

## Gwadar Attack: Exposes Fault Lines in Pakistan

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### Introduction

The attack on Gwadar's Port Authority Complex on 20 Mar 2024, is yet another reminder of the grim trajectory of militancy in Pakistan. Within days of a major terrorist attack in North Waziristan, in which seven Pakistan Army soldiers, including two officers were killed, militants targeted a facility which houses government offices, including those of security agencies.

On 18 Mar, between the two attacks, Pakistan Air Force had conducted strikes on multiple targets in the Spera District of Khost Province (KP) and Barmal District of Paktika Province, in Afghanistan. The Pakistan Foreign Office had issued a press release stating that in addition to the outlawed Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), commanders of the Hafiz Gul Bahadur Network were also the 'Prime Targets' of these airstrikes.

The Majeed Brigade, affiliated with the banned Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), claimed responsibility for the attack. The lethal Guerilla Cell Majeed Brigade formed in 2011, is named after a guard of former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who was killed while attempting to assassinate the Pakistan People's Party founder. It is known for mostly targeting security forces and Chinese interests in Pakistan.[\[1\]](#)

A press release from the Inter Services Public Relations said that "A group of eight terrorists attempted to enter the Port Authority Colony but were successfully thwarted by security forces personnel. Own troops employed for security responded immediately and effectively engaged the terrorists, and in ensuing fire exchange, all eight terrorists were sent to hell".[\[2\]](#)

They also reported the death of two Pakistani soldiers in the attack while stating that Security Forces in Pakistan "Remain determined to thwart attempts at sabotaging peace and stability of Balochistan".

In yet another incident on 21 Mar two soldiers were killed after a suicide bomber struck a military convoy on Tank Road, in, Dera Ismail Khan. It is reported the attack also injured at least 22 personnel. These incidents reveal that far from being neutralised; separatist militants remain a potent threat in Pakistan.

### Previous Incidents

This is not the first time Gwadar and its environs have been targeted by insurgents. Here, separatism and geopolitics combine in a lethal cocktail, as militants target Chinese interests in what is supposed to be the 'Jewel in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) Crown'.

The luxury Pearl Continental Hotel was attacked in 2019, also by the BLA, with the terrorist group saying it had targeted the facility as it was hosting "Chinese and other foreign investors".[\[3\]](#) Even Confucius Institute, a Chinese institute inside Karachi University was hit in a deadly attack in 2022, in which the Director was killed.

Even though Gwadar is reported to be under a security blanket, to protect Chinese nationals and others associated with CPEC projects in Balochistan, the militants are able to strike at will. In fact, some analysts have pointed to the 'Working Relationship' between religiously inspired militant groups such as the TTP, and Baloch separatist outfits, including the BLA.

This nexus can compromise the fragile security situation existing in KP and Balochistan, especially if both sets of militants have bases in the countries neighbouring these provinces. After the Gwadar attack the Chief Minister of Balochistan Sarfraz Bugti said that whoever uses violence “Will see no mercy from the state”.

### **Significance of Gwadar**

Gwadar is the centrepiece of the multibillion-dollar CPEC, Pakistan’s most ambitious infrastructure and investment project.

Gwadar Port is a strategically important naval base and outpost that Pakistan is providing to China. China's interest in the Port has implications for the maritime security architecture of South Asia. The development of the Gwadar Port is a good indicator of the steady expansion of Chinese maritime interests and strategic influence in India's neighbourhood. Being only 180 nm from the exit of the Straits of Hormuz, Gwadar, enables control over the world energy jugular and interdiction of tankers.

Striking Gwadar has immense geopolitical significance, as such attacks are designed to scare away whatever investment and economic activities are being carried out in the coastal city as also reveal the vulnerability of CPEC.

### **The Taliban Threat**

The Taliban’s takeover of Kabul in Aug 2021 was welcomed as a ‘Victory of the forces of Islam’ against another superpower, this time the US, by many in Pakistan. Then Prime Minister Imran Khan, had commended the Afghan people on “Breaking the shackles of slavery” by militarily overthrowing the Ashraf Ghani government.

The Inter Services Intelligence Chief had even travelled to Kabul in Sep 2021, and it was reported that Pakistan was negotiating a ceasefire with the banned TTP. At that time, Lt Gen Faiz Hameed had remarked to a Western journalist "Don't worry, everything will be okay".

But Pakistan continued to suffer relentless terror attacks, the responsibility for which was claimed by other terrorist groups and not TTP throughout 2021 and 2022 in spite of the mediation by the Afghan Taliban. By the end of Nov 2022, TTP announced the end of their ceasefire with Pakistan, and ordered their operatives to conduct attacks whenever and wherever they could. This vicious trend continued throughout 2023, with many attacks and casualties.

Despite Pakistan’s desire to have a favourable relation with the Taliban Government after it came to power, tension between the sides rose as attacks grew, and 2023 was among the bloodiest years in recent Pakistani history, with more than 650 attacks across the country, killing nearly 1,000 people.<sup>[4]</sup>

Pakistan has accused the Afghan Taliban, of providing safe haven to terrorists associated with the TTP, who are based in the border regions of Afghanistan and use it as a launching pad for strikes in Pakistan. The Taliban denies that it hosts Pakistani militants and other international jihadists.

Pakistan has failed to realise that there is no distinction between a ‘Good’ and a ‘Bad’ terrorist”. A militant organisation can only be defeated by a coherent national strategy and an effective tactical and operational approach to internal security and border security. There is no place for ambiguity and nurturing of some terrorist organisations. Unfortunately, a lack of cohesion

continues to prevent Pakistan from dealing with the terror threat and also preventing this from metamorphosing into a conventional threat from the present Afghan government.

### **Issues That Need Addressing**

Military operations are largely tactical in nature, and hence can reduce terrorist incidents in the shorter term; therefore, military operations need to be backed by strategic plans carried through by all agencies of the government for a long-term solution.

Along with the security dimension, the socio-political and economic aspects of the insurgency must also be examined to include educational reforms and job creation. Balochistan is Pakistan's poorest province, despite being rich in natural resources, including oil, coal, gold, copper and gas reserves. Poverty and deprivation in Balochistan need to be addressed if the issue of separatism is to be tackled successfully.

Foreign investment is direly required but the fruits of these projects whether CPEC-related, mining schemes, or others needs to reach the people of Balochistan. Furthermore, issues such as enforced disappearances, and miserable health and education indicators cannot be ignored and must be given priority.

The Durand Line which cuts through Pashtun and Baluch ethnicities fuels differences with Afghanistan and continues to be a source of tension. The fencing of this line and the Taliban 2.0 have now brought these tensions to the fore, Pakistan has now realised that its security lay diminished due to the presence of the US troops in Afghanistan but now it is being forced to address the security issues on its western borders.

Poverty, deprivation and the state's apparent disinterest in the welfare of the populations of both Balochistan and KP, have contributed to swelling the militants' ranks.

Unless these contributory factors are addressed in earnest, eradicating separatism will be very difficult, and militants will continue to exploit internal weaknesses.

### **Conclusion**

Confronted by the complexities of an increasing wave of terrorist violence Pakistan needs to review their policies. They can also no longer afford to support extremist groups who are supportive of Islamabad's foreign policy towards India. This convoluted policy of incessant support to terrorism had led Hillary Clinton to remark "You can't keep snakes in your backyard and expect them to only bite your neighbour."

Further, Pakistan's approach ignored the affiliations between the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban. After the US-North Atlantic Treaty Organisation withdrawal from Afghanistan, the jihadist ecosystem of Afghanistan is now targeting Pakistan. Tit-for-tat actions could further destabilise two fragile nations, but hostilities are presently unlikely to spill over into a broader conflict.

Pakistan faces threats of rising Islamic extremism but is reluctant to face up to how these 'Threats are internally rather than externally driven'. Pakistan must realise that playing with fire can also cause burns and hence it needs to come down on all forms of terrorism in a concerted manner.

### **Endnotes**

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[1] Sasoli, Ismail, Tahir Khan, and Iftikhar Shirazi. "2 Soldiers Martyred, 8 Terrorists Killed in Attack on Gwadar Port Authority Complex: ISPR." DAWN.COM, March 20, 2024. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1822759>.

[2] Attack on Gwadar Port Authority complex kills two Pakistani soldiers and eight Baloch terrorists, The telegraph India, March 21, 2024 <https://www.telegraphindia.com/world/two-pakistan-army-soldiers-and-eight-baloch-terrorists-killed-in-attack-on-gwadar-port-authority-complex/cid/2008310>

[3] Nabeel, Fahad. "Gwadar Hotel Attack: The Revival of Balochistan's Ethno-Nationalist Insurgency?" Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research, August 2, 2019. <https://cscr.pk/explore/region/asia/gwadar-hotel-attack-the-revival-of-balochistans-ethno-nationalist-insurgency/>.

[4] Hussain, Abid. "Cousins at War': Pakistan-Afghan Ties Strained after Cross-Border Attacks." Al Jazeera, March 20, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/19/cousins-at-war-pakistan-afghan-ties-strained-after-cross-border-attacks>.

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