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A new battle begins in Pakistan

By Syed Saleem Shahzad
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ISLAMABAD - Despite serious reservations, Pakistan's military at the weekend began an all-out offensive against the Pakistani Taliban and al-Qaeda in the tribal areas on the border with Afghanistan.

The deployment of about 30,000 troops in South Waziristan, backed by the air force, shifts the main theater of the South Asian battlefield from Afghanistan to Pakistan.

That Pakistan has become a focal point was underscored on Sunday when six Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps commanders were killed, as well as 37 other people, in an attack in Iran's restive Sistan-Balochistan province.

Iranian state television said the Foreign Ministry summoned a senior Pakistani diplomat in Tehran, saying there was evidence "the perpetrators of this attack came to Iran from Pakistan". The Pakistani government was asked not to delay "in the apprehension of the main elements in this [terrorist attack](#)".

[The attack](#) has been blamed on the group Jundallah, which is believed to operate from Pakistan's Balochistan province and which recently established a link with al-Qaeda. (See [Al-Qaeda seeks a new alliance](#) Asia Times Online, May 21, 2009.)



On Monday, clashes between the Pakistan military and the militants continued for the third day in South Waziristan. Islamabad says that 60 militants have been killed, with 11 soldiers dead.

[The army](#) had serious reservations about sending ground troops into [South](#) Waziristan, firstly for fear of a strong [militant](#) backlash in other parts of the country and secondly because there is no guarantee of success. However, under pressure from the United States, and with the carrot of US\$1.5 billion a year for the next five years in additional non-military aid, Pakistan's political [government](#) has bitten the bullet. The timing might have been influenced by a string of militant attacks in the country over the past few days.

The offensive is concentrated in the areas of the Mehsud tribe in South Waziristan, which is also the headquarters of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

In preparation for the assault, the army made ceasefire deals with several influential Taliban warlords who run large networks against coalition troops in Afghanistan. They include Mullah Nazir, the chief of the Taliban in Wana, South Waziristan, who operates the largest Taliban network in the Afghan province of Paktika. Mullah Nazir is neutral in this [Pakistani](#) conflict and agreed to allow passage to the army to enter Mehsud territory.

In North Waziristan, two top Taliban commanders, Hafiz Gul Bahadur and Moulvi Sadiq Noor, also agreed to remain neutral. They are members of the Shura of the Mujahideen and a main component of the Taliban's insurgency in the Afghan province of Khost.

This leaves a few thousand Mehsud tribal fighters along with their Uzbek and Punjabi militant allies to fight against the military. Thousands of civilians have fled the area.

However, Hakimullah Mehsud of the TTP, according to [Asia](#) Times Online contacts, has apparently adopted a strategy that will not expend too many resources on protecting the Mehsud area. Instead, he aims to spread chaos by attacking security personnel in the cities. Hakimullah was the architect of successful attacks on [the North Atlantic](#) Treaty Organization's supply lines in the Khyber Agency, which began in 2007.

The same contacts say that when thousands of people left South Waziristan last week under the military's directives, a majority of the militants melted away to the Shawal region, situated at the crossroads of South Waziristan, Afghanistan and North Waziristan, besides going to Pakistani cities.

A very limited force is entrenched in the Mehsud tribal area, and by all accounts it is putting up fierce resistance.

In the cities, the TTP will be assisted by Punjabis, who will aim to replicate the audacious and well-planned attack on the Pakistani military headquarters in Rawalpindi on October 10.

This attack and subsequent siege in which a number of hostages were held exposed loopholes in the security mechanisms of the [armed forces](#) as well as the deep penetration of militants in the security forces.

A transcript of the militants' calls, intercepted by the security forces and read by Asia Times Online, shows that the militants had noticed a damaged wall at General Headquarters Rawalpindi. They therefore engaged security personnel at the main gate, while at the same time sending about 10 men through the breach in the wall. These militants were given support by insiders.

The attackers made directly for the barracks of [Military Intelligence](#) and took several senior officials hostage, including the director general of Military Intelligence. They then presented a list of demands. According to some reports which have not been authenticated by independent sources, six prisoners were released on the militants' demands before the hostages were released after a commando operation on October 11.

The heat is on Pakistan

Washington has been keen to extend the war into Pakistan since early 2008. To reflect this, this year it coined "AfPak", and even appointed a special representative, Richard Holbrooke, to handle this portfolio. The focus in Pakistan was to be the militant bases in the tribal areas which feed directly into the insurgency across the border.

The aim was to create breathing space for coalition troops in Afghanistan and eventually pave the way for an honorable exit strategy after initiating talks with sections of the Taliban.

This year, the US also stepped up its presence in Pakistan by acquiring new bases and the Americans developed a joint intelligence mechanism with Pakistan to hit al-Qaeda and Taliban targets in Pakistan with Predator drones. These missile attacks have proved particularly successful in taking out key targets, including Baitullah Mehsud, the TTP leader.

The US also coordinated ground military [operations](#) such as Lion Heart, which saw coalition troops on the Afghan side working with Pakistani troops on the other side to squeeze militants. (Asia Times Online documented this last year - see [US forces the terror issue with Pakistan](#) September 16, 2008.)

There are parallels in what the US is doing with Pakistan to what happened during the Vietnam War, when that war was extended into Laos and Cambodia.

Beyond the South Waziristan operation

Washington is watching developments in Waziristan with keen interest. Both General Stanley A McChrystal, the top US general in Afghanistan, and US Central Command chief, General David Petraeus, are currently in Pakistan.

They will be pleased that Pakistan has committed its biggest-ever force for such an operation

- 30,000 troops with another 30,000 in reserve. Yet the chances of a decisive military victory remain remote.

Given the nature of the opposition and the tough territory, there is a high probability of extensive casualties in the army, with resultant desertions and dissent. There is also no guarantee that if the conflict drags on, the warlords with whom ceasefires have been agreed will not go back on their deals.

At the same time, there are signals that the Taliban in the Swat area in North-West Frontier Province are regrouping after being pushed back by the army this year. It is likely that by the time the snow chokes major supply routes, the Taliban will have seized all lost ground in the Swat Valley.

By marching into South Waziristan, the military has taken something of a gamble as it is highly unlikely to eliminate the militant threat. Indeed, the past seven or so years have shown that after any operation against militants, the militants have always gained from the situation. By the same token, the militants don't have the capacity to permanently control ground beyond their areas in South Waziristan and North Waziristan.

In this situation, in which the militants and the military can't defeat one another, and if the fighting continues, a political crisis could be provoked. This would weaken the state of Pakistan and its institutions.

Alternatively, the authorities could accept the fact that Pakistan is a tribal society which always operates through bargains and deals, and move quickly to contain this conflict.