

Precarious position

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A Pakistani army soldier on guard last year on a mountain at Matta, in the troubled Swat valley

When Richard Holbrooke visited Islamabad this month, the consequences of defeat in the Swat valley were all too clear. Not only was the former tourist paradise, 120km from the capital, now overrun by Taliban fighters but the government of President Asif Ali Zardari, rather than send its troops to fight, had struck a peace deal with the Islamists.

The pact, covering Swat and the sizeable Malakand region of the North West Frontier Province, granted the state's acceptance of shariah [Islamic law](#) there in return for a ceasefire. Few of the 200,000 people displaced by the Taliban advance are keen to return. Video footage showing the public flogging of a woman suspected of adultery may help explain their reluctance.

"What has happened in Swat has stunned ... many of the people of Pakistan," Mr Holbrooke, President Barack Obama's special representative to Pakistan and Afghanistan, said in New Delhi on the next stop of his tour. "The events in Lahore [where Sri Lanka's cricket team was shot at last month and a police station attacked] ... have further raised concerns and I think everyone here in this part of the world should recognise what's happening."

Pakistan's deteriorating security has unnerved the country's civil society, neighbouring countries and the world. The Taliban, once thought of as a menace merely in the border areas, are advancing across Pakistan and meeting little resistance. Beyond the country's borders, this is fuelling fears for the stability of south Asia, the potential loss of a key US ally in the fight against al-Qaeda and – not least – the safety of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal.

LAHORE:

City in dread of a 'mullah march'

Today the Swat valley, tomorrow Lahore? The attack on Sri Lanka's cricket team and the storming of a police academy, both of which took place in Pakistan's second largest city and capital of the powerful Punjab province, have made local human rights activists anxious about an offensive by hardliners against their open society.

"This is a very planned strategy. What they did in Swat they now want to do in Lahore. These militant groups have been here for a

The Swat peace deal, rather than halting the Taliban, has emboldened the militants, estimated to number about 15,000 fighters in total. The group "continues to terrorise the local population, carries weapons in public, patrols main roads, operates checkpoints, kidnaps government officials and security forces personnel and attacks security forces convoys in Swat and the Malakand region," says Maria Kuusisto of Eurasia Group, a political risk consultancy. Last week the Taliban pushed closer to the capital by seizing the Buner district. The recent attacks in Lahore, the country's second largest city, have led many residents to believe that the populous and affluent Punjab province is the next battlefield (see left).

US officials talk of the Taliban as an "existential threat" to Pakistan. The disquiet in Washington, which has given Islamabad at least \$10bn in military aid over the last nine years, is deepening. [Hillary Clinton](#), secretary of state, last week showed her impatience with the inability of the Pakistan government and army to stand up to the enemy. "We're wondering why [the Pakistani army] don't just get out there and deal with these people," she said. "If you lose soldiers trying to retake part of your own country, it seems to me that's the army's mission."

The army is indeed at the centre of Pakistan's difficulties. One of the world's largest, with some 555,000 personnel and a similar number in reserve, it is widely regarded as the country's most powerful institution, having ruled on and off for most of the nation's 62-year history.

very long time," says Hina Jilani, a human rights lawyer.

Finding a unity of purpose among Pakistan's civil society is difficult. In a dusty auditorium belonging to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, an assembly of lawyers, teachers, writers and hotel managers try to agree on a plan of action. But not everyone sees the threat in the same way. Some blame foreign imperialists; others political rightwingers.

"We need to unite everyone to fight," says activist Fouzia Saeed. "This means that there must be a focus on the Taliban." To this end, she had thousands of stickers printed that read: *Taliban bhagao, awam bachao* – "Force back the Taliban and save the people".

Many commentators say the fight will not be won by military might. The Taliban will be checked only when civil society rejects it and puts greater pressure on the government to defend liberal values against those promoting theocracy. Civil activists, though vocal, have yet to mobilise a popular movement against Islamist militancy.

"The Punjab still has enough strength to beat back the Taliban even though many Islamic militants have flourished in this province during the past 30 years," says a retired senior police officer. "Punjab is not the North West Frontier Province."

Across town, news of Taliban militants seizing parts of the NWFP is greeted very differently. Guests at a dinner party hosted by a local industrialist anxiously exchange notes on how to emigrate and transfer their assets. They intend fleeing what they predict will be a period of bloodshed and a divided country. "I don't want to have the mullahs march into my home," says one businessman.

In Islamabad, Pakistan's capital, cries of "Al-Jihad" (the holy war) resonate in its red mosque where more than 100 people were killed two years ago when the military fought Islamic militants. Militant fervour was revived this month when Abdul Aziz, the mosque's firebrand preacher, was released from captivity under orders from Pakistan's Supreme Court.

Stung by the criticism, General **Ashfaq Pervez Kiyani**, Pakistan's US-trained army chief, on Friday defended the resolution and capability of his forces. Outsiders, he insisted, were mistaken in confusing an operational pause in the campaign with a desire to seek compromise.

But speak to civilian leaders and senior military officers and each side admits the army does not have much stomach for this fight. Why do the armed forces, so well resourced and capably led, appear unwilling to protect the country – and what can be done? Extensive interviews conducted by the Financial Times reveal a range of problems threatening cohesion.

First is a sense that the nation is merely providing cannon fodder. Pakistan, the leaders complain, has lost more troops – about 2,000 – in the US-led war against terror than Nato forces on the other side of the border in Afghanistan. "That means we are paying a heavy price," says Yousuf Raza Gilani, prime minister. "The border terrain is long – 2,500km – and the terrain is so difficult, and we have deployed more than 150,000 troops to guard it."

Second, more and more low-ranking troops view the conflict as a civil war and are reluctant to fight people often seen as brothers. On the streets, civilians share the ambivalence. The fighting on the Afghan border is a US war, not Pakistan's, they say. Seething resentment towards Washington intensifies whenever a drone – an unmanned bomber aircraft – strikes on Pakistani soil.

The military establishment also has longstanding loyalties to militants. Although prepared to withdraw its support for groups it once sponsored to cause trouble in Afghanistan and India, the army cannot bring itself to close them down entirely or destroy them. Instead it prefers to monitor them.

"The danger to Pakistan is fundamentally that the army has been Islamised over the long term. For them, jihad is the guiding principle," says one western diplomat. "They have been so closely married to the cause of Islamic militancy that there are questions over their determination to fight. Does a mother ever kill its own child?"

Third, a lack of engagement by other arms of the government can mean that military successes are often quickly reversed. A top commander complains that, once the army has cleared an area of militants, law enforcement and development agencies fail to make good the gains and the militants reassert themselves.

Fourth, and perhaps most crucially, combating a growing militant threat is not top of the day's orders at national military headquarters in Rawalpindi, south of Islamabad. For the army, the principal enemy remains India. The big threat to Pakistan's security, as seen by the military, lies on the eastern border, where it maintains its largest concentration of troops and equipment.

The threat from within, in spite of high-profile militant attacks on government buildings and other installations, goes barely recognised by a security apparatus that has for so long defined itself against its larger neighbour. "The military leaders cannot focus on the internal threat. They are still focused on the external [Indian] threat. They are not understanding the gravity of the internal changes," says Talaat Masood, a retired general.

Civil society leaders say Pakistan can no longer play the victim of someone else's war. "Terrorism is the number one issue in this country. And yet there are still competing priorities," says Hina Jilani, a human rights lawyer in Lahore. "Pakistan's problem is not equipping a military for a war situation. We have to equip the security forces for internal armed conflict and a guerrilla war."

But in what shape are Pakistan's forces to take this step, without either haemorrhaging further loyalty in the lower ranks or tipping the country into yet another military dictatorship? Some of the portents are good. Not only has the army received considerable financial support from the US since 2001 but its links with western militaries and intelligence agencies go back rather longer. Washington forged stronger ties with Pakistan in the 1980s amid the Soviet occupation of neighbouring Afghanistan. Gen Kiyani has so far displayed no appetite to rule himself.

Yet in spite of its size and US support, the army is far from insuperable. Swat clearly demonstrated its Achilles heel. Some local commentators say the peace deal with the Taliban was irresponsible because it was signed out of weakness after a military defeat. Another says the west is asking the army to turn 180 degrees, adding that Inter-Services Intelligence, the military intelligence agency, despite its links with militant groups led by Afghan leaders Jalaludin Haqqani and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar is an essential partner for tackling terrorism. At the same time, a realisation is growing that "extremist groups are now doing more

harm than good. They have now started to cause harm to Pakistan and the people of Pakistan."

Teresita Schaffer of the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies agrees. "The military is passionately



Asif Ali Zardari, president of a country under existential threat

nationalistic. They don't want to fight Muslims but they certainly don't want to be pushed around by Afghans."

The internal threat invites historical parallels. Failing institutions and blindness to danger have drawn comparison with Cambodia, even the Soviet Union. "It's almost like the rug being pulled away from beneath the generals," says a western defence official in Islamabad. "The Soviet Union collapsed due to internal contradictions and Russia's large arsenal of nuclear missiles targeting the western world could not save it from ruin."

Others claim the fears are exaggerated. Although the Swat deal may yet be reversed by Mr Zardari, some officials consider it a blueprint that could be rolled out more widely to bring stability and help sift the hired guns from the committed extremists.

"People simply exaggerate when they say the state of Pakistan will be taken over by the Taliban," says a Pakistani official. "Has anyone considered that the Punjab is home to six of the nine corps of the Pakistan army? The military's headquarters are in Rawalpindi, while the air force and navy headquarters are in Islamabad. Do you seriously believe the Taliban can simply walk over this area?" He predicts that a bloody fight awaits. But for now, the government's strategy is to neutralise the Taliban through conciliation.

Others blame a weak government. For them, the peace deal in Swat was a blunder by an inexperienced Mr Zardari. Shaukat Qadir, a military analyst, says the problem is political inaction rather than lack of military resolve. "Our present political set-up is not inclined to do anything major [to repel the Taliban] ... The army has decided to let democracy run its course, civilian supremacy to stay intact – and we are paying a price for that ... But somewhere in Gen Kiyani's mind must be the question: how long can we let this continue?"

Mr Holbrooke and Mrs Clinton are asking the same thing, with ever greater urgency. Not long ago, Swat with its lakeside holiday camps seemed an unthinkable conquest for extremists. Now, other possibilities are opening up: after assaults on Lahore, an encroachment on Islamabad and, most worrying for neighbours and western powers, the capture of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal.

Pakistan in conflict

Troubled regions

Islamabad Marriott bombing in Sep 2008, Red Mosque insurrection Nov 2007

Lahore Recent attacks on the Sri Lankan cricket team and a police academy

Swat valley Former tourist attraction now under Taliban control following peace deal encompassing Malakand region

Buner district Taliban defy ceasefire pushing closer to Islamabad; local population under pressure to stop shaving and wear burkhas

North West Frontier Province Under attack from Taliban militants formerly waging war in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas

Rawalpindi Military headquarters

Peshawar Suicide bombing of mosque

Punjab Pakistan's most populous and politically powerful province

Source: FT research



Army facts

Army One of the largest in the world with 1m personnel

Weapons Conventional and nuclear weapon capacity. Highly mechanised with tanks and heavy artillery

Volunteer force Largely of people enlisted from rural areas

Chief of army staff: US-trained Ashfaq Pervez Kiyani. He succeeded General Pervez Musharraf in Nov 2007

Motto Iman, Taqwa, Jihad fi Sabilillah (faith, piety and holy war)

Headquarters Rawalpindi, near Islamabad. The Pakistan army has seized control of Pakistan three times from civilian governments and ruled the country for most of its 62-year history

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