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BLYTH ON PAKISTAN, 21/02/2009

Pakistan is of strategic importance to world stability, providing a fertile breeding ground for militancy and terrorism within the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and Baluchistan which border Afghanistan and Iran. Mike Blyth writes.

Geopolitically Pakistan is far from stable, having a long standing conflict with its larger neighbour India, a situation which has recently been exacerbated by accusations that its intelligence apparatus was directly involved in the November 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks. Pakistan is also struggling to control a complex blend of tribal, religious, ethnic and militant groups, with terrorism and criminality interwoven in what is a confusing and changing risk picture – made more concerning given that Pakistan is considered to have a dysfunctional and fragile political system.

Fuelling the growing discord are continued U.S military drone attacks which claim militant as well as civilian lives, coupled with the crucial role Pakistan is playing as a main logistics route into Afghanistan for coalition military supplies. Over the course of the past several years Pakistan's security situation, never stable, has worsened and militancy has grown from an internal security concern to a full scale intra-state conflict; with major military operations continuously underway in areas of the FATA and Malakand, including the Swat region. As this article is being written, military operations in Swat have been halted following the government's decision to give in into the Taliban demands of implementing Sharia law in the region.

In order to support stabilization through social and economic prosperity DFID and USAID have been channelling billions of dollars of development funds into the volatile settled and tribal regions that run down the western side of the country. Efforts are also being focused within the Punjab and Sindh regions, which have seen a significant growth in militancy over the past two years. When the United States government allocated \$700M to development programs in Pakistan some 18 months ago, only 1% of the budget was apportioned to security. Given the levels of sectarian violence and general volatility within the tribal areas, as well as the lack of a supporting security infrastructures, this level of funding was, from the start, unrealistic and resulted in many development and NGO organizations under bidding programs, or running operations with little to no security. Few groups had (or indeed have now) an effective security management apparatus and almost none operated with anything more than a gate guard to protect their expatriate and Pakistani national staff. The security situation was (and continues to be) dire and hampers the effective delivery of aid and development programs, although many organizations continue to valiantly bring support to local communities, and many Chiefs of Party continue to apply common sense and a genuine desire to protect their people, albeit without any formal training or experience within the field of security and risk management. Within Pakistan western organizations face suspicion and constant allegations of being American spies, as well as being subject to wide sweeping Fatwa's against any activity deemed to pose a threat to the religious or cultural lifestyle of some elements of the local populace.

When comparing the risk environment against more obvious unstable regions such as Iraq and Afghanistan one should note that during 2008 within the tribal areas there were 92 reported bomb blasts resulting in 347 fatalities and 598 injuries. A comparative study of murders between British and Pakistan major city indicates the scope of the problems facing western organizations and their Pakistani partners, with London accruing 162 murders in 2007, while Peshawar had a reported body count of 452 victims, a staggering range given that London has a population of over 14 million while Peshawar has under three million residents. Sectarian violence is also a significant concern, with over 2,826 deaths and 2,413 reported injuries since 1989. Catastrophic attacks such as the 2008 Marriott hotel bombing have also resulted in high casualty tolls; affecting commercial as well as diplomatic groups. These intra-state issues, coupled with devastating natural disasters such as the 2005 earthquake resulting in approximately 75,000 fatalities within the Pakistan occupied Kashmir makes the country one of the most troubled regions in the world, and one in which western organizations, whether development, telecommunications or oil and gas, struggle to succeed in.

Over the course of the past several 12 months the series of attacks against western organizations; kidnappings, shootings and bombings have caused USAID and DFID to re-think their approach and allocate more appropriate budgets to support struggling organizations faced with militancy within what is naturally a challenging environment. The murder of 4 workers from a British NGO (Plan International) in their Mansehra offices in February of 2008 and the assassination of Steven Vance (CHF International) in Peshawar in November 2008 brought concerns to a head and have resulted in most western groups withdrawing from Peshawar. Even U.S government agencies are nervously looking to relocate to the relatively safer city of Islamabad to the south east in fear of terrorist attacks. In recent weeks the kidnapping of a senior UN official in Quetta and the beheading of a Polish engineer in Attock has highlighted the need for robust and sensible security provisions for western organizations seeking to support government or commercial activities within the country.

Unlike other parts of the world the number of western security companies operating within Pakistan is relatively low. In

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part this is because the Pakistan government owns its own private security companies; often branches of established security organizations such as the Frontier Constabulary or the Army which use such off-shoots to provide employment for both serving and retired military and police personnel, as well as providing a source of revenue for the sponsoring government organizations. These groups are frequently hired out to western companies, whether development groups or major oil and gas companies, sometimes at platoon or company levels. While such organizations are naturally well equipped and supported by their government sponsors, a natural gap exists between their ability to provide tactical security services and their ability to grasp culturally different perceptions of risk and management requirements. Pakistan has a well educated and experienced military and police population, however struggles to embrace the western concepts of risk management and holistic security solutions. This perhaps is not so surprising given that before the Iraq war the field of security and risk management was relatively small, and only the unforeseen need for large numbers of non military players within the field of post war security has generated a more mature and sophisticated commercial security capability.

What makes Pakistan interesting from the western security perspective is that the culture leans towards a more specialist society, with a heavy emphasis on social status, whereas the western security culture requires more generalist approach to security and risk management. As a result western companies often find that their local partners instinctively field a security specialist who is supported throughout the task by administrative, linguist and IT specialists, rather than the function being undertaken as a singleton task. In addition, the hierarchal nature of the society can impair independent action and mission orientated leadership, impeding the speed and effectiveness of the more western orientated mission driven approach. While Pakistan is more aligned to western concepts and approaches than most countries, companies operating within Pakistan must understand the nuances of the culture, as well as the relative immaturity of the security sector. These differences create fundamental threats to organizations and their staff given the growing levels of militancy and sectarian violence, as well as the specific targeting of western groups. As such, the ability for western organizations to mentor their Pakistan partners and bridge the cultural and experience gap within the field of security management will be fundamental to the long term safety and success of business operations in Pakistan.

About the author

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