

## **What After Waziristan?**

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On October 17 the Pakistan army launched its offensive in South Waziristan. Code named “Rah-i-Rast” (the path of righteousness), it was advertised by the army establishment as a death blow against the Taliban whose suicide bombers have left thousands dead across Pakistan. But dazed citizens are asking: will this operation really succeed in stopping the daily carnage?

Some attacks are more spectacular than others. But even the outstanding ones are forgotten once the next one happens. This week, a car bomber left well over a hundred dead, mostly women and children, at Peshawar’s crowded Meena Bazaar. Last week educational institutions across Pakistan were shut down after a suicide bomber blew himself up after walking into the girls cafeteria of the International Islamic University. Simultaneously, another one targeted male students in a different part of the campus. At this time the country was still reeling from the triple whammy which had hit Lahore, devastating the Elite Police Academy, the Federal Investigation Agency building, and the Manawan Police Academy. Dozens were killed. As the guns were firing in Lahore, a suicide bomber blew up his explosives laden van outside a police station in Kohat, about three hundred miles away, while another blew up school children in the same city on the same day.

Days earlier the headlines had been dominated by Taliban militants who had stormed the apparently impregnable General Headquarters (GHQ) of the Pakistan Army in Rawalpindi, Islamabad’s sister city. The 20-hour siege, followed diligently by private television channels, left eight insurgents, eight soldiers and three hostages killed. The meticulous planning, culminating in hostage-taking and killing, bore eerie resemblance to the Mumbai attacks. The message was clear: no place in Pakistan is safe any more.

Just a couple of months ago, Pakistanis had heaved a sigh of relief. A brief lull in terrorist attacks has followed the army’s successful operation against the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Swat, and the killing by an American drone of TTP’s supremo, Baitullah Mehsud. Some hubris-filled “analysts” – who ceaselessly chatter on Pakistan’s numerous private television channels – claimed that the TTP had been mortally wounded. But they were dead wrong.

Why the upsurge? The answer is two-fold. First, the new TTP head, Hakeemullah Mehsud, needed to prove his effectiveness and wanted to dispel speculations that infighting for Baitullah’s successor had rendered the TTP ineffective. More importantly, the TTP tried its best to prevent South Waziristan, sometimes called the “Taliban GHQ”, from being attacked by the army. In this they did not succeed: South Waziristan, after Swat, has become the next battleground. So far, by army accounts, the fight is going well. But past experience shows just how difficult it is going to be. This calls for a brief recapitulation.

In 2002, on Washington’s insistence, the Pakistan Army had established military bases in South Waziristan. This rugged area had become a refuge for Taliban and Al Qaeda

fighters fleeing Afghanistan from America's post 9/11 attack. Combat soon followed, with the Pakistan army making extensive use of artillery and US-supplied Cobra gunships. But the Pakistani state was ultimately expelled from this ferociously conservative area. An Islamic emirate, governed by particularly regressive interpretations of religious law, took its place.

By 2005, Taliban influence had spread from South to North Waziristan. Even though soldiers rarely ventured out from guard posts and heavy fortifications, the Army was taking losses whose extent has never been revealed. The senior army leadership officially ascribed the resistance to "a few hundred foreign militants and terrorists". But morale continued to sink, with junior army men wondering why they were being asked to attack their ideological comrades – the Taliban. Reportedly, local clerics refused to conduct funeral prayers for soldiers killed in action.

The half-hearted war failed, leading to the signing of a "peace treaty" on 1 September 2006 in the North Waziristan town of Miramshah – which was by now firmly in the grip of the Pakistani Taliban. Army officers, and the militants they had fought for 4 years, hugged each other while heavily armed Taliban stood guard. Although the military governor of the province, Lt. Gen. Ali Mohammad Aurakzai, praised the peace agreement as "unprecedented in tribal history", in fact it was reminiscent of earlier Shakai agreement in South Waziristan, which too had ended up making the militants stronger.

The Miramshah treaty met all demands made by the jihadists: the release of all jailed militants; dismantling of army checkpoints; return of seized weapons and vehicles; the right of the Taliban to display weapons (except heavy ones); and residence rights for fellow fighters from other Islamic countries. As for "foreign militants" – who General Musharraf had blamed exclusively for the resistance, the militants were nonchalant: we will let you know if we find any! The financial compensation demanded by the Taliban for loss of property and life has not been revealed, but some officials remarked that it was "astronomical". In turn the jihadists promised to cease their attacks on civil and military installations, and give the army a safe passage out. The army had surrendered.

Today, is a more experienced and better equipped Pakistan Army capable of repeating Swat in South Waziristan? Or will it be bogged down in an endless counter-insurgency on a terrain that is ideal for insurgents? Will reverses then lead to face-saving treaties such as in Shakai and Miramshah?

The stakes today are much higher than in 2006. Military victory will not be easy, especially since the militants have had years to dig tunnels, hide weapons and store supplies in the mountains. But let us suppose that the army succeeds in destroying the terrorist infrastructure. What then?

Success must be defined more meaningfully this time: the army must demonstrate the ability to hold on to the territory long enough to establish functioning state institutions in Waziristan and, more generally, in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

FATA must be fully absorbed into Pakistan and its British-era special status must be revoked. After this there will be a still greater challenge: creating an economy in a place where there is nothing beyond subsistence farming, and where the major income derives from arms, drugs, smuggling, kidnapping, and car-jacking.

South Waziristan will certainly not be the last battlefield, and a victory here will not end terrorism. This is a war of necessity, not of choice. A defeat or stalemate here will embolden the fanatics in South Punjab, including Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Muhammed. The cancer of religious militancy has spread across Pakistan.

In the long run, fighting religious extremism effectively will be impossible until there is a clear perception in the Pakistani public, as well as the army, that the Taliban threaten the existence of Pakistan and its ability to function as a state. Although public opinion moved behind the army after the Taliban flouted the Swat agreement, Pakistanis are still far from unanimous on the nature of the threat. A predisposition towards conspiracy theories results in terrorist acts being blamed on to “foreign elements”. This usually means the United States and India (in that order) but has come to include Kabul more and more.

Overcoming the scourge of Talibanization and religious terrorism will ultimately require that Pakistan joins hands with those that it does not trust today. This includes Iran. Although Pakistan has been amazingly contrite, Iran is still furious with Pakistan after 42 people, including senior commanders from the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), were killed by the Pakistan-based Jundullah jihadist group on October 18.

Mind-sets created over decades do not change easily. A majority of Pakistanis still believe that India poses a greater threat than the Taliban. But there are welcome signs of a shift towards sanity. India can help discreetly by keeping its rhetoric down, as well as by giving repeated assurances that a secure Pakistan is in India’s interest. Indeed, for India nothing can be worse than a Pakistan splintered into a hundred jihadist groups, each with its own agenda and tactics, as they execute their holy wars on both sides of the border.

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