

# Pakistan: The Challenges of a Frontline State

Numata Sadaaki

*Made a fortress against Russia by Britain in the nineteenth century, and cultivated by the United States to hold against the Soviet Union in the mid-twentieth century, Pakistan's struggle for survival and identity is further strained by conflict with neighboring India. As Japan has stepped forward to support Pakistan's wise strategic choices and help Islamabad withstand the pressures that could erupt in chaos and nuclear catastrophe, the distance that divides the two nations is sure to gradually close.*

The cataclysmic events of 11 September 2001 changed the tone of Japan's relationship with Pakistan. From virtual international isolation, Pakistan emerged as an important partner in the international coalition's fight against the heinous terrorist acts perpetrated by al Qaeda. In Japan, television and other media covered Pakistan intensively as the military action led by the United States unfolded in Afghanistan. This continued until December, when the focus shifted to the process of post-Taliban nation building.

In 2002, Pakistan continued to capture international headlines: remnants of al Qaeda and other extremist groups within the country's borders continued to launch terrorist act after terrorist act; in May and June, tensions with India over Kashmir escalated almost to the point of war; and in October, as Pakistan headed toward elections, the first step in the transformation from military-led government to democratic, civilian rule, political debate in the country was heating up.

In the course of my two-and-a-half-year tenure as ambassador to Pakistan, I observed firsthand a number of Pakistan's most vexing problems. As a former Pakistani foreign minister told a delegation of Japanese parliamentarians, Pakistan has been the victim of global fault lines. Time and again, Pakistan has found itself on the frontline of conflicts. For most Japanese, the very notion of being on the frontline of a conflict is alien. Since its defeat in World War II nearly six decades ago, Japan has worked assiduously to keep its distance from such a situation. However, if Japan is to forge an enduring relationship with Pakistan as partners in the international community, a conscious effort

must be made to understand the geopolitical, religious, and other issues that place Pakistan on the frontlines.

## Pakistan's Compulsions

There are certain English words, conveying a sense of intense drive or purpose, that are used more often in Pakistan than in any other Anglophone country I know of. There are Pakistan's security and other "compulsions," there is the need to appreciate the "ground realities," and there is discussion of things in a "threadbare" manner to find areas of convergence out of sharply conflicting viewpoints.

Pakistan has three main compulsions. The first is to survive amid the rivalries that have arisen in the region among great powers. In the nineteenth century, Britain sought to prevent Russia's advances through Central Asia into Afghanistan. That confrontation, chronicled by Peter Hopkirk in *The Great Game*, turned Kashmir and areas that today comprise Pakistan's Northern Areas, Northwest Frontier Province, and Balochistan into the frontlines of battle. In the twentieth century, as the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union grew tense, Pakistan allied itself strategically with the United States. With the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, a new great game developed, and for about ten years beginning at the end of the 1970s, Pakistan again cast its lot with the United States by supporting the fight of the Mujaheddin against the Soviets. When the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, so did American strategic interest in Pakistan. The United States suspended its economic and military assistance to Pakistan on suspicion of nuclear proliferation under the Pressler Amendment in 1990, and Pakistan felt abandoned.

The second compulsion is to ensure Pakistan's survival in its highly charged tensions with neighboring India. Ever since the 1947 partition of British India into India and Pakistan, the dispute concerning Kashmir has been visceral in intensity, each side claiming that its integrity as a nation is at stake. To Pakistanis, Kashmir represents the ideal that has been whispered into their ears ever since they were babies, namely, that Pakistan as a Pan-Islamic state is not limited to its borders. In their minds, the imperative of defending themselves against the military might of India, which has nuclear weapons in addition to conventional forces more than double that of Pakistan's, has left them with no choice but to follow the nuclear option as well.

The third compulsion is to develop as a modern nation while preserving an identity as an Islamic state. The motto of Pakistan consists of three words: "Faith, Unity, Discipline." The implication is

that forging unity among the country's diverse ethnic groups (Punjabis, Sindhis, Pashtoons, Balochis, etc.) and regions (Punjab, Sindh, Northwest Frontier Province, Balochistan, the Northern Areas, and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas) is no easy task. Pakistan's founding father Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah set forth the vision of Pakistan as a modern, moderate Islamic state. But on a practical level, debate has raged about the degree to which modernity should be achieved at the cost of traditional values and the degree to which Pakistanis, 97 percent of whom are Muslim, should be "Islamized."

### Japan and Pakistan: Shortening the Distance

To most Japanese, South Asia is an unfamiliar region lying beyond what is normally seen as Asia, which is to say, Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. Central Asia, too, is a far-off region, more distant than the vast land masses of China and Russia. It takes a conscious effort to learn that Pakistan shares its borders with India, China, Afghanistan, and Iran, thus straddling Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Pakistan, for its part, tends to be preoccupied with relations with its neighbors, in particular India, and, with the exception of its all-weather friendship with China, Pakistan has not really focused on cultivating ties with the countries of East Asia, including Japan.

There is thus considerable psychological distance between the people of Pakistan and Japan. Moreover, in recent years, Pakistan's image in Japan has suffered from the CNN/BBC syndrome. On television, reports of sensational events, be it the nuclear testing in May 1998, the military takeover of the government in October 1999, the exchanges of rhetoric and shellfire with India, or the sectarian violence between



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Sunni versus Shiia, formed negative images of Pakistan in the Japanese mind. The images soon acquired a life of their own, giving rise to Japanese fears of the radicalization, or Taliban-ization, of Pakistan.

Economic ties, which had formed the mainstay of Japan-Pakistan relations, were seriously affected. In the 1950s, Japan-Pakistan trade flourished with Pakistan exporting raw cotton to Japan, which Japan processed into yarn and cloth and exported to Pakistan. The pattern shifted in the 1960s as Japan exported spinning machinery to Pakistan; since then, Pakistan has exported cotton yarn and textiles to Japan. In 1961, Japan began official development assistance (ODA) loans to Pakistan, and after the Pressler Amendment sanctions by the United States in 1990, Japan was the world's top bilateral donor to Pakistan for most of the decade. In May 1998, however, commitments of Japanese concessional loans and grants to both Pakistan and India were suspended in the wake of their nuclear testing. In the absence of Pakistani progress with respect to nuclear testing and proliferation, Japan's economic relationship with Pakistan remained stalled, with Japanese businesses reluctant to invest in the country.

During my tenure in Pakistan, my main concern was how best to shorten the psychological distance between Japan and Pakistan and put our relationship back on track. To this end, I tried to emphasize the positive aspects of the relationship and the potential that Pakistan represents. I thus tried to make the following points to my Japanese interlocutors:

- (1) Pakistan is in the unique position of straddling both Asia and the Middle East.
- (2) It is a major player among Islamic countries, with a population second only to Indonesia. As such, its influence as a moderate Islamic nation can be significant.
- (3) It lies at the gateway to the Central Asian republics, which offer great potential in energy and other fields.
- (4) Pakistan borders the Arabian Sea, which stretches to the Indian Ocean and is part of the sea lane linking the Middle East and Japan. For Japan, which has few natural energy resources, this sea lane is of vital strategic importance.

The events of 11 September 2001 raised Pakistan's profile and prompted Japanese to see Pakistan in a wider, geopolitical context. High-level contacts intensified, including the visit of President and Mrs. Pervez Musharraf to Japan in March 2002. As a result, the psychological distance between Pakistan and Japan began to be shortened.

## Biting Two Bullets

Pakistan shares a highly porous border with Afghanistan that stretches for more than two thousand kilometers, with the Pashtoon people, who live on either side of the border, linked by a strong tribal kinship that defies nationality. Since the late 1970s, Pakistan's Afghan policy had been largely dictated by the desire of its military to use Afghanistan as a hinterland base

for logistical support in the event of a prolonged war with India. This quest for strategic depth was an important motivation behind Pakistan's support of the Taliban regime.

It is believed that many Pakistani militants, supported by radical Islamic groups in Pakistan, were trained in Afghanistan for their jihad in Kashmir as well. As Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda followers strengthened their grip on the Taliban, making Afghanistan a training and staging ground for terrorist activities abroad, Pakistan faced, by association, the serious risk of international opprobrium and isolation.

The events of 11 September 2001 confronted President Musharraf with the starkest choice: to cut Pakistan's ties with the Taliban and cooperate with the United States in the war against terrorism or to side with al Qaeda and the Taliban against the international community. Realizing that this meant life or death for Pakistan, Musharraf decided to bite the bullet.

On 15 September, I went to see Inam ul Haq, then foreign secretary of Pakistan, to make the *démarche* that Japan, for its part, considered it essential that Pakistan join the international community's war against terrorism. He responded, "We realize that we have become a frontline state again," and informed me that a joint meeting of the cabinet and the military leadership had decided minutes earlier to cooperate with the U.S.-led action in Afghanistan in intelligence, logistical support, and border vigilance.

With that decision, the United States, Japan, and other major countries stepped forward to extend substantial emergency assistance to Pakistan to help alleviate its burdens as it again became a frontline state, and Pakistan came back to the international fold as an important player. At the same time, however, within Pakistan, anti-American feelings were roused, and there were real fears of a radical Islamic

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backlash as the air campaign in Afghanistan intensified, with reported collateral civilian casualties

Shortly before Ramadan began in November, the Taliban collapsed, and the radical Islamic opposition to the military action in Afghanistan waned. Musharraf had survived his first test successfully. But within Pakistan, sentiments toward the United States and the West remained ambivalent; there were undercurrents of a war being waged against Muslims as well as fears of again being left in the lurch as had occurred after the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan.

The military action in Afghanistan also had the effect of triggering an escalation of tensions between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. India pressed Pakistan to clamp down on the militants who, sharing the same ethnic and religious roots as forces fighting with the Taliban, were engaged in cross-border infiltration into Indian-held Kashmir. Following the terrorist attack on the Parliament in New Delhi on 13 December 2001, India amassed the bulk of its troops along the Line of Control (LOC) in Kashmir and the international border.

Musharraf was thus forced to bite a second bullet. Despite the risk to his presidency and the internal stability of Pakistan, Musharraf, speaking on national television on 12 January 2002, declared that neither Pakistan nor territory under its control would be used for terrorist acts anywhere, including any acts in the name of Kashmir. Under his presidency, Musharraf stated, Pakistan was firmly on the path to development as a modern, moderate Islamic state, free of extremist forces. Musharraf is still biting this bullet today.

## Fighting Three Battles

Under the leadership of Musharraf, Pakistan is fighting three battles at the same time. The first is dealing with the heightened tension with India. The second is fighting the threat of terrorism, emanating in part from the remnants of al Qaeda within Pakistan. The third is implementing economic and social reforms and achieving political stability.

Since the end of 2001, the India-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir has been a matter of serious concern to the international community. At the end of May 2002, the two countries were on the brink of war. What was most disturbing, however, was that the two nuclear-armed countries were talking in a cavalier way about the actual use of nuclear weapons. At a roundtable seminar organized then by one of Pakistan's English-language newspapers, I felt compelled to state that the nuclear option was nothing less than suicidal. I said that, given the death toll of

the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, including those who died years later from radiation sickness, and given the populations of India and Pakistan, a full-scale nuclear exchange between the two countries could leave as many as twelve million people dead and seven million wounded—as claimed in an article in the *New York Times*, 27 May 2002. I was approached afterward by a number of people in the audience who indicated that more informed debate on these issues needed to take place within Pakistan.

Toward the end of 2002, the danger of war subsided somewhat as contingents of Indian and Pakistani troops were redeployed away from the international border. A heavy concentration of troops from both sides remains in Kashmir, however, and tensions still run high. Both sides need to make the necessary effort if the impasse between India's "coercive diplomacy," as alleged by Pakistan, and Pakistan's "cross-border infiltration," as alleged by India, is to be broken. The United States, Japan, and members of the international community, on their part, should continue to appeal to both sides for self-restraint, resumption of dialogue, and de-escalation of tensions. At the same time, the international community must bear in mind that Pakistan's domestic difficulties could be compounded if outside forces were to impose the solution of "freezing the status quo (the LOC)," which is feared by many Pakistanis to benefit India alone.

While the U.S.-led coalition's campaign against al Qaeda and the Taliban continues with no clear end in sight, the infiltration of remnants of al Qaeda into Pakistan and their suspected collaboration with Pakistani sectarian terrorist or jihad groups have posed serious internal security problems. Since spring 2002, there has been a spate of terrorist incidents in Pakistan, including the abduction and murder of *Wall Street Journal* correspondent Daniel Pearl, the suicide bombing of a Christian church in Islamabad, the attack on a team of French submarine engineers in Karachi, and the car bombing near the U.S. Consulate in Karachi. In collaboration with U.S. law enforcement authorities, the Pakistani government has been conducting operations to apprehend al Qaeda and other terrorist elements, especially in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas close to the Afghan border. More than four hundred suspected al Qaeda members have been captured there, but the effort is of a highly sensitive nature due to radical religious sentiments and the fiercely independent mindset of the Pashtoon tribes there.

It is against the backdrop of the above two battles that the Pakistani leaders are fighting the third battle, that is, effecting Pakistan's economic, social, and political transformation. The articulated goal is

to live up to the vision set forth by Pakistan's founding father. In today's terms, that vision is the building of a modern, moderate, tolerant, progressive, and democratic Islamic state. It is in the interest not only of Pakistan but also of Japan and members of the international community that Pakistan succeeds in this.

## Economic, Social, and Political Dilemmas

The major task in Pakistan's nation-building efforts is to instill a sense of national unity among its people and to build the institutions that will ensure stable economic, social, and political development. Its major dilemma is that powerful remnants of premodern societies stand in the way of establishing good governance in the sense normally accepted in Western societies.

Upon coming to Pakistan, I was surprised to hear words like "feudal" or "tribal" mentioned so often in the course of daily conversations. When I traveled to traditional communities in the Northern Areas, Northwest Frontier Province, southern Punjab, interior Sindh, and Balochistan, I saw firsthand how the feudal landlords or tribal chiefs commanded the unquestioning loyalty of their peasants or tribesmen, appearing disdainful of modern concepts such as the rule of law or justice. Enabling democracy to take root on this kind of soil will necessarily be a painstaking, evolutionary process.

These structural problems lie at the heart of Pakistan's economic difficulties as well. By 1999, the cumulative total of Japan's ODA to Pakistan amounted, on a net disbursement basis, to US\$4 billion. The sanctions related to Pakistan's nuclear testing in May 1998 were discontinued in October 2001, and Japan is now in the process of extending \$300 million over the course of two years for poverty reduction in priority areas such as health and education. As we enter this new chapter of Japanese assistance to Pakistan, we should perhaps ask why Japan's ODA of \$4 billion appears not to have enabled Pakistan's economy to take off. The following reasons come to my mind:

- (1) Before anything else can be done, further reduction of poverty must be achieved. There is urgent, immediate need to reverse the trend where the percentage of people below the poverty line increased from 17.3 percent in 1987–1988 to 33.5 percent in 1999–2000.
- (2) Pakistan's human resources need to be fully mobilized, utilized, and maintained for development. There are so many capable and intelligent people in Pakistan. How can they be motivated to

work cohesively as a group?

- (3) There is need to transform Pakistan's industrial structure. The economy would remain static if the industrial sector continued to grow at only about the same rate as the agricultural sector, which has averaged about 4 percent due to frequent drought and inadequate irrigation.
- (4) More fundamentally, the disparity between the rich and the poor is excessive. The problem is especially acute in rural areas, where 68 percent of the country lives and feudal landlords are reluctant to forgo their wealth and privilege.
- (5) Through all this, education is essential. Pakistan's literacy rate cannot remain at the present 47 percent. There is no case in history where a country has achieved sustainable development with an illiterate people.

The reform programs undertaken by Musharraf's government need to be implemented on a systematic basis if Pakistan is to address the formidable structural problems outlined above. Political stability is a prerequisite. In that regard, the federal and provincial elections of October 2002 were an important step toward the establishment of democratic, civilian rule—even as, at the same time, the dilemmas inherent in Pakistan's political situation revealed themselves.

Politicians from the established political parties, who could stand as pillars of parliamentary democracy, carry the legacy of their own feudal or plutocratic heritage. The two prime ministers preceding Musharraf, Nawaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) and Benazir Bhutto of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), were castigated for their autocratic rule and their use of political office for personal gain. When General Musharraf assumed power in a bloodless coup d'état, he and the Army leadership portrayed themselves as the only whistle-blowers with moral authority, and they set about correcting the excesses of politicians who had "looted and plundered" the nation.

The dilemma, however, is that if the role of the Army in national politics is to be perpetuated, parliament and parliamentarians will have less and less opportunity to develop as institutions. A very senior

**It is vital that Pakistan stays the course in its fight against terrorism and in its reform efforts.**

general told me that the Army should be a mediator, not a referee or a player. But given the political situation, a mediator might end up being an active player. Thus a considerable tug of war is expected between the Army led by General Musharraf and the newly elected politicians in Parliament.

The surprise about the October elections was that the Islamic parties' coalition, Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), emerged as the third party after the pro-Musharraf faction of the PML and the PPP. Its dramatic gains in Northwest Frontier Province and Balochistan can be attributed, in part, to strong anti-American sentiment in regions near the Afghan border. Another factor is that the Islamic parties took effective advantage of the frustration and disaffection of people living under poor, underdeveloped, neglected conditions. With the MMA, the new federal government will have a tough balancing act to follow—countering the Islamic parties' negative influence on issues like the fight against terrorism, without antagonizing them to the extent of inviting a nationwide Islamic backlash.

## Empathizing with a Frontline State

Pakistan continues to face myriad challenges as the three battles it faces become closely intertwined. There remain highly divisive issues: how Pakistan's sovereignty can be reconciled with the need to collaborate with the United States and other countries in the fight against terrorism; how the impasse with India on Kashmir can be broken and the bilateral dialogue resumed; what roles can be envisaged for the Army and the Parliament in national government; and how certain Islamic injunctions regarding, for example, the status of women and reproductive health can be adapted to meet the pressing needs for economic and social development.

For Japan and other members of the international community, it is vitally important that Pakistan stays the course in its fight against terrorism and in its reform efforts for economic, social, and political development, and that it does so with national unity and cohesion. Polarization within Pakistan could provide opportunities for extremist forces to exploit, and that would be destabilizing for the international community as well.

When I paid my farewell last October to Inam ul Haq, who had been promoted to minister of state for foreign affairs, he offered his appreciation for Japan's approach of not lecturing Pakistan but discussing issues to search for solutions. No doubt, there will continue to be issues for discussion with Pakistan. Our global and strategic

dialogue needs to be enhanced. At the same time, our advice and help to Pakistan can be more effective if we avoid the pitfall of rushing to hasty conclusions and try to see, with empathy, Pakistan's plight as a frontline state.

### About this Article

This article was originally written by the author for the Spring 2003 issue of the English edition of *Gaiko Forum*, not as a government official, but in his private capacity as an independent observer.

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**Winter 2003  
Vol. 2, No. 4**

ISBN4-901783-05-X C0031  
64 pages ¥840

