

Beginning of the Countdown to Sectarian End-Game in Pakistan?

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Summary

Kayani's comments on Siachen and other recent Pakistani overtures being made to India on trade and other issues need to be seen in their correct perspective: against the backdrop of the ever worsening sectarian divide in Pakistan, the ever widening chasm in relations between the Pakistani establishment and the Taliban and other Deobandi Islamic zealots on both sides of the Durand Line, the ever increasing economic crunch facing Pakistan, particularly the Army, due to stoppage of US and other international assistance, and the continuing failure of the economy to sustain the ever mounting military expenditure. It is a moot point whether if the Afghan Taliban and their associates come to power in Kabul by overthrowing the Karzai regime, they would remain loyal to the Pakistani establishment or gravitate towards supporting the struggle of their coreligionist TTP and its Punjabi associates against the Barelvi dominated Pakistani state. The Pakistani leadership has apparently come to the point where it realises that for the survival of the country and its structures created by Jinnah, it must buy peace for the present with its arch-enemy India. In their minds a tactical move to mend fences with India would allow them to divert military resources from the eastern to the western borders where the uncertain Afghan situation might be becoming critical. India should not bale Pakistan out without the latter making an effort to extricate itself from its present predicament by making tough choices and taking hard action.

General Kayani recently spoke (Skardu, 18 April 2012) of “Peaceful coexistence between the two neighbours” (i.e. India and Pakistan) and “resolution of all issues through dialogue” so that “everybody can concentrate on the well-being of the people”. Another important issue, in his view, is the adverse ecological consequences of deployment of troops on the Siachen glacier, which would affect the flow of the river Indus and, hence, he implies, something should be done to resolve the conflict. Many have found these views coming from Pakistan’s hawkish Army chief as quite a radical departure from their usual tone and tenor and a significant absence of his usual bravado and bluster on Indo-Pak relations. However, Kayani’s comments and other recent Pakistani overtures to India on trade and other issues need to be seen in their correct perspective: against the backdrop of the ever worsening sectarian divide in Pakistan, the ever widening chasm in relations between the Pakistani establishment and Taliban and other Deobandi Islamic zealots on both sides of the Durand Line, the ever increasing economic crunch facing Pakistan, particularly the Army, due to stoppage of US and other international assistance, and the continuing failure of the economy to sustain the ever mounting military expenditure.

The recent stepped-up militant activity in Afghanistan and Pakistan seem to be the latest catalyst for a new round of expressions of peaceful intentions by the Pakistanis. The Bannu jail-break in Pakistan, which came after an attack by the Tehriq-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) around mid-night of April 14-15 and attacks in Kabul and other places in Afghanistan later during the same day by the Afghan Taliban, has expectedly been presented by the Pakistanis as a manifestation of their being in the vanguard of the struggle against religious radicalism for which they are paying a price far higher than others. However, the truth is that the latest attacks in the Af-Pak region represent Pakistan’s duplicity in dealing with other nations and societies, its propensity to exploit religion to secure political/strategic ends and not coming to terms with the real threat of religious radicalism that it has been nurturing and sustaining ever since the emergence of the idea of Pakistan. There is also the lingering reluctance to recognise that any continuation of its policy of religious activism is likely to consume the very edifice – Pakistan – which was raised to sustain it.

Pakistan’s Relations with the Haqqani Network and its Allies and TTP

The attacks in Afghanistan came from the Taliban belonging to the Haqqani network and/or may be their other allies, whom Pakistan treats as its strategic assets along with Mullah Omar’s Quetta shura (now stated to have been relocated to Karachi) and Hikmatyar’s Peshawar-based guerrilla group. Notwithstanding the fact that these groups represent the biggest factor of instability in Afghanistan and the most potent danger to President Hamid Karzai and his fledgling democratic regime, Pakistan has protected them by offering sanctuaries against US/NATO raids on the one hand, and resisting US pressure to degrade their fighting ability by targeting them in Pakistan on the other. Pakistan has

been helping the US/NATO operations in Afghanistan by providing them an overland route to carry fuel and other supplies, even while not cooperating with them by not sharing ground intelligence for launching drone strikes against these Pakistan based pro-Afghan groups that must be neutralised if Afghan recovery is to be sustained. As a contrast, however, Pakistan has not only conducted large scale military operations of its own against the TTP and its other Pakistani Punjabi allies like elements of the *Jaish-e-Mohammad*, *Lashkar-e-Taiba*, the *Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan*, *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi*, etc., but it has also tacitly assisted US drone strikes against them by providing ground intelligence. And the ironic part is that both the TTP and its Pakistani Punjabi allies and the Haqqani, Hikmatyar and Mullah Omar's groups are linked with each other on account of sectarian and broad ethnic identities (Wahabi/Deobandi/Salafi denomination and mostly Pashtun ethnicity) and aspire to usher in an identical shariat-based socio-political order in the region as per their beliefs.

The Barelvi versus Deobandi Conflict

One of the factors that makes the Afghan Taliban and their cohorts like the Haqqanis and Hikmatyar an ally and 'strategic assets' of Pakistan is their deadly opposition to the US/NATO presence in Afghanistan as well as their resolve to overthrow the Karzai regime as soon as the Western forces withdraw. Their sectarian agenda though is not being overplayed at present. On the other hand, the TTP and its Punjabi allies constitute a deadly enemy to Pakistan that must not be given any quarter because they wish to supplant the existing Pakistani edifice with a truly Islamic one in accordance with the orthodox Deobandi interpretation. The existing Pakistani socio-political structures are mostly Barelvi dominated. Barelvi Islam is a low-end rustic Islam steeped in folklore and practices of the sub-continent, some of them closer to the religious/spiritual spirit of the region from the pre-Islamic days. This Islam is to be 'corrected', according to the Deobandis who follow a high-end, theocratic and doctrinaire orthodox Islam.

It is a moot point whether if the Afghan Taliban and their associates come to power in Kabul by overthrowing the Karzai regime, they would remain loyal to the Pakistani establishment or gravitate towards supporting the struggle of their coreligionist TTP and its Punjabi associates against the Barelvi dominated Pakistani state. It may be recalled that in the mid-1990s when the Taliban were in power in Kabul, despite their proximity to and dependence on the Pakistani establishment, they did not meekly kowtow to it on all issues. These included their refusal to acknowledge the sanctity of either the Durand Line or becoming a facilitator and access route for Pakistani approaches to the Central Asian Republics. They independently pursued their international Islamic agenda with Osama bin Laden and hatched plans and conspiracies to attack US and other western interests around the globe. It would, therefore, be logical to assume that if the Taliban come to power in Kabul once again, they are unlikely to become a subservient tool in Pakistani hands and would more likely join hands with the TTP and its allies in pursuit of their

theological agenda, which may have an ethnic bias also. A pointer to things to come in the near future manifests itself in the latest Taliban threat to attack Pakistani personalities and strategic targets if the Pakistan government allowed resumption of transshipment of NATO supplies overland to Afghanistan. It is also significant that in one of his rare video statements, Hakimullah Mehsud, the TTP supremo, recently accused Qazi Hussein Ahmad of Jamaat-e-Islami of distorting the concept of jihad and defending Pakistan rather than Islam. "Both the Karzai regime in Afghanistan and the Pakistan government are allies of the US.....Where is the difference between the fight being waged by the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban as both are waging jihad," he asserted. There should be no doubt that Taliban on both sides of the Durand Line are turning into a clear and present danger for the Pakistani state.

The Pakistan Establishment's Response to the Deobandi Challenge

Pakistan's response to this challenge from radical Deobandi thought requires a fundamental shift in attitudes. If Pakistan is serious about dealing with the scourge of religious radicalism and its by-product – the sectarian militancy in the Af-Pak region, it must take this monster in its own society head-on. However, the Pakistani government appears to be merely window dressing the issue. Despite paying occasional lip-service to the cause of de-radicalisation, hardly anything has been done in practice to address the underlying causes of religious radicalism and the sectarian militancy, which have become even more closely intertwined with each other in the country. The Pakistani establishment, particularly the Army, remains tied to its own jihadism and continues to view various radical and jihadi elements on the Deobandi/Wahabi spectrum basically as its allies and 'strategic assets'. This is notwithstanding a greater penetration of the jihadists inside military ranks, clearly discernible in incidents like the attack on the *PNS Mehran* on 22 May 2011, or last month's rocket attacks on the Pakistan Military Academy in Kakul, Abbottabad, or the arrest of one Brig. Ali Khan earlier in the same month for advancing the Hizb-ut Tehrir's agenda of subversion of the Army structure. Speaking to *Dawn*, Army's spokesman Maj. Gen. Athar Abbas has contended that although there was zero tolerance in the garrisons for religious and sectarian organisations, the ranks could not remain unaffected by what's happening in society – a clear acknowledgement of rising religious extremism in the country.

Too much emphasis on religious activism inexorably leads to militant assertions in matters of faith, which, in turn, fuels sectarian conflicts. In Pakistan this vicious chain of events was going round and round in repeated circles as sectarianism produced greater religious assertions, starting a new cycle of action and reaction. Syed Ejaz Hussein, a Pakistani Deputy Inspector General of Police, opines in his doctoral thesis that the network of sectarian violence has its roots in the Deobandi sect. This sectarian-cum-ethnic violence is

a triangular affair with the Deobandis, inevitably better armed and organised, attacking both Shias and Barelvis, and the latter retaliating against the former wherever they could. While the Deobandi Sunnis targeted Shia doctors, the latter went after Sunni lawyers and leaders. The Pakistani daily *The Dawn* reported, on the basis of intelligence inputs available with the Karachi Police, that the sectarian killings in Karachi and other places were not a result of any planned pogrom by Islamic sects, but spontaneous acts of criminals and ethnic groups who were acting on their own under the garb of communal/sectarian vigilantism, targeting mostly ordinary people belonging to the rival sects. According to a media survey, there have been 19 incidents of sectarian violence in Pakistan in 2012 so far, taking a toll of 103 persons. The sweep of this sectarian/ethnic violence covers practically the entire country. If in Baluchistan the targets of the Deobandis have been Hazara Shias, in FATA, KP, Punjab and Sindh they were both Shias and local Barelvis. Arrested attackers revealed strong anti-Shia and anti-Barelvi indoctrination. "Barelvis and Shias are the same. They both need to be killed" – they were stated to have asserted during their interrogations.

The increasing Deobandi attacks on the Barelvis should have encouraged the latter's ideological/theological convictions and they should have become even more steadfast in their acceptance of religious pluralism and moderation. However, instead, the Deobandi threat appears to have forced Barelvis to become even more dogmatic and hardliner. The best manifestation of Barelvi militancy comes from the assassination of Punjab Governor Salman Taseer (January 2011) by his police guard, a Barelvi, for suggesting a re-look at the country's Blasphemy Laws, which incidentally were promulgated by Zia-ul-Haq under Deobandi influence. The mass support for Taseer's killer came from the Barelvi clergy and Pakistani lawyers most of whom were also Barelvis. The lead counsel for Qadri, the Taseer's assassin, was a former High Court Judge, again a Barelvi. The judge who tried and sentenced Qadri to death had to leave the country along with his family for safety.

Barelvi orthodoxy is not only sought to be projected but nurtured and protected by the community through increased activities of *Dawat-e-Islami*, the Barelvi answer to the Deobandi evangelical group *Tabligh Jamaat*. *Jamiat-ul Ulema-e-Pakistan* (JUP) was a predominantly Barelvi political party, but it has waned considerably, creating a vacuum on the Barelvi political front. This was sought to be filled by converting *Sunni Tehriq* into a full-fledged political outfit. Another recent phenomenon is of grown-up and otherwise reasonably well educated Muslim girls from well-to-do families being sent to female madrassas for religious indoctrination. The number of such female madrassa students was estimated to be more than a quarter million and the number of such madrassas nearly 2,000. Interestingly, while education in male madrassas is free, the female madrassas students have to pay between 3,000 and 4,000 per month for their education. Most of these students are Barelvis and justify actions like the killing of Taseer or supporting his assassin.

General Kayani's recent peaceable profile on Siachen and other Indo-Pak issues as well as other Pakistani overtures to India need to be seen against the back-drop of this foreboding and compelling scenario. Perhaps, the Pakistani leadership has come to the point where it realises that for the survival of the country and its structures created by Jinnah, it must buy peace for the present with its arch-enemy India. In their minds, a tactical move to mend fences with India would allow them to divert military resources from the eastern to the western borders where an uncertain Afghan situation might be becoming critical. The starting point for this 'accommodation' could be Siachen, which is not of a very high strategic value at the moment and if some agreement to diffuse that sector is achieved, it would release scarce financial resources also.

India's Response

It is alright for Pakistani leaders to adopt such tactics to overcome their more immediate problems. But what should be India's response? India must play its cards well and not let this opportunity to usher in peace with a real chance in the region be lost again. We lost such an opportunity in 1972 at Simla, or at least failed to take full advantage of it. We should not repeat that now. We must ask Pakistan to initiate concrete actions in order to tackle the basic causes of Indo-Pak hostility and introduce firm and clearly visible and unambiguous measures to put Indo-Pak relations on an even keel. On Siachen, the starting point for the long march to a resolution of the dispute should be acceptance of the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) and its delineation on maps after a joint survey. The second step should be the merger of the AGPL with the Line of Control (LoC). Then there should be an agreement for mutual deployment of advance security observer groups (comprising military, para-military or even civilian police troops) at Khapalu by India and a place on the foot of the Siachen glacier by Pakistan. These detachments should be well equipped to traverse the Siachen region on foot and by air to monitor each other's deployments and serve as a confidence building measure as well. Once this has been done troops could be totally withdrawn from Siachen/Saltoro and the area opened to mountaineering and scientific expeditions by both sides under a joint management system. Similarly, on other aspects of Indo-Pak relations, there has to be a concrete action plan to remove the irritants and prejudices by taking definite measures to de-radicalise Pakistani society, by removing distortions from text-books, by proscribing hostile anti-India propaganda by the media and sections of the society. Even a desperate Pakistani leadership would not come round to accepting these terms for a dialogue. But there is no harm in at least putting hard realities on the table and setting goals which may make us move a few definitive steps forward. The Pakistani leadership is caught between a rock and a hard place and the Indian leadership should not bale it out without forcing the latter make an effort to extricate itself from its present predicament by making tough choices and taking hard action.