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May 2009

Life and Death in Swat Valley

by Frank Schell

Posted May 31, 2009

There is an oddness about the Vale of Swat, known to the world as Swat Valley, high in the Hindu Kush mountains of Pakistan. Alexander's legions came and went over 2,000 years ago, his satraps carrying on. The mountain valley, with icy cold river waters and deodars, became Buddhist under the emperor Ashoka. Later, sculptors produced dramatic stone forms of Lord Buddha wearing Greek robes. Its natural beauty is unsurpassed; there was even a ski resort there not too long ago.



AFP Photo / Tariq Mahmoud

A Pakistani army soldier escorts a suspected Taliban militant as he and other suspected militants are presented to journalists inside an army base in Mingora, the capital of troubled Swat Valley, May 28.

But the serene vale is no more. A former princely state now under Taliban control and Shariah law, the executioner's blade deals quick justice in Swat. Public beheadings, the burning of schools, AK-47 gunfire, and the sound of Pakistan army convoys are now the norm. The Taliban have destroyed an idyllic land and marginalized local residents from Pakistan's economy and society. With a modus operandi of intimidation, they seek out rural antagonisms—against landowners, shopkeepers, the police, and village administrators—and then stage executions.

Until recently, Pakistan seemed complacent about this evil, which advanced to within 60 miles of Islamabad. Far from the tribal and frontier areas, the middle class has gone about its business of buying and selling. And the Pakistan army, with all its might, remained mainly unengaged until this month's operation to wrest Swat from the Taliban—by destroying its training camps and taking out its leadership.

At last, the Pakistan army seems committed and serious about its business, having deployed 15,000 troops in Swat by some estimates. Assessments range from optimistic scenarios of a cleanup within a few months, to an indefinite effort against the Taliban, which is believed to have designs on controlling all of Pakistan with its Islamist and social ideology. A skeptical view is that the Pakistan army may be doing just enough to assure continued financial aid from the United States.

The U.S. trained Pakistan army is not short on firepower: the armed forces rank in the world's top seven in terms of size. But its historical approach to engaging India, configured for armor battles in Punjab, Rajasthan and Gujarat and a face-off over Kashmir, has led to limited focus on development of a counterinsurgency capability, and it lacks depth in the psychological operations and techniques needed to fight a fanatical enemy in remote mountainous terrain.

If the Pakistan army is unable to suppress and destroy the Taliban in Swat,

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it may need support from the United States from across the frontier in Afghanistan. A Taliban success in this part of the Northwest Frontier Province will embolden it to consolidate its presence in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and in the southwest province of Baluchistan, where al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri is reportedly hiding near the provincial capital of Quetta—and to strike further into the heart of Pakistan.

The immediate issue for the world is a refugee crisis of enormous proportions, in a region where displaced populations have already become disenchanted with authority, giving rise to anti-Western sentiments and to the appeal of the Taliban and elements of al Qaeda. With a weak economy, inflation having reached 25% late last year (reportedly easing since then), and a \$7.6 billion emergency loan facility from the IMF, Pakistan is in no position to support what are almost two million refugees by some estimates. This new refugee population will benefit those who seek chaos and the fracture of Pakistan.

In a quest for leading practices against an insurgent enemy, the Pakistan army would be wise to study the methods of the Sri Lanka military, which finally routed the Tamil Tigers, a dangerous secessionist movement persisting for over twenty-five years, as well as the recent U.S. success in Anbar, which leveraged Sunni passions to drive out al Qaeda.

Longer term, a countering ideology is needed to offset the psychology of the Taliban, who promise services and opportunities that the Government of Pakistan is not providing. Until this emotional affinity for radicalism is addressed, military initiatives in Swat are likely to be a short-term fix.

Frank Schell recently returned from a fact-finding mission to India with the Harris School of Public Policy Studies at the University of Chicago, where he is a member of the Dean's International Council and guest lecturer on India affairs. A business consultant and former banking executive, he served in the U.S. Peace Corps in India, speaks Hindi-Urdu, and is on the editorial board of the Chicago-based National Strategy Forum, which focuses on national security issues.

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Deva Dasan @ 2009-07-09 18:35:59

The CIA together with successive Pakistani govts and the ubiquitous ISI have between themselves created the hydra of terrorism. Now that the shoe is on the other foot perhaps they may wish to reconsider /rethink their policy of killing India with a thousand cuts (Zia Ul Haq ,Late Pakistani President and US ally professed this plan). Terrorism can never be controlled and knows no masters or boundaries..... those who know Afghanistan and the and the NW Territories understand the proud traditions of these frontiersmen who never back down! The ISI is playing all the sides against each other and the world should understand this fact.

smg @ 2009-06-13 23:42:39

Taliban a creation of Benazirs government and the CIA has come to haunt Pakistan. Pakistan Army and ISI should realise that terrorism as foreign policy tool will come back to bite them.... When they try to poison others, they would also be imbibing the poison. Hopefully Obama has learnt this and stops such covert operations

B T Tan @ 2009-06-06 11:29:42

The Pakistan army, under the relentless coaxing (if not coercion) of the US, appeared to have driven Taliban out of the infamous Swat Valley, leaving behind some 2 millions of displaced people who are suffering. Was it a victory for Pakistan? No, not yet. The Taliban is fighting a guerilla war, coming and going as they wish -- anytime, anywhere. They mingle freely with the locals, one day they are militants, next day common folks. The battles in the Swat Valley might have ended, but the war for regional supremacy has only just begun. (Tan Boon Tee)

malangi @ 2009-06-03 06:10:22

So far the Swat operation by Paki Army has resulted in large number of unreported civilian deaths, flattened villages & destruction & displacement of more than 3 million people. The degree of success of this operation shall be measured in capturing or killing of the top 20 leadership of Swat Taliban. Which they have failed to do or not willing to do. Pashtoon people demands of the people of US & world in large to closely monitor the actions of Pakistan. The financial & military aid shall be strictly conditional to the honesty of Pakistan army to achieve those objectives. Otherwise Pakistan will be holding the world hostage & innocent Pashtoons will be killed.

Umair @ 2009-06-02 15:08:36

Surely the army is doing and achieving what ISAF and US forces are struggling with, or the motives of forces across Pak-Afghan border are different. It has taken alot of sacrifices by Pakistani civilians and soldiers alike but longterm solution lies in politics and governance. Lets hope civil adminstraion devises a plan tailored to counter the ideological threat as mentioned above. Rest assured, Alexander The Great would have been impressed by the military strategy against terrorists in NorthWest...

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