

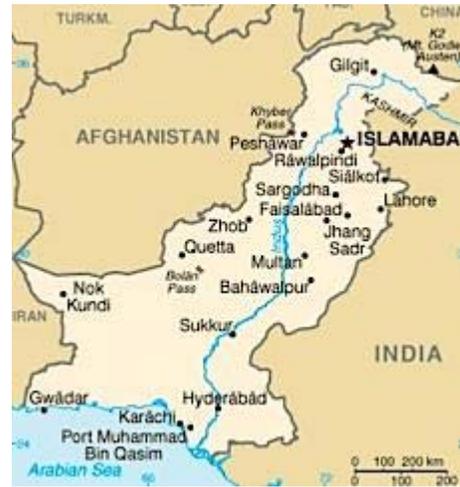
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A Coherent Strategy for Pakistan's Tribal Areas Would Draw Lessons from Anbar

By Malou Innocent

Following years of promising gains since 2001, Afghanistan is in a tailspin. Not long ago, a sophisticated Taliban assault on a Kandahar prison freed 1,200 inmates, including 350 Taliban members. The attack came only weeks after Afghan President Hamid Karzai survived a fourth assassination attempt.

The main forces behind the country's downward spiral are al-Qaida and the Taliban, which have found sanctuary in the vast unpoliced region of western Pakistan known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).



Stabilizing the Afghan-Pakistani front of the war on terrorism will require U.S. policymakers to re-examine the fatal misconception that they face only two options: either heading full force into FATA, heedless of the desires of Islamabad and the Pakistani people, or hoping Pakistan's beleaguered army miraculously revitalizes itself. A coherent U.S. policy toward FATA must not be reduced to these two options. Here, the global war on terrorism's wider strategic pattern necessitates a third alternative.

Lessons from Anbar

U.S. successes in Anbar province, Iraq, hold important lessons for operations in FATA. The two most prominent fronts in the war -- Iraq and Afghanistan -- share common elements, including criminal gangsterism, sectarian violence and militant Islamist insurgencies. In both conflicts, U.S. and allied forces are confronting an adversary who can meld easily into the population. Both are battlegrounds for employing the doctrine of counterinsurgency, such as recruiting indigenous allies, maneuvering the blind alleys of tribal society and cultivating legitimacy from the local population while employing minimal use of force.

But U.S. policymakers must understand that remedies for one conflict never can be perfectly transplanted onto another. For one, the two political and security situations are dissimilar. Anbar presents a liberation insurgency that includes indigenous groups attempting to expel a foreign occupier, while FATA has a national insurgency of

indigenous groups attempting to control and unseat an established government. In this respect, Americans should not try to force the round peg of Anbar into the square hole of FATA, but rather should look beneath the overarching differences to each conflict's striking similarities, such as militant methods and tactics.

Resistance to the American presence was stronger in Anbar than in any other province in Iraq. But over time, al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI), the group that in February 2006 destroyed the Shiite shrine in Samarra, also began to overplay its hand, proselytizing militancy and forcing its customs onto local Sunni tribes. In September 2006, U.S. forces tossed out their conventional war-fighting approach and teamed up with more than 30 indigenous Sunni tribes. By summer 2007, this united Anbar Salvation Council had overseen a substantial reduction in violence. Anbar's success can be used as a template for organizing indigenous tribes in other theaters, including the insurgency along the Pashtun tribal belt straddling the Afghan-Pakistani border.

Although the president of Pakistan assumes direct jurisdiction over FATA, the area has been devoid of an overarching government for several centuries. Until recently, FATA was ruled by a system of political agents who answered directly to the governor of the North West Frontier Province, as well as by tribal elders (maliks) who formed a Council of Elders (jirgas) that would orchestrate a consensus decision to turn orders into policy. Those who broke consensus were punished.

But today, in many areas of FATA, relentless Taliban incursions have led to the collapse of civilian and tribal administration. Critically, militants now have turned against their former hosts. Militants banish music stores and barber shops, destroy girls' schools and threaten men who don't grow beards. Over the past five years, the mutilated bodies of more than 150 pro-government maliks have been found in the region's scattered hamlets. "Oftentimes," former Pakistan-based freelance writer Nick Schmidle recalled in 2007, "the Taliban dumped the bodies by the side of the road for passers-by to see, with a note, written in Pashto, pinned to the corpse's chest, damning the dead man as an American spy."

Although Pashtun loyalties traditionally have been with pro-Taliban militants, the spike in violence could turn them. In FATA, as in Anbar, U.S. Central Command should capitalize on the injustice unleashed on locals by militant groups. One element of the Anbar model that is informing policy in FATA is the emphasis on increased human-intelligence sharing. In March, the first of six joint U.S.-Afghanistan-Pakistan military intelligence centers was opened along the Afghan-Pakistani border. The centers are intended to limit cross-border militant movement in the region and coordinate information and tactics among U.S., Afghan and Pakistani officials. U.S. Army Brig. Gen. Joseph Votel said three of the centers will be built in Afghanistan and another three will be built in Pakistan, at a cost of about \$3 million each. The centers will allow 20 personnel from each of the three countries to watch live video feeds from U.S. spy planes, which can be played back in real time to ground forces on both sides of the border.

Night-vision devices, ultra-high-frequency satellite equipment and other sophisticated signals intelligence devices are critical for monitoring Taliban and al-Qaida communications traffic. But because many militants still rely on traditional modes of communication, such as human couriers, U.S. policymakers must remember that signal and communication intelligence, while indispensable, is no substitute for human intelligence. Central Command must direct its efforts toward understanding the clans, subclans and extended families that weave the complex fabric of tribal society. Such human intelligence is crucial for combating the insurgents' militant zeal.

A Lighter COIN Footprint

As in Anbar, recruiting local allies to fight militants in FATA will be critical for stabilizing Pakistan as a whole and for operations in Afghanistan. But a fair assessment of any model requires scrutiny, and by far the biggest impediment to implementing such an ambitious approach in FATA is lack of manpower, as the scope of America's commitment in Iraq severely limits what it can do in Pakistan, and Islamabad continually refuses to allow more U.S. troops into the area. The [Army-Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual](#) indicates that stability operations typically require a density ratio of 20 to 25 troops per 1,000 residents. By the U.S. military's own standards, a mission in FATA would require 133,000 to 167,000 troops. But a heavier U.S. combat presence would have the unintended risk of provoking a backlash among the Pakistani people. And a lighter U.S. footprint may be a blessing in disguise.

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What about indigenous forces? FATA's traditional law enforcement entity is the Frontier Corps (FC), the tribal areas' locally recruited paramilitary force. Balochistan's Frontier Corps is roughly 80,000 strong, while about 50,000 Frontier Corps are split between North West Frontier Province and FATA. A 40-page classified document titled "Plan for Training the Frontier Corps" is under review at Central Command. The plan would train the FC and significantly increase the size and scope of America's training role in Pakistan. But training will take years, and training alone will not resolve problems surrounding morale and motivation. Moreover, ethnic and ideological sympathies to militants prevail in the FC; one U.S. soldier equated it to the Taliban, saying "The Frontier Corps might as well be Taliban. . . . They are active facilitators of infiltration."

In this respect, applying elements of Anbar operations to FATA will have to rely less on a heavy U.S. combat presence and more on encouraging and enabling Pakistan's army -- not the Frontier Corps -- to exterminate safe havens. Sizable minorities of Pakistani army soldiers are sympathetic to al-Qaida and the Taliban for both strategic and ideological reasons. This lack of willingness is the central problem facing Pakistan's army and, hence, Pakistan itself. But steps can be made to prevent the country's extremist fringe from bleeding into the political mainstream. The first is for the army to overcome its series of demoralizing defeats, and this is where Washington can help. One confidence-building measure would be to significantly increase the number of Pakistani officers

trained through the U.S. Defense Department's International Military Education and Training program (IMET). More training at elite American institutions would help to mitigate the Pakistani army's tilt toward radicalism and hone its counterterrorism efforts.

Meanwhile, Washington must take into account the rest of Pakistan's 165 million inhabitants, many of whom are virulently anti-American. In this respect, Central Command should be ready to act if it comes across actionable intelligence on the whereabouts of top-level al-Qaida operatives, but it also must remember that Pakistani officials in Islamabad must not be perceived as putting Washington's interests above those of their own people. Any U.S. effort must coordinate with officials in Kabul and Islamabad, both civilian and military, to gain a firm understanding of the complexities of FATA's people, and of the political effects of U.S. policy in the region.

U.S. officials also should keep in mind that sustaining a lighter footprint is consistent with a central tenet of counterinsurgency: executing military power precisely and discriminately rather than employing overwhelming force and firepower. This counterinsurgency approach limits collateral damage, lowers the possibility that U.S. tactics will serve as a recruiting tool for al-Qaida and other extremists, and helps foster a bottom-up solution, one achieved through human-intelligence gathering, building legitimacy and neutralizing terrorism.

The advantage of a nimbler version of the Anbar strategy is that lying low with fewer troops will avoid pushing wavering tribes into the Taliban camp and further radicalizing the population. American University Professor Akbar Ahmed, who served in Pakistan's Civil Service in the 1960s, thinks a long-term strategy for FATA should involve cultivating relations with Pashtun tribal chiefs and jirgas.

"America and the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan must put more on the table than army incursions and the wanton destruction of tribal homes and local schools by unmanned aircraft if they ever hope to reduce sympathy for the Taliban and al-Qaida," Ahmed says. "Ordering Pakistan to send in more troops to be slaughtered by far craftier Pashtun tribal forces only piques local resentment against both the government and its American patrons, while creating an ever-growing demand for more military equipment that Pakistan doesn't need."

A Possibility of Engagement

FATA should be understood for what it is -- a relic of the 19th century's imperial era, a slice of territory left unconquered by the British. The fiercely independent Pashtun tribes who inhabit FATA have been invaded by empire after empire and never have been subjugated. Pacifying this Hobbesian state of nature will require more than firepower.

Steve Coll, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author who has visited the tribal areas on numerous occasions over the past 20 years, said he believes that despite the many setbacks facing the U.S., engagement in the tribal areas can be achieved: "Defining, never mind successfully executing, a political strategy in western Pakistan and in the Federally

Administered Tribal Areas is a really daunting project. But there is, nonetheless, reason to believe that the people who live in these tribal areas are themselves modernizing . . . and there is an appetite for self-government outside of the old tribal arrangements."

The Peshawar-based non-governmental organization Community Appraisal & Motivation Program, which aims to promote peace and sustainable development in the tribal areas, concurs with Coll's point. It found that many of FATA's inhabitants want a gradual change in the Frontier Crimes Regulation, a system of governance that is widely regarded as too draconian. Survey respondents instead favored the Wolasi jirga system, which they say accords proper justice to all parties.

The previous Pakistani government, led by Gen. Pervez Musharraf, emphasized a military solution in the tribal areas. The new civilian government, led by the Pakistan People's Party and the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), temporarily continued and then discontinued the military's policy of peace talks with radical groups. Unfortunately, these peace deals did not also employ counterinsurgency tactics; in fact, the Pakistani army thinned its presence in territories confirmed to be safe havens for militants, a move which only emboldened radicals and expanded their territorial gains.

As the so-called "Anbar awakening" shows, there is a middle ground. Still, eradicating safe havens likely will be a difficult and long-term process, requiring years of patience and flexibility. In May, the U.S. Government Accountability Office discovered that although the United States has a plan to combat terrorism, no executive-level department has a comprehensive strategy to eradicate FATA's safe havens. This is a profound strategic miscalculation in the global war on terrorism. However, the absence of a coherent policy provides an opportunity for unique solutions. Afghanistan will not stabilize so long as the havens exist in Pakistan. Until a plan for FATA is reached, America will be losing in the most crucial theater in the global war on terrorism.

Malou Innocent is a foreign policy analyst at the Cato Institute. [A version of this article](#) first appeared in the August 2008 edition of [Armed Forces Journal](#).