

The Waziristan Tangle

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Introduction:

The intensifying unrest in Waziristan, centrally administered by Islamabad, highlights the very troubled state of affairs in Pakistan and its fragile role in “the War on Terror”. In fact, the unrest has serious implications for Afghanistan and the United States, which is leading the War on Terror, as well.

Waziristan covers an area of 11,585 square kilometers (4,473 square miles) and is divided into what are defined as North and South Waziristan agencies. The total population today is estimated to be around a million. The region is one of the most inaccessible, has an extremely rugged terrain and has remained outside the direct control of the Pakistani government. Hitherto, it has only been controlled nominally by the central government of Pakistan. The Waziri tribes that inhabit the region are fiercely independent. However, they had not bothered the Pakistani government till the fall of the Taliban government in neighbouring Afghanistan, when the region turned out to be a good sanctuary for the fleeing Al Qaeda and Taliban elements.

Role of army

Pakistani troops entered the region for the first time in the late 2002 after long negotiations with the tribes, which reluctantly agreed to allow the military’s presence on the assurance that it would bring in funds and development work. However, once the military action started, a number of Waziri tribals took it as an attempt to subjugate them. During the last five years in which Waziristan has been a hotbed of terrorist activities – it now houses the “ fugitive” Osama bin Laden and the top leadership of his al-Qaeda. The government has applied various strategies to rein in the militants suspected to be hiding there but has consistently failed. Despite using disproportionately heavy force, the Army has not been able to establish the writ of the state. It has conducted military operations in which many lives have been lost. It offered amnesties to militants and then reneged on its promise and has seen also the tribal leaders supporting the government being killed. There have been a number of coordinated operations by Pakistani and US troops in the region. Besides, the US has resorted to targeted killings of militants using UAVs, one of which led to the killing of the militant leader Nek Mohammad, who had actually reached an agreement with the Pakistani government.

The Alienation

The Army operations have resulted in a large number of civilian casualties, further increasing the alienation of the population. The Army also tried to buy off the loyalties of the militants by paying them huge sums of money, but it has failed to herald peace in the region. There has been no conclusive report on the casualties of the war, though some authors, especially Pakistani writers, have estimated that the total casualties on both sides to be more than 10,000 by 2006. Some have speculated that the unofficial number of Pakistani soldiers killed in action to be somewhere around 3,000 by the late 2006. Pakistan writer, Ayaz Amir states that the army's "Casualties were high, perhaps unsustainable, although we'll never know the exact figures, (as) the Pakistan army is not given to embarrassing disclosures." According to AFP, in the early 2007 alone, after the first round of fighting, around 700 soldiers and 1,000 militants died in the operations. Other estimates were higher, and many more died since.

Waziristan Accord

It may be noted here that on September 5, 2006, the Waziristan Accord, an agreement between tribal leaders and the Pakistani government was signed in Miranshah, North Waziristan to end all fighting. The agreement included the following provisions:

- The Pakistani Army will help reconstruct infrastructure in tribal areas of North and South Waziristan;
- The Pakistani Military will not tolerate any assistance to intruders in North Waziristan, and will monitor actions in the region;
- The Pakistan government is to compensate tribal leaders for the loss of life and property of innocent tribesmen;
- "Foreigners" (informally understood to be foreign jihadists) are not allowed to use Pakistani territory for any terrorist activity anywhere in the world;
- 2,500 foreigners who were originally held on suspicion of having links to al-Qaeda or the Taliban were to be detained for necessary action against them.

The Waziristan accord was viewed by some political commentators as a triumph for Pakistan. But, in retrospect, it seems that legendary cricketer Imaran Khan, who is now deeply in politics of Pakistan, was prophetic. Commenting on the Accord, he had observed that "Waziristan has been a disaster; there's been a disgraceful withdrawal from there. The Pakistan Army has been defeated."

The Accord Fails

Obviously, the accord has not worked. Within one month of signing the accord, both the jihadists and Pakistani armed forces violated the truce, accusing each other of being the first to break the peace. Ironically these violations had connections to the events outside the region. For instance, if the American or Pakistani troops killed the Taliban and Al-Qaeda elements in Afghanistan and parts of NWFP, the jihadists in Waziristan blasted the army convoys through suicide bombers. Most important of these instances have been the linkage with the seizure of the "Lal Masjid" in Islamabad in July 2007.

As the siege in Islamabad ensued, several attacks on Pakistani troops in Waziristan were reported. On July 14, 2007, a suicide bomber attacked a Pakistani Army convoy killing 26 soldiers and wounding 54. On July 15, 2007, two suicide bombers attacked another Pakistani Army convoy killing 16 soldiers and 5 civilians and wounding another 47 people. And in a separate incident a fourth suicide bomber attacked a police headquarter killing 28 police officers and recruits and wounding 35 people.

In fact, the assault on the Lal Masjid prompted pro-Taliban rebels along the border with Afghanistan to scrap the Waziristan Accord with the government. As a result, despite committing over 70,000 to 80,000 troops supported by helicopter gunships, artillery and air force, the writ of the Pakistani state in Waziristan has become almost negligible. Top ranking Taliban and Al Qaeda leaders have been moving in and out of the region with impunity. As it is, during the winter of 2006, Osama bin Laden had announced his strategy to establish bases and pockets of territory along the Afghan-Pakistani border. The Taliban and al Qaeda (virtually indistinguishable in this region at this point in time) were able, more or less, to conquer the North and South Waziristan by withstanding the air strike against Ayman al-Zawahiri (Osama's number two man) in Damadola, and the attack on the Danda Saidgai training camp in North Waziristan. In both instances, al-Qaeda's senior leadership was targeted, and in Danda Saidgai, Osama bin Laden and his praetorian 'Black Guard,' or personal bodyguard, were the subject of the attack.

While bin Laden and Zawahiri escaped, senior commanders such as Abu Khabab al-Masri (WMD chief) and Imam Asad (chief trainer of the Black Guard), among others were killed. Al-Qaeda retaliated for the air strikes by murdering a U.S. official at the Consulate in Karachi. South Waziristan fell some time in the spring of 2006, since this was when Shariah Law was declared there and the Taliban began to rule openly. A single political party was established in South Waziristan, a party loyal to the Taliban.

Be that as it may, after the Lal Masjid episode in Islamabad, situation in Waziristan has worsened. There has been really heavy fighting between the Taliban and the Pakistani army since September 2007. So much so that the Pakistani armed forces are using helicopter gunships, jet fighters and ground troops. And, what is more worrisome, the war has extended beyond Waziristan to neighbouring Swat district of the North-West Frontier Province, where a large Taliban force, under the command of Maulana Qazi Fazlullah, has been able to impose Sharia law. Around 3,000 para-military soldiers were sent to confront them. After almost a week of heavy fighting the battle came to a standstill with both sides suffering heavy casualties. Then on November 1 and November 3, as many as 220 paramilitary soldiers and policemen surrendered or deserted after a military position on a hill-top and two police stations were overrun. This has left the Taliban in control of most of the Swat district.

Islamic republic of Waziristan

In short, as things stand now, the Taliban militia, backed by al- Qaeda, has virtually established an Islamic Republic in the rugged and remote Waziristan region. Many former members of Pakistani jihadi organizations belonging to the banned Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM), Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI), Laskhar-e-Toiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), have converged on North and South Waziristan. According to rough estimates, about 25,000 activists of several jihadi organisations had assembled in North and South Waziristan alone in 2005, with the declared determination to “fight until the last man and the last bullet”. And most of them are still siding with the local Taliban in their ongoing fight against the Pakistani security forces.

The Taliban, under the leadership of Haji Mohammad Omar, is now a force to be reckoned with in the area due to a weakening political administration. Omar had first enforced a rigid social order in Waziristan in 2004 and then declared, in December 2005, the establishment of an Islamic state in Waziristan governed by Islamic laws. Omar’s name in Waziristan commands great respect and awe. He is the chief of the Pakistani Taliban, which has put up tough resistance against the Pakistani military troops in the tribal region, to take control of large parts of Waziristan. The 55 year-old Omar had served as one of the many lieutenants of Taliban ameer Mullah Mohammad Omar until the fall of the Taliban regime in November 2001. Omar’s three important commanders include Maulana Sadiq Noor, Maulana Abdul Khaliq and Maulana Sangeen Khan. The US intelligence sleuths stationed in Pakistan allege that the Taliban have already lined up more than 100 suicide squads for suicide missions, with specific targets all over Afghanistan.

Intra-Tribal Dynamics

While Omar’s hold over South Waziristan is said to be complete, his three commanders are active in North Waziristan and at the verge of gaining total control. It may be noted that three major tribes currently live in North Waziristan, which has become the principal stronghold of the Taliban outside Afghanistan: the Wazirs, the Mehsuds and the Dawar. British soldiers referred to the Wazirs as wolves and the Mehsuds as panthers of the mountains while the Dawar have traditionally been peace loving, preferring shop-keeping to guns and towns over mountains.

The Mehsud and Wazir tribes have been archrivals for centuries. Traditionally, the Mehsuds have been part of the Pakistani establishment, and as recently as the past few years they supported the military’s actions against the Wazir tribes, who are mostly Taliban. Things are, however changing, and traditional roles and rivalries have shifted. In North Waziristan, Maulana Sadiq Noor and Maulana Abdul Khaliq, the unbending leaders of the Taliban-led resistance, are both Dawar and, even more surprising, the Wazirs and the Mehsuds have accepted their command.

Currently, the man responsible for launching the Taliban raids into Afghanistan is Maulana Sangeen Khan, an Afghan from the neighboring Khost province. In South Waziristan, while Haji Mohammad Omar is leading the resistance movement against the Pakistani security forces, one of his colleagues, Abdullah Mehsud, is in charge of the Afghan operations. In fact, never before in the recorded history could one find similar instances of Mehsuds and Wazirs fighting side-by-side, and, that too, under the command of the Dawars.

Implications for Afghanistan

Since there is no clear demarcation of the Pak-Afghan border, the Taliban and al - Qaeda fighters sheltering in the tribal belt under the control of Wazirs, Mehsuds and Dawars easily cross the border and attack their targets on Afghan soil, using the mountain terrain to strategic advantage, and then melt into the villages located in the Pak-Afghan border areas. The result is that the al- Qaeda-backed Taliban resistance movement in Afghanistan continues to gain strength in the tribal areas of Pakistan, which provide natural strategic depth to Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters.

No wonder that hardly a day passes when Karzai administration in Afghanistan does not urge Pakistan to do more to help overcome insurgency in the southern and eastern parts of Afghanistan. The anxiety being expressed by the Karzai administration is understandable and not entirely misplaced, given the fact that much of the trouble along the border area of Afghanistan happens to be a result of the Taliban militia crossing over from the Pakistani side of the border. In the past, the Afghan mujahideen, too, had bases in the Waziristan region, which they used as launching pads to make frequent incursions into Afghanistan to target the occupying Soviet troops.

Under these circumstances, the Musharraf regime is often blamed for whatever is happening in Afghanistan, given the quantum of activity within close proximity of the Pak-Afghan border. Many visiting US officials have stated time and again in the recent past that Islamabad should fulfill its international obligations by curtailing the movement of miscreants from its side of the border, as it cannot simply absolve itself by asking Kabul to tighten control on the other side. They have made it clear that the issue is not just placing 80,000 Pakistani troops on the border, but rather how effective that force has been in accomplishing its mission objective.

Of course, there is a theory that many elements in Pakistani armed forces and ISI are jihadists by inclination and that they are not sincere in fighting the Taliban. But then, without going into the merits and demerits of this allegation at the moment, the question is whether Pakistan, given the history of Waziristan, can ever be able to rise to the occasion. We may now look at that history briefly.

Lessons from the history

It was during British rule that Waziristan came in contact with settled areas on large scale. This had economic, social and political impact on the tribal society. Officially, the area was

under Afghan suzerainty but actually no one had control over the land. Throughout British direct or indirect rule, many expeditions were carried out in Waziristan area. The main objective of these expeditions was punishment for perpetual commission of crimes by tribes in settled districts. The crimes were usually robbery, murder or kidnapping in settled districts or attack on civilian caravans or military convoys in tribal territory. The usual form of punishment was blowing up of defensive towers, cutting of crops and burning of villages. When the tribe submitted, they were asked to pay a certain amount of fine and surrender few rifles and the forces would be withdrawn.

In the early part of British rule (starting in 1849 after the annexation of Punjab) the area was totally independent of both British and Afghan authorities. British Deputy Commissioners of settled districts dealt with the tribes adjoining their districts. Deputy Commissioners of Bannu and Derajat dealt with Waziristan tribes. Apart from punishing the tribes for their crimes, the British arrangement also involved the cultivating a strong personality among the tribes (Maliks). This arrangement meant that a strong personality which earned the respect of the tribes and could communicate with them. Written agreements were negotiated with tribes where the tribe would be responsible for the security of their area and control raiders while government would provide allowances (called muwajibs) to Maliks. These intermediaries were the key in this policy called closed border policy. In these arrangements, the tribes were not subjects and the measures were meant only to prevent looting raids on settled districts. There were many military expeditions during this period but no permanent occupation of strategic areas.

Of course, during the Second Afghan War (1878) the penetration in Baluch tribal areas was accompanied with increased penetration in Waziristan. But the penetration in Waziristan was never at the scale of Baluch territories. The area remained 'no man's land' until the 1893 treaty with Afghanistan, which was negotiated by Sir Mortimer Durand. Though we will discuss it at a little length later, for the moment it may be mentioned that Waziristan with the exception of Birmal came under the British sphere of influence. However, the demarcation of boundary (Durand Line) was resisted by Wazirs and the area saw heavy fighting. The Tochi Valley and Wana were occupied and two agencies called North and South Waziristan were subsequently established.

After the Third Afghan War (1919), Mehsud -area was penetrated extensively and roads and posts were built. When Maliks appeared unable to deliver due to strong and independent nature of Mehsuds, British tried to introduce for a brief period a new system where allowance was given to whole tribe (called tuman). The Commissioner of Derajat, Merk also started to deal with the whole tribe in mass assembly called 'the great jirga'. It was impossible to reach any reasonable agreement with an armed crowd of 5000 Mehsuds and after Merk's departure the system was scrapped and Maliks were restored. However, collective benefits were restructured through establishment of tribal police called Khassadars. At the same time another irregular force composed of tribes but with a significant non-local component called Scouts was created. The local militia was named Frontier Corps headed by an Inspector General with

its headquarter in Peshawar. The South Waziristan Scouts and Tochi Scouts for North Waziristan were operating in Waziristan area.

With the greater penetration in Waziristan, the incentives included the recruitment of locals in tribal militia with its economic benefits. At the same time the punishment scope also increased. A system of collective tribal responsibility for any outrage committed by any member of the tribe was instituted. This included not only termination of allowances but also blockade of the culprit tribe (called bandish). The tribe members would be prevented from grazing their flocks in neighbouring districts and excluded from markets. Another method was the arrest of individuals and seizure of animals and property of the culprit tribe in settled areas (called baramta). Last resort would be a punitive expedition against the culprit tribe or clan, which was usually of a short duration. In 1872 Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) was introduced in tribal areas, which authorized settlement of quarrels, by customary methods conducted by the jirga. FCR also gave Political Agent significant powers that could not be challenged in any court. This system is still operative in tribal areas with very little change and Political Agent with his administrative staff and militia is the sole representative of the central government in the area.

Operation Curzon

After the partition of India in 1947, the successor state of Pakistan decided to remove regular troops from the tribal areas. The country's founder Mr. Mohammad Ali Jinnah personally took this important decision and the Brigade from Razmak was evacuated (the operation was named Curzon). Since independence, many social, economic and demographic changes have occurred in Waziristan. The Wazirs have come further down into the plains from their hills in adjoining settled districts. Increasing educational facilities have opened new avenues and many of them enlisted themselves in army and militias. Similarly large number of Mehsuds has joined the mainstream Pakistani society. When the Hindu traders of Tank left after the partition in 1947, most of their shops were taken over by Mehsuds. Now Mehsuds are employed in militia and regular army, state bureaucracy and are involved in business all around the country. Many of them are now living far away from their native lands.

Incidentally, immediately after the independence, Wazirs and Mehsuds were part of the tribal lashkar, which attacked Kashmir. They quickly reached the outskirts of Srinagar defeating the Maharaja's troops. In fact, if Pakistan now controls nearly 40 percent territory of the Maharaja Hari Singh's Jammu and Kashmir, it is because of the tribals of Waziristan in 1947-48. But for them, Pakistan would have had no role in the Kashmir-problem as it exists today.

The Changing Scene

Be that as it may, the strength of tribes in Waziristan lies in the inaccessibility of their area. The tribesmen have used this to their full advantage. The location - inhospitable mountainous terrain bordering between Afghanistan and Pakistan - has given them the flexibility to

maintain some independence from central authorities of both countries. Like all other tribes, Wazirs and Mehsuds cherish their independence and are fully conscious of their reputation of 'honour' and 'bravery'. They use these qualities to convey their ethnic superiority. The responses of Wazirs and especially Mehsuds to resist any penetration in their enclave was due to their intense independent spirit which almost borders on anarchy. Every Mehsud considers himself responsible and equal to the other Mehsud. This sentiment was well expressed by one Mehsud leader, Jaggar, to British officer Evelyn Howell in these words: 'Let it be field. Blow us all up with cannon, or make all eighteen thousand of us Nawabs' suggesting that all were equal. Similarly, wife of Viceroy Lord Minto had said after the visit to the frontier tribes in April 1906: 'They fight for the love of fighting, and though at the moment they are contented and peaceful, they say openly that they must soon relieve the monotony by having a rising'.

Of course, gradual change has occurred in Waziristan due to increased interaction of tribes with government and settled districts adjoining them. As mentioned earlier, the most significant experiment of British was raising of Militias (later called Scouts) from the area. It gave the tribesman an alternative to boring life of tending the fields. The system has all the incentives that a tribesman can enjoy. He is clothed, fed and given cash. He is given a good rifle, the prized possession and he lives in his own hills with opportunities to use his rifle. Over the last decades, the tribal society is, thus, increasingly attached to the settled area both economically and socially. This has limited some of the independence, which the tribesman's forefathers enjoyed. If he chooses to challenge the central authority, he has to suffer more than his forefathers. On the other hand, the government's authority to punish the whole tribe is also restricted to some extent due to increased integration of tribesmen into settled districts. And this is precisely what one is witnessing these days in the Swat valley.

Secondly, endowed with this fierce sense of "individual independence", overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of Waziristan do not consider themselves to be Pakistanis in legal sense. They simply do not realise that Durand line has made them Pakistanis. This line for them is artificial in every sense of the term. The other side of the line – "Afghan territory" – is as much their land as this side is (they all are essentially Pashtuns). They have never seen or accepted any restriction on their movements and the movements of their guests across the Durand line. Nor are they in a mood to accept any such restrictions. In fact, going by history and ethnicity, they have more affinity with the people of present day Afghanistan than those in Pakistan. And what is most important, no government in Afghanistan has formally accepted till today that Waziristan is a part of Pakistan. This point needs little elaboration.

The Durand Line

Sir Mortimer Durand, the then foreign secretary of the colonial government of India signed a document with King of Afghanistan Abdul Rahman Khan in November 12, 1893 relating to the borders between Afghanistan and British India. The line so devised was named Durand Line. The document was to be ratified by the legislative body in Afghanistan. However, it never happened. The Durand line, which runs through the areas inhabited by the Pashtuns, was never accepted by either Afghanistan government (which signed it under duress) or the Pashtuns

(who sought to create their own homeland called Pashtunistan). In fact, In April 1919, Afghan General Nadir Khan had advanced to Tal of Southern Waziristan to reclaim Afghan rights over the region. The area was recovered after a long fight – that killed many – by the British Brigadier Rex Dyer (of Jalianwala Bagh notoriety).

Besides, Afghanistan's loya jirga (parliament) of 1949 had declared the Durand Line invalid as they saw it as ex parte on their side, since British India ceased to exist in 1947 with the independence of India and Pakistan. It proclaimed that the Afghan government did not recognise the Durand Line as a legal boundary between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

This being the situation, every government in Islamabad, military and non-military, has desperately tried to reach a bilateral agreement with successive regimes in Kabul to convert the Durand Line into an international border, but without any success. Even when Taliban took over Afghanistan, Pakistan, which aided and abetted the Taliban during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, expected, in vain, a favourable response. The then Pakistani interior minister, Moinuddin Haider, called for the revival of the sanctification of the Durand Line, since it had legally lapsed in 1993. It may be noted here that the document between the British India and Afghanistan was to remain in force for 100 years. The Taliban regime ignored the Pakistani pleas.

Similarly, frequent press statements from 2005 to 2007 by President Pervez Musharraf calling for the building of a fence delineating the Afghanistan/Pakistan border have been met with resistance from numerous political parties within both the countries. Leaders of Pashtuns on both sides of the border do not recognize the Durand Line. Afghan President Hamid Karzai has systematically avoided the issue.

Conclusion

Pakistan's de jure western border has ceased to exist. In fact, this realisation has made it imperative for Pakistan to get even more deeply involved in determining who rules from Kabul. According to one US Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare report, Islamabad has always been anxious to secure a docile Pashtun-dominated government in Kabul. This explains Islamabad's continuing and increasing involvement in affairs pertaining to Afghanistan. It always wants a dependent government in Kabul that would more likely ensure the de facto preservation of the lapsed and abrogated Durand Line, even if it could not be converted into an international border. Of course, there is the added advantage of a Pakistani-dominated Afghanistan constituting a forward strategic depth on Pakistan's western flank vis-à-vis India; but that is a different matter.

Viewed thus, Pakistan is facing a peculiar problem in Waziristan, or for that matter, with its Afghanistan-policy as a whole. The aggravation of the crisis in Waziristan is deeply interlinked with the resurgence of the Taliban and al-Qaeda in the region. That means that the remedy lies in Islamabad abandoning, once and for all, its policy of engagement, covert if not overt, with the Taliban in the hope of using them to retrieve its lost influence in Afghanistan.

After all, the situation in Waziristan is a holdover from the past when this area was one of the staging posts for the anti-Soviet resistance in Afghanistan during the 1980s. And when that war was over, many of the Arab and other 'mujahideen' had nowhere to go, as their own countries — Egypt, Saudi Arabia, etc — were wary of 'Islamic radicalism'. So they remained behind in Waziristan, some of them even marrying into the local tribes. These "retired" jihadis have now recouped under the leadership of Osama bin Laden.

Noted Pakistani analyst Ayaz Amir is right when he says that the Pakistanis, with their better local knowledge, should have been left to handle the Waziristan problem in line with history and tradition. But that has not been done. Old tribal structures, which had withstood the test of time, stand demolished. Pro-government tribal figures have been killed. The army is licking its wounds. Moderate sentiment has been crushed while the Taliban are stronger than ever. Now, President Musharraf has woken up to a new refrain, warning western audience that the Taliban were now a more serious threat than Al Qaeda, conveniently forgetting his own role in making the Taliban powerful in the two Waziristans. He has inflamed tribal sentiments and brought wider support to the Taliban cause.

There does not seem to be an easy solution ahead. Pakistan's Taliban policy has boomeranged. President Musharraf's "military approach" to rectify the situation is not simply working in absence of a clear policy and vision of what Pakistan will be. The fact remains that Pakistan is now confronted with a resurgent al-Qaeda that aims at Pakistan's disintegration. Osama now seems determined to create his own sovereign state comprising Afghanistan, parts of NWFP, Waziristan, Baluchistan and Kashmir as an ideological launching pad for its global terror war.

But then, the problem that Pakistan is facing is a problem that has ominous implications for the United States, Afghanistan and even India. This problem needs to be met in a combined manner by the global community. But for this, Pakistan needs to take extra two steps forward. It must win over the trust of the world community as far as its sincerity in fighting terrorism is concerned, and that, in turn, requires the support of all the Pakistanis. But that will be possible only when the country is transformed into a genuine democracy.