

# ISA S Brief

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## Pakistan's Taliban Crisis – Savaging or Salvaging the State?

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Barely 18 months from its historic democratic elections of February 2008, Pakistan is mired in a war against domestic religious extremists. The country's civilian political leadership and administration is still struggling to find its feet. Its relations with India have also deteriorated with the terrorist attacks in Mumbai by suspected Pakistan-based militants late last year. The increased United States military activity within Pakistani territory, especially its drone attacks against suspected Al-Qaeda bases, have added to the pressure on Pakistan's government vis-à-vis its domestic constituency. Religious extremism poses a veritable threat to Pakistan from inside and out.

Despite the gloom, there are some signs of hope, as the Pakistani government has finally decided to match rhetoric with action and has launched an all-out military campaign against the Islamist extremist groups within Pakistan. This committed action by Pakistan has given it renewed credibility and the moral authority to seek domestic and international support. The majority of the civilian population in Pakistan has been outraged by the excesses of the Taliban and are supportive of the government's actions while the international community, especially India and the United States who have been victims of Pakistan-based terrorist organisations, clearly want to see the Taliban and other extremist groups suppressed, if not altogether eliminated, for obvious reasons.

It should be remembered that Islamic fundamentalism and religious extremism are relatively recent phenomena in Pakistan, having been spawned during the Afghan war in the late 1970s and exacerbated by the post-9/11 politics. However, Pakistan is not without blame for this development as it has allegedly been supporting militant organisations such as *Jaish-e-Muhammad* and *Lashkar-e-Taiba* in its proxy war against India over Kashmir. There has also been clear evidence that Al-Qaeda had many of its training camps in Pakistan and Pakistani madrasas have been churning out young recruits for these terrorist groups. While these terrorist groups have long operated on Pakistani soil, it was only recently that they turned against Pakistan itself by carrying out suicide attacks and bombings.

As the excesses of the extremist groups slowly became evident, highlighted recently by the much publicised videos depicting the flogging of a woman and beheading of captured security personnel, public sentiment turned against the Taliban. The Pakistani state also felt that it had no choice but to take action. A full scale war ensued in Swat and other parts of the

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Malakand division, including Dir and Buner. The army has now pushed on to South Waziristan in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas in a determined effort to strike at the heart of the Taliban by going into the territory controlled by Baitullah Mehsud, the lynchpin of *Tehrik-e Taliban-Pakistan*.

This is a difficult war for Pakistan to win for many reasons. First, its army is not adept at this kind of domestic insurgency and there is a great moral barrier to fighting against fellow Pakistanis and fellow Muslims. In fact a number of senior officers are from the tribes with whom the army is fighting. Second, this is a war where all the collateral damage will be domestic – Pakistani civilians and Pakistani property will be the casualties of this war. Third, the scale of this war has created an unprecedented humanitarian crisis with over three million internally displaced people. Although the government has some experience in dealing with this kind of situation with the earthquake of October 2006 in Kashmir and also the Northern areas where an equal number of people were displaced and subsequently resettled, it faces a serious challenge of peaceful resettlement. There is a real risk that desperation, resentment and fear may result in these internally displaced people becoming prime candidates for recruitment by extremist groups. Thus, the crisis will savage itself.

However, with every crisis comes opportunity and Pakistan must seize the moment to salvage itself. Here, there are some positive signs. The state has taken the very difficult, albeit very correct, step in deciding to fight the Taliban rather than succumb to their demands, as it initially did in Swat. Pakistan's political leadership has also shown maturity in the face of this real threat and has adopted a cooperative and constructive approach. The coming together of leaders of 43 parties and religious organisations for a meeting convened by Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gillani to seek a consensus on the security operation highlights the willingness of every stakeholder to stand together to defeat a common enemy.

This unequivocal political support for the military action is critical for the army. Unlike its usual ventures on the border, which are guaranteed to win popular support amongst Pakistanis, this war could alienate the army from a significant segment of the populace. Perhaps the most important development from the strategic and symbolic points of view is the support for the counter-insurgency campaign from many religious clerics and scholars who have denounced the Taliban and supported the military action. Ironically, the Taliban have succeeded in doing the impossible in Pakistan – they have brought together the competing political parties, the religious leaders and the army, and strengthened the resolve of the general public in rejecting extremism and supporting moderate democratic leadership. It should not be forgotten that the basic ethos and religious outlook of the majority of the people of Pakistan are moderate. This is evident in the political sphere where the Islamic parties have seldom secured more than three to four percent of the votes on their own.

In terms of foreign policy implications, Pakistan, the United States and India have to set aside historical tensions and strategic posturing and do what it takes to ensure Pakistan overcomes this crisis and eliminates religious extremism and related terrorist activities. Coincidentally, both India and the United States have just emerged from general elections where Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Barack Obama won resounding victories respectively. Both leaders are widely admired and respected, which will allow them to do what is right and not what is politically expedient.

The Congress government of India is in a much stronger position than before the election and should take advantage of this political strength to extend a genuine hand of friendship to

Pakistan. Unfortunately, with the conclusion of the general elections in May 2009, India's new foreign minister, S. M. Krishna, while expressing a desire for both countries to move forward, reiterated that 'it will become extremely difficult for India to continue the composite dialogue unless Pakistan brings all those perpetrators of that crime to book to justice'. Pakistan's foreign ministry, on the other hand, is urging continued dialogue, stating that the 'breakdown of dialogue only works to the advantage of terrorists. ...we should not walk into their trap. It is important to show statesmanship'.

Not surprisingly, the first meeting after the Mumbai blasts between Prime Minister Singh and President Asif Ali Zardari in Yekaterinburg, Russia in June 2009, on the sidelines of the summit of the six-nation Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, yielded little as India made terrorism a key point in its discussions. India needs to move forward with constructive dialogue and cooperation, and not continue to drag its feet by citing past injustices. Equally, Pakistan can no longer pretend that it has not supported terrorism, including against India, when the chickens have come home to roost in such a big way. Détente with India will remove the need for Pakistan to keep jihadists in reserve to fight against India in case war breaks out again. This strategy has been followed for decades, especially since India began to invest heavily in its military strength.

With respect to the United States, while Pakistan is still clearly seen as an ally, there is a subtle shift in tone from the George W. Bush era when the United States' foreign policy was overly generous to Pakistan. In his new strategy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan, President Obama made it clear that the increase in aid and training was conditional upon Pakistan demonstrating its commitment in rooting out Al-Qaeda. The United States' Senate has clearly recognised that 'Pakistan is facing a critical moment' and unanimously passed the bipartisan Kerry-Lugar Bill authorising US\$7.5 billion in economic assistance to Pakistan over five years.

This Bill is significant as it seeks to reorient the basis of United States-Pakistan aid from an instrumental crisis management model to a more sustainable, strategic partnership. It delinks the military and non-military components and is aimed at rejuvenating Pakistan's institutional capacity, developing its tribal areas and encouraging multilateral solutions by engaging neighbouring countries such as India and Afghanistan. While this new approach is encouraging, the United States can make a much bigger contribution by adopting a more inclusive approach to combating terrorism. At the moment, security assistance to Pakistan is subject to certification by the Secretary of State that the assistance will be used to fight the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

If the United States is sincere about developing a multilateral framework, it should not only be concerned with terrorist groups that have attacked the United States, but also with all terrorist groups in Pakistan, including those targeting India. A truly multilateral approach would require Pakistan, India and the United States to sit around a table and work out a clear plan to save Pakistan and bring stability to the region. This is a critical juncture and these three states must act decisively, set aside selfish personal interests and break out of the shackles of the past.

Finally, this crisis could throw out a shining beacon if the Islamic authorities show leadership in rejecting the absolutism that has come to characterise a dominant segment of Islamic politics and reassert tolerance, diversity and progressive policies that were the hallmark of the

Islam that existed at Pakistan's birth and cherished by the vast majority of the Pakistani population.

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