Taking on the Taliban

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ON Dec 16, the Taliban attacked an army school in Peshawar and killed 132 children and nine adults. Eight terrorists dressed in military uniform penetrated the school's well-guarded perimeter and opened fire on the students and school personnel. Pakistani army commandos fought the intruders for several hours before killing the last attacker.

The assault on the military school was the single deadliest attack in the Taliban's history.

The question now is whether it would turn out to be a turning point for Pakistan in its relations with the group.

Pakistan's military is the country's most respected and powerful institution. By attacking the children of military families, the Taliban has dramatically increased the likelihood that Pakistan will move resolutely against it.

This may, of course, take some time. A Pakistani court's decision to grant bail to Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi, who is accused of masterminding the 2008 terror attack that killed 166 people in Mumbai, underscores the challenge of getting every Pakistani government institution on board.

Pakistan has had a complicated relationship with the Taliban. The country's intelligence services had a hand in the group's formation and in its rise to power in neighbouring Afghanistan. Many in the international community suspect that some in the Pakistani military and its spy networks continued to support the Taliban even after the country joined what then-United States president George W. Bush called "the war on terror" in 2001.

More recently, however, three crucial developments have altered the environment in which Islamic extremists operate in Pakistan.

For starters, in November last year, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif appointed General Raheel Sharif as chief of staff of the Pakistani army. Sharif views Islamic extremism as an existential threat that needs to be faced and defeated.

In a conversation I had with the general when he visited Washington DC last month, he placed Islamic extremism well ahead of Pakistan's poorly performing economy and immature political system on the list of problems that the country must confront. Pakistan, he said, had the strength — and now the political will — to move decisively against terrorism.

In June, the Pakistani army launched Operation Zarb-e-Azb, an effort to eliminate terrorist hideouts and safe areas in North Waziristan, one of the tribal areas along the border region with Afghanistan.

For Sharif, the offensive was just the beginning of an all-out effort that will take time to produce the desired result.

“There will be difficulties on the way, and three have already occurred,” he said.

Following this summer’s attacks on Karachi’s international airport, a naval base and a crowd gathered on the India-Pakistan border to witness a popular display of force by each side’s guards, the Peshawar massacre makes it four.

The second key development is the election in Afghanistan of President Ashraf Ghani.

A former senior World Bank official, Ghani is interested not only in finding a durable solution to the problem of Islamic extremism but also in setting his country on a path of sustainable economic development. Moreover, Ghani has been persuaded that he needs Pakistan’s help on both fronts.

One of Pakistan’s first actions after the Peshawar school attack was to approach Ghani’s government and ensure that Afghan authorities blocked the escape routes of those involved in planning and executing it. Indeed, Sharif visited Ghani in Kabul just a few hours after the attack and, even as the battle was still under way, Pakistan’s military launched airstrikes on terrorist hideouts along the countries’ border after intelligence officials concluded the attack had been planned by a group operating in that area.

The third development is the sudden rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. The group’s brutality is not so much an expression of religious belief as of tribal traditions that have, over the centuries, shaped a narrow, fanatical interpretation of Islam.

This is the source of much of the trouble in Afghanistan and Pakistan as well. Bringing the tribal system and its mores into the mainstream and under the rule of law will be an important component in the effort to end the reign of terror in both countries.

The border where Operation Zarb-e-Azb is taking place highlights the importance of all three developments. To this day, Afghanistan has not recognised the Durand Line — drawn by a British diplomat in 1893 and imposed on Afghanistan by India’s colonial rulers — as the formal border with Pakistan.

Afghanistan was the only state that opposed Pakistan’s entry into the United Nations when it gained independence from British rule in 1947, contributing to nearly 70 years of bilateral tensions.

The Durand Line bisects the territory of several Pashtun tribes, including the Mehsuds and the Haqqanis. The former has supplied the leadership and foot soldiers to the Pakistani Taliban and the latter has fought, often with devastating effect, against the government in Kabul and American and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation troops.

Both groups aim to replace their countries' governments with an Islamic caliphate, based on what they interpret as the tenets of Islam. Over the decades, the governments in Islamabad and Kabul have done little to remove the sanctuaries established by the two groups, whose members freely cross the poorly patrolled frontier.

Today, the two countries have a chance to mend ties and join forces to rein in Islamic extremists on both sides of the border. This week's slaughter of schoolchildren in Peshawar could be the tipping point.