

Pakistan: Chaos unto Order?

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The Pakistani military finally appears to have embraced the war against jihadi militancy as its own. If so, an important shift in perception and policy has taken place. Past experience, however, demands caution before coming to any hasty conclusions. Things are chaotic enough in any case, for there to be sufficient material evidence to support optimists and sceptics alike. It is possible, nevertheless, to post milestones that will need to be crossed if we are to decisively move in the right direction.

Swat was always going to be the first test of the Pakistani military's will for confronting jihadi militancy. Recent reports suggest that the will has been found. After months of losing ground to the militants, the state's forces now have the initiative. A full-scale military operation supported by air power seems to have loosened the grip of Maulana Fazlullah's Tehreek-e-Taliban-e-Swat on the scenic valley.

Military action was accompanied by a large-scale exodus from the region – something that has now become a recurrent pattern in confrontations between the military and the jihadi militants. It is estimated that some three million people have left their homes for safer places in anticipation or as a result of the war. Military sources claim that over 1,200 Taliban and their supporters have been killed, and nearly a hundred, including foreign militants, have been captured. Military losses are put at around 80 deaths. There is no word on civilian non-combatant casualties.

It is difficult to directly verify most of these claims. The number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) who are registered at relief camps hovers around the 2,00,000 mark. While this is a huge figure in its own right, it represents a small fraction of the three million IDPs claimed by government and UN agencies alike. It is argued that most IDPs live with their relatives and friends in safer areas, and have chosen not to register for relief. This claim is, obviously, hard to verify. In any case, there is a humanitarian crisis, and it is officially acknowledged that populations are advised to leave their homes in areas where military operations are imminent.

The confusion surrounding IDP numbers is nothing compared to different interpretations of the run-up to the military operation. There is agreement that a "peace pact" between the North-West Frontier

Province (NWFP) government and Maulana Sufi Mohammad, leader of the Tehreek-e-Nifaz-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) or the movement for the enforcement of Sharia, marked the turning point. Critics of the civilian government say that the secular Awami National Party (ANP) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) were cowed into handing over Swat and the entire Malakand region (consisting of Buner, Malakand, Dir and Chitral districts) to the Taliban. Emboldened, the militants immediately expanded their operations beyond Swat, thus leaving the military little choice but to respond to external pressure.

The descent into war is seen as yet another case of policy confusion – alternate rounds of appeasement and containment – with respect to the Taliban and other jihadi militants. It is quite likely that the present military operation called Rah-e-Haq (the righteous path) will go down the route of previous such endeavours, which generated much sound and fury while leaving the Taliban unscathed. Sceptics fear that like before the Taliban will be back in the driving seat as soon as international (read the United States) optics are satisfied. In the meanwhile, the secular parties will have given up further ground to the jihadis.

A more optimistic view is that the Swat peace deal was a classic set-up. The peace deal delinked the jihadi demand for Sharia enforcement from their quest for political power. The government itself took over the responsibility for enforcing Sharia in the Malakand region, and Sufi Mohammad undertook to deliver peace. The government, according to this view, called the Taliban's bluff. It also disarmed the jihad apologists among mainstream parties and media whose main policy plank was to negotiate with the Taliban. The peace deal was destined for failure, but Sufi Mohammad, his son-in-law Fazlullah and other Taliban leaders made the government's job easier when they took the deal as a signal to escalate aggression. After that, there was nothing to say in the defence of the Taliban, and the path to war was open.

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If the Swat peace deal was, indeed, part of a political trap for the jihadis it was a brilliant tactical move. The ANP and PPP took on the momentary ire of a minority of committed anti-jihadi segments, to soon inherit an elusive political consensus against the militants. As if to underscore this point the government took the peace deal to the national parliament and got the endorsement of Nawaz Sharif's recalcitrant Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N). By openly defying the peace deal, the jihadis disrupted the rightwing consensus that the war in Pakistan's north was not "our war". But the most important implication of the classic set-up view is that, finally, the civilian government and the military were coordinating their moves to devastating effect for the jihadis. Cooperation between the civilian government and the military against jihadi militants, even if temporary and contingent on US stewardship, will be a historic shift.

Divergent Narratives and Common Ground

What is disconcerting for now for those who believe in a Pakistani future, is the wide gulf that separates the narrative about the war in the Punjabi heartland and in the "peripheral" Pashtun, Baloch and Sindhi regions. The heartland is being pushed hard to make the transition from "this is not our war" to "the Taliban are coming down the hills". It is being asked to swap one form of xenophobia for another. The "Talibanisation" of jihadi militancy serves an effective though insidious purpose. The subtle invocation of the wild Pashtun tribesman taking over the plains and the cities taps into a longer memory and serves to replace the threat from the US and India. In the periphery it is common to hear that the Taliban and the military are but two sides of the same coin.

What most non-Pashtuns failed to pick up in the Pashtun conversation about the Swat peace deal was the near unanimity of opinion across classes, regions, and ideologies in support of the deal. Liberals, Pashtun nationalists, communists and feminists were one with the pious in arguing that peace was the first priority even if it meant handing over Malakand

to the Taliban. They felt frustrated that their friends and peers across the Indus would just not understand their concerns. The idea that the Pashtun political and civil society was being decimated in what was suspected to be a phony war between the Taliban and the military, remains a core belief. For the Pashtuns the truce was a way of extricating themselves from this "phony war" to live and fight another day.

Military action following the breakdown of the peace deal is being handled in a similarly sophisticated way. Not content with becoming entangled in what it sees as a "phony war" again, Pashtun political society wants to see credible signs of irreversible military commitment against the jihadis before it will pop its head above the parapets. There have been just too many beheadings to take any further chances. If this means that a real war will be harder to fight and longer to win than necessary, the military has none but itself to blame. What is clear, however, is that if the fight is for real this time around, and the military is seen to cross some point of no return, Pashtun political society will step in, and expedite a military victory.

Milestones Passed and Coming Up

There are specific milestones people mention – and ones that make eminent sense. An important one is the confirmed death or capture of specific jihadi commanders. There is not much credibility to the claim of scoring Taliban deaths, particularly when these are reported in multiples of five, if nothing is known about key commanders who have spread the reign of fear. There is no news on these characters, but acknowledging the credibility gap, the military's public relations' team has started to publish names of lower-level commanders captured or killed. Multiples of five too have given way to more specific information.

There are other signs too that what is happening now is different from before. While Musharraf made much of the claim that the Pakistani military lost 800 men and officers fighting against the Taliban in his tenure, these deaths were never used for war propaganda. In stark contrast the public broadcaster as well as

private television channels are now fully involved in what feels like a war effort. Military funerals, interviews of "martyred" soldiers' family members, and patriotic songs have been telecast for domestic viewers. Heroism which was previously the preserve of the jihadis is now an attribute of the military men who are confronting them.

There is mobilisation too of diverse political constituencies against the Taliban. In the past the military agencies played an instrumental role in constructing cross-sectarian Islamic alliances – particularly between the leaders of the majority syncretic Barelvis and the emergent hardline Deobandis. Now the former clerics are tripping over one another in denouncing the Taliban. The Deobandis too have been divided, with some issuing edicts against suicide bombs and beheadings – the favoured methods of the jihadis.

It will be prudent to take a cue from the Pashtuns who have suffered the longest and the hardest in the "phony war". It is true that there are today unprecedented propaganda or political moves against jihadi militancy, even though these are mostly articulated in terms of opposition to Pashtun Taliban. These moves are not irreversible in themselves, but it can be hoped that if sustained for long enough, even under US pressure, their cumulative effect might be a definitive change of course. After all, the Pakistani military's embrace of jihad was itself a barely considered drift that got fossilised into a policy.

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