President George W. Bush's White House dinner in late September with Afghan president Hamid Karzai and Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf produced a carefully worded statement promising greater cooperation between the two visitors in curbing the Taliban attacks that threaten Afghanistan's emergence as a viable state. Karzai's and Musharraf's strained relationship was clear. Pakistan's September 5 agreement with the tribal residents of North Waziristan—the dominant item on the agenda—has played to mixed reviews, with some viewing the deal as a shrewd strategic move and others seeing it as surrender. This agreement, and more generally the two countries' ability to isolate and contain the Taliban, is critical to the future viability of Afghanistan and will also have important political repercussions in Pakistan.

Explaining Pakistan's Frontier: Waziristan is a remote, mountainous region in northwest Pakistan encompassing two parts ("agencies"), North Waziristan and South Waziristan. Both are dominated by the same ethnic Pashtun tribes that live across the border in southern Afghanistan. The governments in the "settled areas"—Pakistan and, before it, the British Empire—have never really controlled Waziristan. The border between these areas and Afghanistan was drawn in 1893 by the British official Sir Mortimer Durand, dividing the tribes in part in order to reduce their power. Now called the Durand Line, the border has never been accepted by Afghanistan, which continues to claim the Pashtun regions on the Pakistani side of the border.

The Waziristan Conflict: Although the British occasionally used force to quash uprisings in Waziristan, the region was generally left alone in a tacit exchange for stability, and provided a "buffer zone" for British India. Since Pakistani independence in 1947, Waziristan has been treated as a semiautonomous region, part of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), with a separate legal regime and minimal Pakistan government interference. All this changed in 2002, however, when, under pressure from the United States, Musharraf ordered the Pakistani military into the region to track down suspected al Qaeda and Taliban militants who were thought to have sought refuge there.

The tactics of the Pakistani military escalated tensions in a region that already harbored an intense suspicion of the government. Heavy fighting broke out in early 2004 and continued until mid-2006, despite two attempted truces. Casualties among the Pakistani military and local residents have been high. In addition, the conflict has strained the manpower of military; since 2001, approximately 80,000 Pakistani troops have been deployed along the border with Afghanistan.

Musharraf's Waziristan Deal: Rising casualties and a lack of progress in pacifying the region contributed to the agreement announced by Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf on September 5, 2006. The so-called Waziristan peace accord between North Waziristan's tribal leaders and the Pakistan government was brokered by a 45-member intertribal jirga (council). Under the accord, the Pakistan government agreed to discontinue military
operations in the region and promised to release the approximately 165 militants arrested for attacks on the Pakistani military. The tribal leaders pledged that the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan would not be crossed for the purposes of militancy (although crossing for trade, business, and family visitation is permitted). The agreement also stipulated that there would be no attacks on Pakistani law enforcement agencies. All foreign militants—those who were neither Pakistani nor Afghan—were required either to leave the area or to stay but peacefully abide by the law. Finally, the agreement prohibited the creation of a “parallel administration,” or quasi government, in the region.

Monitoring and implementation of the agreement is formally the responsibility of a 10-member jirga, comprising elders, members of the Pakistani political administration, and Islamic legal scholars. If a violation takes place, the Pakistani military has the authority to intervene. Considering the unpopularity of the Waziristan operation within the military, however, such intervention will not be lightly undertaken. The government also notes that the army will continue to staff its posts along the border, and Musharraf has clearly stated that no soldiers or units have been relocated outside the region. Under the agreement, however, the government has agreed to turn over its responsibilities in interior Waziristan to locally recruited paramilitaries. In other words, the details of enforcement and implementation are quite loose.

Official Pakistani View: The Pakistan government believes that the agreement is the best hope for peaceful resolution of a war that has cost the military around 700 lives. The government maintains that the sporadic violence between militants and the Pakistani military has served primarily to entrench the conflict and to radicalize militants. Officials assert that the presence of the military inside Waziristan has also disrupted tribal mechanisms for control of the region. They argue that the peace accord, created and implemented through the traditional tribal forum of the jirga, is the best way of ensuring that local residents “buy in” to the agreement and that they look to full implementation as an obligation of honor. In addition, by establishing a cease-fire, Pakistani officials argue, they have created the conditions for economic development in Waziristan to begin in earnest.

Criticisms Abound: Critics of the Waziristan accord are extremely skeptical of the official Pakistani claims. However, critics from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the United States have different reasons for their views.

...from Pakistan: Many commentators see the accord as a face-saving measure that allows the military an exit strategy from a conflict that had begun to feel like a quagmire. There is a political element to the deal as well; Musharraf feels increasing domestic pressure to scale back overt cooperation with the United States ahead of the Pakistani presidential elections scheduled for 2007.

Some voices in Pakistan, however, describe the government’s agreement with the militants as a defeat for the army. Observers have argued that the agreement was actually formed between the government and Taliban personalities, with the tribal leadership simply serving as camouflage. Others see the cessation of operations by the country’s robust military in a region it should control (at least nominally) as a sacrifice of territorial integrity. Journalist Ismail Khan of the leading Pakistani newspaper, the Dawn, argues that the deal returns Pakistan “to square one,” and he speculates that, under pressure from Afghanistan and the United States, the Pakistani army may once again be forced to return to the tribal areas, refighting the same battles. Although such a move would be unpopular, Musharraf’s control of the army appears secure.

...from Afghanistan: Afghanistan has repeatedly criticized Pakistan for not taking adequate steps to prevent the Taliban from gaining a foothold in the tribal regions on Pakistan’s side of the border. Despite Karzai’s reference to Musharraf as “my brother,” the Afghan leader clearly has misgivings about the prospects for success of the Waziristan peace accord. Some Afghan critics believe that the Waziristan deal is evidence of an underlying Pakistani policy of tacit support for the Taliban in the hope that a Taliban government, friendly to Islamabad, might one day regain power in Afghanistan.

At a joint press conference with Bush on September 26, 2006 Karzai remarked, “We will have to wait and see if that [the provision concerning border crossing] is going to be implemented exactly the way it is signed. So, from our side, it’s a wait-and-see attitude.” The wait-and-see attitude seems to be eroding, however, as the militant attacks in Afghanistan continue. A remark by Karzai, reported in the Dawn on October 11, 2006, indicates that Afghanistan’s patience may be wearing thin: “Let’s see the result […]
but unfortunately up to now, it hasn't had a good result for Afghanistan."

...and from the United States: For the United States, the primary issue is gaining control over the insurgency-prone areas of Afghanistan, so the agreement's impact on border enforcement is a key issue. The United States worries that the deal, if ineffective, will exacerbate the difficulty of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) operations in Afghanistan, where there is now an international force of around 32,000 troops. There is considerable concern in Washington over the vagueness of the enforcement mechanisms and over the Pakistan government's implied retreat from exercising full sovereignty in Waziristan. The jirga system that produced the agreement is an unknown entity from Washington's perspective. Nevertheless, the United States remains intent on preserving its relationships with both Pakistan and Afghanistan and does not want to undercut the agreement with public criticism. Bush has stated, "When the president [Musharraf] looks me in the eye and says the tribal deal is intended to reject the Talibanization of the people, and that there won't be Taliban and won't be al Qaeda, I believe him."

The White House Meeting: The Musharraf-Karzai talks at the White House took place against the background of reports that attacks tripled in eastern Afghanistan during the month following the Waziristan agreement. Confronted with the possibility that Pakistan's new strategy might fail, both leaders aimed to reach consensus on cooperative steps to neutralize militants on both sides of the border. At the meeting, Musharraf and Bush expressed interest in Karzai's proposal to convene two tribal jirgas, one on each side of the border, to fight extremists and terrorists using established tribal structures. The relationship between the Pakistan-based jirga and the one responsible for implementing the Waziristan agreement is not altogether clear. Moreover, no time frame for implementation has been announced.

What Next? Observers in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the United States are saying, in different ways, that the jury is still out on whether this agreement advances the peace and stability of the region. Measuring success is relatively easy: if the agreement is followed—fairly soon—by a reduction in violence in and near Waziristan and an expansion of Pakistan-Afghanistan cooperation, whether through tribal jirgas or through the governments, it will be a plus. Ideally, it will also provide a window of opportunity to allow economic development and reconstruction to take root in the region. Most observers—Pakistani, Afghan, and American—agree that visible economic development is the best hope of preventing residents of the tribal regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan from allying themselves with the Taliban.

But the early signs are at best mixed, and there may not be much time. The NATO commander in Afghanistan, Lt. General David Richards of the UK, has suggested that the window of opportunity may be as short as six months. Taliban attacks in Afghanistan rose during September 2006. In September and October, assassinations felled one provincial governor, several senior mourners at his funeral, three senior provincial security officials in the troubled Nangarhar province, and the Kandahar director for the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Although these attacks may not be the direct result of the Waziristan agreement, the agreement clearly has not yet reversed the trends in violence in the region.

For Musharraf himself, the deal is something of a gamble. Pakistan's elections for president and for the national and provincial parliaments are scheduled for late 2007. A successful agreement will boost both him and the party he supports. Continuing violence in and near Waziristan, however, may damage Musharraf's credibility. Another concern for Pakistan is the impact on the refugee problem: there are reports that, in contrast to the trends in recent years, refugees have once again begun entering Pakistan rather than trickling back toward Afghanistan.

The stability of Afghanistan and Pakistan is a top priority for the United States, which is prepared to serve as a diplomatic link to facilitate coordination and cooperation. The Waziristan agreement may very well be an acid test of Karzai's and Musharraf's commitment to brokering peace in this turbulent area. Ultimately, the success of U.S. objectives in these remote territories will depend on the commitment of all parties to ensure stability in the region.

—Jan Cartwright

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