Defeating the FATA Insurgency

BY MIKE KOPROWSKI

“You can have a great government in Kabul, and if the current situation in Western Pakistan continued, the instability in Afghanistan will continue.”

— Richard Holbrooke, U.S. Special Envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan

America’s war in Afghanistan seems to deteriorate with each passing day. According to a December 2008 International Council on Security and Development report, the Taliban now have a permanent presence in 72% of Afghanistan, up from 54% in November 2007. In many small towns and villages, the Taliban are seen as the de facto government. Three out of the four major highways leading into Kabul are compromised by Taliban activity, allowing them to infiltrate the capital at will. This grim assessment is the general consensus among almost all intelligent observers and policymakers in Washington DC, reinforced by General David Petraeus, commander of U.S. forces in the Middle East and Central Asia, who said Afghanistan has “deteriorated markedly in the past two years,” and warned of a “downward spiral of security.” The Taliban’s “renaissance” illustrates an incredibly disturbing truth for the West’s counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan: the Taliban’s political, social, and economic strategies resonate with many in the local populace. As the dire warnings continue, the “forgotten war” in Afghanistan has taken center stage for newly elected President Obama.

The deteriorating situation in Afghanistan is due, in large measure, to the deteriorating situation across the border in Pakistan. Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA), which sits on Afghanistan’s porous and ill-defined eastern border, has become an external “safe haven” for Taliban and al-Qaeda elements. This historically uncontrolled, ungoverned, and unlegislated area – colloquially referred to as Pakistan’s “Wild West” – is used as a stable base of operation by insurgents, allowing them to regenerate, train, recruit, equip, and

Mike Koprowski received his B.A. in Political Science from the University of Notre Dame and is currently a graduate student in International Relations at Duke University.
launch cross-border attacks into Afghanistan and elsewhere.³

During the initial U.S. attack on Afghanistan, in 2001, an unknown number of Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters retreated across the border into the friendly, Pashtun Sunni-dominated territory of Pakistan’s FATA. Pakistani military units, meant to serve as a blocking force, proved either unwilling and/or unable to stop the retreat. In the FATA, as Dr. Marvin Weinbaum of the Middle East Institute said to the House Armed Services Committee, “a symbiotic relationship developed among the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, al-Qaeda, and domestic extremist organizations. They have somewhat different priorities. They are in agreement, however, over supporting the insurgency in Afghanistan that aims to drive out international forces and topple the Karzai government”⁴ – in short, an alliance to battle common enemies. On March 26, 2009, the New York Times reported that the three major leaders of the Pakistani Taliban – Baitullah Mehsud, Hafiz Gul Bahadur and Maulavi Nazir – formed the “Council of the United Mujahadeen” and formally agreed to put aside their personal squabbles and focus more on the American-led forces in Afghanistan. As U.S. troop increases are expected later this summer, the article reported, “Taliban leaders based in Pakistan have closed ranks with their Afghan comrades to ready a new offensive in Afghanistan.”⁵

While exact figures are difficult to determine, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) documents that many suicide bombers who strike in Afghanistan travel from the FATA or receive logistical support from the FATA (i.e., vests, explosives).⁶ While these numerous small attacks have little operational impact on coalition forces, they seriously undermine the legitimacy and credibility of the Karzai government at home and abroad. But suicide attacks are not the only harmful activities coming out of the FATA – millions of dollars in finances, training, recruits, and resources (i.e., hundreds of thousands of rounds of mortars, RPGs, and ammunition) flow across to the extremists stationed in Afghanistan, too. It is now clear that the FATA has become a central base for Taliban decision-making and logistics.

President Obama recognizes that the success of the counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan is inextricably linked to the solution of the FATA problem, stating five days before his victorious election that “the most important thing we’re going
to have to do with respect to Afghanistan is actually deal with Pakistan.” While the FATA is thought of, in military terms, as an extension of the battlefield in Afghanistan, the fact that it lies in the sovereign jurisdiction of Pakistan greatly complicates the dynamics. To put it simply: the United States does not have the freedom of action in the FATA that it has in Afghanistan. While the United States needs Pakistani cooperation to solve the FATA insurgency, Pakistan’s will and capability to do so remains in serious doubt.

Pakistani President, Asif Zardari, certainly has a vital interest in remedying the FATA insurgency. Not only did insurgents kill his wife, but they also threaten the very survival of his own government. Yet, amid rampant accusations of corruption and enormous domestic political strife, many question his leadership skills, experience, and ability to exercise control over the traditionally powerful Pakistani security establishment. It is well known that, for decades, Pakistan’s security elites, mainly within the military and Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), have enjoyed general autonomy from the civilian government and have been heavily influential in devising and implementing national security policy. However, serious doubt surrounds the security establishment’s commitment to solving the FATA problem. For years, suspicions have run high that many elements within the military and ISI ignore, and sometimes even covertly support, the FATA insurgency. The very existence of these elements within the security establishment is not seriously debated among experts, but rather has become conventional wisdom. The CIA has documented the divided priorities within the ISI and military establishment and, in July 2008, Stephen Kappes, Deputy Director of the CIA, confronted senior Pakistani officials with evidence that several military and ISI officers maintain deep ties to FATA militants. As one senior NATO official put it: “The Taliban could not have done this on their own without the ISI.”

In addition to the dubious commitment of many military and ISI officers, there also exists serious doubt over the security establishment’s capability to wage a successful counterinsurgency. Historically, when the Pakistani military has intervened in the FATA, it has proven ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst. After nearly a decade, the Pakistani security establishment, coupled with recent U.S. air strikes, has been unable to impede the growing FATA insurgency. The question is: What can be done to improve both the commitment and the capability of Pakistan’s security establishment? What will help make it a reliable force upon which the United States can depend?
Why the United States Needs Pakistan’s Security Establishment

At this point in time, the United States cannot deploy its own troops to have a permanent presence in the FATA. This is, in part, because the overwhelming majority of Pakistanis (80%) oppose allowing foreign forces to intervene, especially American forces. According to a September 2007 poll conducted by the U.S. Institute of Peace, 64% of Pakistanis think that the United States cannot be trusted to act responsibly in the world. 86% of Pakistanis think that America’s goal is to weaken and divide the Islamic world. According to an October 2008 Gallup poll, 54% of Pakistanis believe that the U.S. presence in Afghanistan poses a threat. Only two per cent of Pakistanis believe that cooperation with the United States has benefited Pakistan; seven per cent say that the cooperation has benefited both the U.S. and Pakistan. Five per cent of Pakistanis say that U.S. air strikes in the FATA are effective; 48% say they are not effective; 47% did not express an opinion.

Furthermore, while President Zardari, judging by his public statements, seems to recognize the severity of the FATA problem, he does not possess the political power to approve the intervention of foreign forces. The new civilian government is vastly unpopular and lacks a governing mandate. Zardari’s approval ratings consistently linger around nineteen per cent, largely due to a massive economic crisis (the IMF gave Pakistan a US$7.6 billion rescue loan in November 2008) and a general lack of security. According to an October 2008 Gallup Poll, thirteen per cent of Pakistanis said they were confident that Zardari would improve conditions. 66% said leadership was taking the country in the wrong direction. Pakistani government intervention in the FATA, itself, has been very controversial, with a majority of Pakistanis (58%) opposing the government “exerting control” over the FATA.

While intervention by the Pakistani military in the FATA remains a controversial issue in Pakistan, it is much less unpopular than the approval of intervening American forces. While 80% oppose American intervention, 44% approve the Pakistani army entering the FATA to pursue and capture al-Qaeda militants. Likewise, 48% favor allowing the Pakistani army to pursue and capture Taliban militants who cross over from Afghanistan. It seems, from these poll numbers, that Pakistan’s military intervention in the FATA, while still controversial, is a manageable political risk with a fair number of advocates and critics. An approval of sustained foreign intervention, however,
could very well amount to political suicide for the Zardari government. While the United States wants stern action taken, it must be careful not to inadvertently destabilize the Pakistani government by inflaming public opposition. The United States knows that last thing the world needs is the collapse of an already fragile Pakistani government, which possesses nearly one-hundred nuclear weapons.

The United States has hitherto relied primarily on the Pakistani military to accomplish its goals of routing the insurgents in the FATA. The U.S. Government Accountability Office reports that of the US$5.8 billion directed at the FATA from 2002-2007, approximately 96% (US$5.56 billion) was spent on Pakistani military operations. According to the report, “U.S. and Pakistani government officials recognize that relying primarily on the Pakistani military has not succeeded in neutralizing al Qaeda and preventing the establishment of a safe haven in the FATA.” The United States, recognizing Pakistan’s failings, has attempted to complement its strategy with cross-border air strikes into the FATA, which, so far, have achieved mixed results. Many drone strikes have eliminated their intended targets. In fact, according to Obama Administration officials, nine of al-Qaeda’s top twenty leaders have been killed by the aerial campaign. However, these same strikes inevitably produce collateral damage and civilian casualties. The strikes, of which there have been over thirty since August 2008, have caused a huge backlash among tribal leaders and the general Pakistani population, who view America’s incursion on Pakistani soil as a violation of sovereignty. The air strikes, while frequently useful for tactical victories, cannot be considered a comprehensive strategy. Moreover, they are often strategically counterproductive in that they fuel public anger not only against the United States, but, more significantly, against the Zardari government for either allowing it or being unable to stop it. The strikes, in the eyes of many citizens, undermine the legitimacy and credibility of Pakistan’s already frail government. Domestic instability has been a continuous problem for Pakistani leadership, especially over the past few tumultuous years, and the U.S. air strikes certainly do not help pacification.

Advocates of supporting Pakistan’s military make a key point: While strengthening governance, solving socio-economic problems, and building legitimate institutions are certainly essential for long-term sustainability, these policy instruments take years, even decades, to produce meaningful results. Unfortunately, the threat in the FATA is an imminent danger that requires immediate attention. For example, many intelligence experts believe that the next attack
on U.S. soil will originate in Pakistan’s FATA.\textsuperscript{19} Clearly, there is an imminent security imperative in the FATA; however, so far, relying on the Pakistani security establishment has not worked. U.S. air strikes cannot replace the value of focused and competent boots on the ground, especially in a ground-centric counterinsurgency.

Yet, for a multitude of reasons, it cannot be American boots on the ground. While it may be a tough pill to swallow for many Americans, U.S. national security directly depends on the performance of Pakistan’s boots. For this reason, the United States must ensure that Pakistan’s security establishment is a more committed, loyal, and competent fighting force that understands how to win a counterinsurgency. It is well-known that Pakistan’s security establishment has not been a reliable ally in the past. However, the more relevant question for the Obama Administration is: Can it be a reliable ally in the future? This paper argues that the security establishment can be a reliable ally in the future, one that plays a crucial role in defeating the insurgency – but it will not be easy.

**Improving Commitment**

To begin with, many elements within Pakistan’s security establishment remain primarily committed to the perceived Indian threat on the eastern border, and not to the FATA insurgency. They see the FATA militants as a manageable threat that is secondary to Pakistan’s nuclear-armed neighbor, India.\textsuperscript{20} After teetering on the brink of war several times in Kashmir, India and Pakistan (both nuclear-armed) consider each other to be an existential threat – it is arguably the most worrisome nuclear flashpoint in the world. Pakistan’s military planners are professionally inclined to prepare for worst case scenarios, and, as such, will continue to hedge their bets with the FATA, unless old paradigms can be changed.\textsuperscript{21} The recent terror attacks in Mumbai, which were planned inside Pakistan, have only added to the tension. In fact, just days after the Mumbai attacks and amid rampant accusations, Pakistan redeployed 20,000 troops from the Afghan border to the Indian border.\textsuperscript{22} Essentially, forces designated to secure the tribal areas were diverted to confront the Indian threat. While President Zardari has stated that India “is not a threat to Pakistan,”\textsuperscript{23} suspicions run deep among security elites and the powerful military establishment. In Pakistan, civilian leadership and military leadership are often quite divergent in their
assumptions, perceptions, and policy beliefs. Zardari’s statement is a radical change from the past, and, if he is truly sincere, it will be an uphill battle for him to assert more civilian influence over security elites and for him to change old paradigms.

India has similar fears about Pakistan. Indian public opinion indicates a belief that the Pakistani Army and ISI are directly responsible for the terrorist attacks all across India and that the Pakistani security establishment would ultimately undermine any attempt at peace dialogue. Moreover, after the recent Mumbai attack, the Indian government is under considerable domestic pressure to act decisively and aggressively in dealing with Pakistan. Opposition parties in India have used the Mumbai attacks to argue that the current ruling party is incapable of providing security, citing six different attacks since May 2008.

For the Pakistani security establishment, the sense of fear does not stop at India alone. Security elites also panic at the prospect of a U.S.-Indian-Afghan alliance, which they believe may “form a pincer around Pakistan to dismember the world’s only Muslim nuclear power.” Pakistan has accused India of working with the Afghan Ministry of Tribal Affairs and the Afghan intelligence service to fund Pakistani separatists. India has reestablished consulates in Afghan cities and provided US$650 million in economic and military assistance to the Karzai government. Also, the October 2008 U.S.-India nuclear cooperation agreement has raised suspicions in Pakistan of a growing alliance. As a senior Pakistani official said, “One of the biggest fears of the Pakistani military planners is the collaboration between India and Afghanistan to destroy Pakistan. Some people feel the United States is colluding in this.”

Let there be no doubt that the fear is real in Pakistan, especially within the security establishment. On September 19, 2001, Pakistan’s President Pervez Musharraf, a military man himself, stated that the main reason why he planned to support the U.S.-led attack on Afghanistan was to prevent the United States from allying too closely with India, which would ultimately give India the ability to influence an anti-Pakistani government in Afghanistan. He said, “It would not be surprising that the Indians want to ensure that if and when the government in Afghanistan changes, it shall be an anti-Pakistani government.” This profound fear is one of the main reasons that many in Pakistan’s military and ISI have ignored, and sometimes even covertly supported, the FATA insurgents, allowing the “Wild West” to act as a barrier against potential enemies. Prior to the U.S. invasion in 2001, when the Taliban governed Afghanistan, some Pakistani military planners believed that support for the Taliban would ensure that, in the event of conflict with India, Afghanistan would provide Pakistan with use of land and air space. After 9/11, rhetoric certainly changed, as Pakistan did not want to find itself on America’s terror list, especially given the Bush Doctrine of pre-emption; however, many question whether the security establishment’s
core interests of supporting the Taliban have really changed. Since the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, while creating the facade of assisting the United States in its War on Terror, elements within Pakistan’s security establishment keep the FATA as a quiet reserve force of militants, well versed in asymmetric warfare, who can be utilized to deter/defend against Afghanistan, in case India (who gets closer to America and Afghanistan by the day) is successful in shaping an anti-Pakistani government in Afghanistan. The prospect of an Indian-Afghan offensive against Pakistan is seen by some Pakistani security elites as distinctly possible once the United States withdraws its forces from Afghanistan. Adding fuel to the fire, Afghanistan consistently refuses to recognize the Durand Line as a legitimate border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which raises suspicions in the Pakistani security establishment that Afghanistan eventually plans to bring Pakistan’s Pashtun population in the FATA under Afghan control; therefore, it is thought, the FATA militants must be kept to counter that possibility.

This strategic logic is not only complicated and arguably paranoid, but has also backfired in dramatic fashion. The tribal region has obviously spiraled out of state control and FATA militants are now attacking inside Pakistan with great frequency. As Barnett Rubin, Senior Fellow at the Center on International Cooperation at New York University, states, “Pakistan’s strategy for external security has thus undermined its internal security.” In essence, Pakistan’s military planners have lost control of their own monster and now must be re-oriented to defeat it. As evidenced by his public statements, it seems that President Zardari wants to change old patterns of thought. In February 2009, Zardari told CBS 60 Minutes that: “It’s happened out of denial. Everybody was in denial that they’re weak and they won’t be able to take over. That, they won’t be able to give us a challenge. And they are taking advantage of that weakness.” As Bruce Riedel, an expert at the Brookings Institute and adviser to the Obama Administration, said, despite Zardari’s flaws, “he gets it: he knows this is as much his war as it is ours.” Of course, it remains to be seen if Zardari can exercise influence over the national security establishment.

Though the regional insecurities run deep, a major diplomatic initiative can help mitigate these destructive dynamics. So long as regional insecurities are given top priority, many security elites will continue to support militant groups they consider useful in countering Indian influence. A chief diplomatic goal would be to convince both India and Pakistan that they share common security interests regarding the FATA insurgency. Granted, even the most skilled diplomatic effort cannot fully erase deep-seated historical animosities between India and Pakistan.
However, it could help reduce tensions just enough to allow certain Pakistani security elites to re-think their threat calculus and place the FATA insurgency at the top of the priority list, where it rightfully belongs. Indeed, Pakistan has an enormous interest in solving the FATA problem. Conspiracy theories that keep the FATA radicalized to counter a possible anti-Pakistani government in Afghanistan, sponsored by India, must be put to rest. The fact is that the FATA insurgency is a most serious threat not only to the security of the Afghan people, but also to the Pakistani people.

A chief diplomatic goal would be to convince both India and Pakistan that they share common security interests regarding the FATA insurgency.

In 2008, Pakistan experienced an average of one suicide attack every five days, killing 965 people, 80% of whom were civilians. The Special Investigative Unit of Pakistan’s Federal Investigative Agency (FIA) estimated that, in 2007, over 80% of suicide bombers belonged to tribes residing in the FATA. Moreover, the Pakistani Taliban insurgency, which maintains a stronghold in the FATA and has now taken control of Swat Valley and the Buner district (just 70 miles away from Islamabad), should illuminate a frightening prospect for the Pakistani security establishment: the insurgency is spreading geographically, gaining popular support, and could soon threaten the very existence of the current Pakistani state. The insurgency in Swat Valley had become so dire that, on February 17, 2009, the Zardari government was forced, out of desperation and a position of weakness, to accommodate the Taliban’s demands and institute a complete version of strict Sharia law, in return for a cease-fire. The government’s military campaign in Swat Valley had clearly failed. Over an 18-month period, 10,000 Pakistani troops were unable to defeat 2,000 militants, primarily because the Taliban enjoyed local support in the valley, the army had little aptitude to fight a counterinsurgency, and an over-reliance on air strikes caused inordinate civilian casualties, which prevented the military from gaining access to vital human intelligence (HUMINT) from locals.

As Pakistani Army spokesman, General Athar Abbas, said: “We had lost our connections, our informers, our support from the public.” At best, the Taliban will be satisfied and stay put in northwest Pakistan, but even still, Zardari has lost enormous credibility by losing control of one of Pakistan’s most treasured regions – the “Switzerland of Pakistan.” At worst, the Taliban have been emboldened and are using the cease-fire to re-arm, re-supply, and recruit, increasing their appetite for power, readying another strategic move. Recent reports, in fact, suggest that Taliban insurgents are making inroads in Punjab, the province that is home to more than half of the Pakistani population. While the Pakistani military can hope for the best, it must prepare for the worst.
India, too, has an enormous security interest in a solution to the FATA problem. The Mumbai attacks, which were planned and launched from inside Pakistan, demonstrate this clearly: The next terror attack on India is likely to be FATA-borne. Also, India would be in serious danger if Pakistan’s government collapsed, especially if radical militants fill the void. Clearly, it is in India’s interests for Pakistan to devote more attention and resources to the FATA problem. Dialogue can result in a mutual recognition of shared interests, easing tensions and allowing Pakistani decision-makers to shift their priorities from the Indian border to the Afghan border. This will not be easy, as any dialogue is likely to be domestically unpopular in both countries. Therefore, the normalization efforts may have to be conducted behind closed doors. The United States would do well to convince India that it is time “to exercise the kind of regional and global leadership expected of a rising power,” especially regarding Pakistan.

Not only can the United States play a significant role in easing Pakistani-Indian bilateral relations, but it can also play a role in easing Pakistan’s fears of a U.S.-Indian-Afghan alliance. A key purpose of the dialogue would be to provide Pakistan with assurances and pledges of territorial integrity. Pakistani military planners must know that no state is interested in its dismemberment. In order to ease tensions, America must be seen by doubtful elements in Pakistan’s security establishment as a neutral arbiter, concerned for the success of the entire region, not just India. In sending that message, the United States could work with the EU to open markets to Pakistan’s critical exports, such as textiles.

Pakistan’s textile industry consists of 60% of its total exports, which is 46% of the nation’s total outputs. Textiles are 8.5% of Pakistan’s total GDP and employs 15 million people (38% of the total workforce). Yet, as the global economy turns downward, so has the Pakistani textile industry. According to Pakistan’s textile industry association, 90% of the industry is losing money and facing closure. Consistent power cuts and gas shortages further exacerbate the problem. Foreign investors are understandably nervous about the instability of Pakistan; yet, the United States and the EU can take concrete steps to ease Pakistan’s pain by granting duty-free market access. The EU granted duty-free access to Pakistan in October 2001. During the following three-year period, textile exports increased from US$5 billion to US$10 billion. The EU, along with the United States, should extend the access. However, this will likely upset India, the main competitor to Pakistan in garment markets of the EU and the United States. As such, similar agreements may have to be considered with India to ease its concerns. The opening of markets would be a significant gesture to Pakistan, with the added bonus of helping to revive Pakistan’s economy. The United States may also consider offering a nuclear deal to Pakistan, as it did with India, once Pakistan has “transparent and internationally monitored guarantees about the nonproliferation of its nuclear weapons technology.”
Some disagree with an overall diplomatic initiative, advocating a more hard-line approach to Pakistan. For example, Vanni Cappelli, President of the Afghanistan Foreign Press Association, argues that the Pakistanis “can never be allies of conviction, and are only pretending to be allies of convenience.”

He rightly points out that Pakistan’s national security suffers from “abiding structural pathologies,” such as its overpowering military establishment, its regional conspiracy theories, and its history of using militants as instruments of national policy in Afghanistan and Kashmir. Cappelli argues, as do others, that it is futile to assist an irresponsible nation like Pakistan; therefore, the United States should cut off military and economic aid, and even consider sanctions against Pakistan until its behavior improves. The United States, he says, should recognize Pakistan’s true motivations and commit itself to a tripartite U.S.-Indian-Afghan alliance which aims to contain the Pakistani threat. He states that the United States should focus on providing support to Indian and Afghan efforts to counterbalance Pakistan. Islamabad’s possession of nuclear weapons, he believes, “need not deter such a policy any more than the Soviet Union’s did the successful American Cold War containment strategy.”

Cappelli is right to point out Pakistan’s troubles, especially within the security establishment, but his policy prescriptions are dangerous. First, he assumes that India and Afghanistan are the only members who have a reason to be committed allies. Yet, both the Zardari government and the Pakistani security establishment have a supreme interest in focusing on the insurgency, especially as it spreads beyond the FATA and threatens the very survival of the Pakistani state. Diplomacy can help ease regional tensions by promoting recognition of mutual interests and reforming the “structural pathologies” within Pakistan’s security establishment, in order to make it a reliable ally. Second, Pakistani-born transnational terrorism, unlike nation-states, cannot be contained, as the 9/11 attacks proved – it is too easy to cause mass destruction with limited resources considering today’s mobility and technology. It would be absolutely impossible to contain clandestine groups of radicalized individuals who leave Pakistan to wreak havoc elsewhere, even with increased troop presence and defensive measures. Furthermore, and most importantly, a U.S.-Indian-Afghan tripartite would only serve to confirm and perpetuate the Pakistani security establishment’s worst fears, causing them to rely even more heavily on the FATA “buffer” strategy.

Additionally, Pakistan simply cannot be contained like the Soviet Union. The Soviet government was never threatened by a vast and radical internal insurgency (in Pakistan’s case, the Taliban, who have proved willing to sponsor those who will attack American soil). The “collapse” of the Soviet Union was not a literal collapse whereby the government descended into the abyss and was replaced by a wholly new entity. Gorbachev peacefully resigned as president of the Soviet Union, declaring the office extinct and ceding powers to the president of Russia,
Boris Yeltsin. A collapse of the Pakistani state, unlike the Soviet Union, could be a collapse in the most dramatic and violent sense, with radical elements waiting to fill the vacuum.⁴⁹ Denying aid to Pakistan’s national defense apparatus may lead to the state’s eventual collapse and the prospect of loose nuclear weapons in the hands of radical militants. As deficient as Pakistan’s security establishment may seem today, it nonetheless remains an essential instrument in the future fight against insurgents, and thus, deserving of efforts to improve it. A policy that exacerbates the worst aspects of Pakistan’s already fragile state is unwise; instead, the better policy is one that aims to remedy existing problems, especially within the military and ISI.

The first step is, through diplomacy, to address the regional insecurities which give Pakistan’s security elites a reason to either place the FATA insurgency on the back-burner or attempt to keep the FATA insurgency alive. Will this new focus eliminate every individual within the security establishment that wishes to support the FATA insurgency? Certainly not. However, more security officials in strategic agreement over the primacy of the FATA insurgency will create a more unified and devoted culture, establishing greater incentive to identify and remedy individual deviations that undermine the overall cause – to “weed out” those who are playing for the wrong team. Shifting the strategic focus, however, is only half the battle. The United States must also promote a more capable tactical fighting force, well versed in winning a counterinsurgency.

**Improving Capability**

Shifting focus to the insurgency is a vital piece of the puzzle; yet, it is not enough. Even when it has intervened, Pakistan’s military has proven incapable of waging an effective counterinsurgency (COIN). In 2003, at the urges of the United States, and after several peace deals meant to engage different tribes failed, President Musharraf ordered Pakistan’s Frontier Corps to move into the FATA. Because this type of military intervention was an historical anomaly and considered contrary to the established norm, traditionally autonomous tribal leadership reacted furiously.⁵⁰ The military operations were, by almost every account, unsuccessful. To begin with, waging a rural counterinsurgency (only 3% of FATA’s population resides in established townships) over a vast, rugged terrain is inherently difficult. But also, the units were poorly resourced, poorly funded, received no training in counterinsurgency operations (which frequently resulted in high civilian casualties and collateral damage), and had extremely...
low morale. To make matters worse, several tribal mullahs issued fatwas, or religious edicts, to local villagers criticizing the military “invaders.” It should be noted that while low-ranking soldiers in the Frontier Corps come mostly from indigenous Pashtun tribes in the FATA, the higher-ranking officers are recruited from the national Army, which is predominately Punjabi. In other words, 80,000 local Pashtun natives are led by a few Punjabi outsiders. The bulk of the Frontier Corps, while sharing little in common with its leadership, shares tight familial and societal ties with the very population it is being asked to subdue, which probably explains, in part, the low morale and questionable commitment.

Overall, the intervention in the FATA increased public sentiment against President Musharraf and did little to curb the growing insurgency. In fact, many argue that the interventions, which continue to this day, worsened the situation by fueling the fires of radicalism. The heavy-handed tactics led to many civilian casualties. In a 2008 poll of FATA residents, 72% said that the Pakistan Army did not carry out its operations with precision. Moreover, many fear that large-scale military action in the FATA will only serve to push the insurgency to other parts of Pakistan, further destabilizing the country.

Unlike in conventional warfare, insurgents demonstrate little desire to actually hold territory, which allows them to retreat to more hospitable locations. Indeed, Pakistan’s military operations have done little to address the core socio-economic problems that often cause locals to join an insurgency in the first place.

The FATA is the one of the poorest and most disenfranchised regions in Pakistan, creating a fertile breeding ground for insurgents. As the following chart indicates, almost every socio-economic indicator in the FATA is well below those of Pakistan, as a whole:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Pakistan</th>
<th>NWFP*</th>
<th>FATA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literacy rate (both sexes)</td>
<td>41.92</td>
<td>45.41</td>
<td>17.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male literacy rate (%)</td>
<td>54.81</td>
<td>51.39</td>
<td>29.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female literacy rate (%)</td>
<td>32.02</td>
<td>18.82</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population per doctor</td>
<td>1,226</td>
<td>4,916</td>
<td>7,079</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population per bed in health institutions</td>
<td>1.341</td>
<td>1.594</td>
<td>2.179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Road (per sq km)</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Poverty levels in the FATA are 60%, twice the national average. There are 102 high schools in the tribal region, of which only two or three are for girls. Madrassas, however, number three hundred. Only two or three hospitals in the entire region have the basic facilities for complex surgery. No aid agencies or NGOs have a significant presence in the FATA. The per capita development allocation is one-third the national average. The per capita income is half the national average. Unemployment averages 60-80%, sometimes even close to 100%, depending on the season. To make matters worse, the FATA receives only one per cent of Pakistan’s total national budget.

An environment with few legitimate avenues to make money, extremely high unemployment, little infrastructure, and a near absence of basic goods and services, fosters grievance and discontent, especially when madrassas, mullahs, extremists, and sympathizers exploit the environment to their advantage. With few opportunities to earn a legitimate income, and a dire necessity to put food on the table, it is not surprising that many have actively or passively supported the insurgency, either for ideological reasons and/or because the insurgency offers some of the highest pay in the area. As Colonel David B. Haight, Commander of the 3rd U.S. Army Brigade, said, officials “don’t believe it’s hardcore al-Qaeda operatives that you’re never going to convert anyway. They believe that it’s the guys who say, ‘Hey you want US$100 to shoot an RPG at a Humvee when it goes by,’ and the guy says, ‘Yeah I’ll do that, because I’ve got to feed my family.’” Richard Holbrooke, U.S. special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, estimates that 5% of the Taliban are incorrigible, 25% are unsure of their commitment, and 70% support the insurgency for the money. Some even refer to it as an “economic war.” Numerous studies and existing theories indicate that people primarily join or support an insurgency due to grievance, whether it is political, social, economic, or, most often, a combination thereof.

Despite its size — Pakistan has the sixth largest army in the world (650,000 active, 528,000 reserve) — Pakistan’s military has proven woefully ineffective in waging a successful counterinsurgency. In order to resolve the FATA problem, and the larger insurgency in general, Pakistan’s security establishment must become a competent COIN fighting force. For sixty years, Pakistan has been preparing to fight an enormous conventional battle against India on the plains of Punjab, not enemies within its own border. The army is built for conventional warfare — “a blunt instrument...better at inflicting punishing blows than targeting and eliminating specific enemies.” Nuclear arsenals, long-range missiles, fighter jets, large battalions, and heavy artillery, which make up the bulk of resources and funding, are of little utility in a counterinsurgency. So long as Pakistan’s security establishment is primarily concerned with the Indian threat, any foreign military assistance is likely to be funneled to prepare for war against India, as it has in the past, instead of toward the insurgency. In fact, there are new concerns rising on Capitol Hill that Pakistan may divert billions in U.S. aid to its...
nuclear weapons program, which, of course, would be geared towards India, not internal militants.62

Previous U.S. policy has not significantly pushed Pakistan in a new direction, either. In July 2008, for example, the Bush Administration planned to shift US$230 million in aid from COIN programs to upgrading Pakistan’s F-16 fleet. In fact, the F-16 program would represent more than two-thirds of the entire military financing and training package for the year, even though Congress specified that those funds be used for counterterrorism or police efforts. The Bush State Department argued that improved F-16s could strike at insurgents, provide surveillance, and offer close-air support (CAS) to ground troops.63 To its credit, Pakistan’s Air Force has recently increased CAS training and even flown several CAS combat missions against insurgents (i.e., 93 sorties in August 2008).64 While improving the air force’s capability is certainly a worthy cause, it must be remembered that American resources are finite and that air power is a relatively small piece of the puzzle in a ground-centric counterinsurgency. While air power can and should play an important supportive role, counterinsurgencies are ultimately won at the ground level.65 Also, as several defense experts argue, given the immense regional tensions, it is likely that the F-16s will be primarily dedicated to a conventional deterrence/defense role against India. In any event, given America’s limited resources, given the relatively reduced importance of air power in COIN, and given the multitude and severity of the problems facing Pakistan’s ground units, it seems that such a heavy emphasis on F-16s is ill-prioritized. Instead, as Brookings expert Stephen Cohen argues, the United States must try to shape Pakistan’s ground forces (at least portions of it) into a lighter, quicker, mobile force uniquely adapted to irregular warfare – mobile vehicles, easy-to-transport weaponry, sophisticated surveillance equipment, small-manned special operations forces, small attack helicopters, engineering, reconstruction, and development teams, and the like.66

Pakistan’s soldiers, in addition to having the correct configuration and equipment, must be well-trained in winning a counterinsurgency. So far, their heavy-handed tactics have done little to suppress the insurgency; they have caused large civilian casualties and, as a consequence, an angry local populace. An angry and disillusioned populace means little to no access to human intelligence...
(HUMINT) from the locals, which, in a counterinsurgency, is a crucial source of information. Without HUMINT, kinetic operations will be more difficult to wage precisely. Civilian casualties and angry locals also tarnish the legitimacy of Pakistan’s government. As such, Pakistani soldiers must understand the fundamental doctrinal nuances of COIN, with respect to the use of force. They must understand that today’s kinetic operation does little good if it creates tomorrow’s insurgent. Also, as Defense Secretary Robert Gates said of counterinsurgencies, “Where possible, what the military calls kinetic operations should be subordinated to measures aimed at promoting better governance, economic programs that spur development, and efforts to address the grievances among the discontented, from whom the terrorists recruit.”

Pakistan’s military planners have long focused on India’s “centers of gravity” – destroying leadership headquarters, command and control facilities, airfields, and power generators. However, this type of thinking cannot apply to Pakistan’s internal struggle. In battling a vast insurgency which enjoys popular support, the most important “center of gravity” is shaping the behavior of the local populace and addressing the core reasons that residents join, support, or ignore the insurgency in the first place. Killing and destroying as a way to victory, while the basic idea in a conventional war, is ineffective against an insurgency and often adds to the population’s list of grievances. The Soviet Union learned this lesson the hard way in Afghanistan during the 1980s. The Soviet’s infliction of enormous destruction and mass casualties with conventional weaponry increased popular resistance which, consequently, served to nurture the growing insurgency. As General David Petraeus wrote in the U.S. Army Counterinsurgency Manual: “Sometimes, the more force is used, the less effective it is. Any use of force produces many effects, not all of which can be foreseen. The more force applied, the greater the chance of collateral damage and mistakes. Using substantial force also increases the opportunity for insurgent propaganda to portray military activities as brutal.”

Yet, it is not as simple as lecturing COIN doctrine to Pakistan’s military officers. As the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, said in a February 17, 2009 Washington Post op-ed: “A whole generation of Pakistani military officers either doesn’t know the United States, doesn’t trust us, or both.” This is the reason it is critically important to establish military-to-military trust between the United States and Pakistan through a series of confidence-building measures (CBM), which will help alter Pakistani military officers’ negative perceptions and misunderstandings of Americans. According to research conducted by the Stimson Center, one of the primary CBM tools is persistent and lasting communication. With this in mind, the United States can establish direct “hotlines” and regional communication centers, similar to those between the United States and Russia, to provide reliable and direct channels to the highest levels of defense officials, especially in times of crisis. Direct channels will also promote quicker and more effective intelligence sharing. Moreover, in order
to improve personal relations at the highest levels, the United States must rely heavily upon persistent consultations and meetings, such as the regular conferences between the chiefs of staff of the armed forces of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay.\textsuperscript{72} In addition, the United States can extend long-term security guarantees and multiyear aid packages to demonstrate its intention for a lasting partnership. These measures have already worked in the past. Take, for instance, the hundreds of military agreements between the United States and South Korea, as well as the U.S.-ROK Combined Forces Command, which promotes daily, joint operational planning and, in turn, foster trustworthy relationships.\textsuperscript{73} Granted, Pakistan is much different than South Korea, but past measures can serve as a useful framework to formulate a new strategy.

Relationships of trust must be formed not only at the top levels, but also at the junior and mid levels. As Daniel Markey of the Council on Foreign Relations said, the “bilateral trust deficit is most acute in the junior and mid ranks, where personal interaction between Pakistanis and Americans is remarkably infrequent and where officers are most likely to reflect the anti-Americanism that dominates the national discourse.”\textsuperscript{74} Trust amongst the lower ranks can be improved through closer and more frequent working relationships, information-sharing, extensive joint training exercises, exchange officer programs, and attendance at war colleges, such as Squadron Officer School and Air Command and Staff College. For example, Pakistani forces can train jointly alongside U.S. special ops forces, learn COIN doctrine at U.S. schools, and attend close-air support exercises. As Admiral Mullen said, “Trust cannot be won over the phone. You build it one person – and one issue – at a time.”\textsuperscript{75} Some within the United States may be concerned that such extensive information-sharing programs and joint exercises will pose an opportunity for foreign officers to exploit U.S. technology and intelligence. Yet, the FATA, and Pakistan’s larger insurgency, is a battlefield in which American troops can exercise little direct influence. America’s training and skill-sets in COIN will do little good if they cannot be extended to the Pakistanis. Additionally, undue security risks can be virtually eliminated with proper security and supervision. In all, regular meeting groups, cooperative training, increased transparency, and improved face-to-face relationships will help promote trust, confidence, and the exchange of vital skill-sets and information, allowing Pakistan’s military to act more effectively and precisely, while simultaneously reducing the need for unpopular U.S. cross-border strikes into Pakistan.

Conclusion

The FATA insurgency has reached new levels of severity, directly threatening not only the very life of the current Pakistani state, but also U.S. national security. Yet, with great crisis comes great opportunity. Pakistan’s security establishment is currently part of the problem – the idea is to help make it part of the solution.
Now is the wake-up call, the time to unify effort. As a first and necessary step, diplomatic initiatives can promote a mutual recognition of shared goals, helping to ease the regional tensions that give many in Pakistan’s security establishment a reason to either place the FATA on the back burner or covertly support the insurgency. However, shifting focus is only half the battle. The United States must also promote a more capable Pakistani tactical fighting force, well versed in winning a counterinsurgency. This will require proper training, the appropriate allocation of equipment, the wise use of resources, extensive information sharing, and increased confidence building measures between the United States and Pakistani military. These policies will help to cultivate an establishment that plays a more constructive role in the region. Of course, the recommendations in this paper must be employed synergistically with a myriad of other policy instruments, many of which are beyond the purview of this paper, such as developmental aid, border patrols, the political and legal integration of the FATA into Pakistani mainstream, and the strengthening of Pakistan’s domestic institutions.

- Mehran Gul served as lead editor for this article.

NOTES

14 “Pakistani Public Opinion on Democracy, Islamist Militancy, and Relations with the US,” US Institute of Peace.
26 Rubin, “From Great Game to Grand Bargain,” p. 36.
33 Rubin, “From Great Game to Grand Bargain,” p. 37.
Defeating the FATA insurgency

42 Rubin, “From Great Game to Grand Bargain,” p. 37.
46 Rubin, “From Great Game to Grand Bargain,” p. 42.
48 Ibid., p. 69.
50 Abbas, “President Obama’s Policy Options in Pakistan’s FATA,” p. 3.
51 Ibid., p. 5.
58 Straziuso, “Afghan Surge Begins in Dangerous Region.”
59 Ideas attributed to the Contemporary Insurgent Warfare Course (CIWC), USAF Special Operations School, Hurlburt Field AFB, FL.
60 Markey, “Securing Pakistan’s Tribal Belt,” p. 29.
65 Contemporary Insurgent Warfare Course (CIWC), USAF Special Operations School, Hurlburt Field AFB, FL.
66 Idea attributed to Stephen Cohen, in Bobby Ghosh, “Pakistan’s Prospects.”
72 Ibid.
74 Markey, “Securing Pakistan’s Tribal Belt,” p. 43.
75 Mullen, “How to Build Our Best Weapon.”