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Bilawal Rules Out Strikes Against TTP in Afghanistan

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1732779/bilawal-rules-out-strikes-against-ttp-in-afghanistan>

KARACHI: While ruling out talks with the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari said the country does not intend to carry out attacks against the group inside Afghanistan.

“We’re not interested in launching a cross-border operation, nor would we want to advocate for more military intervention after what we’ve already seen was the longest war,” Mr Bhutto-Zardari told Anadolu Agency on the side-lines of the World Economic Forum (WEF) on Thursday. Separately, in an interview with Washington Post’s Lally Weymouth, the foreign minister also ruled out talks with militants who don’t respect Pakistan’s Constitution and laws.

“The new leadership in Pakistan, both political and military, has been absolutely clear. There will be no talks with terrorist organisations that don’t respect our laws and constitution,” he told the Post. Mr Bhutto-Zardari said Pakistan was confident to work with the Afghan interim government, which he claimed has influence over these groups.

Pakistan was willing to build the capacity of the Afghan government to deal with the threat, he told Anadolu. The foreign minister claimed that Pakistan successfully managed to break the backbone of the TTP and terrorist groups and blamed the previous PTI-led government’s “policy of appeasement toward the Pakistani Taliban” for the resurgence of terrorism, the Post reported.

Talking about the new reality that has emerged in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal, the foreign minister said everyone around the world was concerned about the potential use of Afghan soil for terrorist activities.

Comments

Introduction

As another explosion raked up a popular mosque in Peshawar leaving 59 civilians dead and over 150 injured. Scholars, military thinkers and political scientists in

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Pakistan and across the globe look for ounces of information available to find TTP footprint. As more information unfolds, The Dawn broke the news of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) taking responsibility for the attack, which further increases their range of targets (Pakistani soldiers, members of the ISI, law enforcement in particular) to include ordinary citizens as well. With Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari denying possibility of a strike against the TTP within its territory, the author wishes to re-trace Islamabad's serious missteps, at both tactical and strategic levels, that resulted in Taliban control of Kabul and TTP (which continues to make a stand-off against Pakistani troops in FATA & Waziristan provinces). One may argue, has resurrecting Taliban from its ashes in 2001 and transforming it into an alliance infused with politico-strategic ambitions, a strategic gamble that horrifically misfired? Because for years, Pakistani state propaganda continued to distinguish Afghan and Pakistani Taliban through vivid rhetoric.



Source: Eastern Eye

With over a year in Kabul, the saga of mistrust towards once an ally Pakistan continues to overshadow judgements even within Quetta Shura's strongest supporters, on one account, dismissing Pakistan's capability to launch an aerial and land-based counter-offensives against the TTP sanctuaries inside Pakistan. It will not be incorrect to say that Pakistan's actions (strategic manoeuvres over time) have resulted in another hostile neighbour and one more headache.

Strategic failure (if the author can pre-maturely summarise as a decision with negative exercised outcome), poor tactical decisions further complicate this engagement, pressuring Islamabad, more than relieving it. The secret release of Muslim Khan and Ehsanullah Ehsan makes it all the more evident. But what makes TTP more aggressive that Islamabad felt the pressure to release its tier-1 commanders? What made them change the stance of not negotiating with terrorists (later engaging in limited negotiation) and giving in to the demands of an outfit recruited, trained & radicalised by various actors controlled and financed by Islamabad?

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The Evolution

It will not be incorrect to say that, TTP to has undergone dynamic shifts within its jihadi networks based in Pakistan.

The legitimate: Pashtun's Paishwa پیشوا

From the outset, the TTP had two challenges to overcome:

- It had to forfeit its jihadi outlook for a faction that was controlled by a state. Islamabad's long-standing ties with jihadi factions against prominent tribal groups (including affiliates of AQ operating in Kashmir) stained their image for a long time. These groups were actively involved in jihad, operating within Kashmir and Afghanistan under Islamabad's umbrella and ISI's shadow. It opted the path to legitimacy by going toe-to-toe with their once supporters and declaring its jihad against the state.
- It will not be incorrect to say that Pakistan held (continues to hold) some serious highly competitive jihadi and religious-politically induced factions, which held more legitimacy than the TTP. The challenge was to influence these prominent groups which many promoted non-militant ways to achieve similar objectives. These factions, rallying local support and external donors (generous contributions from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt & Turkey) with the ultimate aim of transitioning leadership within the Pakistani state to a Maulvi influenced (and driven) Sharia induced rule of law.



Source: Dawn

To overcome these hurdles, TTP leadership formulated a strategy based on four principal pillars:

1. Develop confidence in Al Qaeda and Taliban leadership (affiliates)

The first major step TTP leadership undertook was to induce confidence within Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda which gained them local and international legitimacy.

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The Taliban's jihad against the infidels (US & Allies) received continuous support from Pakistani Pashtuns along with Deobandi and Salafist mullahs, Islamist NGOs, and other jihadi factions, during the peak of insurgency, legitimising their jihad and propagating it as the only viable tool against the West. The TTP too supported this jihad by providing constant supply of young recruits, Wahabi luminaries and materials support which enhanced their legitimacy within vivid factions. The Pakistani state, north in particular became a recruiting hub for the group. This resulted in TTP's influence within the Pashtun tribal regions bordering Afghanistan, earning them an official endorsement as a Taliban affiliate and a legitimate ally. Its proximity to Taliban resulted in stronger ties with al-Qaeda—which at this point was an infuriated islamists militant faction worried because rapidly increase in pro-state militant groups who were de-legitimising their ideology after 9/11. This resulted in TTP's elevation as a serious jihadi faction within the competition, elevating its reputation even beyond the likes of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM).

2. *Exercise control over the tribal System*

The tussle for legitimacy further proved fatal for any islamists faction that stood within the ideology of the TTP. This gave the necessary need exercise explicit control over the tribal system in FATA. This resulted in deaths of hundreds of tribal elders who staunchly opposed militarization of the region. The erstwhile Pashtun Tribal belt in Pakistan (which comprised of semiautonomous Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)), was governed using a Tribal system. The government exercised partially and majorly through the elders who they needed to retain strong influence of the local populous of FATA and provided financial remunerations (through provincial/federal government schemes) to keep the largely uneducated populous engaged. This resulted in TTP replacing the traditional tribal leadership commands within the chieftains' system thereby, exercising explicit control over the region.

3. *Increasing Cadre: The Shia recruits*

To cater the constant supply of recruits, TTP began attracting members of the anti-Shia sectarian militant groups within Pakistan, namely the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ). Series of attacks conducted by the TTP against the Shia sect Shia encouraged vast numbers of disgruntled LeJ fighters to defect, elevating its position to the only actor who could target Shia sect aggressively. As the TTP changed its stance to the only anti-Shia faction, it paved their way to forge its jihad against the Pakistani state.

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4. *Sharia is the key*

The TTP established a strong sharia system in FATA province with a similar structure and governance style to the one Taliban proposed (in its vivid propaganda pieces during their jihad). This sought interested Pakistani Islamist groups from Malakand, Bajaur, and Orakzai districts to defect their affiliations and expand TTP's ideology beyond FATA, seeding the roots of political ambitions. The TTP received constant praise from educated Mullahs (Islamists) which was resonated from their sermons within the Pakistan's urban neighbourhoods (large scale household influence); many of them frustrated from the state's political parties to adopt the sharia way of living and governance within the nation. These efforts cumulatively played a larger role in winning the grassroots' level of influence (and interaction, romanticism) from Islamists who dreamed (rather believed) in the idea of an Islamization of Pakistan through politico-religious means.

Declining Al Qaeda's influence amidst political expectations

Over the course, TTP developed into a full functional islamists anti-Pakistan faction. Its development can be credited to three main factors:

- The fall of AQ as the only legitimate face of jihad,
- The rise of Taliban in Kabul and growing influence in the hinterlands, and
- The TTP's emergence as a key factor in domestic Pakistani politics.

To begin with, AQ had significant stake within the TTP's political discourse. They frequently argued and exercised significant influence to limit TTP's strong anti-Shia agenda by renewing their focus on infidels' (Western influence in the region) and the political elite within the Pakistani state; On one account, a former member of the TTP highlighted Osama bin Laden's discourse the TTP, during which he explicitly advised them not to undertake any more attacks against the Shias. The TTP walso received advises on not to target members if the Barelvi subsect (within the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam) in Pakistan. But after the drone strikes that killed the TTP leaders Baitullah and Hakimullah Mehsud, the group re-considered of renewing its affiliation with the AQ. Although many scholars do point towards AQ's significant contribution to the TTP's (from its insurrection, rise, and expansion), one former member of the group spoke of numerous discontents within the TTP ranks, against the AQ's support

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(much like interference). According to some sources (the author spoke on the promise of anonymity) confirms some influence Al-Qaeda continue to exercises at some levels.

With renewed Taliban attacks against the NATO-ISAF and US led troops and subsequent victories against the Afghan National Security & Defence Forces in 2014, the TTP leaders Omar Khalid Khorasani and Qari Shakeel Ahmad hosted a shura to dissolve the then existing quasi-tribal structure of the TTP to centralized bureaucratic system (replicating the Taliban decision making hierarchy), on the context of political and territorial expansion which wouldn't have suited the erstwhile system. After six years of resistance within the leadership (Shura Council), the TTP's new organizational cycle came into existence in 2020, with specific appointments of shadow governors for every province in Pakistan with a dedicated centrally governed military training architecture.

The way forward

With the Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari making a statement of not targeting the TTP hideouts within Pakistan, the only solution that the author foresees is that of a political settlement. Will Islamabad (even after growing tensions with the Taliban) influence Kabul in a way that may result in TTP to settle for a political discourse? It is too soon to predict.

Taking the aforementioned discussion and even for the sake of hypothesing, let us understand the options Islamabad has:

- There is no doubt on the TTP's role in bringing Taliban back in Kabul. The TTP have strong relations with current Taliban leadership and affiliate groups, who deeply value TTP's support and sacrifice. The only option left is a probable intra-tribal rifts, if somehow the Taliban bends taking into account the growing wedge between the two once allies.
- This brings in the unique case of ISKP, which (as mentioned in the previous briefs) may prove valuable to Islamabad if it seriously aims to create a tussle within the TTP ranks. The ISKP has disgruntled fighters which broke away from the TTP ranks and changed their allegiance.

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- That said, two-thirds of the fighting force within the TTP has Taliban affiliates and more than once have fought against the West in the region. Thus, if fighters continue to mount serious offenses against Pakistani forces, this would pave the way for other disgruntled pro-state islamists factions to join the ranks of TTP or act as their affiliates, crippling Islamabad's capability to mount a serious offensive.

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