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29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06, Block B,
National University of Singapore,
Singapore 119620
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassecc@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



Pakistan's Anti-Terror Offensive: The *Zarb-e-Azb* Operation

Shahid Javed Burki¹

The long-awaited – and several-times postponed – anti-terror military operation in Pakistan's North Waziristan began on Sunday, 15 June 2014. The announcement that the operation had been launched first came from the military, not the civilian administration. “On the direction of the government, the Armed Forces of Pakistan have launched a comprehensive operation against the foreign and local terrorists who are hiding in sanctuaries in North Waziristan. The operation has been named *Zarb-e-Azb*”, said the statement issued from the Army headquarters in Rawalpindi”.² *Azb* was the name of the sword used by Prophet Muhammad in various battles associated with the early spread of Islam. *Zarb* means “to hit”. The operation, in other words,

¹ Mr Shahid Javed Burki is Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at sjburki@yahoo.com. Opinions expressed in this paper, based on research by the author, do not necessarily reflect the views of ISAS. During a professional career spanning over half a century, Mr Burki has held a number of senior positions in Pakistan and at the World Bank. He was the Director of China Operations at the World Bank from 1987 to 1994 and the Vice President of Latin America and the Caribbean Region at the World Bank from 1994 to 1999. On leave of absence from the Bank, he was Pakistan's Finance Minister, 1996-97.

² Ismail Khan, “All-out military operation launched in North Waziristan”, *Dawn*, 16 June, 2014, pp. 1 and 5.

is being carried out in the name of Islam. Recalling the Prophet's struggle to gain followers for his new religion, the military statement suggested that the Pakistan Army was no longer drawing a distinction between "good" and "bad" Taliban, unlike in the past. It is believed that the military is hoping to advance its interest in Afghanistan after the departure of the American forces from that country. However, its condemnation of Taliban's activities carried out by militants of all hues was clear. "Using North Waziristan as a base these terrorists have waged a war against the state of Pakistan and had been disrupting our national life in all its dimensions, stunting our economic growth and causing enormous loss of life and property".

In several speeches by the civilian and military leaderships, it was made clear repeatedly that both parts of the government were reading from the same page. A day after the operation was launched Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif went to the National Assembly to explain why he had given up the hope of reaching a negotiated settlement with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). In a speech at the National Assembly on 29 January 2014, he had announced his decision to negotiate with the terrorist organisation and give peace another chance. That did not work out. In fact, the government's reluctance to use force against the TTP was read by it as a sign of weakness. After observing peace for a few weeks the TTP launched a campaign that hit a number of highly visible targets including Karachi's Jinnah International Airport. This campaign embarrassed both the military and civilian leaderships.

"On the one hand we were pursuing dialogue, and on the other we were being targeted. We were pursuing talks, but from Islamabad courts to Karachi airport we were being targeted. Our places of worship were targeted, our schools were targeted", said the Prime Minister in a speech at the National Assembly on 16 June. The response he had earlier got from the Taliban to his peace initiative was clearly not acceptable. "Despite the sacrifices of our soldiers we gave peace talks first priority but our efforts were rendered in vain", he told the members of the national legislature. The Prime Minister made clear that the now-ongoing operation would conclude only with the total defeat of the insurgents. "We will change the fate of this country and under no circumstances will the country be allowed to serve as a safe haven for terrorists. Whatever the cost, this nation will never be handed over to terrorists". This sentiment was echoed by Defence Minister Khawaja Asif, who had earlier caused a mini-crisis by being highly critical of the military. According to him the operation will continue "until the last terrorist has been eliminated".

This commitment to defeat the terrorist groups operating in the country will go down well with Pakistan's immediate neighbours – Afghanistan, China, India, and Iran. All four have been targeted in some way or the other by insurgent groups operating from the sanctuaries in Pakistan. North Waziristan has been hosting fighters from a number of countries. In the words of the novelist Mohammad Hanif, the author of *The Case of Exploding Mangoes*, a highly entertaining book about the air crash that killed General Zia-ul Haq, Pakistan's third military President, North Waziristan had turned into "an international jihadi tourist resort". It would also please the United States whose relations with Pakistan has soured because of Islamabad's reluctance to move against the groups that had carved out safe-havens in North Waziristan.³ The United States has applauded the latest move while emphasising, in the words of State Department's Spokesperson Jen Psaki, that "this is an entirely Pakistan-led and Pakistan-executed operation". The spokesperson, however, emphasised that "we have long supported Pakistan's efforts to extend their sovereignty and stability throughout their country". While the United States was working hard to persuade Pakistan to eliminate the terrorist sanctuaries in North Waziristan, it carried out 372 drone strikes of its own under a Central Intelligence Agency programme running since 2005. Of these, according to New America Foundation, an independent think-tank in Washington, 269 were in North Waziristan. The drones took a heavy toll on the Taliban leadership. Two successive leaders of the organization, Baitullah Mehsud and Hakimullah Mehsud and Wali-ur Rehman, one of their deputies, were killed in those attacks.⁴

It was clear from the reception the Prime Minister now received from both chambers of Parliament that the string of attacks carried out by the Taliban had brought most opposition parties on board. It was especially significant that the launch of the campaign was supported by Imran Khan, whose party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), was in favour of a negotiated settlement. The PTI governs the province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. It was also very critical of the American drone campaign. Notwithstanding this background, the party has formally endorsed the military operation. It regretted, however, that it was not informed before the operation began.

³ The story of Washington's increasing unhappiness with Islamabad on this issue is told in considerable detail by Hussain Haqqani who served as Pakistan's Ambassador to the United States in this period. See his *Magnificent Delusions: Pakistan, the United States, and Epic History of Misunderstandings*, New York, Pacific Affairs, 2013.

⁴ New America Foundation, "Key Findings in the Pakistan Drone War", Washington DC, June 2014.

Judging from the responses in the two houses to Prime Minister's address, one of the major worries on the part of the opposition concerns the civilian population in the area. Speaking in the Senate following the Prime Minister's address, Pakistan People's Party (PPP) Senator Farhatullah Babar said that in the "absence of a proper plan to tackle the mass exodus of people from North Waziristan, we will only add to the frustration and alienation of the affected people".

The operation targets in particular foreign soldiers who were part of the formidable force assembled over the years by the TTP. The largest contingent had come from Uzbekistan, with some presence of Uighurs as well. It was the second group that was of particular concern for Pakistan since they were believed to be behind the attacks launched in China's western region of Xinjiang in 2014. Beijing has been pressing Pakistan to move against this group.

The first reports on the operations by the military were focused on the damage done to the members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. According to the military, it had killed 150 Uzbek fighters, "among them was Abu Abdur Rehman Almani, an expert on improvised explosive devices associated with the IMU".

According to insider accounts in newspaper *Dawn* of the meetings held before the military was given the go-ahead for the operation, the Prime Minister was especially concerned about the blowback – the possibility of attacks on the country's major urban centres. "He wanted to be assured that we can cope with the blowback and we had good intelligence on the ground to finish the job".⁵ This assurance was given by General Raheel Sharif. The security of the city of Islamabad was made the responsibility of the military.

The operation was likely to last three weeks but, as is evident from the history of similar undertakings against insurgents in other parts of the world, events don't necessarily unfold according to even the most-well-laid-out plans. In the case of *Zarb-e-Azb*, a great deal depends on the position taken by some of the local leaders. Among them, the most important is Hafiz Gul Bahadur, a close associate of the Haqqani network. He had signed a peace agreement with the government in 2007 only to revoke it once, when in late May, the military began to bomb his area. The military is anxious to complete most of the task before the beginning of the month of Ramadan in late-June. Hasan Askari Rizvi, a commentator on defence and security affairs,

⁵ *Ibid.*

said the latest campaign was likely to last just two weeks. “I doubt if most intense phase of the campaign can continue during Ramadan when Muslims devote time to fasting and prayers”.⁶

There were no indications of the size of the North Waziristan operation. According to Jon Boone of *The Guardian*, “military sources said that as many as 30,000 troops could be involved in the operation to secure the border region, which the army believes must be completed before the end of Nato [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] combat operations [in Afghanistan]”.⁷ This suggests a much longer timeline than completing the campaign in time for the beginning of Ramadan.

General (Retired) Jahangir Karamat, a former Chief of Pakistan Army Staff, who now heads Spearhead Research, a Lahore-based think-tank, says “there are clear indications that the operation has been preceded by an external manoeuvre. The resumption of drone strikes, the visit by the Army Chief of Staff to Afghanistan for a trilateral meeting (US, Afghanistan and Pakistan), the Prime Minister’s overtures to India, the continuous interaction with China, Saud Arabia, and Iran and a formal request to Afghanistan to seal its borders all point to a well-thought-out strategy based on the correct assumption that Pakistan needs external support and cooperation to complete a task that is in regional and extra-regional interest”.⁸

Pakistan could have taken advantage of the United States’ troop surge in 2010 to hit at the Taliban and other terrorists who had created sanctuaries for themselves in North Waziristan. A large US presence on the other side of the border would have prevented the insurgents to escape to Afghanistan. This had happened during the military’s 2009 Swat campaign. Those who managed to go to Afghanistan included Maulana Fazlullah who went on to become the head of the Taliban and operated out of a sanctuary in that country. However, several analysts believe that such an operation then would have been politically difficult. It would have meant fighting America’s war. “Now it is our war, very clear and legitimate war, not tied to America’s push

⁶ Quoted by Farhan Bokhari “Pakistan air strikes [at] Taliban hideouts mark new phase”, *Financial Times*, 16 June 2014, p. 3.

⁷ Jon Boone, “Pakistan begins long-awaited offensive to root out militants from border regions”, *The Guardian*, 15 June 2014, p. 3.

⁸ Spearhead Research, “Operation Zarb-e-Azb in North Waziristan”, Lahore, 16 June, 2014.

in Afghanistan,” said Simbal Khan, a security analyst based in Islamabad. “Had they moved earlier they would have expanded the Afghan war into Pakistan”.⁹

What are the likely outcomes of the long-delayed operation? It could last a long time and involve the military in an unending civil war that would be waged not just in the hills of the tribal areas. It could extend to country’s major urban centres which now have a major presence of the Pashtun population. “Any government installation can become a target for the Mujahideen [holy warriors]”, said the Pakistani Taliban in a statement a day after the operation began. “We warn all foreign investors, airline companies and multilateral institutions to suspend all their affairs in Pakistan, and prepare to leave Pakistan”.¹⁰ Or the military could prevail. As was noted in a report *Understanding FATA* prepared by the UK-funded Community Appraisal and Motivation Program, the military had gained valuable experience from the more-than 15 operations it had carried out since 2002. “At the beginning most of these operations had limited success, resulting sometimes in spite of intense criticism, [in] agreements. However, the recent military offensives in Bajaur, Mohmand, Orakzai, and South Waziristan agencies seem to have achieved considerable gains for the Government of Pakistan...Following improved military operations, it appears the Pakistani Army is growing in approval within FATA, resulting in increased acceptance and trust from communities”.¹¹ It would become clear in the coming weeks – perhaps coming months – which of these two possible outcomes will materialise.

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⁹ Quoted by Saeed Shah, “Pakistan troops killed in assault on Taliban”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 June 2014, pp. 1 and 14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Naveed Ahmad Shinwari, , *Understanding FATA: 2011: Attitudes Towards Governance, Religion, & Society in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas, Volume V*, Community Appraisal and Motivation Program Islamabad, 2012, p. XIII.