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US Relations with Pakistan: The Need for a Strategic Shift

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Executive Summary

Pakistan reflects and affects many of the critical issues in South Asia that worry the US foreign policy establishment, the media, and the public. Yet US policy deals with Pakistan through one primary lens — that of the war on terrorism. As a consequence, neither America's nor Pakistan's best interests are being served. This Policy Brief outlines a number of perceptual and policy changes that offer an escape from this counterproductive spiral.

Pakistan has come to reflect and affect many of the critical issues in South Asia that worry the US foreign policy establishment, the media, and the public. But US officials are crafting policy responses to deal with Pakistan that are focused excessively narrowly on a single issue — the war on terrorism. In addition to exacerbating Pakistan's own problems, these efforts have undermined Pakistan's capacity and political will to fight this war. As a consequence neither America's nor Pakistan's best interests are being served.

Pakistan, though a partner of the US, also has become a casualty of the war on terrorism. The single-minded pursuit and ill-conceived manner in which this war has been executed has impaired democracy in Pakistan, incited Pashtun nationalism in the tribal areas, and unleashed a jihad in addition to a class and cultural war there. The war on terrorism also has fueled anti-Americanism and anti-army sentiments, thereby subverting public understanding of the dangers of extremism (as witnessed in the case of the Red Mosque siege). If suicide bombings continue, they will seriously threaten Pakistan's stability.

Democracy can advance stability, but can it survive instability? The United States has a strong interest in helping to ensure Pakistan's stability. Fulfilling this objective requires a strategic shift in US perceptions and strategy with respect to Pakistan.

PERCEPTUAL CHANGES REQUIRED

1. ACKNOWLEDGE HOW THE "WAR ON TERROR" IS VIEWED

Writing in the April 19 edition of the *News*, the respected Pakistani journalist Rahimullah Yusufzai stated:

Pakistan may have saved itself from the ire of the US in the wake of the 9/11 attacks after aligning with Washington but the losses to its economy, sovereignty, democracy and peace are much more than the \$10 billion pay check that it got from Washington in return for its services as an active ally of NATO in the 'war on terror.' In fact, there is no way that these huge losses could be quantified.

Probably the economic losses could be put into figures but the damage to the self-esteem of Pakistani people due to loss of sovereignty is unquantifiable ... It isn't proper for sections of the Western media to describe Pakistan as the most dangerous country in the world after having played a role in creating conditions that hastened its destabilization.

In many ways, the challenge of dealing with Pakistan is subsumed in the broader challenge of managing US relations with the Islamic world, especially with countries where the US has been allied with unpopular leaderships in the war on terrorism. The aid-based relationship with Washington strengthened these leaderships, as did the authoritarian measures taken by the latter ostensibly to fight this war. As these regimes grew in strength, so did the opposition to them, and by extension, to the war on terrorism and to the United States. It is not surprising that anti-Americanism



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has been strongest in those Islamic countries where the governments were close to Washington but distant from the population.

The war on terrorism is no doubt of critical importance to the United States and to global security; failure is not an option. But this war has to be fought a different way, simply because the present approach is not working. Pakistan is a crucial partner in the war. The change of strategy thus must begin with an understanding of the complex challenge Pakistan presents and represents. If its stability and long-term reform are sacrificed to policies beating to the rhythm of US strategic interests alone, then Washington will lose more than just a partner in the war on terrorism. Here is why.

The war on terrorism has fallen on an already troubled Pakistan. Since before 9/11, Pakistan, like much of the Islamic world, had been the victim of a slow and sustained assault from an illiberal, pro-Western elite on the one hand and religious extremists on the other. The former provoked aspirations for democracy, especially among the liberal intelligentsia. The latter swayed the weak and the vulnerable, promising them transcendental avenues to empowerment and claiming to have solutions for all their problems. Regrettably, the United States alienated both groups by supporting those who hindered the prospects for democracy while seeming to be working against Islam. Thus, across Pakistan there is scant support for the war on terrorism, which is widely perceived as America's war.

There is now a surge of civil society in Pakistan. The prevailing view within this civil society is that the army, the United States, and Islamic activists together constitute a problem for the country. They regard the army as anti-democratic, the United States as expedient and self-centered, and Islamic activists (their good moral aims notwithstanding) as complicating the search for solutions by opening up people to extremist propaganda and a confused idea of national aims and purpose.

A democracy of sorts has been restored in Pakistan, but will it emerge from the shadows of these forces to play a modernizing and moderating role in the society? Above all, what will be the role of the politicians who themselves have been a threat to democracy in the past? Indeed all three major constellations of actors — the politicians, the army, and the United States — have to bring about a strategic change in their attitudes and policies to be of any help to Pakistan. The Pakistani people, too, will have to contribute by repudiating any fanatical misrepresentation of their great faith and summoning the will to act against the extremism associated with it, which threatens almost everything.

2. UNTANGLE THE ROOTS OF EXTREMISM

Extremism in Pakistan, which comes in many forms, has been fanned by various factors. It essentially reflects Pakistan's long but unhappy struggle at nation and state building. The country also has been caught up in crosscurrents of sectarian, ethno-linguistic and other domestic tensions. Although institutions exist to mediate the differences, they lack integrity. There is thus an inclination to resort to militancy and extremism as instruments of redressing the imbalances and wrongs. Once force becomes an acceptable way of settling differences, it turns on itself and breeds its own imbalances and injustices. Thus, extremism thrives.

This failure has caused an understandable sense of despair, especially among the poor and underprivileged. This mindset is conducive to illusions about and sympathies toward extremism. Pakistan's army, with its ambitions and existential struggle with issues of security, national identity, and state power, has articulated national priorities that have further fed and fed upon these sentiments.

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The army, the dominant social groups, and the religiously orthodox have undermined the political process, contributing to its crisis of governance. In turn, this made Pakistan dependent on financiers like the United States and Saudi Arabia, who have exploited Pakistan's religious infrastructure to further their own political and strategic agendas and added to the extremist mindset. Iran, too, has joined the fray. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry triggered and continues to fuel sectarian tensions in Pakistan.

The United States, specifically, contributed to this witch's brew by nourishing religious militancy during the Afghan jihad against the Soviets and thereby exposing Pakistan to the international jihadi infrastructure, and in October 1990 abandoned the country to its own devices. It was during this period of neglect that the Pakistan-North Korea nuclear connection was fostered; that the Kargil crisis, which brought India and Pakistan to the brink of full-scale war in 1999, occurred; that the AQ Khan nuclear smuggling network thrived; and that the Taliban came to prominence. That is also the period when all streams of radical fundamentalism — from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the broader Middle East — merged and found a home in the region, crisscrossing with impunity between a failing Afghanistan and a Pakistan losing control of itself.

The US response to extremism after 9/11 was largely misguided and counter-productive. The US approach — conducting the campaign against terrorism as a war of ideas between the West and Islam, blurring the distinction between terrorists and the people they come from, and denigrating Muslim societies by designating them as failing or failed and needing help from the West — unwittingly caused Muslims to have to defend their religion and what it stands for. Extremists took up this cause and were tolerated, and even applauded for doing so. Specifically with respect to Pakistan, religious extremism thus came to find wider sponsorship and popular support than even the hearty perennial issues of India and Kashmir.

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Many young minds in particular are opening up to extremist thoughts, especially those getting their first dose of religion which is being administered not by scholars but by those who have mixed their social or political agenda with the message of Islam. This enhances the appeal of their message, even though it distorts the religion. Through this kind of religion the young are seeking an outlet of expression for their anger, fear, and hopes. Religion ends up serving as an idiom of protest and idealism.

Many people are hankering after the Islamic glory of the past. Islamic revivalism has become a surrogate sense of national purpose. People ask, "If we have failed as Pakistanis, who are we?" In this somber national mood, it is little wonder that Islam serves as an anchor of stability and hope — the stronger the dose, the stronger the sense of reassurance.

There is yet another form of extremism in Pakistan, which consists of the vulgarized imitation of Western culture and reaction against religion among the *nouveau riche*. They flaunt their wealth and class and provoke reactions among the poor and lower middle classes, who are more traditional and religious. In this way, religion gets injected into the class and cultural tensions, sharpening the existing societal divisions.

The fact that, for many years, Pakistan lacked a credible political process to contest extremist institutions and ideologies has imposed its own cost. As a result, Pakistani society became virtually de-politicized, providing space for those who employ violence in order to advance their causes. Even educated people are tempted to use violence as an argument. One need only look at the incidents of physical violence in the wake of the elections involving members of the legal community.

3. DISTINGUISH BETWEEN ELECTORAL AND MATURE DEMOCRACY

But extremism is one challenge among many to Pakistani democracy. Historically, Pakistanis have been unhappy about the domestic imbalance of power that was tilted in favor of the army. First, it crowded out a free and credible political process. Second, it led to a skewed relationship with Washington that many Pakistanis regarded as a Faustian bargain.

Over the years, state institutions crumbled and became adjuncts to centers of power while the rule of law and social stability were weakened and preyed upon by the forces of extremism. That the recent round of elections was deemed free and fair, though somewhat encouraging, is not itself a great achievement. What is of far greater importance is whether the electoral process leads to a system of governance that rests on democratic ideals, institutions, and practices. Otherwise, electoral democracy ends up entrenching forces resistant to change that use their political power to enhance their class and institutional interests.

Mature democracy will arrive neither easily nor quickly. To date, Pakistani democracy has been a function of a regressive social order, obsolescent political structures, and a skewed balance and distribution of power. The social structures and economic disparities have to change before it could ensure that individual rights would be protected and there would be justice and fair economic opportunities. The degradation of the constitution, the subordination of the judiciary, and the rise of extremism and ethnic nationalism will all have to be rectified. Only then can one lay the foundation of the democratic ideals of social justice; liberal constitutionalism; the empowerment of the people, minorities, and smaller provinces; and facilitate the emergence of a Pakistan at ease with its religion and at peace with itself, its neighbors, and the outside world.

There is little sign that the newly elected government, with the same politics and personalities and being product of the same traditional power structure, promises such a fundamental change. As of now it has articulated no vision of a reformed Pakistan or any strategic understanding of the horrendous problems Pakistan currently faces, such as a very difficult economic situation, insurgencies in the tribal areas and Baluchistan, and the complexities of civil-military and US-Pakistan relations.

The liberal/democratic surge in the country now evident in the emerging civil society and activist media gives some reason to be hopeful about Pakistan's future.

These forces may act as an instrument of pressure that had previously been lacking. Yet, paradoxically, these stirrings of change may lead in a different direction — merging with the current of anti-Americanism and producing a new overlap of religion and politics. Indeed, a public opinion survey conducted by World Public Opinion for the US Institute for Peace last January reveals that the majority of Pakistanis support a “democratic Islamic state.”

Thus the consolidation of democracy in Pakistan, if it does occur, will happen fitfully in stages; and it may not solve Pakistan's multiple problems, at least not in the near term. Yet without it, Pakistan will remain potentially unstable and open to extremist influences.

POLICY CHANGES REQUIRED

1. ALLY WITH THE PEOPLE

The US needs to get people on its side in the war on terrorism in Pakistan and elsewhere in the Islamic world. At the same time, the leaders allied to the US who have cooperated in the war on terrorism have constraints of their own. They walk a tightrope between Washington and populations opposed both to their rule and to US policies. The United States would be best advised to let the new Pakistan government evolve its own strategy of fighting terrorism,

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one that can generate and sustain public support. Washington can be a vital partner in this effort by implementing a long-term comprehensive strategy that supports social change and economic development, spurs democratization, and fights extremism.

Like the rest of the Islamic world the people of Pakistan want to be empowered, but they are being offered two bad bargains — one by the West and the so-called “moderate” leadership and the other by religious demagogues who at least promise some “dignity” and “honor,” however convoluted such notions may be. The leaders whom Tony Blair and George Bush call “moderate” may be moderate in supporting the US war on terrorism, but they are hardly moderate in the political system that supports them. Were that system liberalized it would be better suited to fight extremism and terrorism than the alliance between the West and authoritarian rulers.

People need a third choice — one that is geared toward producing social change and that is consistent with liberal values. Will the West join them? The movement for democracy is populated by a large number of liberal elements, including lawyers, retired judges, diplomats, female writers, and media personalities. The United States should help strengthen their ability both to lend support to the elected government and to serve as watchdog over it.

Given Pakistan’s current serious economic difficulties, a sizeable US relief package would set the bilateral relationship on a positive footing. The fact that the United States has enlarged the scope of its economic assistance by focusing on energy, education, and science and technology is a welcome development. However, what is needed is massive

long-term aid, a free trade agreement, and investment commitments by the West and other donors, especially Japan. The focus of development should not be just in the tribal areas but the entire country. There is an emerging entrepreneurial environment and a middle class waiting to lead the effort to engage in employment-generating economic activity that may undercut economic frustration and incentives to extremism.

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2. ENGAGE THE ISLAMISTS

The United States needs to reach out to the Islamists, as this will help the cause of democracy in Pakistan. The best way to deal with political Islam is to strengthen the democratic process. Pakistan is not like many Arab countries, where the Islamists are the only credible political alternative to authoritarianism. Pakistan’s political arena is diverse and competitive, and the country has a history of constitutional rule. Radical Islamists will benefit from the exclusion of *all* Islamists from the political process.

Political Islam is essentially a resistance movement. As an ideology of governance it can succeed only through authoritarianism and in a dangerous security environment, or in the context of a regional dispute or a struggle against an external enemy. But unlike dealing with communism in the days of the Cold War, political Islam is not susceptible to containment; on the contrary the only viable strategy to deal with it is engagement.

In the final analysis, the Islamists will stand or fall based on whether they can respond to people’s aspirations for improvement in the quality of life, rather than simply an appeal to their religious instincts. The leadership will be judged not by its religious content but by the quality of its governance, as in the case of the AKP’s performance in Turkey.

In a democracy, the Islamists will either have to adapt or become irrelevant. After religion has served its main purpose of giving leadership to political change and giving a sense of empowerment to the masses in the name of religion, it may struggle to survive as a political force, especially if external stimuli like tensions between Islam and the West will have moderated. Islam’s moral, cultural, and emotional appeal may, however, live on.

3. RETAIN THE GOODWILL OF THE ARMY

The US thus need not be afraid of political Islam or democracy. A democratic government may be more sensitive to public opinion regarding the war on terrorism but the US can balance that concern by retaining the goodwill of the army, which will still have a role in the war on terrorism. This can be assured by retaining a strong link between the army and the US through security assistance.

The army, too, would like to retain a strong US connection; its leadership can be persuaded to support any new democratic dispensation in return. By warning that any future coup will invite heavy sanctions, Washington would advance the prospects of working with both the civilians and the army.

The army remains Pakistan's last hope to guarantee its territorial integrity, which will remain at risk as long as Pakistan does not fully reform, moderate, and democratize. The army will remain a stakeholder in Pakistan's body politic until the politicians have outperformed it, as they have in Turkey. If the army were denied political space or isolated, either by Pakistani politicians or by the United States, it has the potential to revive tensions with India and keep the pot boiling in Afghanistan. Thus the army's cooperation is essential to carry forward any peace process in the region, without which Pakistan will not moderate.

Congressional moves to link, now or in the future, Washington's military aid to a certification by the President that Pakistan is doing its best to counter the Taliban operations would thus be unwise, as the army's importance goes well beyond its role in the war on terrorism. Such overt linkages also raise uncertainty about the durability of US policies and damage its reliability as a partner, prompting countries to start looking after their own interests and working at cross-purposes with Washington. It will revive memories in Pakistan of the Pressler Amendment and the sanctions they invoked; Pakistan's isolation that followed destroyed more than its relationship with the US in the end.

Rather than threaten to cut off aid, the United States should calibrate aid carefully, starting with a lower baseline and accelerating upon evidence of improved performance. The Coalition Support Funds may have been used improperly but the solution is not to pass legislations linking aid to Pakistan's performance but to introduce accountability by reforming the disbursement system. The reimbursements should be tied more closely to specific counter-terrorism tasks rather than be subject to greater oversight to ensure that funds are not diverted elsewhere.

4. ADOPT AN INTEGRATED DOMESTIC-REGIONAL APPROACH

Apart from addressing Pakistan's internal dynamics and rethinking the whole strategy of the war on terrorism, the United States also must reassess its regional perceptions and policies. The United States must adopt an integrated approach to South Asia — one that incorporates measures designed specifically to deal with the tribal areas and integrates these with efforts to engage Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India.

As in Iraq, the US has changed the balance of power in Afghanistan and left behind a trail of dissatisfied people. Many Pashtuns, especially in the tribal areas, feel that they, too, have been dethroned. Pakistan as a whole feels encircled, as Afghanistan has come under Indian and Iranian influence. It is neither prudent nor realistic for Washington to expect or to insist that Pakistan acquiesce in this strategic defeat. For Pakistan to do so would be inimical to its foreign policy interests and would threaten the delicate and special status of the tribal areas.

Dealing with the tribal areas was never easy for Pakistan or for the British before them. The tribal population

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on either side of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border has had the traditional rights to cross into the other under what is known as “easement rights.” People, goods, and bandits have filtered through this “blurred border” for centuries. There had existed an uneasy balance that was unfortunately shattered by the Afghan jihad against the Soviets in 1980s, and the tribal areas have never been the same since. Four million refugees trekked to Pakistan during that war; half that number remains there. About 50% of the population of Quetta is Afghan. About 200,000 people cross the border daily both ways. Divided villages and numerous refugee camps lie along the border. Controlling the border is a huge challenge.

Many of the Taliban were born of the refugee population and have created a new country inside Pakistan that they have penetrated through intermarriages and social osmosis. Pakistan’s tribal elements view the Taliban’s struggle in Afghanistan as their own. For decades, Pashtuns in Afghanistan spoke for their kinsmen on the Pakistan side; now Pakistan’s tribal areas speak for them as they did in the 1980s.

The war on terrorism in which Pakistan’s army has been a partner is seen by much of the tribal population on both sides of the border as an assault on its religious and ethnic identities. Support for the Taliban by Pakistan’s tribal areas is thus becoming a surrogate for their own nationalist aspirations. The extremism and militancy that defined the Taliban have become the substance of their tribal ethos, in addition to raising the influence and status of the mullah.

The Taliban insurgency is not solvable by a military solution alone. It has to be addressed principally on political and economic levels, by all stakeholders, and in the short, medium, and long term.

Military operations in the tribal areas have made the government unpopular there, not only diminishing the government’s own influence but also that of the tribal leaders (Maliks) who derived their power and influence from that of Islamabad and who have become unpopular along with it. This has raised the status of the mullahs even further.

A core tribal value on both sides of the border is resistance against control by the foreigner or the state. Whenever such a conflict has happened in the past — especially when the invader was also an “infidel” like the British or the Soviets — the resistance has been led by the mullah. This is yet another reason for the rise in the mullahs’ influence.

The traditional societies can best be reformed by self-strengthening mechanisms, at least initially. The Pakistani army tried to use force and to dismantle the existing structures of authority. This has disturbed the social and tribal structure as well as religious observances.

Traditional institutions of stability lie in disarray while new ones have not been born. If Pakistan had not neglected developing these areas for decades, this transition would have taken place long ago.

The Taliban insurgency is not solvable by a military solution alone. It has to be addressed principally on political and economic levels, by all stakeholders, and in the short, medium, and long term. The US has lacked a firm commitment to Afghanistan since its diversion to the Iraq War. It does not have enough troops. Moreover, the strategies of NATO and the US are not in harmony. NATO’s Comprehensive Approach, which was to provide security, development, and governance, is not working. It is being undermined by the reaction to civilian deaths by the use of force. Above all else, the Afghans simply do not like foreigners ordering their lives about, much less killing them.

There is little evidence of the Afghan government’s efforts to improve the economic and security situation in the Pashtun areas. The Afghan army remains professionally incompetent while the police is as oppressive as always. Corruption remains rampant throughout the country, particularly in the Pashtun areas. President Hamid Karzai has been unable to govern effectively; his support essentially rests on foreign troops rather than popular acclaim.

Pakistan also needs to do much more to stop the Taliban insurgents operating out of its tribal areas. The US must

discreetly keep up the pressure using whatever leverage it can. The Taliban problem will be around for a long time, and Afghanistan does not show any promise of stabilizing any time soon. The US must limit direct missile strikes inside Pakistan or risk further destabilizing the country. It is time to pause and reassess the complex web of issues involving Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the war on terrorism. India too will have to be brought into the equation.

Of course, the US, cannot mediate or dictate policies. But it should gear its political engagement, aid, and strategic weight to policy options that consider the influence of internal dynamics and foreign policy in these countries. Further, these policy options should take into account how these influences impact America's principle challenges and opportunities in the region.

The success of so much that the US does in, around and with Pakistan would involve India's cooperation especially with policies that help moderate Pakistan's behavior and sustain its reform effort. Similarly, India cannot rise under the threat of destabilization by Pakistan. Friendly relations between Kabul and Islamabad will be crucial to their cooperation in meeting their shared challenges that also affect the United States.

To begin with, the US should persuade Kabul to recognize the Durand Line, and Afghanistan must not appear to be collaborating with India to advance the latter's regional agenda. The growing Indian presence in Afghanistan is causing concern in Pakistan and is perhaps raising the value of the Taliban in the army's eyes. The Indian security threat seems to have relocated to Afghanistan. If Pakistan's concerns are assuaged, which would not happen without a fundamental change in India-Pakistan relations, it could change Pakistan's perceptions of the Taliban and indeed of Afghanistan. Pakistan may then come to see India's presence in Afghanistan as a stabilizing factor.

It would be a good idea to co-opt India in the Tripartite Commission (composed of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the ISAF), though Pakistan would of course object. Another idea worth exploring is a regional security forum along the lines of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). It could be named the South Asian Regional Forum (SARF). Although India may not agree, US influence can help to bring both the countries around.

Pakistan and India already have become aware of this emerging web of mutual interests and how the US strategic interests in the region are woven into it. India recognizes that in the interest of her own economic aspirations and big power ambitions, in which the US can contribute enormously, it has to accommodate American priorities including a stable Pakistan and a reduction of tensions in the region. Thus peace with Pakistan may have become a strategic imperative for India.

Pakistan too may finally be realizing that an ambitious foreign policy in the region can only be pursued at the great expense of international isolation, the loss of US engagement, and threats to its internal order. Moreover, as the Indian economy soars and Pakistan lags far behind, it may be consigned to subservience to its neighbor. Thus peace with India has become essential for Pakistan's economic survival and national security.

In both Pakistan and India, the US needs to accelerate this strategic orientation, which has been largely facilitated by its own enhanced engagement with South Asia and the vastly changed international context.

CONCLUSION

Pakistan is facing four near and long-term national challenges: the end of the army-dominated political process; democratization; a crusade against extremism; and the refashioning of its alliance with the United States to balance the needs and obligations of the two countries. The United States needs to be a partner in this struggle.

Pakistan too may finally be realizing an ambitious foreign policy in the region can only be pursued at the great expense of international isolation, the loss of US engagement, and threats to its internal order.

Pakistan has reasonably good resources that can be harnessed for the purpose of economic development. There is already a large investment stream from the Middle East and Pakistani diasporas. Pakistan also has enormous human resources and a large proportion of young people.

Ultimately the success of US engagement will be gauged by Washington's ability to have helped Pakistan find an alternative model of society and external behavior that

At the same time, however, Pakistanis are subject to the influences of extremism and moderation, competing visions of Islam, tensions between authoritarianism and democracy, and the struggle between the *status quo* and social change. The Pakistani leadership and the United States each have a role to play in determining whose influence will prevail and thus which way Pakistan goes.

The US has to look beyond the war on terrorism without losing sight of it. Pakistan is not a lost cause. Though it has suffered from poor leadership for much of its history, the nation has been very resilient. Given the enormity of the self-inflicted damage to the country even survival has been a great achievement.

Ultimately the success of US engagement will be gauged by Washington's ability to help Pakistan find an alternative model of society and external behavior that meets people's democratic aspirations and socioeconomic needs and that is resilient enough to help the state absorb and transcend ethno-linguistic, regional, religious, and sectarian divisions. Only such a model can defeat the competing vision of an extremist Islam and help Pakistan become a responsible member of international society, at peace with itself and with its neighbors, and a natural ally of the United States.