

South Waziristan: The Beginning of Pakistan's Military Campaign

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Abstract

In this first of a series of briefs that will follow Pakistan's military campaign to oust the Taliban from the South Waziristan tribal agency – one of the seven that constitute Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas – I will provide some details about the background of the ongoing conflict between the Pakistani state and the stateless Islamic insurgents. The army's operation in South Waziristan began on 17 October 2009 when 30,000 soldiers began to slowly move into the area inhabited by the fiercely independent Mehsud tribe. The tribe formed the backbone of the *Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP), now led by Hakimullah Mehsud. The new leader took over when an attack by an American Predator killed Baitullah Mehsud, who was accused of ordering a number of murderous attacks on various targets in Pakistan. He was also alleged to have been the mastermind behind the assassination of Ms Benazir Bhutto on 27 December 2007. The military had declared its intention of a major assault on the Mehsuds in the area. It began after a week of terrorist attacks for which the TTP took responsibility. The attacks, including one on the army headquarters in Rawalpindi on 10 and 11 October 2009, took 175 lives. It was reported that the move into South Waziristan by the military had the full support of the United States which is rushing in supplies needed by the Pakistani forces.

Background

South Waziristan is the southern-most tribal agency in the seven-agency region that constitutes Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The FATA is the most impoverished part of Pakistan with per capita income about one-half of the national average. It borders Afghanistan in the north and the province of Balochistan in the south. It is home to the fiercely independent Mehsud tribe that, in recent years,

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has supplied men, material and leadership to an Islamic insurgency movement that went under the name of *Tehrik-e-Taliban, Pakistan* (TTP). The TTP was loosely aligned with the larger Taliban movement led by Mullah Muhammad Omar, who had headed the government in Afghanistan when the Al-Qaeda launched a terrorist attack on the United States on 11 September 2001 (9/11). The United States retaliated by invading Afghanistan with ground support provided by the forces of the Northern Alliance. The Northern Alliance was dominated by the Tejiks whereas the Taliban drew their support entirely from the Pushtuns, the dominant ethnic group in the country. The United States' invasion led to the installation of a new government in Kabul under President Hamid Karzai, a Pushtun from Kandahar. Supported by the United States and its North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) allies, President Karzai was able to write a new constitution for Afghanistan. The country was given a presidential form of government. The first presidential election was held in 2004 and supervised by the United Nations. Karzai won. The second election on 20 August 2009 was alleged to have been corrupted by a number of frauds, mostly committed to ensure the incumbent president's win in the first round. Although Karzai won 54 percent of the vote, the result was disputed by the opposition, in particular by Dr Abdullah Abdullah, his main rival.²

The dispute over the elections added to the uncertainty that plagued Afghanistan. In the meantime, the administration of United States President Barack Obama began an intensive review of the policy towards Afghanistan. The review followed a request by General Stanley McChrystal for the deployment of an additional 40,000 American troops to pursue a counter-insurgency strategy. This strategy involved the use of force to expel the insurgents from a given area, hold the area and work with the people to develop it. Those opposed to this approach contended that while it may have worked in Iraq, it will not succeed in Afghanistan where the socio-political conditions are very different. Several senior members of the Obama administration instead suggested the pursuit of a counter-terrorism approach that use military force to eliminate the

² The Afghan elections were the subject of three ISAS briefs which I wrote. See Shahid Javed Burki, "Afghanistan Presidential Election 2009: Developments since the Fall of the Taliban", ISAS Brief No 123, 17 August 2009 (accessed at <http://www.isas.nus.org/events/backgroundbriefs/124.pdf>); "Afghanistan Elections 2009: The Day of Reckoning", ISAS Brief No. 126, 31 August 2009 (accessed at <http://www.isas.nus.org/events/backgroundbriefs/127.pdf>); and "Afghanistan Presidential Election 2009: Inconclusive Results a Dilemma for the United States", ISAS Brief 130, 22 September 2009 (accessed at <http://www.isas.nus.org/events/backgroundbriefs/131.pdf>).

leadership of the insurgency while concentrating resources on economic development. This strategy was championed by United States Vice President Joseph Biden who also contended that, in recent years, Pakistan had emerged as the epicentre of organised terrorist activity. Given appropriate support, Pakistan had the capability to use the counter-insurgency approach against the insurgents operating from its area.

It was South Waziristan that had become the stronghold of the Taliban. It was also the area where Osama bin Laden and other leaders of the Al-Qaeda were thought to have taken refuge. The Biden approach was embedded in the “Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act of 2009” that was signed by President Obama on 13 October 2009. The Act was based on the bill originally tabled by Biden when he was Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee of the United States Senate. The Act committed the United States to providing US\$7.5 billion of economic assistance to Pakistan over a period of five years (2010-2014) under its “Title I” and an unspecified amount to strengthen the country’s security forces under “Title II”. There were several conditions for this support. The two that mattered were the vigorous campaign against eliminating terrorist groups that had found haven in the country, and instituting improvements in the social and economic situation of the people.

The Islamic insurgents were in violent opposition to the close ties that had developed between Washington and Islamabad after 9/11. These involved Pakistan’s support to the United States in Afghanistan as well as the commitment to move against the groups that had carried out acts of terrorism not only in Pakistan but also in India. Pakistan’s *Lashkar-e-Taiba*, headquartered in the town of Muridke 15 miles north of Lahore, was held responsible for mounting the attack on Mumbai, India, in November 2008. A number of terrorist acts actually committed or thwarted in Britain were carried out by men who had received training in camps located in Pakistan. There was a consensus among terrorism experts that action had to be taken by the Pakistani authorities if the problem of Islamic extremism was to be seriously addressed.

That the war against terrorism was not only a war involving the West, in particular the United States, was driven home by a series of attacks on targets within Pakistan for which the insurgents took responsibility. These included the assassination of Ms Benazir Bhutto on 27 December 2007 after she had addressed an election rally in

Rawalpindi's Liaquat Bagh. A number of polls had suggested that her organisation, the Pakistan Peoples Party, would win the elections scheduled for later that year and that she would go on to become Prime Minister for the third time. Both the administrations headed by President Pervez Musharraf and Asif Ali Zardari alleged that Bhutto's assassination was masterminded by Baitullah Mehsud, a Mehsud tribesman who had formed the TTP. While Mehsud denied any involvement in the Bhutto murder, he was happy to accept responsibility for a number of acts of violence, including the attack on the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad on 20 September 2008 that killed 60 people. Mehsud went on to become Pakistan's most wanted man. He was killed on 5 August 2009 by a missile launched from an unmanned United States aircraft, the Predator.³ The TTP announced that it would avenge their leader's killing by attacking Pakistan's security forces. This threat was carried out once Hakimullah Mehsud, previously an aide to the slain leader, had established control over the TTP movement. His organisation took responsibility for more than 10 attacks launched on various targets in Pakistan in the 10-day period before the beginning of the campaign by the military. Among these was the audacious attack on the General Headquarters, the army headquarters in Rawalpindi on 10 and 11 October 2009. The army establishment was under siege for 22 hours by 10 terrorists who were able to penetrate the perimeter. Some two dozen people were killed, including nine terrorists. These attacks had claimed the lives of 175 people by the time the military began its campaign in the hills of South Waziristan.

The Beginning of the Campaign

Early on 17 October 2009, 30,000 Pakistani troops launched a major ground offensive in South Waziristan. It followed months of airstrikes intended to soften up militant defences in the area. During this period, the army had encouraged the people living in the area to move out and take refuge in the camps that were being hurriedly set up. Some 90,000 to 150,000 people had left the area. In an interview with the Associate Press, Major General Athar Abbas, the army spokesman said that, "The assault would be limited to the holdings of Mehsud, the slain leader – a swath of territory that

³ Baitullah Mehsud's killing was the subject of an ISAS Brief by Professor Ishtiaq Ahmed. See "Taleban Leader Baitullah Mehsud dead: Is it the Beginning of the End of Terrorism?", ISAS Brief No. 122, 11 August 2009 (accessed at <http://www.isas.nus.org/events/backgroundbriefs/123.pdf>).

stretches roughly 1,275 square miles...The plan is to capture and hold the area where Abbas estimates 10,000 insurgents are headquartered and reinforced with 1,500 foreigners, most of them of the Central Asian origin. There are also Arabs, but the Arabs are basically in the leadership, providing resources and expertise and in the role of trainers”.⁴ The United States was supporting the effort by the Pakistani army by providing equipment such as night-vision goggles, laser-guided munitions and possibly also helicopter gunships.

The army seems better prepared and equipped this time around. It has sealed off many supply and escape routes which may become difficult to travel once the snow comes, which will happen in three to four weeks time. The army believes that winter and snow will hurt the militants more than it will hinder its own efforts. The insurgents may find it difficult to hide in the caves and crevices that punctuate the area once it becomes uncomfortably cold. The army has also been conducting negotiations with the tribes and clans that have been traditional Mehsud rivals, in the hope that they will be induced to switch sides and work with it or, at least, stay neutral.

Will the Army Stay this Time?

This is the fourth time since 2001 that the army has ventured into South Waziristan. On the previous three occasions, it withdrew after making some inroads and following the conclusion of peace deals with the insurgents. The militants went back on the deals as soon as the military withdrew. Having learnt a lesson from these experiences, the army has said that it is determined to stay this time – a strategy it has followed with some success in the Swat district. The Taliban were virtually killed, captured or expelled from Swat and the army has stayed on to help with the rehabilitation of the more than two million people who were displaced together with the long-term development of the area. The same strategy is likely to be repeated in South Waziristan if the military campaign succeeds.

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⁴ Kathy Gannon, Ishtiaq Mahsud, and Hussain Afzal, “Ground offensive begins in Pakistan al-Qaeda haven”, Associated Press, 17 October 2009.