

**Asia Research Centre public lecture
Pakistan and the challenges of a new decade**

Douglas Alexander MP
Shadow Foreign Secretary and Member of Parliament for Paisley and Renfrewshire South

London School of Economics and Political Science
Wednesday 26 October 2011

Check against delivery

<http://www.labour.org.uk/pakistan-the-challenges-of-a-new-decade,2011-10-27>

Thank you for inviting me here today to talk about a country which I believe will come to play a key role in our thinking about a range of international challenges in the year ahead.

As Shadow Foreign Secretary you are of course obliged to consider the immediate foreign policy challenges that are facing Britain today from our relationship with Europe to trying to ensure the positive energy of the Arab Spring isn't frustrated in countries like Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, and of course the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan where 10,000 brave men and women of the British armed forces are still in action.

But, alongside the immediate challenges, there is also an obligation on you to start thinking about what the key foreign policy questions are likely to be in 2015.

And it is partly through engagement in one of our current challenges – the war in Afghanistan – that I've come to believe strongly that Pakistan will be high up in the in tray of whoever becomes Foreign Secretary in 2015.

Pakistan is today facing a "perfect storm" of economic, security and political crises and Britain will be unable to isolate itself from the consequences.

Nuclear armed Pakistan already has the sixth largest population and the sixth largest army in the world.

Its economy is struggling, since its first military coup in 1958 its governance has been erratic and its history marked by violence, and today 43 million of its citizens are living in poverty.

Repeated coups have marred Pakistan's history, and a Pakistan Taliban has emerged with the stated purpose of establishing an Islamic Emirate based on Sharia law.

Groups such as the Haqqani network and Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, once seen by the Pakistan security apparatus as strategic assets, have turned into strategic threats.

Thankfully terror attacks emanating from Pakistan have so far not provoked a terrible showdown either with the West or with India but how long can this situation last in such circumstances?

Of course there are some signs of hope. University of Maryland polling data shows that in 2007 only a third of Pakistanis viewed the "activities of Islamist militants" in Pakistan as a critical threat, whereas in 2009 the figure rose to four out of five or 81 per cent. A similar number, 82 per cent, pointed to al Qaeda's activities in Pakistan as a critical threat.

So although al Qaeda's view of America gets a sympathetic hearing in many quarters – including a significant minority who support its attacks- there is a growing realisation of the threat posed to Pakistan by the terrorist groups that reside there.

And we should also note that Pakistan's military has carried out effective anti-militant offensives in the Swat valley and in the FATA reflecting the understanding of the real and present danger now confronting Pakistan.

In the recent past Pakistan has looked to its relationship with the US as a route to solving these problems but that partnership is under severe strain, with recriminations and distrust on both sides.

The political and military elites in Pakistan have still not fully grasped the extent to which the ten year anniversary of 9/11 and the killing of Osama Bin Laden have affected public sentiment across the West.

There is plenty of evidence for this. Admiral Mike Mullen's recent testimony to the Senate Committee that the Haqqani network in Afghanistan is a "veritable arm" of Pakistan caused alarm and shock in Pakistan.

The remarks were widely interpreted as an accusation by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that Pakistan's military and espionage agencies sanction and direct attacks against US troops in Afghanistan.

Before a visit to Islamabad last week Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned Pakistan to eradicate terrorist camps inside its border, saying there would be a "very big price" for inaction against military groups staging attacks on NATO forces in Afghanistan.

During her visit Secretary Clinton was confronted by a woman at a Question and Answer session who likened America's behaviour to that of a mother-in-law, "we are trying to please you and every time you come and visit us and you tell us 'You're not doing enough and need to work harder.'"

While Secretary Clinton made clear that Pakistan faced a decisive choice.

She said: "We asked very specifically for greater co-operation from the Pakistani side to squeeze the Haqqani network and other terrorists because we know that trying to eliminate terrorists and safe havens on one side of the border is not going to work."

She added: "You know it's like the old story: you can't keep snakes in your backyard and expect them only to bite your neighbour."

But despite the heat in the relationship and despite the offense taken by those remarks it is difficult to detect any real understanding in Pakistan about the factors behind this increasingly tough rhetoric.

If you speak to American foreign policy officials you encounter a keen desire to bring troops home and an unwillingness to give Pakistan any benefit of the doubt over its relationship with extremists.

It is said an image is worth a thousand words.

And on May 2nd, the image of Bin Laden's hide out in Abbotabad, just yards from Pakistan's Military Academy, seared itself on to consciousness of millions around the world.

The camera shots that showed reporters outside Bin Laden's hiding place and then panning slowly round to show you the Military buildings, were a visual representation of something that had long been a topic of intense debate.

As a result the two sides appear - at this time - to be drifting apart.

Pakistan feels angry at being accused of directly orchestrating groups like Haqqani to kill coalition forces. It feels its sovereignty increasingly violated both by the Bin Laden raid and increasing drone strikes.

While America fears incompetence or worse collusion from the Pakistani security apparatus is imperilling the mission in Afghanistan and risking the lives of their forces.

The dangerous product of this is that some in Washington now seek to downgrade America's strategic relationship with Pakistan to a purely transactional one, and instead place even greater reliance on drone strikes to disrupt terrorist groups on both sides of the Durand line.

One American official told me that they felt the pretence of being friends with Pakistan was causing the problem. The attempts at friendship led to huge fallings out and bitter disappointment when incidents like the Bin Laden raid or the Mullen remarks occurred. The official suggested a new way forward based not on friendship but on a more contractual arrangement to take some heat out of the two countries dealings.

If Pakistan faces a crossroads, Britain faces it too.

But the character of Britain's relationship and exposure to Pakistan's problems means we do not have the luxury of isolating ourselves from them.

In time some argue it will be possible to largely isolate ourselves from Afghanistan - once British combat operations come to an end in 2014 and responsibility for security is transferred to the Afghan forces in 2015.

But even if you believe future isolation from Afghanistan's problems is possible there is simply no credible way of Britain achieving that with Pakistan.

You only have to take one of the many crowded flights between Islamabad and Heathrow to realise how closely bound together are our two nations.

Britain has the largest Pakistani diaspora community in the world - 900,000 British citizens have ties to Pakistan.

So what should Britain's response be?

What would a response look like that learns the right lessons from the last ten years. And that matches our ambitions to our capacities?

It begins by recognising that whatever the frustrations and disappointments of working with Pakistan, the alternative is worse.

Our own security interests are at stake and we cannot simply walk away.

We should recognise that the future of Pakistan will be decided by the actions of its youthful population.

As Development Secretary in the last government, I ordered aid to the poorest Pakistanis to be doubled and our programme be rebalanced towards education. The current Government deserves credit for continuing that work.

Education can be a gamechanger because the main competitors with the worst state schools are the madrassas – which are an attractive option for any people as they provide free food and clothes for children as well.

I was taken to visit a madrassa in Peshwar several years ago. Now clearly a British minister would not be shown one that was particularly extreme but what worried me more was not the teaching of a perverted form of Islam, but that children were leaving without any of the necessary skills required to get on and get work.

Afghanistan is of course crucial both to Pakistan's future and to Britain's security. There has been a notable shift in recent months – conversations used to start about Afghanistan and end with a discussion about Pakistan. Now they increasingly begin on Pakistan and end with a discussion on Afghanistan.

President Obama's plan sees NATO forces step back, as Afghan forces step up. The transition timetable has been set and draw down has begun.

It seems to me very unlikely this is going to change significantly - given public support for transition and that fact that already more than 100,000 British armed forces personnel have undertaken at least one tour in Afghanistan during a conflict lasting just over ten years.

The question now is how to achieve a stable and lasting end state by the defined end date not least because, ten years on, the condition of Afghanistan continues to affect the security of Britain.

I have been arguing since my time in Government that renewed diplomatic and political momentum needs to be found that can take forward a political settlement that is inclusive to the tribes, while excluding al Qaeda.

The British Government have said recently that they are supportive of this process and they will have the backing of the opposition in taking that difficult work forward.

It is the sustained military pressure that British and other NATO forces have applied that has made this even possible.

But even military commanders like General Petraeus have always stressed that you can't kill and capture your way out of an industrial scale insurgency.

Work could and should be underway now to try and ensure long term security guarantees that Afghanistan will not host al Qaeda again. For example; a "status of forces" agreement to regulate any continuing role should now be under discussion.

At the London Conference in 2010 the Afghan High Peace Council was established and that should continue work to reach a consensus on constitutional arrangements and ensure that women have a proper role in Afghanistan's future.

It is likely that Afghanistan's thousands of villages and valleys will need a less centralised system than the present constitution and that is a process that should be explored.

Britain will be required to exercise its diplomatic influence to try and ensure Pakistan's leadership recognises that terrorism and violent extremism has become the most immediate threat facing the Pakistan state.

And of course continued cooperation on counter-terrorism and the continued vigilance and professionalism of our intelligence agencies are hugely important.

Beyond that we have to bring other countries to the table as we look to help Pakistan solve its problems.

Bringing in the regional players to help ensure a stable end state in Afghanistan is crucial to Pakistan's stability.

Pakistan – just like China, Russia, India, the central Asian republics and Iran – would be ill served by a chaotic Afghanistan that is a stage for the kind of problems seen after Soviet troops left in 1989.

So as many countries as possible should be brought into the discussions about Afghanistan's future.

In Pakistan, the old orthodoxy that India remains its greatest threat still endures. Instead of looking West Pakistan continues to look East.

One Pakistani politician told me that Westerners often failed to fully appreciate how much the need for "strategic depth" - the ability to retreat into Afghanistan and launch attacks on an invading Indian army from there - is drummed into the Pakistani military at all stages of their training. And it is true that this anxiety and approach still endures.

But Pakistan's thinking now risks being left behind by events both inside and beyond its borders. Internally, the threat of violent extremism has grown.

Externally the global rise of India continues apace. And of course the economic and security problems are closely linked.

Meeting business leaders in Islamabad I was struck how many had recently been in India trying to grow their companies and how much they wanted their politicians to make that easier for them.

If Britain along with regional players could play a part in creating the space for further steps towards co-operation and understanding between the two countries it would be one of the most important steps we could take to contribute to global security.

And we can continuously try to put Pakistan on the Brussels agenda.

We have the strongest links but, through the EU, we can offer bigger carrots and bigger sticks: on one hand supporting progress with further trade agreements with Pakistan but equally being willing to take joint diplomatic action against organisations proved to be helping violent extremists inside or outside Pakistan.

Through the EU we should encourage countries like America to modify their trade policy to allow more Pakistani-made textiles to be sold worldwide.

And rather than being played off against each other the EU and America should approach China and Saudi Arabia with the view to a joint approach that could breathe new life into the Friends of Democratic Pakistan group launched at the United Nations in 2008.

But these efforts will matter but not as much as the efforts of Pakistan's own political leadership to solve Pakistan's problems.

Pakistan's many friends in Britain still wait for a big positive vision from a Pakistani politician setting out how they see their country and its place in the region over the coming decades.

We might not agree with all of it but it would surely be better than the present situation. The current inertia is so frustrating for Pakistan's friends in the international community that it's time for Pakistan to choose a way forward and then its friends to back it as best it can.

Our concern should be to support the institutions of democracy within Pakistan, by which such leadership can emerge.

Britain's aim should be to learn the lessons of recent years and ensure we encourage that sort of political discourse rather than undermine it.

Because I believe concerns about Pakistan will come weigh more heavily in the next ten years than even concerns about Afghanistan.

Thank you very much.

END