

Taking Back The Frontier

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By Ahmed Rashid

LAHORE, Pakistan -- The most dangerous place on Earth -- the Pashtun tribal belt straddling Pakistan's border with Afghanistan -- is about to get more dangerous. As the summer offensive by [al-Qaeda](#) and the [Taliban](#) against U.S. and [NATO](#) troops gets underway in Afghanistan and the militant groups threaten to resume their attacks on Pakistan's army, the newly elected government in Islamabad needs the support and patience of the Bush administration rather than Washington's single-minded desire for military solutions.

Much has been made in the United States about the possibility that Pakistan's coalition government is about to cut a deal with [Baitullah Mehsud](#), the leader of the Pakistani Taliban who rules over much of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Such a deal would free up Pakistani and Afghan Taliban members for the summer offensive in Afghanistan.

Almost every global terrorist plot carried out or prevented since 2004 has been traced to training, funding or material support from al-Qaeda based in these areas. The key to changing the status quo in the tribal areas is major political reform. Instead of archaic colonial laws, the tribal areas need a strategic vision and political changes based on consultations with the people living there.

The Pashtun tribes in the tribal areas must be given the political and social opportunities available to all Pakistanis, and the authority of the state must prevail. Ultimately, such reforms must lead to the people making a democratic decision about their status -- such as establishing a separate province or becoming part of the neighboring Pashtun-majority North-West Frontier Province.

[Benazir Bhutto](#) spoke about the urgent need for such reforms. Her [Pakistan People's Party](#) leads the coalition government with the [Awami National Party](#), a secular Pashtun group whose leader, Afsandiyar Wali, has said much the same.

In the short term, the government could open a dialogue with all the tribes, Pashtun civil society and even those Taliban members who will lay down their weapons. It could more effectively isolate the extremists if it had a political future to offer the people of the tribal areas.

Yet the government appears to be backsliding on long-term reform. The parties are being squeezed by the army, which wants a quick, localized peace accord with the Pakistani Taliban (which would give its troops breathing space) and by the Bush administration, which is suspicious of long-term political programs and wants U.S. troops to be able to pursue extremists in the tribal areas.

Right now, though, only the extremists have a clear vision for the tribal areas -- they want a state ruled by Islamic law, independent of Pakistan, where al-Qaeda and extremist groups can congregate.

The deal under discussion is inadequate. The Pakistani Taliban would stop its attacks on Pakistan's army and free several hundred hostages but would make no promises about ceasing attacks in Afghanistan. The government would largely hand over to extremists major swaths of the tribal areas and free Taliban leaders it is holding. Pakistan's army has struck similar accords -- and been commended by [President Bush](#) -- yet these deals have collapsed and led to a further concentration of extremists.

The key is the army. Even though Gen. [Ashfaq Kiyani](#), the army chief, has expressed willingness to follow the civilian government, the army calls the shots in the tribal areas. Pakistan's government cannot implement change there without army support. Kiyani wants political leaders to take "ownership" of the war on terrorism, but the army first needs to make strategic changes for the good of the region and the country.

First, it must curtail the Afghan Taliban leadership, which draws recruits, supplies and support from elements within Pakistan. The Afghan Taliban is guiding the Pakistani Taliban in the tribal areas and farther south in Baluchistan province, where the Afghan Taliban leadership is largely based.

Second, the army must accept that no political process or development programs can succeed in the tribal areas unless linked to similar efforts in the Afghan provinces where the same Pashtun tribes live. (Afghan President [Hamid Karzai](#) is trying, unsuccessfully, to woo the Afghan Taliban.) Such efforts require a much better relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan than has existed since 2001. The army needs to support improvements in relations. For its part, Afghanistan must ultimately recognize the Durand Line, a border between the two countries that no Kabul government has acknowledged.

Third, the army needs to make clear that it supports political reform in the tribal areas and will protect tribal leaders and Pashtun civilians there. Since 2004 tens of thousands of Pakistanis have fled the tribal areas rather than live under the Taliban. Hundreds of Pashtuns have already been executed by the Taliban. The army must help the refugees return and protect them while the government provides economic support. Only then can the state develop a serious Pashtun lobby for political changes in the tribal areas.

Given its massive military aid to Pakistan, the Bush administration could push the army to take such steps while also encouraging the army and the government to promote an effective plan for the tribal areas. Instead, the United States is again pushing military action -- a course that will further alienate the Pashtuns, weaken a fragile civilian government and absolve the army of responsibility for changes it must make.

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