

Pakistan's India Rivalry Harms Its Anti-Terrorism Strategy

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By Ahmed Rashid

On Sunday night a suicide bomber killed 60 people and injured more than 100 others when he detonated his explosive-packed belt at a police checkpoint near [Pakistan's](#) Wagah border post with India. The precisely-timed attack hit the large crowds that had gathered to watch a daily flag-lowering ceremony at the border town, making it the [worst terrorist attack in Pakistan](#) this year.

At least four different terrorist organisations have claimed [responsibility for the bombing](#), but the most plausible claim comes from Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, a viscous and extreme splinter group of the Pakistani Taliban. Its spokesman Ehsanullah Ehsan tweeted that a teenager carried out the attack in order to exact "revenge of the killing of those innocent people who have been killed by [the] Pakistan army particularly of those who have been killed in north Waziristan".

During the past four months the Pakistani army has carried out an [offensive in the tribal areas of north Waziristan](#). The aim is to retake territory from the Taliban and punish those groups which have carried out attacks against the army and the general civilian populace from their bases in north Waziristan and the tribal belt bordering Afghanistan. Some western diplomats have alleged that the Afghan Taliban, the dreaded Afghan Haqqani network and even some Pakistani groups fighting in Afghanistan have been left alone. However, the army claims to have targeted all groups and killed more than 1,000 militants - although it does not identify those killed and bans all media coverage of the operations.

Even though the battle against the Taliban continues in north Waziristan, there is no comprehensive counter-terrorism policy in the country, which is led jointly by the army and the elected government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Plans announced last year to create a [joint secretariat to co-ordinate civil and military intelligence](#), and articulate a single narrative about the need to condemn Islamic extremism, have withered on the vine.

Until such a strategy is forged - which seems unlikely in the current climate of political tension between the military and Mr Sharif's government - Pakistan will continue to reel from successive terrorist attacks. The police were already on [high alert last weekend](#), fearing attacks on Shia Muslims during the two holy days of Ashura which commemorate the death of the Prophet Mohammed's grandson and mark the origin of the Shia sect. However, Sunday's bomber killed indiscriminately: among the dead were eight members of one family, seven children, 10 women and three soldiers.

However, it is the location of the bombing which is most provocative - the check post is just 500 metres away from the Indian border. [Tensions between Pakistan and India](#) over the disputed territory of Kashmir have been rising for the past six weeks, leading to the most ferocious shooting war at the border since 2003 (when the countries almost went to war). It was sheer luck there were no Indian casualties in the terrorist attack as that would have caused an immediate escalation in the shelling between the two countries.

Militant groups such as the Taliban - which wants to topple the government in Islamabad - would like nothing better than a conflict between India and Pakistan to distract the army from north Waziristan. The easiest way to achieve this would be by planting bombs on the border, leading both governments to levy accusations of terrorism against each other. Despite these dangers, there has been no attempt to formulate a strategy against the plethora of militant groups, once nurtured by the military, who now occupy strategic and extremely dangerous space along the border with India.

Pakistan cannot forge a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy as long as it makes its enmity and competition with India the central plank of its foreign policy - whether in relation to Afghanistan or to the US. Narendra Modi, the prime minister of India, has already [issued blistering statements against Pakistan](#), which scuttled Mr Sharif's attempts to improve relations and increase trade between the two nations.

As long as the India-Pakistan rivalry continues, Islamabad is bound to turn a blind eye to those extremists who are willing to fight for Kashmir. Yet it is these militants who pose the biggest risk to the Pakistani state, and to the stability of the region and the world in general. Both India and Pakistan, after all, are nuclear powers.