

SUMMARY OF SEMINAR PROCEEDINGS

'Pakistan – A State In Crisis: Regional Reality Or Western Narrative?'

**Committee Room 4A
House of Lords**

Wednesday 13th March 2013

On Wednesday 13th March 2013, Global Strategy Forum (GSF) held a seminar entitled *'Pakistan – A State In Crisis: Regional Reality Or Western Narrative?'* The seminar took place in Committee Room 2 of the House of Lords under the chairmanship of **Lord Lothian** (Chairman, GSF).

The speakers were:

Owen Bennett-Jones, Writer and Journalist, author of *'Pakistan: Eye of the Storm'*

Robert Brinkley CMG, UK High Commissioner to Pakistan (2006-2009)

Rt Hon Sir Malcolm Bruce MP, Chairman, International Development Select Committee

Baroness Falkner of Margravine, Chair, Liberal Democrats House of Lords Parliamentary Policy Committee on Foreign Affairs

Professor Anatol Lieven, Chair of International Relations, Department of War Studies, King's College London

Patrick Moody, Head of Pakistan and Afghanistan Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Jonathan Paris, Senior Fellow, South Asia Center, Atlantic Council

The seminar's central theme was how to reconcile a long-standing dilemma in UK policy toward Pakistan, specifically the challenge of clear-headedly acknowledging what one speaker described as the 'serious imbalances' in Pakistan's political, economic and governance structures while at the same time maintaining a sustainable, viable and mutually respectful relationship. The expert presentations made it clear that there is no definitive answer to that question other than that the bond between the UK and Pakistan is 'indivisible' and that, as a consequence, 'walking away' is not an option. As one speaker remarked, the task for UK policy-makers is to see Pakistan as an 'opportunity rather than a problem.'

Governance: Many speakers identified similar sets of problems deriving from the compromised state of governance in Pakistan: the elite lives in its own separate world; the political parties are corrupt and compromised; the military has reverted to its traditional zero-sum obsession with anti-Indian 'strategic depth' thinking; radical

extremism is spreading, further enabled by the blasphemy law; fundamentalist factions are striking deals with the mainstream parties; they are fuelling anti-British sentiment that can lead to acts of terrorism in the UK; ethnic, regional and class divides are deepening; communalism is the default political mode; constitutional devolution impairs delivery of UK aid; the ISI is being unhelpful in Afghanistan; the threats from narcotics and illegal immigration are growing.

The UK stake and the outlook for UK aid: Despite this negative catalogue, it was left to a single voice from the audience to question whether the UK should substantially reduce its ties to Pakistan. Otherwise, speakers highlighted what one described as the 'asymmetric' relationship between the UK and Pakistan in which the former needed the latter more than vice versa. The UK's ties to Pakistan were described as a 'matter of necessity, not of choice.' The overall stability and territorial integrity of Pakistan is fragile, but not thought to be in question. As a result, UK aid is on a trajectory to rise from its present annual level of £266 million to £446 million over the coming two years. While speakers acknowledged growing scepticism about the efficacy of this aid and one noted that success was 'a long way away', the unanimous consensus was to argue that the UK should commit itself to sustained engagement on education, health care and trade. Institution building will be a key aspect of UK aid. The Pakistani diaspora in the UK is seen as an asset in this context. UK aid givers should not hesitate to challenge Pakistani aid recipients on delivery.

Politics, the elections and the military: Some optimism emerged over prospects for the forthcoming elections. While the PPP under President Zardari appears to be in pole position, the final outcome appears genuinely not to be pre-ordained and the patronage element seems to have been reduced. On satellite channels, the media is free and robust. The transfer back to full civilian rule will be an accomplishment. It appears that the military will likely be able to accept any outcome involving one or more of the mainstream parties. A coalition led by Nawaz Sharif or Imran Khan would be more likely to negotiate with the Taliban. Speakers underlined the difficulties of achieving true political reform in Pakistan. With the military having co-opted the main parties, it is extremely difficult to build the critical mass for governmental restructuring. However, this dimension is also a check on the ability of extremist factions to force a revolution, although some speakers pointed to a diminishing confidence on the part of the elite that they could hold the line against radicalism. The most likely way forward on the political front is a version of the status quo.

The economy: With an application for a \$10 billion loan from the IMF on the horizon, Pakistan's economy is on an unsustainable path. Tax avoidance is rampant, especially among the elite, and the debt ratio is alarming. UK policy should concentrate on the trade multiplier, both with the EU and with India, to facilitate Pakistan's emergence from its economic hole.

Afghanistan and India: While speakers emphasised that Pakistan should not be seen solely through the lens of Western interests in Afghanistan, there was agreement that

the ISAF withdrawal in 2014 would create substantial problems for Pakistan. Even if the Taliban proved unable to take power in Kabul, nonetheless Pakistan would be tempted to foster Afghan political weakness. This would complicate the triangular relationship with India, although it appears that a 'grumbling detente' is the most likely form of relationship between Islamabad and New Delhi.

Nuclear issues: As Pakistan overtook the UK in terms of nuclear weaponry, concerns abound on the UK side: proliferation, Pakistani refusal to abandon a first strike option against India, the place of honour afforded to A Q Khan.

The US dimension: Unlike the UK, the US has less of a strategic interest in Pakistan. Nuclear proliferation and Afghanistan aside, the US's main aim is to encourage rapprochement between Pakistan and India. There is little US interest in nation-building inside Pakistan.