

## **Iran's Hitting of Its Nuclear-Armed Eastern Neighbour is a Dramatic Escalation**

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Iran launched attacks in Pakistan on 16 Jan targeting what it described as bases for the militant group Jaish al-Adl in the Border Town of Panjgur in Balochistan. This strike came a day after Iran's Revolutionary Guards attacked targets in Iraq and Syria with missiles.

Iran's news agency Tansim stated that, "Two key strongholds of the Jaysh al-Dhulm (Jaish al-Adl) terrorist group in Pakistan" were "Specifically targeted and successfully demolished by a combination of missile and drone attacks".<sup>1</sup> Turbat and Panjgur are reportedly the two places targeted. Tansim reported that the "Focal point of this operation was the region known as Kouh-Sabz" (green mountain) in Balochistan. The village is about 45 km from the Iranian border and 90km from the nearest town Panjgur. The area is described as a sparsely populated area home to livestock-owning Baloch tribes where smuggling of goods, drugs and weapons is rampant.

Jaish al-Adl had previously attacked Iranian Security Forces in the border area with Pakistan. The Jaish al-Adl, or the 'Army of Justice', is the 'Most active and influential' Sunni militant group operating in Sistan-Baluchistan. It is also designated as a terrorist group by Washington and Tehran.<sup>2</sup>

The Iranian attack in Pakistan follows strikes on Iraq and Syria less than a day earlier, as Tehran lashed out, following a dual suicide bombing this month claimed by the Sunni militant group Islamic State that killed over ninety people.

### **Adding to the Multiple Crisis Across the Region**

On 03 Jan, Iran suffered its worst domestic attack when two bombs killed 84 people at a ceremony in Kerman to commemorate the US assassination of Iran's Revolutionary Guard General, Qasem Soleimani.<sup>3</sup>

In retaliation on 15 Jan, Iran fired ballistic missiles at Syria and Kurdish-controlled Northern Iraq. Iran said it was targeting Islamic State and Israel's Mossad, both of whom it said had been involved in the Kerman bombings.<sup>4</sup>

The strike on Iraq hit a building in Irbil. Four civilians were killed and six hurt in the attack. The United States condemned the attack. Iran then struck Syria's North-Western Idlib province, which is the last remaining opposition stronghold in the country and home to 2.9 mn displaced people.

Pakistan and Iran have a delicate relationship. Both have accused one another of harbouring militant groups that carry out attacks on the other in their border areas for years.

Security on either side of their shared border, which runs for about 900km has been a long-running concern for both countries.

### **Pakistan's Reactions**

Pakistan strongly condemned the unprovoked violation of its airspace by Iran, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs saying that the strike inside Pakistani territory killed two children and injured three girls.

"This violation of Pakistan's sovereignty is completely unacceptable and can have serious consequences", the Ministry said in a statement but did not mention the location of the attacks.

As per reports a missile hit a Mosque, partially damaging it and injuring some people. In its statement, the 'Ministry of Foreign Affairs' said "The violation of Pakistan's sovereignty is completely unacceptable and can have serious consequences".

Calling it an 'illegal act', the statement said it took place despite the existence of several channels of communication between Pakistan and Iran. Pakistan lodged a strong protest with Tehran, while the Iranian Chargé d'Affaires had been called to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to convey the "Strongest condemnation of this blatant violation".<sup>5</sup>

However, Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, speaking in Davos, insisted that no Pakistani citizens had been targeted, only members of Jaish al-Adl. "We only targeted Iranian terrorists on the soil of Pakistan", Mr Amir-Abdollahian said.

He added that he had spoken to his Pakistani counterpart and "Assured him that we do respect sovereignty and territorial integrity of Pakistan and Iraq".<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, Islamabad has recalled its Ambassador to Iran and said that the Iranian Ambassador would not be allowed back into the country for the time being.

### **Talking and Striking**

Confrontations between terrorists and security forces are common along the Pakistan-Iran border, which often result in the loss of both Pakistani and Iranian personnel.

Surprisingly this strike coincided with a meeting between Iranian Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, and Anwaar ul Haq Kakar, the caretaker Prime Minister of Pakistan, during the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland and when both navies held drills together in the Gulf.

In Jul 2023, Pakistan Army Chief, General Asim Munir, visited Iran. He met the Iranian President and Foreign Minister, as well as Tehran's military hierarchy. Border security was a dominant theme during the visit.

As per an Inter Services Public Relations statement then, both sides 'vowed to eradicate the menace of terrorism' along the common border by sharing intelligence and enhancing cooperation. This was the second high-level exchange between the leaderships of both countries, as Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and President Ebrahim Raisi had met in May to inaugurate the Mand-Pishin 'border sustenance market'. President Raisi again reiterated the need for "Safe economic borders" during his meeting with General Munir.<sup>7</sup>

However, the world has changed to a substantial degree after the 07 Oct attack by the Hamas in Israel. Iran's proxies in the form of the three H's, Hamas, Hezbollah, and Houthi's have been hyperactive thereafter.

On 15 Dec Jaish al-Adl attacked a Police Station in Rask, a town close to the border with Pakistan and killed eleven policemen. Soon after the attack, Iranian officials blamed weak Pakistani border control measures and claimed that militants had crossed from Pakistan to carry out the assault.<sup>8</sup>

### **Pakistan Realities**

This strike was not the first time that Iranian forces had hit inside Pakistan, but the attack was the deepest inside Pakistani territory. In 2021, Iran rescued two Iranian soldiers who were being

held hostage by Jaish al-Adl inside Pakistani territory. In 2017, the Pakistani Air Force had shot down an Iranian drone.

But these attacks have brought to light the fact that Iran is emboldened after the recent activities of their proxies in Israel, Lebanon, and Yemen. Syria and Iraq where the Shia regime is dependent on Iran to a large extent is also emboldened by the fact that Pakistan has a caretaker government and the country is in turmoil.

As per some reports, the missiles and drones were launched from Sirkan area of Iran. However, like Balakot, the Pakistan Army may only open the area to reporters after they have cleaned up the damage and claimed that no terrorists were killed.<sup>9</sup>

Retaliation by Pakistan which has numerous fault lines, its own internal political problems and is in the midst of a severe economic crisis has the risk of drawing into a conflict in West Asia against Iran which will have far reaching ramifications.

According to a statement by the Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Pakistan undertook a series of highly coordinated and specifically targeted precision military strikes and killed a number of terrorists during the Intelligence-based operation codenamed '*Marg Bar Sarmachar*' (death to guerilla fighters). The country is headed for Parliamentary Elections shortly, will find it difficult to be in a position to escalate the conflict militarily in view of its rapidly deteriorating situation.<sup>10</sup>

To quote Husain Haqqani, a former Pakistani Ambassador to the US "If Pakistan hits back, it risks getting drawn into Middle East conflicts it has avoided so far. If it does not retaliate, it will appear weak yet again, and that will have consequences for the prestige of its armed forces".<sup>11</sup>

No wonder China which has close relations with both countries has urged Pakistan and Iran to show "Restraint and avoid actions that would lead to an escalation of tension". Foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning added that Beijing saw the countries as "Close neighbours".

Whereas India said that Iran's missile attack on Pakistan "Is a matter between Iran and Pakistan. Insofar as India is concerned, we have an uncompromising position of zero tolerance towards terrorism. We understand actions that countries take in their self- defence", the Ministry of External Affairs said in an official statement.

## **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that Iran's hitting of its nuclear-armed Eastern neighbour is a dramatic escalation. But Pakistan's nuclear deterrence was clearly not a factor when Iran decided to strike at terror camps across the border. What stands out is that it did not bother to use its proxies but sent a message by using its own military perhaps sensing a weakness in Pakistan. While matters are unlikely to calm down soon, this is also something both countries would not like to escalate.

The activity of militant groups on both sides of the border is one of the biggest irritants in the bilateral relationship between Pakistan and Iran and both countries need to address this issue in a mature fashion to ensure the situation does not worsen further.

For Pakistan, its troubles on its Western borders are only increasing. It already faces security issues with the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, Islamic State Khorasan and its deteriorating relationship with the Afghan Taliban - a group it sheltered for decades. Now a new front has

been opened up with the Iranians resorting to targeting it directly with missiles and drones, which is going to further stretch their resources.

However, countries reserve the right to retaliate against terrorist groups and proxies supported by hostile states who have vitiated the atmosphere. Promoting and nurturing terrorists and extremists by state institutions is undoubtedly a failed policy that can backfire anytime. Hence, it is imperative that the leaders of both countries must reign in their proxies as plausible deniability is not elastic.

## Endnotes

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