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Taliban stuck between anvil and hammer

By Brian M Downing
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In February, the government of [Pakistan](#) and the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) came to an agreement whereby the government accepted the latter's imposition of Islamic law in parts of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) in exchange for a ceasefire. Few thought the agreement would last long and indeed it soon fell apart - because of government support for US Predator drone strikes, according to TTP leader Baitullah Mehsud. This raises new questions about the future of Pakistan and US/North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) operations in Afghanistan.

On announcing the end of the agreement, Mehsud sent his bands south, toward the political and military centers of Islamabad and Rawalpindi. In so doing, he let passion override strategy and badly damaged the TTP cause. Their thrust into the Punjab heartland accomplished what has only rarely and ephemerally happened in Pakistan: agreement between civilian and military leadership. The rancorous politicians and generals saw the sortie as a challenge to the existence of Pakistan, and struck back.

Guerrilla forces like the TTP are effective in insurgencies and inter-tribal warfare, but success can give rise to senses of destiny and invincibility. In going on the offensive toward Islamabad, the TTP had to forego the advantages of insurgents and, to some extent, fight in a conventional manner. They had to concentrate forces, hold positions and organize supply systems - often in areas where they did not have local support or intimate knowledge of terrain. Such quixotic attacks play into the hands of all but the most inept conventional armies and lead to failure, as the Afghani Taliban learned in its 2007 offensive, as did the Vietcong in the 1968 Tet Offensive in [Vietnam](#).

Mehsud's attack also turned large portions of the Pakistani public against them. Many Pakistanis were amenable to tribal autonomy and even Islamic law in parts of the NWFP. After all, the government presence there had never been strong, not even during British rule, and the affairs of Pashtun tribes up in the mountains were of little interest. But the TTP's drive into Punjab threatened many Pakistanis who, regardless of comfort with secularization, had little affinity with harsh interpreters of Islam. Attendant images of the TTP's idea of

justice brought widespread concern that Pakistan might be in danger.

The frontier has long been marked by warfare, but it was almost always tribal warfare - a form of conflict circumscribed by custom to limit death and destruction. Led by a young visionary, not tribal elders, the TTP bring an almost limitless idea of warfare that has occasionally jarred the frontier, wreaking havoc on villages and tribal systems alike and portending convulsive but unknowable change.

TTP support is localized - South Waziristan, the Swat Valley, and a few other pockets. But their sortie brought war to disinterested areas and not all the blame for destruction fell on the government. In recent days, tribal councils have been pressing for the TTP's withdrawal from their regions.

Neither popular support for war on fellow Pakistanis nor an agreement between government and army can be relied on to last. Anti-[United States](#) sentiment is strong and nears the intensity reserved for [India](#). Of particular concern is the response of Islamist personnel in the army and Frontier Corps, whose affinities with the TTP may conflict with professional discipline and lead to balks or worse.

Political-military cooperation and public opinion allow the opportunity to pursue a counter-insurgency program in parts of the NWFP, perhaps only in the Swat Valley. Such a program would likely violate constitutional principles or at least long-standing customs in the tribal agencies, and some areas are likely beyond reclamation from the TTP for now. Some army and security forces will remain in towns and villages to keep the TTP at bay, help local police develop intelligence networks and protect development programs that will ensue.

The government would do well to use foreign aid to bring government services to Swat. Development programs and medical-veterinary services are straightforward, but the matter of schools presents critical opportunities.

Madrasahs (seminaries) have been boot camps for insurgents on both sides of the frontier ever since the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s when foreign money poured into their coffers. They continue to supply insurgents but in many regions they are the only means of education and advancement. An alternate school system could build rapport between government and society and reduce the number of insurgent recruits as well.

Land reform presents another opportunity. Islamist insurgencies are usually based on religious passion, armed intimidation or hostility to a foreign presence. The TTP, however, have mobilized support from those lacking economic opportunity and their own land to till. As with education, the government can make headway against a TTP resurgence by pushing through land reform over the objections of landlords.

For now, the TTP is being driven back and may be in full [retreat](#). Pakistani reports provide casualty figures that are unreliable if not fantastic, but the TTP has undoubtedly been unable to hold ground or inflict high casualties on government forces.

Reports from Afghanistan indicate an influx of TTP fighters, especially in Kunar province just west of the Swat Valley. Bloodied by their foray into the Punjab, the TTP will add numbers to the Afghani Taliban offensive, which is what the Pakistani government wanted when it made the short-lived agreement in February. Whether the TTP have lost their reckless

zeal or will forge a lasting agreement with Islamabad is unclear.

US/NATO forces may seek to drive the TTP back across the frontier, re-engaging them with Pakistani forces and perhaps precluding another short-lived agreement. Caught between a hammer and anvil, the TTP may find negotiating - and abiding by - a settlement to its benefit - perhaps one leaving them latitude in one or more of the tribal agencies. And the US/NATO side will have stripped away one part of the insurgency along the Durand Line.