

Pakistan is fighting

Pakistan represents the first realistic prospect for a jihadist movement. Large parts of it. It would, in effect, mean that militants would

BY
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THE stark mountainous northern regions of Pakistan's Tribal Areas are among the most beautiful landscapes in the world. Yet as Barack Obama's newly appointed special envoy to the region, the famously tough and straight-talking diplomat Richard Holbrooke, has said, Pakistan is the country that scares President Obama and keeps him awake at night more than any other.

On my assignments to Pakistan in the past two years, it has been hard to believe the country's nightmare could get any worse. It has been heartbreaking to see this nation of more than 170 million people convulsed by political violence that its government seems increasingly incapable of halting. From the assassination of Benazir Bhutto to the almost weekly suicide bomb attacks that go unnoticed by the outside world, every strike by the militants is more audacious than the previous one.

The ambush of the Sri Lankan cricketers in Lahore at the beginning of this month came at the same time that the four main Taliban groups in Pakistan announced their decision to unite their forces in a concerted military campaign against NATO and government forces in neighbouring Afghanistan. Cricket, as many have observed, is one of the few cultural and sporting pastimes in which all Pakistanis, regardless of class, regional, ethnic or sectarian traditions, can unite around.

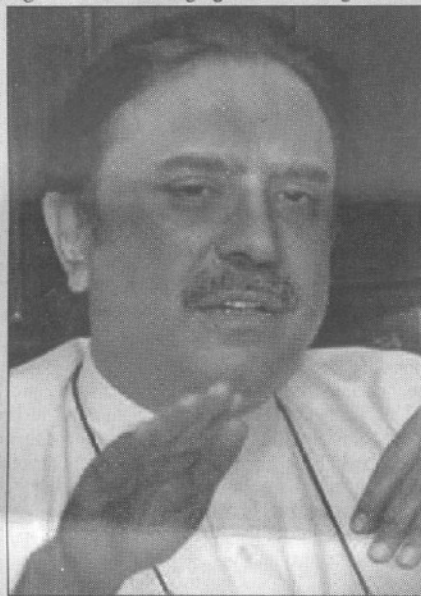
It is a sport that both the religiously conservative and the Westernised elite enjoy. The aim of the militant attack on Lahore was to undermine this; to make the point that nothing is immune from political violence and that the Taliban's vision for Pakistan is an absolutist one with no room for anything Western, or anything that isn't derived from their literal interpretation of Islam.

More and more of Pakistan is slipping beyond the control of the government. As the Lahore attack showed, even the centres of major cities are vulnerable. Nowhere is the absence of the rule of law more evident than the north-west of Pakistan. The region is officially known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, a clunky

communities we stayed in.

It was in Dara Adam Khel that I held and fired a Kalashnikov for the first and only time in my life. I was a student then and I had yet to witness the kind of things this weapon in particular does to people all over the world every day. The main road in the town, its high street if you like, was filled with shops and stores. But there were no sacks of rice and flour, no cooking and spices. The high street shops in Dara Adam Khel sold only one product: weapons – from pistols and rifles to heavy guns, mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, even small surface-to-surface missiles.

A little way out of the centre of the town, the road was lined with small settlements of mud-daub huts typical of the North-West Frontier region. In the middle of the cluster of huts that made up the settlements were open yards where young children played amid roaming chickens scavenging for rice and grain. On



the floor of the yards, men and women seemed to be rolling out what looked like very dark brown and thick pieces of bread. A pungent, sweetly musty smell hung in the air. I remember how our host, a cousin of the gun shop owner who had invited me to fire a Kalashnikov, beckoned William and me to come and have a look inside one of the huts.

It was filled with hundreds of bricks the size of a man's hand, tightly sealed in hessian cloth. 'That side hashish,' our guide said chirpily as he pointed to one corner of the room. 'That side opium.' He was most proud of showing us rolls of black wire, the kind you find in any hardware store for extension cables. But instead of electric wire, the plastic was housing thinly rolled-out hashish.

Pakistan is paying a terrible price in the war on terror. Not even Iraq had as many suicide bomb attacks in 2008 as Pakistan, and Pakistan has lost more than 1,400 soldiers since 2001

To try to get an idea of how it came to this and to witness the cost and dangers of this conflict for Pakistan and for us, I spent more than five weeks travelling throughout the Tribal Areas, making a television documentary for Al Jazeera. It was a journey that needed careful planning. I travelled with three colleagues from Peshawar, through Swat and up to the Pakistani military garrison in Bajaur in an ordinary minivan, ubiquitously used as a shared taxi in Pakistan.

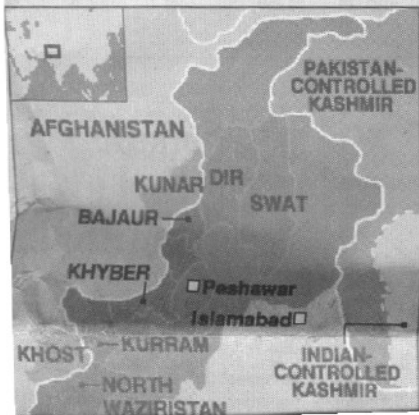
We had the windows screened by curtains so that no one could see that we were Westerners. The long delays in traffic in the towns and villages we passed through in the Tribal Areas close to Pakistan were our most nervous moments. In other areas, such as North and South Waziristan, it was simply too dangerous to travel this way, and we were given a military escort through the areas under attack by the militants. Although this in itself was no guarantee, as the military convoys are prime targets themselves.

A siege mentality now prevails inside the National Assembly and diplomatic enclaves in Islamabad. President Zardari finds himself engaged in a precarious juggling act: he has to carry the army and public opinion with him, while keeping the Americans sweet

The huge Balahisar Fort dominates the centre of Peshawar. It sits on a massive earth mound giving the impression that it is hovering above the raucous traffic in the heart of the city. It is the headquarters of the Frontier Corps, which, along with units of the Pakistani Army, are spearheading the war against Al Qaeda and the Taliban in the Tribal Areas. The fort is a living monument to the wars and insurgencies that have been fought in this region for centuries. It dates from the 18th century when the Pashtun rulers of the region gave it its name, which in Farsi means 'elevated fort'. It was conquered by the Sikhs, who held it until 1849, when it was seized by the British during the Raj.

The Frontier Corps was established in 1907 in an attempt to subdue the tribes of the North-West Frontier which, although divided by an international border, were united by close kinship bonds forged by family history and intermarriage. The British knew that they could never control them on their own, so the soldiers of the Frontier Corps were recruited from the local Pashtun tribes they were trying to overcome. Amazingly, that is still the system today.

A long and spiralling walk takes you beyond two outlying defensive walls and into the large open parade ground. In one corner, behind a nondescript entrance, is a museum dedicated to the history of the fort, and its painful lessons. The walls are decorated with the campaign banners of Britain's three failed wars to conquer the Pashtun tribes.



—more than 10 times the number of British fatalities in Afghanistan

but accurate description of this vast expanse of nearly 11,000 square miles, home to an estimated seven million people whose first loyalty is not to Pakistan but to their tribal community.

As its name indicates, this region is nominally administered by the Pakistani government but it has been autonomous and unconquered for centuries. I first came here as a university student in the summer of 1989. It was the last carefree summer before my finals. We were all fretting about our exams and the imminent reality of having to decide what we wanted to do with the rest of our lives. One of my housemates, William, and I decided to have one last real adventure; to do something and go somewhere we would never get the chance to do again in our lives.

That was when we decided to journey by land through Pakistan's Tribal Areas, past the Khyber Pass and up to Chitral and the Karakoram Highway towards the border with China. The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan had just collapsed and the area was still full of *Mujahideen* who, back then, were not only allies of the West, but viewed Western travellers who sneaked through to the Tribal Areas as truly honoured guests – citizens of countries who had come to their aid in their hour of greatest need.

This region has always been an impossibly romantic place; a mesmerising landscape of huge jagged mountains, lush valleys and deep gorges, and home to Pashtun tribes that had seen off every would-be invader and conqueror since Alexander the Great. Then, as now, foreigners needed special permission from the Pakistani government to enter the Tribal Areas. In the summer of 1989 my housemate and I ignored this rule. It would hardly have been an adventure if we were going to do

How long ago that time now seems. Dara Adam Khel still manufactures and sells weapons, and it still processes opium and hashish, but no Westerner could go there today. If William and I were to attempt the same journey now, we would not survive an afternoon. Over the past two years, I have noticed that there is such a hatred of anything to do with the West throughout much of the Tribal Areas that the region has changed dramatically.

It is not just the rise of violent anti-Western sentiment that frightens President Obama. Neither is it the emergence of an emboldened and reinvigorated alliance of the Taliban and Al Qaeda within Pakistan that is leading his administration to refocus America's strategic priorities on this region. What is happening in Pakistan presents a much deeper, more elemental challenge to the entire world that is not faced anywhere else in the so-called war on terror.

Put simply, Pakistan represents the first realistic prospect for a jihadist movement to capture a nation-state, or at the very least to control large parts of it. It would, in effect, mean that militants would have something approaching a mini-state within the country where the central government's power and influence would be non-existent, and from which they could plan and launch attacks beyond its borders.

And Pakistan is not just any nation-state at threat from militant groups, but one that has nuclear weapons, a large population and economic resources; one that borders a vulnerable failed state in Afghanistan where tens of thousands of NATO forces are stationed; and one that also has as its neighbours two emerging

the Tribal Areas of Pakistan. The dangers are bear the names of past campaigns in the same areas that Pakistan, America and Britain are still trying to subdue today, including North Waziristan, Bajaur, Swat, and Khyber.

The past failures of the British are repeated today by the United States. The British Raj tried and often failed to find the right allies to secure its interests. The same has been true of America since 9/11. One of President George W Bush's most unremarked mistakes was his inability to acknowledge the unravelling of the former Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf's policies in combating militancy within the country.

President Bush had a very personal relationship with his Pakistani counterpart and he was loyal towards him. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11 it was Musharraf who turned Pakistan foreign policy around 180 degrees to support America and Britain in the invasion of Afghanistan. Despite all Musharraf's failures over the next eight years, President Bush would find it well nigh impossible to openly criticise his friend. For much of 2002-5 the US was absorbed by the invasion and occupation of Iraq and the insurgency that followed.

Afghanistan, as President Obama has so repeatedly and sharply commented, was ignored. As a result, many Afghans felt overlooked. It was in this vacuum that the Taliban regrouped, seizing on the tide of despondency and anger felt by many ordinary Afghans. Musharraf failed to tackle the use of safe havens in the Tribal Areas by Taliban militants, many of whom belonged to the same tribes straddling the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Pakistani Army and intelligence services, under Musharraf, thought they could use militant groups in the Tribal Areas to serve their own interests. But what many failed to grasp until it was too late was the deep impact Al Qaeda had on the tribes of the region, radicalising people's outlook and changing the views of those who only 15 years earlier, during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, saw themselves as friends of

Zardari's ambitious state-building agenda could take decades, and is at odds with the insurgents' vision of a Pakistan ruled entirely by Islamic law. His efforts to strengthen central institutions are compromised by the US cross-border drone strikes

things by the book. So we rode on one of the old and garishly decorated buses used by villagers to take them from the main towns to their homes in the different Tribal Areas.

On many occasions, such as the time we went to the arms-manufacturing and opium-processing town of Dara Adam Khel, the villagers on the bus hid us at the back when we came to the main police checkpoint that you had to pass through to get into the Tribal Areas. Everyone on the bus was delighted when we made it through, laughing when we emerged. I think it appealed to the natural rebellious spirit of the Pashtuns that they had got one over on the authorities. We stayed in whatever local guesthouses we could find. It was basic accommodation, no running water and plenty of lizards and cockroaches on the walls, but that could not have mattered less when judged against the generosity and hospitality of the



Aftermath of a US drone attack on a village in Damdola

economic superpowers, China and India.

What is more, Pakistan has a long coastline open to the most economically important stretch of waterway in the world, the Gulf, from which hundreds of tankers supply oil-hungry economies. It is a nightmare scenario from which no country is immune. None of us will escape the consequences of a situation where large parts of Pakistan are politically, militarily and economically controlled by jihadists.

This is what is unique about the danger that Pakistan poses, and why the Obama administration believes it represents the most 'worrisome' crisis in the war on terror. Jihadists have not come this close to debilitating or even controlling a significant nation-state before; not in Iraq or Algeria – even Afghanistan under the Taliban and Al Qaeda, the launchpad for 9/11, never had the same strategic resources that Pakistan has. This is what is at stake now.

the West, and were happy to host young Western travellers like my friend William and me.

Many senior Al Qaeda figures and allies had come from Middle Eastern countries in the early 1980s, encouraged by the West to fight against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Several stayed and put down deep roots in the Tribal Areas. They married and thus became members of the Pashtun tribes themselves – Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al Qaeda's deputy leader, is married to a woman from Bajaur, and is believed to be hiding in that area.

These Arab jihadists became part of the fabric of tribal society. They also had money, weapons and military know-how. It meant that people in the Tribal Areas had more of a reason to be allies with Al Qaeda militants than their previous sponsors in the Pakistani military and intelligence services. Suddenly they had much deeper bonds with the jihadists from the Middle

ing a war for its soul

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East to whom they were now related by marriage and from whom they also received money. Musharraf failed to realise how deeply Al Qaeda had changed Pakistan's tribal regions until it was too late.

Much of the war against the militants inside Pakistan has gone largely unseen, not only by the outside world but also by many Pakistanis themselves. We have all seen footage of British soldiers fighting in Helmand and Americans fighting in Iraq and northern Afghanistan, but how many of us have seen images of the fighting between Pakistanis? In the past two years there have been endless waves of suicide bomb attacks. Only the most spectacular, such as the bombing of the Marriott Hotel in which at least 54 people were killed and nearly 300 injured, have been noticed internationally. But the bombings are an everyday reality.

In the first fortnight of my journey to the Tribal Areas, there were five suicide bomb attacks; one of them outside a government munitions factory near the capital, Islamabad, killed 65 people and injured dozens more, all of them Pakistani. No one is immune. Suicide attacks have killed prominent politicians such as Benazir Bhutto and local people who happen to be nearby.

The man believed to be behind many of these bombings is the Taliban commander, Baitullah Mehsud, based in South Waziristan. It is estimated that he has 20,000 fighters loyal to him. And with Al Qaeda's leadership in hiding, Baitullah is the main organiser of the Taliban in Pakistan. Baitullah, who refuses to appear on camera, shares with his fighters a hatred of America. At a press conference for Pakistani journalists in May last year he boasted that suicide bombers were 'the Taliban's atom bomb... The others also have their atom bomb but ours is stronger.'

For a place whose name has become synonymous with militant Islamist violence, Waziristan is an incredibly beautiful place. While it is rugged and harsh in the mountainous terrain bordering Afghanistan, what few out-

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nine-year-old shooting a blindfolded captive in front of a crowd of onlookers. Frustrated by the Pakistani Taliban's continuing operations in the Tribal Areas and the obvious threat this posed to its own forces in neighbouring Afghanistan, the United States intensified its use of pilotless 'drone' aircraft to attack suspected militant hideouts and training facilities.

At the end of last year, 20 strikes from drones hit targets in South and North Waziristan. More than 100 were killed, many of them civilians. Pictures recorded by the drones showed some compounds shortly before they were hit with what clearly looks like men undergoing some form of military training. But there can be no doubt that the drone attacks also led to the death of innocent Pakistani citizens and the destruction of their property. What has made matters worse is that these attacks were carried out by the US unilaterally and without prior warning to Pakistan.

were forced to retreat when the battalion we were filming was ambushed.

We drove through abandoned villages, laid waste by weeks of artillery fire, Taliban ambushes and aerial bombardment. Unseen by the outside world, the fighting in the Tribal Areas has displaced 300,000 people. They have become refugees, with no idea when they will be able to return home.

Suicide bombings continue to be a daily threat. Islamabad is choked with concrete barricades and police checkpoints that grow each week. And a siege mentality now prevails inside the National Assembly and diplomatic enclaves of the capital. President Asif Ali Zardari finds himself engaged in a precarious juggling act: he has to carry the army and public opinion with him, while keeping the Americans sweet. His reassertion of democracy in Pakistan will have support as long as his government is seen to deliver, and to avoid the corruption that tarred his reputation in the past (Benazir Bhutto's widower, he spent eight years in jail but was never convicted of corruption charges).

So profound have been Pakistan's multi-ple upheavals that the US has openly questioned its ability, even its willingness, to destroy the numerous insurgent networks across the country. Gordon Brown's revelation that three quarters of terror plots investigated in Britain are linked to Pakistan has turned the focus on Islamabad's capacity to control militants inside its own borders.

Zardari denies that he is fighting a proxy war for the West. He claims he has opened up a 'new dialogue' with America, and says he is fighting a battle for democracy. 'I will take the writ of law to the ends of the last border post of Pakistan,' he told me. 'That means there will be police stations, there will be judges, there will be civil society and civil law. We have to make people understand that they cannot challenge the writ of the state and they cannot blackmail the world into listening to their point.'

But what about Pakistan itself? Zardari's

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siders get to see is the lush and carefully tended fields in the valleys closer to Pakistan's interior. It is here that one can feel the overwhelmingly romantic nature of this land which has drawn adventurers and invaders to it for centuries.

The main roads through Waziristan bend and curve their way through the steep escarpments. But it is not this that makes it so thrilling, nor the dangerous nature of the trip. It is the feeling that, as a Westerner, you have this place to yourself; that there are very few others who are making the same journey. It is what drew me to this land when I was 19, and in a very different way, and in a very different era, it is one of the things that makes it so compelling.

I was heading to the garrison at Dera Ismail Khan because it has built up an expertise in fighting Baitullah Mehsud; they have learnt how his forces recruit and train the suicide bombers that have unleashed such violence in Pakistan. Many of the bombers are young boys, mostly between the ages of 12 and 18. Colonel Naeem Malik, a commander there, has captured and rehabilitated many failed bombers. He showed me a 'certificate' issued by the Taliban under Baitullah to the would-be suicide bombers, a sort of macabre graduation diploma to paradise, applauding their fight against 'the occupiers and unbelievers'.

It is easy to be led into the belief that fanaticism and hatred is what motivates these young men. Undoubtedly some of them are driven on by blind dogma. But Col Naeem has more daily experience of facing this kind of warfare than most Western military experts, and he himself is from the same society as the bombers, and talks to the failed bombers regularly. His testimony suggests different motives: he believes that it is a mixture of economic hopelessness, bribery and intimidation that drives many towards this path.

'Most of these boys are from totally poor backgrounds,' he says. 'They are barely able to survive from their small plot of land, and the war has damaged the rural economy. The Taliban, who are well funded, offer these boys and their families a lot of money to carry out this kind of mission.'

Col Naeem says that the Taliban make this prospect palatable for the families by stressing how religiously honourable suicide attacks are; not only will the family of the bomber be rewarded here on earth, but the bomber will also be rewarded in heaven at the same time. It is a powerful combination. 'Of course, there are those who can't go through with it,' Col Naeem says, 'and for them, the real danger is that their families are targeted if they fail. Not going through with it is in some ways even more difficult than going through with it.'

Col Naeem showed me some video footage, much of which made me so nauseous that I had to turn away. There was one of a young boy cutting the throat of a captured, prostrate Pakistani soldier who was pleading for mercy just before his death, and another of a



Security forces display weapons seized from Taliban in Bajaur

The violation of Pakistani sovereignty has only added to the tensions between the two allies. But there is little Pakistan can do about it, reliant as it is on nearly \$2 billion of military aid from the US every year. Nevertheless, senior Pakistani commanders do not hide their anger at the tactic. Gen Aslam Masood, the overall commander of the Pakistani Army in the Tribal Areas and one of the most senior generals in the country, told me, 'The majority of the people in this area perceive the US presence in Afghanistan as occupation forces. So when the US starts acting inside Pakistan and any innocent citizen is killed by any of these attacks... it reduces the credibility of the Pakistan Army to be doing something good. But in Pakistan we are expected not to utter a word when a Predator [drone] comes and hits a village.'

The Swat Valley has been at the epicentre of the fighting. It is close to the other major frontline of Bajaur. I travelled with Maj Gen Nasser Janjua's forces in the region twice in the past year, and this time round he had become increasingly frustrated and disillusioned, although he would never say that on record. Like almost every other Pakistani soldier fighting in the Tribal Areas, it is the accusation by and assumption of their Western allies that they are not doing enough to fight the militants and are somehow in cahoots with them that riles the most.

'We are suffering the maximum,' he told me, as we walked through the rugged mountain trenches his troops are dug into. 'We are contributing the maximum, we are killing the maximum... and we are sacrificing for the sake of the world... yet we are accused of not doing enough. How is this?'

Twice in the past year, on the verge of making significant military gains against the local Taliban forces commanded by Mullah Fazlullah, a firebrand cleric in the Swat Valley, the civilian government agreed to cease fire, under strong tribal pressure. A new ceasefire was agreed again last month, but in return the Taliban allied tribal leaders were allowed to impose Sharia law. In reality, the ceasefires have been nothing more than an opportunity for the Taliban to regroup and demonstrate their ability to extract concessions from the Pakistani government. It is likely that this spring Maj Gen Nasser or his successor will again find himself fighting over the same positions and valleys that they captured in the autumn.

On the mountain frontier with Afghanistan, I embedded with the Pakistani Army and Frontier Corps in Bajaur. I had expected to witness small skirmishes but I was taken aback by the scale of the fighting. I followed tanks and infantry, supported by attack helicopters and artillery, as they mounted a full-scale offensive against the Taliban stronghold of Loe Sam. It was classic guerrilla warfare. The army moved from house to house, and across open ground, securing just a few yards of territory with every sortie. Progress was painstaking and erratic. We

ambitious state-building agenda could take decades, and is at odds with the insurgents' vision of a Pakistan ruled entirely by Islamic law. His efforts to strengthen central institutions and prosecute the war on his own terms are compromised by the US cross-border drone strikes that President Obama has in fact intensified.

That Pakistan is paying a terrible price in the war on terror is undeniable. Not even Iraq had as many suicide bomb attacks in 2008 as Pakistan, and Pakistan has lost more than 1,400 soldiers since 2001 – that is more than 10 times the number of British fatalities in Afghanistan – and nearly 4,000 have been wounded. But I sense that it is only now that the Pakistani civilian government and army both realise the actual threat that the militants pose to the country. It is no longer an insurgency but a battle within, something that to me at least looks like a civil conflict. It has become a war for the soul of Pakistan.

It will take a unity of political purpose that the country has not had for decades to overcome the growing militant movement. This is not because of the blind fanaticism of the impoverished majority of Pakistan's people. The militants' influence is growing because most Pakistanis think that the decades in which they have been ruled by an alternating series of corrupt civilian and corrupt military governments have

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brought them nothing but dismal statistics of economic and social development in the world.

Only when Zardari and the army decide to change the narrative of Pakistani politics will this seemingly unstoppable jihadist movement no longer appeal to the impoverished masses. The one thing that Zardari and the generals do not have is time. So dangerous, unstable and rudderless has the country become that its long-term future could be decided in the next 18 months. With it hangs the stability not only of neighbouring Afghanistan but also of the world. COURTESY DAILY TELEGRAPH