



Military Operations in South Waziristan: Issues and Implications

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Pakistan's Army and para-military forces have been engaged in an operation against 'terrorists' in the Wana region of South Waziristan Agency since the second week of January 2004. 'Terrorists' refer to fighters belonging to the Taliban and al Qaeda. While tracking of these 'terrorists' has been proceeding since Pakistan joined the American led 'War' against terrorism, what is striking in the present operation are the issues involved and their implications for Pakistan.

The current operations in South Waziristan began in the second week of January when some al Qaeda members were suspected to be in the Kalo Shah town. Wana is the headquarters of this tribal region, which is 25 miles from the Afghan-Pakistan border. The region is also home to the Ahmadzai Wazir tribe, which consists of nine sub tribes including the Zalikhel and Yargulkhel.

When the suspects were cornered by the para-military forces, they refused to surrender which led to firing. Though there were no casualties, three houses were damaged. Immediately, a brigade of the Pakistani Army was stationed in Wana, along with airborne troops of the Quick Reaction Force and armored personnel carriers. Helicopter gun ships were used to fire on suspected houses, but at the end of day one, Major Shaukat Sultan was quoted saying "no foreign suspects have been found." Unfortunately, the problem has just begun in the tribal region.

Following a search by security forces in the region, an attack was carried out against one of the army camps in the tribal area by 'terrorists' and their supporters. Two soldiers and two personnel of the Frontier Constabulary were killed, while three others were injured in the attack.

Initially, the Army denied that these attacks were a reaction to their earlier operation calling them "stray rockets." Later, an ultimatum was delivered to the Ahmadzai Wazir tribal jirga to hand over three members of their tribe, suspected of harboring 'terrorists' and whose houses had earlier been attacked in the operation. These three suspects belong to the Yargulkhel sub tribe, while the rocket attacks are believed to have been carried out by the larger Zalikhel sub tribe.

Following the ultimatum from the political administration demanding the handing over of Naik Mohammad Yargulkhel, Haji Sharif Yargulkhel and Maulvi Abbas (whose houses were demolished in the January 8 operations), a jirga was called and attended by all nine sub tribes of the Ahmadzai Wazir. It was decided by the tribe to form a lashkar that would assist the security forces in getting 22 tribesmen (the list later expanded to 57) including the three prime accused to surrender. They stood accused of assisting the al Qaeda and Taliban and for attacking the military camp with rockets.

This arrangement was a shrewd move by both the government and the tribes. The government was well aware that an operation without the support of local tribes, who are armed with sophisticated weapons including rockets, would be disastrous. Besides, the government was demanding the surrender of persons suspected of assisting the al Qaeda, and not al Qaeda members per se, which would be extremely difficult for the security forces to achieve on their own. As far as the tribal jirga was concerned, this arrangement suited them as it prevented the direct entry of Pakistan's security forces into their territory. The tribal leaders were aware that, given the tribal sentiments of independence from external interference and

American pressure on Musharraf, the entry of security forces into the tribal agency would lead to an armed clash that would be disastrous.

Subsequently, the tribal leaders succeeded in making the suspects surrender. More than twenty suspects have surrendered thus far. What needs to be emphasized is that those who have surrendered so far are Pashtuns from Pakistan, who have been accused of supporting and harboring al Qaeda and Taliban personnel, and not group members per se. Second, among those who surrendered, most belong to the Khojal khel and Tozi khel sub tribes of the Ahmedzai Wazir and not the main Zalikhel, which is the biggest of the nine sub tribes and also known for its sympathy towards the Taliban and al Qaeda. Of the list of 57 suspects that the Political Agent gave to the jirga, 29 belong to the Zalikhel and only 28 to the other eight sub tribes of the Ahmadzai Wazir.

While the current operation seems to be almost completed, several other issues and questions need addressing.

South Waziristan: A Haven for Al Qaeda?

South Waziristan is a tribal agency with North Waziristan in the north, Bannu and Dera Ismail Khan in the east, and Baluchistan in the south. Like

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What makes South Waziristan significant is that it also borders Afghanistan, especially its Paktia province, where the Taliban and al-Qaeda forces are regrouping. Due to its proximity and local support, these troops have been using South

Waziristan as a base for ongoing operations against the American troops in Afghanistan. The US and Pakistan are aware of this problem, with the former pressurizing the latter to take decisive action against the 'terrorists' in South Waziristan. In June and October 2003, the Pakistan Army carried out two operations in the region against the Taliban and al-Qaeda terrorists. In the October operation, eight al Qaeda men were killed and 18 were captured, though the key leader ? Ahmed Said Khadr - escaped.

What needs to be noticed is the level of local support to the Taliban and al Qaeda elements in these tribal areas. Many view the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan to be an Afghan Jihad II. In Jihad I, they believe, they fought one superpower and now they are fighting another. The predominant conviction is that if they could drive away the Soviets they could do the same to the Americans. Not only are there strong sentiments against America for its involvement in Afghanistan, but there is visible opposition against Pakistan's support for the same. Al Qaeda has been exploiting these jihad sentiments in the tribes for their survival; so has been the MMA for political purposes.

Second, the al Qaeda and Taliban elements find it easier to slip into these tribal areas, as there has never been effective control over them ? administrative or legal - either from Islamabad or Peshawar. Without the active support of the locals, it would be impossible for the security forces to track down the suspects. The al Qaeda seems to have won over these tribes by treating them well and paying them better. Worse, al Qaeda has won over some supporters who serve as al Qaeda's agents and recruit from the tribes. In fact, the current operation is targeted against those Pashtuns in South Waziristan who have been acting as agents of the al Qaeda and Taliban either by providing shelter or providing manpower to fight against the American forces in Afghanistan.

Governance: Will it ever find a way?

The tribal regions have always been neglected by the provincial and national governments. While it is true that the tribes loath any interferences by these governments and have their own tribal regulations and laws, the governments have failed to take steps to improve their basic amenities and

standard of living. While the government-run educational facilities are bad all over Pakistan, it has been worse in the tribal regions. Unemployment has increased due to the lack of adequate employment opportunities. Electricity is yet to reach the entire tribal region, which is a major hindrance to exploiting its limited agricultural potential. On the other hand, madrassas have monopolized the educational structure of these tribal regions by default, and waging jihad has become the main source of employment and revenue. Unless the economic potential of the tribal regions is developed, there is every possibility of their getting influenced by al Qaeda money, which is considerable.

The rocket attack on the security forces and the recent operations highlight the need for bringing the tribal areas under a uniform governance process, taking into account the tribal culture. Integration of this governance process is bound to weaken the tribal and religious leaders of the region. However, tribal exclusion has in fact become an excuse for successive governments? democratic or military to ignore providing them good governance and improving their standard of living.

Space for Political Parties?

What is striking in these operations is the opposition of the religious parties, especially the JUI (Fazlur). Indeed, Fazlur Rehman, the leader of the JUI (F) and Secretary General of the MMA repeatedly emphasized that there were no terrorists in the tribal region and termed the military operation as 'terrorism' against the innocents. Siraj ul Haq, a senior minister in the NWFP cabinet, warned that the "repercussions of military adventurism will be very serious."

While there has been political opposition at the national level, mainly from the religious parties, what is interesting is the lack of response from the secular parties. The main reason has been that political activities in the tribal areas have been banned by the government; as a result the secular parties have no role to play in the politics. On the other hand, the role of religious parties has been increasing, which has been the main reason for the growth and sustenance of conservatism, leading to extremism. General Musharraf should understand that the growth of Talibanism in these regions, and the rest of Pakistan in general, can

only be arrested by providing space to the secular parties. Neither the Pakistani military nor US aid and support for Gen Musharraf can be the panacea. In fact, they have adverse implications.

A Way Out?

It is essential that General Musharraf seriously addresses the issues of governance in these tribal areas rather than focus on eliminating the extremists there.

The causes underlying popular support for extremism need to be addressed and removed at the earliest. The US should understand these compulsions and pressure Musharraf to take long term measures in the tribal regions

and not focus only on ridding it of al Qaeda elements. Half-hearted and half-baked efforts to gain temporary relief would only increase the pain over the long run. With anti-American sentiments remaining high in these regions it is imperative that a long term perspective be adopted and implemented. If General Musharraf is genuine in his desire to reform but needs more time to address these concerns, the US should wait for results and not hurry him up.

Second, the Durand line running along the Pashtun tribal areas needs better monitoring. Traditionally, this border has not been monitored for various reasons, and it should now be better manned. The entire 2,200 kilometer border is manned roughly by 60,000 to 70,000 troops, including para-military forces and the army. This is inadequate given the porosity of the border and the support given from both sides to those crossing it. Will Musharraf post more troops along the western border? Since he has reached an agreement with India, he could shift some of his troops to the west. The threat from within constitutes the greater danger for Pakistan.

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Third, there needs to be greater integration between mainland Pakistan and its tribal regions, taking into account the tribal sensitivities. A process could be started with providing better governance, in terms of providing electricity, educational facilities and so on. A section within the tribal region looks ahead, and would like to be a part of the modernization process. While the local mullah may be against watching television, the people at large individually violate this rule! It is wrong to consider that 'tribal' societies as necessarily inward looking. In fact, it is the failure to integrate with the outside world that has made them to look inward. The Taliban and al Qaeda have only 'encashed' these failures.

Fourth, General Musharraf has to pursue his 'jihad' against the jihadis earnestly. The support for Taliban, glorification of Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden, formation and the growth of MMA, adulation of its nuclear scientists are the outcome of Pakistan military's carefully orchestrated jihad and nuclear policies with the same objective. Will he stand up?

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- One of the local tribesmen, Behram Khan who fought in Jihad I, was quoted saying: "They were mujahids yesterday, how come they have become the terrorists of today? They were here during the first Afghan jihad and we welcome them even now. For us nothing has changed, unlike America and Pakistan." Owais Tohid, "The Last Refuge," Newsline, November 2003, p.39.
- A tribal elder in South Waziristan was quoted saying: "Osama and his men are heroes for the locals. They are treated as honorable guests. They don't harm tribesmen, stay for a couple of nights, and pay 10,000 to 20,000 rupees before they leave." Owais Tohid, "The Last Refuge," Newsline, November 2003, p.41.
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