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The Pakistan Military Proves its Mettle

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Abstract

It is argued in this brief that the recent London conference on the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan was a major success for the Pakistani military in convincing the international community that its cooperation is vital to resolving the crisis in Afghanistan. It was achieved in light of the fact that the Pakistani military effectively combated Taliban terrorism on its own soil. The Pakistani military has also come out against the Taliban domination of Afghanistan in case of an early United States (US) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troop pullout, because it would threaten Pakistani security and national interests.

Introduction

Considerable attention has been given to the conference hosted by United Kingdom's Prime Minister Gordon Brown at Lancaster House on 28-29 January 2010 in London in which nearly 70 countries, including the United Nations, backed a US\$500 million Afghan government drive to tempt fighters to give up their weapons in exchange for jobs and other incentives. Before the conference took place, brisk diplomatic moves were underway in Istanbul and London to garner the support of important players such as China, Turkey, Iran and Russia. It was realised that Pakistan was the key player in any peace deal in Afghanistan.

It dawned upon the American and the British – the two major powers involved in fighting the Taliban – that only military action would not do. In recent years the Taliban, who are almost all from the Pukhtun ethnic group, have expanded their influence outside the traditional Pukhtun strongholds of eastern and southern Afghanistan. They are reportedly present in almost all parts of the country, though it does not mean they exercise real power in them. The US and Allied Forces troop surge that is to bring more than 35,000 soldiers has been qualified by President Obama's statement that the US will start pulling back its troops from the summer of 2011.

US top commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, remarked recently that as a soldier he felt that it was time to find another way of dealing with the insurgency in

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Afghanistan.² The idea is that by mid-2011 the Afghan military and security forces should be large enough and trained properly to take over the responsibilities of maintaining the peace, and law and order. In any event, hectic consultations with President Hamid Karzai and other leaders had convinced the West that it was possible to strike a deal with sections of the Taliban who were not hardcore ideological fanatics.

The general understanding is that it is a major victory for Pakistan, as its point of view that not all Taliban were bad was accepted. Equally, it has been seen as a major setback to India, which had insisted all along that the Taliban as a whole had to be defeated because they were committed to an ideology that was rabidly militaristic and expansionist, and any concession to them would gravely threaten India's security. Such India-Pakistan sabre rattling in Afghanistan is symptomatic of their zero-sum postures on almost all security matters. The reality, however, is always more complicated and complex than what meets the eye.

Now, doubts are being expressed about the wisdom of such optimism about striking a deal with the Taliban. The Taliban have not responded to President Karzai's invitation to Taliban leaders to attend the traditional consultative assembly, the *Loya Jirga*. Karzai is travelling to Saudi Arabia to seek its influence in convincing the Taliban to attend the *Loya Jirga*. The Saudis are reportedly making it conditional to the Taliban openly declaring that they will part company with *Al-Qaeda*.

Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff General Ashfaq Pervaiz Kayani has stated, 'Pakistan doesn't want a "talibanised" Pakistan'.³ Elaborating that point, he said that Pakistan did not want for Afghanistan what it did not want for itself. Further, he stated that his country had no intention of controlling Afghanistan. He offered Pakistan's assistance and help in training the Afghan military. He also made the important point that Pakistan's geostrategic location continues to be relevant in the post-Cold War and post-9/11 periods. He urged the NATO to fully appreciate that objective reality.

Wahid Mujdah, a writer who served in the Afghan Foreign Ministry under the Taliban, has expressed his scepticism in the following words, 'These efforts will not bear fruit. I do not see any change, because the Taliban are abiding by their old stance and I cannot see anything new on the part of Karzai either'.⁴

Another doubtful voice is that of Daniel Korski of the European Council on Foreign Relation. 'Expectations stirred in London of a quick breakthrough in talks with senior militants are too rosy. The London conference was almost delusional in its optimism. Let's reject the idea that negotiations will happen according to a timetable that we find convenient. Let's reject the idea that 2010 is a make-or-break year. If the West and Karzai want the Taliban to negotiate, they will first need to score victories on the battlefield, improve the capabilities of the Afghan government and to weaken Taliban unity with well-run reintegration programmes', said Korski.⁵

At any rate, Pakistan has demonstrated that it can defeat the Taliban terrorists and put them on the run. The Taliban have been expelled from Swat and South Waziristan. Since May 2009, General Kayani, has been demonstrating an unwavering resolve to defeat the Therik-e-

² *Financial Times*, London, 24 January 2010.

³ *Daily Times*, Lahore, 2 February 2010.

⁴ *Daily Times*, Lahore, 2 February 2010.

⁵ *Daily Times*, Lahore, 2 February 2010.

Taliban Pakistan. The Pakistan military fought pitched battles with the Taliban. The latter retaliated by vicious suicide bombings and other acts of terror that have claimed 3,021 lives and caused injury to 7,334 people last year.⁶ The fact remains that the Pakistan military would never allow the Taliban to capture power in Pakistan. General McChrystal admitted some weeks earlier that the trust deficit between the US and Pakistan had begun to diminish.⁷

It is also commonsense to recognise that breaking the power of the Taliban in Afghanistan can be more successful if Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan are properly recognised. It remains the paramount power in south-west Asia. President Obama has given Pakistan an additional US\$0.5 billion increase in military aid.⁸ This despite the fact that the Pakistani Army spokesperson Major General Athar Abbas announced some days ago that they will be on a major offensive for the next six to 12 months.⁹

General Kayani also demonstrated another resolution that he adhered to with great consistency – to let the political process in Pakistan take its natural course. Sensational media reports and conspiracy theorists predicted a military coup that never took place. Under the circumstances, the point seems to be that a strong military in Pakistan does not preclude per definition a civilian and democratic government. It is, of course, too soon to jump to any conclusions. The military is and will remain the most powerful institution in Pakistan – for both bad and good.

India has started to recover from the shock that its standpoint on the Taliban was ignored at the London Conference. “World Rejects India's stand” wrote Ashis Ray of the *Times of India*.¹⁰ Foreign Minister SM Krishna issued a statement that his country can do business with the Taliban provided they fulfil three preconditions: acceptance of the Afghan constitution, severing connections with *Al-Qaeda* and other terrorist groups, and renunciation of violence. ‘If the Taliban are accepted in the mainstream of Afghan politics and society, we could do business’, asserted Krishna.¹¹ President Karzai has all along been very appreciative of India's help and assistance and India enjoyed considerable goodwill among the Northern Alliance old guard. Now, if the moderate Taliban return to the mainstream and are accommodated in the government it will mean reduced stature for India in Afghanistan.

It is the duty of the West to stay on as long as is needed to capture or eliminate *Al-Qaeda* and the hardcore Taliban leadership. Most Taliban would abandon their leaders and ideology only when it is demonstrated to them that they have no chance of prevailing in Afghanistan militarily. A premature exit could mean chaos and civil war in Afghanistan that can destabilise not only Pakistan but also India. The 35,000-plus troop surge will have to be used to inflict severe punishment and defeat on the *Al-Qaeda* and Taliban leadership. If that is not achieved then the rational basis for beginning the troop pullout will be undermined.

It is also important that India and Pakistan show maturity and vision. It should be perfectly possible to accommodate India's continuing participation in the reconstruction and developmental projects while Pakistan takes care of training the Afghan military. Pakistan's centrality to facilitating peace and stability in Afghanistan need not be over-emphasised. A

⁶ *Pakistan Security Report 2009*, Islamabad: Pakistan Institute for Peace Research, p. 4.

⁷ *Daily Times*, Lahore, 5 January 2010.

⁸ *Daily Times*, Lahore, 2 February 2010.

⁹ *Dawn*, Karachi, 22 January 2010.

¹⁰ *The Times of India*, New Delhi, 29 January 2010.

¹¹ *Daily Times*, Lahore, 31 January 2010.

division of tasks between India and Pakistan would in no way hurt their vital interests in Afghanistan. They may also learn the vital lesson that they gain more from cooperation than confrontation.

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