



## Anatol Lieven on Pakistan

Anatol Lieven , David C. Speedie

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[Anatol Lieven](#)

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**May 3, 2011. Following the death of Osama bin Laden, here follows a special note from Anatol Lieven.**



[David C. Speedie](#)

*In recent years, Pakistan—or rather the Pakistani military—has been pursuing not a two-faced but a four-faced approach to extremism: One face for the Afghan Taliban, one for the Pakistani Taliban, one for al-Qaeda and other international terrorists based in Pakistan, and one for Pakistani terrorists who in the past operated against India with Pakistani military support. To the Afghan Taliban, it has given shelter. Against the Pakistani Taliban, it has pursued a tough military campaign. It has also intermittently cracked down hard on al-Qaeda. With regard to the anti-Indian extremists, it has said that it is keeping them from terrorism against Pakistan and the West by maintaining a close relationship with them.*

*In the past, the U.S. has turned a partially blind eye to Pakistan's shelter to the Afghan Taliban because of a belief that the Pakistani military really was co-operating against al-Qaeda. It is this belief—and with it the whole U.S.-Pakistani relationship—that risks being blown into the air by the revelation that bin Laden was hiding near a major Pakistani military base without being spotted. To restore the relationship, the Pakistani military will either have to come up with a much better explanation than it has done so far or do its utmost to catch and hand over Aiman al Zawahiri or other leading al-Qaeda figures. Otherwise, the U.S.-Pakistani relationship will suffer permanent damage.*

**DAVID SPEEDIE: Hello. I'm David Speedie. Our guest today is Anatol Lieven, professor of international relations and terrorism studies in the War Studies Department of King's College London.**

**Anatol, welcome back to the Carnegie Council. Always a pleasure to have you.**

**ANATOL LIEVEN:** Thank you.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: I know it has been a whirlwind tour, so thank you for joining us.**

**We are here to talk primarily about your new book, [Pakistan: A Hard Country](#). First of all, you have just returned from Pakistan, even after completing the book. I remember the last time you were here we spoke about the [catastrophic floods](#) that affected the country from north to south. Any update on that situation or just recent thoughts on your visit?**

**ANATOL LIEVEN:** One of the amazing things about the floods is how little long-term damage they left behind. It does say something about Pakistan, which is that the flood-control system actually worked, to a great extent. Despite the extent of these floods, only 1,500 people were killed. That's a lot, but in terms of the extent of the floods and in a population of almost 200 million, it wasn't that bad.

The reason was that the barrages which protect the main cities held; they didn't break. The floodwaters were diverted into floodplains, which are supposed to be left uninhabited, precisely for this purpose. Of course, this

being Pakistan—or South Asia—people have moved in there. But they are not idiots, and when they heard the floods were coming, they knew what was going to happen, so they got out. So casualties were low.

Infrastructure was quite badly damaged, but that is being repaired. Villages were washed away, but the thing is, to be brutally honest, mud huts can easily be rebuilt.

But a very interesting thing is that Pakistani agriculture, which everybody, including me, thought was going to be very badly damaged, is actually undergoing a boom, mainly because global commodity prices, thanks to China and so forth, are going up, but also because the water resources in many areas have been replenished by the floods.

So this brings out a number of things about Pakistan: that aspects of the system work, that you can't trust the most alarmist accounts of the Western media, and that often something that is very bad in one way will turn out to be good in another, which is one of the main themes of the book.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: In part of the blurb on the book it says that you look at the disparate, often conflicting, but surprisingly potent forces that hold the fractured country together. At one point you quote from Galileo: *Eppur si muove*—"and yet it moves." In a different part of the book you talk about islands of successful modernity. So it really is a paradox here, isn't it? There are forces that promote the development of the country but, at the same time, hinder it. It's a constant paradox that you are exploring.**

**ANATOL LIEVEN:** Yes. A friend who introduced me at one of my talks in America said that if you're looking for simple explanations and simple answers to the problems of Pakistan and U.S. relations with Pakistan, then this book is not for you. It is hellishly complicated.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: We do tend to look for simple answers in this country, and probably beyond.**

**ANATOL LIEVEN:** America is not going to find them in Pakistan, I fear.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: Yet there must be some chagrin on your part that Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya pretty much have knocked Pakistan, to some extent, off the front pages. Yet this is really, as you argue later on and we will come to, perhaps, in more detail, an enormously important country that we don't see in the complexity and nuance that you obviously feel it deserves.**

**ANATOL LIEVEN:** What's happening in the Middle East is colossally important, though just in these weeks that I have been in America, there has been a real flare-up of tension between Pakistani intelligence services and U.S. intelligence. Pakistan is always generating news stories.

But it's worth pointing out that when compared to the Middle East, just Pakistan has almost two-thirds of the population of the whole of the Arab world put together. It has nuclear weapons. It has a huge army. In a context of the potential terrorist threat, it also has a huge diaspora. That's something to which I as a Brit am very sensitive. Of course, they have, unfortunately, some of them, been involved in terrorism already.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: [The 7/7 bombings](#) in London some years ago.**

**ANATOL LIEVEN:** Of course, because they have British passports, this is also a potential threat to the United States. The [last major terrorist attempt](#)—not successful, thank God—in America, by [Faisal Shahzad](#) here in New York, was also by Pakistan. It will, I fear, go on being a serious issue, quite apart from what's happening in Afghanistan.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: Yes, which we'll get to.**

**But one thing that probably ought to be put out at the outset, too, is that one of your admiring critics says, "Lieven has gathered the thoughts, words, and opinions of hundreds of Pakistanis from all classes and walks of life, to present a compelling portrait of the country."**

**This is terribly important, isn't it? You and I have talked before about others who parachute into Pakistan and perhaps touch down in Islamabad, have a few meetings, and then leave. But you have really spent time and literally covered the country in preparation for this book.**

**ANATOL LIEVEN:** Yes, although not most of the tribal areas, as you can see from the fact that I'm here and in one piece rather than two. But other than that, yes, I've spent a considerable amount of time in each of the provinces. I've talked to as many ordinary Pakistanis on the street as I could and garnered their opinions.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: And that speaks again to the complexity of the country. The various provinces—it's not a homogeneous entity by any means. That's part of both the paradox and the problem of the modern state of Pakistan.**

**ANATOL LIEVEN:** That is one of the many things that holds it back in terms of economic progress. On the other hand, there is a possibility in some circumstances of an Islamist revolution in Pakistan. But it wouldn't lead to an Islamist state, like in Iran. It would lead to chaos, disintegration, and civil war. Because enough Pakistanis know that, that's an additional barrier to revolution. There is a strong awareness that it would, in fact, destroy the country and lead to utter misery for tens of millions of people.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: Let's look at some of the specific aspects of this paradox that is Pakistan that you cover in really admirable detail in the book.**

**First of all, the justice system and rule of law: You write that Pakistanis with even the most limited power to do so have contributed to the wreckage of the state judicial system by their constant efforts to twist it to their own individual or group purposes. You talk about continual struggles for power that permeate Pakistani society, the fragmentation in the form of what you call customary laws. Clearly there is an anarchic flavor to this.**

**ANATOL LIEVEN:** Well, that's it. We tend to see the struggle for the judicial system in Pakistan as between state law, which is basically British law by origin, and the Sharia. But, in fact, a great many people in the countryside and even some in the cities across Pakistan follow their ancient customary tribal law. Unfortunately, while it has certain positive aspects in terms of maintaining basic peace, it's savagely oppressive, to women in particular. In fact, as I remark in the book, the British used to prefer the Sharia to tribal law because the Sharia was actually a relatively progressive code by comparison, which tells you something, alas.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: Alas, indeed.**

**On the military: Clearly the military has been and is fundamentally important, both as a power broker and at times as a power taker. I have heard it described as perhaps the only stable aspect of Pakistani society. But again the paradox comes into play here. I'm struck by two points that you make in the book. First, you say the Pakistani military likes to think of itself as a big family, and in some way, it is more like a big Pakistani family than it likes to think. Then you say, since 9/11, the Pakistani military has been forced into an alliance with the U.S. that a majority of society, including the soldiers' own families, detests. So clearly, again, there is a tension here, both within Pakistan itself and in terms of our relations with the country.**

**ANATOL LIEVEN:** My point about it being like a big family is that big Pakistani families basically use their power to exploit and plunder the state. The Pakistani Army has done that on an enormous scale. On the other hand, its discipline, its *esprit de corps*, its ethos means that this is not a West African army; the generals haven't just stolen the money and transferred it to bank accounts in London. They have spent it on the army and even, to a considerable extent, on the well-being of ordinary soldiers, which is what maintains the efficiency and the loyalty of the army.

But the loyalty of the army has been challenged in recent years by the fact that they are part of this war that most of them, at least initially, really didn't like. There were serious problems of morale for several years, because the soldiers were being told, even by their own families when they went home on leave, that they were acting as slaves to the Americans, killing fellow Muslims to take American money.

That has changed quite a bit in recent years, when it comes to fighting against the Pakistani Taliban, partly because the Pakistani Taliban have emerged as an obvious threat to Pakistan, and the army is dedicated to defending Pakistan against external and internal enemies; partly because the Taliban have committed so many atrocities in Pakistan, including against soldiers whom they took prisoner, which has certainly strengthened the military's willingness to fight.

But I'm sorry to say, as well, that one of the reasons the soldiers are now fighting harder against the Pakistani Taliban is that they have been told, and they believe, that behind the Pakistani Taliban stands India. Their entire mindset is structured around hostility to India and fear of India. If they are convinced that the enemy is really the Indians or being backed by the Indians, they always fight much harder, which is encouraging in a way, since they are now fighting hard against the Islamist rebels. In other ways, it is, however, an extremely sad comment on the Pakistani mindset in general and the military mindset in particular.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: The right thing for the wrong reason.**

**Then, the 800-pound elephant in the room is [ISI](#) [Inter-Service Intelligence], with at least suspected**

**extremist links, particularly in terms of Kashmir. You talk about strange intentions within the rest of the military. Clearly ISI is another layer of complexity and difficulty in understanding Pakistan.**

**ANATOL LIEVEN:** Although in some ways I would see the ISI as a somewhat disobedient and recalcitrant baby elephant, rather than an enormous elephant, in that in the end, I'm quite convinced, at least when it comes to strategic questions, they are firmly under the command of the military. After all, the present chief of staff of the Pakistani military, General [Kayani](#), was previously, himself, head of the ISI.

It has sometimes been a convenient fiction in both Pakistan and America to pretend that they are an independent force. I don't think that they are. Some particular operations, like, perhaps, the terrible [Mumbai terrorist attack](#) on India in 2008 by a group that was long linked to the military—that could perhaps have been a rogue operation by lower ISI officers. There's no doubt that ISI officers were involved, but it's not certain that the orders came from above. But, in general, the ISI obeys the orders of the military.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: From extremism, let's touch quickly on the religion question. You mentioned this in passing, but let's just develop it a little bit. I quote you:"A dangerous intellectual mass is created by the mixing up of words such as 'extremism' and 'militancy' with the very different concepts of fundamentalism and conservatism."**

**Then of the Islamic political movements, you say the question is not why they are so strong, but why they are so weak.**

**That's an interesting and perhaps counterintuitive thing for an American to grasp. It goes back to the paradox question.**

**ANATOL LIEVEN:** There is a strong and dangerous militant movement in Pakistan now. But if you look at Pakistani history—and, according to opinion polls, the next election as well—the actual Islamist parties have, with really very rare exceptions, done very poorly in the elections. They have never come anywhere near a majority.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: It has been constantly in the single digits.**

**ANATOL LIEVEN:** That's right. That's pretty striking. After all, Pakistan has had elections, much more than in the Middle East. People are very poor. It has a very strong intellectual tradition of Islamism—well, at least it was strong; it hasn't been updated for decades now. In parts of the Middle East the Islamists won. In Algeria for example, until it was overturned by a military coup. They won in Turkey. They may do extremely well in Egypt. So it's very striking that, in fact, they haven't been able to develop in Pakistan.

That brings out, above all, to some extent, the backwardness of Pakistan. These modern Islamist parties do come out of a certain kind of modernity, especially urbanization. But it also just brings out the fact that Pakistan is so divided. A party representing one sect of Islam will always have enormous sections of the country against it, before you even get into the differences between the different provinces, ethnic traditions, and languages. So in some ways, Pakistan is too divided to experience a revolution.

Terrorism is a different matter. I fear that terrorism is going to be with Pakistan for a long time to come. But some of the most terrible attacks of terrorism have been directed by the Pakistani Taliban against other Muslim sects and shrines whom they hate on theological grounds. Of course, that doesn't do anything to win supporters in those traditions.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: In that regard, in the sense of Islamic identity, you made one statement that was perhaps more sweeping than many. It was an interesting quote: "The Pakistani Muslim thinks of himself as heir to the Muslim empire, descended from a race of emperors and rulers. There is a streak of militarism in Pakistan's ethos, even at the popular level."**

**It's almost as if you do see a national sense of self or identity in Pakistan.**

**ANATOL LIEVEN:** I should perhaps have qualified that. It's probably not true that your ordinary farmers in Sindh or your tribesmen in Baluchistan do. But certainly in Punjab, which is the biggest province, there is that strong sense. This reflects analysis of Pakistan by many Pakistanis themselves.

The memory of how Muslims used to rule the whole of South Asia and of the prowess of Muslim warriors is very important in Pakistan. It does strengthen this instinctive respect for the military, which periodically helps the military to seize power—though, to be fair, the military in that regard always get an enormous amount of help from the civilian politicians in the dreadful messes that they make in the country.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: I assume the aforementioned and incorrigible rivalry with India, in this case, plays**

**into the sense of collective identity, to the extent that it exists.**

**ANATOL LIEVEN:** Yes. There are some reasons for Pakistani paranoia, given the much greater size of India and the fact that India in the past has often been very hostile to Pakistan. Nonetheless, the level of paranoia and the absolutely grotesque conspiracy theories that it generates really often do make rational public discussion in Pakistan very difficult on some issues.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** Let's move now to the question of the importance of Pakistan to the U.S., the region, and the world, which you speak of eloquently in the book. You mentioned that after Afghanistan has been settled, in whatever way—we may get into that in a moment—Pakistan will remain as an enormously important country. You mentioned the demographic, two-thirds of the entire Arab Muslim world. The population of Pakistan is six times that of Afghanistan and Iraq. It's twice that of Iran.

**Dan Markey**, who is at the Council on Foreign Relations, [spoke recently](#) about President Obama's [December 2010] visit following a disastrous few months during which Pakistan-U.S. relations hit a new low. Clearly the administration has had much more emphasis on al-Qaeda and the Afghan War than on getting Pakistan right, is his conclusion. Presumably you agree, in large extent, with that? How do we get to the point of thinking over the horizon in an almost strategic way about Pakistan?

**ANATOL LIEVEN:** It seems to me, first, that we do have to prioritize Pakistan because of the nuclear weapons, the size of the country, the fact that if, God forbid, the Pakistani Army disintegrated, let alone nuclear weapons, the expertise, the munitions that would be flow into the hands of terrorists—that in itself would raise the terrorist threat to the West by an order of magnitude.

We need to be very clear what we can get and what we are getting out of the Pakistanis, and what our chief priority is. For me, that's clear. It's to prevent terrorism against the United States, Britain, and the West. There the Pakistanis have generally been very helpful—sometimes giving crucial help in preventing particular terrorist attacks—partly because they have no interest in promoting terrorism against the West, partly because they have been threatened with the wrath of God if a terrorist attack on American soil does take place with Pakistani links.

The problem is how to balance that against our needs in Afghanistan, where the Pakistanis have not been helpful at all, to put it mildly.

Partly because on the basis of my deep former experience with Afghanistan, I do not believe in the possibility of victory there, I would advocate using the Pakistanis to see if we can gain some kind of settlement with the Afghan Taliban, which would then get us our main objectives in terms of excluding al-Qaeda, cracking down on heroin, ending the Afghan civil war, and allowing us to leave. The Pakistanis are hopeless when it comes to fighting against the Afghan Taliban. When it comes to brokering a peace deal with the Afghan Taliban, they will be crucial, if we ever decide to go for that, and of course, if the Afghan Taliban are prepared to play ball.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** There seems to be a drumbeat in that direction with the [Brahimi-Pickering Report](#) and other—[Gianni Picco](#), the former UN representative, has written a [piece](#) that we actually have just published at the Council that speaks to this need for Pakistan involvement in essentially a non-military solution to Afghanistan, thinking afresh.

You're absolutely right that perhaps the way to encourage this is to threaten draconian measures if an attack takes place on American soil. But clearly, from the Pakistani point of view, there are other things: What are we getting out of this in return, for what the U.S. wants us to do in cooperation against the Afghan Taliban, for example? Clearly there is something of a fundamental disconnect. The U.S. claims that the drone attacks it carries out with concomitant civilian casualties are targeted at forces that are actually destabilizing Pakistan, not just a threat to U.S. interests, where Pakistan may see it differently, as both a loss of life and a question of territorial integrity.

Then, there was the [Raymond Davis](#) espionage case, that didn't help matters.

There's a bit of a he said/she said question to all this, isn't there?

**ANATOL LIEVEN:** There is. There's also a problem that what Pakistan has said in public, as we know from WikiLeaks, has often been very different from what Pakistan has said in private about the drone attacks. The [last one](#), however, which killed so many civilians and came right on the heels of the Raymond Davis case, does seem to have changed Pakistani thinking. They have come out much more strongly than ever before against it.

I have to say on Raymond Davis, for different reasons, I agree with the Pakistanis. In my book—it was written long before the Davis case—I described such agents in Pakistan as hostages to fortune. The hostage to fortune is precisely what he turned out to be. Highly visible, it seems inadequately trained, rather trigger-happy American

special forces people wandering around in Pakistan is not a good idea. I'm also highly skeptical about how much really useful intelligence they are bringing in, simply because they stick out like a sore thumb.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: This is perhaps not the first time this has happened, and not the first place. But we won't go there.**

**In terms also of long-term strategic and mutual interests, you touch on this question of the need for long-term trade and investment, instead of just the billions on direct aid that may end up in perhaps not the best and most salubrious places for the country.**

**ANATOL LIEVEN:** Let's look on the bright side. They may well end up in bank accounts in London and New York.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: But quite clearly, you are an advocate for looking more profoundly and sensibly at investment in Pakistan, as opposed to just direct aid.**

**ANATOL LIEVEN:** Yes, especially in water infrastructure, which I regard as actually the biggest long-term threat to their existence.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: In fact, you mention at some point that ecology may be the greatest long-term threat to Pakistan. That's an interesting thought and one that is based on a more substantial immersion in the country than perhaps others have. Speak a little about that.**

**ANATOL LIEVEN:** This, by the way, is before one even factors in the potential effects of climate change. According to the World Bank, unless Pakistan can bring its birth rate down by a much steeper rate than it has done so far, it will have a population of about 335 million people by the middle of the century. That is simply too much for Pakistan's water resources to support, unless there is a radical improvement in the use of those resources to cut down on waste and improve agricultural efficiency. The problem is that that requires a very different kind of Pakistani state. It requires a much more educated population. It requires all the kinds of things that Pakistan has not been able to achieve up to now.

But, yes, that is a terrible looming menace in the decades to come.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: Back to this question about the particular paradox of the same forces who advance things in Pakistan, but also may retard or even reverse. How optimistic are you? That may be just too pointed or specific a question. Are you generally optimistic? The subtitle of your book is *A Hard Country*. It seems obvious to me that you are dealing with "hard" in two senses—hard to deal with and perhaps to comprehend, from an American or Western point of view, and also hard as in hardness, toughness, and resilience.**

Where do you come down?

**ANATOL LIEVEN:** I think urbanization will lead to social change and to change in attitudes over time, although by no means always positive. This can lead to a great increase in Islamist radicalism perhaps, though it hasn't done so yet—this very steep radicalization. But with luck, it will also lead to more education and to a diminution of the power of these entrenched elites with their tremendous resistance to positive change.

But the thing is one of the things that gives the system its resilience against revolution, but also its resilience against positive change, was summed up by the epigraph that I actually wanted, but it would have cost too much. It's the [Bruce Springsteen](#) song, "Highway Patrolman," the refrain of which goes: *Man turns his back on his family, he ain't no good.*

The thing is that so many of these structures in Pakistan—we see them as purely negative, but they are rooted in profound loyalty to kinship ties, and that's what gives them their toughness. But that also gives them their ability to resist all the kinds of positive developments that we want to see.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: As a good New Jerseyan, I, of course, appreciate and understand fully the Springsteen ethos here.**

**Two final questions on regional issues, Anatol. The last time you were here, we spoke of the strategic importance in the context of an extended region for an Afghan solution—for example, India, Russia, China, even Iran, where there is a confluence of interests with the U.S., although it's not immediately evident to U.S. officials. How do you see that? Has there been any positive movement in that direction as far as you see, looking more broadly at a regional solution?**

**ANATOL LIEVEN:** Well, glacial. I have been part of some track two-ish stuff, as it's called, private conferences

between Indians and Pakistanis. It has at least got to the point where sensible people in both the Pakistani and the Indian security establishments realize that neither side will get most of what they want in Afghanistan; they will have to settle for something less. Once you get to that point, you can then begin to talk about possible compromises.

There has been just the beginning of greater Russian involvement in Afghanistan, but also just the beginning of Russian thinking about whether it might be possible via Pakistan to do some kind of a deal with the Taliban that would meet Russian fears—both of international terrorism directed against them and also of something which isn't talked about nearly enough in America because it doesn't really affect America, but is of tremendous importance to Russia and Europe, which is heroin. The only force in Afghanistan for 30 years now which has been able to suppress the heroin trade—for its own reasons—in 1999-2000, was the Taliban. They are the only people who have been able to control the countryside. So clearly, as part of any deal with the Taliban, their suppressing the heroin trade would have to be a key part of that, in return for a continuation of Western aid.

That's something which also draws in the Iranians, who have suffered terribly from Afghan heroin.

So some of the building blocks of a possible peace settlement, both within Afghanistan, and also involving the interests of the great powers, are already visible. But whether it will really be possible to put them together in a foundation for peace, that I'm not sure. At the first stage of bringing the Taliban in and talking to them, Pakistan is critical, because Taliban leadership is in Pakistan, apart from everything else.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: Finally, again, we have spoken in passing about India, the chronic state of rivalry between two nuclear powers, and you do say that the West and the U.S., must do what it can to seek a peaceful solution to Kashmir.**

**The same question: Do you see any progress, even glacial, on that score?**

**ANATOL LIEVEN:** Very little. In fact, I have somewhat modified my position in the book. What we may have to settle for is a continuation of a basically Cold-War relationship between India and Pakistan. But during the Cold War, it was possible for Washington and Moscow to reach limited deals on certain areas. It might be possible for India and Pakistan to reach a limited deal on Afghanistan, but the U.S. will need to invest a great deal of diplomatic attention to this. It might also be possible to reach a South Asian version of [START](#), agreeing on mutual limits on nuclear weapons. That is of tremendous importance to us, because of the apocalyptic threat—for me, not actually so much of the weapons themselves, but of Pakistan's nuclear materials and expertise falling into the hands of terrorists, quite apart from the risk of an accidental nuclear war.

So that's the approach I would take—rather than going head-on at an issue which may at present be insoluble, see if we can work around it and reach limited but still crucially important agreement on other areas.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: On that note of qualified but discernible optimism, our guest has been Anatol Lieven of King's College London. His book is *Pakistan: A Hard Country*, a truly magisterial work, Anatol, and an enormous contribution to this enormously important country.**

**Thank you again for being with us.**

**ANATOL LIEVEN:** Thank you, David.

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