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Deadly Embrace: Recent Books on Pakistan

A Report of the Book Discussion held on 14th November 2011 at IIC



Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies

in collaboration with



The Book Review Literary Trust



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*Report based on a panel discussion organized by the
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at the IIC, New Delhi*



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TCA Rangachari: Review of *Deadly Embrace* (by Bruce
Riedel) and *Pakistan: A Hard Country* (by Anatol Lieven)

Both Anatol Lieven and Bruce Riedel have spent a consider-
able amount of time studying Pakistan and they should
therefore not be taken lightly. However, it is important to
note that their description of Pakistan is not very new or dif-
ferent.

Lieven has called Pakistan a Janus-faced state. Lieven's book
is perhaps a more serious work as it goes into an in-depth
analysis of the Pakistani society and the social and political
processes at work there, such as the institutions, the politics,
governance and so on. Lieven argues that the very strengths
of Pakistan are also its greatest weaknesses.

Pakistan is a conservative society based upon conservative
traditions. The rural elite guarantee to the rural population
safety, security and economic assistance at the time of need,
and in return derive their sense of power. The interests of
the rural elite in a sense become an example of being Janus-
faced. It is important for them to preserve this conservative-
ness to entrench their power. If they were to modernize they
would stand to lose their power. If this analysis is correct
then Pakistan, especially the rural population, is likely to re-
main backward forever, in return for security. Therefore, in a
way they are stuck between the devil and the deep sea, with
only two options before them - either to remain feudal, or
the Taliban-way. The Taliban, which provides the challenge to

the elite, is currently not pervasive across society. Moreover, the Taliban may provide security and economic assistance in the rural areas as effectively but their methods are very drastic and rigid. However, the possibility of the Taliban taking over is low unless two things happen:

I. If the army implodes internally

II. There is some kind of an external input, which could crack the Pakistani state.

The internal implosion could come about due to changes in the character of the army. The latter could be an outcome of Indian and/or American efforts. Today, more recruits at the higher levels are drawn from the lower classes. The army is thus drawn from society and is influenced by the value system the rest of society is subjected to. This society is averse to fighting the Taliban, and it is the army which is being called upon to fight it.

Thus, if a Pakistani soldier is given orders to fight the Taliban he could feel that his Muslim identity is brought into question. Moreover, it is not just the issue of Muslim identity that is threatened but also his identity as a soldier. This is what gives rise to the possibility for an implosion within the army. In this manner, Lieven explores the complex nexus between the Pakistani army and society.

However, even though Anatol Lieven's book purports to give an insight into the state of Pakistan, it suffers from a major drawback. This is so because it accepts all the ghosts and myths that the army conjures up, and there is no attempt to challenge it.

Bruce Riedel's work is more current as it focuses on contemporary issues that confront Pakistan like terrorism and jihad, and how the state approaches these issues. He argues that Pakistan is projecting itself as a state that has failed to earn the respect of those it serves and is completely unable to run its own affairs. Moreover, his book also confirms all the negative images that India has of Pakistan.

The problem with both books lies in the solutions they offer; both revolve around what India can do. Moreover, the books also talk about what India should or should not do in Afghanistan. India is meant to make all the necessary concessions and sacrifices, when the focus should really be on strengthening Pakistan's integrity, cohesiveness and existence.

How then do you deal with a state that cannot take care of itself but is vital for a number of reasons? The solution does not lie with India but within Pakistan itself. The changes have to come within Pakistan, especially with respect to the feudal structure of society. However, whether these changes can happen or not is debatable.

Despite all this, there is still some basis for optimism. Although the Pakistani society and the army are being increasingly radicalized, the radical forces are not doing what the Taliban did in Afghanistan. They are not burning down schools or preventing girls from going to schools.

Srinath Raghavan: Review of *Pakistan: Democracy, Terror and Building of a Nation* (by Iftikar H. Malik) and *Pakistan: Beyond the Crisis State* (by Maleeha Lodhi)

The edited volume by Maleeha Lodhi is strong; it gives an image of Pakistan that is different from the alarmist outlook of daily headlines. Most of the contributors are Pakistani and very concerned about where Pakistan is going. They want to highlight that Pakistan is not simply about 'Allah, Army and America' or a series of crises upon crises that are going to pull down the state. There is some sort of strong inner resilience and Pakistan can still be revived. Most of the contributions also adopt a normative position

and argue that the status quo does not matter as long as one goes back to certain ideals on which the state was founded. The emphasis on the importance of Jinnah and his ideals are a pet theme of the Pakistani liberals at large. They essentially argue that only if one goes back to the state which Jinnah had envisioned, one be in a much better position to get a grip over the state. This, however, tends to create its own set of myths.

Ayesha Jalal begins with an interesting aspect of Pakistan. She says there is a sense of gripping paranoia in Pakistan. The people are unwilling to confront their problems and always looking for external sources to explain them. She concedes this is not just propaganda from India or the US. Such a state of paranoia actually comes from the intellectual climate itself and this does not encourage a very clear engagement with Pakistan's own history. She says, psychologically, Pakistan's problem with its own identity is being complicated by an education system and a society that lay more emphasis on myth-making, rather than looking into historical facts.

Akbar Ahmad also talks about why Jinnah matters. What he fails to see, however, is that some of the problems of Pakistan especially the structural asymmetries that have been created in the Pakistani system stem from Jinnah's decisions. For example, the dismissal of the duly elected government of NWFP. Moreover, it was during his time that the army and the bureaucracy were made the backbone of Pakistan's political process. Thus, while liberal Pakistanis may think it is good to go back to Jinnah's time, that itself may be the source of the problem.

Maleeha Lodhi lays out a good conceptual way of thinking. According to her, there are five features of Pakistan:

- I. The power asymmetry between political institutions and non-elected institutions like the military and bureaucracy
- II. The domination of the political system by the feudal order
- III. The economic growth of Pakistan based on the borrowing of funds
- IV. The geopolitical situation being a source of advantages as well as a source of problems
- V. Centrifugal and ideological contradictions within Pakistan.

As far as the asymmetry of power is concerned, there is a perpetual tendency to lay all the blame straight away on the army. This may be one of the disappointing things about the volume. It is important to note that the army did not take power on its own. It was the military-bureaucracy nexus that took power and subsequently, all these decisions were sanctioned by the judiciary, which historically has been a highly conservative force.

The domination of the polity by the feudal order was evident in the latest elections; it was only people from a particular set of families or tribes or clans who managed to get the bulk of the elected seats.



However, this is a trend that you can see all over Asia as dynastic politics exist in other Asian countries as well, like India, China, Taiwan, Vietnam and Thailand, and is not restricted simply to Pakistan. Moreover, the family as an important unit is not restricted only to politics but can be seen in other fields as well such as business.

Meekal Ahmad and Mudassir Mazar Malik also write about the growth pattern of Pakistan. Both of them highlight the possible sources of change for Pakistan and, at the same time, the sources of grave concern. Pakistan's economic problems have improved in the recent past. On human development indicators, Pakistan has done better than India on most accounts. Both these chapters try to disentangle the weak economic structures of Pakistan because of which it has to rely on external aid. In particular, they highlight the flawed tax structure which exists in Pakistan. Agriculture contributes 40 per cent of Pakistan's GDP but is not taxed. The indirect taxes are regressive and no progressive taxation exists. However, external funding may not account for all that much. The external funding becomes important in its ability to act as leverage for the international community, as Pakistan has shown itself to be a chronic defaulter. Thus, in this way, these chapters not only highlight the strengths of the Pakistani state but also mention the points where the international community can have leverage over the Pakistani state.

Iftikhar H Malik's book is a bit disappointing. Although it emphasizes that another source for change for Pakistan is the middle class, it is very repetitive and thematically does not get down to the brass-tacks until half-way. According to Malik, the Pakistani middle class is growing and has created a new space in Pakistan's political order. This has been seen in the movement that led to the ouster of Pervez Musharaff. But these issues cannot be automatically assumed to be strengths. Revolutions do not happen in moments of stagnation but in periods of change, and are a result of rising expectations. Pakistan seems to be on the brink of one. The growth and the economic pattern of Pakistan are not benefitting all sections of society. It is these sections of society that could act as agents of change. What form these agents would take is an open question.

Both the books are worth reading, especially the Lodhi-edited volume. However, it is important to do so in a critical manner. While Pakistan may not be on the verge of collapse or teetering towards anarchy, many of the sources that have been identified as sources of strengths can also be sources of Pakistan's weakness. And this is something that the authors should focus on.

A major flaw in the books lies in the fact that they do not talk about critical issues like environmental change. These could be major problems in the long-run. For instance, water issues with India could be a major problem in the long-run. Moreover, the levels of salination in ground water in Pakistan are increasing tremendously. Pakistan is part of a river basin, which underpins its economy. Unless these issues are taken up more seriously they could pose bigger problems for Pakistan in the future.

Rana Banerji: Review of *Storming the World Stage* (By Stephen Tankel) and *Secularizing the Islamists* (by Humeira Iqtidar)

Tankel succeeds in pointing out the importance of the historical development and growth of Lashka-e-Toiba (LeT) as an institution, including its front organization, the Jama'at-ud-Da'wah, a point which Humeira Iqtidar elaborates upon in greater detail. Tankel's focus is on how Saeed and Zafar Iqbal and then later Abdul Rahman were influenced by the concept of jihad, and the extent to which this was fused with pan-Islamism, with a very vicious anti-Hindu content. The base of their support arose mainly from west



Punjab. Both had studied in Saudi Arabia and held academic assignments until they were associated with militant units.

Tankel also very clearly outlines the ISI's role to demonstrate the pattern of support that Pakistan has traditionally offered to militant outlets acting against India. Particularly, he outlines how the pattern of support first shifted from the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) to the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, then to the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, and finally to the LeT. Tankel also discusses Musharraf's use of the 'good' versus the 'bad' jihadis post-9/11, in which the LeT certainly fall under the 'good jihadis' because of their refusal to attack the state.

Tankel moves on to discuss Lashkar's transition to a social welfare role during the earthquake in 2005 as well as natural catastrophes in recent years. He talks about how the Markaz-ul-Dawa developed, and how LeT established links with Dawood Ibrahim and later with outfits in India. While none of this narrative is new or unknown to Indian investigators, Tankel succeeds in systematically and correctly delineating the evolution of this development. There is now a factual development of this from an independent scholar from abroad, a point which can be seen as very pleasing to an Indian observer.

Another aspect is that Tankel mercifully does not buy the thesis that LeT is being employed or used by al Qaeda to further their own ends, and that the Pakistani state or ISI did not have any involvement in this. Tankel is able to extensively access the Headley interrogation report that was made available by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) in India. Thereby he follows a general trend by using such documents as primary source material. Tankel acknowledges this fact by clearly stating that he had access to security services on both sides of the divide, stating that the use of anonymous sources has now become quite prevalent for academics working in the field of terrorism. While this brings the danger of skewed reporting, he had made an attempt to balance the two sides and succeeds with a fairly objective book that sieves the facts. Nevertheless, the book risks being over-reliant on the Headley interrogation at times. His conclusion is that the Lashkar is here to stay and that the Pakistani state will keep the LeT for asymmetric options in the future.

Humeira Iqtidar is a young scholar of Pakistani origin with very impressive academic credentials who is now with the King's College in London. She has written extensively in fairly prestigious journals on the subject of secularism and the state. However, when she deals with secularism in the context of Jamaat-e-Islami and Jamaat-ud-Dawa, it leads to an indirect support of the Pakistani establishment's view on the

War on Terror and the role of these outfits. Less so in case of the Jamaat-e-Islami because she does take a very honest and in-depth look at the history and the evolution of the Jamaat-e-Islami as a religious and apolitical force. She correctly goes through these developments and argues that this has been a way of secularizing the urban and middle classes of Pakistan. Eventually, she extends this comparison from the Jamaat-e-Islami to the Jamaat-ud-Dawa as well, when she reports about meeting with women in the region, and the social changes made by their contributions. Simply pointing fingers at the tainted parentage of these outfits, she argues, detracts from understanding their long-term social impact.

This, however, is an apologist type of approach which goes against empirical analysis. It fails to address for instance the levels of militancy among the cadre or the fact that women's cadres take an active role in hiding terrorists. Iqtidar decides to ignore all such aspects. For that reason, the theory she tries to propose in this book about Jamaat-ud-Dawa playing a secularizing role is little convincing.

D Suba Chandran: Review of *Inside the al Qaeda and Taliban* (by Saleem Shahzad) and *The Taliban Shuffled* (by Kim Barker)

Saleem Shahzad's book deals with the rise of the most recent group of al Qaeda and Taliban leaders. In fact, it is posited that the work for this book played an important role in his killing in May 2011, apparently executed by intelligence agencies in Pakistan's Punjab. The second book under discussion has been written by Kim Barker, a *Chicago Tribune* journalist. Both books are written by journalists and both deal with the Taliban and al Qaeda in particular. However, there are important differences. On one hand, Kim Barker's book is written in the capacity of her role as the South Asia correspondent of a well-known newspaper, which allowed her access to the highest sources of the government. On the other, Saleem Shahzad, who worked with a news portal called *Asia Times Online*, had to struggle with the second and the third rank of the leadership. So in a way, the two books also represent the difference in perspectives between the first, and the second and third ranks of the leadership. This is further underlined in Kim Barker's style of writing which presents itself as a sort of autobiography in a difficult situation. On the contrary, Shazad's book is more of a search to establish himself. He is much more adventurous, even though this involves the risk of getting carried away.

Kim Barker's book is quite disappointing in that it appears as a form of autobiography with too much anecdotal detail. Nevertheless, it makes some important points. Firstly, on how the US's former ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad presented himself as the prince of Kabul, including the way he held press conferences, the way he spoke to Karzai, and the way he organized himself. It becomes clear when she describes the system of aid delivery, namely through Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), circumventing the formal Afghan government. She also talks about the strength of anti-Americanism among the Pashtun people because of unpopular American activities, including the counter-insurgency operations.

Other aspects that she brings up are the level of corruption in Afghanistan or how the conflict has transformed doctors into journalists because of better pay. In the context of Pakistan, Barker seems to present two Pakistans: one that looks forward and uses religion as a tool, and one that actually believes in what they are doing. The key question is about where the majority stands on this. Since the middle class does not come forward with their issues, and the lawyer's movement was limited to a small part of society, it might in the end be the foot soldiers who take up the struggle. Despite these interesting accounts and unlike the other book, there is no cohesiveness, no flow in her book.



Shazad, in contrast, tries to contextualize the actors by going through the history of particular actors or events, but then gets carried away by these stories. Still, he makes some very important points. Firstly, on al Qaeda's objectives, he argues that the primary goal was to fight in Afghanistan and a secondary goal was to extend this fight all the way through Central Asia to Bangladesh. He tries to support this point by showing how al Qaeda is building a series of networks with other organizations, like the TTP – an argument that is not necessarily convincing. Secondly, he argues that al Qaeda is not looking for WMD, their primary goal is to defeat the West in Afghanistan.

With regard to the Taliban, Shazad argues that it is not a monolithic organization, and outlines the differences between the Afghan and the Pakistani Taliban. Within the Pakistani Taliban, especially in the tribal areas, he highlights how tribal differences presented a stumbling block for al Qaeda to achieve its objectives. The al Qaeda realized at one point that they were not receiving the support they wanted from the ISI and subsequently formed their own support group, the TTP. Therefore, due to the inability of the Mullah Omar-led Afghan Taliban to provide safe havens, al Qaeda saw the justification for the creation of the TTP. It is therefore a new creation that has yet to find its ideological place, except that it is fighting the Pakistani state and that there is a strong Punjabi component. The next important point he talks about is radicalization in the Pakistani army. He gives an account of two or three former Pakistani military leaders to substantiate his case that the Pakistani army in fact is getting radicalized.

His book fails to elaborate on the ideological divide between Sunnis and Shias, particularly on which ideology guides the leadership. Also, substantially missing is an elaboration on the Saudi Arabia-Iran-Pakistan triangle, wherein Pakistan is closer to Saudi Arabia and tries to project its particular ideology against the Iranian Shia ideology.