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Mountains and Marginalization: Structural Constraints of Counterinsurgency in Pakistan

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Explanations of counterinsurgency failure are often framed in operational terms: insufficient force density, intelligence gaps, or the tactical versatility of militant groups. In the Pakistani context, such explanations are not inaccurate. They are, however, insufficient. The persistence of insurgency in the country's mountainous peripheries illustrate a landscape that depicts the lack of structural amalgamation rather than the absence of strong-arm force in the regions. Control in such difficult terrains is valuable, but is often imprecise. What sustains long-running insurgency in these areas, is the interaction between rugged geography and prolonged political and economic marginalisation. Military operations here, can disrupt militant networks, but thin and inclusion limited authority, paves the way for violence that reconfigures with predictable regularity.

This article argues that Pakistan's counterinsurgency challenge is not primarily one of capability, but one that requires political follow-through. Even though the state seems to demonstrate calculated competence in hostile terrains- it has continually failed to institutionalise its transition from sporadic military authority to a fairly durable command. With the persistence of exclusion, Pakistan's frontier, acts not only as a mere physical obstacle, but as a strategic enabler of insurgency- an aspect that doesn't explain conflict, but conditions it.

Terrain and the Limits of Operational Control

Highly charged, vast terrains often cast constraints on state power, and in the case of Pakistan- limited connectivity, fractured lines of sight and increased dependence on local armed groups over conventional state authorities have worsened the situation in these regions. This has allowed insurgents to disseminate rapidly, embed within civilian populations, and impose asymmetric costs on security forces through natural chokepoints, particularly in Pakistan's western and southwestern regions.

At the same time, geography alone does not account for insurgent endurance. Pakistan's military campaigns in Swat, South Waziristan, and North Waziristan have proven to show that even severe terrain can be progressed and cleared into, through sustained operations- campaigns that dismantle militant infrastructure, disrupt leadership hierarchies, and temporarily suppress violence. A genuine reflection of operational capacity and institutional adaptation; neither symbolic nor limited in scope.

However, had terrain been decisive, these campaigns would have terminated insurgency in Pakistan's provinces- but they did not. The explanation lies not in the mountains themselves, but in what lies in the deprivation of lasting control, post military clearance.

Marginalization as the Structural Constant

Pakistan's volatile regions are heavily characterised by their historically uneven union into the state. Governance in these areas, for decades has been indirect, exceptional, or minimal. Political representation remains weak, civilian administration underdeveloped, and service delivery inconsistent. The state's presence has incessantly been intermittent and coercive rather than intentional and institutional.

This pattern of marginalisation, in Pakistan carries strategic consequences- where trust in the state and its institutions is low, legitimacy deficits are bound to emerge. In such holistically complex landscapes, insurgent groups do not require broad ideological allegiance; limited social space is sufficient. Passive toleration or conditional accommodation by local communities often meets this threshold. Where legal alternatives are slow or unavailable and economic opportunities are scarce, yielding to insurgents may appear less costly than resisting them.

This dynamic is further intensified by jagged topography, a terrain that raises the administrative cost of governance while lowering the operational cost of insurgency. Where marginalisation already exists, difficult geography shields insurgent networks and deters the state's ability to project authority beyond temporary military occupation. The result is not permanent rebellion, but cyclical instability- periods of suppression followed by relapse.

Tactical Competence and Strategic Incompletion

Pakistan's counterinsurgency record continues to reveal a consistent pattern: effective clearance followed by incomplete consolidation. Large-scale operations have succeeded in dislodging militant groups and restoring nominal control. Intelligence-led strikes and conventional offensives have imposed tangible costs on insurgent organizations. Yet these gains have frequently proven fragile.

The post-operation phase has remained coarse. Military withdrawal has often surpassed civilian governance establishments. Policing capacity has been insufficient, judicial reach limited, and economic reintegration initiatives narrow. Where state authorities and institutions failed to materialise quickly and credibly, insurgent networks retained the capacity to adapt and re-enter, either by reoccupying cleared areas or by shifting operations to adjacent regions.

This represents a failure not of force application, but of institutional transition. Clearing territory without reaffirming governance, produces control without command. Recent security trends reinforce this conclusion. Recurring violence in frontier districts followed by years of counterinsurgency operations reflects not only steady militant competence, but persistent political and administrative deficits that continue to shape local incentives.

The Political Economy of Insurgent Resilience

Mountainous terrain when met with sustained insurgency can be understood by three, though unrelated but highly influential mechanisms.

The first, institutional absence or neglect gives way to parallel authority- where formal justice systems are unreliable or distrusted, insurgents can position themselves as providers of order. This role does not require popular legitimacy; comparative efficiency suffices.

The second, economic exclusion of these provinces, lowers the opportunity cost of participation in violence. Characterized by limited employment, underdeveloped infrastructure, and extractive economic arrangements, insurgent mobilization in these provinces becomes economically rational for certain sections of the population, particularly young men. Military operations may disrupt these dynamics temporarily, but in the void, they reassert themselves.

The third is kinship and tribal networks. They facilitate concealment, logistics, and intelligence- signalling social embeddedness that enhances insurgent survivability. In such environments, these networks act as formal infrastructure. Marginalisation reinstates their centrality by weakening the appeal of state institutions and strengthening inward-facing loyalties.

Together, these mechanisms ensure that insurgent organisations retain regenerative capacity despite suffering tactical defeat.

Borders and Strategic Continuity

In Pakistan, cross-border dynamics also contribute to mountainous insurgency. Frontier regions are not solitary spaces, they are incorporated into transnational social, economic and political networks. While fencing and patrols can somewhat attempt to harden the border and restrict certain types of movement, but this cannot eliminate insurgent sanctuaries where political relations across borders are yet to be settled.

Border management can alleviate tactical frictions, but cannot replace governance in communities close to the border- that view the state as unreliable and distant. Parallel political engagement and economic integration serve as vital elements without which, border security measures can further add to the complexity by becoming a layer of tactical management that is being applied to a structural problem

Conclusion

Pakistan’s insurgencies along its frontier, are not oddities. They are the inevitable outcomes of the interaction between the geography and governance of the country. Terrain complicates control, and exclusion determines whether that complication becomes incessant. While tactical wins showcase the state’s coercive abilities, repetitive violence uncovers the institutional constraints of the state.

Until counterinsurgency is approached as a process of political amalgamation rather than irregular force implementation- the cycle of withdrawal and relapse is likely to persist. The challenge is not seizing terrain, but converting control into authority.

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not represent the views of CNAWS.

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