



Empowering “Soft” Taliban Over “Hard” Taliban: Pakistan’s Counter-Terrorism Strategy

By **Sadia Sulaiman**

The phenomenal rise of various Pakistani Taliban militant groups since 2004 and subsequent militant activities in both Pakistan and Afghanistan have surprised many. In a short span of nearly three years, the Pakistani Taliban threat has developed into a considerable political and security challenge to both Pakistan and Afghanistan. The presence of figures from al-Qaeda’s senior leadership and other foreign militant groups in the North Waziristan Agency, South Waziristan Agency and Bajaur Agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan has provided enormous support to various Pakistani Taliban groups in the shape of ideological, strategic, tactical and logistical assistance, particularly in the development of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and suicide bombings.

The formation of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in December 2007 by various Taliban groups effectively brought together 27 Taliban groups under one umbrella. The union was viewed as an attempt to pursue Talibanization in Pakistan while conducting a “defensive jihad” against Pakistani security forces operating in FATA and the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) (Islam Online, March 6). Baitullah Mahsud, who heads the TTP, is blamed for most of the suicide attacks and terrorist violence in FATA, NWFP and Punjab province in 2007. Mahsud is also accused of involvement in the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in December 2007.

A New Alliance in Waziristan

On June 30, Mullah Nazir, commander of the Taliban of the Ahmadzai Wazir Tribe of South Waziristan, and Hafiz Gul Bahadur Wazir, leader of the Taliban of the Uthmanzai Wazir and Daur Tribes of North Waziristan, announced the merger of their groups under a common front, the “Local Taliban Movement,” to fight ISAF-NATO and U.S. forces in Afghanistan (Islam Online, July 13; Dawn [Karachi], July 1). Subsequently, Hafiz Gul Bahadur was appointed as the overall commander of both the Ahmadzai and Uthmanzai Taliban, Mullah Nazir as the deputy commander and Mufti Abu Haroon as the spokesman of the group (The News [Islamabad], July 13). The formation of the Bahadur-Nazir alliance could be aptly described as a “Waziri alliance” since both Nazir and Bahadur belong to the dominant Wazir Tribe, which nearly encircles the Mahsud Tribe from three sides in Waziristan. As stated by Mullah Nazir, the group has been formed to “defend the Wazir Tribe’s interests in North and South Waziristan” (Daily Times, July 2).

It is, however, generally believed that the bloc was formed as an attempt to counter Baitullah Mahsud and his TTP. As stated by a pro-Mullah Nazir tribal elder who attended a jirga (tribal council) to ratify the Nazir-Bahadur agreement, the move aims at allowing the two leaders to “forge unity against Mahsud” (Daily Times

[Lahore], July 8). The agreement comes against a backdrop of increasing terrorist activity by the Baitullah Mahsud-led TTP against the Pakistani government as well as militant raids in June to punish the pro-government Hajji Turkistan group from the neighboring Bhattani tribe. Both Mullah Nazir and Hafiz Gul Bahadur are pro-government and shun terrorist activities within Pakistan.

The biggest point of contention between Mullah Nazir and Baitullah Mahsud is the support the latter provides local Uzbek militants belonging to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The dispute can be traced back to March 2007, when Nazir purged the Uzbek militants along with their local supporters from the Ahmadzai Wazir's tribal territory following accusations they had violated local customs and traditions and indulged in the killing of tribal elders. These Uzbek militants and their local supporters took refuge with Baitullah Mahsud and continued to carry out attacks against Mullah Nazir and his key commanders. Simultaneous attacks were conducted against Mullah Nazir and Commander Malik Khanan on January 7, killing eight militants and injuring three others (BBC, January 7). Khanan was eventually killed by suspected Mahsud and Uzbek militants on June 1 (Dawn, June 1). The killing of Khanan left Mullah Nazir vulnerable to the threat posed by Baitullah Mahsud. The Waziri alliance, therefore, will help Nazir in strengthening his support base among the Ahmadzai Wazir and restrain the Uzbeks and Mahsud militants from harming him. At the same time, Hafiz Gul Bahadur has expressed his concerns several times about the Uzbek militants' growing anti-Pakistan activities in North Waziristan.

Nazir and Bahadur, while committed to fighting ISAF-NATO and U.S. forces in Afghanistan, are both against the TTP's terrorist activities in Pakistan (Daily Times, July 2). The policy of Nazir and Bahadur conforms to the broader policy of the Afghan Taliban, who have always advised the Pakistani Taliban to shun fighting Pakistani security forces and focus their energy and resources on Afghanistan (Asia Times Online, May 15, 2007). However, some Taliban militants, especially Baitullah Mahsud, have recently moved closer to al-Qaeda, which advocates conducting terrorist attacks against the Pakistani government and staging global jihad. Mullah Omar, the leader of Afghanistan's Taliban, has personally disapproved of Baitullah and renounced his relationship with him (Asia Times Online, January 24).

Impact of the Formation of the Waziri Alliance

The Waziri alliance will lead to Hafiz Gul Bahadur emerging as the strongest Taliban commander in North and South Waziristan—both in terms of manpower and influence with the Afghan Taliban. Both the Ahmadzai Wazir and Uthmanzai Wazir tribes share a border with Afghanistan's Khost and Pakista provinces while Baitullah Mahsud's tribe is landlocked. Hence, Mahsudi Taliban militants require a safe passage through Waziri territory to conduct cross-border activities in Afghanistan. In the wake of any open hostility between the TTP and the Waziri alliance, the latter could deny the Waziris safe passage to Afghanistan. That is why Baitullah Mahsud distributed pamphlets in North Waziristan assuring Hafiz Gul Bahadur that he will neither oppose him, nor conduct a fight against him (Dawn, July 3). The alliance also provides strength to the much-weakened Mullah Nazir and assures him of the needed support if Baitullah Mahsud adopts a threatening posture toward him.

The formation of the Waziri alliance may considerably weaken Baitullah Mahsud and the TTP in North and South Waziristan. The Waziri alliance is presently attempting to woo various Taliban militant groups operating in FATA and NWFP away from the TTP. The Haji Namdar-led Amr bil Maroof wa Nahi Anir Munkir (Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vices) militant group operating in Khyber Agency has reportedly joined the Waziri alliance (The News, July 6). Bahadur may also try to attract other non-TTP

Taliban militant groups operating in FATA, such as the Shah Khalid group (Mohmand Agency) and the Jaish-e-Islami of Maulvi Wali-ur-Rehman (Bajaur Agency).

Isolating Baitullah Mahsud

There are prospects that the Waziri alliance may also bring the pro-government Hajji Turkistan group of the Bhattani Tribe into its fold. The Bhattani Tribe borders the Mahsud Tribe to its east and provides the latter land passage to the southern districts of NWFP. While the infamous Asmatullah Shaheen group of the Bhattani tribe has joined the TTP, the rival Turkistan group faced an armed onslaught from the TTP militants in June that left nearly 40 Bhattani tribesmen dead. The Mahsud tribe and its Taliban fighters face a complete blockade if the Ahmadzai, Uthmanzai and Bhattani tribes join their ranks in the wake of any aggression by the Mahsuds against one of them.

There is a chance some of the dissenting Mahsud Taliban commanders may join hands with the Waziri alliance, thereby weakening the base of Baitullah Mahsud within his own tribe. The Uzbeks may also come under tremendous pressure from both Nazir and Bahadur. Baitullah Mahsud has a significant number of Uzbek militants in his ranks and any change of loyalty on the part of Uzbek militants from Baitullah to Nazir and Bahadur in an attempt to safeguard their survival may effectively erode Baitullah's fighting capabilities in the region. As it becomes embroiled in inter-tribal and intra-tribal cleavages, the TTP may shift its focus away from the Pakistani government for the time being.

What can now be expected is a successful and historically-tested "divide and rule" policy by the Pakistani government, based on pitting one rogue against the other with some concessions offered to the one willing to side with the government. Such a strategy could prove more effective than employing troops and conducting military operations in the volatile frontier region.

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