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Religious Militancy, Taliban and Peace Deals in FATA

1. Background:

Since the ouster of the Taliban government in Afghanistan in 2001, the pro-Taliban militants in FATA and NWFP have remained engaged in intermittent confrontation with the Pakistani security forces. Pakistan army undertook the first major military operation in March 2004 in South Waziristan and there has not been any turning back since then as the confrontation kept escalating at newer – and higher – level with every skirmish happening. While the sporadic military operations kept taking place in one or the other of the seven FATA agencies, militancy kept spilling over into the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). Before the implication of the militancy spillover from FATA into settled areas is discussed, it is crucial to understand NWFP and how it differs from FATA. Before we get into a discussion of the causes and implication of the spillover of militancy from FATA to NWFP, we will have to understand what NWFP is, and how it is different from FATA and if the patterns, objectives and operational schemes of the militancy is identical or different at both places.

FATA is governed under the British Colonial Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR) of 1901 and these laws are peculiar to that part of the country based on tribal customs and traditions whereas, NWFP is governed by the laws that are applicable all across Pakistan. Moreover, the jurisdiction of federal courts and the federal police does not extend to FATA, while NWFP is fully under the reach of both. In other words, if FATA is categorized as a loosely governed territory of Pakistan, NWFP is a fully governed territory where the federal courts of the country adjudicate civil and criminal cases on the basis of law of the land.

2. Present Situation and Analysis:

With the rise of pro-Taliban militancy in FATA directed against the Pakistani state, especially after March 2004, NWFP could not remain immune to its negative influences for long, provided its contiguity with FATA. There were around 60 suicide blasts in Pakistan in 2007, out of which 26 were in NWFP (43

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percent). A number of CD shops and internet cafés have been blown up in NWFP over the past couple of years, including in the provincial capital Peshawar. Besides such acts of terrorism and subversion, pro-Taliban extremist militants have also tried to enforce their puritanical rules in various parts of NWFP through their actual ground-strength. Most of the districts of NWFP that were affected by this trend of the presence of pro-Taliban Vice and Virtue ('Amr-bil-Marouf wa Nahi-anil-Munkar') police were adjacent to FATA, with the exception of Swat district. Again with the exception of Swat – as well as Tank (pronounced as Taank) – in most cases the militants restricted their Vice and Virtue policing restricted to rural areas and small towns rather than extending to the district capitals. It is in the context of the extremist movement of pro-Taliban militants in the Tank district of NWFP that this article strives to analyze the dynamics of the spillover of militancy into NWFP and its linkages with the militant movement in FATA.

Tank district of NWFP is connected with South Waziristan agency through the Frontier Region Tank (FR Tank), which is also part of FATA. Militants started asserting themselves in Tank in mid-2006, by the end of the year they were attacking police force to weaken the resolve of the security forces in the district, and by March 2007 they were patrolling the streets of Tank openly brandishing their weapons inviting clashes with the security forces in March and May 2007. The 'writ of the militants' in Tank was rided in the second half of 2007 but to this day, they stage attacks on security forces and civilians in the area. Even during the recent operation against militants associated with Baitullah Mahsud in January 2008, there were rocket attacks by militants in Tank city.

As the government of Pakistan had entered into a peace agreement with the militants of South Waziristan led by Baitullah Mahsud in February 2005, militants not only entrenched their positions in South Waziristan but also felt emboldened to extend their writ to the adjacent Tank district. The peace agreement allowed them a sanctuary to recruit and train more militants and

for those training camps they needed more and more money and manpower, which they tried to obtain by extending their sphere of influence to Tank. Actually, the clashes between FC and the militants in Tank in March 2007 resulted because of the attempt for recruitment of militants from a private school in Tank by the South Waziristan militants. The principal of the school refused and he was abducted by the militants, resulting in clashes with the security forces.

In absence of a social dimension, the military action might continue endlessly proving extremely detrimental to the state, society, politics and the economy of Pakistan.

Before the advent of Talibanization in Tank, it was one of many hotbeds of criminal activities with criminals brandishing weapons openly in parts of the city. With militancy taking root in the adjacent tribal areas, residents of Tank found it

hard to resist armed militants with almost non-existent support from the ill-resourced and corrupt police force of the district. Tank proved more vulnerable to militant influences than the other districts adjacent with the tribal areas for certain reasons. Bannu – though not immune to militant influences in the rural areas – fared relatively better because it was the home district of the Chief Minister of NWFP till 2007. Kohat and Nowshera are garrison cities, with large military deployments, Peshawar is the capital of the province, while Hangu, Charsadda, Dir, and Malakand districts have had their own sets of problems with the militants, but not as strong as those of Tank. The reason for Tank being the worst hit (besides Swat), is that it was adjacent to a FATA territory with the most formidable local Taliban militant movement in the country as well as certain clan affiliations of the tribes living in Tank with those living in FR Tank and South Waziristan (both part of FATA).

There is a large concentration of Bhattani and Mahsud tribes in Tank district besides Kundi and Jatt tribes. Baloch and Marwat tribes live in small pockets in the district. Mahsud is a major tribe of South Waziristan, while Bhattanis mostly live in FR Tank. Their clan affiliations with Tank have enabled them smooth access to the district and also safe houses whenever they were in need.

The recent spread of Talibanization from North and South Waziristan to other tribal areas like Bajaur,

Kurram, and Mohmand agencies, as well as FR Kohat (Darra Adam Khel) and other districts like Tank, Bannu, and Swat was in most part because of the vacuum of state. The local dynamics of militancy in Bajaur and the northern districts are a little different from Tank, but fall into the broad description.

Emboldened Taliban now are trying to reach out to their supporters in all across Pakistan and over the past few months have made their presence felt by attacking and killing many active duty servicemen including Pakistan's intelligence apparatus, Pakistan Air Force and police. The state security structure is resisting this onslaught by the Taliban but the situation of law and order is hanging in a very delicate balance with strong resolve from the Taliban and an even stronger crushing from the Pakistani security organizations. The situation is grim but many observers believe that Pakistan has walked through the climax of the militancy and the state security apparatus is now engaged in active battles with Taliban elements in FATA and have scored some successes, latest being the crushing of Taliban in Darra Adam Khel. The need of the hour is to expand the horizon of the crisis management and the militants must not be allowed to set the agenda of the armed conflict in FATA or elsewhere.

A military undertaking on its own has not produced any worthwhile, sustainable result. A social as well as a political dimension would have to be added to the equation. In absence of a social dimension, the military action might continue endlessly proving extremely detrimental to the state, society, politics and the economy of Pakistan. To be certain, a stable Pakistan is actually the need of the hour.