THE BAD AND WORSE IN PAKISTAN

Pakistan reminds us that in foreign policy, often the only choices we have are between bad and worse.

The war in Iraq is winding down. U.S. deaths in December (21) were the second lowest monthly total, and the tally for October, November and December (93) was the lowest three month period of the entire war.

Insurgents are taking a pounding in Afghanistan. In 2007, 231 Allied troops (110 of them Americans) and about 1,000 Afghan soldiers and policemen were killed. But al Qaeda, the Taliban, and drug gangs allied with them lost an estimated 4,500 dead and several thousand more arrested.

The heavy losses have caused the Taliban to split, with Taliban leader Mullah Omar taking the unusual step of firing Mullah Mansoor Dadullah, his commander in southern Afghanistan. (Just as an aside, try to say "Mullah Dadullah" three times without laughing.)

So Pakistan has become the central front in the war on terror. Perhaps it always was, since al Qaeda's leadership took up residence there after being chased out of Afghanistan, and the war in Afghanistan cannot be won so long as the Taliban has a safe haven in Pakistan's northwest territories.

The assassination Dec. 27 of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto may turn what for us has been an unsatisfactory situation into a catastrophe.

We've been relying on Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf to tamp down Islamic radicalism in his own country, and to interdict supplies and reinforcements for the Taliban in Afghanistan. But as one observer has noted, this strategy was "triply flawed."

First, because it's doubtful that the Pakistani army -- even if it were united and motivated to do so -- has the capacity to carry out the mission. Second, because it's clear that many in the army and especially in the intelligence service sympathize with the Islamists. Third, because Gen. Musharraf is more interested in hanging onto power than in doing America's bidding.

So Mr. Musharraf is a slender reed on which to lean. But he's a stout oak compared to the alternatives.

Benazir Bhutto has been lionized in the Western news media since her assassination. She was beautiful, brave, and skilled at telling liberals want they want to hear. But Ms. Bhutto's two terms as prime minister (1988-1990 and 1993-1996) were disasters in which the standard of living in Pakistan plunged and Islamic radicalism soared. She talked a much better game than she played.

Ms. Bhutto's administrations were disasters chiefly because she and her husband -- Asif Ali Zardari, aka "Mr. Ten Percent" -- were so corrupt. They squirreled away more than $100 million in foreign bank accounts. Canadian journalist David Warren described Ms. Bhutto as "the most spoiled brat I ever met."

The Pakistan People's Party she headed was never more than a vehicle for first, her father, and then for her to obtain power to use for personal enrichment. Its undemocratic nature was demonstrated when the PPP elected Ms. Bhutto's 19-year-old son, Bilawal, to succeed her, even though he's returning to school at Oxford in England. Mr. Ten Percent will run the party while her son completes his education.

The Bush administration pressured Gen. Musharraf to permit Ms. Bhutto to return from exile. The president hoped that she as prime minister and he as president would form a coalition to battle the Islamists. But as soon as she returned to Pakistan, Ms. Bhutto directed her rhetorical fire at Mr. Musharraf, not the Taliban.

But bad as a third Bhutto administration likely would have been, it'd have been preferable to having the other major "democratic" figure in Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif, (prime minister from 1990 to 1993, and again from 1997 to 1999) elected to a third term.

While Ms. Bhutto's Pakistani Peoples Party was (more or less) secular, Mr. Sharif drew much of his support from Islamists. He strongly supported creation of the Taliban, and it was during his second term that Pakistan developed the atomic bomb.

Shortly before he was overthrown by then Gen. Musharraf, Mr. Sharif accepted a $1 million bribe from Osama bin Laden, one time bin Laden intimate Ali Mohamed told the FBI. Mr. Sharif's friendship with the al Qaeda leader goes back to the 1980s, a former officer of Pakistan's intelligence service told ABC News.

Because of Ms. Bhutto's assassination, the parliamentary elections scheduled for Tuesday have been postponed to Feb. 18. In view of the fact that Mr. Sharif is now the leading political figure (after the increasingly unpopular Mr. Musharraf) in Pakistan, that's probably a good thing.

[*Addendum by JW:* One knowledgeable TTPer with long experience in Pakistan posted this comment recently in the User Forum. It's a great example of what a valuable asset the Forum is.

"More than probably, Makhdoom Amin Fahim, a man I know personally as a gentle PPP politician and old friend of the Bhuttos will be stand-in prime minister for Assif Zardari (90% sure).

The newest nugget is the very strong suspicion I have that Zardari cooperated to eliminate his wife for getting all the power in his hands, the man never showed any grief, on the contrary he couldn't

hide his satisfaction. I recognized his leering expression from the past.

Conclusion: there is a temporary truce in Pakistan between ISI, Zardari and PPP, and Musharraf.

Result: calm returns slowly to Pakistan and everybody recuperates for the next round.

Smuggling will continue unabated and Pakistan will be politically calm for about 5 years until the next fight breaks out. Nawaz Sharif will not be winning anymore.

I suppose some terrorists will be caught to appease the US and the Taliban will not be making too many waves.

The army came out stronger in this because they stayed in their barracks and the population respects that as the only source of stability in this political turmoil. The ISI is very much weakened by the suspicion of their foul games amongst the population.

The only joker to be eliminated now is Zardari but that will take time. Now, everybody needs R&R."]