

Military operations in Swat: A Critique

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Pakistani security forces recently concluded the fourth military operation in Swat since 2007. A few days ago, major offensives in Operation Rah-e-Rast were declared over nearly two months after the latest campaign began. Major roads have been de-mined and public services restored. In fact, many refugees stranded in camps have begun to return. With the security establishment having finally realized the importance of retaining troops in Swat, will normalcy return, so that socio-economic development can commence? Or will, as in the past, a thinned state presence make Fazlullah and his cohorts stage a comeback in the next few months?

Having been fatigued by three military operations, the provincial government's peace negotiation with the local Taliban in February 2009 was received with much expectation and goodwill by the people of Swat. After all, previous operations were carried out heavily handedly with the army relying on firepower instead of proven counterinsurgency tools. Not only did this lead to the country's greatest internal displacement in history, but a year long curfew also crippled the local economy dependent on tourism. A peace deal, most locals thought, will allow them to return to a normal lifestyle, without the fear of daily executions that Fazlullah ordered, or the equally precarious air strikes conducted on little intelligence.

According to the peace deal, militants agreed to cease violence after Shariah Law was reintroduced in the region. Discrepancies soon rose as the state refused to make the local Islamic courts independent of review in appellate courts. By the end of April it was clear that the peace deal was virtually obsolete, and that both sides were preparing for the offensive. The Taliban soon spread to the adjoining districts of Buner, Dir, Shangla and Malakand. The Army launched simultaneous operations in Dir and Buner, while at the same time reinforced troops in Swat. Whether the militants attempted to pressurize Islamabad to succumb to their version of Shariah, or whether the peace deal was simply an alibi to prepare a planned expansion is a matter of debate. However there is little doubt that their forays beyond Swat was the tripping point that led to the offensive.

In the first week, important locations like Khawazakhela and Chakdhara were retaken. According to data provided by the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), security forces killed close to 600 insurgents in the first week. After Chief of Army Staff Gen Ashfaq Kayani visited Swat on May 14, a 'new phase' of operations commenced¹ concentrating on key cities of Matta and Kanju, known Taliban strongholds. A week later on May 23, the 'most important' phase of the operations began to sanitize the biggest city Mingora². With 20,000 people still stranded in Mingora³, a lethal close quarters battle was feared. However, Fazlullah, in a classic guerilla strategy, asked his cadre to avoid fighting a conventional battle, and withdrew. The troops, backed by helicopter gunship, aircraft and artillery support quickly reclaimed Mingora, Swat's biggest city. The guerrillas⁴ dispersed into the villages and strongholds in upper reaches of the district. By the beginning of June, security forces and government agencies began restoring public

services in Mingora by re-supplying food items, medicines, energy supplies and other provisions. By June 22, Pakistan claimed to have killed 1592 insurgents⁵.

Major ‘seize’ operations, the first phase of any counterinsurgency operation, was largely over by the third week of June with the Special Services Group (SSG) consolidating their much celebrated ‘behind enemy lines’ operation in the Piochar Valley. Soon cordon and search operations began in most places in Swat, with the army emphasizing their intent to ‘hold’ terrain⁶, unlike in previous operations when area domination was delegated to the inadequately trained Frontier Corps and local police.

Armies the world over are trained to “find, fix and annihilate” the enemy. This, arguably, is the only easy component of a counterinsurgency campaign. Subsequent phases – Holding the terrain, Developing capacity of local stakeholders like the police and administration, and finally transferring duties to these local units is a very complex task which pushes all of the State actors to their limit. Soldiers are not only required to provide security, but are also expected to act as local councilors, administrators, even anthropologists - tasks they are not trained for. Besides, the nature of a ‘hearts and minds’ program is by design a long drawn process, forcing the state to provide men and resources for an indefinitely long period.

How will the Pakistan Army respond to such a difficult task? Pakistan’s past record in counterinsurgency does not merit confidence. Since socio-political dissent in Pakistan has traditionally been viewed as a national security threat⁷; indiscriminate use of force has hence been preferred over political resolution⁸. All evidence since 2001 suggests that Pakistan’s policy prescription towards addressing the militancy in the frontier suffers from these traditional flaws where attrition rather than reconciliation has been the favored metric. Given that Pakistan continues to consider India as its greatest threat, maintaining a strong security presence in militancy prone areas, a pre-requisite to development, seems unlikely in the near future.

¹ ISPR briefing, May 17

² ISPR briefing, May 23

³ “Street battles rage in Mingora”, *The News International*, May 23, 2009

⁴ Since 2007, the concentration of foreign militants has increased in Swat. Abuses of locals, especially women also point of the increasing involvement of non-locals. (“Swat Taliban turn their guns on lawyers, judges”, *The News International*, February 03 2009). Besides trained militants of Baitullah Mehsud, the other organizations present in Swat include al -Qa’ida, Tehrik-i-Taliban, Tanzeem-i-Islami, Tora Bora and Qari Mushtaq. (“Taliban’s Darkness Descends On Swat Valley”, *The Australian*, February 08 2009). Uzbek, Tajik and other fugitives also enjoy Fazlullah’s protection. (“In the Realm of Mullah Fazlullah”, *Spiegel Online*, November 22 2007)

⁵ ISPR briefing, June 22

⁶ In a speech delivered in Center for Strategic and International Studies, Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff said “This time I think what’s different this time in Swat as opposed to last time in Swat is the commitment to hold not just to clear out the insurgents (emphasize mine), and that’s where he is right now and as I said earlier sometimes this doesn’t happen at a pace that we’d like, but it’s their country and they get to pick that pace.” Full text available at <http://www.jcs.mil/speech.aspx?id=1217>

⁷ For an excellent history of political violence in Pakistan read Ian Talbot, *Pakistan A Modern History*, (London: C. Hurst & Co.,2005)

⁸ The Pakistani establishment failed to realize the extent of discontent in erstwhile East Bangladesh and preferred brute force over political reconciliation, which ultimately led to the dismemberment of Pakistan. In spite of five ‘miniwars’ between Baluch tribesmen and Pakistani forces, the insurgency, whose roots lie in reconcilable social and economic grievances still persists. Read Stephen Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan*, (Washington: Brookings Publication,2005) p. 219 -222