

ISAS Brief

No. 104 – Date: 28 April 2009

469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassecc@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



Pakistan's India Fixation can bring the Taliban into Power

Ishtiaq Ahmed¹

Several statements published in the News on 23 April 2009 illustrate the diverse perceptions of the real or imagined existentialist threats to Pakistan. In one key statement, United States' Secretary of State Hilary Clinton alleged that Pakistan has abdicated to the Taliban by agreeing to the imposition of Islamic law in a part of the country and that nuclear-armed Pakistan poses a 'moral threat' to world security.

It would not be presumptuous to say that Mrs Clinton expressed an opinion which is shared by the inner circle of United States' President Barack Obama's government. If that is the case, the Americans will most certainly exert even greater pressure on Pakistan to do something urgently to thwart the Taliban peril. It may also mean that airstrikes by the United States will continue, notwithstanding Pakistani protests. In case the situation gets out of control, an American military intervention cannot be overruled.

However, in an interview to the CNN soon after Mrs Clinton's remarks, Pakistan's Ambassador to the United States Husain Haqqani refuted the threat of the Talibanisation of Pakistan. He found suggestions that the Taliban were steadily extending their influence and power in Pakistan and that their writ prevailed less than 100 kilometres from the Pakistani capital, Islamabad, gross exaggerations. He remarked that 'Pakistan is facing many challenges in terms of threats posed by (the) Taliban but (the) government is cognizant (of the) responsibilities and (is) geared up to take the Taliban bull by the horns'. Further, he observed that the 'Swat peace accord was aimed at disarming (the) Taliban'.

However, the Taliban do not seem any less steadfast in their mission and objective. The recent flogging of a girl by Taliban brutes for appearing in public without a legally-correct male escort and their almost daily announcements that they are aiming to expand the enforcement of the *Sharia* all over Pakistan as well as concrete threats to lawyers for functioning in a non-*Sharia* legal system leave hardly any room for doubt about their intentions and the actions being undertaken in pursuit of their objectives.

In a very different but nevertheless closely-related context, Pakistan's Interior Minister Rehman Malik alleged in a Senate discussion on Balochistan that India and Russia were

¹ Professor Ishtiaq Ahmed is a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at isasia@nus.edu.sg.

supporting the insurgency mounted by the Balochistan Liberation Army in its secessionist bid. Mr Malik urged India to stop its interference in Balochistan. He went on to describe India as 'an open enemy of Pakistan'. His assertions were challenged by some senators from Balochistan but he stood his ground.

What Mr Haqqani and Mr Malik have said is in conformity with the views expressed by Pakistani governments in the past, whether they were headed by elected representatives of the people, civil servants or army generals. Quite simply, India remains the constant referral for definitions and rationalisations of Pakistan's national identity and security. It is the villain in the piece in Pakistan's security paradigm.

Now, security paradigms tend to become dogmas if they are not constantly revisited. As dogmas, they obfuscate rather than identify and highlight real threats. The classic case is the United States' Soviet fixated security paradigm. It invested almost entirely all its resources to warding off a nuclear attack from the Soviet Union. The Al Qaeda very skillfully exploited that weakness and ordered terrorist attacks from within the United States. The United States was woefully ill-prepared for such an assault on its security.

In the case of Pakistan, the refusal to treat the Taliban as the main and most imminent threat is of a similar nature. Whereas it is reasonable to assume that neither the Pakistan military nor the political class or the civil service would want the Taliban to impose their will on them because each one of them will have its privileges considerably curtailed, it is equally reasonable to assume that the Pakistan ruling elite is not a cohesive body of power and influence wielders.

The Taliban have sympathisers and supporters in the highest echelons of power in Pakistan. Some former top generals and Inter-Services Intelligence operatives, rightwing politicians and a host of journalists and political commentators are open supporters of the Taliban version of Islam. It is most distressing to note that the main opposition leader, Nawaz Sharif, has not spoken out strongly against the Taliban threat – he has expressed only symbolic concerns about some of their actions.

If we now return to the India-fixated Pakistan security paradigm, it can be argued that confronting the Taliban threat and prioritising resources for this threat does not necessarily require Pakistan lowering its preparations for the perceived threat from India. If India is stoking secessionist passions in Balochistan, then that is totally unacceptable. Pakistan should convey to the Indians that they cannot subvert its sovereignty with impunity.

However, the real and imminent danger threatening Pakistan's existence is the one posed by extremism, and the Taliban are its most notorious practitioners. They are not the only ones though. Extremism as a creed has many other adherents and, together, they represent a Third World-type cultural fascism.

Classical fascism was the mobilisation of vile passions and atavistic drives to fuel vain ideologies and mob-based movements that seek to establish the supremacy of some pure race or nation. In the late-industrialised and nominally-secularised European societies of the 1930s, fascism did not have to rely directly on religious invocations to win over the support and devotion of the bigoted sections of the society.

However, in the deeply-religious societies of South Asia where agrarian and tribal forms of society and culture still fashion politics, fascism is bound to exploit the religious factors to recruit their shock troops. Therefore, cultural fascism deliberately distorts and mutilates the spiritual and ethical values of a religious system. The so-called Islamisation process unleashed by the late General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-88) set that process in motion. The Taliban are determined to subvert whatever vestiges of pluralism, democracy and peaceful co-existence that survived General Zia's Islamisation.

The question is, of course, whether the Pakistani power elite are conscious of the peril that the Taliban represent. Up until now, it seems that this is not the case. Narrow personal interests and ambitions continue to signify the behaviour of the politicians and the civil servants are not heard any more.

The military had until now maintained a troubling silence. However, on 25 April 2009, the News reported that the Chief of Army Staff, General Ashfaq Kayani, issued a strong statement, emphasising that the peril of terrorism will be defeated decisively by the armed forces. Verbal pronouncements need to be backed by determined action. Time is running out. Pakistan needs to act now. Otherwise irreparable damage to its security and existence will take place.

oooOOOooo