

Why Pakistan cannot defeat the Taliban

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Is Pakistan fighting a losing war against the Islamists? It would appear so given the sort of confusion in the country about what this war is all about. There is also a lack of clarity on what is desirable (reconciling and reintegrating the Taliban, entering into a negotiated settlement the terms and conditions of which remain an enigma, or even an elimination and extermination of the Pakistani Taliban) and whether this is theoretically, let alone practically, possible. Then there is the nagging doubt about how much of what is achievable will be sustainable. Compounding to the problem are the multiple and often contradictory objectives (internal and external, tactical and strategic) which different agencies and organs of state seem to be pursuing. Worse still no one seems to have a clear idea on how to obtain these objectives, which is leading to state entities working at cross-purposes. The Taliban also have their internecine conflicts, turf wars, ego clashes and differences over tactics, for instance, on whether or not to talk with the Pakistani state. But despite this, they all are working (and killing) towards a common objective in pursuit of their 'grand idea' of grabbing power and imposing their brand of Islam, first in Afghanistan and Pakistan and eventually in rest of the world. The Pakistani state and society, on the other hand, is split on who or what is the enemy, where it wants to go and how it wants to get there.

Shortly after the 26/11 attacks in Mumbai, the then ISI chief, Lt Gen Ahmed Shuja Pasha declared Pakistan's then enemy no. 1, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) chief Baitullah Mehsud, a loyal and patriotic Pakistani. The message that Pasha was sending was clear: in the event of hostilities breaking out with India (the eternal enemy!), he expected Mehsud to throw in his weight behind the Pakistan Army. This was almost as though the Pakistan army had more confidence in the TTP's fanatics than on its own firepower in taking on India.

The current Interior Minister, Chaudhry Nisar, who is trying to take on the mantle of security czar and chief peacemaker rolled into one, took a leaf out of Pasha's book when he declared in the National Assembly that 'a clear majority of the Taliban were not enemies of the country...most Taliban groups had no animosity to the state of Pakistan' and that the elements that were targeting the state were doing so at the behest of foreign agencies (read CIA, RAW and Mossad).¹ Amazingly, just days before he gave the Taliban a certificate of patriotism, Chaudhry Nisar had triumphantly unveiled the National Internal Security Policy to stem the tide of terrorism and Talibanisation in the country.

Surely there is something seriously wrong. In a country where the government spends nearly nine months to come up with a policy document to fight terrorists responsible for the deaths of nearly 50,000 people, and yet the man who makes the policy doesn't consider these terrorists enemies of the country! Of course, this comes as no surprise in a country where TTPs denials of involvement in an attack readily lapped up even though their fingerprints and footprints are clear in the involvement. Instead of condemning terror and demanding action against the perpetrators, politicians and religious leaders blame the government for its lapses and its inability to make peace

with the terrorists. It is also a country where politicians and ministers in charge of the security policy are so terrified of coming into the cross-hairs of the terrorists that they are reported to be sending messages to the TTP about how they have carefully avoided saying anything against the Taliban. In these messages these leaders have washed their hands off the air strikes which they have explained as being ordered by the army in retaliation to TTP attacks, and have pleaded with the TTP to announce a ceasefire so that they could push ahead with a dialogue with them. From this it should be quite clear how this 'phony war' is being fought and why it can't be won.ⁱⁱ

It isn't just the politicians who are playing both sides of the game. The military hasn't quite been able to make up its mind on whether the Taliban and other sundry jihadists are assets or unacceptable liabilities. There is a significant section within the army that isn't ready to make a clean break with the radical Islamists just yet. This section continues to attach utility to the jihadists for achieving objectives in both Afghanistan and India. They would like nothing better than to isolate and eliminate only those Islamists who are not willing to dance to the tunes of the GHQ in Rawalpindi and then continue their joint venture with the other radical groups. In other words, the Pakistan army has no real ideological or cultural problem with the Taliban/Al Qaeda combine per se; it only has a problem with that segment of the Islamist conglomerate that is targeting them. Jihad after all has been one of the mottos of the Pakistan army and jihadists like the notorious Fazlur Rehman Khalil of the Harkatul Ansar and Harkat-ul-Mujahideen infamy are still used to act as intermediaries.

The trouble is that as the Islamists become stronger, more autonomous and less dependent on the Pakistani Army and its 'agencies' and as they expand their area of operation and influence, the segment that is willing to follow the GHQs line is becoming smaller by the day. Even as Pakistan becomes weaker because the 'war of thousand cuts' it inflicted upon its neighbours has now started making more cuts in Pakistan, the army is now caught in a terrible bind. If it continues to flirt with the Taliban, the latter will continue to gain in strength. On the other hand, if the army has realised its monumental mistake of backing the Taliban in the fond belief that they stand the best guarantee of a friendly Afghanistan not becoming India's playground, then they might be in even greater trouble because undoing this mistake will involve a complete overhaul of practically every aspect of Pakistani national life and narrative. That in a country that is deeply divided is almost a mission impossible.

Notwithstanding the usual bombast of the top-brass about how they can clean up the terror in the North Waziristan Agency (NWA) within a matter of days and weeks, things are not looking good. Although many people claim that the Taliban announced a ceasefire as a result of the aerial bombing on terrorist hideouts in NWA and other Tribal Agencies in FATA and some areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Taliban don't seem to have suffered any major loss of commanders, cadres or capability as a result of these bombing runs. In any case, conquering NWA is the easy part; the tough part is to bring the peace and establish the writ of the government, and on this there are no clear answers. As for establishing the writ, even though the Taliban have no visible presence in a city like Lahore, one letter from them to traders is enough to ensure a bonfire of all pornographic CDs, something that all the laws and police could not manage ever.

The simple truth that has eluded Pakistan is that fighting the Taliban is like fighting a shadow. The Taliban are but a symptom, admittedly a malignant one. The real problem is of religious extremism which is manifesting itself in radical Islamism and has struck deep roots in state and society. But instead of doing something about this fundamental issue, the Pakistanis are busy hiding behind the fiction of the nebulous 'third force' which they claim is standing between

them and their brethren, the Taliban. With such a self-defeating approach, how can Pakistan ever defeat the Taliban?

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.

ⁱ Majority of Taliban not anti-state: Nisar”, The News International 7-3-2014

ⁱⁱ Khaufzada Hukumranon Ke Khufia Ijlas by Rauf Klasra in Dunya 28-2-2014