

‘Taliban presently lack capabilities to attack India’



Pakistan forces have launched an offensive in South Waziristan Agency against revived Pakistan Taliban. However, the offensive has failed to deter Pak Taliban from launching more terrorist attacks around the country. In an exclusive interview with Kamna Arora of Zeenews.com, Pakistan expert Syed Adnan Ali Shah Bukhari talks about the tumult in Pak and forces’ offensive against Taliban.

Syed Adnan Ali Shah Bukhari is an Associate Research Fellow at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore.

Kamna: Is the anti-insurgency military offensive in Pakistan’s South Waziristan just an eye-wash or is Islamabad really determined this time to flush out terrorists?

Bukhari: Since early 2008, we have seen a firm resolve on the part of the Pakistani government to take-on the terrorists and eliminate them. It was for the first time in the history of the present day FATA that we are witnessing multiple military operations taking place across the length and breadth of the region. Pakistan’s present military offence against its local/Pakistani Taliban is even contrary to the previous policies of the former British Indian government (1857-1947) which pursued the strategy of subduing one tribe at one time while placating the other restive tribes and taking them on one by one over a course of time.

The current operation in South Waziristan Agency (SWA) is being pursued with the strong belief that SWA has become the headquarters of foreign and local terrorists and until the semi-sanctuaries of these terrorists are not eliminated, the wave of terrorist violence in the entire Pakistan cannot be brought down.

However, there are many factors that could shape the success or otherwise of the present military operation in SWA. Firstly, any major political instability in the country could derail the focus on the ongoing military operation. Secondly, the evolving external security environment around Pakistan could also factor into the success of the operations. The recent suicide attack in Iran, for example, and the evolving terrorist links between Jundullah and Pakistani terrorist groups, such as the sectarian Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LJ), Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and al Qaeda (AQ), could be a deviation that could affect Pakistan’s focus on the drive against terrorists in FATA.

Thirdly, the cooperation of the Pakistan civil society in eliminating Taliban militants

could be a major factor. Their support is crucial in eliminating the Taliban since they could provide the much-needed human intelligence (HUMINT) to root out militancy from the entire region. Fourthly, the Taliban is a cross-border phenomenon, and the Taliban in Afghanistan are growing in strength with every passing year. In 2007, the Afghan Taliban were maintaining permanent presence over 54 percent of the Afghan territory, which increased to 72 percent in 2008. In 2009, the Taliban's presence further increased to 80 percent, with violence reaching up to the northern and western parts of the insurgency-torn country. The Pak-Afghan border is porous, and the Pakistani Taliban may sneak into Afghanistan if they come under extreme pressure from the Pakistani security forces. While Pakistan has deployed 120,000 troops on the border, there are few soldiers on the Afghan side - their number needs to be increased. Unless, the Afghan Taliban are eliminated and Afghanistan stabilised, we may see the presence of Pakistani Taliban, albeit weak, in FATA.

Kamna: How will Pak offensive in SWA help the US in Afghanistan?

Bukhari: The present operation in SWA is being conducted against the Pakistani Taliban faction belonging to the Mehsud tribe. Since late 2007, the Mehsud Taliban are mainly focused on conducting operations in Pakistan, and their involvement across the border has dwindled considerably. The Mehsud Taliban provides the biggest chunk of suicide bombers, who conduct attacks in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. But, given Mehsud's dwindling role in Afghanistan, the present military operation in SWA has little impact on the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. However, since the Mehsud Taliban are host to a considerable number of foreign militants – both AQ-linked Arabs and other Central Asian militants – the US may benefit from the destruction of semi-sanctuaries of these foreign militants in the Mehsud area.

Kamna: What do you think was the motive of the Pak Taliban behind targeting students at Islamabad University this time and not security forces?

Bukhari: Firstly, the students were attacked following an announcement on October 17, 2009 by Pakistan's Interior Minister, Rehman Malik, regarding the launching of a Volunteer Student Task Force (VSTF) with the slogan of making the country a "Terrorism Free Pakistan". Under the plan, the said volunteers would be required to register with their respective police stations and help the law enforcement agencies (LEAs) in informing them about suspicious persons in academic institutions. The terrorist suicide attack was an attempt to harass the students and discourage them from becoming part of such initiatives. Secondly, the academic institutions are a soft target since they were not attacked previously while the military institutions have become a hard target recently, militarily speaking.

Kamna: The recent offensive against Pakistan is wholly in the wake of terror

attacks inside the country. Had the targets been the US, Afghanistan or India, Pakistani forces won't have reacted in the same way. Comment.

Bukhari: First of all, the militancy phenomenon existing presently in the Middle East, South Asia and Central Asia, including Afghanistan, is a complex and intricate web. Terrorist groups are non-state actors who are operating in the entire Asian region, and are interconnected and span the international boundaries. International cooperation is required to jointly fight them since it involves many governments and States. Pakistan, despite its limited resources is aiding the international community to foil any attack that comes to its knowledge. For example, the post-9/11 cooperation by Pakistan to the US-led coalition in Afghanistan, as well as the recent foiling of terrorist attacks in Europe, especially the Liquid Plot of August 2006, are examples of Pakistan's cooperation in the war against terrorism. Pakistan's investigation into the November 2008 Mumbai attacks is proceeding and there is ample cooperation going on in terms of exchange of information.

Kamna: Does Pakistan appear to be in the grip of devastating civil war?

Bukhari: So far, there are no indications of such an eventuality. The Taliban militants are more of a terrorist group than an insurgent group. Secondly, despite repeated military operations in FATA, the tribesmen of FATA support the government's punitive action against the Taliban, since it presently enjoy minimal support among the communities in which they operate. While security situation is deteriorating in the country, voices of civil war and secession are absent.

Kamna: Is Pakistan hesitant to antagonise the Afghan Taliban in North Waziristan Agency (NWA) who might be collecting the aid for their brethren in South Waziristan?

Bukhari: The Afghan Taliban exclusively operate in Afghanistan and have also pleaded with the Pakistani Taliban to cease their fight in Pakistan and focus on the US and NATO forces stationed across the border, since they are the main enemy. Also, Afghan Taliban do not collect finances from Pakistan since they are generating considerable finances in Afghanistan to run their movement. Some of the major sources of Afghan Taliban finances are taxing the drug cartels, kidnapping for ransom in Afghanistan and receiving huge donations from rich Arab sympathisers in the Gulf region.

Secondly, it is militarily suicide for Pakistan to proceed against all the factions of the Taliban residing in the twin agencies of Waziristan in one-go, given the vastness of area, rough terrain and the strategic depth the Taliban exercise in the region owing to their proximity with the restive eastern provinces of Afghanistan. Hence, a successful military operation against the Mehsud Taliban might pave way for a subsequent operation against

the Wazir-tribe based Taliban.

Kamna: How is Pak Taliban a threat to India?

Bukhari: So far, the Pakistani Taliban are specifically focused on the Afghanistan-Pakistan front. A major success by them resulting in subduing both the Afghan and Pakistani government may allow them the opportunity to turn their attention towards India. This could be due to the unresolved Kashmir dispute between the two countries. However, the chances of the Taliban overrunning the governments in Afghanistan and Pakistan remain non-existent. We need to understand that there are two things: Intentions and capabilities. While the Taliban may express their intentions to attack India as was done by the new TTP chief, Hakimullah Mehsud, on 15 October 2009, they presently lack the capabilities to conduct such an attack. Mehsud in his statement said, “We want an Islamic state. If we get that, then we will go to the borders and help fight the Indians.” The statement could also be meant for public consumption since Mehsud understands that such statements could negate his anti-Pakistan image and present him as a patriot.

Also, the Kashmir-based militant groups, such as Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) do not maintain ties with the TTP and al Qaeda, which could facilitate such terrorist attacks. Some of the breakaway individuals and factions such as Jamiatul Ansar and Jamiatul Furqan (Maulana Abdul Jabbar faction) of JeM, LeT, Harkatul Mujahideen (HuM), Harkatul Jihadi Islami (HuJI), however work closely with the TTP and al Qaeda, but they are more focused on Afghanistan and Pakistan and their activity in Kashmir and India is almost non-existent.