Tehrik-i-Taliban: A Specious Claim and Brash Threats
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When we wrote our Global Security and Intelligence Report last week on Baitullah Mehsud and the Manawan attack, we had no intention that the piece would be part of a series, but several developments over the past week have compelled us to once again write about Pakistan — and Mehsud and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in particular.

First, on April 4, eight paramilitary police were killed in a suicide bombing against their camp in the Pakistani capital of Islamabad. This attack was the second suicide bombing in Islamabad in less than two weeks, and followed closely on the heels of the March 23 attack on the headquarters of the Police Special Branch in Islamabad. After the April 4 attack, one of Baitullah Mehsud’s deputies, Hakimullah Mehsud (who, like Baitullah, is a member of the large Mehsud clan) contacted the press to claim credit for the attack and threatened that the group would carry out two suicide attacks per week in Pakistan. According to press reports, Hakimullah Mehsud said: “We have shown enough restraint, previously, we were striking once in three months, but from now onward we will go for at least two suicide attacks a week.”

On April 5, a suicide bomber attacked a Shiite mosque in Chakwal, a Punjab city located approximately 50 miles southeast of Islamabad. The attack killed at least 22 people and injured another 35. About 2,000 people had gathered at the mosque for Majlis Aza, an annual Shiite celebration. The bomber reportedly detonated himself when guards stopped him in the crowd at the mosque’s front gate.

Umar Farooq, the spokesman of the shadowy militant organization Fedayeen al-Islam (FI), called The Associated Press the same day to claim credit for the Chakwal attack. Farooq said his group staged the attack on the mosque as part of a “campaign against infidels.”

Oddly, on April 4, Baitullah Mehsud (or someone claiming to be him) called Reuters to claim responsibility for the April 3 shooting at a U.S. immigration center in Binghamton, New York. “They were my men,” the caller told the AP. “I gave them orders in reaction to U.S. drone attacks.” This claim was quickly discounted by eyewitness accounts of the shooting. According to surviving victims and other witnesses, the Binghamton shooting was carried out by a lone gunman, Jiverly Voong, who was a Vietnamese immigrant with no apparent links to Islam or the Taliban.

Background on Mehsud

Before plunging into the Binghamton claims and threats to attack the continental United States, let’s take a quick look at the man behind them, Baitullah Mehsud. As STRATFOR has previously discussed, Mehsud, who is only in his mid-30s, is a member of a new generation of militant leaders in Pakistan’s tribal badlands. As part of this new generation, Mehsud has endeavored to systematically remove or undermine the established tribal leaders in South Waziristan, usurping power and
thus severing many of the tools of influence the Pakistani government held in the region. This process of killing off the old tribal leadership has been a significant contributing factor to what we have previously referred to as the "Talibanization" of Pakistan. In some ways, Mehsud personifies the struggle between al Qaeda and Pakistani intelligence organizations for influence and control of Afghan and Pakistani jihadists.

Since Mehsud operates largely outside of its control, the government of Pakistan has come to view Mehsud (and others like him) as a larger threat to Pakistan than the Afghan Taliban or the foreign jihadists — like al Qaeda — that Mehsud considers allies. Indeed, Pakistan has long tried to play up the importance of Mehsud to the United States and has been quite agitated that, until relatively recently, the United States was not targeting Mehsud’s TTP organization. When the United States finally did turn its sights on Mehsud and his network, the TTP responded by launching attacks against the Pakistani authorities. Indeed, Hakimullah Mehsud said the group was stepping up the tempo of their attacks precisely because of the U.S. unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) attacks directed against the TTP.

As we noted last week, although Baitullah Mehsud tells journalists that he is ready to be martyred, the UAV attacks against the TTP do pose a very real threat to him, and to the viability of his organization. The scope of this threat is made evident by their response to the attacks.

However, there is also another dynamic that threatens the TTP, and that is the efforts of the Pakistanis and the Americans to try to split the nationalist militants from those who are more internationally focused. That is, split those groups who want to carry out jihad to create a transnational caliphate (like al Qaeda) from those groups whose primary interest is establishing more localized control — like the Taliban in Afghanistan prior to the U.S. invasion. This approach is very similar to the approach coalition forces took in Iraq to separate al Qaeda in Iraq from the more nationalistic Sunni tribal militants in places like Anbar province.

While the United States is attempting to divide the jihadists on the Afghan side of the border, the Pakistanis are attempting to do the same among those in Pakistan. If the Pakistanis and Americans are able to split the more nationalist jihadists (like the Haqqani network) away from the more internationalist jihadists (like al Qaeda and the TTP) this could leave al Qaeda and the TTP isolated and far more vulnerable — which is why this process is seen as a threat by Mehsud and company. Indeed, divisions already exist with groups like the Haqqani network, which opposes attacks inside Pakistan.

**Claims and Threats**

Into this mix, Mehsud has injected threats to hit the United States and has made the strange claim of credit for the Binghamton shooting. Let’s examine the Binghamton claim first. We were quite surprised — and a bit embarrassed — to see this claim come out only a couple of days after we wrote in our security weekly that a prominent militant leader like Mehsud did not have to take credit for other people’s attacks, and that lying about such things would hurt his already well-established reputation.

Initially, we thought that perhaps the claim was some sort of psychological operation by the Pakistanis or Americans designed to make Mehsud look like a fool or a nut. However, when days passed and the TTP issued no retraction, it became apparent that Mehsud had actually made the claim for some reason. Also, despite his carefully crafted public image of never displaying his face, Mehsud is a media animal, who, as his frequent calls to Reuters, The Associated Press and Pakistani journalists testify, loves to see his name in print. With all the coverage surrounding the Binghamton claim, he undoubtedly was aware of the event. Had the claim been orchestrated by an intelligence agency seeking to discredit him, he would have quickly denied it — just as he quickly denied the claims that he was behind the assassination of Benazir Bhutto.

As to the threat to attack the United States, one must use a two-step test: 1) Does the actor behind the threat possess the capability to carry out the threatened action? and 2) Does the actor possess the intent to do so? When we look at the capabilities of the TTP, the group has not demonstrated the ability to operate as a transnational organization. We have seen instances of grassroots-type jihadists elsewhere who were allegedly trained at TTP camps, but providing paramilitary
training to grassroots jihadists is different from actually training and dispatching operatives to conduct attacks on your behalf.

The technical skills and tradecraft required to conduct an act of terrorism are very different from those needed to be an insurgent, and are very different from the subjects taught in basic military — or paramilitary — training. Even if the grassroots operatives are trained in some of the more technical skills of terrorism such as bomb-making, there are still important tradecraft skills that must be acquired and honed before a person can become a successful transnational militant capable of conducting acts of terrorism in a hostile environment. We define terrorist tradecraft as the set of subtle skills needed to maintain secrecy and operate within a hostile environment. These skills are foundational to the success of both the individual jihadist and his network anywhere, but they are acutely critical while conducting transnational operations.

Merely being able to travel internationally with ease is something many guerrilla fighters cannot do. More refined tasks, such as conducting preoperational surveillance in a major metropolitan area, maintaining secure communications, establishing cover for status and cover for action while undertaking operational activity, or acquiring weapons without arousing unwanted attention, are simply things not taught to most guerrilla fighters, and they are skills that require a great deal of practical training in order to master.

So far, the TTP has shown an ability to successfully operate inside Pakistan and Afghanistan, but its operations to date have been somewhat rudimentary (like the Marawan attack) and have not shown an advanced degree of nuance or sophistication. Likewise, the group has not demonstrated the ability to train and dispatch operatives to a major western city like New York or London in order to conduct an attack. (Al Qaeda has demonstrated this ability but the TTP has not.)

When all is said and done, employing an improvised explosive device manufactured at a camp in Pakistan against a target in Pakistan is a far cry from employing it against a target in London.

Now, with regard to the second step of the test — intent. Is the TTP really planning to strike Washington, D.C., New York and London? This is a question that almost every major intelligence and law enforcement agency in the West began to focus on following Mehsud’s public statements in a January 2008 interview with Al Jazeera that he wanted to attack the United States and the United Kingdom. “We pray to God to give us the ability to destroy the White House, New York and London,” Mehsud said during the interview. “And we have trust in God. Very soon, we will be witnessing jihad’s miracles.”

But does such a public statement — or even his March 31 statement in which he threatened strikes against Washington, D.C. in response to U.S. UAV attacks — really translate into intent? This is where the intent side of the equation gets very fuzzy. Merely stating that one is going to do something is not necessarily a clear indication that there is real intent to do so.

Indeed, there is a good argument to be made that if Mehsud truly intended to strike the United States or United Kingdom he would remain silent about his aspirations in order to help ensure the operational security of any operatives he has dispatched abroad to conduct such strikes. Certainly, Osama bin Laden did openly declare war against the United States in August 1996 and again in February 1998, but he never mentioned specific targets in those declarations and was certainly far more circumspect with his statements as his operatives got closer to actually executing attacks. In fact, bin Laden even went so far as to deny responsibility for many of the early al Qaeda attacks and initially denied responsibility for the 9/11 attacks.

Calculations

Mehsud is neither stupid nor crazy. Such people do not become major militant leaders at age 35 in the violent world of Pakistan’s tribal areas. He is clearly rational and quite Machiavellian. What he is doing, therefore, likely has some rational explanation beyond the fact that he likes to hear his name mentioned by the media. While the threats against the United States and United Kingdom may be explained away under the “media debutante” rationale, unless Mehsud made a terrible miscalculation in taking credit for the Binghamton shooting, there must be some other overriding reason to risk damaging his reputation as a militant leader with a specious claim.
As seen by the U.S. reaction to the 9/11 attacks, any successful large-scale attack on American soil could have dire consequences for Mehsud. Such a strike could, at the very least, serve to steel U.S. resolve to stay in Afghanistan, or it could motivate the United States to dramatically increase its focus on totally destroying the TTP. Additionally, if Mehsud is truly intent on hitting the United States or United Kingdom, we should see him begin to hit American and British targets within his current operational sphere, i.e., within Pakistan, before graduating to American and British targets overseas.

There is another possibility. Perhaps Mehsud does not possess the intent to attack Washington, New York or London. Maybe his threats — along with the Binghamton claim — are intended to scuttle the emerging U.S. strategy of dealing with factions of the Taliban in an effort to divide them and isolate the more radical elements.

If Mehsud does fear such a strategy — and he has reason to, following its successes in Iraq — it is possible that his recent antics are an effort to influence public perception inside the United States regarding the Taliban. As the United States reaches out to factions of the Afghan Taliban in an attempt to split them from al Qaeda, et al., Mehsud threatens the United States and attempts to link the Pakistani Taliban to a shooting in Binghamton, New York. Even though the link to the shooting was quickly and officially discounted, it is a safe bet that it will live on for a long time as an urban legend or rumor, especially among the more conspiracy-minded. Such perceptions are going to make the strategy of negotiating with any Taliban (Afghan or Pakistani) appear to be less tenable for many Americans.

At the same time, Mehsud could be using his rhetoric in an attempt to steer the more nationalist jihadists in Pakistan and Afghanistan toward his more transnational agenda. In any case, Mehsud’s efforts to shape opinion at home or abroad could explain his recent posturing, however bogus or brash it might be.