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The Resurgence of Militant Groups in Pakistan After Taliban Invasion of Afghanistan

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Noor Saeed Khan*

Noor ul Ain Naseem†

Muhammad Usman Ullah‡

Abstract

Peace and stability are the utmost need for protecting the South Asian region from the ripple effects of the ongoing crisis situation in Afghanistan. The Taliban's rise to power in Kabul has engendered a difficult choice—the hard path of peace or reversion to civil war. The latter has deep repercussions for the entire world, particularly Pakistan. It is because of the fact that wars in Afghanistan have twisting but contrasting impacts on the societal level of both states simultaneously. The Taliban's rise in Kabul has uptick the non-conventional security threats for Pakistan including its border security. The recent momentum in the attack of TTP and militant groups on security forces in Pakistan is a testimony to this fact. TTP leaders and different other non-state actors inspired by either TPP's ideology or encouraged and funded by India have received impetus from the 'blitzkrieg' of Taliban in Kabul.

Key Words: Militant Groups, Pakistan, Taliban, Afghanistan

Introduction

Afghanistan, a war-torn country and natural resources-rich country has always borne long term consequences of multiple wars, occupation of superpowers and instability (Durani & Khan, 2011). After the end of the war on terror and with the drawl of NATO forces, peace is assumed in Afghanistan. Among the Afghan population especially women and children are the most vulnerable group and victims of violence and war. Almost 24.4 million people are facing various issues due to declining socio-economic conditions in the country since the inception of the Taliban government in 2021(IRC, 2022). The rise of fear among people under the Taliban's rule is increasing day by day as the humanitarian situation constantly deteriorating in the state. The fear and uncertainty are visible on the faces of common masses who are unaware of

their fate and country's future, especially in the Afghan Shia Muslim community. In the past Taliban had been involved in communal violence against Afghan Shia families and raided their homes in an uninformed manner reported by Zarmeenay Begum, 60 years old Shia Muslim to a BBC reporter in Pakistan (BBC News, 2021b). It is evident from these incidents that the rising political, social and economic depressions in Afghanistan have spillover effects on its neighbouring countries, especially Pakistan.

The peace and security of Pakistan are dependent upon Afghanistan's situation. This is the reason that Pakistan has participated as a mediator and vibrantly play its role in the Afghan peace process. The state has wholeheartedly welcomed and anticipated the peacebuilding process inauguration in its

* Lecturer Peace and Conflict Studies Department National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan.

† Visiting Lecturer Peace and Conflict Studies Department National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan.

‡ Mphil Schalor Islamic International University Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: Usmanktk013@gmail.com

neighbour. As Pakistan is also the victim of the war of terror along with the Afghan people as it has fought the proxy war and direct ally of the US. To protect the development of its own territory, the peace process is also a ray of hope for the Government of Pakistan (GoP). Although, the international community didn't acknowledge the role of Pakistan either in the war on terror or in Afghan Peace Process (BBC News, 2021a). Consequently, the UN is also appealing to the international community and particularly the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan to increase their efforts for the rehabilitation of vulnerable communities in Afghanistan.

On the one hand in the contemporary situation, Pakistan due to its geostrategic position in a South Asian region and close proximity with Afghanistan seems to be pushed into a red zone by several international political and strategic actors. On the other hand, the rapidly evolving political scenario in Kabul after the US troops withdrawal in 2021, has subsequently dragged Islamabad into complex situations. As Pakistan was expecting the exit of US forces and the formation of the Taliban government in Kabul will limit the threat of cross border infiltration and TTP growth rate but all happen in contrast, particularly in the case of Pakistan. While denying the crucial role of Pakistan in the US-Afghan peace process by the international community, ironically Pakistan is once again being called into account as an important strategic actor whose foreign policy choices and internal security environment is going to have a serious effect on Afghanistan and vice versa. Only recently Pakistan's interest to reach out to some infamous TTP factions and holding talks to make sure the state policy of zero tolerance across the table and ensure ceasefire agreements with militant groups, has been misinterpreted by international media and alarmed its strategic partners. The recent National Security Policy (2022-2026) launched by Prime Minister Imran Khan's government has also prioritised stable Afghanistan in the state's foreign policy over China and India. The wisdom behind upholding negotiations and public first-ever NSP of state by the PTI government before opting for military operations is to retain peaceful conditions on

intra and inter-state levels during the amid of Covid-19 crisis.

The reluctance of recognizing the Taliban government by the global world, the rising humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan after 15th August 2021, the inability of GoP to host Afghan refugees in its territory as 1.5 million have already fled to Pakistan (UNHCR, 2020) and TTP attacks in Pakistan are major acting irritants in Pak-Afghan relations (Parker, 2021). Another important factor is the growing drug trafficking in Afghanistan. As the economic activities are totally stopped and the state is completely dependent upon the limited neighbourhood aid China has given 31 million USD for humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan (T. E. Times, 2021). Meanwhile, Pakistan is also providing them with tons of food items, relief packages and medicinal aids to cater for the humanitarian disaster. Iran, Turkmenistan, Sweden, Germany and other Central Asian countries are providing them with relief funds and eatables. But the non-responsive behaviour of the international community towards the acceptance of the Taliban government has promoted poppy cultivation and its trade from Afghanistan. The growing drug trade and its trafficking will further help in transforming the country into a hub of illegal activities. As the Taliban government recognized as one of the major sources of their revenue is poppy yields (Landay, 2021). Moreover, these aforementioned factors have greater potential to resuscitate both the states 20 years back and generate drastic impacts on both economies and peace conditions (Sohail Ahmad, Mahwish Bakht, 2017).

The growing challenge of TTP insurgencies in Pakistan can also fuel the mistrust among the people of both countries. As violence has been the rule in the history of both states (Ahmad & Bakht, 2016). The central leadership of the Taliban's government has given their statements about having no ties with TTP while there are different factions within the government and peripheral areas that have bargaining and burgeoning relations with TTP in Afghanistan (Mir, 2022). In this case, any further escalation in militancy in Pakistan and having its roots in Afghanistan can further raise the hatred and provoke structural and cultural

violence against each other instead of humanity and brotherhood.

Factual Analysis

Taliban's rise to power led to a surge of attacks by militant groups in Pakistan. A recent report on militant attacks in Pakistan shows a sharp decline in violent incidents this September after taking a dangerous hike in August. As many as 23 militant attacks were monitored during the month of September in which 25 people were killed and 46 others were injured as compared to 45 militant attacks in August in which 64 people were killed and 136 others were injured. The highest number of militant attacks were reported from Baluchistan where militants carried out nine attacks in which 15 people including 14 security forces personnel were killed and 36 others including 34 security forces personnel were injured. Seven militant attacks were reported from the erstwhile FATA region in which six people including five security forces personnel were killed and nine others including six security forces personnel and three civilians were injured. Five militant attacks were reported from KPK while two militant attacks were reported from Sindh. August had witnessed 66 Pakistan incidents in which 100 people were killed and 139 others were injured while 42 incidents were recorded in July in which 50 people were killed and 57 others injured (PICSS, 2022).

As Imran Khan's government is heavily focusing on the revival of the tourism industry as a pathway to economic stability in Pakistan. But the recent attempt of terror threats ensued to the New Zealand cricket team in Pakistan via fake email has resulted in their return without participating in the series (Klosok, 2021). Later on, the incident has caused the cancellation of the England cricket team's visit due to their security concerns. In contrast to history, this time the Government of Pakistan (GoP) has strongly condemned the response of New Zealand and England cricket boards to cyber terrorism without consulting with GoP on security issues (Masood, 2021). The consecutive cancellation of the cricket series has caused the country with severe economic blow and has greater potential to once again create a security dilemma for hosting long-awaited international cricket tournaments.

The recent trends in the mushrooming of militant attacks have raised various security concerns for the state on the international level when CPEC projects are in progress. The country's rival involvement in the Dasso Bus attack (AlJazeera, 2021a), Quetta hotel bomb blast (Syed Ali Shah, 2021) and Gawadar port incidents (AlJazeera, 2021b) act as sore points in Pak-China strategic partnership. This has not only caused a pause in Sino-Pak economic projects but also raised President Xi's government's concerns over the security measures of Pakistan (Myers, 2021). After the higher official meetings of economic partners on continuity of projects, Pakistan has paid compensation of 11.6 USD million to the 36 Chinese victim families as goodwill gestures (Jamal, 2022). But in the ongoing economic depression of the country, this is not possible for the state to practice it in future in case of a security breach.

It is high time for the federal government is reviewing its policies towards Afghanistan particularly implementing Pakistan's National Action Plan which is basically the key state policy against countering terrorism (Zaheer Abbas Chohan, 2022). This indicates the state's alertness in accounting for all internal security breaches as well as developments happening in Afghanistan and their potential impact on the Pak-Afghan border. While focusing on the various paradigms of state security internally and externally, Islamabad has needed to wisely select its choices and policy lines with the current administration in Kabul (Group, 2022). Reports of IS trying to take recruits in Afghanistan are also circulating, meanwhile, the Taliban are showing a clear disdain for a representative and inclusive central government, rejecting women's participation and entertaining minority seats in its cabinet. This though was a clear demand put forward by SCO members in Dushanbe where dialogue with the Taliban was indicated by Imran Khan while considering them an important military and political force in post-US withdrawal Afghanistan (PTI, 2021).

On the Eastern front, Pakistan faces the looming threat of India whose cold start doctrine has resulted in putting the region on the brink of a nuclear war in 2019 over its so-called surgical strikes (Lewis, 2019). The

revoking of the special status of Kashmir and putting a gruesome curfew in Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK) has fueled ethnic militant groups on both sides of the border, putting further pressure on the Pakistan government to restraint militancy and pacify Kashmiri people on this side of the border as they helplessly watch their kin being subjected to war crimes by Indian forces (Noorulain Naseem, 2020). Here, it is important for Pakistan to keep its eastern front secure as Kashmir Dispute has a vital position in its foreign policy. In order to control the proliferation of TTP and limit the Indian assistance for promoting surgical strikes in Pakistan, the government of Pakistan need to make wise decisions based on the defensive realist perspective. As more efforts are needed for maximizing security by Islamabad to ensure the security measures for sensitive border sites and communities.

After the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, the Indian forces' occupation and genocide cases have taken many folds in Disputed Kashmir as the rising fear in Mr. Modi's administration about the Taliban's soft corner for Kashmiri Muslims (NPR, 2021). Moreover, the green signal given to Chinese investment after Pakistan by the Taliban government has also marginalized the New Dehli efforts for building an influential Indo-Afghan Alliance after Ghani's government (H. Times, 2021). Although, India will try hard to revive its relations with the Taliban government to counter influence against China and Pakistan strategically and economically (Siddiqi, 2021). The arrival of Chinese investors in Afghanistan and regarding China as the most important partner for Afghanistan has raised strategic concerns for India (Arzan Tarapore, 2021). While India is not able to compete on two war fronts in the Ladakh region with China and at the Line of Control with Pakistan (Singh, 2021). In the meanwhile, the economic investment of China in Afghanistan both for the development of infrastructure, railway tracks or extracting or trading natural resources mainly Lithium, Copper, Cobalt and Iron can further isolate India in its neighbourhood and encapsulate it in the Chinese web (Kaura, 2020).

The China-Afghan developing relations have multiple benefits for Pakistan as well like it further adds value to the ongoing CPEC

projects in a country, increases people to people connectivity and employment opportunities for common masses (Kaura, 2021a). These developments further widen the scope of opening new pathways for economic prosperity along with the utility of Pak-Afghan border transit routes. It will also build immunity in Af-Pak fragile economies to be self-sufficient for their renewable energy demands apart from CASA-1000 and BRI Green Initiative projects (Wasi, 2021).

Ethno-nationalist grievances, relative deprivation, social injustice and radical ideological indoctrination have been identified to inspire terrorist and extremist groups to become politically motivated and hire recruits across borders (Crenshaw, 1981). Pakistan has embraced extraordinary measures in the form of constitutional amendments, military operations, border fencing, adopting a counter-terrorism & radicalization policy, and engaging national level Media-Civil Society Partnerships to deconstruct narratives, ideologies and social acceptance for militancy and religious extremism. But, the lack of international and regional moral, political and economic support in the face of the spillover of the Afghan conflict over the years has cost heavily state resources and the security sector.

Via its 21st constitutional amendment to counter-terrorism in 2015 (Bilal Hassan, 2018) army courts were established for the duration of two years and a national action plan has formed. The NAP has presented 20 points to curb terrorism and extremism. Article (1) of the NAP said that terrorists will be sentenced to death, Article (2) established the special military courts, Article (4) strengthen NACTA, and Article (5) deals with newspapers and magazines which promote extremism, sectarianism and violence. Article (6), to freeze the bank accounts of terrorist organizations and Article (8), to form a Counterterrorist force to curb terrorism (NACTA, 2017). According to the NACTA Schedule (4) of the ATA 1997, some measures were taken to counter terrorism including an embargo on passports, seizure of bank accounts, ban on financial support, arms license embargo and freezing of assets and property (Rani, 2015). Due to these measures taken by the government of Pakistan terrorism had been quelled, and army operations took

place in tribal areas to counter the terrorists and their accomplices.

While curbing the terrorism internally, Pakistan also started fencing the western border, to stop those elements who sabotage Pakistan soil and moving back across the border. Islamabad started fencing its porous border with Afghanistan in March 2017 (Hincks, 2017). Despite the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, a slow-performing economy and a volatile security environment in the last four years still 85 fencings have been completed. The cross-border movement will only be allowed through 16 formally designated crossing points after the completion of the project. It is evident from national and international agencies the Durand Line, a bordering region has been an epicentre of terrorist activities (across the border) of Haqqani Network, al-Qaeda and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) (Basit, 2021). Barry Buzan's analysis of five sectors of security clearly applicable to the above counter-terrorism measures of Islamabad has both pros and cons on its bordering communities and the state's international prestige.

The consecutive governments in Kabul have long accused Pakistan of providing sanctuary to the Afghan Taliban. Islamabad, on the other hand, has raised similar concerns about TTP's presence in Afghanistan. Indeed, both Pakistan and Afghanistan have repeatedly found prominent criminals they are seeking to capture and eliminate in each other's backyards in recent years. In 2016, for example, Taliban chief Mullah Akhtar Manor was killed by a US drone attack in Pakistan's Baluchistan region (Donati, 2016). Two years later, in 2018, TTP leader Mullah Fazlullah was killed by another US drone attack in Afghanistan's Kunar province (The Guardian, 2018), after which the umbrella network of TTP was pretty much dismantled for good. Pakistan hopes that fencing its border barrier will extensively increase security in restive border areas and put to rest the tensions it experienced with its neighbour over cross-border militant attacks (Basit, 2021). Border fencing has curtailed the space for terrorist organizations, due to fencing and measures to counter terrorism, 75% of suicide attacks have been declined, and 2

attacks were recorded in 2020 compared to 8 attacks in 2019 (NACTA, 2020).

Pakistan's punitive and hard approach towards terrorism is reflected by granting death sentence to terrorists, empowering NACTA, choking financing for terrorist and terrorist organizations, banning various militant and terrorist groups, establishing counter-terrorism force; Article (12), administrative reforms in FATA, repatriation of IDPs and Afghan refugees beginning with the registration of all refugees (NACTA, 2017). Pakistan's tricky geographical placements and its history of making strategic miscalculations and falling a victim to the US's sudden policy changes regarding the Afghan Taliban have resulted in internal security dilemmas for the state. In the current Afghan situation, Pakistan cannot afford as a rational state to remain indifferent to the Taliban whose military and political power has been displayed quite clearly after the US withdrawal. A stable and peaceful Afghanistan is of key concern to Pakistan whose Eastern borders, falling economy and volatile political environment already take much of the centre's attention and resources.

Way forward (options)

A negotiated and gradual de-escalation in Afghanistan will in all conditions be advantageous to Pakistan. It will, indeed, further reduce the ideological appeal and political motivations of the TTP and other extremists groups in Pakistan. Disengagement with the Taliban has never been an option and should never be in future. Using ethnic instruments of strategic depth with great caution and awareness of possible security concerns from militant networks is of prime importance to policymakers, where any political power gained by the Taliban will wrongly inspire radical militant groups across the region and any failure to negotiate with Taliban might result in isolating Pakistan government and leave a vacuum of trust and dialogue which may be capitalized upon by non-state actors and rival state especially India to score ground with the Taliban. It is high time that the international community shows respect and trust in Pakistan and helps us in negotiating a consensus and representative

central government in Afghanistan (Kaura, 2021b). Moreover, the international community will have to engage the Taliban in order to create a very conducive environment not only in Afghanistan but also in the entire region. Pakistan's geographical, and societal connection compels for peace in Afghanistan and peace in Afghanistan means a lot to Pakistan in terms of creating an environment that augurs prosperity in the region. Traditionally, the engagement of the Taliban has worked be it on part of Pakistan or the US. Today if they are engaged in dialogue, given trust they can be convinced to disarm be an ordinary good citizen. There has been no military solution to the crisis in Afghanistan and there will be no military solution to the resurgence of TTP etc. Only diplomacy and mutual understanding in terms of respecting the sovereignty of state and individual is the key to the imbroglio (James Landale, 2021). Talks with the insurgents, except Al-Qaeda, should be opened, initially through intermediaries. What can be offered to them is: to disavow Al-Qaeda, halt hostilities, support development, as well as the creation of ethnically balanced Afghan security forces in exchange for the progressive withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan. This political strategy should seek to isolate and weaken the irreconcilable elements of the Taliban (Elizabeth Threlkeld and Grace Easterly, 2021).

Conclusion

Given the Afghan Taliban's link with the Pakistani Taliban – both at operational and ideological levels—there is a real worry in Pakistan about the resurgence of TPP and other militant groups which are inspired by the Taliban's ideology. TTP leadership in Afghanistan whereas most activities have a base in Pakistan against security forces. It has already been observed that some of these risks have materialised with the release of prisoners from different prisons in Afghanistan. There are reports of the release of hardcore TTP and other militant elements from the prisons. Such elements can create multiple security and related issues for Pakistan. Moreover, the US blame game, its resentment and suspicions about the role Pakistan played in the last 20 years in Afghanistan and Indian lobbying

against Pakistan by portraying it as a terror-sponsoring state can add more to the already volatile and critical situation created by the rise of Taliban to power in Kabul. What Pakistan needs is to convince the one hand international community of its critical role played in Afghanistan. The loss of economy, citizens and soldiers is a broad daylight fact. And on the other hand, (Pakistan) needs to encourage the Taliban to form an inclusive government in Afghanistan and exercise influence on the Taliban inspired militant groups in Pakistan to stop their anti-Pakistan activities. The main aim should be to establish a decentralized political order, that has existed historically in Afghanistan, and reflects the country's ethnic composition while protecting the rights of minorities.

Suggestions

The following suggestions are drawn after the analysis of the entire study:

1. The Government of Pakistan (GoP) need to ensure the internal security conditions by aligning its policies with the existing threats especially anti-nationalist movements, communal/sectarian violence and potential spoilers, especially in the case of Baluchistan. As these pathways play an active role in the mushrooming of terrorist organizations in a state.
2. The security forces and state institutions must consider the existence of TTP as a potential threat to the state and its foreign relations with the neighbourhood.
3. The GoP should take the representatives from all the strata of society, armed forces and institutions for designing better counter strategies for ensuring economic and human security other than NSP 2022-2026.
4. Moreover, it is the need of the hour to complete border fencing in Af-Pak for regulating the border movement of Pak-Afghan common masses, promote the Pak-Afghan border as a pathway of people to people connectivity corridor, check the arrival of new or undiagnosed Covid-19 cases, strong restriction on traffickers and managing smooth trade

- activities.
5. With the ongoing trade activities between both states being based on Pakistani rupees due to the high inflation rate, the lack of USD in the Afghan banking system can be a good opportunity for local transporters and small traders to expand their business in Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and China via Pakistan.
6. The Taliban's government should declare a complete boycott of TTP and its associated organizations for their stable inclusive government and gaining their political recognition on the neighbourhood, regional and international levels.
7. In case of consistency in the political and economic decline, the humanitarian crisis may collapse the social system of Afghanistan. Therefore, international organizations should need to take radical steps for the provision of humanitarian assistance and financial support to Pakistan for adopting mitigation measures in case of any uncertain situation on intra and inter-state levels.
8. Pakistan should be removed from the grey list of FATF as a result of its magnificent performance against international terrorism and the peacekeeping process.
9. The GoP along with security agencies should closely control and monitor the hidden channels and facilitators that are sabotaging the national security of the state and supporting TTP free movement, its funding and weapon exchange across the borders.
10. There is a need for Pakistan to slow down its political support to the Taliban government as pressure building tactic and make them realize its importance and efforts for a stable Afghanistan through diplomatic means and other forums.
11. There is a need for the Taliban government to restrict the free movement of TTP in Afghanistan, affiliations with government officials and their weapon exchange. The advent of the Afghan Taliban government in Kabul has also given confidence and rise to TTP terrorist activities in both states. This practice may also provide a pathway for ISIS its establishment in the Khorasan region.
12. The government of Pakistan need to compel the Afghan Taliban government to do more efforts for their better relations with Pakistan. Also, Islamabad takes documented confirmation from Kabul about their claim that Afghan soil will not be used for any other country either in the form of conduct of TTP attacks from Afghanistan to Pakistan or Indian interventions against Pakistan from Afghan territory.
13. The international human rights organizations, the international community and the UN must take necessary actions to save 3.5 million internally displaced people in Afghanistan from uncalculated consequences of humanitarian crisis during extreme winters and global pandemics.
14. There is a need for the international community to support and recognize the current Afghan government along with its people to protect the entire region from unimaginable non-conventional threats.
15. There is a need for a greater number of Chinese and Pakistani joint economic ventures for the development of Afghanistan. Other countries must also need to participate in the rehabilitation of the Afghan people and society

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