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Suffering Terrorism but Flirting with Populism: Pakistan's Current Predicaments

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Abstract

The Taliban-Al-Qaeda nexus has, in recent days, mounted a number of bloody terrorist assaults in Pakistan, including the nerve centre of the Pakistan armed forces and general headquarters in Rawalpindi, causing several fatalities and injuries. Disappointingly, the national debate in Pakistan has instead focused on the Kerry-Lugar Bill that will provide economic and military aid worth US\$7 billion for the next five years, alleging that it compromises Pakistani sovereignty. This paper argues that the real threat to Pakistani sovereignty is posed by the terrorists.

Introduction

The recent few weeks in Pakistan have been full of activism. While the chattering classes have been overly vocal about the perceived threats to Pakistan's sovereignty posed by the Kerry-Lugar Bill, the Taliban-Al-Qaeda activism has been directed at concretely and incontrovertibly undermining the same sovereignty through the use of terror. Once again, the real threat to Pakistan's existence seems to have been eclipsed by a discourse laced in populism, debating issues of technical sovereignty. We begin with a review of the Taliban-Al-Qaeda activism and then discuss it in the context of the controversy over the Kerry-Lugar Bill.

Recent Suicide Attacks

On 10 October 2009, Taliban militants donning military attire drove into the compound of the Pakistani army's general headquarters in Rawalpindi. When the security guards challenged them, they began shooting and throwing grenades at them. The security personnel returned fire and, in the shootout which ensued, six security guards and four terrorists lost their lives. Some of the Taliban, however, managed to enter the general headquarters premises and took dozens of people hostage. Sporadic shooting continued throughout the night. By early morning, Pakistani commandos from the elite Special Services Group had succeeded in freeing most of the hostages. Four more terrorists were killed and one, believed to be their

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ringleader, Aqeel, also known as Dr Usman, was captured. Among the Pakistani army personnel who lost their lives were a brigadier and a lieutenant-colonel. Eight security personnel, nine terrorists and three civilians – altogether 20 people – were killed.

It is undoubtedly the most audacious and daring assault by the Taliban-Al-Qaeda nexus. Questions will be asked about any intelligence lapse that may have occurred, because security arrangements around the general headquarters are supposedly the most stringent and impregnable. The latest reports suggest that the conspiracy to attack the general headquarters may have links even to Punjab where, in the southernmost districts, fanatical Islamists have been growing by the day. However, it is difficult to believe that complete outsiders plotted the attack – help and assistance from rogue elements either serving or retired, or a combination of both, must have played some role in it.

The assault on the general headquarters was preceded by two other vicious attacks in the same week. On 5 October 2009, a suicide bomber, dressed up in a Frontier Constabulary uniform succeeded in entering the premises of the United Nations Food Programme Office and blowing himself up. Five people were killed, including a United Nations diplomat and three female employees. The culprit was able to deceive more than 20 security guards who were on duty at that time. Then, on 9 October 2009, another suicide bomber blew himself up in a very busy and central part known as the Soekarno Square of Peshawar, the capital of the North-West Frontier Province. Among the dead were many schoolchildren who were on a bus. More than 50 people were killed and over 100 injured. Most recently, on 12 October 2009, a suicide bomber detonated a car packed with explosives in a crowded market in the northwest Shangla district. Aimed at a military convoy, the strike killed at least 40 people.

Reasons for Suicide Bombings

What is the reason for this recent spate of coordinated and calibrated outrage? Quite simply, the fact is that from May 2009 onwards, the Pakistani military launched an all-out offensive against the Taliban which has resulted in the latter suffering serious reverses. They have been more or less driven out of the Swat Valley where, in early 2009, they had announced the establishment of a so-called Islamic emirate, which in practice, had meant a reign of terror that particularly targeted women and religious minorities.

In any case, the Islamic emirate collapsed within days of the attack by the Pakistani military. The Army Chief, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, did not order the cessation of the offensive as had happened in the past when several ill-planned and poorly-motivated military operations had failed to dent the Taliban's fighting ability. This time, the resolve of the military seems to be of a very different nature. It went in pursuit of the Taliban in their stronghold in South Waziristan. It is widely believed that the military is planning a massive operation against the Taliban in the days ahead. The conflict has entered a critical stage and if the military carries out its operation as planned, and successfully, a crippling blow will be inflicted upon the Taliban.

Therefore, the renewed attacks are without doubt meant to deter the military from executing its operation. In the days and weeks ahead, the nerve and resolve of the two combatants will be put to the test. The military spokesperson, General Athar Abbas, declared that the attack on the general headquarters has by no means weakened the resolve of the military to crush the Taliban.

Controversy over the Kerry-Lugar Bill

It is unfortunate that, just at a time when patriotic Pakistanis should be fully backing the campaign against terrorism, a futile controversy has erupted over the Kerry-Lugar Bill. It provides economic and military aid worth more than US\$7 billion to Pakistan over a period of five years. There is no doubt that the Bill primarily seeks to extract optimal output from the Pakistani civil and military elites in the fight against Al-Qaeda and its Taliban allies. However, the Bill is much more ambitious than that. It is an undertaking in political engineering as well. It aims to establish civilian supremacy over the military in the interest of democracy. Moreover, it introduces specific rules and standards for monitoring the use of money so that corruption and embezzlements are kept to a minimum.

The loudest and shrillest critique has come from right-wing parties and leaders who, in the past and with very few exceptions, had no qualms of conscience in receiving huge amounts of United States money and arms to conduct *jihad* and/or to keep an unrepresentative government afloat. Now when the same superpower, led by President Barack Obama, wants to change course and return to the pristine United Nations Charter of creating a world order anchored in collective security, Pakistan's reactionary politicians are worried about the country's sovereignty being compromised.

There is, of course, a critique of the same Bill from another quarter in Pakistan – the military. The Bill provides amply for the military being trained and equipped for fighting terrorism, a goal it has itself adopted with great determination and courage. There are some clauses requiring the dismantling of terrorist outfits such as the *Lashkar-e-Tayyaba* and *Jaish-e-Muhammad* and not just Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. However, more importantly, the Bill seeks to prioritise civil control over the military. A number of clauses in the Bill have admittedly been phrased awkwardly. It is these portions of the Bill that have probably irked the military establishment.

The response of the military is, therefore, partly a reflection of its anxiety about a new balance of power coming about in Pakistan, in which civilian institutions may gain greater clout and prestige at its expense. It is also partly a response calculated to not appear too obliging towards the Americans. Considering that democracy is still very vulnerable and fragile in Pakistan, it is important that the civilian sector is kept in good humour, even as the military remains the country's dominant institution. The Bill has yet to be passed by the United States Congress. It is going to be debated in the Pakistan National Assembly, where the legitimate concerns of Pakistan will hopefully be put forth, and addressed in the final Bill.

Conclusion

On the whole, however, the Bill is good for Pakistan, as well as its political and military establishments. There is now a chance to undo the distortions and deformations that afflicted the body politic of Pakistan during the Cold War and the Afghan Jihad. Now is the time to aim for peace, prosperity and democracy within Pakistan and in the South Asian region. It is also time to develop a national consciousness that can distinguish between a United States that is committed to peace and peaceful resolution of conflicts, and one that believed, until very recently, that its will must prevail simply because it is the most powerful nation on earth.

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