



**ISSUE BRIEF**

## **Profiling the Taliban Threat to India**

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Despite some recent reverses in NWFP, the Taliban has emerged as a force to reckon with in Pakistan. Their formidable presence, an estimated 3000 fighters in Swat Valley, as observed by President Asif Ali Zardari during his visit to Washington, predicts a long drawn battle for Pakistan's security forces. Should the Pakistan Army fail to contain their spread, as is much feared, it could pose a serious challenge to other countries in the neighbourhood. The crumbling frontline of the global war against terror sounds an alarm for the Indian state as well, for it to be prepared and respond effectively in times of crises.

### **Taliban and Terror**

The Taliban's capacity to cause death and destruction cannot be underestimated. In their ignorance of values, the Taliban is "virtually destroying anything that they find distasteful and does not fall in line with their way of thinking". In a recent incident near Peshawar, the mausoleum of seventeenth century legendary sufi poet Rehman Baba was attacked and badly damaged, apparently because they took offence to shrine culture, and the fact that women were also praying at the mausoleum. In yet another incident, several shops selling music and film videos at Takhtbahi (a small town northwest of Peshawar) were blown up. In the past the Taliban have attacked scores of shops in the frontier provinces, charging that entertainment is contrary to the teachings of Islam. The Taliban did not spare even the town of Mardan (located 50 kilometres south of Swat), a prominent military cantonment in NWFP and, from where the counter offensive against the Taliban has been launched. In one such incident in Mardan, suspected militants targeted the girl's high school in the town, a day after another school outside the cantonment was attacked. Taliban guerrillas also claimed responsibility for bombing the office of National Rural Support Programme, and killing a woman staff member in a village near Mardan. The Taliban have always been critical of non-governmental organizations, which encourage a more public role for women. Most interestingly, because of worries that the Taliban are coming, it is reported that land prices have dropped by as much as 25 per cent in Mardan. The latest threat from the Taliban is targeted at medical doctors in the city of

Peshawar. Threatening letters sent to several prominent hospitals want doctors to stop wearing western clothes or else be prepared to face suicide attacks. The Taliban seem hell bent on pushing the state apparatus to the edge and cause total administrative collapse in the frontier provinces. The prevailing situation looks grim and surely needs to be treated with concern.

### **Modus Operandi**

Traditionally, the Taliban have always sought to control territory and defend key terrain objectives and, not merely indulge in hit and run tactics. Several battles fought by the Taliban against the United States and its allies in Afghanistan, prominently at Cobaki, Chapchall and Bai Beche in October 2001, Sayed Slim Kalay and Highway 9 in December 2001, as also Operation Anaconda in March 2002, are indicative of the pattern of operations. In recent times, the Taliban's engagement of Pakistan security forces in NWFP demonstrates their continued penchant for controlling territory and population centres. A few issues in the context of their modus operandi are:

- Control of territory seems central to the Taliban's operational thinking, as this implies a share in local revenues, dispensation of tribal justice and adjudication of land cases and above all, unquestioned control over poppy cultivation and the booming drug trade.
- Fixation of Pashtun militants to fight from well prepared positions was seen in Kashmir as well. In the late 1990s, these cadres operated extensively from higher reaches of the Pir Panjal and Shamshabari mountain ranges. Their other favourite haunts being thickly forested areas of Surankote, Haphruda, Bandipore and Lolab in the shadow of these ranges. Their compulsion to operate from high mountains stemmed from the fact that, distinct physical features, language and mannerisms made them easily recognisable and, thus an easy target for the security forces.
- In fact, the problem of identity made it extremely difficult for them to operate and undertake actions in isolation. However, a few sensational acts by Pashtun militants did catch the attention of the public and media, such as those at Hazratbal Shrine and Hill Kaka. The fidayeen and IED attacks introduced by these cadres too had a significant impact. India's past experience in dealing with these cadres in Jammu and Kashmir surely gives it an advantage in the emerging context. However, the new breed of militants look far more experienced and motivated and in that sense, would be much more difficult to tackle than their predecessors.

## **The Indian Context**

The growing chorus that the Pakistan Army does not have the capacity to fight unrest in frontier provinces raises several questions. While the US policy intends to build such capacities, it may take time before results actually show up on ground. Pakistan surely needs to stand up to the threat and save the state from a possible collapse. Can the political and military hierarchy in Pakistan handle the fragile situation? What does the situation portend for other countries in the region? What factors could drive further worsening of the situation? Does Taliban, a loose alliance of disparate militant groups, possess the organisational and ideational capacity to carry 'terror' to distant lands? And, should the Pakistan establishment fail to contain the threat, what dimension could the problem assume in the sub-continental context? These are some key questions which need to be addressed.

While it may be too early to speculate about the unfolding Taliban threat, it is however important to examine a few plausible scenarios as far as India is concerned. Hypothetically, the threat could unfold in two major ways. One, it could manifest as heightened infiltration attempts along the Line of Control, as witnessed during the late 1990s, when militants from the Pashtun belt infiltrated in significant numbers and proactively engaged the security forces in Jammu and Kashmir. And two, it could evolve as a secondary effect due to increased violence and instability in Pakistan; the scenario presumes that the Taliban ideology shall first afflict the plains of Pakistan and, is then carried forward to the Indian hinterland by a new breed of 'Talibanised' militants from mainland Pakistan. The two scenarios could well evolve in unison and present a larger challenge.

## **Jammu and Kashmir**

The Kashmiri terrorist leadership has always had a strong connection with militant outfits hailing from Afghanistan, most prominently the Hizb-e-Islami (HeI) and Harkat-ul-Jihad-i-Islami (HuJi). Cadres of several militant groups from Jammu and Kashmir attended madrassas in NWFP, and even trained at camps in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. It may be recalled that Farooq Kashmiri Khalil, the leader of Harkat-ul-Mujahedeen (HuM), also signed the Al-Qaeda's declaration of 1998, which called upon Muslims to attack the Americans and their allies. Maulana Masood Azhar, who founded Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM), supposedly traveled to Afghanistan several times to meet Osama bin Laden, while the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) recruited volunteers to fight alongside the ban. In that sense, there was always a strong connection between Pashtun militants and Kashmir. These cadres were known to infiltrate with Kashmiri militant groups such as Jamaat-ul-Mujaheedeen (JuM), Tehrik-e-Mujaheedeen (TeM) and Tehrik-e-Jehad (TeJ), and operated extensively in the hinterland along with LeT, Al-Badr, HuM, HuA and HM cadres. The newly formed Taliban groups such as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Tehrik-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohamamadi

(TNSM) do carry the ability to recast old alliances, even if some outfits are no longer active, and this probability cannot be wished away.

With infiltration attempts being reported along the Line of Control, influx of Taliban cadres cannot be ruled out. Should this happen in significant numbers, these cadres could gravitate towards their traditional haunts, in general, areas of Rajauri, Surankote, Lolab, Haphruda, Bandipore, Tral and Kangan. Their intent would always be to draw the Security Forces deeper into the hinterland and thus dilute the counterinsurgency grid. Some cadres may even push towards the adjoining districts of Himachal Pradesh to expand their influence in the region. To further widen the scope, we may even witness sporadic infiltration attempts in the Ladakh region. Heightened infiltration attempts would perhaps be the first indication of ingress of Taliban cadres. With security forces' operations being effectively coordinated along the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir, there is no immediate cause of concern. The Indian security forces seem well poised to handle the situation. However, a few issues which may require attention are:

- The need to strengthen existing security mechanisms, in particular gathering of actionable intelligence and its timely dissemination requires no emphasis. Those areas which have been lying dormant for several years now could also be exploited. Militant groups are known to exploit such gaps and opportunities and, we need to guard against it. Surveillance over traditional routes of infiltration, increased availability of rotary wing aircraft to meet operational contingencies, provision of high definition night vision devices, durable body protection and gear, improved communications at the tactical level, electronic interception cum monitoring facilities, robotic devices for counter IED operations, etc are some capabilities that may need immediate attention. Augmentation of existing capabilities, as also exploitation of the new enabling technologies, would go a long way in reinforcing the ongoing security forces' operations in Jammu and Kashmir.
- There is also perhaps the need to re-visit our counterinsurgency strategy in Jammu and Kashmir. Counter infiltration operations require a technology intensive approach (not forgetting the need for boots on ground) to enable effective surveillance over areas that facilitate infiltration, as also the ability of forces to undertake effective neutralisation operations. Equally important is the need to progressively reduce militant strength in the hinterland through sustained operations. This calls for greater inter-agency coordination and seamless operations at the tactical level to draw maximum dividends. The unified approach is crucial towards tackling militancy in Jammu and Kashmir.
- And lastly, given the volatile situation in NWFP, there may not be too many separatist leaders willing to ride the Pakistan boat, giving India much needed time and opportunity to re-think the future of

Jammu and Kashmir. India needs to focus on socio-economic issues, wherein the security forces too could play an important support role for overall development of the region. Besides the ongoing operations, there is a need to 'connect' with the local populace in a more positive and visible manner. Building bridges at all conceivable levels is of utmost importance towards creating a favourable operating environment for the security forces in the emerging context.

### **The Indian Hinterland**

Ever since Pakistan outlawed three Islamist militant groups namely, Harakat-ul-Mujahedeen (HuM), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), and Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM), terrorist attacks in the Indian hinterland have been carried out by cover groups, such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Indian Mujahedeen. In recent years, as Jayshree Bajoria of the Council on Foreign Relations observes, "many new terrorist groups have emerged in Pakistan, several existing groups have re-constituted, and a whole new crop of militants - more violent and less amenable to political solutions - have risen." Many experts feel that it is difficult to determine how many terrorist groups are currently operating in Pakistan. As Ashley J. Tellis summarizes, these can be placed under five distinct categories: sectarian, anti-Indian, Afghan Taliban, Al-Qaeda and its affiliates and the Pakistani Taliban.

In this context, the rise of Pakistani Taliban, an estimated 30,000 to 35,000 cadres under Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), carries the potential to galvanize several banned or relatively less active militant organizations in Pakistan. Collusion between Taliban and militant outfits from plains of Pakistan can produce a fiery brand of militancy - a potent mix of tribal and urban cultures - which could test the state's capacity to respond. Taliban ideology per se may not appeal to all outfits; however decades of fighting experience in Afghanistan could influence the character and modus operandi of banned and cover terrorist groups.

Terror patterns are infectious by nature and militant cadres draw pleasure in experimenting with new ideas. Their leadership and propaganda machines too impel them to try out these ideas towards devastating effects. As Steve Coll of the New America Foundation states, "a younger generation of violent and radical militant cadres with no patience" is what we need to watch out for, since they will be more than willing to undertake sensational actions. LeT, HuM and HuA cadres have always been known for their guile and agility, and how much smarter they could get from this alliance, is for all of us to guess!! The Taliban surely has the capacity to transform the modus operandi of Pakistani and Kashmiri militant groups. It is not ideology alone that should worry us, but the modus operandi of militant groups in times to come as well. Terror can shape intent and actions of militant groups in no time and, this is the biggest challenge faced by security forces. Building the state's capacity for intelligence, policing, security and legal functions is the obvious answer to the problem. Given our geographical and social diversity, available capacities would always fall short to meet emerging threats and uncertainties. Thus the need to evolve

`alternate strategies' to deal with evolving trends in terrorism assumes importance.

- Since an act of terror cannot be predicted or foreseen, one needs sharper eyes and ears to prevent it. The intelligence agencies alone cannot fit this bill and the need to evolve mechanisms for `public watch', which could caution likelihood of an adverse incident, is relevant. There could be several ways to involve the local populace; unemployed youth, retired people, school children, college students, social activists, religious heads, residential welfare associations, private security companies and above all, the large community of well trained ex-servicemen could be employed innovatively to yield desired security dividends. A concept based on public participation should draw strength from the public per se, to prevent acts of terror, while governmental capacities and the security forces are directed towards dealing with actual acts of terror.
- The `bhagidari' system, a well experimented concept in Jammu and Kashmir, is an apt example of the role played by local populace in counter terror operations. Their involvement in sanitization of public places such as busy market places, bus stands, schools and colleges, roads and bridges etc, to facilitate functioning of security forces was noteworthy. This idea of `public watch' can be replicated with little effort in the metros, cities and towns. Our population is our best bet to counter terror and their unbiased involvement can play a major role in preventing incidents.

### **Looking Ahead**

The evolving situation in the frontier provinces of Pakistan does not portend well. Though it seems that the Pakistan establishment under increasing pressure from US is trying hard to tackle the problem, there is as yet no sign of how sooner the threat could be contained. Terrorism, when under pressure, tends to move to areas which offer least or no resistance and the operational tempo built by Pakistani security forces could act in several different ways. This could either lead to elimination of the Taliban or push them into areas where they could flourish. Those new areas could be anyone's guess. The worst case for us would be the influx of `Talibanised' cadres into the Indian hinterland. While the situation in Kashmir could still be controlled, our ability to handle terror in the urban areas is yet to build up. We need to prepare for it, lest it is too late to control the situation. In this context, participation of local communities will be crucial towards evolving an effective counter terror strategy in the changed circumstances.