Countering the Tehrik-I-Taliban in North Waziristan: A Better Approach for the Pakistan Army

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Tehrik-I-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is the most lethal domestic militant group in Pakistan. Based largely out of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), it has carried out hundreds of terrorist attacks across the country since its inception in December 2007. One of its most significant and perhaps counterproductive undertakings was the attack on the Karachi Jinnah International Airport in June 2014. This attack created widespread political and public support in Pakistan for greater military action against the TTP. Islamabad responded by launching Operation Zarb-e-Azb in North Waziristan, a tribal agency in the FATA considered a stronghold for not only the TTP but also the Haqqani Network, a longtime proxy for the Pakistan government. Despite ten months of extensive military operations, the TTP in North Waziristan continues to pose a threat to Pakistan’s national security.

A fundamental problem in the Pakistan Army’s approach is the reliance on kinetic operations as a counterterrorism strategy in-and-of itself. Realistically, one cannot eliminate all members of the TTP through military force. The TTP is a decentralized, fluid organization whose members often flee or blend into the local populace in response to military operations. Moreover, large-scale kinetic operations can alienate the local population and create new justifications for individuals to join the TTP. Consequently, military force must only play a complementary role in a wider counterterrorism initiative. A more effective approach for the Pakistan Army to weaken the TTP’s grip on North Waziristan requires a multifaceted approach tailored to the local environment and aimed at reducing the TTP’s ability to recruit and retain militants.

Specifically, this paper recommends the following interconnected policies over a five-year timeframe: enabling the Frontier Corps to lay the ground work for basic local security; targeting TTP recruitment and retention through a two-pronged approach of establishing pilot schools and disengagement centers; and building an effective road system to better integrate North Waziristan into Pakistan. In each of these policies the Pakistan Army would serve in auxiliary roles by providing protection, training, funding, and advice. By playing a more behind-the-scenes role, the army would support these initiatives while simultaneously promoting local involvement, which would give the people of North Waziristan a greater stake in the tribal agency’s stability. In short, undermining the TTP’s manpower and generating local buy-in are two fundamental aspects of this new approach.

The complete eradication of the TTP from North Waziristan in five years is a largely unrealistic aim and a very difficult objective to measure in practice. Thus, the desired end-state put forth in this paper with regards to the TTP in North Waziristan has three components: decreasing the number of terrorist attacks; significantly reducing the terrorist group’s human and material infrastructure; and increasing local participation in the tribal agency’s security and development. Reaching these objectives is not devoid of challenges. Implementation hurdles include providing adequate security, securing diversified sources of funding, and incentivizing local participation and staffing; broader issues also include insecurity along the Durand Line and the presence of the Haqqani Network. While implementing the proposed policies will be challenging, the Pakistan Army must alter its modus operandi to succeed in North Waziristan.