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Negotiate with the TTP?

The notion in army circles that Pakistan's civil war is transient, is delusional — this war will be long and...

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With their hands tied together, 21 abducted off-duty Levies personnel were lined up in a cricket ground near Peshawar on December 30, 2012, and then summarily executed. Negotiations conducted through village elders with TTP militants had failed after the militants refused ransom money. Instead, their demands were purely ideological: Pakistan must accept sharia law, break off relations with the United States, and restore the caliphate. The killers, as well as those they killed, had probably prayed and fasted with equal fastidiousness. But as salaried soldiers of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan — which the TTP says is a state of the *kuffar* (unbelievers) — they were *wajibul qatl* (deserving of death).

This mass execution — one of many — shows that Pakistan's military and security establishment is bleeding from a thousand cuts. Its enemies are the relentless foot soldiers of an army that says it is an army of God. Most fighters are local villagers and well known to other residents, but some are Uzbeks and Arabs. Last week's communique by the TTP's high command rejects that non-Pakistanis, as well as al Qaeda militants, are "foreigners" because Islam recognises no national boundaries. This time around even Interior Minister Rehman Malik dared not claim that the killers were Indian or US agents. The pretense of a foreign hand is up, or nearly so. Army Chief General Kayani, in his much celebrated August 14, 2012 speech, said, "We realise that the most difficult task for any army is to fight against its own people". This pill must have been bitter to swallow.

There are only three choices in dealing with this internal enemy: surrender, fight, or talk. Surrender is out of the question. Fighting without public support is a recipe for failure. And so that leaves only talking. But, as things at present stand, negotiations will fail. Last week, Hakeemullah Mehsud flatly refused to lay down arms while talking. This leaves only one viable option: talk, but only from a position of strength. No matter how much ground one cedes, it is never enough.

The militants are so extreme that they kill even those belonging to their ideological universe. General Hamid Gul, fiery supporter of the Taliban and the sharia state, was helpless when militants kidnapped and executed Squadron Leader Khalid Khawaja and Colonel Imam, his former colleagues. The late Qazi Hussain Ahmad of the Jamaat-e-Islami adamantly refused to condemn Taliban-claimed suicide attacks but was targeted by a burqa-clad female suicide bomber in Mohmand. Maulana Fazlur Rahman, the self-professed father of the Taliban, has been repeatedly targeted by suicide attackers and rocket fire; and Imran Khan's anti-drone march fell apart when the TTP threatened to attack his convoy (the threat was partially retracted later). But the biggest loser has been the military, which has lost thousands of fine soldiers. Many have been tortured before being killed — all in the name of Islam.

It is ironic that things should have turned out this way because the Pakistan Army also thinks of itself as the Army of God. Since the 1980s, the army's mission has been to protect the "ideological borders of Pakistan" together with the physical borders. The 1994 army's Green Book states that "the existence and survival of Pakistan depend upon complete implementation of Islamic ideology in true sense. If the ideology is not preserved then the very existence of Pakistan becomes doubtful". This thinking was reflected in the banners at army recruiting centres displaying, "*iman, taqwa, jihad fi sabil Allah*" (faith, piety and jihad in God's way).

But now that the TTP insists that it is the real army of Islam, the old narrative has stopped working. The public largely sees the Taliban as sincere, although somewhat overzealous. Therefore, soldiers killed fighting them are quietly buried, while those killed in Pakistan-India wars are remembered as *shaheeds* through the streets and roads bearing their names. The military's morale has plummeted: to quote General Kayani, "Disillusionment, desperation, religious bigotry, political disharmony and discord seem to permeate our lives". He goes on to say that "No state can afford a parallel system of governance and militias, and that extremism is the gravest threat to Pakistan".

General Kayani's counter-narrative is quintessentially liberal: "Any person who believes his opinion to be the final verdict is an extremist. More so, if one tries to enforce his opinion through use of gun, it becomes terrorism. Islam does not allow anyone to claim to be a know all, and flirt with divinity." This amounts to a welcome redefinition of the philosophy, as well as fighting goals, of the Pakistan Army.

Brilliantly stated, sir! But your actions do little to address the grave concerns you raised. In still stronger words, identical concerns were contained in the landmark January 12, 2002 speech by your predecessor, General Musharraf. He banned several terrorist organisations, started reforming madrassas, and announced a de-weaponisation programme. All this was insincere and so, a decade later, the enemy is stronger and more confident.

The army's failure is one of will and strategy. How does it help to whip up anti-Americanism by publically condemning drones — a precision weapon with smaller collateral damage when compared to aircraft and artillery — while privately asking for more strikes? Or to eliminate journalists such as Saleem Shahzad who expose the enemy within the ranks? The mysterious rise and fall of the Difa-e-Pakistan Council, as well as the rush to block Nato lines and then the rush to unblock them, merely strengthened those who kill our soldiers and the helpless citizens of this country.

If Pakistan is to be at peace with itself, the army must stop seeing everything through the prism of competition and war with India. To prosper, Pakistan must overcome its hatred for India and leave Kashmir as a problem to be solved by Kashmiris. Muddled thinking has left Pakistan exhausted and indifferent to its own suffering. The notion in army circles that Pakistan's civil war is transient, and will disappear if unnamed string-pullers stop their mischief, is delusional — this war will be long and bitter. The military must limit itself to defending the people of Pakistan from violence and to ensuring that their constitutional and civil rights are protected. It must cease posturing as the defender of ideological frontiers. Our army must become Pakistan's army, not an army of God.

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