

By Bill Roggio

As reports come in that the Pakistan Army has started its long awaited operation against the Pakistan in Waziristan, this analysis published in The Long War Journal on October 17, 2009 at 1:06 AM is particularly timely.

With the Taliban offensive against military, police, and government installations as well as against soft civilian targets in full swing, the Pakistani government and military have been forced to make a decision on taking the fight to the Taliban.

The operation has been discussed since early June, when the military claimed it was moving into South Waziristan to defeat Baitullah Mehsud's forces. But moving into South Waziristan via the ground was tabled and replaced with punitive air and artillery strikes designed to weaken the Taliban. While discussions about an operation were underway just prior to the current Taliban terror offensive, the military was content with pushing an operation back until next year.

But a spate of attacks, including terror assault teams striking at the Army General Headquarters in Rawalpindi and three police centers in Lahore, action against the Taliban in South Waziristan could no longer be delayed. After a meeting between senior military and government leaders on Oct. 16, the Pakistani Army has been given the green light to attack in the Taliban stronghold of South Waziristan. The operation will target the Mehsud branch of the Taliban in South Waziristan, as this group is deemed to be the major threat against Pakistan.

A military offensive in Waziristan will pit Pakistani troops against the best fighters the Taliban have to offer. The military has been defeated four times in South Waziristan since 2004, and has signed a series humiliating peace agreements in an effort to keep the Taliban at bay. Instead, the Taliban insurgency has metastasized throughout the tribal areas and into the Northwest Frontier Province.

The Waziristan Taliban:

The Waziristan region is divided into two tribal agencies, North and South Waziristan. There are four major Taliban figures in the two agencies, with an array of allied terror groups based in the region. The operation will focus on only one Taliban group, based in South Waziristan.

In North Waziristan, the Haqqani Network operates in an around Miramshah, while Hafiz Gul Bahadar controls much of North Waziristan. Other Taliban commanders include Saddiq Noor and Maulana Abdul Khaliq Haqqani. Al Qaeda operative Abu Kasha al Iraqi runs a fiefdom in the Mir Ali region.

In South Waziristan, the two main Taliban leaders are Waliur Rehman Mehsud, based in the

Makeen-Ladha-Sararogha region, and Mullah Nazir, based in the Wana region. Qari Hussain Mehsud, the notorious trainer of child suicide bombers and a senior military commander, is based in Kotkai.

Al Qaeda, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Islamic Jihad Union, Hezb-i-Islami Gulbuddin, and a host of Pakistani jihadi groups such as the Jaish-e-Mohammed, the Lashkar-e-Taiba, the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen all have bases in both North and South Waziristan.

The target:

The Pakistani military has made it clear that the operation will be limited to South Waziristan and will focus on the Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan, which is run by Hakeemullah Mehsud and based throughout the tribal areas and the wider Northwest Frontier Province. Waliur Rehman Mehsud runs the South Waziristan branch of the Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan.

The military has sought to sideline the Haqqanis, Bahadar, and Nazir in order to focus on the Mehsud branch of the Taliban in South Waziristan. The military purportedly has cut a deal with Nazir to remain out of the fight, and is currently in negotiations with Bahadar. The Haqqanis project little power in North Waziristan as the bulk of their forces are oriented towards the eastern Afghan provinces of Paktia, Paktika, and Khost.

It is imperative that the Army keep Nazir and Bahadar out of the fight as it does not have sufficient forces to take on all three groups at once. Even if sidelined, Bahadar and Nazir likely will provide safe have and supplies to the Mehsuds to bleed the Pakistani Army.

The Mehsud Taliban are estimated to have 10,000 hardened, trained fighters who have battled both the Pakistani Army during past operations and NATO forces in Afghanistan. Another 20,000 tribal fighters are thought to be at the disposal of the Taliban; the Mehsud tribes have backed the Taliban in the past and there are few indications they will not do so in an upcoming operation.

Nazir is estimated to have 5,000 to 10,000 experienced fighters, and Bahadar another 20,000.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan is also thought to have substantial forces in the region. Estimates range from 500 to 6,000 Central Asian fighters are thought to be at the disposal of the Taliban.

Another 30,000 Taliban fighters from Bajaur, Swat, Mohmand, Arakzai, Kurram, Kohat, and throughout the northwest are potentially at the disposal of Hakeemullah. However with military operations underway in many of these areas, these forces are likely to be tied down.

The Pakistani military:

The Pakistani Army is said to have been massing two or more divisions, or an estimated 28,000

soldiers, on the outskirts of the Makeen-Ladha-Sararogha region.

The Pakistani military is tight lipped on deployments, so it is unclear what type of forces are arrayed against the Taliban. Given past operations in Bajaur, Swat, and Waziristan, the military will likely rely heavily on infantry from both the regular Army and the paramilitary Frontier Corps, supported by tank formations and air and artillery assets. In the past, the military has not deployed its advanced armor against the Taliban, but instead has relied on older, poorly armored tanks. Troops are often transported in pickup trucks and open-bed trucks, making them susceptible to deadly IED and suicide attacks and ambushes.

The Pakistani Air Force has deployed F-16 fighter-bombers and the Army has deployed Cobra attack helicopter gunships to target the Taliban by air, and has relied on artillery to pound bunkers and bases from the ground. Pakistani air and ground fire has been typically heavy-handed; villages are often attacked indiscriminately, increasing the odds of civilian casualties.

The military has the advantage of having the vast resources of the state to throw into the battle against the Taliban. One question that remains unanswered is the will of the senior military and political leaders. Some senior military leaders are reluctant to destroy the Taliban as they are viewed as assets against the Indians. And the Pakistani government is ultimately beholden to the military.

Also, there are varying reports of troop morale in the wake of the operation in Swat, where the military has been successful in dislodging the Taliban during the spring and summer. Some reports claim the officer and enlist ranks are flush with success, while others claim the troops suffered heavy casualties and some units refused to fight. During prior operations in Waziristan, some units refused to fight or surrendered en masse without firing a shot.

The battlefield:

The terrain in both North and South Waziristan is a difficult place for a modern army to fight. Thick with mountains and few roads to support large-scale troop movements, the ground favors the defenders. Winter snows usually begin in November and block the mountain passes.

The Taliban have been in overt control of the region since 2004 and have had time to prepare the battlefield. The Taliban will have dispersed ammunition and weapons caches, built bunkers and fighting positions, and seeded the region with mines (IEDs). The Taliban have fought on this ground and know it well; it has defeated the Pakistani Army in four separate engagements since 2004 [see below].

There are three main roads leading to the Makeen/Ladha region: from Ramzak in the North (in North Waziristan), Wana in the Southwest, and Jandola in the Southeast. The military maintains brigade-sized garrisons in these three towns, which will be important hubs for the operation

The Taliban will operate in small units, melt into the population, and focus on ambushing supply and troop columns on these three roads in an attempt to cut off and kill Army and Frontier Corps units. The Taliban will also attempt to hit the military in Ramzak, Jandola, and Wana to prove it can strike where the military is mustering. The Pakistani military will attempt to control the roads, occupy the high ground, set up garrison in the towns, and starve out, freeze out, and bomb out the Taliban.

Since June, the military has sought to isolate the Mehsud Taliban by blockading major roads and cutting off supplies to the Makeen-Ladha-Sararogha region. But the military has been clear that it has not blocked off secondary routes and traditional smuggling paths.

The Pakistani military has relied on airstrikes and artillery barrages to weaken the Taliban and destroy bunkers and bases. The US has also weighed in with a series of unmanned Predator and Reaper strikes aimed at Taliban leaders and camps. The campaign was ramped up from mid-June through July (nine straight US airstrikes in South Waziristan were carried out in six weeks), and culminated in the Aug. 5 attack that killed Baitullah Mehsud, the former leader of the Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan.

The wild card: the US

The US has a vested interest in Pakistan succeeding against the Taliban in South Waziristan. The US has argued that Taliban fighters based in the region have been conducting attacks against NATO and Afghan forces in Afghanistan.

The US is reportedly rushing arms and equipment, including guided munitions for aircraft and helicopters, night vision equipment, and other aid to help the Pakistani military, which has said it lacks proper equipment to take on the Taliban. But recent reports indicate the Pakistani military has been funneling US support allocated to fight the Taliban to units on the border with country's traditional enemy, India.

The US will also likely provide intelligence support. Unmanned US aircraft can provide ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) support to Pakistani forces. Predators and Reapers can even be used to strike Taliban positions. US special operations forces are unlikely to be engaged due to political difficulties. The Pakistani military does not want US forces operating on the ground and fear that knowledge of this will stir up support for the Taliban.

While a Pakistani military offensive in South Waziristan will be welcomed, the US will find that the operation will fall well short of crushing the Taliban threat from Pakistan. The Pakistani government and military, by focusing on the Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan, is targeting the one group that directly threatens the Pakistani state, while leaving Taliban groups that primarily operate in Afghanistan (Nazir, Haqqanis, Bahadar) intact.

The Pakistani government will also find that the Taliban is not merely based in South Waziristan, but has tentacles throughout the northwest and in Punjab, Sindh, and Baluchistan provinces. The "Punjabi Taliban" has taken credit for the recent attacks in Lahore and Rawalpindi, while the Pakistani jihadi groups created by the military to fight in Kashmir have

allied with the Taliban as well.

### Past operations in Waziristan

The Pakistani military has avoided directly confronting the Taliban in North and South Waziristan after suffering a string of humiliating defeats there between 2004 and 2008. The most recent operations in Waziristan resulted in peace agreements that have ceded control of the region to the Taliban.

The last time the Pakistani military took on the Taliban in North Waziristan was in October 2007. The Pakistani military and the Taliban fought pitched battles after the military launched artillery barrages and helicopter and attack aircraft assaults against Taliban-controlled villages in North Waziristan.

The Taliban responded by setting up complex ambushes, including surface-to-air missile traps, a senior US military intelligence official told The Long War Journal. Several Pakistani Army helicopters were said to have been shot down during the fighting. The Pakistani military claimed that 120 Taliban and 45 soldiers were killed in the fighting, but independent reports put the number of soldiers killed much higher.

At the end of October 2007, the government pushed for a peace deal, and the fighting waned. The Taliban, led by the Haqqani Network and Hafiz Gul Bahadar, remained entrenched in the region. In February 2008, an official peace agreement was signed. The military has insisted the agreement rains intact to this day, despite a spate of Taliban ahttacks against the military during the summer of 2009. The Taliban even negated the agreement.

The last major operation against the Taliban in South Waziristan took place in late January 2008. The military launched an offensive with the declared aim of dislodging Baitullah Mehsud's forces from entrenched positions. Prior to the military's offensive, the Taliban overran two military forts and conducted numerous attacks against Pakistani forces. More than a dozen of Pakistan's elite counterterrorism commandos were killed in a single engagement.

The military claimed to have ejected the Taliban from strongholds in Kotkai and Jandola, however, and said it killed Qari Hussain. But Hussain later mocked the government during a press conference in May 2008.

Just 11 days after the fighting in South Waziristan had begun, the military sued for peace. The Taliban retook control of Jandola four months later, after murdering dozens from a rival tribe while the military looked on. The military has since abandoned several forts in South Waziristan and has kept activity there to a minimum, instead relying on punitive air and artillery strikes.

Map of the Ramzak/Makeen region:

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