

An Overview of Major Military Operations in the Tribal Areas of Pakistan

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Abstract

In the aftermath of 9/11 scenario, the US and its coalition forces designed a joint strategy to eradicate Al-Qaeda and their supporting Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Being coalition partner against 'war on terror' (WoT), Pakistan deployed its military and security agencies in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Provincially Administered Tribal Areas (PATA) in order to ensure and maintain her hold in these areas. Removal of Taliban regime in Afghanistan pushed these terrorists and their supporters to flee away and find out hideouts in bordering areas such as Bajaur Agency. Consequently, the insurgents and terrorists with the support of local tribesmen launched terrorist activities in Afghanistan from the soil of Pakistan and also challenged the writ of the state of Pakistan. Realizing the sensitivity of the situation, terrorist attack on security forces and public places, Pakistan's armed forces launched considerable military

Keywords:

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1 Introduction

The United States accused Osama Bin Ladin, leader of a religious extremist and militant group Al-Qaeda, responsible for being the mastermind of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on World Trade Centre. In the wake of 9/11 attacks, Al-Qaeda was operating its terrorist activities under the leadership of Bin-Laden from Afghanistan with the support and protection of Taliban regime. In the aftermath of 9/11 events, the allied forces launched a war against Taliban regime in

Afghanistan, known as ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’ in retaliation to the Afghan government’s refusal of handing over Al-Qaeda leader Osama to the US government and banning Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. On October 7, 2001, with allied airstrikes on Taliban and Al-Qaeda, US invaded Afghanistan. The invasion aimed at discontinuing the provided support and protection to Al-Qaeda by Taliban regime and abolishing Al-Qaeda’s network in Afghanistan.

Within the span of weeks, the major objective of the operation ‘overthrowing Taliban regime’ was achieved and also some Al-Qaeda terrorists were captured. The US insisted and pressurized Musharraf government for assisting in ‘War on Terror’ (WoT) as the US and allied forces were not merely aware of geo-strategic position of Pakistan and her strong involvement during Russian invasion but also strong ethnic and cultural bond of Afghan (Pushto speaking) with people of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in general and people of tribal areas in particular.

President of Pakistan, Pervez Musharraf allied his country with the US-led coalition to fight the war on terror. Pakistan being a coalition partner not only shared intelligence and immigration information but also granted air bases, space and landline rights and routes for logistic supply to the US allied forces in Afghanistan and conducted small and medium range operations in the FATA (Christine & Seth, 2009). In spite of that strategic military cooperation, the two most wanted figures Laden and Al-Zawahiri of Al-Qaeda escaped the attacks on Afghanistan and succeeded in entering adjoining tribal areas of Pakistan.

As a result of Operation Enduring Freedom (2001-2002), seven tribal agencies (Bajaur, North Waziristan, South Waziristan, Khurram, Khyber, Orakzai, and Mohammad,) commonly known as Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) turned as hideouts for militant groups mainly Al-Qaeda and Afghan Taliban. As Anti-America (USA) perception already existed amongst tribes of these agencies because of removal of Taliban regime, therefore, the militant groups were not only provided with safe haven but also with logistical support by Pashtu tribesmen, which resulted in FATA to become the hub of terrorism. Rasheed (2008) presents the scenario of FATA emerging as the nucleus of terrorist activities of Al-Qaeda and Taliban as below:

Safe passage was provided to al-Qaeda by not deploying Pakistani forces on the border in South Waziristan, although troops were deployed in Khyber and Khurram Agencies. Thousands of al-Qaeda and Taliban were allowed to settle in Waziristan, create bases, and restart military operations. Jalaluddin Haqqani, the former Taliban minister, became the key organizer by hiring FATA tribesmen to provide sanctuary or safe passage out of the region... Within a few

years, these guides [tribesmen] had become commanders of the armed groups that emerged as the Pakistani Taliban. (p. 268)

Accordingly, South Waziristan turned to be the first shelter for Al-Qaeda used for launching consistent assaults and attack on the US headquarters located in Afghanistan. Frequent attacks from Pakistan's soil on the US military points and headquarters in Afghanistan made the US cautious regarding the possibility of hidden support from Pakistan Paramilitary forces (Rasheed, 2008). This unexpected and annoying situation triggered the US command in Afghanistan and Pakistan was threatened to stop trans-border attacks to avoid penetration of US forces in the tribal regions of Pakistan

When the suspicions about the presence of Al-Qaeda leaders in FATA were in the air, in the meantime, Al Jazeera TV channel released a video tape showing presence of Osama and his group members in South Waziristan. Following the leaked information, Pakistan military forces targeted a camp in South Waziristan and killed eight terrorists. It was the first attack of Pakistan army to shatter terrorist hidings in tribal areas of Pakistan. In retaliation, the then president Pervez Musharraf was targeted in a suicide attack in December 2003. Suicide attack on Musharraf made him admit first time the presence of near about six hundred alien suspects in tribal areas and FATA. Following the statement of the President Pervez Musharraf, US Secretary of State immediately issued an ultimatum that 'either the Pakistani army would attack Al-Qaeda camps in South Waziristan or the US Army would do it for them' (Ali, 2004).

For conducting military operations against terrorists in tribal areas, the US provided Pakistan with financial, military and strategic support. In connection with security assistance and operation against terrorists, Pakistan was granted 2 billion US dollars per annum. In the return of huge financial and military assistance the Washington administration had been continuously insisting Pakistan for more and more positive outcomes in favour of the US (Christine & Seth, 2009).

2 Research method

This was a pure qualitative research which employed secondary data for critically reviewing the major military operations in FATA. The secondary data consisted of journal articles, newspapers, and reports from official as well as independent national and international organizations. To make this research objective and bias-free, we explored the extensive

literature such as expert opinion and research articles from the authors of different perspectives and school of thought.

3 Discussion

During the literature review, it was observed that Pakistan being an ally on 'War on Terror' conducted many small and medium military operations since 2001. Since the very beginning of US invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan launched operations termed as collectively 'Operations Enduring Freedom' (2001-2002). However; in this research paper we have discussed and analyzed the major military operations and most of them were fought between the period of 2007-2009, and year of 2009 witnessed more important military campaigns. These are: Operation Al-Mizan (2002-2006); Operation Sher Dil (2007-2009); Operation Rah-e-Haq (2007-2009); Operation Rah-e-Rast (2007-2009); Operation Zalzala (2008); and Operation Rah-e-Nijat (2009-2010). We have critically assessed the strategies and outcomes of each above –mentioned military operation under a separate heading.

3.1 Operation Al-Mizan (2002-2006)

The Taliban regime's collapse compelled the Al-Qaeda's local and international militants to leave Afghanistan and seek sanctuary in the northern areas of Pakistan known as FATA and PATA. These terrorists/militants launched destructive strikes with the support from local militants in South Waziristan. These international terrorists not only instigated their offensive activities against the US and NATO forces on the Pak-Afghan border but also threatened Pakistan's solidarity and sovereignty. In June 2002, with the support of local jihadists, they attacked Pakistan security forces and killed 12 security personnel in South Waziristan (Naeem, 2014).

Attack on security forces along with many offensive activities pressurized Pakistan's security forces to realize the intensity of militants' offensive activities in the region and aggravating threats to the stability of Pakistan. Realizing the intensity of well-organized and well-planned offensives against security forces, Pakistan army stroke back launching small and large range security operations known as 'Operation Al-Mizan' in South Waziristan in particular and FATA in general. The key objective was to clean the South Waziristan and detain/kill the alien militants who had challenged the writ of government and sovereignty.

In the beginning, Pakistan military faced a heavy loss because of inaccurate intelligence information and estimation of a number of hidden militants as well as their capabilities. Consequently, when Pakistan army could not make advancement in a ground war, it used helicopters, gunships, and substantial artillery to dismantle terrorists' hubs.

Operation Kalosha March 2004 (Wana): In January 2004, the terrorists began to target Pakistan army camps in Bajaur, South Waziristan. As a result of rocket fires an army check post in Shulama faced a considerable loss. The deteriorating state of security in Wana and Bajaur of South Waziristan directed Pakistan army to initiate "search-and-destroy" drive known as 'Operation Kalosha' (Tankel, 2015). The prime purpose of 'search-and-destroy' operation was to clear the area from the foreign militants. Lack of planning and operating was noticed in the Wana operation. As per the military and strategic analysts, untrained Frontier Commanders with poor intelligence were sent to the hubs of militants. Militants were having comparatively enough territorial information of the valley and war tactics as well as geographical information. Adamantly, terrorists having the advantage of familiarity with geographical area enjoyed the commanding position in the mountainous region. It is argued that major reasons for the failure in this operation were lacking communication and coordination amongst the army, frontier corps and its intelligence agencies (Rasheed, 2008).

Heavy casualties in the Kalosha Operation compelled Pakistani army to make a peace agreement with militants termed as the 'Shakai Agreement'. This agreement, signed in April 2004 was an unwritten reconciliation or verbal understanding between the Pakistani government and Ahmad tribe led by Nek Mohammad. Succeeding the agreement, both parties (government and Zai tribe) claimed to have victory though this agreement proved that both parties were not achieving their prime objectives. The militants put forward three conditions such as lifting army's barricade, reconstruction of demolished houses, and military's confinement to cantonments. Whereas the government made it mandatory for a foreigner to get registered with state authorities and government warned local rebels to cease attacking Pakistan government and military personnel (Nawaz, 2009). The three conditions of peace deal presented by militants in the leadership of Nek Muhammad reveal that by means of agreement government and army legitimized Taliban and sanctioned them to fortify their clutch in the area. Local commander Neck Mohammed calling this agreement an unspoken surrender of the army stated 'I did not go to them, they came to my place. They should make it clear who surrendered to whom' (Singh, 2015). On June 18 Nek Mohammad's killing in a US Surveillance missile strike resulted in rescind of the agreement (Christine & Seth, 2009).

In February 2005, government of Pakistan signed 'Sararogha Agreement' with Baitullah Mehsud in order to maintain peace and stability in South Waziristan. As per this six-point agreement, the government not only removed troops from the stronghold areas of Baitullah but also compensated militants for damage during military operations. In return, instead of surrendering weapons, militants were just required to stop their attacks on Pakistan.

The provision of compensation in the peace deal to the tribesmen (supporters of Baitullah Meshed) made Baitullah and his supporter further strong militarily as well as strategically. Baitullah was declared as a "soldier of peace" and it was claimed to have successful exclusion

of terrorists from South Waziristan. Thus, the peace deal helped the militants in moving forward to North Waziristan (Hussain, 2010).

By this peace agreement, the Taliban just discontinued attacking army and other security forces, whereas the army and government, directly or indirectly, legitimized Taliban's control over North Waziristan. Resultantly, they amplified their undertakings against US-allied forces in Afghanistan, which stimulated uncertainties and reservation in Kabul against Pakistan government and security forces' intentions and plans. In the result of miscalculations and peace agreements with militants, FATA converted into a hub of terrorist activities against Afghanistan which helped in the advancement of Talibanization to the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

3.2 Operation Sher-e-Dil (Lion Heart Operation)

The Bajaur agency adjacent to Afghanistan's Kunar province turned out to be the center of international and local terrorists and militants. In Bajaur and Sawat, Baitullah Mehsud facilitated the militants to enter the urban areas of Pakistan. Applying his strategy on the platform of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan he supported militants to invade and into enter the urban areas (Moeed, 2014). Militant forces led by Qari Zia Rahman had succeeded in destroying many checkpoints at Loe Sam and bothered the civilian government by robbing banks, launching a suicidal attack on government officials. The Operation Sher-e-Dil was launched on September 9, 2008, soon after an ambush on security forces by the local militants (Mukhtar & Khan, 2009) to target these militants. During operation, many tunnel complexes were found, which were used by militants as safe hideouts and storage for weapons (Lloyd, 2008).

3.3 Operation Rah-e-Haq (2007-09)

Pakistan Military by realizing the worst situation and achieving no substantial advancement in a two-year battle (2004-2006) opened a negotiation with tribesmen for a ceasefire. They were made to promise for hunting down Al-Qaeda, ending Talibanization and discontinuing attacks in both countries. Shortly, the militants and their local supporters violating the ceasefire

continued to re-organize and rebuild themselves in the region and within a few months they took over Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in the capital of Pakistan. This incidence questioned the capabilities and competence of both government and army across the globe. After the failure of negotiation with the *Imam* (clergy), in July 2007, Musharraf regime decided to forcefully evacuate the Lal Masjid from militants. Soon after the successful completion of Lal Masjid operation, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a newly formed umbrella group of militants undertook to revenge and propelled a wave of suicide bombings and attacks in major cities particularly in northern areas of Pakistan. Expanding their operation bases they moved towards the Valley of Swat.

Pakistan armed forces conducted this operation in three phases against the (TNSM) militant group –formed by Sufi Muhammad in 1989 (Ali & Khan, 2009) and banned in 2002—which demanded for enforcement of *Sharia* Law in Malakand division. By the mid of 2007, the TNSM has succeeded in establishing its control over much of the area of the Swat. In order to relinquish Swat Valley from the militants, this operation was launched in collaboration with local police in November 2007. By the end of December, military forces succeeded in evacuating almost all public buildings such as police stations, schools including those in headquarter of Fazalullah, **Mam Dheri**, and pushing terrorists back to the mountains (Khattak, 2010). In July 2008, the second phase took place in the northern parts of Swat Valley and later spread to the southern areas (Amin, 2007; Christine & Seth, 2009). The third phase of Operation Rah-e-Haq was carried out in January 2009, along with the imposition of ‘shoot-on-sight’ curfews in major cities in Swat. In retaliation, TNSM targeted security forces and destroyed public places such as schools, hospitals, and offices etc.

In February 2009, the Malakand Accord was signed between the government and the TNSM. As per this accord, the Musharraf government agreed to impose *Sharia Law* in Malakand Division. Actually, armed forces faced difficulties in establishing its control and defeating terrorists and tribesmen in this operation, hence, they changed their strategy to restore peace and their trust amongst local people so that Talibanization of the areas could be stopped. As a result of this peace accord Taliban strengthened their hold in the valley, supported militants to enter the valley (Hussain 2010, pp, 151-52). Afghan administration expressing its apprehensions called the Malakand Accord a threat to the Afghan security forces. The US administration criticizing it called the accord not merely a threat to the US and allied forces in Afghanistan but to the world security, and by this accord safe haven had been provided to Taliban and extremists (Mohammed, 2009).

3.4 Operation Rah-e- Rast (2007-09)

Through the peace agreement and imposition of *Sharia* law in Malakand division Government sought surrender of weapons by Taliban and TNSM, but they did not. By doing so, they revealed a hidden intention using Swat as their base for waging terrorist activities in future (Syed, 2009). Later than two-month period, the militants re-started occupying shops, public buildings in the capital city and also entered the Shangla and Buner districts (Christine & Seth, 2009). They targeted NGO offices, schools as well as police and military forces' check posts, and established their checkpoints down the roads. In May, the TNSM and TTP challenged the credibility and integrity of clean-shaved *Qazi* appointed by the government (Dawn, 2009).

As follows, in the same month, the armed forces launched an operation known as 'Operation Rah-e-Rast' in Swat District. In the end of May, the military succeeded in regaining the control over the entire Mingora. Many concrete bunkers were destroyed and intensive volume of arms

and ammunition along with explosive material hidden in caves were confiscated during this operation (Khan, 2009).

3.5 Operation Zalzalā (2008)

Baitullah Mehsud and his supporters captured Sararogha Fort in South Waziristan agency and killed a number of army personnel (BBC, 2008). In retaliation, Pakistan armed forces launched Tri-Star (three operations) against Taliban in FATA in January 2008. Operation Zalzalā being the major one of Tri-Star operations, aimed at evacuating areas controlled by Baitullah and his supporters. This operation focused to completely destroy the Baitullah Mehsud and his network because he threatened the writ of the State. On the other hand, those tribesmen and groups (jihadis) who wrestled in Afghanistan and Kashmir were purposefully excluded from the operation and were requested for cooperation with Pakistan armed forces. The armed forces controlled many villages and towns and Spinkai, the stronghold of Mehsud. (Abbas, 2008). However, armed forces were strongly resisted in South Waziristan by Mehsud's militants as they were well trained and employed psychological campaigns by uploading war videos on YouTube to discredit and demoralize armed forces. One of the military personnel's words about the field situation are rephrased as:

The militant had good weaponry and a better communication system [than ours]... their tactics are mind-boggling and they have such a defence system that would take us days to build. It does not look as though we are fighting a rag-tag militia; they are fighting like an organized force. The fighting caused a significant exodus of locals to Afghanistan and other parts of Pakistan (Khan & Gall, 2008)

3.6 Operation Rah-e-Nijaat (Path to Salvation)

Apparently, the operation zalzalā failed in achieving its core objectives and created a huge displacement and destruction of houses. On the other hand, Baitullah and his TTP militants getting psychological advantages from this operation received local moral support and launched a strong wave of violence throughout the country.

In summer 2009, Pakistan army and air force jointly conducted operations in South Waziristan. Meanwhile, due to the escalation of violence, the army initiated ground operations in the mid of October 2009, with helicopter gunships and fixed-wing aircraft (Gul, 2009). The prime objective of this operation was ensuring the security of lines of communication (LOC) and completely destroying the TTP as it had become the threat to Pakistan. By December 2009,

armed forces regained control over the strongholds (such as Ladha, Makin, and Sararogha) of TTP and succeeded in distracting TTP command and control system (Gul, 2009). This operation successfully disassembles TTP and got control over South Waziristan, but also resulted in a huge displacement. In the beginning of the operation, almost 11,080 families and 80,000 individuals were registered as internally displaced persons in the camps established in the district of Tank and Dera Ismail Khan.

4 Conclusion

Culturally, linguistically and ethnically, the people of FATA have strong affiliation with people of Afghanistan. Hence Taliban regime in Afghanistan had received strong moral support from the people of FATA. Thus, after the overthrow of Taliban regime in Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda and Taliban terrorist crossed Pak-Afghan border, they were warmly welcomed by various tribesmen living in seven agencies known as FATA. These terrorists were given all kind of support because people of FATA considered them as a holy soldier who was fighting against the USA. Secondly, most of them were those who fought in the Afghan war against USSR in Afghanistan. This is the reason that FATA tribes refused to hand over these terrorists to Pakistan and US forces. Thus, these terrorists and infiltrators continued attacking US & NATO forces and created problems for Islamabad administration.

The USA demanded and pressurized Islamabad for 'do more' to destroy the terrorist network and safe haven in FATA. Pakistan being an ally launched military operations and campaigns against Al-Qaeda and TTP terrorists in FATA, and faced strong resistance from the militants as well their local supporters

Initially, in the retaliation of the operation, violent activities increased and the level of extremism spread across the tribal areas. The country faced a heavy wave of suicide attacks which took a thousand lives of people and psychologically affected people. As a result of a heavy and

unending fight between armed forces and terrorists, the local people were displaced to other areas and provinces.

It is observed and concluded that almost every operation ended with a peace agreement with local terrorist groups such as Shakai agreement with Nek Muhammad, Sararogha Peace agreement with Mehsud, Swat agreement with Sufi Muhammad. This clearly showed that the government and armed forces were on the same page and they intended a peaceful resolution of the conflict in FATA. On the other hand, these militants had hidden intention behind peace deal one of the secret plans was having sufficient time to re-organize themselves. Owing to lack of commitment, the militant exploited and violated the agreement and the actual motive of peace agreements could never be achieved.

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