



PAKISTAN: Corps is ill-equipped for 'war on terror'

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SUBJECT: A profile of the Frontier Corps, a paramilitary force based near the Afghan border.

SIGNIFICANCE: The corps is central to US proposals to enlist tribal leaders in the region the better to execute the 'war on terror' -- a strategy modelled on Washington's experience recruiting allies to fight al-Qaida in Iraq's Anbar province. The corps has long played a key security role, including for foreign powers, but questions surround its capacity and reliability.

ANALYSIS: The Frontier Corps is a locally recruited paramilitary force that operates in the regions bordering Afghanistan. British colonial rulers in 1907 created the corps to extend and strengthen control over tribal areas of British India. By 1947, the corps had responsibility for a 2,500 mile-long area from the Karakoram mountain range in the north to the Mekran Coast in the south. To manage the growing organisation it inherited, Pakistan divided it into the two units that are now in the North-west Frontier Province (NWFP) and Baluchistan. The former is also in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

Tribal factor. The presence of the Frontier Corps in the tribal belt served as a guarantee to Pashtun tribes wary of outside forces that the Pakistani army would not be deployed there. The soldiers and lower ranks are ethnics Pashtuns from the FATA, and local recruitment has ensured that the corps commands respect from tribesmen (see [PAKISTAN: Pashtun tribes defy pressure on militants - May 3, 2007](#)).

With manpower currently at around 80,000, the corps is under the administrative control of the federal government (Ministry of States and Frontier Regions), with major generals from the Pakistani army leading the two branches as inspector generals. Incumbents are Mohammad Alam Khattak in NWFP and Saleem Nawaz in Baluchistan.

Key insights

- The United States is mulling a significant investment in the Frontier Corps to boost the 'war on terror' effort in Pakistan.
- Established in 1907 by the British, the corps has long helped secure the tribal regions and has recently played an important role supporting operations against the Taliban and al-Qaida.
- Yet it faces equipment, training and morale problems, and it will take years to turn it into a force capable of leading counter-insurgency operations.

Security goals. During the early 1970s, the corps was used to pursue regional security and political objectives, including the organisation of Afghan opposition to President Sardar Mohammad Daud Khan (and the recruitment of former mujahidin commander Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the late National Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Masud). Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1973-77) had plans to use the corps to incorporate the tribal areas into the federal government, but they never materialised.

The Frontier Corps was involved in the 1970s in operations against separatists in Baluchistan and in the 1980s to help the Afghan mujahidin. Most of the soldiers from that era have now retired. In the 1990s, it was also used to enforce the writ of the state and to tackle sectarian tensions. The results were unspectacular, but there was no attempt to improve the force.

Border responsibilities. Over the past decade, the corps' roles have varied:

- In 2004, it protected Chinese engineers and technicians working on the Gomal Zam Dam project.
- It helps the police during sensitive religious occasions, which often coincide with sectarian violence.
- In FATA it has helped enforce the Frontier Crime Regulation -- a legal code covering administration that is often perceived as oppressive.
- It has also undertaken border post and anti-smuggling duties (though it receives no specialised training for these jobs).



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Recently, for example, the Federal Board of Revenue instructed the corps to tackle wheat smuggling that Customs had failed to curb, and had led to serious shortages and consequent price rises. It will be playing this role until the end of March.

Tackling terrorism. Since 2003, the Frontier Corps has been used in military operations against Taliban and al-Qaida militants, during which it has suffered significant casualties (see [PAKISTAN: Al-Qaida goes from strength to strength - September 20, 2007](#)). For almost all Frontier Corps units in NWFP, this was their first combat experience in recent times (except for the Chitral Scouts which were involved in the Kargil operations against India in 1999). Their operational capacity has been limited by:

- inadequate training;
- outdated equipment;
- a lack of modern communications systems; and
- a declining esprit de corps.

To be engaged in Pashtun versus Pashtun conflict in the context of an unpopular US-led 'war on terror' has proved highly controversial. This has been particularly so as kidnappings of Frontier Corps soldiers (as well as Pakistani army troops) have become more common. The government has been slow to identify changes to the dynamics of conflict, with soldiers increasingly giving up fighting -- some out of sympathy with the Taliban and others reluctant to kill fellow Pashtuns.

In some cases, the Pakistani army has also pressed the Frontier Corps to lead operations without much weaponry and training, on the assumption that Taliban militants would not attack troops of the same ethnic background (see [PAKISTAN: Military status is assured -- unlike morale - October 25, 2007](#)). The army came in for a shock, as the Taliban even beheaded their own tribal elders who they suspected of being pro-government or to be cooperating with the Frontier Corps.

Potential partner? Since 2006, the United States has been supporting the Frontier Corps with communications equipment and bullet-proof helmets. Moreover, it has recently earmarked some 350 million dollars to equip and train the corps in return for its participation in the 'war on terror'.

However, there are serious concerns about this strategy -- some of which have been expressed publicly by former senior NWFP officials. Mahmood Shah, a retired army brigadier who has been in charge of security in the tribal regions, has warned that a direct US role in training and equipping the Frontier Corps could backfire politically and strengthen militia forces.

While involvement of US trainers with the Frontier Corps would probably be accepted within the corps and by the army (whose support would be essential to enable the strategy to proceed), there would be considerable resistance to a US military presence on the ground. Training would have to be small-scale and low-profile to avoid generating political tension.

President Pervez Musharraf, with his own political considerations in mind amid signs that the army is increasingly critical of its role in the border areas, plans to equip the Frontier Corps with tanks and guns from the country's own resources (see [PAKISTAN: Musharraf must compromise or risk overthrow - November 20, 2007](#)). This would enable the army to play more of a supportive role in the region. However, it would take years of training and capacity-building to make the Frontier Corps capable of leading anti-militancy operations.

Moreover, training would not resolve questions around morale and motivation. Morale has long been undermined by command and promotion structures that make it difficult for local Pashtun recruits to reach high positions that are held by army representatives, as well as by costly involvement in 'war on terror' operations.

Development options. The Frontier Corps could be more effective, even with short-term training and better resources, in a more conducive political climate and with the Pakistani army spearheading any military action. Stabilisation in Afghanistan would also ease pressure on the Frontier Corps (by reducing smuggling, for example).

The Frontier Corps is better suited to keeping the peace than fighting wars and insurgencies. New demands and requirements need different kinds of expertise and skills that will take years to develop. Poor education levels affecting recruitment, low salaries and corruption are among the issues that have long undermined law enforcement, and these would also have to be tackled to improve the Frontier Corps, and other law enforcement forces.

CONCLUSION: A major overhaul of the Frontier Corps in terms of its mandate, service conditions, new training facilities and improved promotion prospects has the potential to rejuvenate the force. However, this is a long-term project, and there is little

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prospect that it can be transformed quickly to tackle the menace of Talibanisation.

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