

Pakistan in the eyes of the world: A new perspective on a blemished international image

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As part of a research project exploring perceptions of Pakistan, **Farzana Shaikh** discussed how its image is compromised by a disconnect between the stated position of the elected authorities and the reality of the way power is exercised. Here **Nadir Cheema** offers an overview of his conversation with Dr Shaikh, in which she argues that in order to start to address the lack of credibility in the eyes of the international community, the military needs to take a step back.



Research carried out over the course of 2016 indicated that many analysts and academics share a perception that Pakistan lacks credibility within the international community. The results, summarised [here](#), revealed that the factors people most closely associate with the country were nuclear weapons, terrorism, security, Islam and the Taliban. There was a generalised view of Pakistan as a militarised state involved with Islamic extremism.



Further analysis of the data gathered for the 2016 survey has highlighted strong views held by influential commentators, including members of the Foreign Service Programme at the University of Oxford. These encompass academics, analysts and diplomats from all over the world, 25 of whom were contributors to the research. This article will focus on a discussion with one of them, Dr Farzana Shaikh.

Dr Shaikh is Senior South Asia Fellow at Chatham House in London and widely respected as a specialist on Pakistan and the regional politics of the sub-continent. Born in Pakistan, she has a Ph.D. from Columbia University, New York and is a former research fellow of Clare Hall, Cambridge.

She has been a visitor at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, and in 2013 was elected to a fellowship at the Institut d'Etudes Avancées in Paris. In 2010 her book, *Making Sense of Pakistan*, was selected by the Guardian as one of four 'essential books' for Prime Minister Cameron's government.

Dr Shaikh concurs with the view that Pakistan lacks credibility within the international community. She says the country's image is compromised by a disconnect between the stated position of the elected authorities and the reality of the way power is exercised.

"[It is] the fundamental dilemma of a country... with competing centres of power. On the one hand, we have elected government or political classes or public representatives who seek to project an image of Pakistan as liberal, modern and democratic. But at the same time, we have a very dominant military, which has a very different projection of Pakistan as a highly-militarised state where questions of democracy have to be subordinated to questions of sovereignty and the so-called national interest is defined almost always in terms of security."

Dr Shaikh's published work places her at the liberal end of the political spectrum, and she has been critical of the dominance of the security state in Pakistan. But she sees a range of influences at work in the way the country's image is projected to the world.

“It is of course a very complex exercise, this business of projecting an image. The complexity stems from the fact that there are competing centres of power in Pakistan, all of whom have very different visions of what kind what kind of image Pakistan ought to project internationally. If you take the political classes, the elected government for example, the emphasis particularly since 2008 would be to try to project an image of the country as one which is genuinely engaged in the process of democratic transformation, of a country that highly values the ideals of liberal modernity, without of course compromising its Islamic identity (although even that Islamic identity is often cast by sections of the political classes as a modern identity, one that is able to accommodate ideas that might be considered broadly progressive).

It is no secret that the security establishment, led by the military, are principally the ones involved with projecting the security narrative internationally, projecting this image of Pakistan as basically a hard, resilient state, primarily concerned with the defence of its frontiers, primarily concerned with questions of national sovereignty. And that image then tends increasingly to convey the picture of a country that is highly militarised.

You have these two polar opposites. And in between, we have a very wide range of images being projected by what is broadly called civil society, of a Pakistan in the process of significant social transformation. The emphasis here is broadly on a country that is prepared to take its place in the international community of nations as liberal and forward looking... along the lines that many within sections of civil society believe that Mr. Jinnah was interested in projecting.”

Although critical of the anti-liberalism of the so-called security establishment, Dr Shaikh believes the blame for the country’s poor international reputation has to be shared by both sides.

“I wouldn’t myself believe that there is one particular party to blame. The way that things have panned out in Pakistan since the inception of the state is one where I think all players have had some responsibility in terms of lack of credibility with regards to Pakistan’s image. [But] when you consider that the military has been the main political player and the dominant power for the largest part of Pakistan’s history, then it’s fair to conclude that much of the responsibility for Pakistan as a so-called hard state, highly militarised with little time for democracy, and the responsibility for projecting that image, must surely lie largely with the military.”

In a country with such divided centres of power, it is sometimes difficult to discern who holds the greatest sway, who makes the decisions that ultimately count. The ‘establishment’ is a widely-used term in Pakistan, but one that encompasses a wide range of players. Dr Shaikh agrees that defining what we mean by the ‘establishment’ is a tricky task.

“As you know, we have a few people trying to define by what is meant by establishment. Mushahid Hussain is one of those who has argued that actually the establishment in Pakistan consists of 500 key people. Steve Cohen in his [The Idea of Pakistan](#), addresses and builds on that. I think there is probably truth to it. I certainly believe myself that the establishment is of course dominated by the military, but it goes well beyond the military, to encompass members of the foreign policy establishment, members of the planning commission, our business and industrial magnates. And the whole thing is held together, people would say, through links of Biraderi and kin.

I would argue that actually what is going on in Pakistan is the establishment is being held together

through ties of marriage. Very little study has been done on this, but they are intermarrying, and in that way strengthening that core base. And this throws a completely different dimension on an understanding of Pakistan at this particular level being held together not through ties of kin so as much through ties of marriage between names and big families that matter.”

Pakistan’s foreign policy is often seen as a function of its national security doctrine, which has the perceived threat from India at its core. Foreign policy is thus driven by objectives articulated and defined by the requirements of national security. Dr Shaikh says the question of who runs foreign policy in Pakistan is a crucial factor in the projection of the country’s international image.

“I think we need to rid ourselves of the delusion that foreign policy is made by the Foreign Office of Pakistan. As we may well know, the key sections of our foreign policy, particularly those that relate to relations with India, Afghanistan and USA, are dominated by the military. I would go so far as to say that the military actually exercises a veto on those sections of our foreign policy; so, if you want to equate the military with the establishment then you are on to something. But if you are suggesting that the establishment also includes foreign policy professionals, trained diplomats etc., then I think that argument is rather more tenuous. We have Mr. Sartaj Aziz, who is a good example the man who projects officially Pakistan’s foreign policy. But we know that policy with regard to these three key issues is being made at the GHQ in Rawalpindi and not at the FO in Islamabad.”

Such a narrow definition of the goals of foreign policy, says Dr Shaikh, is not conducive to a balanced approach to international relations. But she says the security narrative has become ingrained in society and therefore difficult to change:

“Much of the security narrative is informed by a very rigid definition of the national interest which is almost entirely conceived of in military and security terms. There is no understanding of the national interest as the one that might encompass larger issues of social and economic welfare. And I think that has very much skewed the debate about what is meant by national interest in Pakistan. However, I would like to emphasize here that a security-informed definition of the national interest, while it may have originated with the military, is now widely shared within what you would call the establishment and sections of the population at large. That security narrative has permeated society in Pakistan now to a much greater degree than perhaps we recognise.”

In the final analysis, the security narrative is difficult to reconcile with the ideals of pluralism and democracy. The international community, says Dr Shaikh, is confused by the conflicting signals being sent out by the Pakistani establishment and this has damaged the country’s credibility. Does she discern any signs of that credibility being restored?

“No, I think at the moment this is an uphill task. It is one that Pakistan is not likely to overcome for a few years yet. So much damage has already been done where we have tried to project a certain image but then the image turned out to be hollow in the extreme; and to my mind, there is really very little indication that we are anywhere near a course correction...”

I suppose one way in which the country could move forward is by loosening the grip of the military. I think the effects of military rule, not just on things like democratic transition but on society as a whole,

are extremely damaging for Pakistan. I think for a more so-called positive image to become tenable the military does need to step back. It needs to allow the country to emerge with all its complexity and range of opinions. That alone wouldn't be enough, but it would certainly be the first step in trying to project a more complex and, I believe, more realistic picture of what Pakistan is and is likely also to be.”

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Cover image: Geography of Pakistan. Credit: NASA Public Domain

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