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Lal Masjid operation and the emergence of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

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Abstract

Following the attacks of 9/11 on the economic and military symbols of America, the global system underwent sweeping changes. This event not only changed world history, but also the global geopolitical landscape. For Pakistan, the international strategic landscape rapidly transformed its strategic concerns. Pakistan took a strategic turnaround vis-a-vis Taliban government in Afghanistan and joined the US-led Global War on Terrorism. The fallouts of this decision in the form of violence and terrorism as well as the downslide in the security scenario of the country could be witnessed for long. This paper is an attempt to highlight the factors behind the creation of TTP following the Lal Masjid Operation in Islamabad. It also looks into the nature of the security threat posed by the TTP in the country.

Keywords: Lal Masjid operation, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, global

Introduction

The attacks of September 11, 2001 on the twin towers of World Trade Centre and Pentagon brought about the 'most rapid and dramatic change in the history of U.S. foreign policy' [1]. The consequences of such horrendous attacks have been severe not only for the United States, but for the international community at large. This fateful day (Eleventh of September 2001) would be written in the annals of history, in the times to come, as a precursor to the tectonic shifts in the international system. The other events which impacted the foreign policy of USA much have been a surprise attack on the US Pacific fleet lying at anchor in Pearl Harbor by then Imperial Japan [2]. In the rush of events that followed September 11-in the largest display of military might since the Second World War-the United States embarked upon a military adventure which now seems threatening the future of humanity. Scholars across the board are of the opinion that the events of 9/11 kick-started the transformation of all aspects of life including local, domestic and international which caused the breakdown of old structures and thus giving rise to new patterns, orientations, and practices. As one analyst puts it, "few veteran foreign policy watchers can remember when a single event has had so instant and so profound an effect on the entire dynamics of world politics" [3]. The impact of the day-when the attacks on the Pentagon and WTC happened-have been so immense that 'it does not even have to be referred to in full, but can be signaled by the simple shorthand of two numbers-9:11' [4]. This defining moment in the history of modern world is a new signifier of historical breakpoints that it is now acceptable to speak of a post- September 11, world in the same way as we talk about a post-war (the period after 1945) world and a post-Cold War era (the period after the fall of Berlin Wall) [5]. Hence, Deputy Secretary of Defense, Paul D. Wolfowitz, said, "I think everyone understands that we have, unfortunately, entered a new era" [6]. In a similar fashion, Eliot Cohen declared the situation, shortly after the September 11 attacks, as the likelihood of "World War IV" (the Cold War being the World War III) [7]. According to Aston B. Carter, 'the post-Cold War security bubble finally burst on September 11, 2001' [8]. Undeniably, these attacks had far-reaching implications for the global political scenario. As the global system underwent sweeping changes post 9/11, this event not only changed world history, but also the global geopolitical landscape. For Pakistan, the international strategic landscape rapidly transformed its strategic concerns. Pakistan took a strategic turnaround vis-a-vis Taliban government in Afghanistan and joined the US-led Global War on Terrorism.

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The fallouts of this decision in the form of violence and terrorism as well as the downside in the security scenario of the country could be witnessed for long.

Peace deals with militants

Pakistan's decision to deploy its armed forces in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (*FATA*) led to rise of militant landscape there. Also, the botched up operation in Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in Islamabad led to the emergence of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (*TTP*) in the country. Pakistan could not comprehend the nature and level of threats and thereby could not employ the well thought out strategy to deal the emerging situation. The decision makers were unable to forge peace deals with the non-state actors efficiently. "The government policy, like a pendulum", According to Ismail Khan "has swung from one extreme to another, from the use of brute military force to what appears to be total capitulation to militants. Never did the government try to intelligently combine the use of force with pursuit of dialogue"^[9].

Pakistan's strategy, of peace deals and confrontation at the same time, in the Frontier region reflected local realities which, even the British during their rule in the subcontinent learned and managed. According to Lieven, it always made sense to try to play divide and rule, because the tribal society of the Pathans meant that the enemy was naturally divided and if Pakistani state was attacking some militant groups while seeking agreements with the other, this was also true the other way round-that is to say, the Pakistani Taliban were attacking in some areas while seeking accommodation in others^[10].

This and other previous peace agreements including, prevented major battles between the army and the militants but intermittent skirmishes continued. At the same time, the militants used these peace overtures and the consequent withdrawal of troops to expand their power, influence and impose their version of administration i.e. *Sharia law*. They also continued their policy of crossing the border into Afghanistan and fighting alongside the Afghan Taliban. Pakistan's policy of taking on the local militants in a particular areas and entering into the peace deals with the same in other areas presented a perplexing picture to West. For the West, it was the double game that the Pakistani government and the military are playing in the tribal areas. However, for Pakistan and its security institutions, the unwillingness to launch an all-out war in the tribal belt was because of the fear of further internal destabilization.

As Pakistan continued with the policy of appeasement and coercing militants, the U.S. became impatient with the approach and adopted an alternative approach-that of bombing *FATA* with unmanned drones. The two simultaneously unfolding strategies, i.e., of negotiation by the Pakistani state and of eliminating militants by the U.S. drones on Pakistani soil, represented contradictory posturing which mutually undermined one another. The U.S., after losing patience with the Pakistani approach of dealing with the militants, wanted to aggressively curb armed groups in the tribal areas of Pakistan. On the other hand the armed groups remained hell bent on waging Jihad in Afghanistan. Both sides were trying to minimise or even avert confronting militants head-on which, in the meantime, resulted in the divergence among Pakistani, the U.S. and armed group perspectives^[11]. Having this on the cards, it

only resulted in further escalation in the tribal areas of Pakistan.

Lal Masjid operation and the creation of TTP

The year 2007 began with Musharraf defending the North Waziristan Agreement at home and abroad. But what followed latter was the pinnacle of Pakistan's instability.

In the first three months of 2007, an uneasy calm prevailed in Waziristan. The army, in January 2007, claimed to have carried out air strikes in the areas both North and South Waziristan-Gurwek and Salamat village of Shak Toi respectively-against the foreign fighters by using gunship helicopters. However, this claim by the army runs contrary to the commonly held view by the locals-that US military used its aerial unmanned and *CIA*-operated predator drones to fire the missiles that hit these targets. Such impression was first created on January 13 when the Damadola village, in the Bajaur agency, was targeted by two Hellfire missiles fired by a US predator drone. In the incident, 13 civilians including women and children got killed^[12]. These air strikes were widely condemned and criticised throughout the country. Protests were held in the Tank-home to large section of Mehsud and Wazir tribal families because of migration during the inclement weather during winters. Similar protests were organised in other parts of the area and both secular and religious parties alike condemned the action^[13].

The security situation continued to deteriorate, at alarming levels, in Pakistan since 2007 onwards. Until mid-2007, the Pakistani state had been fighting a war that had been confined to its remote tribal belt only. Until that time, the militant attacks, outside the tribal areas, were more or less individual acts of terrorism. However, the event of July 2007 that took place at the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) changed the entire security landscape of Pakistan. Barley two miles from the Presidential Palace, in Islamabad, the Lal Masjid clerics Abdul Aziz and Abdul Rashid Ghazi, challenged the writ of the state by instructing their students to mount vigilante action against what they call as un-Islamic activities. The two clerics also demanded the immediate imposition of *Shariah* in the country. In this process a standoff developed between the state and the clerics inside the compound-consisting of Jamia Fareedia and Jamia Hafsa^[14]. When all other options failed, to resolve the issue amicably, the Pakistan army launched *Operation Sunrise*^[15] to clear the compound from the inmates. This operation was carried out to restore the writ of the state. This watershed event led to the 'geographical expansion of the conflict' into the country's heartland as well as other settled areas.

According to Shaukat Aziz, "the storming of the mosque led to a wave of insurgency in the Pathan areas, a huge increase in terrorism, and revulsion in Pakistani public opinion which led to the downfall of the Musharraf administration"^[16].

The fallouts of the Lal Masjid episode paved way for the formation of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (*TTP*)-a deadly and violent fundamentalist extremist organisation. Different groups in the tribal areas of Pakistan, in December 2007, came together to form the Pakistani Taleban (the *TTP*) in a loosely-knit together with Baitullah Mehsud as *Amir* or the leader. On December 14, 2007, commanding 40,000 militant fighters, some 40 militant leaders gathered in South Waziristan in a bid to form a united front under the banner of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (*TTP*). This new militant

organisation included representatives from all the seven tribal regions as well as parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, including Swat, Malakand, Buner and Dera Ismail Khan. According to Imtiaz Gull:

The TTP [was] essentially a conglomerate of about two dozen commanders from various FATA areas; its central consultative forum is a large shura comprising of representatives from all seven tribal regions, with the chief commander from the respective regions designated as deputy emir ^[17].

This new organisation emerged as a powerful entity in the country and was another major turning point in the rise of insurgency in north-western Pakistan and the tribal areas. Baitullah Mehsud, after the death of Abdullah Mehsud, organised all other groups that were operating from various areas of the FATA region, which apparently had a common ideological orientation, under one umbrella-the TTP ^[18].

The TTP's coming on the scene marked a new and more threatening development in Pakistan. Having said this, the immediate reaction from the militants in response to the Lal Masjid showdown was the scraping of a 10-month long peace deal in North Waziristan with the government. Following the breakup of the agreement, the tribal militants-which later came to be known as Pakistani Taliban-started a deadly wave of classic guerrilla attacks on the security forces of Pakistan. Their tactics such as hit-and-run attacks, ambushes, remote-controlled landmine explosions and long-range rocket attacks including others, according to one analyst, were "borrowed from the tactics employed by resistance fighters in neighbouring Afghanistan and in distant Iraq" ^[19]. In this way, in the first following year alone after the *Operation Sunrise* according to one report, "more than 88 incidents of bombing killed 1,188 people and 3,209 wounded". Similarly, an 18-year old boy, two months after the Lal Masjid siege blew himself up inside the high-security base of elite Zarrar Company of SSG, killing 22 soldiers. This produced a major blow to the entire scrutiny apparatus and especially the elite force which had been specially trained to carry out counter-terrorism operations ^[20]. Such a campaign inflicted heavy losses on the security forces of Pakistan and made the troubled North Waziristan "the most dangerous place" in FATA. The situation spiralled into the South Waziristan and rest of the FATA. Gradually, according to some analysts, TTP made strong presence in all seven agencies of the FATA and in the settled districts of the NWFP: Bannu, Karak, Hangu, Kulachi, Dera Ismail Khan (D.I. Khan), Lakki Marwat, Doaba, Kohat, Dir, Buner and to some extent Mardan, the Swat Valley and Shangla district. The militants kept expanding their base to Malakand and Lower Dir in KP. Its expansion into the Swat valley was a shock for the government. To cut it short, the storming of Lal Masjid catalysed the insurgent-cum-terrorist campaign in the tribal areas.

As the Taliban was spreading its sphere of influence in all the agencies of FATA, a threatening development, according to one analyst, was a "reported agreement between the local Taliban in both North Waziristan and South Waziristan to come to each other's rescue in case of fresh military operations by the Pakistan Army or by the US through its forces deployed in Afghanistan. The two factions of tribal Taliban certainly had contacts with each other in the past as well, but, there was little coordination between them in terms of planning and launching guerrilla

operations. Evidence of closer cooperation between them emerged when Taliban fighters in South Waziristan took up positions on hilltops overlooking major roads in anticipation of military operations in North Waziristan. In the words of a spokesman for the militants, the Taliban in South Waziristan didn't want to be overtaken by events once the government launched fresh military operations in North Waziristan, and the deployment of their fighters on mountain ridges was to show their readiness to face any eventuality. One would, therefore, expect coordinated Taliban attacks on the Pakistan Army troops in the two Waziristans in the event of hostilities breaking out in the area ^[21].

This development became a cause of concern as the two tribes in the region shun their past differences in order to launch a counter-offensive in case of military operations. The Taliban, for their part, prepared for the war coming into their areas.

The spate of relentless suicide bombings, under the direction of Baitullah Mehsud, rocked Pakistan subsequently. On Sept. 4, at least 25 people were killed when two suicide bombers blew themselves up in the garrison city of Rawalpindi. Many of the victims belonged to the country's powerful intelligence agency, known as Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) ^[22].

Baitullah was also held responsible for the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in December 2007, when a suicide bomber, first shot her in the head and then blew himself up at the entrance of Liaquat Bagh, Rawalpindi ^[23]. In addition to it, Baitullah's men captured the Fort-in Sararogha-South Waziristan, by attacking it from four sides with 200 heavily armed strong men ^[24]. Similarly, close to 300 security personnel were held captives by the militants in North Waziristan without firing a single shot ^[25]. This and other similar incidents, created a gulf between Baitullah and the state which ultimately culminated in the launching of *Operation zalzala* (Earthquake) with the declared goal of dislodging Mehsud. Pakistan Army's 14th Infantry Division led by Major General Tariq Khan was given the task to carry out operation against Baitullah Mehsud and his supporters ^[26]. During the operation, collateral damage at exceptional level occurred in Spinkai Raghzai, Cheg Malai, Nawazkot and Kotkai areas. A committee, later set up by the government, comprising of senior officials of the army, intelligence agencies and political administration, militant commanders and elders of the Mehsud tribe, estimated that over 4,000 houses were destroyed in the Mehsud dominated area of South Waziristan. The losses, during the operation, were estimated to be around PKR 1.32 Billion. There was a severe damage to the infrastructure in the affected areas where over sixty government school buildings, healthcare centres, telecommunication facilities and electric substations were also damaged. In addition to it, this operation led to the displacement of about 200,000 local people who were relocated to Dera Ismail Khan and Tank, both in North-West Frontier Province. This separation of people from the militants provided the army a relatively free hand to mount an operation. The army, during the operation, engaged infantry, artillery, tanks, helicopters and the air force. However, the senior commanders like Qari Hussain Mehsud believed to be the brain child of suicide bombing, managed to escape the area ^[27]. According to the *New York Times* report, "the operation did not cause even a tremor, and only 12 days later, authorities were struggling to revive the peace accord" ^[28]. Militants, estimated between 6,000 and 7,000 in

the area, according to the officials in the army “will defend their power base and fight till the very last”. At the time of the operation the important questions, according to one report, remained that “whether the army will be able to hold territory and sustain operations in a tough and treacherous terrain, where snows arrive in late November” [29].

During the operation, the army according to the commanding officer cleared a “factory that had been recruiting 9-12 year old boys and turning them into suicide bombers”. According to the same report, the army also seized a huge cache of weapons including improvised explosive devices (IED’s) as well as the propaganda material from the compounds. Major General Khan claimed that, “I have made the entire area from D.I. Khan up to Jhangola weapon free, and need be, I can do it in the rest of the areas too [30]”. By the end of May 2008, the Pakistan army began withdrawing from the areas secured during the operation but continued to control all the four roads leading to the Mehsud strongholds. According to Major General Khan “We are not moving out, and are only re-adjusting our positions” to provide space for the implementation of the peace accord, he said [31].

Summing it up, operation Zalzala did clear the Mehsud strongholds of the militants but at a huge cost. The militants escaped the operation and set up bases elsewhere in other parts only to re-infiltrate the trampled Mehsud areas once the army began moving out leaving the space open for the militants to re-assemble. After the withdrawal, according to Pakistani intelligence authorities, the brainchild of suicide attacks, Qari Hussain Mehsud, in the Spinkai Raghzai areas re-activated his suicide training camp which the army had dismantled earlier [32]. Further, the collective punishment to the tribe, by destroying houses of the inhabitants who allegedly were providing shelter to the militants and the damage to the infrastructure, further increased the animosity among locals for the state and its security forces [33].

Putting it simple, the operation just displaced the TTP’s Mehsud group from their strongholds to other parts of the area. Cooperation was forged, between various leaders of the militant organization, in the northern parts of FATA and KP, like Faqir Mohammad, Mullah Fazlullah and Sufi Mohammad. As part of the strategy, Baitullah Mehsud provided logistics and manpower to militant networks in Bajaur and Swat in order to coordinate and control the insurgency under the umbrella of TTP.

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