

Counterterrorism, Regional Security, and Pakistan's Afghan Frontier

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Success in defeating the insurgency in Afghanistan and stabilizing the country will be largely determined by events taking place along the Pakistan-Afghan border. Uprooting Al Qaeda's network and reversing the spread of Islamic extremism in Pakistan and the region also strongly hinge on developments in the tribal frontier regions. With so much at stake, we cannot ignore the fact that across much of Pakistan's border with Afghanistan, Islamabad has, for now, lost the battle to fight militancy and terrorism. This harsh reality carries serious consequences for the kind of cooperation that the United States has sought in its strategic partnership with Pakistan.

Pakistan has seen growing challenges in recent years to its legitimacy and authority from a surge in militant Islamism, mounting provincial and tribal unrest, and the weakening of the institutional capacity of the state. All three are apparent in Pakistan's western border areas, and can be traced in large measure to its Afghan policies. By indulging and supporting extremists as a tool to retain and hold influence in Afghanistan, Pakistan has introduced changes that undermined its ability to maintain its writ within its own borders. Three decades of Islamabad's policies, sometimes using excessive force, other times appeasement, have altered traditional power structures in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and created fertile ground for challenges to the stability and integrity of Pakistan.

The State of Affairs in the Borderlands

Pakistan's FATA has historically been lightly governed. But today the Pakistan state has virtually ceded North and South Waziristan to powerful radical forces. Justice, education and social policies are in the hands of the Pakistani militants who practice a strongly conservative form of Islam. Other tribal agencies and districts in the neighboring "settled areas" have to some degree similarly fallen outside the government's writ. A large area of northern Baluchistan bordering Afghanistan is also mostly a no-go area for the Pakistan army.

It is generally acknowledged that anti-Kabul militants led by Taliban chief Mullah Omar, and former mujahideen leaders Jalaluddin Haqqani and Gulbudin Hekmatyar succeeded after 2001 in regrouping, establishing command centers, and launching insurgents into Afghanistan. Their presence along with Al Qaeda has also inspired and assisted in the radicalization of Pakistanis throughout the tribal region. Madressas (or madaris) have played a central role in helping to revitalize the Afghan Taliban and their allies, and in the creation of a Pakistani Taliban. By 2005, these religious schools had become a prime source for recruiting suicide bombers attacking within both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Elements of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) are increasingly accused of facilitating if not directly supporting these militants. Although the ISI is

known to work with U.S. intelligence operatives in Pakistan, many of its officers are suspected of harboring strong Islamist sympathies.

The decision by President Pervez Musharraf to deploy large numbers of regular and paramilitary forces to the FATA beginning in 2003 has been very costly in terms of casualties and hurt pride. The Pakistan army has demonstrated that it is seriously incapable of engaging in a mission of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. Despite the presence of between 80,000 and 90,000 regular and paramilitary forces, the army has shown its inability to mount a sustained campaign against either tribal militants or resident foreign fighters. The army's often-cited lack of aggressiveness in the frontier does not result from a lack of courage. Instead, its troops, trained to fight a conventional war with India, lack training, equipment and, very frequently, motivation.

Anxious to salvage something from their long, unpopular campaign, in September 2006, government negotiators concluded a truce, the North Waziristan accord. Islamabad portrayed the accord as a step towards peace and stability in the region. In return for the curtailing military operations and removing most army checkpoints, Islamabad was promised restraints on foreign militants (Arabs, Chechens, and Uzbeks, among others) and an end to cross-border infiltration by Afghan insurgents. The agreement also called for the local Taliban to refrain from spreading their vision of Islam and cultural demands outside of their tribal lands. But it was a deal struck largely on the militants' terms. They were handsomely "compensated" for their losses and allowed to retain weapons. The accord, supposedly approved by tribal elders, was in reality negotiated with the Pakistani militants and their representatives, and allegedly approved by Al Qaeda. By 2006, most pro-government traditional leaders had either fled or had been killed. Reportedly, in the past year alone more than 100 pro-Islamabad tribal elders have been assassinated.

From all available evidence, the military's withdrawal allowed militants to regroup, train, and arm. Border crossing by Afghan insurgents increased, as did violence inside Afghanistan. The Pakistani Taliban also failed to keep their word about not imposing their views of Islam on the nearby settled areas. In fact, their influence has been felt across the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), notably in the northern districts of Swat and Malakand. The extent of the militant Islamist influence well beyond the tribal areas became apparent in the standoff and defiance of state authority that brought the army's July 2007 assault against Islamabad's Lal Masjid (Red Mosque).

The Pakistan army had hoped to use the 2006 agreement to neutralize those groups with an anti-government agenda. In a strategy of divide and control, it sought to turn rivalries among tribal leaders and resentment against resident foreign groups to assert influence over the area. With money and arms as further incentives, the army was making some progress until the entire strategy fell apart following the army's massive assault on the Red Mosque. Islamist extremists in Waziristan and the NWFP sought retribution for the Lal Masjid crackdown by renouncing the North Waziristan accord and an earlier one in South Waziristan. Over the last few months the militants have effectively taken the fight to the army with suicide and other bombings, both in the frontier and across the country. With its reputation seemingly at stake, Pakistan's proud

army initially reacted with renewed aggressiveness against the militants. But this did not last long, and the army, suffering new humiliations, has again assumed a defensive posture. There has been a virtual collapse of the army's campaign in North and South Waziristan, including the refusal to fight compatriots. The surrender of nearly 300 regular and paramilitary troops last month struck a devastating blow. There have been other less publicized kidnappings of soldiers by tribal militants. Desertions have increased, unusual for a Pakistan army known for its professionalism.

It is impossible to explain the military's failures without recognizing that it has never had the support of Pakistan's public for its military actions in the frontier. Because Washington conflates most conflicts across the Middle East and Afghanistan as part of the "global war on terrorism," Pakistanis see it as a U.S.-led war against Islam, and thus not their war. Similarly, the Pakistanis have overwhelmingly refused to view the American-led efforts to defeat the Taliban and its allies in Afghanistan as its wars. The Pakistan Taliban are not considered enemies nor, for that matter, are their Afghan counterparts. The government's unpopular, failed militarization of the tribal agencies is generally seen as having been undertaken at the behest of the U.S.

The Antecedents

The loss of the frontier has been coming for some time. The practice of light governance inherited from the colonial era had always been a practical concession to the existence of unruly tribes in a difficult terrain over which to assert authority. Rules and regulations that had applied under the British were carried forward, and the seven tribal agencies, all but one straddling the border, were never politically integrated into the rest of Pakistan. Denied development assistance, the tribal agencies remained economically and socially backward. Control by traditional leaders began to weaken in the tribal areas with the presence of mujahideen commanders during the anti-communist jihad of the 1980s, and further declined during the 1990s with mullahs taking on increasing importance in a Talibanizing Afghanistan. The ceding of authority to local extremists in several critical tribal agencies accelerated following US armed intervention in Afghanistan after 9/11. The ability of Afghan Taliban and Al Qaeda to find sanctuary across the border, and finally the Pakistan army's failed militarization of tribal lands beginning in 2004 virtually completed the process. The old and largely secular system of governance in place in the FATA had become Islamicized.

Behind these changes is the dismantling of a system of political control through the gradual destruction of legitimate political structures. Previously, the *malik*—the secular leader of the village or tribe—was the local political authority. He was elected by a *jirga* in the village and through an Islamabad-appointed political agent received government funds and handled relations with the state. The *mullah*—the local religious authority—was clearly subordinate, and in most cases completely apolitical. However, from the regime of General Zia ul-Haq onward, the state started to fund the mullahs directly, giving them financial independence. Over the years the mullahs took on an enhanced political role in the tribal community and gradually became more powerful than the malik. With new resources and status, the local religious figures were able to emerge

as key political brokers and, very often, promoters of militancy. Empowering the mullahs made these border areas more hospitable to radicalized local tribesmen. With the malik significantly weakened it became harder if not impossible for disgruntled citizens to protest the presence of the Afghan fighters and foreigners.

Radical Islamic mullahs in the tribal belt and NWFP were valued for recruiting the Afghan mujahideen during the jihad. Economic and social deprivation of young Afghan refugees made their camps in Pakistan fertile ground for recruiting Afghan insurgents and imposing the doctrines of the Islamists. The Islamabad government, financed by the US and Saudi Arabia, poured money and arms into the border regions, further empowering the mullahs and their young militant followers. Opposition to the changes was difficult since the Afghan anti-Soviet insurgency and Taliban movement carried religious sanction, and had the backing of the Zia regime. Pakistan's support for the Taliban regime in the 1990s resulted in the further usurpation by Islamist militants of traditional tribal leadership.

This gradual change in the power structure from the malik to the mullah that united the tribals under the banner of Islam gave less prominence to national and ethnic allegiances. It has coincided with a period of history that has seen a global Islamic awakening, in which the struggles in Afghanistan have played a key role. Pakistan's mullahs have been able to benefit from this "larger cause" for which they fought. They connected with a network of militants from all corners of the Islamic world who provided the assertive Islamists in Pakistan's frontier areas with additional financial resources and military know-how.

The local Islamist leaders and their often youthful followers established contacts with foreign fighters who had taken refuge in the tribal agencies after 2001 as well as jihadi organizations in Pakistan and offshoots of the country's main religious parties. A symbiotic relationship developed among the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, Al Qaeda, and domestic extremist organizations. They have somewhat different priorities and can be bitterly competitive. Their relationships with Pakistan's intelligence services and security forces also vary. They are in agreement, however, over supporting the insurgency in Afghanistan that aims to drive out international forces and topple the Karzai government. They also share a disdain for Musharraf's rule and Pakistan's partnership with the United States.

Yet serving as patron to Islamist elements has long served the Pakistan military's strategic purposes. Beginning in the 1980s, successive governments in Pakistan have concluded that supporting Pashtun mujahideen and Taliban Islamists in Afghanistan and their ethnic cousins in Pakistan is pivotal to acquiring strategic depth in the event of an armed conflict with India. That policy also calls for efforts to ensure a friendly regime in Kabul. Even in recent years when Pakistan's nuclear deterrence would appear to make the concept of strategic depth outmoded, supporting Afghan Pashtuns seems warranted. That conclusion rests on the assumption that Pakistan may be confronted in the not too distant future with a disintegrating post-American, post-NATO Afghanistan. In that event, Russia, through its Central Asian surrogates, and Iran, both with close ties to India,

can be expected to carve out their geographic spheres of influence in Afghanistan. Non-nationalist, Islamist Pashtuns are then seen as serving Pakistan's interests as a proxy force in helping to create a buffer zone for Pakistan in southern and eastern Afghanistan. Pakistan, however, pays a heavy political and social price in its tribal frontier for adopting a Pashtun reserve strategy.

Options and Policies

As the insurgency in Afghanistan has worsened, the US and Kabul governments have understandably called publicly on Musharraf and his army to do more to block infiltration routes and eliminate sanctuaries in Pakistan. These demands have been largely counterproductive, however. Actions taken by Musharraf to satisfy his external critics have not only fallen short but have had the double-barreled effect of intensifying opposition to the government in the tribal areas and further eroding Musharraf's political support throughout the country. Additionally, Musharraf's political problems during 2007 have served as a strong distraction from the problems posed in the tribal agencies and further limited his willingness to take political risks. Least of all is he prepared to take strong action against the Taliban. And despite the looming challenge of religious extremism and militancy countrywide, Pakistan's political elites are consumed by electoral gamesmanship.

The Islamabad government finds few good options in meeting the challenges presented to the Pakistan state by Islamic extremists and militants in the tribal regions. Among those that have been tried or considered over the last year are strategies that:

- Revive a military effort that commits the army to an aggressive approach toward the Pakistani Taliban and the foreign militants among them. Recent setbacks challenging the honor of the army could stiffen the resolve of the senior military to show greater resolve in confronting the extremists. Although there are continuing reports of a withdrawal of troops, with General Ashfaq Kayani soon expected to assume command of the army, there could be a reassessment of the military's offensive posture in the Waziristans and elsewhere in the border region. Even then, the fundamental weaknesses of Pakistan's armed forces operating in the area, as already described, will not be overcome easily or soon. Moreover, the government in Islamabad, whatever its composition, will still be reluctant to undertake a military campaign that has so little popular political support in the country.
- Concede that a military solution is unlikely and renegotiate agreements with local centers of power. The regular army would again presumably disengage from regular contact with the local population, and restrict operations of the paramilitary Frontier Corps. In exchange, the Islamic militants would agree, as before, to restrain cross-border activity, keep foreigners in check, and refrain from Talibanizing the settled areas. But there is no more certainty that the Pakistani Taliban and their allies would hold to an agreement than previously. As earlier, the government will be negotiating from a position of weakness. Reaching a

modus vivendi with the tribal forces offers little promise of weakening the insurgency in Afghanistan. It will at best be a policy of containment against domestic extremists. Government plans to retain some authority by rebuilding the malik-political agent structure is a long-term, uphill policy. The old system that thrived on bribes and threats fits poorly with a new leadership over much of the tribal region that has an ideological agenda aimed at changing Pakistan's society.

- Create incentives for cooperation by the delivery of social services, justice and security to the people of the FATA. Plans call for channeling development assistance to the tribal agencies and promising their fuller integration into Pakistan's political system. Political reforms would lift the prevailing ban on political party activity and revise the region's archaic criminal code. \$750 million in funds over five years from USAID are slated for major physical infrastructure improvements in an aid program targeting the education and health sectors as well. Local economies are supposed to receive a boost by creation of Reconstruction Opportunity Zones. But there are serious doubts about the deliverability of US-sponsored aid programs or the payoff from political reforms. The sad fact is that it is probably too late to make a difference. Had development begun and political changes been instituted soon after 2001, they might have strengthened remaining traditional leaders. Instead of heeding pleas from the Islamabad government for a development program for FATA, the US insisted that the focus of both countries be solely on counterterrorism objectives.
- Change the political landscape in Pakistan in order to build a national mandate to oppose extremism in the tribal areas and elsewhere in Pakistan. Many observers have seen these actions as requiring a more open political system in which mainstream moderate parties can compete and form the government. It would allow the military to avoid forming electoral alliances with the religious parties sympathetic to the extremists. This approach is based on an arguable proposition that Islamic extremism can be discouraged through more democracy. It remains unproven that an elected, likely coalition government is better suited to deal with the challenges posed by militancy in the tribal frontier. Success against extremists will still turn on the military's will and capacity to take on these elements.
- Work closely together with the US, inviting/allowing the US greater leeway to pursue and target terrorists in Pakistan. In fact, American cross-border operations have been quietly going on for some time, as has intelligence sharing. Stronger cooperation could increase their effectiveness. However, recent public rhetoric in the US calling for possible unilateral action against high-profile targets has probably set back operations. Pakistanis regardless of political persuasion take great umbrage at the idea of violations of their territorial sovereignty. This sensitivity makes covert military actions more difficult. The problem has been compounded with the Congress's passage of legislation putting Pakistan on notice of a determination to have future aid judged by the extent of its cooperation against terrorism.

All of these approaches either have not worked or offer the prospect of success only over the long term. Consequentially, US and NATO forces in Afghanistan may be left for the time being with but one good option: to strengthen their own efforts to interdict insurgent forces. This will require substantially larger force levels on the Afghan side of the border with Pakistan as well as in contentious areas of southern and eastern Afghanistan. It is commonly believed that counterinsurgency forces should be in a ratio to the civilian population of 1:6 whereas in Afghanistan they are closer to 1:200. Moreover, as is now widely appreciated, improved and sustained security in Afghanistan cannot occur without accelerated development, better governance, and more realistic strategies for eliminating opium poppy production. Pakistan will continue to have a critical contribution to several of these goals. The US must adjust its expectations about what Pakistan is willing and able to accomplish on its increasingly restive, possibly explosive tribal frontier with Afghanistan