SCARCELY a day goes by when the Obama Administration does not lament Pakistan’s unyielding reluctance to shoulder more of the burden in the US War on Terror. For the past 10 years, the North and South Waziristan Agencies of Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) have served as a launching pad for violent Islamic militancy. With al Qaeda and affiliated groups roving the restive tribal belt, US officials have tirelessly but futilely tried to nudge its intractable allies in Islamabad to conduct domestic offensive operations against the terror network. Consequently, Pakistan’s jarring disinclination to counter violent Islamic extremism has plunged both countries into a series of imbroglios, prompting US officials and a chorus of intelligence analysts to inquire as to why Pakistan refuses to act on a threat that poses grave challenges for its internal stability. The answer to this question may lie in an examination of Pakistan’s recent history of combating militancy in South Waziristan Agency—a track record festooned with sordid failures generating outcomes of severe political blowback and volatility within the country.

Neatly nestled between Pakistan and Afghanistan, the FATA region has long been the staple of wanton lawlessness, simmering distrust of outsiders, and fierce adherence to tribal customs in the Asian subcontinent.
It’s a different world altogether,” said Pakistani journalist Zahid Hussain when I recently went to see him. “It’s backwards. Infrastructure is not there, there’s no education or health facilities. The people are very poor.” The tribes of FATA have a long history of brutally repelling outsiders from their lands, rendering the area sclerotic to modernization. In the Raj era of the 19th and 20th centuries, the British—after exhausting their forces trying to quash the marauding tribesmen—found it more prudent to lightly rule the tribal environs by distributing allowances to tribal elders and deploying indigenous police forces to maintain stability. Since its birth in 1947, Pakistan has honored that tradition. But al Qaeda’s assaults on 9/11 and the subsequent US invasion of Afghanistan brought new and unwanted attention to this mysterious enclave that would transmute the tone and texture of the greater state of Pakistan forever.

When it became evident to US officials that the Taliban and al Qaeda were secretly rejuvenating in Pakistan’s borderland and subsequently carrying out cross-border attacks on Coalition forces in neighboring Afghanistan, the US sought to prod the Pakistani military to suit-up and get its hands dirty. In 2002, to titillate the fancy of the Bush Administration, the Pakistanis began Operation Kalosha II—a 13-day cordon search operation across South Waziristan Agency heavily focused on defanging the town of Wana, the nucleus of radical Islamism and stronghold for a burgeoning insurgency led by the 27-year-old Nek Mohammed. Rolling 7,000 deep, at first glance, the Pakistani armed forces due to their swollen numbers and use of heavy artillery and helicopter gunships succeeded in steamrolling a major al Qaeda command and control center along with a network of tunnels owned by the terror group. In addition, with the assistance of the CIA and their crown jewel weapon of choice—the Predator—Nek Mohammed was vaporized by the first Hellfire strike in Pakistan in 2004. The Pakistani military’s warpath also consumed the lives of a number of violent radical Islamist locals perched in South Waziristan Agency.

But the military’s indiscriminate assault on Wana triggered an upsurge in attacks on Pakistani military checkpoints in the Agency, perpetrated by militants and an array of local tribesmen fuming

at the army’s destructive tactics. One incident in particular, the shelling of a pick-up truck carrying 12 civilians thought by the military of being terrorists on the run, brought local perception to a fever pitch and eroded the army’s stature in the tribal regions. “Resorting to firing on the pick-up was an extremely cruel act,” said Inamullah Masud, a resident of Wana. “The tribesmen were already against the army deployment and operation now they want the army to withdraw....”* In the midst of the military’s mixed success, the insurgency tightened its grasp on South Waziristan and emerged as a parallel state within Pakistan in 2006. They in turn provided sanctuary for al Qaeda and simultaneously launched a series of assaults against Pakistan’s army garrisons and civilian government institutions.†

As the curtain closed on Kalosha II, a more sinister character surfaced in the tribal areas: Baitullah Mehsud, leader and founder of the anti-state Pakistani Taliban. In 2006, Mehsud, after consolidating tribal militant groups under the Pakistani Taliban banner, unleashed a campaign of fear and intimidation through suicide bombings on military checkpoints, which resulted in the deaths of an inordinate number of state security officials.

* ibid. 168–170.
The brazen assaults provoked the Pakistani military to gear up for a renewed campaign in South Waziristan, Operation Zalzala in 2008. The incursion cleared most of Mehsud’s territory, but in one month alone, the Pakistanis managed to destroy over 4,000 homes and rendered 200,000 residents displaced or in relative squalor. With little salvation to console their grievances, a manifold of locals picked up arms in resistance to the Pakistani state. After Zalzala’s strategic blunder, and the botched siege by Pakistani security forces of the Red Mosque in Islamabad in 2007, attacks originating from the tribal areas percolated into the Pakistani countryside. The increase from 2005 to 2008 was a whopping 746 percent.

Given this dismal trend, armed incursions in the eye of the militant storm just don’t seem to fit Pakistan’s strategic interest vis-à-vis domestic stability. Counterinsurgency hasn’t been fully ingrained in the operational DNA of Pakistan’s security forces; its military is anchored in preparation for a conventional scuffle with India, its perennial adversary.
In the same vein, past infiltrations have failed miserably and inadvertently triggered more assaults in the tribal areas and in Pakistan proper. Indeed, the Pakistanis found it less arduous to sheath rather than brandish the sword by lubricating deals with the militants; in 2004 they signed the Shakai agreement with Nek Mohammed demanding that he and his menagerie hand over al Qaeda operatives in return for amnesty. The treaty allowed for a brief respite in violence, but in an act of sheer defiance, Nek failed to uphold his end of the bargain. The lull in fighting was short-lived and despair returned to South Waziristan as tribal militants and Pakistan’s armed forces clashed on the battlefield once again.

If military force engenders negative results, can the Pakistanis pioneer a less lethal approach to countering militancy? Former ambassador to Islamabad William Milam told me that the Pakistanis should incorporate soft power as much as hard
power. “The Pakistani Army has used hard power and destroyed a bunch of things it didn’t need to,” he said. “That didn’t do anything to win the hearts and minds.” Milam commented that the radical Islamic narrative is deeply woven into the fabric of the tribal areas and any soft power approach should be tailored to temper it. But, he notes, there are caveats. “I just don’t think soft power alone is going to work on some extremists. The Pakistanis have no choice but to deal with someone with force.”

When I asked him if this method had been tested before, he highlighted that the Pakistanis had traditionally used the old British ritual of buying off tribal leaders to keep their people in the rugged borderlands in line. “The problem,” he explained, “was that the Taliban killed most of them and made it much harder.”

Separate from the extremism originating from FATA, the threat of militant violence from groups lurking in Pakistan’s municipalities casts an even bigger pall of fear and insecurity over ordinary Pakistanis. “Militancy has no support among the Pakistani public,” said Hussain, “but the violence affects their daily life.” Recognizing the need for stability in Pakistan proper, the US poured billions of dollars annually into the state’s security establishment to add luster to a previously decrepit fighting force. But as the Pakistani armed forces evolved, so did the militants. Hussain told me, “There is a network of militant organizations within Pakistan. They have created this nexus with the militants in the tribal areas and they are largely responsible for the violence.”

Pakistan’s security forces have either limped on in their efforts to quash the militant threat or turned the other cheek. Indeed, US officials have surmised that Pakistan’s current indifference to domestic extremism is a mask for tacit approval for some militant groups operating in the region. And given the current climate of the US-Pakistan relationship, Pakistani duplicity no longer warrants the quality of ghastly surprise. But the specter of violent Islamic extremism remains a thorn in the government’s underbelly and undoubtedly will be for years to come. “Whatever happens there,” Milam concluded, “anything positive, it’s going to be a long, long process.”