

Upsurge in the “War On Terror” in the Pakistani Arena:

Dimensions and Consequences

Arif Kamal* - June 2009



Introduction

The ‘War on Terror’ in the Pakistani arena has registered an upturn in scale and intensity since April this year, coinciding with President Obama’s new ‘Af-Pak policy’. This is manifested in the Swat operation, ending the peace agreement with the local cleric Sufi Muhammad, and an active military engagement in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), particularly South Waziristan. The most pronounced and visible objective of the operation is to establish the writ of the state in the areas overwhelmed by Talibanization of sorts. The upturn in military engagement has caused massive displacement of population bringing to the fore complex human dimensions and desperate country-wide militant reaction, particularly by way of suicide attacks that threaten infrastructure and generate fear amongst the masses. The factors also impact on the wider political landscape of the country and its relations with the US.

Pre-Conflagration Scenario

To recap the scenario preceding the current conflagration, the government and local cleric Sufi Muhammad (acting as proxy for the Taliban) had concluded an agreement on ‘peace and system of justice’ in the volatile region and tried to seek its implementation with varying interpretations, during the period from February to May this year. The agreement was a give-and-take bargaining in which the militants promised not to challenge the writ of the state, refrain from attacking security forces and government installations, and stop opposing girl’s education and immunization of children. They also denounced suicide bombings and agreed to disband their private militia. The carrying of unlicensed arms in Swat was banned and suspected militants in government custody will be released. The government also gave in to the militant’s demand to retain control of the faction’s sprawling mosque and Madressah complex in Fazlullah’s village, and establish an Islamic university there and allow them continued use of their FM radio channel.

The implementation of the agreement, however, remained in troubled waters from the very outset. The extremist camp continued to pose as a “parallel administration” and questioning the constitutional and democratic ethos of the country. The agreement also evoked strong criticism from the country’s civil society and important segments of the international community. In short, the trust deficit between the signing parties led to the disbandment of the agreement.

Context: Varying Views

The launch of a military operation in Swat is viewed in many ways though with an invariable appreciation of the need to restore the governmental writ over the region. First, this signified an end to the ‘policy of appeasement’ and the so called ‘half steps’ that was the hallmark of previous initiatives to stabilize the situation. The new advance means a resolve to contain and then eliminate the extremist infrastructure. The Swat operation also appeared to be a test case of a similar action in parts of the tribal areas, South Waziristan in particular. Second, the decisive action came in tandem with the US military surge in Afghanistan, envisaged in President Obama’s new policy direction. It also

coincided with the US consideration of 310 million dollars aid package so vital to the revival of Pakistan's economy. The timing of the operation, critics suggest, lends credence to their view that the operation is more of a "compliant action". Third, the decisive military operation, doesn't *ipso facto* promise an intelligent political prong in store for tomorrow.

Human Dynamics

The number of people displaced from Swat in the wake of the military engagement is estimated to be in the range of 3.5 millions. The proportion of humanitarian disaster is indeed enormous, perhaps not foreseen by those planning and executing the operation at the outset. The bulk of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) have relocated themselves in camps in neighboring districts in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), with a spillover to Punjab and other areas. The displacement unfolds enormous humanitarian challenges in terms of shelter, food, sanitation, health, education and ecology. This brings in a massive and unforeseen burden on the Exchequer.

The Extremists' Backlash

The country-wide scenario is overwhelmed by fear of suicidal attacks and the corresponding security alerts that are in place on a regular footing. Evidentially, Islamabad, the capital region and the heartland of Punjab have been targeted, ostensibly to convey reaction messages from Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan and their allies. Since Obama's new policy direction, seven major suicide attacks have been made in various parts of the country. According to the Taliban Spokesman Muslim Khan, the attacks would continue till the military operation in Swat ends and the U.S forces leave Afghanistan. Does the militant response reflect their potential to act across the board or indicative of desperation? The answer may vouch for a blend of the two.

"Operation Rahi Rast": Time Frame?

The time frame for "Operation Rahi Rast" (the correct path) is linked up with the establishment of governmental writ and therefore it remains open ended. The governmental functionaries, both at the federal and provincial levels, have made conflicting statements in this regard. A difficulty in the way of pronouncing a time frame relates to the capacity of the civilian infrastructure to take up its role, once the military targets are achieved. There is also talk of establishing a permanent military cantonment in the valley that should carry a deterrent effect on the prospects of Taliban's return. In spite of these complexities, it is important that for a victory in the arena, the military action must bring rapid and spectacular results, and that political prong should supplement the military gains.

Revisiting the Root Causes

To better appreciate the dynamics of the Swat operation, it is not possible to overlook the genesis and characteristics of militancy in the so called "Af-Pak" region. Understandably, the extremists are "the children of America's War against the Soviets", groomed in the

vacuum that was left by the sudden Western withdrawal from post-Soviet Afghanistan. According to a prevailing view, this constituency had continued to serve as a strategic asset for Pakistan's survival strategy vis-à-vis India. In this background, it is important to keep in view that the 'hesitant' operations in the past and piecemeal political deals were indicative of Pakistani establishment's uncertain view of how to deal with this erstwhile constituency. In the post - 9/11 policy reversal, the establishment had not developed an 'antidote to Jihadist network and culture'. Concurrently, this also reflected an overriding concern on how best to minimize the impact of "Af-Pak" war on the Pakistani soil. However, the Pakistani Taliban's overconfident posture in Swat and their move to expand to Buner (less than 100km from Islamabad), generated a strong sense within the government that 'lines must be drawn somewhere and now'.

Role of Foreign Agencies

An ingredient in the popular-level perception in Pakistan relates to the role of foreign intelligence agencies in Swat turmoil. The Indian intelligence agency RAW is seen as trying "to keep internal disturbances flaring up and the ISI pre-occupied" so as to reduce Pakistani capacity to counter Indian designs. The perception is strengthened amidst evidence gathered from arrested persons who are reportedly close confidants of Commander Baitullah Mehsood. Moreover, factions of Taliban (e.g. Zain-ud-din and the Tarkistan Betani) have spoken of Baitullah Mehsood's Indian and Israeli connection.

Impact on Pakistani Political Landscape

The Swat operation has raised many politically important questions in Pakistani. First, once the operation was launched, the main political streams in the country seemed to converge on the view that establishing governmental writ takes precedence over what were the varying views on the desirability or otherwise of a military operation. The PPP, ANP and MQM, all partners in the power configuration, who supported the military action, seemed to have received greater understanding from PML (N), the opposing mainstream. Together, they represented a consensus on the broad policy objectives, as distinct from the religiously-oriented parties and Imran Khan's Tehreek-e- Insaf which remain outside the loop.

Second, the question of finding refuge for the internally displaced persons (IDPs) has exposed the sensitivities of smaller provinces and their fears of further erosion in their cultural distinctiveness. From amongst the supporters of the military operation, PPP and MQM in Sindh, joined by Sindhi nationalist groups, vehemently opposed any move to locate IDP camps to Sindh province. Sindhis already feel marginalized in their own province, and now feel threatened from a growing Pushtoon population. Incidentally, Pushtoons number 3.5 million in Karachi metropolis.

Third, the contemporary setting is heightening concern about the identification of Taliban with the radical and inflexible interpretation of Islam and thus widening cleavages amongst various schools of religious thoughts. Interestingly, political actors have attempted to mobilize sections of clergy associated with *Ahl i Sunnat* and *Mushaikh* against the puritan view expressed by the extremes.

Findings

Amidst the conflagration in Swat and parts of FATA, persistent reports suggested that the Pakistani Taliban were using US Arms, ostensibly transferred from Afghanistan. These reports, together with the alleged US connection of Commander Baitullah Mehsud, have given wider currency to the conspiracy theory view. Concurrently, Pakistan Army was primarily using the US resources to fight back the extremists and militants in the region. Given this perspective, all players would appear to be engaged in making Afghanistan and Pakistan as 'one theater of war' and consequently, shifting the focus of America's war against Al-Qaeda from Afghanistan to the conduct of this war on Pakistani soil.

The activation of the Pakistani theater of war to a near-climax came in tandem with the US surge in Afghanistan. About 17,000 troops to be deployed to Afghanistan, which by itself carries a spillover effect on Pakistan and serves as a source to enlarge hostilities in the country's north west. This surge in Afghanistan comes in the wake of persistent reports of the US engagement in proxy dialogue with "good Taliban" (offices of Britain and some Arab countries are often referred to as contact points). It is ironica that in the offensive against the Pakistani Taliban, the road for dialogue is now narrowed and possible framework is blurred than before.

The articulation of the US' "Af-Pak" policy, though designed to combat the menace of terrorism, goes a long way in enforcing an organic linkage between Afghan Taliban and Pakistani Taliban, and reconfirms the convergence of interests between them. This creates, whether intended or unintended, a critical landmass of ethnic-based political activity amongst Pushtoons on both sides of the divide. If invisible US dialogue with "good Taliban", for that matter with Pushtoon activists in Afghanistan succeeds in the follow-up of the current surge, the new dispensation in Kabul will also reflect their "due share". What impact this would bring in political terms on the Pakistani Pushtoon zones that are infested with Talibanization? A right answer to this dilemma is yet to be established. However, one lesson for the Pakistani elite lies in a growing need for them to unfold a political prong in tandem with military action and keep in store policy options that gain relevance in the days ahead.

Constraints continue to exist in a way of a political prong. First and foremost, the rise of the Pakistani Taliban is symptomatic of the failure in growth and vitality of political institutions in the country, particularly the political parties' operation. To recall, in the wake of the mobilization against Soviet presence in Afghanistan, the FATA also witnessed collapse of the "Maliks", the traditional tribal elders and rise of "young Taliban" filling in the vacuum. Adult franchise was introduced in the Tribal Areas without enabling the political parties to operate and offer an alternate to Taliban. The region has thus remained a special-status area, susceptible to politico-military activism and open to uncertainties in the direction it should take. Second, the ANP which is a secular and democratically elected ruling party in NWFP, the settled Pushtoon areas, has not shown a convincing report card of political dynamism in the war torn Swat, a settled area overwhelmed by Taliban. It has yet to prove its relevance to serve as an alternate stabilizing factor, following the end of military operation. For an ultimate success, the

political forces in NWFP and FATA will have to come of age and play a proactive dynamic role.

Recommendations:

- The measure of success against extremism expected from Pakistan is to be matched with similar American success on the Afghan side. The outcome of the overall “War Against Terror” will depend on this synergy.
- Numerous intelligence outfits including those from India and Israel, besides the US, are operating from Afghanistan to promote their interest in the so called Af-Pak region. Their operations may also be one complicating factor in the situation. They will have to be persuaded to give the Pakistani government and its military the much needed time necessary for success.
- Political process must run in tandem with the military operation, keeping policy options for a timely future dialogue with the ‘reformed-extremists’.
- Taliban and other extremists should be encouraged to assume a political face, shunning violence, and ready for electoral politics.
- Incremental steps should be taken to administratively merge FATA into NWFP, and give them representation in the provincial assembly.
- The military operation as well as the political prong when it comes, ultimately relate to the battle for hearts and minds. The political government must move swiftly to rehabilitate the displaced persons at the earliest possible, rebuild all required facilities, provide a local civilian administration and improve socio-economic conditions.
- The military operation cannot aim at victory in the war; all it can do is to create an environment for the political government to bargain from a position of strength. It is up to the political government to use that space and the opportunity provided by the military to find a lasting solution.

*Arif Kamal, former Pakistani Ambassador