KnowledgeNews

A Peek at Pakistan

Pakistan makes world news headlines all the time. You know that the nuclear-armed nation is both a key U.S. ally in the fight against al-Qaeda and a major base for al-Qaeda. But what else do you know about it?

The Indus River Runs Through It

With nearly 165 million people, Pakistan is the world's sixth most populous country. Only China, India, the United States, Indonesia, and Brazil have more people. Among mainly Muslim countries, Pakistan is the second largest (after Indonesia), and the only one with nuclear weapons.

Squeezed between Iran (to the west), Afghanistan (to the northwest), China (to the northeast), and India (to the southeast), Pakistan is home to the Indus River Valley, where one of the earliest known human civilizations flourished some 4,000 years ago. Yet the nation itself is just 60 years old.

How the East Was Lost

Modern Pakistan was born through the partition of the Indian subcontinent when the British left in 1947. The idea behind the partition was to create an independent Muslim nation from mainly Muslim regions within otherwise Hindu-dominated India. Practically since partition, India and Pakistan have been at each other's throats—especially over Kashmir, a northern region to which each lays claim.

For its first 24 years, Pakistan had two major parts: East Pakistan, which is now Bangladesh, and West Pakistan, which is still Pakistan. East and West Pakistan were separated by 1,000 miles of India, which intervened to help East Pakistan secede in a brief but bloody civil war in 1971.

The Man with the Golden Centrifuge

In 1972, a shrunken and severely weakened Pakistan secretly launched its nuclear weapons program. The program gained momentum after India tested its first nuclear device in 1974, and again after the return of German-trained nuclear scientist Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan in 1976. A.Q. Khan would become a Pakistani hero by building the first "Islamic Bomb." He would also become an international pariah by passing on nuclear secrets to the likes of North Korea.

According to Pakistani sources, the nation was nuclear-capable by the late 1980s, though it didn't test a bomb until a nuclear standoff with India in 1998. That test led to economic sanctions that Pakistan's poor could ill afford.

Big Trouble in Little Karachi

In 1999, Pakistan's prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, tried to fire his army chief, General Pervez Musharraf. He even tried to prevent the general's international flight from landing at the Karachi airport. In response, the army seized the airport—then captured the rest of the country in a bloodless coup. Musharraf has been in charge ever since.

Many ordinary Pakistanis welcomed Musharraf's coup. It swept out a largely inefficient and corrupt government, and it was hardly a departure from Pakistan's past. Military regimes have alternated with elected governments throughout the nation's brief history. Still, the coup left Pakistan's government on the outs with much of the world, which already looked down on the nation's nuclear program.

It also did little to fix Pakistan's internal political and economic problems. One of the nation's four provinces—the North-West Frontier Province—is practically beyond the federal government's control. And much of the population of another province, Balochistan, wishes it were, too. Meanwhile, about a third of Pakistanis live in poverty.

Shall We Dance?

Pakistan's economic prospects got a lift after September 11, 2001, when the nation became a key U.S. ally. Breaking with his former friends in the Taliban, President Musharraf agreed to provide support for the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan. At the same time, the United States dropped most of the sanctions it had imposed when Pakistan began nuclear tests in 1998.

Musharraf's decision to align with the United States proved unpopular with many of his people—notably the Islamic fundamentalists and the ethnic Pashtuns in the North-West Frontier Province. Yet, like his coup, the move was in some ways a throwback to the old days.

As a Cold War ally, Pakistan received billions of dollars of U.S. aid during the 1980s, when the Soviets were in Afghanistan. And the nation might never have survived at all had it not been for Cold War aid during the 1950s. Still, the relationship often seems to embarrass both sides. Over time, Pakistan may be more keen on cultivating ties with the neighbor it calls its "all-weather" friend: China.

—Steve Sampson

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