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Why the Taliban won't take over Pakistan

For reasons of geography, ethnicity, military inferiority, and ancient rivalries, they represent neither the immediate threat that is often portrayed nor the inevitable victors that the West fears.

By Ben Arnoldy
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It has become the statistic heard round the world. The Taliban are within 60 miles of Islamabad. Just 60 miles. Every dispatch about the insurgents' recent advance into the Pakistani district of Buner carried the ominous number.

Washington quivered, too. A top counterinsurgency expert, David Kilcullen, reiterated that Pakistan could collapse within six months. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said flatly if the country were to fall, the Taliban would have the "keys to the nuclear arsenal." On a visit to Islamabad, Sen. John Kerry – the proctor of \$7.5 billion in Pakistani aid as head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee – warned bluntly: "The government has to ratchet up the urgency."

The Pakistani military did launch a major counteroffensive that has sent 2 million people fleeing their homes. For now, both the US and many Pakistanis appear to be relieved that the military has drawn a line at least somewhere, in this case in the fruit orchards of the Swat Valley and the city of Mingora, north of Islamabad.

Yet Pakistani analysts and officials here caution that the *casus belli* of all the commotion – the infamous 60 miles and the threat of an imminent Taliban takeover – is overblown. The Visigoths are not about to overrun the gates of Rome. Bearded guys with fistfuls of AK-47s are not poised to breeze into Islamabad on the back of white Toyota pickups.

True, the Taliban threat remains serious. By one estimate, the militants maintain a presence in more than 60 percent of northwestern Pakistan and control significant sections along the Afghan border. Moreover, the possibility of the insurgents one day getting their hands on

nuclear material remains the ultimate horror – it would probably be more ominous than the Cuban missile crisis.

But experts note that, even if the current operation by the Pakistani military stalls, or the Taliban return to areas they've been ousted from, the insurgents may not significantly expand their footprint in the country anytime soon. For reasons of geography, ethnicity, military inferiority, and ancient rivalries, they represent neither the immediate threat that is often portrayed nor the inevitable victors that the West fears.

"The Americans have become paranoid about Pakistan," says Talat Masood, a retired Pakistani military general. "They are losing their objectivity, and I think they need a reality check."

A planned city built in the 1960s, Islamabad is a strikingly modern South Asian metropolis. Broad streets lie along a spacious, uncluttered grid filled with trees. Nearby, its sister city, Rawalpindi, is more a reflection of old Pakistan but serves as its protectorate: It is the headquarters of the world's seventh-largest army.

One of the biggest houses in "Pindi" goes to the chief of Army staff. Clustered near the military compound are tony neighborhoods where retired generals live. Colonels, majors, and businessmen mingle in upper-middle-class enclaves, and farther away rise the starter homes of the lieutenants.

The elite area features a commercial center with a movie theater showing, at the moment, "Fast & Furious IV," as well as a big-box store and a McDonald's. Sitting on a bench, a young Pakistani businessman dressed in jeans laughs at the question of a Taliban takeover. "No," says Omar Ali with incredulity. "Do you think the Taliban are going to take over Washington?"

If it sounds as if Mr. Ali lives in a world far removed from the Taliban, it's because he does, literally and figuratively. The drive from McDonald's to the mountain hamlets of Buner, where the Taliban are trying to gain a sandal hold, takes about four hours. It may be 60 miles as the drone flies, but it's double that by pickup truck.

The M1 Motorway heading out of the capital starts like an American Interstate highway – three divided lanes in each direction, manicured on and off ramps. Take an exit toward Buner and soon the pavement grows intermittent, as does the sight of any women in public view.

Eventually, a bridge spans the rock-strewn Indus River. Historically, this has marked a significant divide – and serves as a reminder of how geography and history intrude on the Taliban. "West of the Indus [versus] East of the Indus – the cultures, attitudes, and linkages with Afghanistan are very different," says General Masood.

West was frontier and Pakistan still calls it that: the North West Frontier Province. In this direction, the land rises toward Afghanistan, and the lives get harder as mountains tear apart arable land and communities divide into insulated tribes.

The worldview of the Taliban comes from West of the Indus. For them, the plains represent exposure. "The Taliban have been able to operate in certain [mountainous areas] because of

the terrain and the sympathy factor," says Rifaat Hussain, a military expert at Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad. "But the moment they begin to move out of the hideouts, they are exposed. If you have 100 truckloads of Taliban on the Peshawar Highway, all you need is two helicopter gunships" to wipe them out.

Coming down from the hills also would expose the Taliban to a more secular, urban world that views their way of life as something on the cover of National Geographic. Or, as a colleague of Professor Hussain puts it: "They are a bunch of mountain barbarians."

One area halfway between Islamabad and Taliban country looks like the California Central Valley, with donkey carts. The roads in the area, the Haripur district, are lined with eucalyptus trees, agricultural fields tumble off in the distance, and brickmaking kilns puff smoke from stout stacks.

The Taliban have threatened to come to this area to free comrades held in prison. As a result, officials mobilized extra security forces and intensified intelligence activity. But Haripur's best defenses lie with the people. "There is absolutely no support for Taliban in this district," says Yousaf Ayub Khan, Haripur's nazim, or ruler. The main reason: This is non-Pashto country.

More than 90 percent of residents speak Hindko, as opposed to Pashto, the language of the Pashtun people – and the Taliban. It's a common saying these days in Pakistan that all Taliban are Pashtuns, but not all Pashtuns are Taliban.

Haripur sits along a vast ethnic fire wall against further Taliban conquests. To the north and west are Pashtun lands, to the east and south – toward Islamabad – other groups dominate. "Pashtun areas have always been very conservative and religious, so they become easy prey," says the nazim, who also happens to be Pashtun. "People are docile here [and] their thinking is more toward Islamabad."

The grievances that the Taliban exploit, such as unemployment and tribal feudalism, don't exist as much here. Schools poke out from nearly every alley of Haripur city, and the district – with more than 1,000 private academies – is among the most educated in the country. Lush farmland and an industrial center support relative prosperity.

There are limits to the ethnic fire wall, of course. Ahmed Rashid, author of "Descent into Chaos," suggests the Taliban enjoy support in the Punjab region – Pakistan's heartland – among jihadi groups originally fighting in Kashmir. Moreover, many Pashtun refugees, including those displaced by the latest fighting, exist in places as far away as Karachi, the nation's financial center.

On the edge of Haripur, two camps house refugees who fled the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. After three decades, the original tents have transformed into a little Kabul with mud, brick, and wood-pole structures. Residents say even police fear to go here, and some suspect the Afghan camps play host to militants.

"They visit often, they have links there," says Dr. Faiza Rasheed, a member of the provincial assembly and local gynecologist. "I think if [the Taliban] came, Afghans will support them, but not the local community."

Internet cafes in Haripur city have received threatening calls from insurgents, and some, like the Speed Link, have people frisking Afghans before entering.

Yet many Afghans chafe at the suspicions cast on them. "They blame us, saying that all Afghans are the Taliban," says Basti Gul, a barber at the Islamabad Beauty Parlor. He denies there are any Taliban in town and says the local populace – Afghan and Hindko speakers – are united against them. "We will not welcome them," he says. "The people of Swat liked them. But the people of Haripur don't."

The notion of a Taliban conquest of Pakistan also bumps up against some simple arithmetic. The Taliban in Swat number 5,000, and the total from all factions in Pakistan is estimated in the tens of thousands, at most. The Pakistani military, meanwhile, numbers more than half a million.

"There would have to be a collapse of will on the part of the Army to defend the country," says Hussain. "Yes, it's a state that's under stress, but it's not a failed state in the sense that people refer to Somalia or Afghanistan."

Until the latest counteroffensive, US and Pakistani analysts questioned the military's resolve in fighting the insurgency. Armies do not like fighting their own people. And Pakistani intelligence agencies have a history of funding militant groups to achieve foreign-policy goals.

But the counteroffensive in Swat has convinced many analysts here that the Army is serious – at least for now. The mass displacement of civilians offers grim confirmation of heavy engagement.

Until recently, it would have been easy in the war rooms in Islamabad to see the Taliban as someone else's problem. Since 2007, however, at least 17 suicide attacks have rocked the twin cities, killing more than 250 people. The Marriott hotel, scene of the most deadly strike, has turned into a five-star fort hidden behind a rock-wall barrier. Neighborhood conveniences are a little less convenient, too: The drive-through at the McDonald's in Rawalpindi has turned into an obstacle course with four concrete barriers and a checkpoint.

The military also senses it has public backing for the operation – as scores of interviews with average Pakistanis confirm. "The government is fair to do operations in Swat and Buner because the government has already given a chance to the Taliban to give up weapons, but they did not," says Muhammad Murtaza, a student at Quaid-i-Azam.

Some of the fiercest opponents of the Taliban are those who lived under their reign, making it more difficult for the movement to spread. Mr. Murtaza's classmate, Muhammad Nisar, worries every time he moves between school and his home.

A year ago, he and three other students were waiting for a van in Swat to head back to Islamabad when a group of Taliban approached. They brandished guns and said, "Go pray in the mosque."

"I was scared, so I went to the mosque," says Mr. Nisar. "But the prayer was just a formality. They are just using Islam."

He says that for years the Taliban in Swat were just students of a local religious leader, Maulana Fazlullah. At first their goals were limited to building a mosque, and locals willingly helped. But he and other residents say the Taliban grew increasingly belligerent as outsiders and criminals joined their ranks. "I think 50 percent of the Taliban are criminals," says Nisar. "They have no jobs, no other opportunities, so they join the Taliban."

The Taliban enforced bans on movies, music, and modern mores, with threats broadcast over FM radio. They ordered CD stores closed, and once a bomb ripped through the music market. Residents who fled from Swat and Buner told of public floggings and rampant kidnappings. One aid worker was hanged in the street.

Certainly, many are upset with the military's tactics. One resident of Buner, Sherin Zaida, says the government gave his town three hours warning – but bullets flew within 15 minutes. He and 11 family members carried his mother, who can't walk, for two days until they reached a camp in Swabi.

Yet much of their wrath is reserved for the Taliban. Not long after the insurgents invaded Buner, two masked men approached Mr. Zaida, a court clerk, and told him: "We know which is your village and your family. Why don't you just shut down the court, put a lock on it, and go back home." The judge told him to comply. This is how law and order left Swat and Buner, one courthouse and police station at a time. "We don't want the military, we don't want the Taliban," says Zaida.

From her desk at the RAND Corporation, C. Christine Fair watches Pakistan and the prevailing zeitgeist in America about it. What she sees at the moment is fear among more than a few in Washington that the Taliban will sweep into Islamabad in some sort of ragtag swarm and seize the city. She and other scholars consider this notion almost cartoonish.

Yet there is another danger she sees lurking on the leafy streets of Islamabad, and this is the main caveat to the argument that the Taliban won't prevail in Pakistan. Call it the jihadi within. "What does it mean that they are 60 miles outside of Islamabad when there are actual cells within Islamabad?" she asks.

She's referring to infiltrators who have the capacity to conduct suicide bombings, which they could carry out frequently enough to make residents of the twin cities more wary about public spaces and private intimidation. English-language schools in Islamabad have already had to close temporarily after receiving bomb threats.

Even worse – though unlikely – Taliban cells might be able to operate with enough inside help to succeed in nabbing nuclear material as it's transported. Or they could blow up a key installation such as the Tarbela dam or sever the road between Islamabad and Peshawar.

In other words, the real threat isn't the Taliban occupying urban territory. It's their ability to attract followers and sow chaos. One reason given for the conversions: US meddling. "The mujahideen are not the products of the madrasas," says Syed Yousef Shah, who heads one of the largest religious schools. "They are the product of American actions." He argues that the militants attack Pakistan because of its cooperation with America and its intervention in the region. "A person whose house is destroyed by a drone attack and sees his parents and his brothers dead, what will he do? A suicide attack demands no lecture."

As enemies go, Talibanization may prove trickier to fight than the Taliban. Just ask Fahad Marwat. At an upscale coffee shop in Islamabad, the 20-something reaches for his cellphone and pulls up a photo of a young man with a Taliban beard. That's my cousin, he says. Over the course of a year, his cousin went from being an unemployed college graduate to Taliban sympathizer. "I was like, 'Who is this guy?' " says Mr. Marwat.

It's taken his family six months – and the counsel of "peaceful" clerics – to reverse the process. "We do make fun of him," says Marwat. "[But] he's very thankful to us for forcing him to come back."