

As Pakistan Launches Operation Azm-I-Istehkam, It Needs to Address Its Fundamental Confusion

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Introduction

Amid a surge in terror incidents, which Pakistan blames on the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) leadership hiding in Afghanistan, on 22 Jun, Pakistan announced that it is launching a Counter-Terrorism (CT) campaign which promises to eradicate all forms of extremism and violent militancy in the country in a 'Decisive manner'.

Described as an attempt to 'Reinvigorate and re-energise the ongoing implementation of the revised National Action Plan (NAP), "Operation Azm-i-Istehkam" which means strong commitment for stability' or 'Strong resolve for stability' is the latest in a list of kinetic actions that Pakistan's security forces have undertaken over the last two decades.

Earlier Operations

It was in 2001 that the military-led government of General Pervez Musharraf launched the so-called Operation Enduring Freedom in the former tribal regions following the United States (US) invasion of Afghanistan. A series of CT campaigns followed: Al-Mizan (2002), Zalzala (2008) Sher Dil, Rah-i-Haq, and Rah-i-Raast (2007-2009), Rah-i-Nijaat (2009), Zarb-i-Azb (2014) and Raddul Fasaad (2017).

Given the questionable success of the previous operations, there is scepticism over the launch of the present operation. This is also because Pakistan is seen to be making compromises with militant outfits it claims to be fighting, and hence, there exists a trust deficit between the state and the people on this count. An example of this was the secret deal with the TTP in 2022, which allowed thousands of armed militants to return home and regroup.

Despite various military operations, the menace of terrorism has persisted with greater ferocity. The militants are better organised and equipped with sophisticated weaponry and are now involved in attacks that are taking a huge toll, especially on the security forces. As per the annual security report of the Centre for Research and Security Studies, Pakistan "Witnessed 1,524 violence-related fatalities and 1,463 injuries from 789 terror attacks and [CT] operations in 2023 - marking a record six-year high". Matters turned worse in the first half of 2024 with a rise in militant activities, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan.¹

There has been an exponential rise in terrorism in Pakistan since the Taliban returned to rule Afghanistan in 2022. There are also reports of tacit Afghan Taliban support for the TTP. Pakistan in turn has blamed the Taliban administration in Kabul for not taking action against TTP sanctuaries on its soil.²

The Inter-Services Public Relations, the military's media wing, has stated that the "Recent wave of terrorism in Pakistan has the full support and assistance of Afghanistan". It also stated that "The Afghan interim government is not only arming the terrorists but also providing a safe haven for other terrorist organisations as well as being involved in the incidents of terrorism in Pakistan".³

Attacks on Chinese Citizens

The targeted attacks against Chinese nationals working on various development projects in the country have caused concern in China. The latest attack took place a few months ago when a suicide bomber rammed his explosives-laden vehicle into a convoy in a remote district in KP where a key dam is being constructed. As a result, five Chinese workers were killed.

This was the third major attack this year on Chinese interests in the country. The growing number of targeted killings of Chinese nationals also has serious geopolitical implications. Thousands of Chinese workers are engaged in multibillion-dollar infrastructure projects in the country under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and China has invested USD 62 billion in the project.⁴

The increasing occurrence of targeted killings of Chinese nationals has in turn raised questions about Pakistan's ability to ensure the security of its citizens and was brought up when Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif visited China recently. It is apparent that the launching of a new CT operation has been largely driven by the threat of Chinese companies pulling out their investment from Pakistan.

Liu Jianchao, a Chinese official who visited Pakistan last week, reiterated the importance of protecting Chinese interests in the country. "We need to improve security and the business environment. In Pakistan's case, the primary factor shaking the confidence of Chinese investors is the security situation". Hence, one of the aims of these operations is to placate China.⁵

Challenges in Dealing with Terrorism

The issue of terrorism in Pakistan is a complicated one, which involves crime, drugs, smuggling, religiously motivated and state-sponsored extremists. But there seems to be no coherent policy in place to deal with the challenge, and thus, successfully counter the extremist narrative.

While the latest round of terrorism in Pakistan needs to be responded militarily, there are questions regarding the limits of military force to quell the threat. No doubt, the state must employ force where necessary. But this is not very effective unless accompanied by other measures. The threat posed by violent extremism cannot be countered without broad political support.

Analysts have said that despite the government's claim of removing the shortcomings in the implementation of NAP, there are no signs that the administration is carrying out long-delayed reforms critical for containing extremism in the country.

What is also not clear is if the operations will be intelligence-based operations (as in the recent past) rather than full-scale operations. The environment in 2008 was very different when large-scale operations were launched. At that time, the TTP was in control of territory and the operations were launched, to dislodge the militants and impose the 'Writ of the state'. As per reports in the media, it seems that TTP is not controlling territory in the same way.⁶

Operations at that time were partly based on assumptions that once the TTP fighters tried to escape military operations by crossing the border, they would be confronted by Afghan and NATO forces. However, this time around, given the relations with Afghanistan, cross-border coordination of operations will be difficult, as the regime in Kabul is unlikely to provide assistance in eliminating the TTP.⁷

Also, the large-scale operations earlier enjoyed widespread public support; the latter didn't just come from the urban centres and the mainstream areas of the country but also from political parties based in KP. However, this time around, the support will not be easy to ensure because the people are openly hostile to operations.⁸

The mass-scale displacement of people, the challenges of living in refugee camps, and then their return to homes and livelihoods destroyed and delayed compensations, have made the Pakhtun population wary. This has been brought home by the mass protests that were held in many areas when the TTP reappeared in 2022. The large gatherings in a number of areas, including Swat, were not simply against the TTP but also against military action; such was the public mood that all parties took a stand against them. This distrust of the state and its institutions will not make it easy to create public support for the widespread use of state force, as in the past.⁹

Finally, there is also the issue of expense. The extensive military operations in the past took place at a time when aid from the US in the form of coalition support funds was still making its way to Pakistan. At present, with no such aid and the cash crunch the country is dealing with, planning for military operations will also have to consider how they will be financed.

Can Afghanistan Be Targeted

Pakistan's Defence Minister Khawaja Asif has recently hinted at the possibility of cross-border strikes to eliminate militant hideouts in Afghanistan. In an interview with Voice of America, the Defence Minister said Islamabad could strike terror havens in Afghanistan and it would not be against international law since Kabul had been "Exporting" terrorism to Pakistan and the "Exporters" were being harboured there. He said though the TTP was operating from the neighbouring country, its cadre, about a few thousand in number, "Are operating from within the country" and blamed the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf government for bringing these militants back.¹⁰

In separate remarks to Geo News, he said Islamabad would "Stringently enforce international laws at its borders with Afghanistan" to restrict the movement of smuggled goods. "All traffic from Afghanistan will only be allowed entry into Pakistan with a valid passport and visa".¹¹

His statement came on the same day as Maulana Fazlur Rehman's warning about the critical security situation in KP. The Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Chief said that things had reached a point where even the police could not go out at night due to the presence of armed men.¹²

However, the Maulana compared Afghanistan to Iran. Issues with Iran were resolved within a week of both countries conducting strikes inside each other's territories, he said, asking why Afghanistan was not being dealt with in the same manner.¹³

Conclusion

The attacks in Pakistan have exposed its vulnerabilities as well as the increasing political and economic instability in the country, particularly in KP, which has borne the brunt of the terrorist resurgence. There now appears to be a severe breakdown of law enforcement in this region as the confrontation between the centre and the provincial government worsens.

But unilaterally targeting militants on Afghan soil may create more problems than it solves. Further, if hot pursuit across their Western borders is Pakistan's publicly stated policy to target terrorism, the same must also hold good when terrorists are targeted inside their Eastern borders.

Given their past record and intimate relationship with terrorism there, however, remains scepticism regarding the success of these operations. For Pakistan, there cannot be two sets of rules to deal with terror targeting those in its west and nurturing those in its east. It needs to address this fundamental confusion.

Endnotes

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¹³ Ibid

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