



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call (+65) 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

No. 114/2014 dated 17 June 2014

Pakistan's Home-grown Terrorism Threat: War Beyond 2014

By Abdul Basit

Synopsis

The upsurge in terrorist violence in Pakistan this month indicates the trajectory of its home-grown terrorism by Islamist insurgents well beyond 2014. Besides a strong military response to win the fight against militants, the political leadership must take ownership of the war and demonstrate strong political will.

Commentary

TWO HIGH-PROFILE attacks in Karachi and Balochistan have highlighted the resurgent threat of home-grown terrorism by Islamist insurgents in Pakistan. On 8 June 2014 militants from the Islamic Uzbekistan Union (IMU) and their Pakistani counterparts mounted a brazen terrorist attack on Pakistan's biggest airport in Karachi. In the five-hour long siege, around 39 people, including 10 militants and 12 security personnel, were killed.

Meanwhile, three suicide bombers of a Sunni militant outfit Jaish-ul-Islam (Army of Islam) targeted a hotel hosting around 300 Shia pilgrims in south-western Balochistan province's Taftan town, killing 30 people. The Shia pilgrims were returning from visits to shrines and holy places in Iran.

Implications of airport attack

The attack on Karachi airport virtually stymied the peace process between the militants' umbrella group, the Pakistan Taliban (Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan TPP), and the Pakistani government. It has pushed the country's political and military leadership onto the same page. The public anger over the attack allowed the embattled Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to announce a military operation in North Waziristan Agency, along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. On 15 June the Pakistani Army formally launched the military operation, Zarbe Azb (Sword of the Prophet) against local and foreign militants in the Agency.

The attack on Karachi airport has brought home the realisation that Pakistan's fight against home-grown terrorism will continue well beyond 2014. The US exit from Afghanistan in 2014 will not bring any respite but more trouble for Pakistan's internal security. In the context of growing militancy in Pakistan, the US presence in, or absence from Afghanistan and Pakistan-US counter-terrorism cooperation, have become irrelevant factors.

Ahead of 2014, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), had shifted its strategic objective from fighting the US occupation of Afghanistan to Pakistan-focused operations. TTP has reconfigured itself as a Pan-Islamist jihadist group in Pakistan. Its war is now against the Pakistani state for the establishment of Taliban-style Sharia

system in Pakistan. TTP's campaign against Pakistan's May 2013 parliamentary elections was a clear signal of the strategic shift.

In August 2013, TTP wrote a four-page letter to Pakistan's religious scholars seeking their opinion (*Fatwa*) about democracy as a system of governance in Pakistan. The letter categorically stated that TTP's struggle was not only against Pakistan's alliance with the US in the WOT but also against the democratic system in Pakistan.

TTP has been carefully orchestrating and spreading its terror campaign to mainland Pakistan. Moving to cities is a part of the Taliban's evolving strategy for post-2014 operations inside Pakistan. The struggle to weaken Pakistan and bring about a Shariah system will not occur in the hinterlands of FATA but in the streets and cities of Punjab and Sindh. By targeting Karachi airport the TTP has announced the shift in the militant trajectory from tribal to urban areas.

Peace talks or military operations?

The Karachi airport attack has also raised serious questions about the efficacy of the political approach alone to deal with militancy. Since his assumption of power in May last year, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has engaged the TTP politically but only achieved a 40-day ceasefire (1 March-10 April).

The current government deemed suspension of drone strikes and military operation in FATA as a pre-condition for peace talks to succeed. Reluctantly, the Pakistan army supported Sharif's political approach and gave his government the time and space it needed to try its political approach. During the peace talks, the US suspended drone strikes in Pakistan from December 2013 to 10 June 2014, and the Pakistan army did not conduct any major military operation in FATA as well.

The fanfare with which Prime Minister Sharif initiated the peace dialogue with the TTP has subsided now. It has dispelled the misguided belief that the Pakistan army's counter-terrorism operations, unrest in Afghanistan and US-led drone programme in FATA had fuelled terrorism in Pakistan. The critics of military operations and drone strikes failed to realise that to date almost all the peace deals with the Taliban have failed.

At the same time, military operation alone is not a solution to militancy in Pakistan either. There is no one silver bullet for this pernicious issue. Disrupting and destroying terrorist infrastructure is only one component of counter-terrorism. Physically gaining an upper hand against the militants in the battlefield is a tactical gain that remains incomplete without discrediting and delegitimising the terrorist ideology.

Need for robust counter narrative

At a strategic level, winning the war of ideas is more important. Pakistan will have to come up with a robust counter narrative against the Taliban's ideology to win the war of ideas as well. A comprehensive policy ensuring a strict legal and administrative counter terrorism regime that ensures timely and efficient trials of detained militants is also needed.

Given the above, Pakistan's problem will only increase after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. TTP-led terrorism in Pakistan is not just about the retaliation of military operations and the US drone strikes.

Instead it is a means to force the state to accept the Islamist militant as a stakeholder in the system and create space for the terror group in Pakistan beyond 2014. To win against terrorists, besides a strong military response, it is critical that the political leadership takes ownership of the war and demonstrate strong political will.

The US withdrawal places Pakistan at a crossroads: to become an economic bridge between Central and South Asian regions by curbing the internal militancy that has regional and global aspirations, or be an obstruction to regional peace by continuing its support for favourable militant groups, the so-called "good Taliban". The latter scenario will lead to a new wave of proxy wars in the region.

The writer is a Senior Analyst at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.