



PAKISTAN'S APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING TERRORISM

Shreya Talwar

Research Associate, CAPS

Pakistan has launched eleven successive military operations targeting terrorist groups within its territory. Despite that, such groups manage to survive and continue attacking. The series of terrorist attacks across Pakistan in the month of February (2017) marked the resurgence and revitalised lethality of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The attacks demonstrated coordination and planning, moving away from the usual pattern of 'hit-and-run'. TTP's largest faction, Jamaat-ul Ahrar (JuA), has been executing attacks all across Pakistan under its newly launched offensive against the state of Pakistan 'Operation Ghazi.' Moreover, many factions of TTP have pledged allegiances to the Islamic State and conducting attacks on its behalf.

Pakistan's faulty counter terrorism operations are symptomatic of a deeper issue pertaining to its approach towards terrorism. Pakistan's conventional security threat perceptions have dominated all spheres of its policy and decision making. Due to this, Pakistan

continues to view terrorism essentially as a geostrategic entity, and not as an outcome of its state policy of supporting and negotiating with terrorist groups for its own strategic gains. Pakistan has linked its approach to terrorism with its security calculations pertaining to India and Afghanistan.

This approach was reflected in the statement made by the Interior Minister of Pakistan, in reference to the string of attacks in February, where he blamed 'external powers and their intelligence agencies for the upturn in violence'.¹ The same was echoed by General Bajwa as he pointed towards the 'hidden hand of external powers'.² By not looking inward and focussing on external threat perceptions, Pakistan's misguided approach to terrorism has a detrimental effect on its efforts to protect its own people from terrorist attacks. For instance, in the case of the Quetta attack, the Home Minister of the Government of Balochistan, without any investigation, had presumed and

announced that the attack was carried out by the intelligence agencies of India and Afghanistan working in tandem. It was noted by the Quetta Commission appointed by the Supreme Court of Pakistan that:

“If the concerned Minister had already determined and declared who the perpetrators were it would hamper the investigation and also undermine the credibility of the Government; as the investigators would either not investigate the crimes because the Minister has already predetermined who had committed them, or in order to appease the Minister proceed to investigate with a view to arrive at the stated conclusion.”³

The same can be seen in the notification published by the ISPR providing information about the launch of the new military operation Raddul-Fassad where it states: “Pakistan army launches ‘Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad’ across the country. Operation aims at indiscriminately eliminating residual/ latent threat of terrorism, consolidating gains of operations made thus far and further *ensuring security of the borders.*”⁴ Border security has been made a primary objective in counter-terrorism operations due to the perception in Pakistan that Indian and Afghan intelligence agencies, including outlawed terrorists groups based in Afghanistan are

engrossed in overtly employing the Afghan soil to mount disruptive attacks in Pakistan, exploiting the long and porous Afghanistan-Pakistan border.⁵ It is essentially related to its paranoia over Indian presence in Afghanistan and its effect on Pakistan’s strategic designs and has little to do with tackling terrorism.

Such behaviour is an example of how Pakistan continues to feed the narrative that terrorism is an external problem funnelled into Pakistan by the intelligence agencies of its hostile neighbours India and Afghanistan while at the same time actively promoting and supporting militant groups that can be kept pliant for achieving its military objectives.

In fact, it has been a long standing policy of Pakistan of engaging armed Islamist groups to wage proxy wars in Afghanistan and India. It has become strongly ingrained in its military culture to the extent that strategy for Pakistan has become “the identification, ranking and prioritization between these different domestic centres of non state violence.”⁶ When Operation Zarb-e-Azb was launched in retribution for the deadly attack on the Army School in Peshawar in 2014, it promised to eliminate all terrorist groups. It turned out to be another selective operation attacking those with anti-state agenda. The three prominent militant groups- the Haqqani Network, the Afghan Taliban and Hezb-e-Islami- which are based in Afghanistan but also have bases in Pakistan, remained untouched by

the Pakistani military during their various operations in the tribal areas to uproot terrorism. Overlooking the fact that the TTP groups which fled into Pakistan, were given sanctuary and logistical support by those untouched groups due to their longstanding personal relationships. Moreover, according to a report, Pakistan's army gave the Haqqani network the opportunity to shift into Afghanistan before the operation began.⁷

This strategy has trickled down to its own domestic counter-insurgency/terrorism operations. The military, taking advantage of local rivalries, engages and supports armed militant groups as proxies to weaken the hold of other militant groups which are targeting the state. For instance, in the Khyber agency of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) the military initially supported the local militant group Lashkar-e-Islami (LeI) led by Mangal Bagh as a counter to the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Between 2009 and 2013, there was a curfew in the agency, but men from LeI could operate freely.⁸ However, this alliance between the military and LeI broke when Mangal Bagh not only dislodged the Khyber government but also took over the Tirah Valley and other surround regions, barring the military from entering the area. The military in order to counter Mangal Bagh's growing powers began supporting Ansar-ul Islam, a religious outfit opposed to LeI. It eventually backfired, when Mangal Bagh officially joined hands with the TTP

in 2013 and became the joint emir of the TTP in Khyber.⁹ In such a scenario, the structure put in place to support the military's proxies continues to incubate a culture that promotes militancy.

Pakistan's approach to terrorism is extremely subjective and a matter of convenience. It would move to execute a Kulbhushan Yadav for terrorism but at the same time protect a Masood Azhar and a Hafiz Saeed for the same reason. Pakistan essentially focuses on building the narrative that terrorism is not a domestic problem but a result of external elements at play, focusing on India and Afghanistan; that it is simply a victim of terrorism and not a perpetrator. It does not see the irony in playing the victim while placing jihadi militias in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) to attack Indian soldiers at the Line of Control (LOC).

In the process of using terrorism as a tool of foreign policy, Pakistan has created ample space for terrorist groups to grow and survive. It is running on the false notion that it can distinguish between terrorist groups. Pakistan's parameters of a good or bad terrorist group are based on whether the objectives of the group are in line with the state's strategic ambition. The state which once declared that it would eat grass but build a nuclear bomb to achieve strategic parity with India, is now willing to self implode in order to project India as a sponsor of terrorism.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Baqir Sajjad Syed, "The return of terror," *Dawn*, February 26, 2017, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1317085>, accessed on May 20, 2017

² Ibid

³ "Quetta Inquiry Commission Report," Supreme Court of Pakistan, December 15, 2016, at <http://www.supremecourt.gov.pk/web/page.asp?id=2339>, accessed on May 24, 2017

⁴ "No PR-87/2017-ISPR," Inter State Press Release, February 22, 2017, at https://www.ispr.gov.pk/front/main.asp?o=t-press_release&id=3775#pr_link3775, accessed on May 24, 2017

⁵ Ayaz Ahmed, "The Recent Spike in Terrorism: A Critical Evaluation of NAP," *Defence Journal*, March 2017, v.19, n.8, p.13

⁶ Samir Puri, "Strategy and Pakistan's Conflict with Islamists Armed Groups," in *Pakistan's War on Terrorism* (Routledge: New York, 2012), p.7

⁷ Saeed Shah and Safdar Dawar, "Militants Slip Away Before Pakistan Offensive," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 17, 2014, at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/militants-slip-away-before-pakistan-offensive-1405637710#:Ql82r0NY6oNXHA>, accessed on May 23, 2017

⁸ "Operational Hazards," *The Herald Annual*, January 2015, p. 52.

⁹ Ibid