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*Taliban Insurgency in Pakistan:
A Counterinsurgency Perspective*

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Introduction

Pakistan military launched a massive offensive against Taliban groups in Malakand region of NWFP in the last week of April 2009. The operation was chosen as a last resort after the failure of two agreements of the provincial government, first with the local Taliban group, led by Mullah Fazlullah, and second with defunct Tehrik Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi (TNSM) headed by Sufi Muhammad. Taliban had refused, in violation of the agreement, to lay down their weapons even after the promulgation of the Nizam-e-Adl Regulation in the restive region. Taliban attacks on security forces including Pakistan Army, Frontier Corps (FC) and police did not stop either. Before the launch of the security operation and while the peace agreement was still intact, militants carried out 18 terrorist attacks in Swat, Dir and Buner districts of Malakand region in the month of April alone. Eight of these attacks targeted security forces, including the army and police. That was a clear indication that the militants had no respect for the peace agreement and wanted to pursue their own agenda. Indeed it was Taliban's advance into adjacent areas of Swat, mainly Buner and Shangla, which forced the government to launch an operation.

The operation in Malakand is the 15th major military operation against Taliban in NWFP and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan. Almost all previous operations had eventually ended with the government reaching a peace agreement or truce with Taliban. After every agreement, the government declared its victory. Taliban, nonetheless, used these agreements strategically to their advantage. These deals had not only consolidated their control in certain areas but also helped them make new recruitments, vital for making further advances.

The state response has been called in question throughout this counterinsurgency drive against Taliban in the country's northwestern parts. Reservations have been expressed about the state's will, capacity and the military capabilities to defeat the militants. Very few attempts, however, have been made so far at the state or non-state level to see the Taliban uprising in the counterinsurgency perspective, which is fundamental to understanding the dynamics and mechanisms of the phenomenon. Initially the Taliban were regarded as a reactionary, temporary movement, motivated and inspired by the events in Afghanistan. The Pakistani state and society were hesitant to declare it a terrorist movement despite Taliban's links with Al Qaeda. It was also seen as a religious, social reformist and political movement at different times and the state took measures accordingly. Taliban's potential to threaten and challenge the Pakistani state and society was not assessed appropriately until the situation transformed into a full-fledged insurgency, which alarmingly linked itself to regional and global violent movements.

This paper is an attempt to view the Taliban movement as an insurgent movement and analyze it within the available counterinsurgency perspectives to explore the best counterinsurgency options in the situation. Which factors shaped the movement and how the state responded to this challenge will be key questions for analysis. The paper will also examine the opportunities for the state and the inherent disadvantages and threats the

Taliban pose to it. The state's capacity to take on the insurgents will also be explored in terms of optimization of its strengths and overcoming its weaknesses. Comprehension of possible future scenarios of eventual success or failure of the counterinsurgency and its impact on the state and society will be another underlying theme.

Background

After the fall of the Taliban and dislodgement of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan in 2001, members of both sneaked into Pakistan's tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. Initially they concentrated on the South Waziristan tribal region and expanded their support base among the local tribes on ideological basis, and through money and marriages in tribal families.¹ They waged extensive guerrilla operations against the coalition troops in Afghanistan until Pakistani forces launched the Wana operation, in February 2004. The first clashes between Taliban and security forces started when Al Qaeda and the Taliban started kidnapping Americans troops and Afghan government officials. They used these captives as bargaining chips to seek the release of Taliban and Al Qaeda detainees held in Afghan prisons. The US started pressing Pakistan to stop the tribal people from helping Taliban and Al Qaeda. It also threatened to use force in Pakistan's tribal areas if the residents there were not refrained from supporting Al Qaeda and Taliban.² The Pakistani government apprised the tribal leaders of the gravity of the situation and asked them to hand over foreign militants living in their area. The demand escalated the already simmering tension.

Soon, incidents of exchange of fire started between government forces and militants/tribesmen. On September 5, 2002, a tribe in Bannu district of NWFP forced Pakistan Army to release six prisoners arrested over alleged links to Al Qaeda.³ This rang alarm bells for Pakistan Army. When a Wazir sub-tribe from Akakhel, in North Waziristan, helped Al-Qaeda fighters attack a camp of US forces across the border in Afghanistan and kidnap five US troops in July 2003, Pakistan Army launched the first major military operation against the tribes. This operation, which continued for three days, was described as a "routine military exercise" by the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR). According to tribesmen, Bannu was only used as headquarters while the real operation was carried out in Akakhel Pass against Waziri tribes who had provided shelter to the Taliban and Al-Qaeda terrorists involved in abducting US troops. The Pakistani forces secured the release of the abducted troops and sent them to Afghanistan through Bannu Airport.

At the same time, Pakistan tried to bar tribes' support for Al Qaeda and Taliban through traditional tribal means like holding jirgas and forming tribal lashkars. The first such jirga was held in August 2002 and the first armed lashkar to expel the foreigners was raised in October 2002.⁴ But the tribes made these attempts half-heartedly with a view to protect their own financial and political interests. In fact, they were inclined towards the militants and perceived them as holy warriors fighting against the infidel forces in Afghanistan. When all these efforts failed to achieve the desired results the government imposed economic sanctions on the tribes. The first response to the sanctions was very negative and militants expanded their operations to urban areas of NWFP. They launched several

attacks in Peshawar and Bannu districts. But with the passage of time the sanctions started to bite and tribal militants agreed to reconcile with the government.

The government also tried other options to resolve the issue, and at one stage it was willing to accept the foreign militants in the area by enlisting them under fake registration. When the militants intensified their activities in the tribal areas, the political administration and Pakistan Army looked for a way of rapprochement and struck several deals with them, as military operations against them had not yielded results until then. In one such agreement, reached on June 27, 2002 between the tribal chiefs and Pakistan Army, it was agreed that the houses and property of a person giving refuge to a foreigner shall be destroyed. Pakistan Army and the political administration of the tribal areas settled all the issues with tribal militants by paying huge amounts of money to them.⁵

Jirgas, lashkars, economic sanctions, registration, payment of money, use of force and even peace agreements failed to resolve the issue. Nonetheless, the primary issue of the presence of foreign militants in the tribal areas had gone in the background with the passage of time. Pakistani or local Taliban, as they are called, and who were created, sponsored and trained by Al Qaeda and Afghan Taliban, came to the forefront and emerged as the biggest challenge for the government. They also strengthened cooperation with Pakistani and Kashmir-based jihad groups and established strongholds in Bajaur, Waziristan, Mohmand, Khyber and Orakzai tribal agencies in FATA, and in Swat, Darra Adam Khel, Tank, Bannu, Mardan, Lakki Marwat and Dera Ismail Khan in NWFP. Their next destination can be Punjab and Karachi as many assessments and media reports indicate.

Taliban: An Insurgent Movement

An insurgency is usually described as “the pursuit of the policy of a party, inside a country, by every means.”⁶ The Taliban movement in Pakistani tribal areas was pursuing its agenda in a similar way. Taliban is not a distinct organization but an alliance of different groups, which have common goals but different agendas, making it a more complex phenomenon. When troops from the US and its coalition partners toppled the Taliban government in Afghanistan, there was a wave of sympathy for Taliban, especially in Pakistan’s tribal areas because of the region’s proximity with Afghanistan and ethnic and religious links. When Taliban and Al-Qaeda militants fled Afghanistan to Pakistan’s tribal areas, the local tribes provided them shelter. Militants cleverly took full advantage of the traditional tribal hospitality. As discussed earlier, confrontation between tribes and the state had started on the issue of presence of foreign militants in the tribal areas. To safeguard and justify their presence, foreign militants had encouraged the local tribes to form groups to wage jihad in Afghanistan and against those who stopped or disapproved of jihad. Religious parties, jihad groups and former “mujahideen” who had fought against Soviet troops and also served in the Taliban regime in Afghanistan from 1994 to 2001 were encouraged to form or join the local Taliban militant groups.

During the past eight years, Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan have moved strategically to gain increasing control of the frontier regions at both sides of the Pak-Afghan border. There is no credible evidence to suggest that the local (Pakistani) Taliban movement had the potential to transform into an insurgent movement until a peace deal was reached between commander Nek Muhammad and the military on March 27, 2004 which encouraged the local Taliban to enforce their 'writ' in the area. There is however sufficient evidence that the Taliban were not keen on the imposition of *Shariah* and their primary purpose was to use the slogan of jihad to recruit human resource and collect funds.⁷ Baitullah Mehsud first drew the features of his own system in the tribal areas when he first reached an agreement with the government on February 22, 2005.⁸ He had been successful in seeking assurances from the government that he would be allowed to enforce *Shariah* in the area in exchange for not sending his militants to Afghanistan. He did not abide by the agreement. At the same time, the pact helped the Taliban move forward to establish their control in some of the areas. Other Taliban groups followed in his footsteps and formulated a four-point strategy to gain control over an area. It was a milestone for the movement, which provided it an ideological, moral and social 'cause'. The cause is always considered vital for an insurgent movement. It provides an identity to the movement and separates it from criminal syndicates.

Under Baitullah's four-point strategy, his fighters took steps against criminals and started collecting "taxes" to speed up their operations. Secondly, they killed or forced out influential tribal elders, who they knew could challenge their authority. Thirdly, they created a parallel justice system as a dispute resolution mechanism dispensing prompt justice.⁹ Only in Bajaur Agency, one Taliban court had registered 1,400 cases until August 2008 and decided 1,000 out of them.¹⁰ Finally, they organized their administration where they appointed their trusted men.¹¹ The Taliban also contributed to the welfare of the local population to gain their sympathies. In June 2008, Taliban in South Waziristan established a fund to help the victims of the military operation and distributed 15 million rupees among the locals.¹²

Their strategy eroded the traditional concept of collective responsibility, which adversely affected the political administration. Other actors who could create any ideological or tactical challenge for the Taliban were treated harshly, especially non-governmental organizations and formal and modern educational institutions. Taliban groups imposed a ban on NGOs, targeted CD shops and attacked educational institutions, especially girls' schools. From January to May 2008, they attacked 29 schools, of which 17 were girls' educational institutions.¹³ Until February 2007, the Taliban had killed 61 teachers¹⁴ and 25 local and foreign NGOs had been forced to return to Islamabad halting their operations.¹⁵ Dozens of alleged US and Pakistan government spies had been killed.¹⁶

The process of Talibanization in the tribal areas was gradual and they were successful in establishing parallel justice and administrative systems. Taliban leaders' statements suggested that their agenda was to enforce their system not only in FATA or NWFP but all

over the country. The Taliban matured into a full-fledged insurgent movement within four to five years.

The span, pattern and movement of the Taliban insurgency have characteristics similar to a civil war or a revolutionary struggle. It has been as explosive upheaval, spontaneous as the revolutionary movements of China in 1911, and Hungary in 1956 and divisive as the civil war of the America, which split the nation into two blocks.

The Taliban insurgency remained violent, organized and structured on tribal basis. That was the reason that Taliban failed to manipulate its cause in urban areas.

Advantages to Taliban

A range of diverse factors shaped the contours of Taliban insurgency and helped them expand their networks and influence.

Militancy Landscape

The tribal areas demonstrated strong resistance against the British in the 18th century and provided strong basis for radical movements of Syed Ahmed Shaheed in India. Syed's armed movement against Sikh rule in Punjab was aimed at establishing an Islamic state on the principles of Sheikh Abdul Wahhab Najdi, and got remarkable momentum in the tribal areas. After the British occupation of India, it changed into a movement against British rule and remained active until the British rule ended in 1947. Bajaur, Khyber and Mohmand agencies were the strongholds of the Syed movement at that time.¹⁷ The Taliban claim the same legacy and manipulate tribesmen for their cause.

At the same time overall jihad atmosphere in Pakistan was favorable for them. There were 104 violent jihadi and 82 sectarian groups of varying strength operating in Pakistan before September 9, 2001.¹⁸ All of them had come into being in the 1980s and 1990s. The Afghan-Soviet war and the insurgency in Indian-held Kashmir had further nurtured these groups. These groups had ties with regional and international terrorist organizations and shared multiple agendas and ideologies. After 9/11, the number of these organizations shrank in mainland Pakistan and Kashmir to 21 jihad and 39 sectarian groups.¹⁹ But the number of militant groups grew in FATA and NWFP where more than 50 local Taliban and many other violent religious groups came into being within just six years.²⁰

Many of these organizations had networks in the tribal areas and, as the local Taliban movement emerged, members of these groups joined its ranks or formed their own Taliban groups. Maulana Masood Azhar, head of banned Jaish-e-Muhammad considers this phenomenon was the outcome of banning of jihad groups. He wrote in a weekly publication:²¹

Many [Taliban] commanders fighting in Swat today were once affiliated with the faithful, spiritual and ethical system of Jaish-e-Muhammad and they were not allowed to hurt any Muslim but when the

government banned Jaish they parted ways with the organization and became local and regional militant commanders. It is a fallout of banning the jihad groups in Pakistan.

The existing militant landscape made Taliban's job of setting up new groups easy. Local Taliban groups adopted similar structures and followed tactics of jihad groups for recruitments, fund-raising and spreading influence through propaganda and media campaign. Existing militant networks across the country provided them not only the support base but also resources and logistics to spread their terrorist operations across the country. Al Qaeda and other foreign terrorist groups, especially comprising the Uzbeks and Tajiks, proved to be tactical and strategic assets for Taliban to enhance their operational capabilities.

Cross-Tribal Characteristics

The Taliban encouraged different tribes to form their own Taliban-affiliated militias. Initially, groups joining the Taliban were mostly from the Wazir sub-tribes, which made other tribes reluctant to join the Taliban ranks since they feared Wazir domination. The Taliban, however, changed their strategy and gave other tribes equal status. As a result, now most tribes in FATA have their own Taliban-affiliated militias. It allows Taliban to base their movement in the masses and establish separate local Taliban cells, thus reducing the organizational burden and creating strategic problems for the Pakistani military establishment in launching operations where they are forced to target their "own" people.

The Taliban's initial success across the Pak-Afghan border rested mainly on two basic ingredients of support—Pashtun ethnicity and religious ethos. Being Pashtun they had the convenience of a common language, Pashtun human force, *Hanafi* Islam, fundamentalist sympathizers, and well-established financial and educational institutions already at hand. In addition to the popular perceptions of the Taliban as the religious movement driven by the zeal of Islamic fundamentalism, the ethnic undertones of the movement cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to the analysis of its social support base. For the ethnic minorities, the Taliban was both a symbol of Islamic conservatism as well as a reflection of Pashtun chauvinism.²²

The Cause

The basic need for an insurgent is an attractive cause.²³ Through the cause he can transform his formidable asset into concrete strength. Without an attractive cause an insurgent is little more than part of a criminal syndicate. Galula argues that the 1945-50 Communist insurgency in Greece failed because of the lack of a cause. The cause provides a support base for an insurgent movement and Taliban successfully manipulated their 'cause'. If we look deep into Taliban movement different shades of ideologies, mainly sectarian and political, can easily be traced. But the main 'cause' of Taliban groups is based on the teachings of the Deobandi school of thought in Islam. Initially, they gained the sympathies of the public without sectarian discrimination. The short-term cause of the Taliban was to liberate Afghanistan from US-led occupation forces through jihad and to

enforce a new social, political and economic order based on their ideology or interpretation of Islam. The long-term cause is to drive out the “infidel forces” from all Muslim lands. They associate their identity with the various Islamic movements across the world and disapprove of geographical barriers.

An average Muslim cannot disagree with this diversified cause and especially when they include anti-imperialism in it, the people conceive it as a revolutionary movement. The Taliban tactically manipulated that agenda. The religious political parties who are part of the mainstream electoral process and also the moderate Islamic scholars encounter difficulty in countering Taliban on the ideological front.

Political / Structural Milieu

The Taliban had effectively taken advantage of the lack of governance and political participation in the tribal areas. The political, administrative and structural flaws present in the tribal areas provided the justification for and sustainability to the Taliban movement and allowed them to introduce a system similar to Afghan Taliban’s.

According to Article 247 of the Constitution of Pakistan, FATA comes under the executive authority of the Federation. FATA has been divided administratively into seven political units or agencies – Bajaur, Mohmand, Khyber, Orakzai, Kurram, and North and South Waziristan – and into four Frontier Regions (FRs), Peshawar, Kohat, Bannu, and D.I. Khan, the last one further divided into FR D.I. Khan and FR Tank. Likewise, FR Bannu has been reconstituted as FR Bannu and FR Lakki. The administrative and judicial business of the tribal areas is run through Frontier Crime Regulations (FCR), which were introduced by the British in 1901. Most of the political parties, tribal people and experts see the FCR as a mass of black laws denying fundamental rights to the tribal people. Some of the draconian provisions in the FCR include seizure/confiscation of property and arrest and detention of an individual without due process, barring a person in the tribal areas from entering the settled districts (Section 21); removing a person from his residence/locality (Section 36); imposition of fine on the entire community for crimes of an individual (sections 22, 23); prohibition on erecting village, walled enclosures and their demolition (sections 31-33);²⁴ demolition of a house or building on suspicion of being used or populated by thieves or dacoits (Section 34); fines on relatives of a criminal and realization of fines by selling his property (Section 56); and, no right to go to courts against the political agent’s decision (Section 60), etc.²⁵

The administrative structure in FATA has broken down, as has the institutional structure. A ‘political agent’ (civil servant) manages administration in each agency of FATA, and is answerable to the NWFP Governor. He keeps links with the tribes through Maliks, who are influential tribal elders. The Taliban have now made this administrative system ineffective by killing several Maliks and threatening the political agents. As a result no one seems ‘responsible’ for the security situation. Swat is an interesting example in this regard. Former Ambassador Dr Humayun Khan mentions:²⁶

In 1997 there was no court system in Malakand, and Shariah-cum-Riwaj (a blend of Islamic and customary laws) system existed there. It took 5-10 years for the government to establish district courts. The recent agreement with Sufi Muhammad has again made those district courts irrelevant. People are forced to think that the government cannot control and safeguard its institutions and is simply surrendering to extremists.

The security operations by army and paramilitary forces in FATA and parts of NWFP against Taliban since 2004, nonetheless, have raised many questions regarding the significance of ensuring the transitional judicial system for the civilian population affected by the security operations and clashes between security forces and the militants. The tribal people have continuously demanded compensation for the casualties they suffered and damages to their properties. The government has been unable to secure people's lives and properties, and provide them expeditious justice. At the same time, many criminal groups also operate in these areas, who remain at large after looting, robbing, kidnapping and even killing people. There have been little by way of rehabilitation efforts after the collapse of the state's capacity to provide security and justice to its people. These structural flaws created space for Taliban who were offering parallel security and judicial systems to the people by establishing parallel "courts" in almost all parts of FATA and some areas of settled districts in NWFP.

Tribal people in FATA remain deprived of their political rights. The sense of political deprivation and lack of participation has also created the feeling among the tribal people that they do not have a stake in the state and has resulted in a weak state-society relationship.

In this perspective Taliban were clever enough to not only exploit inherent structural weaknesses in the tribal political and administrative system but also erode it further. It further proved productive for Taliban to provoke the deep-rooted class divisions in the tribal society where many people started perceiving Taliban as their saviors.

Tactical / Strategic Edge

The Taliban insurgency is an asymmetric conflict. The movement has a well-defined ideological inspiration, logistic support from international terrorist groups and uses terrorism to achieve objectives which can be summarized as follows:

1. To destabilize state's security apparatus so that people should look towards the Taliban for protection.
2. To force the government not to interfere in Taliban-controlled areas so that they can continue their activities unhindered.
3. To force the government to bring some structural changes in laws or the constitution, or to bring a new system according to the Taliban agenda.

Some of the Taliban groups have sectarian agendas especially against *Shias* and Sufi followers. They are also well connected with global terrorist groups, like Al Qaeda, which

have even more dangerous agendas of destabilizing or toppling the government to capture territory.

Until 2004, the main focus of Pakistani Taliban was on protecting foreign militants, recruiting for the war in Afghanistan, training them, and securing their position against security operations. Their main strategic victory that made them the major player in the area, however, came after a tactical change in their operations: they began kidnapping security and state officials. Although suicide attacks on security forces played a role in demoralizing the security forces, the kidnapping strategy elevated the Taliban to a position where they could negotiate with the government on their terms and could bargain for the release of arrested militants as well. Independent sources estimate that the Taliban kidnapped more than 1,000 security force personnel and state officials during 2007, and in return more than 500 militants were released. Kidnappings were a major factor behind the peace talks between the government and the Taliban.

Dynamic leadership was another strategic advantage for the Taliban; especially leaders like slain Nek Muhammad, Abdullah Mehsud and now Baitullah Mehsud and Maulana Fazlullah. Baitullah, whose leadership qualities were once questioned by the supreme Taliban leadership, has succeeded in forming an umbrella organization of all Taliban groups, which is known as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).²⁷

The TTP has provided shelter to smaller groups, which are working under the command of Baitullah. He is trying to bond all of these groups under the banner of Mullah Omar, the Afghan Taliban's supreme leader. Every group that wishes to join the TTP must take an oath of commitment to *Shariah* enforcement and loyalty to Omar.²⁸

The TTP has imposed conditions on all affiliated groups to contribute 50% of their income (through "taxes" and donations) to a major "jihad fund." The fund is used to sustain Taliban activities in the tribal areas and in Afghanistan.²⁹ These small groups, which are mostly operating in Mohmand and Orakzai agencies in FATA and Tank, Bannu and other settled areas of NWFP, are getting involved in criminal activities, especially killings, kidnapping for ransom and taxes on transport and trade to achieve their financial targets. Mehsud's opponents—both outside and inside Taliban circles—fear his increasing influence and are too weak to challenge him. Even the political administration and tribal elders cannot afford to deny his authority in North and South Waziristan. The same situation is prevailing in other agencies of FATA, where Baitullah's allies enjoy the same powers.

Taliban have remained resolute enough in pursuing their strategy of propaganda and ideological propagation. They have well-defined targets in pursuance of imposition of their "Islamic code of life." And they are trying to convince people in the name of religion and ethnicity, offering temptations and deterring them from standing by the 'enemy'. They are not willing to tolerate their self-perceived 'ideological enemies' which can be put into two broad categories: first, people following and supporting "un-Islamic practices," and secondly "infidels and their friends".

Counterinsurgency Perspective

An insurgent movement cannot grow without some sort of protection. David Galula, an expert on counterinsurgent strategies raises a question: who protects the insurgent? While analyzing the factors he finds in many cases that counterinsurgent himself protects the insurgent.³⁰ Although Galula mainly focuses on the communist insurgencies but his study is also worthwhile with reference to the Taliban insurgency and similar factors can be traced in counterinsurgent policies. He pins down some of the major factors, which nurture the insurgent movements and which are very relevant to the Taliban insurgency:

- i) **Absence of problem:** When an insurgency starts taking shape, states fail to access the potential of the threat and try to ignore it or misjudge the problem.

That happened in the case of Taliban also. When the movement was emerging in the tribal areas, the state continued pretending it was not a major issue and could be overcome anytime. The state always assumes that ‘small violent groups’ cannot undermine and/or challenge its authority. But when a movement or group has a cause it should be considered a serious issue.

- ii) **National consensus:** Not only the state but also the people live in a fallacy that the writ of state cannot be challenged. The other related problem arises when the state wants to take measures to overcome the insurgency in its initial stage and lacks an undecided public’s backing. But the solidity of a regime is primarily based upon this factor and without national consensus no counterinsurgent strategy can be successful. Sri Lanka is a recent example of a state’s plans to overcome the insurgents not taking off until it managed to build a national consensus to defeat them.
- iii) **Resoluteness of the counterinsurgent leadership:** Determination of the counterinsurgent leadership is considered to be a major factor in any conflict because: a) the insurgent has the initial benefit of a dynamic cause; and, b) an insurgency does not emerge suddenly as a national danger and the people’s reaction against it is slow. Consequently, the role of the counterinsurgent leaders is paramount.³¹ This factor was very visible in the Taliban case and the political and military leadership were not as resolute as they should have been and very few attempts were made to develop a national consensus on the issue.
- iv) **Counterinsurgent leaders’ knowledge of counterinsurgency warfare:** Galula argues that “it is not enough for the counterinsurgent leaders to be resolute; they must also be aware of the strategy and tactics required in fighting an insurgency.” Initially, the Pakistani armed forces lacked the resolve and fighting capability. They had religious and ethnic considerations and were fighting under great psychological stress. Apart from this constraint, the armed forces were mainly trained in conventional warfare and the fight against rebels required a different strategy.
- v) **Cost and benefit:** The insurgent has more warfare and tactical advantages compared to the counterinsurgent. Since the insurgent alone can initiate the conflict, he is free to choose his hour, to wait safely for a favorable situation, unless external factors force him to accelerate his move.³² The insurgency is inexpensive to create but very costly to prevent³³. The insurgent is fluid because he has neither

responsibility nor concrete assets. He also benefits from propaganda and has a strategic advantage over counterinsurgents (*See comparison chart*).

A comparison of Cost and Benefit between Insurgents and Counterinsurgents

No	Insurgent: Taliban	Counterinsurgent: State
1	Cost Inexpensive	Costly
2	Fluidity Has no responsibility & no concrete assets	Rigidity The state has both
3	Power of Ideology	Ideological handicap
4	Propaganda Free to use every trick Not obliged to prove claims Primary agenda	Tied to responsibilities Judged on action not words Secondary agenda
5	Strategic Free to choose time and place Free to choose target Initiate civil war when strength acquired Operate in small guerrilla groups	Bound Answerable for collateral damage Try to avoid civil war Trained in conventional warfare

vi) **The counterinsurgency tools:** The political structure, the administrative bureaucracy, the police and the armed forces are the key instruments to control an insurgency. The Taliban took advantage of lack of political mainstreaming and weak and ruthless administration in the tribal areas. The police or local security forces like Khasadars, Levies and Frontier Constabulary could not help evolve a security mechanism until there was political resoluteness and an effective administrative system. The lack of the first security cover of the police makes the job of the armed forces difficult and most of their energies are consumed to develop alternative apparatus in the insurgency-hit areas. This was the reason why the state applied the traditional tactics of jirgas, lashkars, selective operations and peace agreements, but these attempts did not prove fruitful. The peace deals strengthened the hands of Taliban and writ of the state weakened further. Military operations have resulted in the expansion of Taliban and produced a bigger pool of militants.³⁴ On the other hand, the Taliban know exactly how to target and weaken the domestic opposition against them. The state has also used a strategy to support some Taliban groups,

such as those led by Mullah Nazir and Hafiz Gul Bahadar in South Waziristan, to divide them but that was based on a shaky rationale.

- vii) **Geographic conditions:** “Geography can weaken the strongest political regime or strengthen the weakest one.”³⁵ In the tribal areas, Taliban hold geographical advantages, as they are familiar with the mountainous terrain and the climate. The large pool of insurgents and their presence among the civilian population makes counterinsurgency operations difficult. But counterinsurgency becomes more complex if it erupts in the border areas and gets external moral or political support. In Taliban’s case, they have no moral or political support from neighboring states. But the insurgents get connected with smugglers and mafias in the border regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan and have support from international terrorist networks, which makes the situation as difficult as that of an insurgency that is getting external help. Significantly, when an insurgency becomes the field of covert wars of different international and regional spy agencies and players, it distracts the counterinsurgent and the focus shifts from countering the insurgency to countering covert wars. Pakistan has reservation over the presence of Indian consulates in Afghanistan near the Pakistani border and the hostile attitude of Kabul towards Islamabad. The issue is linked to geo-strategic interests in the region.
- viii) **Geo-strategic perspective and ‘strategic assets’:** Another important and unique factor in the counterinsurgency in the tribal areas is the geo-strategic perspective of Pakistan and neighboring states. This is another factor which has been undermining the state’s counterinsurgency efforts, and insurgents and counterinsurgents have remained unclear on how long the security operations would continue. Indeed insurgents have mostly remained consistent and inflexible in advancement of their cause but counterinsurgents have got confused in evaluating the geo-strategic disadvantages of eliminating the insurgents. Before 9/11, Pakistani policy-makers considered the Taliban a strategic asset and even after 9/11 they were reluctant to dispose off these assets. There were many arguments and perceptions to sustain this option: a) The US was not serious in eliminating resistance in Afghanistan and wanted to prolong its stay in that country; b) the Pakistani government also found that the trouble in Balochistan was being sponsored by India on US encouragement. It was in this context that the Taliban became assets for the Pakistani establishment; c) There is a perception that the US, India, Afghanistan and other countries are also using many Taliban groups as strategic assets to destabilize Pakistan. Barrent Rubin and Ahmed Rasheed argue:³⁶

Pakistani security establishment believes that it faces a US-Indian-Afghan alliance and a separate Iranian-Russia alliance, each aimed at undermining Pakistani influence in Afghanistan and even dismembering the Pakistani state. Some, but not all, in the establishment see armed militants within Pakistan as a threat but they largely consider it one that is ultimately controllable.

Despite these arguments the US focus in the region remained on the elimination of Al Qaeda, from whom it perceived internal threat, and largely ignored the broader insurgency, which remained marginal until 2005.³⁷

Counterinsurgents’ Challenges and Options

- 1) **Built-in disadvantages in Taliban insurgency:** The Taliban have four major disadvantages, which the counterinsurgent can exploit. At the same time these

disadvantages are barring the Taliban movement from getting converted into a revolutionary movement.

- a) Taliban have failed to establish any political agenda in line with the mainstream political system. They are against democratic system and there are few chances that the Taliban would morph into a populist political movement. Even the religious political parties denounce Taliban's anti-democratic agenda, which has kept them alienated from the urban population.
- b) Sectarian differences among Taliban ranks and the Deobandi tag on the movement are significant factor isolating the insurgency from the mainstream religious community and keeping it confined to specific areas.
- c) Taliban are also divided on ethnic lines and attempts by some Taliban leaders to bind them into 'Islamic brotherhood' have not been successful so far. Tribal differences cause mistrust, and further divisions occur at clan level. At the same time, Taliban do not represent all the tribes. In fact, they have cut themselves off from the main tribes and values.
- d) The system that they want to impose in the areas under their control or in the country lacks wide appeal. It is not supported even by the prominent religious scholars and religious political parties. This factor undermines Taliban efforts to win popular support for their system.
- e) Their involvement in terrorist activities is making them unpopular.

It depends on the counterinsurgent or the state how it manipulates insurgents' disadvantage in its favor. But the task requires vision, will and capacity and so far there are no signs that the state is successfully playing on this tactical front.

2) Strategic level: Galula suggests a few general principles for the counterinsurgent in a selected area.³⁸ Many of these are already in practice and some need attention of the policy-makers.

- a. Concentrate enough armed forces to destroy the main body of armed insurgents.
- b. Detach for the area sufficient troops to oppose an insurgent network in strength, install these troops in hamlets, villages and towns where the population lives.
- c. Establish contact with the population and control its movements in order to cut off its links with the guerrillas.
- d. To undermine the political influence of insurgents, empower local political forces, make administrative and judicial mechanisms smooth and effective.
- e. Engage the local authorities by assigning them various concrete tasks. Replace the soft and the incompetent; give full support to the active leader. Organize self-defense units, such as lashkars, in the tribal areas.
- f. The operation should be irreversible and should continue until the last insurgent element is won over or suppressed.
- g. "An insurgent war is 20 percent military action and 80 percent political is a formula that reflect the truth."³⁹ In this perspective, the political leadership (not only the government but also the opposition) needs to show commitment and should realize the gravity of the situation. Due to the lack of continuity of elected governments and military dictatorships, the military leadership has obligations to help and strengthen the political government's efforts.

- h. Ideological response is important but the most important factor is winning the hearts and minds of the people in the insurgency-hit areas. This can be done through the collaborative efforts of the state and civil society.

3) Terrorism front: The international and local terrorist groups, who have association with Taliban insurgents and use their terrorist cells, are changing their targets and tactics rapidly. As has been observed in the first quarter of 2009, terrorists have applied different new tactics in their terrorist operations in Pakistan, especially in attacks carried out in Lahore, provincial headquarters of the Punjab province.

It is imperative to develop improved counter-terrorism strategies not only at the level of enhancing the security forces' capacity, but also a coordinated intelligence surveillance system. Incoherent efforts by various intelligence agencies not only badly impact the security situation, they also spoil their efficiency, effectiveness and impact on their capabilities. There is a need to build Pakistani intelligence agencies' capacity and ensure better coordination among various agencies and law enforcement departments.

4) Regional and global perspective

As discussed earlier, the insurgency in the tribal areas has a regional dimension as well. Not only are Pakistan's strategic interests at stake but regional and global powers also want to secure their interests in the area. In short, the key issues of conflict are:

- a. Pakistan wants a friendly government in Kabul because Afghanistan had created a lot of trouble for Pakistan in the past. Kabul directly remained involved in provoking separatist and nationalist movements in Balochistan and NWFP until the 1980s. At that time India was on the same page with Afghanistan and had good intelligence and strategic coordination with Kabul. Afghanistan again seems more committed to strategic cooperation with India. The Indian and Afghan involvement in Balochistan and in Pakistan's tribal areas has Islamabad perplexed on whether to treat the insurgents as enemies or assets.
- b. Pakistan had not made comprehensive diplomatic efforts to take the international community into confidence to secure its strategic interests and depended on non-conventional tactics.
- c. The nature of US-Iran, US-China, Central Asian and the Russia-West interests is very complex. These conflicting interests have a direct bearing on stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan and both states are perplexed on how to secure their strategic, internal security and economic interests. This also creates bilateral misunderstandings, which leads to further confrontation.
- d. The international community, particularly the United States views the situation through its internal security threat prism, but Pakistan wants the US to see the issue in its regional context and fix the problem on a permanent basis.
- e. Pakistan faces double-edged media propaganda; internally and externally. The popular national press is very critical of Pakistan's counterinsurgency collaboration with the US and the West. On the other hand, the international press is skeptical about Islamabad's operational efforts. The national and international media are oversimplifying the complex nature of the insurgency and its regional dimensions.

This is fueling misperceptions among the international community about the issue and hurts Pakistan's diplomatic efforts to find a comprehensive solution.

Pakistan was hopeful that US President Barak Obama would address the issue in the broader regional perspective in his new AfPak policy. But the US put further liabilities on Pakistan while not taking any concrete step except the announcement of a regional contact group. The central purpose of the contact group as suggested and agreed by many American and Pakistani think tanks includes reassuring Pakistan that all international stakeholders will show their commitment to its territorial integrity and to help resolve Afghan and Kashmir border issues to better define Pakistan's territory.⁴⁰ It was also expected that India would be urged to become more transparent about its activities in Afghanistan, especially regarding the role of its intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW).⁴¹

The world is demanding more from Pakistan and not showing any commitment to safeguarding Pakistan's interests. Pakistan must continue its counterinsurgency efforts, not least because its internal security and stability is at stake but because of diplomatic and regional strategic and economic interests as well. The political leadership should make sincere and more coordinated efforts to build a consensus on the issue. The real test would be for the diplomatic corps to convince the international community on regional conflicts, which are hurting global interests. The best strategic, operational and political counterinsurgency measures can throw the ball in the international community's court to also 'do more' for its part.

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²⁰ As many as 40 groups have joined Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) headed by Baitullah Mehsud. Other major groups who are still keeping their independent integrity are Lashkar-e-Islami in Khyber Agency, Qari Gul Bahadar in North Waziristan, Maulvi Nazir in South Waziristan, Dr. Ismail group in Bajaur and local militants in Dara Adam Khel. See Chart 1 for major groups.

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²⁷ After the assassination of Taliban leader Nek Muhammad in 2004, Baitullah took charge as the operational commander, but the Taliban Supreme Council replaced him with Abdullah Mehsud. For details see *Al-Qaeda Fights Back inside Pakistani Tribal Areas*.

²⁸ This information is drawn from interviews from sources in the tribal areas.

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Annex

Taliban Groups in Tribal Areas

No	Name	Sect	Tribe	Head	Area of Concentration
1	Baitullah Group	Deobandi	Mehsud	Baitullah Mehsud	SWA ⁴¹
2	Shehryar Group	Deobandi	Mehsud	Shehryar Mehsud	SWA
3	Said Alam Group		Mehsud	Said Alam	SWA
4	Mullah Nazir Group	Deobandi	Ahmadzai Wazir	Mullah Nazir	SWA
5	Abbas Group	Deobandi	Ahmadzai Wazir	Commander Abbas	SWA
6	Noor Islam Group	Deobandi	Ahmadzai Wazir	Noor Islam	SWA
7	Haji Sharif Group	Deobandi	Ahmadzai Wazir	Haji Sharif	SWA
8	Haji Omer Group	Deobandi	Ahmadzai Wazir	Haji Omer	SWA
9	Ghulam Jan Group	Deobandi	Ahmadzai Wazir	Ghulam Jan	SWA
10	Javed Group	Deobandi	Karmazkhel Wazir	Commander Javed	SWA
11	Awal Khan Group	Deobandi	Bhittani	Commander Awal Khan	Jandola, SWA
10	Angaar Group	Deobandi			
11	Bhittani Group	Deobandi	Bhittani	Asmaatullah Saheen	Jundola, SWA

12	Gul Bahadar Group	Deobandi	Utmanzai Wazir	Qari Gul Bahadar	NWA ⁴¹
13	Daur Group	Deobandi	Daur	Sadiq Noor	NWA
14	Khaliq Haqani	Deobandi	Daur	Abdul Khaliq Haqani	NWA
15	Wahidullah	Deobandi	Utmanzai Wazir	Wahidullah	Spalga, NWA
16	Saifullah Group	Deobandi	Turi khel, Utmanzai Wazir	Commander Saifullah	NWA
17	Abdul Rehman Group	Deobandi	Daur	Abdul Rehman	Mirali, NWA
18	Manzoor Group	Deobandi	Daur	Commander Manzoor	Eidaq, NWA
19	Haleem Group	Deobandi	Daur	Haleem Khan	Mirali, NWA
20	Maulvi Faqir Group of TSNM	Deobandi	Mamond	Maulvi Faqir	Bajaur
21	Tehrik Jaish Islami Pakistan	Deobandi	Bajaur	Commander Waliur Rehman	Bajaur Agency
22	Karawan Naimatullah	Deobandi	Bajaur	Haji Naimatullah	Bajaur Agency
23	Dr. Ismail Group	Jamaat-i-Islami	Bajaur	Dr Ismail	Bajaur Agency
24	Maulana Abdullah Group	Deobandi	Bajaur	Maulana Abdullah	Utamzai, sub-District Bajaur

25	Omer Group	Deobandi	Qandhari sub tribe of Safi Tribe	Omer Khalid Group	Mohmand Agency
26	Sha Sahib Group	Ahle Hadiath	Mohmand		Lakaro area, Mohmand Agency



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