



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org.uk
F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org.uk

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Transcript

The West's Vital Interests in Pakistan

Anatol Lieven

Chair, International Relations and Terrorism Studies, King's College London and Senior Fellow, New America Foundation, Washington DC

Chair: Sir Jeffrey James

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Sir Jeffrey James:

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. It's nice to see so many of you here and obviously I think we're in for a highly relevant and interesting session here this afternoon.

Our speaker today is Anatol Lieven who is the Chair of International Relations and Terrorism Studies at King's College London and also a fellow at the New America Foundation in Washington. He has spent a good part of his career as a journalist in such places as the former Soviet Union and South Asia but also – highly relevant to today – as the *TIME* correspondent in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the late 1980s. He's written a number of books – as I am sure we know – but his latest volume, which is very, very timely, *Pakistan: a Hard Country*, will get some enlightenment as to what the 'hard' in the title refers to - there are many interpretations off the cuff. I am sure also that the subject of the talk – the West's vital interests in Pakistan – not only will the book be relevant but obviously also the happenings of the last few days have added a certain amount of edge to the whole topic. So without further a due over to Anatol. Thank you very much.

Anatol Lieven:

Thank you very much indeed and my thanks to Chatham House for inviting me and my thanks to you all for coming.

I should say that most of the book is not in fact about the militant threat in Pakistan or the threat to us or the struggle against it. Although, of course the whole book is written against that background. It's a study of the Pakistani state's system and political system, and the reasons for, on the one hand, its resilience in the face of Islamist revolution but on the other hand the tremendous obstacles that this system throws up to progress.

Tonight, however, I will talk mainly about the militant and terrorist threat in Pakistan, and the state's approach to it. I will leave to questions my answers – which are of course completely informed, clear, and categorical to the inside story of Osama bin Laden. And you will also find them all set out in the book although it was written several months ago!

Yes, some of the provisional conclusions drawn in my book may be challenged, including – I fear – my statement that, while very unhelpful on other issues, the Pakistani state has been on the whole helpful when it comes to the fight against international terrorism in Pakistan. That is now open to debate.

I think one statement won't be challenged – by anyone that knows Pakistan – and that is where I talk about Pakistani society's ability within a remarkably short space of time to produce a remarkably large number of contradictory conspiracy theories on any subject.

If any of you have been following the news from the past four days, of which I assume you have, one could only say: 'Ain't that the truth'. And the only excuse for the Pakistanis on this occasion is that it seems that the American government has also had some trouble getting its ducks in a row, shall we say, in its messages about this.

One thing I would say to begin with is that if it was a decision by the High Command of the Pakistan armed forces to give shelter to bin Laden – and of course this whole matter remains very murky and completely open – then that decision would have been made not for reasons of ideological sympathy with bin Laden or with terrorism. That may be true of certain groups within Pakistani intelligence – one doesn't know – but if the decision was made by Pakistani High Command then it would have been made for Pakistani nationalist reasons and in what they saw as Pakistan's national interest.

That is not to say, of course, that they would have been right - on this issue or on many others. As we know from European experience and that of many other countries around the world, just because military or indeed civilian establishments believe that what they are doing or define what they are doing as in their country's national interest does not mean necessarily that it is so. And God knows one can see from the examples in Pakistan over the past generation and more – and much more, since the inception of the country – so many decisions genuinely made, feeling this corresponded to Pakistan's national interest, Pakistan's national mission, but of which turned out in the end disastrously for the country.

First, one has to state clearly who is responsible in Pakistan and I am sure that you all know that in the end for security policy and in many aspects of foreign policy – I have been asked a number of times this week by shall we say less informed Western journalists, 'But how can President Zardari not of known what his own intelligence service was doing?', to which the only reply was: 'You might want to read a little back into history'.

The discussion, however, of the makings of Pakistani strategy toward the different militant groups operating in Pakistan – what I have called the 'four-faced approach to terrorism and militancy': Pakistan's approach is often portrayed in the West as two-faced – I think its much, much more interesting

than that, four-faced at least possibly more, given that there are more militant groups than that.

Now most of the Western analysis, comment, and indeed criticism has focused on the Pakistani military, which in the end makes the strategy towards the militant groups. Mentioned, but comparatively less, has been the fact that whatever Pakistan does in this field – and this is true whether it is under military rule or civilian rule – does of course take place against the background of Pakistani public opinion and the attitudes of public opinion to the issues on one hand of militancy, on the other hand of relationships with the United States.

Now there I'm afraid both the results reflected in opinion polls, by Gallup, by the Pew, by the National Republican Institute and by others, and I have to say my own interviews with ordinary Pakistanis on the streets of Pakistan in recent years, have been in many ways profoundly discouraging. One obvious example that I give, but which of course in itself completely undermines the public will in Pakistan to give help to the United States, is that the overwhelming majority of people with whom I've spoken – and I'm sorry to say in the educated classes as well as in the mass of the population – sincerely believe that 9/11 was not the work of al Qaeda and was in fact a plot by the CIA, Mossad or both to give America an excuse to invade and dominate parts of the Muslim world. Now I wish to emphasise very strongly that this is of course absolute nonsense. I also have to emphasise, however – without taking any satisfaction in this – that this is the view of the great majority of Pakistanis.

Secondly, incidentally I do have to say on this last point that the attitude was not nearly as bad after 9/11. It was the invasion of Iraq that really confirmed that view among Pakistanis; the view that this was all essentially an American plot.

Connected to this is something that has struck me very much with my conversation with ordinary Pakistanis – and that is the attitude towards the Afghan Taliban. Now here the attitude of the mass of the Pakistani population needs to be carefully examined because this population does also draw - and the great majority – a distinction here between the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban. And what the Afghan Taliban is doing and has the right to do in Afghanistan, and what militants are doing within Pakistan. Once again I do not endorse this view but to judge by – once again – the great majority of people I have talked to, the mass of the population in Pakistan regard the Afghan Taliban in much the same light as they regarded the Afghan

Mujahideen when I was there in the 1980s. That is to say they certainly do not – most of the people who say this – support the Taliban's ideological programme nor would they wish to see the Taliban ruling in Pakistan.

The reasons for criticism of the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan Mujahideen are somewhat different. The Afghan Mujahideen was condemned for fanaticism and cruelty but also for corruption and anarchy. With the Taliban it's more the ideology and the harshness. But both were seen in the end as waging what we would call a legitimate war of resistance – what would be called in the Muslim world, or Islam, a defensive jihad – against an illegal, alien occupation of their country. And the belief is that they have the right to do that. Once again, I do not endorse this view, but I do have to report it since as I say it is the view of the great majority of Pakistanis with whom I have talked. Once again that does not mean they want the Afghan Mujahideen in the 1980s to rule Pakistan, or people like them to rule Pakistan, or the Afghan Taliban, or its allies, to rule Pakistan today.

But, this mood in the Pakistani population does need to be taken very seriously. Clearly it was one reason – and of course I am being drawn back to the dread name of bin Laden – why, frankly, it would have been extremely difficult for Pakistan to have participated directly and acknowledged its participation in the American operation against bin Laden since that operation was clearly designed to kill bin Laden; something that would have gone down very badly in Pakistani public opinion.

Moreover, although as I have said, the great majority of the Pakistani population does not support Pakistani Taliban and Islamist revolution within Pakistan, nonetheless, at least in the years leading up to 2009, less so now though still to some extent, the forces which went on to found the Pakistani Taliban – this loose alliance of groups in 2007 - benefited tremendously from the created perception - the propaganda - that their struggle within Pakistan was linked to, was part of this defensive jihad in Afghanistan: that basically what they were doing was acting as the guards of the Afghan Taliban against this traitorous stab in the back by this slave regime – the American slaves – of President Musharraf. And they gained a lot of credit from that.

The most dangerous aspect of this perhaps – here I come back to the Pakistani military – is that you can not isolate the military completely from the views of society from which its taken - even in a military like Pakistan's which by international standards is relatively isolated and takes some considerable trouble to make sure it is so isolated.

Some of the most worrying stories that I have heard – once again before 2009, less so now – have been about soldiers going home to their villages and towns from which they came and being condemned by their neighbours for being slaves of the Americans, taking American money, to kill fellow Muslims. This was profoundly wounding to their self-respect, especially of course, dangerously indeed if it came from their own women folk – it is difficult to find a more wounding accusation than that in Pakistan. And this led to serious problems of morale, and in a number of instances especially in the frontier corps, of units refusing to fight against the Pakistani militants in the mountains and in a number of cases – I'm not sure how many – of officers resigning their commissions in order not to fight.

Since the spring of 2009, that has changed quite considerably. As you know in the spring of 2009, after the Pakistani Taliban and their local allies in the district of Swat, the TNSN, reached an agreement with the government, the Nizam-e-Adl Regulation, whereby the government declared the full extension of Sharia Law in the district of Swat. The militants then marched into a neighbouring district, Buner. And then the decision was made by the military, but with the backing of the governing political parties both in Islamabad and Peshawar, to fight back very hard against the militants.

They were tremendously helped in this by the fact that what the militants had done; they had tarnished, to at least some extent, their image in the population as a whole. They had shown that they were not just acting as guards of the Afghan Taliban nor were they simply interested in spreading Sharia law, but that they were interested in power in Pakistan; in a revolution against the Pakistani state. And most Pakistanis do not support that.

There were two additional factors that helped the military. The first was of course the cruelty of the Taliban. A Pakistani officer said to me when it came to the appeal of the Taliban really the best strategy in dealing with them would be to allow them to take over as much of Pakistan as possible on the grounds that they would discredit themselves so much with the people they ruled that it would be possible to start a mass movement against them. He meant that as a kind of joke, but there is real truth to it: they greatly alienated much of the population in Swat with the savagery of their behaviour. This incidentally included the beheading on camera of military prisoners who they had captured.

As I have often said, unfortunately in many ways the greatest asset of our Islamist enemies has been our own policies – at least the policies of the United States in the Muslim world. By the same token our greatest asset in

the fight against these people has been their behaviour. Of course the Pakistani military took great care to distribute these films to soldiers going into battle against the Pakistani Taliban with, of course, striking effects on morale.

There is another aspect of this, which is perhaps not quite so encouraging. That is that – I would not wish to say to what extent this is believed in the High Command, it is certainly come to be widely believed in Pakistani society and certainly in the lower ranks of the Army – it was a great help to morale in the Army in the fight against the Pakistani Taliban and its allies to believe, or to be persuaded to believe, that behind the Pakistani Taliban actually stands – three guesses: India. This allowed the army to fit this struggle against the militants in Pakistan into its own absolutely dominant governing narrative - with striking results as far as morale is concerned. Not, I fear however, what you might call a general contribution to truth and objectivity in this particular case.

Anyway, the campaign against the Pakistani militants has been determinedly and often ruthlessly carried out, at least up to the point where those militants in northern Waziristan, and one or two other places, became mixed up with the Afghan Taliban. But as far as the campaign in Swat is concerned – I was there in 2009 and I was there again this March – it's been an impressive campaign and ruthless. I must endorse the report of Human Rights Watch on the subject of extrajudicial executions as part of that campaign. Although I would say that local journalists and a lawyer who I talked to in Swat did say that the army, unlike some South Asian forces, has taken real care to shoot the right people. That's something – actually that's quite a lot, I have to say!

You referred to my title – the title is meant to refer to the difficulty we have in dealing with Pakistan; it's meant to indicate the difficulty we have in dealing with Pakistan, and something about the resilience of the Pakistani state. But the phrase itself – the first time I heard it was from a Pakistani member of parliament in 1988 explaining why he'd have to have five people murdered that year. I heard it in Swat, and in 2009 from a superintendent of the police explaining why if you really wanted to have any effect on Islamist terrorists in southern Punjab the only thing to do is to shoot them in the back of the head. 'You do understand this is a hard country', he said. Like the MP, this is a phrase I have heard many times over the years and it must be said usually in connection with someone having been shot, very true in Swat as well. But who are we to criticise frankly? The Americans do it with drones, the Pakistanis do it with bullets, less hypocrisy on this score. Oh, the Americans do it with bullets as well, in one prominent case.

But certainly the campaign has been tough, no doubt about that. And efficient I would say – efficient both in the targeting and in the reconstruction effort that has accompanied it, especially when one considers that this reconstruction had to take place in the context, not just of the fighting – and very destructive fighting that took place in 2009 – I would also say the even more destructive floods that took place last year. I was very impressed by the progress of the reconstruction in Swat. And also the de-radicalisation programme for lower level Taliban fighters who have been captured. It is not true that the army has been simply going out and shooting lower level people. It has gone after the 'hard men' as they are called in Ireland.

So when it comes to the struggle against the Pakistani Taliban that has been going well. And as the Pakistanis have stressed, quite rightly, it has also demanded immense sacrifices on their part. Financial sacrifices which are vastly in excess of the money - the damage to the Pakistani economy - of the aid given by the United States. And of course human sacrifices, some 3080 soldiers and police now dead, tens of thousands of civilians, 80 ISI officers it should be said, and a number people for whom I had personally a great admiration like the additional inspector general of police in North-West Frontier province who is mentioned in my book, though it was an off the record interview so I did not name him. His name was Safwat Ghayur. He was largely responsible for turning around the morale and efficiency of the police in the fight against the Taliban and as a result was murdered by the Taliban last summer. People like that should be remembered amidst all the criticism of Pakistan.

However this is only one face of militancy in Pakistan and one face of the Pakistani state's response to it. There are three others, briefly.

I'll start with the second face – since it is the issue of the day – towards international terrorism based in Pakistan. Now there I have to say as far as the government, political classes as a whole with the exception from the Islamists among them, and the military High Command is concerned, there is no support in Pakistan, no support for international terrorism, no sympathy for international terrorism. These classes after all are to a great extent part of an international elite which is threatened by terrorism – here in London for example. It's not that. And as I say, until this week I was reasonably convinced on the basis with talks with people in both British and American intelligence, that by and large – though only by a large – Pakistan had been helpful to preventing terrorism against the West, against the American homeland and against Britain.

And it should be noted that in Abbottabad itself in January the Pakistanis themselves picked up an Indonesian terrorist leader linked to al Qaeda, called Umar Patek, led to him by an al Qaeda facilitator and handed him over to the Indonesians. So, the cooperation continues but clearly what happened this week – to which we will return to in the discussion – puts a real question mark over that. Though as I say, if there was collusion it would have been for assumed Pakistani reasons, not for ideological reasons.

So that is the second face and it is of course that up till now it has been because of reasonable cooperation, or the perception of reasonable cooperation, against international terrorism that the United States has been willing to turn a limited blind eye to Pakistani' shelter for the Afghan Taliban.

As far as the Afghan Taliban is concerned there has been shelter to the Afghan Taliban leadership. There has not, I would say – and here I disagree with Matt Waldman – been support. If there had been actual support, the Afghan Taliban would be a much more formidable military force than it is. At least the last briefing I had on the subject from the British military said that, for example, IED technology on the part of the Afghan Taliban as of late last year was in most cases still well below that of the Iraqi rebels who they had faced. Now it wouldn't be if the Pakistani military had been giving them actual support training, equipment. But shelter there has undoubtedly been.

Of course once again the chief element of shelter has not been the Pakistani military, it has been the population of the Pakistani tribal areas for exactly the same reasons that it would have been 100 years ago when we were facing an Islamist-inspired revolt on that frontier. My book, by the way, is dedicated to my grandfather who was a British Official in India and my uncle who fought against the Faqir of Ipi in Warizistan in the 1930s. I don't think that much of what is happening today in Warizistan comes as an enormous surprise to my uncle, or many other British officials who served on that frontier. But shelter to the Afghan Taliban there has certainly been.

Finally, when it comes to the fourth face, and here perhaps this is the most dangerous aspect of things of the whole setup. It is the attitude to those Pakistan based militant groups who in the 1980s helped in the jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan, sponsored by the Pakistani military and the ISI. And in the 1990s were sponsored by the Pakistani military and the ISI to fight against India in Kashmir and carry out terrorism against India.

To some extent since 2002, certainly since the Mumbai attacks in 2008, the following strategy appears to have developed on the part of the Pakistani military. That is to retain links to these groups and to refrain from doing what

India and America have demanded, which is crackdown on them much harder. In return for a commitment not to attack India in the short term, although I am quite sure that these groups are keeping open that option for the future, and not of course to join the rebellion against Pakistan – not to join the Pakistani Taliban in revolt against the Pakistani state – but thirdly not to join in terrorism against the United States and the West.

Now, one of the reasons why the Pakistani state – I still think the news of this week notwithstanding – is basically committed to prevent terrorism against the United States is that I don't think that the leaders of this state are idiots. And they would have to be idiots not to listen to the messages coming out from Washington about what would happen to Pakistan if there were a major successful terrorist attack on the United States by a group based in Pakistan, especially if that group had long standing links to the Pakistani military. Quite frankly, and it would depend upon the scale of the attack and the number of victims, the American response could be enough to indirectly destroy Pakistan as a state. I think the commanders know that.

Interestingly one of the leaders of ban Jama'at-ud-Da'wah, the sort of social welfare, 'the public face', of the biggest and most formidable of the anti-Indian jihadi groups Lashkar-e-Taiba which carried out the Mumbai attacks, he said something very interesting to me. He was speaking about why they don't join the revolt against Pakistan – but I think that you could apply that to why they don't join terrorism against the United States – and he said, and I paraphrase from my book here – 'that we are, in principle, Islamic revolutionaries, we would like to see a completely different state and system in Pakistan but even the Pakistan that does exist we see as the essential defender of the Muslims of South Asia against the Hindus' - by which he meant India. He said, 'We have been fighting the Hindus for 60 years or more. We are not going to do anything to destroy Pakistan and allow the Hindus to March in and dominate us'. I thought that was convincing because it was so much in tune with what we know of Lashkar-e-Taiba's ideology and attitudes.

So, this is the deal. There are a number of problems. One, these groups always fray: members break off. Secondly, as far as what the military calls the 'mother organisation of Lashkar-e-Taiba' is concerned, one part of this is that they are being allowed to some extent to send their people to fight in Afghanistan to help the Afghan Taliban. As a retired military officer said to me, 'Look, these boys joined up to fight, not to sit around in Lahore doing social work. If we tell them they can't fight the Indians and they can't fight you, they have to fight somewhere so go fight in Afghanistan' – which is fighting us of course but not at home.

So that is the problem there, and it could in certain circumstance prove a catastrophic problem for Pakistan if indeed some of these people did engage in direct terrorism against America.

On the other hand, here we come back to the hard country again, when it is demanded that Pakistan crackdown on Lashkar-e-Taiba, for example, well the question becomes how. The Pakistani courts, as many of you may know, have refused to ban Jama'at-ud-Da'wah, the public face of Lashkar-e-Taiba. They have refused to convict the leader of Jama'at-ud-Da'wah and Lashkar-e-Taiba, Hafiz Saeed. That is because there is extensive sympathy for this group in much of Pakistani society and especially Punjabi society. So if you are talking about a crackdown on Lashkar-e-Taiba, let us be completely candid about this, what you are talking about is shooting people in the back of the head. Now, you don't have to know Pakistan to know that this might not be a good idea – you only have to know Bradford, frankly. We need to think about that. This is the reality of crackdowns in Pakistan.

When it comes to Afghanistan I have to say that I am quite convinced that we are not going to be able to shift Pakistani behaviour towards support for assisting American strategy in Afghanistan. If we want to change Pakistani behaviour we are going to change the strategy. And if America were to move towards an attempt at a peace settlement with the Afghan Taliban then I think they would find Pakistan very helpful indeed, because such a settlement is seen very much in Pakistan's interest. What that settlement might be you can read about in the *Guardian* on Saturday – I have a piece. There is however a problem about this which I left out of the *Guardian* but anyone can infer, which is that if Pakistani mediation is important to this process, and if not mediation than certainly Pakistani goodwill would be essential to any Afghan peace settlement, well that obviously depends on a real level of trust between the United States and Pakistan.

Now unless, which is possible but wholly unproven, there is a secret story to the role of Pakistan in the killing of bin Laden – which we have not been told about – I have to say that trust between the United States and Pakistan in the near future will be in singularly short supply.

Thank you.