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COMMENT 270 – Pakistan's Security Conundrum



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On Wednesday, March 18, Pakistan [launched](#) an airstrike into Afghanistan, specifically in the provinces of Paktika and Khost. In response, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan asserted this was an ‘[intelligence-based anti-terrorist operation](#)’. However, Islamabad’s decision was triggered by an attack on its [paramilitary camp](#) in the Mir Ali area of North Waziristan in Pakistan on March 16 by a militant group called [Jaish-e-Fursan-e-Muhammad](#), led by Hafiz Gul Bahadur. The group is considered to have a stronghold over the North Waziristan province according to Pakistani officials, its members are mainly from the [Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan](#) (TTP). This is the second time Pakistan has been involved in a cross-border conflict after the stint with Iran in January this year. Islamabad’s retaliation comes at a crucial period amidst slumping ties with Afghanistan and an internal polycrisis.

Pakistan’s Security Concerns

While defending the country’s move, the newly elected Prime Minister of [Pakistan Shehbaz Sharif](#) said, “We will not tolerate any kind of terrorism from across the border”. On the other hand, in reaction to Pakistan’s airstrikes, the spokesperson of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Zabihullah Mujahid, strongly condemned the attacks and viewed them as a [violation](#) of Afghanistan’s territory. Additionally, other Taliban leaders, including Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani, had also [warned](#) Islamabad not to conduct strikes on Afghan soil. In [2022](#) Islamabad had launched similar airstrikes in the Khost and Kunar provinces of Kabul in response to the rising terrorist activities by the TTP.

The establishment of the Taliban administration in August 2021 was a turning point,

for two reasons. First was the spike in the number of terrorist attacks conducted by the TTP in Pakistan; second, the descending relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The main contention by the Pakistani government is the unwillingness of the Taliban leadership to jointly address the menace of terrorism and their persistent support to terrorist groups in Afghanistan, including the TTP. In 2022, a report released by the [Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies](#), an Islamabad-based think-tank, found that the number of terrorist attacks in Pakistan soared to 51 per cent after the takeover by the Taliban; the number of deaths increased to 500. The groups mainly responsible for conducting attacks in Pakistan were the TTP and the Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K). Another significant report published by the [Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies \(PICSS\)](#), another Islamabad-based think-tank, stated that the number of militant attacks in Pakistan surged by 641 – in which 974 people were killed and 1,351 were injured, as opposed to 2022 which observed 380 militant attacks, 539 deaths and 836 injuries. The [provinces](#) of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) were the major hubs of violence, with 90 per cent of the overall fatalities and 84 per cent of the attacks (on security forces as well as other terrorist incidents). Islamabad's concerns are genuine, as the security situation in the country stands in jeopardy, alongside the rising insurgency movements in Baluchistan. While assessing Pakistan's actions towards Afghanistan, [Uzair Younus](#), former director of the Pakistan Initiative at the Atlantic Council's South Asia Center, argues that Pakistan's administration as well as the military seem to run out of patience with the Taliban leadership and will therefore continue to use kinetic as well non-kinetic means to coerce Kabul to act against these terrorist organisations. Another view [contended](#) that the closer ties between the Taliban and the TTP pose a challenge to the political stability in Pakistan and further strain Islamabad's relations with Kabul.

Pakistan's slackening economy is also a cause of anxiety. The threat to its security directly impacts its economic interests because of the large-scale Chinese investments under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The Gwadar Port, which is considered the most important component of the CPEC, is located in Baluchistan – which is heavily exposed to threats emerging not only from increasing insurgency in the province but also from the TTP and other organisations. The unstable security situation in Pakistan impedes the progress of such instrumental projects; it also dissuades foreign investment. Preserving both

security and economic interests has become a top priority for Islamabad. As a result, serious actions are being undertaken by the government.

Impact of terrorist attacks

A major consequence of the surging terror activities has been Pakistan's [deportation policy](#) against the Afghan populace, which was executed in November 2023. [Roya Rahamani](#), former Afghani ambassador to the United States, posited that the fractured nature of the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan will not lead to a full-blown conflict; however, civilians in both countries will suffer, especially Afghan refugees in Pakistan who will be used by Islamabad as a means to exert pressure on the Taliban leadership. Therefore, the Pakistani government has [announced](#) that the second round of deportation of Afghan refugees will commence after Ramadan.

Pakistan-Afghanistan relations

India has been one of the major determinants behind Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan. Islamabad has always wanted to keep Kabul on its side to prevent closeness with New Delhi. Additionally, the countries, which considered each other as brothers, are on the verge of becoming hostile neighbours. Kabul becomes important for Islamabad for two reasons: first to safeguard its national security by providing strategic depth; second, to expand its outreach to Central Asian countries, due to an abundant supply of mineral reserves. However, Afghanistan has now become a [strategic trap](#).

Besides, Islamabad's high hopes from the Taliban leadership have eventually diminished as terrorism emerged as a major irritant in the relations between the two countries. Thus, the ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan do not seem to move towards a positive direction – and both sides need to rethink their policy options. Additionally, third-party mediation, especially by China, which shares a good relationship with both countries, can try to stabilize relations.

The Way Forward

Pakistan finds itself engulfed in the vortex of a severe security crisis due to the escalating military threat by the TTP, as well as the strengthening insurgency movements in Balochistan. In order to overcome its security issues, Pakistan needs to preserve order within the country. Going forward, Islamabad, which continues to be a safe haven for terrorist organisations, must eliminate protection to such organisations; this should be the first step towards countering terrorism.

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