

Pakistan needs 'shift' to beat the Taliban

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By Ahmed Rashid

The latest deadly bomb attack in the Pakistani city of Lahore has once again highlighted the threat posed by the Taliban. The militants now face a much more determined government, people and army - but there is a long way to go, argues guest columnist Ahmed Rashid.

After a month-long military campaign that has created nearly 1.5 million refugees, some 15,000 troops of the Pakistan army are now well on their way to retaking the Swat valley from the Pakistani Taliban.

Twice since 2006 the army has been driven out of the valley by extremists - but this time they appear determined to eliminate the Taliban and secure the valley over the long term so that refugees can quickly and safely return home.

However major extremist threats still remain while the civilian government and the army's need for a long-term strategy against them is being debated.

Paradigm shift

The Swat campaign is the first time that the army has appeared determined to wipe out extremism in one region.

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The military campaign has been buoyed by a dramatic shift in public opinion against the extremists, the support of all major political parties and the international community, who have promised major international aid.

Without all these factors coming together it is unlikely that the army would have been so determined.

However eliminating extremism from the entire country will need a strategic paradigm shift by the government and the army.

Such a shift will affect domestic and foreign policy, relations with Pakistan's neighbours and a different set of national interest priorities.

Some 10% of the country is still under the control of the extremists.

The Pakistani and Afghan Taliban - and al-Qaeda - are headquartered not in Swat, but in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (Fata) adjacent to Afghanistan.

Senior Afghan Taliban leaders are also based in Balochistan and Sindh provinces from where they provide logistics for the Taliban's war against US and Nato forces in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile militant groups in Punjab who have fought in Indian-administered Kashmir - frequently at the behest of the military - remain active.

Some groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba - which was accused of carrying out the attacks in Mumbai (Bombay) last year that killed more than 170 people - have set up relief camps for refugees in northern Pakistan as an Islamic

charity.

Guerrilla attacks

The government's immediate aims must be to secure Swat so that the refugees can return home and not become a recruiting base for the Taliban.

But it will have to show much better management than it has up until now to help them rebuild their homes and livelihoods.

Thousands of troops will have to be based in Swat indefinitely to hold the valley and counter future Taliban guerrilla attacks.

Even after victory in Swat, extremism will remain a potent threat to Pakistan, undermining its economy, politics, social development and threatening the entire region.

For the US and Nato, Pakistan was once an appendage to their Afghan policy. Now it is their major concern.

There can also be no long-term solution to militancy without eliminating the command and control centres of the militants in Fata. So far the fighting there has been largely left to the under-armed and under-trained paramilitary Frontier Corps (FC).

Last August, when the FC deployed in Bajaur, the government promised that its actions there heralded the start of a campaign that would retake control of all seven tribal agencies.

Instead, nine months later the FC is still battling the militants in Bajaur.

That will have to change, but for the regular army to deploy in Fata in sufficient numbers and equipment, major external funding and military aid will be needed - which Washington and Nato countries will have to provide.

The army will have to get rid of its aversion to accepting Western training in modern counter-insurgency warfare.

However 80% of the army is deployed on the Indian border - and a dramatic improvement in relations with India has to take place before it can feel secure enough to move tens of thousands of troops from that border to Fata.

Before giving such assurances the Indians will demand that Islamabad also wind up groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba, which the military continues to regard as a strategic asset.

For the army to give up on such groups there will have to be major progress on sorting out the multiple disputes between India and Pakistan - such as the Kashmir question and the sharing of river waters.

An equally decisive shift will be needed to deal with the Afghan Taliban leadership in Pakistan, which the army also treats as strategically important.

Pakistan's improved relations with Afghanistan since the advent of the civilian government reflects a major positive shift, but ultimately the Afghan Taliban will have to be given a timeframe to open talks with the Kabul government and leave Pakistan.

In order to deal with Fata and the overall threat of extremism, Pakistan will need to make a major shift in its national priorities that will be not so much based on enmity with India, but focused more on domestic threats and the economy.

Yet at the same time Pakistan's neighbours will also have to be more accommodating, changing their attitudes

and policies in the region in order to make such a strategic shift by Pakistan both possible and sustainable.

The end.