
Anti-terrorism: Pakistan must move towards a home-grown policy

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AS PAKISTAN moves forward on the irreversible path towards genuine constitutional democracy, the first issue that the newly elected coalition has been forced to address is Pakistan's policy on dealing with terrorism. This policy has directly impacted Pakistan's internal security and been the centre-piece of its equation with the United States.

The confusion on policy generally and on the nature of cooperation with Washington specifically has persisted. For example, in the latest issue of Newsweek magazine, it is claimed that the recent drone attacks to some extent resulted from an understanding between US and Pakistani officials giving clearance to Washington to hit at targets in the border areas. According to the magazine, "The surge began after visits to Pakistan at the beginning of the year by senior US officials, including intelligence czar Mike McConnell, General Michael Hayden, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and Admiral William Fallon, who recently resigned as commander of US forces in the region."

However on March 24th the presidential spokesman Major General (R) Rashid Qureshi, rejected the report. He said, "The report is baseless and unfounded. No such type of approval has been given to US forces." He said that the US had been informed several times that only Pakistani forces had the right to launch operations against Al Qaeda in the Tribal Areas. While the Musharraf regime has repeatedly said that no foreign forces will be allowed to fight on Pakistani territory, there is no evidence that US drone and missile attacks on Pakistani territory take place without permission from Pakistan. Late last year the Director General Military Operations, while briefing journalists at the GHQ, had categorically stated that no US attacks were granted on Pakistani territory without prior clearance from Pakistani authorities.

US authorities arrived in Islamabad within hours of the election of the new Leader of the House, Yusuf Raza Gilani. Washington's primary concern was whether or not the new elected government would continue with Pakistan's policy of cooperation with the US on the war on terrorism. Currently, Pakistan provides a range of logistical facilities crucial for Washington's military operations in Afghanistan.

Recent statements on Pakistan's current anti-terrorism strategy by leaders of the ruling coalition clearly indicate that the ruling collation will not opt for complete continuity of the existing anti-terrorism policy. For example, the PPP leader Asif Zardari has indicated in several television interviews including a late February Hum TV interview that his party will support dialogue with the militants. The need for dialogue has also repeatedly been stressed upon by Mian Nawaz Sharif. In his first address to the parliament, the ANP leader Asfandiyar Wali underscored the necessity of dialogue also. In his impassioned plea, the ANP leader argued that if we could hold a dialogue with Indian Prime Minister ManMohan Singh, then dialogue with the militants should also be possible. Clearly the entire ruling coalition recognises the seriousness of the terrorist threat and how it continues to devastate Pakistan from within. Yet more importantly, the political leadership cannot ignore the near ineffectiveness and also the damaged caused at home of the existing policy.

The political forces recognise the many compelling compulsions to review the current policy. Eight are noteworthy. One, the overwhelming use of force has not at all worked for Pakistan. Since 2003, when forces were deployed in the tribal areas, the crisis of internal security has accentuated. Last year alone 1,200 people were killed. This year already 500 have met the same fate. Two, from Pakistan's vantage point, just using more force will alienate even a greater number of people vis-à-vis the government. The peoples' perception has been that instead of getting out of the firing line we have brought fire into our house; indeed literally put our own house on fire. Three, Pakistan has become the target of terrorism while fortunately for the US there have been no major incidents since 9/11. By contrast in Pakistan thousands have been killed since the induction of forces in the tribal areas. Four, never has a counter insurgency strategy, which does not enjoy the support of the people, ever been successful. In Pakistan the overwhelming majority of the people do not support the government's current policy for countering terrorism — the public and the state do not share a common threat perception.

The local population comprises Pakistanis, majority of the militants are Pakistanis and so are the local influentials. We believe we must engage with all these groups.

Five, while the ingredients of the Musharraf regime's policy may have been correct, they were inadequate and were not given sufficient time. For example, while use of force, dialogue, development, regional and international cooperation and coordination were there, they were not there in the correct proportion. Also, the policy was neither coherent nor consistent. Peace treaties and dialog have to be given a fair chance. The key element of widespread and across-the-board political support from national regional and local players has generally been missing. Without political support the policy can enjoy no public support.

Six, as much as the ingredients of the policy, the articulation and framing of the policy is crucial. Major flaws of the Musharraf policy have been articulation, conduct and no less the policy formulation process.

Seven, even if the Musharraf regime has been able to hand over number of high profile terrorists to the US, within Pakistan the political outcome of this policy has been the spread of violence, terrorism and anti-US sentiment. It is a

policy that in the Pakistani public perception has undermined human and security rights as enshrined in the constitution of the citizens of Pakistan.

Eight, the only policy which will receive the support of the people of Pakistan will be one that is seen to be a 'made-in Pakistan' policy. People are suffering the fallout of two problems – one, terrorism itself and two, a flawed anti-terrorism policy. Pakistanis want to fight terrorism but not in a manner that backfires on the people of Pakistan.

Given these compulsions and the fact that the new government must obviously have zero tolerance for terrorism, it must formulate a homegrown anti-terrorism policy. Pakistan's policy must above all uphold rule of law at home, protect the lives, property and dignity of our citizens at all costs and oppose through strict enforcement of law any attempt to forcibly impose any outside system on the citizens of Pakistan.

Such a policy alone can help us defeat terrorism at home and exclude the possibility of letting any Pakistan-based group spread it outside. Only the Pakistan government itself, factoring in Pakistan's own contextual realities, political dynamics and the concerns of the international community, can create the most success-prone policy to fight terrorism.

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