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Fighting Militants in Pakistan: Who Is In Charge?

By James M Dorsey

Synopsis

A lethal attack on a Pakistani police academy in Quetta, the provincial capital of Baluchistan, highlights the country's power struggle over policy towards militant Saudi-backed Islamist groups nurtured by the Pakistan military and intelligence service. It also spotlights China's willingness to accommodate Pakistani ambivalence towards militants.

Commentary

THE OCTOBER attack on a police academy in Quetta that killed 61 cadets and wounded some 170 others, the worst such incident since an assault in December 2014 on a military school in Peshawar, has exacerbated tensions between the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, the military, and the country's intelligence service, the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI).

The attack occurred barely two months after a bombing virtually wiped out Baluchistan's legal elite and less than two weeks after senior government officials, including Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, clashed with military commanders and intelligence leaders over counterterrorism policy. Sharif and his ministers warned their military and intelligence counterparts that Pakistan risked international isolation if it failed to implement a national counterterrorism action plan adopted in the wake of the attack in Peshawar two years ago. The civilians' warning included the fact that the military and intelligence service's selective crackdown on militants puts US\$46 billion in Chinese infrastructure investments at risk.

Crucial Chinese Link

Pakistan constitutes a crucial link in China's One Belt, One Road initiative designed to link the Eurasian land mass through infrastructure, transportation and telecommunications. The Baluch port of Gwadar is key to the maritime and land links China is trying to create that would give it geopolitical advantage, theoretically more secure routes for the import of badly needed resources and export of Chinese goods, and help Beijing develop economically the strategic but restive north-western Chinese province of Xinjiang.

Baluchistan is also crucial because it borders on Iran and constitutes a potential battleground for proxies of Saudi Arabia and Iran in their bitter struggle for regional hegemony. This province is also historically a key territorial conduit for the opposing forces in Afghanistan and their respective insurgency campaigns.

In a blunt statement during the meeting of civilian and military leaders leaked to Dawn newspaper, Foreign Secretary Aizaz Chaudhry noted that Pakistan's closest ally, China continued to block, at the request of the Pakistani military and the ISI, sanctioning by the United Nations of Masood Azhar, a leader of UN-designated Jaish-e-Mohammad, but Beijing was increasingly questioning the wisdom of doing so. Jaish-e-Mohammed has long served as a proxy in Pakistan's dispute with India over Kashmir.

Azhar was arrested in the aftermath of the Peshawar attack but released in April 2016. Azhar was long held in Indian prison on charges of kidnapping foreigners in Kashmir but was freed in 1999 in exchange for passengers of a hijacked Indian Airlines flight. Jaish-e-Mohammed was responsible for a 2001 attack on the Indian parliament among other incidents. The group was however conspicuously absent from a list of groups, issued earlier this month by the State Bank of Pakistan, whose accounts were frozen as part of the government's selective crackdown on militants.

Payback Time

Among those accounts was Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, the group the government blames for the latest attack in Quetta. A Lashkar spokesman told The Wall Street Journal that the group had aided the Islamic State, which claimed responsibility. Analysts doubt whether the freezing of accounts will have much effect. They note that most of the funds available to militant groups are either not in bank deposits or, if they are, not in accounts belonging to the groups' leaders.

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi is an offshoot of Sipah-e-Sabaha, a Saudi and Pakistani-backed Sunni supremacist, anti-Shiite group. Like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Sipah-e-Sabaha is banned but is allowed to operate under a different name, Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat. In interviews, Sipah-e-Sabaha leaders said the military and intelligence was advising them in the framework of the national action plan to tone down their inflammatory anti-Shiite language but to maintain their basic policy.

Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat leader Ahmad Ludhyvani, a meticulously dressed Muslim scholar whose accounts are among those blocked, speaking in his headquarters in the city of Jhang, amid protection by Pakistani security forces, noted that Sipah, as

the group is still commonly referred to, and Saudi Arabia both opposed Shiite Muslim proselytisation even if Sipah served Pakistani rather than Saudi national interests.

“Some things are natural. It’s like when two Pakistanis meet abroad or someone from Jhang meets another person from Jhang in Karachi. It’s natural to be closest to the people with whom we have similarities... We are the biggest anti-Shiite movement in Pakistan. We don’t see Saudi Arabia interfering in Pakistan,” Ludhyvani said to the author of this Commentary over a lunch of chicken, vegetables and rice.

The freezing of accounts is the latest incentive for Lashkar-e-Jhangvi to strike out. Much of the group’s leadership has been killed in what the government called encounters with security forces and independent analysts assert were executions.

Between A Rock and A Hard Place

The latest Quetta attack was likely also designed to exacerbate the differences between Pakistan’s government and its military and intelligence as well as within Sipah itself between those who favour following the government’s advice to tone down its anti-Shiite language and more militant factions.

The violence in Quetta puts Pakistan’s military and intelligence as well as Saudi Arabia between a rock and hard place. The Pakistani military sees militants as a key part of its anti-India policy while Saudi Arabia finds them useful in its struggle with Iran. Those interests are now bouncing up against both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia’s need to ensure that Chinese interests are not threatened by their various shadow wars as well as their need to distance themselves from assertions of involvement in political violence.

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