

# Containing Pakistan: Engaging the *Raja-Mandala* in South-Central Asia

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by Vanni Cappelli

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*Abstract: Recent events have refocused attention on Pakistan's role as an epicenter of global Islamist terror and called into question Islamabad's reliability as an ally in the fight against a resurgent Taliban and the hunt for Osama bin Laden. Pakistan in fact suffers from abiding structural pathologies that make it a questionable Western ally at best. In its foreign policy toward Pakistan, the United States would do well to consider the ancient Indian geopolitical concept of the raja-mandala ("ruler circle"), which seeks to balance opposing spheres of influence and exploit the tensions between them. This concept provides the key to containing and eventually eliminating South-Central Asian terror.*

This past summer's terrorist attacks on the Mumbai transit system and the thwarting of a conspiracy that would have repeated them on a larger scale on airplanes flying from Britain to America dramatically refocused attention on Pakistan's role as an epicenter of global Islamist terror. India alleged that the Mumbai attacks were carried out by Kashmiri separatists backed by its enduring rival, and most of the London plotters were of Pakistani origin (as were the London transit bombers of the previous summer). All of this called into question Islamabad's reliability as an ally in the fight against a resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan<sup>1</sup> and the hunt for Osama bin Laden, who is widely believed to be hiding in Pakistan.

Yet for all the increased discourse, little light was shed on the critical question of where exactly the innermost circle of the Pakistani terror orb lies. Media and government characterizations of Pakistan and its leader have a stock quality: "After 9/11, Pakistan became 'an indispensable ally' when President Pervez Musharraf broke with the Taliban and Al Qaeda to join in the U.S.-led war on terror"; "Musharraf is caught between a rock and a hard

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<sup>1</sup> See Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, "Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan," in this issue of *Orbis*.

place, an American ally faced with an anti-American public and under pressure from Islamists”; “Pakistan is ‘not doing enough’ to crack down on militants crossing into Afghanistan and Kashmir or thriving at home”; “Musharraf must be supported by the West because whatever came after him would be worse,” etc. These largely unexamined assertions fail even to consider the extent to which the Pakistani state itself fostered transnational networks of Islamist terrorists from the 1970s on in service of its own ideology of political Islam.

Pakistan in fact suffers from abiding structural pathologies: its status as the first ideological Islamic state of modern times, its all-dominating military, its influential extremist religious establishment, its powerful feudal oligarchy, its hatred of India, the perpetual resort to violence to answer political questions, the inadmissibility of dissent, and its long history of using Islamic radicals as instruments of state policy and of aggression in Afghanistan, Kashmir, and beyond. “There is no overarching strategic framework for South Asia—and being against ‘terrorism’ does not provide one,” Indian subcontinental expert Stephen Philip Cohen asserts, neglecting both the region’s enduring historical realities and our most pressing current security challenge.<sup>2</sup> Such a framework does exist, one that applies traditional wisdom to contemporary crises. The ancient Indian geopolitical concept of the *raja-mandala* (“ruler circle”), which seeks to balance opposing spheres of influence and exploit the tensions between them, provides the key to containing and eventually eliminating South-Central Asian terror.

### **The Fourth “A” and The Double Partition**

An old but not inaccurate cliché of writings about Pakistan holds that the country can be understood by the “three As” that have shaped its destiny—Allah, the Army, and America. Yet there is a fourth “A” that is even more fundamental to understanding and dealing with Pakistan, and that is Alienation. Born of a traumatic separation the aftershocks of which still exert a profound influence on it, the Pakistani state is defined by a multiplicity of alienations or degrees of separation that have long set it violently at odds with its neighbors and against itself.

Pakistan comprises the ethnically-centered provinces of Punjab, Sindh, and Baluchistan as well as the ethnic Pashtun lands called the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), territories that have for millennia been the geostrategic linchpin upon which hegemony over South and Central Asia has rested. Battled over by conquerors from Alexander the Great to Babur the Mughal, they were the point of entry for Islam’s penetration of the Indian subcontinent from the eighth century CE onwards, and as a result came to have the subcontinent’s

<sup>2</sup>Stephen Philip Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), p. 305.

highest density of Muslims. In the last two centuries, these lands assumed a vital political importance for the Western world as the staging area for the various phases of the Great Game for control of the region: the British Raj vs. Czarist Russia, the Cold War, and the current war on terror. In the closing years of the Raj, this perennial geohistorical problem took on the particular cast of the “Pakistani Question.”

Many historians, most prominent among them Ian Talbot,<sup>3</sup> have emphasized that as the last areas to be acquired by British India—for strategic rather than economic reasons—the lands that became Pakistan had a fundamentally different character from the rest of the Raj. Administered as a security-obsessed garrison state that relied heavily on martial law, they did not experience the development and more liberal governance enjoyed elsewhere on the subcontinent. These “frontier” lands close to the Indus River were characterized by a heavy military presence, the strong alliance between the colonial rulers and local feudal lords, the presence of unruly tribal peoples on their periphery, and paranoia about foreign invasion.

It was secular considerations, not its Muslim majority population, that gave this part of India its especially set-apart quality. Perhaps as many Muslims lived in the more thriving areas of the Raj, and few spoke of a geographic “Hindu India” and “Muslim India.” Yet powerful forces were at work that would seek to bring about such a geopolitical rupture.

The demand for a separate state of “Pakistan” (land of the pure) for the subcontinent’s Muslims emerged late in the struggle for independence from Britain as a result of a schism in the Indian nationalist movement. The schism was much more about secular ideologies than it was a religious conflict. By the 1930s the contrasting worldviews of democratic pluralism and authoritarian exclusivity that came to be the hallmarks of the Indian and Pakistani states, respectively, were embodied in the rivalry between Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharal Nehru’s Indian National Congress and Mohammad Ali Jinnah’s Muslim League.

Congress was a mass movement inspired by modern liberal democratic values, guided by an ethos of personal sacrifice and focused on the problem of poverty. Though dominated by Hindus, it put forward a vision of India as a multi-confessional, multi-ethnic, and evolving civilization which, upon achieving self-determination, would advance towards economic and social justice under the triad “secularism, democracy, socialism.” Though the present Indian state has shifted to a market-oriented path to development, there is a continuity in the aspiration to build a society free of sectarian, caste, or ethnic divisiveness and engaged in addressing contemporary concerns. The motive force behind Jinnah’s Muslim League was far different.

An elitist movement built around the authoritarian personality cult of Jinnah, who was called *Qaid-e-Azam* (“Great Leader”) by his followers, the Muslim League was a vehicle for privileged Muslims to hold onto their social

<sup>3</sup> Ian Talbot, *Pakistan: A Modern History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 53–65 ff.

and economic status, which was threatened by Congress's populism. Affluent Muslim professionals in Hindu-majority areas and feudal landlords in the heavily Muslim northwest forged an alliance that sought to subsume issues of economic development, poverty, self-determination, education, and human rights under the emotional cry "Islam in danger" from the "Hindu Raj" that Congress was allegedly striving for. As Pakistani writer Khurshid Hyder wrote, "Lacking economic and social programs, politicians adopted obscurantist tactics and religious sentiments for the furtherance of their respective political aims."<sup>4</sup>

The contradictions and ironies behind the campaign for "Pakistan" were dangerously magnified in the structure of a sovereign state. Though Jinnah himself was profoundly secular, by equating "Pakistan" so thoroughly with Islam and attacking both Hindu and Muslim opponents as anti-Islamic, he undercut any secular basis for the state. He thought he could found a country *because of* but not *on* Islam, which proved to be an inherent contradiction. As the Islamist ideologue Syed Abdul Maududi bluntly put it, "If Pakistan was to be secular, then what was the point of separating from India?"<sup>5</sup>

This essential contradiction only deepened when Jinnah's "Two Nation" theory of incompatible Hindu and Muslim civilizations that had to be separated in order to live in peace came up against the real nationality question posed by the subcontinent's ethnic diversity. Ironically, Pakistan's advocates were weakest in the provinces that eventually became part of Pakistan: the cry "Islam in danger" resonated more strongly among Muslims living in Hindu majority areas. The NWFP in particular was a Congress stronghold under its social democratic leader Abdul Ghaffar Khan, "the Frontier Gandhi," who stressed both ethnic pride and Hindu-Muslim unity.

All such ideals were swept aside in the violence that followed Jinnah's call in August 1946 for "Direct Action" to bring Pakistan into being. The hastily effected partition could not bury the ethnic question or its Islamic corollary in the new state. As Olivier Roy has written, "If 'Islamness' was merely an identity asserted against Hinduism, then once the Muslims were all together on the same territory their basic identity would no longer be an Islam without an adversary but would fall into an ethnic or linguistic category (Pashtuns, Baluchis, Sindis, etc.). Hence the promotion of a secular Pakistani nationalism proved impossible."<sup>6</sup>

The partition effected in August 1947 involved massacres that claimed a million lives; the sundering of the ancient linguistic and cultural regions of Punjab and Bengal; mass migrations of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs in both directions; and the severing of long-integrated economic markets. Partition left

<sup>4</sup> Khurshid Hyder, "Pakistan under Bhutto," *Current History*, November 1972, p. 202.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in T.V. Paul (ed.) *The India-Pakistan Conflict: An Enduring Rivalry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 184.

<sup>6</sup> Olivier Roy, "Islam and Foreign Policy" in Christophe Jaffrelot, *A History of Pakistan and Its Origins* (London: Anthem Press, 2004), p. 137.

the fate of the northern Muslim-majority state of Kashmir undecided and a “dark legend” of reciprocal recriminations between the new countries. India was in a much better position to put the past behind it and get on with the business of nation-building, while Pakistan entered the world riven by alienations that only worsened the set-apart nature that had made these lands the most backward part of the Raj.

Internationally, Pakistan was bitterly alienated from India by the horror of the partition violence and the unresolved Kashmir question. This rivalry has poisoned the development of South Asia for six decades. It has manifested itself in 43 militarized confrontations, four of which escalated into war. To the northwest, Pakistan came into immediate conflict with Afghanistan, whose aspiration to also develop as a secular, ethnically-based nation-state led it to lay an irredentist claim to Pakistan’s Pashtun lands. A low-intensity conflict in its early years, this “Pashtunistan question” would be the lens through which the tortured politics of the region became a global conflict.

Internally, tensions between the Muslim nationalist central government and those who continued to promote ethnic and regional interests intersected with conflicts between Islamists and secular modernizers, rich and poor, natives of Pakistan’s territories and emigrants from India (called Mohajirs), and Sunnis and Shia. Jinnah’s insistence that all Muslim majority areas of British India be included in Pakistan had won him the eastern part of Bengal, a desperately poor province almost a thousand miles away from the rest of Pakistan whose more liberal traditions of Islam would soon darken into an alienation that would eventually explode.

Thus the new state came to be defined by its alienations, and the worst-case scenario was realized: the most strategically vital, illiberally governed, and least developed area of British India had attained a separate independence under the rule of a reactionary authoritarian movement amid inter-religious violence that left a legacy of hate, an unresolved territorial dispute, and the question of what the new country’s identity would be. Amid all this conflict, what could serve as a unifying force except for Islam? The stage was set for the emergence of Pakistan as the *locus classicus* of political Islam in its operational rather than aspirational form, a double partition that created not only two countries on the Indian subcontinent, but also a state founded upon a narrow and aggressive conception of religion.

## From Solon to Draco

“Make Pakistan really *pak* (pure),”<sup>7</sup> Gandhi entreated his disciple Abdul Ghaffar Khan as the latter left on his mission of advocating Pashtun

<sup>7</sup> Rajmohan Gandhi, *Ghaffar Khan: Nonviolent Badshah of the Pakhtuns* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 199.

rights in the new state. Yet the country's violent alienations combined to thwart all efforts to develop Pakistan along healthy lines. The country had structural constraints on its economic and political development that were an inevitable inheritance from its parentage. The economic weakness proceeding from feudalism carried over into the political weakness of its landlord culture, which would ultimately extend to foreign policy and acquire a dangerous religious sanction. As if all of these forces were not enough, a new series of calamities soon combined to further dim Pakistan's prospects.

The war over Kashmir that erupted between India and Pakistan within months of their independence, which was only terminated by a UN intervention that left the province divided and provided no political settlement, made a lasting imprint on the political psychology of Pakistan. Official myth characterized the conflict as a brutal denial of self-determination to a Muslim populace, and therefore Pakistan was not an ordinary state with defined borders and the normal obligation to provide for security and development within that territory. "Pakistan" was instead an ideological concept: the champion of Islam wherever it was challenged, with a regional and even a world mission. As Jean-Luc Racine has written, by intervening in Kashmir, Pakistan "put incompleteness and exteriority at the heart of its national vision."<sup>8</sup> This dangerous attitude might have been moderated by a strong secular civilian leadership, but Jinnah's death barely a year after the birth of the state was followed by the assassination of his right-hand man and successor, Liaquat Ali Khan, in 1951. A weak, illiberal, and very angry young country was floundering at its very beginning, and as a survival strategy turned to the "three As": Allah as its *raison d'être*, an Army for the citadel of an "Islam in danger" (chiefly from India but eventually from a litany of bogeymen), and America as the enabler whose financial and military resources would allow it to survive and carry out its mission.

That Pakistan had such a religious mission became the guiding premise of its Islamic nationalist ideology. Hussein Haqqani has explained how a national mythology was elaborated which presented:

... a version of history that linked Pakistan's emergence to Islam's arrival in the subcontinent instead of its being the outcome of a dispute over the constitution of postcolonial India. The history of Islam was presented not as the history of a religion or a civilization, but as a prelude to Pakistan's creation. Muslim conquerors were glorified, Hindu-Muslim relations were painted as intrinsically hostile, and the ability of Pakistanis to manage democratic rule was questioned.<sup>9</sup>

Such a worldview was eminently useful in resisting demands for democratic change, regional and ethnic autonomy, and economic empowerment. It also differentiated Pakistan from most other Muslim nations of the era

<sup>8</sup>Jean-Luc Racine, "Pakistan in the Game of the Great Powers," in Jaffrelot, pp. 97–98.

<sup>9</sup>Husain Haqqani, *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005), p. 40.

of the 1950s and 1960s, which largely sought secular bases of legitimacy. And it advanced the country along a path that eventually resulted in its becoming an epicenter of Islamist terror. As Haqqani has noted, “This political commitment to an ideological state gradually evolved into a strategic commitment to jihadi ideology.”<sup>10</sup>

Long before that dark defile was reached, “guns not butter” had become a central motif in Pakistani life. The violent circumstances of its birth, the ongoing confrontation with India, and the turmoil created by the denial in the name of Islamic nationalism of practical needs and legitimate demands combined to give the army a natural controlling role in what had, after all, long been a garrison state. A key element of the Pakistan myth was an idolization of the Islamic Mughal Empire, whose primary relation to the territories it controlled was as a forcible extractor of natural and human resources from those areas. In the name of an “Islam in danger,” the army increasingly assumed this function, to such a degree that it is inaccurate to refer to “Islamabad” with regard to policy-setting as one would to Washington or Moscow. Rawalpindi, the nerve-center of the armed forces, would be more to the point. By the late 1950s the army began to forge an alliance with the Pakistani Islamist parties that lent theological sanction to its policies.

As a function of the exigencies of the Cold War and Pakistan’s astuteness in playing to them, the United States early assumed the role of the nation’s primary foreign sponsor. With nonaligned India pursuing anti-Western allies as America took up the task of confronting Russia in Central Asia, Pakistan’s vociferous anticommunism based on Islamic principles made it seem like a natural fulcrum for the advancement of American interests in the region. Perceived simply as a conservative state, the dangers of its politics had not yet become clear and were of no great concern amid the imperatives of the time. As Stephen Philip Cohen has written, “Pakistanis are expert at deciphering American interests and appealing to short-term American fears in the hope of establishing a relationship of mutual dependency in which Pakistani obligations are minimal while American ones are substantial.”<sup>11</sup> Pakistan proceeded to use the enormous military and financial aid provided by the United States in the 1950s and 1960s to confront India and repress domestic dissent.

The country’s leadership at the time inspired U.S. confidence. The political turmoil that followed the assassination of Liaquat Ali Khan ended in 1958 when Gen. Ayub Khan launched a military coup with the stated intention of ending disorder and corruption and moving the country forward. These have been the justifications of all subsequent coups in Pakistan. A graduate of Sandhurst, Ayub Khan undertook a series of reforms intended to modernize the country that led the American historian Samuel P. Huntington to bestow

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Cohen, p. 327.

the honorific “Solon” on the general in his seminal book, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (Yale University Press, 1968). But the image of progressive modernizer was largely an illusion. Ayub Khan’s land reform was circumvented by the feudals, his “Basic Democracies” system of political councils was only an instrument of regime control, and his economic policies were too weighted in favor of the business class to benefit the mass of impoverished and illiterate Pakistanis. Worst of all, he adhered closely to the Islamic nationalist line of confronting India and suppressing ethno-regional identities, particularly that of the Bengalis, who constituted a majority of the population, under their charismatic leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. After a failed war to conquer Kashmir in 1965, these policies combined to set off unrest that forced Khan’s resignation in 1969. Long before this, however, the American-Pakistani relationship had cooled, and Rawalpindi had sought to bridge the resulting aid deficit by forging an alliance of convenience with communist China, which was pursuing a strategy of encircling India.

Ayub’s successor, General Yahya Khan, was compelled by the sudden weakness of the army’s position to call Pakistan’s first countrywide democratic elections in December 1970. Their long-repressed aspirations for self-determination finally unbound, the Bengalis rallied behind Sheikh Mujib’s secular program of regional autonomy, language rights, deescalating the conflict with India, and transferring resources from the military to development, and they elected him prime minister. Yahya refused to recognize the results and set the army on Bengal. The mass murder of hundreds of thousands of civilians that followed, which targeted intellectuals and professionals, has been termed a genocide by many. Ominously, Islamist followers of Maududi and other fundamentalist ideologues were heavily employed in this by the army, in what amounted to the formal introduction of terrorist tactics into the politics of South and Central Asia by a regional state. As Talbot has argued, “the genocide unleashed in East Pakistan made later episodes of state repression . . . more acceptable. . . . State terrorism in the name of national security thereafter secured a political legitimacy.”<sup>12</sup>

The intervention of the Indian army on the side of the Bengali resistance in late 1971 won the province independence under the name “Bangladesh,” but it only strengthened the radicalism of the Pakistani state, which felt betrayed by America and desired vengeance against India. The interlude that followed of prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s “Islamic socialism” did nothing to weaken the army’s position as the ultimate arbiter of power in the country, as was demonstrated when he was overthrown in 1977 and later executed by Gen. Mohammad Zia ul-Haq. The renewed exigencies of the Cold War now created a situation where an American-backed military dictator of Pakistan no longer needed to present himself in the borrowed vestments of Solon, but could openly don the black robes of Draco.

<sup>12</sup>Talbot, p. 33.

## Pragmatic Extremism

Zia's accession to power was the consummation of the logic inherent in the ideology of the Pakistani state and the main strains in its history. Lawrence Ziring has written, "The loss of East Bengal obviated the need for bridge-building between disparate communities and centered attention on constructing a Pakistan that was more akin to Islamist doctrine and precept than that suggested by the constrained and tortured secularism of the earlier vision."<sup>13</sup> A fundamentalist himself, Zia was intent on "Islamizing" Pakistan, both as an end in itself and as a means of suppressing ethno-regional dissent and economic agitation. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the billions of dollars of American aid to his government that followed allowed him to project this domestic program on a regional and even a global scale, leading him to dream of renewing hostilities with India, building an Islamist confederacy in Central Asia, and leading a worldwide revival of Islam.

It was fitting that Afghanistan was the vehicle for enabling these vast projects, for the Islamic nationalists' deepest fears regarding India and ethnic self-assertion had swirled around its northwestern neighbor for decades. The presence in the NWFP of half of the same Pashtun ethnic group that dominated the Afghan state had been an obstacle to Pakistan's creation, as this group initially favored Indian unity. The disillusionment of the Pashtun with their new state was seized upon by Afghanistan's progressive nationalist leader Mohammad Daud to pursue irredentist agitation in cooperation with India against Pakistan. The Soviet invasion, which followed Daud's assassination in a Moscow-engineered coup, provided a golden opportunity to break this double threat of dismemberment and encirclement by fighting communism with U.S. support, while using U.S. and Saudi money to advance a fundamentalist agenda. This quest for gaining "strategic depth" against India by dominating Afghanistan was inseparable from the tactic of undercutting Pashtun nationalism by supporting Islamists. It remains a foundation of Pakistan's foreign policy to this day.

The domestic, regional, and international dimensions of this program were made to reinforce each other in a seamless flow. Strict Islamic laws were passed after a vigorous propaganda campaign led by the lavishly state-supported Pakistani Islamist parties. The weak public school system was allowed to collapse, to be replaced by religious schools run by the fundamentalists. These were the only schools open to the millions of Afghan refugees flooding into the country, and the project of channeling Pashtun ire on both sides of the frontier away from nationalism into fundamentalism was cemented by the heavy backing given to the most radical—and most subservient to Rawalpindi—Afghan mujahideen parties. Finally, the presence

<sup>13</sup> Lawrence Ziring, *Pakistan: At the Crosscurrent of History* (Oxford: One World, 2003), p. 130.

of numerous “Arab Afghan” militants who had come from around the Muslim world to fight the Soviets lent a pan-Islamic character to Zia’s grand scheme and provided Pakistan’s main security agency, the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), with an ongoing reserve of transnational operatives. Among them was Osama bin Laden, who began to build his own network among Pashtun fighters and Pakistani army and intelligence officers.

Zia’s success in persuading the United States to bankroll and arm a transnational movement that was in essence as anti-American as it was anti-Soviet, to the exclusion of the more moderate resistance groups operating in Afghanistan, was a triumph of the pragmatic extremism with which Rawalpindi has always approached Washington. While under Ayub Khan the relationship had appeared to Washington a reasonable investment in what was posing as a progressive conservative state, the Pakistan of the 1980s and its international proxies clearly represented religious fanaticism. The uncritical nature of this assistance and the fact that its volume was far greater than that required by the strict needs of the Afghan war laid the basis for Pakistan’s dangerous interventions in Kashmir and Afghanistan in the 1990s, which created the international climate that led to 9/11. Iran still tops Washington’s list of enemy states in the Muslim world, while Pakistan has persuaded the United States that it is an ally in the fight against the very militants operating in South and Central Asia that have formed the shock troops of its regional policies for over two decades. Roy has pointed out the inherent contradiction of Pakistan’s two sets of alliances, Western and Islamic.

Zia’s death in a mysterious aircraft crash in 1988<sup>14</sup> as the Soviets were in the midst of withdrawing from Afghanistan removed a forceful leader but did not put an end to the pursuit of his international Islamic revivalist project. Domestically, the army had to maneuver in the political vacuum that followed Zia’s removal and the resulting popular calls for change by allowing elections and permitting the operation of a tenuous democracy for a decade under the interchanging rival prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif. But the army and the ISI reached an understanding with the political parties that they would not interfere with the “strategic depth” project that was coming to fruition in Afghanistan or in the new operations Pakistan launched in Kashmir after the outbreak of a nationalist revolt against India there in 1989.

Indeed, the new, two-front Islamic nationalist offensive demonstrated continuity in all respects. As had been the case in Afghanistan, any secular aspect to the guerrilla movement in Kashmir was suppressed, and the ISI was given free rein to secure Pakistani influence in the province by means of Islamic militants. As Roy has noted:

<sup>14</sup> See Barbara Crossette, “Who Killed Zia?” *World Policy Journal*, Fall 2005.

Pakistan's Afghan policy was absolutely in line with its policy on Kashmir: first and foremost the use of international militias composed of Islamic volunteers; direct support for the mujahedin; the same religious network to train volunteers; the same implacable denial that they are interfering. These are often the very organizations that are found in Kashmir helping the Taliban, such as Harkat-ul-Ansar. So it was indeed a policy of aggression on all sides that Pakistan pursued.<sup>15</sup>

The strength of the Indian army in Kashmir limited the human toll of the ISI's operations there, but when Pakistan sought to fill the void that opened in Afghanistan upon the fall of the communist regime, it became responsible for inter-Muslim bloodletting and destruction on a scale unseen in the region since 1971. Too often depicted in the media as simply an Afghan civil war, Rawalpindi's forceful backing first of the Pashtun Islamist warlord Gulbaddin Hekmatyar and then of the Pashtun-based Taliban was essentially an act of international aggression. The successful conclusion of this effort with the Taliban's September 1996 entry into Kabul, which had been almost leveled in the fighting, provided Pakistan with a friendly regime there for the first time since independence. It was now free to concentrate on India with the confidence that comes with possessing WMD.

Ever since India's explosion of a nuclear device in 1974 led Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to declare the necessity of an "Islamic bomb," Rawalpindi had placed a high priority on acquiring such weapons. This was a tall order for a state that lacked the industrial infrastructure needed to sustain its own conventional army, but had always managed to exploit its strategic location to "borrow power," first from the United States and then China. America's strong opposition to such a development, which eventually resulted in its terminating aid in October 1990, was also a major obstacle. Yet Washington's de-prioritizing of this question during the anti-Soviet jihad and its neglect of the region after winning that struggle left the Pakistanis with room to maneuver. By a combination of the multifaceted activities of its top nuclear scientist, A. Q. Khan, and the sympathy of China, which determinedly sought to encircle India, Pakistan formally entered the nuclear club with its explosion of five devices to answer an Indian test in May 1998.

Long before this event, which resulted in the imposition of U.S. sanctions on both countries, Washington had come to the conclusion that Pakistan's recidivist behavior threatened regional and international security. Yet it never sought a substantive confrontation with its erstwhile ally. It never followed through on its May 1992 threat to declare Pakistan a state sponsor of terror, even when the latter became the chief enabler of the Taliban and the Taliban gave shelter to Bin Laden. Indeed, it seemed unable to recognize that Kashmir, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden were part of the same expanding epicenter of terror.

Already internationally isolated for supporting the Taliban and fostering Kashmiri militants, for its nuclear tests, and for the Kargil War it fought with

<sup>15</sup> Roy, in Jaffrelot, p. 142.

India in the summer of 1999, Pakistan was even more set apart when Gen. Pervez Musharraf ended its latest, tenuous experiment with democracy that October. Then 9/11 led the Bush administration to conclude that this major sponsor of Islamic extremism and terrorism could serve as an important means of fighting these phenomena.

### **The Logic of Containment**

During the days that followed 9/11, the Bush administration presented President Musharraf with an ultimatum: abandon support of the Taliban and commit to the American-led war on terror, or face the consequences of being considered an enemy of the United States. Musharraf's acceptance, which facilitated America's tactical military needs of the moment and led to yet another long-term commitment of aid to Pakistan, has earned the country the title "key ally," but an existential question is being ignored, even now when the dangers of doing so have never been greater.

If the Pakistanis are to be believed, they have suddenly renounced "the core policies that guided Pakistan's direction as an independent state almost since its inception,"<sup>16</sup> as Haqqani called them. Musharraf's pledges to pursue a domestic reform program that combats extremism, engage in a sincere peace process with India, prevent militants from entering Kashmir, and support the American-backed Karzai government in Afghanistan by stopping the Taliban from operating out of his country amount to a repudiation of the aggressive Islamic nationalism that has sought for so long to force India out of Kashmir and to dominate Afghanistan.

Five years after 9/11, with the United States absorbed with the war in Iraq, Pakistan's Islamist parties are growing stronger, the radical *madrassas* are flourishing with little government interference, a resurgent Taliban pours over the frontier to challenge the fragile new order in Afghanistan, and the persistent violence in Kashmir has aftershocks as far as Mumbai. As Haqqani has noted, Rawalpindi is well practiced in providing answers when it is challenged about saying one thing and doing another:

During the decade following the American threat to declare Pakistan a state sponsor of terrorism, Pakistan repeatedly promised to crack down on Islamist militant groups operating from its territory. Each time, some measures were taken to create the impression that the task of uprooting the jihadists was a difficult one and that the Pakistani government was struggling with the problem. . . . The official explanation also featured the difficulty of the mountainous terrain along Pakistan's border with Afghanistan . . . [and that U.S. pressure] would 'throw Pakistan into the hands of the mullahs.' That argument was first made in 1993 and continues to be made today.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Haqqani, p. 262.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297.

Amid a global conflict against a totalitarian ideology, it is time for Washington to abandon its historic approach to Pakistan and shift to a policy that proceeds from a clear assessment of its nature and motivations. Uncritical support for Pakistan has won America some limited, short-term victories, but over the long term has severely damaged American interests. Shoring up an Islamic nationalist state may have seemed logical at a time when communism was the enemy, but Pakistan cannot be a “key ally” against Islamism, which has been able to make South-Central Asia its stronghold due to Rawalpindi’s direct sponsorship over a quarter century.

Although Pakistan is not yet formally an Islamist state, it shares its battle cry “Islam in danger” with the fundamentalists, and Rawalpindi is in continual danger of being overwhelmed by them. This need not be a matter of revolution or coup, but simply of osmosis. As Roy has pointed out, radical Islam enjoys increasing state support, and young army officers show a tendency towards Islamization.<sup>18</sup> Whatever Musharraf’s personal inclinations, he presides tenuously over the military-intelligence complex, the essential character of which must be the central preoccupation when dealing with Pakistan. A policy based on assistance aimed at encouraging reform and changing behavior can only succeed if there is some domestic impetus for such change. Pakistan’s history shows that calls for change have only arisen outside the army, and were crushed or marginalized. Rawalpindi cannot be a U.S. ally against terrorism because it is the root cause of the problem.

Evidence that a country supports or tolerates radical Islamists must result in the cessation of all U.S. military and economic aid to that state. For six decades now, Pakistan has pursued dangerous policies that have set it apart from responsible nations; accordingly, it should be formally granted the set-apart status it has long embodied. Containing Pakistan is the key to weakening the transnational Islamist terror networks it has fostered, and in looking for allies in this endeavor, America has only to turn to the neighboring countries and regional secular forces who have been its victims for so long.

In searching for an overarching strategic framework that will cement South-Central Asian security, one comes to encirclement, which the geopolitics of the area has long employed. Since the 1960s, China has sought to encircle India by allying itself strongly with Pakistan; likewise, India has sought to escape this trap by allying itself with Afghanistan, employing the ancient geopolitical concept of the *raja-mandala*. America’s interests can only be secured by engaging the *raja-mandala* fully, synchronizing its ideological and geographic aspects.

The workings of the *raja-mandala* are elucidated in the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, the Indian equivalent of Machiavelli’s *Prince*, written in the late fourth century BCE by the chief political advisor of King Chandragupta, the founder of the Mauryan dynasty that was India’s first great *raj*. It conceives of

<sup>18</sup> Roy, in Jaffrelot, p. 146.

geopolitical relations in terms of concentric circles, which can only be balanced by exploiting the tensions between them. As described by John Keay in *India: A History*, this concept posits that

the immediate neighbors of the axial 'king of kings,' those therefore within the first circle, are to be regarded as his natural enemies; those beyond them in the next circle are his potential allies; those in the third circle are his enemies' potential allies, those in the fourth his allies' natural allies, and so on.<sup>19</sup>

This schema well describes axial America's engagement with Asia today, as it is faced with an assertive China, China's rising rival India, India's enduring rival Pakistan, and Pakistan's longtime victim Afghanistan. Washington is currently doing a poor job of exploiting these tensions in its own interests, and its continued support of Pakistan is the tossed wrench that upsets the potential balance of the spheres.

In the broader realm, America has seen the wisdom of building up India as a counterbalance to China. Yet such efforts, as well as the counterterrorism fight itself, will be undermined if an uncritical attitude towards Pakistan makes the United States an unintentional partner in China's efforts to encircle India and Pakistan's efforts to foment extremism, sponsor terror, and pursue an expanded nuclear capacity. The false perceptions that guide America's current policy of assistance to Pakistan are summed up by Anatol Lieven's assertion that "In South Asia, the melancholy fact is that whatever the ties of sentiment between the U.S. and India, it is the Pakistani state which is the vital ally in the war against terrorism, because the threats to the U.S. (and to the U.S. position in Afghanistan) stem from Pakistani society, which only a Pakistani state can control."<sup>20</sup> In fact, only a policy that proceeds from a historically conscious opposite view will enable the United States to engage the South-Central Asian *raja-mandala*.

America's ties to India are not founded upon mere "sentiment," but on a broad range of vital common interests such as upholding secular democracy, maintaining a strong trade relationship, and combating a mutual terrorist threat that had its regional origins in Pakistan's violent rivalry with India. This mutual threat does not stem from Pakistani society, which whenever it has been given the chance to vote has elected leaders with a socioeconomic focus, but from a military-security complex that has always sought to block socioeconomic change by fostering violent religious sentiment. And the greatest threat to the U.S. position in Afghanistan comes from Rawalpindi's continued determination to use Pashtun fundamentalists to break apart the historic Indo-Afghan alliance, which was renewed after the fall of the Taliban.

With all this in mind, the United States should change course and commit itself to a tripartite American-Indian-Afghan alliance aimed at containing

<sup>19</sup> John Keay, *India: A History* (London: Folio Society, 2003), p. 192.

<sup>20</sup> Anatol Lieven, "Managing Pakistan," in *The State of Pakistan* (Washington: School of Advanced International Studies, South Asia Program, 2003), p. 25.

Pakistan and the Islamic ideological and terrorist threat that it poses. The pillars of this policy would be (1) cutting off all U.S. military and economic aid to Pakistan, (2) placing Pakistan on the list of state sponsors of terror, (3) brokering a resolution of the Kashmir question that grants Kashmiris a substantial autonomy shored up with economic development, (4) reconstructing Afghanistan, with special emphasis on building its military capability and securing semi-permanent U.S. basing rights, and (5) providing covert economic and military support to any efforts that India and Afghanistan would make to counterbalance Pakistan's support for insurgent groups within their countries.

The logic of containment underpinning such an alliance recognizes that Pakistan is hostile to all three members, with their secular democratic, anti-extremist ethos and aspirations, and has in fact been the chief obstacle to such aspirations in South and Central Asia for decades. Pakistan's possession of nuclear weapons need not deter such a policy any more than the Soviet Union's did the successful American Cold War containment strategy. Chinese support alone would not permit Rawalpindi to continue its dangerous policies when it has been hemmed in on so many fronts and by a combination of two world powers and a committed regional state. In this way the geographic aspects of the *raja-mandala* and the ideological ones harmonize beautifully.

### **Ever-Decreasing Circles**

"You should have confidence in the Pakistani military and the Pakistani system," Mahmoud Ali Durrani, the Pakistani ambassador to the United States, told CNN in August 2006, when asked why the five-year hunt for Bin Laden has proved futile.<sup>21</sup> Yet within weeks came the announcement of his government's peace agreement with the militants in Waziristan, followed by the hastily retracted assertion by a senior general that Bin Laden would not be taken into custody as long as he behaved as "a peaceful citizen." By late September U.S. military officials had noted a threefold increase in militant attacks in eastern Afghanistan, and a British intelligence report warned that continued ISI backing of the Pakistani religious parties was enabling extremism in Afghanistan, Iraq, and even Britain. This open contradiction was a palpable presence at the Bush-Musharraf-Karzai summit in Washington at the end of the month.

Pakistan's intractable problems and its danger to the world have proceeded from the illiberal, exclusivist ethos behind its founding and the latent radicalism of the official state ideology. Its problems are structural in nature, and decades of oppression, crises, wars, and disasters have only solidified its role as a breeding ground for extremism. The founder of Pakistan must bear culpability as the first to enshrine the cry of "Islam in danger" within

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Wolf Blitzer on CNN, Aug. 24, 2006.

the formal structure of a modern state. That none of Jinnah and his successors except Zia were themselves fundamentalists does not alter the results of their policies. The long litany of Pakistan's misdeeds confirms its central role in the rise of the Islamist terrorist threat.

America's mistaken belief that Pakistan was a "conservative" Muslim nation and therefore a useful ally during the Cold War led it to enable that country's authoritarian and aggressive military-security services complex, but Pakistan was an altogether different polity than historically rooted, genuinely conservative countries with secular modernizing aspirations, such as Turkey and Iran, that formed the mainstays of the United States' anti-Soviet strategy in the Muslim world. Even granting that India's neutralism and the overbearing presence of the Soviet Union and China in Asia rendered America's Cold War search for allies in the region a somewhat desperate one, Washington could have been far more critical in assessing the consequences of engaging with Pakistan and stricter in linking aid to the fulfillment of precise stipulations on its use. A quasi-theocratic, Islamic ideological state dominated by a praetorian military was a problematic ally to say the least. Pakistan's habitual resort to violence and extremism to address its problems meant that it was never a responsible ally. As the Pakistanis can never be allies of conviction, and are only pretending to be allies of convenience, it is futile to assist them further when the Indians and the Afghans have vital reasons to be committed allies in both these senses.

By denying further military and economic aid to Pakistan and working with its neighbors to contain it, America can hasten the same internal collapse of a dictatorial state that occurred when the Soviet Union's weak economy was unable to bear the weight of its military superstructure. This would eliminate a state sponsor of terror and give the country's democratic forces their first real opportunity to transform their troubled land.

Ian Talbot entitled the final section of his history of Pakistan "Ever-Decreasing Circles" to convey the tragedy of the country's internal decline and alienation from responsible nations. By engaging the *raja-mandala* artfully, ever-decreasing circles of Pakistani state-sponsored terror and extremism will be America's great contribution to the security of South-Central Asia and the world.

