

**Book Review: CHRISTIAN WAGNER: Brennpunkt  
Pakistan. Islamische Atommacht im 21.  
Jahrhundert. Bonn: Dietz, 2012. 191 pages, 1 map,  
1 figure, 5 tables, € 16.90. ISBN 978-3-8012-0424-2**

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CHRISTIAN WAGNER, *Brennpunkt Pakistan. Islamische Atommacht im 21. Jahrhundert*. Bonn: Dietz, 2012. 191 pages, 1 map, 1 figure, 5 tables, € 16.90. ISBN 978-3-8012-0424-2

Since the 9/11-attacks in 2001 and the proclamation by the USA of global war on terrorism, Pakistan has gained renewed attention in international politics and Western media. Just three years before being suddenly thrust centre stage in international affairs as a frontline state in US geopolitics, Pakistan had become the first and only Islamic state to acquire nuclear weapons. In view of Pakistan's ongoing struggles with Islamist militant groups and terror attacks, Western media readily developed a narrative of the imminent threat of the "Talibanization" of the country. They sketched a scenario of the "Islamic bomb" falling into the hands of Islamist terrorists in a collapsing state, thus earning Pakistan the unflattering title of "the most dangerous country of the world".

In his book *Brennpunkt Pakistan* Christian Wagner's dual objective is to correct and counterbalance the often negative, one-sided and distorted picture of Pakistan drawn in the media by presenting a more detailed depiction of a country with democratic traditions, moderate attitudes, liberal media and an active civil society. In his view, these factors make the "Talibanization" and disintegration of the state highly unlikely. His account is based on the presentation of historical facts and developments as well as political analysis, drawing on his profound knowledge and experience as head of the Asia research division at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP).

He fully achieves the second of his objectives – to present a more detailed picture – by covering a broad range of political, social, cultural, ethnographical and ideological aspects in a highly condensed, but well-readable and coherent

historical perspective. Particularly for general readers not familiar with Pakistan, the concise thematic overviews, which can also be read independently, offer a quick summary of Pakistan's political, social and ideological history and current developments. However, the first of his objectives, namely to provide an alternative to the narrow view of Pakistan offered by the media, is only partly fulfilled. Christian Wagner himself applies a very specific perspective on Pakistan by observing it mainly through the prism of geostrategic and security affairs. His analysis of Pakistan's difficult situation is largely focussed on the military, the secret service, militant groups and foreign strategic interests. The book is silent about the country's other pressing problems – human rights issues, gender inequalities, the permanent educational crisis, the demographic challenge, the energy crisis, rising food prices, deepening socio-economic inequalities and increasing marginalization – all of which are major determinants of stability or instability, growing militancy or tolerance and peaceful cooperation in Pakistan.

The book is divided into two parts dedicated to the analysis of internal politics and foreign relations, respectively, since Pakistan's independence. Running like variations on a theme through both parts is Christian Wagner's key analytical metaphor of Pakistan as a "cantonment democracy", in which real power in the state lies with the military. The military sets the narrow limits for democratic institutions, has assumed power in Pakistan several times in military coups and has successfully prevented any attempts to enforce the primacy of civil authority. As if this were not enough, the power of the military stretches far beyond the political realm: the military is the most important economic player in the country, has penetrated civil institutions from the public service to universities, and is influential in shaping discourses on state policy and national ideology.

In the first part of the book, Christian Wagner analyses the military primacy in separate sections dealing with domestic politics, national security, economy, national identity, the role of religion in the state and nation-building in the context of Pakistan's linguistic and ethnic heterogeneity. In the second part of the book he demonstrates how military and strategic questions and the agenda of the military and secret service have always dominated Pakistan's foreign policy, be it in relation to its "difficult neighbours" India and Afghanistan or to its "difficult friends" the USA and China. Christian Wagner identifies the military as "certainly bearing the main responsibility" (p. 12–13; my translation) for Pakistan's problems and negative developments. But this is not the end of his analysis. He goes on to reveal the multiple complicity of Pakistan's civil elites, political parties and civil institutions in reproducing the military primacy, e.g., by politicians readily joining hands with the military for their own party interests, by the judiciary sanctioning military coups *ex post*, and by democratic governments appealing to the military for help in times of domestic political conflict. Clear distinctions between the military and democratic institutions are

blurred in the context of a political system in which the “basic elements” (p. 55; my translation) are influential family and patronage networks with members in all relevant sectors of power.

Furthermore, he points out the central role of foreign states in strengthening the power of the military and secret service in Pakistan, in particular the USA, which several times co-opted Pakistan as a frontline state in pursuance of their own geo-strategic interests, and for the most part have cooperated with and strongly supported military regimes in Pakistan. Due to this multiple complicity with the military in Pakistan, Christian Wagner does not see any relevant player inside or outside Pakistan that has an interest in changing the established status quo of the civil-military power balance in the country. This is bad news for all those who hope that the democratic process will make progress; but, as Christian Wagner concludes, it seems to be the price the “international community” (read: USA) is ready to pay to guarantee the “precarious stability of this cantonment democracy” (p. 136; my translation) and the supposed security of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons.

*Andreas Benz*