

Terrorism from FATA is Rocking Pakistan State and Society

The war on terror began with the bombing of Taliban strategic positions on Oct 7, 2001. Over six years on, Taliban and their ideological partners – al-Qaeda operatives – continue to challenge the US-led 43,000 NATO troops in Afghanistan. On this side of the 2,400 kilometers Durand Line over 80,000 Pakistani troops, in coordination with the Coalition forces across the border are battling hard terrain, rough and inhospitable environment and ideologically-driven hardened Taliban militants. The Pakistani vigil also includes surgical strikes and search operations in the seven tribal agencies of FATA, spread over nearly 27,000 square kms. Of these seven tribal agencies, North and South Waziristan, Kurram, Khyber and Mohmand agencies are under the microscope of both the domestic and international military and strategic thinkers and policy planners. The most turbulent of all the troubled agencies is the Waziristan region, where Taliban militants are sandwiched between the Pakistani security forces and the US-led Afghan and NATO troops. The symbol of the Taliban movement is Baitullah Mehsud, 34, who is battling two of the world's reported best armies: US and Pakistan military. He and his like-minded militants are believed to be behind the spree of suicide bombings that shook the whole of Pakistan in the second half of 2007 climaxing in the killing of Ms. Benazir Bhutto on December 27, 2007. The first bombing of the 2008 took place in Lahore, killing 26 policemen on Jan 10, 2008 and the police officials in Lahore suspected the involvement of the FATA-militant leaders.

The Ministry of Interior, Government of Pakistan released a paper claiming that the 2007 has been the bloodiest year of the Pakistani history that killed far more people killed in the same kind of terrorist activities in 2006. If all the attacks and bomb blasts are combined together, 2,116 people, including 558 Law Enforcement Personnel (LEP) were killed and 3,962 injured in 1,825 attacks in year 2007, up from 1,482 attacks in 2006 which killed 967 people, including 263 LEP. Incidents of missile/rocket firing, Improvised Explosive Device (IED) explosions and landmine explosions went down to 417, lesser than 528 such acts of terrorism in 2006. Attacks on LEP and organs of the security establishment increased by 100 percent with 234 personnel losing lives in about 465 attacks across the country, including some on installations and vehicles of intelligence services and one on a training and monitoring facility for special counter-terrorism Pakistani and US troops near Ghazi Barotha, North Western Frontier Province (NWFP). Most of the attacks on LEP were carried out in FATA and the adjoining settled districts FATA.

Details:

The aggravating situation of the internal security does not speak well for Pakistan's overall economic growth, political stability and social confidence, ahead of general elections set for Feb 18. Although, most of the victims belonged to the police, the attack ahead of lawyers' protest on Jan 10, 2008 in

Lahore also indicated a shift in the militant tactics i.e. instead of attempting to directly hit the security/intelligence/military services; they now aim to instill a sense of insecurity via their guns and suicide bombers. Officials responsible for keeping an eye on militants in FATA say that increased Pakistan military presence and greater coordination with the US-led coalition troops across the border have forced the militants to turn to settled Pakistani areas. The improved checks and enhanced controls on the various border crossing points, militants seem to be under pressure in search of safe havens, shelters while looking for targets inside Pakistan.

At present, about 27,000 Americans are based in Afghanistan. 14,000 are part of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and 13,000 are operating under all-US Operation Enduring Freedom. U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates, according to a Jan 11, 2008 report, has demanded for another 3,000 Marines for Afghanistan, which he believes would significantly impact on operations in the country. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Navy Admiral Michael Mullen said on the same day that the proposal was on the table and that the secretary has discussed it with military leaders, including the commander of the NATO-led ISAF, Army Gen. Dan McNeill. Admiral Mullen was quoted saying that there has been a "tremendous amount of success" in the country but it has been "uneven." He reiterated that "al-Qaeda and the Taliban are using the FATA in that country to plan, train and finance operations inside Afghanistan and worldwide." Pakistani intelligence agrees that reinforcement of US and international troops in Afghanistan could help in curbing the militants in Afghanistan but that may result into a proportionate increase in their activities on the Pakistani soil. It already has as the number of the terrorist activities in Pakistan during 2007 speaks about the situation on ground and this is a massive challenge to the Pakistani State, society, security organizations and the nation.

Situation Analysis:

The Pakistani intelligentsia believes that Pakistan is on a crossroad. The success against terrorism can steer Pakistan into a direction of political stability, economic growth and increased democratic freedoms and civil liberties. Failure means a fragmented state, society, institutions with crippled confidence among the citizens. The failure can be detrimental to the role that Pakistan may keep playing in the global war against terrorism. The insecurity that is rooted in the tribal areas is now affecting the urban centers posing a daunting challenge both to Pakistan and the US. Pakistani officials now link almost all the suicide attacks with al-Qaeda but such claims lack clue in a direction that may enable both the Pakistani and the US officials taking a meaningful action against the terrorists. With an immense and quick growth of the terrorist activities in the second half of 2007, al-Qaeda seemingly has very skillfully turned Pakistan into its regional headquarters with ample recruitment for terrorists and suicide bombers from FATA where the military operation has still to hit a decisive blow to both the Taliban and al-Qaeda operatives/leaders. Al-Qaeda's involvement and strength in Pakistan become

complete clear when in Sep 2007 it issued a statement vowing to avenge the killing of a religious cleric and Government's crackdown against the religious militants in Islamabad's Lal Mosque in Jul 2007.

Since then, the Pakistani Jihadists have successfully staged multiple suicide attacks against army and air force installations and personnel as well as those of the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI). Pakistani President General (r) Pervez Musharraf on record claimed that such activities and the killing of Ms. Benazir Bhutto are linked with the Taliban leaders based in FATA. Her killing aggravated the domestic political instability and insecurity in Pakistan but the threat is still looming as many other top political leaders reportedly are on the hit list of the terrorists. The deterioration of political stability in Pakistan is forcing the US to reevaluate its options as the New York Times reported on Jan 6, 2008 that the National Security Council was considering expanding the authority of the CIA and the Pentagon to conduct more aggressive covert operations in Pakistan's Northwestern and FATA regions. Observers say that chaos, weakened government control and the entry of the US military into the fray all blend into conditions in which al-Qaeda thrives. From al-Qaeda's point of view, the Afghanistan-Pakistan theatre is perhaps the only area of opportunity left for the Jihadists to exploit, and the area where the final battle of the US-Jihadist war will be fought.

Recommendations of CRSS:

Given the severity of the Pakistani situation, CRSS strongly recommends the following:

1. The Government of Pakistan must increase coordination with the ISAF and US-led forces for a wider exchange of information and sharing of the vital intelligence on real-time basis.
2. US Government and military officials should avoid the "newspaper diplomacy" and rather concentrate on serious exchange of information, papers to formulate joint strategies against terrorism.
3. The government must move swiftly on the social and infrastructural development of FATA parallel with a firm military action. It will help reducing the recruitment grounds for militants.
4. The Pakistani military must firmly handle the terrorism problem in FATA along with increasing cooperation with the ISAF and US-led forces to check cross-border movement of the militants.
5. Feb 2008 Elections must take place and the Pakistani government must ensure security, freedom and fairness during these elections with level playing field for all the political parties.
6. The Government of Pakistan must invest more to enabling the police, paramilitary forces and other relevant urban security services.