

Pakistan is very angry at all the demands the US has made on it

Musharraf's strategy has always been to play balanced power politics

I think the peace process is moving forward. But it could be blown away

Stephen P Cohen

The legendary South Asia expert talks Pakistan with Managing Editor Aziz Haniffa

The recent concern of senior United States military leaders that because of massive deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US military — now lacking in a large strategic reserve of ground forces — would be constrained to respond quickly and decisively to potential foreign crises, including if there is an internal collapse of Pakistan, according to renowned South Asia expert Stephen P Cohen, “reflects the Pakistani argument that only Pakistan’s stability stands between us and chaos in Afghanistan.”

Cohen, director of the South Asia Program at The Brookings Institution, is considered the doyen of American experts on the subcontinent. He has written extensively on the region and published several books including on the Indian and Pakistani armies. He says that fears of Pakistan unraveling or imploding are arguments that the likes of military dictators Mohammed Zia-ul-Haq and now President Pervez Musharraf have used for a long time — for decades in fact.

In a wide-ranging interview, Cohen, who before he joined Brookings, was professor of political science and history and founder-director of the Program in Arms Control, Disarmament, and International Security at the University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign, added that the US military and intelligence is extremely perturbed over Pakistan’s role in the continuing turmoil in Afghanistan and the resurgence of the Taliban. But, he said, the US seemingly has no alternative because Musharraf is apparently the only game in town as far as the US is concerned in executing the war on terror against the Al Qaeda.

He says while Pakistan’s resurrection of the Taliban and its efforts to foment the insurgency in Afghanistan is not to acquire any strategic depth vis-a-vis India — which he argues is “a misnomer” — but more in line with a paranoia Islamabad perceives of “encirclement by India.”

“As long as they believe that India is expanding its presence in Afghanistan and Afghanistan has a pro-India government, you are going to see Pakistan pushing in that direction,” he says. “This is counter-encirclement with Pakistan.”

Cohen, who also served in the Reagan administration as a member of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff from 1985 to 1987, dwells at length on the burgeoning detente between India and Pakistan. He acknowledges he is impressed with the progress made in the composite dialogue and the efforts to resolve the Kashmir imbroglio. But he argues that it is fragile to the extent that any major terrorist strike against India by a Pakistan-based militant group can lead to the peace process unraveling.

He also says that even though the current military hierarchy in Pakistan, whom he had met during a recent visit to Islamabad, has the ideological bent with regard to Kashmir as was the case with the Pakistani military a few years ago, “that could change very quickly if the present military leadership goes out and you get another set of officers.”

Cohen also pooh-poohs reports speculating of a *rapprochement* between Musharraf and former civilian prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, saying, “Musharraf is playing this game of playing them off against each other,” as part of his propensity for “balanced power politics.”

But he bemoans this albeit “successful strategy,” as being a detriment to moving the country forward, and says it is imperative that Pakistan “rebuild the political structure.” The military, he adds, is no substitute for “organized political parties.”

Several senior US military leaders, including General Peter Pace (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) recently in testimony before the House Armed Services Committee have acknowledged that because of the high and growing demand for US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US military now lacks a large strategic reserve of ground troops ready to respond quickly and decisively to potential foreign crises — among them, an internal collapse of Pakistan. Is there an impending internal collapse in Pakistan, with all what’s been going on in that country in the past couple of months?

No. I believe what they are doing — people like Pace and others, who are also in a sense administration officials — sort of reflects the Pakistani argument that only Pakistan’s stability stands between us and chaos in Afghanistan. That’s an argument that the Pakistanis have used for a long time — for decades in fact. They have said, “We are your only real allies, and you’ve got to support us. We may not be perfect but...”

You mean the [former President and military dictator Mohammed] Zia- [ul-Haq] card that Musharraf seems to be playing over and over again and has virtually made into an art form?

Exactly. And, generally, the American military is very unhappy with the situation in Afghanistan and they are absolutely correct that there’s not enough American forces there and also that the Taliban is obviously being supported from Pakistan. But none of them that I know of — except maybe [former General Anthony] Zinni or maybe not even Zinni — have really come out openly and criticized Musharraf. Privately, I am not sure what their views are. But there’s a difference between, certainly, the civilian observers of Pakistan and the US military.

Why is that? That even people like Zinni and others, even though they are out of government, and who has not been bashful about slamming the administration for the invasion of Iraq, are reticent to come out and publicly rebuke Musharraf?

They don’t believe that civilians can govern Pakistan. There is a lot of evidence that civilians can’t govern it well, and from their point of view, we would rather have a military guy we know, who is on our side, than an uncertain civilian. From their point of view, that’s a correct judgment because we



are not very popular among the Pakistani civilians — partly because we are supporting the military. That’s the irony of it.

So it’s a sort of chicken and egg situation?

Yes, that’s seems to be the kind of ironic situation. But I know that NATO [the North Atlantic Treaty Organization] military, [and] our military is very unhappy with Pakistan and have complained to Pakistan for allowing the Taliban to function within Pakistan. Of course, the Pakistani army denies that but there’s a lot of evidence that the Taliban is really based in Pakistan — in Quetta, not so much in Waziristan.

Apparently when [Vice President Dick] Cheney went out to Pakistan a couple of months ago, he had virtually read the riot act to Musharraf over the resurgence of the Taliban and also of their links with Al Qaeda elements, all based in Pakistan. And that according to US intelligence, the Taliban leaders, including Mullah Omar, were all in Quetta?

Yes. I mean, they are seen there regularly. It’s no secret that they are there. Now, the Pakistanis have turned over one or two Taliban, but the unit cost — giving the amount of aid we are providing Pakistan — is enormous. It’s like a billion dollars per Taliban. But I think the root problem is that we are asking the Pakistanis to do about six different things — you go down the list, it’s democratization, it’s reform the economy, it’s normalization with India, it’s

Taliban, it’s Al Qaeda, it’s the nuclear issue, it’s the [renegade nuclear scientist] A Q Khan issue. So, we are asking them to do a lot and we are giving them a lot of money but we’ve never made it clear exactly what we want for our money. There are different American agencies that want different things from Pakistan.

And, so from the Pakistan point of view, we have this huge list of things we want them to do. They probably can’t and don’t want to do everything. They’ll do what they think they have to do and that may not match up exactly with our demands because our demands are all over the place.

There are very little serious, frank discussions between the Americans and Pakistanis even at a high level. When two of our friends — Musharraf and [Afghan President Hamid] Karzai are insulting each other publicly, then we have a serious problem in terms of diplomacy. And I don’t think it’s a sustainable relationship.

So, I think the Pakistanis are looking for options themselves, but they want to retain the US relationship as long as it’s beneficial. But they are very angry at all the demands we have made at them.

What I have learnt is that with all of the negatives regarding Musharraf and all of the Bush administration’s concerns over what a lot of people within the administration itself — including in the military and intelligence — believe is his two-timing

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game, *al la Zia*, the US has no intention of dumping him because they believe he's the only game in town?

I don't know what they are thinking of, but there apparently has been no attempt that I know of to contact either Nawaz [Sharif] or Benazir [Bhutto] to really establish ties with the Pakistan mainstream opposition.

We did that. I remember when I was in the Reagan administration, the US government met Benazir frequently and Zia didn't care.

But Musharraf is playing this game of playing them off against each other, offering and withholding of power sharing. It's going to come down to whoever goes to the streets and what happens in the streets of Pakistan.

That could happen in either the Presidential election or the general election. So, I think we are in for a very, very exciting year.

So, you believe any possibility of a Musharraf-Benazir rapprochement that has been speculated for weeks is just a lot of hype? The US simply doesn't give her the time of the day when she visits here and whines about Musharraf and has privately made clear that no one in the administration has reached out to her. Even in Congress, she doesn't seem to have any sympathizers as she used to in the good old days when she was considered the great young hope for democracy in Pakistan?

I believe it is. I don't think they trust each other at all, and this has been going on for years now. Musharraf's strategy has always been to play balanced power politics. So, he balances her off against Nawaz, he balances her off against the Islamists, he balances her off against the Americans, just to play each against the other. That's been a successful strategy but it doesn't propel the country forward very fast. I do think they have to rebuild the political structure in Pakistan — the military is not competent to govern a country. They are no substitute for organized political parties.

You said earlier that different US agencies have different priorities and Pakistan is doing as much as it can. Is it in terms of its perceptions of these priorities and not that of what the US perceives are its priorities vis-a-vis Pakistan?

Pakistan has one set of priorities, we have another set of priorities. The US and Pakistan agree that Al Qaeda is a threat because clearly they are a threat to Pakistan itself. [But] we probably disagree over Taliban. They see the Taliban — in a sense — as patriotic Pashtuns fighting an oppressive Northern Alliance-dominated government in Afghanistan. We probably agree on the need for economic reform, but we certainly disagree on the pace of democratization. So you go down the list and the US government wants some things and the Pakistani government wants some things, and there are only a few areas where they are in complete agreement.

With regard to the Taliban, after Pakistan's complete 360-degree turn after 9/11, there is now this resurgence of the Taliban, which we all know was conceived of and promoted by Pakistan — mainly by the Inter-Services Intelligence. But why is it that after this complete 360-degree turn, the Pakistanis are once again pandering to them? Is it because they still believe that it's through the Taliban that they can gain this strategic depth in Afghanistan vis-a-vis India?

No. This strategic depth theory is a misnomer. They are very much worried about encirclement by India. They are driven in Afghanistan by what they imagine to be an Indian move to encircle them or put pressure on them. And now that the Iranians are not quite as friendly as they used to be, they have got an additional concern. So, from their point of view, the Taliban or Pashtuns are legitimate assets and that's all they have. So, as long as they believe that India is expanding its presence in Afghanistan and Afghanistan has a pro-Indian government, you are going to see Pakistan pushing in that direction. This is counter-encirclement with Pakistan. They themselves are trying to develop ties in Nepal and Bangladesh to put pressure on India. It's essentially still a strategic rivalry between the two countries.

In view of the recent firing by Musharraf of the country's Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry and the protests that followed, compounding all of the other foreign policy problems



■ An anti-Musharraf rally in Lahore, May 2, over the suspension of Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry

he has been having with Karzai, the resurgence of the Taliban and Al Qaeda and so on, is Musharraf feeling really besieged now and highly vulnerable?

He is a guy with such exuberance and self-confidence, he may not feel this. But the general assessment is that he is beginning to lose a lot of ground in Pakistan. Now, the public opinion polls show him to be as popular as anybody else in Pakistan, although he's declined [in popularity], especially in Punjab, but is still regarded by most Pakistanis as their best leader.

But, some recent polling shows that most Pakistanis would like to see a coalition government between the Pakistan's People's Party and the Pakistan Muslim League come to power. And they are divided as to whether the military should get out of politics. So, to the degree that you can trust these polls — which may not be very great — they

2002, but between the two of them, they both realized that you can't use military force to really change boundaries in South Asia. But still I think this detente between the two is very superficial. All they know is that they can't use nuclear weapons or they shouldn't threaten to use nuclear weapons. But otherwise, they are at each other covertly in all kinds of ways — there is no question about it.

But when you released Navnita Chadha Behera's book *Demystifying Kashmir* [published by Brookings], you seemed optimistic about the so-called peace process and the composite dialogue and all that. In fact you mentioned that when you recently visited Pakistan and met with several military officers, there was a realization that no more is Kashmir an ideological issue and top priority for Pakistanis, let alone the military?

Yes, but that could change very quickly if the present military leadership goes out and you get another set of officers. And, it's not going to change positively with India unless India begins to adjust some of its policies.

But I think in India there is a change going on. That's mostly in the shape of India-Kashmiri dialogue and in the shape of Pakistanis being more worried about Afghanistan than Kashmir at the moment. But that could change back in 10 seconds — there's no two ways about it.

But wouldn't you agree that there has been some tangible forward movement even though you argue that you don't give much credence to this detente? Even some of the Kashmiri leadership and some of the [All-Parties] Hurriyat [Conference] guys in recent weeks have been making positive statements with regard to their interactions with the Indian government.

True, and I am very impressed with what's going on — certainly more than in the past 15 to 20 years. So, I won't say I am optimistic, but I am no longer as pessimistic as I used to be.

When you said nothing is going to change positively with India unless India begins to adjust some of its policies, is demilitarization in Kashmir one of the tangibles that is imperative for starters if there is to be some kind of trust of New Delhi's intentions to resolving the problem? During Navnita's book release this was the argument that was propounded by several policy wonks like [former US ambassador to India] Tom Pickering?

Indians are creeping in that direction. They have talked publicly about reducing military forces in Kashmir. They are now talking about using satellites to verify the pulling off [from] Siachen. I think the process is moving forward. But it could be blown away by some kind of awful terrorist act. And, there are groups out there trying to break up the India-Pakistan normalization process.

So, another terrorist attack like the Mumbai train bomb blasts last year could easily lead to the unraveling of the whole process?

Yes, or worse. You can let your imagination wander around and think of even worse things happening.

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don't show any clear Pakistani preference, one way or the other.

He certainly seems to continue to exude his characteristic Teflon exterior, he has once again taken off on an overseas trip to Turkey, Kosovo and several other places, notwithstanding all the turmoil at home.

Yes, he's trying to solve problems around the world. That grows out of his personality. He is a problem-solver but he is not good at dealing with details and attention to detail.

You say problem-solver. Are you saying that tongue-in-cheek? Are you being facetious?

No. I think he really believes that he has a mission to bring about major, fundamental, strategic changes, and I believe Kargil was his badly judged effort to do something on Kashmir. It was totally incompetently done, but I think that was the purpose of it.

You mean whether it had negative consequences or not?

In the short-run it had negative consequences, and the Indians responded with their own threat to do Kargil