COMMENT 191 – The Challenge of Terrorism: An Impediment in US-Pakistan Relations

By **Shivani Sharma**

9 July 2020 - **ISSN NUMBER: 2406-5617**

Shivani is a Guest Assistant Professor the Sri Venkateshwara College, University of Delhi. She has recently submitted her PhD. at the Centre for South Asian Studies, School of Interna-tional Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. She has previously taught at the Hindu College and Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi and was a fellow at the South Asia Democratic Forum. Her main areas of research

The recently released 2019 United States State Department's annual country report on terrorism has once again sparked tensions between America and Pakistan. Despite the recent appreciation and acknowledgment of Islamabad's facilitation of the United States-Taliban peace talks, the State Department in its 2019 report slammed Pakistan for its continued support to certain regionally focussed terrorist groups. Much like what happened in 2018, the 2019 report claims that Pakistan provides support to militant groups within the country and accuses the state of "allowing groups targeting Afghanistan, including the Afghan Taliban and affiliated HQN [Haqqani network], as well as groups targeting India, including LeT [Lashkar-e-Taiba] and its affiliated front organisations, and JeM [Jaish-e-Mohammed], to operate from its territory." (US. Department of State, 2020). It further indicates that the pledges and commitments made by the Pakistani government in its National Action Plan – including commitments to dismantle all terrorist organisations without delay and end discrimination - remain unfulfilled. The report's assertions were not new – in fact, they were mostly in sync with concerns by successive American governments regarding the Pakistani State and its links to terrorism. President Trump had made remarks in its South Asia policy regarding Pakistan's bluff and double game in the fight against terrorism. He expressed America's discontentment over "Pakistan's harbouring of militants and terrorists who target U.S. service members and officials." (The White House Press Release, 2017). The Trump administration had even suspended military aid to Pakistan in 2018, to push the state to undertake "consistent and irreversible" steps against terrorism (Syed, 2019).

The report fuelled major reactions from Pakistan's Foreign Office, who expressed their disappointment over the official document by condemning it as "self-contradictory" and "selective." Refuting its claims, the Pakistan Foreign Office referred to the report as being "selective in its characterisation of Pakistan's efforts for countering terrorism and terrorist

financing and rejects any insinuation about providing any safe haven." (Baabar, 2020). Pakistan has long maintained that the state has suffered enough while fighting terrorism on behalf of the United States, having endured more than $123 billion in economic losses, and 75000 casualties (PTI, 2018).

U.S.-Pakistan relations, especially in the last two decades, have been deeply influenced by the issues of Afghanistan and counterterrorism. Having promised unstinted support to the United States in their fight against terrorism, Pakistan's dubious and half-hearted policy approaches have remained a major irritant in the relationship between the two countries. Successive governments and U.S. policymakers have repeatedly raised concerns over Pakistan's involvement in aiding, abetting, harbouring, and supporting militant and terrorist groups within its country - thus greatly hampering US missions and efforts in Afghanistan. For instance President Obama recognised - in his administration's revised strategy on Afghanistan - that America's success in that country is inextricably linked to a strong partnership with Pakistan, and that the US will remain unsuccessful in defeating militant infrastructures in Afghanistan as long as those terrorist groups enjoy sanctuaries across the border (The White House Press Release, 2009).

Pakistan's strategy of using proxy forces has remained a major policy instrument used by the state, to meet its strategic and security goals in the region. Pakistan's participation in the US-led global war on terrorism was based on what Christophe Jaffrelot refers to as a long-shared "security-oriented, clientelist" relationship between the two countries - based on a reciprocal exchange of favours and mutual dependence (Jaffrelot, 2016). Pakistan's participation in the war was mainly guided by the state's interest in reviving its economy and safeguarding critical concerns such as drawing international attention towards the Kashmir issue and securing its nuclear assets.

Therefore, despite having joined the war efforts, Pakistan did not completely break its ties with militant groups. Instead, the state practiced a selective securitization process. It defined its relationship with militant groups according to their strategic relevance - tightening pressure on groups whose objectives were out of sync with the military's perception of national interest, while protecting others who helped meet strategic interests in the region (vis-á-vis the Indian State). Categorising militant outfits in terms of 'bad jihadis' and 'good jihadis', the Pakistani state cooperated with Americans in targeting Al-Qaeda and other foreign forces which US policymakers were most interested in capturing - while maintaining their protection of Afghan proxy groups (the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network). This protection was expressed by supporting those seeking safe hideouts against the United States operations in Pakistan's federally administered tribal areas. Other, indigenous Kashmir-based militant groups were also shielded from the wrath

of Islamabad's counter-terrorism operations. Furthermore, while being selective and discriminatory in its categorisation of militant groups, the Pakistani state deliberately remained oblivious to the growing ideological and operational interlinkages between different militant groups. Pro-state, indigenous militant groups supported displaced, foreign terrorist organisations and helped them regroup and re-organise within Pakistan's tribal areas - some even joined the broader global movement of Jihad against the West.

Pakistan's support for Afghan proxy groups, who continued to protect Al-Qaeda, had a significant impact on America's strategic mission in Afghanistan. The (state sponsored) Haqqani network's incessant attacks on American interests within Afghanistan have remained a major source of friction in the relationship between the US and Pakistan. Notwithstanding America's criticism of the group, Pakistan's inner establishment continues to "view Haqqani network as a useful ally and proxy force to represent its interests in Afghanistan" and conveniently keeps the insurgent organisation outside the purview of a security threat (Combating Terrorism Centre Report, 2011). Though Pakistan has long denied maintaining relations with the Afghan Taliban, some leaders have been vocal regarding the state's support to militant groups. Making a significant departure from the Pakistani government's official position, Sartaj Aziz - a top adviser on foreign affairs under the then Pakistan PM Nawaz Sharif's government - openly admitted to the presence of Taliban leadership members within Pakistan as well as to the leverage the state has on the group. He stated that "We have some influence on them because their leadership is in Pakistan, and they get some medical facilities, their families are here." (Iyengar, 2016). In another instance, in one of the documents revealed by the Washington Post regarding Afghanistan, Ryan Crocker - the U.S. ambassador to Pakistan (2004-2007) - recounted a conversation with General Ashfaq Kayani (the then Pakistan's Intelligence Chief) regarding the Taliban in which the General did not hesitate to explain Pakistan's support for the Taliban and remarked:

"You know, I know you think we are hedging our bets. You are right, we are because one day you will be gone again, it will be like Afghanistan the first time, you will be done with us, but we are still going to be here because we can't actually move the country. And the last thing we want with all our problems is to have turned the Taliban into a mortal enemy, so yes, we are hedging our bets." (Whitlock, 2019).

Pakistan's involvement in the sheltering of militant groups is an open secret. However, the state was placed on an international monitoring body's – the Financial Action Task Force - 'grey list' in June 2018 for issues related to money laundering and terrorism financing. Pakistan's listing can be seen within the larger picture of U.S.-Pakistan relations, an antic used by Americans so as to pressurise Pakistan to cease its support for terrorist groups or

be placed on a 'blacklist' with strict banking and international finance-related sanctions. The issue of terrorism remains central in the relationship between the US and Pakistan. Desiring a relationship based on mutual respect, interests, and benefits, Pakistan maintains that the state has immensely contributed and fought together with the United States to degrade and diminish the terrorist organisations that perpetrated the horrific 9/11 attacks. Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi professed that 'for too long, Pakistan-U.S. relations have remained hostage to the Afghan issue' and that it should be 'larger than Afghanistan and counter-terrorism' (CSIS, 2020). Pakistan also claims that it has fought and eradicated the menace of terrorism on its soil. In order to affirm its commitment and protect its international image, the state indicted LeT co-founder Hafiz Mohammad Saeed, the chief of Jamaat-ud-Dawa, for two terror financing cases in the Punjab province - and sentenced the mastermind behind the Mumbai attacks to 11 years in prison (PTI, 2020). However, this was not the first time that Saeed was prosecuted - he has been in the past arrested and then released. Moreover, the Pakistani state has made no efforts to prosecute other terrorist leaders who continue to reside in Pakistan under state protection. However, as new developments are taking shape in the region in terms of a withdrawal of American forces and an Afghan peace and reconciliation process, it will be significant to watch how far the Pakistani state be willing to stick with its commitment to eradicate militant infrastructures from the country.

References:

Baabar, M. (2020, June 26). Pakistan disappointed over 'self-contradictory' US report on terrorism. International The News. https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/678097-pakistan-disappointed-over-self-contradictory-us-report-on-terrorism

Improved Pak-US ties linked to irreversible action against terrorists. International The News. https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/506917-improved-pak-us-ties-linked-to-irreversible-action-against-terrorists

Iyengar, R. (2016, March 4). Pakistan has finally Admitted that Afghan Taliban leaders are living there. TIME. https://time.com/4247456/pakistan-taliban-afghanistan-sartaj-aziz/

Jaffrelot, C. (2016). *Pakistan at the Crossroads: Domestic Dynamics and External Pressures.* Columbia University Press.

PTI. (2018, November 19). Pakistan suffered 75,000 casualties, over 123 billion USD was lost: Imran Khan takes jibe at Trump. The New Indian Express. https://www.newindianexpress.com/world/2018/nov/19/pakistan-suffered-75000-casualties-over-123-billion-usd-was-lost-imran-khan-takes-jibe-at-trump-1900416.html

PTI. (2020, February 12). Pakistan court sentences Hafiz Saeed to 11 years in Jail in terror financing cases. The Economic Times. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/pakistan-court-sentences-hafiz-saeed-to-11-years-in-jail-in-terror-financing-cases/articleshow/74100508.cms?from=mdr

Reframing the U.S.-Pakistan Strategic Relationship: A Conversation with Foreign Minister Qureshi. (2020, January 16). Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., United States.https://www.csis.org/events/reframing-us-pakistan-strategic-relationship-conversation-foreign-minister-qureshi

The Haqqani Nexus and the Evolution of Al-Qaida.(2011, July 13). Combating Terrorism Centre. https://ctc.usma.edu/the-haqqani-nexus-and-the-evolution-of-al-qaida/

The White House. (2009, December 01). Remarks by the President in Address to the nation on the Way forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan [Press Release]. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan

The White House. (2017, August 21). Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia [Press Release].

https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-strategy-afghanistan-south-asia/

U.S. Department of State. (2020). Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Pakistan. https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/pakistan/

Whitlock, C. (2019, December 9). The Afghanistan Papers: Stranded without a Strategy. The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-strategy/

19 Avenue des Arts 2nd floor, 1210 Brussels, Belgium
E 0833.606.320 RPM Bruxelles
Email: info@sadf.eu Web: www.sadf.eu