

Modern History of Federally Administered Tribal Areas

Agencies and Frontier Regions that constitute the region of Pakistan known as Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) have a long and rich history.

The area along the British India frontier and Afghanistan border inhabited by Pashtuns of various tribes was the epicenter of the “Great Game” between the British and the Russian Empires in late 19th and early 20th centuries. London’s anxiety of Russia’s expansion into Central Asia and fear of a Afghan-Russian conspiracy compelled the British to launch two wars on Afghanistan in 1839-42 and 1878-79 with the Pashtun tribal belt caught in the middle of the confrontation. Pashtuns viewing themselves as part of an anti-British resistance fought along with rulers of Kabul against British and Indian forces. If the first war brought shameful results for the British Crown the second war brought most of the Pashtun tribal belt under the control of the British troops.

Despite the military success, the political establishment in London realized that constant attacks by Pashtun tribes against forces of the East India Company were very costly and failed to provide security for British interests. In 1893, Britain, having control of Afghanistan’s foreign policy, compelled King Abdur Rahman of Afghanistan to accept the Durand Line Agreement. This plan artificially divided the Pashtun inhabited tribal region into two parts that would fall under jurisdiction of two then unfriendly countries. According to the Durand Line document, the 1,610 miles border between Afghanistan and India were drawn from Wakhan in the north to the Iranian border with some adjustment of territories.

Since the enforcement of the Durand Line Agreement, FATA had a unique administrative system and relationship with the national capital under the rule of the British Raj and even later when tribal areas became a part of Pakistan in 1947. The Pashtun tribes who always resisted control from outside were granted autonomy in running their internal affairs and were governed by the Frontier Crimes Regulation established by the British through appointed political agents and maliks.

In 1947, the Indian Independence Act annulled the agreements between the British Raj and Tribal Areas, and the newly created state of Pakistan had to negotiate new terms binding Pashtun tribal areas to Islamabad. The Pakistani Government extended the rights and privileges of maliks and autonomy to the region which in return pledged loyalty to Pakistan. The conditions of the political relations between FATA and the federal government and administrative set up of the tribal areas were formalized by orders, notifications by the Governor General of Pakistan and agreements which had been reviewed and modified later and finally finalized in the Pakistan’s Constitution of 1973.

The Soviet invasion in 1979 and occupation of Afghanistan until 1989 negatively affected the FATA with an economic and humanitarian crisis as millions of Afghan refugees fled across the border into the most undeveloped region of Pakistan. The region served as a hub for the Mujahideen campaign against the Soviets as weapons, money,

fighters and Jihad ideology spread. The social fabric of the tribes gradually transformed into religious fundamentalism as maliks and traditional clergy lost authority while Mujahidden commanders assumed power and assumed control over resources. Deobandi and Salafi teachings found acceptance among many young disenfranchised students who were frustrated with long wars with the Soviet Army and the subsequent Afghan civil war. Many madrassas provided not only religious education but militant Jihadi propaganda in the region where the youth had no other opportunity to receive even a basic secular education.

With Operation Enduring Freedom in October of 2001 many Taliban fighters, Al-Qaida and affiliate groups such as Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan escaped and found safehaven in the FATA. Today FATA is the one of the most important areas in the global war on terror. The history of the region is full of examples where mere military intervention did not bring strategic long-term success. Understanding of the complex history, geography, politics and economy of the region is key to our victory in combating terrorism in this part of the world.