

By Elayne Jude, Great North News Services

Is Pakistan the Most Dangerous Place on Earth?

Danger, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder, says Dr Farzana Shaikh, of Chatham House's Pakistan Study Group.

Inside Pakistan, peril is perceived very differently from the news reports and analyses in Western media.

The sources of danger are seen as external; the notion of threat is, historically and inextricably, linked to India, and its reluctance to accept the Pakistan state. India has simply never come to terms with its existence, and the rejection shows no signs of abating.

In Pakistani public opinion, the threat from internal groups has been greatly exaggerated.

Since September 11, 2001, external threats have intensified; their complexion now American as much as Indian.

The United States, haunted by the spectre of Muslim radicals seizing power, along with Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, is unreconciled to the fact of Pakistan's nuclear power status.

To the Pakistan Army, the (Pakistani) Taleban are seen as a manageable nuisance, their destruction to be compassed by decisive action; unlike the scenario of a conflict with India, which would be a fight to the death.

The arrival of US ground troops on Pakistani soil would be seen as apocalyptic; the action, whose purpose would be to seize the nuclear arsenal in order to prevent it falling into the hands of extremist groups, actually triggering the very response which it was aimed to prevent, as the Pakistani administration might well hand over its nuclear weapons to the radicals for safekeeping.

So how have we got into the habit of viewing Pakistan as described by another of today's speakers, Baroness Faulkner: a lurid mix of nuclear weapons, terrorism, poverty, dictatorship, narcotics and lack of governance ?

This, says Dr Shaikh, is attributable to the practice of brinkmanship, honed by successive regimes and espoused by Pakistan's political classes.

Sir Hilary Synott, of the IISS, and former British High Commissioner to Pakistan, emphasising that he in no way speaks for the British Government, examines the effects of that

brinksmanship.

He notes: It seems to be working.

Quoting Admiral Mike Mullen, the US chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that Pakistan is moving closer to tipping point, Sir Hilary calls the statement hyperbolic, hopes very much that the Admiral didn't actually mean what he said, and speculates as to why he said it.

The Admiral's remarks preceded President Zardari's recent visit to Washington, to press Pakistan's case for further funds. Pakistan is currently in IMF receivership, with a GDP estimated at \$1000; some \$6000 short of a sum estimated to be the minimum at which a democratic state can succeed.

As Sir Hilary points out, the US doesn't want to give unconditionally.

Immediately after the President's visit, Pakistan performed a complete volte-face, scrapping its negotiated cession of the Swat valley to the Taleban and sending in 150,000 troops to eliminate an estimated 5,000 insurgents.

What to do to retrieve the situation ?

There are (here are some familiar mantras) no quick fixes or easy solutions; but we can stop making some glaring mistakes.

Boots on the ground are a mistake. The US Special Forces operations of September 2008 caused many civilian casualties and created enormous resentment, and possibly radicalised further a traumatised populace.

(General McChrystal, who replaces General McKiernan this week as top commander in Afghanistan, recently ran all Commando operations in Iraq. He is a former commander of the Joint Special Operations Command. The New York Times reports that "his training in unconventional warfare that emphasizes the need to protect the population, made him the best choice for the command in Afghanistan, Defense Department officials said.")

The visit by then Deputy US Secretary of State John Negroponte to Pakistan and to India in December 2008 was seen in Pakistan as bullying.

Financial assistance to the country needs to be rebalanced. Of the \$11.2bn given since 2001, only 2 or 3 billion have gone to the civilian sector.

The Pakistani Deputy High Commissioner, Asif Durrani, also warns that we must not create a vicious circle by discouraging foreign investment in Pakistan, exacerbating unemployment and creating radicalism out of economic desperation.

Pakistan's friends, so critical of the elected president, have previously supported dictatorships in defence of their own national interests.

Pakistan's own 9/11 started with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, triggering regional drugs trade escalation and socio-economic destruction.

For Pakistan, the consequences of these old conflicts are still deeply present.

Her problems are not necessarily of her own creation. She did not invite the Soviets to her neighbourhood, and did not fund the mujahideen and the madrassahs.

And from where, asks Mr Durrani, have today's insurgents obtained their weaponry ? Much of it is state of the art. Not Soviet era.

NATO has failed to address Afghan opium production as part of its strategy. Profit from the massive expansion of the trade flows directly into the radicals' coffers.

Geography persists. Mr Durrani states that, on the notoriously porous Afghan/Pakistan border, which simply does not exist for the tribal peoples who live there, there are 351 mountain passes which could be operated and sustained only at a cost of approximately £1m per annum.

The people there live, not in the twenty-first, but in the nineteenth century. The cultural reality is patriarchal. Sharia law is seen as, above all, functional, and fluid, and indigenous, based on Islamic teaching. Its extremities, as practised by some Taleban (and it is important to distinguish that Taleban is not a single entity), have given its practice a bad name, but Sharia is not necessarily all of that degree.

The writ of the Pakistan government, says Mr Durrani, does not extend to the tribal areas; and that is the legacy of the British.

This Global Strategy Forum meeting was held at the National Liberal Club on Tuesday 12 May