



Losing Ground Pak Army Strategy in FATA & NWFP

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A once proud professional army has been challenged and found wanting in its own country. The Taliban-al Qaeda led insurgency in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) is spinning inexorably out of control as the militants are steadily holding their own against a force that is much superior in both numbers and firepower. To add to the woes of the army, the US has launched several trans-Durand Line forays into Pakistani territory to destroy the Taliban and al Qaeda terrorists in their hideouts.

An assessment of the Pakistan army's overall strategy to counter the threat of insurgency and the efficacy of its operational tactics reveals the many infirmities in its strategy and tactics.

I MILITARY OPERATIONS IN FATA

The Pakistan army and the state's external intelligence organization run by the army, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Directorate have over the last near three decades developed great experience in aiding, abetting and fuelling insurgencies. In Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation in the 1980s and in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and other parts of India since 1988-89 they have perfected the art of terrorism. But, it has limited capability to counter insurgency, having concentrated solely on preparing for a conventional war with India. This was demonstrated by its failure to counter the insurgency in the picturesque Swat valley recently.

Pakistan has deployed more than 100,000 soldiers in the NWFP and FATA, and has lost between

1,200 and 1,500 soldiers. Casualties in Operation Al Mizan in North Waziristan were particularly high. Special Forces units of the Pakistan army, the elite SSG, are also directly engaged in fighting the militants. The far less capable and less well trained and equipped Interior Ministry paramilitary force, the Frontier Corps, has been employed extensively in direct fighting in the Waziristan agencies. However, it has failed to cope with the better armed and better motivated Taliban militants.

The army's convoys have been repeatedly ambushed; it has faced numerous terrorist strikes in the shape of suicide attacks and bombings; many of its personnel (especially Pushtun soldiers) have deserted as they do not wish to fight fellow tribesmen; and, many soldiers have been captured in humiliating circumstances. While some of these soldiers were later released by the militants for a large ransom, some others were killed. Soldiers are routinely overstaying leave or going AWOL (absent without leave) and even regular army battalions have seen their morale dip to worryingly low levels. There have been some reports of soldiers disobeying the orders issued by their superior officers. Complicating the issue further is the fact that the army has been gradually Islamised since General Zia ul Haq's days and the early converts to the Jihadi way of life are now coming into positions of command.

II MILITARY STRATEGY IN FATA: AN ASSESSMENT

The Pakistan army has been forced by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), headed till recently by the late Baitullah Mehsud, to wage a three-front "war": against the TTP and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in South Waziristan; against the

anti-Shia Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) in the sensitive Darra Adam Khel-Kohat area of NWFP and the Shia-dominated Kurram Agency of FATA; and, against the Tehrik-e-Nifaz-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM), headed by Maulana Fazlullah, and the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) in the Swat Valley of the NWFP. The TTP's cadre base is over 20,000 tribesmen and Mehsud commands about 5,000 fighters. "Radio Mullah" Mangal Bagh Afridi, leads Lashkar-e-Islam (LI), a militant group that has refrained from joining the TTP and is independently active up to the outskirts of Peshawar

Though it has flirted with peace deals with the militants, the army finds it impossible to meet the demands of the TTP and the TNSM. According to B. Raman, a noted counter-terrorism expert, these include the suspension of all military operations in the tribal areas; the withdrawal of army posts from the FATA; the release of all tribals arrested under the Anti-Terrorism Act; the release of Maulana Abdul Aziz Ghazi and tribal students arrested during the commando action in the Lal Masjid of Islamabad in July 2007; and, enforcement of the Sharia in the tribal areas.

Stung to the quick by a series of Taliban successes in "liberating" tribal areas and under pressure from the Americans to deliver in the "war on terror", in

The heavy-handed firepower-based approach without simultaneous infantry operations failed to dislodge the militants but caused large-scale collateral damage and served to alienate the tribal population even further.

further. Major reverses led to panic reactions including the hurried negotiation of "peace accords" that were invariably observed more in the breach by the militants.

III THE PEACE ACCORDS

On September 5, 2006, the Government of Pakistan had signed a "peace accord" with the tribal leaders of Waziristan (and probably the Taliban as well, though the government denies this) in the North Waziristan town of Miranshah.

The salient points of this rather surprising agreement included the following:

- The Government agrees to stop air and ground attacks against militants in Waziristan. Militants are to cease cross-border movement into and out of Afghanistan.
- Foreigners (understood to mean foreign jihadists) in North Waziristan will have to leave Pakistan but "those who cannot leave will be allowed to live peacefully, respecting the law of the land and the agreement" (wording from Dawn newspaper article).
- Area check-points and border patrols will be manned by a tribal force. Pakistan Army forces will withdraw from control points.
- No parallel administration will be established in the area. The law of the Government shall remain in force.
- The Government agrees to follow local customs and traditions in resolving issues.
- Tribal leaders will ensure that no one attacks law enforcement personnel or damages state property.
- Tribesmen will not carry heavy weapons. Small arms are allowed.
- Militants will not enter agencies adjacent to this agency (the agency of North Waziristan).
- Both sides will return any captured weapons, vehicles, and communication devices.
- The Government will release captured militants and will not arrest them again.
- The Government will pay compensation for

property damage and deaths of innocent civilians in the area.

The terms of the Miranshah peace accord were humiliating for a proud professional force to swallow and are reported to have led to the payment of large amounts of money for “damaged property” – sums that went indirectly to the militants.

The US and its NATO allies were taken completely by surprise by the accord that allowed the militants to make peace with the Pakistan army and gave them the freedom to use the NWFP and FATA areas close to the Afghan border as safe havens to attack the US and NATO forces from. The militants soon broke the cease-fire as well as the peace accord. Other similar peace agreements were also signed. In October 2007, the Pakistan Government entered into a peace agreement with the terrorists in the Swat Valley that was spinning out of control. This accord too did not last long. All these accords clearly showed that the Pakistan army and the Musharraf-led government had no clear strategy to counter the growing menace of Taliban-al Qaeda insurgency in the NWFP and FATA. The government and the army were groping in the dark and hoping that something would work out.

IV THE FALLOUTS

At some operational risk, the regular army has moved several combat formations from the Corps facing India across the LoC and the international border in Jammu and Kashmir to the northwest, besides troops from the two western Corps at Peshawar and Quetta. Three brigades of 11 Corps based at Peshawar and two brigades of the Quetta-based 12 Corps are reported to have been moved to Pakistan’s western border with Afghanistan. One brigade each has been deployed in the northwest from 30 Corps at Gujranwala and 31 Corps at Bahawalpur.

The internal crisis is considered so grave that even the Strike Corps have not been spared and a total of about nine brigades have been re-located to the west, though not all of these have been rushed headlong into counter-insurgency operations. These include two brigades from the Kharian-based 17 Infantry Division of 1 Corps,

Pakistan’s Army Reserve North.

However, this massive re-deployment at the risk of depleting combat strength on the eastern border with India has not really fetched the desired dividends. When fighting formations are pulled out from major war-time roles and their primary areas of responsibility to be employed for secondary tasks, the expectation is always that their absence will be for a limited duration and that they will be employed only to launch surgical strikes that will be followed by quick extrication. On the contrary, these formations are getting sucked deeper into a worsening quagmire on the western border.

The army leadership has failed to address this emotive issue with any degree of success. Clearly, at present the army lacks both the will and the capacity to fight the insurgents effectively in the NWFP and FATA

While the Pakistan army has conducted a number of successful operations in the NWFP and FATA areas, it has not been consistent in its efforts and has failed to gain the upper hand. For example, the success at Bajaur in end-September 2008 came after several months of poor results in lackadaisical operations. The tactics, techniques and procedures adopted by the Pakistan army have not yielded results that are commensurate with the effort put in.

The army’s intelligence network is virtually non-existent as humint sources are proving difficult to cultivate. Its ability to undertake operations at night and in conditions of poor visibility is rather limited as it lacks suitable night vision devices, hand-held battlefield surveillance radars and other sensors. Its movements are ponderous and easy for the militants to spot as its columns follow the beaten track while the militants know every nook and cranny of the terrain over which they operate.

The army’s God fearing soldiers are not convinced

that going after their fellow Muslims, even if they are anti-national militants, is a justifiable approach. Deep down in their hearts, many of them would much rather fight the US and NATO troops whom they see as occupiers and violators of their land, their faith and their culture.

V CONCLUSIONS

The army leadership has failed to address this emotive issue with any degree of success. Clearly, at present the army lacks both the will and the capacity to fight the insurgents effectively in the NWFP and FATA. It is also completely out of synch with the aspirations of the tribal people inhabiting these areas and is unable to win the battle of hearts of minds that is crucial to gaining popular support. While a few of the tribal chieftains are neutral in the fight between the army and the militants, most of them encourage their people to provide shelter and succour to the militants.

The senior leadership of the Pakistan army has so far been used a heavy-handed approach to put down rumblings of discontent in Balochistan and the Northern Areas in the past. It needs to understand that artillery barrages and helicopter and air force bombings of civilian villages and towns are inherently counterproductive. The field commanders must be taught to discriminate between innocent civilians and armed combatants and must demonstrate concern for senior citizens, women and children instead of treating them with disdain.

Success will come only when the army begins to close in with the militants and clears them from key areas systematically while ensuring that sufficient combat units are left behind to prevent the militants from taking over the cleared territory again. One method that can be adopted is to establish an interlinked grid of company-sized 'posts' to dominate given areas, conduct patrolling and strike operations based on hard intelligence and, simultaneously, enable the civil administration to execute development projects and run schools, hospitals, a postal service and banks. And, army or para-military columns must be physically deployed to ensure rear area security and keep the arteries open for supplies and reinforcements. All this is, of course, infinitely more difficult than lobbing 500 kg bombs from the air

combined with artillery barrages.

There can never be a purely military or a purely political solution to an insurgency. A successful counter-insurgency strategy is a dynamic but balanced mixture of aggressive offensive operations conducted with a humane touch and socio-economic development. Political negotiations to address the core issues of alienation of the population and other political demands must also be conducted with the local leadership simultaneously.

The tribal culture prevailing in the NWFP and FATA, with its fierce ethnic loyalties and its diffused leadership, makes the task of the army and the government more difficult. At present the Pakistan army is a long way away from becoming truly combat worthy for the nature of sub-conventional warfare that circumstances have forced it to wage in the NWFP and FATA.

It would do well to understand, analyse and learn from the counter-insurgency doctrine that the Indian army has so successfully followed for almost 20 years in Jammu and Kashmir and over half a century in India's north-eastern region. On its part, the Indian army must also study the counter-insurgency campaign of the Pakistan army so as to carefully avoid the hazards and pitfalls that the Pakistan army has encountered in its high-handed approach



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