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EMERGING AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN CONUNDRUM: PAKISTAN'S OPTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

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CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES

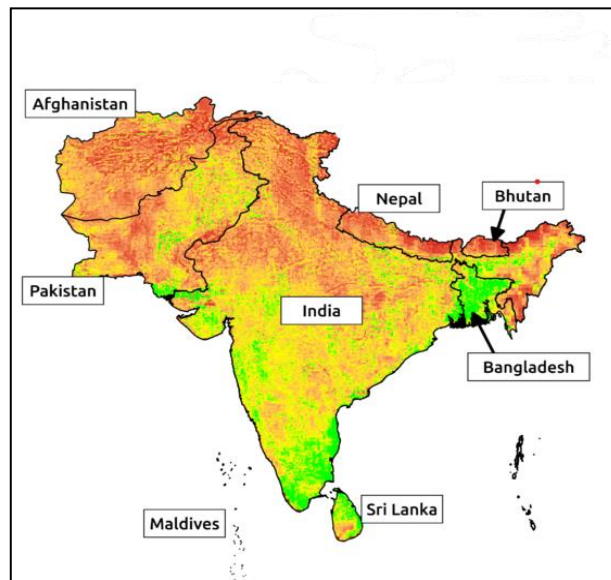


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EMERGING AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN CONUNDRUM: PAKISTAN'S OPTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA



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Source: Drishti IAS

Increasingly Routine Parasitic Twin¹ Relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan. On 16 April 2022, the Pakistan Air Force conducted predawn airstrikes using jets and drones on multiple targets in Afghanistan's Khost and Kunar province. Afghan officials reported that the attacks killed at least 47 civilians (UN confirms over 20 children killed and injured 23 others), mostly women and children. After initial denial Pakistan vacuously stated that the airstrikes involved drone strikes from inside

Pakistani airspace, and that no aircraft were deployed. It was apparently a retaliation to an attack on a Pakistani military convoy in North Waziristan on 14 April, which had killed seven Pakistani soldiers, allegedly by militants belonging to Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP)², and was apparently the last straw on the ever increasing and bolder terrorist actions perpetrated by TTP against Pakistan (in Afghanistan territory too). This impasse continues as of date ----

As You Sow, So You Reap. Islamabad, operated on the assumption that the Taliban would be beholden to Pakistan out of gratitude for years of support. But Taliban has stunned them by challenging the Durand Line, and providing a haven to the anti-Pakistan insurgent group TTP, known as the Pakistani Taliban, which has killed thousands of Pakistanis and seeks to establish a Taliban-style, Shariah-compliant state in Pakistan. Pakistan's use of cross-border strikes is tied to the trajectory of the TTP and her unstated steadfast relations with the Taliban, and Pakistani leadership's growing frustration with the Taliban's failure to restrain the TTP. The growing clout of Taliban resulting in governing Afghanistan is directly proportional to the resurgence of TTP, which has strengthened its bases in Afghanistan to attack Pakistan; especially in areas where the Taliban's territorial influence as an insurgency was significant. It would not be out of place to say that the Taliban has given the TTP de-facto political asylum.

Tough to Fight Your Own Child. Pakistan has been repeatedly urging/warning Kabul "to secure Pak-Afghan Border region and take stern actions against the individuals involved in terrorist activities in Pakistan". The strikes had at least two coercive goals. First, Pakistan probably used the bombing to send a message to the TTP that its cross-border haven is not as safe as it assumes, in the hope of deterring it from further cross-border action. And second, Pakistan wanted to give a shock treatment to the Taliban to get them to reconsider their approach to the TTP. Pakistani military leaders are aware that their military action on Afghan territory is unpopular with Afghans. So, they may have hoped that the strikes will bring pressure on the Taliban to reverse policies that create grounds for Pakistan to undermine their domestic political standing, or at the least, the strikes will drive a wedge in TTP-Taliban ties and compel Taliban pragmatists to consider the cost of their support to the TTP. But Pakistan may have overplayed its hand (large civilian specially children casualties), as the TTP's status and activities from Afghanistan remain unchanged. At the same time, anti-Pakistan sentiment within the Taliban appears to have surged, shoring up support for the TTP within the Taliban. Pakistani strikes have also reinvigorated anti-Pakistan sentiment across Afghanistan's political spectrum, who see them as a violation of Afghan sovereignty.

Standing up to Pakistan or even militarily responding has the potential to shore up the Taliban's domestic political standing³. Despite all the aggravations there is no strong indication that Pakistan is ready to turn against the Taliban, as it views them as the safest force to counter Indian influence in Afghanistan. Recent trends may buck this logic too (more later).

The Taliban-TTP Calculus. The US State Department estimates that fluctuating figure of approximately 10,000 TTP militants are hiding in Afghanistan. The mantra for the relationship remains a mystery. Some argue that at the heart of the Taliban-TTP relationship is an ideological alignment on a jihadist project seeking to implement a Shariah-compliant political order through force. The TTP has genuinely or cleverly pledged allegiance to Taliban chief adding to the alignment. Others point to history: many in the TTP supported the Taliban in its nascence, including by providing suicide bombers. The Taliban and the TTP also share al-Qaida as an ally. There are strong interpersonal, war-time bonds between the influential Haqqani family and the TTP, and between some Southern Taliban leaders and TTP's political leadership. There is abundant ethnic amity, built around tribal ties and disdain of the Pakistani state; at least in the rank-and-file and middle tier of the Taliban. One explanation for the Taliban's post-takeover position is that they want to use the TTP as bargaining leverage with Pakistan. A competing perspective is that the Taliban want a like-minded political actor such as the TTP to ultimately rise to power in Islamabad. It is possible that given the deep support the TTP enjoys in the Taliban rank-and-file, as well as the size of the TTP in Afghanistan, the Taliban face capacity constraints to act against the TTP, partly due to ISKP's (Islamic State Khorasan Province) growing threat. Ironically, some Afghan opposition leaders see the Taliban's position and the TTP violence as an elaborate ruse by Pakistan's powerful intelligence agency, the ISI, to absolve itself of supporting the Taliban over the last many years. **Whatever the motive, the bottom line is that the Taliban are unwilling to act against the TTP in any meaningful way⁴.** Increasing Pakistan's discomfiture and alarm are credible inputs that TTP and Pakistani Baloch secessionists have established several safe houses in Afghanistan and Baluchistan possibly before the Taliban takeover, but which continue to function.

Pakistan-Afghanistan Prognosis.

Uncertain Future. Taliban will continue to provide sanctuary to TTP, and attacks will continue, and with Imran Khan out and Pakistan military in charge, one can expect an inclination to use military force. The Taliban too has warned Pakistan against further military action, threatening retaliation. Pakistan stands at a cross-road facing an uncertain relationship with its

North-Western neighbour. Has the Pashtun linkage between Taliban and TTP taken precedence specially with regards to stance on the Durand Line⁵? Does it imply that Pakistan's decades-long interventionist policy on Afghanistan has failed? Has the ruling Taliban, instead of providing any strategic advantage or contributing to Pakistan's security, become a worrisome thorn in Islamabad's side. Does Pakistan need to relook its Afghan policy? Most importantly and worryingly; is the Taliban showing more openness to talk with India, do business with India. Training of Afghan National Army personnel in India is continuing with full gusto, even under this regime.

Options for Pakistan. In the near term, Pakistan is likely to search for more coercive leverage against the Taliban. Along the escalatory ladder, Pakistan may: -

- Seek to manipulate the Taliban's internal politics by trying to marginalize Taliban leadership more supportive of the TTP. Crackdown against families of Taliban leadership as well as assets of the Taliban leadership that remain in Pakistan.
- Get Pakistani religious clerics whom the Taliban are responsive to, to condemn their behaviour.
- Use economic coercion like closing the border crossings; which, given their limited revenues, will bring enormous pressure on the Taliban and aggravate the country's humanitarian crisis.
- **Fence the Border.** Strengthen border fencing and surveillance mechanisms so that the cross-border movement of terrorists, particularly the TTPs as well as the proliferation of leftover weapons in Afghanistan into Pakistani territory be stopped.
- **Negotiate with the TTP without the Afghan Taliban.** Prevent Taliban leverage which currently enables the TTP and its operations in Pakistan. Stop appeasement tactics and present the TTP with an ultimatum: lay down arms or otherwise face military action. Once deprived of Taliban support, the TTP would have no other option but to negotiate with Pakistani authorities on the latter's terms.
- **Address the Grievances of Pakistani Pashtuns.** Pakistan's war on terror has been entirely fought on Pashtun-inhabited regions, including Khyber Pakhtunwa province (KP- FATA region merged on 21 May 2018), and upper Baluchistan, resulting in large-scale death, destruction, and displacement of millions of people. It contributed to large-scale disaffection and anger among Pashtuns who consider themselves to have been victims of the war. Pakistan must put an end to discrimination and deprivation among its Pashtun population, dedicating funds for development, reviving livelihoods, and providing education. One option is for demerger of FATA and make it a separate province. Separation and localization of FATA and KP's

governance would be instrumental in establishing industries, extending loans to enable young people to set-up small businesses including privately run schools and workshops, and generally enable a better social-political-economic milieu. Revocation of the merger and making FATA a province would enable inhabitants of the tribal borderlands to have their own elected legislative assembly that could formulate laws in accordance with local customs and traditions⁶.

- **Open a Dialogue with Arch-rival India!** Farfetched indeed, but both nations agree on non-interference in Afghanistan with the rationale that worsening security situation in Afghanistan would directly impact both countries adversely.
- **Accept Regional Economic Integration between the Three Nations.** Create win-win situation by formalising economic interdependence among regional countries. This **would also showcase Pakistan's genuineness to follow its avowed paradigm shift in foreign policy focus from geo-strategic to geo-economic.** This action would facilitate neutralisation of non-state terrorist groups like the TTP and compel the Taliban to reform and focus on economic rehabilitation of their country instead of engaging in destructive and destabilizing activity for the broader region. It would also go a long way in promoting India-Pakistan goodwill.

With Strategic Implications India Needs to be Nimble, Proactive and Bold.

To begin with, India and Pakistan pursue different objectives in Afghanistan and leverage different mechanisms to achieve their respective goals. Pakistan utilizes militant groups, including the Afghan Taliban, as strategic proxies, while India places considerable weight on the moral compass and soft power influence among Afghans. India has been the region's largest provider of development assistance to Afghanistan since 2001, having invested US\$3 billion in infrastructure projects spanning schools, roads, dams, and hospital; all of which increase their leverage over the Taliban. The collapse of the Ashraf Ghani Government coupled with the tragic, desperate withdrawal of US and allies from Afghanistan left India reeling, not holding any strategic card, but with very serious and dangerous implications if she does not improvise and manage the situation. To India's credit, we did some adroit manoeuvres. In early June 2022, a group led by JP Singh, the Joint Secretary heading the Pakistan-Afghanistan-Iran desk at the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, visited Kabul and met with senior Taliban ministers. At no time India indicated recognition of the Taliban government, but understanding the significant role played by India in stabilising the country and providing generous multi-domain assistance with no strings attached, the Taliban too cautiously welcomed the delegation. Additionally, India was in close liaison with

USA, who indicated that they prefer a major role for/by India. Aim is to stabilise the country, promote an inclusive government and deny the space to militant groups. India opening a line of communication with the Taliban marks a significant change of policy. New Delhi had long been staunchly anti-Taliban, deeming the group to be Pakistan's proxy.

Historically, The Taliban by itself has not acted against India's security interests, but its ties with Pakistan and jihadi groups such as Lashkar-e-Tayyiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad are worrisome. Afghanistan is important to India's continental economic aspirations, including closer ties with Central Asian Republics and Iran. These goals are currently hampered by Pakistan's blockade of Indian access to the region. India has always wanted non-interference in Afghan affairs, with Afghan people resolving the situation internally. India has fortunately woken up from its slumber and taken some significant steps, like considering permitting Afghanistan's national carrier to resume flights to India: posted 'technical team' in Kabul to provide consular services to Afghans apart from the delegation visiting Kabul, which in itself is a remarkable development. Engaging India could be a sign to indicate that Pakistan no longer wields a preponderant influence in Taliban-led Afghanistan. India is hoping that the Taliban will provide security cover to Indian projects, infrastructure and nationals as hitherto fore by the previous Ghani government, which they have promised from the beginning. The Taliban gains on multiple fronts with India willing to talk and assist them; it adds to their legitimacy, puts pressure on Pakistan using the 'India card' specially when their relations have hit a trough⁷.

Conclusion. Pakistan-Afghanistan relations have always been complex due to regional historical events in South Asia, the great games played by the major powers USA, Russia and UK, and the geo-political role played by Pakistan to ensure Pakistan friendly Afghanistan. The current nature of the trilateral equation does not ensure better India-Pakistan ties, especially if India-Afghanistan ties broadens. Nevertheless, an inclusive Afghan settlement would reduce prospects of Afghan insurgents finding newer pastures in India, as also for proxy games between India and Pakistan in Afghanistan. However, Pakistan's permanent trend of waging a proxy war against India would continue, which requires an entirely different approach focussing on the people of Pakistan. Many Indian citizens on the emotional plane, and even some geo-political analysts/observers desire an unstable or even imploding Pakistan, and increasing adversarial mode between Pakistan and Afghanistan, but a rational analysis including the official Indian stance is to work towards a stable Afghanistan and Pakistan. A mature, working relationship between Pakistan, Afghanistan and India might currently seems illusory, but should be the goal. India has the capability and capacity to ensure her national interests are not

compromised, for which India needs to be proactive, think and implement 'out of the box' and leverage all domains and opportunities to first persuade Taliban to follow international norms and reboot the friendly relationship, which the two nations have always enjoyed.

CERTIFICATE

The paper is author's individual scholastic articulation. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

Disclaimer: Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS.

Endnotes

¹ A parasitic twin is **a type of conjoined twin where one fetus stops developing but remains attached to its twin**; definition in mayo clinic online

² Wikipedia and most national and international news media platforms and '***I Lost Everything: Pakistani Airstrikes Escalate Conflict on Afghan Border***', by Christina Golbaum and Safiullah Padshah, New York Times, 06 Jun 2022, available on <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/30/world/asia/pakistan-airstrikes-afghanistan-taliban.html>. Accessed on 17 Oct 22

³ **Pakistan's Relations With Taliban Regime Worsen: The Afghan Taliban prefer to broker peace rather than crack the whip on the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan**'; by Kathy Gannon, May 19, 2022, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/pakistans-relations-with-taliban-regime-worsen/>. Accessed on 14 Sep 22.

⁴ **'Pakistan's Twin Taliban Problem: Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan attacks lead to growing tension between the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan. What's at stake?'**, by Asfandyar Mir, 04 May 2022, United States Institute for Peace (USIP), available at <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/pakistans-twin-taliban-problem>. Accessed on 15 Sep 22

⁵ **(As Pakistan's Afghanistan policy fails, the Afghan Taliban moves against Islamabad**

By Raza Khan Qazi, September 06, 2022, Atlantic Council, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/as-pakistans-afghanistan-policy-fails-the-afghan-taliban-move-against-islamabad/>. Accessed on 14 Sep 22)

⁶ **'India's cautious return to Afghanistan'**, 21 Jul 22, by Manoj Joshi, ORF, available at <https://www.orfonline.org/research/indias-cautious-return-to-afghanistan/>. Accessed on 14 Sep 22

⁷ **'India-Pakistan: regional rivalries still rule in Afghanistan'** by Syed Fazl-e-Haider, 22 Jun 22, Lowy Institute, Australia, available at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/india-pakistan-regional-rivalries-still-rule-afghanistan>. Accessed on 15 Sep 22