

Pakistan Must Unleash The Military On The Militants

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By Ahmed Rashid

The horrifying [suicide attack on Karachi airport](#) by Pakistani Taliban will place the government on a direct collision course with both militants and the military - unless it is prepared to change its weak-kneed response to [terrorism](#). On Sunday night militants blasted their way into the cargo terminal of [Pakistan's](#) largest airport and fought a five-hour gun battle with security forces, setting alight the terminal and damaging aircraft. At least 29 people were killed, including 10 terrorists. The attack was later claimed by the Pakistani Taliban, which has begun a nationwide offensive against the government. On the same day a Sunni extremist group allied to the Taliban massacred 23 Shia civilians on a bus in Baluchistan province.

The authorities appeared to have made inadequate security precautions at the airport despite a devastating attack on a naval air base in Karachi in May 2011, in which Taliban militants destroyed two US-built surveillance aircraft and killed 10 members of the security forces. In December 2012 militants struck at Peshawar airport. For months the military has been champing at the bit, wanting to launch a ground offensive against the Pakistani Taliban, which has havens in North Waziristan and other areas in the tribal belt bordering Afghanistan. The government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has resisted, insisting that [talks with the Taliban](#) that started in February can still produce results. Instead, the group has used the time to prepare an offensive, re-arm and recruit and train fighters.

To buy even more time, in March the Taliban had pledged a month-long ceasefire. Yet, even though the army halted all military action against the group, it continued to attack civilian and military targets. On April 16, it rescinded its ceasefire, saying the government had failed to offer any concrete suggestions in its talks. The government has dithered over its next steps ever since.

The Karachi attack should clear away the government's cobwebs. Liberal sceptics have always maintained that Mr Sharif's assessment of talks was totally wrong and that the Taliban need to be driven out from the territory it controls. Not only does North Waziristan house Pakistani and Afghan Taliban; it is also a training ground for al-Qaeda, which attracts Central Asians, Uighurs from China, Chechens from the Caucasus and a flow of militant Muslim converts from Europe.

In recent days the military has stepped up what it calls "retaliatory attacks" on the Taliban, consisting mainly of artillery shelling and aerial bombing. This was in response to the brazen killing of two lieutenant colonels near Islamabad, daily attacks on isolated military posts in the tribal areas and the ambushing of military convoys, all of which have ignited deep frustration in the military and the public.

What is so desperately needed is a ground offensive by the army, which aims to retake the territory the state has lost to the Taliban and the elimination of the group's leadership.

Sunday's attack appears to be part of the Taliban's counterstrategy.

First, it is a diversionary tactic to spread out the military so that it is unable to focus all its strength on the tribal areas. It is also a retaliatory blow to army efforts to clean up Karachi's multiple ethnic and sectarian militias. At the same time the Taliban is signalling that it is now a nationwide movement capable of striking the most sensitive of targets anywhere.

The attack is also a warning to Mr Sharif that the Taliban is quite capable of making life for his government even more ruinous - especially in Punjab province, which is the political heartland for the Sharif family, so far untouched by suicide attacks.

The Taliban also knows that such attacks further isolate Pakistan from the international community. Most airlines refused to fly to the country after September 11 2001. The danger now is that those from the Arabian Gulf that still do so will also pull out.

The government and the army need to work in tandem. The former needs to cancel talks with the Taliban and send the military into the tribal areas; the latter needs to help the government take these difficult decisions.