclear Pakistan? Is there anything India can do to prevent this outcome? Why has the Pakistan military (its dominant state actor) allowed this creeping jihadi peril to develop, and will it, as it now claims, be able to stem the militant tide? I attempt to answer these questions in reverse order.

A recent history of the Pakistani military by Shuja Nawaz (Crossed Swords: Pakistan, its Army, and the Wars Within) shows how the composition of the army has changed. The traditional rural martial tribes in Punjab which provided most of the volunteer force are increasingly being diluted by petit-bourgeois recruits from the burgeoning urban areas — the strongholds of the growing Islamist parties. This is a pattern which has been observed in both Egypt and Iran (see my In Praise of Empires, p.89-90). Moreover, the officer corps, since the promotion of Islamism in the army and the polity by General Zia, has an increasing number of Islamists. Despite the liberal General Musharraf’s attempts to remove them from the higher echelons during his tenure, the cohort of conservative Islamist officers commissioned under Zia (the Zia Bharati) are set to take over the Pakistan army when the current group of senior lieutenant generals retires (Nawaz, ps. 571-2). Finally, the paramilitary forces policing the FATA are tribes in who are surrendering rather than fighting their fellow tribes. Therefore, I guess that it is the fear of a serious mutiny which has prevented the liberal Pakistani generals from taking on the jihadist.

The Pakistan army has also been complicit in not only promoting jihadi groups in Afghanistan as part of its policy of ‘strategic depth’ policy to counter India, but also in aiding and benefitting from the lucrative opium trade in Afghanistan. This has financed the Taliban and, with the extension of the US war on drugs to Afghanistan, has led to the Taliban gaining recruits and sympathisers by offering a protection racket to the opium poppy farmers in Afghanistan. One way to cut off this source of funding for terrorist arms would be for the US and NATO to buy up the Afghan poppy crop, to be converted into morphine and donated to meet the acute shortage in many Third World countries suffering from AIDS (see my “Endangering the War on Terror by the War on Drugs,” World Economics, July-Sept. 2008).

But, to make Pakistan a normal state the most important means to end its army’s continuing obsession with India. At the centre of this remains the Kashmir question. The only answer to this is to make the LOC not just the de facto but de jure border. India lost the chance of imposing this in exchange for the Pakistani prisoners captured in the Bangladesh war at the Simla conference (see P N Dhar: Indira Gandhi, the “Emergency”, and Indian Democracy, ps.190-4). The second opportunity to lance this boil was Musharraf’s near agreement with Mannaohan Singh as part of the ‘peace process’, before hubris led to the General’s fall. The only hope now is for the US to persuade the Pakistani army that a settlement with India on this line must be a quid pro quo for continuing military and economic assistance. This should be accompanied by providing the means and training for counter-insurgency, and the deployment of the Pakistan military to the existential internal, rather than the imagined external, threat it faces. To make this stance credible, India should agree to a joint reduction of forces on the Indo-Pak border.

This still leaves the question: what can India do in the event of a jihadi takeover of Pakistan? I had asked this of a former high-ranking defence official in the Clinton administration at a conference at Harvard in late 2001. Without blinking an eyelid he said, “We would help the Indians take out the nuclear arms.” After the US intelligence failures in Iraq, I would not be too sanguine about this possibility. I would be more confident if Mossad makes a similar offer! In any case, I do hope our security analysts have an answer to this question, and that the ongoing elections yield a government which is able and willing to deal with what is no longer an implausible existential threat to India.

Even if the Pakistani state can be restored to some semblance of health, the question of its long-term relationship with India will remain. There is a growing Pakistani recognition of India’s emerging superpower status. There is little it can do to prevent this rise. For India, like any nascent ‘imperial’ power there will be a temptation to extend its frontiers to naturally defensive borders. This outcome would be a nightmare. A better solution is one which, as a young IFS probationer, I heard Pandit Nehru articulate in one of his last appearances in the Lok Sabha. On being asked how he hoped he hoped the Indo-Pak imbroglio centred on Kashmir and created by Partition would be resolved, he replied that he hoped in time there would be some form of confederation of the states in the sub-continent. Ramachandra Guha (India After Gandhi, ps.331-59) has recounted the events before Nehru’s death, when Sheikh Abdullah had embraced this idea contained in the ‘Rajaji formula’, and having cleared it with Nehru he was returning from his meeting with Ayub to discuss the plan, when Nehru died. But this vision, like the German-led reunification of Europe through the EEC and EU, may be the only long-term answer to the continuing subcontinental strategic woes.