

ISAS Brief

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The Grand *Jirga* Imperative: Is this the Solution to the Taliban Insurgency?

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The Taliban insurgency on both sides of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border has become almost uncontrollable. A recent American intelligence report claimed that the north-west tribal areas in Pakistan, near the Afghanistan border, have become “safe havens” for Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. In the backdrop of such reports, there have been strong calls in the United States for direct military attacks on these areas, bypassing the Pakistan army, to take out the militants.

On the other hand, Afghanistan’s President Hamid Karzai and Pakistan’s President Pervez Musharraf called for a grand *Jirga* last month to resolve the spreading insurgency and violence on both sides of the border through dialogue. President George Bush had extended his support for the *Jirga* last year when the three met at Camp David. The recent call was an attempt by President Karzai to revitalise the role of traditional civil society in containing the insurgency.

A formal *Jirga* is a legitimate and established institution in the *Pushtun* tribal society, inhabiting the regions on both sides of the Pakistan and Afghanistan border. Comprising tribal chiefs and respected elders, the *Jirga* can be called upon by any chief. For thousands of years, the *Jirga* has provided an effective way of resolving issues concerning different tribes and dealing with external entities. The British and successive Pakistan governments have dealt with issues concerning the tribes through the *Jirga*. In modern terminology, it can be understood as a confederation of different tribes. The respective chiefs and their councils are responsible for implementing the decisions taken by the *Jirga*.

However, a cross border *Jirga* called by the two governments is a unique phenomenon for the two countries. The arbitrarily-drawn Durand line by the British, after a stalemate in the two consecutive Afghanistan Wars in the late 19th century, forms the 2,600 kilometre-long Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The *Pushtun* leaders on both sides of the border do not accept the international boundary. In fact, the *de facto* status of a boundary is virtually non-existent and remained a contentious issue between the two sides since Pakistan came into existence in 1947.

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Seven hundred tribal leaders from the two countries attended the grand *Jirga*. General Musharraf had initially refused to attend the event as an expression of displeasure over allegations that he was “not doing more to stop insurgents” and threats of direct attacks in the Pakistani territory. Nevertheless, the White House successfully persuaded him to attend the last session. The *Jirga* decided to form a 50-member coordination committee to come up with peace initiatives. However, the Taliban and other insurgent factions were not present in the dialogue. As such, the *Jirga* was doomed to fail.

It is important to note that any initiative that excludes the *Pushtuns* from both sides of the border will prove futile. The problem for Washington, Kabul and Islamabad is that many of the *Pushtuns* are pro-Taliban and are against foreign intervention. It is not an easy task to change their views on religion, kinship structure of the society and values. The Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups have exploited this.

The Taliban insurgency, once confined to Pakistani North and South Waziristan and adjacent Afghanistan areas, has spread to the tribal areas and in Pakistan’s North Western Frontier Province. It is no longer just a “Taliban insurgency”; it is a fast growing movement attracting tribal militants and youths.

There were more than 250 suicide attacks in Pakistan in the last six years, claiming the lives of more than 1,200 army personnel. The morale of the Pakistan army is low. The insurgents have been kidnapping army personnel and, in many cases, the soldiers surrender without firing a single bullet. On the Afghanistan side of the border, the Taliban have reclaimed many areas won by NATO forces last year and violent attacks have increased considerably.

The *Lal Masjid* saga and the consequent surge in Pakistani troops may have exacerbated the situation in the tribal areas. However, this is not the primary reason behind the growing insurgency. Whether it is Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan or anywhere else, resistance to foreign influence provides the impetus for global *jihadi* terrorism.

To understand the nature of the conflict, we first need to make a distinction between the tribal militants, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda on both sides of the border. Second, we need to understand the dynamism of the relations among these three, their tactics and their motives. Finally, Washington, Kabul and Islamabad need to stop the blame game and acknowledge the failure in containing the insurgency.

The Taliban, both hard and soft core, are ethnic *Pushtun*, largely driven by ideologically (not necessarily Islam but a religious-nationalism) and are national in their approach. The Al-Qaeda, on the other hand, is global in its approach, has a mix of different nationalities and ethnicities, and is driven by a reactionary theology. The tribal militants are opposed to foreign influence – be it from the NATO forces, the Pakistan military or the Al-Qaeda terrorists.

The NATO forces and Pakistani troops have been unsuccessful in containing the insurgency. The politicians’ polemic aside, NATO officials, on many occasions, have acknowledged the “tribal” and indigenous nature of the insurgency.

In this backdrop, President Karzai made the offer of a dialogue to the Taliban last week, which the latter accepted for the sake of “national interest ... on minimum conditions”. It is important to note that both sides have been involved in such negotiations in the past but

nothing came out of these. One of the key stumbling blocks is that the Taliban want the withdrawal of NATO forces which Kabul and Washington vehemently oppose.

Nevertheless, this time around, the committee formed in the *Jirga* is expected to call for a small gathering of tribal elders and will include Taliban leaders from both sides of the border, and, possibly, Hikmatyar, the leader of Hizb-e-Islami, who was the recipient of massive covert aid from Islamabad and Washington throughout the Afghanistan *ji*had.

The key to the recent initiatives is White House's tacit support. In a recent visit for "strategic dialogue" to Kabul and Islamabad, US Deputy Secretary of State, John D. Negroponte, commented on the negotiation offer: "It will depend ... first of all on exactly what the suggestion is; it would depend on what the government of Afghanistan thinks". What Negroponte failed to mention is that the political situation in Islamabad and the security situation in the north-western areas are likely to act as important considerations in any decision taken on the issue.

Ironically enough, when Islamabad signed the "Waziristan peace accord" with the pro-Taliban tribal leaders last year, the security hawks in Washington were critical of the truce, with some calling it a surrender to the terrorists. Nevertheless, the accord was relatively successful and many "foreign elements" were removed by the tribal leaders from their ranks.

The reason behind the recent *Jirga* idea is a fairly simple one. Senator Joe Biden, chairing the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during General Petraeus testimony last week on the Iraq issue, put it very succinctly when he stated that "the one thing virtually everyone now agrees on is that there is no purely military solution".

The Musharraf government has been criticised for not doing enough to stop insurgents despite millions of dollars being given to his army. At the moment, Musharraf's own rule is under threat and his future seems uncertain. As such, he has more important issues to worry about in Islamabad than the insurgency. However, whatever the political outcome in Islamabad, Pakistan and Afghanistan need to realise that dialogue with the Taliban perhaps seems to be the best available option at the moment to avoid an escalation of the insurgency to a level where it may just engulf both of them.

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