

Indian Threat Assessment

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There are clear indications of Pakistan projecting a radical change in respect of its policies towards the five Jehadi entities listed in President Obama's Pak-Af strategy, in his West Point speech on 1st December, 2009. Al Qaeda, Afghan Taliban, Pakistani Taliban, Lashkar-e-Toiba (LET) and the Haqqani network had all been cited as the extremist enemies, which are to be disrupted, dismantled and defeated. Pakistan had earlier initiated military action against the Pakistani Taliban which had challenged the Pakistani state.

Commenting on this operation and about the perceived difference in Pakistan's attitude towards other Jihadis, Admiral Dennis Blair, the US Director of National Intelligence in his Annual Threat Assessment statement to the Senate Intelligence Committee on 2nd February, 2010 said *"Islamabad's conviction that militant groups are an important part of its strategic arsenal to counter India's military and economic advantages will continue to limit Pakistan's incentive to pursue an across-the-board effort against extremism..... Islamabad has maintained relationships with other Taliban-associated groups that support and conduct operations against US and ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) forces in Afghanistan,....It has continued to provide support to its militant proxies, such as Haqqani Taliban, Gul Bahadur group, and Commander Nazir group.....The Al Qaeda, Afghan Taliban, and Pakistani militant safe haven in Quetta, will continue to enable the Afghan insurgents and Al Qaeda to plan operations, direct propaganda, recruiting and training activities, and fundraising activities with relative impunity."*

On 8/9 February, Pakistani authorities arrested five members of the Quetta Shura including Mullah Barader, Commander of the Afghan Taliban and Deputy to Mullah Omar, the Taliban Chief and more than a hundred militants, including two Al Qaeda people. Since then, the Pakistani media - both electronic and print - have launched a virulent campaign against the Taliban and its threat to Pakistan. Foreign Minister Quereshi has asserted that these actions had been taken in Pakistan national interest.

Senior US leaders, such as the Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, Senator John Kerry and Ambassador Holbrook have praised the changed Pakistan policy of cooperation with US intelligence and strategy.

The White House Press Secretary has also warmly endorsed the change. The Pune Bakery explosion and attack on the Indian residents' hostel in Kabul, both believed to have been carried out by LET, happened only after this supposed shift in policy. It is therefore an issue calling for very careful assessment by our security establishment: what is the nature, scope and significance of this policy change and what are likely to be its implications for the Indian security.

The change of policy may be looked at, in terms of four possible alternative scenarios. The first, and least likely one, is that the move is a sincere one and the Pakistani Army, which is the real ruler of Pakistan, has decided to fall in line with the US strategy of fighting all the five jihadi groups described by President Obama as cancers eating into the vitals of Pakistan and posing an existential threat to that country. Such a change in policy would however, not resonate with the extremely harsh stand taken by the Pakistani Foreign Secretary in the Indo-Pak Talks on 25th February, the two explosions in Pune and Kabul and encouragement of Hafiz Saeed (the real leader of LeT) to call for war against India.

The second alternative is that Pakistan is convinced that the US will withdraw from Afghanistan by mid 2011 and it is trying to pretend to go along with US – so as to take over Afghanistan after US departure. The Taliban will be asked to hibernate till the US departure.

The third possible scenario is that Pakistan hopes to deceive US as it successfully did in 2001. It is pretending to take action against the Jehadi groups but will protect them from American action so that they can play their role after the expected US departure.

The last and most complicated and realistic scenario is that the Americans are fully aware of the possibility of Pakistanis attempting to cheat them and notwithstanding this - they are going along with the Pak establishment to get the Taliban resistance reduced in the initial stages of the surge.

The US hopes to intensify its drone attacks. Already they are becoming increasingly effective against the jihadi leaders. If the Americans find that Pakistanis are double-crossing them as they did in 2001, there may be a confrontation between the two. Washington is keeping the Pakistanis on a tight leash by regulating release of coalition support funds, at a time when the Pakistani financial situation is extremely difficult. The US forces have stepped up their capability to monitor the communications and movements of Jehadi groups. They have the option of extending the drone strikes further interior into Pakistan to target the jihadi leaders. As such attacks increase, there is the possibility of Jihadis turning against Pakistani Army and cities as happened in the case of Pakistani Taliban. If that were to come about, Pakistan will be left with no alternative but to join the US in real war against the jihadis.

The terrorist threat to India will vary according to the scenario most likely to materialize. If Pakistanis are sincere on their change of policy, the threat to India will be minimal. For reasons explained earlier, this is the least likely scenario. In the case of scenarios two and three, which involve the Jihadis being kept in hibernation within Pakistan, the probability of terrorist attacks are relatively higher because of the compulsions to keep up their morale. In the case of the last scenario, the threat is perhaps the highest, till such time Pakistanis are compelled to fight their existential war. In such an eventuality, while the Pakistani state-sponsored terrorism may go down, the sleeper cells that have been already positioned may become active. Since any deception strategy by Pakistan is likely to get exposed in the next three or four months, that period will pose much higher risks of terrorist attacks on India.

If the US has a strategy to counter Pakistan's deception, it will be in India's interest to correlate its own counter-terrorism strategy with a broader American one. But given the

nature of the counter-terrorism war against Pakistan, the US may not share its strategy with India in advance. This places India in a dilemma in assessing whether America is being taken for a ride (as it was during the Bush period) or is it biding its time to initiate a counter-terrorism attack to full effectiveness.

The first assessment will call for counter-measures by India in case of a terrorist attack while the second assessment may call for very restrained response. This judgment calls for very close interaction and coordination between the security establishments of India and US. While it is unrealistic to expect the US to reveal its counter-terrorism action plans in the Pak-Af area to the Indian authorities, it is in US interest to let India know their assessment of the Pakistani change in policy. Otherwise there is a risk of Delhi and Washington working at cross-purposes. That should be avoided at all cost.

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