Fighting Unconventional War In The Tribal Areas Of Pakistan Through Conventional Means

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Abstract

The US invasion of Afghanistan on October 7, 2001 left profound impact on the security situation in Pakistan. Pakistan's tribal areas became a hub for different local and international militant organisations. As an ally of the US in the war against terror Pakistan security forces conducted military operations against these non-state actors. This infuriated the people of the tribal areas which had extended support to these different organisations in the Soviet-Afghan war. They started an armed struggle against the state and the security forces. The terrain of the tribal areas provided the militant an enabling environment which helped them to expand their area of influence. The militants effectively exploited the administrative weaknesses of the state in the tribal areas which helped them to obtain the support of the people. The government on the other side heavily relied on the conventional use of force to fight an unconventional enemy. The irregular warfare warranted a comprehensive strategy based on the principles of unconventional warfare to defeat the insurgency in the area. This contributed to the failure of initial military operation in Waziristan. However, the government later changed its strategy from conventional to unconventional warfare in Bajaur and Swat which helped them to defeat the militancy.

Introduction

Unconventional warfare has remained recurrent phenomena in the twenty-first century. The importance of unconventional warfare can be known from the fact that between 1816 and the end of the twentieth century 464 wars took place out of which only 79 (17 per cent) were conventional conflicts which occurred between states, while 385 (83 per cent) were civil-war insurgencies or unconventional wars which occurred within states (cited in Kilcullen, 2010, pp. ix-x). The term insurgency, irregular warfare and asymmetrical conflict are being used interchangeably to explain unconventional warfare. This study uses the term insurgency and unconventional warfare to explain armed struggle confronted by Pakistan government and its security forces in the aftermath of 9/11.

The incident of 9/11 and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan by the US led many Al-Qaeda and Taliban operatives to escape to the tribal areas of Pakistan. Pakistan intelligence agency ISI and the CIA conducted intelligence-based operations in the major cities and captured key Al-Qaeda members. This led the CIA to expand its operation to the tribal areas. Publicly the Musharraf government denied this, but the CIA was covertly allowed to work on selected targets (Crilly, 2013). The government of General Pervez Musharraf believed that applying conventional means would solve the problem. Counterinsurgency expert David Galula maintains that '[C]onventional operations by themselves have at best no more effect than a fly swatter. Some guerrillas are bound to be caught, but new recruits will replace them as fast as they are lost' (Galula, 1964, p. 51). This paper analyses the conventional means applied by the then Musharraf regime in the tribal areas of Pakistan to fight an unconventional warfare.

Applying Conventional Means

It is important to understand that irregular warfare is fundamentally different from conventional state-on-state conflict (Corum, 2009, p. 15). In conventional warfare, it is the strength which is being attacked but in unconventional warfare the enemy attack the weakness of the opponent. The government has to apply unconventional means to win the hearts and minds of the people to undermine their underlying support. After becoming an ally of the US in the war on terror, Musharraf paid little heed towards to apply unconventional measure to eliminate insurgency. Furthermore, he ignored development, compensation and rehabilitation of displaced persons after military operations, which further eroded the government legitimacy. Instead of alienating foreign militants with the support of the people, the government's confused strategy further pushed the local tribesmen to join the ranks of militant groups. Musharraf was convinced that using force would defeat the insurgents, ignoring the fact of unconventional warfare that material superiority is not enough for controlling the population. The Pakistan army's reliance on a heavy-handed approach to punish people further undermined the support of the people (Jones and Fair, 2010). The Pakistan army applied collective punishment under the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) - a century-old colonial law which governed FATA (Jones and Fair, 2010). Despite the resentment and backlash of tribal people, the government nevertheless imposed an economic blockade and sealed off the entire Wana bazaar,[1] closing about 6,000 shops (Dawn, 2004c).

The empirical literature on the insurgency in Pakistan's tribal areas also supports the view that the state's repressive measures in the tribal areas alienated the tribal leaders and created animosity and anti-military feelings among the tribesmen (Wilson and Akhtar 2019, p. 715). The army was accused of killing innocent civilians rather than the militants (Rashid, 2009, p. 2). S. Ahmed (2013, p. 159) shares the same argument and maintains that the excessive use of force destroyed civilian homes and livelihoods

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[1] Wana is the largest town in South Waziristan.

in the tribal areas, which forced the people to join the militant ranks. Khan (2012, p. 141) argues that military operations inside the country have increased terrorism and militancy before.

Favourable Environment for Unconventional Warfare

The mountainous nature of the tribal areas and its terrain made it conducive for unconventional warfare. Acquaintance with the area enabled the Taliban to move freely and attack the convoy of security forces whenever they wanted. Moreover, weak administrative control of the government provided space for the militant to exploit the situation. The poor administrative control allowed the militants to move from the Wazir area to the Mehsud region in South Waziristan, where the Bait Ullah Mehsud regrouped these militants and emerged as a strong local leader. In February 2005, the government signed peace agreement in Sararogha[2] to appease the new group of Bait Ullah. The Sararogha peace agreement mediated by JUI-F leader Maulana Sirajuddin was signed by both the Pakistani government and the Bait Ullah Mehsud group in South Waziristan. According to the peace agreement, Bait Ullah and his groups agreed not to attack Pakistan security forces and officials, or to give shelter to Al-Qaeda and foreign militants, and it pledged to help the government in the war on terror (ICG, 2006). It was also specified in the agreement that the government would compensate the damage to property and would not attack Bait Ullah and his supporters (Khattak, 2012).

In insurgency, it is essential that the government undermines the existing support to the insurgents, however, the military government of Pervez Musharraf ignored this fundamental fact of revolutionary warfare. His government initially conducted military operations against the insurgent and then appeased them and signed truce with them. One of the key flaws in the peace agreement was that the government did not involve major political parties in the process. Had the government debated this in the parliament, the result would have been different. Despite the agreement and the government's claims, the militancy continued to spread. Former DG ISI Lt. General Asad Durrani maintained that 'Two years down the road after military operations, the situation is much worse than it was when the military entered the tribal areas…. strategic errors are not always easy to correct but there is a failure on the part of the Pakistani authorities to even recognise failure (International Crisis Group (ICG, 2006, p. 17).

After the peace agreement, the government allowed Meshud to enforce Shariah law, provided that he stopped cross border infiltration into Afghanistan. Rana maintains that Bait Ullah Mehsud's agreement with the government helped him to enforce Shariah in the areas which provided cause to other militant groups to follow him (Rana, 2009a). The agreement provided him with an opportunity to increase his influence. Secondly, the government was unable to ensure the security of the tribal people, and especially the elders. The role of local tribal leaders was diminished

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[2] A subdivision in South Waziristan.

when the Taliban announced the implementation of Shariah in South Waziristan in March 2006 (Nawaz, 2009a).

In May 2006, Musharraf appointed Lt. Gen (retd) Ali Muhammad Jan Orakzai, who belonged to the tribal agency of Orakzai, as governor of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. On September 5, 2006, the government signed another peace agreement with pro-Taliban leaders in the town of Miranshah, in the troubled North Waziristan agency. The deal was signed by a Political Agent from the government's side in the presence of army commander Major General Azhar Ali Shah (ICG, 2006). From the Taliban side, the deal was reciprocated by Hafiz Gul Bahadar, Maulana Sadiq Noor, Maulvi Ahmad Jehan, Azad Khan, Maulvi Saifullah, Hafiz Amir Hamza, Azmat Ali and Mir Sharif (Khan, 2006). The government appeasement policy benefited the militants where they emerged as serious contenders for power and at the same time exposed the limited statehood of the government in the tribal areas. The weak control in the tribal areas followed by major military operations and their collateral damage further helped the insurgency to expand.

The search and destroy operation which started under international pressure was not only against the tribal traditions but also against the basic norms of counterinsurgency strategy. The history of the tribal areas warranted a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy to win the hearts and minds of the people against the insurgents. Shahid Javed Burki Pakistan's former Finance Minister summarises the tribal history and notes that the Pushtun belt in Afghanistan and Pakistan is inhabited by people who have preferred to be ruled by the ancient code of life rather than modern state laws. The combination of this code with Islamic laws has produced a way of life practised for centuries. The key features of this way of life according to Burki are an abhorrence of external interference and distant central authority and confidence in the local tribal leadership where they can practise their own laws. The Pashtuns have adhered to these traditions even when they were on the move (Burki, 2012, p. 14). However, as discussed previously, neither Musharraf nor the army was concerned about the resentment of the people.

James Corum (2009, p. 240) rightly observed that 'Armed forces and national intelligence agencies tend to be very good at conventional military intelligence…. but dealing with insurgencies is not so simple and straightforward, and civilian and military intelligence agencies are often unequal to the task.' Galula (1964, p. 178). towards the end of his book summarised the situation thus, 'I am not writing all this to show what a genius I was, but to point out how difficult it is to convince people, especially the military, to change traditional ways and adapt themselves to new conditions. His observation is still relevant to understanding the challenges faced by the Pakistan army in the tribal areas. The literature on counterinsurgency suggests that the learning capability of the military plays a significant role in the success and failure in unconventional warfare. Citing the example of British and the US experience in Malaya and Vietnam respectively, John Nagl (2002, p. xiv) explains:

[T]he better performance of the British army in learning and implementing a successful counterinsurgency doctrine in Malaya (as compared to the American army's failure to learn and implement successful counterinsurgency in Vietnam) is best explained by the differing organisational cultures of the two armies; in short, that the British army was a learning institution and the American army was not.

Similarly, Trinquier while explaining France's failure in Indochina and Algeria stated that the main reason was the inability of the French army to adapt to the local culture. Success, he maintains, depends on the external army's ability to adapt to the changing strategies of the insurgents (Trinquier, 1964). Similarly, Kitson (1971), who participated in counterinsurgency campaigns in Asia, Africa and Europe, argues that insurgency has three essential components: a political structure, a military structure and the population. He argues that counterinsurgents should target the political and military structure to win over the population. In Pakistan, unfortunately, the army continued with its traditional enemy approach and only changed the strategy in Swat and Bajaur (See Change of Strategy for more details).

Weak Control of the State in the Tribal Areas

One of the fundamental problems Pakistan faced to fight this unconventional warfare in the tribal areas was its weak administrative control in the areas. Risse (2011) defines a strong state or statehood as an 'institutionalized rule structure with the ability to rule authoritatively (Herrs chafts verb and) and to legitimately control the means of violence' (p. 4). Areas of weak states according to Krasner and Risse 'concern those areas of a country in which central authorities (governments) lack the ability to implement and enforce rules and decision and/or in which the legitimate monopoly over the means of violence is lacking (Krasner & Risse, 2014, p. 549). Risse (2011) distinguishes weak state from fragile, failing and failed states. Furthermore, limited statehood is not confined to developing states.

According to Chojnacki and Branovic, the state's lack of authority 'in such areas leaves space and time for nonstate armed actors to recalibrate their interaction with the civilian population and invest in the provision of security' (Chojnacki & Branovic, 2011, p. 91). Matteo Fumagalli (2007) rightly suggests that 'the state's limited capacity to provide social welfare and means of interest articulation to its citizenry exposes it to a crisis of legitimacy' (p. 2). Analysing the situation in the tribal areas of Pakistan, it can safely be concluded that the state lost the ability of effective control as well as legitimacy. Before 9/11, three different, yet overlapping and mutually interdependent sources of authority existed in the tribal areas: (1) the tribal elder, or malik; (2) the religious leader, or Mullah; and (3) the political agent representing the central government (Ahmed, A. 2013, p. 49).

The political agent would closely work with both the tribal elders and religious leaders to ensure law and order in the area. However, after the arrival of the army, the office of the political agent was made irrelevant. This made the tribal elders who were

responsible for ensuring law and order in their respective areas the primary target of the militants. The already weak monopoly over the use of violence shifted to the insurgents. According to an estimate, after 9/11 some 400 elders were assassinated in Waziristan alone, and 800 in the whole of the tribal areas (A. Ahmed, 2013, p. 77). Similarly, the traditional religious clerics who were close to the government were targeted after military operations (A. Ahmed, 2013). Furthermore, the collapse of the existing administrative structure led the state to rely on coercive power which further weakened the government legitimacy and undermined the support of the population.

## Change of Strategy – Bajaur and Swat

In 2008, the government adopted a multi-dimensional approach in the tribal areas of Bajaur and Swat which included military operations and peace agreements and the formation of tribal lashkars (private militias) to defeat insurgency (PIPS, 2008). The government also tried to enhance the capability of the security forces to effectively contain insurgency (PIPS, 2008). One of the key reasons for successful military operations in Bajaur and Swat in 2009, was the changing counterinsurgency approach from coercion to 'winning hearts and minds' (Mullick, 2009b, p.10) Despite the increasing atrocities of the militants in 2009, the Pakistan army was finally willing to learn lessons from its past failure, and apply a counterinsurgency strategy in Bajaur and Swat (Mullick, 2009a, p. 54).

Bajaur remained an important hub of local and foreign militants until 2008. Its proximity to Afghanistan's provinces of Kunar and Nuristan made it strategically important for both Pakistan and US forces across the border. The Afghan Taliban had established safe havens in both Kunar and Nuristan from where they continued attacking US and NATO forces. The militant leaders in Bajaur, Maulvi Faqir Muhammad, a deputy to TTP leader Bait Ullah Mehsud, and Qari Zia Rehman, were believed to have close links with Al-Qaeda (Khan, 2009). At the beginning of 2007, local militants gained control of many parts of Bajaur Agency and they intensified their attacks against security forces. In early 2008, the militant group led by Qari Zia Rehman gained control of Loi sam area. By June, the insurgents destroyed more than half of 72 check posts and disrupted the civil administration through continued suicide attacks (Jones and Fair, 2010).

On September 2, 2008, the tribal elders of Salarzai tribe warned the local supporters of the Taliban of strict action. Munsib Khan, the leader of the 20,000 tribal Lashkar, said that those who were found supporting Taliban would be fined one million Rupees, their houses would be put on fire, and they would also be thrown out of the area (The Frontier Post, 2007d, p. 1). On September 9, 2008, the security forces initiated the operation Sher Dil (Loin Heart) in the area Loi sam, Khar, Nawagai and Alizai. Some 8,000 troops of the army and Frontier Corps (FC) along with Pakistan Air Force fighter jets took part in the operation. The security forces faced tough resistance from the militants. A security official was quoted saying that 'They have good weaponry and

a better communication system (than ours) …. It does not look as though we are fighting a rag-tag militia; they are fighting like an organised force' (Khan, 2008a).

FIGURE 1. 3: OPERATION SHER DIL 2008
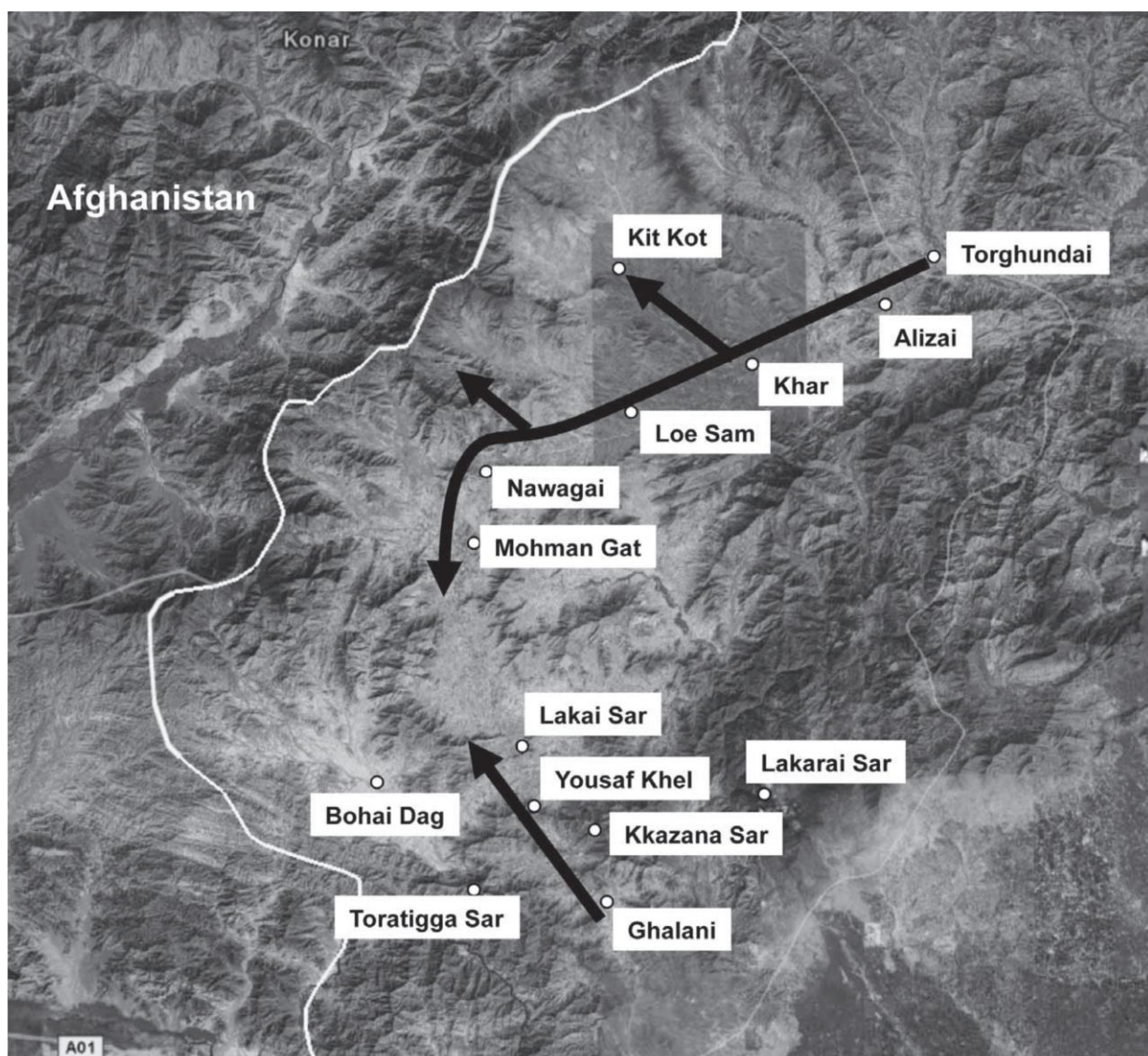
Source: Counterinsurgency in Pakistan (2010, p. 63).

The Chief of Army Staff General Pervez Kiani visited Bajaur agency in September 2008 and met the tribal elders. He reiterated that the success of the operation was directly linked to the support of the people. On October 25, the head of the paramilitary Frontier Corps (FC) Tariq Khan said that security forces had completely cleared Loi Sam, a stronghold of the insurgents. By the end of 2008, the security forces had also gained control of Utmankhel, Nawagai, Torghudai and Salarzai area. The security forces in a briefing to a joint session of parliament said that around 2,744 militants were killed including 321 foreigners, and 1,400 were injured (Bano, 2008).

In Bajaur operation, the security forces demonstrated not only capability but determination. A senior politician from KP commented on the operation. "They

[security forces] seem serious. As to what caused this change of mind, we really have no idea" (quoted in I. Khan, 2008a). The security forces won the support of the population, which played a key role in the success of the operation. The local tribes such as the Salarzai played a significant role in defeating the insurgency. The security forces initially relied on the enemy-centric approach but shifted to population security by supporting tribal lashkars and jirgas (tribal councils), which helped them to identify the irreconcilable Taliban on one side and build the morale of the troops on the other side (Mullick, 2009a). The trend of anti-Taliban Lashkars started in Buner district of KP, but in tribal areas it was the Salarzai Tehsil of Bajaur agency which first formed a tribal Lashkar against the insurgents (PIPS, 2008). The government capitalised on the tribal support and pushed the insurgents from the area.

Secondly in Bajaur, the junior officers were made part of the decision-making process, which not only helped to boost the morale of the army but was significant in helping them obtain popular support. Unlike South Waziristan, in Bajaur the military negotiated with the Momond tribe from a position of strength, which led to the success of their military operation in March 2009 (Lalwani, 2010). Military operations in Bajaur, Swat and Waziristan in 2009, show that the Pakistan army had learned from its past blunder of using indiscriminate forces which killed innocent people and contributed to insurgency (Lalwani, 2010).

Learning from the Bajaur experience, the Pakistan army needed to apply the same counterinsurgency in Swat in 2009, while developing a political consensus. The opportunity came when the Taliban occupied the Swat, Buner, and Shangla districts of KP and were only 60 miles away from the capital Islamabad. In Swat, the militants were able to exploit the vacuum of governance. Moreover, Pakistan's alliance with the US and its drone strikes also helped them to garner public support. The RIPORT in its survey (2010) demonstrated that 78 per cent of people in Swat agreed that Pakistan's alliance with the US in the war against terror encouraged people to support militancy (Aziz & Luras, 2010).

In Swat, the provincial government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa signed a 16-point peace agreement with the Taliban on May 21, 2008. However, unlike Waziristan, the government was able to forge a political consensus by taking all political parties into its confidence. According to the IRI survey, 80 per cent of citizens supported the peace deal with the Taliban in Swat (Fair, 2009, p. 51). The agreement showed the government's desire for peace. However, the Taliban refused to surrender arms before the withdrawal of security forces from the Swat valley (Khattak, 2012, p. 12). They also demanded the release of the Taliban apprehended by security forces, and began to attack the government officials and installations (Ibid). In 2009, after Sufi Muhammad, the leader of Tehrik-e-Nifiaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) declared the whole political system un-Islamic, sentiments against the Taliban increased. The increasing suicide attacks on public places, including markets, mosques, schools also shifted the threat perception against the militants. This helped support for military actions. A Pew

research poll in 2009 showed that 77 per cent of the respondents supported the military operations against the militants (cited in Akhtar, 2019).

Unlike past operations where the army only cleared the area, this time the military applied a 'corner, choke, and contain' strategy in Swat, which forced the Taliban to hide in schools, mosques and houses (Mullick, 2009b, p. 20). This enraged the common population, which helped the army to gather intelligence and popular support. Secondly, since 2001, the army for the first time executed a 'presence-oriented approach' by establishing small bases within the population, enforcing curfews and helping the local government (Mullick, 2009b, p. 20). Thirdly, as in Bajaur, the encouragement of junior officers in decision making helped them to use their available weapons and resources more innovatively. For instance, in Buner, Major Bilal helped the local refugees to escape to safety, before using heavy artillery against the Taliban (Mullick, 2009b, p. 20). After the military operation in June 2009, the army adopted a more population-centric approach by merging with people and helping the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), building the local economy and improving governance (Lalwani, 2010).

The government's change of strategy from an enemy-centric approach to a population-centric approach in Bajaur and Swat contributed to the containment of insurgency. In Bajaur Agency, the government established tribal Lashkar (militia) which played a key role in controlling the expansion of the insurgency. In addition to the tribal Lashkar, the government included the junior field officers in decision making, which not only boosted the morale of the security forces but helped the officers to take a situation-based decision in the field. Similarly, in Swat, the government first built a political and religious consensus and passed the Nizam-e-Adl regulation (order of justice) which was being exploited by the insurgents. Passing the act exposed the insurgents and helped the government to obtain the support of the people before launching a military operation in 2009. Unlike Swat, the government failed to obtain the support of the people which helped the insurgents to expand their area of influence.

Conclusion

The incident of 9/11 and the following US attack on Afghanistan significantly affected the security situation in Pakistan. In order to escape the US attacks, many Al-Qaeda and Taliban members took refuge in the tribal areas of Pakistan. As an ally of the US Pakistan security forces conducted targeted operations to apprehend the Al-Qaeda and Taliban members. This infuriated the tribal people who were asked in the Soviet-Afghan war to support the foreign militants. Consequently, they started armed struggle against Pakistan army and its security forces. They waged jihad and announced that Pakistan security forces are fighting to the militants at the behest of US.

In order to quell the insurgency, Pakistan army applied conventional means to uproot the Al-Qaeda and Taliban. According to counterinsurgency experts revolutionary and unconventional warfare has its own principles and they must be followed to fight irregular forces. In unconventional warfare it is not the strength an enemy attack but

the weaknesses. The mountainous nature of the tribal areas suited the irregular warfare, therefore, the security forces failed to flush out the militants. However, in later military operations in Bajaur and Swat the security forces changed its strategy and adopted counterinsurgency strategy which helped them to undermine their underlying support. The support of the people and change of strategy significantly contributed to the success of military operations in these areas. Hence, it can be concluded that the government and security forces should adopt unconventional means to defeat an unconventional enemy.

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