



CENTRE FOR
JOINT WARFARE
STUDIES
(CENJOWS)

JULY 15-31 2023



AFGHANISTAN WATCH

VOLUME 7 | ISSUE 2



**Pakistan's
Military Chief
Warns Afghan
Taliban
Against
Harbouring
Militants As
Attacks Spike**

JULY 15-31 2023

AFGHANISTAN WATCH

Pakistan's Military Chief Warns Afghan Taliban Against Harboring Militants As Attacks Spike

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/pakistan-afghanistan-taliban-militants-attacks-isis-tehreek-e-jihad-rcna94327>

Afghanistan Neither Fulfilling Its Obligations As Neighbour Nor Safeguarding Doha Deal: Asif

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1764888>

On 14 July 2023, Pakistan's Army Chief Munir was quoted as saying that Pakistan's armed forces were seriously concerned about the "safe havens and liberty of action" the Pakistani Taliban have in Afghanistan. He said he expects the Afghan Taliban to live up to their promises from a 2020 agreement with Washington to bar any terror group from using Afghan soil for attacks. **If they fail to do so, these "intolerable attacks would draw an effective response,"** he said.

The stern remarks by Gen. Asim Munir, came after two separate militant attacks on 12 July 2023 killed 12 Pakistani soldiers in the Balochistan province. **Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP)**, formed in Feb 2023, has claimed responsibility for the attack on a military garrison in the Zhob[1] district, which left nine soldiers dead. The responsibility for the other attack, in the Sui district, which killed three soldiers, remained unclear. On 15 July, Pakistan's **Defence Minister Khawaja Asif** strongly condemned Afghanistan for "neglecting its duties as a neighbouring and fraternal country", and for disregarding vital obligations made in the Doha peace agreement, specifically its commitment to prevent the use of Afghan soil for terrorist activities.

Comments

Traditionally Balochistan has been the stronghold of a few Quetta Shura Taliban commanders till Aug 2021. With limited presence of Pashtuns in Balochistan, the **Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)**, or the **Pakistani Taliban**, had limited footprints there. However, that situation has changed. The Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS) database reveals a **103% increase in terror attacks in Balochistan** during the first six months of 2023, compared to the same period in the previous year, and a 14% rise compared to the last six months of 2022[2].

[1]Zhob falls on the Quetta-Dera Ismail Khan highway, which is part of CPEC project. Newly raised Pakistan's 44 Infantry Division, headquartered at Gwadar, is responsible for protection of its assets.

[2]PTI Islamabad, <https://www.deccanherald.com/international/world-news-politics/pakistan-registers-79-spike-in-terror-attacks-in-first-six-months-of-2023-compared-to-last-year-think-tank-1233603.html>; 03 July 2023

AFGHANISTAN WATCH

Overall, Pakistan saw a 79% y-o-y spurt in terror attacks in first six months of 2023[3]. The TTP has claimed responsibility for these attacks, most of which are on Pakistani security forces (SF), including the police.

Background

Separatism, terrorism and militancy have been endemic in Pakistan, which has been the fount of global terror for several decades. 2012-13 saw a peak, averaging nearly four attacks a day[4]. In the recent times, after **the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) unilaterally revoked the May-Sep 2022 ceasefire in Nov 2022**, December was the worst in a decade. Close to 30% of almost 1000 terror related fatalities in 2022 were of the SF. This spurt in terror is attributed to TTP, the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) and the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP). While **the TTP Emir, Noor Wali Mehsud, has denied that TTP is using Afghan soil for attacks outside Afghanistan**, Pakistan alleges that TTP cadres are operating from safe havens in Afghanistan, especially after Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in Aug 2021. **Pakistan wants the Afghan Taliban to stop supporting the TTP, which the Afghan Taliban denies.**

Terrorists acts against the SF have been been **exacerbated by the political, economic and military upheaval, turmoil and uncertainty in** Pakistan. Pakistani military's involvement in national politics[5], has also contributed to this uptick.

Geopolitical factors are also fuelling terrorism in Pakistan. The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and the ISKP, viewed by China as Western proxies designed to undermine Chinese interests, target Chinese assets and people. China questions why the US removed ETIM from the terror list in 2020. The US has banned the TTP, but is more concerned with ISKP and al-Qaida. Pakistan has **threatened the Afghan Taliban with 'an effective response for these intolerable attacks'**. In this backdrop, **three issues need examination. What factors underlie the growing sinews of the TTP? What are TTPs Relations with Afghan Taliban, Pakistan, and other major actors? How will TTP's Rise impact the trajectory of Pakistan-Taliban relations?**

[3]ibid

[4]Imtiaz Gul, CRSS Islamabad, 'Explaining the resurgence of terrorist violence in Pakistan', [https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2023/03/29/explaining-the-resurgence-of-terrorist-violence-in-pakistan/#:~:text=An%20absence%20of%20cohesive%20civil,taking%20out%20scores%20of%20militants.](https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2023/03/29/explaining-the-resurgence-of-terrorist-violence-in-pakistan/#:~:text=An%20absence%20of%20cohesive%20civil,taking%20out%20scores%20of%20militants.;); 29 Mar 2023

[5]ibid

AFGHANISTAN WATCH



Source: *The Express Tribune*

Growing Sinews of the TTP

- The TTP's meteoric resurgence post 2018, when **Noor Wali Mehsud, designated 'Global Terrorist' by the US in 2019, became its Emir**, has been widely analysed at length. There is consensus that the TTP owes its phoenix like rise from the ashes to **narrowed anti-Pakistan agenda, sophisticated information warfare, enlarged span and tempo of operations through mergers, and agile organisational makeover.**

- **Narrowed Anti-Pakistan Agenda. Perceived to be an extension of Afghan Taliban**, the TTP spawned as an umbrella Pashtun anti-Pakistan militant movement under Baitullah Mehsud in 2007. Its narrative of **anti-State jihad** ran counter **to the pro-State (anti-India) jihad of Pakistan-sponsored terror groups.** TTP won support by decrying **the Government's support for the 'Global war on terror' (GWOT).** It won the Islamists with the call for **Sharia.** In the **formative years, aligning with the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaida, the TTP had a global jihadi agenda** (participation in the failed 2010 attack in Times Square, New York). In 2018, the TTP removed "greater jihad" and support for al-Qaida's agenda from its manifesto[6]. Since the Taliban-US Doha deal in Feb 2020, the **TTP publicly disowned any transnational agenda, and reassured the US that TTP is only fighting the Pakistani SF on Pakistan's soil (to likely escape drone attacks).** A Pakistan centric agenda inspires its cadres with hopes for mirroring the demonstrated success of the Afghan Taliban, in contrast with the **dwindling support al-Qaida, which has a global agenda.** The TTP has mandated its cadres to **emulate three key features of the Afghan Taliban-** limit the war to one enemy (Pakistan's SF), ensure internal unity, and **ideological coherence.**
- **Sophisticated Information Warfare.** The Global Network on Extremism and Technology has assessed that Umar Media's (TTP's propaganda machine) online propaganda is sophisticated and easily accessible across social media platforms in many languages[7].

[6] Abdul Sayed, 'The Evolution and Future of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan', <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/12/21/evolution-and-future-of-tehrik-e-taliban-pakistan-pub-86051#:~:text=Tehrik%2De%2DTaliban%20Pakistan%20; 21 Dec 2021>

[7] Archie Macfarlane, 'Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP): Operating with Impunity Online', <https://gnet-research.org/2023/04/17/tehreek-e-taliban-pakistan-ttp-operating-with-impunity-online/>, 17 April 2023

JULY 15-31 2023

AFGHANISTAN WATCH

Its Arabic productions target affluent Arabs those in Dari target Afghans. Balochi media products appeared in 2022, and in English in March 2023 for the first time, targeting educated youth. TTP's first magazine was launched in 2016 and a new website in January 2020[8]. TTP has ingeniously woven its anti-State narrative with local tribal grievances, targeting the Government's growing setbacks and endemic corruption, besides its support for GWOT. Few TTP's publications allude to globalised jihad, with specific references to Kashmir, perhaps to attract recruits, **which suggests that TTP may emulate AQIS and ISKP[9] at some point of time.**

- **Enlarged Span and Tempo of Operations through Mergers.** After TTP's violence peaked in 2010-13, and especially after a 2014 attack on an Army School in Peshawar which killed over 150, mostly children, the **State crackdown under operation Zarb-e-Azb (2014-17) and US drone attacks crippled the TTP.** Internal splintering and cadre poaching by ISKP further weakened the TTP, besides dwindling domestic support due to high civilian casualties in indiscriminate suicide attacks. By 2019, the TTP was reduced to 3000-5000 fighters[10]. **The TTP relocated to bases in Afghanistan, remaining steadfast in its support for the Taliban insurgency,** which eventually led to the US withdrawal and the Afghan Taliban overthrowing the Afghan Government. Emboldened by the Afghan Taliban's success, **the TTP is attempting to emulate the Taliban strategy to gain territorial control.** Having regained influence in several districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), *it is aiming at semi-autonomous control in erstwhile FATA.* TTP **footprints are expanding** from the traditional areas of KPK (Peshawar), FATA, Karachi and eastern Punjab, to Balochistan (Quetta, Chaman, Kuchlak and Zhob) and southern Punjab. **There is an uptick in TTP attacks, largely on SF and Government assets.** The number of TTP-claimed attacks have *more than tripled between 2020 and 2022, with the monthly attack average increasing from 14.5 in 2020 to 23.5 in 2021 and 45.8 in 2022[11].* The scale and tempo of attacks has increased, expanding to major cities. **The TTP has received US weapons from Afghan Taliban and fighters,** which include sophisticated M24 sniper rifle, M4 carbines and M16A4 rifles with scopes[12]. Since 2018, suicide attacks are planned by the suicide brigade and executed with approval from the Emir or his deputy, to obviate civilian casualties. Although suicide attacks have increased in number, but only two civilians were killed in 2022[13].

[8] Amira Jadoon, 'The Evolution and Potential Resurgence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan', United States Institute of Peace, May 2021 https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/sr_494-the_evolution_and_potential_resurgence_of_the_tehrik_i_taliban_pakistan.pdf

[9] Asfandiyar Mir, Tamanna Salikuddin and Andrew Watkins, 'Is Pakistan Poised to Take on the TTP?', 14 Feb 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/02/pakistan-poised-take-ttp>

[10] Amira Jadoon, op cit

[11] Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, 'The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan After the Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover', The CTC Sentinel, May 2023, Volume 16, Issue 5

[12] Zia Ur Rehman, 'U.S. arms left in Afghanistan surface in Pakistan Taliban insurgency', <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Terrorism/U.S.-arms-left-in-Afghanistan-surface-in-Pakistan-Taliban-insurgency#:~:text=U.S.%2Dfunded%20military%20equipment%20valued,of%20Defense%20report%20last%20year.> 12 Mar 2023

[13] Center for Preventive Action, 'Instability in Pakistan', Updated July 06, 2023 <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/islamist-militancy-pakistan>

JULY 15–31 2023

AFGHANISTAN WATCH



Source: *The Print*

Tribal resistance in response to **the 2018 constitutional merger of FATA with KPK** that ended its autonomy, also heightened the violence. The **suspension of US security assistance** to Pakistan in 2018 and **a polarised and resource-deprived Pakistani Establishment, beset with unprecedented socio-economic and politico-military headwinds, desperate to strike a peace deal with the TTP,[14]** also emboldened the TTP. The end of Jihad in Afghanistan in Aug 2021 freed the Pakistani Taliban. The Feb 2020 Doha deal was a turning point and mergers began soon after, gathering momentum post the Taliban takeover in 2021, with 21 groups, including erstwhile splinter groups, bringing battle-hardened militants to the TTP[15]. Mergers also helped extend influence to new areas like South Balochistan and North Waziristan, especially the latter with the **Hafiz Gul Bahadur group**, which enjoys the support of al Qaida and the Haqqani Group, **extending organisational support**. Since July 2022, four Baloch groups have joined the TTP. Though **little is known about TJP, there is indication they share goals similar to the TTP[16]**. **TTP craftily supports the politics of Pashtun and Baluch nationalists**, despite ideological differences. To remain relevant, the TTP also supports Tehrik-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), which is a Sunni Bareilvi sect, while the TTP belongs to the rival Deobandi sect.

- **Agile Organisational Makeover.** In 2022 the TTP ceased to be an organisation with limited control at the top (which was a major reason for splintering in 2014), turning **into a centralised bureaucratic structure, akin to the Afghan Taliban, with nearly 140 appointed officials. A Leadership Council and Governors of Wilayas** (administrative units) **function under the Emir[17]**. However, some factions and leaders still retain a fair degree of autonomy. TTP now has, ministries, an intelligence directorate, a suicide

[14] Abdul Sayed and Amira Jadoon, 'Understanding Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan's Unrelenting Posture', https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/Understanding-TTP-Posture_Sayed-Jadoon_August-2022.pdf, 16 Aug 2022

[15] Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, op cit

[16] Pakistan: TTP increases activity in Balochistan

<https://acleddata.com/2023/07/06/regional-overview-asia-pacific-june-2023/>

[17] Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, op cit

JULY 15–31 2023

AFGHANISTAN WATCH

brigade and training camp, a three-layer court system, an institute of 'Islamic' jurisprudence, and a housing department[18]. Of the 12 Wilayas established, seven are in KPK, one in the Pashtun-dominated Zhob division of Balochistan, one comprising Qalat and Makran of Balochistan (both non-Pashtun majority), one each in North and South Punjab; and one in Gilgit Balitistan[19]. In the rest of the country, the TTP has approximately 400 "Dalgays" (military units), with each Dalgay having 5 to 25 members[20].

TTP's Relations with Afghan Taliban, Pakistan and Major Actors

- TTP & Afghan Taliban.** Over the last two decades, while the TTP have supported and fought for the Afghan Taliban, the latter, disapproving of TTP's anti-Pakistan stance, had denied their affiliation in 2009 and condemned TTP's attack on the Army School in 2014[21], treating TTP as a '**liability**'. However, **ideologically aligned**, they maintained good relations despite the fact that the Pakistani SF/ISI, the TTP's sworn enemies, were the Afghan Taliban's sole benefactors[22]. The Afghan Taliban and TTP relations, which serve **mutually reinforcing agendas, have morphed into 'tacit support' by Afghan Taliban, with plausible deniability, after gaining power in Aug 2021.** While the Afghan Taliban extends material support to TTP, **it does not support anti-Pakistan operations directly[23].** *The Afghan Taliban gets a resource pool, leverage on Pakistan, and TTP resources as a counter to the ISKP, whereas the TTP gains recognition, legitimacy and safe bases.* Holding the US-Taliban Doha deal as a **major victory for the jihadi ideology, the TTP released** a video in 2020, showcasing its reverence for the Afghan Taliban[24]. In 2020, Emir Mehsud pledged allegiance to the Emir of Afghan Taliban. **The Afghan Taliban presently considers TTP as part of the Emirate[25].** TTP's demand for **restoration of the semi-autonomous status of FATA and implementation of sharia resonates with the Afghan Taliban, since both envision a Sharia-compliant political order[26].** *In contrast to the denial of support to TTP by the Taliban leadership, Afghan Taliban's cadre wish to continuing the next phase of jihad against Pakistan's SF* after liberating the homeland[27]. Afghan suicide bombers and fighters support TTP[28], as most **harbour the hatred for the Pakistani SF.**

[18]ibid
 [19]ibid
 [20]ibid
 [21] Amira Jadoon, op cit
 [22]Samina Ahmed, 'The Pakistani Taliban Test Ties between Islamabad and Kabul', 29 Mar 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/pakistan/pakistani-taliban-test-ties-between-islamabad-and-kabul>
 [23] UNSC, S/2023/370, 'Fourteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team', <https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2093255/N2312536.pdf>, 01 June 2023
 [24]Samina Ahmed, op cit
 [25] UNSC, S/2023/370, op cit
 [26] Asfandyar Mir, 'Pakistan's Twin Taliban Problem', <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/pakistans-twin-taliban-problem>, 4 May 2022
 [27] Abdul Sayed and Amira Jadoon, op cit
 [28]ibid

AFGHANISTAN WATCH

This hatred emanates from the anti-Pakistan sentiment of the Pashtuns Afghans as regards the disputed Durand Line[29]. The Afghan Taliban *released large numbers of TTP prisoners incarcerated by the former Afghanistan regime, instead of handing them over to Pakistan.* The argument that the Afghan Taliban's **support for the TTP is a crafty subterfuge by ISI**, to rid of the allegation of having supported Afghan Taliban[30], is far from convincing. It is evident that the Afghan Taliban and the TTP enjoy a mutually beneficial and symbiotic relationship, and Afghan Taliban is maintaining **the same deniability regarding its support to TTP, as Pakistan did while supporting the Taliban.** *The TTP is an asset which the Afghan Taliban is adroitly leveraging as the sole actor which can influence TTP, possibly for concessions on the contentious issue of the Durand Line at a later stage.* The Afghan Taliban wishes to **demonstrate that it can not be arm-twisted**, leveraging Pakistan's vulnerability in a calibrated manner, without rupturing the relationship. The Afghan Taliban also has its own concerns. The **destabilising power struggles between rival factions in Afghanistan risk armed conflicts**[31]. Taliban, thus **needs a reliable resource base like TTP** for such contingencies, though they seem remote today.

- **TTP and al-Qaida.** The Afghan Taliban, al-Qaida and the TTP have symbiotic linkages[32]. TTP emerged from *al-Qaida's jihadi politics in Afghanistan and Pakistan (anti-US and anti-Pakistan)* and still has covert links with al-Qaeda[33]. Al-Qaida helped **shape TTP's ideology (Global and anti-State Jihad) in its early years**, besides providing financial assistance and bolstering its legitimacy. **Remaining organisationally independent**, both have collaborated in operations (Times Square 2010). The TTP attacked the Mehran naval base in May 2011 to *avenge the death of bin Laden and in 2018*, and public condolences on Mullah Fazlullah's death by AQIS, an al-Qaida affiliate, indicate continued linkages[34]. AQIS is reportedly helping the TTP bypass the restrictions placed by Afghan Taliban[35] in Afghanistan. **Al-Qaida is presently keeping a low profile, while covertly generating capability for external operations, and seeking to infiltrate its members into the Taliban, TTP and ISKP**[36]. The TTP had condemned the UNSC reports which alleged that TTP has links with al-Qaida, accusing Pakistan's leadership of peddling falsehood. However, there are reports that **al-Qaida provided suicide bomber training** to TTP in camps in Kunar (Afghanistan)[37]. Al-Qaida is

[29] ibid

[30] Asfandiyar Mir, op cit

[31] The Economic Times, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/taliban-slam-baseless-and-biased-un-report-suggesting-rifts-and-conflict-within-their-ranks/articleshow/100916367.cms>, 11 June 2023

[32] UNSC, S/2023/370, op cit

[33] Abdul Sayed, op cit

[34] Amira Jadoon, op cit

[35] UNSC, S/2023/370, op cit

[36] ibid

[37] ibid

JULY 15-31 2023

AFGHANISTAN WATCH

reportedly helping the TTP with funds. In late 2020, al-Qaida reportedly re-established close relations with the HQN and the *HQN-TTP controlled areas in southeast Afghanistan could potentially be exploited by al-Qaida*. Presently, **the TTP is demonstrating strategic sophistication by 'officially' distancing itself from al-Qaida and its affiliates, since likely benefits from al-Qaida, which is presently weakened, will be far outweighed by the costs of international retribution.** This is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

- **TTP and ISKP.** ISKP took shape in Afghanistan-Pakistan in 2015, largely by poaching cadres of TTP, *eroding the resource base of a TTP in decline*[38]. To delegitimise Taliban, **the pan-Islamist ISKP called the Afghan Taliban 'filthy nationalists**[39], for betraying the Jihadi cause with the Taliban-US deal in 2020, *meant to protect the US interests*[40]. The TTP retracted from the allegiance made to the IS (Islamic State) in 2014, due to TTP's ideological moorings with Afghan Taliban and al-Qaida, both anti-ISKP. In 2020, in response to a UNSC report which **insinuated that TTP and ISKP had linkages, the TTP condemned the ISKP, calling it a conspiracy of intelligence agencies**[41]. In Aug 2021, as the TTP renewed its allegiance to the Taliban, ISKP **promptly labelled the TTP as apostates**. However, **like the TTP, ISKP advocates the implementation of sharia in Pakistan** and both have not clashed, due to a shared anti-Pakistan agenda. It has been recently alleged that some TTP fighters have sold weapons to ISKP[42]. Besides attacks on foreign embassies in Afghanistan to sever critical diplomatic and commercial relations, ISKP undertakes targeted lethal attacks to discredit the Taliban. Notably, **the Afghan Taliban has accused Pakistan of sheltering ISKP**[43] and in Jan 2023, it leaked a memo to the press, detailing training camps in Pakistan, supported by the Pakistani SF, training thousands of ISKP fighters to attack Afghanistan[44]. **Any reverse for TTP directly benefits ISKP, as a competing entity.**

- **TTP and Pakistan's Flip-flop Strategies.**

Diplomatic Flip-Flops. In July 2021, after a TTP attack on a bus in KPK **killed 12 people, including nine Chinese**, Pakistan's foreign minister blamed it on **"a nexus" of Ghani's Government and India's intelligence agencies**[45]. In the **same month**, Pakistan's Army Chief, General Bajwa **labelled the TTP and the Afghan Taliban as two faces of the same coin**. This **allegation was curiously buried** during the peace negotiations that followed the Taliban takeover **the very next month!**

[38]ibid

[39]EFSAS Study Paper, 'Good Taliban, Bad Taliban Tracing the Resurgence of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)'; <https://www.efsas.org/EFSAS-TTP-June2022.pdf>, June 2022

[40] Abdul Sayed and Amira Jadoon, op cit

[41]ibid

[42] UNSC, S/2023/370, op cit

[43]Samina Ahmed, op cit

[44] Asfandyar Mir, Tamanna Salikuddin and Andrew Watkins, op cit

[45] Madiha Afzal, 'Pakistan's ambivalent approach toward a resurgent Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan',

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/pakistans-ambivalent-approach-toward-a-resurgent-tehrik-e-taliban-pakistan/>

JULY 15–31 2023

AFGHANISTAN WATCH

- Flip-Flop in Peace Negotiations.** Both Pakistan and the TTP hoped to leverage their intimate relationship with the Afghan Taliban, **pursuing diverse and conflicting agendas**. Pakistan expected an **indebted Taliban to pressurise the TTP to unconditionally cease anti-Pakistan attacks and water down their demands**. The TTP leveraged the Taliban's support to **strengthen their bargaining power**. Events since Aug 2021 have revealed that Pakistan **harboured misplaced expectations**. **The TTP demands include imposition of Sharia in Pakistan, removal of SF from the borders and revocation of the constitutional merger of FATA into KPK[46]**. While negotiating the Nov 2021 ceasefire, Pakistan had offered **general amnesty on the condition that TTP lays down arms unconditionally**. **The TTP rejected the offer**, calling the Constitution "un-islamic" and vowing to replace it with Sharia in Pakistan. Though **surprised by the Afghan Taliban's offer to mediate**, the TTP accepted the mediation on the basis of the Taliban's promised support[47].



Source: The Quint

Reflecting weakness and desperation[48], the Pakistani Government ordered the release of over 100 TTP prisoners and return of cadres/families from Afghanistan, as a confidence building gesture[49], without taking the Parliament in confidence. After a month long ceasefire declared Nov 2021, **blaming Pakistan for lack of interest, the TTP resumed attacks in Dec 2021** with renewed ferocity.

The suicide attack at **Tank Military garrison** in Mar 2022 killed/injured 24 soldiers, **triggering cross-border air attacks** by Pakistan SF on alleged TTP bases, which killed civilians. **Pressed by the Taliban**, and perhaps **sensing an opportunity due to a weak coalition Government** battling unprecedented challenges, **the TTP announced a unilateral ceasefire in May 2022**, extending it indefinitely in June 2022, as a step to facilitate peace negotiations. To facilitate a settlement, *the TTP also diluted the demand for implementation of sharia in Pakistan to just the tribal districts (FATA), and demanded restoration of its semi-autonomous status*. On 22 June 2022, the Parliamentary Committee on National Security (PCNS), chaired by the PM, was informed that **negotiations with**

[46] Dawn, 'Islamabad, TTP agree on indefinite ceasefire', <https://www.dawn.com/news/1692383/islamabad-ttp-agree-on-indefinite-ceasefire>, 31 May 2022,

[47] Abdul Sayed and Amira Jadoon, op cit

[48] Samina Ahmed, op cit

[49] ibid

JULY 15–31 2023

AFGHANISTAN WATCH

TTP were in accordance with the Constitution, and any final decision will have the approval of the Parliament[50]. In the same meeting, it is surprising to note that **Pakistan's military leadership had averred that there was no organised TTP network left in Pakistan, and the civil leadership expressed satisfaction with the military strategy and the dialogue process[51]**.

- Pakistan's Deceit Broke Negotiations and Ceasefire.** TTP is an amalgam of diverse groups, which makes negotiations vary challenging[52]. However, the blame lies with Pakistani Establishment in this instance. The Taliban and the TTP blamed Pakistan for **facilitating the US drone strike that killed al-Qaida Emir Zawahiri** in Kabul on 31 July 2022. On August 7, 2022, Umar Khalid Khurasani, a key member of TTP's negotiation team, was **killed in an unclaimed attack** in Afghanistan. **Pakistan had deceitfully lured TTP leaders for talks, only to kill them under the Afghan Taliban's watch[53]**. The TTP **resumed attacks** in September 2022, before **officially revoking the ceasefire on 28 Nov 22**. **The transfer of Gen Faiz Hameed**, the lead negotiator, to Bahawalpur in Aug 2022 also indicated **Pakistan's insincerity**.
- Afghan Taliban's Proposal of Further Talks Deadlocked.** On 17 July 2023 the Pakistan Army leadership stated that **Taliban militants in Afghanistan are harbouring terrorists from the TTP**, and **sanctuaries and weapons available in a 'neighbouring country'** are **impacting the security of Pakistan[54]**. The **stance of both parties now appears to be irreconcilable on the issue of revocation of constitutional merger and autonomy of FATA**. Nonetheless, the Afghan Taliban is advocating another round of negotiations between TTP and Pakistan[55]. In response to allegations of not fulfilling its obligations under the Doha deal, Afghan Taliban has countered that the **Taliban did not sign the peace accord with Pakistan, reiterating that Afghanistan's territory is not being used against Pakistan[56]**, and reassuring that **steps would be taken if Pakistan shares evidence[57]**. **This stance would embolden the TTP**. Pakistani leadership has decided that **talks with the TTP can be held only after it surrenders**. Pakistan is also under **pressure from China** to respond decisively to the killing of Chinese citizens[58]. **The deadlock, thus, is likely to persist**.

[50] Muhammad Anis, 'Only Parliament to approve TTP talks' outcome', The News, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/968303-only-parliament-to-approve-ttp-talks-outcome>, 23 June 2022

[51] ibid

[52] Javid Ahmad, 'For Pakistan, dealing with its Taliban problem is a walk on eggshells', <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/for-pakistan-dealing-with-its-taliban-problem-is-a-walk-on-eggshells/>, 2 Feb 2023

[53] ibid

[54] The Economic Times, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/sanctuaries-and-weapons-available-to-ttp-in-neighbouring-country-reason-behind-spike-in-terror-attacks-pak-army/articleshow/101833834.cms>, 17 July 2023

[55] The Economic Times, 'Afghan Taliban asks Pakistan government to pursue peace talks with TTP: Report', 22 July 2023

[56] Geo News, 'Taliban's statement on Doha deal worries Pakistan leaders', <https://www.geo.tv/latest/499722-talibans-statement-on-doha-deal-worries-pakistan-leaders>, 17 July 2023

[57] Aaj News, <https://www.aajenglish.tv/news/30327428/signed-doha-pact-with-us-not-pakistan-say-afghan-taliban-after-asifs-accusations>, 15 July 2023

[58] KN Pandita, 'Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan, The 'New Kid On The Block' Emerges As A Big Threat To China's CPEC: Op Ed', The Eurasian Times, <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/tehrrek-e-jihad-pakistan-the-new-kid-on-the-block-emerges/>, 23 July 2023

JULY 15-31 2023

AFGHANISTAN WATCH

- **Pakistan's Flip-flop in Counter-TTP Military Options.** Frustrated by the TTP's spring offensive in April 2022, **Pakistan resorted to air strikes on alleged TTP bases in Afghanistan** on 21 April 2022, **killing several civilians, straining Pakistan-Taliban relations**[59]. **Pakistan had mistakenly hoped to kill many birds- deter the TTP** by showing that the cross-border bases are unsafe; **shock and force the Taliban** to reconsider their support for the TTP; **build domestic Afghan pressure** to reverse TTP policies; and **drive a wedge** in TTP-Taliban ties. Pakistan is also witnessing sectarian violence between Sunni and Shia tribes over disputed lands in the Parachinar area[60] involving the TTP and Iran-backed Zainabiyoun Brigade[61]. The same leadership which concluded in June 2022 that no TTP network is left in Pakistan, have now sought **zero tolerance for terrorism**, without discriminating between good or bad terrorists[62] and **announced a nationwide counter-terror offensive in April 2023**[63]. **Resorting to trans-border airstrikes again, violating Afghan Sovereignty**, would likely raise the anti-Pakistan sentiment, *with Afghan Taliban fighters joining the TTP. Moreover, the risk of escalation of conflict* in the backdrop of **impending National Assembly elections** before Nov 2023 raise **skepticism** about such air or drone strikes. *Undeclared kinetic actions by Pakistan in the past that eliminated some senior leaders carried risks*[64], and though these likely had the tacit consent of the Haqqani faction, the Afghan defence minister publicly warned Pakistan[65]. Any tacit consent by the Haqqani **faction is highly unlikely now**, since it has recently provided bases to the TTP, besides avoiding **internal rifts within the Afghan Taliban**[66]. Any large scale operation like Zarb-e-Azb calls for resources and funding, whereas Pakistan is now at risk of default. A nationwide anti-terrorist operation would also likely exacerbate Pakistan's unprecedented **politico-military crisis, with impending elections**. The option of heightened military operations against the TTP could *swing the support of affected communities towards the TTP*, and **seeking US support and resources to fight TTP in Afghanistan would invite Taliban and Afghan backlash**[67]. Trans-border artillery strikes and intelligence based raids within the country appear to be viable options. A **serious challenge** may arise if TTP autonomously controls territory in Pakistan, **a haven, which could be exploited by al-Qaida or AQIS**.

[59] Center for Preventive Action, 'Instability in Pakistan', Updated July 06, 2023

<https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/islamist-militancy-pakistan>

[60] Press ISW, 'Salafi-Jihadi Movement Weekly Update, July 12, 2023', 14 July 2023

<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/salafi-jihadi-movement-weekly-update-july-12-2023>

[61] Pakistani Shias are recruited from Parachinar in KPK for operations in Syria

[62] Samina Ahmed, op cit

[63] Asif Shahzad and Gibran Naiyyar Peshimam, op cit

[64] Maleeha Lodhi, 'Pakistan's Afghan dilemma', <https://www.dawn.com/news/1766452>, 24 July 2023

[65] Javid Ahmad, op cit

[66] ibid

[67] ibid

JULY 15-31 2023

AFGHANISTAN WATCH

- The US and TTP.** The US essentially worries about the growing ISKP footprints in Afghanistan and beyond, but it still considers the al-Qaida as a long term threat. Zawahiri's killing proved that the Afghan Taliban has maintained its relationship with al-Qaida, staking its credibility. The TTP, though blacklisted by the US is not an immediate concern, possibly due its assurance that it has no agenda outside Pakistan. The US State Department, however, did state in 2022 that it would **use counter-terrorism tools to counter threats posed by AQIS and TTP**, so that Afghanistan is not used as a base for international terrorism. However, direct **US options against the TTP are constrained** by diminished **intelligence and military capabilities in Afghanistan** and secondly, *Afghan Taliban, a benefactor of TTP, is in control*. Moreover, any provocation that could trigger a retaliation against US assets from Afghan Taliban or TTP, will be opposed in Washington, **given the present priority accorded presently to Russia and China**. The TTP, which is an amalgam of diverse semi-autonomous *factions like Jamaat-ul-Ahrar and Hizbul Ahrar*, runs the risk of **inviting international wrath if rogue elements independently collaborate with global terror groups**. Any US endeavour to constrain TTP's nexus will necessitate engagement with the Afghan Taliban, which would entail transactional costs. Moreover, such cooperation will be opposed by Taliban's leaders and factions, since it would potentially incentivise defections to ISKP.
- China and The TTP.** While the TTP maintains that it will *not pose any threat to diplomats or assets of any foreign country in Pakistan*, **TTP has targeted Chinese nationals**. China raised its concerns regarding collaboration between terrorist groups like ISKP, al-Qaida, and ETIM in Afghanistan at a UNSC meeting in June 2023[68]. **China pressurised the Afghan Taliban** at the trilateral foreign ministers' conference on May 6, 2023, to **act against the TTP**. As per a **Dari language report quoting local sources on Aamaj News** (an Afghan website) published on 16 June 2023, **that over 300 armed members of the TTP have been relocated to the Dashti Qala district of the Takhar province in North Afghanistan[69]**, which corroborates the assertion of **Ms Maleeha Lodhi**, former Pakistani ambassador to the US, UK and UN, that *during recent talks the Taliban leaders have accepted presence of TTP in Afghanistan, which they deny publicly*, seeking time for restraining them, averring that are **constrained by capacity and not willingness[70]** and sought **financial support for disarming and resettling around 5000 TTP cadres and families**, away from the border with Pakistan[71]. Pakistan's and Tajikistan's defence

[68]Ayaz Gul, 'Pakistan Cautiously Lauds Afghan Taliban's Moves to Counter Cross-Border Terrorism', <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-cautiously-lauds-afghan-taliban-s-moves-to-counter-cross-border-terrorism-/7172654.html>, 8 July 2023

[69]Tufail Ahmad, 'Amid Chinese Diplomatic Push, Afghan Taliban Begin Settling Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) Fighters In North Afghanistan', <https://www.memri.org/reports/amid-chinese-diplomatic-push-afghan-taliban-begin-settling-tehreek-e-taliban-pakistan-ttp>; 21 June 2023

[70]Maleeha Lodhi, op cit

[71]ibid

JULY 15–31 2023

AFGHANISTAN WATCH

ministers also met on 6 July 2023, possibly with an intent to discuss security issues related to TTP militants in northern Afghanistan. ***If true, these reports indicate that the Chinese have the power, howsoever limited, to extract cooperation from Afghan Taliban, besides giving a lie to the defiance with which the Taliban negated provision of sanctuaries and support to TTP.***

The TTP and the Trajectory of Pakistan's Afghan Relations

- **Afghan Taliban's Control on TTP.** Given that the organisational reforms ushered by Noor Wali Mehsud are nascent, and the fact that few constituent factions retain reasonable autonomy, TTP's ***operational consistency and ideological cohesion needs to be viewed with due skepticism.*** The suicide attack on a mosque in a Police Headquarters in Peshawar in January 2023, which killed over 100 Pakistanis, mostly police officials, is illustrative. While ***refraining from denouncing the two senior TTP commanders*** who had claimed its success, ***the official TTP spokesperson Muhammad Khurasani disowned the attack,*** since it violated the TTP's new guidelines that ***forbid attacks against mosques.*** The lack of internal support for TTP's new policies stood exposed. However, it was equally notable that ***the Emir and the Council would not tolerate a compromise on the reform agenda.*** Some have also argued that ***the TTP leadership succumbed to the pressure from Afghan Taliban to issue a denial.*** Some voice a concern that an ***amorphous, bigger and potent TTP may defy control by the Afghan Taliban***[72], which lacks credibility. **The Taliban is likely to consolidate its control and leverage over TTP for the following reasons-**
 1. TTP's growing relationship with HQN has further cemented Taliban-TTB bonds, complicating the challenge for Pakistan. ***TTP is now being hosted by HQN in Southeast Afghanistan***[73] and HQN has facilitated the ***merger of former TTP factions in southeastern Afghanistan.*** This ***surprise action by HQN, could be possibly to settle a score with Pakistan's denying of resources to the HQN,*** when HQN had opposed the US-Taliban Deal, ***or more likely to closely monitor, cultivate and control the TTP as a leverage against Pakistan.***
 2. The ***TTP had attacked the erstwhile Afghan government forces alongside the Taliban,*** majorly assisting the capture of ***Kunar in eastern Afghanistan in July 2021.*** The TTP, thus, equally strong relations with other factions of Afghan Taliban. The ***majority Taliban opinion backs the TTP. Most importantly, the Taliban Emir Akhundzada agrees with the TTP that Pakistani system is "un-Islamic",*** which resonates with the view that the Afghan Taliban wish to have an ideologically aligned actor in Pakistan[74].
 3. TTP is the trump card for retaining bargaining leverage with Pakistan for the vexed issue of the Durand line.

[72] UNSC, S/2023/370, op cit

[73] Antonio Guistozi, 'The Resurgence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan', <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/resurgence-tehrik-i-taliban-pakistan>, 12 Aug 2021

[74] Asfandiyar Mir, 'Pakistan's Twin Taliban Problem', op cit

JULY 15–31 2023

AFGHANISTAN WATCH

4. **Afghan Taliban's calibrated negation of Pakistan's allegations**, helps **emphasise its sovereign equality**, driven by the historical dislike for the Pakistani elite who have for years **treated Afghanistan as a subordinate surrogate**.

5. The **Taliban rank and file shares the hatred for the Pakistani SF** with the TTP and feels obliged to payback TTP for its sacrifices.

6. The Afghan Taliban's need for TTP as a support base to *counter ISKP*.

- **The Limits of Pakistan's Control over Afghan Taliban.** In 2013, when Karzai broke off the Doha talks with the Taliban, **Bruce Riedel** had very presciently observed that there **were limits to the control of Pakistan over Taliban**. **Mullah Omar**, when in power, had refused to recognise the Durand line; the Afghan Taliban provided assistance to the TTP, while the latter recognised Omar as their Emir; **and Omar never publicly criticised the TTP or its attacks**[75].



Source: *The Wire*

These fundamentals have remained immutable even a decade later. With Pakistan's economy having taken a nose-dive and a long way off from recovery, **Pakistan's ability to provide economic succour to a bleeding Afghanistan is negligible**, and the Afghan Taliban is justifiably exploring other options for recognition and economic support and China is a preferred choice. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan in Aug 2021 has further **diminished the dependance of Afghan Taliban on Pakistan**, except for diplomatic leverage. Some have opined that this relationship is **teetering on the brink of a major crisis**, since the Taliban 2.0 has also defied Pakistan by **challenging the Durand Line**, and **providing safe havens to TTP**[76][77]

- **Pakistan's Dilemma.** Pakistan can **ill afford to antagonise the Taliban, which Pakistan knows is the most reliable partner to negate or diminish Indian influence** in Afghanistan. **Marginalising the Taliban is not an option**, due to absence of any viable ideological or political challenge the Afghan Taliban. Though **accommodating the Afghan Taliban's advocacy of talking to the TTP would imply ceding ground**, a bankrupt, dysfunctional, divided and polarised Pakistan has limited choices[78].

[75] Bruce Riedel, 'Pakistan, Taliban and the Afghan Quagmire', 24 Aug 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/pakistan-taliban-and-the-afghan-quagmire/>

[76] Asfandyar Mir, 'Pakistan's Twin Taliban Problem', <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/pakistans-twin-taliban-problem>, 4 May 2022

[77] Sushant Sareen, 'Opinion | Pakistan Gets a Taste of Its Own Medicine from Taliban', <https://www.news18.com/opinion/opinion-pakistan-gets-a-taste-of-its-own-medicine-from-taliban-8399719.html>

[78] ibid

JULY 15-31 2023

AFGHANISTAN WATCH

Pakistan's mistaken distinction between 'good' and 'bad' Taliban disregarded the fact that the **TTP's activities are inexorably linked to, and are emboldened and enabled by the Afghan Taliban.**

- **Can China or the US Pressurise Afghan Taliban to Rein In the TTP?** Even if *reports of relocation of a few hundred TTP to North Afghanistan bear partial truth*, they **imply that the Afghan Taliban has wilted under the Chinese pressure.** However, the move of such **small numbers is largely symbolical, meant to diffuse the situation by providing a face-saving outcome** to both sides, since the TTP retains significant and growing capability to target Pakistan, as *evinced by the spiralling terror attacks*. More importantly, **the Afghan Taliban is unlikely to give further ground**, since such concessions will likely aggravate the internal divisions and fissures between Kabul and Kandahar^[79], and **ensuring internal cohesion will likely trump deferring to any external pressure to rein in the TTP.** The Taliban's defiant refusal to acknowledge the support to the TTP indicates that **any security cooperation between Taliban with Pakistan regarding the TTP will be largely transactional and symbolic.**
- For the present, clearly, given the internal and external challenges faced by Pakistan, the **TTP is a critical asset in the hands of Afghan Taliban.** Adherence **to the 'mediation and negotiation' strategy to bide time is the best option for Afghan Taliban.** It has also provides **strategic leverage to Afghan Taliban, labelling the TTP Pakistan's own internal problem, to be sorted out by Pakistan itself.**

Conclusion

- Afghan Taliban decries dependence on Pakistan and wishes to assert its independence of Pakistan at every step, especially at the present moment when Pakistan is a State in deep disarray, from every perspective. Since the Afghan Taliban presently faces no political challenge and its only concern is ISKP, the need for Pakistan's support has dwindled substantially. Any future political reconciliation and consolidation of power by Taliban, though not apparent at present, would likely lead to a major re-calibration of the Pakistan-Afghanistan equation.
- The **TTP has become a critical asset, defining the Afghan Taliban's Pakistan policy.** The *TTP is an asset for grey zone influence in the hands of Afghan Taliban, and a long term asset to negotiate the Durand line favourably.* The Afghan Taliban's thinly **veiled willingness to support the TTP, even at the cost of its relations with Pakistan, is evidence of** Pakistan being considered unreliable, in contrast with the TTP being considered an ideologically and strategically reliable ally. The Afghan Taliban **places a higher premium on the repercussions of pressurising the TTP**, which could have the undesirable fallout of splintering and defection to ISKP. **Exploiting the Pakistani**

[79] UNSC, S/2023/370, op cit

JULY 15-31 2023

AFGHANISTAN WATCH

Establishment's present state of chaos and disarray, the Afghan Taliban has **adroitly denied that TTP draws any operational support** in Afghanistan, has officially '**distanced itself**', calling the TTP as '**Pakistan's problem**', with **negotiations between TTP and Pakistan** as the only pragmatic option, which the Afghan Taliban **is amenable to facilitate**. This **crafty stance helps maintain a veneer of cooperation and neutrality**, maintaining mutually beneficial relations with the TTP, while accepting strained but engaged relations with Pakistan. The **onus to sustain the tenuous Taliban-Pakistan relations** thus presently lies with Pakistan. However, Pakistan can **neither meaningfully punish the TTP, nor pressurise Afghan Taliban beyond a point, nor snap the ties altogether due to the India Factor**.

- The **TTP, realising that a Taliban like success of overthrowing the Pakistan Government is beyond its reach presently, has limited its immediate objective to autonomous Sharia based control of FATA**. Believing that the time is on its side, the TTP will likely continue to prosecute operations at scale and pace, in an attempt to disrupt the impending elections especially if Imran Khan is unlikely to contest.
- Negotiating a **settlement with the TTP appears elusive**, given the truant, deceitful and maximalist attitude of both sides, as **also the non-monolithic nature of TTP, which will likely spawn dissatisfied splinter groups**. Given the present **intransigence of the Taliban, TTP and Pakistan, there is little room for optimism about any enduring settlement. Thus, Pakistan will have to find ways to manage the internal dimensions of the TTP's alarming rise and expanding footprints**. The present Government has abjured talks. The new Government, likely to be formed in Nov-Dec 2023, will likely face the same dilemmas as detailed above.
- The **Pakistan's Military** appears to be not in a position to **mount counter-TTP operations at a scale, as in 2014**, given the present Politico-Military and socio-economic turmoil and the extreme **resource constraints**. A *Pakistan in turmoil would likely incentivise more terror and militancy in Pakistan, raising the risk of some territory being controlled by TTP and used for launching trans-national attacks, which would have serious repercussions*.
- However, Pakistan does have a range of choices in the tool-kit. It may resort to coercive acts on the kin and assets of Taliban/TTP in Pakistan. It may resort to calibrated **closure of border crossings** to pressurise the Taliban. *Pakistan can also apply pressure with diplomatic manoeuvres, downplaying Taliban's recognition, leveraging its relations with China, which appears better placed to coerce the Afghan Taliban, than the US.*

JULY 15-31 2023

AFGHANISTAN WATCH

- Should any faction of the TTP execute collaborative external operations from Pakistan's soil, it would likely draw a policy and operational international response, including from the US. Pakistan may then coordinate its strategies with the US.
- The bottomline is that the Taliban's assumption of power in Kabul, underwritten and hailed by Pakistan as an unprecedented triumph, has soured as a **pyrrhic victory in no time**. The future trajectory of Afghan-Taliban and Pakistan relations will be one of heightened tensions, with the TTP playing a pivotal role in the foreseeable future.



Source: *The Wire*

By
Lt Gen Sunil Srivastava, AVSM, VSM (Retd)**
Director, CENJOWS