

Now Pakistan must strike while the iron is hot

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By Ahmed Rashid/Lahore.

Despite the mayhem in [Afghanistan](#) and the crucial presidential elections there last week, the real focus of the [US](#) and Britain in the region remains on [Pakistan](#), which at this moment has an unprecedented opportunity to turn the tide against the [Taliban](#) and al [Qaeda](#).

Whether it will seize the moment or not is the question uppermost in the minds of Western leaders.

On 5 August, Baitullah Mehsud, the all-powerful and utterly ruthless commander of the Pakistani Taliban, was killed in a US missile strike as he lay on the roof of his father-in-law's house in a village in South Waziristan in Pakistan's tribal belt with his young second wife.

He was undergoing intravenous drip treatment for a kidney ailment. His death marked the first major breakthrough in the war against terror groups in the region since 2003, when several top al Qaeda leaders were arrested or killed in Pakistan.

Mehsud's death has prompted a fierce leadership struggle among the Pakistani Taliban that offers a major opportunity for the [CIA](#) and Pakistan's Interservices Intelligence (ISI) to further disrupt the extremist groups and for the Pakistan army to attack South Waziristan in the tribal belt adjoining Afghanistan.

Mehsud had become Pakistan's number one target after his fellow Taliban tried to grab the [Swat valley](#) just north of [Islamabad](#) this summer.

They were pushed out by the army after fierce fighting as two million refugees fled the region.

Now the refugees are going home and the army is emboldened after its first real victory against the Pakistani Taliban since 2005. However, the tribal belt is another story. Mehsud's estimated 20,000 fighters control the seven tribal agencies that make up the Federal Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) bordering Afghanistan.

The criminal network he oversaw, whose mainstay was kidnapping for ransom, netted him a war chest that is estimated in tens of millions of dollars.

The fierce internecine struggle for the leadership of the Pakistani Taliban - still unresolved nearly a month after his death - has involved shoot-outs, ambushes and assassinations among the various Pashtun tribal contenders.

Mehsud was also close to and trusted by [Osama bin Laden](#) and Mullah Omar, the leader of the Afghan Taliban, and lent them support, troops and training facilities in their various operations.

By fighting off the Pakistan army and expanding his writ across FATA, he gave al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban leadership a hugely expanded sanctuary and safe haven from which to operate.

Al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban have a major stake in the succession crisis because they want a leader who will continue Mehsud's hospitable arrangements towards them.

The sanctuary in FATA has proved vital in the Afghan Taliban's war against US and Nato forces in Afghanistan and the training of foreigners, especially British and European extremists, by al Qaeda.

While Mehsud dominated South Waziristan, two key allies of the Afghan Taliban are based in North Waziristan.

They are Jalaluddin Haqqani and Gulbuddin Hekmetyar, whose networks carried out the spate of suicide

bombings in [Kabul](#) and other Afghan cities just before the elections.

Their manpower and explosives came from North Waziristan.

These are the reasons why in the past few weeks a spate of US and UK visitors have trooped through Islamabad, starting with [Foreign Secretary David Miliband](#) and last week two top US commanders, Generals [David Petraeus](#), head of Central Command, and Stanley McChrystal, head of Nato forces in Afghanistan.

Also last week US special envoy [Richard Holbrooke](#) spent four days in Islamabad.

They have all been urging the Pakistan army to go for it - use this moment to turn decisively against not just the Pakistani Taliban in South Waziristan but also al Qaeda and the Haqqani and Hekmetyar networks in North Waziristan.

The US has promised aid, weapons and helicopters for the fight. Pakistan has partially responded, arresting two key aides to Mehsud, but the generals have made it clear that they will not invade South Waziristan for the moment.

"It's going to take months" to launch a ground offensive and "possibly beyond the coming winter", senior commander in the area, Lt General Nadeem Ahmed, told reporters after meeting Holbrooke on 18 August.

Instead, said General Ahmed, the army was choking off supplies to South Waziristan by shutting down the roads into the area while planes, helicopters and artillery were bombarding suspected terrorist hideouts from outside South Waziristan.

That clearly is not going to be enough. The Pakistanis have ventured there before and have always been defeated by the harsh mountainous terrain and the strength of the Taliban.

In Swat they succeeded because they temporarily brought in large numbers of troops from the Indian border. The key to getting an early Pakistani offensive in FATA is improved relations with proverbial enemy [India](#), so that the India-obsessed army can move its forces away from the Indian border to Waziristan.

India, however, delivered a dampener to efforts by [Washington](#) and [London](#) to get them to be more flexible, when [Prime Minister Manmohan Singh](#) said on 17 August that Pakistan-based terror groups were plotting more terrorist attacks against India.

Meanwhile, in partial retaliation, Pakistan refuses to satisfy Indian and Western demands to clamp down on terror groups who fight in [Indian Kashmir](#), especially [Lashkar-e-Taiba](#), which carried out the terrorist attack on [Mumbai](#) last year, killing nearly 200 people. Lashkar is known to have cells in several European countries including Britain.

In Washington, London and all major European capitals the debate about Nato's Afghan strategy is heating up.

Governments and their publics are tired of an open-ended commitment to secure Afghanistan and are reluctant to bear the cost in soldiers' lives and cash that it involves.

However, giving a deadline for withdrawal from Afghanistan would only encourage the Taliban to wait out Nato. In Washington, [President Barack Obama](#) is under fire from the Left of the Democratic party for becoming another war president and from Right-wing Republicans for being too ambitious in his plans for Afghanistan. The Obama plan is certainly far more positive than what [ex-President Bush](#) had to offer but it needs time and space - at least three years - to be successful. In the meantime, American pundits are demanding results by next year's Congressional elections.

Pakistan remains the key to hurrying along the West's Afghan strategy.

There is a huge dent now in the Pakistani Taliban and only further Pakistani military action in FATA co-ordinated with Nato forces in Afghanistan can finally turn the tide against extremist successes.