

Operation Replay?



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An anti-terror rally in Karachi. Photo: Reuters

As Pakistan launches the Raddul Fasaad counter-terror offensive, a comparison with the previous crackdown

After a spate of terror attacks in Punjab, Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan has launched a new counter-terrorism offensive, Raddul Fasaad. Will it succeed where Zarb-e-Azb, the previous operation, failed? Or, could the new operation create more problems and have unintended fallouts?

According to the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), the media wing of the Pakistan Army, Raddul Fasaad aims at “indiscriminately eliminating residual/ latent threat of terrorism, consolidating the gains

made in other military operations... and further ensuring security of the borders”.

Borderlines

The ISPR statement highlights the predominant Pakistani perception of the problem and its potential solutions. The security establishment sees the problem as a “residual/latent threat of terrorism” and linked with an ineffective border. Is the border and what happens across the Durand Line the real problem of terror attacks in Pakistan? Ironically, Kabul also seems to believe that ineffective border management, but by Pakistan, is a strong requirement for Afghan stability.

Here lies the problem. Immediately after the February attacks, the Pakistan Chief of Army Staff, Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa, expressed “concerns over continued acts of terrorism in Pakistan with impunity from Afghanistan” to Gen. John Nicholson, Commander of the Resolution Support Mission (RSM) in Afghanistan, and asked him to “play his role in disconnecting this planning, direction, coordination and financial support” from Afghanistan. The terrorism problem in Pakistan could well have a cross-Durand link; some of the terrorist groups such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA), that had claimed the Lahore attack may be operating out of Afghanistan. But this is only part of the larger problem. Gen. Nicholson, in his testimony on February 9, just before the terrorist attacks in Lahore and later in Sehwan, told the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee: “The Taliban and Haqqani network are the greatest threats to security in Afghanistan. Their senior leaders remain insulated from pressure and enjoy freedom of actions within Pakistan safe havens.”

Clearly, Pakistan’s terror problems will remain complicated as long as the terror groups with safe havens in Af-Pak have convergence. Perhaps, this is where Zarb-e-Azb failed miserably. Though the operations targeted militants in the tribal agencies and a few districts of the KP, it remained selective. The Pakistani establishment continues to consider the Taliban-Haqqani network as an asset and a source of leverage.

Will Raddul Fasaad succeed if Pakistan goes ahead with the same strategy? Pakistan’s present terrorism problem is not “residual terrorism” and “border related”, but a result of selective targeting of terror groups by the Zarb-e-Azb.

The difference this time

The big difference between Zarb-e-Azb and Raddul Fasaad will be the nature of operations and its geographic spread. The Zarb-e-Azb concentrated primarily on the tribal agencies and select parts of KP, mainly North and South Waziristan, Swat valley and Khyber Agency.

Raddul Fasaad has an expanded scope; perhaps this will be Pakistan’s first urban counter-terror offensive, and that too in Punjab. Yet another challenge for the new operation would be the target groups, the sectarian militants. Led by the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and its factions, the sectarian

militants are stronger in Punjab and Sindh (especially Karachi). These groups, unlike the TTP and al-Qaeda in Pakistan, ideologically have the support of some mosques and their madrasas. Besides, there have also been reports on the presence of the Islamic State (IS); it has in fact claimed the suicide attack on the Sufi shrine in Sehwan, Sindh. Raddul Fasaad will be treading into sectarian groups, which Zarb-e-Azb didn't. Also, the support and patronage for some of these sectarian groups come from political parties that have been ruling Punjab and Sindh.

The larger problem and the likely fallout of the Raddul Fasaad will be political. The "National Action Plan" to counter terrorism so far has been primarily led by the military rather than by the Parliament. Raddul Fasaad is likely to expand this gap even further.

Raddul Fasaad is also likely to strengthen the debate on reviving the military courts that expired in January 2017. The Pakistan Muslim League favours its revival and is likely to get a resolution passed soon, perhaps this month itself.

Finally, an important fallout may be on ethnic relations within the country. Already, the Pashtun community has started complaining of "racial profiling"; the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provincial assembly has just passed a resolution against the selective targeting of Pashtuns in Sindh, Punjab and Pakistan Occupied Kashmir.

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