

# PAKISTAN CANNOT DISMANTLE TERROR GROUPS OPERATING FROM ITS SOIL

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The foreign minister of Pakistan, Khawaja Asif, acknowledged in the US that Hafiz Saeed, Haqqani network and the LeT are liabilities for Pak. He went on to add, 'Give us time to get rid of them as we don't have assets to match these liabilities'. This is not the first time Pakistan has admitted that it supports terror groups. Sartaj Aziz, their earlier foreign affairs advisor had stated about the Taliban at the Washington's Council of Foreign Affairs think tank on 01 Mar 16, "We have some influence over them because their leadership is in Pakistan and they get some medical facilities. Their families are here". This was in the context of bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table.

General Joseph Dunford, chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff committee even stated in a recent US senate hearing that the 'ISI has connections with terror groups'. As a counter, the Pak DG ISPR, Major General Ghafoor, in a news conference stated, 'having links is different from supporting. Name any intelligence agency which does not have links'.

## **Denials always**

The Pakistan top leadership, including their Prime Minister had reversely stated that there are no safe havens in Pakistan of any terror groups, from the podium of the UN General Assembly. Their army chief had also stated on similar lines on numerous occasions. Other government spokespersons claimed that the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network were based and operating from Afghanistan, where they control close to forty percent of the territory.

The Pakistan opposition criticized their foreign minister claiming his facts were incorrect and the sacrifices of the army in battling terrorists targeting Pakistan were forgotten. Hafiz Saeed even issued the foreign minister a legal notice, claiming he was being maligned in his comments. These are some of the many contradicting statements emanating from the same government, within a very short time, raising more doubts than answers.

## **No mention of anti-India terror groups**

They have never been able to similarly comment on the anti-India terror groups. Hafiz Saeed, Syed Salahudeen amongst other known terror group leaders moves and operates freely in Pakistan. The daily culling of Pakistan sponsored terrorists, as they attempt to enter India is ample proof of their existence. Indian arrests of Pak militants, including Ajmal Kasab, have blocked any such Pakistan actions. Hence, while they attempted to cover the Taliban and Haqqani network, despite the known presence of Bin Laden and Mullah Mansoor, they ignored anti-India groups.

### **The world is aware of Pakistan lies**

However, the facts are clear. The deep state controls, supports and employs terror groups operating in India and Afghanistan as strategic assets. The polity cannot pass directions to the deep state on the issue. The infamous 'Dawn newspaper leaks' where an article on the polity challenging the deep state on maintaining terror groups as state policy emerged, led to an angry response by the army.

It created such panic within the government, that the information minister was made a scapegoat and compelled to resign. The Prime Minister held a series of meetings with the army chief to resolve the issue. It was this difference in opinion of handling terror groups which could possibly be one of the reasons for Nawaz Sharif's downfall.

The world is aware of Pakistan's policy of state sponsored terrorism. It was with this backdrop that Trump gave Pak a direct warning on stopping its terror supporting activities. The US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis's statement in Afghanistan that the US would be observing Pakistan carefully, amply elucidates the point. It is in international crosshairs for all the wrong reasons.

### **Fears within their establishment**

The Pakistan army has a major predicament, which was possibly what their foreign minister attempted to state, when he made his comments in the US. The predicament stems from an earlier incident in Pakistan, the storming of the Lal Masjid. The Pak army was compelled to storm the Lal Masjid in Islamabad in Jul 2007, resulting in over a hundred dead, after an announcement of Islamic rule from its pulpit. Over seventy percent of Lal Masjid's students are from the tribal belt of Pak. This was the same masjid from where the ISI had in the past, recruited and mobilized volunteers for Kashmir and Afghanistan.

Six months post the storming of the Lal Masjid, forty militant leaders from the tribal belt, possessing between them large numbers of trained and battle hardy militants, met in South Waziristan and agreed to form a united front against Pakistan, because they strongly opposed the attack on Lal Masjid. Thus, was born the Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP), also termed the Pakistan Taliban, the organization which the Pak army struggles to control.

The worry within the Pak establishment stems from the fact that any action it takes against the HuM, LeT, Haqqani network, Afghan Taliban, Hafiz Saeed or any other group or leader, could result in the group turning inwards or its loyalists aligning with the TTP. This could result in increased internal turmoil, spread across the length and breadth of the country.

### **Pakistan army fears becoming overstretched**

The Pakistan army is stretched to its limits battling the growing freedom struggle in Baluchistan, rising militancy in the tribal areas, regular attacks by the TTP, strong retaliation by India along the LoC and a hostile border with Afghanistan. In addition is the requirement to continue to provide support and protection to the CPEC and the Chinese working on it. The rise of another terror group may spell doom and be beyond the army's control. Thus, the army attempted to bring in legitimacy to the JuD by endorsing its forming a political party. However, international pressure forced their interior ministry to step in and prevent it.

### **Polity vs the Deep State**

The polity seeks peace with both its neighbours as it desires Pak grows economically, basically under directions from China, its main benefactor, but the army has a different view. It does not desire any role for India in Afghanistan and seeks to reclaim Kashmir by a violent struggle while tying down a large part of the Indian army in the valley, thus seeking to reduce chances of an all-out war.

Hence, its reliance on terror groups. Supporting the Taliban would strengthen its grip on Afghanistan and whenever it becomes part of the Afghan government, a major condition would be to keep India away. Employing cannon fodder militants against India would keep Kashmir alive in the international environment and by providing funding for encouraging violence, it would keep the region on the boil. In the opinion of the deep state, talks would impact its actions hence every time suggestions for talks are made, it launches a strike.

### **Fears Indian strategy**

Their polity is aware that India, pursuing its policy of isolating Pak, would be seeking to convince the US into naming it as a terror state, akin to North Korea, which would mar its international standing. The BRICS statement and subsequent comments by Russia have reduced margins for support. Even during the recent visit of the Pak foreign minister to China brought forth no major achievements.

While China stated no change in relations with Pakistan, it ignored any reference to the BRICS statement, a shift from the normal as also a gentle warning to change tack. It may support Pak by again placing a hold on the designation of Hafiz Saeed as a global terrorist in the UN at the end of this month, but it would possibly come with an ultimatum to Pakistan.

The deep state also knows that it would be compelled to dismantle terror groups as international pressure would mount once the US surge is completed in Afghanistan, however is unsure of the impact. One Lal Masjid was bad enough. The future could be even more bleaker. Hence, it would find it extremely difficult to even consider the dismantling of terror groups. It may bear international pressure, accept lack of funds, greater isolations, worsening relations but would not risk the rise of more anti-Pak terror groups due to its own follies.

### **Past role of US and China**

Previous US governments continued nudging India to maintain contact with Pak, solely seeking Pak support in Afghanistan. It expected that hopes of a solution to Kashmir would change Pak's approach to supporting terror groups. In recent times, India and the US have become closer and with India becoming a major strategic partner with the aim of counter balancing Chinese hegemony in the region and its active participation in the development of Afghanistan, this nudge has ended. Further, with Indian attempts to isolate Pakistan gaining ground, Pak's counter claims requesting everyone to intervene in Kashmir are ignored.

China, while supporting Pakistan is keeping its hands off the Kashmir issue. Post Abbasi's speech in the UN, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson stated that Kashmir is a bilateral issue. China has continuously advised Pak to concentrate on trade and development. Its agreement to name Pak based terror groups in the BRICS summit was a silent warning.

### **Trust deficit**

The 'Dawn newspaper leaks' proved that the government desires to recommence dialogue, requests for talks, but the deep state desists. Trust deficit only enhances, solely because India

knows, Pak fears dismantling terror groups. Unless the offer for talks emanates with support from the deep state, it would be valueless. The deep state knows that the freedom granted to Hafiz Saeed and his ilk has resulted in them possessing their own identity and support base, as recent byelections have proved, when the JuD sponsored party, Milli Muslim League (MML), secured the third place.

### **Nuclear weapons guarantee national security**

The Pak leadership is aware that its nuclear power status will ensure that the nation state continues to survive, despite external threats. The statement by Abbasi in the UN reiterated this aspect. The spreading of its nuclear arsenal in nine sites across the country is aimed at deterring any international power from attempting to launch a pre-emptive strike. It is worried about India taking advantage of US pressures from Afghanistan, hence reiterates its tactical nuclear weapons.

### **Impact for India**

The surgical strike conveyed that a major terror strike on Indian soil would not go unpunished. However, within the valley the game would continue. The isolation of the Hurriyat by the NIA and the ED has drastically reduced Pakistan's Kashmir support base, compelling them to enhance pressure on militants to increase attacks on security forces. A stronger anti-infiltration grid with culling of terrorists at the LoC is making even this difficult.

A major option open for India is to continue enhancing pressure on Pak in every international forum, compelling it to attempt the unthinkable, withdrawing support to terror groups. This would tie down their deep state. It is only by reducing the power of the deep state, can the subcontinent witness peace.