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Pakistan to Tackle Taliban in North Waziristan Counter-insurgency Operation

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Background

According to a media interview given last week, US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta stated that Pakistan's top military man, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, had confirmed that the Pakistani army would, in the 'near future', launch a military operation into North Waziristan. Kayani also revealed that the main target would be the Pakistani Taliban and not the Haqqani Network, a particularly nasty faction of the Afghan Taliban. So, why did Panetta welcome the announcement?

Comment

Washington has been demanding unrelentingly for the last three years that the Pakistan army hunt down the Haqqani Network fighters in North Waziristan. The insurgents have found refuge in that mountainous and difficult-to-access tribal agency in Pakistan's north-west, along the border with Afghanistan. The Haqqani network fighters have, very successfully, launched attacks from North Waziristan against Coalition forces in Afghanistan. But they have also been attacking from inside Afghanistan.

Still, the Americans believe that, if a Pakistani military operation against the Haqqani Network in North Waziristan could degrade its fighting capability, this would assist the Coalition's counter-insurgency efforts against the Taliban in the lead up to NATO's departure from Afghanistan in 2014. This is partially true. Unfortunately, things are not so simple in that part of the world.

Tactically, the Haqqani Network, which numbers about 15,000 fighters, has been playing a dual role in North Waziristan. First, it has been keeping 'some' control over the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Pakistani Taliban, which has wreaked death and destruction throughout the land since 2007, based in that same tribal agency. This is good news for the Pakistan government. However, as we saw a few days ago with the brazen attack against a Pakistani air force base 60km north-west of Islamabad, while the TTP is a much weaker force today than a couple of years ago, it still remains a lethal force.

Second, the Haqqani Network has managed to persuade a number of Pakistani militant groups to stop their attacks against the Pakistani state and instead to turn their attention to fighting the Coalition forces across the border in Afghanistan. This is also good news for Pakistan but not so good for Coalition forces, including Australia's, in Afghanistan.

Strategically, the Haqqani Network is seen by Pakistan, and specifically by the military, as a long-term asset in Afghanistan post-2014. Most Pakistani leaders, civilian and military, believe that the Haqqani Network leaders will have a role to play, not only in the negotiations leading up to the departure of Western forces from Afghanistan in 2014, but also in Kabul after 2014.

Given the above, it is not surprising that the Pakistan military will not be going after the Haqqani Network. As far as it is concerned, it would make absolutely no sense for the army to open up a new front. High-level official Pakistani sources confirmed this on my recent visit to Pakistan. On the contrary, it is quite possible that Haqqani Network fighters could assist the army in pursuing the TTP militants.

The aim would be to significantly destroy the TTP's capability and therefore its ability to conduct terrorist attacks against civilian and military targets in Pakistan. Already, it is a divided force, weakened by internal divisions, tribal differences and leadership rivalry. Hopefully, this operation, if successful, could mean the beginning of the end of the TTP.

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150,000 troops and move into North Waziristan.

So, why did Panetta appear pleased with Pakistan's announcement, even though the Haqqani Network will be off the hook? I suspect it is because the Obama administration realises that this is probably the best it could hope for and that: 'if the result of this operation is that the Pakistan Taliban is significantly weakened, that would be good news for the long-term stability of the country'.

Whether Pakistan's support for the Haqqani Network today is good policy for Pakistan's stability in the long-term is, of course, another issue.

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About the Author: *Dr Rakisits is a Senior Lecturer in Strategic Studies at Deakin University. His principal research interests are Pakistan and Afghanistan. He has almost 30 years of professional experience and knowledge in defence and strategic issues, intelligence and international affairs. Dr Rakisits has taught at universities in Australia, Canada and Switzerland. He writes and comments regularly for Australian and international media.*