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Karachi: In the Sights of the Pakistani Taliban

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Karachi, Pakistan's economic hub, has been hosting key Al-Qaeda figures and is suffering from sectarian violence. Now it appears that the Pakistani Taliban are seeking to establish a stronger foothold amongst young disaffected Pashtuns, with implications for the country.

KARACHI, the economic lifeline of Pakistan, is no stranger to international headlines. It is known as a major meeting place for Al-Qaeda operatives and has also witnessed intense sectarian violence as well as organised criminal activity. However, when discussing this sprawling, unregulated city with a constantly changing population, a possible Taliban presence is rarely discussed.

Enter the Pakistani Taliban

Recent years have seen an increasing presence of Pashtuns, especially in Banaras. Many have been forced out of North and South Waziristan, entered Karachi through several northern and southern routes, and settled in slum areas or on previously uninhabited land. Afghan slums have been a part of the Karachi reality since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan but the events witnessed over the past few weeks suggest new developments. Disaffected Pashtun youths have been seen directing traffic, attacking those dressed in Western clothing, and carrying out other Taliban-style activities in the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA), parts of the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and in several districts of Karachi, most notably the middle class Gulshan-i-Iqbal.

Government officials are now predicting major clashes and claiming that many of these youths are linked to the *Tehrik-i-Taliban-i-Pakistan* (TTP) -- the Pakistani Taliban.-- and aim to take control over the resources of the city. However, a TTP takeover of Karachi is an extremely remote possibility given its strategic and economic importance to Pakistan. Nonetheless, TTP proxies are able to generate much unrest within Karachi's multi-ethnic society. These groups are capable of causing significant economic disruption. This will allow them to capitalise on the growing popular anger arising from the increasing food and fuel costs and water and electricity shortages that have already caused large-scale demonstrations and even riots in the city.

Evolving TTP and Al-Qaeda Tactics

The TTP, along with a core group of Al-Qaeda fighters that serve as force multipliers, have been able to steadily move through marginalised Pashtun populations in FATA and the NWFP and now claim to be planning a siege on Peshawar. However, it appears that the TTP has recognised that success in Pakistan's settled and more economically developed areas will be much more difficult, especially amongst the educated segments of the Punjabi population. As such, there is a high likelihood that the TTP and their Al-Qaeda counterparts may adopt new tactics in urban centres such as Karachi, namely those that focus on economic disruption.

Although the economic situation in Pakistan is by no means desirable, it could quickly become much more critical if Karachi, Pakistan's economic lifeline, and its ports are disrupted through terror tactics. Anti-American sentiment is already increasing amongst nearly all segments of Pakistani society. A major disruption or shutdown of Karachi's ports could accelerate this trend and push Pakistan's higher socio-economic classes over the edge along with the masses of low-income Pakistanis. The Lawyers Movement serves as a preview of what is possible if the educated classes mobilise.

If the TTP is able to consolidate their positions in Karachi, expect a distinct focus on economic targets. This is to further aggravate the tense situation in the country, with ports being the most likely casualty. Also potential targets are major sources of international trade and foreign currency earnings, namely banks and other financial institutions along with the Karachi Stock Exchange (KSE). Sustained attacks on any of these targets could send Pakistan into economic chaos. This will paralyse Islamabad's abilities to combat Taliban and Al-Qaeda activity on either side of the Durand Line, while simultaneously deflecting public hostility away from Islamic extremist groups and towards the political establishment.

What can be done?

Prior to Musharraf's resignation and the election of Asif Ali Zardari as president of Pakistan, the Bush administration's continued support for an increasingly isolated former military dictator has alienated and angered everyday Pakistanis. It has also led some to begin to question multi-party democracy, secularism, and other modern concepts that are often associated with the United States. This is hugely detrimental to counter-terrorism efforts and it is essential that this approach is re-visited.

American policy towards Pakistan since 2001 has been largely military-centric; most of the estimated US\$10 billion of aid has gone through the Pakistani Army with little accountability. A substantial portion of these funds have been used to purchase conventional military equipment, such as F-16s; they have little value in counter-terrorism/insurgency operations and are clearly aimed at maintaining a deterrent capacity vis-a-vis India. Further, army chief General Kayani and other senior military commanders have shown themselves to be extremely reluctant to shift their combat focus from a conventional conflict with India to fighting terrorism in the tribal regions. The recent hostilities along the LOC in Kashmir should not be viewed as a coincidence.

Though carefully calculated force will be necessary to permanently remove Al-Qaeda and the Taliban (both Afghan and Pakistani) from FATA, these groups can ultimately be defeated by moderate Pakistanis if the latter can unite and assert themselves. But this is a group that the US has hardly tried to connect with until recently. Initiatives that focus on civilian aid and institution building like those recently introduced by Congress need to be encouraged and improved upon. However, aid channelled through external bodies is not a long lasting solution and domestic economic capabilities must be developed. A solid start would be to grant Pakistani exporters greater access to the American market and to enable more Pakistanis to pursue advanced studies in the US.

There must also be an increased emphasis on encouraging capable civilian leadership, something

Pakistan has been sorely lacking for most of its history, through a long-term and unwavering commitment. The US abandonment of the region following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan is still fresh in the minds of many of Pakistan's most prominent strategists and government officials. Also, Washington's recent neglect of Afghanistan due to preoccupation in Iraq has served to reinforce those fears. That at least partially explains why elements within Pakistan's security apparatus are so reluctant to cease support for the Taliban. It must be clearly communicated that the US is committed to Pakistan for the long run this time around and that Washington is not merely interested in dealing with military.

In addition, the US must take steps to improve the capacities of the police force, especially the Karachi police -- an organisation that is unable to control large parts of the city. Until these events occur, Pakistan will continue to be plagued by many of the same social, political, and economic difficulties. It will remain an enabling environment for terrorism and will be unable to prevent the spread of Taliban fighters and ideology into Karachi and Pakistan's other major cities. Time is running out.

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