

ISAS Brief

No. 109 – Date: 29 May 2009

469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassecc@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



Pakistan: Finally Taking Ownership of the War against Terrorism?

Iftikhar A. Lodhi¹

Soon after the momentous 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, President G. W. Bush told the world, “Every nation in every region now has a decision to make. Either you are with us [in the war on terror], or you are with the terrorists.” Pakistan decided to side with the United States. It remains debatable, though, whether Pakistan’s decision was wholly voluntary or it was made under duress. Whatever the reasons, Pakistan has emerged to become a central figure in the war against terrorism.

For a long time, opinion in Pakistan on the fight against terrorism was divided. While some argued that it is America’s war, others contended that it is Pakistan’s war against the ‘existential threat’ posed by the Islamist militants. This division, however, seems to be fast disappearing. The Pakistan army has begun an all-out offensive against the Islamist militants – Pakistani Taliban – in the Swat valley, 130 kilometers northwest of Islamabad, and extending to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the supposedly ‘safe havens’ of the militants mounting insurgency against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and American forces in Afghanistan.

Earlier this year, the Pakistan government had struck a peace deal after two years of fighting with the Islamist militants. The peace deal was widely supported by the political parties and the public. According to a survey conducted by the International Republican Institute in March 2009, 75 percent of the respondents supported the deal. However, once the peace deal was struck (in which the government promised to implement *Sharia* [Islamic law] in Swat), the militants began to show their real teeth by refusing to lay down their arms, taking law and order into their own hands, capturing state buildings, imposing their religious demands and expanding their military operations into new territories. The deal increasingly came under severe criticism at home and abroad. Washington equated the deal to ‘abdicating to the Taliban’. Finally, Islamabad decided to wage battle against the militants.

However, an all-out war has led to a humanitarian crisis. Some 2.5 million people have fled the conflict zone and dozens of civilians have been killed. Ironically, once again, the outlawed (terrorist) Islamic organisations have been leading the assistance work for the displaced, which not only raises their public standing but also attracts more funds and recruits for them. The army’s use of artillery and airpower has resulted in heavy losses of life and

¹ Mr Iftikhar A. Lodhi is a Research Associate at the Institute of South Asian Studies, an autonomous research institute within the National University of Singapore. He can be reached at isasial@nus.edu.sg.

property. The Pakistan army remains ill-equipped and incompetent for the 21st century guerilla warfare, particularly an urban one.

The results of the Swat operation have so far been mixed. The Pakistan army suffered dozens of casualties while reportedly killing about 1,000 militants. The army has regained control of the Swat district headquarter, Mingora, after two weeks of fighting, though it still faces 'stiff resistance' from the militants. The army has also been pursuing militants retreating into the neighbouring areas. A number of the militants killed or captured are reportedly foreign nationals, mainly Afghans, Uzbeks and Arabs. This, on the one hand, indicates the borderless nature of Islamist militancy, particularly in the Afghanistan conflict. On the other hand, it also vindicates the Pakistan army's allegations that the militancy in Pakistan is fueled by elements in Afghanistan.

It remains uncertain how far and for how long the Pakistan army would be willing to fight the militants. Would it take the battle to its final conclusion? The United States is certainly hoping that it does and has been urging it on.

However, if history is any guide, the Pakistan army may just be content with fighting the militants in the settled areas and could eventually work out a peace deal after regaining control of the main cities and towns. The government will also be sensitive to the heavy civilian casualties. Prolonged fighting is also likely to exacerbate the crisis caused by the large-scale civilian displacement. There seems to be a consensus among Pakistan's strategic analysts that a swift and decisive victory against the militants in Swat is an imperative.

On the other hand, Washington has been mounting pressure on Pakistan to continue the Swat battle into the FATA region. Pakistan's President, Asif Ali Zardari, in an interview with the Sunday Times (London) on 17 May 2009, said that the army would continue the fight into the FATA region. However, the very next day, he backtracked from his statement, saying that he was misinterpreted. The Pakistan army spokesperson said that the Swat operation would continue till the army regains full control of all the areas but he did not comment on any plans for a decisive operation in the FATA region.

The Pakistan government has, so far, avoided taking any decisive action in the FATA region, oscillating between haphazard small-scale battles and peace deals. Although, some 100,000 Pakistan troops are deployed in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border regions, they have mainly been ensuring the safe and smooth supplies to the NATO forces in Afghanistan. This has increasingly frustrated the United States which is mired in the Afghanistan quagmire. This has also raised suspicions about the Pakistan army's 'willingness' and 'capability' to fight against the militants.

In the past, the United States officials and lawmakers have voiced their suspicions and urged the Pakistan government to 'do more'. However, the Barack Obama administration has publicly referred to the alleged links between the Pakistan army/the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the militants. The United States' Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, has dubbed Pakistan 'a mortal threat to the security and safety of [the United States] and the world'. President Obama has warned Pakistan to 'demonstrate its commitment in rooting out Al-Qaeda and the violent extremists'. Various statements from American officials seem to indicate that the United States would expand and intensify air and ground attacks on the militants in the Pakistan territory.

The Obama administration's new strategy (called Af-Pak plan) includes increasing the number of American troops in Afghanistan and exerting more pressure on Pakistan to fight the militants. The American troop surge is likely to result in more militant activity on the Pakistan side of the border. This, in turn, can only be dealt by the Pakistan army or selective American air and ground operations in Pakistan.

The emerging consensus that the militants pose an 'existential threat' to Pakistan provides Islamabad with the opportunity to take the Swat battle to the heart of the militancy in the tribal areas. However, it remains to be seen how far Pakistan would be willing (or would be able) to take the Swat operation forward. If the Pakistan army fails, what would President Obama's next strategy be?

oooOOooo