

## The Pakistan Army and its Role in FATA

By Shuja Nawaz

FOR THE FIRST TIME since independence in 1947, Pakistan has sent its army into the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the largely ungoverned region that lies between its North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Afghanistan. Since the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the United States and its NATO allies have been pressing Pakistan to do more to stop the Afghan Taliban and al-Qa`ida from seeking sanctuary in FATA and the northern reaches of the NWFP. Furthermore, since 2001 the United States has provided more than \$10 billion in financial assistance to Pakistan to offset the costs of moving troops into the region. Out of this sum, approximately \$7 billion has been in the form of Coalition Support Funds.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the lack of a uniform vision on the part of both the United States and Pakistan on what constitutes adequate counter-insurgency measures has been the source of some discord.

Despite Pakistan's complaints that the United States has not provided adequate equipment and weapons support, a key factor hindering Pakistan's ability to fight insurgents has been its own forces' lack of training and indoctrination necessary for fighting an insurgency within its own borders. Still clinging to its self image as a conventional army, Pakistan's military has not fully nor speedily accepted the need to change to Counter-Insurgency (COIN) doctrine. This article will provide a better understanding of why the Pakistani government was forced to send its military into the tribal regions, the changing tactics used in the fight against the insurgents, and what steps are necessary to create a lasting solution.

### An Escalating Problem

The United States offered to help Pakistan retrain and re-equip the Frontier Corps (FC) and the regular army. Pakistan, not wanting to be perceived as too closely tied to the

U.S. military, chose to first train the FC. As for its regular forces, Pakistan decided to provide battle inoculation in what it calls Low Intensity Conflict (LIC), rather than in COIN operations.<sup>2</sup> According to the former director general of military operations of the Pakistan Army, the difference between the two is that LIC demands no more than a "well trained infantry soldier," whereas COIN operations require indoctrination of both soldiers and officers—in addition to civil-military collaboration—to win over the general population and isolate the insurgents.<sup>3</sup>

The situation on the border area has grown more precarious over time. Following escalating attacks by Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan, the United States sent in aerial drones to attack selected Taliban and other militant targets inside FATA. The U.S. strikes have grown in intensity. On September 3, 2008, the United States also launched an incursion with Special Operations Forces near Angoor Adda in South Waziristan Agency and attacked a suspected militant hideout inside Pakistani territory. Although Pakistan has protested each incursion, the drone attacks have continued, and the first ever attack inside the settled areas of Pakistan occurred on November 19, 2008 near Bannu in the NWFP.<sup>4</sup> Although agreement was reached between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the United States to set up coordination mechanisms in the border region, the United States alleges that Pakistan has not done enough to counter militancy.<sup>5</sup>

Initially, a perception emerged inside Pakistan that it was being forced to fight America's war solely to aid U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. Since the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, however, the level of militancy inside Pakistan itself has increased significantly. The 2001 invasion and its aftermath caused the

rise of Talibanization inside Pakistan. It has escalated to the point where today Islamist militants are taking the battle to the heart of Pakistan's capital, Islamabad, and even targeting the army's soft targets in different "cantonments" or military reservations. Pakistan measures its costs not only in the movement of troops and loss of public support for its actions, but also in the deaths of more than 1,300 soldiers since the army moved into FATA and the adjoining areas in the NWFP; moreover, since 2001 tens of thousands of civilians have been killed or wounded due to the Afghanistan-spawned militancy.

### A Military Solution

In Pakistan, there is no national consensus over how to proceed in FATA, or on what type of society the country should accept as a whole. As a result, once Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) began organizing itself and linked up with malcontents across FATA and in the adjoining frontier regions—as well as in Swat, Dir and Chitral—the Pakistan government's only possible response was to send in the army. For the first time since independence, the army moved into FATA in force.<sup>6</sup> The equivalent of six infantry divisions were deployed over time to FATA and Swat, some having moved from their positions along the Indo-Pakistan border where they represented Pakistan's strike force against any Indian attack. Largely a conventional army, it was trained and equipped for regular warfare against other similar forces, not against insurgent guerrilla units.

The locally deployed Frontier Corps—a largely peacetime militia that had lost its efficacy over the years through neglect, lack of training, and failure to upgrade arms and systems—was not able to aggressively patrol or fight the well-armed and trained militants. Moreover, the FC was composed of local tribes and commanded by officers from the Pakistan Army, the latter of whom had little knowledge of the people and the terrain. The courses in mountain warfare geared to fighting in the border region with Afghanistan that were once a regular part of training for British Indian Army officers and even in post-independence Pakistan are no longer key

1 "Increased Oversight and Accountability Needed over Pakistan Reimbursement Claims for Coalition Support Funds," U.S. Government Accountability Office, Combating Terrorism GAO-08-806, June 2008.

2 Personal interview, Major General Ahmed Shuja Pasha, Director General Military Operations, Pakistan Army, August 2008.

3 Ibid.

4 "First US Drone Attack Outside FATA: Major Qaeda Man Among 6 Killed in Missile Strike," *Daily Times*, November 20, 2008.

5 Such accusations generally state that elements of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence continue to ignore the activities of the Afghan Taliban in Pakistan, if not actually assist militants in their missions inside Afghanistan.

6 In 1960, the army went into Bajaur briefly to repel an alleged Afghan incursion.

training elements in today's Pakistan Army. Moreover, many officers were assigned to the FC from the regular army rather than volunteering for it, as had been the practice in the past. Therefore, in effect, the FC received the dregs of the officer corps. Unlike in the Pakistan Army, the commanders of the individual wings of the FC were only majors, not lieutenant-colonels.<sup>7</sup> There was little incentive for officers to excel during their short rotation to the FC, and no locals could hope to rise to the officer ranks in the Corps because they had to enlist in the regular army to become officers. Nevertheless, the number of officers commissioned into the Pakistan Army from FATA rose from 63 in the 18-year period of 1970-1989 to 147 in the 15-year period of 1990-2005. Even the number of soldiers recruited by the Pakistan Army from FATA has grown, with some 2,255 recruited in the decade of 1996-2006, compared with only 75 in 1991-1995.<sup>8</sup> Although the numbers are still small, there has been a steady increase in recruits.

The poor training and morale of the FC showed in its encounters with the militants. The troops proved unable or unwilling to fight their fellow tribesmen. The regular army, appearing for the first time inside FATA, was seen as an "alien" force. Even today, many of its officers still consider it as such. Largely Punjabi (60% or more), the army lacked the ability to converse with the locals and had to rely on interpreters.

#### Changing Tactics

The fight against the militants forced the army to change its tactics, using religious symbolism to garner local support and to encourage local tribesmen to rise against the militants and thus isolate them. Gradually, it adjusted to the fight by using classic counter-insurgency tactics by cordoning, clearing and holding areas, while trying to limit civilian collateral damage. Two major operations illustrate these changes.

In Swat District of the NWFP, the first operation by the regular army was named

<sup>7</sup> This has now changed. All Frontier Corps wings are now commanded by lieutenant-colonels.

<sup>8</sup> Data obtained by the author from General Headquarters, Pakistan Army for the book Shuja Nawaz, *Crossed Swords: Pakistan, its Army, and the Wars Within* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Operation Mountain Viper, a name that failed to inspire participants or locals in a fight against Islamist militants. As a result, the new commander of troops in Swat, Major General Nasser Janjua, commanding the 17th Infantry Division from Kharian near the Kashmir border, launched a fresh operation on November 13, 2007 named Rah-e-Haq. The purpose of the operation was to wrest the Islamic ground from the insurgents by claiming to act in the name of the true faith. The operation ended in mid-January 2008. Recognizing the need to "reduce civilian casualties, since we are operating inside our own territory against our own people,"<sup>9</sup> Janjua attempted to isolate the insurgents and to cordon and search areas repeatedly to draw them out for elimination. At the same time, medical aid and food supplies were delivered to the people in the affected areas. Initially, Janjua maintains that he allowed the insurgents to "escape" into the northernmost Piochar Valley, giving them a false sense of security and letting them establish fixed positions for training. Whether this is an *ex post* rationalization for the army's shortcoming at that stage is hard to prove. Nevertheless, by the end of August and early September 2008, he had identified and attacked the new targets, causing heavy damage and forcing the militants to seek help from others in Dir District and Bajaur Agency.

Meanwhile, the FC in Bajaur mounted an intensive campaign in August 2008 against the militants in that area and found significant support from local tribes, including the Salarzai tribe, the dominant tribe in Bajaur that wanted to reassert their status against the Taliban. Their leader, Malik Zeb Salarzai, promised to bring their own armed militia, known as a *lashkar*,<sup>10</sup> in

<sup>9</sup> Personal interview, Major General Nasser Janjua, August 2008.

<sup>10</sup> The use of *lashkars* is not new in FATA. Such groups have always been used to assist the administration in ensuring peace and order. In the current war against militants, *lashkars* have taken on special importance since they represent the spontaneous upwelling of unhappiness with the activities of the militants, primed to some extent with official financial incentives. Nevertheless, there is a latent danger in training and arming local warlords, who may well become future challengers of the government's writ or a conduit of arms or information for the militants.

support of the FC for patrolling and fighting the "foreigners." The militants were told to leave the area or risk being killed and their property destroyed.<sup>11</sup> Following a major principle of COIN, the authorities tried to isolate the militants from the general population in Bajaur. Rather than accomplishing this by providing security to the general population in the towns, authorities asked locals to evacuate the Bajaur areas where militants were suspected to be hiding, creating a huge flow of refugees. Ground troops and aircraft then proceeded to heavily bombard the area to destroy suspected areas where the militants took shelter.<sup>12</sup>

Although there has been some initial success in the military operations, by themselves they are not likely to take hold. Civilian efforts, especially on the political and economic fronts, will be needed to make civil-military collaboration effective in the long run.

#### Producing a Lasting Solution

Both the FC and the army operated in FATA and the Swat and Malakand sectors with severe handicaps. They were poorly trained for counter-insurgency warfare and did not have the proper equipment for the highly mobile war against militants who engage in surprise attacks and disappear before troops can reach the affected areas or military posts. The lack of attack and troop-lifting helicopters limited the ability of the Pakistani forces to react with alacrity to seemingly random and widely distant insurgent attacks. Although the United States promised Cobra helicopters, not all of the helicopters had been delivered by the end of the summer of 2008. The Pakistan Army's smaller and unarmored Bell helicopters cannot operate at the altitude required in the mountains of Malakand and Swat, especially during hot days. Moreover, the solitary heli-lift squadron supplied and supported by the United States at Tarbela cannot adequately cover the wide arc of militancy in the region from South Waziristan to Dir and Swat.

The Pakistan Army, for its part, has begun some preparatory training of

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Anwarullah Khan, "Crackdown on Militants by Tribal Volunteers," *Dawn*, October 6, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> The danger of such practices is that they could alienate the evacuees.

units being deployed to FATA and Swat with a three-phase program that gradually indoctrinates, acclimatizes, and trains troops under live fire before sending them into battle against the insurgents. In general, however, the army has been “learning by doing,” and standard operational procedures change with changes in commanders at all levels.

Most critically, an underlying issue that affects military operations is the importance over the mid- and long-term to create political context and structures in FATA that create more space for the military and the paramilitary to act legitimately. In other words, the government, by setting national policy publicly, must give the military the legitimacy to act on its behalf in the context of the strategic interests of the country.<sup>13</sup> Without clarity on those strategic interests, the military solution can only be temporary and perhaps even counter-productive. Troops, training, and equipment are one part of a two-part approach to counter-insurgency. The other, more important part is political governance, without which military actions will fail to gain traction or produce a lasting solution.

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<sup>13</sup> Personal interview, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, August 2008.