

## **Pakistan's Tribal Areas: Achilles heel or strategic outpost?**

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The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), which stretch over 27,220 square kilometres (about 2.6 per cent of Pakistan's total area), are inhabited by more than 3 million people. This region, mostly mountainous, has been historically defined the "buffer zone" between the British-ruled India and Afghanistan. Britain gave it the name of Tribal Areas in 1926. FATA was divided administratively into seven political Agencies: Bajaur, Mohmand, Khyber, Orakzai, Kurram, North and South Waziristan. Contextually, four Frontier Regions (FRs) have been established and currently are part of the North West Frontier Province: Peshawar, Kohat, Bannu, and Dera Ismail Khan; the last one further divided into FR Dera Ismail Khan and FR Tank. Likewise, FR Bannu has been reconstituted into FR Bannu and FR Lakki (Marwat). The administrative setup of Khyber, Kurram, North and South Waziristan dates back to the time of the British Empire, while the system of the other three agencies Mohmand, Orakzai and Bajaur was established after independence in 1947. This form of administrative management of the tribal areas gave the local people (mostly ethnic Pashtuns) a sort of autonomy, but in meantime, the overall management of security and development remained in the Central Authority's hands.

The Government of Islamabad is represented by a political agent that is in charge of the financial and security management. The political agent relies on the Malik (tribal leader) as an intermediary. Local Maliks are an important link between the administrative system and local people. In order to obtain their support, Maliks receive funds by the Political Agent for assisting in carrying out policies.

Even the Jirga (Council of Elders) is an important mechanism of conflict resolution among the Pashtuns, and has contributed to the maintenance of social order in the Pashtun tribal society and in compliance with the code of conduct (Pashtunwali). This judicial system is also applied on the other side of the Durand Line, namely in Afghanistan. With the connivance of local Maliks, the political agents often misappropriates funds, which has given rise to a culture of corruption and resulted in loss of faith of the people in their leaders and the system. The political agent allocates annual development grants by the government, and also generates a substantial amount of revenue by imposing fines and levying discretionary taxes. Most of the funds placed at the political agent's

disposal are non auditable, non accountable and discretionary which leads to corruption and/or a patron-client relationship. Due to this loss of transparency, criticism of the government is increasingly stronger.

Over time, this neglectful behaviour has resulted in the erosion of the power and influence of the Political Agents and Maliks and the rise in the influence of Mullahs and Taleban (Koran students). The Taleban movement has therefore established deep roots in the tribal society and is increasingly supported by the local population. In an environment devoid of traditional trust and financial security, for the members of tribes that have not been involved in the political process, becoming a prey to foreign (but also local) elements has been the easiest way to gain power and the confidence of the people. Foreign elements have been buying their loyalties even against the government. The elders, known as *Spin Geera* (a man with white beard), are highly respected in the tribal society. They play a significant role in the resolution of tribal feuds and their verdicts are usually upheld by respective tribes. However, under the present circumstances, the traditional role of the elders has diminished as Taleban operating in the area do not give due regard to the traditions and values of tribal society. In a society with a literacy rate of 18 percent among men, and less than one percent among women, the increasing number of seminaries (Madrassas) in these areas has given a considerable boost to Islamist proselytism.

With the political agent's failure, the Mullahs established a new socio-economic system, where mosques and madrassas - often the best buildings of the region - put down roots as new centres for conflict resolutions among the tribes, as well as for education and training for children. The families sent their children to the madrassas for a free education and with the hope of a better future. The years spent in a madrassa carve a deep imprint on the personality of the student (Talib), which is later manifested in their behaviour. As children, Taleban lived away from home and spent their childhood performing menial tasks in a madrassa. As they grew older, they were unable to integrate socially and find a job. Disdain for a society which did not accept them turned into a denial of the real society. No wonder these unemployed youth revolted against the system and committed highly irrational acts in the name of Islam, such as suicide bombings.

After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, Pakistan took advantage of the "power vacuum" in Afghanistan, establishing a radical Islamic system in the country. There were two main goals: the first concerned the fear of Pashtun nationalism which could have undermined Pakistan's integrity,

while the second was aimed at earning a “strategic depth” in the case of a conflict with India, and for the control of trade routes towards Central Asia.

In 1996 the Taleban seized control of Kabul and established the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan, recognized by Pakistan and soon after by two other Sunni States: Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Straight after the fall of Najibullah's regime in 1992, Islamabad supported the efforts of the leader of the Islamic radical party Hezb-i-Islam, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, to take power in Kabul. Later Pakistan's establishment preferred Mullah Omar instead of Hekmatyar, especially for his great capacity of mobilisation within the Pashtun tribes. Following the September 11, 2001 attacks, the United States pushed Musharraf not only to withdraw his support from the Taleban regime, but to establish a strong cooperation in the “War on Terror” as well. Thanks to Islamabad, Washington was able to overthrow the Taleban regime in a few weeks. After the U.S. air strikes, herds of militants, mostly Arabs of al Qaeda, crossed the border and entered Pakistan's tribal areas. Their aim was to find refuge and establish bases to continue their jihad. The tribes living on both sides of the Durand Line provided shelter to both Taleban and al Qaeda and brought the groups closer.

Extremists from Chechnya, Xinjiang, as well as from Arab and Central Asian countries also started shifting to the agencies of tribal areas, principally in the North and South Waziristan. Most of them had settled in Waziristan in the early 1980s when the area was being used as a Mujahidin launching pad against Soviet troops. To deepen the ties, al Qaeda members got married to local tribesmen's daughters. Many weddings were arranged overnight. The ceremony usually ended with pledges of guests to wage jihad against the U.S. forces in Afghanistan. Many foreigners also preferred to stay in the tribal areas after paying from 100 to 300 US\$ per week for a shelter. Many local tribes cooperated with the militants for money, which was sent from abroad (mostly from Arab States) through an informal value transfer system, called *hawala*. In the meantime, the tribesmen had to choose between religion and the state. They mostly rejected the state, where they were not enjoying all the constitutional rights, and adopted for religion (Taleban) and jihadism against U.S. forces.

In 2002 President Pervez Musharraf decided to deploy the Army in the tribal areas, for the first time in Pakistan's history, in support of the U.S. led operation in Afghanistan. The aim of the Army's operations was to cleanse the area of foreign elements and prevent them from crossing the border.

With the widespread diffusion of mosques and madrassas, mostly financed by Arab states and Pakistan, mullahs and the Taleban have developed deep roots in the society and have become an integral part of tribal culture. The success of madrassas is due to the ineffectiveness of the Maliks and the Jirga system to deliver wise decisions and the failure of the political agents to uphold and implement decisions. This has produced a new generation of Talebans who have revolted against the existing system, and have created tensions between tribal traditions.

Pakistani military operations carried out since 2002 have disappointed both the military personnel and the tribesmen. The Taleban exploited this situation and further tightened their grip on the people. Anyone found working for the government or against the will of the Taleban had to face brutal consequences. The lack of awareness, insufficient understanding of Islam and effective propaganda by the various elements are some of the contributory factors leading to the mental confusion of soldiers operating in the area. Furthermore, the Pakistan Army is perceived by many people as a partner of the “infidels” in the war on terror. The Taleban have taken advantage of this and contextually have implemented a stricter interpretation of Sharia law; they have closed music shops, barber shops, girls’ schools, and set up permanent “Islamic Courts”.

A key aspect of the Taleban’s efforts to establish a sort of shadow government in their strongholds was the attempt to project an image of authority stronger than Islamabad’s. Only when the militants became more aggressive and completely destroyed the tribal structures, the Elders and Ulema (religious scholars) vowed to denounce their activities and help the national security forces in restoring peace. For example, on September 11, 2008 the Jirga members of Kohat district declared that “Islam does not allow the destruction of public and private properties” and “the suicide attacks were in violation of the Islamic teachings”.

This situation has produced an increasing instability in the Tribal Areas, as almost three-quarters of supplies for NATO troops in Afghanistan move either through or over Pakistan. During the last NATO Summit in Bucharest (April 2-4), the Russian government agreed to allow logistical supplies for NATO forces in Afghanistan to cross Russian territory, but declined to allow the passage of troops as sought by NATO. In June Moscow and Washington signed “an agreement in principle to provide Russian military material to the Afghanistan National Army” as part of the United States-Russia Working Group on Counterterrorism (CTWG). The CTWG works to improve bilateral cooperation between Russia and the United States, while also concentrating on

Afghanistan, the fight against drug trafficking, the financing of militant groups and weapons of mass destruction. Taleban efforts to interdict NATO supplies as they cross through Pakistan to Afghanistan have included a March 2008 attack that left 36 fuel trucks destroyed. Interdiction incidents reportedly increased in the first semester of 2008, but as reported by U.S. officials, “only about 1% of the cargo moving from the Karachi port into Afghanistan is being lost”.

Over time, Pakistan's establishment became wary of signs that India was pursuing a policy of “strategic encirclement”, taking note of New Delhi's past support for the Afghan Northern Alliance, and after the fall of Taleban regime, the opening of one Embassy and four Consulates in Afghanistan. Islamabad has always been suspicious of New Delhi and Kabul cooperating against it, and as India's influence in Kabul has increased in post-Taleban Afghanistan, Pakistan has stalled in its efforts to curb extremists. Several long-standing strategic interests have fuelled Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan. It has long believed that it can gain "strategic depth" against India by influencing politics in Kabul.

The negotiations between Islamabad and Taleban groups in the northwest might be viewed under this Pakistani point of view, and furthermore due to the fact that the Afghan president Hamid Karzai is described as pro-Indian. The Pakistani government has signed multiple peace agreements with some Taleban groups in an effort to stem the violence, but this has not led to a decrease in attacks conducted by extremists in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

At the same time, the next presidential elections in Afghanistan (2009) could be a new opportunity for increasing Pakistan's efforts to win the “hearts and minds” of Afghan voters. So the tribal areas are becoming the new strategic outpost to recapture leverage in the Afghan people. The pro-Pakistan Afghan party, Hezb-i-Islami, has about 40 out of 249 seats in the Lower House of the Parliament (Wolesi Jirga) in Kabul, but with the next presidential elections in Afghanistan, Pakistan can increase its consensus within the Pashtun tribes.

In the meantime, the missile air strikes conducted by the U.S. with unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) on Pakistan soil have exacerbated the relationship between the two countries and created great concern within the population and military circles. On last June 10, a unit of Pakistani paramilitary soldiers was caught up in a fire fight between Taleban militants and U.S.-led coalition forces at the Pakistan-Afghanistan border in the tribal areas. U.S. air assets, apparently targeting fleeing insurgents, killed 11 Frontier Corps soldiers. Islamabad strongly condemned the airstrike,

calling it “unprovoked” and “a gross violation of the international border” that “tends to undermine the very basis of our cooperation.” A Pakistani military statement called the airstrike “cowardly,” and some in Pakistan believe the country’s troops were intentionally targeted. On June 13, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met with Pakistani Foreign Minister, Makhdoom Shah Mahmood Qureshi following a Afghanistan aid conference in Paris, where both officials supported the idea of a joint military investigation. Secretary Rice expressed regret for the deaths of Pakistani soldiers. The NWFP Provincial Assembly passed multiple resolutions condemning the airstrikes, and the incident served to inflame already sensitive bilateral relations and could lead to a diminution in cooperative efforts to curb cross-border attacks.

At the same time, the Kabul government claimed to have proof of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) complicity in both an April assassination attempt on Afghan President Karzai and in the July bombing of India’s Kabul Embassy. Some analysts, and a U.S. top intelligence official as well, have reported that there are some indication that individuals within the Pakistan government — for example, within the Frontier Corps and the ISI — were involved in assisting insurgent groups inside Afghanistan. Specifically mentioned was an alleged relationship between ISI agents and members of the Haqqani network believed to be based in the tribal areas and named as responsible of the Embassy bombing in Kabul. Islamabad angrily rejected such reports as “baseless and malicious,” but, only days later, Pakistan’s federal information minister conceded that some individuals within ISI “probably” remain “ideologically sympathetic to the Taleban” and act out of synch with government policy.

In 2008, the influence of Islamist militants appears to be growing unchecked in large parts of Pakistan beyond the tribal areas, bringing insecurity even to the North West Frontier Province provincial capital of Peshawar, which reportedly is in danger of being overrun by pro-Taleban militants. Other so-called “settled areas” of Pakistan have come under attack from pro-Taleban militants. Indeed, the “Talebanisation” of western Pakistan appears to be ongoing and may now threaten the territorial integrity of the Pakistani state.

Growing instability and insecurity in Pakistan is therefore one of the biggest challenges that the international community has to face. As stated by Henry Kissinger in the International Herald Tribune, “a strategic consensus remains imperative. If that effort fails, many countries will be affected and, perhaps more immediately, Pakistan’s stability should not be viewed as an exclusively American challenge”.