



TTP INFILTRATES KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA

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Daily news reports speak of the Tehreek-e-Taliban resuming its terrorist activities in Waziristan and other tribal areas. Ordinary citizens, state functionaries, policemen, soldiers and officers are being targeted and mercilessly killed. From time to time I receive anguished emails from former QAU students belonging to villages in Waziristan and other tribal areas. One wrote to me that he has fled his village Eidak in North Waziristan. Every single member of the village peace committee, including the village mosque's imam, Qari Samiuddin, and his son, Qari Nouman, was first threatened and then murdered by shadowy elements, followed by a businessman Murtaza.

The horrific events of Eidak resemble those across FATA 10-15 years ago. Using terror tactics TTP wants to destroy all local authority in villages. Thousands of Swat residents have held **rallies** against the TTP's resurgence. However thanks to Pakistan's victory in successfully installing a "Pakistan-friendly" government in Kabul, this time around it will be far more difficult to reverse terrorist gains through dedicated military action.

There are three reasons for this.

First, for three decades the wise men who control Pakistan's foreign policy worked hard to achieve strategic depth. They succeeded but from August 2021 – which is when Kabul fell to the Taliban – that depth belongs to TTP. Pakistani **airstrikes** aimed at eliminating TTP hideouts across the Durand Line have drawn loud growls from Afghan Taliban leaders. These are far more menacing than

the squeaky complaints of Ashraf Ghani's wishy-washy defunct government.

Second, a decade ago Pakistan's economy was propped up by coalition support funds and other Western aid. After America's exit from Afghanistan these have run dry and the CPEC "game changer" is still a faraway dream. Runaway inflation coupled with political chaos is rapidly creating an enabling environment for terrorism.

The third problem is ideological and the most intractable. TTP is demanding that ex-FATA must not only be returned to its pre-June 2018 semi-governable status but, this time around, must be run by sharia law. After 75 years Pakistan's own ideological narrative on sharia remains muddled and confused. For example Riyasat-e-Medina – a popular idea with many – is impossible in a state without sharia. Army cadet colleges fill their student's minds with everything except the knowledge of how to deal with these challenges. But without clarity Pakistan is deeply vulnerable.

So how is Pakistan presently responding to the upsurge of TTP's terrorism? The answer before us is clear – exactly as it behaved at the time that Sufi Muhammad and Maulana Fazlullah were establishing their control over Swat. Once again the policy is to appease religious fascists and to suppress local forces that oppose the TTP such as the Pakhtoon Tahaffuz Mahaz (PTM). While those who have killed Pakistan's soldiers and citizens are to be negotiated with and given respect, the PTM is to be

suppressed. One of its leaders, Ali Wazir is a parliamentarian but remains on bail for allegedly insulting the army's "wise men" on its KPK policies.

In spite of near daily attacks and continued TTP infiltration, in July a parliamentary committee authorised the military leadership to hold talks with the newly energized TTP. This cowardly and shameful abdication of responsibility suggests a rubber-stamp parliament that is good for naught but seeking perks and privileges for its members.

Direct negotiation between the Army and terrorist groups is nothing new but has never produced results. In May 2004 an agreement was signed in Shakai with tribal militant leader Nek Mohammed of South Waziristan. This called for stopping attacks on Pakistani security forces and government property. In return the state would pay compensation and release prisoners. De-weaponization was not mentioned.

The Shakai agreement lasted 50 days. Only days after signing, in a radio interview Nek Muhammad declared that no treaty could stop him from hosting the Chechen jihadists and Al-Qaida then at war against Pakistani forces. Terrorist activities resumed. Nek was killed by a US Predator drone on 18 June 2004, the very first missile attack on Pakistani soil.

Listing the failed agreements of the last 20 years – including one with Swat's Sufi Muhammad – needs too much space. But that of September 2006, signed inside the Taliban stronghold of Miramshah, stands out in my memory. Photos showed army officers hugging those they had fought for 4 years as heavily armed, bearded militants watched grimly.

Today we all know what ultimately weakened terrorism and gave us a longish stretch of quasi peace. Operation Zarb-e-Azb (2014) was a frontal assault against TTP and its jihadist guests. Artillery and air power finally dislodged them from inside captured Waziristani villages. The widespread devastation forced over 90,000 families into becoming refugees. Had force been used earlier the collateral damage would have been far smaller.

Still, success was only partial and so operation Radd-ul-Fasaad (2017) followed. The choice of name was deliberate – radd means elimination and fasaad suggests internal fights rather than external foes. The delusionary bubble within which Pakistanis had lived after 9/11 finally burst. General Hamid Gul and his protégé Imran Khan had convinced many that terrorists were operated by some "foreign hand". No Muslim, they said, could kill another Muslim.

There could not have been a bigger lie; no captured

Hindu or Jew was ever paraded as a failed suicide bomber.

This lie was followed up with Khan's astonishing act of deference to terrorists. Directly after the 2013 suicide attack on the All Saints Church in Peshawar, he urged that TTP be permitted to open offices inside Pakistan for holding peace talks. A year later TTP massacred 148 persons inside the Army Public School in Peshawar.

As events proved again and again, TTP killers understand only the language of force. But today that lesson seems lost and the gains of Zarb-e-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasaad – achieved at great cost by soldiers and officers – are being undone. A new generation of Hasanabdal-trained officers is again chasing fruitless appeasement. The history of how terrorism was subdued appears forgotten. To accept the demands of TTP terrorists is poison for Pakistan. Terrorists must be fought against with full force, not given respect and deference. The price of cowardice will be enormous.

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