Countering Pakistan's Internal Threats

An examination of the internal security threat to Pakistan and the ability of the Pakistan Army to meet it

Brian Cloughley

There are two main types of internal violence occupying the attention of the army in Pakistan: the comparatively new but ever-present threat of suicide bombings, many specifically directed against military personnel and bases; and ongoing conflict in the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and Balochistan. Both are major challenges and the latter requires extensive specialist training, while achieving balance in force structure and capabilities is proving time-consuming and expensive.

Pakistan has a short history of suicide bombings, the first recorded being in 1995 when an Egyptian citizen tried to drive a bomb-laden truck into the Egyptian Embassy compound in Islamabad. In 2002, a suicide bomber killed 14 people in Karachi (including 11 French technicians employed at the naval dockyard), and there were two such attacks in 2005, both caused by disputes between Sunni and Shia extremists (most Sunnis and Shias get along perfectly well in Pakistan, but the wild men are always on the lookout for an opportunity to encourage hatred by bombing or otherwise murdering those of the differing persuasion). In 2006 there were six attacks: two Shia-Sunni; the others aimed at US and security forces targets. In 2007, there were over fifty, most of which directly targeted military forces, especially soft objectives such as bus transport linking residential areas to military bases. In Rawalpindi last November, there were attacks on check-posts and buses that killed 16 people, and on December 10, an air force school bus at Kamra, close to Islamabad, was hit by a suicide car-bomber, injuring five children. It appears that army operations in the NWFP and US unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) strikes and other US incursions in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) bordering Afghanistan had at least some influence on the extremists. There is little doubt that the army's action at

Brian Cloughley is a Commentator on South Asian Political and Military Affairs.

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In the first quarter of 2008, there were 18 suicide bombings in Pakistan, in which 250 people were killed. (Iran had 13, although the casualty figure was higher, at 274.) There are many theories concerning the origins and driving force of the bombers, but the task of the army is not to determine motivation but rather to counter the menace by whatever means practicable. But the nature of the threat is such that anything approaching full-scale protection is impossible in social, financial and physical terms. The costs of securing facilities, alone, is proving a severe burden, especially as many establishments are in urban areas with multiple means of access. And even given armed escorts for such transport as military school buses, it is apparent that such measures mean little to a determined assailant, as demonstrated by the killing of the army's surgeon general in February by a pedestrian teenage bomber when the general's car stopped at traffic lights.

Many protective measures have been put in place, but when obsessive terrorists are intent on carrying out suicide missions, there is little that can be done to prevent them. The effect on the defence forces as a whole has been heightened awareness of the threat and realisation that Islamic fanaticism can be targeted anywhere, not just against secular or allegedly secular agencies or organisations. Ironically, but healthily, there appears to be rising consciousness of the fact that Islamic extremists are far from averse to murdering their co-religionists and that their fanaticism is directed just as ferociously against military dependants and doctors as against those considered to be the deepest-dyed enemies of their faith.

It might appear that religious faith is the paramount factor in the violence in the NWFP and Balochistan, but the problem in both provinces derives equally or even more markedly from an archaic societal culture, deep-dyed inflexible custom, and inherent proclivity for mayhem on the part of the tribes, the latter fed and encouraged by US missile strikes and other action within Pakistan's territory. The tribes are given to rigid religiosity and, thus, justify their actions in

attacking security forces (army and paramilitary) by claiming that these are acting on behalf of irreligious foreigners, which, indeed, is a widespread perception throughout Pakistan. No matter what the rationale for violence may be—and irrespective of whether the justification is credible, wilfully misrepresented or entirely fabricated — the undeniable fact is the FATA of Pakistan has been a region of semi-anarchy in which violence is the norm.

In Balochistan a violent 'freedom' movement overlays the reality that leaders of tribally-established gangs indulge in feudal oppression, large-scale smuggling, and other illegal activities. Over the years, extensive government subsidies to tribal leaders for the purpose of improving social conditions of their peoples have resulted in no improvements to their lives, unless enhanced armament of private armies can be considered in that category. While the province has undoubtedly been neglected by Islamabad governments for decades (the first military operation to crush the tribes was ordered by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto in the 1970s), the veneer of 'freedom-fighting' quasi-respectability disguises the essentially anarchic and criminal nature of the violence. The standard of governance in the province may be assessed from the fact that in the 62-seat Assembly elected in April 2008, there are 41 ministers.

On May 2, 2008, federal Prime Minister Syed Yusuf Gilani stated that military operations in Balochistan had been stopped until he was "briefed by the new provincial government on the ground realities in the province."

It appears not to be widely known that the FATA tribes have large supplies of weapons, including mortars, heavy machine guns, and rocket-launchers of many types. These have on occasion been used during inter-tribal quarrels, which now tend to involve drug-smuggling rather than the ancient disputes over land, water and women, but in current circumstances have also figured in attacks on outposts of the paramilitary Frontier Corps and on the army itself. Their use in built-up areas, concurrent with usual tribal tactics of the ambush and other classic guerrilla manoeuvres, has resulted in a requirement for the army to concentrate on counter-insurgency procedures and training, while also necessitating enhanced ground-air cooperation. (The general standard of air-land teamwork is good, especially with Cobra attack helicopters, largely because these are under direct army command instead of being air force assets.)

The Pakistan Army concentrated on conventional warfare for decades, with only comparatively minor attention being given to internal security/counter-insurgency (IS/CI) because the requirement was minimal. Given the unrest in

the tribal areas that followed the US invasion of Afghanistan, it became necessary to focus more intensively on counter-insurgency training, as routine troop rotation and movement of reinforcements from the eastern border diluted expertise in the west. Courses of instruction in mountain patrolling, anti-ambush drills, cordon and search and other arcane arts of anti-guerrilla operations were given priority, with satisfactory results, but not before several incidents occurred in which paramilitary forces and even some regular troops were wrong-footed by the tribesmen, and casualties had mounted.

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The threat in the NWFP remains acute and is likely to remain so for as long as the conflict in Afghanistan continues. The US and other forces in Afghanistan are incapable of securing the border from the west, just as Pakistan finds it impossible to do so from its side, therefore, passage of guerrillas (be these referred to as the 'Taliban' or 'Al Qaeda') across the border will also continue. There is no such thing as a secure border, as evidenced in America's frontier with Mexico which, in spite of the billions of dollars being expended in attempts to secure it, remains "porous" (as former US Defence Secretary Rumsfeld so accurately defined Afghanistan's eastern border).

The major difficulty for Pakistan is that the Frontier tribes have been increasingly alienated from mainstream society in recent years, in considerable measure because US missile attacks have killed civilians. There is hardly a citizen of the NWFP — and few throughout Pakistan — who would not condemn the US, and, by association, the government in Islamabad, for committing what are regarded as atrocities. (Implications of international law as that bears on attacks on civilians and infringements of sovereignty are irrelevant in the tribal context.) The army is, therefore, faced in the tribal areas with an increasingly hostile population having scores of thousands of unemployed youths whose intrinsic penchant for violence is becoming less controllable. The US strikes have been the Taliban's best recruiter, but the government in Islamabad appears to have adopted a cautious approach, combining offers of peace deals with a less high profile army presence.

The army is naturally following the political developments with interest. Its operations in South Waziristan Agency (SWA) since late 2007 have been successful (in no small part by reason of skilled and energetic leadership), but there is some concern that the extremists, led by Baitullah Mehsud, a vicious criminal with overtones of religiosity and a considerable following, could take advantage of a lull in order to regroup and extend his power. But while the army is capable of maintaining its ascendancy indefinitely, there must be speedy political and economic initiatives taken in order to erode the influence of such as Baitullah in SWA and others of similar inclination elsewhere in the tribal areas and throughout the NWFP.

As the British found in colonial times in the Frontier, there is a delicate balance between achieving stability through military pressure and maintaining and attempting to further it by encouraging education, health care and employment. The tribes in general remain to be persuaded that these societal advances are desirable, largely because their feudal leaders and religious fanatics consider (rightly) that their authority would decline were civilisation to apply. Their fear of change and progress, usually justified on quasi-religious and supposedly cultural grounds, is a powerful influence on uneducated conservative tribesmen. Education, especially that of females, is a major threat to these autocrats, and will continue to be strongly resisted. (A high school for girls in the NWFP was burned down by religious fanatics on May 4, 2008.)

There is no easy solution in the Frontier. The army can be relied on to ensure continuance of a reasonable degree of law and order, but it is up to the governments in Islamabad and Peshawar to develop a new social structure, which will be an uphill struggle.