

AT A GLANCE

The Peshawar Army Public School attack: From nightmare to greater darkness?

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The nightmare of the Peshawar Army Public School attack could mark a turning point in a region plagued by war, disaster and misery – one in which the EU invests substantial amounts in development cooperation and humanitarian aid, but little political capital. The Pakistani government has responded by lifting the ban on the death penalty – moving further from the values the EU upholds. Yet the need to break Pakistan's vicious circle of endemic violence is clearer than ever – as is the need for the EU to recognise what role it can play in preventing Pakistan from slipping into further darkness.

The Peshawar Army Public School terrorist attack

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) terrorists killed at least 130 children, ostensibly in retaliation for a counter-terrorist military campaign that has targeted the war-struck region since June 2014.

The December 16 attack on the Army Public School of Peshawar was the worst terrorist act in Pakistan's history: more than 140 people were killed, including at least 130 children, and a nearly equal number injured. After a squad of seven armed men launched a suicide attack during class hours, eight hours elapsed before military forces regained control of the school. Many pupils and school personnel were executed and injured in that interval. Responsibility for the massacre was claimed by the *Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP), which said it acted in retaliation for the army's *Zarb-e-Azb* offensive, which has taken place in the Pakistan's tribal areas since June 2014. The city of Peshawar – which is surrounded on three sides by the 'Federally Administered Tribal Areas' (FATA), largely under the control of the Taliban and other militant groups – has often been targeted by terrorist acts. The FATA are among the poorest areas in Pakistan, and residents live on subsistence agriculture and mining, without access to healthcare, sanitation or even shelter. Today more than 900 000 refugees also live in camps in and around Peshawar.

The origins of *Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan* and operation *Zarb-e-Azb*

The TTP has clashed with the Pakistani army since 2002.

Since October 2013, the group has

The formation of the TTP dates to the 2002 Pakistani army attacks on tribes in the FATA. Al Qaeda fighters had fled to the region from Afghanistan following the US-led intervention the previous autumn. Many of the TTP's leaders are veterans from Afghanistan who previously fought the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). In 2007, the TTP was formally created as an umbrella organisation, led by Baitullah Mehsud, incorporating 13 militant groups. Mehsud's successor, Hakimullah Mehsud, declared a war against the Pakistani state in October 2013, seeking to replace Pakistan's 'un-Islamic system'

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declared war against the 'un-Islamic' Pakistani state.

Operation *Zarb-e-Azb* – the military campaign in northwest Pakistan, was supposed to compensate for NATO's drawdown in Afghanistan; yet it has fuelled the war in Pakistan.

by an Islamic one. (Hakimullah Mehsud was killed the following month in a US drone strike.) Major differences in the historical background, interests and goals of the TTP and the Afghan Taliban mean there is no direct affiliation between the two. The distance between the groups was highlighted when an Afghan Taliban spokesman criticised the Peshawar school attack as 'un-Islamic'. The TTP has, on the other hand, coordinated actions with other regional Islamist organisations – notably in the June 2014 attack on the Karachi international airport, which it carried out with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Al-Qaeda. That attack left 36 dead and 18 wounded.

The *Zarb-e-Azb* ('Hit the TTP') operation is a major military offensive launched by the Pakistani forces against the TTP and other militant groups in the FATA. In support of the offensive, the US has resumed its local drone strikes, which it had halted in December 2013. Islamabad's decision to launch *Zarb-e-Azb* was also motivated by the drawdown of NATO's ISAF in Afghanistan and the incomplete build-up of Afghanistan's national security forces. By placing military pressure on the militants, Pakistan and the US have endeavoured to deter and defeat insurgent fighters – at the least, making it more difficult for them to launch attacks outside the tribal areas. A recent warming in US-Pakistan relations and the visit of the new Afghan President, Ashraf Gahni, to Islamabad have also paved the way for Afghan authorities to act against the TTP, in exchange for Pakistan's efforts to defeat the Afghan Taliban operating on Pakistani soil.

US and EU stakes and messages

Pakistan is crucial for the US's 'war on terror'.

The stability of Pakistan – which has a population of more than 180 million, a significant diaspora, a massive army and nuclear weapons – is of key importance to the US. Any change of order in Pakistan leading to an Islamist government would constitute a strategic defeat for the US and its 'war on terror'.

The EU offers the country preferential trade conditions and substantial direct support.

The EU has its own stakes in Pakistan. A strategic dialogue, including the EU's High Representative, was launched in 2009. In 2014 political talks on disarmament and non-proliferation were held among principal advisors, and talks on counter terrorism and defence were held among senior executives. (Both sets of talks are to be continued in 2015.) Economically, the EU supports Pakistan through an advantageous trade programme (the Generalised System of Preferences Plus), as well as substantial support: EUR 97.5 million in development cooperation and EUR 45 million in humanitarian aid in 2014. Another approximately EUR 550 million is foreseen in the Multi-annual Indicative Programme for Pakistan until 2020 for rural development, education, good governance, human rights and the rule of law.

The EU may wish to emphasise the potentially counter-productive effect of Pakistani operations.

These contributions are dwarfed by US commitments, which topped USD 1 billion in economic assistance and even more in military assistance in 2013. As a result, the EU's voice is sometimes heard less distinctly in Islamabad. Yet the EU has reason to pronounce its own views on the current escalation of violence, and possibly to engage with Pakistan's armed forces as well as its sometimes stymied politicians. Rather than curbing terrorism in the region, Pakistan's operations, including *Zarb-e-Azb*, could fuel a vicious circle of protracted war. The Union may wish to stress this in future dialogues with Pakistan – as well as continuing its programmes promoting social development and education in the county's northwest – in the hope of preventing a re-enactment of the recent, horrific attack in Peshawar.