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PAKISTAN'S MILITANT GROUPS IN 2015

Will the TTP implode? | Will the Islamic State intrude? | Will the Punjabi Taliban return to its roots? | Will the Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) get unleashed?

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IPCS Forecasts

Pakistan's Militant Groups in 2015

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After the Taliban attack on a school in Peshawar, killing more than 100 children, there has been a general perception that the Establishment and Civil Society in Pakistan is now serious and in sync about countering terrorism within. New acts have been passed by the Parliament empowering military courts to fast track cases relating to terrorism. A series of post-Peshawar counter militancy strikes and hangings witnessed scores of terrorists neutralized.

Five sets of questions need to be addressed in the above background, in terms of what will be the nature of situation relating to multiple militant and jihadi groups in Pakistan during 2015 and beyond?

First, what will be the nature of response from the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in 2015? There have been major splits already within the TTP in 2014, and few reports on the arrival of Islamic State in Pakistan. Will the Pakistani Taliban ultimately implode in 2015? Will the Islamic State find a space as a follow up?

Second, will the problems within the TTP along with an increased counter militancy offensive by the Establishment force those fighters from Punjab, who are now fighting in FATA and KP to return to their province?

Third and the most important from an Indian perspective will be related to the Lashkar-e-Toiba. Following the Mumbai attacks, it is generally perceived that the Establishment has kept the Lashkar under a tight leash. With a successful elections in J&K and an increasing strong response from India on cross-border violations, will Pakistan's Establishment now unleash the Lashkar elsewhere in India to reduce the pressure on the border?

Fourth, as of today, the militant and jihadi groups within Pakistan, as explained subsequently, do not form a monolithic bloc. Broadly divided into Afghan Taliban, TTP, Sectarian militants (more belonging to Punjab, hence can be referred as the Punjabi Taliban) and the Lashkar-e-Toiba, fighters of the above four categories though may have fought along with the others, they have not come together in Pakistan. Are there chances of these groups coming together and forming a 'Jihadi Central' in Pakistan?

Finally, it is also generally perceived that both the State and Civil Society, today is serious about fighting terrorism within Pakistan. Peshawar attack on school children is considered as the tipping point. Is it really? Or, are the military courts and few offensives are an emotional and immediate response to address the public anger? Or, worse, are the recent offensives part of an American pressure, and a well planned strategy by Pakistan to convince an audience elsewhere to attract the Kerry Lugar financial assistance?

This report attempts to answer the above questions under the following four heads.

I

Will the Pakistani Taliban Implode?

The primary question in this context is - after being formed in December 2007 and carrying out deadly attacks all over Pakistan for the last eight years, has the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) started imploding today? Or, should the recent developments within Pakistan Taliban be addressed in a different framework – in terms of, multiple franchisees within the TTP are breaking away as separate franchises on their own, and in the process destabilising the security environment even further? Externally, is the success of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, creating a new wave of militancy and pulling the erstwhile groups under the TTP banner to move away from the al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban?

In the above context, two issues need to be probed – whether there is an implosion within the Pakistani Taliban, ultimately leading to the complete irrelevance of the TTP, or whether there will be new franchises, deadlier than the TTP. In this context, it will be useful to refer to what happened to the al Qaeda in Syria and Iraq during the recent years. Al Qaeda witnessed both merger and split in Syria and Iraq ultimately resulting in the al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) paving way for the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL); today the AQI is considerably weakened in Syria and Iraq, while the ISIL emerging deadlier, referring itself now as the Islamic State. Will such a phenomenon get repeated within Pakistan – in terms of a splinter becoming deadlier than the original?

TTP's Internal Divide since Hakimullah Mehsud's Death

When it was formed in December 2007, Pakistani Taliban was not a monolithic organization. In fact, it never attempted to transform into a monolithic organization with a rigid hierarchy even under the strong leaderships of Baitullah Mehsud and his successor Hakimullah Mehsud. Any debate on the TTP imploding or getting divided has to understand this basic framework of the Pakistan Taliban.

It remained a conglomerate of multiple pashtun tribal groups in the FATA. Later, the Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) from the Malakand region joined the TTP and became its franchisee in Swat. Sectarian and jihadi groups from Punjab such as the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) also joined the TTP and came to be referred as the Punjabi Taliban.

Though both the Mehsuds (Baitullah and Hakimullah) were ruthless leaders and wielded strong power within the TTP, there were regular bickering and infighting. When Baitullah Mehsud - the founder leader of the TTP was killed in a drone attack in 2009, there was a struggle between Hakimullah Mehsud and Wali ur Rehman, before the former took control of the TTP. Right from the beginning, the TTP continuously witnessed an internal power struggle – based on tribal divides and also based on individual groups' loyalties towards Afghan Taliban, al Qaeda (and its affiliates) and the Pakistan Establishment.

The Pakistani State succeeded in creating few pro-State groups; the group led by Mullah Nazir in Waziristan, was a “Good Taliban”, for it opposed the presence and influence of foreign militants in the FATA. The Uzbek militants, especially belonging to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), despite their closeness to the Mehsuds were targeted by Nazir’s militants, killing hundreds belonging to the former. Hafiz Gul Bahadur, another militant leader from Waziristan, though was formally part of the Pakistani Taliban, had struck a deal with the State and has ceased all attacks against Pakistan.

Despite the above differences, until the death of Hakimullah Mehsud, the TTP was tightly controlled and led predominantly by the Mehsud tribe. Hakimullah and his predecessor Baitullah had control over the various TTP factions from the rest of FATA and other parts of Pakistan. Another explanation could be – perhaps the franchisees from Swat and Punjab were much more interested in joining hands in establishing the TTP into a powerful organization, than quarelling for their own space within the larger franchise.

The killing of Hakimullah Mehsud in a drone attack in November 2013 has altered the coherence of the TTP’s decision making. There was a problem of succession within the TTP after Hakimullah’s killing; the leadership ultimately went to Mullah Fazlullah, who at that time was heading the Swat Taliban. He is neither a Mehsud nor belongs to any other tribal groups of Waziristan. With the core of TTP fighters primarily belonging to the Mehsuds and from Waziristan in the FATA, the ascendancy of Mullah Fazlullah (belonging to the Yusufzai tribe from the settled districts Khyber Paktunkwa and not from FATA) seems to have upset the internal balance of the TTP.

Though the elevation of Fazlullah was reported to have the blessing of Mullah Omar, the Mehsuds led by Khan Syed Sajna and Azam Tariq were the first to revolt. In May 2014, it suddenly dawned upon to the Mehsud fighters of the TTP that the “bombing of public places, extortion and kidnappings” are “un-Islamic”; “since the TTP leaders continued with these practices” they decided to split from the TTP. Later, in August 2014, Omar Khalid Khorasani with his strong base in Mohmand Agency and the leader of TTP’s Mohmand chapter formed his a new group – the Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, which is believed to have carried out the recent attack on the Wagah post in the Indo-Pak border. In October, a group of five Taliban commanders from all over FATA, including the then spokesperson of the TTP Shahidullah Shahid announced their allegiance to the Islamic State and proclaimed Abu Bakr al Baghdadi as their Amirul Momineen (instead of Mullah Omar of the Afghan Taliban).

Thus, there has been a spate of divisions within the TTP during 2014. While the divisions are obvious and apparent, the causes and factors behind them are not so evident. As explained above, it can only be conjectured.

The divide between Taliban, al Qaeda and the Islamic State

This section attempts to analyze whether the above divide is due to internal contradictions, or due to external pressure or attraction (from the Islamic State). Also it attempts to analyse another important question: whether the divide within the TTP also underlines dwindling hold of the al Qaeda over Pakistani jihadi groups.

To understand the fine difference between the Afghan Taliban and the al Qaeda, and its impact on the TTP, one has to go back to the origin of the formation of the TTP. Though the TTP owed its allegiance to the Afghan Taliban when it was formed and considered Mullah Omar as its Amirul Momineen, the al Qaeda played a crucial role in the formation of Pakistani Taliban. Despite the allegiance to Afghan Taliban and Mullah Omar, the Mehsuds were more influenced by the al Qaeda. It was no coincidence that the Mehsuds welcomed the al Qaeda components from Central Asia and the Arab world and provided them shelter. It was also no coincidence that the TTP went after Pakistani security forces, when the latter was dismantling the al Qaeda network under American pressure. The TTP under the leadership of the Mehsuds were more closely knit with the al Qaeda for operational and financial support, though ideologically professed support to the Afghan Taliban.

Similar is the case today, with the newly formed Jamaat-ul-Ahrar by Omar Khalid Khorasani from the Mohmand Agency. He is believed to be closer to al Zawahiri; it is no coincidence that Khorasani released the video of killing 23 Pakistani soldiers when there was a negotiation between the TTP leadership and the elected government during early 2014. Though there is no hard evidence, it can be conjectured that the release of the video was aimed at stalling the negotiation between the TTP (under Fazlullah's leadership supported by Mullah Omar) and the government. Such a process was not in the interest of the al Qaeda, hence Zawahiri could have used Khorasani to scuttle the talks process.

In the recent weeks (Dec 2014-Jan 2015), though not physically present, the Islamic State seems to have impressed the Pakistani militants through its ideology, achievements and popularity. Today a section within Pakistan considers the Islamic State as ideologically stronger and militarily powerful, when compared to the al Qaeda, which is growing older and getting slower.

Though there were internal faultlines within the TTP since its formation, it appears the differences, between the three main organizations (the Afghan Taliban, al Qaeda and the Islamic State) have further deepened the divide within Pakistan Taliban resulting in new franchises.

II

Will the Islamic State intrude Pakistan?

Few wall graffiti in Karachi and Lahore, along with the distribution of posters in Peshawar have raised questions about growing influence of the Islamic State (IS) in Pakistan. Though the Islamic State has not shown any inclination to catch the attention of Pakistani militants, the latter are jumping forward to get recognized by the Islamic State. One of the militant group was reported to have stated, "From today, Sheikh Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi shall consider Tehreek-e-Khilafat and Jihad mujahideen fighters of Pakistan as one of the arrows among his arrows which he has kept for his bow," while Shahidullah Shahid, one of the five commanders to publicly pledge allegiance to the IS was quoted the following: "I am confirming my allegiance to Amirul Momineen Abu Bakar Al-Baghdadi and would abide by all his decisions, whatever is the order, and whatsoever the circumstances, I shall be loyal to him and obey his orders."

Three questions needs to be addressed while attempting to understand the nature and possibility of any links between the jihadi groups in Pakistan and the Islamic State: Is the ISIL

looking for Pakistan as a recruitment ground? Or, are the militant groups in Pakistan attempting to use the ISIL banner and in the process aiming to become its franchisee in South Asia? Or, is it a hype and exaggeration?

While the questions seem to be clear, the answers are not. Given the resources available in public, and the early nature of the phenomenon, the answers could only be conjectures. Three specific points have been projected by those who argue about the threat of the ISIL to Pakistan. First, the split within the Pakistani Taliban pushes the multiple groups to look beyond the Afghan Taliban and the al Qaeda, hence a section within the TTP looks at the ISIL. As those five commanders swore allegiance to Baghdadi, a section in Pakistan is willing to be the ISIL franchisee. Second, a section of the militants consider the existing organizations including the Afghan Taliban and the al Qaeda are spent forces and do not have a coherent road map; on the other hand they see the ISIL as a credible alternative. "Islamic Caliphate" as an idea and the skills of the ISIL leadership is perceived as more active, ideologically sound and technologically sophisticated, when compared to Mullah Omar. Third, a section looks at the ISIL as a credible option and the future of international jihad. From establishing edicts to managing local administration, the ISIL is running day to day affairs of the Caliphate, while the old jihadi orders in Pakistan are on the run or hiding elsewhere. The new generation of militants, in their 20s perhaps are more buoyed by the ISIL, than al Qaeda or the Afghan Taliban. With al Qaeda getting weaker day by day, and the prospects of Afghan Taliban running the show in Kabul looking too far, the new militants in Pakistan want something more and something tangible.

While the above arguments look coherent and possible, the reality within Pakistan looks more nuanced. The ISIL is yet to reach Pakistan physically; it is not clear whether the ISIL is keen to establish bases or wanting to recruit fighters from Pakistan. However, as an idea, it is well present amongst the militant and radical groups. It appears, groups which are fighting for different causes in Pakistan want to establish themselves as an ISIL franchisee, than the other way around. It also appears, that the idea of ISIL has caught the imagination of the militants, than the organization itself.

Two factors will determine whether the ISIL will succeed in establishing bases and ancillary structures in Pakistan and extend the Islamic State into South Asia. First, the space available for the IS within the militant matrix amongst the various Taliban factions in Pakistan. Though the new generation militants are enthralled by the success of the Islamic State, organizationally, the al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban are better structured and deep rooted within Pakistan. Despite problems of implosion within the TTP during the recent months, factions within the Pakistani Taliban from Waziristan, Mohmand and Swat are still organizationally linked with the al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban. Though few former commanders of the TTP may have committed themselves to the IS, there is no structured organizational support to the latter. Other groups belonging to the Haqqanis, Mullah Nazir and Hafiz Gul Bahadur, are better connected with the military and its ISI, and hence unlikely to see the IS as an alternative.

However, the danger Pakistan groups joining the Islamic State, is more likely to come from the Punjabi Taliban. The sectarian militants (belonging to the erstwhile Lashkar-e-Jhangvi) and others such as the Jaish-e-Mohammad, who have been fighting along with the TTP in the FATA, may be tempted to replicate the IS strategy in Punjab, especially in targeting the Shias, Ahmediyas and other minority communities. So, the responses from the Pakistani Taliban to

the ISIL have to be seen from a more nuanced position, than painting everything with an ISIL black brush. Perhaps, it is easier to draw a graffiti; but establishing a network in already crowded militantsphere may not be that easy.

Second, the role of the State and its institutions in Pakistan will remain crucial for any success of the ISIL. Had it not been direct and indirect support of the State, the al Qaeda and the multiple Taliban factions would not have established their roots in Pakistan. In particular, the role of military and its ISI will be crucial for any success of the ISIL in Pakistan. Both the Taliban and the al Qaeda got well entrenched in Pakistan, as they were seen as foreign policy tools by the Establishment. Given the present template, the State in Pakistan does not seem to be providing such a space to the ISIL.

To conclude, as of today, there is no clear indication that the ISIL is attempting to recruit in Pakistan. It may do so in the future; for now, it already has a long queue of militants from all over Europe and Central Asia with better skills and exposure than the militants from Pakistan or the rest of South Asia. Within Pakistan, except for few individuals, and disgruntled militants, the multiple factions of Pakistani Taliban are strongly connected with either the Afghan Taliban or the al Qaeda. Perhaps, the Punjabi militants of the Taliban, who share the sectarian agenda of the ISIL may find the latter more appealing. Much would depend, how strong the military and the ISI in Pakistan responds to the ISIL threat; if the Establishment decides to make use of the phenomenon as it did with the al Qaeda to achieve narrow interests within the region, then there is a larger problem for everyone, starting with Pakistan.

III

Will Punjabi Taliban return to Punjab and become the TTP?

Though the militant situation looked muddier few weeks back, it is getting clearer now. Within the tribal regions and the KPK, there are four distinct groups – the TTP led by Mullah Fazlullah (backed by Mullah Omar); the Mehsuds; Jamaat-ul-Ahrar led by the former Mohmand chapter of the TTP (backed by the al Qaeda); and those individual groups and commanders owing allegiance to the Islamic State. Further, there are pro-State militants in Waziristan, the Huqqani network and the smaller sectarian group – Lashkar-e-Islam in the Khyber Agency led by Mangal Bagh.

Besides the above groups based in the tribal regions, with their own reach in Karachi, there is a powerful section of erstwhile sectarian militants from Punjab, referred as the Punjabi Taliban. When FATA became the centre of jihadi activity following 9/11 (and the displacement of the Afghan Taliban and al Qaeda into Pakistan's tribal regions), many militants from Punjab moved to fight along with the Taliban and al Qaeda.

Improvement of bilateral relations with India during 2004-08 and Musharraf trying to “close the tap” of militants pouring into J&K did have an impact the above movement. Many of those who have been fighting along with the Jaish-e-Mohammad and its multiple earlier avatars, became restless within Punjab and started moving towards FATA. The sectarian militants, who also had close links with the Jaish joined this new “look west” movement of jihadis from Punjab towards (and at times even across) the Durand line.

The exodus of sectarian militants into FATA and becoming a part of the Pakistani Taliban subsequently had three alarming effects in the TTP's attacks. First, the FATA region witnessed more sectarian attacks, especially in Kurram and Orakzai Agencies. Second, the sectarian militants from west of the Indus started becoming the Punjabi Taliban, thereby providing the much needed reach for the TTP leadership in Waziristan to carry out attacks in heartland Pakistan. Third, either deliberately or inadvertently, the TTP's agenda due to the presence of Punjabi militants also got "sectarianised". Worse, the sectarian agenda within Pakistan got expanded, bloody and extremely violent.

There was a sectarian faultline within Pakistan, much before the creation of the TTP during the last decade, and even the Afghan Taliban during the 1990s. However, the sectarian attacks were not as bloody as one could witness during the last ten years in Pakistan. Also, the target of sectarian militants today seems to have expanded and increasing further. While the Shias have been the primary target of the Sunni militants, along with the Ahmediyas, today the sectarian targets include even those who practice Sufi Islam, within the Sunni fold.

Return of the Punjabi militants from the tribal regions to the mainland (especially Punjab) will pose a bigger threat to Pakistan. As mentioned above, though there existed sectarian violence within Pakistan for a long time, the intensity and casualty in the recent years have been taken to a different level, with the use of suicide bombs and attacks on places of worship.

And if they draw their inspiration from the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, it would spell disaster to the sectarian harmony, which is already under strain. Since the Islamic State in Iraq has been using sectarian violence as a powerful tool, the sectarian militants in Punjab may also get influenced and linked with the larger conflict at the international level. Any such links with external actors, will further increase the potency and ideological vehemence.

If the above merger happens, then the Punjabi Taliban will become the primary component of the TTP, as the Swat Taliban had become under Mullah Fazlullah.

IV

Will the Lashkar-e-Toiba get Unleashed?

From an Indian perspective, within the larger militantsphere in Pakistan, the most important question will always be related to the Lashkar-e-Toiba, Jamaat-ud-Dawa and Hafiz Saeed.

Is there a change in Pakistan's approach towards the above three, post Peshawar attack? Second, irrespective of the change within the Establishment, are the militants belonging to the LeT likely to pursue an independent approach?

Then above two questions are important, for it would have larger implications for India.

Is there a paradigm shift vis-a-vis LeT, JuD and Hafiz Saeed within Pakistan?

The State in Pakistan recently in January 2015 has announced freezing the bank account of the Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD). According to the foreign office note, "JuD and some other organizations are listed by the United Nations. Pakistan, as a member of the United Nations is under obligation

to proscribe the entities and individuals are listed...Bank accounts of such entities and individuals have been frozen..."

While Pakistan has been a member of the UN for a long time, the fact that the announcement of freezing the assets of the JuD (and not banning it) comes after Kerry's visit clearly underlines where the pressure has come from. The issue in LeT's context is not an official note or announcement, but the sincerity behind the Establishment (political and military) to implement the same.

The accounts of JUD were in fact frozen in 2008 itself, through an official announcement. Hafiz Saeed has been put under house arrest. But the JuD continue to thrive and collect funds; Hafiz Saeed has been given official protection and the learned courts have found it difficult to convict him, given the lukewarm cases and the provisions under which they were filed.

While a section within Pakistan has been asking for a complete ban of all militant organizations, whether they are fighting within the country or outside, the State has been reluctant for a long time to touch the LeT and JuD. There is enough literature today available within Pakistan, linking sections of the Establishment (both political and military) with the JuD. It was no secret that a section within Pakistan's Establishment perceived and promoted Hafiz Saeed and his organization as its proxy against India.

Hafiz Saeed, for his part was also willing to play the role of a perfect proxy. Until today, the Lashkar never turned its guns within Pakistan against any State or non-State targets. Despite the pressure on the JuD after the Mumbai attacks, Hafiz Saeed has been willing to play a larger role designed by his supporters. Will this change now, after the official "freezing" of JuD accounts? Will this become a "Lal Masjid" event vis-a-vis the Lashkar? It is generally believe that the militants within Pakistan turned against the State, after Musharraf's operations in Lal Masjid.

Pakistan has mastered the art of playing double game vis-a-vis Hafiz Saeed. He may be arrested the or kept under house arrest, only to be released shortly by the Courts, as the provisions of his arrests would be purposefully made under weak sections. Lashkar may be banned by law, but will be allowed to function, collect funds and operate in public.

Rise of Lakhvi and New Generation Militants: Will the LeT chart a new paradigm?

It is unlikely that Hafiz Saeed will go rogue and turn against the State in Pakistan now. He has been closely knit with a section of not only the military Establishment, but also the political Establishment, especially the PML-N. It is no coincidence that a Minister in PML-N (Rana Tanveer Hussain) vouched for the JuD not having any links with the Lashkar; he was quoted saying "The JuD only pinches India, not Afghanistan nor America. You can cant group it also with ISIS and al Qaeda."

Hafiz Saeed will not turn rogue for another reason; he is well aware that the State is playing a double game and protecting him within Pakistan. The UN may have proscribed him and the US announced for a bounty on his head; but he is moving freely within Pakistan, organising events and marches under the protection of guards provided by the State. He is also well aware, despite

the cases against him for his role in the Mumbai attacks, they were purposefully filed and pursued in a weak manner. The State will announce a ban; but the Courts will give free him.

The real problem for Pakistan may not come from Hafiz Saeed. Rather it will come from his ability to keep the Lashkar united, and prevent its fighters from moving closer to the Pakistani Taliban. Lashkar today is not what it was when it became a potent force in the 1980s. Hafiz Saeed is no more the undisputed leader of the Lashkar as he was during the 1980s and 1990s. In the fourth decade of its presence, Lashkar has also witnessed new leaders, and perhaps, even new generation of fighters. It is difficult to fathom that the handlers of the Lashkar will liaison only with Hafiz Saeed and give full functional autonomy to run his organization. History of covert operations has not witnessed such a strategy of keeping the lines of communication with a single person.

The rise of Zaki ur Rehman Lakhvi should tell a different story about what is happening within the Lashkar hierarchy. Though information at this moment is sketchy and not clear, there is enough literature from writings within Pakistan to the David Coleman interrogations about the emerging differences within the Lashkar. Lakhvi's association with the Mumbai attacks and the weak legal case built by the State may have increased his image amongst the Lashkar. There have been murmurs about the divide within the Lashkar cutting across the generational gap.

The bigger threat to Hafiz Saeed's control will rather come from the new generation militants who have been fighting elsewhere and not in India. When Pakistan had decided to curb the Lashkar activities in India following the Mumbai attack, it did not completely disband its network within. As a result, at the leadership level the Lashkar and JuD may have decided to go slow in pursuing violence, but not its cadres. One is not sure, whether these militants and those who have been joining the organization in the last few years were asked only to do social work within Pakistan, or had a mind of their own and fought elsewhere. If latter is the case, it is only a matter of time, before they start finding another leader within the LeT fold, or outside it.

Will Lakhvi finally take over, or take the complete operational control with Hafiz Saeed being relegated? Much would depend on how strong the State in Pakistan remains in countering the militants. While the recent initiatives such the establishment of the military courts are a positive development, the State appears confused in pursuing any action against the LeT and JuD. Formal statements on freezing the JuD assets blame the UN resolution for taking those measures, than actually owning up. News papers within Pakistan have been asking for clarity on this issue in terms of State's position vis-a-vis the JuD and Huqqani Network.

Perhaps, the State fears a reprisal and does not want to be seen as taking actions on its own against the JuD. Will such a reservation help the State to pursue a wholehearted strategy against the Lashkar? Or, a half-hearted effort against the Lashkar and its affiliate organizations such as the JuD will only worsen the situation further?