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Muzamil Ahmad Dar
Research Scholar, Department
of Political Science, Aligarh
Muslim University, Aligarh,
Uttar Pradesh, India

Pakistan's counter-militant offensive: A critical evaluation of operation Radd-ul-Fasaad

Muzamil Ahmad Dar

Abstract

Pakistan's joining the US-led global war on terrorism has brought multi-dimensional challenges to her territorial integrity as a result of which the country has plunged into deeper crisis within her borders. Pakistan faced the brunt of the US military campaign at the domestic level due the unprecedented influx of the non-state actors from the western front. As a result, Pakistan had to move the military into the tribal belt for the first time since her independence in order to mitigate the threats posed by the militant landscape. The security forces of Pakistan for two decades since 9/11 launched many counter-terrorism operations within its borders. Raadul Fasaad (RuF) is one such operation. This operation included both the hard and soft power strategies for countering the threats of terrorism. The paper is an attempt to critically evaluate the achievements of this operation as well as highlight the challenges ahead for the security establishment.

Keywords: Pakistan, USA, terrorism, counter-terrorism, security

Introduction

Pakistan, since its inception as an independent state has been facing problems of extremism and terrorism within its borders in various forms. However, the situation reached alarming levels following Pakistan's strategic turnaround vis-a-vis Taliban government in Afghanistan in 2001 and the consequent backlash at domestic level in the form of suicide attacks and civil unrest. Against the backdrop of Pakistan's siding with the US in the global war on terrorism, various militant organisations emerged which wreaked havoc in the overall security situation of the country. The emergence of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) following the Lal Masjid military operation set the stage for the deteriorating security environment in the country. Since the emergence of TTP and other militant organisations, there has been rapid increase in the attacks on the security grid, civilians as well as the state infrastructure.

Pakistan's security forces carried out various military operations in the country in order to eliminate the menace of terrorism from country. Operation "Raddul Fasaad" or "Elimination of Strife" seeks to eliminate the remnants of terrorism in the country. prior to this operation, Pakistan military launched Operation Zarb-e-Azb on June 15, 2014 in North Waziristan aimed to clear this area which was considered as a militant stronghold and a bastion of suicide bombing and other anti-state activities ^[1] in addition to this operation, the Pakistani military launched Operations Khyber I and II in October 2014 and March 2015 respectively as clearing operations in Khyber Agency. These military campaigns were considered a success given the significant drop in the militant activities, for the first time in six years, in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

Chronology of military operations in Pakistan

The following are major military operations carried out by armed forces against local and foreign militants in the recent past:

- Operation Rah-i-Haq-I in Swat valley and Shangla district (2007).
- Operation Rah-i-Haq-II in Swat valley and Shangla (2008).
- Operation Sirat-i-Mustaqeem in Khyber Agency (2008).
- Operation Sherdil jointly launched with Frontier Corps in Bajaur Agency (2008).
- Operation Rah-i-Haq-III in Swat valley and Shangla (2009).
- Operation Black Thunderstorm in Buner, Lower Dir and Shangla district (2009).
- Operation Brekhna in Mohmand Agency (2009).

Correspondence
Muzamil Ahmad Dar
Research Scholar, Department
of Political Science, Aligarh
Muslim University, Aligarh,
Uttar Pradesh, India

- Operation Rah-i-Rast, commonly known as Swat Operation, (2009).
- Operation Rah-i-Nijat in South Waziristan (2009).
- Operation Zarb-i-Azb in North Waziristan along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border (2014).
- Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad across the country (2017).

Operation Raddul Fasaad was launched on February 22, 2017 in response to series of suicide attacks on Pakistan military by the splinter group of TTP called Jamatul Ahrar in 2017. This operation covers the whole geographical area of the country unlike previous operations having particular areas of concern ^[2]. It aimed at eliminating the residual and latent threat of terrorism from the country.

Objectives of operation Radd-ul-Fasaad

The primary objective of this operation has been to consolidate the gains achieved by the successful completion of Zarb-e-Azb, Khyber I and Khyber II military operations in order to eliminate the “residual or latent threats of terrorism” across the length and breadth of the country and ultimately realize the dream of a stable and peaceful Pakistan. In addition to it, the operation also focuses on country-wide disarmament and explosives control in order to block the access of the anti-Pakistan actors to the arms and ammunition thereby blocking the supply chain ^[3]. However, this operation targets only those groups which have taken the Pakistan army, civilians as well as the state institutions at large. Further, those groups who are fighting the US-led NATO forces in Afghanistan are being left untouched.

Achievements of operation Radd-ul-Fasaad

The entire operation has been characterised by the Intelligence Based Operations (IBOs) involving various security agencies of the country against the militant landscape which emerged in the post 2001 era. The military operations carried under the garb of Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad have targeted latent remnants as well as sleeper cells operating in the country and have been the hallmark of efficiency and precision. Thousands of small-and large-scale operations have been carried out by the security agencies which resulted in the steep decline of violence across the country.

In order to contain the threats of violent extremism and terrorism from the country, it was imperative on part of the decision makers of the country to follow both the kinetic and non-kinetic measures in the violence hit areas especially the tribal belt. Thus, in order to carry forward the consolidated gains achieved by the Khyber I, Khyber II as well as Zarb-e-Azb military operations, it was necessary to inject administrative, economic and social reform in such areas. This is because of the fact that the historically ungoverned spaces act as breeding grounds for extremism and terrorism in such open spaces and thereby creates ripple effects cross the country ^[4]. Additionally, the grievances of the people against the central government also contribute to the extremism and terrorism which engulfs the whole state. In order to overcome these issues, various measures have been adopted by the government in order to address the grievances of the people belonging to the FATA region. In this regard, the government passed landmark legislation (25th Constitutional Amendment) regarding FATA’s merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) ^[5]. This has been a

measure milestone towards consolidating the gains made by military operations in the erstwhile FATA and in this way would transform the socio-economic and political dynamics of the region towards peace and prosperity. Various infrastructure development projects have been taken up by the government and the security agencies in order to cater the needs of the local population. These areas previously lacked the basic facilities ^[6]. Further, securing the Western frontier from cross border infiltration of non-state actors was considered to be important objective of operation RuF. In order to achieve this objective, Pakistan started a massive campaign of fencing the Durand Line on war footing despite facing opposition from local people. This fencing the border also includes the construction of border posts for its effective management and security.

Assessment

The Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad has so far achieved greater success so far as the security environment of the country is concerned. The intelligence-based operations have improved the overall security of the state and has resulted in steep decline in the number of casualties among the security forces throughout the country.

The operation has been criticised for being selective in its modus operandi. It is being alleged that the only those militant groups which have taken the state head-on are facing the actions from the state while those groups who have extra-territorial agenda are ignored for one reason or the other. In addition to this, those organisations which have extremist inclinations or support such tendencies are being given free hand in the political setup of the country. Thus it is too early to pronounce the success of the operation RuF given the various challenges ahead of the security agencies ahead.

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