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ZARB-e-AZB: An Evaluation of Pakistan Army's Anti-Taliban Operations in North Waziristan

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ZARB-e-AZB: An Evaluation of Pakistan Army's Anti-Taliban Operations in North Waziristan

by

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PREFACE

Terrorism has been synonymous with Pakistan for years. Post 9/11, Pakistan had an opportunity to make a break with its use of jihadist terrorism as an instrument of state policy. But despite all the international pressure and notwithstanding all its claims of becoming a frontline partner in the Global War on Terror, Pakistan continued to support and provide sanctuary to jihadists, especially those who escaped the US-led offensive in Afghanistan. The safe havens that these terrorists found in Pakistan, especially in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) region and in the Pashtun belt of Balochistan – the Quetta Shura – ensured that the ISAF war effort in Afghanistan failed to pacify that hapless country. But while the security situation in Afghanistan steadily deteriorated because of the cross-border operations of Pakistan-based terrorists, these groups also expanded their activities inside Pakistan. As a result, Pakistan started becoming a victim of its own monsters.

From around 2003-04, Pakistan carried out a number of military operations in various parts of FATA. But most of these operations were at the tactical level and not part of any grand strategy to combat jihadist terror groups. Some of these operations were the result of mounting pressure from the US and other members of the international community, and some others because the depredations of the Pakistani Taliban had crossed threshold of tolerance. While the Pakistan Army did manage to wrest possession, if not control, of the areas where it carried out the operations, the problem of Taliban remained in place. Over a period of time, North Waziristan Agency (NWA) became something of a Terror Central, what with all Taliban groups establishing their bases in the territory and using it to mount attacks not just in Afghanistan but also in Pakistan. It wasn't only an epicentre of terrorism but a veritable Witches Brew of all sorts of disreputable characters – drug smugglers, kidnappers, extortionists, target killers and what have you.

For years, the Americans had been leaning on Pakistan to carry out operations against the terror bases in NWA. But under one pretext or another, the Pakistanis avoided, delayed and even opposed any kinetic operations in this area. A number of reasons were proffered for this apparent ambivalence and reluctance on part of Pakistan to move against the terror networks based in NWA. Apart from the obvious fear of a massive counter-retaliation by the

Taliban, there was also the whole issue of 'good' (pro-Pakistan) Taliban who had to be protected because they were serving Pakistan's strategic interests versus the 'bad' (anti-Pakistan) Taliban who were attacking Pakistan and needed to be taken out. The problem ostensibly was that any steam-roller operation in NWA wouldn't be able to keep this distinction intact. It is another matter that this was a specious and self-serving distinction made by the Pakistan establishment because the 'good' and 'bad' Taliban were inextricably linked with each other.

In June last, the new Pakistan Army chief, Gen Raheel Sharif, decided to bite the bullet and launch the much awaited operation in NWA. But there are serious doubts about how honourable and sincere are the motivations behind Operation Zarb-e-Azb. On the one hand, there is an undeniable external dimension, namely the pressure from the Chinese who are deeply apprehensive of Uighur terrorists operating from NWA, and of course the issue of US aid and continuing engagement with Pakistan which is linked in no small measure to Pakistan's dependence on NWA. The external dimension also ties in with the so-called end-game in Afghanistan. Pakistan knows that post-withdrawal it will need China and the US to bankroll Afghanistan and therefore needs to reassure both these countries that their interests – economic and security – will be taken care of.

The big question however remains whether Pakistan has indeed ended the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' Taliban and, if it has, then does this apply to all hues of the Islamist/Jihadist spectrum, including those groups which target India? Although the declared stand of the Pakistani authorities is that this applies across the board, a position that has been emphatically reiterated after the Peshawar school massacre, facts on ground suggest that not much has changed. While the Lashkar-e-Taiba/Jamaatud Dawa have demonstrated the impunity with which they function by organising their congregation in Lahore, there are reports that 'good' Taliban – Quetta Shura and Haqqani network – have been relatively untouched by Operation Zarb-e-Azb. The Haqqanis have reportedly been provided new sanctuaries inside Pakistan, the Quetta Shura continues to receive support as is clear from the fact that efforts are underway to accommodate them in the Afghan power structure. The problem with this sort of an approach is not only that religiously motivated terror groups metamorphose over time and their

objectives change – the Pakistani Taliban is a prime example of this immutable reality and this could be repeated with the groups currently being propped up – these groups are also in cahoots with each other and could easily bit the hand that feeds them.

The other big problem is that while the Army is making claims of shifting focus and troops from the Indian border to build up troop presence for carrying out operations against the Taliban, there are questions about the veracity of these claims. Given that the army continues to define the threat from India as its primary strategic threat and has made its entire Afghan strategy with an eye on India, it doesn't make sense for the army to reduce its presence on the Eastern front. Moreover, the fact that the Pakistan army is making extensive use of air power and other conventional war weapons like armour and artillery to target Taliban, should reduce the need for the troop levels that would otherwise be required for anti-insurgency operations. All the data on troop levels in this paper is based on open source information which in turn is made available by the Pakistan Army. There is therefore a need to re-examine is indeed Pakistan has committed the number of troops its claims it has in the military operations against the Taliban. Or is it the case that these number have been deliberately inflated to extract money from the donor countries, in particular the USA which gives Pakistan the Coalition Support Fund for carrying out operations which ironically Pakistan claims is a war for its survival.

The final question is that if the operations are as successful as the Pakistan army claims, then where have all the terrorists gone. Some have obviously been killed in the operations, but these are only about 10% of the total strength of terrorists. Other have crossed the border into Afghanistan. Still others are believed to have fled to other parts of Pakistan. But how many of these terrorists, especially those belonging to Punjab, have been turned around and sent to launching pads in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir? This is an issue of grave and immediate concern to India.

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Prologue

On December 16, 1971, Pakistan changed forever when it got divided with the liberation of Bangladesh. Forty three years to the date, on December 16, 2014, it appeared for a moment that another epochal event was unfolding – the barbaric massacre in the Army Public School, Peshawar, with over 130 children being butchered with unparalleled savagery – that would unite Pakistan, against both terrorism and the extremism that had rent asunder the social fabric of the country. The anguish and anger caused by the outrage in Peshawar was being seen as a game-changer.¹ Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif declared that Pakistan would no longer make any distinction between 'good' and 'bad' Taliban and would do whatever it takes to eliminate terrorism.² The Army Chief, Gen Raheel Sharif, said that the massacre had only strengthened the resolve of the army and it would 'go after the inhuman beasts, their facilitators till their final elimination'.³

Immediately, retaliatory strikes were carried out, mostly in the Khyber agency but some also in parts of North Waziristan Agency (NWA). In about one week of air strikes, claims were made of nearly 200 terrorists being killed. There has been a lot of talk of renewed vigour in the anti-terrorist campaign and taking the much vaunted Operation Zarb-e-Azb in NWA and Operation Khyber – 1 in Khyber Agency to their logical conclusions and disrupt, degrade and destroy the terrorist networks. The media, political parties and even the judiciary and civil society, all seem to be clamouring for a fight to the finish against the Islamist terrorists.

But the big question is: how long will this sentiment last? How long before reality on ground, strategic exigencies and political compulsions start impinging on the resolve being expressed. After all, Peshawar is neither the first nor even the worst (at least not in terms of casualties, though it is arguably the worst in terms of the barbarity on display) attack in Pakistan. In

¹“School massacrePakistan’s 9/11: Sartaj”, Dawn 20/12/2104, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1152041/school-massacre-pakistans-911-sartaj>
Zulfiqar Ali, “Disntinction between good, bad Taliban no more: PM”, Dawn 18/12/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1151550/distinction-between-good-bad-taliban-no-more-pm>
²“Terrorists are enemies of humanity:COAS”, The Express Tribune 17/12/2014, accessed at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/808102/terrorists-are-enemies-of-humanity-coas/>

previous terrorist attacks similar sentiments had been expressed only to see business as usual after the dust settled. This was also not the first time that families of army officers had been targeted – that dubious honour is reserved for the attack on the Parade Lane Mosque in Rawalpindi in which around 40 people were killed including senior serving and retired officers and their family members.⁴

In the five years since the Parade Lane attack, there was hardly any paradigm change in the Pakistan military's strategic orientation or policy regarding the Taliban. During this period, despite some operations against the 'bad' Taliban, by and large there was tolerance for the Taliban operating in Pakistan lest it disturb the larger strategic game plan of using the Afghan Taliban and affiliated groups like the Haqqani Network in Afghanistan. Chances there fore are that Peshawar too will not lead to any earth-shattering change in strategy. The Pakistan Army will, of course, go all out against the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) factions opposed to or fighting against the Pakistani state. But beyond this, there is unlikely to be any major change in either policy or strategy, Operation Zarb-e-Azb notwithstanding.

Why this will be so is what this paper, which was completed long before the Peshawar massacre, is all about. Despite the outpouring of grief, shock and revulsion caused by the Peshawar massacre, we don't feel the need to re-examine the conclusions we have reached in this paper. The two most important reasons why we don't think anything will change are:

- 1) Although the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' Taliban has been ended, what the Pakistani establishment has not specified is whether Mullah Omar of the Afghan Taliban is a 'good' or a 'bad' Taliban. This is important because as long as Pakistan continues to separate the Afghan Taliban from the Pakistani Taliban, the problem of Taliban isn't going anywhere. Talibanisation is a Pakistani concept and construct which was exported to Afghanistan and not the other way round. In other words, Taliban are intrinsic to Pakistan and installing the Taliban in Kabul will only give strength to the Pakistani Taliban;

Shakeel Anjum, "40 killed in Rawalpindi mosque suicide attack", The News 5/12/2009, accessed at http://e.thenews.com.pk/tp_details.asp?id=25910

- 2) As long as Pakistan continues to nurture, support, and permit terrorist groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba/Jamaatud Dawa (JuD/LeT) to function in the country, the problem of terrorism within and without isn't going to go away. The JuD/LeT might be assets today, but so was the TTP until not too long back. The longer Pakistan delays acting against groups like LeT/JuD, the more difficult it will become to take them on later because every day that action is delayed against them adds to their strength and contributes to weakening of the Pakistani state in equal measure.

Pakistan's tactical approach to terrorism – playing one group against another, or dividing groups (mostly by weaning away some top leaders) to make them more manageable hasn't really been very successful in the past, and is unlikely to work in the future. And yet, this is likely to be the course that the military establishment will take against the Pakistani Taliban. This it will do in the fond hope of getting the best of both worlds: re-establish control over the jihadists and at the same time use them as instruments of state policy. But this is a policy that will backfire because it won't address the root of the problem viz. extremism in society. Therefore, on December 17th, 2014, Pakistan remained what it was on December 16, 2014.

Sword of the Prophet, or that of Damocles?

On June 15, 2014, the Pakistan military spokesman, Maj Gen Asim Bajwa announced the commencement of what had for long been touted as the 'mother of all military operations' against the Pakistani Taliban.⁵ For more than half a decade, Pakistan had resisted all pressure and persuasion by the Americans to take action in NWA, which by all accounts had become a 'terror central' in the Af-Pak region. Titled Zarb-e-Azb (ZeA) or "Strike of the Sword of Prophet Mohammed", the military operation in NWA of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), was declared as being 'comprehensive...against foreign and local terrorists'.⁶ The Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) chief went to the extent of calling ZeA 'a war of survival' and emphatically stated that there would be no discrimination

⁵Ismail Khan, "All out military operation launched in North Waziristan", Dawn 16/6/2014 accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1112949/all-out-military-operation-launched-in-north-waziristan>

⁶Kamran Yousaf et. al., "Zarb-e-Azb: Full scale assault begins in North Waziristan", The Express Tribune 16/6/2014 accessed at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/722436/zarb-e-azb-full-scale-assault-begins-in-north-waziristan/>

against 'good' and 'bad' Taliban.⁷ This was an effort to address the doubts on whether or not the Pakistan army was once again indulging in a smokescreen and while making a big show of the 'largest anti-insurgency operation of its kind in the world',⁸ was going to spare the 'good' Taliban like the notorious Haqqani Network and friendly Taliban warlords like Hafiz Gul Bahadur.

In a media briefing on June 26, 2014, the ISPR chief discussed the reason for launching the operation. He said that NWA had become "a stronghold of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and a hub of terrorist activities".⁹ But this was hardly a revelation because for years the entire world had been saying the same thing and yet the Pakistan army refused to move and restore the 'writ of the government', which the ISPR chief said was the objective of Operation ZeA. In the same briefing, the Pakistan army, with its characteristic bombast, declared that 'the terrorists were entrapped in North Waziristan and would not be given a chance to escape'.¹⁰ But three and a half months down the line, it became quite clear that most of the terrorists had indeed escaped or, as the sceptics maintain, were allowed to escape the much vaunted dragnet of the Pakistan Army. The ZeA operation has, however, continued, both on ground and from air. Its slow pace in recovering territory is defended on the grounds that the army will proceed in a calculated and deliberate manner because it is not subject to limitations of either time or legitimacy.¹¹

In its wake, however, Operation ZeA has raised more questions than it has answered. These include: Having resisted this operation for so many years, what prompted the Pakistan Army to conduct this 'steam-roller' operation and that too on the eve of the withdrawal of US-led NATO troops from Afghanistan? Does this Operation signify a paradigm shift in the strategy of the Pakistan army from seeking 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan

⁷Syed Irfan Raza, "Zarb-i-Azb is war of survival, says ISPR chief", Dawn 27/6/2014 accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1115371/zarb-i-azb-is-war-of-survival-says-ispr-chief>

⁸Wajahat S Khan in Yeh Kya Baat Huyi on Capital TV, 11 October 2014, accessed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBnnQczlQiw>

⁹"All terrorists, including Haqqanis, to be tackled: DG ISPR", The News 27/6/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-31199-All-terrorists-including-Haqqanis-to-be-tackled-DG-ISPR>

¹⁰Op. cit.

¹¹Wajahat S Khan, "Zarb-e-Azb: Gear up for the forever war", The News 14/10/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-33451-Zarb-e-Azb-Gear-up-for-the-forever-war>

to seeking 'strategic safety' within Pakistan by re-establishing the control of the Pakistani state in areas where it de facto had ceased to exist? Or, is this an eyewash to play all sides of the end-game in Afghanistan, i.e. make the show of an operation and win financial, diplomatic and other support from the West for its efforts while at the same time give enough space to 'friendly' or 'good Taliban' like the Haqqanis, the Afghan Taliban and other potentially useable Taliban, to seek new safe havens within Pakistan and in Afghanistan and in the process regain control of the 'jihadist infrastructure' so that it can be deployed in a more fruitful and useful manner in pursuit of larger strategic objectives? Is it still within the capacity and capability of the Pakistan Army to rein in, much less eliminate, the local Taliban and jihadists, or have things slipped out of the hand of the Pakistan military which is now engaged in a futile rear-guard action and in the process is getting enmeshed in the quagmire it has itself created?

Is ZeA a personal agenda of the new Army Chief or is it an institutional response to a perceived threat? Equally important is the question of whether it was driven by the political tussle between the military and the civilian government or by considerations of national security? This question gains salience given the reluctance of the Nawaz Sharif government to launch a full-fledged operation in NWA even though the army seemed itching to go in. The fact that the launch of the operation was announced not by the civilian government but by the military spokesman, and the Prime Minister only rubber stamped the action the next day suggests that the government was confronted with a fait accompli.¹² Shockingly enough, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa chief minister claimed that neither he, nor the governor of the province who is the point person for FATA, nor even the Peshawar Corps Commander were aware of when the operation, which was impending for long, would be launched.¹³

Most important, of course, is the question of whether or not this operation will achieve either its stated objective and/or, as it is widely suspected and alleged, its 'hidden' objectives, which range from taking

¹²Salman Masood, "Government, Army clear the air over op ownership", *The Nation* 20/6/2014, accessed at <http://nation.com.pk/national/20-Jun-2014/govt-army-clear-the-air-over-op-ownership>

¹³Manzoor Ali, "Off guard: 'K-P CM, Corps Commander were unaware of operation's timing'", *The Express Tribune* 20/6/2014, accessed at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/724404/off-guard-k-p-cm-corps-commander-were-unaware-of-operations-timing/>

control of the jihadist infrastructure, dominating the end-game in Afghanistan, and using both these for pursuing its larger strategic designs in the region and beyond. Given the past track record of Pakistan military operations against entrenched Taliban bases in FATA and their networks around Pakistan, there is little cause for optimism.

Déjà vu

Notwithstanding all the drumbeating that accompanied the launch of ZeA and the claims of stupendous successes notched up by the 'valiant' armed forces of Pakistan against the Taliban and other Islamist terror groups based in NWA, there is an unmistakable sense of déjà vu about the operation. From around 2002-03, the Pakistan army had launched at least a dozen or more major operations in various parts of FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province against the Taliban and their affiliates. Much of what was witnessed during those operations in terms of military tactics and strategy, the propaganda surrounding the operation and tightly controlled information flow by restricting access to independent media, the claims and counter-claims about success or otherwise of the operations, the mass dislocation of civilians, the 'scorched earth' policy in which entire towns and villages were razed to the ground, the image building of the army, is once again on display.¹⁴ But just as all the operations that preceded ZeA haven't really solved the terrorism problem even to the limited extent that they were supposed to, there are serious doubts about the success of ZeA in terms of the restoring the writ of the Pakistani state on a long term and sustainable basis under a civilian dispensation without the permanent presence or even shadow of the army hanging over not just NWA but also all the other Agencies of FATA.

On the face of it, there is a sort of national consensus behind ZeA. The media (bludgeoned into submission after the failed assassination attempt on journalist Hamid Mir), political parties and civil society, all appear to be backing the offensive in NWA. But a lot of this consensus is not only manufactured and forced, but has also been on display in past operations, only it dissipated just as quickly as it was forged. The ruling

¹⁴Sailab Mehsud, "Footprints: Dispatches from North Waziristan", Dawn 8/7/2014 accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1117751/footprints-dispatches-from-north-waziristan>

party, Pakistan Muslim League faction led by Nawaz Sharif (PMLN), for instance, has literally being forced to endorse the operation because its political survival depends on kowtowing to the military, more so after the serious tensions that erupted between the government and the military over issues like the treason trial of former military dictator Gen Pervez Musharraf, relations with India and the government's support for the Geo/Jang media network which the army was wanting to take down. Although Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his interior minister, Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan, were not keen on an all-out operation, once it started they had no option but to back it.

The main opposition party, Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaaf (PTI), was dead opposed to the operation. Just two weeks before the formal commencement of the Operation ZeA, Imran Khan 'appealed' to the army to stop all offensive operations in NWA and restart the dialogue because he feared that the army was getting sucked into a conspiracy to separate NWA from Pakistan.¹⁵ Of course, once the operation started, Imran Khan's tone changed and he 'prayed for the success of the operation'.¹⁶ The quid pro quo for Imran Khan from the army's side became clear a few weeks later when he mounted a no holds barred political campaign against the Nawaz Sharif government. The political parties that suffered the brunt of attacks from the TTP, i.e. Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) and Awami National Party (ANP) backed the military. But the religious parties like Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam faction led by Maulana Fazlur Rehman (JUIF) and Jamaat Islami kept making carping sounds. Maulana Fazlur Rehman of JUIF even went to the extent of saying that the Pakistan army had even surpassed India and Sri Lanka in using force against its people.¹⁷ But even he didn't openly oppose the operation.

While some political parties hope to curry favour with the military brass and get its support for their political plans, others were willing to pay

¹⁵Azam Khan, "Air Strikes: PTI chief warns of secession plot in North Waziristan", The Express Tribune 28/5/2014, accessed at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/714191/air-strikes-pti-chief-warns-of-secession-plot-in-north-waziristan/>

¹⁶Peer Muhammad, "Groundswell of support: PTI endorses operation to flush out Waziristan militants", The Express Tribune 17/6/2014, accessed at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/722854/groundswell-of-support-pti-endorses-operation-to-flush-out-waziristan-militants/>

¹⁷Muhammad Alam Khan, "Use of force no solution, says Fazl", The News 26/6/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-31184-Use-of-force-no-solution-says-Fazl>

lip service in support so that they didn't fall foul of the army, something that could adversely affect their political fortunes. In other words the army had led the politicians by the nose on the issue of operations, what with most top politicians changing their positions overnight, not out of conviction but compulsion. This is exactly what happened during previous operations, especially the Swat operation – Rah-e-Rast. The Awami National Party government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was willing to go to the extent of even brushing aside the Taliban flogging of a girl because they didn't want to jeopardise the 'peace deal' with the Taliban.¹⁸ And yet, once the military decided to launch the operation, they threw the same peace deal in the rubbish bin. Other right-wing parties like PMLN, JI, JUI-F also lent either open or muted support once that operation commenced.

ZeA is not the first operation that has been touted as a 'war for Pakistan's survival'. Most of the previous operations – Swat and South Waziristan (SWA) – had earlier been given similar titles.¹⁹ What is more, some of them had also been hyped as the 'mother of all battles', especially Rah-e-Rast in South Waziristan, the outcome of which, it was said, would determine the direction of militancy in Pakistan.²⁰ Of course, nearly five years after the operation was launched in SWA and claims were made of eliminating the 'centre of gravity' of Pakistani Taliban militancy, the tribal agency remains disturbed, the military presence remains in place, the Internally Displaced People (IDP) remain displaced, and the centre of gravity shifted quite seamlessly from SWA to NWA. In fact, this is what happened during every operation in an area that was labelled as centre of gravity.²¹ For instance, after Operation Sherdil was launched in 2008 in Bajaur, also described as a 'centre of gravity', the Taliban led by Maulvi Faqir shifted to Mohmand.²²

There are also other commonalities between Operation ZeA and other operations that preceded it in other tribal agencies. A couple of days

¹⁸Essa Khankhel & Daud Khattak, "NWFP govt, Taliban term video release conspiracy", The News 4/4/2009, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/TodaysPrintDetail.aspx?ID=21320&Cat=13&dt=4/4/2009>

¹⁹See for eg. Jahangir Badr's interview in Friday Times 22/5/2009

²⁰Sayed Bokhari in The Battle for Waziristan, DAWN 17/10/2009; Also Rahimullah Yusufzai in 'Mother of all battles', The News International 25/10/2009

²¹Cyril Almeida in 'The Half Fought War', DAWN 30/10/2009

²²Ismail Khan in 'No timeframe to call off operation', DAWN 30/9/2008, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/323539/no-timeframe-to-call-off-operation>

into ZeA, and amid reports that militants of the Haqqani Network had started relocating to other areas, the ISPR chief Maj Gen Bajwa claimed that the cordon had been tightened to “thwart any attempt by terrorists to escape during the evacuation process of IDPs”.²³ Senior government ministers claimed that the noose had tightened around the terrorists and they were encircled with their escape routes effectively cut off.²⁴ Something similar was claimed by the Pakistan army in a briefing to the political leadership at the time of Operation Rah-e-Rast in Swat. At that time the army is reported to have proclaimed that “all escape routes had been plugged and that the militants would not be allowed to flee to other areas to reorganise”.²⁵ During Operation Rah-e-Nijat in South Waziristan the then information minister Qamaruzzaman Kaira declared that the terrorists in the agency had been 'surrounded from all sides and there is no chance for them to escape in large numbers'.²⁶ In Bajaur, Mohmand and Khyber agencies too similar claims were made.²⁷ But the end result was always that almost all the leadership and most of the Taliban cadre escaped practically unscathed. In the case of ZeA, three weeks into the operation, the defence minister Khwaja Asif (who really holds only a ceremonial position and has practically no say in any defence-related matter) was forced to admit that most of the terrorist had already escaped even before the operation started.²⁸

Yet another similarity between ZeA and earlier operations is that the military declares victory quite prematurely. A few weeks into ZeA, the army claimed that it had cleansed townships like Miranshah (the capital of NWA) and Mir Ali and most of the areas in the Tochi river valley which have been the focus of the first phase of the military offensive. But in operation after

²³ “US drone strike kills six in NWA”, The News 19/6/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-31022-US-drone-strike-kills-six-in-NWA>; also see op.cit (5).

²⁴ “Closing in: Troops have encircled terrorist havens, says government”, The Express Tribune 20/6/2014 accessed at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/724393/closing-in-troops-have-encircled-terrorist-havens-says-govt/>

²⁵ Tariq Butt, 'Swat Operation to end in eight weeks', The News International 17/5/2009, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/TodaysPrintDetail.aspx?ID=178041&Cat=2&dt=5/16/2009>

²⁶ Muhammad Anis, “Evidence of Indian hand in SWA unrest found: ISPR”, The News 3/11/2009, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/TodaysPrintDetail.aspx?ID=25354&Cat=13&dt=11/3/2009>

²⁷ “Forces claim victory in Bajaur Agency”, The News 1/3/2009, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/TodaysPrintDetail.aspx?ID=20655&Cat=13&dt=3/3/2009>;

²⁸ “There's no such thing as a good Taliban!”, Pakistan Today 7/7/2014 accessed at <http://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2014/07/07/national/theres-no-such-thing-as-a-good-taliban/>

military operation, the army had announced that it had cleared 80 or 90% of an area. A few months down the line, reports appear of the same area being cleared again and then again.²⁹ In places like Bajaur, Mohmand, Orakzai, Khyber and even SWA, operations are declared as complete and then reports appear about another operation in the same area.³⁰ Importantly, even where the army toms-toms its success, it has been unable to transfer control to the civilian authorities and has remained enmeshed in keeping the Taliban at bay.

An important reason for this is the experience which the army had in places like Swat, where after an operation they withdrew only to see the Taliban make a comeback.³¹ What is equally worrisome is that wherever the army has maintained a presence post an operation and the IDPs have been able to return to their homes, the Taliban presence continues to loom large. Not only do the Taliban carry out targeted attacks against both civilian supporters of the army and security force personnel – a prime example being that of the blowing up of the vehicle of GOC Swat Maj Gen Sanaullah Niazi in an IED blast³² – but also appear all set to recapture the areas they were pushed out from by the military the day the army withdraws.

In many areas, despite claims of having cleared it off the Taliban, the IDPs have not been able to go back to their homes either because the towns and villages they lived in were flattened by the Pakistan army offensive or because the areas are still not safe to allow people to come back.³³ There is, therefore, little reason to believe that the experience in other areas where the military has launched offensives will not be repeated in NWA, even less so because all the portents suggest that even though the Taliban may have

²⁹See for example two stories with the same headline "90 pc of Orakzai cleared of terrorists" but four years apart from each other: <http://www.thenews.com.pk/TodaysPrintDetail.aspx?ID=1617&Cat=13&dt=1/5/2011> and <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-7-282704-90pc-of-Orakzai-cleared-of-militants>

³⁰For Example see Tayyab Ali Shah, "Pakistan's Bajaur Agency Emerges as New Hub for Islamist Militancy", *Terrorism Monitor* Volume: 8 Issue: 32, accessed at http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=36739&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=457&no_cache=1#.VJg-2V4AM;

³¹Khadim Hussain, "In the grip of fear", *Dawn* 13/10/2012, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/756515/in-the-grip-of-fear>

³²Delawar Jan, "Maj Gen, Limit Col martyred in Dir Attack", *The News* 16/9/2013, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-25473-Maj-Gen-Lt-Col-martyred-in-Dir-attack>

³³"Yearning for home: Mehsud IDPs demand repatriation", *The Express Tribune* 13/2/2014 accessed at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/671119/yearning-for-home-mehsud-idps-demand-repatriation/>; also see Zia Ur Rehman, "Is it time to go back home?", *The Friday Times* Vol XXIV, No. 32, September 21-27, 2012

lost their redoubt in NWA, their network, firepower, and strike ability hasn't been degraded to the point where they no longer pose a potent challenge to the writ of the Pakistani state.

The similarities between all the previous operations and ZeA also extend in the claims of the punishment that has been inflicted on the Taliban in terms of casualties, busting of their bases, unearthing and demolition of their arms dumps, fortifications, IED manufacturing units, and suicide bomber and militant training facilities.³⁴ Given that there is no independent verification of these claims, this is probably a lot easier to push through the media while the operation is on. For instance, for weeks if not months, the media religiously reported tens of casualties on a daily basis in airstrikes and gunship helicopter attacks in Orakzai agency.³⁵ But there was absolutely no way of verifying the accuracy of these figures. What is more, there was no way of confirming the identity of the people who were killed, whether they were combatants or civilians.

The same kind of claims are being made for the air attacks being carried out in ZeA. There is, however, one difference. Given the massive displacement that has taken place during ZeA, there are eyewitness accounts of heavy collateral damage in the airstrikes in NWA. Of course, a sort of media clampdown and strict control over information (including blocking access for journalists and non-jihadi NGOs to some of the IDP camps) has meant that the full story hasn't really come out.³⁶ While these big claims can be explained away in terms of the propaganda war that invariably accompanies the actual fighting, the problem comes after victory has been declared because that is the time when the hollowness of many of these claims becomes visible in terms of continuing attacks by the terrorists.

For the Pakistan army, the military operations have served as an

³⁴ISPR Press Release No. PR450/2009-ISPR dated 31/10/2009, accessed at https://www.ispr.gov.pk/front/main.asp?o=t-press_release&date=2009/10/31;

³⁵See for example "Over 100 militants killed in Orakzai blitz", *The News* 24/5/2010, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/TodaysPrintDetail.aspx?ID=29044&Cat=13&dt=5/24/2010>; also see "32 Taliban killed in Orakzai airstrikes, clashes", *Dawn* 17/5/2010, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/857170/32-taliban-killed-in-orakzai-air-strike-clashes>

³⁶Mahvish Ahmed & Anum Naz, "Pakistan has turned against us: Voices from North Waziristan", video interview 24/6/2014 on tanqeed.org, accessed at <http://www.tanqeed.org/2014/07/pakistan-has-turned-against-us-voices-from-north-waziristan/#sthash.fRP01cLd.dpbs>; Also see Taha Siddiqui, "Footprints: Extremist bodies run IDP relief efforts", *Dawn* 4/7/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1116927/footprints-extremist-bodies-run-idp-relief-efforts>

excellent opportunity to refurbish their image in the eyes of the public. The army's stock had fallen badly during the last couple of years of the Musharraf era. But the operations in Swat in 2009 were used to rally the public around the army, and the media played a critical role in this entire publicity campaign. With its image as the saviour and defender of Pakistan restored, the army was not only able to recover the political ground it had lost to the civilian dispensation, but also reassert its primacy in security policy making. This is partly an outcome of the civilian government voluntarily ceding space to the military by giving a free hand to the army chief to take whatever decision he deems fit in conducting the operations, without any civilian oversight over the military.³⁷ At the time of the South Waziristan operation, this was the mistake made by the then Prime Minister, Yusuf Raza Gilani, and in case of the NWA operation a similar mistake has been made by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

From the point of view of the generals, wars, while they are on, tend to put a Teflon coating on the army's top brass. As a result, the power balance between the civilian government and the military, which was already tilted in the latter's favour, gets even more lopsided. This is precisely what happened in the past with Gen Ashfaq Kayani after the Swat and SWA operations, and is now happening with his successor, Gen Raheel Sharif with ZeA. Just as Gen Kayani was able to break out of the shadow of Musharraf with the Swat and SWA operations, Gen Raheel Sharif has been able to come into his own with ZeA. In the case of both these army chiefs, there has been a major image building exercise in which they have been projected as brilliant, fearless, wise, cunning, and all-conquering heroic generals.³⁸ Other general officers too have benefitted from the glowing accounts in the media of their exploits. For instance, the former Inspector General Frontier Corps (IGFC) and later Corps Commander Mangla, Lt. Gen. Tariq Khan, was lauded for his leadership during the operation in Bajaur.³⁹

³⁷ Abrar Saeed, "Army to decide launch of SWA operation", *The Nation* 17/10/2014, accessed at <http://nation.com.pk/politics/17-Oct-2009/Army-to-decide-launch-of-SWA-operation>

³⁸ See for eg. Syed Shoaib Hasan, "Rise of Pakistan's quiet man", *BBC News* 17/6/2009, accessed at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7024719.stm

³⁹ Isambard Wilkinson, "The man who is defeating Pakistan's Taliban", *The national* 29/7/2009, accessed at <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/the-man-whos-defeating-pakistan-taliban>; also see Ejaz Haider, "Insight: The soldier and the lover", *Daily Times* 17/9/2009, accessed at <http://archives.dailytimes.com.pk/editorial/17-Sep-2009/insight-the-soldier-and-the-lover-ejaz-haider>

Thus it is that the despite the hype and hoopla surrounding ZeA, scepticism abounds about the efficacy and the intention behind this operation. A lot of this has to do with uncanny similarities with past operations which seem to reaffirm that much of what is being seen and projected today is a script that has been played out earlier. But there are some important differences as well between ZeA and earlier operations.

First, NWA, in many ways, had become the headquarters for all sorts of jihadists who had collected there, partly as a result of previous operations in other areas of FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Over the last few years, most of the major Taliban strikes inside Pakistan could be traced back to NWA, which had acquired the reputation for being a Witches Brew of jihadists of all hues and persuasions. Afghan, Arabs, Chechens, Uighurs, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Pashtuns, Punjabis, you name it, they were all present in NWA. An operation there will naturally disrupt a major safe haven for these groups, though it won't, by any stretch of imagination, demolish the jihadist networks and infrastructure. In other words, unlike the other agencies which faced military operations earlier, NWA is in many ways the 'final frontier' – the last agency that remained to be 'conquered'. After this, the kinetics of operations will change from steam-roller operations to a combination of counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations.

Map 1: Areas of influence of various militant and jihadist groups



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⁴⁰ All maps are taken from criticalthreats.org and dawn.com

Secondly, almost all of the earlier operations were localised affairs. If the army was on an offensive in SWA, it was only in about a third of the agency where the 'bad' Taliban of Baitullah Mehsud led TTP were operational. In areas where the 'good' Taliban like Mullah Nazir were present, no operations were carried out. Similarly, when the operations were being conducted in Swat or Bajaur or Orakzai, nothing was happening in NWA. This time, however, not only has the army declared that it will clean up the entire NWA, it has also conducted intelligence driven operations all over the country, including in Punjab and Karachi, both to prevent the backlash that was being expected as well as to deny safe houses and sanctuaries to Taliban escaping from NWA.⁴¹ It is, of course, another matter that senior officers of the army, including the man who was directly in charge of ZeA, Peshawar Corps Commander Lt. Gen. Khalid Rabbani, have made it clear that a massive clean-up operation will have to be conducted in South Punjab if the Taliban network has to be uprooted an operation which isn't any where on the anvil yet.⁴²

Third, unlike previous operations when the army had clearly designated the 'bad guys' whom they were going to target, this time they at least claim to not make any distinction between 'good' and 'bad' Taliban.⁴³ It is another matter that this declaration of intent seems to have been observed more in its breach, what with reports of 'good' terrorists like the Haqqani Network having been accommodated and adjusted in Kurram agency and others like Gul Bahadur not suffering any major damage in the first phase. Most of the Taliban seem to have decamped well before the operation started. But if indeed the Pakistan army lives up to carrying out an across the board operation then it would be a change from the past. How it plays out on the ground – whether it disrupts the Taliban or makes them close ranks against the Pakistan army – remains to be seen.

Fourth, ZeA took place against the backdrop of divisions within the TTP. Not only was there internecine fighting between factions within the TTP, there were also splits and leadership challenges mounted. In most

⁴¹"Countrywide actions avert Zarb-e-Azb backlash: ISPR", Dawn 4/9/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1129771/countrywide-actions-avert-zarb-i-azb-backlash-ispr>

⁴²Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Corps Commander calls for curbing terror in Punjab, Balochistan", Dawn 25/9/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1134212/corps-commander-calls-for-curbing-terror-in-punjab-balochistan>

⁴³Op. cit.

previous operations, this sort of division in the ranks of the Taliban was not present. Whether this is a factor in the surprisingly easy victories notched by the army during ZeA – there has hardly been a single pitched battle of the sorts seen in Swat, Bajaur and SWA – is not entirely clear. It is quite possible that the low casualty rates suffered by the army could be because the Taliban factions decided not to expend their resources and personnel in fighting a set-piece battle with the army in which the odds were heavily loaded against them.

Build Up to Zarb-e-Azb

After six years as army chief, Gen Ashfaq Kayani handed over the reins of the army to his successor, Gen Raheel Sharif, on November 29, 2013. Within a week of the baton changing hands, Gen Sharif paid a visit to the troops in both South and North Waziristan, presumably to get a first-hand account of the situation on ground. But as subsequent events revealed, he was also making a statement about both his intentions and his priorities. The very next day after his tour to the two Waziristan's, Gen Sharif chaired his first Corps Commanders conference where he took stock of the security environment facing Pakistan, including the situation in the troubled FATA region.⁴⁴ Almost as though even before he got the fourth star Gen Sharif's mind had been made up on how he would handle the Taliban threat, the 'Raheel Sharif doctrine' – terrorist attacks will not be tolerated and will be responded effectively – was enunciated in the third week of his assuming charge of the Pakistan Army.⁴⁵ He declared his policy of tit-for-tat during a visit to the Peshawar Corps HQ after the army carried out a massive and disproportionate retaliation against TTP and its affiliates in response to both a suicide attack on the security check post at Khajori near Mir Ali in North Waziristan and the subsequent ambushing of the relief convoy.⁴⁶

The immediacy and ferocity of the no-holds barred barrage that was let loose by the Pakistan Army in the Mir Ali bazaar using gunship helicopters, tanks, artillery and mortars against supposed Taliban targets

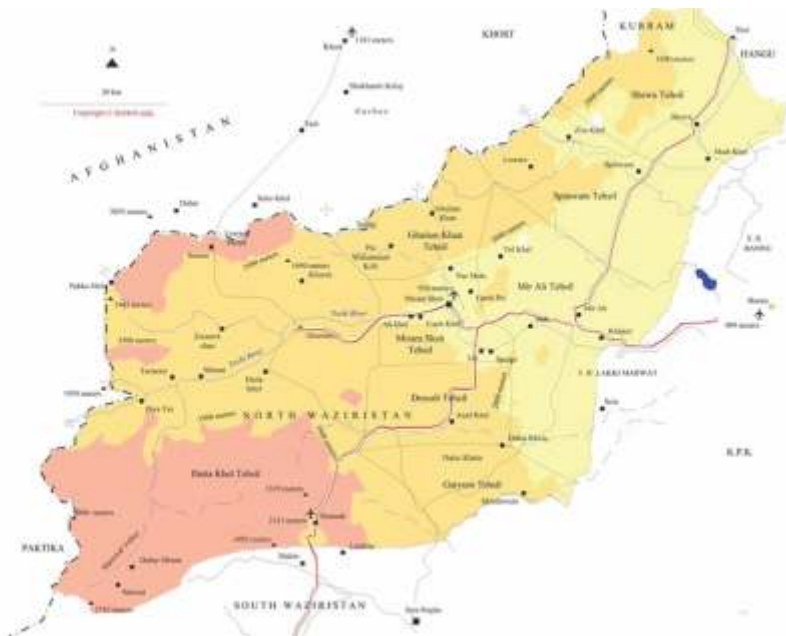
⁴⁴"Reviewing security: Army chief chairs maiden coprs commanders meet", The Express Tribune 7/12/2013, accessed at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/642347/reviewing-security-army-chief-chairs-maiden-corps-commanders-meet/>

⁴⁵https://www.ispr.gov.pk/front/main.asp?o=t-press_release&date=2013/12/21

Wajahat S Khan, "How the 'code' was broken in Mirali in NWA", The News 22/12/2013, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-2-221783-How-the-Code-was-broken-in-Mirali-in-NWA>

took everyone by surprise. In an operation lasting around a week, dozens of alleged Taliban fighters were killed. Having imposed a virtual media clampdown, the army controlled the information flow and claimed that they had killed mostly foreign fighters, including Uzbeks. But this was challenged by locals who claimed that there was enormous collateral damage and most people were killed when the security forces surrounded two hotels and opened indiscriminate firing on the people inside.⁴⁷ Giving an account of the scorched earth tactics of the Pakistan army, a furious Maulana Fazlur Rehman insisted that not a single terrorist was killed during the operation and all the 60 odd people who died were innocent residents. He claimed that houses and mosques were razed during the shelling and even dead bodies were not allowed to be removed.⁴⁸

Map 2: North Waziristan Agency



⁴⁷Pazir Gul, "Over 30 killed in Mirali flare-up", Dawn 20/12/2013, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1075204/over-30-killed-in-mirali-flare-up>

⁴⁸Muhammad Anis, "NWA situation to get worse if operation continues: Fazl", The News 24/12/2013, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-27494-NWA-situation-to-get-worse-if-operation-continues:-Fazl>

The tactics used by the army after the Khajori terror strike became the template for subsequent retaliatory actions by the security forces every time there was a major terrorist attack anywhere in the country, especially one targeting the security forces. In fact, there were complaints that the army's response was always restrained, even non-existent, when civilians were hit by terrorists but was ferocious and unrestrained when the security forces were targeted. Be that as it may, the pattern of reaction was repeated time and time again, which convinced many people that it was a matter of time before a major operation would be launched in NWA.

The Kajori retaliation was extremely significant because, in a manner of speaking, it heralded the end of the peace agreement that the Pakistani state had struck in North Waziristan in 2006, including, among others, with one of the most powerful warlords in the area, Gul Bahadur.⁴⁹ The agreement was, of course, observed more in its violation ever since it was signed. The Taliban did not adhere to their side of the bargain and not only did foreign fighters continue to get refuge in the area but also there were occasional attacks and ambushes against security forces. For their part, the security forces continued to hold on to the peace deal.⁵⁰ The reason for this was simple. The Pakistanis did not want to take any step that could affect their terrorist "strategic assets" who were using NWA as a safe haven and a command and control centre for launching strikes inside Afghanistan. As the Pakistanis saw it, these terror groups were an essential component of a strategy to prepare for the time when the Americans would quit Afghanistan.⁵¹ The terror activities inside Pakistan of some of the groups based in NWA was, in a sense, bearable when weighed against the larger strategic picture drawn by the military establishment of Pakistan. Although there was a plethora of evidence that the groups carrying out attacks in Pakistan had organic links with the groups focussed on Afghanistan, a deliberate dissemble was carried out to differentiate these two groups.⁵²

⁴⁹Analysis of Peace Agreements with Militants and Lessons for the Future by Sohail Habib Tajik, Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies, Pp 7-8, accessed at <http://san-pips.com/download.php?f=140.pdf>

⁵⁰Saleem Safi in Taliban se Muzakarat kyun? In Daily Jang 30/12/2012 accessed at <http://jang.com.pk/jang/dec2012-daily/30-12-2012/col5.htm>

⁵¹Mark Mazzetti and Eric Schmitt, "Afghan strikes by Taliban get Pakistan help, US aides say", New York Times 25/3/2009, accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/26/world/asia/26tribal.html>

⁵²Saleem Safi in "Taliban, Waziristan aur Confusion-istan" in Daily Jang 20/10/2012 lays out the links between the leaders of Pakistan Taliban and Afghan Taliban

Gen Ashfaq Kayani, who was not only Gen Raheel Sharif's predecessor but had also held the office of Director General ISI before becoming army chief, resisted all the pressure and persuasion that the Americans brought to bear on him to launch a stream-roller ground offensive in NWA to root out the Al Qaeda and Taliban sanctuaries in the region. The Americans felt that Kayani wanted to use these terror groups as proxies to prevent India from encircling Pakistan through Afghanistan. He was also 'hedging his bets' in case the US failed in Afghanistan.⁵³ There were, of course, other reasons why Kayani was just not interested in an operation in NWA, some of which had to do with the US, others with the lack of political consensus inside the country and still others that were related to the capacity and capability of the army which was already overstretched. In other words, the threat of a fierce retaliation by the Islamists in rest of Pakistan coupled with the uncertainty of about the effectiveness of such an operation in dismantling, degrading and destroying the terror infrastructure and network based in NWA, presented Kayani from going whole hog into NWA.

In an interaction with top Pakistani journalists, Kayani expressed his deep mistrust of the US aims in the region. He claimed that the Americans wanted a 'controlled chaos' in Pakistan and their real objective was to 'denuclearise' Pakistan. He was convinced about the dichotomy between short-term US aims and Pakistan's long-term security interests. While he did admit that tackling the issue of terrorism emanating from NWA was not a question of "if but when and how to tackle it militarily", he was non-committal on when such an operation would be launched.⁵⁴ Although the military under Kayani kept hiding behind the excuse of lack of political consensus to not launch an offensive in NWA – a claim endorsed by none other than the man under whose charge ZeA was launched, Peshawar Corps Commander Lt. Gen. Khalid Rabbani, who blamed the delay in launching an all-out operation in NWA on 'political indecisiveness'⁵⁵ – the then Prime Minister, Yusuf Raza Gilani, revealed that while his government was keen on

⁵³Karin Brulliard and Karen DeYoung in "U.S. efforts fail to convince Pakistan's top general to target Taliban", Washington Post 31/12/2010 accessed at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/12/31/AR2010123103890.html>

⁵⁴"Pakistan the most bullied US ally" in Dawn 30/10/2010 accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/587348/pakistan-the-most-bullied-us-ally-2>

⁵⁵Op. cit. (37)

an operation Kayani wanted it left to the army to decide when such an operation would be undertaken.⁵⁶

Not only had the government given the go ahead, apparently even the top brass in the military was keen on an operation in 2011 which they believed would be able to destroy the terrorist bases in a matter of couple of weeks. But Kayani kept the decision hanging and it later transpired that he was of the view that such an operation would have only a 40% chance of success.⁵⁷ Although Kayani clarified that the 40% figure was not about the chance of success of the operation but the reduction in terrorism as a result of the operation,⁵⁸ the military spokesman of that time, Maj Gen Athar Abbas, disclosed that Kayani dilly-dallied over the decision to send in the army despite the fact that all preparations had been made by 2011 for such an operation. According to Gen Abbas, Kayani did not want to take responsibility for sending in troops to NWA.⁵⁹

All of this changed after Gen Raheel Sharif started wielding the baton, and the lack of robust response to terrorist outrages that characterised the latter part of the Kayani term gave way to massive retaliation against the Taliban in the period leading up to the official announcement of the commencement of ZeA. The intensity of the retaliation steadily increased with every attack until the full blown operation ZeA was launched. This was almost as though with every retaliatory attack the army was sending out signals to the Taliban to fall in line or else be prepared for overwhelming use of force by the military.

About a month after the suicide attack at Khajori, the Taliban carried out two back to back suicide attacks, the first on 19 January 2014 in Bannu Cantonment killing 20 soldiers, and the very next day near the army officers mess not far from the GHQ in Rawalpindi killing 14 persons including 7 army personnel.⁶⁰ Both the attacks were claimed by the Taliban.⁶¹ The retaliation

⁵⁶Hafeez Tunio, "New disclosure: Kayani wanted Waziristan operation to be his decision, says Gilani", The Express Tribune 12/7/2014, accessed at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/734474/new-disclosure-kayani-wanted-waziristan-operation-to-be-his-decision-says-gilani/>

⁵⁷"Ex-COAS Kayani's six-year tenure comes under criticism", The News 2/7/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-31309-Ex-COAS-Kayanis-six-year-tenure-comes-under-criticism>

⁵⁸"Kayani rebuts Imran's remarks on chances of operation's success", The News 17/2/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-2-233158-Kayani-rebuts-Imrans-remarks-on-chances-of-operations-success>

⁵⁹"Kayani delayed the operation: Athar Abbas", The Express Tribune 1/7/2014, accessed at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/729499/kayani-delayed-the-operation-athar-abbas/>

was swift and severe. About 48 hours after the Bannu and Rawalpindi attacks, the Pakistan military, using fighter aircraft and helicopter gunships blasted alleged terrorist hideouts in Miranshah and Mirali subdivisions in NWA and Tirah valley in Khyber agency killing over 50 terrorists in the former and around 15 in the latter.⁶² The media also reported that many of the dead terrorists were Uzbeks and some other foreigners.⁶³ Although the ISPR denied that these attacks a retaliation and maintained that the targets were chosen on basis of intelligence, reports in the press quoted unnamed officials as admitting that the killed terrorists were involved in not just the Bannu attack but also an earlier attack on a church in Peshawar.⁶⁴ In a meeting between Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Gen Raheel Sharif the military was given the go-ahead to 'pay the terrorists in their own coin' through 'intelligence based surgical strikes' on their sanctuaries and hideouts.⁶⁵

These retaliatory attacks were being seen by everyone as a precursor of a massive operation which analysts believed was imminent. Just as people were bracing themselves for the long delayed operation in the forbidding NWA, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif surprised everyone by proposing a dialogue with the Taliban.⁶⁶ Nawaz Sharif's reasons for not going in for a steam-roller operation was quite understandable. Apart from the question of the effectiveness or, for that matter, the sustainability of such an operation, something that Gen Kayani himself seems to have hinted at, there were other factors that also weighed upon him. For one, members of

⁶⁰Mohammad Alam Khan & Mushtaq Yusufzai, "20 soldiers killed as convoy attacked in Bannu", The News 20/1/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-28046-20-soldiers-killed-as-convoy-attacked-in-Bannu>; Shakeel Anjum, "Suicide attack near GHQ kills 14", The News 21/1/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-28066-Suicide-attack-near-GHQ-kills-14>

⁶¹Mohammad Asghar, "Blast near GHQ kills 14", Dawn 21/1/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1081661/blast-near-ghq-kills-14>

⁶²Habibullah Khan & Mushtaq Yusufzai, "56 killed in shelling by fighter aircraft, helicopters", The News 22/1/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-28078-56-killed-in-shelling-by-fighter-aircraft-helicopters>

⁶³Baqir Sajjad Syed, "36 foreign fighter among dead", Dawn 22/1/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1081771/36-foreign-fighters-among-dead>

⁶⁴Abdul Salam and Pazir Gul, "40 killed in North Waziristan air strikes", Dawn 22/1/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1081786/40-killed-in-north-waziristan-air-strikes>

⁶⁵"Pay terrorists back in their own coin, forces told", The News 24/1/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-28116-Pay-terrorists-back-in-their-own-coin-forces-told>

⁶⁶Raja Asghar, "PM gives Taliban another chance", Dawn 30/1/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1083663/pm-gives-taliban-another-chance>

his cabinet were known to be explaining themselves to the Taliban as to how they had absolutely no hand in the retaliatory strikes by the armed forces and pleading with the Taliban for a ceasefire so that they could push for a dialogue.⁶⁷ The lack of political consensus, both between parties and within the government itself, tied Nawaz Sharif's hands because if things didn't quite go according to what he was being told by the new military command, then he feared ending up as the fall guy. The ghosts of Kargil were haunting Nawaz Sharif and he did not want to create a situation in which the civil-military balance would tilt in favour of the army, something that was inevitable in the event of an all-out military offensive. Plus there were considerations of safety, both personal and family. Nawaz Sharif also feared the blowback that would hit Punjab, which would in turn affect his political fortunes.⁶⁸

Both Nawaz Sharif and his interior minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan were almost apologetic advocates of the Taliban. Nawaz Sharif had expressed the view that the Taliban were not enemies of the country but had only lost their direction.⁶⁹ Given that thousands of people in Pakistan had died in violence perpetrated by the Taliban, perhaps when Nawaz Sharif said they had lost direction, he meant that these were people who were supposed to be used against Afghanistan and India but had turned their guns in the wrong direction inside Pakistan! Not to be left behind, the interior minister said a couple of months later that most of the Taliban were not anti-state, only anti-government!⁷⁰

Even as the dialogue with the Taliban meandered through the treacherous and purposeless path that its detractors had predicted, there was no let-up in the attacks by the Taliban or the retaliation that followed from the military. Even after Nawaz Sharif announced the intention of the government to give another chance to a dialogue, the Taliban continued to

⁶⁷ Khaufzada Hukumranon Ke Khufia Ijlas by Rauf Klasra in *Dunya* 28-2-2014

⁶⁸ Sushant Sareen in "Disarrayed Dialogue: Moderate Taliban reach out to Real Taliban in Pakistan" accessed at <http://www.vifindia.org/article/2014/february/13/disarrayed-dialogue-moderate-taliban-reach-out-to-real-taliban-in-pakistan>

⁶⁹ "Extremists not our enemies, they have just lost direction!", *Pakistan Today*, January 15, 2014, <http://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2014/01/15/extremists-not-our-enemies-they-have-just-lost-direction/>

⁷⁰ Muhammad Anis, "Majority of Taliban not anti-state: Nisar", *The News*, March 7, 2014, <http://www.thenews.com.pk/TodaysNews-13-28965-Majority-of-Taliban-not-anti-state-Nisar>

attack. The stream of attacks by the Taliban seemed to suggest that either they were deliberately provoking the Pakistani state to call off the talks or else trying to see how far they could push the state before it called off the talks. Within days of Nawaz Sharif's announcement, the Taliban bombed a bus carrying police personnel in Karachi, killing 13 police commandos.⁷¹ This was followed by bomb blast in Kohat in which another 13 civilians were killed.⁷² The Kohat bombing was claimed by 'Major' Mast Gul, a man who had at one time been a jihadist hero in Pakistan because of his exploits in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, including the burning of the Charar-e-Sharif shrine.⁷³

The most provocative, as also horrific, action by the Taliban was the brutal massacre in mid-February of around two dozen Frontier Corps personnel who had been in the custody of the Taliban.⁷⁴ The massacre put a cloud over the moves to start a dialogue with the Taliban and there was a huge clamour in the country for taking the war to the Taliban. For its part the military retaliated with air strikes and gunship attacks on terrorist hideouts in both North Waziristan and Khyber agency and claimed to have killed around 50 terrorists. A number of foreign terrorists, including Uzbeks, Chechens, Turkmen and Tajiks were reportedly killed in these strikes.⁷⁵ This was followed by more attacks on Taliban positions in not just NWA and Khyber agency in FATA but also South Waziristan and Hangu in the settled areas killing dozens of terrorists. The retaliation wasn't just by air but also on ground.⁷⁶ Shortly after reports that the Special Services Group (SSG) commandos of the Pakistan army were being inducted in NWA, one of the senior-most TTP commanders, Asmatullah Bhattani was gunned down.⁷⁷ The Pakistani press tried to present Bhattani's killing as part of the internecine

⁷¹M Waqar Bhatti, "TTP mows down 13 policemen in Karachi attack", The News 14/2/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-28546-TTP-mows-down-13-policemen-in-Karachi-attack>

⁷²Zahir Bangash, "Uptick in violence: Bomb kills 13 in Kohat", The Express Tribune 24/2/2014, accessed at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/675404/uptick-in-violence-bomb-kills-13-in-kohat/>

⁷³"Mast Gul claims Kohat attack", The News 25/2/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-2-234797-Mast-Gul-claims-Kohat-attack>

⁷⁴Zahir Shah Sherazi, "Mohand Taliban claim killing 23 FC men", Dawn 17/2/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1087561/mohand-taliban-claim-killing-23-fc-men>

⁷⁵Sikander Shaheen, "Jets strike at heart of terror", The Nation 21/2/2014 accessed at <http://nation.com.pk/E-Paper/Lahore/2014-02-21/page-1/detail-0>

⁷⁶Pervaiz Shaukat, "Infantry troops enter NWA operation areas", The News 21/2/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-28683-Infantry-troops-enter-NWA-operation-areas>

⁷⁷"Senior Taliban commander gunned down in NWA", The News 25/2/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-28750-Senior-Taliban-commander-gunned-down-in-NWA>

warfare among Taliban commanders between those who favoured talks with the government and those who opposed any such dialogue. This was the beginning of the time tested tack of sowing divisions and suspicions in the ranks of the Taliban by exploiting existing differences between commanders and factions. A number of other commanders were also gunned down in mysterious circumstances which were reported as part of the internal power struggle in the Taliban ranks. It wasn't long before the suspicions that these killings generated in the Taliban rank and file manifested themselves in open warfare between contending factions.

In the beginning of March 2014, the Taliban unilaterally announced a month long ceasefire to pave the way for a dialogue with the government.⁷⁸ Immediately the government reciprocated by calling off all air strikes against the Taliban, albeit with the caveat that there would be retaliation if any attack was carried out anywhere in the country.⁷⁹ According to some reports, the ceasefire came about as a result of back channel negotiations between the government and the Taliban. The Taliban had made three demands – suspension of operations by the security forces, release of all non-combatants by the government and creation of a demilitarised zone where negotiations could take place.⁸⁰ The last two conditions, however, remained a non-starter and ultimately became the excuse for resumption of hostilities and an end to the dialogue. In any case, despite the ceasefire, attacks by the Taliban continued relentlessly, the first one taking place within days of the ceasefire announcement of the when the district courts in Islamabad were targeted and 11 people were killed.⁸¹ Although the Taliban washed their hands off almost all of the attacks that were carried out during the ceasefire, groups like Ansarul Mujahideen and Ahrarul Hind that did claim responsibility had links with the Taliban. While they presented themselves as breakaway factions, many believed that they were fronts for the Taliban and were creating 'plausible deniability' for the Taliban.

⁷⁸“Reviving peace talks: TTP declares ceasefire”, The Express Tribune 2/3/2014, accessed at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/677916/reviving-peace-talks-ttp-declares-ceasefire/>

⁷⁹Amir Wasim, “Govt halts air strikes”, Dawn 4/3/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1090706/govt-halts-air-strikes>

⁸⁰Pazir Gul, “Taliban declare month-long ceasefire”, Dawn 2/3/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1090517/taliban-declare-month-long-ceasefire>

⁸¹Shakeel Anjum, “11 dead in suicide attack on Islamabad district courts”, The News 4/3/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-28890-11-dead-in-suicide-attack-on-Islamabad-district-courts>

In the last week of March 2014, representatives of the TTP and the government held direct talks. But by then it was a foregone conclusion that these talks were quite pointless and little that was going to come out of them. After a brief extension of the ceasefire, the Taliban finally called it off and promised to hit back against any use of force by the government.⁸² The action-reaction cycle restarted. Within a day of the ceasefire being called off, the vegetable market in Islamabad was bombed killing 24 people.⁸³ Although a Baloch separatist group claimed responsibility for this attack, the authorities were convinced that it was the handwork of the Taliban from Khyber.⁸⁴ A couple of weeks later aerial strikes were launched against their positions in the Tirah valley of Khyber agency killing around three dozen terrorists.⁸⁵ By the end of April, it was clear that the peace tack had collapsed irretrievably and it was only a matter of time before an all-out operation would be launched. In early May, nearly a dozen Frontier Corps (FC) personnel were killed in an IED blast in Ghulam Khan area of NWA.⁸⁶ This not only effectively killed the so-called peace process and resulted in a massive clampdown, including a week long curfew and attacks from air and on ground, but also prepared the ground for Operation ZeA.⁸⁷ The final straw was the attack on the financial capital Karachi's Jinnah International Airport by Uzbek terrorists of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and TTP.⁸⁸ A week later, ZeA commenced.

Three things had happened by the time this stage was reached. The first was that many of the terrorists started to move out of the terror central, NWA, to safer areas. Some relocated to safe havens inside Pakistan which

⁸²Mustaq Yusufzai, "Ceasefire ends, talks process to go on: TTP", *The News* 17/4/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-29779-Ceasefire-ends-talks-process-to-go-on-TTP>

⁸³Munawer Azeem, "Blast terrorises capital; 24 dead", *Dawn* 10/4/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1098850/blast-terrorises-capital-24-dead>

⁸⁴"Interior Ministry: UBA's 'ridiculous' claim dismissed", *The Express Tribune* 10/4/2014, accessed at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/693657/interior-ministry-ubas-ridiculous-claim-dismissed/>

⁸⁵Ibrahim Shinwari, "35 suspected militants, eight civilians killed in air strikes", *Dawn* 25/4/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1102158/35-suspected-militants-eight-civilians-killed-in-air-strikes>

⁸⁶Mushtaq Yusufzai, "Nine soldiers die in NWA IED blast", *The News* 9/5/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-30219-Nine-soldiers-die-in-NWA-IED-blast>

⁸⁷Kamran Yousaf and Nasruminallah, "Peace process: Army plans response to North Waziristan blast", *The Express Tribune* 9/5/2014, accessed at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/706151/peace-process-army-plans-response-to-north-waziristan-blast/>

⁸⁸Faraz Khan and Tahir Khan, "Brazen assault: Uzbek group claims credit for airport attack", *The Express Tribune* 12/6/2014, accessed at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/720690/brazen-assault-uzbek-group-claims-credit-for-airport-attack/>

had been cleared for them –namely, Kurram agency and some other areas in FATA and other parts of Pakistan.⁸⁹ The Kurram agency in particular was extremely critical for creating new safe havens for the dreaded Haqqani network and to save them from the military operation.⁹⁰ To prepare the ground for the Haqqanis, the administration first expelled a Shia cleric, Agha Irfani, who had been instrumental in organising the Shia community against the Taliban in the agency.⁹¹ A furore followed in Kurram against the decision but days later Irfani was shot down in Islamabad.⁹² Many foreign jihadists also started to move out into the border regions of Afghanistan. According to one report nearly 6000 local and foreign jihadists – including Uzbeks, Turkmen, Chechen and Tajik – opted for Afghanistan while some 400 odd made a bee-line for the new jihadist hotspot – Syria.⁹³ Amidst conflicting accounts of how many jihadists had moved out of the region came reports that many of the foreigners were seeking 'safe passage' out of Pakistan, presumably to Syria.⁹⁴

The second thing that happened was that open internecine warfare broke out among two Taliban factions – one led by Shehryar Mehsud and backed by the TTP chief Fazlullah and the other led by Khan Said 'Sajna' – belonging to the Mehsud tribe which was spearheading the fight against the Pakistani state. More than a hundred militants from both sides died in the in-fighting. All efforts to make peace between the warring factions, including by the Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Omar, failed.⁹⁵ Worse, the inability of Fazlullah to assert himself resulted in not just the first of several

⁸⁹Khan Shehran Eusufzaye & Kahar Zalmay, "The battle for Kurram", The News on Sunday 24/8/2014, accessed at <http://tns.thenews.com.pk/battle-for-kurram-agency/>; also see Jeffrey Dressler and Reza Jan, "The Haqqani Network in Kurram: The regional implications of a growing insurgency", May 2011 accessed at https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Haqqani_Network_in_Kurram_web.pdf

⁹⁰Dr Mohammad Taqi, "The Kurram Dharna: all politics is regional", Daily Times 14 August, 2014; accessed at <http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/opinion/14-Aug-2014/the-kurram-dharna-all-politics-is-regional>

⁹¹Zia ur Rehman, "Behind the scenes in Kurram", The Friday Times 8 August 2014, accessed at <http://www.thefridaytimes.com/ftf/behind-the-scenes-in-kurram/>

⁹²Rizwan Shehzad, "Shooting spree: Former prayer leader gunned down", The Express Tribune 27/11/2014, accessed at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/797944/shooting-sprees-former-prayer-leader-gunned-down/>

⁹³Omer Farooq Khan, "Fearing operation, Taliban fighters relocating to Afghan border areas", Daily Times 29/4/2014, accessed at <http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/islamabad/29-Apr-2014/fearing-operation-taliban-fighters-relocating-to-afghan-border-areas>

⁹⁴Hasan Abdullah, "Foreign militants seeking safe passage", Dawn 25/4/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1102154/foreign-militants-seeking-safe-passage>

⁹⁵Mushtaq Yusufzai, "Afghan Taliban approached to settle TTP infighting", The News 16/4/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-29765-Afghan-Taliban-approached-to-settle-TTP-infighting>

splits in the ranks of the TTP but was also posed a challenge to Fazlullah's own position when the central shura refused to endorse his decision expelling 'Sajna' from the TTP.⁹⁶ Most Pakistani analysts welcomed the internal squabbles and warfare within the Taliban and saw this as both a success of the tactics used by the security agencies to divide the Taliban as well as an opportunity to successfully wean away some of the Taliban to the government side and launch an operation to degrade and defeat the hold-outs.⁹⁷ Some, however, cautioned that a lot of the information being spread by the authorities was classic disinformation and while there was a problem between various factions, matters were not as bad as they were being made out to be.⁹⁸ Nevertheless, the government strategy seems to have worked in the short run at least and Taliban splits made the army's operations much easier.

The third and extremely important development was one which in all likelihood seemed to have brought pressure on the Pakistani state to start the crackdown on the Taliban. On March 1, Uighur terrorists wielding knives hacked around 30 people to death and injured more than 100 in Kunming, China. Shortly after this attack, Abdullah Mansour, the leader of Uighur terrorist organisation Turkestan Islamic Party, gave an interview from his perch in NWA, threatening vengeance and violence against China.⁹⁹ There was a spate of incidents in China following this interview, including a knife and suicide bomb attack on the Urumqi Railway Station, and an attack in a busy market in which 31 people were killed.¹⁰⁰ The link between the Pakistan operations in that city in NWA and the actions of Uighur terrorists was established when around the same time as the market attack in Urumqi, Pakistan air force jets carried out a massive bombing attack in NWA killing over 70 terrorists. For the first time since the Pakistan military had started

⁹⁶Mushtaq Yusufzai, "TTP Shura rejects Fazlullah's decision", The News 19/5/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-30408-TTP-Shura-rejects-Fazlullahs-decision>

⁹⁷Qaiser Butt, "Situationer: Sajna's departure likely to exacerbate divisions within TTP", The Express Tribune 29/5/2014, accessed at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/714748/situationer-sajnas-departure-likely-to-exacerbate-divisions-within-ttp/>

⁹⁸Sailab Mehsud in "Aaj Kamran Khan kay Saath" on Geo TV 8/5/2014, accessed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lzoY8DhmG68>

⁹⁹"Based in tribal areas, Uighur leader vows revenge on China", Dawn 15/5/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1093303/based-in-tribal-areas-uighur-leader-vows-revenge-on-china>

¹⁰⁰For a timeline of attacks by Uighur militants see <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/special/UyghurUnrest/Home.html>

retaliating, the Pakistan army spokesman mentioned specifically targeting Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) bases in Mir Ali area of NWA.¹⁰¹ Senior officials even admitted that the Chinese had been putting pressure on both the political and military leadership in Pakistan to crackdown on the Uighur terrorists.¹⁰²

After the Lal Masjid operation in Islamabad in 2007 which became a catalyst for a massive wave of Taliban attacks inside Pakistan, it seemed that once again Chinese pressure that was forcing the hand of the Pakistanis to act against the terror networks. This was clearly a Hobson's choice for the Pakistanis: on the one hand the entire economic revival strategy of the Nawaz Sharif government and the military-strategic policy of the army hinged on China; on the other hand, there was the threat of the Taliban unleashing a firestorm of terrorism that could not only ruin whatever was left of the national economy but also lead to an unravelling of the decades old strategy of using the jihadists as instruments of foreign and security policy against both Afghanistan and India. Reports in the Pakistan press expressed fears that the Taliban and their ETIM colleagues could target Chinese inside Pakistan, something that would affect Chinese investments in Pakistan.¹⁰³ What is more, with the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan underway, Pakistan would need someone to underwrite and fund economic activity through investments in Afghanistan. But the Chinese were already getting spooked by the presence and activities of the Uighur separatists in the region and had started taking steps that did not augur well for Pakistan's plans to rope in the Chinese to find their plans in Afghanistan.¹⁰⁴ It was under these circumstances that just days before ZeA started, Gen Raheel Sharif went to China where he reassured the Chinese of sparing no effort to crackdown on the Uighur terror networks.¹⁰⁵

Once the Operation ZeA commenced, in almost all the press releases

¹⁰¹Pazir Gul, "73 militants killed in air strikes, clash", Dawn 22/5/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1107868/73-militants-killed-in-air-strikes-clash>

¹⁰²"Four militants killed as operation continues", Dawn 24/5/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1108295/four-militants-killed-as-operation-continues>

¹⁰³Zia Ur Rehman, "Militants may target Chinese interests in Pakistan", in *The Friday Times* 23 May, 2014; accessed at <http://www.thefridaytimes.com/tft/militants-may-target-chinese-interests-in-pakistan/>

¹⁰⁴"Chinese banks halt Afghan banking deals over Xinjiang unrest", Dawn 24/5/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1108175/chinese-banks-halt-afghan-banking-deals-over-xinjiang-unrest>

¹⁰⁵<http://nation.com.pk/national/05-Jun-2014/raheel-assures-china-of-anti-terror-support>

issued on the conduct of the operation during the first few days, the spokesman of the Pakistan military unflinchingly included Uighur terrorists as targets of the offensive. In fact, on day 1 of ZeA, the ISPR chief claimed that over a 100 terrorists were killed and majority of them were Uzbeks belonging to the ETIM.¹⁰⁶ For their part, while the Chinese accepted Pakistan's assurances and even appreciated the action taken against the ETIM by Pakistan, they were still not sure of what long term strategy Pakistan had to eliminate the terror networks.¹⁰⁷ Given the sort of games that Pakistan played with the US – giving the same assurances on cracking down on the Al Qaeda/Taliban while continuing to surreptitiously support these terror groups – there is a good chance that the Pakistanis will be loath to completely sunder their links with some of the terror groups which may be useful to them in the future. If so, then Pakistan will try and balance their interests in China by acting against ETIM even as they try and avoid inflicting debilitating damage to groups that they intend to use in the future.

While the strategic relationship with China almost certainly forced the hand of the Pakistan army to launch ZeA, there was also the issue of US aid that was tied to undertaking such an operation in NWA. According to the American academic C. Christine Fair, \$300 million of the \$900 million coalition support fund hinged on Pakistan undertaking “military operations in North Waziristan that have significantly disrupted the safe haven and freedom of movement of the Haqqani network”.¹⁰⁸ True to form, the Americans fell hook, line and sinker for the Pakistani sales pitch about ZeA and how there were no longer any favourites or distinction between the 'good' and 'bad' Taliban.

Apart from the pressure of the Chinese and the need to keep the US aid tap flowing, there were some other very pressing concerns regarding the Afghan end-game that made it necessary for the Pakistan army to launch ZeA. For over a decade since 9/11, Pakistan had tolerated, even assisted, many of the terror groups that operated from its territory because the price

¹⁰⁶Kamran Yousaf et. al., op. cit. (2)

¹⁰⁷Imtiaz Gul, “How far will China go?” in *The Friday Times*, 3 October, 2014, accessed at <http://www.thefridaytimes.com/tft/how-far-will-china-go/>

¹⁰⁸C Christine Fair, “The Pakistan Army's foray into North Waziristan: Get used to disappointment”, 7 July 2014 in *warontherocks.com*, accessed at <http://warontherocks.com/2014/07/the-pakistan-armys-foray-into-north-waziristan-get-used-to-disappointment/>

it had to pay in terms of the attacks some of the elements launched inside Pakistan was something that the military establishment was willing to pay in pursuit of its larger strategic interests in Afghanistan. It was precisely because of this that even the most wanted terrorist, TTP chief Hakimullah Mehsud, could build a fancy farm house for himself just about a kilometre from the Pakistan Army HQ in NWA and travel to this house in a fleet of SUVs without any action being taken by the military.¹⁰⁹ But over the years the Pakistani state steadily started to lose control over the jihadists whom it had nurtured and supported for decades. With the US-led foreign forces announcing their withdrawal from Afghanistan, it was necessary for Pakistan to regain a measure of control over their territory and their proxies, lest they go totally out of control once the Americans left. Once this was achieved, the Pakistanis could pick and choose who they would allow to use their territory according to their own strategic interests and calculations.

Equally important, the timing of the offensive operations in NWA was such that even though the terror network in Pakistani areas would be disrupted, these people could be pushed across the border into Afghanistan without any danger that they will suffer major degradation. With foreign forces in withdrawal mode, there was no 'anvil' to the Pakistani hammer and so the jihadists being pushed into Afghanistan could fill the vacuum being created by the drawdown of foreign forces. This way Pakistan would end up winning kudos for taking action against the terrorists and at the same time keep their 'strategic assets' intact.¹¹⁰ In addition to all this, the Pakistan army was also able to burnish its image in the eyes of the public and regain much of the lost political ground.¹¹¹ The icing on the cake was that the much feared blowback never really occurred.

Op Zarb-e-Azb

Although officially Operation Zarb-e-Azb was announced only on June 15, 2014, it had been anticipated by almost everyone months earlier. Soon after

¹⁰⁹“Of the farmhouse & street where TTP leader was killed”, Dawn 4/11/2013, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1053944/of-the-farmhouse-street-where-ttp-leader-was-killed>

¹¹⁰Sushant Sareen, “Zarb-e-Azb: Phony War or Paradigm Shift?”, 31 July, 2014; accessed at http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/ZARBeAZBPhonyWar%20orParadigmShift_ssareen_310714.html

¹¹¹Wajahat S Khan, “What are 'they' thinking?”, The News 13/8/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-2-266873-What-are-they-thinking?>

the Pakistan army went into a retaliatory mode against Taliban attacks, a steady stream of refugees started moving out of various parts of NWA to escape being caught in the cross-fire between the military and militants. This turned into a torrent after the operation commenced and within weeks practically the entire NWA agency was depopulated. By some estimates the total number of Internally Displaced People were close to a million.¹¹² Over 100,000 people moved across the Durand Line to take refuge in Khost and Paktika provinces of Afghanistan, which were also strongholds of the Haqqani network.¹¹³ But it wasn't only the civilians but also many of the militants who had moved to safer locations.

The strategy adopted by the Pakistan army in NWA was no different from what it adopted in Swat or South Waziristan viz. depopulate the area and then carry out a steam-roller operation in which entire towns and villages were laid waste by use of overwhelming force which included artillery, tanks, mortars, aerial bombardment and gunship helicopters. According to one analyst, the counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy of the Pakistan army was a three-pronged one: separate insurgents from population; wrest control of territory under occupation of insurgents; deny insurgents access to population.¹¹⁴ This sort of a spin was, of course, just that, and part of the marketing strategy of the Pakistan army to project itself in glowing light. The trouble with this spin was that the first and third prongs proved to be failures, because of which the sustainability of the success of the second prong has a big question mark around it. The reason for this is that most of the terrorists had already vacated control of the areas they occupied,¹¹⁵ which was one reason why the 'mother of all battles' was anything but that and the army captured most of the areas in the Tochi river valley, including the big towns and terror bases like Miranshah, Mir Ali, Boya and Degan and Dattakhail with very few losses and very little fighting.

¹¹²“Rapid assessment of IDPs needs to be completed today”, Dawn 19/6/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1120188/rapid-assessment-of-idps-needs-to-be-completed-today>

¹¹³Sardar Sikander Shaheen, “120,500 NWA residents have moved to Afghanistan: UN”, Daily Times 5/7/2014, accessed at <http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/national/05-Jul-2014/120-500-nwa-residents-have-moved-to-afghanistan-un>

¹¹⁴Farrukh Saleem, “India disappointed by Zarb-e-Azb's success”, The News 14/10/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-2-278257-India-disappointed-by-Zarb-e-Azbs-success>

¹¹⁵“Taliban cut hair, remove beards to escape operation”, The News 7/7/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-31426-Taliban-cut-hair-remove-beards-to-escape-operation>

Map 3: Tochi River Valley and Shawal Valley



The operations in NWA were spearheaded by the 7th Infantry Division of the XI Corps (Peshawar). Over a period of time and in particular for the Operation ZeA, the 7th Div was built up almost to the strength of a Corps with around 45,000 men.¹¹⁶ While the operational area fell under the area of responsibility of the XI Corps, its strength was beefed up by drawing in elements from I Corps (Mangla), II Corps (Multan) and X Corps (Rawalpindi) to seal the area and 'prevent escape of the militants'.¹¹⁷ According to Pakistan military, the army has cannibalised formations on the eastern front with India to bolster the forces on the western front where even before Zarb-e-Azb started, 150,000 troops were deployed as compared to just 100,000 on the eastern front.¹¹⁸ The preparations for the operation had started months before it commenced and areas of responsibility had been farmed out to the formations: 7th Div to do the fighting in NWA, 9th Infantry Div in South Waziristan to control the area between the two Waziristan's and interdict any movement from North to South of the terrorists, 40th Div of

¹¹⁶Wajahat S Khan, "The ghosts and gains of North Waziristan", The News 18/11/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-34162-The-ghosts-and-gains-of-North-Waziristan>

¹¹⁷Farrukh Saleem, "Zarb-e-Azb is a meticulously planned targeted operation", The news 17/6/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-30980-Zarb-e-Azb-is-a-meticulously-planned-targeted-operation>

¹¹⁸Wajahat S Khan, "Army is now a think tank, a spy network, an FO", The News 24/2/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-28737-Army-is-now-a-think-tank-a-spy-network-an-FO>

II Corps to protect the eastern flank and defend mainland Pakistan from any terrorist assault by escaping jihadists, 19th Infantry Div of 10 Corps to protect the northern flank and two divisions – 37th and 17th Mechanised Infantry Divs of I Corps – to support the 7th Div operations. An engineering division, 45th Engineering Div was also dedicated for both assisting the operations and the post-operation rebuilding of destroyed infrastructure.¹¹⁹ In addition, FC troops were also attached to the main force for the operations.

The operational strategy during ZeA was to use 'all available means' to regain control of the territory in which the terrorists were holding sway.¹²⁰ This included not just ground operations but also the use of full spectrum of weapons in the arsenal of the Pakistan armed forces – fighter jets, gunship helicopters, drones, artillery, tanks and APCs, mortars etc. The military had apparently convinced the political leadership that the operation would take around three weeks to complete.¹²¹ This was a clearly unrealistic time frame and quite naturally it kept getting extended until it became pretty much open-ended.¹²²

In the days leading up to the actual start of operations, a dragnet was put in place to prevent escape of the terrorists. Claims, which subsequently proved hollow, were made of how in the west, the border with Afghanistan was sealed, in the north egress into Kurram and Orakzai and onward to Khyber agency was blocked, in the south there was a cordon to prevent ingress into South Waziristan and in the east, precautions were taken to apprehend any movement into the hinterland of Pakistan.¹²³

After 'sealing' the exit routes, the residents were given a warning to vacate the area. Even as the civilians were streaming out, the aerial attacks started to 'soften' the area. While bulk of the aerial bombardment was in North Waziristan, the remote Tirah Valley in Khyber agency bordering Kurram and Orakzai also started coming in the cross-hairs with terrorist hideouts (most of them belonging to the Lashkar-e-Islam group) being

¹¹⁹Wajahat S Khan, op. cit.; also see <http://www.criticalthreats.org/pakistan/order-battle-pakistani-military-fata-and-northwest-frontier-province>

¹²⁰Kamran Yousaf, Op. cit.

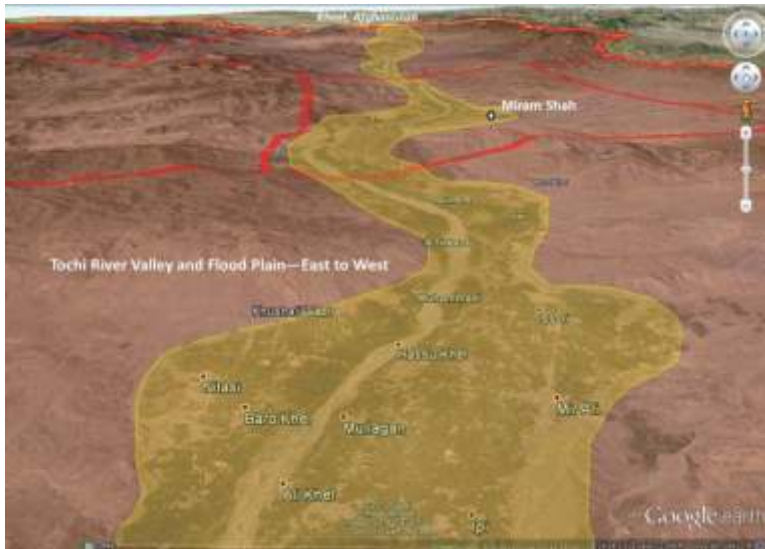
¹²¹Ismail Khan, op. cit.

¹²²Wajahat S Khan, op. cit. (7)

¹²³ISPR Press Release No. PR126/2014-ISPR, dated 16/6/2014 accessed at https://www.ispr.gov.pk/front/main.asp?o=t-press_release&id=2577

target routinely. But it was only four months after the commencement of Operation Zarb-e-Azb that the Pakistan Army officially announced an operation in the area titled Khyber-I.¹²⁴ In NWA, while the focus of the aerial attacks was on the main axis along which the major thrust of the first phase of ZeA was to be carried out – the Tochi River valley where the bulk of the terrorists were based – other areas like Spinwam and Shewa in the north, Shawal in the south and Ghulam Khan in the west bordering Afghanistan were also targeted. These were areas where the terrorists were moving in order to escape the operation. The strategy was to first clean out the Tochi Valley through air and ground operations and then fan out to south towards Shawal and South Waziristan and north towards Spinwam and Shewa in the subsequent phases of the operation to re-establish control over the entire tribal agency.¹²⁵ In other words, the initial thrust was along an east-west axis in the centre of NWA to regain control of the main population centres in the Tochi river valley, which included Miranshah, Mirali, Boya, Degan, Ipi, Hassukhel, and Dattakhel.

Map 4: Tochi River Valley



¹²⁴ Ahmad Nabi & Asif Bashir Chaudhry, "Army launches Khyber One operation", *The Nation* 18/10/2014 accessed at <http://nation.com.pk/national/18-Oct-2014/army-launches-khyber-one-operation>

¹²⁵ Wajahat S Khan, "Zarb-e-Azb: Raheel Sharif's doctrine of clarity", *The News* 9/10/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-33387-Zarb-e-Azb-Raheel-Sharifs-doctrine-of-clarity>

After 15 days of sustained bombing by air, the ground operations were launched on June 30. The ground troops didn't have to move into the area from outside as some sort of invading army. In fact, over a period of time, the Pakistan Army had built up a fairly sizeable presence in the agency – an estimated 30,000 troops were directly involved in the ground operation – around many of the main thrust points in the Tochi River valley (see Map 5).¹²⁶ The ground offensive to clear and hold areas comprised troops, which had been bottled up in the forts and camps for years, moving out into designated operational areas to secure them even though they had mostly, if not entirely, been vacated by both the people and the terrorists. The first town into which ground troops backed by tanks, artillery and air cover moved was Miranshah, and after sanitising the NWA capital and its surrounding areas like the Haqqani network base Danday Darpakhel, the plan was to move to other areas to both east towards Mirali and west towards Dattakhel.¹²⁷ Meanwhile, further to the east, the other big town of NWA, Mirali, was being subjected to 'integrated' artillery, tank and other heavy weapons fire which practically flattened large parts of the town.¹²⁸

Map 5: Location of Pakistan Army cantonments, camps, and posts

¹²⁶Anwar Iqbal, "Terrorists cornered in NWA: official", Dawn 2/3/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1090526/terrorists-cornered-in-nwa-official>

¹²⁷Mushtaq Yusufzai, "Ground operation begins in NWA", The News 1/7/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-31283-Ground-operation-begins-in-NWA>; Also see "Air Strikes in Shawal kill 35 suspects", Dawn 17/7/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1119723/air-strikes-in-shawal-kill-35-suspects>

¹²⁸"Zarb-i-Azb operation: Troops go for all-out ground offensive", Dawn 1/7/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1116194/zarb-i-azb-operation-troops-go-for-all-out-ground-offensive>



It took the military around ten days of a house-to-house search to clear and secure around 80 per cent of a deserted and depopulated Miranshah. There was practically no resistance largely because the

terrorists had already left and most casualties suffered by the security forces were from IEDs and ambushes and not in any kind of pitched battle.¹²⁹ This despite the announcement by the 'good' Taliban leader, Hafiz Gul Bahadur, calling off his 'peace deal' with the military and threatening retaliation and declaring a 'defensive war' to 'avoid losses'.¹³⁰ Gul Bahadur's jihad was titled 'Zarb-e-Momin' (strike of the true believer or faithful).¹³¹ There were grandstanding and bombastic statements issued by the 'bad' Taliban as well, but apart from an odd skirmish, ambush and sniper attack in the conflict zone or terror attack outside the war zone, the strike of the faithful (Zarb-e-Momin) seemed to be faltering in the face of the strike of the Prophet's sword (Zarb-e-Azb)!

A month into the operation, and about two weeks after the ground operations started, the army claimed to have regained complete control of Miranshah and had entered Mirali, which had been practically flattened by weeks of aerial bombardment and artillery shelling.¹³² At around the same time, the security forces had also started consolidating their control in terrorist hotspots like Boya and Degan, west of Miranshah before they pushed towards Dattakhel, the base of Gul Bahadur.¹³³ A fortnight later, in end-July, the army claimed to have complete control of Miranshah, Boya and Degan and had cleared around 70% of Mirali.¹³⁴ By mid-August, the Corps Commander 11 Corps declared that the entire 80 km stretch from Khajori post on the eastern edge of NWA to Dattakhel in the west had been cleared.¹³⁵ But there remained pockets of resistance along this entire stretch, so much so that even weeks after claims of having sanitised areas like Boya and Degan, the military had to use gunship helicopters to hit

¹²⁹Ismail Khan, "80pc of Miramshah cleared: Military", Dawn 10/6/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1118191/80pc-of-miramshah-cleared-military>

¹³⁰Pazir Gul, "Eight Uzbeks among 23 suspected terrorists killed in NWA", Dawn 20/6/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1113879/eight-uzbeks-among-23-suspected-terrorists-killed-in-nwa>

¹³¹Tahir Ali, "'Good' Taliban now joining bad Taliban", The Nation 20/6/2014, accessed at <http://nation.com.pk/E-Paper/Lahore/2014-06-20/page-12/detail-6>

¹³²Intikhab Hanif, "Troops gain control of Miramshah, enter Mirali", Dawn 16/7/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1119444/troops-gain-control-of-miramshah-enter-mirali>

¹³³"Drone kills 15 Punjabi Taliban, Uzbeks", Dawn 20/7/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1120423/drone-kills-15-punjabi-taliban-uzbeks>

¹³⁴"Army mops up targets, secures 70% of Mirali", The Express Tribune 28/7/2014, accessed at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/741914/army-mops-up-targets-secures-70-of-mirali/>

¹³⁵Zulfiqar Ali, "80 km stretch in North Waziristan cleared of militants", Dawn 15/8/2014, accessed at http://epaper.dawn.com/DetailImage.php?StoryImage=15_08_2014_008_005

terrorist hideouts in the very same areas.¹³⁶ What is more, while the army might have taken control of Dattakhel town using scorched earth tactics of blowing up entire markets and habitations in retaliation, its hold over the area around the town remained tenuous.¹³⁷ In fact, the area cleared in the first two months – the central axis from Khajori to Dattakhel – was in some ways the easier part of the operation even though it had the main terrorist bases. The more difficult areas were to the south of Dattakhel – Shawal valley and its surrounding areas – where many of the terrorists were believed to have relocated.

From around mid-August, the ground operations seem to have come to a standstill insofar as clearing new areas was concerned. Ground troops continued to try and hold areas they had cleared through mop up operations, but there was no major thrust into Shawal in the south or for that matter north of the Tochi river valley. It was almost as though the steam-roller operation had come to a grinding halt and the only offensive action was through the aerial route using fighter jets to bomb terrorist positions in these areas. Despite the army chief declaring that the operation would be carried out in the remotest areas, the second phase of the operation seems to have gone into hibernation.¹³⁸ The bulk of the air operations were concentrated on Dattakhel and Shawal, though terrorists were also targeted in other parts of NWA in the north and west after August. Meanwhile, a parallel operation started in Khyber agency, initially in the form of aerial attacks in and around Tirah valley and later ground operations under Operation Khyber-1. What also happened was that from mid-August, the political circus in Islamabad shifted the focus away from the military operation in the troubled western borderlands of Pakistan. So much so that after the 3rd of September when a somewhat detailed press release was issued, Operation ZeA seems to have fallen off the radar of even the ISPR which issued hardly half a dozen one line press releases regarding the operations in which claims were made of a certain number of casualties in some air raid.

¹³⁶“Operation Zarb-e-Azb: 10 terrorists killed in Boya, Degan air blitz”, Dawn 9/9/2014, accessed at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/759802/operation-zarb-e-azb-10-terrorists-killed-in-boya-degan-air-blitz/>

¹³⁷“30 militants killed as jet fighters pound NWA”, The News 6/8/2014, accessed at

<http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-32040-30-militants-killed-as-jet-fighters-pound-NWA>

¹³⁸“Operation to be extended to remote areas”, Dawn 11/9/2014, accessed at

<http://www.dawn.com/news/1131244/operation-to-be-extended-to-remote-areas-army-chief>

Even though the GOC 7 Div, Maj. Gen. Zafarullah claimed that after five months of Operation ZeA, 90% of NWA had been cleared, the aerial operations and the continuing attacks on the troops suggests that the army might be getting stuck into a quagmire out of which it will find difficult to extricate itself.¹³⁹ This is something that had always been feared. The other big fear regarding the operation was the terrorist blowback in rest of Pakistan in retaliation to ZeA. That fear has, however, proved false. While there have been attacks, including on the Quetta airbase, Karachi naval dockyards and outside the Wagah border post on the Indian border, by and large the security forces have been able to contain the fallout. Apart from the fact that the operation in NWA disrupted the command and control centres of the terrorists and emasculated their ability to strike in the hinterland, the massive countrywide intelligence driven counter-terrorism operations – over 2250 of them in which 42 terrorists were killed and over a 100 arrested – also played a major role in preventing the much feared retaliation.¹⁴⁰

In the last detailed press release in early September, the ISPR claimed that apart from clearing the major towns of Miranshah, Mirali, Dattakhel, Boya and Degan, the military had uncovered and destroyed 27 IED factories, 1 rocket and an ammunition factory. In the entire two and a half month operation a grand total of 42 soldiers and 910 terrorists had died in what had been for years touted as the 'mother of all military operations'.¹⁴¹ By mid-November, the number of terrorists killed had risen to around 1200, but since most of whom were supposed to have died in air strikes, there was no independent confirmation of this figure being given by the Pakistan army.¹⁴² In any case, the Taliban have admitted to just a fraction of the casualties that the army claims to have inflicted on them. The army also gave a list of the arms and ammunition recovered from the terrorists: 6,752 rifles with 0.99 million ammunition, 2,470 sub-machine guns

¹³⁹Nasaruminallah, "Hafiz Gul Bahadur's aides among 34 militants killed in n Waziristan", The Express Tribune 17/11.2014, accessed at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/792256/hafiz-gul-bahadurs-aides-among-34-militants-killed-in-n-waziristan/>

¹⁴⁰"Countrywide actions avert Zarb-i-Azb backlash: ISPR", Dawn 4/9/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1129771/countrywide-actions-avert-zarb-i-azb-backlash-ispr>

¹⁴¹ISPR press release No. PR187/2014-ISPR dated 3/9/2014 accessed at https://www.ispr.gov.pk/front/main.asp?o=t-press_release&id=2638

¹⁴²Op. cit. (135)

including snipers rifles with 0.67 million ammunition, 293 machine guns and light machine guns with 0.24 million ammunition and 111 guns (12.7mm and 14.5mm) with 0.25 million ammunition were recovered from different areas, 389 rocket launchers and recoilless rifles with 5,481 rockets, 68 mortars with 5,667 rounds, 3,821 hand grenades and 4,991 IEDs besides 132,000 kg of explosive material, all together valued at around PKR 250 Cr.¹⁴³

While the terrorists suffered a major loss, the operation's cost for the Pakistan state was even more severe. While there isn't much information available in the public domain on the cost incurred by the Pakistan state in conducting the operations, whatever little number crunching has been done suggests that Pakistan has had to pay a big cost – both direct and indirect – in first allowing the terrorists a safe haven for over a decade in NWA and then undertaking operations to regain control of the area. According to one report, in the first three months of the operation, the government of Pakistan provided PKR 1500 Cr to the Army for ZeA. Another PKR 1800 Cr was spent in providing for the close to 1 million IDPs that the operation created. The army was also assured of reimbursement from \$ 360 million or PKR 3600 Cr that the US would give to Pakistan under the Coalition Support Fund.¹⁴⁴

Clearly, the amount of money spent would have increased in the subsequent three months. All of this money doesn't take into account the massive damage to homes and hearths and infrastructure in the towns and villages razed by the Pakistan army during the operation. Nor does this take into account the massive collateral damage in terms of human lives and property of civilians. Despite the media clampdown and denial of free access to media in the conflict zone, there have been a number of very poignant reports of the merciless and indiscriminate targeting of civilians by the Pakistan army.¹⁴⁵ Far from being contrite about the loss of civilian lives, army personnel have unashamedly defended their actions.¹⁴⁶ The irony is

¹⁴³“Arms recovered from terrorists enough for 15 year war”, The News 16/11/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-34123-Arms-recovered-from-terrorists-enough-for-15-year-war>

¹⁴⁴Mehtab Haider, “Rs 15 bn given to army for Zarb-e-Azb so far”, The News 21/9/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-33029-Rs15-bn-given-to-army-for-Zarb-e-Azb-so-far>

¹⁴⁵Sailab Mehsud, “Footprints: Dispatches from North Waziristan”, Dawn 8/7/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1117751/footprints-dispatches-from-north-waziristan>

¹⁴⁶“Rising civilian deaths fuel outrage in NWA offensive”, The News 23/7/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-31793-Rising-civilian-deaths-fuel-outrage-in-NWA-offensive>

that this sort of defence is being offered by an army that for nearly two decades, and even now, paid journalists to unleash a vicious propaganda campaign in their country against the Indian Army operations in Jammu and Kashmir despite the fact that there was never ever any use of air power, artillery or tanks, let alone depopulation of any area, in the anti-insurgency operations in the Indian state. Equally ironical is the fact that the Pakistan 'deep state' has also drummed up a storm against the immensely effective and precise targeting by US drones even as it has itself used fighter aircraft which are a lot less precise and have caused far more collateral damage.¹⁴⁷

For their part, the Pakistan Army claimed that they had done extremely precise targeting of terrorist hideouts and minimised collateral damage.¹⁴⁸ This was by some accounts made possible by the use of indigenous drones that not only fixed target locations which were then taken out by the fighter aircraft but also helped in battlefield reconnaissance. On the eve of the launch of ZeA, there were reports of sightings of such drones in NWA.¹⁴⁹ Although the Pakistan army had reported the induction of 'indigenous' drones in November 2013, experts were of the view that these were probably Chinese drones with Pakistani labels.¹⁵⁰ There was, however, some speculation, emphatically denied by Pakistani officials, that the PAF was being assisted in target selection by the American drones.¹⁵¹ The possibility that the US was providing coordinates to the Pakistanis is probably not entirely far-fetched. Ever since Zarb-e-Azb commenced, there has been an uptick in drone attacks by the Americans. The Pakistani reaction has been extremely muted and limited to a pro forma statement by the Pakistan foreign office spokesperson. Even a politician like Imran Khan, who for long had a single point agenda of crusading against the drones which he considered the 'mother of all problems', has just ignored these new attacks despite being on the warpath against the Nawaz Sharif government.

¹⁴⁷Mirza Khurram Shehzad, "Interview: US drones are better than PAF jets", Dawn 29/5/2014, accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1109300/interview-us-drones-are-better-than-paf-jets>

¹⁴⁸Op. cit. (20)

¹⁴⁹Op. cit. (97)

¹⁵⁰Farhan Bokhari, "Pakistan to deploy its own UAVs over FATA", HIS Jane's Defence Weekly 11/2/2014, accessed at <http://www.janes.com/article/33887/pakistan-to-deploy-its-own-uavs-over-fata>

¹⁵¹Shaheen Sehbai, "Military using made-in-Pakistan drones against TTP", The News 26/2/2014, accessed at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-28774-Military-using-made-in-Pakistan-drones-against-TTP>

The muted response from Pakistan could well be part of an understanding between the Pakistan military and the Americans to keep taking out targets that the Pakistani fighters are unable to either because these are not static targets or because the target is a slippery one which requires long surveillance (not possible for fighter aircraft) before being taken out. Alternatively, the continuing drone strikes could be because the Americans are not entirely convinced about the intentions and/or sincerity of the Pakistanis in taking out their 'strategic assets' and are therefore going to continue doing what they need to do. The point is that earlier, it was fairly standard for the Americans to implicitly suggest that since the Pakistanis were not acting against the terrorists, the US had no choice but to take them out using drones; but if indeed ZeA is such an effective operation and a fulfilment of the long standing demands of the Americans, then continuing with the drone attacks doesn't stand up to logic.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding all the bluff and bluster about Operation Zarb-e-Azb, the bombardment with all types of munitions and propaganda, the grandstanding about "fighting to saving the world from the scourge of terrorism," there remain serious doubts over not only the strategic design (or if you will, delusion) of the Pakistan army behind the operation but also the operations its effectiveness in attaining the multiple objectives that may be underpinning this 'grand operation'. Six months into the formal launching of ZeA, these doubts continue to linger, more so because the operation has stalled. Whether this is for reasons of weather turning inclement or because of some more ulterior reason is something that will become clear in the weeks ahead. Whatever the real reason for the operation not succeeding in securing the entire tribal agency, it has unleashed problems that will be a millstone around the neck of Pakistan for years to come. Worse, it would appear that as is their wont, the Pakistan army didn't think through the operation and its implications.

The positives of the operation are, of course, the plaudits that both Gen Raheel Sharif and his army have won from the Americans who for years had been demanding, cajoling, pressuring, and bribing Pakistan to carry out such an operation. Not only has the US kept the aid tap flowing, it has also started re-engaging Pakistan in a security relationship that it hopes will help

keep the peace in Afghanistan after the US troops withdraw. Along with the US, the new Afghan dispensation also seems to have been taken in by the Pakistan military operations in NWA. The problem is that this is a worn-out path that all these players have travelled on before. After the Pakistan army operations in Swat and South Waziristan in 2009, the then Pakistan army chief Gen Ashfaq Kayani was lauded and feted in the same manner as Gen Raheel Sharif is today. But it didn't take long before the reality sunk in that the Swat and SWA operations were less about the War on Terror and more about regaining control over areas where the writ of the Pakistan state had stopped running. Something similar is the case in NWA. Chances are that the delay in taking the operations to their logical conclusion will create space for the terrorists to recover and regroup, and by next spring the dynamic of the insurgency in border regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan might change drastically and to the detriment of not just the two countries 'joined at the hip' but also US and its allies. While the terrorists might not be able to re-occupy territory lost to the Pakistan state, they can bog down the security forces in an exhausting and debilitating war of attrition, something in which they are past-masters

The IDP crisis that ZeA has created is not going to be solved anytime soon. Given that at least the ground clearing operations have for all practical purposes been suspended until next spring, there is little chance of the IDPs being able to return to their homes before next autumn, if at all. Most of the people displaced in previous operations in SWA, Bajaur, Mohmand, and other agencies have still not been able to return. Even if the NWA IDPs return, they will find it extremely hard to reconstruct their homes and businesses devastated in the course of the operation. What is more, over the last decade the entire economy of the region had got tied into a terror economy and for the people to reconstruct a normal economy in a region which never had anything anyway is going to be a Herculean task. This will then become a major cause of discontent and could feed into the narrative of the radical Islamists, who will be lurking in the background, ready to strike as and when an opportunity presents itself.

The biggest problem with ZeA is that it is not quite clear what Pakistan hopes to achieve and whether it has thought through its game-

plan. Ostensibly, Pakistan wants to clean up its act, restore the writ in places where the state had ceased to exist – it is of course another matter that in most of Pakistan the state has ceased to exist in terms of being able to provide basic public goods to the citizens – and eliminate the threat that Islamist terrorists pose. Alongside, Pakistan is projecting that it is keen to play a positive role inside Afghanistan and facilitate national reconciliation in that country. But the question is what has prompted Pakistan to change its policy on Taliban and Afghanistan at this late stage? Is it that with the US withdrawal looming large, Pakistan thinks that the time is opportune for it to move in for the kill and make the play for which it had been preparing since its U-turn post 9/11?

Having backed the Taliban/Al Qaeda combine for so many years and having tolerated the activities of their affiliates for so long, it doesn't make sense for Pakistan to force them to sue for peace with their adversaries when they are on the verge of winning. Why would they toe the Pakistani diktat when they are so close to getting what they want? Whether or not the Taliban are really as close to getting what they want is hardly important; what is important is that they think they are winning. If the Taliban refuse to play ball, then Pakistan will face a huge problem. It will have to go with either the Afghan government and move against the Taliban or it will have to renege (not for the first time) on the commitments it has made to the Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani, and throw its lot with the Taliban. Neither is a good option.

If Pakistan decides to go with the Afghan government, it will create a situation where the entire swathe of territory straddling the Durand Line, where the Taliban and their affiliates are establishing their sway, will become the battle zone. This will mean prolonged conflict which will suck in both the Afghan and Pakistan states and sap their energies, putting paid to the grandiose economic plans. On the other hand, if the Pakistanis are only deceiving the Afghan and US governments and will ultimately go with the Taliban, then they risk not only the opprobrium of the international community but also the dangers that a Taliban dispensation in Afghanistan, sympathetic to the cause of the Pakistani Taliban with whom they share fraternal links, will pose for the security of Pakistan. The implications of

either of these options for the state of terrorism inside Pakistan are extremely serious. Although Pakistan has managed to avoid the backlash of terrorism in the last six months, the threat posed by the Taliban remains pretty much intact, partly because most of the terrorist cadre and their networks hasn't been eliminated, partly because the ideology of radical political Islam and other socio-economic and political factors that have spawned, sponsored and supported the Taliban remains in place and partly because the strategic paradigm of the biggest purveyor of jihad – the Pakistan army – hasn't changed. Given all this, it is unlikely that Zarb-e-Azb will achieve any of its strategic objectives.

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