

Changing Paradigm in Pakistan after Peshawar

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In an extremely heinous attack, nine terrorists in military uniforms attacked the Army Public School Peshawar on December 16, 2014, killing 145 people, including 132 school children. The terrorists, who, according to Pakistani authorities, were foreign nationals and included fighters from Chechnya, Afghanistan and the Middle East, entered the school in the early hours of December 16, and opened fire on the school staff and children, killing 132 schoolchildren, ranging between eight and eighteen years of age. The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) spokesman Mohammed Khurasani claimed responsibility for the attack. In a phone call to the media, he stated that TTP suicide bombers had carried out the attack in revenge for the killings of Taliban members at the hands of the Pakistani authorities. He termed the attack as retaliation for Operation Zarb-e-Azb, which had displaced almost one million people from North Waziristan Agency. The TTP claimed that they targeted the school because the Army targets their families and they wanted to inflict similar pain on the Army. They also claimed that most of the people killed in Operation Zarb-e-Azb were innocent women and children.

Retaliation from the Taliban was expected ever since operation Zarb-e-Azb was launched in June 2014. Adequate warnings had accordingly been issued by the intelligence agencies about the impending attacks on military targets and the security forces had been geared up for it. As a result, such a major attack in the vicinity of a cantonment on a target linked with the Army was shocking. The attack was intended to hurt the Army, and by targeting a secondary school with a large number of children from Army families, the TTP succeeded in hitting where it hurt

the most. It delivered its deadliest blow and created fear and anger across the nation, especially within the all-powerful Army. In terms of its sheer impact on the armed forces, it was far more painful than the attack on the General Headquarters, the air stations, the naval ship and bases, or the mosque in Rawalpindi where Army officers in the middle of Friday prayers, were slaughtered. In terms of its impact, the attack also surpassed the recent carnage at Karachi airport and the Wagah border. The attack created widespread indignation within Pakistan and almost all the political parties agreed for drastic action against the TTP. It was a sudden volte-face; all those, who had been courting the TTP, talking of rapprochement and talks with it, suddenly changed their opinion taking a cue from the Army Chief, Gen Sharif.

Peshawar school attack created fear within Pakistan Army.

The global community also grieved with Pakistan over the loss of innocent lives. All major world leaders, from the UN Secretary General to Prime Minister Modi expressed their sorrow at the dastardly act. In India, irrespective of the recent hostilities, there was genuine outpouring of grief. Many poems were written about the tragedy and its innocent victims and all educational institutions in India prayed for the departed souls and maintained two minutes silence. Even the Indian Parliament expressed its shock over the incident and expressed sympathy with the bereaved families. There was a general perception that this incident would appraise Pakistan of the dangers of harbouring terrorists within its territory.

Within Pakistan the reaction was swift: a large number of strikes were launched on the terrorist hideouts in tribal areas and in a knee-jerk reaction, the government terminated its moratorium on the death penalty. Many of those awarded the death penalty and waiting for years, were executed immediately in different jails across the county, sometimes even without adhering to the laid down judicial process. The Army claimed large-scale success in killing terrorists in dozens of aerial attacks since the attack in Peshawar. In Tirah valley in Khyber Agency, alone, it claimed to have killed over 70 militants, including Umar Khalifa, believed to be the mastermind of the attack on the Army Public School. Hundreds of other 'militants' were killed in air strikes over North Waziristan, parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Although, the Army has claimed that all those killed in the aerial strikes were terrorists, it is virtually impossible to differentiate from the air, especially when the air attacks are taking place with such amazing regularity and frequency. In addition, the security forces launched a number of operations in Karachi and Punjab and claimed to have eliminated a large number of terrorists there.

Lakhvi incident displayed soft policy of Pakistani judiciary towards terrorists.

For the first time, since it came to power, the government of Nawaz Sharif overtly expressed its desire to eliminate all terrorists. The Army also stated that there are no good or bad Taliban and all such elements need to be eliminated. The fact that Gen Sharif, possibly lacks the ability to be shrewd or vicious, has contributed to this changed paradigm. The Army Chief travelled to Kabul and succeeded in getting Afghanistan to cooperate in anti-Taliban operations. Consequently, simultaneous operations have been launched by the Afghan Army in Kunar province and by the Pakistan Army in FATA, ostensibly to eliminate TTP Chief Fazlullah and other leaders of the TTP. The Army also demanded the setting up of military courts by amending the Pakistan Army Act 1952, so that the civilians involved in terrorist activities directed against the military or military installations could be court-martialled, instead of being tried and convicted by regular courts or anti-terrorism courts. More significantly, despite Pakistan's proclivity for military rule, there was widespread support for the proposal of setting up military courts to try the terrorists. Almost all the political parties initially supported the proposal to set up military courts for even trying the civilian accused, without going into the constitutional ramifications of such actions. It appeared as if the entire Pakistani establishment had come together to eliminate the menace of Islamic terrorists.

Pakistan's establishment even crossed the Rubicon and banned the Jamaat-ud-Dawa, and, in keeping with the prevailing norms, though the outfit re-emerged with a new name, the ban clearly indicated the resolve. More significantly, on the western front, in a significant attack in North Waziristan, Hafiz Gul Bahadur and many of his commanders were eliminated. For long, Mulla Nazir and Hafiz Gul Bahadur were considered to be the pro-government 'good' Taliban. Even the Haqqani network and associates of Mullah Omar have been targeted, thereby showing some resolve by the establishment.

However, as the dust settled on the Peshawar tragedy, the murmurs of dissent started appearing within the Pakistani society. There were sections within Pakistan, including the cleric from Lal Masjid, Maulana Abdul Aziz, who were not ready to condemn the incident unambiguously and offered only conditional condemnation of the incident. Even more significantly, the TTP tried to justify its attack on the school children by quoting from the Islamic lexicon, and stated that it was in conformity with the norms established by the holy prophet and they had, accordingly, not targeted the smaller children,

although they could have easily done so. More significantly, after turning down a few appeals by convicts on death row, Pakistan's judiciary, which has time and again exhibited radical proclivities, released Maliq Ishaq, a known Sunni sectarian terrorist, who had publicly boasted about having personally killed hundreds of Shias. As if that was not enough, the Anti-Terrorism Court granted bail to Zakiur Rahman Lakhvi, the mastermind of the Mumbai attack, though there were numerous voice samples and technical evidence, including Ajmal Kasab's testimony to prove that he was directing the terrorists during the attack and had initially recruited and trained them. After, initially cancelling his bail, the High Court also granted him bail. Although he was arrested again by the authorities on another case and an appeal was filed in the Supreme Court against the bail, the incident exhibited the sympathetic attitude of the Pakistani judiciary towards Islamic terrorists.

After supporting the establishment of the military court, the political parties realised the inherent dangers to democracy and started expressing their reservations. Although the amendment was passed in both Houses of Parliament, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) had opposed it in the Senate initially and even others showed dissent. In the Senate, a member from Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam (Fazal-ur-Rehman) asked as to who had trained these people and sent them to Kashmir and Afghanistan. He further asked as to why their names were not being revealed and suggested that for his role, former Director General, Inter-Services Intelligence (DG ISI), Hameed Gul should be hanged first and then former Chief of the Army Staff, Aslam Beg. He also wanted to know who had identified the Taliban, who were now being branded as terrorists and why the Army Chief had stayed in the US for 15 days and for what purpose did the Prime Minister receive \$1.5 billion from Saudi Arabia. More significantly, it appears that there are sections within the Army that are not willing to go along with the recent drive of the Army Chief against all the militants. Consequently, firing has started across the Line of Control (LoC) and is being resumed periodically as these elements know that the Indian security forces will respond in strength and this could aggravate the situation along Pakistan's eastern front, forcing it to halt operations against the TTP in FATA and shift troops to the east. There has also been sporadic firing across the Afghan border, which has resulted in an adequate response from the Afghan Army. If this continues, it could sound the death-knell for the ongoing cooperation against the Taliban between the two countries. It clearly shows that there are powerful sections within the Army that want to protect these strategic assets.

There are sections within the security establishment which are trying to sabotage this entire operation against the Taliban and other radical outfits, by instigating a terrorist attack against India. In this context, one has to view the developments around the new year, when a suspicious boat was apprehended off the Saurashtra coast – the crew destroyed the boat, rather than surrender. This being their objective, in the current context, nothing could ensure that better than a replication of an attack like in Mumbai. Although a number of steps have been taken ever since the Mumbai attack of 2008, the Indian maritime frontiers continue to remain porous and it is, therefore, far easier for a determined band of terrorists to use the medium of the sea for a large terrorist attack rather than try to infiltrate across fenced land borders. Even the timing was carefully selected and it was possibly felt that the boat could sneak in on New Year's Eve as many security personnel would be busy celebrating the New Year bash, as has been the norm in the Services.

It seems that the Taliban is trying to create further fissures within the Pakistani armed forces. With this intention, Adnan Rashid, the former Air Force personnel, who was convicted and sentenced to death and was later freed from Bannu jail by the Taliban after a daring jail break, released a video aimed at defence personnel. In the video, he speaks in impeccable Queen's English and exhorts the armed forces personnel to revolt. He castigates Pakistan's armed forces and accuses them of fooling innocent men, by using them to meet their objectives in Kashmir and Afghanistan. He also accuses the officers of the Pakistani armed forces of mistreating their men and urges the Pakistani soldiers not to obey them. To further encourage them to revolt, he promises those, who rise against their officers and join the Taliban, complete amnesty for their past sins of having served in Pakistan's armed forces.

Another attempt by the TTP to mitigate the pressure being mounted on it has been to aggravate sectarian tensions and towards this end, there has been an increase in sectarian attacks. The attacks are taking place in areas that have not been afflicted by the sectarian virus in the past. The attack in an Imambargah in Shikarpur was the first such attack in interior Sindh in four and half decades. The attack killed over 60 Shias and injured many more. Jundallah, which is considered a breakaway faction of the TTP, claimed responsibility for it. The attack has expanded the arena for sectarian conflict considerably and although it may not have immediately released pressure from the TTP in FATA, such attacks in newer areas will force certain redeployment, thereby releasing the pressure from the Taliban.

In the days to come, one may see more and more sectarian attacks, greater fissures within the forces and, consequently, increase in firing across the LoC and IB. Gen Sharif, despite his intentions to eliminate all the militants, is unlikely to succeed as he is not as shrewd and vicious as his predecessors. Consequently, he will face both overt and covert opposition to his actions within the military and political establishment. More significantly, the use of aerial bombing and artillery firing to eliminate terrorists does not comprise sound tactics. It, in fact, ensures a larger recruitment base for the terrorists' cause as the victims of the collateral damage invariably gravitate towards the militants.

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