

The Afghanistan Essays

This 2018 short-essay series by the Jinnah Institute (JI) reflects a range of Pakistani thought leadership on Afghanistan and it's complex history with Islamabad. With the region in the current crosshairs of a seemingly intractable conflict, these essays attempt to spur old and new thinking on the history of Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan and existing challenges. The essays cover a range of subject matter on Afghanistan-Pakistan including efforts for peace and reconciliation, threats to security, the broader geopolitical dynamic, and the role of civil society and economy.

This essay titled 'Enemy at the Gates: The TTP in Afghanistan' examines the threat posed to Pakistan by the TTP from their terror sanctuaries in Afghanistan. It explores Pakistan's strategic anxieties and what can be done to address them.

About the Author

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ENEMY AT THE GATES: THE TTP IN AFGHANISTAN

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Introduction

As the United States ratchets up an old but familiar diplomatic pressure on Pakistan to "do more" in the fight against terrorism, Pakistan continues to face a diverse set of potent security challenges in an uncertain neighborhood. Domestic and transnational militancy, loosely comprising a motley mix of factions of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its associated permutations, hastaken a deadly human and economic toll in recent years. This is not only because of the TTP's local roots and branches within Pakistan, but also, critically, due to safe havens in Afghanistan where the organisation has found the support of hostile foreign intelligence agencies. A porous 2,400-kilometer Pakistan-Afghanistan border, meanwhile, enables the TTP to execute a formidable catalogue of high profile terrorist attacks in Pakistan and then retreat to eastern Afghanistan. While several military operations within Pakistan against the TTP over the last five years have resulted in a decline in the number of terrorist incidents, the threat continues in earnest, in large part due to the sanctuary and support received from across the border.

TTP: Genesis & Evolution

While the TTP did not emerge as a formal organisation until the Lal Masjid operation in Islamabad in 2007, its leaders and members, mostly Pushtuns from FATA and Swat, shared common ideologies and experiences. Some of them having fought in the Afghan civil war against the Soviets, had developed close links with the Afghan Taliban. They also forged a close relationship with Al-Qaeda. This nexus continued after they returned to Pakistan following the defeat of the Taliban by US forces in 2001 and 2002.

In Pakistan, the group sought to impose an extremist interpretation of Sharia, and became violently opposed to the Pakistani government's support to the US in the War on Terror. Accordingly, they made common cause with Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban, as well as other extremist outfits including Arabs, Uzbeks and Chechens that had fled Afghanistan. The then government's reluctance to crack down on these elements in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Swat only encouraged them to defy the state and target government forces, including the military.

In 2006, a group of militants calling themselves the Taliban attacked and targeted several criminal outfits in Miranshah. They also launched attacks on military posts and challenged the authority of local maliks, elders and government representatives in North and South Waziristan. Similar groups began to emerge in Bajaur under Fakir Muhammad, in Swat under Maulvi Fazlullah,

and in Mohmand, Kurram, Orakzai and Khyber agencies of FATA under local commanders. They even made frequent forays into the settled areas of Khyber-Pukhtunkhwa including Peshawar. Though their ideological moorings were similar, these were still disparate outfits. The Lal Masjid incident of 2007, however, was a turning point, and enabled these groups to find common cause.

On December 14, 2007, approximately 40 militant leaders with a combined strength of forty thousand fighters gathered in South Waziristan to formally set up the TTP under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud. Among its other leaders were Faqir Muhammad from Bajaur, Hafiz Gul Bahadur from North Waziristan, Maulvi Nazir from South Waziristan and Fazlullah from Swat. There were also representations from all seven tribal agencies of FATA as well as other parts of Khyber-Pukhtunkhwa including Swat, Malakand, Buner and Dera Ismail Khan. The Shura set up at the meeting agreed to an eight-point charter based on instituting their version of Islamic Sharia and opposing the Pakistani government's ongoing support for the US in Afghanistan against Al-Qaeda. In these efforts, the TTP was also joined by members of Al-Qaeda and other Uzbek groups. Thereafter, it is said that the TTP controlled virtually the whole of FATA.

The TTP's funding is believed to have come from locally imposed taxes, Gulf and Pakistani charities, abductions for ransom, smuggling, and drug trafficking. It is highly likely that these groups were already receiving funding from NDS and RAW to destabilise Pakistan. In any event, such funding was sufficient for the TTP groups to purchase arms and ammunition, communication equipment, transport and fuel, as well as to pay their fighters, suicide bombers and their families.

The Road to Zarb-e-Azb

After a series of stillborn attempts to engage the TTP in dialogue, attempts to reestablish the writ of the state began in 2009. Despite the significant successes of military operations since then, this continues to be a work in progress. The first group to be targeted was Fazlullah's faction in Swat, which eventually fled first to Afghanistan's northern Badakhshan province where it was allowed to remain under the protection of Tajik warlords. Subsequently, with relations deteriorating between Islamabad and Kabul and with the active support of NDS and RAW, Fazlullah moved to Afghanistan's Kunar province where he is currently located.

Military action in Swat as per Operation Al Meezan targeted TTP factions in Bajaur, Khyber and Mohmand agencies, squeezing the TTP mainly into North and South Waziristan. Following the killing of Baitullah Mehsud and his successor Hakimullah Mehsud in American drone strikes, the TTP was left in disarray but undefeated. It is unclear whether decapitation strikes were done at Pakistan's behest or if they were a function of ongoing TTP collaboration with Al-Qaeda.

During the brief interlude when the government once again sought dialogue with the TTP, the group was able to regroup and move their assets, including their leadership, into neighboring pockets in eastern Afghanistan. The launch of Operation Zarb-e-Azb in 2014 focused on remaining TTP strongholds in North Waziristan, and has more recently been followed by Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad in FATA and other parts of the country to eliminate TTP remnants and round up their facilitators.

The fact remains, however, that the TTP leadership and many of the organisation's fighters took advantage of confusion within the Pakistani leadership, the porous nature of the border, and sanctuary offered by the NDS to escape and retrench in the Afghan provinces of Nangarhar, Kunar, Khost, Patiya, Paktika and Nuristan. Using mountainous routes well known to them from Chitral right up to Khyber Agency, they continue to cross over into Pakistan to carry out terrorist attacks and return to their Afghan sanctuaries.

While the TTP remains under the overall leadership of Mullah Fazlullah, its composition and alliances have evolved since their escape to Afghanistan. Among its five factions, the most active and powerful group to emerge is the Jamat-ul-Ahrar (JuA) under Omar Khalid Khorasani who was killed in a drone attack in October 2017. Khorasani also provided a critical conduit to the emerging presence of Daesh in Afghanistan known as the Velayat-e-Khorasani under the leadership of Pakistani national Hafiz Saeed Khan. While Daesh has a predominantly sectarian agenda, and is aligned with a slew of Pakistani sectarian outfits, there remains a close working relationship between Daesh and elements of the TTP including the JuA given the shared objective of creating an Islamic Caliphate in the region and imposing a common conceptualisation of Sharia. The emerging convergence of the TTP and Daesh has become a potential flashpoint in the TTP's relations with the Afghan Taliban, which is competing with Daesh for space as well as for the allegiance of fighters and recruits.

Furthermore, the Afghan Taliban agenda continues to be one of resistance to the ongoing occupation of Afghanistan, and not one that seeks a caliphate in the region or to target Pakistan. This widening gulf between the Afghan Taliban and the TTP-Daesh conglomerate is likely to continue. So far, the Taliban have tolerated the TTP in Afghanistan, but this could change as cooperation and convergence between the TTP and Daesh increases. This is largely inevitable as Daesh fighters of Pakistani and Afghan origin return from Iraq and Syria, seeking refuge in the vast ungoverned spaces of Afghanistan.

Shadow Wars & Proxy Games

There is a larger strategic dimension to the TTP's presence in Afghanistan beyond the group's ability to carry out terrorist attacks in Pakistan. The TTP has become part of a worst-case strategic scenario for Pakistan, i.e. getting caught up in simultaneous confrontation on both its western and eastern borders with Afghanistan and India. With Indian and Afghan support, the TTP is a key player in this confrontation.

Historically, Pakistan's Afghan policy has been a function of its relations with India, designed to avoid getting caught up in a two-front situation. For this reason, it has sought a friendly government in Afghanistan, or at the very least one that is not collaborating with India to destabilise its western border, or worse, trigger dissensions within Pakistan. Kabul's refusal to accept the legitimacy of the Durand Line as the international border, its promotion of the Pukhtunistan bogey, and continued support for Baloch and Pushtun separatists still rankles Pakistani policy makers. A more recent Indo-Afghan strategic partnership agreement has made matters worse; for Pakistan, the support given by New Delhi and Kabul to the TTP remains a serious strategic concern.

Since the overthrow of the Taliban regime by US forces in 2001, India has been making steady inroads in Afghanistan, building on its ties with anti-Taliban forces including the Northern Alliance that rose to prominence after the American intervention. Of special concern for Pakistan has been the presence of RAW operatives in Afghanistan, but particularly in the areas bordering Pakistan. Indian consulates in Jalalabad and Kandahar together with front organisations such as Indian medical and reconstruction missions are believed to be RAW outposts presently being used to recruit terrorists to destabilise Pakistan. In these efforts, various Afghan leaders are seen to be complicit, and are known to have received bribes from Indian agents. The TTP is now playing a frontline role in this project. Evidence provided by captured Indian spymaster Kulbushan Yadav since 2016, corroborated by testimony provided by defecting TTP spokesman Ehsanullah Ehsan, serve to confirm the Indo-Afghan role in supporting the TTP as well as Baloch separatists.

Collaborating with India also serves Afghanistan's interests, given that such an alliance is seen as a riposte to Pakistan's alleged support for the Afghan Taliban while also weakening Pakistan and thereby ostensibly improving Kabul's bilateral bargaining position with Islamabad. India has also increased the frequency of its ceasefire violations along the Line of Control (LoC) and Working Boundary (WB) in Kashmir, in a bid to bog down Pakistan troops and force Islamabad to concentrate on two fronts simultaneously.

However, given the growing collaboration of the TTP and Daesh, the perpetrators of regional proxy wars are playing with a fire that will not only engulf Afghanistan but also the wider region. It is unsurprising therefore that China, Russia, and Iran have increased the frequency of their contact with the Afghan Taliban as they consider the Taliban to be the only force within Afghanistan that shares their concerns regarding Daesh. For Pakistan, this has become an added reason not to confront the Afghan Taliban despite increased American pressure. Other factors are at play as well: the impact this would have on Pakistan's internal situation if Taliban families with local tribal and family connections, are forcibly evicted from Pakistan; the need for leverage in the endgame in Afghanistan; and the strategic need to counter Indian influence in Afghanistan.

An increasingly popular view in Pakistan, meanwhile, is that the United States is actively assisting the TTP to destabilise Pakistan or, at a minimum, to ensure "controlled chaos" in the country so that Pakistan can be bent to Washington's will. This can also be retribution for Pakistan's alleged support to the Afghan Taliban, especially the Haggani Network, which targets American forces. Even if such claims are exaggerated, the fact remains that at the very least the US is looking the other way and indeed can do much more to ensure that the TTP is not given sanctuary in Afghanistan and be used by NDS and RAW to destabilise Pakistan. The US can also compel Kabul to take up Pakistan's offer to better coordinate border management and check the movement of terrorists in either direction. The US has thus far failed to use its extensive monitoring capabilities to help Pakistan, by sharing information on the movement of TTP terrorists into Pakistan, or by eliminating TTP leaders in Afghanistan through the use of drones, even though Pakistan has repeatedly shared intelligence about the location of these terrorists with the Washington. Perhaps the American rationale is that preserving their strategic partnership with India is more important than helping Pakistan in the current regional dynamic. Moreover, Washington may not see merit in taking sides on the border issue by asking Kabul to cooperate with Pakistan for more effective border control.

Charting a Less Destructive, Future Course

Is there a way out of this conundrum for Pakistan? Frankly, there are no easy solutions. The TTP has become a part of the larger strategic threat to Pakistan's security. Islamabad must not only neutralise TTP and Daesh-sponsored terrorism in the country, but also work towards a lasting solution to the overall Afghan conflict to ensure long-term national as well as regional security.

Already, Pakistan's role in the so-called war on terror has exacted a heavy price. Pakistani losses due to terrorism are upwards of \$60 billion. Nearly 70,000 people have been killed and more than 10,000 security personnel including around 6,000 soldiers, have died in counterterrorism operations. Property and infrastructure losses have crossed over a \$100 billion at the very least.

By all accounts, there has been a marked decrease in terrorist attacks in the country since Operation Zarb-e-Azb began in 2014. According to media reports, there has been a 70 per cent decline in terrorist incidents. However, as long as the TTP enjoys safe haven in Afghanistan with support from NDS and RAW, as well as the existence of their facilitators in Pakistan, the

terrorist threat will remain. To counter this threat, Pakistan needs to pursue a short-to-medium term policy of minimising terrorist infiltration from Afghanistan while eliminating their domestic source base. This will require, above all, sealing the border with Afghanistan to whatever extent possible, especially in the most vulnerable areas used by the TTP to cross over into Pakistan. Since the Afghans and Americans are not willing to cooperate in this effort, Pakistan may have to act unilaterally and with extreme measures beyond fencing: this could include more robust border checks, mining selective areas, and using more effective electronic surveillance techniques. Such measures to protect our western border should be an essential requisite of Pakistan's overall counterterrorism strategy.

The government in Kabul should also be warned that there will be a steep cost for its continued collaboration with India to promote terrorism and foment trouble in Pakistan. This could involve restrictions on Afghan trade with India through Pakistani ground and airspace, on Afghan transit trade through Pakistan, the forcible return of illegal unregistered Afghans in Pakistan, and the seizure of Afghan properties and bank accounts in Pakistan.

In the long term, Pakistan should push for a political settlement in Afghanistan. First, Islamabad must engage with the United States through officials well known to it such as Defense Secretary Mattis and National Security Advisor McMaster, to impress upon them the fact that there is no military solution in Afghanistan and the United States must seek a political settlement through dialogue without pre-conditions with the Afghan Taliban. Pakistan should also use whatever leverage it has at its disposal to convince the Afghan Taliban that they should seek a political settlement without preconditions. Both sides should also be reminded that the greater threat to them over the long term emanates from Daesh. Such an approach by Pakistan should be made in concert with China and Russia, countries that share Islamabad's concerns about Daesh and seek an early end to the Afghan conflict.

This is by no means an easy task, given that the US is not yet ready to admit defeat in Afghanistan, and continues to scapegoat Pakistan for its own failures while the Taliban seeks total victory. Therefore, a grand bargain is required that provides a face-saving for both sides. Such a bargain could involve a ceasefire followed by intra-Afghan talks on a power sharing formula whereby, in a decentralised structure, both sides retain governance of the areas they broadly control, while Kabul retains its federal powers over security, defense, finance and foreign affairs. Once such an agreement takes hold, the US forces could withdraw from Afghanistan while other regional powers guarantee the implementation of an agreement. Ultimately, it is in the interest of all concerned parties to ensure peace and security in Afghanistan.