

Peace in Waziristan

Success or Setbacks in the Fight against Terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan?

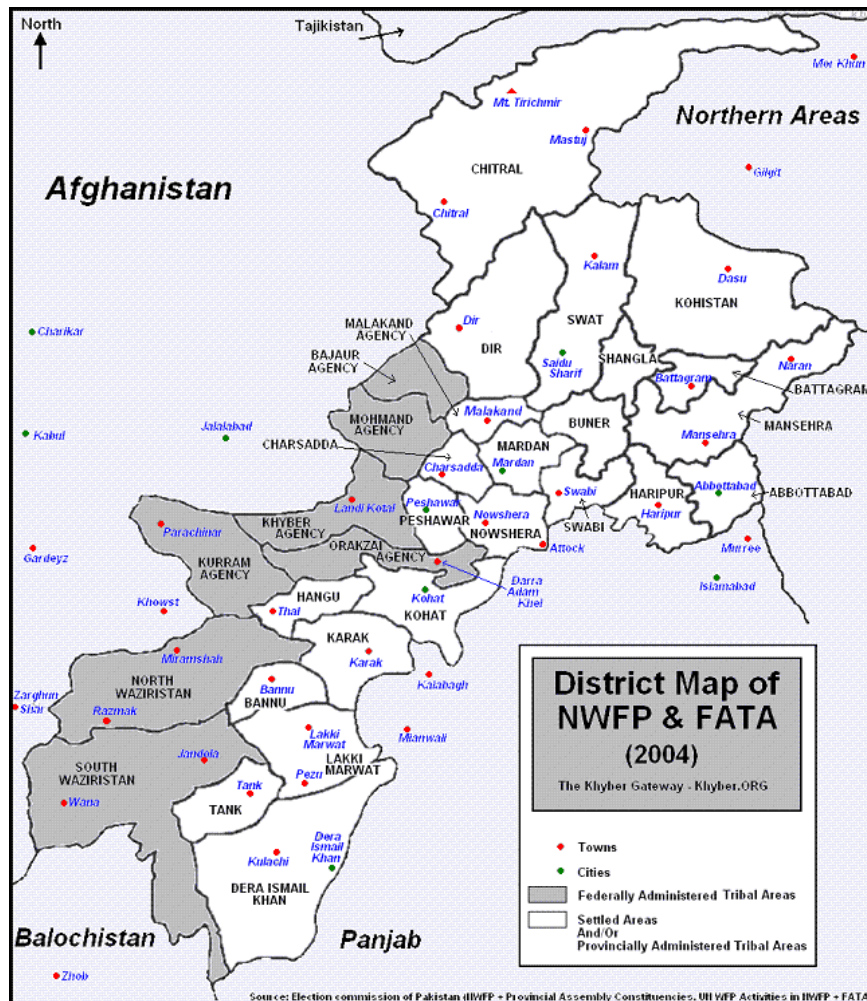
Christian Wagner / Citha D. Maaß

At a remarkable dinner for three that took place in Washington on 27 September 2006, President Bush, backed by the Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, once again urged Pakistan's president Pervez Musharraf to take tougher action against terrorist bases in the border regions of Pakistan. However, Musharraf's options are limited as he faces increasing domestic opposition because of his close cooperation with the USA in the fight against terrorism. This limitation is illustrated by the agreement of Miranshah, which was signed on 5 September 2006 by the governor of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and the tribes of North Waziristan in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Foreign terrorists and neo-Taliban groups have for years been using this region as a retreat and a base for infiltrating Afghanistan to fight the government of President Karzai and the international troops. Since the start of the military campaign in South Waziristan in spring of 2004, the Pakistani army has not succeeded in controlling the tribal groups, stopping the neo-Taliban infiltration of Afghanistan, or integrating the FATA into the Pakistani state. While the agreement may bring about a cessation of hostilities in North Waziristan, it could constitute a setback to the battle against terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The FATA have been an anomaly in the Pakistani state since the country became independent in 1947. As early as the days of British colonialism, the tribal areas in the north-west of modern Pakistan were being regarded as a buffer zone to Afghanistan. Covering an area of 27,220km², these areas are roughly the size of Albania and are divided into seven so-called "Agencies": Bajuar, Mohmand, Khyber, Orakzai, Kurram, and North and South Waziristan. Additionally, there are smaller tribal areas (frontier regions) in the adjacent NWFP

districts of Peshawar, Kohat, Bannu, Lakki Murwat, Tank, and Dera Ismail Khan. The FATA territories extend for over 1,000km along the Durand Line in the mountainous border regions between Afghanistan and Pakistan. In Pakistan, the FATA territories border on the North West Border Province (NWFP) and the province of Baluchistan. These regions have a total of approximately 3.5 million inhabitants, most of whom are Pashtuns. The tribal areas are autonomously governed according to their own traditions and largely resist the influence of

Map 1
The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in Pakistan



Source: <http://billroggio.com/images/maps/pakistan-fata.php>

the Pakistani government, which is represented there only by a political agent. Because of the special status of the FATA, smuggling has long been rife here across the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Compared to other Pakistani regions, the FATA are chronically underdeveloped.

The FATA and the fight against terrorism

After the attacks of September 11 and the overthrow of the Taliban regime, the FATA moved into the focus of international attention. After the intervention by the west and the fall of the Taliban regime, many Taliban

and Al-Qaeda cadres which had previously been active in Afghanistan withdrew into the remote mountain regions. In the course of the fight against terrorism, the Pakistani army stepped up its operations against these groups from spring 2004 onwards. The army's aim was to combat foreign terrorists, tighten its control of the tribal areas, and end the terrorists' infiltration of Afghanistan. This represented a watershed in the history of Pakistan, in that military forces (comprising up to 80,000 soldiers) were operating in the FATA for the first time in the country's history. The main hot-spots of the fighting were in North and South Waziristan. Several hundred soldiers

Map 2

The eastern provinces of Afghanistan



Source: <http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/profile/afghanis.pdf>

have been killed there over the last few months. Despite their military superiority and despite having air sovereignty, the Pakistani forces were unable to achieve a decisive military success.

Cross-border Militancy in Afghanistan

The insurgent groups fighting on the Afghan side beyond the FATA territories use the permeable border to smuggle fighters and weapons into Afghanistan. The main protagonists of this militant cross-border activity are the neo-Taliban groups which have reconstituted themselves under various rival leaders and which, unlike the “old” Taliban of the 1990s, have a decentralised form of organisation. Other groups operating across the border are rebels with regionally limited spheres of influence as well as drug rings and other smugglers. To describe this new alliance of interest groups, the term “Oppo-

sitional Militant Forces” (OMF) was coined in early summer 2006. Although pursuing different interests and power strategies, the OMF are united by a shared objective—they all want to drive the international military forces and civil organisations out of Afghanistan while continuing to weaken the Karzai administration and thus attain a higher degree of autonomy in their separate regional spheres of influence. The ascendancy of the heterogeneous OMF is favoured by several factors.

The weakness of President Karzai’s national government gives the OMF sufficient political leeway to consolidate their hold on the Afghan border provinces. Most seriously affected by these activities are five provinces adjoining the FATA on the Afghan side of the border (see map 2). The most northerly province is Nuristan, followed to the south by Kunar, Nangarhar, Khost and Paktika. President Karzai is obliged to make extensive concessions to the powerful tribal leaders in all five

provinces, as the provincial governors and police chiefs appointed by the president are unable to enforce the national government's monopoly on power. The two northern provinces, Nuristan and Kunar, are entirely subject to the arbitrary rule of the local commanders. To a lesser extent, the same is true of the southernmost province of Paktika, which is under the control of neo-Taliban groups and strong tribal leaders striving for autonomy.

The "militant border traffic" is facilitated by geographical factors as well. This entire section of the border is located in mountainous territory at elevations of up to 5000 m, where hidden mountain trails and rough passes serve as supply lines and escape routes. During the Soviet occupation in the 1980s, it was the US-backed Mujaheddin groups who, armed with weapons supplied by the CIA, used this ungovernable territory to their advantage. Today, it is the OMF groups which use the hidden trails and smugglers' routes within their spheres of influence. These routes have been used for centuries by Afghan nomads (*Kuchis*) in their migrations from winter pastures in the FATA to their summer grazing regions in northern Afghanistan. The routes are now under the control of mafia-like smuggling rings who use them to bring weapons, combatants, and drugs across the border. In late 2001, it was these rings who assisted Osama bin Laden in fleeing from the border area.

The Miranshah Agreement

On 25 June 2006, the Pakistani forces and the tribes in North Waziristan agreed to a one-month cease-fire. Shortly before the cease-fire expired, Ali Muhammed Orakzai, the governor of the NWFP, himself a native of the tribal areas, called a meeting of the tribal elders (*jirga*) to end the conflict permanently. Judging from reports in the Pakistani media, the agreement included the following points:

- ▶ The infiltration of Afghanistan by militant forces must be stopped.

- ▶ The government will refrain from further military ground and air operations against the militant groups.
- ▶ The armed forces will be withdrawn from the checkpoints in the region and will be replaced by paramilitary tribal troops.
- ▶ All foreigners will leave North Waziristan. They may, however, remain in the FATA if they behave peacefully and respect the agreement.
- ▶ The army and the tribes will return all captured weapons.
- ▶ The tribal elders will undertake to prevent attacks on the military and the peacekeeping forces.
- ▶ The government will release its prisoners.
- ▶ A ten-member joint commission composed of tribal elders, administrative officials, and religious leaders will monitor the implementation of the agreement.
- ▶ The government will make loss compensation payments to the members of the tribes.
- ▶ There will be no prohibition on carrying weapons. However, the members of the tribes agree to refrain from carrying heavy weapons.

The Pakistani government views the Miranshah Agreement as part of its strategy to win the battle against terror both on the political and the military level. The agreement did indeed succeed in putting an end to the sustained fighting. Additionally, the governor of the NWFP announced a far-reaching development programme for the tribal areas that would run for several years. Independently of the precise wording, however, some of the points of the agreement show that the Pakistani government has failed to reach certain important goals in the battle against terrorism.

The Consequences in Pakistan

The aim of the military operations which began in the spring of 2004 was to combat

foreign terrorists in the FATA. Various sources speak of several hundred combatants, among them Egyptians, Saudi Arabians, Arabs of other nationalities, Uzbeks, Uigurs and Chechens. At a minimum, the armed forces wanted to compel the registration of these combatants, but they were unable to achieve this. On the contrary, foreign nationals, many of whom became members of the tribal societies by intermarriage, are still able to live in the area without being subject to governmental control. Thus it is possible that even leading Al-Qaeda cadres could still be living unmolested in the region, even though the Pakistani government vehemently denies this possibility. Shortly after the agreement was signed, a spokesman for the tribes announced that there were no foreign militants in North Waziristan, citing as proof the fact that the government had submitted no evidence for the existence of such militants.

Additionally, doubts remain about the effectiveness of the agreement in ending the infiltration of Afghanistan as the Pakistani armed forces are virtually unable to monitor cross-border activities. Similar agreements, both official and unofficial, have been made between the armed forces and militant tribal leaders in the past. One such agreement was concluded in March 2004 in Shakai in South Waziristan. However, while the situation there did become calmer in the short term, observers believe that the militant groups simply transferred their activities to North Waziristan. South Waziristan, too, is still frequently the scene of skirmishes with the military. In August 2006, the region's first suicide attack was targeted against the armed forces. It is therefore feared that the Miranshah Agreement will once again cause the militant groups to move their base of operations elsewhere—possibly to the Bajaur Agency north of Peshawar. The existence of active militant groups in this region has been clear since January 2006, when the USA carried out a missile strike in Damadola in Bajaur in an attempt to eliminate the

Al-Qaeda leader Al-Zawahiri. The abandonment of checkpoints in North Waziristan, the exchange of prisoners, and the return of captured weapons too cast doubt on the success of the military operations of the past few months.

Another aspect of the agreement is that the Pakistani government, by its withdrawal, is tacitly acquiescing to the creeping Talibanisation of the tribal areas. In the past months, some tribal leaders who were willing to cooperate with the government or prepared to participate in talks were murdered. Pakistani journalists have lost almost all access to North and South Waziristan, as both these territories have become no-go areas. The few reports of the past months suggest that Taliban groups are enforcing their ideas of order with increasing success both in the FATA and the adjacent districts and are using violence against those who criticise them.

Motives for the Agreement

There are various reasons that may have motivated the Pakistani government to approve this agreement despite its shortcomings. For one thing, the agreement was signed one day before President Musharraf's visit to Afghanistan. Relations between the two countries are difficult, as the Kabul government has repeatedly alleged that Taliban combatants are entering Afghanistan from Pakistan—and indeed, President Musharraf has indirectly admitted that this is the case. The agreement represents an attempt by the Pakistani government to underscore its political willingness to pacify the tribal areas and improve relations with Afghanistan. Secondly, after the murder in late August of Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, a leader of the autonomy movement in Baluchistan, the internal situation worsened in this province as well. The Pakistani army fears that the fighting in this notoriously unstable province may spread and possibly oblige the military to engage in a war on two fronts within its own country. Because parts of the auton-

omy movement in Baluchistan are going so far as to demand independence, the military command may be taking this threat to national unity more seriously than the situation in the FATA. Baluchistan, Pakistan's largest province and a region that borders on Afghanistan and Iran, has been the theatre of a civil war once before, in the 1970s. Thirdly, President Musharraf may be anxious to improve his relations with the religious parties, which supply the provincial government of the NWFP, in the run-up to the forthcoming elections of 2007/08. One of the mediators in the negotiations between the armed forces and the tribes was Maulana Fazlur Rehman, the leader of Jamiat-i-Ulama-i-Islam (JUI-F) and the president of Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA). This oppositional alliance of various religious parties gained about 11% of the vote in the 2002 elections, partly because MMA candidates had the support of the military and the secret service. In view of the growing opposition and the cooperation between the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League (N), whose leaders, the former premiers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif are in exile, Musharraf may once again be tempted to court the support of the religious parties before the elections. Thus the MMA, which is often ironically described as the "Military-Mullah Alliance", may once again emerge from the coming elections as a factor to be reckoned with in Pakistan's internal affairs.

Little Impact on Security in Afghanistan

The agreement is scarcely expected to produce noticeable improvements in the security situation of the Afghan border provinces. The networks of the OMF are based on tribal client systems on both sides of the border. These systems include new combatant groups and war profiteers as well as traditional leaders. The guerrilla tactics of the OMF are dependent on access to military supplies from Pakistani terri-

tory. Without these supply lines, the increasingly frequent attacks and the increased military professionalism of the OMF in 2006 would not have been possible. At the same time, this form of underground warfare also presupposes support on the Afghan side if the infiltrating combatants are to be tolerated—or even actively supported—by the tribal population.

The widespread perception in Afghanistan that the militancy problem was "imported" from Pakistan simplifies the line of causation to include only the external factors of Pakistani "interference and infiltration." It is indisputable that the combatants operating in Afghanistan are receiving massive support from Pakistani territory, and the political willingness of Islamabad to curtail this support may not be particularly high as it is not in the interests of Pakistan to have a strong Afghanistan in close alliance with a friendly India. The Miranshah Agreement, however, reveals that even if the government in Islamabad were firmly committed to taming the militant forces, the special status of the FATA Agencies, the porous border, and the heterogeneous OMF networks render the Pakistani administration incapable of cutting off the cross-border support by military means.

However, the decisive factor which makes terrorist activities in the border region impossible to control is the fact that there is a breeding ground for militancy on the Afghan side. The strong growth of the OMF alliance of interest groups is due to the inability of the Karzai government to enforce their monopoly on power in the border provinces, provide jobs for the population, and make visible progress in the reconstruction of the country. The murder of the provincial governor of Paktya, Abdul Hakim Taniwal, on 10 September 2006 and a repeat attack which claimed six lives on 11 September 2006 during his funeral in the neighbouring province of Khost illustrate the weakness of the Kabul government.

Another reason is the inappropriate military strategy pursued by the USA. The military operations conducted by special US forces in the border provinces as part of their war on terror (*Operation Enduring Freedom*) are ineffective, and ultimately even counter-productive, in the face of the decentralised guerrilla tactics of the OMF. The “robust” tactics of the US army are fomenting resentment and even hatred among the tribal population against the international troops, so that, if anything, their presence is causing the situation to deteriorate. At the same time, sympathy for the OMF has increased among the population, and there has been a resurgence of the historical resentment against foreign occupation. The US-led units are increasingly being regarded as “occupying forces” which deserve the same fate as the British Indian troops in the 19th century and the Soviet troops of the 1980s.

Prognosis

Should the Miranshah Agreement end the infiltration of Afghanistan by agents of violence, this would undoubtedly represent a major success. In the face of past experience, however, it is unlikely that the tribes will be able to prevent neo-Taliban forces from crossing into Afghanistan or to curtail the freedom of movement of foreign combatants in the FATA in accordance with the intentions of the Pakistani and Afghan governments. Additionally, the government in Islamabad has thus far given no indication of the means by which it intends to enforce any such control. Thus the agreement is more likely to represent a setback in the battle against terrorism both in Afghanistan and in Pakistan. Areas outside governmental control are becoming entrenched on both sides of the Durand Line, and these areas will serve as retreats for militant groups in the foreseeable future. In the long term, this state of affairs is likely to strain both the relations between Islamabad and Kabul and the domestic situation in Pakistan. The Talibanisation of

the FATA, which was identified as dangerous to the internal stability of Pakistan even before 11 September 2001, is expected to increase still further. The Miranshah Agreement appears to have increased rather than decreased the magnitude of this threat.

Given these developments, the international community is powerless to do more than hope for the best. In the face of the losses sustained by the Pakistani army, a continuation of the hostilities would have served only to weaken the army’s standing and Musharraf’s position even further. As the government still has no jurisdiction in the FATA, the only way to integrate the region into the Pakistani state in the long term is to provide support for development projects there. However, there is no certainty that this support will reduce the threat which is currently represented by the FATA. Even though Musharraf has repeatedly been criticised by the USA in the past, he may be indispensable for the moment as a partner in the American “war on terrorism.”

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