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PAKISTAN'S STABILISING DEMOCRACY: Time For a New EU Strategic Partner

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Pakistan's spring 2013 elections will mark the first completion of a full term in office by a civilian government. The Pakistani press is full of speculation over the elections, but primarily over which party will win rather than whether the elections will be held at all. Despite the usual worries from Pakistan's army of conspiracy theorists, it appears increasingly likely that the elections will proceed without interference from the military. While the leading political parties fight it out in the press, the military leadership has so often repeated their disinterest in interfering with the election that they are beginning to be believed.

For the international community, the upcoming elections serve as another indication that Pakistan can be approached as a 'normal' partner rather than as a crisis state. Pakistan remains, either in itself or through its relationship with Afghanistan, of importance for every threat in the 2003 European Security Strategy: terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, regional conflicts (with Kashmir listed first), state failure, and organised crime. For all these issues, however, there is increasing reason for optimism. Problems with Pakistan-based terror groups will continue for years, but Pakistan's own struggles with militancy have influenced the government's approach, aligning Pakistani and Western perspectives on terrorism and Afghanistan to a greater degree. While the US remains the indispensable external actor in South Asia, the EU will have increasing space to carve a role for itself.

For more than a decade, the EU has engaged with Pakistan primarily as an aid donor while being seen by Pakistan primarily as an export market. Current EU aid to Pakistan prioritizes two focal sectors: rural development/natural resources management and education/human resources development. The EU is Pakistan's largest trading partner but Pakistan is the EU's 47th largest trading partner. In the world of the regularized trade agreements enforced by WTO rules, trade policy has limited efficacy for the pursuit of political and security ends, particularly for Pakistan, which already benefits from liberal access to EU markets.

The common narrative of Pakistan as a fragile crisis state has misled decision makers to focus on narrow military or humanitarian issues. Political violence

claimed the lives of nearly 40,000 people between 2008 and 2011 and attacks by extremist groups continue daily. Such chaos leads outsiders to mistrust the idea that democracy can succeed in such a poor, chaotic, Islamic state. Rather than a luxury for a struggling crisis state, however, democracy should be viewed as a central component of Pakistan's efforts to build a stable political order and a secure environment for its citizens and neighbours. Poverty, religious conservatism and anti-Americanism can and do co-exist with support for democracy among much of the public.

The consolidation of democratic government will be important for Pakistan. Democratic governments are more effective at protecting human rights. Any reduction in the influence of the Pakistani army in domestic affairs can also lead to a reallocation of resources away from security affairs and toward underfunded areas such as education. Most importantly, the fight against terrorism, separatism, and militancy can be most effectively pursued by a democratic government responsive to the rule of law. Pakistan's history is replete with examples of how autocratic rulers have proven poor at managing political conflict. This has been seen most recently in FATA where 60 years of neo-colonial misgovernance has brought political marginalisation and instability.

The best systems for responding to issues of legitimacy and freedom are democratic systems with mechanisms allowing local input and control. As the EU states in its strategy on the external dimension of the area of freedom, security and justice, "Societies based on common values such as good governance, democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights will be more effective in preventing domestic threats to their own security as well as more able and willing to cooperate against common international threats."

But democratic consolidation is rarely a smooth process and Pakistani democracy is challenged by a hostile regional environment, widespread political violence and a struggling economy. Compared with earlier attempts at establishing democracy in the country, however, several factors provide grounds for optimism. Pakistan already has the institutional framework for democratic government, a more supportive international environment and past experience with democracy. Importantly, previous attempts at democracy in Pakistan took place in eras without a free press, but no single narrative today can control the public discussion. Despite continued threats to journalist safety, the development of a free and lively media is changing the political landscape by shaping public opinion and forcing political responses to public demands.

Support for democracy is widespread and there is public confidence that an accommodation between democracy and Islam can succeed. The variegated nature of Pakistani religious practice makes it necessary to build coalitions to win political support. Western discussion of Pakistan often focuses on the violence of the most extreme revisionist Islamist groups. This misrepresents the capacity of multi-vocal Islamic Pakistan to implement democratic practices.

Yet Pakistan's ongoing evolution will benefit from targeted external support. Before going to Islamabad to launch the new Strategic Dialogue in June 2012, Catherine Ashton issued a press release stating, "My visit to Pakistan is an expression of the EU's support for the consolidation of democracy in the country." The EU can build on this sentiment by ensuring that the planned EU election observation mission proceeds with sufficient resources to monitor the full electoral process at both the federal and provincial levels. The EU should also support the Election Commission of Pakistan in the post-election period to respond to election reports and recommendations with an eye on the next elections in 2018.

Looking beyond the current election cycle, the EU can engage with democratic Pakistan without facing difficult choices between its democratic values and its hard security and economic interests. Previous aid agreements with Pakistan had reflected the fact that they were negotiated with a military dictatorship, limiting themselves primarily to economic and industrial issues. Today, the EU can support common Pakistani/EU objectives without the need for imposing sensitive and often ineffectual political conditionality.

The EU can begin by making Pakistan its 11th Strategic Partner. Pakistan's centrality to peace, development, and security both in South Asia and beyond makes it a prime candidate. Including Pakistan as a Strategic Partner (as India is) would send an important political signal that Pakistan matters to the EU, solidifying structures of dialogue and assistance and ensuring continuity of support.

The EU can also make good governance and human rights the primary focal sector for its aid program, prioritising and expanding technical support programs at both federal and provincial levels as part of a significant long-term support plan for government capacity building. Rather than bypassing the government or focusing on service delivery improvements, patient, long-term government support, targeted at core management functions, can help the government increase its transparency and its effectiveness at providing for its own people. With clear political direction, the EU can play a limited but important role in helping Pakistan develop effective democratic state institutions.