



PAKISTAN: Counter-terror policy is in disarray

Tuesday, September 16 2008

EVENT: President Asif Ali Zardari will take up the issue of Pakistan's sovereignty in talks with UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown today, Prime Minister Syed Yousaf Raza Gilani said yesterday.

SIGNIFICANCE: A cross-border raid by US ground forces, together with media claims that US President George Bush had authorised Special Operations troops to conduct such operations without seeking permission from Islamabad, has provoked anger from Pakistan's politicians, media and army. Pakistan's counter-terrorism policy may suffer as US-Pakistan relations deteriorate.

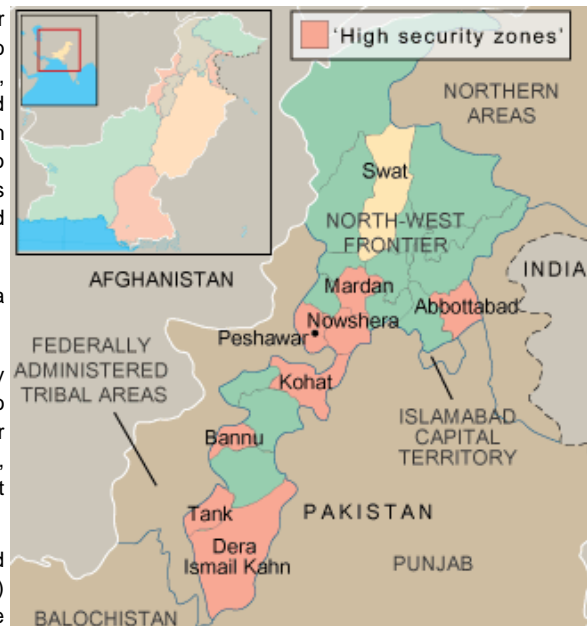
ANALYSIS: Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, told Congress on September 10 that US efforts in Afghanistan required a new strategy encompassing both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Hours later, Pakistan's chief of army staff, General Pervez Ashfaq Kayani, issued a sharply worded rejoinder in which he vowed to defend Pakistan's sovereignty "at all costs".

That Pakistan's political leaders stated their support for this view after Kayani's statement was issued -- and did so in a relatively muted tone -- indicates that the army continues to act autonomously and assertively. Kayani's sharp reaction also points to frayed relations with his US counterparts. An August meeting between Kayani and Mullen on the USS Abraham Lincoln was reportedly cordial, but it appears to have been marked by miscommunication and a lack of trust, with both sides interpreting the outcome differently.

Policy disarray. Since they took office in March, Prime Minister Syed Yousef Raza Gilani and his cabinet have left the military to spearhead the counter-terrorism effort. For its part, the army, nursing wounds received at the hands of the militants, has looked to the political leadership to take a position on counter-terrorism goals and accept credit or blame for it. Amid this mutual effort to shift responsibility, militancy in Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and North West Frontier Province (NWFP) has increased substantially.

Taliban advantage. Several developments provide evidence of a deteriorating situation:

- **Geographic spread.** Disturbances and militancy in the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) are spreading into neighbouring settled districts of NWFP. In late July, the Interior Ministry declared eight districts of NWFP as high security zones, where Taliban activities are expanding and chances of terrorist attacks have increased.
- **High casualties.** More than 600 people were killed in around 330 bomb blasts (including an estimated 28 suicide bombings) during January-August 2008. Suicide bombers targeted the Wah ammunition factories (near Rawalpindi) in August -- a highly secure area which also houses Pakistan's missile development programme, including nuclear warheads.
- **Taliban hallmarks.** Some 125 girls' schools were bombed in the last 10 months in the Swat area alone, according to multiple local news reports. A girls' school was also bombed in NWFP's capital Peshawar recently.
- **State functions.** Taliban militants have assumed policing responsibilities in certain districts, such as Tank in NWFP, arresting criminals and parading them for public display. In response, the NWFP police force has recruited 7,000 policemen for special counter-terrorism duties and hurriedly purchased weapons from the open market to arm its force.
- **Sectarian aspect.** A Shia kinship group in Kurram agency, the Turi tribe, is surrounded on all sides by Taliban forces and their sympathizers. This siege-like situation persists and has led to hundreds of deaths in the area.



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- **Deterrent capacity.** The main Taliban grouping, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), feels empowered to threaten the NWFP government and has issued many ultimatums to this effect. After the suicide bombings in Wah, the TTP issued a threat on a nationwide basis, stating that the continuation of military operations would be met with suicide bombings against major population centres.

New approach? A recent statement to the press by Lieutenant General (retired) Shahid Aziz, a former senior general and close associate of former President Pervez Musharraf, asserted that Musharraf did not share with the senior military command his various understandings with the United States. Aziz further claimed that Musharraf went against the advice of his senior commanders about counter-terrorism operations. The statement underlines the view that US-Pakistan counter-terrorism cooperation has been concentrated in the hands of one man, rather than in deeper institutional cooperation (see [PAKISTAN: Reputation may hamper Zardari presidency - September 5, 2008](#)).

The Pakistan Peoples' Party government has stated that it is developing its own, new counter-terrorism approach. Information Minister Sherry Rahman has suggested that it will have three aspects, namely :

- talking to peaceful elements within the tribal areas;
- providing employment and investment opportunities in those areas; and
- applying force against extremists who continue to challenge the writ of the state.

Yet officials close to President Asif Ali Zardari have been sharply critical of the US decision to authorize 'boots on the ground' operations within Pakistani soil, saying that it deprives the government of space to take control of anti-militant policy.

Pakistan policy. The domestic approach to countering militancy this year has been characterised by grave problems, but also some more positive signs:

1. **Problems.** Counter-terrorism action has been compromised by pro-Taliban and anti-US sentiment at some levels of the security apparatus:
 - During an operation in Khyber agency, leading militant leader Mangal Bagh was shown by various Pakistani independent news channels to have vacated his offices well ahead of time, apparently benefiting from leaks.
 - Pro-Taliban sympathies exist, particularly among the army's lower ranks, and are rife in the paramilitary Frontier Corps, which has proved an ineffective instrument against the Taliban (see [PAKISTAN: Corps is ill-equipped for 'war on terror' - December 11, 2007](#)).
 - Pakistan's intelligence services have demanded more intelligence-sharing but have met with US reluctance, reportedly on the grounds that crucial information has in the past been leaked to the very people targeted by the United States (see [US/PAKISTAN: Distrust hinders counter-terror policy - September 4, 2008](#) and see [US/PAKISTAN: ISI reform is urgent but faces hurdles - August 28, 2008](#)).
 - Retired members of the Directorate for Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) have advised and worked for Taliban militants, reinforcing perceptions of more systemic ISI involvement.
 - There is concern over the circumstances under which some banned sectarian militant organisations (including Sipha-e-Sahaba) and Kashmir-focused groups (such as Lashkar-e-Taiba) were allowed to hold public rallies and re-open their old offices.
2. **Encouraging signs.** However, the military has undertaken strong actions in the last two months in the Bajaur and Swat districts of North West Frontier Province, involving army, special operations, air force and paramilitary operations. These actions began on the insistence of the civilian government and enjoyed public support -- partly due to earlier government efforts to talk to these militants. (In Swat, the operation began when militants backed out of their peace deal.)

The operations have shown new signs of civil-military coherence, with the Awami National Party (which leads the state government of NWFP) fully backing the Swat operation. In neither case have army and political leaders issued opposing or inconsistent statements. However, such embryonic consensus risks being undermined by US actions. As well as harming relations between government and military command, the new doctrines could make citizens more receptive to opposition party arguments against Pakistani military action in the tribal areas.

CONCLUSION: Pakistan's approach to countering terrorism in the tribal areas has shown some promising signs of

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consensus and civil-military coherence, but this risks being undermined by recent US actions. While the civil and military leadership may accept precision strikes by US airpower, they will strongly resist unauthorised ground operations by foreign forces.

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