Exploring the linkage between soldier-local relations and economic development in conflict zone: Darra Adamkhel in front line

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Abstract: Counterinsurgency operations have become a matter of pivotal importance for Pakistan to re-establish its monopoly on violence in its tribal region. But counterinsurgency operations have moved beyond the traditional military strategy and the outcome overwhelmingly depends on the success of the population-based strategy that includes consultative and cooperative pattern of solider-locals relations and could ultimately win the hearts and minds of the people. This study explored the role of local traditions and clan politics playing a pivotal role in determining the parameters of the solider-local interactions. How the soldiers’ understanding and respect for the local traditions not only contribute in enhancing trust between the state institution and locals, but also, in return, enhance military effectiveness in the counterinsurgency operations and local economic development. However, final word remains with the commanding officer showing the asymmetrical nature of the interactions. It divulgated that soldier-people relations were not ideal and balanced. In this context, Darra Adamkhel case study reveals that

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT
Militancy in Pakistan’s tribal areas became an existential threat for the country’s security. To address the challenge, Pakistan launched [Army-led] military operations that focused on defeating militants and establishing the state writ. Traditionally, the ultimate task of a counterinsurgency (COIN) operation is limited to regaining state’s monopoly on violence in a conflict zone and such an operation is conducted to restore the pre-insurgency political status quo in a targeted area. In doing so, winning “hearts and minds” of the local population becomes important for the forces to keep the militants away from the area. Without locals’ support, the success, achieved through military operations, cannot be translated into a long-term victory. Thus, militants come back as soon as the forces complete their operation and withdraw from the conflict zone. In Pakistan’s case, however, the forces did not withdraw and continued working for the welfare of locals. Area commanders frequently engaged with the tribal elders and helped them revive the pre-insurgency market activity in the area.
counter-insurgency operations are inextricably linked with local-soldier interactions and economic development in the midst of the traditional dynamics of the region.

Subjects: Security Studies - Pol & Intl Relns; Military & Strategic Studies; Comparative Politics

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1. Introduction

Military operations in tribal areas of Pakistan to establish the state writ and to defeat non-state actors (militants) have become a salient feature of Pakistan's military strategy. Traditionally, the ultimate task in counterinsurgency (COIN) operations is limited to regaining state monopoly on violence in a conflict zone. In most of the cases, such operations are conducted to bring about a preferred political status in a target area. They are conducted primarily as an integrated approach of combat and for pursuing socio-economic activities in the conflict zone to win “hearts and minds” of local citizens to eliminate moral and logistic support of insurgents.

Convincing the locals, for their support against insurgents, depends on gaining their trust. (And for this, respect for ordinary citizens is necessary.) As Kalev Seep suggests, “Security operations unified with governance and economic development will see the progress and increasingly withdraw support from or even oppose the insurgents” (Seep, 2007, p. 224). People are at the core of COIN operations. Whatever the objective of the COIN campaign is—either establishing state legitimacy or destroying militant networks in a targeted area—support of the people is the key to success. But it is only possible when the interaction pattern between the counterinsurgent (mostly armed forces) and locals is shifted from conflictual to cooperative and consultative. For divergent perceptions of civilians and military leadership on the conduct of COIN operations may cause tensions and delays in enhancing security and promoting economic development in the conflict zone.

Contemporary COIN operations are complex. They are taking place in difficult terrains and unique cultures, particularly tribal culture. Winning hearts and minds-focused approach, therefore, have become an important feature of COIN operations and the war on terrorism in general. The rationale for employing this approach is not limited to getting locals' support to defeat or isolate insurgents. Rather, it is important for peace and stability (Cornish, 2009, pp. 61–79). Its execution requires coordination and cooperation between locals and civil-military representatives of the state. Military is one of the most dominant features of COIN operations, for safety and security provided by armed forces increase the chances of civilians' cooperation with military against insurgents.

There is no ready-to-employ schema to use a winning hearts and minds-focused approach, however. Theoretical and practical discussions on the approach constitute a classic feature of COIN, for the idea may be new, but it has been practiced in the past (Fitzsimmons, 2008, pp. 337–365). Origins of this approach can be found in Sir Gerald Templar’s intellectual understanding of COIN operations conducted by British forces against communist insurgents in Malaya. His view that “the answer lies not in pouring more troops ..., but in the hearts and minds of the Malay people” (as cited in Lapping, 1985; Clutterbuck, 1966, p. 3) serves as a classic example of the approach. Mao Zedong augmented similar views while explaining the guerrilla strategy, “The guerrilla must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea” (Dixon, 2009, p. 362). Put simply, both counter-insurgent and insurgent strive for the same objective: support and loyalty of the people.

Winning hearts and minds-focused approach gives a stronger role to the military in a COIN operation. Military, acting within the ambit of law, is better equipped to garner locals’ support against insurgents. In its pursuit, however, the intensity of force needs to be low (or at maximum, proportionate) to get consent and cooperation from locals to capture insurgents and rout
insurgency. From Malaya to Afghanistan, historically, interveners and local regimes—striving to overcome opponents in internal conflicts—have tried to implement this approach to stabilize the targeted area and establish the state writ. Yet the history of COIN operations also provides another lesson: non-military aspects of COIN operations are important.

Non-military aspects are crucial for economic development and the provision of public services. (Respect for local traditions holds a central position in understanding and execution of COIN techniques.) The pursuit of non-military activities requires winning the hearts and minds, rather than territory. The path to this approach is inextricably linked with the interaction pattern between locals and soldiers—symmetry, even partial, in interaction pattern is favorable—and socio-economic activities in the target zone. The symmetry between locals and soldiers enhances the possibility of success in addressing the grievances of locals and reducing the support for insurgents who politicize the grievances for their benefit (Mockaitis, 2003, pp. 21–22).

In practice, however, the symmetry in interaction pattern suffers from complications and an intransigent COIN approach used for bringing stability in the conflict zone. A fluid situation therefore exists between enemy-centric and population-centric approaches, particularly in contemporary COIN operations. (Population-centric approach is, at tactical and strategic levels, based on winning the hearts and minds of locals.) For instance, in Darra Adam Khal (Pakistan), Pakistan army, as the counterinsurgent, largely applied a population-centric approach, but the unit commanders did not hesitate from using force to curb violence or to eliminate militants from the area.

Hence, in Darra Adam Khal, a dichotomy existed between the above approaches. And the ideal of popular support, based on winning hearts and minds of locals, remained subjective. Competing and contrasting views existed at both [military and population] sides. More important in this context, however, is outcome of the campaign and questions concerning its execution. How successful was the military in implementing a hearts and minds-focused strategy in Darra Adam Khal? If implemented, what sort of limitations did exist in the strategy? What sort of interaction pattern did exist between soldiers and locals? And importantly, what sort of role did non-military aspects play in shaping locals’ perception of COIN campaign and the counterinsurgent’s presence in the conflict zone?

2. Methodology, sources, and limitations
This study examines the soldier-local relations in COIN operations in Darra Adamkhel and their impact on the economic development of frontier region (FR). The research method that I have used for this study, at the micro-level, focuses on semi-structured interviews with Army officials, local elite, and civilians—who were based in the area for a longer period and understood [local] dynamics of the insurgency. Field research in a conflict zone is a challenging task, especially when the military unit is engaged in a COIN operation. Yet, my research associates were allowed to visit the area to observe the security environment. Given the limitations, only short trips and interaction with military officers were possible, as unsolicited access to the area and interaction with locals involved a security risk.

The only channel to get information about the soldier-local interaction pattern during the COIN campaign, as stated above, was the military officers and soldiers who served in the area and, in some cases, locals who moved to other safer places in the FR. After the start of the military operation, some affluent families, living in conflict zones, moved to urban areas, particularly Peshawar, Islamabad, and Karachi (Saif ul Masud, personal communication, July 12, 2013). Nonetheless, getting information from the Darra residents living in Islamabad and Karachi has also been difficult. Conflict and target killings have suppressed local voices significantly. Therefore, only a few interviews of locals were conducted in and outside the zone.

The nature of conflict and ongoing military operations in the north-western FR have constrained me to adopt a restricted approach while doing primary research on the subject. Confidentiality has been maintained in this study; all interviewees were assured that their identities would not be disclosed.
without their consent, and quotes would not be attributed to any organization or individual. Given the “no-go area” status of the region for academics, textual sources and empirical evidence are limited on the subject. The last caveat this study constitutes is the limitations of scope and timeframe. It does not address the new political and constitutional status of FATA region. FATA’s merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), political reforms, and the emergence of Pushtun Tehfaza Movement (PTM) and its impact on soldier-local relations is not under the purview of this study.

3. Setting the context
Since Pakistan’s independence in 1947, the frontier region (especially Dara Adamkhel) has been virtually a no-go area for the military. The maintenance of law and order in the area was an exclusive business of Frontier Corps (FC). FC is a product of colonial rule, but its services continued, after the partition, in the border areas between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Over the years, it has played a key role in assisting the civil administration of tribal agencies (ISPR Official, personal communication, November 17, 2013).

Pakistan’s tribal areas came on the international radar screen after the start of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan in 2001. After the US invasion of Afghanistan, Federal Administrative Tribal Areas (FATA), adjacent to North-West Frontier Province (now KPK) of the country, became a sanctuary for al-Qaeda and Afghan Taliban. “FATA became a multilayered terrorist cake” (Rasheed, 2008, p. 265). “Safe passage was provided to al-Qaeda by not deploying Pakistani forces on the border in South and North Waziristan, though troops were deployed in Khyber and Kurram agencies. Thousands of al-Qaeda and Taliban operatives were allowed to settle down in Waziristan, create bases, and restart military operations” (Rasheed, 2008, p. 268).

FATA tribesmen, especially Mahsuds and Wazirs, helped al-Qaeda and Taliban settle down in their areas—the helpers later became rich and powerful entities in the region. Later, they launched a Pakistan-based movement of Taliban, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (hereafter, TTP), comprising jointed and disjointed militant groups under the umbrella of TTP. 1

TTP turned out to be a success case; it managed to spread its tentacles in the tribal and semi-tribal regions of FATA over time. For the state, its rise was a nightmare, for that increased the difficulty level. By late 2000s, it was evident that exterminating the militants had become tantamount to the survival of state.

Fundamental reasons for the rise of militants and the state’s inability to control them in the tribal region were terrain, semi-autonomy, the border with Afghanistan, geopolitical significance, and ethnic divisions. Particularly, the border with Afghanistan and difficult terrain made FATA and adjacent areas attractive for militants in raising armed militias and organizing themselves against coalition forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan’s armed forces in Pakistan carrying out the war on terrorism. The resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan was also attributed to support they gained in FR of Pakistan—for which Washington put immense pressure on Islamabad to act against the Afghan Taliban and their local guides in the tribal region. Pakistan’s dependency on the US, making US pressure forceful, and worsening security situation proved sufficient to push Islamabad toward the military operations in the region.

The first military operation in the region—launched in 2004 in South Waziristan against militants mostly from Mahsud tribe—cost the country around 100 casualties and considerable collateral damage to militants and civilians (Kennedy, 2005, p. 110). It ended with an agreement between the government and militants. The agreement, however, could not last long, for the militants did not hand over foreign militants to the government as part of the agreement. The failure of agreement closed the door for a political, negotiated solution. Militants, who controlled a significant area, too, did not show any flexibility. The military, after the failed agreement, began several operations against the militants in various parts of FATA and FR (some of them are continued).
Both sides used force and inflicted significant damages on the other. The intensity of war continued to grow. For instance, before the war, FC was responsible for providing security in the region. (It suffered heavy losses in the military operations.) After launching the operation, [regular] army troops (well trained and equipped with advanced weaponry) were deployed to assist the FC. Army's intervention in tribal areas was received with mixed reactions. Some considered it a mistake, while others found it significant to rout the militants from the area where the latter had imposed their rules and regulations and used brutal methods against the resistant populace (Yusufzai, May 4, Yusufzai, 2008).

Opponents of the military operation involving army pointed to the negation of centuries-old traditions and cultural values of the area. Their position partly reflected the reality, for the initial military operation, based on a limited mandate to establish the state writ, depicted negation of local traditions and cultural values. Lack of understanding about the nature of conflict and failure in winning the support of locals to rout the militants from the conflict zone were probably the two most important reasons for enormous losses, human and material. There were wide-ranging perception gaps between soldiers and locals regarding why, how, and when the operations should be conducted. Advocates of the operation, on the other hand, emphasized that the Taliban's rise had already weakened a century-old administrative system of Maliks and jirga in FATA.2

4. Soldier-local interaction: Theory to practice
Soldier-local relations in a conflict zone are complicated by the fact that there are no elaborated “rules of engagement.” Soldier is no longer a unidimensional actor in the conflict zone, its actions and identity have evolved and interpreted in different ways (Kaspersen, 2021). A part of society but at times its role demands a supra-societal approach to safeguarding the state's interests. This approach determines the interaction pattern between the unit commander and locals. Therefore, leverage is given to the commanding officer to conceive the nature of soldier-local interaction, based on his understanding and prevailing circumstances. Interaction between the domestic elite and commanding officer can comprise regular meetings to discuss the law and order situation of the area—the military officer sets the agenda of meetings. Narrow agenda and authoritative attitude prove less productive.

From a commanding officer’s perspective, gaining the confidence of the other side is important for success. Success requires broader interaction, focusing on combat and non-combat services. In non-combat services, good governance and economic development are important, for they can prove a catalyst for long-term peace and stability in the conflict zone. They offer both tangible and intangible benefits. At the same time, however, they require shared-authority and shared-responsibility from the forces’ side. For authority in contemporary COIN operations is not confined to the command. The responsibility of authority is rather shared at the lowest level of command (Kanwal, 2013).

In Pakistan's case, the agenda of military operations in the initial phase of military operations was narrowly defined: focusing on getting quick and effective results. Soldiers were given space to operate and leverage to decide. Their presence in the tribal region expectedly generated divided civilian perceptions of tanks and soldiers' trucks buttressed by air power. The flexibility in interaction pattern however helped change the situation. The military bettered its population strategy in the conflict zone. (For its leadership understood that success in COIN campaigns sought beyond combat.) And it duly focused on good governance and economic development because its leadership realized that understanding the grievances and needs of locals was the recipe for success. Suffice it to say that the military’s focus on non-combat services appreciated the evolving nature of the modus operandi of COIN.

The above two tasks, economic development and good governance, were linked with the population strategy in the target zone. Since every area has different socio-economic conditions and cultural values, it is therefore possible that every operation needs a brief review of local
politics before the crafting of a comprehensive COIN strategy. (Locals’ perception of insurgency is embedded in the cultural context.) Military units conducting COIN operations in different conflict zones experience several types of socio-political and economic circumstances. Virtually every COIN operation differs from the other in its details due to differences in culture, political dynamics, and neighborhood.

Therefore, it becomes important for the military unit to gain knowledge about local traditions, values, and conflict resolution institutions. Only an effective combat strategy based on a clear understanding of the problem can provide the administration with an opportunity to regain its losses. In Darra’s case, unit commanders got elaborate briefings on the security situation of the area. But the anthropological knowledge of the area came only through learning on the ground. Although military started gathering narrative data collection, through regular reports and briefings from the serving and former unit commanders in the conflict zone, civilian perspective was in dearth (Military Officer, personal communication, January 21,2020).

An important reason for the above deficiency was the intensity of conflict. The growing presence of non-state actors in the tribal region hassled the state to increase the number of military units in the zone. According to a military official, 189 military units were deployed in KPK, which were part of COIN operations in 2013 (ISPR Official, personal communication, January 21,2020). The numbers varied with changes in the ground realities and policy decisions of successive civilian regimes after Army Public School, Peshawar, terrorist attack, and the launch of military operations in North Waziristan.

5. Darra Adamkhel: Militants and military intervention
Frontier regions of FATA are semi-tribal areas, and Darra Adamkhel is one of those. It is a region, known as the wild west, of pivotal importance due to its strategic location for militants and the Pakistani government. It is a “gateway to one-third of the frontier and onward to the rest of the countryside, besides of course to Afghanistan and Central Asia”(Yousaf, 2008). Militants occupied Darra due to its proximity to settled areas of KPK and used it as their stronghold (Kheshgi, 2010). The presence of militants in Darra Adamkhel was, therefore, a serious threat to Peshawar region and sustenance of NATO supplies to Afghanistan via Indus Highway(Kheshgi, 2010). Besides, Pak-Japan friendship tunnel (bypassing Kotal Pass) also made this area strategically vital for Pakistan. Overall, Darra, as a town, was not a serious security concern for the center, but it gained the attraction of the outside world due to its ungoverned gun bazaar (that is one of the largest in the country) and traditional setup.

Constitutionally, Darra Adamkhel came under the jurisdiction of the central government. Governance of FATA region, even after the partition, was carried out through Frontier Crime Regulation (FCR) 1901. FATA agencies’ administration was the responsibility of political agents, with support of Assistant Political Agents (APA), Tehsildars, Naib Tehsildars, Khassadars (local police), and paramilitary forces (Levis and Scout). Islamabad gave political, economic, and judicial powers to political agents. But unaccountable and unquestionable authority in the region, as in most of the cases, perpetuated corruption and nepotism in the agents’ offices. In an FR administered by District Coordination Officer (DCO) of the respective region, DCO enjoyed similar powers as exercised by political agents in the agencies. In addition to corruption, another yet substantial obstacle to good governance was the obsolescence of FCR.

After independence, the central government’s decision to retain the FCR without making any significant amendment in the act to adapt the socio-political structure of tribal agencies with modern nation-state system wrecked the governing arrangement. No government, whether military or civilian, could make any successful effort to integrate FATA into mainstream politics for seven decades. Instead, the colonial-era rules and regulations were kept that made the region semi-autonomous and provided an opportunity to criminals, smugglers, radicals, and terrorist outfits to establish and strengthen their sanctuaries. The tribal police gradually lost its authority
in the region, particularly following the colossal influx of non-state actors with money and advanced weaponry. Drugs and guns became rampant in the region (Khan, July 24, 2007). (Already, Islamabad’s lack of interest in the economic development of region for decades had been generating a sense of deprivation among locals.) Center’s half-hearted FATA policy, concurrent with an influx of non-state actors, therefore, not only impeded structural reforms but also provided an impetus to militants to encroach the FR.

The Pakistani Taliban specifically focused on those areas that acted as a buffer zone between FATA and settled areas of KPK. And they used the FR to travel between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Their numbers, as well as permanent presence, in the area multiplied after 9/11. An important reason for this development was the series of military operations in South Waziristan and North Waziristan agencies. The subsequent short span of peace agreements between the state and militants also constrained the Taliban to flee the area and take refuge in the FR. In Darra Adamkhel, however, the Taliban were mostly local; they were in alliance with the former TTP leader Hakimullah Mehsud.⁶

Three insurgent groups were active in the town: Tehriki-i-Islami, Islami Talibain, and al-Hezb. But later, they all merged in the TTP. The leadership of these groups became popular in the area, and they felt victorious, especially after their position strengthened circa early 2007. Their popularity also grew through a public propaganda campaign against un-Islamic activities in the area. However, the killing of the top leadership of Tehriki-i-Islami and Islamic Talibain in a military operation, launched in January 2008, provided an opportunity to certain individuals, including Tariq Afridi (otherwise known as Giddr), to become the leaders of an important group within the TTP(Khesghi, 2010).

Notwithstanding the subtle divisions, the insurgents continued to work together. An important objective of their struggle was to gain legitimacy and portray themselves as the vanguard of Islamic rules. For this, they began by executing thieves and robbers. For instance, a car thief, Amer Said Alais Charg (rooster), was publicly killed in the bazaar of Darra Adamkhel(Yusufzai, 2008). They also exterminated the dominant class of Maliks and tribal elders from the area to rid of potential challengers and foes.⁷ Civilian administration, including police, became irrelevant and was halted from performing its duties. All public civic activities were banned. All so-called un-Islamic activities were banned. They stopped people from listening to music and closed down barbershops, though they did not declare opium and its sale un-Islamic (Darra resident, personal communication, 19 January 2020). Similarly, the gun business also continued—now at the behest of the militants—and the availability of smuggled made-in-USA weapons in Darra market attracted the local criminals associated with criminal syndicates in the adjacent regions.

Simply put, the takeover of Darra Adamkhel substantially strengthened [Taliban] militants’ position against the state. Members of insurgent groups (bristling with weapons) patrolled streets and imposed their own austere rules(Shah, 2008). In response, paramilitary forces’ under-capacity and losses had forced them to confine themselves within the White Fort in Darra (Shah,2008). The response from central administration was also inconsequential. Islamabad did not respond to the takeover by militants for months—only after the latter captured the friendship tunnel. It rather tried to resolve the issue through peaceful means, particularly by sending jirgas. However, kidnap-pings and killings of soldiers and exploding of vehicles in the tunnel proved to be the turning point for Islamabad to move the troops into the region().

From January 2008 to 2013, five infantry military units were posted in the town with the objective to “flush out the militants from the area and establish the writ of the state”(Unit Officer, Personal Communication, November 15,2013). Military’s first battle with the Taliban was fierce. Both sides retaliated intensely to gain control of the town and tunnel (Sector Commander, personal Communication, n.d). As the fighting intensified, business activities in the arms bazar halted and the tunnel was closed. Security forces imposed night curfew in the area. The military nonetheless took months to regain territory on which the Taliban had taken over.
To this day, with territorial control regained, security forces conduct search operations regularly (Shah, 2008). And military units are still deployed on the border of the Darra and tunnel.

6. COIN operations: Perceptions of local civilian elites and military

Soldier-local relations are defined by different, shared perceptions of the civilian elite and military on the nature of the insurgency. (How do both sides define the insurgency problem is important.) Success in the conflict zone depends on mutual understanding of the problem. Only then economic development and long-term security can become possible. In a conflict zone, the sequence of war and peace can be difficult to attain. For it may take military a longer period to establish the state writ and eliminate non-state actors before shifting focus to non-military activities. And in any case, the first task of a military operation is establishing the state writ.

In Darra Adamkhel’s case also, the first of the tasks was establishing the state writ and elimination of non-state actors. Army units—deployed in the town between January 2008 and February 2012—conducted several military operations against insurgents in and around the region (Shah, September 2008). The military was there to create peace through either threat or force. For peace, limiting the insurgents’ threat to the minimum possible threshold was necessary (Sector Commander, Personal Communication, n.d.). It did not shy away from using force to deal with the criminals. Its heavy-handedness with criminals initially caused apprehensions. But frequent interaction with civilians was helpful. The interaction between soldiers and locals helped both sides enhance mutual trust and brought about flexibility in the military's approach.

Improvement in soldier-local relations does not suggest that insurgents were outnumbered immediately. They had sympathizers in virtually every community who were attracted by their revolutionary ideas and saw them as the only option for bringing about a change. Unsurprisingly, many locals provided them with food and shelter. Some worked as their informers. Tariq Afridi, a militant leader who belonged to the area, used his origin tactfully and harnessed support among his tribal elders and relatives. The politics of clan, ethnicity, and fear often worked in favor of insurgents. They also exploited the “Pukhtunwali code” and used “beheading” as a tool to terrorize the populace.

Contrary to the masses, Maliks rarely showed any sympathy for insurgents. They did not accept the manifestation of insurgents in the town, and rarely did they hide their dissonance with them. Other locals, especially the working class associated with the business of tailoring, haircutting, and selling entertainment items such as music and movie CDs, favored Maliks’ position because they were also a victim of militants. This cluster of people—locals with their interests differing from that of the Taliban—openly supported the military operation against them (Afridi, President of Darra Coal Mine Association, personal communication, November 18, 2013). They despised the Taliban because the latter damaged the societal fabric and structure: Maliks for challenging their authority and workers for disturbing their businesses (Malik, Darra Resident, personal communication, December 10, 2019).

Overall, the perceptions of soldiers and locals were different regarding the gravity and influence of insurgents in the town. These differences were too significant to ignore. The responsibility of managing and reducing differences laid with the unit commander who found it “a daunting task.” Cooperative relations between soldiers and locals were vital to garner civilian support that was a prerequisite for reducing insurgents’ influence (Luttwak, 1983).

7. From military offensive to community development: Venues of soldier-local engagement

Contemporary COIN operations have multiple aspects. Militaries across the world have produced an abundance of COIN manuals that frequently overemphasize the military dimension and de-emphasize political and social aspects. Jochen Hippler argues that “counterinsurgency is not a matter of military conquest but of social control” (Hippler, 2006, p. 17). Gaining social control
requires social and economic development and addressing the reasons for the conflict to deprive insurgents of influence in the conflict zone. It is only possible when the non-military aspect of COIN operation is pursued, and civilian actions and non-combat activities are promoted in the area. At the same time, however, reconstruction of the state structures and government offices, in addition to restoring security, and revival of the pre-insurgency political order in the target area are also important.

The above activities have a direct link with the interaction pattern between locals and soldiers. Direct involvement of military in capacity-building of the society may engender mistrust among civilians. Locals may perceive that military would be directly involved in their political sphere by patronizing their choice of leaders and institutions. In this context, the imposition of modern liberal political institutions may also challenge the local attributes of society. Lack of understanding of the local culture can therefore complicate the soldier-local relations because locals do not accept the military playing a leading role in non-combat activities. (It is noteworthy that soldier-local relations at the local level are managed under the supervision of unit commander who heads the COIN operations.) Although the military power and resources make the men-in-uniform superior, history shows that the lack of understanding of cultural context of the frontline area would ultimately render the COIN operations a futile job.

Pakistan's armed forces were successful in this regard. The Darra Adamkhel case shows that cultural aspect transpired as one of the key features in soldier-local relations during and after the COIN operation. Clan politics and Pashtun traditions also influenced the interaction between soldiers and locals. After intervention and gaining control of the town (and forcing insurgents to flee or hide in the adjacent frontier region, particularly Tirah valley), the unit commander established a long-term channel of communication with local civilian leaders and restored the authority of APA of Kohat region. (Sector Commander, Personal Communication, n.d)

Restoration of civil administration and building trust required a community meeting of the local elite and unit commander. Pashtun traditional institution, Grand Jirga, was called on by the military commander to know about locals’ grievances and concerns and reduce the trust gap between the locals and military command. According to Burnett Rubin, “Jirga includes all adult males and rules by consensus” (Rubin, 2002, p. 42). It is a traditional institution linked with social and economic aspects of the Pashtun society.) Commencing of the jirga was the first civil-military engagement in the target area. During the jirga, Pashtun traditions were followed and both sides exchanged their concerns while taking forth the soldier-local engagement process. In Pashtun tradition, jirga members sit in a circle on a floor mat (Chaddar) and every elder brings his mat. But during the first jirga, the unit commander provided every member a chair to sit in to win the respect of tribal elders (Sector Commander, Personal Communication, n.d).

Positive interaction with tribal elders enhanced the unit commander’s importance in the area. Disputants (locals with each other) frequently submitted their applications to his office for permission to hold Maraka to solve their issues(Wardak, 2002). His approval was compulsory due to the security concerns in the area. The approval from his office illustrated that military had accepted jirga as a conflict resolution institution. No parallel military courts were created. Virtually all issues were decided by jirga except for the unresolved disputes that were later referred to the FATA tribunal or Sharia Court. The military did not become a party to local disputes unless they affected the stability of region.

Similarly, once the operation was complete, the military avoided direct interference in local political affairs and encouraged the civil administration to take the lead. DCO office regained its importance in the area; civil administration retook the charge of matters it used to oversee before the rise of insurgents. DCO office, with the presence and support of military, gradually became the ultimate authority per the spirit of FCR. For instance, after the operation, the area senator began to
visit the DCO office frequently. It was not possible for him before the operation. Simply put, the civil administration took the lead only when military retreated to the role of a helper.

Not only did the military retreat, but it also improved relations with locals. The unit commander assured the locals that actions taken by soldiers would remain within the parameters of Pashtun “Ravaj” (customary law) and Shariah. Every agency or FR has its ravaj, but these ravaj are not codified(Khattak, 2013). For security, however, the military continued its search operations—“home search, some claimed, violated the code.” Locals proposed that they should be informed before search operations. Soldiers considered their proposal tantamount to giving space to insurgents to escape from the house where they were hiding. On various occasions, local elders highlighted this issue and portrayed it as “against the Pashtun values.” Lack of progress in this regard partially negated the spirit of winning hearts and minds of locals and giving space to dissent voices. Nonetheless, before the start of wide-scale operations, civilians were informed to leave their houses to avoid damage.

Another problem rendering cooperation difficult was the long-term resettlement of Internally Displace People (IDPs). Military strove to finalize settlement plan with cooperation among civilians, forces, and humanitarian organizations. But local grievances lingered due to the slow response of the military in rehabilitating IDPs and its failure in improving the living standards of locals who were severely affected by COIN operations. These apprehensions and limitations made winning hearts and minds of locals, secondary to only kinetic operations, arduous and protracted for the military. The undertaking continued nonetheless, for the unit commanders, operating in conflict zones, were aware that the success of kinetic operations and sustainability of peace went through locals’ trust and their physical acceptance in the area. Displeasures at the population front meant less acceptance of military operations against militants in the region.

Observers hold contending opinions on military’s performance. Some argue that “military’s attempt to win the hearts and minds of the local populace remains a futile exercise in FATA”(General Shoaib (retd), Personal Communication, April 7, 2017). Others raise questions on its behavior in the conflict zone. They consider the military a superior power while highlighting the grey areas in actions it has taken to restore stability in the region. According to Tahir Khan (personal communication, February 2017), it has failed to win the hearts and minds of the people. His arguments are congruent with other scholars’ positions on FATA who posit that the old system was destroyed and the erection of check posts hindered the moment of locals. According to Farhat Taj’s findings, based on her field research in Darra Adamkhel, locals have a strong perception “that the clashes between the army and the Taliban were planned at the level of the army generals and the Taliban Commanders.”(Taj, 2011, p. 162) Darra’s economic and political culture is under duress due to the presence of the Pakistani military and ISI acting as dominant actors (Taj,p. 163).

Conversely, according to the military’s version, political confidence-building between the civilian elite and the unit commander (at the town level) resulted in uplift of the community. Military undertook various non-combat operations, such as organizing sports contests and opening basic health units and schools for girls and boys in the area. Scarcity of female doctors thus ended in the area. A polio campaign was launched that proved successful despite the Taliban threat.(Military Unit Officer, personal communication, n.d) Cultural and sports activities enhanced comfort-level between soldiers and locals. Military also facilitated acquisition of land to establish FATA University in the area, because of its location and accessibility, for students of the tribal area (Unit Commander, Personal Communication, n.d).

An area where the exemplary shift took place in gaining civilians’ support was the public trust in the institution of military. It enhanced once the military undertook initiatives for the benefit of society. Kidnapping and theft cases rapidly reduced and Kabob (traditional meat food) shops remained open till 10 pm. The friendship tunnel was fully operationalized, and troops were deployed to secure it. The unit commander also allowed barbers to resume their business.
Locals, especially the beneficiaries, welcomed his initiatives. Long queues in front of barbershops were witnessed on the day of opening (Sector Commander, Personal Communication, n.d) Local shopkeepers admitted that the above initiatives narrowed the gap between soldiers and locals (Darra Vendor, personal communication, February 27, 2020).

Another venue for enhancing soldier-local interaction was the creation of livelihood opportunities through economic development. Darra Adamkhel is known as “one industry town” (Bonner, April 11, Bonner, 2002). Since the deployment of troops in the area, illegal production and sale of guns were banned in the region. The Darra weapons industry produced a wide array of prohibited weapons, including AK-47, 12.7 mm AA Guns, 14.5 mm guns, rocket launchers, RPG-7, HMGs, and Kalakovs (Arms Manufacture, personal communication, March 15, 2016). Its arm bazar was an important source of weapons proliferation and arms supply to criminal gangs, miscreants, and militant sectarian groups in FATA, Balochistan, and urban areas (Perwaiz, 2009). Darra manufacturers, however, also produced non-prohibited weapons, such as pistols and shotguns. According to the political administration of Darra, the local gun artisans produce 400–700 guns each day. They can make carbon copies of virtually all guns available across the world.

Darra’s gun merchants were given an opportunity to continue their business legally by getting licenses from the Interior Ministry. The military leadership facilitated this process in cooperation with the civil administration. Several gun merchants secured licenses to sell their guns to legal companies operating in various parts of the country. During an interview, the sector commander provided some facts:

120 applications were filled to get licenses to do a legal business of selling guns and their parts. At present, 10 have got the license for selling, 11 for export, and 9 for manufacturing. Issuing of licenses is a continuous process.

Although some skilled workers have shifted to Peshawar after the insurgents’ takeover, the provision of security and economic opportunities have partially revived the gun industry. Locals believe if the trend continues, this activity is likely to reduce the influence of militants in the area. Military has also supported the local mining businesses. (Darra Adamkhel is the hub of minerals and non-renewable energy resources such as coal.11) The discovery of coal and its mining has changed the economic landscape of the region. Darra coal mines now produce the best quality of coal. But it was not possible without military’s support. For, after the intervention, not only did the military provide security for coal mines, but it also arranged health and safety workshops for the miners (Afridi, president Darra Coal mine Association, Nov 18, 2013). In 2014, it was estimated that around 100 trucks leave the town for various parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan per day.

Coal mining did more than creating job opportunities for locals. It underpinned the emergence of a new “elite mine class” in the area. The rise of mine class received mixed reactions from locals. Relations between mine owners and miners remained a trouble spot. But mine owners achieved the status of “a point of contact” between locals and soldiers. Unsurprisingly, serving a group of mine owners generated negative perceptions of military among the populace. The unit commander’s compromising attitude also created a loophole in the implementation of the policy. At the same time, however, soldiers acted as mediator between miners and mine owners to resolve their issues, mostly concerning wages, safety, and strikes.

8. Conclusion
Pakistan army entered the FR to eliminate the militants. Its COIN strategy looked beyond coercion and encompassed a people-centric component of accommodation and development in the region. Security managers, deployed in the conflict zone, faced a challenging task of identifying and separating militants from local populace without violating cultural codes and traditions of the tribal region—variations in cultural and tribal values existed between settled areas near urbanized centers and tribal region. Long-term success of military’s COIN operations depended on managing
the “military muscle” versus “cultural values” dilemma. Both counted in shaping the interaction pattern between the soldiers and locals. And both became significant, especially when interaction pattern had already suffered from soldiers’ pre-conceived perceptions of the region and people.

Yet it was only one of the limitations. The military had to incorporate key aspects of winning the hearts and minds approach in its strategy to garner the support of the populace. Unit commanders made a tactical nexus with local business elites to garner their support for military action and establishing state writ in the conflict zone. The commanders persistently tried to establish a balance between the use of force and cooperation with locals. To maintain the balance, they pushed for development projects and invested in the emergence of a new business class that would be loyal to the military. They initiated community uplift projects and revived economic activities in the region. Locals appreciated the dislodging of militants from the area and stability in the area. But their perceptions of economic development were divided. The beneficiaries, predictably, viewed it positively. But critics saw it as cosmetic and believed that soldiers-led economic development projects lacked long-term sustainability.

Soldiers also found it difficult to detach themselves from local disputes and raviats. In some cases, their decisive role in development projects and economic activities created tensions and infringement of locals’ rights and tribal codes. But these tensions and perceptions of infringement had to be managed. Important actions such as quelling the militant threat, dislodging them from the region, and establishing the state monopoly on violence were not possible without support from the populace. For this propose, unit commanders tried to show compatibility with locals’ perceptions and expectations.

The case of Darra Adam Khel, comprising both favorable and apprehensive opinions, shows that locals were ready to cooperate with the government if the letter understood and assuaged their concerns. Providing security for their businesses and promoting non-combat services improved not only military’s image but also reduced sympathy and support for insurgents. Nonetheless, some of the concerns could not be assuaged. One of them was of weapons manufacturing that suffered substantially during the COIN campaign. Since Darra’s broader economy based on weapon manufacturing, the loss affected the majority. For the nature of business and manufacturing violated the state law, the state could not facilitate the industry. Unit commanders suggested a formal status given to the weapons industry and integration of skilled workers in the legal small weapons-making entrepreneur-ship of Pakistan. But that process was slow that tempted few local manufacturers to sell prohibited weapons to the unlawful people—an activity that limited the options for soldiers deployed in the region.

Illegal trade was a threat to the region. Nonetheless, it also highlighted the need for economic diversity. To diversify the economic activities in the region, the military encouraged mine owners to resume their work and guaranteed them protection. Protecting mines and miners developed an operational understanding between the miners and soldiers. It was a win-win solution for both sides. But the resumption of mine business with protection guaranteed implied that military’s detachment from local disputes, which virtually all sector commanders and unit commander we interviewed aimed for, was not possible. Despite commanders’ efforts, clashes between the miners and owners on wages and working conditions were brought to the unit.

Overall, Pakistan army succeeded in its tactical counter-insurgency operations. Insurgents became irrelevant or blended themselves in the Darra community. However, sporadic violent incidents challenged the military’s perception of “winning the hearts and minds of the locals.” But military gains could not be reversed. Winning the hearts and minds project was far from complete, soldiers’ involvement in non-combat aspects is not the guarantee of long-term peace and development unless locals are fully empowered in the area.
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Notes
1. Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), founded in 2007, is an alliance of various militant groups in Pakistan. Since its emergence as a group, it has been fighting against the Pakistani military in tribal regions and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It seems to have challenged the state writ in the tribal and frontier region. The TTP has also been involved in sporadic target killings in settled areas of Pakistan. It believes in the imposition of a strict interpretation of Quranic teachings throughout Pakistan. Moreover, it has maintained a strong connection with al-Qaeda leaders in the region.
2. Jirga and Malik systems are powerful domestic institutions for deciding the local disputes among the conflicting parties. These two institutions are based on reconciliation and conflict resolution. The nomination of Malik for the jirga is the prerogative of the disputants. Malik is the elite of the tribe because of their close link with the government-appointed Political Agent. Malik is periodically paid by the PA and even has a group of male members to assure the implementation of decision taken by the jirga. See, www.fata.gov.pk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=53&Itemid=87
3. After the partition of the subcontinent, Pakistan decided not to place soldiers in FATA region as it recognized the semi-autonomous status of the Pakhtun tribes of FATA and the instrument of accession. It was also because Muhammad Ali Jinnah and 200 Malik’s of the FATA signed the accession instrument on the conditions that they would have a special status in newly independent state and the center would give them allowances and subsidies uninterruptedly. The 1973 Constitution of Pakistan has clauses defining the status of FATA, which include 13 agencies and frontier regions. Article 247 explains that the executive authority of the Federation extends to FATA and that the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Governor shall administrate it as per the direction of the president of Pakistan.
4. In 1901, the British colonial masters issued a decree known as new Frontier Crime regulation that gave more powers, including judicial, to the administrative officials. Civil and criminal laws were different from the rest of British India. Conflict resolution took place through local jirgas.
5. In an FR administered by District Coordination Officer (DCO) of the respective region, DCO had similar powers as exercised by political agents in the agencies.
6. Hakimiullah Mehsud executed in a US drone strike outside North Waziristan on 1 November 2013.
7. The reports on FATA security situation show that around 200 government Maliks were killed in North and South Waziristan. In Darra, Maliks were either killed or forced to flee the area.
8. According to the unit commander(1), flexibility also means less interference in tribal politics and disputes. For military was also the judicial authority initially. Admittedly, the meaning of flexibility can vary in different situations. Flexibility in interaction reduced the asymmetry in dialogue and bettered understanding of the local perspective on militant threat and military operations in the conflict zone. It created avenues of cooperation between locals and soldiers in the region. For instance, minneworkers helped soldiers establish check posts in mountains.
9. Clans(khel) are identity networks embedded in kinship. Unity is based on blood ties and bonds. In political terms, clans are authority structures based on hierarchy. Clan politics establishes unofficial or informal laws of economic and political activity in the clan. The latter influences the security situation during a conflict. Darra is the place of Afridi clan and sub-clans of Zarghun Khel, Sherani, Bosti Khel, Akhonwal, Tan Chapper, and Jawaki.
10. Grand Jirga is convened to resolve conflicts and discuss grave issues directly affecting peace in the society. The composition, scope, and agenda items of grand jirga make it grand and it includes Masharani, Speen Giri, Khans, and tribal elders.
11. The discovery of coal and its mining has changed the economic landscape of the region. The coal mines are producing best quality coal. Not only did the military provide security for coal mines, but it also arranged health and safety workshops for the miners. Mining provided the locals with employment opportunities and assuaged some of their grievances.

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