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“Irksome and Unpopular Duties”

Pakistan’s Frontier Corps, Local Security Forces, and
Counterinsurgency

William Rosenau



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Cover Photo: Chitral Scouts and the Pakistan Chief of Army Staff, 2011 (Inter Services Public Relations photo)

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Introduction

The growing role of irregular security units such as the Afghan Local Police (ALP) has sparked fresh interest in the subject of community-based defense forces and counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. Seeking lessons that seem applicable in the Afghan context, analysts are exploring cases ranging from the Civilian Irregular Defense Group in Vietnam, to the Sons of Iraq.¹ Policy specialists are also examining potential roles for state-sanctioned but less-structured local forces in addressing emerging security challenges in settings beyond Afghanistan.²

However, a particularly relevant case has received relatively little analytical scrutiny. Across the border in Pakistan, government authorities have, since the late 19th century, organized, trained, equipped and paid Pashtun tribesmen to provide local security. The Frontier Corps (FC) is the most prominent of these groups. Under the British, the Frontier Corps was an instrument in a wider system of indirect imperial control. Since independence in 1947, Pakistan has employed the Frontier Corps to police the Afghan border and tribal areas and in so doing, has helped free up the army to prepare for conventional military operations.

This primary purpose of this paper is to provide historical and contemporary context for analysts, practitioners, and decision-makers who focus on local security structures in conflict and post-conflict environments. This paper is divided into four sections. The first section gives a brief overview of the FC in British-controlled India. The second section considers the Frontier Corps during and after the 1947 partition of India and the founding of Pakistan. The third section examines the contemporary roles, missions, and functions of the Frontier Corps and assesses its capabilities and performance. The concluding section presents some general thoughts on how the FC experience can help inform ongoing local security initiatives in Afghanistan.

Before beginning, a note on sources: As is the case with all of Pakistan's security forces, there is little open-source information on the Frontier Corps. Although there is a rich secondary literature on individual colonial-era Frontier Corps units and a number of useful memoirs by British officers who served along the frontier, nothing comparable exists on the Pakistani side. Given the limitations of the data, our understanding of the Frontier Corps remains incomplete.

¹ See for example Austin Long, *Historical Lessons Learned on Local Defense: Interim Report* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, April 2011).

² For example, see Patricio Asfura-Heim and William Rosenau, "Beyond Counterinsurgency: The Future of Civil Defense Forces in Counterterrorism and Stability Operations," Center for Strategic Studies, CNA (forthcoming 2012).

Origins

The Frontier Corps (also known as the Frontier Scouts) traces its origins to the late nineteenth century. Under the British imperial administration of the Indian subcontinent, a variety of lightly armed and highly mobile irregular forces, including scouts, levies, and militias, were raised to provide security along the restive Afghan frontier and within the strategically important tribal regions that functioned as a buffer between the border and India's "settled" areas. Ultimately, the Frontier Corps would have responsibility for a region stretching 2,500 miles from the Karakorum mountain range in North West Frontier Province (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) to the Makran coast in Balochistan.



The Khan of Lalpura and followers, with British political officer, 1879
(British Army Museum photo).

Paramilitary forces, drawn from the area's Pashtun tribes and commanded by British Indian Army officers, served a number of purposes. These units were relatively low-cost force-multipliers that allowed the army to maintain a light "footprint"—an important benefit, given that the presence of "foreign" troops (such as Hindus and Sikhs) was a source of considerable irritation to local tribesmen. By using indigenous forces, and a mere handful of imperial administrators, the British were able to exercise a measure of control and maintain

what one historian termed an "acceptable level of violence" in a vast and inhospitable territory.³

The Indian Civil Service representatives in the tribal areas who served as political agents used forums such as jirgas to encourage tribal cooperation or, at the very least, used these gatherings to persuade tribesmen not to attack British interests. In addition, these administrators, according to one scholar, "paid the tribes regular allowances in return for their recognition of the principle that they lived under imperial government."⁴ When such blandishments failed, scouts and militias served as the political agent's "strike force" to buttress imperial authority.⁵ Routine patrols (gashts) were intended to assert and reinforce the writ of government.⁶

In 1907, the plethora of irregular forces operating along the frontier, including units such as the Zhob Militia, the Kurram Militia, and the Khyber Rifles, were brought together administratively as the Frontier Corps. For British Indian Army officers, the Frontier Corps held out the promise of adventure and excitement. The Frontier Corps, in the words of one historian,

offered an independent command at an early age, far from senior headquarters with narrow, textbook constraints....Mounted infantry companies existed but most work was done on foot, patrols at platoon-strength often covering more than forty miles in a twenty-four hour period over the harshest terrain in the world.⁷

For the foot soldiers of the Frontier Corps, service offered a way to provide for themselves as well as their families. More important, service was a source of pride and prestige. Few if any Pashtuns identified themselves as "Indian" or displayed any particular loyalty to

³ Ty L. Groh, "A Fortress Without Walls: Alternative Governance Structures on the Afghanistan-Pakistan Frontier," in Anne L. Clunan and Harold A. Trinkunas (eds.), *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 102.

⁴ Alan Warren, *Waziristan, the Faqir of Ipi, and the Indian Army* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), xxiv.

⁵ Charles Chenevix Trench, forward by Philip Mason, *The Frontier Scouts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), xiv.

⁶ Javed Iqbal, "An Overview of British Administrative Set-Up and Strategy in the Khyber 1849-1947," *IPRI Journal* 11, no. 1 (Winter 2011), 86.

⁷ John Gaylor, *Sons of John Company: The India and Pakistan Armies 1903-91* (New Delhi: Lancer International, 1993), 309. According to Gaylor, service on the frontier had certain financial attractions for some officers: "If the Indian Army was a refuge for impecunious British Army officers then the Militia was a refuge for Indian army officers with financial problems....[There was] almost no chance to spend any money." *Ibid.*, 309.

the British Raj. Instead, their fealty was to their units and to individual officers.⁸ Moreover, Pashtun society gave considerable standing to those who fought in the Frontier Corps, even if such service entailed the use of violence against members of one's own tribe.⁹

During the 1923-1947 period, the British adopted the "modified forward strategy" that included the garrisoning of a large number of Indian Army troops in tribal areas. The FC continued to play its local security role, although other irregular forces were also part of this approach. Khassadars (tribal police), who were paid but neither trained nor equipped by the imperial authorities, were described in a contemporaneous British government report as having the responsibility "to ensure the safety of communications within each tribe's territory and secondarily to act as a stabilising element in the tribal life. The subsidies...are given in order to assist the elders of the tribe to control the whole tribe."¹⁰

The Frontier Corps after partition

With the independence of India and the creation of Pakistan in August 1947, the British Raj came to an end. However, the Frontier Corps survived largely intact. Even before the partition of India, the Frontier Corps was assuming greater responsibility for security as the army made plans to withdraw from Waziristan and the Khyber. During the communal violence that erupted in 1947, units displayed remarkable discipline and professionalism—there are many accounts describing how these units protected minority Sikh and Hindu communities caught on the wrong side of the new international boundary.

Enlisted personnel, while sometimes saddened to see individual officers go, typically welcomed the creation of the new state and the departure of the ferangi (foreigners) and their administrative apparatus.¹¹ A number of British officers chose to stay on after partition, including four who remained with the Tochi Scouts, where they served under a Pakistani commander, much to the delight of the Pashtun ranks.¹²

⁸ Trench, *Frontier Scouts*, 6.

⁹ "Due to the status of *izzat* (honour) with the Pashtunwali, the normative code of the Pashtuns, social prestige was associated with fighting in the Frontier Scouts, even if this involved assaults upon one's own tribe." Will Clegg, "Irregular Forces in Counterinsurgency Warfare," *Security Challenges* 5, no. 3 (Spring 2009): 9.

¹⁰ Quoted in Frank Leeson, *Frontier Legion: With the Khassadars of North Waziristan* (West Sussex, UK: The Leeson Archive, 2003), 20.

¹¹ Mohammad Nawaz Khan, *The Guardians of the Frontier: The Frontier Corps*, NWFP (Peshawar: The Frontier Corps, North West Frontier Province, 1994), 157.

¹² *Ibid.*, 159. One British officer, who remained until 1950, was ordered to remove a possible temptation to Muslims by drinking up all the alcohol in the mess. This officer, according to Trench,



Lt. Col Sarfaraz Khan, Tochi Scouts, North Waziristan, 1956
(Tochi Scouts photo)

The Pakistanis inherited eight corps of scouts from the British. The new government quickly ordered the army to withdraw from the frontier, leaving its security in the hands of the Frontier Corps. In addition, the government decided to split the corps along geographical lines, creating Frontier Corps-North West Frontier Province and Frontier Corps-Balochistan. Pakistan also created additional units, such as the Karakoram Scouts, for defense against India. Indeed, unlike the British, the Pakistanis used the Frontier Corps in major combat operations, including the Indo-Pakistani wars of 1948, 1965, and 1971. The Frontier Corps fought against separatists in Balochistan in the 1970s and provided assistance to the Afghan mujahidin in the 1980s.¹³

The Frontier Corps today

The Frontier Corps, which numbers approximately 80,000, has responsibility for law and order in three areas: along the border with Afghanistan; within the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), a semi-autonomous tribal region in northwestern Pakistan; and in Balochistan. Key roles, missions, and functions include anti-smuggling, counternarcotics, and, increasingly, counterinsurgency operations against the Taliban and other violent extremist organizations.

“manfully tackled the Herculean task, his last service to Scouts, until there was only crème de menthe left; it was never his favorite beverage, and now the mere sight of it turns his stomach.” Trench, *Frontier Scouts*, 266.

¹³ “Pakistan: Corps is Ill-Equipped for ‘War on Terror,’” Oxford Analytica Profile, 11 December 2007, 1.

A minimum of five 80-man “wings” are deployed in each tribal agency.¹⁴ As in the period before independence, enlisted men are Pashtun recruits and officers are drawn from the Punjabi-dominated regular army. Along the border and in the FATA, enlisted men are locally recruited, while in Frontier Corps-Balochistan, most enlisted men are Pashthuns from outside the region. Although the FC is technically a part of the ministry of the interior, it is commanded by an “inspector general,” a post that since 1950 has been occupied by an army brigadier or major general.¹⁵



The Frontier Corps in Balochistan (Pakistan Army photo)

Although the regular army provides all of the Frontier Corps officers, the army has traditionally held FC officers (and the men under their command) in low regard. With India perceived as Pakistan’s primary threat, and for all practical purposes the army’s *raison d’être*, officers at all levels view the Frontier Corps as a backwater that is unlikely to be career enhancing. At the senior level of command, officers serve only one relatively short rotation, lasting two or three years.¹⁶ In the words of one Pakistani military analyst, army officers see militiamen “dressed in shalwar and qameez (traditional loose shirt and baggy pants worn by civilians) and chaplis (local sandals) and...dismiss them as a rabble.”¹⁷ The contempt ap-

¹⁴ Imtiaz Gul, *The Most Dangerous Place: Pakistan’s Lawless Frontier* (New York: Viking, 2009), 48.

¹⁵ “Paramilitary Forces,” *South Asia Defence and Strategic Yearbook*, New Delhi, 1 January 2009, Open Source Center, SAG20090519525013.

¹⁶ Tariq Mahmud Ashraf, “The Pakistan Frontier Corps in the War on Terrorism: Part One,” *Terrorism Monitor* 6, no. 15 (2008), accessed 5 October 2011, at http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=5053&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=167&no_cache=1.

¹⁷ Hamid Hussain, “Spit and No Polish: Soldiering with Scouts,” 4 September 2008, accessed 28 October 2011 at <http://www.chowk.com/pavocavalry/iLogs/politics/The-Frontier-Corps-Militia>.

pears to be mutual. Enlisted FC personnel criticize what they consider to be the army's over-reliance on artillery and airpower, which militiamen believe needlessly alienates and antagonizes local communities.¹⁸

Recent U.S. policy supports a more robust (some would say more militarized) Frontier Corps capable of more aggressive and potent operations to defend the border, to disrupt drug trafficking, and, most important, to counter the Taliban, al-Qa'ida, and other illegal armed groups. Since 2003, the Frontier Corps has borne the brunt of the fighting in the FATA and nearby areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, including the Swat valley.¹⁹ According to press accounts, U.S. Army Special Forces advisors have trained Pakistani paramilitary units and have helped establish a 400-man "commando unit" to hunt down Pashtun tribal militants and foreign Islamists.²⁰ Infrastructure programs, with American and British funds, have built more than 200 new outposts in the FATA and Balochistan, which, according to the U.S. State Department, have improved the ability of the Frontier Corps and other internal security forces to "interdict militants, narcotics traffickers, and other criminal elements."²¹

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Chris Woods and Declan Walsh, "Pakistan Expels British Military Trainers As Rift With West Grows," *Guardian* (London), 27 June 2011, 13. Among the security forces, the Frontier Corps has also borne the brunt of the casualties: in 2011, it suffered 1,004 killed or wounded while the army suffered 607 casualties and the police 581. Pak Institute for Peace Studies (Islamabad), *Pakistan Security Report 2011*, Islamabad, January 4, 2012, accessed 9 January 2012 at <http://san-pips.com>. The figures are particularly startling when the organization's small size (relative to the army and police) is taken into account.

²⁰ Eric Schmitt and Jane Perlez, "US Unit Secretly in Pakistan Lends Ally Support," *New York Times*, 23 February 2009, accessed 12 November 2011 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/23/world/asia/23terror.html>.

²¹ U.S. Department of State, "Pakistan Border Security Program Fact Sheet," 23 November 2011, last accessed 5 December 2011 at <http://www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/fs/177706.htm>. British military advisors, who were part of the country's £15 million aid program to the FC, were expelled from Pakistan in June 2011, reportedly in response to the raid that killed Osama bin Laden. Chris Woods and Declan Walsh, "Pakistan Expels British Trainers of Anti-Taliban Soldiers," *Guardian* (London), 26 June 2011, accessed 10 January 2012 at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jun/26/pakistan-expels-trainers-anti-taliban-soldiers>.



Member of the Pakistan Frontier Corps (left) and Afghan border policeman near Spin Boldak, Afghanistan (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Francisco V. Govea).

Other assessments of the Frontier Corps are more downbeat. The frontier forces are widely acknowledged to be poorly equipped, badly trained, and poorly led. Heavy losses in battle and the frequent use of force against civilian Pashtuns have badly battered morale in Frontier Corps–Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.²² Whatever Pashtun normative code that accepted (or permitted) the use of violence against fellow Pashtuns during the colonial period no longer appears to hold. Divided loyalties, or simply the fear of retribution by their own tribes, have reportedly made some FC members unwilling to carry out operations against Islamist groups.²³ Desertion is a serious problem, according to a 2008 report, which concluded that roughly 2,000 FC members had run away in recent years.²⁴

Although engaged in “hearts and minds” activities such as building schools and providing medical assistance, Frontier Corps–Balochistan has earned an unenviable reputation for heavy-handedness, corruption, and incompetence. These forces are ethnic outsiders in a province dominated by Balochi-speaking tribes and are therefore cut off from detailed local

²² Sameer Lalwani, *Pakistani Capabilities for a Counterinsurgency Campaign: A Net Assessment* (Washington, D.C.: New America Foundation, September 2009), 37.

²³ Lalwani, *Pakistani Capabilities*, 37; and Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, “No Sign Until the Burst of Fire: Understanding the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier,” *International Security* 32, no. 4 (Spring 2008): 76.

²⁴ “US Begins Training Pakistan Frontier Corps,” *Jane’s Country Risk Daily Report*, 27 October 2008 (online, subscription required).

knowledge. Widely seen as intruders, the Frontier Corps faces widespread public hostility.²⁵ Moreover, press reports suggest that the FC has been “captured” and manipulated by local political and business interests.²⁶

Conclusion

The case of the Frontier Corps illustrates some key challenges associated with the use of irregular forces in internal security operations. In North West British India, tribal and imperial authority existed side by side. Militias, rifles, and scouts served as relatively cheap tools for consolidating and maintaining indirect rule in turbulent tribal areas. As one British Indian Army officer concluded in 1908, “the militia system grew up as a cheap expedient to relieve regular troops from irksome and unpopular duties.”²⁷

Martial prowess, the ability to endure hardship, and *esprit de corps* characterized much of the FC, but these strengths had little to do with any allegiance to abstractions such as India or the British Empire more generally. The capabilities derived instead from group allegiance as well as personal fealty to those British officers who were able to inspire loyalty and affection. In addition, Pashtunwali²⁸ honored service as scouts, rifles, and militiamen even if that service resulted in violence against fellow Pashtuns.

The Frontier Corps inherited by Pakistan served the new government in many of the same ways it had served earlier imperial interests. Recruited in the areas where they would serve (with the exception of Balochistan), members of the Frontier Corps had a depth of knowledge that was almost certainly unobtainable otherwise. Although officered by the Pakistan Army, the FC—by policing up the ever-restive tribal regions, the neighboring areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan—freed up the army to fix its attention on India.

²⁵ Ashraf, “Pakistan Frontier Corps”; and “Security and Foreign Forces, Pakistan,” *Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment – South Asia*, 21 April 2011 (on-line subscription required).

²⁶ Amir Mateen, “A Drive Through Troubled Balochistan,” *The News Online* (Islamabad), 15 November 2011, accessed 22 November 2011 at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/TodaysPrintDetail.aspx?ID=10304&Cat=13>.

²⁷ Quoted in Jules Stewart, *The Khyber Rifles From the British Raj to Al Qaeda* (Phoenix Mill, Gloucester, UK: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2005), 212.

²⁸ Pashtunwali, according to one definition, “includes all traditions by which the Pashtuns, according to their understanding, distinguish themselves from other ethnic groups: their tribal spirit, a sophisticated code of honour, moral and ethical rules of behaviour, the demand for martial bravery, reasonable actions and consultation, a system of customary legal norms and not least, faith in Islam. “Pashtunwali: Tribal Life and Behaviour Among the Pashtuns,” Afghan Analysts Network, 21 March 2011, accessed 1 December 2011 at <http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=1567>.

But the performance of the post-1947 Frontier Corps has been substantially poorer than that of its pre-1947 incarnation. Of course, conditions, circumstances, and threats have changed substantially over time. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to characterize the current force as having been “lost in translation.” For the Pakistani state, like the British Raj before it, the frontier and tribal zones are operational sideshows. Unlike the British, however, the Pakistanis have treated the Frontier Corps as an irritating distraction from the main task of preparing for conventional war and have almost certainly shortchanged the force in the process. Pakistan has maintained the tradition of bringing in officers from the outside (Punjab, overwhelmingly). However, this colonial legacy is counterproductive. As one leading analyst convincingly argues, local tribesmen must be given the authority to lead their own forces.²⁹

Moreover, the Pakistani state, unlike the British imperial authorities, has employed the Frontier Corps in sustained, highly “kinetic” operations. Again, circumstances, conditions, and threats are obviously different today. But it should come as no surprise to anyone that an ill-trained, inadequately equipped, and badly led paramilitary force thrust into combat operations against well-armed and capable Islamist militants would perform poorly and that morale would suffer accordingly. Moreover, it seems likely that the pace and intensity of such operations, combined with civilian casualties, have helped erode the Pashtun code that provided the social license for serving in the FC.

What does the case of the FC suggest about Afghanistan? It would be a mistake to try to apply “lessons” across the border. Instead, the case suggests two notes of caution that should be considered as the U.S. military and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) expand the Afghan Local Police and other irregular forces. First, it is essential that local forces remain local. Perhaps even more so than in Pakistan, “outsiders” in southern and eastern Afghanistan are distrusted, hated, and feared. Whatever threats and operational demands may arise, the temptation to deploy these forces outside of their hyper-localized settings should be resisted.

The second note of caution is intertwined with the first. In Pakistan, as in many other conflict zones, military commanders often employ paramilitary and police units as adjutants to combat forces. But irregular forces are rarely if ever trained and equipped for war-fighting. Nor do they typically have the discipline of conventional ground units. High casualties (including among noncombatants), low morale, and desertion are the typical results of this operational misapplication.

²⁹ Hassan Abbas, “Transforming Pakistan’s Frontier Corps,” *Terrorism Monitor* 5, no. 6 (2007), accessed 5 October 2011 at http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=1056.

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