



Counterinsurgency in Pakistan: Learning from India

By Moeed Yusuf and Anit Mukherjee

Pakistan is facing tremendous pressure to take on the threat posed by the Taliban–al Qaeda nexus in its “tribal belt” along its border with Afghanistan. Topping the list of U.S. demands is the concerted use of the Pakistan army to stem and roll back extremist influence. What is required is a classic counterinsurgency campaign within Pakistani territory. Pakistan’s neighbor and traditional rival India provides a model for tackling this challenge.

Recent statements from high-ranking Bush administration officials as well as several presidential candidates favoring military action within Pakistan reflect growing frustration with Islamabad’s inability to deliver on its promises to curb militant activities.¹ Washington realizes—correctly—that while it is leading the fight against the Taliban and al Qaeda elements in Afghanistan, victory in the war on terror depends on Pakistan’s performance in dealing with the militant presence in its tribal region.

Much of the current discussion has revolved around the sincerity of Islamabad’s commitment to take on the Islamist militants whom it has long treated as proxy allies. Most observers suggest that Pakistani policymakers have not been entirely forthcoming, instead choosing to play both sides in which they do just enough to stave off American criticism while allowing the militants to retain their sanctuaries. While this may well have been true, recent events in Pakistan seem to have forced a strategic shift in the Pakistani mindset.

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The willingness of the extremists to challenge the Pakistani state—demonstrated most dramatically by pro-Taliban militants’ July takeover of the Red Mosque in the heart of Islamabad and rising extremist violence against the military and urbanites ever since—suggests that the militants no longer consider the Pakistani government a partner.² Moreover, recent events like the bomb blasts at army establishments in Tarbela and Rawalpindi; the kidnapping, killing, and mutilation of at least fifteen soldiers; and Osama Bin Laden’s call for jihad against Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf reinforce this notion.³ Indeed, private conversations with top decision-makers in Pakistan and recent statements by all major moderate political leaders there reveal a sense of urgency to tackle militancy in the tribal belt.

That said, sincerity is only a first step toward a solution. It is far from assured that Pakistani forces will prove capable of pacifying the militants. Ever since Musharraf ordered the military to move into Pakistan’s tribal areas in 2003, operations have continued with varying intensity but little success. The Pakistani army has lost over six hundred troops officially—with perhaps many more casualties unannounced—and has also been responsible for tremendous collateral damage.⁴ Yet, as the recent U.S. National Intelligence Estimate states, the al Qaeda and Taliban presence in

the region has only grown.⁵ Clearly, for a Pakistani counterinsurgency to be successful, and for any U.S. hope of victory in Afghanistan, Pakistan must revisit its counterinsurgency strategy.

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The military's performance thus far reveals rather elementary errors. With a dismal track record in counterinsurgency and a traditional outlook focused solely on fighting a conventional war against India, the Pakistani army seems to have adopted an ad hoc strategy. The self-proclaimed invincibility of the armed forces initially prompted it to use a firepower-intensive approach, demonstrated by the frequent use of weapons like helicopter gunships and artillery. The use of brute force instead of low-intensity strikes is a classic flaw in counterinsurgency campaigns: its military effectiveness is suspect, and it invariably embitters the local population. But when these heavy-handed operations fail—as they are bound to—the army has been clueless about alternatives and pulls back completely in favor of political and economic “peace agreements” with insurgents.⁶ Since the peace agreements are used as stand-alone bargaining chips, they end up handing over control of the region to local militants.

Over the past four years, the army has failed to create an adequate balance between hard and soft power, between military and socioeconomic strategies. This is where Pakistani counterinsurgency operations have faltered. Ironically, given long-simmering Pakistani-Indian tensions, it is India's experience in Kashmir that can provide guidance to Pakistan's faltering campaign. The Indian army is the only military organization with great experience in “internal” insurgency in terrain similar to that of Pakistan's tribal belt. Lessons from the Indian experience with counterinsurgency can therefore be useful to Pakistan.

The Context: Pakistan's Tribal Belt

Any counterinsurgency effort by the Pakistani military will have to take the tribal belt's unique characteristics into consideration. The region consists of eight

semi-autonomous tribal lands called agencies. They border Afghanistan to the west and Pakistan's North West Frontier Province (NWFP) to the east. The tribes are predominantly Pashtun, sharing their ethnicity with both a majority of those in the NWFP and Afghanistan, including the Taliban.⁷

The tribal areas have never been under Islamabad's strict control. In fact, at the time of independence from British India in 1947, they joined Pakistan under constitutional guarantees of exceptional autonomy. Islamabad has honored these commitments, rendering it unable to establish its authority. Instead, traditional tribal norms and culture continue to dictate governance in the region, resulting in little modernization and economic development.⁸

The political situation in the tribal belt is complex. The locals overwhelmingly oppose military action in the region and are consequently unwilling to side with the central government in its quest to eliminate extremist cadres. The tribal opposition mainly stems from three cultural norms: hospitality, independence, and solidarity. During the 1980s war, the tribes provided extensive support to the *mujahedeen* fighters against Soviet occupation,⁹ and then supported their ethnic kin in the Taliban as it fought a civil war to establish an Islamic state in Afghanistan. Pakistani strategic interests (and America's during the Afghan war) reinforced this outlook.

After the September 11 attacks against the United States, the tribes were stunned when their Taliban allies were branded terrorists by Islamabad and banned from Pakistani territory. Not only was this seen in the tribal belt as a direct attack on the ethnic cohesion of Pashtuns, but it established popular narrative in which Musharraf betrayed the principle of Islamic solidarity. Coupled with a cultural norm of hospitality, Islamabad's policy prompted tribesmen to shelter not only the Taliban, but also the al Qaeda fighters who fled from Afghanistan in 2001–02. Intriguingly, the average tribesman does not so much support al Qaeda's pan-Islamic extremist agenda as he believes that it is his moral duty to shelter these extremists from an invading foreign power.¹⁰

The U.S. attack on Afghanistan provided an opportune moment for the Islamists to reinforce this popular narrative. The radical mullahs who traditionally have relied on the conservative yet relatively non-ideological tribal chiefs for patronage have hijacked the discourse in the tribal belt.¹¹ As a consequence, the intrusion of the Pakistani army has been portrayed both as a challenge to tribal independence as well as a proxy war waged by

the “anti-Islamic” United States. The army is now widely perceived to be party to the crime and thus also a legitimate target. Moreover, anyone who spies for Islamabad (let alone Washington) is ostracized for going against tribal cultural norms.¹² Brutal killings of alleged spies intimidate the population further and eliminate even the minutest possibility of defection.¹³ Loss of local support has left a void in Pakistani intelligence, especially since Islamabad has long relied upon locals for information about the region.

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Moreover, the convergence of so many Islamist actors into the tribal belt has provided a rare opportunity for the otherwise heterogeneous community of radicals based in Pakistan to unite. For the first time, Pakistan’s varied Islamists have managed to transcend sectarian and ethnic boundaries and collaborate under the banner of “Islamism.” Even Kashmir-oriented militant organizations like Harkat-ul-Mujahedeen and Lashkar-e-Toiba are now reportedly operating from the tribal belt. This increases the human and capital resources available to the enemy while simultaneously making it impossible for the state to track funding and communication channels and links among traditionally disparate groups.

Finally, there is a virtually endless supply of extremist recruits. Any military fighting an insurgency must shut off the avenues by which new recruits join enemy ranks. In the tribal belt, poor socioeconomic conditions, youth unemployment, a pervasive gun culture, and—most importantly—the remarkable success of the mullahs in hijacking the popular discourse bolster extremist outfits. Personal conversations with local actors reveal that there are hundreds of aspiring suicide bombers.

The Indian Military in Kashmir: Learning by Doing

The Indian military is the only organization familiar with operating in a terrain similar to Pakistan’s tribal belt *and* that has a track record of successful counterinsurgencies.¹⁴ Although the Indian military has battled internal insurgencies since 1956, its ultimate test was the

decade-long insurgency in Kashmir, where the Indian military faced a steep learning curve but eventually managed to employ an effective strategy.

There are some similarities between Pakistan’s tribal belt and Kashmir. As in the tribal belt, in Kashmir there was tremendous resentment against the central government—in this case Delhi—which was reflected by the indigenous origins of the insurgency. A large population—especially Muslims in the Kashmir Valley—was also sympathetic to the anti-state militants in the early years of the insurgency and was thus unwilling to share information with Delhi. In the later stages of the Kashmiri insurgency, the influx of non-Kashmiri militants from abroad meant that there was little existing intelligence on militant groups’ links with each other and with local pockets of resistance. The insurgency was also constantly replenished from outside. Despite the differences between the two case studies, their similarities make a study of the Indian model relevant for Pakistani forces.

The Indian experience commends approaching a counterinsurgency campaign with an emphasis on both military and non-military means. For India, success was based on three critical elements: a sustained, large military presence; effective civil administration; and development.

Sustained, Large Military Presence. The first element of success was the use of military force to eliminate extremists—those unwilling to negotiate—and create conditions for a political settlement. The importance of the military aspect cannot be overstated. Without tackling the active resistance, there is little possibility the non-military components of a counterinsurgency strategy will succeed.

In Pakistan, the military component should involve weapons useful in a low-intensity conflict, as well as saturation of an area with ground troops. The principle of “minimal use of force”—rather than using indiscriminate, massive firepower—should guide the effort. In keeping with this principle, the Indian military stopped using air power or artillery to target insurgents. The low-intensity use of force must remain constant, however, and the state must have the will to employ such force whenever and wherever active resistance is faced. Sporadic—as opposed to sustained—military operations are certain to mitigate the desired deterrent effect.

The Indian forces took two key steps. First, the army established a specialized counterinsurgency force called the Rashtriya Rifles (RR). The RR incorporated soldiers from all arms and services and was specially equipped, trained, and deployed to fight insurgencies. The success

of this experiment led to an increase of RR battalions from six in 1994 to its current strength of sixty-three.¹⁵

Second, the Indian army conducted a number of simultaneous small-scale operations, eschewing artillery and air power. Indian troops were deployed in population areas to provide physical security and carry out intensive area-domination patrols. When faced with the danger of improvised explosive devices—a weapon of choice for Pakistan’s tribal belt insurgents—the Indian army learned that the best protection was to maintain unpredictable routines and conduct vigorous cordon-and-search operations (CASO) in built-up areas near roads and communications corridors. Finally, faced with the difficulty of robust intelligence-gathering amid unfavorable local sentiment, Indian security agencies produced a counterinsurgency intelligence cohort composed of former insurgents called *ikhwanis*. This tactic of incorporating a disaffected part of the population is essential to any successful counterinsurgency strategy—a lesson repeated by successful U.S. forces in Iraq’s Anbar province.¹⁶

Effective Civilian Administration. The nonmilitary key to Indian success was in approaching the internal insurgency as a nation-building project. India implicitly understood that insurgencies have to be resolved politically and that the role of the military is to create a congenial atmosphere for political bargaining by eliminating or isolating the extremists.¹⁷

Therefore, India implemented a political process that strengthened the civilian administration in charge of Kashmir. This was also a function of civil-military relations, since the military must remain subservient to the political regime, even at the cost of operational effectiveness. India’s political strategy has been to hold local elections—even under the threat of violence—to lend a semblance of civilian governance. This strategy was built around the premise that the local population of an insurgency-wracked area has to be convinced that it has more to gain by working within the system than from outside it.

Development. The third element—which lagged behind in the Indian case—consists of measures to address structural causes of the insurgency: unemployment, geographic remoteness, lack of education, and lack of development assistance, among others. Indian efforts at improving socioeconomic conditions in Jammu and Kashmir—addressing the gap between the rich and the poor, especially in the Kashmir Valley, and offering exceptional infrastructure-development assistance during

the late 1990s—were meant to spur economic development and, in a sense, “buy out” the insurgency.

Ultimately, all aspects of the counterinsurgency effort must be geared toward achieving the common goal of establishing the rule of law—the “writ” of the state.

Next Steps for Pakistan

For the Pakistani army to emulate the Indian model, it would have to undertake major structural and doctrinal changes. The key is to view the entire exercise as “state-consolidation” rather than “state power–demonstration.” Pakistan’s oscillation between heavy-handed and submissive approaches is flawed. Heavy weapons will have to be discarded. Instead, special gear for low-intensity conflict—such as night vision devices, communication sets, and bulletproof jackets—should be supplied to the troops. Intensive CASO and area-domination patrol training are also required to reverse elementary Pakistani mistakes, most recently illustrated by the ease with which militants have taken Pakistani convoys hostage.¹⁸

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To convey Pakistan’s seriousness and maintain a deterrent force, the army must be persistent. To date, Pakistani efforts—perhaps suggestive of a lack of conviction—seem to have come only after intense U.S. pressure. Consequently, most of the army’s counterinsurgency operations have been massive, high-profile strikes that have caused significant collateral damage, forcing the army to retreat completely until the next offensive.

To ensure the success of its new approach, the military will have to move far more troops into the tribal belt than the 70,000-man force there now. Long-term physical presence at permanent bases is essential to communicate Islamabad’s resolve to establish its writ—regardless of the time, effort, and losses this course may eventually entail. At the peak of the Kashmir insurgency, India deployed over 300,000 troops to tackle a level of resistance not much greater than what Pakistan faces.

Moreover, just as the Indian military focused on preventing infiltration with a massive troop presence along the Indian-Pakistani Line of Control in Kashmir, Pakistan must cut off free movement of militants across the Afghan border. Setting up a dedicated counterinsurgency force like India's RR—whose sole task would be to achieve the counterinsurgency mission, both in terms of manning the border and conducting tactical operations in the tribal belt—might be Pakistan's best hope.

Finally, Pakistan should adopt the Indian technique of employing captured or pacified militants for intelligence-gathering. Although it may seem impossible in light of tribal norms and intimidation, a look at Kashmir reveals that intimidation levels were no lower there.¹⁹ Pakistan should focus on the "guests" or non-tribal militants who are not necessarily bound by tribal affiliations. The state apparatus must ensure that these informants' roles are never compromised, and the informants must be offered safety in case of discovery.

For the time being, Islamabad's presence in the region will need to be strengthened. This should be done by supporting "political agents"—the traditional representatives of the state currently assigned to liaise with tribal elders. State-appointed representatives should work under the political agents to increase Islamabad's presence in the region. The agents will need to work with locally elected representatives on many issues, which is essential for creating local stakes in Islamabad's success.

As for socioeconomic development, the tribal belt is already home to strong desires for change. Contrary to popular perception, the lack of development in the region is not as much a result of tribalism as it is a reflection of Islamabad's neglect. In fact, tribal chiefs and nationally elected political representatives from the region have often criticized the government for not paying enough attention to their interests.²⁰ The intense local demand makes the militants more hesitant to target development plans directly, lest they risk being condemned by the locals. The flip side of the hospitality norm is that guests are equally responsible to respect the collective interests of the tribal population. The key is to isolate state interests in the military domain (where the tribal leaders oppose the state) rather than in socioeconomic developments (on which the tribal leaders can work with the state).

The U.S. Role

The United States should encourage Pakistan to study the Indian model closely and adapt Delhi's experience to

its own challenges. It should also ask Indian military leaders to suggest to Pakistani strategists ways in which their experience could be applied to the tribal region. A U.S. role would be natural, given the unique relationship its military has traditionally had with the Pakistani army. The latter has always looked to the United States not only for weapons but also for officer training, tactical innovation, and professional knowledge. Indeed, the heavy-handed but ineffective tactics that Pakistani troops have employed in the tribal belt are a perfect example of what one American expert has termed the "Army Concept"—that is, the tactics his own country used in the Vietnam War.²¹

While tangible gains will take time, American interests in Afghanistan will continue to suffer without cooperation on counterinsurgency strategies. The United States should focus its energies on bolstering development aid to the tribal belt through a closely monitored and strategic socioeconomic assistance plan. Meanwhile, Washington should urge Islamabad to revise its military strategy to learn from the Indian model. Finally, the United States should be patient: after all, it took India over a decade to learn the tricks of the trade in Kashmir, and Pakistani efforts in the tribal belt may have many years yet ahead of them.

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Notes

1. Walter Pincus and Joby Warrick, "Strike by U.S. in Pakistan Is an Option, Officials Say," *Washington Post*, July 26, 2007; "Obama Warns Pakistan on al-Qaeda," BBC News, August 1, 2007; and "Republicans Reserve Right to Strike in Pakistan," *News International* (Pakistan), September 27, 2007.

2. See Syed Irfan Raza and Khaleeq Kiani, "Mystery Shrouds Exact Casualty Figures; Resistance Wiped Out: ISPR; Media Visit Put Off," *Dawn* (Pakistan), July 12, 2007; and South Asia Terrorism Portal, "Major Incidents of Terrorist Violence in Pakistan, 1988–2007," 2007, available at www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/database/majorincidents.htm (accessed September 27, 2007).

3. For more on the recent blast in Tarbela army camp, see "Pakistan Bomb Kills Elite Troops," BBC News, September 13, 2007. For a story on Osama bin Laden's call for jihad, see "Al Qaeda Calls for 'Jihad' against Pakistan's Musharraf," CNN, September 20, 2007.

4. Although exact figures on the number of Pakistani soldiers killed in operations in the North West Frontier Province vary,

most estimates are between 600 and 800. See "Taliban Spread Wings in Pakistan," BBC News, March 5, 2007.

5. Karen DeYoung and Walter Pincus, "Al-Qaeda's Gains Keep U.S. at Risk, Report Says," *Washington Post*, July 18, 2007.

6. Pakistan struck peace deals with militants in North and South Waziristan, essentially acquiescing to militants' presence as long as they do not challenge state interests. For criticism of this approach, see International Crisis Group, "Pakistan's Tribal Areas: Appeasing the Militants," *Asia Report* no. 125 (December 11, 2006), available at www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4568&l=1 (accessed September 27, 2007).

7. Hassan Abbas, "Profiles of Pakistan's Seven Tribal Agencies," *Terrorism Monitor* 4, no. 20 (October 19, 2006), available at www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2370168 (accessed September 27, 2007).

8. The tribal region has been governed by tribal chiefs called *maliks*. Traditionally, the only connection of the Pakistani government was through federally appointed "political agents" who worked in tandem with the tribal *maliks* to ensure that the state's overall agenda was enacted. While the political agents remain, representatives from the tribal region are also elected to the national assembly.

9. *Mujahedeen* was the term used for fighters who acted as the foot soldiers in the Afghan war against the Soviet Union.

10. The sense of duty toward jihad was most prominently manifested by the stance of the government's principal interlocutor in the tribal fight against Uzbek militants earlier this year. The kingpin of the strategy, Maulvi Nazir, managed to persuade the tribes to declare jihad against the Uzbeks but was staunchly opposed by the militant enclave for seeming too close to the Musharraf government on the Taliban question. He quickly reverted to an anti-state posture, suggesting that while he supported the anti-Uzbek drive, he will actively back the Taliban and al Qaeda jihad against the United States. See South Asia Terrorism Portal, "Pakistan Timeline—Year 2007," 2007, available at www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/timeline/index.html (accessed September 27, 2007).

11. Rather than promoting jihad, tribal chiefs were traditionally much more interested in retaining power, upholding tribal norms and cultures, and stopping any violence that may have illuminated their weaknesses. While the mullahs were initially mobilized during the Afghan jihad period in the 1990s, the discourse remained largely ethnocentric rather than pan-Islamist. Even though pan-Islamist sentiments were invoked to rally militants to fight in Kashmir, this rhetoric remained subservient to the emphasis on the ethnic connection with the Taliban. See

Christine Fair, interview on *Frontline*, PBS, October 2006, available at www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/taliban/pakistan/fair.html (accessed September 27, 2007).

12. A classic example of tribal intolerance for breaking norms is the concerted drive to fight Uzbek militants (see note 10). See "More than 100 Killed in Pakistan Tribal War," Associated Press, March 21, 2007.

13. Militants in the tribal areas have regularly beheaded alleged American spies. Video recordings of brutal beheadings are being made and distributed to intimidate the local population. The authors have viewed some of these tapes.

14. For an overview of the Indian army and its insurgencies, see Sankaran Kalyanaraman, "The Indian Way in Counter-insurgency," in *Democracies and Small Wars*, ed. Efraim Inbar (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2003), 85–100.

15. "Rashtriya Rifles" translates as "National Rifles" in English, further indicating this force's role in maintaining national cohesion. For a critical review of the Rashtriya Rifles experiment see Rajesh Rajagopalan, "Innovations in Counterinsurgency: The Indian Army's Rashtriya Rifles," *Contemporary South Asia* 13, no. 1 (March 2004): 25–37.

16. For a description of U.S. efforts to turn the insurgency in Anbar province, see John F. Burns and Alissa J. Rubin, "U.S. Arming Sunnis in Iraq to Battle Old Qaeda Allies," *New York Times*, June 11, 2007.

17. This belief was reinforced by the military's past experience with successfully quelling insurgencies in states like Mizoram and Punjab, where creating conditions conducive to political reconciliation between some of the more moderate separatist groups and Delhi ultimately helped pacify the insurgency.

18. Just last week, over 120 Pakistani soldiers were taken hostage by militants in the tribal region and still remain in custody. See "Officials: Islamic Militants in Talks to Free More than 120 Soldiers," Associated Press, August 31, 2007.

19. To intimidate the civilian population, insurgents in Kashmir have carried out large-scale massacres, especially of members of the minority community, and they have conducted selected assassinations of political workers and alleged "informers." See South Asia Terrorism Portal, "Jammu and Kashmir Background," available at www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/jandk/background/index.html (accessed September 27, 2007).

20. Tribal leaders have repeated these sentiments in parliamentary debates and political campaigns over the years.

21. Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 258–60.