

# Clear and Present Danger

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President Pervez Musharraf's stated reason for suspending the constitution, nullifying the judiciary, and censoring the media was the rise in terrorism exacerbated by unwarranted judicial and media activism. While the reasons for imposing a state of emergency can be debated there is no debate about Pakistan's clear and present danger — the rise of the Taliban in the tribal areas and beyond.

Indeed, Pakistan's chief threat is internal destabilisation from a home-grown enemy — the Pashtun insurgency, manifested in the Pakistani Taliban and Al Qaeda. US interest in the region — thwarting Taliban and Al Qaeda, protecting Pakistani nuclear weapons and stabilising Afghanistan — are inextricable from the Pashtun insurgency.

But Pakistan has never had a coherent Taliban policy; instead it's had a flawed and inconsistent posture which unsuccessfully balances the desire to protect some elements of Taliban to offset India's influence in Kabul and Washington's demands for complete annihilation of the Taliban sanctuary in north Pakistan simultaneously.

Although the boiling pot of federally administered tribal areas is spilling into the rest of the country, the heart of the Taliban/Al Qaeda problem remains in the tribal areas. Left at the behest of a 100-year old truce between the tribal leaders and the then British Raj, the region was divided along tribal lines into seven agencies and six smaller zones.

After independence in 1947, Pakistan embraced the precedent in exchange for tribal loyalties against India. Dubiously elected and empowered 'political agents' represent regional agencies in the electoral system. Federal and provincial laws do not apply to the area unless specifically extended by presidential order — for example, President Musharraf's decision to send troops in the tribal areas after September 11, 2001.

After September 11, Khurram, Khyber, North and South Waziristan agencies — all part of the tribal areas — became the first safe havens for fleeing Al Qaeda leaders. Pakistan withdrew support from their proxy, Taliban, and deployed in the area, thousands of troops, backed by helicopter gun ships and a strong intelligence apparatus. In turn, the US provided military and financial support and a promise not to attack the tribal areas unilaterally. What followed is a big mess of poorly orchestrated military, economic and political strategies.

Since the beginning of 2002, the military has struggled with counter-insurgency. In most cases,

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military strategy has produced a rapid response from army units, such as the elite SSGs, or Pakistani Special Forces, in cooperation with the mostly Pashtun Frontier Corps.

But then the forces were slowly and consistently pushed out. With a few exceptions, most tribes considered Pakistan's military as a proxy of the United States threatening their sovereignty and their nationalist aspirations. Al Qaeda, desperate for a safe haven after US attacks on Afghanistan, and Taliban, desiring Pakistani nukes and an Islamic state, began to morph a previously ethnic separatist movement — the Pashtun insurgency — into a unified resistance movement against Islamabad and Washington.

Realising the danger, Islamabad executed an economic strategy focused on development projects, and bribing the local leaders -'Maliks'. The funds, however, were inadequate — for example, the recently announced \$750 million US aid package for the tribal areas could've helped a lot more a few years ago.

Political reconciliation, the most important long-term goal, and prerequisite for any sustainability of military or economic strategy, came too little too late. While local tribes killed or captured foreign terrorists — mostly Chechens and Uzbeks — after the September 2006 tribal accord with Islamabad, American air strikes and continued presence of Pakistani troops made harmony untenable. The poppy trade provided funds and the porous Pakistan-Afghanistan border provided mobility for the Taliban. To make matters worse, agencies such as Orakzai and Kurram were hit hard with sectarian violence.

The Pakistani Army's morale hit an all time low, and by November 2007 more than three hundred soldiers had either deserted or were captured. In most cases they did not put up a fight.

The new Pakistani government next year — if and when national elections are held — will have its hands full. A new multi-faceted Taliban policy will have to be implemented reflecting lessons learnt and the aspirations of the people of tribal areas. For Pashtuns to feel part and parcel of the Pakistani state, Islamabad's focus must shift from direct confrontation to reconciliation and containment. This doesn't mean Pakistan doesn't go after the most radical elements of the Taliban and Al Qaeda in the short run. But in the medium to long-term political reforms in the tribal areas rather than helicopter gun ships will yield more favourable and sustainable results.

First, US and Pakistani militaries must seal the Pakistan-Afghanistan border and cut arms and drug routes to and from tribal areas.

Second, US-Pakistan military communication must be improved.

Third, a three-prong approach similar to Afghanistan must be applied; the military creates 'pockets of control'; development teams build infrastructure; and politicians oversee political reform.

Fourth, a new *jirga* of tribal elders and warlords must be called. The message should be emphatically clear: the writ of the state is supreme, and pending a constitutional amendment, all living in the tribal areas are equal and complete citizens of the republic.

Further overtures should include the right of party-based elections allowing among others the predominantly Pashtun Awami National Party to contest elections in the tribal areas. Political agents must not be simply replaced by those that favour Islamabad but by a whole new set of popular and well-respected political representatives from the main and sub-tribes of every agency.

Not all will agree with Islamabad and Washington, but if they are willing to compromise they are willing to buy into the idea of national consensus. For example, the truce between some tribes and Islamabad in September 2006 could've prevailed if both sides had kept their side of the bargain, and more emphasis was put on economic development and political reconciliation rather than military intervention. Finally, selling the war against Al Qaeda and Taliban to the Pakistani people is unequivocally important.

All of this must be implemented sequentially and at times simultaneously with the looming fear of a major blowback — increased attacks on troops and suicide attacks in major cities. But no price is high enough when Pakistan is facing the challenge of an Al Qaeda-run state within a state. The tribal areas are part of Pakistan; if they disintegrate, so could America's chief ally in the Global War on Terror.

Pakistan can no longer waffle on the Taliban.

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