



Pakistan: Swat and Counter-Jihadist Operations
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Summary

Pakistani troops reportedly seized a key mountain peak Nov. 27 and shut down the pirate radio station operated by a jihadist group in the North-West Frontier Province's Swat district. The government likely will be able to take back the key towns in Swat, but it will only be a tactical victory. In the long run, the militancy likely will revive because of geography, demography and the crisis of governance -- which is becoming especially acute in northwestern Pakistan.

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Analysis

Pakistani soldiers seized control of Najia Top, the highest peak in the Swat district of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), on Nov. 27 and recaptured some towns under Islamist militants' control. Authorities also shut down a pirate radio station run by the Tehrik-i-Nifaz-i-Shariat-i-Mohammadi (Movement for the Enforcement of Mohammed's Laws, or TNSM) jihadist group, which is based in Swat and has influence in the neighboring districts of Dir and Malakand and the agency of Bajaur in the Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA). This is the area which Stratfor in June 2005 identified as the likely location of al Qaeda's fugitive top leadership.

This is the first sign of progress made by Islamabad's security forces (which, by some accounts, number about 15,000) against Islamist militants in the country's northwest in the past several months. Unlike FATA, NWFP is a full-fledged province of Pakistan and thus the government cannot allow Taliban-style militants to control territory there. The Pakistani army is capable of regaining control over the main towns in the district, which until fairly recently was known as a major tourist attraction, given its mountains, rivers and valleys. But this very terrain -- along with the demography, culture and domestic political situation -- will, in the long run, allow for a post-crackdown revival of Islamist militancy.



Despite being a tourist resort, Swat and the adjacent predominantly Pashtun districts are known for the fiercely conservative mixture of religion and tribalism in their local culture. It is quite similar to the culture in Pakistan's tribal badlands. This culture -- especially during the Islamist wave of the 1980s -- facilitated the rise of the TNSM in the early 1990s. The TNSM, which was founded by local mullah Maulana Sufi Muhammad, has been a highly localized but nonetheless significant phenomenon in its area of operation.

The TNSM shot to prominence because its members entered Afghanistan to fight alongside the Taliban in the wake of the U.S. moves to effect regime change in Kabul in 2001. Many of its members were either killed or captured in Afghanistan. Some of them, including Muhammad, made their way into Pakistan. Muhammad was then arrested by Pakistani authorities and has been in custody since.

Muhammad's son-in-law, Fazlullah, has led the group since the founder's arrest. The group has gained ground under Fazlullah's leadership. For a long time, Pakistan tolerated the TNSM, which was given licenses to operate radio stations to broadcast its jihadist mantra. The group dominated the social-political landscape in Swat and its adjoining districts but steered clear of confrontation with the state until a few months ago.

Encouraged by their comrades' successes in the tribal belt, jihadists' ability to strike at the army in Punjab and the ongoing political turmoil in Pakistan, the TNSM decided to move to the next level: challenging the writ of Islamabad and trying to establish their own state-within-a-state. This was evident when the militants took over local administrations in various towns; according to one report, nine of the 12 counties in Swat had fallen in the hands of the TNSM.

From Islamabad's vantage point, such behavior might be tolerable in FATA, which has maintained special autonomous status within Pakistan; the Pakistani military never entered FATA until March 2004 to pursue al Qaeda and Taliban members who had escaped from Afghanistan after the U.S. invasion. But in Swat, the militants crossed a red line, and their gains had to be reversed. This is why the situation in Swat is getting a more robust response than the negotiations Islamabad is pursuing in places like Waziristan. The Pakistanis know that unless militancy is stopped in Swat, they will not be able to keep their heartland along the Indus Valley secure from the chaos that reigns in the mountainous Pashtun areas on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border.

Moving beyond intent and looking at capabilities, the Pakistanis face massive problems in realizing their objective. For starters, the terrain favors the militants. Just as the Taliban melted away into the rural areas after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan only to re-emerge later on, their counterparts in Swat likely will do the same.

Furthermore, the conservative local culture is a favorable environment for the jihadist ideology in the long run. The ongoing military operation will complement this, especially if it results in civilian casualties and troops take their search for jihadists into the homes of local people (among whom the jihadists will almost inevitably be hiding). This means the Pakistani army cannot hunt the jihadists quickly while undermining their support base. Thus, a military operation will be tantamount to winning a battle but not the war -- though the army is desperate for a very visible and immediate victory.

Most important, however, is the ongoing political turmoil in Pakistan, which will prevent the army from deploying the resources needed to deal with the situation. And of course Pakistan is not immune from the global lack of understanding on how to combat extremism and terrorism.

Ultimately, this means that the Pakistani's objective -- maintaining the tribal area as a buffer zone between jihadist chaos and civilization as the Pakistanis know it -- will be difficult to achieve. In many ways, that buffer has already broken down, given that the districts in the NWFP that run along the tribal belt are already undergoing Talibanization. These include Tank, Lakki Marwat, Bannu, Kohat, Hangu, Dera Ismail Khan, Peshawar, Mardan, Charsadda, Swat, Malakand and Dir. Swat is in the most advanced stages of the process.

Swat is the flash point for the next level of insurgency -- a militancy with underlying roots and causes that go well beyond Swat and thus will not be quashed even if Pakistani forces crush the TNSM and kill Fazlullah.