

Comprehensive review of NAP

NACTA, nay activated

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One had thought that the horrific terrorist attack on Army Public School in Peshawar in December 2014 would evoke a robust response. Much hope was pinned on the National Action Plan, a list of actions the government announced to fight terrorism in the country.¹Not least, because the National Counter Terrorism Authority [NACTA], is often taken as a coordinating point of all steps of NAP.²

This was a decision of fundamental nature for integrating and orchestrating the national counter terrorism effort. Unfortunately, NACTA has been in the news mostly for its dormancy than any activity. Making it the prime national coordinating body for counter terrorism, means activating it first (one of the points of the National Action Plan).

For a while, it looked so. After the APS tragedy, Prime Minister Sharif shared strong desire of making NACTA functional.³ On December 31st, 2014, the interior minister, after chairing a meeting of the NACTA, too claimed that from then onwards, NACTA had been revitalized and made fully operational.⁴

But six months down the road, the reality doesn't differ. Except for the military not letting us forget the attack, the old official line has been treaded. In fact, if there is anything that reflects the government's lack of seriousness on strategizing against militants, it is the progress, or lack of it, on NACTA.

Is NACTA needed?

A great need has long been felt for a focal institution at the federal level, to plan, coordinate and orchestrate counter-terrorism efforts. Post 9/11, the national counter terrorism effort in Pakistan was fragmented, with no coordination between the provinces and the federal government, the military and the civilian agencies and different federal ministries having a role in counter terrorism. This lack of unity of effort between different stakeholders weakened the national response.

In January 2009, National Counter-Terrorism Authority, known by its acronym NACTA, was set up precisely to fill that need: to coordinate efforts of all counter-terror stakeholders, civilian and military alike; and to address all dimensions of the terrorist threat.

¹*Dawn*, Islamabad, December 27, 2014.

²The new National Coordinator of NACTA said that turning it into a coordinating body is among his top priorities.

³ "PM sets NACTA in motion, forms 16 committees for NAP," *Pakistan Today*, December 28, 2014.

⁴"Nisar orders immediate execution of death row terrorists," *Daily Times*, January 1, 2015.

Four years later, in 2013, a law was passed to give NACTA a legal status, assigning it the following seven functions:

1. To receive, collate and disseminate intelligence on terrorism and to issue periodical threat assessments for use by stakeholders.
2. To prepare National Counter Terrorism and Extremism Strategies and review progress in their implementation on a periodical basis.
3. To develop action plans against terrorism and extremism and submit progress on implementation of these plans on a periodical basis
4. To carry out research in areas relevant to terrorism and extremism and to share the research with stakeholders.
5. To carry out liaison with international entities for cooperating in counter terrorism and extremism.
6. To review relevant laws and suggest amendments to the Federal Government.
7. To appoint committees of experts from government and non-government sectors for deliberating in areas relating to the functions and mandate of NACTA.⁵

The organization's coordinating role was reiterated after the APS school attack. In December 2014, the Interior minister specified that "the point of coordinating" all the steps of National Action Plan would be NACTA.

Reviewing NACTA

The issue with NACTA has less to do with its mandate, and more with its working. That is why NAP too calls for "revival" of NACTA, a body whose coordinating role seems to be well-taken. Similar statements were made by Prime Minister and Interior Minister, discussed above.

Whatever little is known about NACTA's revival trickles through media reports. The government has, on the other hand, hardly shared any information on the performance of NACTA, probably because there is little to share.

• Management

Six months after APS school attack, NACTA still suffers from the same institutional inattention that had rendered it useless in the first place.

First of all, to date, there remains confusion whether NACTA comes under the Prime Minister or the Federal Interior Minister. The turf war dates back to its genesis in 2009, when opinion was divided on which

⁵Section 4 of NACTA Act, 2013.

office should look after it; the decision was finally made in favour of the Prime Minister's Office.

But sometimes later, NACTA was placed under the interior minister. For quite some time, it looked that while the administrative function of NACTA is with interior ministry, the operation functions rest with the PM's Office. This sounded like duality of offices.

In 2013, the Supreme Court of Pakistan asked the government to revert the notification that put NACTA under the interior ministry, bringing it again under the PM. Yet, there seems little action on that order, as interior ministry continues to speak on behalf of the NACTA.

Secondly, to date, not a single meeting of the Board of Governors of NACTA has been held, not even after the NAP was announced in December 2014. This despite the fact that Section 6 of NACTA Act, 2013, mandates the Board to meet at least once in each quarter of a year.

The Board of Governors is the most important component of its management. Headed by the Prime Minister, the BoG includes top public office holders from all over the country, including chief ministers of the four provinces.⁶

The Board has four functions i.e. exercising all the powers and

functions of the NACTA; providing it strategic vision and overseeing its activities; recommending rules, policies, or manuals to carry out the purposes of NACTA Act; and approving the annual budget prepared by the NACTA.

Without convening the board meeting, efforts to make NACTA functional will fall flat.

Thirdly, no Board meeting means no strategic guidance and no operational directions of the Executive Committee to follow on.

Headed by the Interior Minister, the Executive Committee is the second component of NACTA, responsible for ensuring effective implementation of the decisions of the Board, and performing other such functions as are assigned to it by the Board.

Some two weeks after the APS school attack, the NACTA Executive Committee met. That was December 31st 2014. Since then, no other such meeting took place.

In any case, without prior Board sitting, the meeting of Executive Committee of NACTA may lack legal standing. The EC, after all, is supposed to implement the directives of the Board.

⁶Section 5 of NACTA Act.

Finally, the present head of NACTA, known as National Coordinator, is powerless.

National Coordinator is the most crucial component of NACTA management, delegated with nine functions including full administrative and financial powers for effective administration of the Authority.

These powers, however, are to be approved by the Board. Again, without Board meeting, the NC's powers are unclear, begging a simple question: how can an organization be made functional if its head lacks powers of hiring people or spending budget?

Amusingly, in what is typical of the bureaucratic mind set, an organization without any functional headquarters of its own is asking for regional offices. The Interior Ministry even sent to the Prime Minister summary requesting approval for regional offices of NACTA. Again, nothing has been heard about that summary, too.

- *Tasks*

At the end of the Executive Committee meeting on December 31st, the interior minister shared that NACTA will undertake two key tasks. One, it will set up a helpline, numbered 1717, for citizens to share any information on terrorist threat. And two, NACTA will frame recommendations for the Prime

Minister on how to implement National Action Plan. Progress on both ends is far from satisfactory.

For one, the decision of setting up helpline doesn't fit in the role of NACTA. Setting up helplines is the responsibility of law-enforcement bodies like police or paramilitary force, which operates on ground level. An organization like NACTA, on other hand, works at the strategic tier.

More so, the lifeline of the helpline seems doomed. On February 6th, almost two months after the helpline was set up, the Interior Minister briefed the Prime Minister that the helpline had received 161 calls. Nothing is known about the calls received after that briefing. Apparently, the government seemed more interested in seen to be doing something than doing it.

As of the second decision of the Executive Committee, about sending recommendations to the Prime Minister about how best to implement NAP, no progress has been reported.

- *Budget*

Many speculated that post-APS attack, the government will allocate significant chunk to NACTA. After all, budgets of any institution clearly reflect its value: the higher the budget, the greater the importance accorded to it.

That turned out to be wishful thinking. In the fiscal year 2015-16, no special budget is allocated for NACTA, a fact also conceded by the finance secretary. The finance minister argued that NACTA's budget has been included in the interior ministry's budget.⁷ This probably has been the day-to-day cost of running NACTA. What NACTA has been demanding over the years, is special fund to activate it.

A senior interior ministry official was quoted as saying that 960 million rupees were required for making NACTA functional and that they were carrying out negotiations with the finance officials to get this amount allocated to NACTA.⁸

- *Human resources*

More than six months after announcement of NAP, the working strength of NACTA largely remains the same, raising questions whether the prime minister is too weak or too non-serious, to have NAP implemented.

According to an interior ministry official, who did not want to be named, NACTA has 206 sanctioned posts, out of which only 60 posts are filled up. This means NACTA is working on 29 per cent of sanctioned

strength, as 71 percent posts stay vacant.

What is of greater concern is the difference between the number of officers and non-officers: out of the 60 filled posts, 50 are non-officers (clerks, naib qasids, etc.); only 10 are officers (grade 17 to 22), against their sanctioned strength of 34.

The senior management of NACTA, meant to activate it, is in even worse shape. Out of 12 posts of grade 20 to grade 22, including the head of NACTA, only one is filled up – that of the head.⁹ The remaining eleven, four members and seven directors general, who are supposed to help the NC in running NACTA, are yet to be appointed.

Way forward

Six years after its genesis, and six months after the APS tragedy, the much-needed NACTA is still an ineffective organization, or, in the words of interior secretary, a “paper tiger.” It has yet to be properly revived.

To activate NACTA, the government may well follow NACTA Act, which neatly lays down the working procedures of this body.

Of foremost importance is convening a meeting of NACTA's Board of

⁷“Billions for counter-terrorism, nothing for Nacta,” *Express Tribune*, June 7, 2015.

⁸Ibid.

⁹“NACTA needs men and money to fight terrorism” *The News*, March 11, 2015.

Governors. Without such a meeting, NACTA's actualization will remain mere rhetoric. The meeting, on the other hand, will automatically set the path of its revival. The board's meeting will not only gather the country's top office holders to brainstorm on security threats, but also assign the much-desired powers to the organization's head, alongside approving NACTA's budget without routing it through the interior ministry.

