**The terrorism conundrum - PART-I**

[Imran Malik](https://www.nation.com.pk/columnist/imran-malik)

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Relentless terrorist attacks from across the Pak-Afghan border continue unabated. They are taking a heavy toll of Pakistani lives. Suicide bombings (already more than in the whole of 2022) and wanton terrorist attacks are rampant.
Operation Zarb e Azb was a brilliantly conceived and executed operational plan against the terrorists in the erstwhile FATA. It was extremely successful in not only breaking their back but also in driving them out of Pakistan’s territorial limits. It would have reached its desired end state had the US-NATO-ISAF agreed to join the Pakistan military in what was a very bold and aggressive operation to exterminate or at least critically decimate terrorism in the region. Had they, as purportedly asked by Pakistan, blocked all escape routes along the Pak-Afghan border, the terrorist groups would have been truly caught in a strategic cul de sac - with no viable options available. The Pakistan military’s formidable hammer would have crushed them against the solid anvil provided by the US-NATO-ISAF. That might have brought the menace of terrorism to a closure, somewhat. For reasons best known to the US-NATO-ISAF, they opted to stay out of this fight. This allowed many terrorists to escape and disperse in the badlands of Afghanistan. Quite inexplicably, the US-NATO-ISAF still did not undertake any worthwhile operations against them. This ominously gave the various hostile intelligence agencies, proactive in the region, the critical time and space to help reorganize, regroup, recruit, rearm, re-equip, retrain, refinance, reindoctrinate, remotivate, and refresh their proteges, who were already smarting from a massive hiding by the Pakistan Armed Forces. The terrorist groups got the conducive strategic environment they were itching for the instant the US-NATO-ISAF departed Afghanistan and the Taliban entered Kabul. Thereafter there were no real belligerent threats for them from within Afghanistan. They were literally free to secure their bases there and fearlessly foray across the Pak-Afghan border!
The US-NATO-ISAF conducted a rather unceremonious, confused, poorly executed and a very hasty retreat out of Afghanistan. Predictably, the Taliban soon established their government in Kabul. The Taliban never deviated from primarily securing their own and national interests. Their government in Kabul faced a plethora of terrorist groups ensconced in the wildernesses of Afghanistan. They remain wary of them uniting against them and are still keen to keep them away from Kabul. In the meanwhile, the TTP and others soon got access to a lot of the sophisticated weapons and equipment left behind by the withdrawing US-NATO-ISAF. Their capacity and capability to carry out terrorist attacks thus improved manifold. The Taliban could not conceivably allow such heavily armed terrorist groups, no matter how outwardly friendly, to pose any potential threats to them. Thus, the interests of the Taliban and the TTP converged splendidly when the latter started its nefarious terrorist campaigns across the Pak-Afghan border into Pakistan. The Taliban could not have been displeased with the TTP looking and operating outwards, away from Kabul. They are not averse to its perpetuation. Understandably, the Taliban, despite their rhetoric, have done precious little practically to stop the TTP, ISK, JuA etc from launching attacks into Pakistan from their well-known bases inside Afghanistan.
The change in government in Kabul has had no positive effect on the regional terrorism imbroglio. Rather its fallouts on Pakistan have been excruciating. On the diplomatic and political front, a sense of mutual mistrust between Afghanistan and Pakistan is now steadily gaining ground because of the Taliban’s hesitation in confronting the terrorism problem head on. Their efforts to get TTP and Pakistan to talk to one another remained stillborn. That was a monumental folly by Pakistan. Self-respecting states do not talk to terrorists. They bludgeon them into submission and then dictate terms to them. An even bigger folly was to settle them in the erstwhile FATA without putting them through the rigors of rehabilitation and de-indoctrination. Now, frustrated Pakistani officials are threatening to take the battle against them right across the Pak-Afghan border. The Taliban could not care less. They appear to be more apprehensive of annoying any of the numerous terrorist groups that roam the Afghan country side. They cannot allow them to unite and foment existential threats against them. Therefore, they will inevitably secure their own interests first, quite oblivious to Pakistan’s concerns!
On the terrorism front, Pakistan continues to suffer. The environment in Afghanistan is now very conducive for the terrorists and that has had some very deleterious effects on Pakistan. One, terrorist attacks across the Pak-Afghan border have increased drastically in number, ferocity and audacity. Two, the TTP, ISK and their affiliates appear to operate with the confidence and assurance that their bases, rear areas, lines of communication etc in Afghanistan are secure. Three, the TTP, ISK and others have laid their hands on some sophisticated weapons and equipment left behind by the US-NATO-ISAF. This has greatly improved their capacity and capability to carry out terrorist attacks in most terrains and in all conditions of weather and visibility. Four, the TTP and other terrorist groups appear to have been better trained to employ the new weapons and equipment they have laid their hands on. Five, they seem to have modified their tactics accordingly. They can operate at night too now. Six, they seem to be better led and have better information and intelligence. Seven, the TTP, ISK and their ilk have now acquired longer range weapons, night vision devices, better communication systems and improved mobility to not only mount raids, ambushes, suicide bombings etc but to retreat quickly too. This gives them greater flexibility. Eight, this clearly gives them the confidence to impudently attack Pakistani troops manning isolated check posts, police stations, LEAs and even military compounds and mosques in built up areas.
The Taliban seem impervious to all this. Pakistan needs to adopt a much more aggressive and proactive Afghan policy to tackle this existential threat.
(To be continued)