

PAKISTAN: THE POLITICALS RIFTS AND TERRIOSM.

DER SPIEGEL. December 19, 2014.

By Ahmed Rashid

The horrific terrorist attack against school children in Peshawar that has left 132 young bloodied corpses and 9 staff dead has stunned Pakistan and the world. It is by far the worst atrocity committed by the Taliban since their inception in 1993 in Afghanistan and their expansion into Pakistan in 2003.

Since June the army has been conducting a counter terrorism operation in North Waziristan on the border with Afghanistan against Taliban bases and the attack on the school was a clear case of Taliban retaliation and revenge against an army run school where most of the students are the children of army officers and soldiers. The army claims to have killed over 1200 Taliban in the past six months while the Taliban says the army has also killed hundreds of civilians including their wives and children.

"We selected the army's school for the attack because the government is targeting our families and females," said Taliban spokesman Muhammad Umar Khorasani. "We want them to feel the pain," he said. One result of the military campaign has been the fragmentation of the Pakistani Taliban and the defection of some of their fighters. This singular attack was to demonstrate to the army that the Taliban are still capable of mounting an offensive.

However the military campaign has been stymied by acute political divisions between the elected government, the opposition and the army. For years Pakistan's ruling elite have failed to produce a common narrative and political purpose to comprehensively combat terrorism. Unless it does so Pakistan's dangerous slide into chaos and instability will only increase.

Until recently the army was pursuing a dual policy towards terrorist groups. The army and its powerful Interservices Intelligence (ISI) has both supported the US-NATO campaign in Afghanistan for the past 13 years but has also allowed the Afghan Taliban to maintain their bases, recruitment and logistic facilities in Pakistan. That policy has been dictated by the army's fear that long time rival India will gain excessive influence in Afghanistan. Pro-ISI Afghan Taliban groups have frequently attacked Indian facilities in Afghanistan.

The dual policy syndrome has also led to the army playing favorites amongst the Pakistan Taliban, who emerged after 9/11 as a consequence of the army's soft attitude to terrorism and the pandering to Islamic fundamentalism that the then military regime of general Pervez Musharraf allowed. Once confined to the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan, there are now dozens of Pakistani Taliban groups operating across the country and in major cities like Karachi and Lahore.

Adding to the confusion has been an opposition movement led by former cricketer Imran Khan who has been trying to topple the elected government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Since August his supporters have paralyzed the country, the economy and the administration as Khan led street marches and sit ins amidst calls for Sharif to resign and fresh general elections. Khan is also a sympathizer of the Taliban, has refused to condemn them by name and insists that the government open talks with them.

Earlier this year Sharif himself repudiated the army's call for an offensive and opened four month long talks with the Taliban which proved useless. The Taliban refused to lay down their weapons or compromise on anything as critics of those talks had warned him. Despite their losses the political chaos and the lack of a state narrative against extremism has only emboldened the Taliban.

The attack on the school was not that unusual as the Taliban consider modern education as a threat to their ideology. According to the United Nations between 2009 and 2012 there were 838 attacks on schools in Pakistan, leaving hundreds of schools destroyed and students dead.

Malala Yousufzai, 17 who won the Nobel peace Prize last week and was earlier shot and wounded by the Taliban has become a symbol for student rights. She has put education on the front line of the war against terrorism, but for years the Pakistani establishment had refused to take the threats against schools and students seriously or taken steps to protect them.

The Taliban have also been able to halt a polio vaccination campaign by the government on grounds that it is un-Islamic. Now there are over 260 children who have got the paralyzing polio virus as the government dithered and failed to provide adequate security to the anti-polio teams. Pakistan has now become an incubator of the polio virus that has spread to Africa and the Middle East where it had once been eliminated.

These setbacks due to a lack of determined policies in combating extremism by the government and army have ensured that most countries refuse to invest in Pakistan, have reduced their diplomatic staff in the capital Islamabad and fear for the future of Pakistan. The country's global image has reached rock bottom.

However in recent months some significant changes have taken place. The army has now declared that terrorism rather than India pose a greater threat to the nation. The army has pledged to the Americans that it is pursuing all Taliban factions in the tribal areas including those which it protected in the past.

On December 6, for the first time in ten years the army killed a high level leader of al' Qaeda. Adnan Shukrijumah, a naturalized American citizen was killed at a compound in South Waziristan. The following day a US drone killed Umer Farooq, another top al' Qaeda leader, in North Waziristan. In return for these favors the US began to respond

positively by targeting Pakistani Taliban who had taken refuge in Afghanistan and were wanted by the army.

For the first time Pakistan, Afghanistan and the US appear to be collaborating to root out al' Qaeda and the Taliban in both countries - something not seen since 2002-4 when the Pakistan army killed or captured many al' Qaeda operatives.

However this greater cooperation on the ground in military terms still has to bring about real political dividends. The Afghan government will be looking to see if the ISI use their clout to try to stop the spate of attacks by the Afghan Taliban inside Afghanistan and especially in Kabul. Even more important will be whether Islamabad allows Afghan negotiators to meet with the Afghan Taliban leaders in Pakistan to discuss terms for peace.

In Pakistan on the political front there is also reason for hope. The day after the attack on the school, Imran Khan called off his civil disobedience campaign and met with other political leaders including Sharif to chalk out a campaign against terrorism.

Other opportunities may have emerged due to the attack on the school. When Nawaz Sharif became Prime Minister last year he immediately reached out to Indian leaders, but his initiative was blocked by the army which considered that Sharif was giving away too much. India also took on a more belligerent stance. Now Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has reached out to Sharif - ordering a two minute silence in Indian schools and parliament for the victims and offering any help Pakistan may need.

There is hope now that stalled Indo-Pakistan talks may now resume. nevertheless the future viability of the Pakistan state is going to depend on whether the state unites its factions to deal with the threat of terrorism. The school attack should serve as a watershed for changes in Pakistan's strategy, but there have been watersheds before and unfortunately the state has refused to respond to them.