

Pakistan's existential challenge

By Bret Stephens

The Quaid-e Azam's vision still appeals to a majority of Pakistanis, who have repeatedly defeated radical religious parties at the polls. But rejecting clerical politics is not quite the same thing as accepting secular ideals

ABOUT Iran, Henry Kissinger once asked whether the Islamic Republic was a country or a cause. About Pakistan, the question is whether it's a country or merely a space.

Mr Kissinger's point was that if Iran were a country like France or India, its bid to acquire nuclear weapons wouldn't pose an apocalyptic threat: It would merely be seeking the bomb in pursuit of rational, and limited, national interests, like prestige and self-defence. But if Iran is a cause - the cause being world-wide radical Islamic revolution - then there's no telling where its ambitions end.

The world has a tough time dealing with cause countries, no matter if the causes are bad (Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia), good (the US), or somewhere in between (colonial Britain and France). Even more difficult is knowing what to do about countries that are really just spaces, wholly or partly ungoverned.

Today, Somalia is a space not even pretending to be a country. The result is destitution, piracy and a sanctuary for Islamic jihadists, but little by way of ideas for how to change things. Historically Afghanistan has always been a space, defined mostly by its power to repel: The Obama administration would be smart to take this into account by keeping its expectations for nation-building low. Whether post-invasion Iraq is a country or a space remains a question, though it seems to be leaning in the former direction.

As for Pakistan, we're about to find out.

The world took note last month when a Taliban advance brought it to within 60 miles of Islamabad. But that offensive was less intrinsically distressing than the seeming nonchalance with which Pakistan's rulers, current and former, surrendered sovereignty to Islamic extremists, first in the

tribal hinterlands and then in the Swat Valley.

What kind of state simply accepts that its judicial and political writ doesn't actually run to its internationally recognised boundaries? Three cases are typical.

One is a weak state that lacks the capacity to enforce its law and ensure domestic tranquility - think of Congo. Another is an ethnic patchwork state that knows well enough not to bend restive or potentially restive minorities to its will - that would be present-day Lebanon. A third is a canny state that seeks to advance strategic aims by feigning powerlessness while deliberately ceding control to proxies - the Palestinian Authority under Yasser Arafat.

Pakistan's odd distinction is

Of course the 'Islamic' state that Pakistani founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah foresaw wasn't quite what the Taliban have in mind. 'You will find,' he said in 1947, 'that in course of time Hindus would cease to be Hindus and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because this is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the State'

that it fits all three descriptions at once. It is politically weak, ethnically riven, and a master of plausible deniability - an art it has practiced not only toward India, Afghanistan and the US with its support for various "freedom fighting" groups but also, in the matter of the CIA drone attacks, toward its own people.

The roots of Pakistan's problems go to its nature as a state. What is Pakistan? Even now, nearly 62 years after its founding, the best answer is "not India": As with the Palestinians, Pakistani identity is defined negatively. What else is Pakistan? As with Iran, it is an Islamic Republic: Punjabis, Pashtuns, Kashmiris, Balochis, Sindhis and so on are only really knitted together in their state as Muslims.

No wonder the Pakistani Army has been so reluctant to re-deploy the bulk of its forces to the western front: To do so betrays

Pakistan's entire reason for being. Tellingly, the army only went on the offensive this month after the Taliban took aim at an army convoy. Odds are roughly even that another "truce" will be agreed by the government just as soon as the Taliban draws appropriate conclusions and reserves its violence for clean-shaven men, independent-minded females and other enemies of God.

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each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the State."

That vision still appeals to a majority of Pakistanis, who have repeatedly defeated radical religious parties at the polls. But rejecting clerical politics is not quite the same thing as accepting secular ideals. It's also hard to sustain republican hopes when the practical results - in the persons of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif and current President Asif Ali Zardari - have been so consistently dismaying.

We live in an age dominated by immodest ideas of personal, national or ideological destiny, to which Pakistan has not been immune. It might consider more modest aims, like simple country hood. And since the threat it now faces is existential, let's put the point existentially: The alternative to that kind of being is nothingness. COURTESY THE WALL

STREET JOURNAL