



Noref Report

An anvil of clay: Pakistan's military balks at Obama's Afghan surge

Robert Matthews

Summary

Pakistan's cooperation is crucial to the success of the current US and Nato strategy in Afghanistan. Yet the Pakistani military not only has misgivings about the Nato surge but also its own agenda. Central to the discord is the military's view of the Afghan Taliban as assets to counter rival India's spreading Afghan footprint. The military views the US surge and the 18-month timeframe as acts of desperation by the Obama administration – as well as a vindication of Pakistan's strategy of keeping its options open through a "selective counter-insurgency approach". Thus, there is little indication that Pakistan is willing to undertake campaigns against militants in the tribal areas. Or play the role of anvil to the US hammer along the Afghan-Pakistani border.

Pashtun grievances

The Pakistani military for years has looked upon the US-Nato occupation of Afghanistan with a jaundiced eye. But it takes a very different view of the Pashtun nationalism which has crystallized in the Taliban movement. Since the Afghan insurgency is driven in large part by the Pashtun sense of being marginalized since 2001, the presence of foreign troops multiplies the list of Pashtun grievances, furthers the disaffection of this largest of Afghanistan's ethnic groups (over 40% of the population), and increases their belief that Pashtun culture is under siege.

Pakistan's military and Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI) are apprehensive that the current surge will only further aggravate these Pashtun grievances, intensify Pashtun nationalism and augment the presence of militants in the Pashtun-dominated

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“Unless we really solve the challenge and the issue of Pakistan, I think you can bring in 50,000 more soldiers, 100,000 more soldiers, but in my view we will still have this problem. Unless Afghans and Pakistanis sit down and discuss the issues, I think we're going to be in this mess for a very long time.”^a

Hikmet Karzai, director of the Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies, Kabul^a

borderlands. Moreover, the Karzai government has on occasion evinced irredentist urges, considering all the tribal areas as part of Afghanistan, and this could upset the delicate balance along the contested and poorly marked Durand line. Yet another reason why the Pakistani military thinks it is important to back the Mullah Omar and Haqqani networks because, as its clients, they will not demand that Pakistani tribal areas form part of Afghanistan. Mullah Omar has said as much in recent public declarations.

Not coming to terms with the ‘Pashtun question’ also vitiates the enterprise to create an Afghan army. Any hope that Afghanistan can form an ethnically integrated national army, able to hold the country together after Nato leaves, is wishful thinking, writes Zafar Hillay in *The News International* (Pakistan).¹ “An army consisting in the main of non-Pashtuns officered by Tajiks is unacceptable to the Pashtun population. The concept of a “national” army in a largely tribal society where ethnic groups harbour significant antipathies is a non-starter. And, if the Afghan army were made to reflect the composition of the Afghan population, desertions would multiply and the penetration of the army by the Taliban, which is already considerable, would become pervasive.”²

Selective counter-insurgency

Today, with scant faith that Obama's infusion of troops represents more than an illusion of victory, it is unremarkable that former Pakistani military officers display irritation with the US on national television.

1 Zafar Hillay, “Spare a thought, Mr Obama” *The News International*, 9 December 2009, http://thenews.com.pk/daily_detail.asp?id=212257, accessed 2 January 2010.

2 Zafar Hillay, “Spare a thought, Mr Obama”, 9 December 2009.

a. Cited in “Pakistanis voice concerns about Obama's new Afghanistan plan”, *The Washington Post*, December 3, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/12/02/AR2009120201747.html>, accessed 2 January 2010.

Both the military and the government privately view the US surge and the 18-month timetable as acts of desperation by the Obama administration – an admission of defeat, as well as a vindication of the Pakistani military's eight-year strategy of keeping its options open through a “selective counterinsurgency approach”. Now, as the military comes under increasing US pressure to deliver more on security, many Pakistanis believe that the alliance with the United States has become too costly to bear.

Thus, there is little indication that Pakistan is willing to meet US demands to play an active role in its ‘hammer and anvil’ strategy along the Afghan-Pakistani border. The aim is for the Pakistani military to contain Afghan Taliban crossings into Pakistan, as well as to undertake campaigns against militants in the tribal areas. Such an effort could dangerously stretch the capacity of Pakistan's army, an institution that must conserve its organizational integrity to promote national political stability; it would also jeopardize its recent gains in Swat and South Waziristan.

Finally, the army is wary about overcommitting in the west when it still views Indian forces as a dangerous presence on its eastern border. Even as the US is ratcheting up its demands in this regard, Pakistan is more convinced than ever that there is no advantage in complying with them. In fact, the military does not have a real interest in the US succeeding with the surge.

Past failures influence attitudes

The lessons of history weigh heavily on the army's attitudes. Officers remember the downside of yielding to US pressure to confront al-Qaeda and the borderland tribes sheltering them or aligned with the Pakistani Taliban. The military campaigns between 2004 and 2008 were disastrous for the army, catalyzing and expanding the influence of Pakistan's home-grown Taliban and culminating in 2009 in a full-fledged insurgency that threatened the Pakistani state.

The military believes that, ultimately, as a result of US Afghanistan-Pakistan policy from 2001 to 2009, Pakistan's Islamic militants were transformed from a low-key junior partner of their Afghan counterparts

into a fierce, radical Pashtun tribal movement often making common cause with al-Qaeda. By the end of 2009, despite a punishing military campaign against them in Swat and South Waziristan, Pakistani jihadists had over 30,000 men under arms, and controlled most of the tribal zone and large parts of the settled North-West Frontier Province.

Now, military escalation along Pakistan's border could cause an influx not only of refugees but also of militants and al-Qaeda into the tribal areas and the province of Baluchistan – which will be especially destabilising to the latter. This would increase the vulnerability of US-Nato supply lines and may likely provoke a spike in terrorist reprisals in mainland Pakistan.

There are fears that the Afghan Taliban, fleeing from the US-led campaign in Helmand, will merge with the Quetta Shura and join the networks headed by Jalaluddin and Sirajuddin Haqqani and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, triggering more demands from the US for Pakistan to confront them. The army believes that the problem has been further aggravated because of US/Nato reluctance to take measures to stem the already considerable infiltration across Pakistan's porous western border.

Unresolved paradoxes

Among the several paradoxes and contradictions in the Afghanistan-Pakistan dilemma is that the US views its mission in Afghanistan as central to Pakistan's security, while Pakistani generals see the US military presence next door as a chief factor in Pakistan's escalating violence and deteriorating security. Thus, unlike the Pakistani media who criticised the eighteen-month timetable set by Obama, the generals welcomed an exit date because they view a US departure as key to stabilizing their country, and they want the US to leave in an orderly fashion, with a timeframe and in the context of negotiations with the Taliban.

Like the government, Pakistan's military establishment is clearly interested in exploiting its long-time relationship with the Afghan Taliban to become an indispensable mediator in the inevitable reconciliation talks, and a key player in the regional jockeying

for influence in a post-Nato Afghanistan.³ Washington, on the other hand still skirts the issue of serious negotiations with the Taliban, and has dropped its rhetoric on regional diplomacy.

Pakistan's army rejects the notion that Pakistan and the US-Nato forces face a common enemy. If there is to be strategic cooperation in the immediate future, it must be predicated on an understanding of the separate agendas involved. While the Pakistanis appear sincerely interested in eliminating the presence of al-Qaeda in the region, and have awakened to the need to crack down on the Islamic terrorism plaguing Pakistan, Pakistan insists that a distinction be made between al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

While the US has defined the Afghan Taliban, with their history of collaborating with and sheltering al-Qaeda, as a principal enemy, these Afghan Taliban have so far shown no interest in abetting the insurgency in Pakistan and pose no immediate threat to Islamabad. In fact, they are considered geopolitical allies and assets. At the same time, the military's disagreement with US-Afghanistan policy includes a criticism of what it perceives as a conscious US strategy to marginalize the Afghan Pashtun socially, and virtually exclude them from the country's new military.⁴

Tacit alliances

Apart from India, the military considers only some of its home-grown Islamic extremists – those committing acts of domestic terrorism – as enemies of the state. For example, commanders such as Gul Bahadur in North Waziristan are among the “good” Taliban and enjoy tacit alliances with the military which considers them allies in the current struggle with other tribal militants, and also necessary to maintain Pakistani influence with Afghanistan's Pashtun militants.

3 Omar Waraich, “Pakistan's Reaction to Obama's Plan: Departure Is Key”, *Time*, 2 December 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1945134,00.html>, accessed 2 January 2010; see also the comments of Maleeha Lodhi “Perils of Obama's surge”, *The News International*, 7 December 2009, http://www.thenews.com.pk/editorial_detail.asp?id=212041, accessed 15 December 2010.

4 Cyril Almeida, Pakistani journalist, in a telephone interview from Karachi with Sana Majeed in Oslo, 16 December 2009.

Moreover, even the military's position on al-Qaeda is ambiguous and tempered by larger geopolitical concerns. For example, faced with a choice of abandoning or attacking the Haqqani network, with its reputed links to al-Qaeda in North Waziristan, or holding them in reserve to check India's influence in Afghanistan, it will undeniably opt for the latter.

Under pressure from the US, Pakistan will pursue, arrest and eliminate al-Qaeda, but has proposed negotiating with, not fighting the Afghan Taliban. Pakistani officials believe that the participation of Mullah Omar, the Haqqani network leaders and other Pashtun leaders in discussions is absolutely essential for any arrangement satisfying Pakistani and Western interests. Shuja Nawaz, of the Atlantic Council noted that the military believes: "The best scenario is the broad-based reintegration of all of the Pashtun elements."⁵

Divergence of interests

Pakistan's military believes it faces two adversaries in Afghanistan – neither of which is the Taliban or even al-Qaeda. In fact, between the US and Pakistan there is almost an inversion of allies and enemies. First, Pakistan considers the US-backed regime of Hamid Karzai, particularly its nascent military and intelligence directorates, an adversary. In addition, the incipient Afghan military and intelligence apparatus is dominated by anti-Taliban and India-friendly Tajik warlords, considered hostile to Pakistan and with irredentist designs on the Pashtun borderlands. Second, Pakistan has a sixty-year enmity with another US regional ally, India, whose Afghan footprint the Pakistanis view as strategic, vast, and spreading.

This divergence of interests between Pakistan and the West explains why the military will continue to resist US entreaties to go after the Afghan Taliban strongholds in both Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Provinces of Pakistan. Islamabad's rejection of the new US strategy was underscored in

5 Jonathan S. Landay, "New turmoil in Pakistan threatens to stall Obama's Afghan strategy," McClatchy, 20 December 2009, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/homepage/story/81012.html>, accessed 11 January 2010.

December when the army rebuffed US demands to crack down on the Afghan Taliban under Sirajuddin Haqqani, who are ensconced in North Waziristan.

Using the tribal areas as a staging ground, the Haqqani faction currently constitutes the biggest single threat to Nato forces in Afghanistan. The Pakistani military and the ISI, on the other hand, consider Haqqani and his control of, or influence in, a vast swath of eastern and southern Afghanistan, a vital cat's paw for the coming regional free-for-all in Afghanistan.⁶ Historically, regional powers have filled power vacuums in Afghanistan by sponsoring and arming ethnic factions. Pakistan has backed the Pashtuns, while India, Iran and Russia have opposed them, allying with Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek fighters respectively.

The India problem

Despite an apparent warning from the Obama administration to New Delhi to "shut down Indian Consulates in Afghanistan, reduce its presence in Kabul and stop sending mercenaries across the Durand Line" in mid-2009, Pakistani military officials believe that Washington has often turned a blind eye to the spreading influence and hegemonic design of India in Afghanistan. The military believe the Afghan surge will distract the Americans from addressing the situation on behalf of Pakistan.⁷

The Pakistani military's fears are not unfounded. India is one of Afghanistan's largest foreign donors having invested hundreds of millions of dollars so far in development and infrastructure projects, including a road project (with Iran) in western Afghanistan that links Kabul to the Iranian port of Chabahar on the Persian Gulf, enabling Afghanistan to bypass Pakistani ports. Over 10,000 troops are stationed in Afghanistan, ostensibly to supervise and protect the construction of the road.

6 Jane Perlez, "Rebuffing U.S., Pakistan Balks at Crackdown" The New York Times, 15 December 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/15/world/asia/15haqqani.html>, accessed 16 December 2010.

7 Moin Ansari, "US to Delhi: Shut down Indian 'Consulates' in Afghanistan – aftermath of RAW bombing of Peshawar hotel", Rupee News, 11 June 2009, <http://rupeenews.com/2009/06/11/us-to-delhi-shut-down-indian-consulates-in-afghanistan-aftermath-of-raw-bombing-of-peshawar-hotel/>, accessed 5 January 2010.

New Delhi was the regional backer of the Northern Alliance and currently is Karzai's strongest ally in South Asia. It is also closely allied with the anti-Pashtun Afghan Tajiks. India's military is assisting in the training of the Tajik-dominated Afghan armed forces. Its diplomatic corps has established more than a hundred sub-consular offices, information centres or desks, suspected of being outposts for India's intelligence service, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), especially along Afghanistan's border with Pakistan.

With most of Pakistan's army stationed on its eastern border, and Kashmir still disputed, the military is clearly worried about its western flank and "encirclement" by India when the US inevitably leaves. Islamabad's nightmare is that should hostilities with India escalate into armed conflict, Pakistan would face a two-front war.

Future options

Given these considerations, Nato can anticipate that Pakistan will officially play along with the surge in order to keep the aid and cooperation flowing, and for continuing US help with Pakistan's own terrorist-driven insurgency. At the same time, it will likely drag its feet in providing real military cooperation to ensure the US does not succeed in crushing the Afghan Taliban.

In the current juncture, even if it were convinced to confront the Afghan Taliban in their Pakistani havens, the army has its hands full fighting the Pakistani Taliban in South Waziristan and other places, and officials maintain that it is beyond the army's capacity to open another front.

Moreover, since the army is betting that in the Taliban's war with Nato the momentum is with the insurgents, and that the military balance of power will not tip in the future, few Pakistani analysts believe there is any incentive for the army or its intelligence agencies to alter their calculus. "Is it in Pakistan's interest to antagonize the Afghan Taliban now, if they could be in power two or three years down the road?" asks Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid.⁸

Of course, with Pakistan unlikely to help the US with its surge against the Afghan Taliban, the latter will probably get the breathing space they need to wait out Nato. Whether or not this scenario comes to pass, the perception of it will be their reality – at least, for the foreseeable future. The Afghan Taliban will operate on the assumption of Pakistan's disaffection from Western strategy and its continued quiet collaboration to maintain them in the field. And insurgents only need to avoid losing against a more powerful enemy in order to claim victory.

⁸ Graham Usher, "Catcher's Mitt: Obama, Pakistan and the Afghan Wars to Come", Middle East Report Online, 31 December 2009, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero123109.html>, accessed 2 January 2009.