



Institute for Defence Studies & Analyses

ISSUE BRIEF

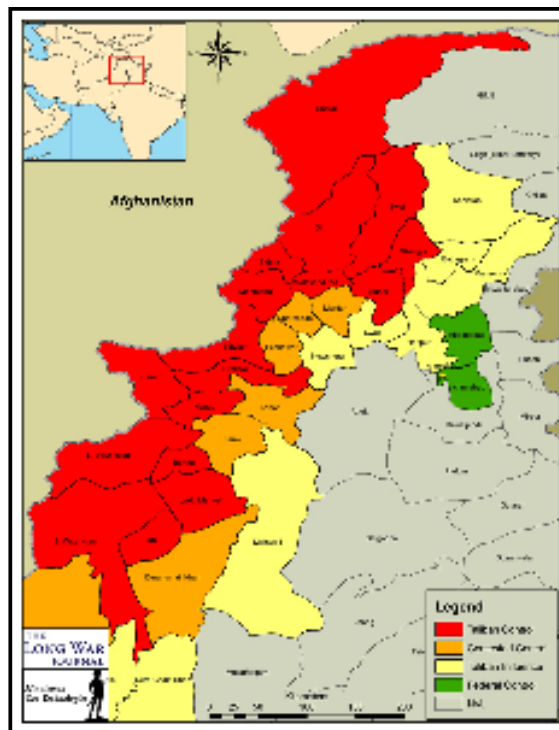
Tackling or Trailing the Taliban : An Assessment

Harinder Singh

July 20, 2009

Backdrop

The Pakistani armed forces have been fighting the rising tide of insurgency in the frontier provinces for several years now. The counter offensive launched in the last week of April commenced by securing the fringe districts of Islamabad by Pakistani Rangers to ward off the immediate threat to the National Capital Region. This was done in a bid to enable smooth passage and deployment of east to west bound military formations. The counterinsurgency operations are focused on re-claiming the territory under Taliban control, clearing resistance along major roads leading to Swat and Dir valleys and re-establishing administrative control in NWFP. Having fought through several hard battles in Swat, Dir, Buner, Shangla and Malakand, the Pakistan army is now poised to extend its operations into South Waziristan. Despite several claims made by Pakistan's political and military hierarchy, the military action seems to have yielded little success, and, in many ways, proved counter productive in light of the large civilian dislocation and collateral damage. Nearly eleven weeks of relentless fighting has claimed several hundred civilian and military casualties, besides an estimated three and half million people displaced during the operations. This piece analyses the military operations conducted so far and makes an assessment of the security situation in Pakistan.



Progress of Operations

Being the seventh largest standing military in the world, the Pakistan army has practically no dearth of troops to undertake sustained counterinsurgency operations in the frontier provinces, albeit in the absence of a trained force, this can only be at the cost of its conventional war fighting potential. Lack of capable forces to fight a non-state actor and its incessant obsession with its eastern borders inhibits commitment of adequate force levels for anti-Taliban operations. Of the total force level available to Pakistan, the army with ease can commit in excess of eight to ten divisions to fight militancy in the frontier provinces, without overly disturbing its defensive posture in the east. Praveen Swami in an article in *The Hindu* dated June, 8, 2009 points out that

Operation *Rah-e-Rast* launched in NWFP and assigned to HQ 10 Corps is supported by close to seven to eight brigade size formations re-located from the east, to include elements of 23 and 37 Infantry Divisions (37 Division forms part of Pakistan's 1 Corps and also designated as the northern army reserve). The 333 Brigade from Jalalpur Jattan, 30 and 212 Brigades from 4 Corps and 54 Brigade from 30 Corps are also part of the deployment. In North and South Waziristan operations continue with the 7 and 9 Divisions of the 11 Corps under Operation *Al-Mizan*. In addition, 14 Division of 31 corps has also been tasked to secure the Bannu-Dera Ismail Khan road axis against a potential Taliban thrust in Punjab.

Concerns expressed in some quarters over the fragility of Pakistan's relationship with India and therefore its reluctance to re-locate additional formations from east is a weak argument, and perhaps an attempt to find fault with a neighbour for its own domestic problems. Notwithstanding the foregoing, the Pakistani establishment has demonstrated some resolve, though far from adequate, in deploying a few military formations, to fight an estimated 40,000 strong Tehrik-i-Taliban (TPP) in NWFP. The Taliban is well known for exploiting the social network of Pashtun tribes to degrade the ongoing military operations. In light of their growing relationship with militant outfits from Punjab, it poses a formidable operational challenge to Pakistan's security forces. Counterinsurgency operations in the frontier provinces thus far have been characterised by indiscriminate use of fire power that include artillery guns, gun ships and fighter jets and, most importantly by inadequacy of 'boots' on the ground. The Pakistani military counter offensive in 2009 is summarised in a chronological order to enable an analysis of the operations undertaken till date.

- **NWFP.**

Date	Event	Remarks
07 April 09	Taliban enter Buner; TNSM demands enforcement of Shariat in Swat; local tribal leaders in Swat ask Taliban to withdraw; results in clashes between the tribal leaders and Taliban; Swat deal collapses on 09 April 09.	Three policemen and two tribal fighters killed; sixteen Taliban cadres reportedly killed.
14 April 09	Taliban fighters parade through Swat in open trucks; the convoy drives through the town of Mardan onwards to Malakand; Pakistan army and Frontier Corps units located at Mardan do not respond.	
15-18 April 09	Suicide attacks against security forces at Charsadda and Kohat; several other areas in Swat, Dir, Buner and Malakand also report sporadic incidents against security forces camps.	Approximately 28 security personnel and six civilians killed.
18-22 April 09	Taliban fighters advance into Mardan and Malakand Division.	
23 Apr 09	Taliban leadership threaten Islamabad; Taliban consolidates control over Buner; Taliban fighters also move into Manshera	

	and Haripur; threaten to take control of Tarbela dam; Pakistan Rangers deployed on outskirts of Islamabad in general area of Haripur to secure the National Capital Region.	
25 April 09	Pakistan Army formally mobilise itself to launch operations against Taliban in Swat valley; military units stand poised to enter Buner, Manshera, Haripur, Swabi, Mardan and Malakand.	
27-30 April 09	Pakistan Army launches military operations in Buner, Manshera and Dir; Pakistan Army claims success in Dir district though later it could not be corroborated.	70 personnel captured by Taliban; 50 militants claimed to have been killed.
01-05 May 09	Pakistan security forces battle in Buner for three days; operations initially launched by troops from Frontier Corps and supported by detached units from Pakistan Army; two additional brigades re-located from the eastern border; SSG units also reportedly employed for operations in Daggar; Taliban strength assessed as 1000 odd fighters in Buner.	64 Taliban fighters reportedly killed.
06 May 09	Taliban attacks against security forces in Swat on the rise; Taliban lays siege to Mingora town; also take over Saidu Sharif; attacks in Malakand continue; IED attacks reported at several areas in Swat; frequent attacks on security forces and convoys.	Exodus of civilian population from Swat reported. Approximately 21 civilian casualties also reported
07-15 May 09	Heavy fighting continues in NWFP; stiff resistance to Pakistan military advances in Swat, Dir, Buner and Shangla; Frontier Corps tries to establish a foothold in Peochar; Pakistan military deployment assessed as 15,000 troops as against 5000 Taliban fighters in Swat.	Taliban casualty tally at 1000 fighters during the first 18 days of fighting. Pakistan military claims own casualties as 45 personnel.
16 May 09	Movement of approximately 150 Taliban cadres reported towards Battagram; area lies north of Manshera in vicinity of Muzafarabad in PoK.	
20 May 09	Pakistan army converges towards Mingora city; Mingora still held by Taliban; newly trained Frontier Corps commando units	

	attempt to secure Peochar valley in Swat; operations in Dir district still underway.	
25 May 09	Mingora re-claimed after nearly three weeks of intense fighting; northern region of Swat still under Taliban control; military in the process of re-claiming control of Peochar.	Approximately 2.2 million people reportedly have fled from NWFP.
13 June 09	Fighting intensifies in Swat; Pakistan military launches attacks against militant hideouts in Dir and Buner; heavy fighting continues in Kabal and Peochar; both areas considered to be the stronghold of Taliban; in general area Dir lashkar tribals fight Taliban.	
20 June 09	Pakistan government arrests TNSM leader Sufi Mohammad; released on 07 July 09.	
12 July 09	Taliban denies government reports of Mullah Fazlullah having been wounded in air strikes in his home town of Imam Dehri.	

- **FATA.**

Date	Event	Remarks
13 June 09	Punitive strikes launched in Mohmand agency; attacks led by artillery and air force; Taliban also targets Bajaur, Arkazai and Hangu.	No formal operations launched in FATA.

- **North and South Waziristan**

Date	Event	Remarks
01 June 09	Approximately 400 cadets and staffers of Razmak Military College located in North Waziristan kidnapped in broad daylight; cadets' convoy ambushed at Baka Khel; no Taliban group takes credit for the kidnappings; eventually released a few days later.	20 Taliban fighters killed during air strikes on militant safe havens in the region.
09 June 09	Pakistani military launches operations in Bannu district; attempts to secure Jani Khel and Baka Khel tribal areas astride Miramshah-Bannu road essentially to secure the line of communication to North Waziristan; similar action also underway	Jani Khel was identified as headquarters of Al-Qaeda's Shura Majlis in 2007. Top leaders and cadres of Taliban were known to operate from Jani Khel.

	in Jandola region to secure the main axis leading to South Waziristan	
11 June 09	Fighting intensifies in Bannu region; about 600 Taliban fighters reportedly move into Bannu from North and South Waziristan; approximately 400 Taliban fighters also attack Frontier Corps outposts in Jandola, Chakmalai and Siplatoi.	Military pegs the overall Taliban casualties as 1300 fighters in six weeks of fighting, as against 90 soldiers. This implies an improbable kill ratio of 14:1 in favour of the military.
13-17 June 09	Pakistan military launches air strikes against Baitullah Mehsud; village of Makeen, Baitullah's hometown is targeted; focus on Baitullah Mehsud and yet to build up on other three tribal leaders namely Mullah Nazir, Hafiz Gul Bahadur and the Haqqanis; these groups though considered pro government may well support or shelter the Mehsud forces when under pressure.	Operations in South Waziristan are code named <i>Rah-e-Nijat</i> .
20 June 09	Heavy fighting along Wana-Jandola road; fighting also reported in towns of Barwand and Madijan; helicopter gun ships strike at Kund Serai, Wara, and Serwekai; approximately 20,000 troops staging at Jandola and Manzai for the operations; focus building up on Baitullah Mehsud.	
28-29 Jun 09	Military convoy passing through the town Wacha Bibi near Miramshah ambushed; Taliban claims 60 soldiers killed in action; peace agreement in North Waziristan breaks down.	
01 July 09	Pakistan military announces that it has no intent of carrying out operations in North Waziristan; drops leaflets at Miramshah.	
07-10 July 09	Four US predator strikes in South Waziristan; Taliban communication centre at Painsa Khel targeted; all strikes focussed on Baitullah Mehsud's tribal areas.	Taliban suffered 49 fatal casualties. Out of the 30 predator strikes carried out in Pakistan this year, 22 took place in South Waziristan. Baitullah has been targeted 14 times and Mullah Nazir eight times.

Note: - This compilation of events is based on reports posted by Bill Roggio at www.longwarjournal.com.

An Assessment

Pakistani military operations so far have focussed on re-establishing control over important population centres in NWFP. Bulk of the fighting has centred on important towns of Mingora, Saidu Sharif, Pechar, Kabal and Dir and along the road axes N45 and N95 leading into the region. Reports of continued fighting in the NWFP suggest that Pakistani security forces are yet to clear all pockets of resistance and establish full control in the hinterland. In all probability, the pace and pattern of operations adopted by the Pakistan army would have prompted Taliban fighters to vanish into remote areas of Swat and Dir districts, in order to avoid any serious engagement with the security forces and suffer undue attrition. The possibility of them moving further east into districts of Battagram and Manshera bordering Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) cannot be ruled out; a development that may have to be closely watched in the Indian context. The Pakistan Army too seems to be in a big rush, without concluding its operations in NWFP it has launched simultaneous operations in South Waziristan. Its ability to advance operations simultaneously could be suspect and perhaps only an attempt to evoke a favourable opinion from the international community.



An assessment of the operations undertaken till date reveals several conceptual and operational flaws in the Pakistani military's approach towards tackling the Taliban. Some issues that merit discussion are highlighted.

- Substituting strategy with fire power can be tempting and more so for a force that lacks experience in fighting an enemy as cunning as the Taliban. Technology has a place in conventional warfare and its exploitation to initiate and sustain momentum of military operations is well known. Its relevance for counterinsurgency operations is no less important, but then its focus clearly lies elsewhere. Counterinsurgency operations call for a more restrained and calculated use of weapon platforms and fire power. The pace and pattern of operations as demonstrated by the Pakistan military clearly defies all normative principles for an effective 'people centric' counterinsurgency campaign. Fire power needs to follow boots on the ground and not the other way around and, in a given operational context in the frontier provinces, its usage would be more relevant in the field of intelligence gathering, aerial and ground based surveillance, reconnaissance of targets, rotary wing based transportation of troops and wide spectrum access communications at the tactical level. In fact, the employment of high impact ground based and aerial weapon platforms with imprudence and utter disregard for the well being of the local populace can have serious strategic consequences, both at the level of governance and for progress in subsequent military operations.

- The tough challenge presented by the Taliban has certainly put the Pakistan military on a steep learning curve, in so far as counterinsurgency operations are concerned. The deep rooted and 'east centric' mindset of the Pakistan military hierarchy seems to be inhibiting its grasp over an entirely different operational situation and in turn, affecting the smooth conduct of counterinsurgency operations. As David Kilcullen notes, counterinsurgency campaigns are best undertaken by adopting an 'ink blot' strategy, implying the need to establish and secure an initial foothold and, then gradually grow in operational size and influence to include the hinterland. This requires time and surely cannot be achieved in haste. Moreover, counterinsurgency operations are a function of simple inter-se ratios such as population versus troops, militants versus troops and acreage versus troops, all of which seems to be badly skewed in the case of operations in NWFP. Furthermore and at least in the initial stages, success in counterinsurgency operations is measured by kills achieved or surrenders engineered and, as reports indicate no Taliban leader of consequence has been killed or captured till date. Similarly, busting militant hideouts and recovery of arms and ammunition make only good news and not a good metric for measuring success on ground.
- Of an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 Taliban cadres reported in NWFP, the assessed number of Taliban fighters killed as a consequence of recent military action stands at less than 2000. In addition, the Long War Journal assesses the Taliban strength in FATA and Waziristan provinces at around 100,000 cadres (30,000 with Baitullah Mehsud; 50,000 with the other three tribal leaders namely Haqqani, Gul Bahadur and the deceased Zainuddin; and another 20,000 with minor tribes in the region). This explains the magnitude of the military problem and, however inflated these figures might be, the Pakistani military is far from arresting the tenuous situation in the frontier provinces. The Pakistan military modus operandi of vacating towns and villages prior to launch of operations too has contributed to the loss of tactical surprise and, in all probability pushed Taliban cadres to other areas including the districts bordering Jammu and Kashmir. If the recent militant attack in Muzafarabad in Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) is any indication, apprehensions of the eastward drive of the Taliban may soon prove true. The border city of Muzafarabad has been the traditional stronghold of Pakistani and Kashmiri militant groups operating in Jammu and Kashmir, and in this context, the incident needs to be taken seriously.
- The appalling conditions reported at IDP camps is sure to exacerbate growing dissatisfaction amongst the local population, a situation that could give rise to yet another strain of militancy in the frontier provinces. These camps could directly or indirectly contribute to strengthening the Taliban cause or perhaps give rise to the 'new' Taliban. Another issue of concern has been the low head count in the IDP camps; as against an estimated three and a half million people rendered homeless, only a few lakhs are registered in these camps, while a majority have preferred staying away with host families or as paying guests elsewhere in Pakistan. It is also quite possible that the civilian dislocation figures could have been inflated to attract more foreign aid. This cross provincial movement could add to the worsening security situation in provinces of Punjab and Sindh, including the low profile insurgency raging in the province of Balochistan.
- Long drawn operations can be a severe test of grit and determination of the junior leadership and the military leadership at the highest level. In conventional warfare, the decision making weight of leadership clearly lies at the operational level, whereas in the sub-conventional context it is leadership at the tactical level that contributes to strategic consequences of a counterinsurgency campaign. Recent reports indicate a few incidents of insubordination in Pakistani military units deployed in the frontier provinces. Prominent amongst these have been reports of mutiny in three brigades from Parachinar, Kohat and Turbat, desertion of a few hundred soldiers and acts of insubordination by air force personnel. Sustained operations impose severe physical and mental stress on troops, manifesting in disciplinary or morale

related problems. Cracks in morale can impact operational effectiveness of fighting formations and this in turn can have serious organisational consequences. This needs to be seen in the context of soldiers hailing from the Pashtun belt who constitute nearly 14 per cent or more of the Pakistani Army. Recent reports of embedding psychologists in the Pakistan Army are perhaps indicative of the impact of operations on troops in the frontier provinces; monetary allowances too have been significantly hiked to compensate fighting formations. In real terms, the actual effect on morale could be gauged eventually from the ensuing recruitment data and trends.

The Taliban Calculus

There is no doubt that the Taliban currently has the initiative in Pakistan, but whether this alliance has the drive and capacity to expand its operations and destabilize the hinterland is yet to be clearly seen. In this context, the recent initiative of dropping leaflets in restive agencies of North Waziristan by the Pakistani Army is perhaps an attempt to narrow down the operational focus on Baitullah Mehsud, rather than running a broad based anti-Taliban military campaign. The Pakistani army has strong reasons to be worried about North Waziristan and largely for two reasons. One, it is yet to convincingly conclude the ongoing operations in Swat and two, the traditional stronghold of the key Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud in South Waziristan is yet to be addressed. It is well known that the Afghan Taliban leader Jalaluddin Haqqani also operates from this area against Coalition forces in Afghanistan.

US forces may want the Pakistan army to pursue operations in both North and South Waziristan, but their reluctance to relocate additional forces from the eastern borders and unwillingness to unduly hurt Pashtun sentiment may hold them back from launching meaningful operations across the western frontier. But now with the North Waziristan leader Hafiz Gul Bahadur scrapping the peace deal signed by the Pakistani government with tribal elders from Dawar and Wazir sub tribes in February 2008, there is a possibility that this could give an opportunity to Baitullah Mehsud to buy out an escape in collusion with Hafiz Gul Bahadur to North Waziristan, or even Afghanistan. In this context, speculation is rife that the Pakistani army has no choice but to expand the scope of current military operations to include North Waziristan as well. Should this happen the Taliban will be successful in stretching the Pakistani army to a breaking point and in diluting the military pressure that seems to be building up against South Waziristan. Either way, the Pakistani Army has difficult times ahead in terms of stretched and stressful deployment caused by the Taliban's alliance with the Al-Qaeda leadership in the frontier provinces.

Choices and Options

General Jehangir Karamat, in a recent panel discussion coordinated by the Atlantic Council South Asia Center on challenges facing Pakistan's army, described the militant activity emanating from the tribal areas as a 'full-blown insurgency' and predicted a protracted struggle for the security forces to bring stability to the troubled region. He emphasized that the prevailing situation has the potential to establish links with Jehadi groups elsewhere in Pakistan, to carry out terrorist strikes within the country. In his opinion, such attacks could destabilize the civilian government and disrupt ongoing counterinsurgency operations in the tribal areas. In the Indian context, the current trajectory of events in Pakistan suggests an increase in Taliban's presence in Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) and in due course, attempts to heighten infiltration across the Line of Control and violence in the Kashmir Valley.

With additional US troops now exerting pressure in the southern districts of Afghanistan under operations codenamed *Dagger* and *Panther's Claw*, the Pakistan Army has an added task of preventing the ingress of Afghan Taliban into the frontier provinces. The two operations launched early this month with more than 4,000 US Marines and 650 Afghan soldiers were air

dropped into the districts of Nawa, Reg, and Garmsir. Several weeks before the operation, more than 3,000 British, Danish, Estonian and US troops from Task Force Helmand had laid the groundwork for Operation Dagger by seizing fifteen river and canal crossings along the Helmand River between Gereshk in Nawa and the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah. The move was designed to block Taliban forces from crossing the river as well as to secure the local populace in the Lashkar Gah-Gereshk region. In a complementary move, the Pakistani Army too deployed forces along the border district of Chagai in Balochistan. Due to the long and porous border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, the situation in the region could worsen with Taliban groups from both sides joining hands to fight the US and Pakistani forces.

Most interestingly and in view of the internal and external security challenges being faced in the region, the Pakistani Army along with the air force and naval components is conducting a major brain storming session codenamed *Azam-e-Nau*, attended by the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, Chief of Army Staff, Chief of Naval Staff and Chief of Air Staff at the National Defence University from 13th July 2009. The war game intends to analyse the nature and magnitude of threats faced by Pakistan and to validate an effective response in accordance with the existing operational environment. The exercise would be keenly watched by all stake holders in the region in order to ascertain the sincerity of Pakistan's political and military hierarchy in dealing with the problem.

Colonel Harinder Singh is Research Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.