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The fight goes on, militants tell Pakistan
By Syed Saleem Shahzad

KARACHI - When United States President George W Bush and British Premier Gordon Brown interacted with their Pakistani and Afghan counterparts on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York last week, they expressed satisfaction for the conflict escalation against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in the South Asian War theater. (See [Militants shake off Pakistan's grip](#) Asia Times Online, Sep 29.)

This escalation, particularly in Pakistan's tribal agencies, is a gamble based on the tactics used by the US's chief man in Iraq, General David Petraeus, in 2007. Following a "surge" in the war, the US offered an olive branch to the militants. This created a

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wedge between al-Qaeda and the Iraqi tribal resistance and led to a significant reduction in the intensity of the resistance.

In Pakistan, there is no sign of this happening. Indeed, the reverse is true.

On Monday, Pakistani security officials warned that the militants battling Pakistani forces, notably in Bajaur Agency, were obtaining weapons and reinforcements from across the border in Afghanistan. "The Pakistan-Afghan border is porous and is now causing trouble for us in Bajaur," a senior security source in the military told a news briefing in Rawalpindi.

The call to arms to join the militants is reverberating across the tribal areas in unprecedented fashion and the flames of war from Afghanistan that have burned for the past seven years could now engulf Pakistan.

This week, the Taliban officially rejected a Saudi Arabian-British backdoor initiative to strike peace deals with the militants. The charm of Islamabad's old comrades (veteran jihadis) and official handlers (secret agents) no longer works with the Taliban.

Back-channel efforts to strike deals with the Taliban and create a wedge between them and al-Qaeda have been going on since September 11, 2001, (see [US turns to the Taliban](#) Asia Times Online, June 4, 2003).

However, for the first time, the Taliban have reacted very strongly against such efforts. On Sunday evening, the Taliban issued a press release in Pashto, followed by one in English:

In the name of Allah, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful
All praise and thanks are due to Allah, the lord of all

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that exists and may peace and prayers be upon the Messenger of Allah, his family, companions in entirety.

The mainstream media are reporting about a "peace process" between the Taliban and the Kabul puppet administration [of President Hamid Karzai] which is being sponsored by Saudi Arabia and supported by Britain, or that there are "unprecedented talks" involving a senior ex-Taliban member who is traveling between Kabul and the alleged bases of the Taliban senior leadership in Pakistan. The ex-members of the Taliban who have surrendered or who are under surveillance are not associated with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan rejects all these false claims by the enemy, who is using this propaganda campaign, the aim of this propaganda is to create an atmosphere of disunity among Muslims in order to weaken the *ummah*. Our struggle will be continued until the departure of all foreign troops. Dr Talib
Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan
Afghanistan/Kabul

The message is clear: the Taliban and al-Qaeda are now one and the same and far from being ready to be divided they are fully geared up to themselves escalate the conflict.

Winning a lost war through Pakistan?

With the Taliban-led insurgency in Afghanistan going from strength to strength, the Western military and political leadership figured on taking on the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Pakistan's tribal areas, where they have strong bases. This would be followed by peace talks.

The military offensive began last month ago in Agency Bajaur, the smallest of Pakistan's seven tribal agencies, semi-autonomous ethnic Pashtun regions. Troops were backed by aerial bombardment, the latter causing hundreds of thousands of people to be displaced.

And contrary to official claims, the militants have not been routed. Instead, all Pakistani pro-Taliban militants who had been rivals as well as foreign fighters have rallied under the command of the Afghan Taliban commander of Nooristan and Kunar provinces, Qari Ziaur Rahman. (See [A fighter and a financier](#) Asia Times Online, May 23, 2008.) All groups have accepted Rahman as their commander in chief for the area that spans Kunar, Nooristan, Bajaur and Mohmand Agency.

The Pakistani media have reported that Rahman's engagement in Bajaur has reduced Taliban attacks in Kunar. But this is not expected to last long, with all-out activity expected soon on all fronts.

According to the original plan, Pakistani forces were to make their attack in Bajaur and US troops across the border in Kunar would block any escape routes. The Pakistanis followed their side of the plan, but US ground troops were unable to stop the militants from taking shelter in Kunar.

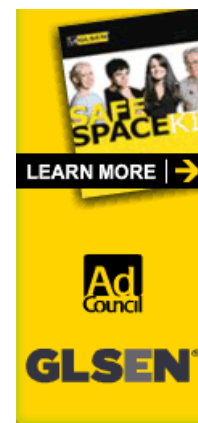
The fault lay in the plan. Unlike Bajaur, which is relatively developed with a road network, on the Kunar side there are few passable tracks in the thick mountain jungles. There are also many caves from which militants and pro-Taliban villagers could target ground troops.

The Pakistani armed forces took heavy casualties, and despite official claims, the militants say they have only lost a few dozen men - and Rahman is not one of them.

Pakistan's strategic quarters now fear a military defeat could set off a chain reaction into the adjacent troubled Swat Valley, and beyond: there is even talk of relocating the provincial capital of North-West Frontier Province, Peshawar, to a non-Pashtun city such as Abbotabad.

At the same time, the low morale of the soldiers and officers is a worrying factor, especially among the Pashtun military cadre, which forms about 25% of the army. In one instance, in obvious disregard to directions from military headquarters, Pakistani border forces and tribals jointly downed a US Predator drone in the South Waziristan tribal area.

Further, following a clear demand made by Washington last week to President Asif Ali Zardari, the director general of the powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Lieutenant General Nadeem Taj, has been replaced by Ahmed Shuja Pasha, who is known for his intimacy with the Americans and anti-Taliban views. The heads of



intimacy with the Americans and anti-Taliban views. The heads of the external and internal security wings of the ISI have also been replaced. (This was predicted by Asia Times Online, see [Militancy dogs Pakistan's new president](#) Sep 9, 2008.)

This move will only deepen mistrust of the government as well as pro-American Pakistani army chief General Ashfaq Pervaz Kiani.

Chasing elusive peace deals

The miscalculation over Bajaur means that the second phase of the Pakistan-US plan - the defeated militants forced into peace deals - has not materialized. Yet Pakistan and its Western allies have little choice but to go after peace accords in an attempt to de-escalation the conflict.

Former jihadi leaders who once sat in the Taliban's and al-Qaeda's camp and retired military officers who are regarded as the real fathers of the Taliban are now trying to build bridges between the Pakistan military and the Taliban.

The idea, as per Petraeus' Iraq plan, is that once dialogue is successful, al-Qaeda will be purged from the ranks of the local tribal resistance, with the latter then being offered a role in mainstream politics.

The chief of the banned Harkatul Mujahadeen, Maulana Fazlur Rahman Khalil, has been tasked to reach out to pro-Taliban militants in the Mohmand, Bajaur and Waziristan areas to initiate dialogue between the Taliban and the Pakistani establishment.

A former ISI official and consul general in Herat in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s, Amir Sultan, also known as Colonel Imam and regarded as a father of the Taliban, is another figure who has been shuttling from the tribal areas to Islamabad in an attempt to end the rift between the armed forces and the Taliban.

The militants are not responding positively to these efforts. Various militant commanders have held talks with two pro-Pakistani Taliban figures - Maulana Jalaluddin Haqqani and Hafiz Gul Bahadur of North Waziristan - and urged them to sever all backchannel contacts with the Pakistani security forces.

Earlier, in Mohmand Agency, the militants pursued Taliban commander Abdul Wali to end his impartiality and join hands against the Pakistani armed forces.

A decisive figure could be Haqqani, a veteran mujahideen commander against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s. If he decides to sever his contacts with Pakistan, the conflict in the country will become dire indeed.

Syed Saleem Shahzad is Asia Times Online's Pakistan Bureau Chief. He can be reached at saleem_shahzad2002@yahoo.com

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