

Insurgency in the FATA & NWFP: Challenges & Prospects for the Pakistan Army

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The Context

The Afghanistan-Pakistan border area with its armed tribes, smuggling, weak central government authority, and incessant warfare, is 2,640 kilometres long, much of it spanning terrain so remote and mountainous that it is virtually inaccessible (see Appendix: Map 1). In the years preceding the formation of Pakistan, British troops had waged wars of varying intensity with a group of obdurate tribes along and beyond the northwestern frontier of the Indian subcontinent for many years. It was a savage, brutal and atypical kind of mountain warfare, frequently driven by religious zealotry on the tribal side and was exceptionally intolerant of tactical error, fleeting negligence, or cultural unawareness.

Ever since the Pakistani army has had to control the region, the fighting has changed in character. After the Pakistani army's action against the resident population of East Pakistan in 1971 under General Yahya Khan and against the tribes of Balochistan in 1973 under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and more recently against the Bugti tribe, today the Pakistani army is operating within its borders again. The opponent now is the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, which has modeled itself after the radical right wing and fundamentalist former regime of Afghanistan. It includes elements from the original Taliban, as well as the Al Qaeda, and is operating in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas [FATA] that form the no-man's land between Pakistan's North West Frontier Province [NWFP] and the Durand Line (the disputed international border between Afghanistan and Pakistan). Over sixty years of political and military crises in the region have alienated it, added to which, a misdirected military approach by the Musharraf regime, which bypassed the local population and civil administration, has isolated the tribal chiefs of the FATA

and NWFP. This has given insurgents and Islamists the upper hand. Also, the army itself is beset with a breakdown in its discipline, as members of the Pakistani army in general and the Frontier Corps in particular, shy away from conducting operations against their fellow tribesmen.

Aim & Scope

To begin with, this paper describes the tribal areas of the FATA and NWFP and their political and military situation, providing an overview of the situation in the provinces. Secondly, it assesses the transformation of the given region, with the emergence of radical extremism in the form of the Taliban and the arrival of the Al-Qaeda. Thirdly, it portrays the rise of insurgency in the region, before elaborating on more recent developments in the region, including the peace accords. Finally, the paper questions whether the standard tactical orientation of the Pakistani Army is suited to the current situation and suggests a counter-insurgency strategy for the same. In conclusion, the paper addresses the larger implications of the situation for the region, with reference to Afghanistan, India and the United States of America.

Background to FATA & NWFP

“These [the FATA and NWFP] are areas where Islamic militancy is strongest. These are also areas which have been economically completely neglected by their own regimes, and by the international community. I think it is the classic case of a combination of poverty, growing unemployment, and the youth bulge fuelling and spurring on extremism”

- Ahmed Rashid¹

With an area of 27,000 square kilometers, and a 600-kilometer border with Afghanistan, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas [FATA] is divided into seven agencies, or administrative units, which from north to south are Bajaur, Momand, Khyber, Orakzai, Kurram, and North and South Waziristan (see Appendix: Map 2). A few more frontier groups adjacent to the settled districts of Peshawar, Kohat, Dera Ismail Khan, Bannu, and Tank are also part of the FATA. The area had a population of approximately 3.1 million people according to the 1998 census, and current unofficial estimates tout the figure at upto 7 million, mostly ethnic Pashtuns whose tribes straddle the Durand Line.²

The North West Frontier Province [NWFP] is spread over an area of 74,251 square kilometers, with 24 districts and a population of 17.7 million,³ bordering Afghanistan to the northwest, the Northern Areas of Pakistan to the northeast, Pakistan Occupied Kashmir to the east, the FATA to the west and south, and Pakistani Punjab and Islamabad Capital Territory to the southeast. The population of NWFP is nearly all-Pashtun, as are 13 million inhabitants of Afghanistan's border regions.⁴

The area is governed by the Frontier Crimes Regulation Ordinance (FCR), which the British implemented in 1901, based upon tribal customs and the Pashtun code of ethics. Under the FCR, governance rests in the hands of the Political Agent (PA), representing the government, along with the *maliks*, or tribal elders. The PA retains all local executive powers. Under them, a political agent may impose an economic blockade or siege of 'hostile' or 'unfriendly' tribes or inflict fines on whole communities where certain 'crimes' have been committed. He can prohibit the construction of houses and raze houses of tribal members as punishment for not meeting the agent's demands. Some of the harshest clauses establish collective responsibility, under which an entire tribe can be held responsible for crimes committed by a single member or occurring anywhere within that tribe's territory.

Also, the law empowers the political agent to deliver multi-year jail sentences without due process or right of appeal to any superior court. The political agent also can appoint and refer civil and criminal cases to a handpicked *jirga*, or tribal council. The administration also manipulates local politics through its exploitation of the system of appointed tribal leadership; hand-picked tribal leaders are showered with government allowances and other economic incentives in return for loyalty. Such unparalleled power over the areas has led to widespread corruption, with tribal administrators controlling local funds illegally, weakening the administration considerably.

According to the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan, the population of the FATA is represented in Pakistan's National Assembly. The Constitution also gives the President executive authority over the area. However, governance of the region continues to be under the FCR. Thus, in effect, the area is ruled from Peshawar, where the Governor of the NWFP is based. In the exercise of over-arching authority,⁵ the provincial government controls all the agencies that deliver services such as health care, education, support for agriculture, and communications in the tribal areas. Albeit, the people of the

FATA have no representation in the NWFP provincial assembly to which the government is constitutionally accountable. Moreover, the administrative arrangements of the FATA deprive tribal members of political participation and economic development. All political parties, aid agencies, and civil society organizations are banned from working in the tribal areas, although radical extremist clerics are free to preach and campaign. Consequently, such clerics have won most of the elections held on a non-party basis after adult franchise was introduced in 1996.

The FATA is economically less developed than most other parts of Pakistan, and the massive influx of refugees following the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, followed by the Afghan Civil War, put an unsustainable level of pressure on the regions' resources, in addition to the general instability that exists on the periphery of conflict. Official Pakistani border controls which were already weak became practically non-existent; and arms, recruits and supplies were channeled into Afghanistan, first to the *mujahedeen* factions and then later to the Taliban, many of whom originated from these areas.

Radical Extremism – The Taliban and the Al-Qaeda in the region

Observations during the years following the U.S.-led overthrow of the Taliban revealed that Afghanistan had suffered a tremendous amount of physical damage, inflicted by 25 years of war on an already nominal infrastructure. This was the result of five episodes of conflict with almost no intervening periods of peace. The first was the Soviet invasion, when uprisings against the government, notably in the Herat Province in western Afghanistan and in the Konar Province in the east, were followed by the occupation of Afghanistan by the Soviet Army in December 1979. This war lasted almost a decade, reaching its height in 1985, when the Soviets made a final major push to win the war—while also devastating the countryside in a counterinsurgency strategy based on forced depopulation. The results of this approach can be seen to this day, not only in the Afghan refugees still living in Pakistan and Iran, but in destroyed irrigation systems, numerous minefields, and ruined villages.

The second episode of warfare pitted the Communist regime of President Najibullah against the *mujahedeen* groups formed to fight the Soviets, ending in 1992 with the collapse of this regime. Following this was

what many Afghans remember as a period worse than the Soviet war: the fighting between the various *mujahedeen* factions. The incongruent guerrilla forces that had triumphed proved unable to unite, and Afghanistan became divided into spheres of control. These political divisions set the stage for the rise of the Taliban later in the decade. This civil war resulted in the destruction of much of the province of Kabul, particularly West Kabul, areas of which remain in ruins. In reaction to the resulting anarchy, a fourth episode of fighting ensued, with the Pakistani-backed Taliban beginning operations in Kandahar Province in November 1994, advancing from there to capture Herat and eventually Kabul. Finally, the fifth, almost *blitzkrieg* period of war began with the U.S.-sponsored defeat of the Taliban and al-Qaeda in late 2001.

Although the physical damage resulting from these wars was more apparent, the damage to society at large was far more extensive. For one, it was the sheer number of people killed, with more than one million Afghan civilians losing their lives in the war against the Soviets out of an estimated population of sixteen million in 1979. Equally striking were the masses of refugees, with more than five million displaced, mostly to Iran and Pakistan. These socio-political crises in Afghanistan precipitated the rise of radical extremist movements in the region, which in turn had far-reaching consequences for the governance of the FATA and the NWFP.

Moreover, following wartime tradition, *mullahs* stepped up to become military commanders during the war against the Soviets. Without doubt, the length and intensity of the war, together with the destruction of the Afghan state, increased the role of *mullahs* in society. At the same time, as the war against the Soviets dragged on, the Afghan education system, for the most part, ceased to exist; as a result, *madrassas* in Pakistan began to provide religion-based education to refugees. Of the seven major *mujahedeen* groups, the government of Pakistani President Zia ul-Haq favored those with more radical leanings, particularly the Hizb-e-Islami of Hekmatyar, the Jamaat-e-Islami under Rabbani, and the faction under Abdul Rasul Sayyaf (who was also backed by Saudi Arabia). More moderate elements received less money and arms or were forced to merge with the better-supported groups.

This combination of factors led to the growth of a movement that was later to culminate in the formation of the Taliban, which started off as a group of hard-line religious students in Afghanistan and gained control of the

country in the mid-1990s. The country had been devastated, first by the brutal war against the Soviet Union, and then in an even bloodier civil war that filled the void that followed the Soviet exit. In these circumstances, the Taliban initially gained the support of some who would not have otherwise been drawn to their extreme religious views.⁶ Once in power, the group imposed the strict fundamentalist enforcement of Islamic law, banning movies, music and the like. The Taliban also provided a haven for Osama bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda organisation. International condemnation of its harsh measures had little effect on the regime, which seemed almost to welcome its pariah status.

After the attack on the World Trade Center Towers in New York on September 11, 2001, American President George W. Bush gave the Taliban an ultimatum to hand over bin Laden. When it refused, the United States joined forces with rebel groups that had never accepted Taliban rule, notably the Northern Alliance, which represented minority tribes. An air and ground campaign began driving the Taliban out of major Afghan cities by the end of the year. Analysts believe that many of the regime's members and supporters then fled across the border into Pakistan, particularly into the ethnically Pashtun areas around Peshawar and in the FATA.

At this time, the tribes (in the FATA and NWFP) were stunned when their Taliban allies were branded terrorists by Islamabad and banned from Pakistani territory. Not only was this seen in the tribal belt as a direct attack on the ethnic cohesion of Pashtuns, but it established popular narrative in which Musharraf had betrayed the principle of Islamic solidarity. This belief finds its roots in the Islamization of the Pakistan Army under General Zia, wherein armed forces personnel were encouraged to view the *mujahedeen* and the like as their comrade-in-arms. Coupled with a cultural norm of hospitality, Islamabad's policy impelled tribesmen to shelter not only the Taliban, but also the Al Qaeda fighters who fled from Afghanistan. Interestingly, the average tribesman did not so much support Al Qaeda's pan-Islamic extremist agenda as he believed that it was his moral duty to shelter these extremists from an invading foreign power. As a result, the Taliban, along with other radical Islamist groups including al-Qaeda, Hizb-e-Islami (Gulbuddin) and the Haqqani network, attempted to establish themselves and their extremist beliefs in the NWFP, which was to be their new base of operations.

The ‘Talibanisation’ of the region is undeniable: there have been closures of schools, including almost all girls’ schools; imposition of a non-shaving regulation; the bombing of NGO-sponsored hospitals; destruction of shops and persecution of shopkeepers selling ‘un-Islamic’ dress, music CDs and film DVDs; enforced refusal of polio injections for infants; banning of music cassettes in vehicles; and other similar decrees. This was followed by the emergence of a new generation of militants in Pakistan. Although they are generally referred to as the Taliban, this new generation is all-Pakistani. They represent a revolt against the government’s support for the US. They are led by young *mullahs*, who unlike the original Taliban are technology- and media-savvy, and are influenced by various indigenous tribal nationalisms, honoring the tribal codes that govern social life in Pakistan’s rural areas. They are Taliban in the sense that they share the same ideology as the Taliban in Afghanistan, but they are totally Pakistani.⁷

The Taliban now has a robust sanctuary in Pakistan’s tribal areas and this is a major factor in their resurgence. The tribal areas have historically been “no-go” zones for the Pakistani military, and the Pakistan armed forces have never performed well in operations there [such as the unsuccessful suppression of the Balochistan uprising under ZA Bhutto’s government]. Apart from near-term tactical military successes, the political momentum of radicalization in the north appears to have gone beyond the power of the Pakistani state to contain it, let alone suppress it, which suggests that the odds are slim to none of the radical extremist being suppressed conveniently. The short-term policy consequences of this ongoing radicalization, and the failure of the Pakistani government to prohibit refuge for the Taliban as well as foreign *jihadis* in the FATA, are the continued destabilization of southern Afghanistan, the spread of the Taliban insurgency, and the further subversion of democracy in Pakistan.

The Breakdown of Governance & the Rise of Insurgency

“No one questions that the rugged border area skirting Pakistan and Afghanistan is home to Osama bin Laden and the remaining al Qaeda leadership, the remnants of Afghanistan’s Taliban movement, an indigenous Pakistani Taliban and other military Islamist armed groups.”

- William M. Arkin⁸

Even after more than fifty years of independence, the Pakistani state has failed to invest either in the human development of this area or in the physical infrastructure that would connect the FATA to the rest of Pakistan. Successive governments in Pakistan allowed the unruly situation in the FATA to develop over its sixty years of existence by retaining the anachronistic system of autonomous tribal government for the tribal areas rather than amalgamating them into the rest of the country and developing the region economically and politically (a combination of a *laissez faire* policy and willful neglect). The legacy of General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization that fed the rise of the *mullahs* as a counterpoint to the tribal leadership has further created a dissonance in the society of the FATA, giving the *mullahs* the upper hand. Pakistan found itself taking on a policing function on behalf of the US along its long and rugged western border. Few in the FATA enjoy the rights of Pakistanis elsewhere and arguably, as a result, most FATA residents have a negligible sense of responsibility and allegiance to the Pakistani state.

The present insurrection in the FATA began in February 2003, when the army conducted its first aggressive action (distinct from peaceful entry to the so-called 'No-Go' areas in 2002). The operation was mounted because of reports that militants from Afghanistan were present at the frontier. Gradually tension and resistance to the Pakistan Army presence rose, and this became more acute in December 2003, when the military increased the intensity of its own operations. So began a new era of major military confrontation in the FATA.

A consideration in this development is the expansion of the role of *mullahs* and political Islam (the importance of following *sharia* or Islamic law as the formal legal code of the government) into the FATA and adjoining areas. In 1996, the government introduced adult franchise into the FATA. However, political parties were not allowed to mobilize in the FATA as the elections were held on a non-party basis.⁹ But, since the Islamist parties controlled mosques and *madrassas*, Islamist candidates effectively had the opportunity to lobby for votes. Consequently, the tribal residents elected *mullahs* to represent the FATA in the national assembly in 1997. This situation continued in the 2002 national assembly elections, which also witnessed the election of *mullahs*. The election of religious leaders to represent the FATA in the national assembly was and remains an important

departure from the past when *maliks* chose their tribal representatives to the parliament on secular and tribal bases. Now, *mullahs* are important power brokers and they enjoy the resources once reserved primarily for the *maliks*. It may be posited that the collapse of the *malik* is one of the most important changes in the FATA, along with the declining quality of bureaucratic talent in the Political Agency.

The Al Qaeda and the Taliban have extended their influence well beyond the tribal agencies and into 'settled' districts. The tribal agencies of Bajaur, Mohmand, and North and South Waziristan are firmly under Taliban control, and the Orakzai, Kurram, and Khyber regions are on the verge of falling into that camp as well. The police and military will not stray from their bases in the settled districts of Swat and Shangla as the Taliban recently took control of these areas, inflicting heavy casualties on the state's forces.

It was the failure of the Pakistani Army to bring the FATA under military control that compelled Pervez Musharraf's regime to change course and pursue several 'peace deals' with tribal leaders fronting for the Taliban leadership in Waziristan in 2004, 2005, and 2006.

In 2004, the Pakistani government concluded a deal with Pakistani Taliban led by Nek Mohammed in South Waziristan, under which the militants agreed to live peacefully and not use Pakistani soil against any other country. Hailed as a breakthrough when it was first brokered, by late 2007, the deal had been declared a failure.

In September 2006, the Pakistani government arrived at a contentious peace treaty called the Miramshah agreement with North Waziristan tribal leaders and members of the Taliban. As part of the accord, Islamabad withdrew troops, released 165 militants, agreed to monetarily compensate tribe members for their losses, and allowed them to continue carrying hand weapons. In return, tribal leaders agreed to stop the infiltration of militants across the Afghani border and prevent attacks on the military. However, in July 2007, militants renounced the deal and cross-border operations surged.

The 2005 South Waziristan Accord, known as the Sara Rogha Accord, and the 2006 North Waziristan Accord were both concluded after the Pakistan military suffered a host of defeats at the hands of Taliban and al Qaeda forces. After the signing of these peace accords, the Taliban and Al Qaeda conducted a brutal campaign against any tribal member suspected of

working with the Pakistani government or U.S. intelligence - beheadings of American spies were a daily occurrence.¹⁰

In March 2007, the government reached another deal with pro-Taliban militants and tribal leaders in the Bajaur agency. The tribesmen and the militants agreed not to give foreign militants refuge in the area and the government agreed not to make arrests without consulting tribal elders. But bombings and attacks on government property in the area followed, prompting renewed government efforts in August 2007 to negotiate with tribal elders and the militants. The militants insisted they were not responsible for the new violence while at the same time demanding the release of fellow militants arrested by government forces.

In August and September 2007, the government also signed peace treaties with different tribes in Mohmand agency, in which the tribes reiterated promises of not sheltering any foreigners or supporting the militants. But a ramification of these deals is that all of them, without exception, leave the Taliban in their stronghold.

The peace deals were a legacy of the British, something they dabbled in when they wanted to ensure a short-term alliance with a particular tribal chief, but since the local chiefs themselves have lost their powers, such deals were doomed to begin with. So far, these deals have brought negligible success. The Pakistani government has little means to force tribal leaders to hold up their end of the bargain, given the unpopularity of military intervention in the region. Also, the peace agreements have been widely criticized for strengthening militancy and are perceived as the central government's defeat at the hands of the militants (most of the agreements were concluded after skirmishes, in which the military suffered heavy casualties and/or surrenders).

While there is a considerable spillover of militancy from the tribal areas to the settled areas of NWFP, the fact is that the state has itself ceded space for radical Islam. The peace accords signed in Waziristan between the militants and the military regime further emboldened Islamist radicals and militants now operate openly and without fear. Thus, the NWFP has emerged as a sanctuary for militants from Waziristan as well as extremist elements from other parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Recent Developments

According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal,¹¹ there are more than a 100,000 soldiers currently deployed in the FATA and NWFP, to combat the insurgents. Five years after military operations were initiated against the Al-Qaeda – Taliban organization in the FATA, the radical coalition is the key advocate of an aggressive *jihad* that has achieved significant strategic successes and major victories. In 2007, 1,681 persons, comprising militants, civilians and Security Forces [SF] personnel, were killed in the region. After the Northern Province in Sri Lanka, the FATA is the second most violent sub-national geographical unit in South Asia. The command of the state has always been flimsy in Waziristan, but levels of violence have been continuously increasing. In 2005, 285 people, were killed in Waziristan in 165 incidents and in 2006, the death toll was 590, in 248 incidents.

Within the FATA, terrorist violence and subversion affects all the agencies in varying degrees. While incidents of subversion were reported from all agencies in 2007, violence was primarily concentrated in North Waziristan, Kurram and South Waziristan. While violence in Kurram is largely sectarian and local in nature, year-end reports indicate that the persistent violence in this Agency is due to the infiltration of militants, including some foreigners, belonging to the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and al Qaeda in Waziristan and NWFP.

From mid-July 2007, when the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan unequivocally terminated the 10-month old truce with Pakistan's military regime, there has been a rising tide of violence in Waziristan. Across North Waziristan, military convoys have been attacked regularly with sophisticated explosive devices and, frontal assaults on military outposts by the militants were increasingly reported through 2007. In the same year, they carried out ten suicide attacks on military and other government targets in Waziristan. While government institutions and military installations in Waziristan are already being targeted, militants from the tribal areas also carry out assaults in other parts of the country. The Taliban are now in effective control of most of North Waziristan and, more importantly, have complete liberty of movement and activities across the region.

The fallout of escalating violence in North Waziristan is being felt in neighbouring South Waziristan. After a lull of nearly three years, militants attacked a military installation at Dargai in South Waziristan on August 13,

2007. Out of the ten suicide attacks in Waziristan in 2007, two occurred in the South. However, the militants in North Waziristan, on January 2, 2008, extended a cease-fire they had announced on December 17, 2007, till January 20, 2008. Another critical aspect of the account of conflict in Waziristan during 2007 is the increasing number of desertions by security force personnel, as well as large groups of the same being taken hostage by the militants. This has resulted in a chain reaction, which has cast a demoralising shadow over security forces across Pakistan.

Current observations indicate that, the capacities of the military to counter the Al-Qaeda–Taliban coalition in Waziristan have been seriously compromised. The enormity of the state's withdrawal is tangible. The administration virtually lives at the mercy of the militants and is unable to exercise any real authority. President Musharraf's efforts to improve the economic and security conditions of the residents of the tribal areas have not been successful.

The past year has also witnessed the across-the-board transformation of NWFP. Almost 2000 persons were killed in 2007. Intriguingly, more than 50 per cent of all suicide attacks in Pakistan in 2007 occurred in the NWFP. Including times when the province witnessed two suicide attacks on a single day, the violence in NWFP is, in fact, the most disturbing indicator of the extent of Pakistan's slide towards chaos. The breakdown and anarchy in NWFP has been rather rapid. Throughout 2006, a comparatively small number of people (163) were killed in the province. Before that, it was only experiencing very infrequent violence, although it was marked as a low-intensity conflict zone, which could explode due to spillover effects from the FATA. The NWFP has now suddenly morphed into the centre of Islamist militant mobilisation in the Pakistan-Afghanistan region, even as Islamist radicals rapidly develop their presence across Pakistan's other provinces. Ironically, the NWFP is a region where the state's presence has historically been fairly strong, and the situation had never before been even remotely comparable to the traditionally ungoverned FATA.

The NWFP has emerged as a safe haven and area of expansion for militants from Waziristan, which they already control, as well as extremist elements from other parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan. While there is a considerable spillover of militancy from the tribal areas to the settled areas of NWFP, the fact is that the state has itself conceded space to radical Islam.

The state's retreat in neighbouring Waziristan has further heartened the Islamist radicals and led to a greater brazenness, with militants now operating openly and without fear.

On July 3, 2008, troops with the paramilitary Frontier Corps began streaming into the northwestern city of Peshawar and the nearby tribal region known as Khyber Agency [See Appendix: Map 2]. Government officials have reported capturing several towns since then, and they announced Wednesday that Pakistani security forces had arrested at least 31 people and seized several large weapons caches near Bara, the main town in Khyber. However, not all quarters are convinced of the efficacy of this new approach. "The action is not very fast, not very effective and not very well-oriented," said Lateef Afridi, a top member of the Awami National Party, the dominant political party in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province. "People are complaining that such halfhearted measures won't work."¹²

Nevertheless, the stated objective of the operation, which is being called 'The Right Path' by Pakistani security forces, is bold: to forge a trail through the core of what is rapidly becoming Taliban-controlled Pakistan, wipe out insurgent strongholds in tribal areas along the Afghan border, and save Peshawar from falling into the hands of Islamist insurgents.

On July 10, 2008, the Pakistani government reported that they had signed a fresh deal with the insurgents, as part of which the latter would dismantle their training camps and withdraw from Peshawar.¹³

Countering the Insurgency – Challenges and Prospects

"In September 2004 a news report about Pakistan's military operations in Waziristan, which involved aircraft attacks, stated that 'until now, aerial bombing has never been used to crush an armed insurgency in [Pakistan]'. But in 1929 the British bombed exactly the same area. Bombing did not subjugate the tribes then, and will not do so in the future"

- Brian Cloughley¹⁴

Pakistan has a large conventional army, tasked by the nation's outdated war directive with defending every inch of its borders: a hostile one on the east against India and a hot one in the west against Afghanistan, with a

potential for unrest on the Iranian frontier, if the internal insurgency situation in that neighbour's Balochistan province becomes a cross border issue.

Pakistan's lack of national unity on the one hand and its location in a tough neighbourhood on the other, dictate that it should maintain a strong defence establishment. However, as assessments by the army itself has shown, there are different ways of achieving security without making the army so large and onerous that it dwarfs and suppresses economic development. There are sound military motivations for re-evaluating the nature, size, and organization of the army too.

The Pakistani Army was ill-equipped to tackle the new kind of low-intensity conflict that slipped across its western border, first into the NWFP and Balochistan and then into Pakistani cities. Al Qaeda operatives hid in the border regions that already had a considerable foreign militant population, following to the Afghan war against the Soviets. Many of them had married into the local tribes and were protected by them. The conventional army of Pakistan, equipped with tanks, artillery, and aided by aircraft was unable to operate against the insurgents, who were not in uniform or occupying fixed defences, and were well equipped for guerilla warfare and had the support of the local population. The insurgents' first line of attack was the Frontier Corps (FC) who normally patrolled the border region and kept the peace among warring tribes. The FC and other paramilitary troops were not equipped with armored vehicles or individual protective armor. The army continued to send them in waves but they were susceptible to mines and hidden attacks and their losses mounted.

The Frontier Corps is a locally enlisted paramilitary force that operates in the regions bordering Afghanistan. The British in 1907 created the corps to extend and reinforce control over tribal areas of British India. The presence of the Frontier Corps in the tribal belt served as a guarantee to Pashtun tribes mistrustful of outside forces that the Pakistani Army would not be deployed there. The soldiers and lower ranks are ethnic Pashtuns from the FATA, and local recruitment has ensured that the corps commands respect from tribesmen. Since 2003, the Frontier Corps has been used in military operations against Taliban and Al-Qaeda militants, during which it has suffered significant casualties. For almost all Frontier Corps units in NWFP, this was their first combat experience in recent times (the only other exception were the Chitral Scouts which were involved in the Kargil

operations against India in 1999). Their operational capacity has been limited by inadequate training, outmoded equipment, lack of modern communications system, and most importantly, a declining will to fight their own people

To be engaged in Pashtun versus Pashtun conflict in the context of an unpopular US-led 'war on terror' has proved highly contentious. This has been particularly so as kidnappings of Frontier Corps soldiers (as well as Pakistani army troops) have become more common. The government has been slow to identify changes to the dynamics of conflict, with soldiers increasingly giving up fighting – some out of sympathy with the Taliban and others reluctant to kill fellow Pashtuns. In some cases, the Pakistani army has also pressed the Frontier Corps to lead operations without much weaponry or training, on the assumption that Taliban militants would not attack troops of the same ethnic background. The army came in for a shock, as the Taliban even beheaded their own tribal elders who they suspected of being pro-government or to be cooperating with the Frontier Corps. However, the contention that it is difficult for the FC soldiers to fight their own 'brothers' is untenable, as they have had no such compunction vis-à-vis engagements in erstwhile East Pakistan in 1971 and the Balochistan province for the past 60 years.¹⁵

Pervez Musharraf, with his own political considerations in mind amid signs that the army is increasingly critical of its role in the border areas, plans to equip the Frontier Corps with tanks and guns from the country's own resources. This would enable the army to play more of a supportive role in the region. However, it would take years of training and capacity-building to make the Frontier Corps capable of leading anti-militancy operations. Moreover, training would not resolve questions around morale and motivation. Morale has long been damaged by command and promotion structures that make it difficult for local Pashtun recruits to reach high positions that are held by army representatives, as well as by costly involvement in 'war on terror' operations.

The Pakistan Army's current strategy appears to be the targeting of specific militant commanders, and if it is able to do this without pervasive agitation of the general population, the operation has a chance of success. Although, more likely, the best the Army can effect is the arrest or death of a few commanders and fleeting disruption of enemy networks before further negotiations begin. This might be enough to satisfy the

government's domestic and foreign critics. It is important that during the second half of July 2008, even as suicide attacks were taking place across Pakistan, government representatives were working hard to re-establish the Waziristan Accord.

The military's performance thus far reveals rather elementary errors. With a dismal track record in counterinsurgency and a traditional outlook focused solely on fighting a conventional war, the Pakistani army seems to have adopted an ad hoc strategy. The self-proclaimed invincibility of the armed forces initially prompted it to use a firepower-intensive approach, demonstrated by the frequent use of weapons like helicopter gunships and artillery.¹⁶ The use of brute force instead of low-intensity strikes is a classic flaw in counterinsurgency campaigns: its military effectiveness is suspect, and it invariably embitters the local population. But when these heavy-handed operations fail, the army has been clueless about alternatives and pulls back completely in favor of political and economic 'peace agreements' with insurgents. Since the peace agreements are used as stand-alone bargaining chips, they end up handing over control of the region to local militants.

There is a virtually endless supply of extremist recruits. Any military fighting an insurgency must shut off the avenues by which new recruits join enemy ranks. In the tribal belt, poor socioeconomic conditions, youth unemployment, a pervasive gun culture, and most importantly, the remarkable success of *mullahs* in hijacking popular discourse strengthen extremist outfits.

The fact that there have been casualties amongst both the Army and the Frontier Corps is unsurprising, given that their training had been almost entirely for highly mobile, fully mechanized, 'strike' operations against Indian forces. The lesson is simple: nobody can expect soldiers and their leaders to be instant experts in all types of warfare. Fighting through such terrain demands very different skills to those required in an armored advance. These skills can be acquired, but not overnight; it was extremely unwise to commit troops to footslogging, ambush-prone, classic frontier warfare without extensive and lengthy preparation. It would take an ordinary battalion a minimum of eight months of concerted training to be prepared for operations in terrain and conditions that are poles apart from those with which it is familiar.

This lack of a practical counterinsurgency strategy is reflected in the absence of guerrilla counter-government, a feature of classical counterinsurgency. Local Taliban in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas have acted against local criminals and sought to impose law and order in a limited fashion. But there has been little attempt to create permanent liberated areas, raise taxes, regulate daily life or control social interaction, as would be expected if insurgents were trying to replicate the state's capabilities. But this assumes the insurgent has realistic objectives, and a feasible strategy that can be defeated by denying these objectives. The religious ideology of these modern insurgents creates a different dynamic. Particularly in Al Qaeda-linked insurgencies, the insurgent may not seek to achieve any practical objective, but rather to be a *mujahid*, earning God's favor (and hope of decisive victory through his intervention) through the act itself. Osama bin Laden alluded to this in an October 2001 interview with al-Jazeera journalist Tayseer Alouni.¹⁷

Strategic Implications

The insurgency in the tribal areas of Pakistan is at a very sensitive point at the moment. There is now a realization on the part of both the Pakistani Army and the Government of Pakistan that to allow the insurgency to snowball any further would be detrimental, not only to Pakistan, but to its relations with its allies, primarily the US, and its immediate neighbors, India and Afghanistan.

Afghanistan

The Afghan government has repeatedly held the Pakistani government responsible, for not only sheltering the Taliban but also helping them in order to make its presence and indispensability felt. During recent months, the Pakistani government has, of course, strongly denied any involvement, arguing that any destabilization of the region would negatively affect all of Pakistan.

A proposal to fence the border does not represent proof of Pakistan's goodwill. With or without land mines, fencing the border is not a practical solution as it would have to be complemented by effective fire and observation. Given the length of the border, it would require more troops than Pakistan has at its disposal. The fact remains that the insurgency is taking place essentially in a corridor along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The guerrillas could not operate without the benefit of sanctuary in Pakistan.

Moreover, the idea of Pashtunistan, which is also being bandied about by the insurgents, would be catastrophic for Afghanistan, for much of the southern part of the nation would be lost, not to mention that the Tajiks and the Uzbeks would clamor for their own territory, leading to the break-up of the nation-state.

United States

The population of Pakistan is determinedly opposed to the presence of U.S. troops to fight Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Pakistan. Almost 80 per cent of the population rejects U.S. troops engaging in Pakistan, while 84 per cent of Pakistanis view the U.S. military presence in Asia as an important threat to Pakistan. Moreover, 86 per cent of Pakistanis are of the view that the United States intends to weaken and divide the Islamic world.¹⁸ Thus, the severe threat posed by indigenous militancy and insurgency is still perceived to be far less than that of U.S. hegemony.

Military intervention on the part of U.S. forces, or potentially further brute force action from Pakistani forces, could lead to a full-scale action on the part of the insurgents against the government. As with 9/11, the London train bombings and numerous other attacks, chances that a significant terrorist attack in the U.S. or Europe would be traced back to groups within Pakistan grow higher by the day. In the event that this happens, the vote for unilateral military action against the militants in the border areas of Pakistan would be very strong.

The negative reaction to such a U.S. response in Pakistan could then lead to a far wider and violent insurgency that would rapidly overwhelm the capacity of the Pakistani establishment to contain it.

India

The Pakistani Army has changed its tactical orientation towards India, in the sense that it has withdrawn a fair number of troops from its eastern border, and transferred them to its western border. On the surface, this change would signify improvement in India-Pakistan relations, given that it doesn't expect any aggressive overtures from the Indian quarter, but unfortunately, no such idea is on the minds of the Pakistani decision-makers. It is simply a case of the lesser evil, in this case, India.¹⁹ India has never made any aggressive moves on its western border, even though rival accounts of the Indo-Pak conflicts would say otherwise. Therefore, for

them to realign their troops is no more than a decision to use their troops most efficiently.

Also, such movement of troops away from the Indian borders will thaw the Kashmir situation and allow India to undertake developmental activities in Jammu and Kashmir. However, the change in orientation should not lull India into a false sense of security. Pakistan continues to maintain that any problems it is facing on either of its borders is a direct reaction to India's involvement in the same.

What India needs to consider is that the delicate situation on its western and northern borders is nowhere near resolution, and the current stalemate could explode into all-out conflict. Under these circumstances, it also needs to prepare for the possibility of Pakistan not being able to resolve its insurgency problems in the FATA and NWFP. These could soon become India's problems as well. It is no secret that the insurgency is burgeoning to a level, which the Pakistani Army is hardly prepared to counter effectively. It would be a clever tactical decision on their part to steer the conflict towards the Indian border. Although India is well-equipped in dealing with insurgencies, it would certainly not be a welcome situation.

Conclusion

During the 20th century, instability in the border lands between Central and South Asia was strictly a regional concern. Indeed a difficult situation, it was one limited to the sphere of the British Empire on the north-west frontiers of India. However, in an age of radical extremism and the increasing role of global non-state actors in terrorism, the very same problems that perplexed the British are now a problem for the world at large.

In Pakistan, the hands-off approach, which has allowed the Taliban to exert the level of control it has, must be tackled, not with doubletalk or empty promises, but with strong action, of both military and diplomatic nature, wherever required and at whatever cost. Given that the Taliban will only demand, and never negotiate, from a position of strength, such agreements are not adhered to as they are seen as a sign of weakness. However, the people of Pakistan have been the suffering party in every instance and are willing to back any military action, so long as collateral damage and civilian casualties are not presumed.

In the end, the fate of the tribal territories will prove to be the ultimate test of Pakistan's abilities in democratic exercise. Should it fail, the ramifications for the Pashtun people, the nations of Afghanistan & Pakistan, and the region on the whole, will be far worse than anything previously experienced.

The following policy recommendations are worth considering in effectively dealing with the situation:

1. The first element of success would be the use of military force to eliminate extremists – those disinclined to negotiate and create conditions for a political settlement. The importance of the military aspect cannot be overstated. Without tackling the active resistance, there is little possibility the non-military components of a counterinsurgency strategy will succeed.

In Pakistan, the military component should involve weapons useful in a low-intensity conflict, as well as saturation of the area with ground troops. The rule of 'minimal use of force', rather than using indiscriminate, massive firepower, should guide the effort. The low-intensity use of force must remain constant, however, and the state must have the will to employ such force whenever and wherever active resistance is faced. Erratic, as opposed to sustained, military operations are certain to take the edge off the desired deterrent effect.

2. The second aspect to a successful strategy should include the army conducting a number of synchronized small-scale operations, steering clear of artillery and air power. When faced with the danger of improvised explosive devices (IEDs)—a weapon of choice for Pakistan's tribal belt insurgents—the army should maintain irregular routines and conduct vigorous cordon-and-search operations in urban areas near roads and communications corridors.

The non-military key to success is in approaching the internal insurgency as a nation-building project. It must be understood that insurgencies have to be resolved politically and that the role of the military is primarily to create an agreeable atmosphere for political bargaining by eliminating or isolating the extremists.

3. The third element of success would consist of measures to address structural causes of the insurgency: unemployment, geographic isolation, lack of education, and lack of development assistance, among others.

Ultimately, all aspects of the counterinsurgency effort must be geared toward achieving the common goal of establishing the rule of law, and the writ of the state.

The Pakistani Army will have to undertake major structural and doctrinal changes. The idea is to view the entire operation from the perspective of consolidating the state's control in the area, as opposed to merely demonstrating its military prowess. Pakistan's wavering between heavy-handed and submissive approaches is flawed. Heavy weapons will have to be discarded. Instead, special gear for low-intensity conflict – such as night vision devices, communication sets, and bulletproof jackets – should be supplied to the troops. Intensive cordon-and-search operations and patrol training on an established counterinsurgency grid are also required to annul basic mistakes, most recently demonstrated by the ease with which militants have taken Pakistani convoys hostage. To convey Pakistan's seriousness and maintain a deterrent force, the army must be unrelenting. To date, Pakistani efforts, indicative of a lack of conviction, seem to have come only after intense U.S. pressure.

Consequently, most of the army's counterinsurgency operations have been massive, high-profile strikes that have caused considerable collateral damage, forcing the army to retreat completely until the next offensive. To ensure the success of its new approach, the military will have to move far more troops into the tribal belt than the 100,000-strong force there now. Long-term physical presence at permanent bases is essential to communicate Islamabad's resolve to establish its control, regardless of the time, effort, and losses this course may eventually entail. At the peak of the Kashmir insurgency, India had deployed over 300,000 troops to tackle a level of resistance not much greater than what Pakistan faces.

4. Fourthly, a major overhaul of the Frontier Corps in terms of its mandate, service conditions, new training facilities and improved promotion prospects has the potential to revitalize the force. However, this is a long-term project, and there is little prospect that it can be transformed quickly to tackle the menace of Talibanisation. The fact that the Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) of the Swat Valley of the NWFP and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan have been demanding that any peace agreement with the Government

should provide for the withdrawal of the Pakistani Army troops from the tribal areas near the border with Afghanistan and their replacement by FC personnel reflects their assurance that the FC personnel will be more friendly to the Taliban. The FC's tribal recruits, with their considerable local knowledge, can be an asset in the operations against Al Qaeda and the Taliban, provided they co-operate earnestly. At the same time, their sympathy for fellow-tribals serving in the Taliban may come in the way of sincere co-operation and reduce their reliability.

5. Finally, the enhancement of the FC should be seen only as a short-term transitional measure, with a greater and longer-term shift towards improving the capacity of the regular Pakistan army in counterinsurgency warfare. Most officers in the Pakistan army probably know that they will not be fighting any large-scale conventional war in the near future, especially against India. The posture there is entirely defensive and the presence of a well trained, mobile Pakistan army, backed by nuclear weapons, should be enough to deter any regional hegemon from exerting undue influence on Pakistan. Pakistan's wars within, against indigenous insurgencies, demand a different type of force and a different mind-set. This will take time. Despite his desire to move towards this new objective, the new army chief, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani has only three years to complete his tenure. The shift in the army's posture and capacity for the new kind of warfare will likely extend even beyond the term of his successor (the insurgency is unlikely to be resolved in the short term). Therefore, a structured system of succession planning would ensure that long-term planning is put into effect.

The most important step to be taken is to include the FATA into the mainstream administration of Pakistan, which would mean doing away with the archaic FCR. It also requires a cognizant decision on the part of the Pakistani government to promote political rights and responsibilities within the FATA and to encourage investment in the human and economic development of the region. It must be accepted, though, that initially the liberalization of politics might have unwelcome consequences, such as electoral mandates for Islamist leaders. Development will not only be difficult, but will also be met with a strong reluctance to move away from accepted norms. All parties in the

situation will need to be engaged to ensure proper representation. The Taliban was, and still remains to be, an organization that thrives on illicit enterprise, which is primarily responsible for its continuing survival. If this connection is severed, it will have no choice but to compromise and come to a mutually acceptable arrangement with the Government of Pakistan.

End Notes

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Map I

INSURGENCY IN THE FATA & NWFP



Map 2



Map 3

INSURGENCY IN THE FATA & NWFP