

OPERATION ZARB-E-AZB: RETROSPECTIVE VIEW IN THE CONTEXT OF US RESPONSE

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Abstract

For more than 19 years, Pakistan has been in a state of war against terrorism. It has launched many military operations in different areas based on different strategic and tactical considerations. The geographic limits, priority, and timing of these operations were carefully planned and executed. Credible intelligence revealed that after operation Rah-e-Nejat (2009), some of the militant groups shifted to Afghanistan while the remaining took refuge in the North Waziristan Agency. There was a requirement to eliminate these hideouts, thus, Pakistan decided to launch a military operation Zarb-e-Azb. As a result, the overall security situation in Pakistan has improved. The US appreciated the successes of operation Zarb-e-Azb but despite these military actions and other practical steps, Pakistan-US relations could not improve as such. There is a consistent divergence of interests between Pakistan and the US in the war against terror that impact seriously on bilateral relations. This paper, therefore, professes that unless this divergence of interest is understood, no ground action irrespective of the dimension and outcome can restore peace and stability within Pakistan and the region.

Keywords: War against Terrorism, Military Operation, Pakistan, US, Counterterrorism.

Introduction

After 9/11, Pakistan played a significant role in the war against terrorism. Pakistan's counterterrorism approach was highly focused on anti-state terrorist elements, whereas, it was accused of having soft spot for the Afghan Taliban. Since 2002, Pakistan's counterterrorism operations have met with mixed results. It was alleged that the Pakistan Army targeted only those terrorist groups that challenged the Pakistan's writ, whereby, the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani Network enjoyed safe havens in the North Waziristan Agency (NWA).

According to an Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) press release, militants were using NWA as a base for conducting their operations inside Pakistan. It was indicated by the ISPR that terrorists were disturbing the life of common citizens of Pakistan in all of its dimensions. Insurgents based in NWA created serious problems for the innocent people, who wanted to live a peaceful life in their respective areas.¹ From 2010 to 2014, Pakistan faced some deadly terrorist attacks by the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) including Mehran base, Kamra Air Base and Jinnah International Airport which radically changed Pakistani perspective on counterterrorism operations and it

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was decided to clear militant groups from NWA.² The Pakistan Army launched a military operation against local and foreign militants in NWA on June 15, 2014, fully backed by the government as well as the civil society. The operation was given a well thought out title, 'Zarb-e-Azb', after the name of the sword of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).³

The basic objective of the NWA military campaign was to obliterate safe havens of the militants and non-state actors in the region and to clear the area from all types of terrorists including locals and foreigners so as to bring long-term peace in the area. For some time, the US complained about the role of militants based in the NWA. The US has always been of the view that militants in NWA were involved in attacking NATO troops in Afghanistan and continued to pressurize Pakistan to launch operations against them. It was also viewed by the US that NWA, once cleared, would help in countering insurgency in Afghanistan and also bring stability in Pakistan. Finally, when the time was ripe enough for this campaign on June 16, 2014, Pakistani Parliament passed a unanimous resolution in support of the Operation 'Zarb-e-Azb', which reads:⁴

This house expresses its fullest support with the decision of the Government of Pakistan to launch the military operation by our valiant armed forces against militants in tribal areas who are using the sacred soil of this country for their nefarious ends including attacks on security forces and law enforcement agencies and public and private properties, resulting in tragic deaths and injuries to thousands of military personnel's and innocent civilians and colossal damage to the economy of the country. This house resolves to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with armed forces till final victory.

The law enforcement agencies expressed that NWA operation was unique in its nature because it targeted the so-called good and bad Taliban. It was decided that the security officials would only spare those militants, who would unconditionally surrender. Otherwise, action was taken against all militants.⁵ Although the military campaign launched by Pakistan in NWA enhanced the credibility of this operation internationally, the US, however, continued to believe that Pakistan has not taken concrete actions against the Haqqani network in NWA. The US held the Haqqani network responsible for many lethal terrorist attacks in the eastern and southeastern parts of Afghanistan.⁶ Nevertheless, it is believed that the Haqqani network had shifted into Afghanistan, long time back, much before the start of the operation. Meanwhile, their bases have been dismantled in NWA.

The US Senator John McCain visited Islamabad and acknowledged the Pakistan Army's efforts in the war against terror.⁷ Other senior US officials have also acknowledged that Pakistan has played an important role in containing the Haqqani network and disrupted their ability to carry out terrorist activities in Afghanistan.⁸ But despite all these efforts by the Pakistan Army, there is always a trust deficit between Pakistani leadership and the US administration and Afghan authorities, which is most likely due to diverging interests. They look at each other with suspicion and doubt. President Trump's statements against Pakistan are a case in point.⁹ But as a matter of fact, if we analyze the situation in Afghanistan, the military mission and Afghan security

forces have been unable to defeat the Afghan Taliban. The Afghan Taliban are now undeniable, established force in Afghanistan and exercise influence if not control over a huge swath of territory, which enabled them to establish, within the county, their safe havens, training camps and command and control structures.

The Taliban's enhanced capacity has enabled them to carry out activities with greater impunity. It was predicted that on the drawdown of the ISAF, the Taliban would come back with renewed power because the Afghan armed forces would be unable to defeat them in the absence of US forces. It was forecasted that Afghan forces would soon melt away under Taliban pressure because they do not have the capacity to work in isolation under sustained pressure. In addition, the Afghan armed forces have many other problem areas that make them quite weak in the face of hardened Taliban.¹⁰

In this backdrop, this paper is aimed at analyzing the outcome of Operation Zarb-e-Azb in the context of the Pak-US relations. Despite conducting the US desired military operation at a high cost of losing valuable human lives and property, Pakistan could not please its allies in the war against terrorism. There is much more to be seen bellow and beyond the spectrum of military operations. This paper looks into the overall conditions and environment that enabled the conduct of operation Zarb-e-Azb and the complementary operations, Khyber-I, II, and III. It highlights the formulation of the National Action Plan that ultimately cleared the way for the operation Zarb-e-Azb. Finally, the paper examines the US response to this operation and its impact on Pak-US relations.

Background of Operation Zarb-e-Azb

The decision to launch an operation against terrorist groups in NWA was widely discussed in and outside of Pakistan. During 2010, it was realized that without a major operation in NWA, peace across the country could not be established. Based on the recommendations of field commanders and intelligence reports collected from the area, senior military leadership was in favor of the operation being launched in 2010. Field commanders were of the view that since various terrorist groups had gathered in North Waziristan and, therefore, without a major military operation, peace would not be restored in the country.¹¹

In an interview, Major General Athar Abbas (retired) expressed that in 2010, military leadership was in support of launching a military campaign in North Waziristan but could not be materialized.¹² There were several compelling reasons for the hesitation to launch an operation in NWA including uncertainty regarding the possible collaboration coming across Afghanistan border. Despite the willingness to launch an operation, the possibility of achieving success was questioned because of the presence of other hostile forces around NWA. It was expected that once the North Waziristan front was opened, terrorists sponsored by India might put intense pressure in Balochistan. Fighting on two fronts was thought to be too much of a challenge for Pakistan's armed forces. There were certain apprehensions that media and civil society might not support this initiative. Hence, in the absence of complete backing from these

factions and the nation as a whole, it was decided not to make an isolated decision to launch an operation in NWA.

Continuous pressure from the Obama administration for launching an operation also made it difficult for the decision makers in Pakistan to submit to US pressure. Although launching the operation in NWA was in the national interest, it was difficult to convince the nation that the Pakistan Army did not take dictation from the US. Additionally, it had to take into consideration the issue related to the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) as a big challenge for any military campaign against militants. Therefore, it was realized that in the absence of national support if Pakistan fails to treat IDPs well, they could reflect badly on this operation. Taking all these factors together, it can be concluded that despite all the criticisms, Pakistan was probably right in delaying the process.

Prelude to Operation Zarb-e-Azb

Before the start of operation Zarb-e-Azb, the Government of Pakistan planned to resolve the issue through peaceful means and decided to engage the TTP. To begin with, the two sides agreed to observe the ceasefire for one month. The TTP spokesman, Shahidullah Shahid, stated that “all comrades to respect the decision and refrain from any activity during the ceasefire period.” The government also stopped surgical strikes against the TTP hideouts in a hope of ending more than six years of violence in the country. Meanwhile, both sides nominated three individuals each for talks. The government team was led by Irfan Siddique. Other members were Rahimullah Yousafzai and Rustam Shah Mohmand. The TTP committee was headed by Maulana Samiul Haq and other members were Professor Ibrahim and Maulana Abdul Aziz, the former cleric of the Red Mosque.¹³

The TTP put forward two conditions for the negotiations: One, the creation of a peace zone in FATA where militants can move freely, and second, the release of non-combatant militants from prison. As a goodwill gesture, the government set free 12 low-profile inmates but declined the demand of a peace zone. Militants did not observe the ceasefire arguing that the government did not meet all their demands and continued terrorist activities. Some of the major attacks which compelled the government to reconsider its plan of solving the issue through peaceful means were an attack at the Islamabad High Court which killed 11 persons including a judge. Moreover, twenty-three people were killed in a bomb explosion in a vegetable market in Islamabad. Finally, militants declared that they were ending the truce in April 2014, thus, ending the hope for a peaceful solution to the problem.¹⁴

Muhammad Nawaz Sharif, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, stated in his address to the National Assembly that his government had sincerely tried to ensure that the peace talks succeed but the militants preferred to carry on terrorist attacks. He stated that terrorism and peace talks cannot go along side-by-side. The terrorist group considered the government’s peaceful effort as a weakness and behaved arrogantly. Following the terrorist attack at Jinnah International Airport in Karachi, the

government finally decided to use force to root out the terrorists from NWA by launching operation Zarb-e-Azb.¹⁵

Karachi Airport Attack and the Tragic Episode of the Army Public School

As mentioned earlier, the Pakistan Army had planned to launch an operation against militants in North Waziristan since 2010 but delayed its action for a number of reasons. In the aftermath of a terrorist attack on Jinnah International Airport on the night of 8/9 June 2014, the peace process immediately collapsed. TTP claimed the responsibility for the attack which left 28 people dead including 10 terrorists.¹⁶ The Pakistan Army was then determined to take the decision to launch its action against terrorist hideouts in NWA carrying the code name operation 'Zarb-e-Azb', which means the 'strike of the sword of the Holy Prophet (PBUH)' used in Badr and Uhud.¹⁷ The operation was launched on June 15, 2014, and was aimed at flushing out the terrorist network consisting of various local and foreign banned organizations.¹⁸

Afterward, TTP terrorists launched a brutal attack on the Army Public School (APS), Peshawar on December 16, 2014, killing over 147 innocent children including 8 teachers.¹⁹ On this occasion, the TTP spokesperson stated that "it is just the beginning, we have taken revenge for one (Mehsud) by taking revenge on hundreds. He said that this attack and the one carried out on Karachi airport are meant to send a message to the Pakistani government."²⁰ Their violent act obligated all stakeholders to unite and bring a major shift in Pakistan's determination to fight terrorism. Accordingly, a national consensus was developed to pass the 21st Amendment in the Constitution to provide a legal base for the parliamentary enacted the National Action Plan (NAP).²¹

The National Action Plan

After the tragic incident of APS, the political leadership of Pakistan presented the twenty-point National Action Program on December 24, 2014.²² This comprehensive plan suggested a list of steps for the elimination of extremism and terrorism from the country. Pakistan lifted the moratorium on death penalties. As a result, 176 convicted-individuals were subsequently hanged in Pakistan. Military courts were constituted within weeks after NAP backed by the constitutional and legal cover was finalized. The objective of the military courts was to deliver quick justice to the militants arrested under the charges of terrorism.

In some areas, the government performed well. It succeeded in registering mobile phone SIM cards nationwide which would help track militants, who are using cellular services.²³ But despite the urgency, there has been limited progress in number of areas, including registration of Madaris and tracking their funding sources. The National Counter-Terrorism Authority (NACTA) though existed on papers but had yet not been fully operational. NACTA was initially conceived and organized during 2009 as the highest body to coordinate intelligence sharing by 26 spy agencies in order to curb terrorism in the country.²⁴ However, in the aftermath of the APS Peshawar episode, NACTA was revived with the NACTA Act-2013 as necessary to curb the menace of

terrorism.²⁵ Subsequently, law enforcement agencies conducted intelligence-based operations across the country and arrested a large number of people on various charges. The security agencies also succeeded in foiling terrorist attacks by the insurgents.²⁶ Moreover, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan formulated an Apex Committee to monitor the success of NAP.

Outcome of Operation Zarb-e-Azb

The operation Zarb-e-Azb played a significant role in eliminating terrorist safe havens, command and control centers of the TTP and other affiliated groups hiding in NWA. It improved the overall security situation in Pakistan. The militants were dislodged from their dens in NWA and Tirah valley of Khyber Agency. Later, Pakistan's security forces launched combing operations throughout Pakistan to eliminate militant sleeper cells in urban centers.²⁷ The terrorists from foreign countries were also the main target of the operation Zarb-e-Azb as they were supporting TTP in its terrorist activities. During this campaign, Pakistan did not discriminate among the terrorist groups.²⁸ While speaking about operation Zarb-e-Azb at the United Nations forum, the former Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif said:

*Our operation Zarb-e-Azb is the largest anti-terrorism campaign against terrorists anywhere, involving over 180,000 of our security forces ... and will conclude only when our objective has been accomplished. This is complemented by an all-inclusive National Action Plan. It encompasses police and security actions, political and legal measures and social and economic policy packages, aimed at countering violent extremism.*²⁹

It was in Pakistan's best national interest to take the battle against militants in NWA. One year after operation Zarb-e-Azb, the law enforcement agencies accomplished most of the objectives against militants in NWA. The former DG ISPR, Lieutenant General Asim Saleem Bajwa shared one-year progress of the operation and pointed out that 2763 terrorists had been killed, 837 hideouts demolished and 253 ton of explosive recovered from the insurgents, enough to make IEDs for at least 15 years. He further stated that the modern weapons recovered from militants were stolen from NATO forces.³⁰ However, despite challenges, in just over two years the law enforcement agencies of Pakistan succeeded in eliminating the terrorists. The Pakistan Army achieved tremendous success against the terrorists and insurgents in the tribal agency, the place which was once considered as a hub of all kinds of militants as well as the graveyard for the invading forces. The Pakistan Army made it possible to eliminate the hardened and well-entrenched terrorists from the entire NWA.³¹

The operation Zarb-e-Azb has yielded its desired results. Pakistan is more stable and peaceful than it was before the launch of this operation. Success can be verified with the help of facts and figures. The number of terrorist attacks across the country has significantly declined.³² According to the data retrieved from the South Asia Terrorism Portal, the fatalities of civilians from terrorist violence had declined. Civilian fatalities have dropped 40 percent in 2014, 65 percent in 2015 and 74 percent in 2016.³³ Despite the progress, we are still far away from the ultimate goal of achieving long term

peace in the region due to many regional and extra-regional factors affecting the region as a whole. However, the peace deal signed between the US and Taliban in Doha, Qatar gave hope that the reign of terror and violence will eventually end soon.³⁴

The Prime Minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif, while lauding the operation Zarb-e-Azb stated that the whole nation along with the Pakistan Army and other law enforcement agencies played a significant role in its determination to eradicate the menace of terrorism from the country. He further remarked that “the past two years of Zarb-e-Azb as an everlasting tale of human determination, courage, fortitude, bravery and sacrifice, which will continue to shine in the pages of our history and would be a source of guidance for the new generation.”³⁵ The former Army Chief, General Raheel Sharif, opined that “the way Pakistan Army conducted this operation, there is no match to be found in the history anywhere in the world.”³⁶

However, the shifting of IDPs from NWA and their resettlement was a serious challenge for Pakistan. Despite difficulties, the Pakistan Army managed to shift the civilians from NWA to save their lives and property. The registered number of IDPs who left the war zone was around one million. The FATA Disaster Management Authority (FDMA) registered IDPs and they were dispersed in different districts of KP. On clearing major areas of NWA from militants, the repatriation of IDPs was permitted after December 2014. Although it was a daunting task to resettle the IDPs, the Pakistan Army took extraordinary steps and made sure that its plan to resettle IDPs implemented in letter and spirit without delay. The Government of Pakistan introduced various uplift programs and activities under military supervision for the development and rehabilitation of the area.³⁷ Nevertheless, Lieutenant General Talat Masood (retired) opined that “the military gains will only be a part of the exercise. The complete success of the operation depends on the rehabilitation of the displaced people and development in the tribal region.”³⁸

US Response to Operation Zarb-e-Azb

As discussed earlier, Pakistan launched a full-fledged military campaign in NWA after due deliberation. Jen Psaki from the State Department expressed that this is solely Pakistan-led operation and the US supports Pakistan’s efforts to protect its sovereignty and create stability.³⁹ Although the US has appreciated Pakistan’s efforts to destroy the terrorist networks in NWA, at the same time, it has failed to recognize the sacrifices that Pakistan has made in reducing the menace of terrorism from the region. The operation Zarb-e-Azb continued for over two years. This military campaign fractured the backbone of the terrorist organizations but in return, Pakistan had to pay a heavy price. Hundreds of soldiers including officers embraced the sacred status of martyrdom and many valiant Ghazis were wounded.⁴⁰

When the Pakistan Army started this operation, the US appreciated the move in a hope that it would help in minimizing the dangers of terrorism. The US State Department explained in a report that it puts “Pakistan at the top of the list of countries that observed a decrease in terror attacks and acknowledged the military operation as a major factor in that drop.”⁴¹ In a talk at the Atlantic Council in Washington D.C. in 2017,

a former US special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Olson, expressed how during 2014 many terrorist attacks and mass killings by militants had occurred in Pakistan. He was of the view that the operation Zarb-e-Azb has turned out to be a game-changer for Pakistan. Due to this successful campaign against the terrorists, violence in Pakistan has decreased significantly.⁴² Lieutenant General John Nicholson, who succeeded General John F. Campbell in Afghanistan, said in a written response to a question by the US Senate Armed Services Committee that the military operation being carried out by Pakistan Army in the tribal region is critical to defeating terrorism.⁴³

On the other hand, the former US Secretary of State John Kerry stated during his visit to India that "Pakistan has work to do in order to push harder against indigenous groups that are engaged in extremist terrorist activities."⁴⁴ The real problem was a trust deficit between Pakistan and the US. In spite of tremendous sacrifices, the US did not give enough credit to Pakistan for undertaking the challenging task of operation Zarb-e-Azb. Pakistan's position and stance were vindicated by the fact that it has played a positive role in bringing the Taliban on the negotiating table to start peace talks with the US and US President Donald Trump had to praise Pakistan publicly during his official visit to India.⁴⁵

Conclusion

Throughout the 1980s, Pakistan was caught up in a war in Afghanistan. Since then, the tribal areas of Pakistan have become exposed to large-scale presence and influence of militants from Afghanistan and other parts of the world. In the aftermath of 9/11 and US military intervention in Afghanistan, the terrorists started acting inside Afghanistan and within the border areas of Pakistan. The security situation across Pakistan finally compelled Islamabad to launch a decisive military operation in NWA to root out the terrorists from their safe havens. Therefore, the operation Zarb-e-Azb seriously degraded terrorist groups and brought a positive effect on Pakistan's security, stability, and progress.

As an outcome of the operation Zarb-e-Azb, the confidence of the nation that was shattered by terrorism during the past few years has been restored. On the other hand, this operation has convinced all stakeholders about Pakistan's sincerity in fighting the menace of terrorism, thus, received praises worldwide. Whereas, the US found it easier to blame Pakistan just for its own failures in Afghanistan. The US has never recognized that the large-scale presence of Indian intelligence agencies in Afghanistan and their nefarious actions against Pakistan are not in the US interest. Since the US-led coalition forces are unable to claim tangible victory against the Afghan Taliban, it is, therefore, advisable that the US must focus on the reconciliation and peace process with the Taliban for having permanent peace in Afghanistan. They should also keep this in mind that the road to peace in Afghanistan passes through Pakistan, not through India.

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