



PESHAWAR KILLINGS: IS PAKISTAN READY FOR A CHANGE?

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A most dismaying terrorist attack took place in Peshawar on December 16th when more than 132 young innocents were massacred in Army Public School by one of the world's most parochial and deadly militant groups Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The organisation took the responsibility of the attack stating that it was in revenge for the military offensive – Zarb-e Azb, launched in North Waziristan this year in summer which has left more than a thousand dead and many more displaced.

TTP is acknowledged globally for its gruesome acts of terrorism and has been making headlines in Pakistan for the last seven years. Formed as an umbrella organization uniting around 40 militant groups sharing a similar ideology, TTP came into existence in 2007 under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud. Since then, the outfit has been involved in a series of brutal acts of terror and has undertaken various terrorist operations specifically targeting the armed forces. The prime agenda for the TTP has been to oppose Islamabad's cooperation with the US and NATO forces in the war on terror. The militant outfit has been under stress for the last few months with a series of internal splits that has probably contributed to the organisation's adoption of even more barbaric acts in order to prove its effectiveness and presence in the competitive world of terrorism. Also, one of the splinter groups has vowed its allegiance to the ISIS raising concerns regarding their future operational tactics and agenda within Pakistan.

TTP has reacted with a series of terror strikes in response to the latest military offensive but the recent act is certainly one of the most horrifying in the history of Pakistan. It has evoked

enormous outrage within Pakistan and widespread international condemnation. Although Pakistan has increasingly become the hub of extremism and frequent militant attacks are not surprising anymore, but this has been by far the most cruel act against humanity the nation has witnessed after 1971.

In response to the December 16th attack, Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif vowed to crush the insurgents. In a statement released, he said, "we announce that there will be no differentiation between 'good' and 'bad' Taliban and have to resolve to continue the war against terrorism till the last terrorist is eliminated". The most critical issue here is whether Pakistan would really think about reshaping its existing strategy of militancy as a foreign policy tool, which it has pursued for decades in dealing with India which, it has consistently perceived as having hegemonic ambitions! Is Pakistan ready to alter its strategic calculus and stop viewing and supporting terrorism as the most effective foreign policy tool? The granting of bail by the Pakistani court to 26/11 accused Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi, is hardly symbolic of any change in Islamabad's mind set.

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The recent attack is not only a response to Zarb-e-Azb but the result of the national policy the ruling elites in Pakistan have supported for decades. Pakistan's consistent support to the terror groups it nurtured against its neighbours – India and Afghanistan -- have invariably not allowed any alteration in the strategic choices which the militia made. Sub-conventional war was seen as the most effective tool by the nation against India since Pakistan launched its first war for Kashmir in 1947. On the other hand, creation and support to Taliban, was an important element in fulfilling Pakistan's desire to create strategic depth in neighbouring Afghanistan.

Support to radical ideology and Pakistan's faith in terror as an effective tool was further bolstered with the Afghan war in the 1980s which provided the optimum infrastructure and resources for radical jihad. Over the years, although the tactics for irregular warfare have undergone change but Pakistan's willingness to use terrorism against India has remained

unchanged. Islamabad was compelled to act against their own strategic assets post 2001 when it had no option left but to join hands with the West in the fight against terrorism. However, very clearly, the selective and partial approach in combating terrorism and insurgents adopted by the Pakistan military did not allow the counter terrorism efforts to gain desired results.

The frontiers borders – FATA, KPK and Balochistan have become the breeding ground for terrorism and the region presents an extremely challenging conglomeration of various insurgents and terrorists groups to the Pakistani military. Presently, Pakistan is facing a broad landscape of militancy. A variety of terrorist groups with diverse agendas operate from Pakistan and share varied relationships with the state. Some of these organisations, like the TTP, regard the state as an enemy of Islam for joining hands with the West and killing their own people. On the other side are the deadly groups like the Jamaat-ud-Dawa, which are flourishing in the heart of Pakistan, and are under the state patronage even after being declared as a ‘foreign terrorist organization’. JuD chief, Hafiz Saeed, with the bounty of \$10 million, is treated as a hero by the Pakistanis, and never fails to fully optimize every opportunity of blaming India for home grown terrorist attacks. The recent statement by Hafiz Saeed holding India responsible for the December 16th attack was interestingly echoed by the former President Musharraf who not only led the country for 10 years but also was supposedly engaged in a peace dialogue with India.

The minorities have always struggled for their rights and survival in Pakistan and the violence against Shiites and other minorities has spread to major cities targeting specifically the educated class. The educated Shiites have been reportedly intimidated by the extremists into leaving the country, painting a grim picture of the country’s future. Liberal thinking finds its survival extremely challenging which has been exemplified by the assassinations of the Punjab Governor Salman Taseer, who tried to oppose the blasphemy law, and Asia Times journalist Salman Shahzad, who tried to disclose the links between the terrorists and the military.

Pakistan is facing a deadly jihadi blowback of its own long stated policies based on terrorism, threatening the survival of state. Pakistan needs to identify terrorism as the enemy and not just specific terrorists like TTP who are against the Pakistani state. It cannot declare

war against selected terrorists who oppose the state and keep nurturing the terrorists which fulfill its strategic interests in the neighbourhood. Leadership in Pakistan needs to seriously reconsider its strategic calculus and restrain from using terrorism legitimised by religion as a foreign policy tool in order to stop these frequent heinous acts of terror within their country.

(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)

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