**The terrorism conundrum**

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The Taliban have consistently, and disdainfully disregarded international agreements and numerous regional conclaves and assertions aimed at helping to fight terrorism. Once reminded of their commitments under the Doha Agreement by Pakistan, they brusquely and arrogantly reminded Islamabad that they had signed that agreement with the US, not with Pakistan. This can be interpreted in many ways: firstly, they may not have the capacity and capability to deal with the plethora of terrorist groups inside Afghanistan; secondly, they may not want to instigate volatile reactions or provoke existential threats from these groups; and thirdly, they may feel indebted to some of these groups for assisting them during their struggles against the US-led ISAF. However, regardless of any rationale, it still implies their complicity in the perpetuation of terrorism in the region.
Pakistan’s current Afghan policy clearly fails to secure its vital national interests by any measure. It falls well short of two major policy objectives: effectively dealing with the Taliban in Kabul and neutralizing the threat of cross-border terrorism. Clarity of thought is essential in policy formulation and decision-making. Trying to resolve militancy/terrorism issues politically or diplomatically through talks and negotiations is a spineless, self-defeating policy that has consistently failed. As a non-kinetic option, diplomatic and economic sanctions are often applied. When these fail, states are compelled to resort to the kinetic option, which could involve a combination of diplomatic, economic, and military coercion. The military creates the necessary strategic environment for the government to overpower, dominate, and manage terrorists from a position of unassailable strength. The Taliban, however, have faced such trials and tribulations before, albeit in a vastly different strategic environment.
Therefore, Pakistan needs to conduct a profound re-appraisal of its Afghan policy. A significant paradigm shift and a fresh approach are necessary. Pakistan has been dealing with Kabul extremely tentatively and cautiously for a prolonged period. This needs to change. Pakistan must understand that the Taliban are not a solution to the terrorism problem; they are an integral part of the problem. Pakistan errs gravely when attempting to co-opt them into the solution. The Taliban have historically undermined and sabotaged these efforts and solutions using various pretexts. Maintaining the current environment benefits them as it keeps Pakistan in a weak position, consistently appealing to them for help and assistance. Importantly, it also keeps belligerent terrorist groups like the TTP, JuA, and ISK occupied elsewhere along its borders.
The new Afghan policy must, therefore, be a comprehensive national and government effort solely focused on securing Pakistan’s vital national interests, even if it requires unilateral action. The policy’s ultimate goal must be friendly relations with Kabul while simultaneously eliminating the terrorism threats that originate from Afghan soil. Though these objectives may appear mutually exclusive at present, the current government needs to devise a clear action plan to address this diplomatic-military dilemma. Pakistan could work towards achieving its policy objectives simultaneously or in stages; first by dealing with terrorists and then re-engaging with the Taliban. However, Pakistan seemingly has no choice but to proceed unilaterally. The current frequency of terrorist attacks and the resulting losses are unsustainable and require change. If the Taliban refuse to contribute, then Pakistan must take matters into its own hands. It is therefore crucial to decisively exclude the Taliban from any potential solution to this complex terrorism challenge. Pakistan must take resolute and independent action.
The core elements of the policy should adhere to the principles of realpolitik – a dedicated pursuit of national interests above all else. It must involve coordinated actions on diplomatic, economic, and military fronts. Adopting a three-pronged approach, the Foreign Office should engage diplomatically with Kabul, economic pressure should be exerted, and the Armed Forces should confront the terrorists. Economic measures may involve strict oversight of transit trade, including enhanced duties, tariffs, and levies. Additionally, all smuggling along the Pak-Afghan border, particularly of food grains and drugs, should cease. The influx of Afghan refugees must also be closely monitored, as some terrorists have infiltrated under the guise of refugees. The UN and the international community should be urged to repatriate these refugees promptly and with dignity.
While the Foreign Office handles diplomatic engagement, the military must act decisively to confront and eradicate the terrorists. Military operations should aim to create a strategic environment where defeated terrorists are compelled to heed Pakistan’s directives. A strategy akin to Operation Zarb e Azb cannot be replicated. A similar scenario is likely to unfold with the Taliban allowing fleeing terrorists to escape into Afghanistan, similar to what the US-NATO-ISAF did. Consequently, the Armed Forces must adopt a new operational strategy. They should set the stage and then strike to eliminate terrorists. They must proactively undertake surgical, pre-emptive, and/or punitive strikes on their bases if necessary. Anticipate a strong Taliban response, with an inevitable surge in terrorist attacks, suicide bombings, and diplomatic tensions both regionally and internationally. Pakistan should be prepared to manage these consequences domestically, regionally, and globally. The government, the Foreign Office, the Interior Ministry, and all relevant state agencies must be equipped to handle these and other repercussions. Pakistan must stand unwaveringly by its policy.
In conclusion, Pakistan must comprehensively, physically, and irreversibly defeat terrorists, irrespective of the associated costs. It is time for Pakistan to take bold action to safeguard its citizens and vital national interests.