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Issue Brief

How has Operation Zarb-e-Azb changed perceptions about Pakistan abroad?

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In 2014, in the backdrop of failed talks with the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and a deadly attack on Karachi International Airport in June that year, the Pakistani government and military leadership took a unanimous decision to eradicate terrorism from the country. On June 15, 2014, the armed forces launched ground operations and air strikes in the North Wazirsitan Agency (NWA) by employing its infantry divisions, artillery, armour and air force. The stated aim of the operation was to strike against all extremists and finish off terrorist activities once and for all. This included destroying groups such as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Al-Qaeda among others. Another important aspect of Zarb-e-Azb was to track and stop the sources of financial backing to the terror mongers. In light of this operation, Pakistan's image has improved considerably in the international arena. During the Heart of Asia conference in December 2015, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif stated that the operation has been remarkably successful and was achieving the desired results. The Chief of Army Staff (COAS), General Raheel Sharif, echoed similar sentiments on the first day of the New Year when he said 2016 would be the year of unity and eliminating terror from the country.¹

According to Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) reports, the operation which is still going on has been successful in killing around 3400 militants, destroying 837 hideouts and recovering a large amount of weapons and explosives. Thousands of suspected terrorists including 183 hardcore terrorists have been killed and 21,193 arrested in around 13200 intelligence-based-operations (IBOs).² Furthermore, North Waziristan has now been made 90 per cent clear of militants and their local support.³ Overall, there has been a significant decrease in the number of terrorist attacks throughout 2015.

Pakistan's relations with its neighbours have also seen a significant improvement. Most vocal has been Pakistan's friend and neighbour, China, in part because China itself faces serious threat from the ETIM, a Uighur militant group residing in far Western Xinjiang region and responsible for a number of terrorist attacks in the country. Beijing's evaluation of the operation is very positive as can be seen in various statements by the Chinese leaders. During his visit to Pakistan in April 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping admired Pakistan's efforts to maintain peace in the region and stated that, "Pakistan has stood on the frontline in the international fight against terrorism."⁴ He also acknowledged that the results of Operation Zarb-e-Azb had changed the situation in the region for the better and avowed that China would help enhance Pakistan's capability in fighting terrorism and meeting non-traditional threats. The Chinese Government has also acknowledged the reports about killing of ETIM militants in the Pakistani

strikes. When the COAS visited Beijing in January 2015 and met his counterpart Gen. Qi Jianguo, the latter applauded Pakistani Army's efforts in the war on terror. The Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, Gen Fan Changlong also praised the success of Operation Zarb-e-Azb which he termed "decisive, bold and a hard blow for terrorists". Hence, Operation Zarb-e-Azb has also helped strengthen the bilateral ties between Pakistan and China.

A similar response can be seen from other countries as well. During Prime Minister Sharif's official visit to Washington in October 2015, President Obama expressed special appreciation for Pakistan's ongoing support to degrade and ultimately defeat Al-Qaeda and its affiliates and honoured the sacrifices of the Pakistani security forces in Operation Zarb-e-Azb. He stated that the operation and other similar ventures had destroyed the ability of militants to plan and execute terrorist attacks and noted that further steps were being taken in this regard in line with the National Action Plan.⁵

On October 5, 2015, Chief of Malaysian Army, General Tan Sri Raja Mohamed Affandi Bin Raja Mohamed Noor, in a meeting at the Pakistan General Headquarters acknowledged success of Operation Zarb-e-Azb and paid rich tribute to sacrifices rendered by Pakistan Army in fight against terrorism.

Similar views were expressed by the King of Saudi Arabia, H. M. Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Naif Abdulaziz Al Saud and Defence Minister HRH Mohammad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud when the COAS visited the country. They said that the Saudis held Pakistan and its army in high esteem and applauded the success of the operation. On December 9, 2015 while visiting the military headquarters, German Defence Minister, Mrs Ursula Von der Leyen also appreciated the phenomenal successes of Operation Zarb-e-Azb while paying rich tributes to the martyrs of Pakistani security forces.

During the Heart of Asia Conference in December 2015, President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan also obliquely acknowledged the success of the operation when he stated during his speech that Operation Zarb-e-Azb was responsible for the exodus of the militants from Pakistan.

On December 12, 2015 the DG ISPR acknowledged the overall improvement in security and order brought about by Operation Zarb-e-Azb. He highlighted the various festivities and national events being celebrated as evidence that stability has been restored. On December 29, 2015 President Mamnoon, during the concluding ceremony of the first Governor Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) FATA Youth Festival in Peshawar, pointed out that the tribal areas of Pakistan have regained peace due to the successful Zarb-

e-Azb Operation and appreciated the sacrifices of the security forces and tribal people in the war against terror.

A report of the US Department of Defence, has verified the fact that while extremism and terrorism had increased around the world during the past year, it had declined in Pakistan.⁶

The economic revival of Pakistan as a result of the government's successful economic policies has been acknowledged and appreciated by the IMF, World Bank, Bloomberg, as well as international credit rating agencies such as Moody's and S&P.

A report by Bloomberg titled "In the 'Best Hidden' Frontier Market, a Boom Signals a Pakistan Revival" cites the country as an "undiscovered investment opportunity in emerging or frontier markets". The report also noted that Moody's Investors Service had upgraded Pakistan's sovereign credit ratings for the first time since 2008, making a strong mention of the soaring Forex reserves and the state's economic overhauling under an IMF programme.

In May 2015, the Economist stated that Pakistan's economy was doing even better than the economies of Canada and the USA. The article stated, "Pakistan's economy is growing at over 4 per cent when the whole of Europe and Canada are below 3 per cent. Terrorism incidents have dramatically gone down in the last year. Operations in FATA and Karachi and throughout Pakistan are producing fruits".⁷ Likewise, Forbes has also acknowledged that Pakistan's improving security dynamic was noteworthy in the economic upheaval. In the article titled Pakistan: The Next Colombia Success Story? the author maintains, "What has not sunk into international perceptions about the country is the tangible consensus among government, military, and Pakistani citizens against violent terrorists including the Pakistani Taliban and the alphabet soup of other terrorist groups in and around the country",⁸ thereby, highlighting the fact that the whole country is on the anti-terror boat.

All in all, Operation Zarb-e-Azb has done a remarkable job of sprucing up Pakistan's image abroad. For this operation to reach its logical conclusion, there should be no interruptions of any kind. Every hindrance must be tackled and the morale should remain high. As indicated by President Ghani at the Heart of Asia Conference, Pakistan and Afghanistan need to increase their efforts if the region is to be cleared of extremist activities. The year 2015 saw steps being taken in this direction. On May 19, 2015 Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the Afghan intelligence outfit, the National Directorate of Security (NDS) signed an agreement to strengthen coordination and intelligence sharing in the fight

against terrorism. Now, both parties need to make sure that this accord is put to proper use and make it effective.

Additionally, in order to sustain Operation Zarb-e-Azb's achievements, the space occupied by militant groups and tribal militias has to be filled by accountable and successful political institutions. Successive military operations in the tribal areas since 2001 have meant a steady erosion of the civilian administration and institutions that did exist in the region. Zarb-e-Azb Operation provides a good opening for political reform and integration of the tribal areas into the central government.

Moreover, almost 700,000 individuals have been displaced by this campaign. The reintegration of these people and reconstruction of towns and infrastructure remain unresolved. Thus, there has to be a due process of rehabilitation. If this is not done, the economy will be thrown into severe imbalance. Furthermore, the whole country should be on the same platform to eradicate terrorism. Every Pakistani must wholeheartedly support the nation's endeavour to do so.

Notes and References:

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