

PAKISTAN INTERNAL SECURITY REMAINS OFF THE RAILS

By

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Introduction

On 11 Apr while the Jaffar Express, a train that journeys once a week from Quetta to Peshawar was travelling through the rugged mountains of Balochistan it suddenly came under attack in the Bolan Pass. Amongst its passengers were military personnel of 12 Corps and Pakistan's prestigious Staff College who apparently travel in civilian clothes for fear of being targeted.

Members of the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) exploded an improvised explosive device and brought the train to a halt before storming the carriages and taking passengers hostage. Thereafter, Pakistan's security forces were locked in a tense standoff with the terrorists in one of the most brazen attacks Pakistan has ever witnessed.¹

Under Operation Green Bolan which lasted over 36 hours Pakistan's military's Media Wing claimed that 354 hostages had been rescued while 33 terrorists involved in the attack were killed. However, 26 hostages lost their lives, including 18 military and Frontier Corps personnel, three railway employees, and five civilians.

The casualty count could rise, as 37 of the rescued hostages sustained injuries and are being treated at hospitals according to Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) Director General Lieutenant General Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry.

As per their reports, the hostages were released in three phases: first, a group of Baloch locals was freed by the terrorists after ethnic profiling, in what the Director General of ISPR termed a 'Deceptive Perception Manoeuvre'.

The second group escaped when Frontier Corps snipers created an opportunity for them to flee, although a couple of passengers lost their lives when terrorists fired at them.

The third and final group was rescued during the clearance operation by the Special Services Group (SSG), which successfully neutralised the remaining terrorists aboard the train. No hostages were killed during the final assault, he said.

The Global Terrorism Index (GTI) 2025 now ranks Pakistan as the world's second most terrorism-affected country, after Burkina Faso. According to the report, terrorism-related deaths surged by 45 per cent in 2024 to 1,081, while attacks more than doubled from 517 to 1,099.²

Groups such as the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and separatist outfits such as the BLA have intensified their campaigns, exploiting the nation's deepening economic

instability and political turmoil following the ouster of former Prime Minister (PM) Imran Khan in 2022.³

The fall of Kabul in 2021 and the subsequent return of the Taliban to Afghanistan have emboldened terror outfits, including the TTP, while also fueling violence from the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). At the same time, Pakistan's growing alliance with China has strained its relations with the US, leading to a decline in American support.

Recent Incidents

However, this is no isolated incident with several others standing out for their scale, sophistication, and lethality. The escalating insurgency has exposed Pakistan's weakening grip over its restive provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, as both terrorists and separatist groups grow bolder.

On 04 Mar two suicide bombers affiliated with the Hafiz Gul Bahadur group, a North Waziristan-based terror outfit, drove vehicles packed with explosives into a military base in KP's Bannu District.⁴ The attackers subsequently stormed the compound, resulting in at least eighteen deaths, including five soldiers, and numerous injuries.⁵ A day earlier, on 03 Mar, a female suicide bomber of the BLA targeted a security forces' convoy in Balochistan's Kalat, leading to the death a paramilitary soldier and injuring four others.⁶

Before that, the Baloch Raji Aajoi Sangar (BRAS), an umbrella grouping of Baloch insurgent organisations, announced plans to "Intensify the blockade on all important highways of Balochistan to disrupt the logistical, economic, and military interests of the state".⁷

Last month, a suicide bombing targeted a Mosque within the Darul Uloom Haqqania seminary in KP's Nowshera District, an institution historically linked to the Taliban leadership in Afghanistan. The attack killed six, including the seminary's Vice Principal and former Senator Maulana Hamidul Haq. On 19 Feb seven labourers hailing from Punjab were killed aboard a bus en route Lahore.⁸

These are some of the major incidents that made headlines in the last month alone which reflect the evolving tactics of terror outfits, their growing brazenness, and their increasing operational capabilities.

Baloch groups, particularly the BLA and Baloch Liberation Front (BLF), have significantly escalated their insurgency in 2024, targeting Pakistani security forces, infrastructure, and foreign investments. Their operations have intensified, with attacks surging from 116 in 2023 to 504 in 2024, while deaths quadrupling from 88 to 388, according to the terrorism index.⁹

The Usual Statements

A day after the hijacking of the Jaffar Express ended¹⁰, Pakistan's PM Shehbaz Sharif went to Quetta to take stock of matters. He reiterated the need for national unity at

this time of crisis, and acknowledged that the lack of development in Balochistan was an obstacle to eliminating terrorism.¹¹ The Foreign Office, meanwhile, reaffirmed the military's earlier assertion that the train hijacking had been coordinated from Afghanistan, while adding that "India is ... sponsoring terrorism" in Pakistan.

Earlier, Pakistan had repeatedly been raising concerns about the Afghan Taliban's lack of action regarding TTP sanctuaries in Afghanistan.¹² Now, it feels that BLA terrorists are being allowed to entrench themselves across the border and plan attacks on Pakistan. The Pakistani Government blaming the Taliban has stated that unless action is taken against all anti-Pakistan terrorists on Afghan soil, bilateral ties will not improve.

Relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have been strained due to frequent border skirmishes and Islamabad repeatedly demanding that Kabul take action against the banned TTP for using Afghan soil to launch attacks in Pakistan. Kabul denies the allegations.^{13,14} Though there is no doubt the pull out of the US from Afghanistan has resulted in weapons falling into the hands of these groups.

Speaking during the UN Security Council (UNSC) on 14 March, Pakistan's Permanent Representative to the UN Ambassador Munir Akram stated: "Pakistan will continue to take all necessary measures to eliminate the terrorist threats to our national security in accordance with our right to self-defence".

He asserted that the Taliban had "Failed to address the threat posed to the region and beyond by other terrorist groups, such as Al-Qaeda, the TTP and Baloch terrorists, including the BLA and the Majeed Brigade, which are present in Afghanistan. The TTP also receives external support and financing from our principal adversary," the envoy said in an apparent reference to India.¹⁵

Lt Gen Sharif, the DG ISPR, linked the attack to Afghanistan, stating that the hijackers were in constant communication with their handlers across the border but also said that "In this terrorist incident in Balochistan, and others before, the main sponsor is your eastern neighbour". He of course offered no proof to support the accusation.

The Indian government has categorically rejected Pakistan's allegations. "We reject the baseless accusations made by Pakistan. The whole world knows where the epicentre of global terrorism is. Pakistan should look within itself instead of blaming others for its internal problems and failures," Indian Ministry of External Affairs Spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said.

Afghanistan also denied any connection between the attackers and its territory. "Pakistan should focus on its security and resolving its internal issues instead of making irresponsible statements," a statement from Kabul read.

Conclusion

With terror networks expanding and state authority eroding, Pakistan's security challenges are reaching a breaking point. Pakistan while feeling the pinch of terrorism in

its West and making cliched statements alleging the role of India, it has done exactly the opposite when it comes to its Eastern border with India in Jammu & Kashmir and Punjab.

The question now is whether the government can reclaim control or will the insurgency further spiral out of hand. Instead of showing any empathy and compassion to the Balouch people Pakistan has gone for a hammer and tongs approach.

While there is a visible security angle to the Balochistan crisis, at its heart it is a political problem, which needs a political solution. Anything that allow the ranks of separatists to increase as a result of recruiters exploiting state-created circumstances also needs to be addressed.

The current round of insurgency in Balochistan has raged for almost two decades, and was triggered by the regime of General Pervez Musharraf, who, had announced 'they won't know what hit them'. Unfortunately, Pakistan does not know what has hit them.

Endnotes

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