Commentary

How will India Respond to Civil War in Pakistan?

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Introduction

In 1971, India intervened militarily on behalf of Bengalis in the civil war in East Pakistan, dividing the country into two. The prospect of another civil war in Pakistan pitting radical Islamists against the secular but authoritarian military raises questions about the possibility, timing, objective, and nature of another Indian intervention.

This commentary argues that history is unlikely to repeat itself. Indians, Pakistanis, and foreign observers have overstated the strategic boldness of the Indian decision to invade East Pakistan in 1971; the invasion was far more reactive and limited. The conditions in Pakistan today are dramatically different from the past, making a similar invasion improbable. First, unlike the Bengalis in East Pakistan, India does not have a natural ally in a conflict between radical Islamists and the authoritarian Pakistan army. Indeed, most Indians see the two sides as allied rather than inimical, and the conflict between them as the result of American presence in the region. Once that casus belli is removed—as President Obama has promised—the two sides will rejoin and refocus on India.

Second, refugees from a civil war in Pakistan today are unlikely to head into India as they had from East Pakistan. East Pakistani refugees were significantly Hindu and the flood plains of Bengal much easier to cross than the mountains of Kashmir or the deserts of Sind-Rajasthan.

Third, Pakistan is today a nuclear weapon state, and Indian leaders have repeatedly backed away from military action—in 1986, 1990, 1999, 2001–2002—that might provoke a nuclear confrontation. Specifically, India has avoided crossing into Pakistani territory, fearing nuclear escalation.

Fourth, US involvement in Afghanistan–Pakistan has put in place a more powerful actor than India can hope to be at this time, and Indian leaders have sought greater policy coordination with Washington rather than pursue an independent policy in Pakistan. Indian leaders are likely to sit out the conflict publicly at least until there is some unpredictably large spillover into India. To the extent that any spillover of a civil war is predictable, the resulting strategic calculation continues to suggest Indian restraint.

This analysis makes two assumptions. First, somewhat improbably, Pakistan’s radical Islamists and the Pakistani state behave as separate and unitary actors. That is, as cohesive entities under purposive leaderships. In reality, the Pakistani state or the

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radicals are hardly unified. However, this assumption is important because the Indian government does not have the will or the intelligence capability to distinguish between different radical groups, nor is it able to determine with confidence divisions within the Pakistani state and, in particular, the Pakistan Army. India has sought instead to erase the differences between groups focused on the US and groups focused on India in the hope that US pressure on Pakistan would extend to anti-India radicals. I would argue that even the US does not have sufficiently good intelligence to make these fine distinctions. The unitary actor assumption, therefore, is the lens through which India views the problem and therefore useful to this analysis.

Second, India’s leadership will act rationally. In other words, Indian officials will base their decisions on calculations of the costs and benefits of alternative policies. Steve Cohen and I have argued in *Arming without Aiming* that India’s national leaders demonstrate a deep-seated preference for strategic restraint even in the face of provocation. This almost cultural impulse runs contrary to the idea of the state as a rational actor. Yet it is a necessary assumption that we must begin with in order to understand the full range of responses that India might have to large-scale civil war in Pakistan.

**No natural ally**

In 60 years of the zero-sum game between India and Pakistan, both sides have accused each other of helping rebel groups in the other country based on balance-of-power logic, where the enemy of one’s enemy is one’s friend. Pakistan has aided Kashmiri, Sikh, and Assamese rebellions in India, and India has aided Bengali, Mohajir, Baloch, and Sindhi separatist movements.

In the civil war between radical Islamists and the secular but authoritarian Pakistani government, however, India does not have a natural ally it will want to back. Most Indians do not even accept the supposed battle lines of this war. They see the two sides in this conflict as allies who have fallen out temporarily in response to forceful American presence in the region.

Once US troops withdraw, the Pakistani army and Islamists will likely rejoin forces and return to their primary preoccupation with India. Consequently, Indian leaders have little attraction to either of the protagonists in this war as long as their country remains Pakistan’s number one enemy. India’s best preference for an outcome, therefore, is a new, legitimate, stable, and hopefully less stridently anti-Indian government in Pakistan. This is a banal preference because there is little that India can do to bring it about. India does not have the capacity to undertake an imperial-style, unlimited intervention with the purpose of putting in place a new regime of its own choice. Indeed, India trying to pick sides in a Pakistani civil war will taint its partner and reduce its chances of taking power. A bystander approach has the further advantage of allowing India to work with whoever emerges at the helm in Pakistan.

**Managing spillover**

While India does not have an extant preference in a Pakistani civil war, the course of the conflict could force Indian leaders to choose. If we accept that India does not have the ability to install a regime of its choice in Islamabad, the next, most compelling reason for it to intervene in a Pakistani civil war is if the war, or its effects, spilled over the border. In 1971, for example, the refugees from East Pakistan ultimately forced Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to intervene militarily.
In the context of a civil war between Islamists and the army in Pakistan, it is hard to imagine Pakistani refugees streaming into India. Muslim Pakistanis do not see India as a refuge, and the war is likely to be fought mainly in North West Frontier Province (now Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa) and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), abutting the western border with Afghanistan rather than the eastern border with India. The Taliban are likely to seek refuge in Afghanistan, especially if the US leaves the region.

Even with the American presence, the Pakistan–Afghanistan border is much more porous than the India–Pakistan border. The eastern border is manned on the Indian side with hundreds of thousands of soldiers. In Kashmir, the terrain is difficult and India has erected an electric fence. The southern sections of the border in Sindh-Rajasthan are desert. The Punjab plains are manned by the militaries on both sides. The possibility of physical diffusion of a Pakistani civil war into India is slim.

We can imagine more selective spillover such as terrorism. We know that the fence in Kashmir can be breached and Islamic radicals fighting the civil war in Pakistan can turn their attention to India. However, it is also important to keep in mind that the radical Islamists who break through the fence usually receive logistical support and covering fire from the Pakistan army. In the event of a civil war between the Pakistan army and radical Islamists, this assistance would become unavailable and breaching the fence much harder. To the contrary, a civil war inside Pakistan itself is likely to train radical attention inside Pakistan rather than dissipate energies on fighting on many fronts.

The real problem of civil war spillover for India is not likely to be in India itself, but rather in Afghanistan. India has already staked a claim in the Afghanistan endgame. In the event of an exodus of refugees and Islamists from Pakistan into Afghanistan, the Indian response is likely to depend on how these new entrants relate to the existing structures of power in Afghanistan.

If the Islamists seek an alliance with the Afghan government favored by India, New Delhi’s best option might be to side covertly with the Islamists against the Pakistan army, reviving the prospect of an independent Pashtunistan and the further division of Pakistan.

Whether India will actually do so, however, depends on US policy. If Washington sees an alliance in Afghanistan involving the Taliban as potentially resurrecting al-Qaeda, India is likely to be sensitive to American concerns and refrain from offering too much support. If the stakes have shifted enough that the US could support such an alliance, and the concomitant pursuit of a separate Pashtunistan, New Delhi is likely to move quickly to expand its already substantial assistance programme in Afghanistan. If the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan come together to fight the Taliban, under US guidance, Indian leaders would probably reduce their current level of assistance to Kabul and seek to redevelop ties with the Northern Alliance in the expectation that Afghanistan itself will slide back into civil war.

For India to back the Pakistan army over the Islamists, Indian leaders would need to see a full and verifiable settlement of all bilateral disputes, including Kashmir, and/or the imminent fall of Pakistani nuclear weapons into the hands of Islamists.

In the first case, a Kashmir resolution—in fact Pakistan abandoning its support for Kashmir—is not only unrealistic, but also likely to weaken the legitimacy of the Pakistan army itself and in turn jeopardise its prospects in the civil war. In the second case, Indian leaders would need to have independent (non-US/UK) intelligence or alternatively see US action (such as a military raid on Pakistani nuclear facilities) that convinces them that nuclear weapons are about to pass into terrorist hands.
Indian leaders would need further to make a judgment about which Islamist group was gaining control over the weapons. If it was Lashkar-e-Toiba, or a splinter, then Indian leaders are more likely to be fearful. If the group taking control of the weapons is focused on Afghanistan or the West, they would be more willing to hold back. Between these two ends of the spectrum, the Indian government would be uncomfortable, but would eventually accept a mainstream Islamist group such as the Jamaat-i-Islami having control over the nuclear weapons. In the past, the Indian government has had cordial relations with Maulana Fazlur Rahman, who was a part of the radical Islamic coalition that ruled NWFP. How vehemently India comes out against this possibility will depend on the degree of policy coordination it achieves with the US.

We can play out the scenarios in increasing detail, but the point here is that the requirements for Indian action are either too high or come too late. India is unlikely to have independent intelligence confirmation of the fall of nuclear weapons into Islamist hands, especially in the middle of a civil war. It will be close to impossible to tell which Islamist group is going to take control of the nuclear weapons. And, if the situation has deteriorated to a degree that necessitates US military action, then it is probably too late for India to act anyway.

Given the uncertainty and the absence of a natural ally in Pakistan, India’s best option would be publicly sitting out the civil war while working covertly with the US. Sitting out the conflict fits the needs of India’s internal politics, where Indian Muslims take a dim view of the US. In particular, India’s Congress party depends on the support of Indian Muslims. Any political party in India will have difficulty justifying ever closer relations with the US to this part of electorate.

**Nuclear deterrence and escalation control**

Before the introduction of nuclear weapons in the India–Pakistan rivalry, the general dynamic of conflict between the two countries (at least on the West Pakistan border) involved Pakistani incursions into Kashmir and India escalating to a general war. In 1948, the Indian army launched a full-fledged campaign against the tribal fighters who invaded from Pakistan, but under Nehru’s directions decided not to retake the whole of Kashmir, effectively partitioning the state. In 1965, India escalated across the international border in the Sind-Rajasthan desert and the Punjab plains.

With the introduction of nuclear weapons in the mid- to late-eighties, Pakistan has forced escalation control on India, virtually ruling out the possibility of another general war between the two countries. With India unable to resort to general war, Pakistan has been able to raise the stakes in the proxy war much higher than would have been possible in the past.

India and Pakistan have gone to the nuclear edge four times—in 1986, 1990, 1999, and 2001–2002. In two episodes—1986 and 2001–2002—India began military maneuvers that triggered the crises but backed away when Pakistan presented nuclear threats. In 1990 and 1999, Pakistan initiated the crises, but India responded in a manner that did not escalate the conflict. Specifically, India deliberately limited its military response to its own territory rather than cross the border (or line of control in Kashmir). In 1990, India began a counterinsurgency effort in Kashmir that has lasted more than twenty years. In 1999, the Indian armed forces cleared the Kargil Hills without crossing into Pakistan. Both campaigns have cost the Indian Army greatly in dead and wounded, but India has not escalated.
India’s armed forces have tried to break out of the strategic bind using the precedence of the US campaign in Afghanistan–Pakistan. After the failure of coercive diplomacy in the 2001–2002 crisis, the Indian Army proposed the ‘Cold Start Doctrine’, which envisaged a quick and deep strike inside Pakistan, preferably against terrorism-related targets. The doctrine argued that a short and swift strike would catch Pakistan unawares. By the time Pakistan could act, the country would be subject to international pressure against nuclear escalation.

This proposal to neutralise Pakistan’s threat of nuclear escalation—to develop escalation space—has not been endorsed by Indian political leaders in word or deed. India does not have the intelligence or military capability to conduct such an operation. India does have the ability to strike quite effectively deep inside Pakistan, but only as part of a general war. A surgical strike such as the one against Bin Laden in Abbottabad requires the ability to observe and watch on the ground for months, which India does not have. India’s special forces are considering how to develop the military capability to conduct a similar raid, but the planning is not useful if it is bereft of intelligence.

Nuclear weapons, therefore, have had a predictable effect on the India–Pakistan relationship, introducing a level of instability at lower levels of conflict, but greater escalation stability. As the country with smaller military capacity, Pakistan early on adopted a nuclear-first strategy, drawing fuzzy red lines, in Schelling’s tradition. India has respected these lines. Even the image of Pakistan as slightly a state helps the cause of stability because it makes Indian leaders think that anything can happen. The prospect of radical Islamist control of nuclear weapons is just the sort of madness that keeps Indian ambitions in check.

An Indian intervention in a civil war in Pakistan is subject to the same calculations and limitations so long as the Pakistan Army maintains its integrity. If the Pakistan Army disintegrates, an Indian decision to intervene will depend on the nature of the break, which Islamist group is likely to gain, and, of course, what the US decides to do.

Looking to Washington

The most important factor that will determine the possibility and nature of Indian intervention in a Pakistan civil war is the US. Indian leaders will be looking to Washington for cues on how to respond to a civil war in Pakistan.

The US is not likely to stand by if a new alliance emerges in Afghanistan that could resurrect al-Qaeda. If Washington is able to get Kabul and Islamabad to work together against the Taliban, then India is likely to continue its current policy or try to preserve some influence in Afghanistan, especially working with elements of the Northern Alliance. If the US supports an Afghan-backed demand for Pashtunistan, India is likely to be much more supportive. New Delhi might consider upgrading its ties with Kabul to the level that they were in the 1980s, when Afghan military officers trained in India.

Both these contingencies are hard to imagine. Kabul and Islamabad have not worked together despite more than 10 years of American efforts. Pashtunistan today has few takers, especially in the settled areas of Pakistan’s North West Frontier Province, who do not want their futures tied entirely to the backward-looking Pashtuns of FATA or Southern Afghanistan. The possibility of a separate Pashtunistan sinks the idea of Pakistan itself—and the Pakistan army and the Pakistani state will disintegrate before that happens.
The worse the situation gets—and the greater the possibility that Pakistan will disintegrate—the greater Indian vigour will become in seeking increased policy coordination with the US. India might offer bases and overflight, share intelligence, agree on how to engage in Afghanistan, and possibly work with the US to identify elements of a new regime in Pakistan (which means that India might refrain from supporting Islamists even if that strategic calculation makes sense regionally), but it will stop short of military intervention. India is not likely to initiate an intervention that causes the Pakistani state to fail.

Pakistan at times seems to be on a collision course with the US. Bruce Riedel, who has advised President Obama on his ‘Af-Pak’ policy, has called for shedding pretences and treating Pakistan as an enemy state that should be contained. This is consistent with the hardline Indian position, which wants Pakistan to be isolated along the lines of North Korea. The hope is that the isolation will force Pakistan to come to terms with India over time. The trouble with this view is that Pakistanis have proven to be more adept at international politics than the North Koreans and are unlikely to allow themselves to be similarly marginalised.

The vulnerability of the Pakistani state

Pakistan is a country of 190 million; it is fractured, restive, stuck in a hostile neighbourhood, armed with more than 100 nuclear weapons, and in the hands of incompetent and corrupt leaders. Bill Keller of the *New York Times* described Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari as ‘overseeing a ruinous kleptocracy that is spiraling deeper into economic crisis’.\(^1\) The Pakistani economy, which has historically ebbed and flowed with the ebb and flow of American assistance, is once again in jeopardy as Washington holds back on aid. The recent ‘Memogate’ scandal shows the continuing vulnerability of Pakistan’s civil–military relations. Pakistan’s dysfunctions mean that the government is unable to deal with the spread of violence across the country.

In contrast to the predictions of an unraveling nation, British journalist–scholar Anatol Lieven argues that the Pakistani state is likely to continue muddling through its many problems, unable to resolve them but equally predisposed against the kind of civil war that will cause total state collapse. Lieven finds that the strong bonds of family, clan, tribe, and the nature of South Asian Islam prevent modernist movements—propounded by the government or by the radicals—from taking control of the entire country. Indeed, neither side is able to mobilise sufficiently large numbers behind its cause. The current war in the frontier is very much a civil war between Islamists and the traditional khans and maliks who have ruled the tribal belt for so long. As in most cases of civil unrest, the battle lines are unclear; the violence that occurs involves cross-cutting alliances between parts of the government and parts of civil society. This is a recipe for civil strife, even war, but not for apocalypse. To the contrary, Lieven argues that external intervention in the form of a misguided American, Indian, or combined invasion is the only real threat to the unraveling of Pakistan.

Lieven’s analysis is more persuasive than the more widespread view that Pakistan is about to fail as a state. The health of some of the formal institutions of the Pakistani state appear to be surprisingly robust given the structural conditions in which they operate.

In particular, so long as the Pakistan army remains a state within the state, which speaks as much to the corporate coherence of the institution as it does to the dangers
of military rule in the country, the prospect of widespread civil war and state failure are distant. Despite the fears, there is little evidence to indicate that the Pakistan Army is likely to become Islamist en masse. To the contrary, the army has conducted at least two rounds of purges (one under Musharraf and one under Kayani) and fought a brutal counterinsurgency campaign against the Pakistani Taliban.

The Pakistani military campaign has not targeted all Islamists—it has spared those fighting US forces in Afghanistan and India in Kashmir, but the Pakistan army has dispelled notions that Islamists might be close to subverting the institution itself. For the army to fall to Islamism, the leadership would have to convert wholesale. The mutiny of individuals or battalions is insufficient. Lieven argues in fact that the most likely reason for the failure of the Pakistan state would be a misguided American or Indian invasion of the country.

Conclusion
Indian political leaders are well aware of the dangers of intervening in Pakistan. Given the bad choices in Pakistan, they would rather not have anything to do with it. If there is going to be a civil war, why not wait for the two sides to exhaust themselves before thinking about intervening?

Indians vigorously debate their Pakistan policy. Many Indians believe that a fully democratised and secure Pakistan best serves India’s long-term interests, but others argue that it is better to deal with the real source of power in the country, the military. There is certainly disagreement over how to encourage Pakistani democracy, and that disagreement further feeds the Indian position of restraint.

India may not always abide by its strategic restraint policy. The 1971 war demonstrated India’s willingness to exploit conditions inside Pakistan, but to break from tradition requires strong, countervailing logic, and those reasons do not yet exist. Given the current conditions and those in the foreseeable future, India will likely sit out a Pakistani civil war while covertly coordinating policy with the US.

Note