

**ARMED CONFLAGRATION IN PAKISTAN:
*REVISITING THE SCENARIO IN THE
BACKGROUND OF OBAMA'S AF-PAK
STRATEGY***

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Novembre 2009



Introduction

The Pakistani arena is witnessing a sharp conflagration on two interwoven tracks that run in tandem: the action by the so-called Pakistani Taliban on one side, and that mounted by the Pakistani army on the other. The latter is unfolding in the volatile and relatively inaccessible South Waziristan Tribal region, which is increasingly viewed as the ‘epicenter’ of a growing insurgency. The upsurge in ‘terror’ and the ‘campaign against terror’ brings an end to the short-lived post-Swat ‘pause’ that had signified a ‘closing of the ranks’ by various players in the arena. This coincides with what is seen as a ‘greater play’ in the new US strategy for the so-called Af-Pak region and the controversies it has generated in Pakistani body-politic. The scenario also serves as a reminder of the extent of the eight-year Afghan war’s growing impact on Pakistan. What began in the year 2001 as a limited American anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan now carries the potential of a spreading regional conflict.

Current setting: Ingredients in the ‘terror’ scenario

Through October of this year, the Pakistani arena has been in the grip of a militant phenomenon of unprecedented intensity. This has manifested itself most evidently in a rapid rise in suicide attacks and hit-and-run operations. These are carefully calculated both in terms of targets and timing, thus ensuring the maximum possible impact. The most audacious such attack has undoubtedly been the precision assault on the Pakistani Army’s general headquarters, followed by coordinated triple attacks targeting the paramilitary and police establishments, as well as a string of explosions at public places and educational institutions.

Analysts and experts are divided over their assessment of the potential of this resurgent Taliban phenomenon in view of the complexity and variety of the tactics it has recently been deploying. To some, this is merely the desperate action of militants thrown into disarray by successful army operations in Swat. Others though view this as a signal of the militants’ capacity to hit a wide range of targets stretching from from the northwest to Lahore in the Punjab. If the militants have such a broad infrastructure that makes such targets possible, then one could expostulate the existence of what may be described as a ‘Punjabi Taliban’. Notwithstanding these diverging interpretations,, there is general consensus over the view that the current intensification in militant activity is designed to fore-warn the government against any possible advance into the Waziristan region.

A perspective on Operation “Rah-e-Nijat”

The Pakistani Army has launched a major ground and air offensive against the insurgent pockets located in South Waziristan, the abode of Mehsud and Waziri Tribes on the Pakistani- Afghan border. The offensive is the second attempt following the Swat operation to strike at the roots of an insurgency that has advanced beyond the country’s fringes to threaten its core. It is worth noting that the tribal region is home to a host of leading Pakistani Taliban, including Hakeem Ullah Mehsud. The region thus has the potential of turning into a vital link to Afghan insurgents and a retreat for suspected Al-Qaeda militants, Uzbeks, Chechens, and possibly for a small number of Uigher too. Operation Rah-e-Nijat (Salvation Path) aims at taking the fight to the Taliban’s largest groupings and to their doorsteps. It is seen as a ‘logical continuation of the campaign against terror’, having gained considerable momentum in Swat. However, the challenge in South Waziristan is doubtlessly far more formidable.

Waziristan, the focus of the current military operation represents the traditional tribal autonomous existence. The inhospitable terrain and undiluted tribal culture has enforced its exclusiveness in relation to other regions in the northwest. The same set of conditions has turned this into ‘safe haven’ for insurgents. Interestingly, today the state confines itself to exercising a juridical writ in the region and not an empirical one. Attempts to make inroads into this part of the country since 2004 were seen as ‘goaded by the US’ and thus ‘half-hearted’. Certainly, Waziristan, unlike Swat, is not nestled within the North-West Frontier Province and, therefore, unfamiliar with the modern precepts of governance. Moreover, the region has a long, traversable boundary with Afghanistan that allows militants ample supply and escape routes. These elements will have to be factored as obstacles in Army operations.

The actual troop movement into Waziristan preceded US Drone actions against ‘actionable targets’ including the killing of Baitullah Mehsud and Uzbik Commander Tahir Yuldashev. Sufficient preparatory steps were also taken for the military preparedness which is reportedly four times more in numbers than the ‘half campaigns’ carried in 2004. Though incremental, the military advance has already caused the displacement of more than 100,000 people. It is uncertain if the US-led forces on the Afghan side are zeroing-in on the border, this being crucial to whatever the success ratio on the Pakistani side might be. There is no clarity at this stage as to how the planners look at the possibility of unfolding a political prong, which runs

in tandem with the military prong, and if the Americans would be ready to allow a political solution in this theatre.

To recall, the backbone of the Swat operation consisted in planner's ability to mobilize popular support for the operation. It also had the advantage of not being a protracted military engagement, with an end in sight. On the eve of the Waziristan operation, the high extent of militant action across the country has enabled the government to keep up the momentum of support for the campaign against militancy. However, this operation's mid-term consequences -including the level of popular support-, would rest upon the time-span and human cost which may unfold. The direction would also be contingent upon the extent of operational support from the Afghan side and the targets which the Americans may have in their minds.

The “greater play” of Obama’s Strategy

The conflagration scenario has come about in the wake of what is seen as a ‘greater play’ in Obama’s Af-Pak Strategy. American preparations for a ‘surge’ in Afghanistan come in tandem with their encouragement of a greater Pakistani engagement in the border region. The operation in Waziristan holds one key in the process. No doubt, it has long been a key US goal to press the Pakistani army into fighting both Pashtoon hostiles in Pakistan and the Pashtoon insurgents in Afghanistan. Now that the US funded Pakistani offensive in Waziristan is underway, it is intriguing to come across reports suggesting that at the outset of the military advance on Pakistan side, US and Afghan forces vacated the military posts and positions on the Afghan side of the border unilaterally instead of enforcing the border regime. This would imply that Pakistan’s engagement with its own tribes in Waziristan will very conveniently absorb the Afghan hostiles into the Pakistani territory and enable the Pashtoons from both sides of the divide to fight the Pakistani Army on Pakistani soil. This would in turn call into question the scope and nature of American interest in an active Pakistani engagement in this border enclave.

The timing of the Pakistani army’s offensive coincides with a broader shift in US and NATO strategy against the Taliban in Afghanistan. Interestingly, the latest unit to deploy as part of the US surge in Afghanistan will focus its efforts in Afghanistan’s Helmand province, far from North and South Waziristan. The strategy does shift the focus of the Afghanistan war

further into Pakistani domain and sets in motion a chain of terrorist and counter terrorist phenomena. These could have the effect of keeping Pakistan busy and increasing its dependence on the US assistance mechanism.

The US aid packages have been known for inbuilt conditions that lead the recipient in a vicious circle of dependence. The controversy over the Kerry-Lugar bill, the US financial aid package is the newer manifestation of discomfort in Pakistani body-politic. The Obama administration has chosen a turbulent time to impose yet another layer of American control over Pakistan. The bill offered US \$7.5 billion over five years, but with several strings attached. The prior certification required in the package would relate to Pakistani action viz. specific locations, perceived as militant outfits within Pakistan (e.g. Mureedkay, Taliban Shura in Quetta), along with questions such as the nuclear proliferation and the so-called civilian control over the army and ISI. Ironically, the Pakistani body politic had shown vehement opposition to the package but in the final run, the elite had shown acquiescence to the move as a *fait accompli*.

Revisiting the Pakistani Posture

The Pakistani actions have been divergently interpreted. The eight year of the current round of Afghan war has impacted on the Pakistani social fabric and constrained its political vitality. The country though a nuclear-weapon state, is in the grip of economic hardship and is, consequently, more susceptible to pressures from the uni-polar order. Its policy direction is caught up in a two-front dilemma: increasing US demands, or the “do more syndrome”, coupled with a US strategic convergence with India in the larger region. .Pakistan appears to be engaged in a campaign for its survivability and a struggle to preserve its strategic gains.

Is the country out of options? The answer is not a black and white one. The political leadership is increasingly interwoven with the West and overwhelmed with the hitherto prevalent uni-polarity. The top brass is not ready to interfere in the political process unless they hit the ‘make and unmake’ benchmarks in national security. In a nutshell, the civil and military leadership appears to be acting out of fear for the country’s security rather than out of a sudden eagerness to earn billions of dollars of US aid.

Latent fears and prospective directions

The US and Pakistani objectives in combating the terror though shared, are not necessarily identical. Pakistanis fear that the US drive to promote active military engagement on their part and its consequential fallout may usher Pakistani society into anarchy. The dreaded scenario goes as follows: As it strives to combat the terrorist menace and comply to US demands the army may gradually find itself being pitted against sections of its own people, which may in turn precipitate the rise of a larger coalition of extremists within the country, and give a common cause to Pashtoons on both sides of Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The result is perpetual civil strife and anarchy.

From the strategic standpoint, Pakistani planners ought to be mindful of a number of significant factors in the evolving situation. Firstly, the Taliban phenomenon in Afghanistan is turning into a “liberation insurgency” and a vehicle to regaining Pashtoon rights. Secondly, the common ground between the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, in terms of objectives and targets, is not necessarily organic. The Afghan Taliban -led by Mulla Umar- have not been a threat to Pakistani security. Thirdly, the so-called Pakistani Taliban are much less potent and largely devoid of ideological motivations, representing a law and order problem more than anything else. It should, therefore, be possible to isolate them instead of allowing a coalition across the Durand Line to be formed. This limited objective is not necessarily in consonance with the Obama policy. Fourthly -and perhaps equally worryingly for Pakistan-, US patronage of India as a regional hegemon enables Delhi to establish a bridgehead with inimical forces in Afghanistan and to ‘keep the pot boiling’ by infiltrating the Pakistani Taliban, besides its support for Baloch insurgents. Fifthly, an upsurge in Pakistan helps the lobbies in Washington to raise concerns about the safety of Pakistani nuclear assets and enables the conspiracy theorists to view this as an attempt to declare Pakistan a ‘failed state’ and to head towards its denuclearization.

In the current conflagration, the Pakistani engagement in the war on terror appears to heralding a shift in focus from the Afghan side to the Pakistani arena.. But this escalation in Pakistani engagement against militants in Waziristan would not necessarily be beneficial to the US mission in Afghanistan. It is more likely that the Pakistani military leadership would in the medium-run, pursue the country’s own interests: taking an incremental approach to

eradicate pockets of militancy that impact on Pakistani territory and shun the possibility of turning into partners in a broader conflict.

The war on terror, as viewed from the prism of an average Pakistani mind, does not evoke unconditional understanding and support. Two chronic issues continue to dominate the popular thought process. First, the widespread notion that insurgency is a result of Islamabad fighting a US-imposed war, and second, conspiracy theories about mysterious ‘foreign hands’ trying to destabilize the country. The terrorist threat facing the country has indeed tilted the balance in favour of the supporters of military action. However, there is little indication that this has generated support for American involvement among the Pakistani public. Public support for the need to confront the militant menace appears to be running hand in hand with growing demands to identify, assert and safeguard Pakistani interests vis a vis those of the extra regional forces with a stake in the raging conflict.