

Pakistan unfairly blamed for "sheltering" Afghan Taliban

By Shibil Siddiqi

Pakistan has been a strategic blind-spot for Canadian foreign policy. A potential shift was signalled recently by Defence Minister Peter McKay when he called Pakistan a "huge priority" for Canada, and sensationally dubbed it the "most dangerous country in the world." The Minister emphasized Pakistan's combination of political instability, nuclear weapons, and sheltering of Afghanistan's Taliban insurgents. Yet there is little evidence of an appreciation of Pakistan's complex political dynamics or any concrete policy aims.

Through the looking-glass of Afghanistan, many NATO countries, including Canada, have *ad nauseam* asked Pakistan to "do more" to interdict the movement of the Taliban insurgents over the common border. This is a sore point for many Pakistanis, who point to their own cross-border insurgency that has massively destabilized the country, claiming the lives of over 7,000 non-combatants, 3,000 soldiers, and an unknown number of insurgents. Indeed, this had brought Pakistan's very ability to stave off a Taliban advance under question.

But just as Pakistan seemed to be buckling under the Taliban onslaught, it gained rare plaudits on its massive offensive to regain control of the Swat Valley. This territory had been effectively surrendered to home-grown Pakistani-Taliban after military failures culminated in a series of ill-fated deals made by the government. The military operations in Swat have enjoyed rare consensus in the Pakistani Parliament and an unprecedented level of public support. Many have lauded the military's resolve in finally tackling the militants that it did much to create and support in the first place.

The battle for Swat, however, is far from over. The military controls the main roads and towns, but the countryside is still Taliban territory. Sporadic clashes continue across the district, as do a spate of suicide bombings. This is to be expected. Like any other insurgency, this one will be measured in years as opposed to weeks or months.

The Taliban leadership in Swat has melted away and will no doubt exploit the government's and military's every misstep. And there have been a raft of them. Thankfully, the army's latest offensive (its fourth) has managed to avoid a high number of civilian casualties. But it did so largely by ordering Swat's residents to flee, causing an exodus of as many as 3 million refugees. The United Nations called this the worst displacement since the Rwandan genocide of 1994.

The under-prepared, under-funded, and overwhelmed relief effort, as well as their forced repatriation, has angered many refugees. The *en masse* migrations from inadequate and overflowing camps have stoked ethnic tensions in the country. At the end of major combat operations, the terrorized residents of Swat are still finding bodies of "collaborators" littering their once serene valley, as they did when the Taliban ruled the roost.

This time the perpetrators are the army, the reported extrajudicial killings vendettas for the army's previous losses.

The nerve centre for multifarious Taliban groups and their regional allies is in the nearly impenetrable mountains of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) on the border with Afghanistan. The area has been reeling under a punishing barrage of hellfire missiles fired regularly by American drones. The missiles have assassinated 15 al-Qaeda or Taliban leaders, but at the cost of over 700 civilian lives.

Even here, the government seems to have regained the initiative. In August, the drone-war netted its biggest success in killing Baitullah Mehsud, the leader of the Pakistani

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Taliban, much to the collective relief of most Pakistanis. Security forces also arrested a number of prominent Taliban leaders, further fragmenting the movement. But the Taliban in Swat and FATA have recently moved closer and infighting among the Pakistani Taliban has given way to the appointment of a new leader. The group will no doubt attempt to demonstrate its viability through a fresh round of attacks.

A commonly held belief in the West is that Pakistan's military and intelligence apparatus is inexperienced in counterinsurgency or unwilling to fight its compatriots and co-religionists. Such thinking has formed the public basis of a renewed \$3 billion military aid package from Washington that dwarfs any development aid. It also provided the likely impetus for Ottawa to restart its military training programs, as well as its abortive plans to provide Pakistan with sophisticated military equipment. In fact, however, the Pakistani army has historically excelled at counterinsurgency campaigns, mounted frequently against disgruntled regionalist forces. The relative battlefield dominance that the military achieved in Swat is clear proof of the army's ability.

The reasons for Pakistan's stuttering actions against the Taliban are more subtle and complex. The Taliban represent the first Islamist rebellion faced by the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. The Pakistani state has built its perceived legitimacy at home on its Islamic credentials, including as a champion of regional causes from Kashmir to Afghanistan and beyond. Throughout the 1980s, Pakistan's present insurgency-affected areas were a massive Western and Arab funded base for Islamic radicals fighting the Soviets in neighbouring Afghanistan. Many of the fighters are part of today's Taliban. But Pakistan's military-bureaucratic elite, with extensive Western support, began the process of Islamizing public life as early as the 1950s, as a bulwark against communists and autonomy-seeking regionalists, as well as populist democrats. By the 1970s, Pakistan was already at the banks of the Islamic Rubicon. Its then U.S.-backed military dictator, General Zia

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Democratic Pakistan possible with proper Western support

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ul-Haq, and the anti-Soviet *Jihad* simply ferried it across.

Pakistan's ideological alienation and foreign policy reorientation, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the United States of September 11, 2001, gave the Taliban the opening to wrest legitimacy from the state by subverting its Islamic idioms. Pakistan has only belatedly understood the importance of occupying the ideological and moral high ground. Its recent military offensives have been accompanied by propaganda broadcasts, as well as conferences organized by pro-Pakistani *ulema* or Islamic scholars. The state is capitalizing on public opinion, which at last has sharply turned against the Taliban.

The government's present successes, however, are bound to be fleeting unless it offers real alternatives, both ideological and material. A return to the *status quo ante* is no longer an option. The Taliban insurgency highlights the dangerous ideological blowback of the Islamization of Pakistan's domestic and foreign policies. Further, the state provides little or no services to its suffering multitudes in the face of crippling defence and foreign debt-servicing expenditure. Over 33% of Pakistan's total population of 170 million live below the poverty line, and nearly 75% live on less than \$2 a day.

The Taliban exploited these deep class resentments and gained support among Swat's under-classes through land reforms and redistributing wealth from local gemstones and mineral trade. What is urgently required in Swat — and much of the rest of the country — is reconstruction, building a viable local economy, addressing poverty and basic services, and building robust democratic institutions. If the state does not turn to the governance vacuum and address fundamental issues of social justice, radical actors such as the Taliban will have an open field to do so. The government's present support could easily metastasize into a propaganda and recruiting coup for the Taliban.

There is also little indication of a change in Pakistan's fundamental geopolitical considerations. The Pakistani establishment views its security policy through the prism of its long-standing

military rivalry with India. A friendly government in Afghanistan will prevent perceived Indian encirclement. Even its present military actions are aimed only at militants who oppose the Pakistani state, not those conducting operations exclusively against the Afghan government, NATO, or India. A shift in this policy is difficult to foresee, short of institutionalizing democratic change in Pakistan and the normalization of relations between the two South Asian adversaries.

The fumbling peace process between the two countries has been dubbed "irreversible," but may yet be outflanked by a new nuclear and conventional arms race, thanks to recent cooperation in these sectors between India and

the United States. Successful dialogue between India and Pakistan is a vital component of the peace-puzzle across South Asia, including in Afghanistan.

Still, alarmism like Defence Minister McKay's is unwarranted. The Taliban are not about to take over the country, and Pakistan's nuclear arsenal has sophisticated controls in place. Such misconceptions merely create a pretext for escalating the war in "AfPak." NATO has found it convenient to blame the morass in Afghanistan on the sanctuaries available to the Taliban in Pakistan, thereby absolving the occupation forces of much of the responsibility. Yet cross-border attacks from Pakistan have fallen by as much as 50% since 2008, while attacks inside Afghanistan are at an all-time high. The problems of the Afghan occupation and insurgency are far larger than Pakistani complicity and, in fact, fuel the instability in Pakistan.

Pakistan does not face overnight collapse, though its insurgency and ideological blowback do present palpable long-term challenges. The best safeguard against the Taliban and their like in Pakistan remain the Pakistani people and their antipathy to religious extremism. Unlike some Muslim

countries today, Pakistanis continue to reject radical Islamist parties at the polls; such parties got only 2.2% of the vote in the most recent elections. But Pakistan has been ruled by its powerful military establishment for most of its existence, and the will of its people has rarely guided the direction of the state. This dynamic must change. The struggle to define the idea of Pakistan must be brought within democratic space and ideological projects made subservient to popular political aspirations.

Pakistanis in the streets see alterna-

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tives. Take, for example, the recent pro-democracy mass movement led by lawyers, highlighting the deep-seated commitment of many Pakistanis to democratic governance and rule of

law. The movement was often referred to in terms of "instability" in Pakistan, whereas similar movements elsewhere are given romantic sobriquets of Rose, Orange or Green Revolutions.

Pakistanis struggled alone in the face of a conspiracy of silence in Western capitals, including Ottawa, that supported the autocratic military regime of former President General Pervez Musharraf. Of course, Pakistan's direction must be set by Pakistanis. But, as Canada seeks to align policy with its ascribed priority to Pakistan, the least it can do is to be vocal in its support for democracy and rule of law. And not only when it is convenient to do so, but each time they are under threat — whether from the fearsome Taliban or from Pakistan's friendly generals.

(Shibil Siddiqi — shibil.siddiqi@gmail.com — is a Gordon Global Fellow with the Walter & Duncan Gordon Foundation in Toronto. He has lived and worked extensively in Afghanistan and Pakistan and has been consulted on South Asia by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and the Afghanistan Taskforce at Foreign Affairs. He is a contributor to *Foreign Policy in Focus* and several Pakistani publications.) 