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Militants change tack in Pakistan

By Syed Saleem Shahzad

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ISLAMABAD - After a month of operations against militants in the South Waziristan tribal area on the border with Afghanistan, Pakistan's military establishment realizes it is chasing shadows; the adversary has simply melted into the vastness of the inhospitable surrounding territory.

Unlike in previous operations in other troubled tribal areas, though, there is unlikely to be any peace agreement. The militants, headed by the Pakistani Taliban - the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) - are bent on a long-term insurgency against the security apparatus, which they now see as heretic as the United States forces in Afghanistan.

In the past, the militants viewed the military as "firing friendly fire" under duress, mostly from the United States. In a fundamental shift, this is no longer the case and the militants will step up their activities.

The implications for Pakistan are profound. The civilian government headed by President Asif Ali Zardari is under relentless pressure from the US to crack down on militants, which includes al-Qaeda. If the militants carry through with their new attitude towards the military, and if the government steps up its efforts, ever-bloodier and broadening clashes are inevitable.

In the latest move, according to a report in the New York Times, US President Barack Obama said in a letter to Zardari that he "expected him to rally the nation's political and national security institutions in a united campaign against extremists". Obama's national security adviser, General James Jones, reportedly handed over the letter in Pakistan on Friday.

According to the report, Jones also warned Pakistani officials that Washington's new Afghanistan strategy would work only if Pakistan broadened its fight beyond the militants attacking its cities to groups using havens in Pakistan for plotting attacks against US troops in Afghanistan.

This is what the military had hoped to achieve when it ventured into South Waziristan, which serves as a staging point for the insurgency in Afghanistan. But by the time the troops reached strongholds of the TTP, they were mostly deserted.

"The militants are applying the same strategy which they were trained to use by the Pakistani security forces against the Indian army in [Indian-administered] Kashmir during the 1990s," a senior Pakistani military official told Asia Times Online on the condition of anonymity.

"That included a pattern of not confronting a regular army once it was mobilized; rather, the militants dodged it and opened a new front far from the point of the army's concentration."



Much the same has happened in Pakistan over the past month, with a string of deadly suicide bomb attacks in various parts of the country, including in Peshawar, the capital of North-West Frontier Province (NWFP).

In the most recent attack, militants blew up a girls' school in the Khyber district about 20 kilometers south of Peshawar in the early hours of Tuesday. The school was badly damaged, but there were no casualties. But attacks in just the past week have killed more than 50 people, including 11 who died on Saturday when a suicide car bomber attacked a checkpoint near Peshawar.

In another stunning attack at the weekend, militants struck at the well-guarded command office of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in Peshawar. On Sunday, militants opened fire on the house of an anti-Taliban mayor in a town near Peshawar. The attack was repulsed.

The army's South Waziristan operation followed moderately successful ones in the Malakand Division in NWFP and the tribal areas of Bajaur and Mohmand. After these, the militants, under the command of Ibn-i-Amin, a former Jaish-e-Mohammad commander who had earlier been arrested in connection with an attack on former president Pervez Musharraf, slowly had his men disperse into the remote region of Chitral. From here, his men crossed the border into the Afghan province of Nuristan, where they solidified the command of Qari Ziaur Rahman, allowing him subsequently to take effective control of the province.

A US-based website, the Long War Journal, has documented in detail [1] that the Taliban are openly and unchallenged governing the province. The report cited al-Jazeera footage that showed the Taliban had also appointed a governor, Dost Muhammad. According to the footage, the Taliban had US arms, which they had seized from abandoned American bases.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization confirmed that the arms showed in the footage belonged to US forces. This report followed Asia Times Online first breaking the story of the Taliban's control of Nuristan on October 29. (See [Taliban take over Afghan province.](#))

While these events were unfolding, across the border, elite commandos and the crack Mangla Strike Corps were going after the Taliban, but the leaders of the TTP had already moved to neighboring North Waziristan. They left behind only a few pockets of fighters, who also steadily withdrew after brief engagements.

They regrouped in Bajaur and Mohmand and seized lost ground. They also gathered in Orakzai and Dara Adam Khel, from where they unleashed the flood of suicide attackers into Peshawar and beyond. Peshawar was hit from all sides, compelling traders to shut down. Private schools are also closed.

Under American pressure, preparations are being made to enter North Waziristan, where al-Qaeda is believed to have its headquarters and from where the most dangerous insurgent networks, the Haqqani and the Hafiz Gul Bahadur, operate.

In turn, the militants will focus on the security forces, whose assets have been under reconnaissance for several months. The current insurgents do not have any separatist agenda. They simply want to punish the Pakistani military, which they now see as an extension of the US military in South Asia.

The militants have lost faith in their fellow "sons of the soil", whom they previously saw as being reluctantly coerced into the "war on terror". They will listen to no more lies from the Pakistani establishment, which undermine the image of the security forces.

For instance, US Predator drone missile attacks have eliminated several top Taliban and al-Qaeda figures in the tribal areas since 2008. Pakistan condemned this drone policy until late last year when it was proved that it was a joint venture between the intelligence agencies of Pakistan and the US. Pakistan's ISI provided information to the US, which then launched the remote-controlled drones from bases in Pakistan to carry out strikes.

The Pakistani military establishment ran a huge and hostile anti-American campaign against the Kerry-Lugar Bill, which last month was approved in the US to provide Pakistan with billions of dollars in non-military aid over the next five years. Conditions attached to the bill were said to be onerous to Pakistan, such as those related to non-proliferation and the meddling of the Pakistani armed forces in civilian affairs.

But soon after US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Pakistan, during which she reassured the top brass that for the US, the army, not any democratically elected government, was important, the whole campaign died down.

Militants are concerned over the close collaboration between the ISI and the US. The ISI has established a Counter-Terrorism (CT) cell, which works strictly in coordination with the US Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Central Intelligence Agency against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Pakistan. The CT is completely segregated from the ISI's top hierarchy.

Background interviews with several detainees from ISI centers suggest they were interrogated in closed rooms by Pakistanis with headphones seemingly being guided in the

questions they asked. Asia Times Online has been told that the recent attacks on ISI offices in Peshawar and Lahore were undertaken by militants who had been interrogated jointly by Americans and Pakistanis.

The Pakistan army is looking for familiar options under which it battles the militants in their strongholds of South Waziristan and North Waziristan, and then strikes ceasefire deals. This is no longer likely to work.