

# Pakistan: The March of Folly

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Multiple challenges face the state of Pakistan. In January 2009, when President Obama assumed office, Pakistan was thought of as “the most dangerous place on earth thanks to its deep divisions, ineffective governance, corruption, and its substantial stockpile of nuclear weapons. Today, other crises have pushed such worries off the front burner in DC discussions”.<sup>1</sup> In broad terms, the two most critical challenges confronting Pakistan pertain to establishing a viable democracy within the country and confronting the myriad internal security threats. The survival of the state in its present form will depend to a large extent on the capacity of its people to overcome these challenges within the existing structure of the state.

Pakistan is riven with a secessionist movement in Baluchistan and a raging ethnic conflict in Karachi. In the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), a violent insurgency rages, with militant groups coalesced under the banner of an umbrella party, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) demanding the imposition of the *Sharia*. Consequently, the writ of the state is weak in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and barely exists in many parts of FATA. To further compound problems, the nation has also developed serious sectarian fault lines between the majority Sunni Muslim population and minority Shia Muslim groups, the latter accounting for about 25 percent of the total population. Politically, the nation’s democracy is fragile, with the military in tight control of all major policy issues affecting critical aspects of its foreign and defence policies – a situation prevailing practically since the birth of the nation in 1947.

Militarily, Pakistan faces a strategic dilemma, being hemmed in geographically, by what it perceives to be two inimical neighbours: India to its east and Afghanistan to its west. Afghanistan does not accept the Durand Line which artificially divided the Pashtun people more than a hundred years ago

**Pakistan is facing myriad internal security threats.**

– a legacy of the ‘Great Game’ played out by Imperialist Britain and Czarist Russia. Pakistan is concerned, as redrawing of borders would mean that it could well lose FATA as also parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. With India, the roots of the conflict go back to the creation of the state on the basis of a religious identity. Rapprochement with India negates the very *raison d’être* of the creation of Pakistan and rules out an overarching role for the Pakistan Army. Pakistani policy, thus, seeks to keep leverages within Afghanistan to avoid the possibility of a two-front war – a thought process that led some in Pakistan’s strategic circles to look for strategic depth in Afghanistan by propping up, and supporting, Afghan militant groups favourable to Pakistan. To neutralise India’s conventional military edge, Pakistan embarked upon a policy of “bleeding India with a thousand cuts”. This led to the promotion of terrorist groups within Pakistan for use against India as strategic assets. While Pakistan would like to go soft on those terrorist groups it considers its strategic assets, it wants to destroy the TTP and other local terrorist groups that are operating against Pakistan. The dilemma which Pakistan faces is that all terrorist groups, whether inimical to Pakistan or being supported by it, have linkages with each other. It is well nigh impossible to dismantle the terror infrastructure of one while leaving intact that of another. Another matter of concern is the radicalisation of the population of Pakistan. The process of radicalisation was first initiated through the education syllabus in the Ayub era, and was continued thereafter by successive rulers. It, however, became more virulent and aggressive through the policies adopted by the Zia Administration in the Eighties. As a result, large segments of the society have been radicalised which further fuels the violence cycle and impacts negatively on the stability of the state.

Violence levels across Pakistan have now reached endemic proportions, with the country having the highest number of terrorist related incidents in the world after Iraq and Afghanistan. In the period from 2001 to November 2013, “Some 48,994 people were killed in the country, including 5,272 personnel of the law enforcement agencies.”<sup>2</sup> The beginning of 2014 saw an initial dip in violence levels, but the casualties mounted as the year progressed, culminating in the horrific killing of 132 school children of the Army Public School in Peshawar on December 16. The worrying factor remains the high rate of security forces casualties which average over 600 per year for the last eight years.<sup>3</sup> Also of concern are the increasing incidents of attacks on high value military and civil targets

which indicate the exceptional planning and execution capability of the militant groups and bring forth fears that elements within the security establishment too may have been compromised by the militant groups.

An obvious fallout of the killing of the school children of the Army Public School, is that a rapprochement between the TTP and the state is no longer an option. In any case, even earlier, peace deals made by the government with some of the terrorist groups, unravelled rather quickly, giving rise to the surmise that the TTP was not really interested in a peace deal but was simply playing for time. Of the over 13 peace accords concluded with various militant factions in the period 2004-09, none held for any appreciable length of time. It was no surprise, therefore, that the peace talks initiated by the government with the TTP at the beginning of 2014 fell apart. The government went ahead with the talks despite objections from the Army, but a spate of attacks by the TTP on high profile targets forced the government to change its stance, the attack on the Karachi airport being the proverbial last straw. Thereafter, the Army launched Operation Zarb-e-Azb in North Waziristan Agency (NWA), to clear the area of its militant stranglehold. The NWA, however, was also the base of the Haqqani network, an Afghanistan militant outfit which the Pakistan Army allowed to get away before the start of the operations. Others, including the TTP in the NWA also moved out with them. While the Army has reclaimed the area, the success is limited to denying the TTP use of the NWA as an operating base. Their ability to plan and execute operations has, thus, been hampered but not significantly impacted as the leadership and the cadre strength remain largely intact. The spate of attacks thereafter testifies to this fact.

The two sides will remain locked in combat till such time as one of them is able to dictate terms to the other. As of now, the TTP lacks the ability to inflict a defeat on the Pakistan Army. On the other hand, the Pakistan Army lacks both the capacity and perhaps the will to dismember the TTP. Post the killing of the school children, the Pakistan government retaliated by lifting the moratorium on the execution of TTP prisoners who had been given the death sentence for terrorist acts in the country. Half a dozen prisoners convicted of the plot to kill the then President Pervez Musharraf about a decade ago were quickly executed and statements emanating from the government indicated that others sentenced to death would also face the firing squad. The TTP was quick to respond, stating that the children of Pakistan Army officers, civil servants and politicians would now be targeted, which in all likelihood will send the conflict on an upward spiral.

The attack by the TTP on school children is significant in many ways. The TTP went ahead with the attack, fully cognisant of the fact that the cold-blooded murder would draw worldwide opprobrium, alienate the Pakistani public, draw the wrath of the Army and close any doors that were still left open for negotiations. This marks a significant turning point in the TTP's strategy and indicates the confidence of its leadership in taking on the Pakistan Army. By targeting an elite Army school, the TTP has sent a very strong signal that it can hit the Pakistan Army where it is most vulnerable. Repeat attacks will erode the confidence of the public in the Army's ability to protect their country when it cannot even protect the children of its own personnel. More importantly, such attacks are designed to sap the will of the soldiers to continue operations against the Taliban. The Army Chief is now under pressure as about 80 per cent of the children killed in the attack on the school were from military families, especially families of junior officers.<sup>4</sup> This will force the Pakistani establishment to divert scarce resources to protect soft targets, at the expense of using such resources to fight militancy.

By terming the attack on the school as revenge for atrocities committed by the Pakistan Army in the NWA, the TTP has drawn attention to the blatant abuse of human rights in the ongoing military operation "Zarb-e-Azb", launched in June 2014 to flush out militants from their strongholds in the NWA. The entire population of the NWA, numbering over a million people, has been forcibly displaced and they are now living in refugee camps established by the government. The townships of the NWA have been razed to the ground by air and artillery bombardment<sup>5</sup> and there is little clarity on when the people can return to their homes and pick up the threads of their lives. By drawing attention to the Army's atrocities, the TTP hopes to justify its own actions in the eyes of the public.

The core demand of the TTP remains creation of a state ruled by the *Sharia*, which is an antithesis to the Constitution of Pakistan. This has appeal in most rural areas and also finds some sympathetic chords within the military establishment. The radicalisation of society represents the success of the state to promote a religious identity through the school educational curriculum and would take a long time to unravel. A strategy to deal with terrorism would require a unified approach against all terror groups, including those promoted by the state as strategic assets, and a change in the educational curriculum. This is unlikely to happen, despite the carnage at the Peshawar Army School. The hope that such a huge tragedy will unite the nation in its fight against terrorism appears aspirational and not grounded in reality. There is a greater likelihood

**Pakistan Army lacks capacity and will to destroy TTP.**

of the nation becoming more divided and the portents for 2015 appear bleak. The government's inability to rein in terrorists of all hues will be seen as a sign of impotence and lack of resolve and is likely to lead to further chaos. The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan and the rise of Daesh<sup>6</sup> will further hasten the process.

Besides terrorism, the second worrying factor is the state of the polity in Pakistan. The Pakistan Army remains in control over key facets of the state's defence and foreign policies and its business interests have seeped into multiple aspects of Pakistani life. As per Ayesha Siddiqi, the Pakistani military's "welfare foundations" run thousands of businesses worth tens of billions of dollars, ranging from street-corner petrol pumps to sprawling industrial plants.<sup>7</sup> The main street of any Pakistani town bears testament to the economic power of the military, with Army-owned bakeries, banks, insurance companies and universities, usually fronted by civilian employees, with retired military personnel acting as primary conduits for the covert use of the country's resources. As per Siddiqi, the military controls one-third of all heavy manufacturing in the country and up to 7 per cent of Pakistani private assets. The military is a major player in real estate and runs its commercial operations through the 'Fauji Foundation', whose interests include oil and gas exploration, sugar mills, security and employment services.<sup>8</sup> The disconnect between the military and the global capitalism economy is so severe that military commanders often fail to perceive how their actions undermine growth and development.<sup>9</sup>

The Pakistani political establishment has been singularly ineffective in countering military power. Post Pakistan's military defeat in 1971, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's attempts to create institutional restraints on the military's power failed because of his propensity to use the defence establishment for political purposes. Benazir Bhutto, in her two stints as Prime Minister, remained unsuccessful in her attempts to build consensus on security issues. Nawaz Sharif, in his second stint as Prime Minister, was removed in a coup by the Pakistan Army Chief, Gen Pervez Musharraf in 1999, after yet another futile attempt at taming the Army. His successor, Asif Ali Zardari, made another futile attempt to sideline the Army, post the US raid in Pakistan which killed Osama bin Laden, but his government was soon embroiled in a swirling controversy, centred on a Pakistani American businessman's claim that Hussain Haqqani, Pakistan's Ambassador to the US, orchestrated a memo asking for US help in diminishing the Army's power after the US raid that killed Osama bin Laden.<sup>10</sup> Zardari lasted out his term only by acquiescing to the military.

There was renewed hope of the political establishment finally getting some level of control over the military after Nawaz Sharif assumed power on winning the elections in 2013. This marked the first time that political power had been transferred from one political party to another through the electoral process, making many analysts believe that Pakistan had finally turned the corner. With a popular people's mandate behind him, Sharif once again set about attempting to control the military establishment. Various terrorist attacks against the security establishment over the last few years had diminished the aura of the military in the eyes of the public but Sharif overreached, forcing a reaction from the Army. The Pakistan Premier's visit to India for the swearing in of India's new Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi in 2014 was frowned upon but not contested by the military establishment. The military was upset with Nawaz Sharif's insistence on talks with the militants, but this irritant too was swallowed. The tipping point that made the military react was the government's insistence on trying the former Army Chief and President of Pakistan, Pervez Musharraf. The High Court of Sindh had given the government an escape route by allowing the former President to leave Pakistan but the government demurred and appealed the case in the Supreme Court. It was unthinkable for the Army to allow their former chief to be humiliated in this manner, regardless of the fact that the Army was not too happy with Musharraf's insistence on returning to Pakistan. What followed were protests by Imran Khan's party, Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), in conjunction with Pakistani cleric Tahirul Qadri, who leads both the Pakistan Awami Tehreek Party and the Minhaj-ul-Quran international network of religious schools. Both called for the resignation of the Prime Minister on charges of having rigged the elections and laid siege to Islamabad. Qadri and Imran Khan led tens of thousands of marchers from Lahore to the capital on August 14, Pakistan's Independence Day, and camped in front of the Parliament building, demanding the resignation of Sharif, who they accused of vote fraud. Qadri ended his protest by late October 2014, claiming that his protest has "awakened the nation and played its role in the path of revolution". Khan, however, continued his protest, calling it off only after the horrific attack on the Peshawar Army School. What the protests did was to effectively neuter the elected government. Many believe that the protests were sponsored by the Pakistan Army, a charge that appears reasonably plausible. In any event, the military has once again emerged on top of the political establishment and yet another attempt to achieve political control over the military has

failed. As per Ayesha Siddiqi, Pakistan suffers from a weak civil society that does not understand that political liberalisation will never occur unless the democratic process — electoral competition, independent oversight, judicial independence — is strengthened.<sup>11</sup> Going further, Siddiqi states, “The military is the state’s primary tool for exercising power, so elites must partner with it, or control it, to eke out the benefits of power. Military dominance is especially dangerous when it reaches into society, influencing the judiciary, political parties, academia, media and civil society organisations. This has happened in Pakistan as the army has shifted from brute force to soft coercion — bribing different constituencies into obedience. It allows the military to tame democracy, without being accountable to voters or being responsible for improving governance”.<sup>12</sup>

Let us understand that eventually, it is economic interests that dictate the behaviour of states, establishments and individuals. Which is why Pakistan’s military establishment can never make peace with India as that would make it irrelevant in Pakistani society. Pakistan remains a state run by an Army rather than a state with an Army. The Pakistani Generals will control Pakistan’s politics and foreign policy and Pakistan-India relations will remain a mix of an uneasy and unpredictable peace. Terrorism will remain a tool of foreign policy as far as Pakistan is concerned, with the military maintaining a firm hold of Pakistan’s political establishment. The signs are ominous. Pakistan will continue to remain unstable, with very high levels of violence in 2015. India needs to watch the situation carefully and be prepared for any eventuality, which could even be the further break up of the Pakistani state.

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## Notes

1. David Rothkopf, “Soldiers for Ignorance” available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/12/16/soldiers-for-ignorance/>
2. Data taken from Pakistan’s National Internal Security Policy, unveiled in the National Assembly on February 26, 2014.
3. For details, see “Fatalities in Terrorist Violence in Pakistan 2003-2014”, available at <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/database/casualties.htm>
4. Ayesha Siddiqi, “Strategic Assets No Longer Maintainable”, available at <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/strategic-assets-no-longer-maintainable/>
5. The pictures are available at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1118349>

6. Daesh is an acronym for the Islamic State. The full form in Arabic is al-Dawla al-Islamiya al-Iraq al-Sham.
7. For a detailed listing of Pakistan Army business interests, see Ayesha Siddiq, *Military Inc: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy* (Pluto Press, 2007).
8. <http://www.aljazeera.com/focus/pakistanpowerandpolitics/2007/10/2008525184515984128.html>
9. Ayesha Siddiq, "Armies Rule", available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/17/opinion/global/where-armies-rule.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>
10. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/pakistans-us-envoy-quits-as-scandal-swells/2011/11/22/gIQAYMFjIN\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/pakistans-us-envoy-quits-as-scandal-swells/2011/11/22/gIQAYMFjIN_story.html)
11. Siddiq, n. 7.
12. Ibid.