

Strategic and Geopolitical Shifts: Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan's surging Resilience and India's Security Calculus

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Abstract

Since 2021, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has transformed into a formidable force despite continuous pressure from the Pakistan Government. With strategic mergers, expanded support, and novel tactics, the TTP intensified attacks on Pakistan's security forces and Chinese projects in Pakistan. The Afghan Taliban's rise further strengthened the TTP, providing sanctuary and support, leading to an influx of fighters and suicide bombers. India faces regional destabilisation risks, necessitating recalibrated military strategies to protect her national interests. Balancing safeguarding interests and avoiding instability demands a sophisticated geopolitical response. For India's regional stability, vigilance, strategic acumen, and prudent military measures are crucial in navigating the complex dynamics between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the evolving terror landscape.

Introduction

Amidst the geopolitical landscape of Afghanistan and Pakistan, a remarkable transformation has unfolded since 2021, witnessing Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) emerge as a formidable force, resiliently countering transnational terror groups and evading the Government of Pakistan's relentless raids. The TTP has significantly enhanced its operational prowess by employing strategic mergers, bolstering its support base, and adopting novel

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tactics. Firmly entrenched within Afghanistan, and now extending its influence into Pakistan, the TTP has amplified its assault on Pakistani security forces and critical Chinese infrastructure projects in Pakistan.

In July 2023, the 32nd report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team released a report to the UN Security Council (UNSC) that focused on 'ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaeda, and associated individuals and entities'. The report highlights Afghanistan's ongoing significance as a global terrorism hotspot, hosting around 20 terrorist groups. Notably, the Afghan Taliban's rise to power has empowered the TTP, allowing them to exploit their presence in Afghanistan to conduct operations within Pakistan. The TTP's objectives include regaining control of Pakistani territory, focusing on high-value targets near the border and soft targets in urban areas.¹

An intriguing development lies in the visible patronage and alliance extended to the TTP by the Afghan Taliban.² Initially, Pakistani authorities anticipated that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan would constrain the TTP's threat, assuming that the Taliban would rein in their influence. Contrarily, the TTP appears emboldened by the Taliban's ascension to power, burgeoning in strength. The Taliban leadership granted political asylum and unhindered mobility within Afghanistan to senior TTP figures and fighters, previously incarcerated by the Afghan Government, providing them a sanctuary to orchestrate their violent campaign within Pakistan.³

The resurgence of the Afghan Taliban regime attracted a significant influx of Pakistani militants, manifesting an unwavering resolve to overthrow the Pakistani state. Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, the Emir of TTP, lauded the Taliban's triumph and pledged allegiance to Emir Haibatullah Akhundzada and unconditional support to the Afghan Taliban's cause. In tandem, the TTP asserted its demand for a semi-autonomous status for the tribal belt, striving to implement Sharia law as its guiding principle.⁴ Compounding the situation is the deep-seated commitment of several Afghan Taliban members to support the TTP's jihad against Pakistan, fuelled by tribal, ethnic, ideological, and personal affiliations that took root during the decades of insurgency in Afghanistan. Scores of Afghan Taliban fighters have volunteered to augment the TTP's

ranks, offering themselves as suicide bombers and foot soldiers in their crusade against Pakistan.

In this rapidly evolving strategic landscape, India finds itself at a critical juncture, compelled to recalibrate its military calculations to safeguard its national interests. As the TTP's influence expands, so does the potential for destabilising the region. India's military must meticulously assess this evolving scenario, anticipating the ramifications of a strengthened TTP and its affiliations with the Afghan Taliban. The implications are manifold and demand a comprehensive strategic response. India must proactively engage in sophisticated geopolitical manoeuvres to mitigate risks while capitalising on opportunities that arise amidst the TTP's rise. The delicate balancing act requires astute military decision-making, deftly treading the fine line between safeguarding Indian interests and avoiding further regional destabilisation.

As the situation evolves, India must monitor the fluid dynamics closely, ready to adapt its strategies to a rapidly changing landscape. The resurgence of the TTP and its nexus with the Afghan Taliban warrant India's vigilance as it seeks to preserve stability and secure its geopolitical standing in the region. Prudent military measures and strategic acumen will play a pivotal role in defining India's position amidst the interlocking dynamics of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the ever-shifting terror landscape.

Growth of TTP

The growth of TTP can be explained under five sub-categories, as follows:

- **Merger and Expansion.** Till July 2023, there were a total of 36 terror groups which had earlier split from core TTP but have rejoined the group back. The TTP has strategically merged with various militant groups, strengthening its ranks and operational capabilities. The return of the Afghan Taliban in 2021, and their opposition to foreign militants on Afghan soil, led to TTP volunteers returning to Pakistan, boosting the group's influence. The merger provided the TTP with battle-hardened militants and expanded its geographical presence, particularly in southern Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province. Additionally, regaining control of north Waziristan further solidified the TTP's position and support base.⁵

- **Centralisation and Command Structure.** To address fragmentation issues, the TTP adopted a centralised command structure. The central leadership retains control over appointments and established shadow province leaders accountable to the main cabinet. This hierarchical system allows for better coordination and operational effectiveness, streamlining the TTP's activities.
- **Revisiting Objectives.** The TTP shifted its focus from regional and global ambitions to a local agenda, exploiting grievances within Pakistan to legitimise its jihad. The TTP aimed to gain sustained support for its war against the Pakistan Government by localising its operations and limiting attacks on civilians. This shift was influenced by the success of the Afghan Taliban, showing that limiting their agenda could enhance their operations and chances of success.⁶
- **Rise in Operational Activities.** The TTP's reformation led to increased operational attacks, focusing on targeting Pakistan's security forces. The group acquired sophisticated weaponry after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, further bolstering its capabilities. Adopting a centralised suicide bombing brigade allowed the TTP to expand its reach beyond tribal areas, infiltrating major urban centres in Pakistan.
- **Reformed Role of Media.** The TTP's media channel, Umar Media, has become more prolific, with improved production quality. Utilising a multilingual approach, the TTP's propaganda targets various communities, linking their anti-state war narrative with highlighting socio-political grievances. By appealing to diverse audiences through regional languages, Umar Media strengthens the TTP's influence and garners support for its cause.⁷

Implications

The TTP's comprehensive reformation has made it a more formidable threat to Pakistan's security and stability. The group's increased operational activities, with focus on urban areas, indicate its ability to strike at the heart of the country. Moreover, the TTP's nexus with other terrorist organisations, like Al Qaeda, and its alliances with various militant groups pose risks to regional security. The TTP's alignment with the Afghan Taliban, and the

latter's takeover of Afghanistan, has provided the former with sanctuary and freedom of movement, enabling it to intensify attacks within Pakistan's. This development raises concerns about Pakistan and Afghanistan's security challenges from transnational terrorist groups operating in the region.

Addressing the TTP threat requires a multifaceted approach, including counter-terrorism efforts, intelligence sharing, border security, and handling grievances within marginalised communities. Cooperation between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and other regional stakeholders is crucial to effectively combatting the TTP and its affiliated groups.

Thus, the TTP's comprehensive reformation and growth since 2021 have made it a significant security threat in the region. Its strategic mergers, centralisation, revisited objectives, increased operational activities, and sophisticated media propaganda contribute to its resilience and expansion. Combating the TTP's menace requires a coordinated and comprehensive approach to ensure stability and security in the wider region.

Consequences of TTP's Merger and Expansions

The TTP's restructuring and expansion significantly affects the regional stability and future developments. On 30 Jan 2023, a devastating suicide attack at the Peshawar police headquarters, claiming over 100 lives, marked the deadliest act of terrorism in Pakistan since the 2014 Army Public School attack. While the TTP tried to distance itself from the attack, doubts persist about the sincerity of its new policies and internal support for them. Nevertheless, despite such attacks, the TTP's leadership remains committed to its reform initiatives. This attack also underscores the role of the Afghan Taliban in the conflict between the TTP and the Pakistani state. The Taliban's interim foreign minister denies the existence of terrorist sanctuaries in Afghanistan, but tensions persist, with Pakistan accusing the TTP of planning attacks from Afghan soil. The TTP's current trajectory indicates a strategic shift under its leader, Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, focusing on gaining territorial control over the tribal belt adjacent to Afghanistan rather than seeking an Afghan Taliban-style victory in Pakistan.

As the TTP continues to escalate violence, particularly in urban areas, Pakistan's military and intelligence leadership may

face domestic political pressure to reassess their approach. Cross-border military action, including covert assassination attempts and drone strikes, may be employed to exert pressure on the TTP. Pakistan could also attempt to divide the TTP by offering incentives and targeting critical nodes within the group to encourage moderates to distance themselves from hardline leaders.

Afghan Taliban's Role and Decisions

The role of the Afghan Taliban in mediating between Pakistan and the TTP is crucial as the stalemate persists. The Taliban faces a delicate balancing act as they seek international acceptance for their governance while upholding their alliance with the TTP. Internal politics within the Taliban, including support for the TTP from certain factions, influences the group's approach to deal with the TTP. The Taliban's stand on the TTP's demands will play a significant role in mediation. While they generally support the TTP's aspiration for a Shariah-based order in Pakistan, specific negotiating points need clarification. Some elements within the Taliban may have reservations about accommodating the TTP's demands due to concerns about potential risks and challenges from anti-Taliban factions like ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K).

The Taliban's decisions as a mediator will have implications for regional stability and security. Their outreach to India reflects efforts to diversify international partnerships, potentially reducing their reliance on Pakistan. The growing aspiration of having closer ties with India could be a driver for how the Taliban approaches managing relations with the TTP.

Pakistan's Political Landscape and Leadership

The upcoming general elections in Pakistan will influence the future role of the Taliban as a mediator. The military's negotiations with the TTP and potential constitutional changes to facilitate a settlement may raise questions within Pakistan's political landscape. While political elites generally align with the military's priorities, some parties, like the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), may have reservations about a settlement with the TTP due to historical grievances. Regarding Imran Khan, his stance on not resorting to military action against the TTP or seeking assistance from the US may be an attempt to appease both, the TTP and the Afghan Taliban. His criticism of the national security policy aligns with the TTP's view on Washington's security cooperation with Islamabad.

However, such stances may also impact the government's efforts to develop a consensus on dealing with the TTP.

Thus, the TTP's merger and expansion have far-reaching consequences for regional stability. The role of the Afghan Taliban as a mediator and Pakistan's political landscape, and leadership decisions, will shape the regional politics, stability, and security dynamics.

Policy Options for India: A Fresh Approach

Before formulating any strategy, India must carefully assess whether affecting itself with the TTP, primarily Pakistan's domestic problem, aligns with its interests. India must clearly define its aims and objectives if it decides to engage. Considering the complexities of the situation and the key players involved, India has several policy options to consider as elucidated below:

Positive Aspects

- **Utilising Turbulence in Pakistan.** The prevailing turmoil in Pakistan could work in India's favour as it allows the country to focus on targeting the Pakistani establishment and its armed forces, which are critical concerns for India.
- **Weakening Pakistan's Control.** The rise of the TTP weakens Pakistan Government's control in areas where the group holds sway, thus reducing the presence of Pakistan's military.
- **Slowing Development in Pakistan.** Continued instability may hinder Pakistan's development projects, leading to frustration and grievances among its citizens.
- **Highlighting the Consequences of Terrorism.** India can leverage the TTP situation to emphasise the self-destructive nature of breeding terrorism, especially in Pakistan.

Challenges

- **Terrorism Spillover.** A rise in terrorist activities in Pakistan could spill over across Indian borders, particularly in Jammu and Kashmir, posing security threats.
- **Enhanced Pakistan-China Collaboration.** Instability in Pakistan might lead to her increased dependency on China, potentially enhancing collusive threat to India's northern border.

- **Impact on Financial Action Task Force (FATF) Measures.** Pakistan might exploit the TTP challenge to plead for leniency from the FATF, affecting efforts to maintain pressure on the country.
- **Blaming India.** Pakistan may continue to blame India for the TTP issue, complicating diplomatic efforts.

India's Strategic Trajectory

To safeguard its interests and address the challenges, India should adopt a multifaceted approach, such as:

- **Strengthen Border Security.** India must closely monitor the borders in Jammu and Kashmir and respond firmly to any aggression from Pakistan.
- **Diplomatic Engagement.** Establish communication with the Afghan Taliban to influence the TTP to avoid targeting India and its bordering states with Pakistan.
- **Engaging with Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) and Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA).** Initiate communication channels with PTM and BLA members to maintain influence and control within the TTP.
- **Cordial Relations with Afghan Taliban.** Foster positive relations with the Afghan Taliban and urge them to deny their territory as a launchpad for Pakistani terror groups targeting India.
- **Information Warfare.** Amplify tensions between the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan over issues like the Durand Line to divert Pakistan's focus inward.
- **Leveraging International Forums.** Continuously raise Pakistan's association with terrorism in international forums, including the UN, SAARC, ASEAN, BIMSTEC, BRICS, G20, and G7.
- **Collaboration on Financial Flows.** Work with FATF and G20 to trace cross-border financial flows involving Pakistan.
- **Sanctions and Asset Freeze.** Impose sanctions on Pakistan, close airspace for their trade, and through back-channel diplomacy, try freezing assets abroad of Pakistani officials and politicians.
- **Diplomatic Pressure.** Urge friendly countries and allies to boycott Made-in-Pakistan products and reduce dependence on Pakistani labour.

- **Diplomatic Bargaining.** Use diplomatic channels to pressure countries like Algeria, Mauritania, and Libya to cut defence and civil deals with Pakistan.

Conclusion

While the precarious situation in Pakistan with the rising TTP poses significant challenges, it also presents opportunities for India if it adopts a realist approach. A realistic assessment of the evolving geopolitical landscape can enable India to craft a nuanced strategy that safeguards its national interests and enhances its regional standing.

By closely monitoring the developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan, India can identify potential areas of cooperation and engagement with various stakeholders, including the Afghan Taliban, to influence the TTP's activities and deter any direct threats to Indian security. Open communication and diplomatic channels can be utilised to convey India's concerns and interests while urging restraint and cooperation from the regional players.

While navigating the complexities of the Afghanistan-Pakistan region demands prudence and foresight, India's realist approach can transform the precarious situation into an opportunity. By calibrating its military, strategic, and geopolitical responses effectively, India can safeguard its interests, promote regional stability, and strengthen its position as a responsible and influential actor in the South Asian context. Therefore, India's approach should be calculated, measured, and adapted to changing circumstances to protect its interests effectively.

Endnotes

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