

# Internal Instability: How Well is the Pakistan Army Coping?

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## Carnage at Peshawar

In an act of unprecedented depravity, seven *jihadi* extremists sent by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) killed 132 innocent school children at the Army Public School, Peshawar, on December 16, 2014. According to Mohammed Umar Khurasani, the TTP spokesman, the killings were meant to avenge the deaths of innocent people in indiscriminate air strikes and artillery bombing during the ongoing military Operation Zarb-e-Azb (Sharp and Cutting) launched by the Pakistan Army in North Waziristan in June 2014. He said, “The government is targeting our families and females... we want them to feel the pain.”

The attack went well beyond mere revenge. Various factions of the Taliban have been opposing all education that is not imparted to children in *madrassas*. The Taliban are particularly opposed to education for girls as their perverted logic leads them to believe that a woman's place is at home. Between 2004 and 2013, as many as 724 attacks were launched by terrorists against schools in Pakistan (Kathy Gilsinan, “Terrorist Attacks on Schools Have Soared in the Past 10 Years”, *The Atlantic*, December 17, 2014.) The TTP also wished to send a message that the organisation had not been weakened despite military operations launched against it by the Army and that it was still capable of striking at will.

The dastardly attack united the political and Army leadership as well as civil society and created a groundswell of support for counter-terrorism operations.

While terrorist groups like the Lashkar-e-Tayyeba (LeT) tried to blame India for the attack, there were no takers for such accusations. The government lifted the ban on the execution of convicted terrorists who were on death row for acts of terrorism. Approximately 3,000 convicts are reported to have been given death sentences. A moratorium on executions was in place since 2008 except for a brief period in August 2013. Up to June 2015, approximately 150 convicted terrorists had been hanged.

Hafiz Saeed's Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD, a front for the LeT) and the Haqqani network, are among 12 organisations suspected of acts of terrorism that have been banned. The government has also constituted military courts to expeditiously try those who are suspected of participation in terrorist strikes. This amounts to ceding of the authority of the civilian government to the military and will prove detrimental to the growth of Pakistan's fledgling democracy; but no one is worrying about that for now, except some human rights organisations.

## **Deteriorating Internal Security Situation**

The deteriorating internal security environment has gradually morphed into Pakistan's foremost national security threat. Karachi remains a tinderbox that is ready to explode. Al Qaeda is quietly making inroads into Pakistani terrorist organisations like the Lashkar-e-Tayyeba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami (HuJI), Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ). Till it was finally attacked, the TTP had consolidated its position in North Waziristan and was capable of breaking out of its stronghold into neighbouring areas. Fissiparous tendencies in Balochistan and the restive Gilgit-Baltistan Northern Areas are a perpetual security nightmare. And, sectarian violence has become commonplace.

As if all of these threats were not bad enough, radical extremists owing allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have begun to show their presence. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the so-called Caliph, has openly proclaimed the intention of ISIS to expand eastwards to establish the Islamic state of Khorasan that will include Afghanistan, the Central Asian Republics, eastern Iran and Pakistan. The final battle, Ghazwa-e-Hind – a term from Islamic mythology – will be fought to extend the Caliphate to India. An ISIS branch has already been established in the Indian subcontinent. It is led by Muhsin al Fadhli and is based somewhere in Pakistan. Some factions of the TTP have declared their allegiance to al-Baghdadi.

Despite facing the grave danger of a possible collapse of the state, the Pakistan government's counter-insurgency policy had lacked cohesion until recently. The commencement of a peace dialogue with the TTP after Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) [PML (N)] came back into power, despite the abject failure of several such efforts in the past, had allowed the terrorist organisation to rearm, recruit and train fresh fighters. It also gave the TTP leadership the opportunity to cross the border into Afghanistan. In March 2014, the TTP offered a month-long ceasefire. The Army honoured the ceasefire and refrained from active operations, but some of the TTP factions fought on. On April 16, 2014, the TTP withdrew its pledge and blamed the government for failing to make any new offers.

In the face of mounting public and Army pressure, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif reluctantly agreed to approve military strikes. He was apprehensive that Gen Raheel Sharif, the Chief of the Army Staff (COAS), may unilaterally decide to launch an all-out offensive. The Army had recommended to the government that firm military action was necessary to deal with the menace of home grown terrorism. The Prime Minister (PM) is now backing the Army fully and has said that he will not allow Pakistan to become a "sanctuary of terrorists" and that the military operation will continue till all the militants are eliminated. He has also said that no distinction will be made between "good" and "bad" Taliban. The so-called good Taliban are considered strategic assets and have been employed to destabilise India and Afghanistan.

## **Operation Zarb-e-Azb in North Waziristan**

Realisation about the gravity of the internal security situation took some time to dawn on the Pakistan Army. Two successive Army Chiefs have now declared publicly that internal instability is the number one national security threat. However, unlike the Indian Army that has been embroiled in low intensity conflict since the 1950s, the Pakistan Army is relatively inexperienced in counter-insurgency operations. Gen Kayani had declared 2009 as the "Military Training Year" to reorientate the Army to internal security duties. Before becoming COAS, Gen Raheel Sharif had developed the training manuals for counter-insurgency. Over the last decade, the Pakistan Army has deployed more than 150,000 soldiers in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) areas. It has suffered over 15,700 casualties, including about 5,000 dead since 2008. The total casualties, including civilian, number almost 50,000 since 2001.

Hurt by a series of Taliban successes in "liberating" tribal areas and under

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and vision**

pressure from the Americans to deliver in the “war on terror”, in the initial stages, the Pakistan Army employed massive firepower to stem the rot – as was visible on television screens worldwide when operations were launched to liberate the Swat Valley (Operation Rah-e-Rast, May-June 2009) and South Waziristan (Operation Rah-e-Nijat, October-November 2009). Fighter aircraft, helicopter gunships and heavy artillery were freely used to destroy suspected terrorist hideouts, irrespective of civilian casualties. This heavy-handed, firepower-based approach without simultaneous infantry operations on the ground failed to dislodge the militants, but caused large-scale collateral damage and alienated the tribal population even further.

Counter-insurgency operations against the TTP in South Waziristan drove most of the fighters to North Waziristan, but for long, the Army had been reluctant to extend its operations to this province. North Waziristan has rugged mountainous terrain that enables TTP militants to operate like guerrillas and launch hit-and-run raids against the security forces. When cornered, the militants find it easy to slip across the Durand Line to safe sanctuaries in Khost and Paktika provinces of Afghanistan. Ahmed Rashid, author of *Taliban* and *Descent into Chaos*, has written: “Not only does North Waziristan house Pakistani and Afghan Taliban; it is also a training ground for al-Qaeda, which attracts Central Asians, Uighurs from China, Chechens from the Caucasus and a flow of militant Muslim converts from Europe.” The Pakistan Army realised that it would be a long-drawn operation and that it would undoubtedly suffer a large number of casualties. Hence, it took its time preparing for the operation.

On June 15, 2014, the Pakistan Army and Air Force launched Operation Zarb-e-Azb (Sharp and Cutting), their much delayed offensive against the TTP. The operation began with air strikes and was subsequently followed up with offensive counter-insurgency operations on the ground. Approximately 30,000 regular soldiers of the Pakistan Army were employed for the operation. The Pakistani air operations were assisted by US drone strikes, which were resumed after six months and caused extensive damage. As a result of the operation, one million civilians left their villages and became refugees.

In the first two days of the operation, the Army claimed that it had killed approximately 180 TTP and Uzbek terrorists, including the mastermind of the twin terrorist attacks on Karachi airport on June 09 and 10, 2014. According to the Karachi Airport Security Force, 29 people had died in the suicide attack, including all 10 terrorists, while 24 had been injured. On the same day, in the

latest manifestation of continuing sectarian violence, Sunni extremists had killed 23 Shia pilgrims travelling by bus in Balochistan. These two and other recent attacks are clearly indicative of the ability of Pakistan's terrorist organisations to strike at will and underline the helplessness of the security forces in taking effective preventive action. The Army claims to have killed 1,500 militants so far, most of them foreign terrorists. Many others had escaped across the border into Afghanistan as they had prior knowledge of the impending military operations.

Though the Army Chief has said that Operation Zarb-e-Azb is aimed at eliminating "all terrorists and their sanctuaries" in North Waziristan, clearly no strikes are being launched against the "good Taliban" who are considered strategic assets. These include the Haqqani network and two other militant groups based in North Waziristan. These groups have been primarily targeting the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation/ International Security Assistance Force (NATO/ ISAF) forces and the Afghan National Army (ANA). Of these, the Hafiz Gul Bahadur group has hosted the Haqqani network and the TTP in North Waziristan and the Mullah Nazir group is in control of the Wana region of South Waziristan. These three groups are called the good Taliban by the Pakistan Army and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and are looked upon as "strategic assets" to influence events in Afghanistan now that the NATO/ISAF drawdown has been completed. The Haqqani network has also been employed to target Indian assets in Afghanistan.

Pervez Hoodbhoy, well-known physicist, said in an interview on July 03, 2014, "Pakistan's biggest problem is that religious extremism and intolerance have penetrated deep into the bones of society. North Waziristan is a magnet for *jihadists* from across the world. Earlier their terrorism was directed internationally and, hence, tolerated. But now their full fury is frontally directed at Pakistan: the people, state, and military... This military operation will certainly not eliminate terrorism. But unless radical militants are contained using force, they will soon overrun Pakistan. Recent events in Iraq and Syria should open our eyes to that terrible possibility... Forced into a war that is not of its own choice, the Army is seeking a way out. Today, the Pakistan Army is genuinely at war against a fanatical, religiously charged enemy. It should not be dismissed as *noorakushti*... I suspect that, like the Lal Masjid operation, Zarb-e-Azb will turn out to be a kind of watershed. It has seriously disturbed the relations between the Army and its former allies, and will deepen the split within the Army as well. The traditionally pro-military Jamaat-e-Islami is furiously condemning the military action and demanding talks instead."

There can never be a purely military or a purely political solution to an insurgency. A successful counter-insurgency strategy is a dynamic but

balanced mixture of aggressive offensive operations conducted with a humane touch and socio-economic development. Political negotiations to address the core issues of alienation of the population and other political demands must also be conducted with the local leadership simultaneously. The tribal culture prevailing in the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and FATA, with its fierce ethnic loyalties and its diffused leadership, makes the task of the Army and the government more difficult.

**Pakistan Army didn't launch any attack against the Good Taliban during Op Zarb-e-Azb**

### **Impact on Regional Security**

What do these developments portend for the region? Regional instability always has a negative impact on economic development and trade. Creeping Talibanisation and radical extremism are threatening Pakistan's sovereignty. If the Pakistan Army fails to conclusively eliminate the scourge in the northwest, it will soon reach Punjab, which has been relatively free of major incidents of violence. After that, it will only be a matter of time before the terrorist organisations manage to push the extremists across the Radcliffe Line into India – first ideologically and then physically. It is in India's interest for the Pakistan government to succeed in its fight against radical extremism, or else India will have to fight the Taliban at the Atari-Wagah border.

Similarly, it is in Afghanistan's interest as well to join hands with Pakistan rather than to take advantage of Pakistan's predicament by providing succour to the TTP on its territory. Early indications are that the two countries are likely to move in that direction. Sartaj Aziz, the foreign policy and national security adviser to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, has said that the forces of Pakistan and Afghanistan will conduct coordinated operations on both sides of the border. He said, "They will supplement each other's operations by blocking the border during operations from one side so that anyone trying to escape could be arrested."

### **How Well is the Pakistan Army Coping?**

The Peshawar attack sparked large-scale outrage across Pakistan. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif called it a national tragedy and promised to fight till the "last terrorist is eliminated." Army Chief Raheel Sharif echoed the same sentiments. There is, however, no evidence as yet to suggest that the attack will actually be a turning point in Pakistan's counter-terrorism policy. Sartaj Aziz had said recently that terrorists who do not threaten Pakistan's security should not be targeted.

The precarious situation in Pakistan is headed towards a dangerous denouement. The likelihood of a military coup is being openly discussed again. Pakistan cannot survive as a coherent nation state unless the Army gives up its agenda of seeking strategic depth in Afghanistan, the attempts to destabilise India through its proxy war, and stops its meddling in politics. The Army must pull itself up by the bootstraps and substantively enhance its capacity to conduct effective counter-insurgency operations. The Pakistan Army has let down Pakistan and must make amends. In the national interest, the Army must give up being a state within a state and accept civilian control, even if it does so with bad grace.

At present, the Pakistan Army is a long way from becoming truly combat-worthy for the nature of sub-conventional warfare that circumstances have forced it to wage in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (erstwhile NWFP) and FATA. However, all hope is not lost. While the Pakistan Army is passing through a rough patch, it is still a good professional Army. Its senior leadership has carefully identified the shortfalls in its performance in counter-insurgency operations and has initiated remedial training measures. In Operation Zarb-e-Azb, it is gaining valuable experience, even though it is at the cost of a very high casualty rate.

The acid test of the Army's present state of training and preparedness for counter-insurgency operations will be how long it takes before it finally defeats the TTP in North Waziristan – an area that it had shied away from addressing. The Pakistan Army would do well to study, understand, analyse and learn from the counter-insurgency doctrine that the Indian Army has so successfully followed for 20 years in Jammu and Kashmir and over half a century in India's northeastern region. On its part, the Indian Army must also study the counter-insurgency campaign of the Pakistan Army so as to carefully avoid the hazards and pitfalls that the Pakistan Army has encountered.

Political turmoil, internal instability, a floundering economy and weak institutions make for an explosive mix. Pakistan is not yet a failed state, but the situation that it is confronted with could rapidly degenerate into unmitigated disaster. All the institutions of the state must stand together for the nation to survive its gravest challenge. The Pakistan Army and the ISI must concentrate on fighting the enemy within, rather than frittering away energy and resources on destabilising neighbouring countries.

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