

Pakistan's Continued Failure to Adopt a Counterinsurgency Strategy

By Ahmed Rashid

IN RECENT MONTHS, the Pakistani Taliban have made unprecedented inroads into the world's second largest Muslim country and the only one armed with nuclear weapons. Pakistan's February concessions to the Taliban in the Swat Valley of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) are a watershed in the country's steady slide toward anarchy and the growing acceptance of the Taliban's control in northern Pakistan.¹ Subsequently, the Taliban called for a cease-fire in Bajaur, a tribal agency adjacent to Afghanistan where the Pakistani government has been battling Taliban militants since August 2008. While neither the government nor the military seem capable of halting the Taliban's spread, the militants themselves are offering cease-fires to Pakistan so that they can unite and combine their resources to better combat Western forces in Afghanistan in early spring.

The current crisis adds to the already prevalent international concern about Pakistan's will to resist extremist forces and comes just as the United States and NATO decide upon a new joint strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan before the NATO summit on April 2. The political and military failure caps a long running inability of the Pakistan Army and the civilian government to learn, adapt or apply the basic principles of modern counterinsurgency strategy. The army refuses to accept that the biggest threat faced by Pakistan is the Taliban and al-Qa`ida, not the state of India. This article examines the Pakistan Army's failure to prepare for counterinsurgency warfare, the army's unsuccessful counterinsurgency operations in the Bajaur tribal agency and the Swat Valley, and the flaws inherent in arming pro-government tribal militias.

1 Zahid Hussain, "Taliban Extend Truce, Gain Sway in Swat," *Wall Street Journal*, February 25, 2009.

Failure to Prepare for Counterinsurgency Warfare

The U.S. military, and in particular the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, spent much of 2008 trying to persuade Pakistan's military to allow the United States to train anywhere from two brigades to two divisions of Pakistan's regular forces to conduct counterinsurgency in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) adjoining Afghanistan. The Pakistan Army rejected the suggestion, insisting that a conventional war with India was the major threat faced by the army and any such defensive war would still be fought on the plains of Punjab and Sind rather than in the mountains of Waziristan. The army also balked at an overwhelming U.S. military presence in the country at a time when there was growing anti-Americanism among the population and in the army. When terrorists struck Mumbai in November 2008, India threatened to launch hot pursuit into Pakistani Kashmir; the incident caused the partial mobilization of the Indian and Pakistani armies, and was used by Pakistan's military to vindicate its position regarding India to the United States.

In the fall of 2008, the army finally agreed to allow approximately 70 U.S. officers train members of the Frontier Corps (FC)—the main paramilitary force in FATA—in counterinsurgency warfare.² Pakistan's army chief, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, also ordered the FC to be re-equipped with better equipment, salaries and facilities—initiatives that the Bush administration and the army should have carried out using part of the largely unaccountable \$11.8 billion the United States handed over to the previous military regime of President Pervez Musharraf between 2001 and 2007.³ Nevertheless, despite the training, the FC is still only a paramilitary force, and it remains deeply controversial. The FC's manpower is largely Pashtun, drawn from FATA

2 Eric Schmitt and Jane Perlez, "U.S. Unit Secretly in Pakistan Lends Ally Support," *New York Times*, February 22, 2009.

3 Ruben Navarrette, "Who Needs Friends like Musharraf?" CNN, November 6, 2007. For the source of \$11.8 billion, see Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia* (New York: Viking Press, 2008).

and the NWFP, while its officers are drawn from the regular army. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the FC was the main operational force used by Pakistan and the United States for their joint covert support to the Afghan mujahidin. Later, it was also on the front line of Pakistan's military aid and support to the Taliban regime in its fight against the Northern Alliance. During this conflict, large numbers of the FC were deployed inside Afghanistan in plainclothes to support the Taliban. In the past, the FC has also been deeply involved in training Kashmiri militants to fight in Indian Kashmir.

Today, the FC soldier not only has family members on the Taliban side in the present war in FATA and Swat, but has become thoroughly imbued with jihadist ideas and motivations.⁴ For a force that was told for three decades that supporting jihad in Afghanistan and India was part of state policy, it is naturally proving contradictory for them now to be told that the same jihadists are enemies of the state. Therefore, it is not surprising that since 2004, when the army and FC launched operations in FATA, the FC has suffered from large-scale desertions, surrenders and loss of morale. Before the FC can become a legitimate counterinsurgency force, a number of steps need to be taken: it must be reconstituted unit by unit and thoroughly screened for Taliban sympathizers; large-scale retirements should be implemented; and a younger, fresher crop of recruits brought into the ranks.

Army's Failed Counterinsurgency Practices

Meanwhile, the army's reluctance to train in counterinsurgency has been even more detrimental. The subject is not taught seriously at Pakistan's military colleges except in historical reference, such as to the Vietnam War. Most teaching and training still relates to the conflict with India.

The army's performance alongside the FC in FATA has demonstrated its lack of counterinsurgency training. After months of delay, in August 2008 the army moved into FATA's Bajaur Agency

4 For more on the Taliban's influence on the Frontier Corps, see Arthur Keller, "Propaganda and Peace Deals: The Taliban's Information War in Pakistan," *CTC Sentinel* 1:8 (2008).

promising a two week campaign to rid the area of Pakistani Taliban, after which it would do the same in the other six tribal agencies. Eight months later, the army is still fighting in Bajaur, unable to clear it of Taliban elements and in addition it has also lost the Swat Valley in the NWFP.⁵ In Bajaur, the tactics used were the direct opposite of the new counterinsurgency doctrine of “clear, hold and build.” That doctrine is people-centric in that military force is used to root out the extremists to protect population centers. Once that is complete, the doctrine calls for rebuilding the lives of the population so that locals turn against extremists. The army did the complete opposite. It moved out the population, flattened villages and entire towns with artillery, bombings and bulldozers. This created vast free fire zones, which the Taliban themselves creatively used to retaliate against the army by ambushing soldiers from concealed positions in the rubble. The Taliban also forced locals who remained to spy on government forces and enlisted more support from fleeing, angry refugees. Moreover, the army did not conduct effective counterinsurgency tactics such as constant patrolling, securing and controlling distinct areas. Instead, it set up large camps where it hunkered down while it relied on its heavy and destructive firepower to inflict Taliban casualties. The army became sitting ducks in Bajaur without a population to provide them information as to who was a Taliban member and who was not.⁶

The operation caused 400,000 people to flee Bajaur, and they are now living in poor conditions as internal refugees barely being looked after by a financially strapped government.⁷ These refugees include important tribal elders and chiefs and educated youth—all vehemently anti-Taliban—who would have provided the necessary support for military operations if they had been protected in the first place. The

most common accusation among these refugees is that the army was always killing the wrong people—civilians rather than the Taliban.⁸

The army used similar tactics in last year’s military offensive against the Pakistani Taliban in the Swat Valley. Swat is a long twisting valley surrounded by high mountains; it is far more heavily populated than areas in FATA. While what should have occurred was securing villages and towns one by one, combined with deep patrols in the mountains to keep the Taliban on the run, the army instead set up camps where it hunkered down, used excessive firepower that killed hundreds of civilians, failed to protect the local anti-Taliban tribal elders who were trying to protect their villages and homes with their own followers and allowed the Taliban to dismantle or kill the local police force and civil administration. The Taliban burned down approximately 200 schools, and teachers were forced to flee. No element of the state machinery or the population was adequately protected or defended.⁹

The army is now negotiating a truce with the Pakistani Taliban in both Swat and in the tribal agencies. In the past, such cease-fires have left the Pakistani Taliban free to consolidate their territorial gains, while at the same time allowing them to concentrate their firepower on U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan. Once again, this seems to be the aim of the Pakistani Taliban, who are under the influence of Afghan Taliban leaders and al-Qa`ida.

Flaws in Arming Pro-Government Tribal Militias

The army’s latest strategy to create pro-government tribal militias to attack the Taliban has proved unsuccessful because there is no plan to protect such militias once they disband and go home for rest or to care for their families. The Taliban have massacred and then mutilated the bodies of several groups of such militiamen after they had gone home for rest. That has worked as a powerful deterrent against joining the

militias.

Most recently, the NWFP provincial government also said that it will distribute 30,000 rifles to local militias to defend their territories against the Taliban.¹⁰ Such experiments, however, are likely to fail in Pakistan’s tribal areas because the Taliban have successfully decimated the tribal elite who would be the traditional leaders of such militias. More than 300 tribal chiefs and elders have been killed since 2004.¹¹ The individuals whom the government is now trying to promote as tribal elders are not the traditional leaders and consequently do not have the full support of their tribes or clans. Similar attempts now being carried out in selective provinces in Afghanistan by the U.S. military are also fraught with the same kind of dangers, as the Taliban have also decimated the tribal elite in that country. In both war zones, the Taliban have deliberately replaced the tribal elite with their own mullahs who act as military commanders, judges of local Shari`a courts and administrative heads.

Conclusion

Even without receiving training from the U.S. military, the Pakistan Army can learn modern counterinsurgency practices. Professional army officers can study counterinsurgency from books in addition to the vast body of experience that has emerged from recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. By applying that theory to basic military training and doctrine and gaining knowledge of local conditions and the enemy, soldiers and officers can be quickly retrained. For this to occur, however, Pakistan’s military must achieve the capability and courage to engage in counterinsurgency operations, in addition to the necessary willpower to alter its present course.

Until the Pakistan Army is able to re-determine its strategic priorities and its interpretation of the country’s security, it will not be able to practice counterinsurgency successfully. The army’s current national security doctrine is entirely focused on India. In sharp contrast, the civilian national

5 In March, however, the government signed a new peace deal with the largest tribe in Bajaur, a deal that some speculate will allow the Taliban to concentrate their operations on neighboring Afghanistan.

6 These conclusions are based on the author’s personal interviews and ongoing research on army operations in Bajaur.

7 “14 Militants, 3 Women Killed in Bajaur,” *Daily Times*, August 21, 2008.

8 This information was drawn from the author’s personal interviews with refugees.

9 Amanda Ruggeri, “Taliban Extends Cease-Fire With Pakistan in Troubled Tribal Region,” *U.S. News & World Report*, February 24, 2009.

10 “Pakistan’s NW Govt to Arm People Against Militants,” *Agence France-Presse*, February 22, 2009.

11 Aamir Latif, “Masquerading as Taliban,” *IslamOnline.net*, June 28, 2008.

security doctrine is focused on building the state in terms of improving relations with neighbors, increasing trade, advancing the economy, and providing mass education and development. The contrast between the two in how civilians and the military see the future of Pakistan has remained the principle contradiction that has bedeviled the country since its inception and has constantly pitted the army against civilian political forces.

Practicing successful counterinsurgency relies upon outlining proper strategic priorities and on making national security doctrine relevant to the needs of the population, rather than on the needs or desires of the army. Pakistan's biggest threat today comes from the Pakistani Taliban and their al-Qa`ida and Afghan Taliban allies. It does not come from India.

Ahmed Rashid is a Pakistani journalist and writer. He is the author of four books, including Taliban (2000) and Jihad (2002). His latest book is Descent into Chaos: U.S. Policy and the Failure of Nation Building in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia (2008). He writes for the Daily Telegraph, the BBC, the Washington Post, El Mundo, the International Herald Tribune, the New York Review of Books as well as for Pakistani media. He has been covering the wars in Afghanistan since 1979. He is a member of the Advisory Board of Eurasia Net of the Soros Foundation, a scholar of the Davos World Economic Forum and a consultant for Human Rights Watch. In 2004, he was appointed to the Board of Advisers to the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva. At the invitation of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, he became the first journalist to address the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2002 and the first journalist to address NATO ambassadors in Brussels in September 2003.