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Ananta Centre is pleased to launch a new initiative, a monthly newsletter which will seek to monitor developments in areas of interest to stakeholders in the Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship. We hope you will find this initiative informative and useful. We look forward to your comments.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Developments in Pakistan
- Developments in Afghanistan

I Developments in Pakistan

Bilateral: In the past days discussions in Pakistan with regard to relations with India acquired a slight variant with signs being noticed of a possible 'softening' on India's position on Pakistan. This was aided by similar speculation in the media in India. In this context, the result of the electoral process in 5 states is believed to have created the opening. Developments such as India agreeing to attend a routine Indus Waters Commissioners meeting, agreeing also to the appointment of a Pakistani diplomat as SAARC Secretary General, three parliamentarians attending an international conference in Muree and some prisoner and fishermen releases earlier on both sides are believed to be pointers of 'something brewing'. Reactions in Pakistan to the electoral verdict in UP were largely on predictable lines. The overwhelming focus in Pakistan however remained security and terrorism related on account of a sudden deterioration in the situation on account of a series of terrorist attacks.

Security Related Issues: Over the past month some of Pakistan's familiar phantoms, optimistically believed to be in recession, reasserted themselves. From 13th February, onwards, a series of terrorist attacks - some major and others of lesser intensity - punctuated Pakistan's political and civil military chronology. This in turn ignited an older debate about both the authenticity and the effectiveness of Pakistan's steps to address the domestic roots of terrorism. That this domestic debate would then spillover on to a larger debate about Pakistan- Afghanistan and Pakistan-India relations is not unexpected.

The suicide attacks in Lahore and a Sufi Shrine in Sindh of February 13th and 16th respectively were preceded and followed by others of lesser impact. The fact that a series of attacks had taken place was really the point, since this happened after a significant rise in public confidence as a result of the actions undertaken since 2015 under Operation *Zarb i Azb*. This was a substantial military action undertaken

against the TTP and was the defining characteristic of the tenure of the previous COAS General Raheel Sharif. It is now left to his successor to analyze its efficacy and success and in that context these February attacks suggested that a great deal was left to be done. The launch of Operation *Radd i Fasad* is the answer being provided by the present COAS General Qamar Javed Bajwa and it is being heralded in Pakistan with as much acclaim as *Zarb i Azb* was.

The question is however whether the erosion in public confidence following the latest attacks will be quickly arrested. We saw this dramatically illustrated by the decision to hold the Pakistan Super League (the Pakistani equivalent of the IPL) final in Lahore. The PSL matches are held in Dubai largely because the foreign players will not play in Pakistan because of the security environment. Holding the final match in Lahore was therefore an act of faith and a public posture to flag Pakistan's determination to 'stand upto' terrorists. Incidentally, the PSL final on 5th March largely coincided with the attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team on 3rd March 2009 which had killed international cricket matches in Pakistan. This coincidence reinforced the message being sent out and the match became an act of political symbolism and was seen as such by most Pakistanis. Nevertheless, the question remains whether such optically powerful gestures will in fact make a dent of the complex issues surrounding terrorism in Pakistan today.

Somewhat predictably the terrorist attacks in February also led to the familiar complaints of external forces – in particular Afghanistan and India- being the trigger which caused them.

The launch of Op *Radd i Fasad* on 22nd February is described as aimed at 'indiscriminately eliminating' the 'residual' threat of terrorism and consolidating the gains of earlier counter terrorism ops. The focus of the latest operation is stated to be in the Punjab although how 'indiscriminate' it will be in fact remains a moot point. For the skeptical no real dent is visible on Pakistan's dual policy w.r.t 'good' and 'bad' terrorists and in particular those groups which are leverage against India and Pakistan.

The *Jammat ud Dawa/ Lashkar i Taiba* head Hafiz Sayeed's 'house arrest' in end January and some limited measures announced against the JUD seemed to flow into this reinforced 'against all terrorists' language again emerging from Pakistan. These steps however predated the launch of *Radd i Fasad* by some three weeks and seem powered by a different set of factors. In particular, the new incumbent of the US Presidency and growing restiveness in international bodies such as the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) at Pakistan's non-compliance in taking even simple measures against the JuD. The house arrest and the other steps taken also seemed to be a repeat of a past pattern of similar activity when some limited steps were taken and then withdrawn when the outside pressure was perceived to have reduced or attention shifted elsewhere. The tentative nature of these steps is all the more obvious given the decision to revive military courts in Pakistan after the latest attacks. Military courts to try terrorists were set up following the Peshawar School attack in December 2015 and had been disbanded in January 2017 under a sunset clause.

The responses of two pillars of the past in Pakistan however illustrated the dilemma in evaluating Pakistani actions. General Aslam Baig, a former Chief of Army Staff, for instance has termed the steps against the JuD as being against the 'national interest'. A former Ambassador to the UN Munir Akram blamed Indian and Afghan intelligence agencies for the attacks, and recommended that Pakistan should act against Afghan sanctuaries 'unilaterally' and continue support for the Kashmir struggle. There are of course many equally articulate voices in Pakistan dismissing such irredenta and irredentists. Nevertheless, it is a fact that Pakistan's record in fashioning a political or counter terrorism strategy that targets terrorists across the board has been a dismal one notwithstanding the damage its flawed policies have caused it domestically and in relations with India and Afghanistan.

Changes in constitutional position of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA): On 1st March the Pakistan Cabinet approved the merger of the FATA with the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province (KPK) and also the repeal of the Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR) that has hitherto been the legal code governing administration of Justice in the tribal areas. The FATA populace will now be able to elect members to the KPK provincial assembly. The jurisdiction of the Pakistan Supreme Court and the KPK High Court will also extend to the FATA.

This has been described as a major step in ending the colonial era status of the Tribal areas-administered directly from the Centre through political agents. Under the FCR, the tribes are

collectively responsible for any act of a member. In the last set of political reform in the FATA in the mid 1990's adult franchise was extended and representatives could be elected to the National Assembly and Senate of Pakistan.

Such a measure has been under discussion for over a decade as the tribal areas became sanctuaries for militants carrying out attacks in Pakistan. Many in Pakistan have argued that 'mainstreaming' of the FATA is the only viable means of eradicating militancy here. How this process will work remains a moot point and a five year transition period has been provided. Nevertheless, central would be the willingness of the Army and the ISI to dilute their role in managing internal affairs in the different tribal agencies. This leverage has long been seen as vital to the tactical running of Pakistan's Afghan and Taliban policy.

Other Developments: The Pakistan Supreme Court concluded on 23rd February its hearing on the ongoing case relating to assets of PM Nawaz Sharif and his family following leaks emerging from the so called Panama papers. The Court reserved its judgement but since then speculation has continued about its imminent announcement as about its content. Whatever the judgement maybe, it will have a major bearing on politics in Pakistan immediately thereafter and on the political standing of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

Pakistan began its first census since 1998 on 15th March. It is expected to be complete by 25th May. Two aspects are of significance. The first that the census is being held at all. Before 1998 there was a 17 year gap after the census of 1981. There have been in effect two census in Pakistan since 1981 and this long gap is itself a comment on the extent of domestic turmoil in Pakistan since the 1980s. Secondly there are concerns regarding the counting of large number of Afghan migrants thus affecting the demographic picture and potentially future politics in parts of Sindh (especially Karachi) and Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Provinces.

A committee headed by adviser on Foreign Affairs Sartaz Aziz is believed, according to press reports, to have recommended that Gilgit Pakistan be formally constituted as Pakistan's fifth province. For many years Pakistan has been careful on this issue, notwithstanding some local demands, on the grounds that this would have an adverse effect on Pakistan's position on the J&K issue. It remains to be seen whether notwithstanding such doubts and also likely resistance from opinion in 'Azad Kashmir' this course of action will be pursued further in the coming months.

Contingents from the Chinese (PLA), Turkish (a band) and Saudi military participated in Pakistan's National Day Parade on 23rd March in Islamabad. The Chinese contingent obviously drew the most attention and in Pakistan itself was seen as another public declaration of Chinese Pakistan strategic congruence. Press reports quoted the President of Pakistan as saying that this was the first time Chinese forces have participated in a military parade outside China. Other reports said that this was the first time foreign military contingents took part in the National Day parade.

II Developments in Afghanistan

Relations with Pakistan: Apart from the domestic debate in Pakistan the latest terrorist attacks had their most immediate impact on Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. In the aftermath of the attacks there were summons and protests on the part of both Foreign Offices and Military Headquarters. This was expected but most visible was the decision to close the Pakistan Afghanistan border at Torkham and Chaman to passenger movement and trade. For land locked Afghanistan this is a real burden and as the closure extended beyond its second week its political fallout also increased. By the end of the first week of March some 6000 trucks are believed to have piled up on both sides. Ironically the summit of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) was held in Islamabad on 1st March amidst the border closure and its closing statement reiterated focus on connectivity. In a sign of the poor state of the bilateral relationship, Afghanistan was also the sole exception in not attending at Head of State/Government level and its Ambassador in Islamabad attended alongside the Presidents/Prime Ministers (Iran, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyz Republic) and Deputy Prime Ministers (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan). A temporary 2 day relaxation on the border closure was announced by Pakistan on 6th March for stranded travelers. Trucks and vehicles were not covered by this temporary relaxation. In

effect therefore a largely traditional frontier and border remained closed for over a month. This is itself a comment on the state of the Afghan Pakistan relationship.

In this background a statement by the former President Hamid Karzai that Afghanistan would never accept the Durand line as an international border received greater than otherwise attention in Pakistan. Karzai's remarks are generally dismissed in Pakistan as coming from one inveterately opposed to Pakistan.

A British initiative with the Afghan and Pakistan National Security Advisers meeting in London seemingly led to a resolution of this issue which receives far greater attention and focus in Kabul than in Islamabad. PM Nawaz Sharif announced the border's reopening on 20th March.

A New Peace Initiative? In September 2016 the National Unity Government had signed a peace agreement with the Hizb Islami (HI). In early February this year the United Nations Security Council followed up on this by removing sanctions placed against this group as a terrorist group. This is regarded as significant as being a step towards accommodating within the existing political dispensation in Afghanistan groups hitherto opposed to any via media with the new political architecture that emerged in Afghanistan post 9/11 and the end of the Taliban Government. Supporters of the agreement say this step increases pressure on the Taliban to enter into negotiations with the Government. Its detractors on the other hand are of the view that the HI is not representative of the various militant groups including the Taliban leading the armed insurgency against the Government since the HI is no longer a military force on the ground and what it does will have no impact on the Taliban.

Under the agreement, the HI leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar can now be expected to take part in the next parliamentary elections. It remains to be seen whether, however symbolic, these steps strengthen President Ghani in any way given the continued onslaught Afghanistan faces from Taliban attacks. Hekmatyar himself is a divisive figure. A prominent anti-Soviet commander in the 1980s, he came to be known as the "butcher of Kabul", and was accused of killing thousands of people when his fighters fired on civilian areas of the capital city during the 1992-1996 civil war.

In Afghanistan, the fragility of the security situation was underscored yet again by a terrorist attack on a military hospital in Kabul on 8th March. This was the latest in a series of major attacks demonstrating in particular the eroding intelligence gathering capabilities of Afghan security forces and in general the continued deterioration in the overall security situation in the country.

(The views expressed are personal)
