

# BROOKINGS

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## Mastering Counterinsurgency: A Workshop Report

By Stephen P. Cohen, Senior Fellow, The Brookings Institution  
and Shuja Nawaz, Director, South Asia Center, The Atlantic Council

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The Brookings Institution and the Pakistan National Defence University, with support from the U.S. National Defense University and the Embassy of Pakistan, Washington, held a three-day workshop that explored American and Pakistani approaches to counterinsurgency (COIN) and low-intensity conflict (LIC) from March 10 to March 12, 2009. The workshop consisted of two days' discussion, a visit to the Marine Corps Base Quantico for discussions with resident experts, and a visit to the Pentagon for briefings by American civilian and military officials.

Subsequently, in early May, the Pakistan army launched its biggest-ever counterinsurgency operation in Swat, which is likely to have had significant consequences for the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP), the army, and Pakistan itself. The workshop anticipated and addressed many dimensions of this operation, although no one present asserted that it was imminent. The surprisingly rapid developments in Pakistan were, in retrospect, the biggest "takeaway" from the conference, and they should make us humble when it comes to prediction.

This report highlights some dimensions of the workshop's exploration of COIN and LIC, and notes areas of agreement and disagreement among and between American and Pakistani participants. It represents our own views, and not necessarily those of sponsors and participants. The conference papers are available on the Brookings website.<sup>1</sup>

### **COIN or LIC?**

Americans and Pakistanis come to counterinsurgency and low-intensity conflict from different backgrounds and different experiences. Further, they interpret the record of successful COIN/LIC operations very differently. Contemporary Western theorists, such as Australian expert David Kilcullen, argue that the emphasis should be on protecting people and building institutions and governance capabilities. The role of the military is to shield this process from disruption. The Pakistan perspective is that one should go after the enemy himself, capturing, disabling, or killing the leadership wherever possible. COIN is population-focused, LIC is enemy-focused.

As Janine Davidson noted in her paper, these differences should not be a surprise, as historically there have been differences in both approach and terminology between the United States and its allies, including members of NATO. At the senior levels, Pakistan army officers still see the need for nothing more than well-trained infantry soldiers to fight insurgent militants. Yet, their own experiences belie their analyses. They have had to resort to overwhelming conventional force: air power, helicopters, artillery, armor, and infantry in major operations in the Federally-Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) as well as settled areas of the NWFP. While initially successful in clearing out militants from fixed positions in towns and cities, the army has been unable to hold the cleared areas or to administer them long enough to restore normal civil

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.brookings.edu/foreign-policy/counterinsurgency-and-pakistan-paper-series.aspx>

administration. The absence of a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy involving the civil administration, political leadership and the military has meant that whatever tactical military successes they might have had were largely ineffective in the long run. A vacuum of civil order in the wake of military action frequently allows the insurgents to regain control. Swat represents a major test for the Pakistan army's ability to learn about this process and craft an effective response.

We know of no strong evidence of institutional memories of past anti-insurgency operations in the Pakistan army. No deeply introspective studies of actions in Balochistan or East Pakistan (Bangladesh) have emerged as seminal pieces of military literature in Pakistan. Instead, there has been a reliance on mythology and denial, with insurgencies blamed more often than not on a "foreign hand." We have heard this as an explanation for recent attacks on the Pakistani state and the army, with India being the likely culprit. Unfortunately, this attitude prevents the army from learning lessons or accumulating enough combined wisdom to form a new doctrine. Yet we would caution that recent American experience may not always be relevant. Each insurgency has its own life-cycle, and direct comparisons between U.S.-led COIN operations in Iraq and Afghanistan on the one hand, and operation in Pakistan on the other must be drawn carefully.

The workshop gave us a good glimpse into these issues. On the positive side, it became clear that Pakistani officers who had served recently in FATA had intuitively absorbed some of the lessons of counterinsurgency that the United States had learned the hard way over several years in Iraq. The institutional dynamics of decision-making in the Pakistan army (not dissimilar to some of the dynamics noted by Colonel Paul Yingling in his influential critique of U.S. military thinking) prevents some officers of brigadier and lower ranks from raising their voices against prevalent conventional doctrine espoused by their senior commanders.<sup>2</sup> A military solution is more often than not seen as an effective response to the rise of militancy in NWFP and FATA. Not enough attention is paid to the underlying economic, social, and political conditions that spawn the insurgency and allow it to use religion as a cover. The Pakistan army continues to use a quaint English word "miscreant" to describe the militants, not realizing the religious origins and connotations of the term, denoting deviation from the accepted religious orthodoxy.

### **The Critical Role of the Police and Justice System**

The substantive theme upon which there was most agreement among all participants was the importance of the police and the local justice system in an insurgency's early stage, and their role in any COIN/LIC operation that attempted to restore normalcy.

Hassan Abbas's paper made this point very effectively in the context of the British and Pakistani experiences. Put bluntly, the role of the police in the Raj was to protect the state, not the population. The police forces were an instrument of coercion, and until recently Pakistani police operated under the outmoded Police Act of 1861. Even today, the police are used by both civil and military leaders to suppress dissent and marginalize opposition politicians. Among other things, this acts as a disincentive for police officers to perform professionally.

Another major problem is the structure of police forces. There is no standardized system of hiring at the provincial level. And there are reports of corruption in recruiting, starting at the local thana (police station) and rising to the highest levels. The system is also hobbled by lack of adequate training, equipment and financial resources. The resource shortage has led to inadequate police forces nationwide, with barely 350,000 police for a population of over 170 million, most of whom earn only about \$100 a month.

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<sup>2</sup> Lt. Col. Paul Yingling, "A Failure in Generalship," *Armed Forces Journal*, May 2007.

It is not surprising therefore that the police in Pakistan have been ineffective in their normal duties as well as in counterinsurgency work. The better-run and paid military intelligence services do not coordinate their work with the police. Data collection on criminal activities and militant organizations is poor. The Special Investigation Group set up under the Federal Investigation Agency had, at one time, only 37 officers. Moreover, state-sponsored militant groups that fed the jihad in Kashmir were out of reach of the local police.

As a result, the police have been hampered in their attempts to monitor or control insurgents or militants. As Abbas noted, if the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) clerics had been prosecuted after their 2004 *fatwa*, the events of 2007 may not have occurred.

If Pakistan is to benefit from the use of its police forces in fighting insurgencies, it has to speed up the reform process, improve salaries and benefits for police officers, and remove the police system from the reach of political leaders. Finally, Abbas called for “intelligence-led policing,” so that pre-emptive actions can head off the growth of criminal or terrorist activities.

As Sunil Dasgupta stated, it must be recognized that insurgencies can last a very long time. The average length of recent insurgencies has been well over 10 years. This includes several in India, the Baluchistan conflict in Pakistan, and the Nepal and Sri Lankan insurgencies which are just now grinding to a halt. As Dasgupta reminded us, there is some risk of ignoring other forces in dealing with an insurgency. Using examples from Iraq, Algeria, the Indian Punjab, and Colombia, Dasgupta noted that local allies, or paramilitary forces, were crucial elements in the fight against insurgencies. These had to be backed by the military and supported politically and financially by the government. Such local alliances allow the government to engage with local allies and, using their knowledge and influence, suffocate insurgencies. These local allies can take the form of militias, task forces, or constabularies. A paramilitary force is not a panacea, and Dasgupta warns of the dangers inherent in a three-step approach of recruitment, withdrawal, and renegotiation of local alliances to fight insurgencies. He cites the poor training and resource bases of these local allies, their susceptibility to deals with the insurgents, and the likelihood that they will be targeted by better-armed and -trained insurgents. Active participation and support from the military is necessary to bolster the work of local paramilitary forces during COIN operations.

Finally, the courts must be treated as a vital element in any counterinsurgency strategy that relies heavily on police and paramilitary forces. Without checks on police abuse by the courts (as well as civil society groups) there is a risk that a poorly trained and unchecked police force will add to popular alienation, lessening its effectiveness against locating insurgents. And, naturally, there must be a justice system in place before insurgents can be brought to justice.

### **Pakistan: Rich in Threats**

In conversation with American officials now working on Pakistan we have been asked, “Was Pakistan always this way? Was there always such a profusion of problems?” Our answer is “no,” that this is an unprecedented moment in Pakistani history. Not even the 1971-72 bifurcation of the old Pakistan by a combination of an ethnic Bengali separatist movement and an armed Indian intervention is comparable. Pakistan is “threat rich.” There are layers upon layers of problems.

This was briefly discussed in the workshop, and subsequently in a paper by one of the participants, General (Ret.) Jehangir Karamat.<sup>3</sup> Several kinds of ideologically-driven struggles have taken root on Pakistani soil. Most of these are Islamist. The most prominent are the over

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<sup>3</sup>Jehangir Karamat, “Multiple Wars,” *Spearhead Analysis*, April 4, 2009.

twenty indigenous Pakistani militant groups known collectively as the “Pakistan Taliban,” which have no central direction, but take some of their inspiration from the “Afghan” Taliban. The Pakistan Taliban are not monolithic, although they may receive support from al Qaeda, an organization with far-reaching ambitions. Islamist movements are also powerful in the Punjab, and recent terror attacks seem to indicate that such groups can link up across linguistic and provincial boundaries. It is also the case that some of the insurgents have used class antagonisms in their campaigns.

As if this was not enough, there are long-standing but very dangerous sectarian conflicts in Pakistan, receiving some outside support, notably from Shi’a Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia. These corrode Pakistan’s civil society, and have taken thousands of Pakistani lives over the last few decades.

Pakistan also has ethnic separatist movements, notably in Balochistan, but also among the Urdu-speaking Mohajirs, found in Karachi and other Sindhi urban centers. There is even a tiny ethnic separatist movement in the Northern Territories.

Rivalry between provinces also figures in Pakistan’s politics. Provincial autonomy was recognized in the Pakistani constitution, which established Pakistan as a federation, although the tendency has been to concentrate power in Islamabad. Provincial rivalry is most acute in the assignment of jobs, and the preferential treatment given to “sons of the soil” in each province. It also manifested itself in interprovincial conflicts over water resources. And because of the army’s political and economic dominance, its own composition has been a sore point between the dominant Punjab and the other provinces. Over 60 percent of the soldiers and officers come from Punjab, while Pashtuns account for some 14.6 percent of the army.

At another layer, there are intra-provincial conflicts simmering just beneath the surface. In the Punjab itself there is a Saraiki movement, making a claim for special status on the basis of language and culture. Balochistan has seen the steady expansion of a Pushtun minority. The politics of Pakistan’s largest and most important city, Karachi, is gridlocked because of a three way struggle between ethnic Sindhis who constitute the original population, Mohajirs who migrated from India after 1947, and more recent Pushtun migrants who form the working class of this megacity.

Religious, sectarian and ethnic conflicts are just for starters. As Karamat notes, they are joined by national rivalries, notably between India and Pakistan and between Pakistan and Afghanistan. These interstate conflicts are not mere quarrels over territory but often involve competing national identities and overlapping ethnic and linguistic groups, notably Baloch, Kashmiris and Pushtuns. This creates a standing invitation for the intelligence services to exploit such divisions in what has become a complex of ruinous and ultimately self-defeating competitions.

Sequencing the response to such a wide variety of conflicts and threats is a difficult policy problem. Further, different counterinsurgency strategies must be crafted for each kind of threat. Some are more amenable to force, while others require heavy investment in civilian governance. How does one build state capacity along several dimensions? What should come first: doctrinal clarity, political leadership, or a restructuring of security forces? Put another way, what changes are necessary even if they are not sufficient? We believe that an explication of these threats and a discussion of appropriate strategies should be a priority topic for any subsequent workshop.

### **Building a Learning Army**

There was much discussion and description of how the U.S. military has learned, forgotten, and then re-learned the lessons of its own COIN experiences. Even today there is a debate about the degree to which it should reduce its conventional war-fighting capabilities in favor of COIN operations. Can the Pakistan army engage in such a debate? Does it have the capacity and the will to do so, or do changes have to come from the outside? What will force it to reform and adapt? How does it balance its Indian, FATA, NWFP, and Punjab threats? Does its ethnic composition and ethos make this especially difficult?

The Pakistan army has been the focus of much attention since 9/11 after it moved into FATA to help U.S. and NATO forces contain and eliminate the Afghan Taliban. The Afghan Taliban had used their ethnicity – as well as popular resentment against a “foreign invader” of Afghanistan – to rely on support from their fellow Pashtuns on the Pakistan side of the porous Durand Line border, and seek sanctuary there.

Some 120,000 army and Frontier Corps troops entered FATA on an extended stay for the first time since 1947. As the army was ethnically dominated by Punjabis, the majority of troops were perceived by the locals as “alien.” Communications were a problem, as were the lack of training and equipment for rapid movement across difficult hilly or mountainous terrain.

Over time, the frontier warfare training that had once been a regular element of instruction for the British Indian Army was largely forgotten. Standard operating procedures for conventional troop movements and engagement with the enemy did not work against insurgents and militants that had local roots and who melded into the local population. Some initial setbacks, including the surrender of troops to well-armed insurgents who used their local knowledge to advantage, created a sense of demoralization. The lack of protection for the soldiers (including too few flak jackets), an inability to operate at night due to a paucity of night vision devices, and inadequate mobility to intercept sporadic attacks at distant sites due to a lack of helicopters, made the army’s job of fighting the insurgency even harder. Collateral damage of civilian structures and persons became a serious issue. The general population saw this as America’s War not Pakistan’s War.

Against this backdrop, the Pakistan army was constrained in its efforts to fight the insurgency from the beginning. It also found it difficult to accept the need to restructure or retrain itself in a massive manner to meet the emerging needs in FATA. It saw any move toward COIN as an all or nothing approach being suggested by the United States, among others, instead of planning for a spectrum of forces with conventional as well as COIN capabilities, and a hybrid structure that would allow it to repurpose its forces for whatever type of action at short notice. Initially, it defined the operations as demanding nothing more than well trained infantry soldiers. But once it became clear that its soldiers and officers were not used to the emerging battles in unfamiliar terrain, a three-part course of battle inoculation was created to prepare troops for induction into FATA. The process of adapting to warfare in the frontier areas of western Pakistan was interrupted briefly in December 2008 after the Mumbai terrorist attack that led India to threaten retaliation.

Meanwhile, the Pakistan army began to learn by doing. At the local level, officers and men had to confront and adapt to fighting an elusive Taliban force. It was a bitter lesson, with high casualties. Over 1500 army officers and soldiers were killed in fighting, prompting some local deals with insurgents that failed in due course. In Swat, the provincial government came under direct Taliban attack, leading it to make its own deal. That also failed but proved that the insurgents had grand designs that could not be thwarted by deals alone. More troops were injected into the area, reaching more than 150,000 by mid-2009. But the military action led to tremendous collateral

damage and unintended consequences with over 300,000 internally displaced persons in Bajaur and nearly three million once military action began in earnest in Swat.

The army resorted to artillery and aerial bombardment of evacuated areas in an effort to kill as many militants as possible. Local intelligence was ineffective. At first the army was unable to even counter the FM radio broadcasts of the insurgents in Swat that created support for the insurgents while demoralizing the army and its allies. US support for jamming operations was slow in coming, making the job harder. Lack of cooperation and coordination between civil and military officials and the absence of a visible central government presence contributed to the confusion.

Gradually, the Pakistan army appears to be learning some lessons of COIN from the experience of others and its own field operations, but it is a slow process. So long as its security concerns remain focused on the military posture of India, it is highly unlikely that it will have the will to transform into a hybrid institution with a strong COIN capability to bolster its conventional force. It will require a great deal of investment in training and equipment for COIN to become a major part of the Pakistan army's ethos.

#### **“Taking Ownership” and “Owning up”**

Throughout the workshop there were implicit concerns about whether the Pakistan army can, or should, assume “ownership” of its present COIN/LIC threat. Should it wait for political direction or should it prompt the politicians to realize that there might be an existential threat to Pakistan? Related to this, should it own up to its past involvement in supporting and directing groups that subsequently turned against the state?

The emergence of a civilian leadership in Pakistan after protracted autocratic military rule means that a shift in decision-making may now be taking place. The 2009 Swat operation could be a turning point, in that while the army did not have a single preferred strategy, one was imposed on it by President Zardari who saw the Pakistan Taliban as the same people who had murdered his wife, and insisted that the army abandon its more cautious options.

The army, however, remains the most powerful player on the political scene. It has tried to give the fledgling government space to operate, and it is still recovering from the overextension into administration and politics that took place under General Pervez Musharraf. The army's role in Pakistan is thus in the balance: if a civilian-encouraged counterinsurgency campaign succeeds, this will further strengthen the position of civilians vis-à-vis the military, allowing the latter to return to true professionalism and withdraw further from civil administration and politics.

At present a fractious coalition of disparate parties forms the government, and the President still retains the extraordinary powers inherited from General Musharraf. Pakistan has also returned to a kind of “troika” wherein power is shared between the president, the prime minister, and the army chief, while the judiciary seems to be reasserting its authority. Decision-making therefore seems sluggish and often hamstrung by politics. Until Swat, no clear strategy had been crafted by the civil government, beyond slogans, to challenge the militants or rally support.

Looking ahead, it may be difficult to expect the army to take the lead in shaping national policy on the war against the militants because of what it still perceives as a major threat from the east. So long as India and Pakistan are unable to build confidence in each other's intentions, they have to rely on military capability as a surrogate. Both have the majority of their forces arrayed against each other. Until the regional security issue is defused, Pakistan may not be able to shift meaningful resources to COIN operations. The best that may be expected is for a small but

effective COIN force to be trained and the emergence of a well-coordinated campaign with civilian administrators. But who will take the lead on the latter? That question remains unanswered.

### **Trust Deficit or Transactional Relationship?**

We take a somewhat different view of the frequently heard claim that there is a “trust deficit” between the United States and Pakistan, and that the relationship suffers from its transactional nature.

The so-called trust deficit has two dimensions. The first is the question of the durability and longevity of the American commitment to Pakistan, and to Afghanistan. Even though President Obama made this the central building block of his policy to the region, doubts remain among Pakistanis about whether the United States will stand by them once al Qaeda is defeated. Pakistanis recount the many times that the United States withdrew from the region, notably after the departure of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan in the late 1980s. They also point to the new U.S.-India relationship, and conclude that the United States has ‘chosen’ India over Pakistan once and for all.

The other half of the so-called trust deficit is heard from Americans, who grumble about Pakistan’s weak cooperation in tracking down terrorist elements and Pakistani support for some groups, notably the Afghan Taliban, that destabilize Afghanistan.

Our view is that invoking the need for trust is futile. The last time that the word “trust” figured significantly in American foreign policy was in the 1980s. At that time, President Ronald Reagan popularized the phrase “trust, but verify” with regard to U.S.-Soviet arms control negotiations. This should be the spirit of the U.S.-Pakistan relationship. Relations need to be framed on a working basis, with obligations and expectations more clearly spelled out on both sides. They should not rely upon vague and unmeasurable concepts of trust.

### **Looking Ahead**

What subjects might a follow-on workshop on counterinsurgency and low-intensity conflict explore? Certainly, some of the themes discussed in March 2009 should be revisited. These include the confusion over terminology, the role of the police, and the varied conflicts and insurgencies that afflict Pakistan. But at least three additional subjects deserve close study.

First, the balance between civilian and military is especially important in a counterinsurgency operation. While the Pakistan military may be politically influential, much of what has to be done on the ground falls into the sphere of civilian authority. Therefore, it is in the interest of the armed forces, notably the army, to see that authority strengthened and made more competent. How can this process be accelerated, and how can civilian competence be enhanced without encroaching on the army’s professionalism?

Second, information transparency is now a vital component of an effective COIN strategy. The state should not propagandize to its own people, and it cannot do so in any case as modern media make traditional ways of controlling information obsolete. The problem, therefore is enhancing the competence and professionalism of the private media, notably the myriad television channels that have sprung up in Pakistan.

Third, Swat is more than an episode. Optimistically, it may be the turning point in Pakistan’s struggle against indigenous separatist and radical groups. However, it may also lead to catastrophe if the problems associated with population displacement are not handled properly, if

the insurgents are allowed to regroup, or if the limited success in Swat encourages the government to overextend itself before the army, the police, and the civilian administration are prepared for, say, a renewed campaign in Waziristan. The history of the operations in Swat needs to be subject to careful study and objective analysis, which the Pakistan army has not done well in the past. It must also be borne in mind that counterinsurgencies are long-term operations, with a typical life extending well beyond ten years. Counterinsurgency can be sustained, however with popular support, a determined and “learning” army, adequate paramilitary forces, and the tying off of external assistance. Can Pakistan sustain such a strategy over the long-term?