**Growing spectre of terror**

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By Raoof Hasan

The spectre of terror is nothing new to Pakistan, but its current resurgence is a matter of grave concern, particularly if one sees gaping loopholes in the policy being pursued to combat the scourge.

This aggravation has been triggered not because of any single act in isolation. Instead, it is a combination of the absence of a sustainable strategy and taking wrong steps and non-steps. It seems we are once again tottering on the verge of another plunge into the monstrous valley of terror.

Through decades, Pakistan’s history of dealing with terror has been more than just weak: it has bordered on being compromised. In addition to home-grown terror outfits which were allowed unrestricted access to arenas conducive to playing their deadly game, the lackadaisical approach we adopted towards the Afghan Taliban has been a major factor in the intensification of the scourge within our borders.

After the US withdrawal and the formation of the Taliban interim government in Afghanistan, we continued to exhibit weakness in the face of increasing belligerence and intransigence from across the border. Incidents of unprovoked firing on our troops resulting in multiple deaths have been virtually ignored with just a note of protest, but without adopting concrete measures to prevent their recurrence. The threat of use of force by the state “to take on any and all entities that resort to violence” has been repeated a millionth time in statements issued by the state as has been a reiteration of Pakistan’s security being “uncompromisable”.

Yet Pakistan’s security has been repeatedly compromised on account of espousal of multiple disputable narratives. Its weakness in dealing with its domestic centres of indoctrination has been a key source of spread and perpetuation of terror. Despite repeated expressions of intent, the seminaries which are spread throughout the country, though continuing to preach the gospel of intolerance and violence, have remained an unregulated domain – with the state repeatedly wilting before those who manage them without putting up even a semblance of resistance. These domestic centres are also connected with their regional and international sponsors which provide them with doctrinal and financial support to continue unravelling violence in the country and, even more damagingly, breeding germs of terror.

Through countless columns in the past, I have been highlighting the close linkage between the Afghan Taliban and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) with a warning to beware of both. It has also been pointed out that the two Taliban factions were indeed similar in disposition with recourse to terror being a strong ingredient binding them together. But, unfortunately, because of policy compulsions which were never rooted in rationality and logic, the Afghan Taliban were taken up as partners while two separate operations were launched to deal with the TTP terror in the country. These were only partly successful because bulk of their operatives escaped across the border where they have been working since in filial bondage with the Afghan Taliban.

Post US withdrawal, when Pakistan asked the Taliban government to root out the TTP from their soil, they instead proposed negotiations which they would facilitate. In an act completely devoid of reason, Pakistan fell for the bait and, reportedly, even offered the TTP concessions in exchange for signing a peace deal. But the price they were asking for was the virtual setting up of a separate government on Pakistani soil. After the breakdown of the ill-conceived talks, further pressure on the Taliban government has not helped, as it is not likely to in the future either.

Meanwhile, even a benign statement from Pakistan regarding its legal right to target terrorist camps across its border has elicited a poisonous response from senior Taliban authorities threatening to “teach them (read Pakistan) a lesson”. A photograph of the signing of the document of surrender in 1971 has also been posted alongside the statement to specify the kind of lesson the Taliban regime has in mind.

Pakistan has landed itself in a bind. Resurgence of terrorism in the country is raising its poisonous head. While it’s elimination will remain an essential component of the overall national security paradigm, the scourge requires to be dealt with on its own also. Consolidation of the Taliban hold in Afghanistan, and the failure of the ill-fated negotiations, has further emboldened the TTP in extending the outreach of their operations deep inside Pakistani territory.

Hurling of mere threats will ring hollow. An effective curbing of the monstrous scourge will require a two-pronged strategy: one component to handle direct threat from the TTA/TTP combine and the other from domestic operators which derive their support from regional and international partners with a view to destabilising Pakistan. At the same time, no attempt should be made, as is being extensively reported, to knit together some factions of terrorist outfits of the past to make them operational again for attaining myopic political objectives. As has been repeatedly demonstrated, a terrorist mindset is not likely to change no matter what the incentives promised. It will continue to use the terror stratagem to achieve its goals.

The key to the success of any operation is the clarity that Pakistan can generate regarding its perception of the Taliban and their intentions. It was much simpler in the past when we had an inimical government across the Western border – and we knew it and dealt with it accordingly. In the current circumstances, we are lost in deeply turbulent waters, yet trying desperately hard to convince ourselves that the storm has not come yet.

As a first step to battling the growing incidence of terror, we need to formulate a clear, consistent and future-oriented policy together with an effective operational mechanism regarding who our enemies are, and who are only pretending to be friends. A policy based on the flawed principle of seeking compromise with a mindset embedded in terror has neither worked in the past, nor is it likely to work now, but the scourge of terror will keep intensifying. Pakistan should divorce its reluctance to grapple with reality.

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