



## **Stephen Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan*, Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2004, 382 pages**

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[1] The central question that Stephen Cohen grapples with in his book, *The Idea of Pakistan*, is what is Pakistan? Is it a 'rogue state', 'a delinquent nation', 'Taliban East' a 'failing state' or just 'misunderstood but an effective US ally' (p. 2)? To probe beyond these descriptions of Pakistan, Cohen has two purposes in mind. First, he wants to demonstrate why Indian Muslims felt the need for a separate homeland to pursue their 'civilizational destiny'. Second, he wants to narrate how the state of Pakistan has evolved into a military-dominated entity that has nuclear capabilities, hostile relations with its neighbours and is characterized by weak economic institutions and socio-political strife. It is clear from this narrative, that Cohen wants to understand Pakistan's past to predict the future - whether Pakistan will fail as a state or manage to scrape through all its troubles and emerge as a 'normal state at peace with its neighbours'?

[2] Cohen's point of departure is to assess 'failure'- a term that he thinks is imprecisely used to describe Pakistan. He argues that to make such an accusation one needs a nuanced definition of failure. If failure is defined as the inability to live up to past expectations, to deal with catastrophe, to run a successful economy and to lead the country with a certain vision in mind, then Pakistan's performance has been dismal. But Cohen pushes the line that it is not a failed state as the possibility of resurrection is not out of reach.

[3] To provide evidence for his line of argument Cohen takes a historical approach that traces the evolution of both the idea and state of Pakistan. In subsequent chapters Cohen surveys the role played by the army, Islamists, political parties and regional elites in shaping the polity. Basically, Cohen's methodological approach derives from historical institutionalism- the precept that institutions, beliefs and actions of the past decisively enabled and constrained the actions and strategies available to actors in the present. More significantly he places a huge emphasis on the role of ideas in severely limiting the options available to leaders for establishing

Pakistan as a state post-1947. Since Cohen does not want to neglect the interaction between socio-economic factors and politics he devotes a chapter to a discussion of critical demographic, economic and educational constraints on Pakistan and how they might have contributed to stunted political development. He concludes his study by outlining five different paths that Pakistan could take in the future and how the United States should shape its policy towards Pakistan bearing these plausible 'futures' in mind.

[4] This book is written with the intention of predicting the country's future. It is written in a journalistic style, largely meant for the consumption of policy analysts in the United States who need a quick and expedient reference to Pakistan's intricate politics. To his credit, however, Cohen sifts through a lot of history to give a succinct picture of politics in Pakistan. The book is very clearly and cogently written. Bullet points to summarize findings especially help with the pace of reading.

[5] The title of the book is misleading- it is not so much the idea of Pakistan that Cohen wants to discuss. Instead he has different analytical goals; he wants to argue that the current state of Pakistan is the result of the unresolved tensions in the ideas that prevailed at the time Pakistan was founded. Cohen's entire analysis is geared towards explaining why Pakistan is a so-called 'failed state' and how the US can secure its interest in South Asia using Pakistan as an ally.

[6] It is not clear from his analysis if Cohen thinks that Pakistan's development has been path dependent. If so, is Pakistan in the throes of a critical juncture where choices made now will put it on a different developmental trajectory? This is the question that Cohen has in mind when he starts the chapter on 'Pakistan's Futures' (p. 267). He approaches this question not by engaging the concept of critical juncture analytically but by arguing that it is not the first time that Pakistan finds itself at a crossroads and not the first time that the country has resurrected itself from chaos and altered the course of development. The book also raises the question whether Cohen's ideational argument is about Pakistan being locked-in because the unresolved tension amongst ideas still persists? It is entirely conceivable to argue that the elite or 'establishment' will continue to pursue the present course because its interests are too embedded in the status quo as it stands today.

[7] Cohen outlines five other scenarios that are likely to arise in the next five to eight years: the emergence of a moderate, democratic state; the rise of authoritarianism; the rise of an Islamist state; Pakistan's possible breakup and Pakistan after a major war with India (p. 297).

While, Cohen discusses the likelihood and impact of each scenario in depth, he is less successful at determining the factors that would result in each possible scenario. For example, when discussing the option of Pakistan becoming a normal democracy, Cohen says that it would be important for a 'strategic accommodation' between India and Pakistan. But he says little about the mechanisms that would result in this strategic accommodation. More importantly, the question left partially unanswered is whether only a change in ideas can bring about a change in developmental path or can other exogenous factors also put Pakistan on the right track? Cohen claims that 'the most important debate raging in Pakistan is that between competing ideas of statehood, Quaid's original conception pitted against the Islamist conceptions' (p. 298). In Cohen's mind a resolution of this debate will determine Pakistan's future. However, one could also argue that not only does this ideational debate have to be resolved but Pakistan also has to address its strategic position in South Asia and reconcile itself to an alliance with the United States.

[8] At this point I would also like to question the value added by outlining the possible scenarios for Pakistan's future. From the analysis in the book, Cohen implicitly acknowledges that the future of Pakistan does not lie exclusively in one scenario but perhaps in a mixture of all five. In Cohen's defense, it is a difficult and impractical undertaking to provide a sure recipe for successful outcomes in Pakistan's political development and the mechanisms by which that change can be made feasible.

[9] Clearly institutions are important to Cohen's analysis yet most political scientists will criticize the book for not having paid enough attention to the interrelation between social, economic and political institutions. For instance one gaping hole in the book is that the role played by the judiciary in legitimizing martial law is a theme barely mentioned. The state of the judiciary as the third organ of state also reflects the importance paid to the rule of law- a significant attribute of political institutions. Secondly, when discussing political parties, Cohen does not delve deeper into the role of the MQM party and how it has been a significant alternative to the PPP in the province of Sindh. One would like to see these topics addressed more comprehensively in future works by the author.

[10] My critique of the book should not detract from its virtues. It is a significant achievement on two levels, first because it provides an introduction to Pakistan's political, economic and social history in broad strokes and second, Cohen is not only descriptive but also prescriptive about Pakistan's problems.