High Stakes on the Frontier

In imperial times the British struggled to control the tribal lands on the border of what is now Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Soviets were also unable to dislodge those resisting its occupation. Now on the frontline of the 'war' on terror, America and its ally Pakistan are trying to contend with fighters of the same stock. The risk is that the current strong-arm tactic might drive the uncommitted into the hands of extremists and jeopardise the Afghan democratisation project in the process. The lessons of history in this frontier terrain have been ignored.

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nis a strategy discussed by diplomats and military commanders against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban to boost President George Bush's credibility in the race for the American presidency. Pakistan's campaign in its tribal areas, coordinated with American action in north-eastern Afghanistan, opted for a heavy-handed aerial and border military approach.

The Peshmerga in the north, little known, little understood and less generally been left to govern itself. With all stuck and no hurry, the age-old system of patronage and clientilism in the east could be heptupled. The may push the potential of local support towards extremism and is unlikely to lead to the surrender of alleged foreign militants working refuge in the tribal areas. Without a hard and strong military force...

The stakes are high for Pakistan. Military and civilian casualties are mounting and the delicate balance of political control that has retained Pakistani tribal allegiance and prevented tribal sentiments from turning inward is under threat.

The stakes are higher still for Afghanistan. Its democracy and its enemies building leverage in the balance of its leadership and security dictates of Washington's campaign in the southeast, which has encouraged a culture of xenophobia and political enmity.

Three years after the fall of the Taliban, with increasing attacks on foreign troops and workers in the countdown to the Afghan elections, and without resistance to Pakistan's attempts to engage militarily, military action appears to be heightening Pushtum alienation on either side of the Durand Line which divides the two countries. Pro-Taliban sentiments seem to be hardening.

Without a political solution to vent Pushtum disaffection, will the military strategy only require Pushtum resistance and risk the souring of relations? And, if Osama bin Laden remains elusive, to...
what extent will the short-term military objectives to improve Bush’s report card before November undermine the long-term goal of establishing a stable and peaceful region?

COLONIAL LEGACY

British history provides plenty of examples of the limitations of military force as a means of political control in the tribal areas. In the late nineteenth century the British Raj conducted numerous operations to extend its border and advance direct administrative control over the area, fomenting frequent conflicts between Muslim and Hindu tribes. The violent tribal revolt, and their perennial insurgency, led Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, to demand a no-man’s land in which the Pathan were eventually left to govern themselves.

Falling outside direct British rule, the colonial government adopted a policy of occasional interference in tribal affairs. The provocation of a permanent army was removed, but when necessary the British relied on punitive expeditions from the settled areas and enforced collective punishment, economic sanctions, subsidies and a discredited system of rule that denied human rights.

Much to the consternation of the British army in India and the Treasury, the costs of maintaining authority in tribal territory that remained rebellious until independence, was far too high and often considered a taxing exercise in futility. It was justified as protecting the strategic security of British India from its expansionist designs of Imperial Russia and its Afghan protégé.

Eventually, roughly 20,000 square miles of territory along the Durand Line became the backyard to the Great Game, where human intelligence and political interference administered by political agents were more effective in maintaining unemployment than military force.

BUYING LOYALTY

Since Pakistan’s independence in 1947, negotiated settlements with the tribes have led to the abandonment of military units, shifted tribal allegiance to the Pakistani state and halted the clashes and hostilities that had plagued British India. The area remained politically insecure with the Mullah government rejecting the Durand Line as an international boundary and making claims to Pakisms land in Pakistan.

To build mutual confidence and foster good relations with the Pakistanis, the Pakistani government, although retaining inherited colonial structures of loose governance, suspended military force as a means of control. Instead it cultivated relationships with local chieftains, known as Maliks and Khans, through a system of subsidies to retain loyalty to the state and protect its external boundaries from their Rifles in the Afghan towns of influence.

It is no surprise then, that when the Pakistan army, constitutionally barred from these areas, introduced tens of thousands of troops in disproportionate force to flush out foreign militants, producing civilian deaths in the process, it met with resistance.

Since March, the army has automatically employed brute force following a haul in negotiations over the surrender of foreign militants and their local supporters, leading to the capture of Udhok, Ushor, and Chechen in no millions of Al-Qaeda that were left uncollared.

The security with which Pakistani troops were confronted in the initial operation in the South Waziristan Agency convinced the authorities of the presence of a high value target. This was first said to be Egyptian Aymen Al-Zawahiri, who was later confirmed by Sulaiman in a tribal town and pro-Al-Qaeda tribal leader.

While America achieved this major step towards dismantling and demobilizing local support for Islamic militants, Pakistani analysts are not so sure. Efforts are reportedly undertaken to malign Pakistani security forces as ‘agents of America’ and manipulate popular sentiment against them.

The danger lies not only in furthering the tribes to seek revenge and retaliate, but more seriously in adding religious grievances to an attack on Pakistani pride. Yet more Islamic militants could be created from disgruntled Pathans, who already regard the current incursion as an assault on their sovereignty.

For Pakistan, the political and security repercussions are considerable. It would not benefit from a repeat of the infamous revolt of the Raj of 1947 and 1948, one of the largest and most significant armed South Asian insurgencies under British rule. Two years of bombing failed to help capture a publicised religious leader and subdue his persuaded supporters in Waziristan.

Unfortunately, the current military strategy is suppressing political channels. It is in danger of undermining the writ of the Pakistani army, which has for decades been able to quell Pathan revolts and, using on the ground intelligence, determine and manipulate the political environment.

In the current climate created by the “war on terror”, Pakistan’s stability is once again being decided by, and depends on, government policy and the country’s weightiest powerbroker, the army. It has been stated that Washington’s “best feet” in Pakistan is President Pervez Musharraf. To bolster the strategic partnership with him, the Musharraf administration has increased aid to complement Pakistan’s military expenditure in the tribal areas and given Islamabad the status of a major non-NATO ally. This has given Musharraf the confidence to institutionalise military control, weakening civil political institutions. Democracy is suffering, but it is argued that the political dominance of the Pakistan army ensures the marginalisation of Islamic groups remains. But what of latent Islamic elements within the army itself?

DEPRIVED AND ISOLATED

Unfortunately, for too long the military oligarchy has neglected the assimilation of the peoples of the tribal belt into the state. These Pathans are amongst the most economically deprived and politically and socially isolated. They have fewer liberties and democratic rights than their fellow countrymen, are beyond the legislative authority of the state, and governed by a repressive system of judicial control inherited from colonial times.

The present military action can only add fuel to the list of grievances, disrupt the delicate equilibrium between the state and the tribes, and create pro-Taliban and Al-Qaeda sympathizers where previously there were none.

The irony is that the modern Pakistani state has failed to learn from the experiences of British India in the tribal areas that you can assimilate, but not people. What is required is an economic development package and a political strategy that doesn’t rely on explicit military force to win hearts and minds.

Old plans to reform the tribal areas, previously shelved, are...
In this insecure environment, political preparations and participatory government are suffering; local strongmen are likely to dominate the elections.

Now being re-evaluated: It is unlikely however, that the government will be able to resist American pressure for speedy action and retain its independence to implement such a policy.

SHORT-TERM TACTICS

West of the Durand Line, the Pakistan heartland of Afghanistan has become the main battleground for the war on terror. Eighteen thousand American coalition troops are engaged in operations ‘Enforcing Freedom’ and ‘Mountain Resolve’ in the south and south-east. Rules of engagement with the local population are defined by ‘BOB’ diplomacy: incendive house searches and arbitrary detention on the one hand and, intensifying tribal politics and embossing warlords in pursuit of its military objectives, on the other.

As a result of a superficial understanding and a fleeting encounter with initial successes, power structures and ethnicities, troops with faulty intelligence play into local realities and dynamics. They are frequently unable and unwilling to distinguish between Pakistani villagers, the Taliban, and Al-Qaeda. Innocents, caught in coalition campaigns and infiltrated by the lawlessness created by warlords and drug barons, often backed by America, inevitably join the ranks of Taliban supporters either intentionally or under duress.

The upshot is increased violence, instability and insecurity. The US-led coalition is discredited to control the rosetta super-trade and unwilling to deploy and extend security to the Pakistan belt. Instead it is financing, recruiting and embossing local authorities to assist in the hunt for Al-Qaeda, further legitimising and militarising their power.

In turn, Islamic militants and the Taliban are mounting a campaign of harassment against predominantly soft targets, particularly aid workers. This is hampering relief and reconstruction, isolating a ‘safe’ province beyond the influence of central government.

DEMOCRACY AND CREDIBILITY

Bespurged Taliban and fratricidal violence, which has reached its highest level since the fall of the Taliban government in 2001, is gaining momentum and threatening to destabilise the elections. UN voter registration teams have been unable to operate in this area and participation is unlikely.

Pakistan, previously marginalised in the 2001 Bonn peace process, already bears grudges at having lost out in the transition to a US imposed interim authority. Traditionally, the Pakistan belt has been ideologically linked to Kandahar and with its support President Hamid Karzai will be unable to consolidate his government’s legitimacy.

The determination of US forces to root out terrorism is overshadowing long-term stability and representative government. The problem is not confined to this war zone but engulfs Afghanistan as a whole. Washington has shaped a political environment that is conducive to meeting its short-term military objectives at the expense of the long-term goals of promoting peace, national reconciliation and nation building.

Since December 2001, the US first sponsored and later dealt inadequately with the political leadership of warlords, ensuring records of human rights violations. This has undermined the development of democracy and the rule of law. Washington has foot dragged on the expansion of the international security assistance force, which has proved to be woefully insufficient in securing what has become a highly fractured collection of undemocratic fiefdoms. Factional fighting is pervasive and the government is not in control.

In this insecure environment, political preparations and participatory government are suffering. Local strongmen are likely to dominate the election. Already violence has set the date back from September to October and further clashes have erupted in Nangarhar province, bordering Iran, forcing the temporary withdrawal of UN staff. Despite the circumstances, Bush’s nod to showcase Afghanistan before his own election, means that it is unlikely that it will be deferred to a date more conducive to democratic expression, when civilian leadership could effectively draw authority away from the warlords.

The American budget for the war in the region far outweighs that which it has set aside for reconstrcuting Afghanistan. Despite the military might, Osama Bin Laden still evades the Afghans, the Pakistanis and the Americans. Without a political solution to the other military dominance, the region will pay a heavy price by repeating the mistakes of the past, waging yet another impotent foreign-led war that is undermining regional peace and democracy.