

Al-Mizan to Azm-e-Istekham: Few Perceptible Dominant Trends

Colonel Varun Vijay Gidh, SM®

“A soft state can never gain the trust of investors”

- Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, Jul 2024

Abstract

The time period between the Taliban 1.0 and 2.0 regimes in Afghanistan has also witnessed multiple military kinetic operations undertaken by the Pakistani Armed Forces starting with ‘Al Mizan’ (Balance), often conducted under American or, more recently, Chinese pressure. Also, a new radical ethnic-religious mindset in the Af-Pak region has emerged as a significant security challenge, with immense strategic implications for stability in the Indian subcontinent. This article summarises some dominant and perceptible trends that require attention from policymakers, academia, and the wider strategic community in the region. Inter-alia, geoeconomics stands out as a key driver for Pakistan, alongside other political compulsions as it has recently announced the launch of the latest such operation aptly titled ‘Azm-e-Istekham’ (Quest for Stability).

Introduction

The euphoria in Pakistani strategic circles over the Taliban 2.0 regime in Afghanistan in 2021 was short-lived and has since turned into a nightmare, as the Pashtuns have never accepted the Durand Line. There is a view that Pakistani authorities found in the process of aggressive Islamisation initiated by the United States (US), an opportunity to blunt the tribal ethnic consciousness

®Colonel Varun Vijay Gidh, SM is an alumnus of Rashtriya Indian Military College, National Defence Academy, Indian Military Academy and Defence Services Staff College. He is from the PUNJAB REGIMENT of Infantry and has served in varied terrains along the nation's borders. He has also been part of United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon. His interests include travelling and reading.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CLIV, No. 638, October-December 2024.

among the Pashtuns—an identity that consistently threatens to draw the frontier population into the orbit of Pashtun nationalism promoted by Afghanistan.¹ This new radical ethnic-religious mindset has now become a significant security challenge with immense strategic implications for peace in the region. It represents a belief system or perspective that combines extreme ethnic ideology for Pashtun causes with religious Islamic convictions. Key characteristics of this mindset include exclusivity, polarisation, and the justification of violence.

A summary of the 10 major operations reluctantly undertaken by the Pakistan Armed Forces in the region to fight this challenge are tabulated below (Table 1).

The nature, scope, and trajectory of these operations have primarily involved the kinetic use of force by the Pakistani Armed Forces, largely concentrated in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) region, leading to a temporary restoration of peace and normalcy in the area of operations.

Name of Operation	Years	Region
Al-Mizan	2002 - 2006	North Waziristan, KP
Rah-e-Haq I, II and III	2007 - 2009	Swat Valley, KP
Eagle Swoop	2007	Darra Adam Khel, Kohat
Silence	2007	Lal Masjid, Islamabad
Khyber I-IV	2008	Khyber Agency, KP
SherDil	2008	Bajaur, KP
Rah-e-Nijat	2009	South Waziristan, KP
Rah-e-Raast	2009	Swat Valley, KP
Zarb-e-Azb (ZeA)	2014 - 2017	North Waziristan, KP
Raad-ul-Fasaad (RuF)	2017 - 2024	All States of Pakistan

Table 1

Source: Table compiled by the author from multiple sources

Concomitantly, 10 major terrorist strikes by Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its associates within Pakistan over the past decade are tabulated below (Table 2):

Target	Month and Year	Region
Karachi Airport	Jun 2014	Sindh
Gathering near Wagah Border	Nov 2014	Punjab
APS Peshawar	Dec 2014	KP
Easter Sunday Gathering in Lahore	Mar 2016	Punjab
Quetta Hospital	Aug 2016	Balochistan
Bannu Hostage Crisis	Dec 2022	KP
Mosque in Peshawar Police Lines	Jan 2023	KP
Jamaik Ulema-e-Islam(F) Political Rally	Jul 2023	KP
Mianwali Training Air Base	Nov 2023	Punjab
Chinese Engineers in Bisham	Mar 2024	KP

Table 2

Source: Table compiled by the author from multiple sources

Thus, the same scenario of Taliban 1.0, which refers to the initial period of Taliban rule in Afghanistan from 1996 until the US invasion in 2001, is now repeating itself. This theocratic rule was characterised by, inter alia, increased violence in KP. As suggested by Dr Arjun Behuria, a Senior Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, in his seminal work on the TTP, Pakistan-Afghanistan relations during the Taliban era only ensured reverse strategic depth for the Taliban and various Pro-Taliban groups emerged in the tribal belt and entrenched themselves in the local terrain since late 1990s.² While Pakistan has always sought ‘Strategic Depth’ in Afghanistan, a term popularised by former US Ambassador to Pakistan Richard Olson, the reverse is now being sought by the Taliban in conjunction with the TTP.

This journey from the Taliban 1.0 to 2.0 regime is graphically depicted below:

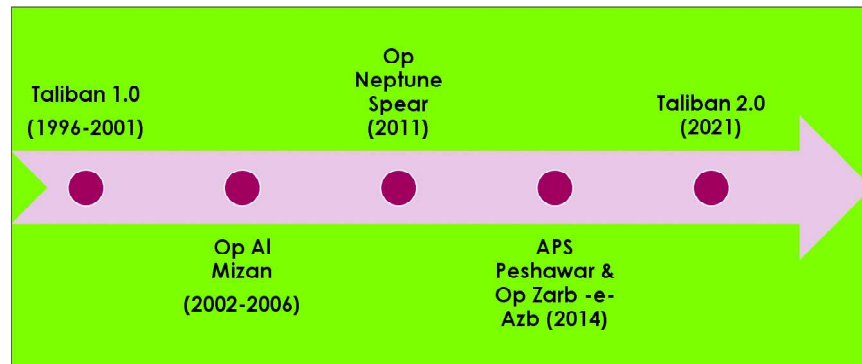


Image 1: Journey from Taliban 1.0 to 2.0

A few key perceptible dominant trends that have emerged since the first operation, *Al-Mizan*, up to the latest, *Azm-e-Istekham* (AeI), are enumerated in the succeeding paragraphs.

One: The Afghan Taliban Factor.

The Afghan Taliban emerged in the mid-1990s as a small group of Afghan religious students and scholars. By Sep 1996, they had captured Kabul and established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan with ideological underpinnings rooted in Pashtun nationalism. The perception of the Taliban can be divided into various perspectives and experiences, leading to distinctions often referred to as ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ Taliban. But this narrative of good versus bad Taliban is now irrelevant as the head of the Haqqani network is himself the Interior Minister in Taliban 2.0 regime.³ While a prompt response by the Pakistan Armed Forces was seen on the Iranian front in Jan 2024, targeting Baloch rebels, the same is not the norm with Afghanistan (although two such Pakistan Air Force [PAF] strikes were reported in Apr 2022 and Mar 2024). Pakistan is facing a dilemma of striking across the Durand Line as the Afghan Taliban and the TTP are joined at the hip and under no circumstances will the former take any action against the latter. Any pressure by security forces in the region will have a ballooning effect with large number of the TTP cadres moving to their safe sanctuaries in Afghanistan, as opined by retired cop Avinash Mohananey, an IPS Officer, in an article in The Economic Times.⁴ This was clearly evident during the so-called successful conduct of Operation ZeA

when the Inter-Service Public Relations (ISPR) claimed that 3,500 terrorists were killed.⁵ Yet, the TTP retaliated with the Lahore and Army Public School, Peshawar terrorist attacks in Nov and Dec 2014, respectively.

Two: The China Factor.

While the killing of five Chinese engineers at Bisham, KP, on 26 Mar 2024 is certainly concerning, the larger worry for China is the potential fallout of its USD 65 bn investment (as of 2022, according to multiple sources) in China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in Pakistan being tarnished by bad publicity. This concern was evident in the joint statement issued at the conclusion of Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif and Chief of Army Staff Asif Munir's visit to China in Jun 2024. Thus, geoeconomics has proven to outweigh other geopolitical factors and regional dynamics, which are also crucial for sustaining China-Pakistan collusion. The joint statement noted Beijing will encourage companies to invest in Pakistan in accordance with the market and commercial principles, signalling that it will not push firms to take unwanted risks or to give any concession to Pakistani companies.⁶

Three: The United States Factor.

While the American pressure resulted in the first-ever Pakistan Army operation in 2002, the US remains a stakeholder, maintaining constant contact with the Taliban regime. Pakistani authorities have alleged that the Afghan Taliban has failed to honour the commitments it made to the international community in the Doha Agreement of Feb 2020 between US and the Taliban. The US refuses to entertain the request of Pakistan Army for targeted operations against the TTP as the US would not mind so, as long as TTP continues to target Chinese interests and spares the US.⁷

Besides, the US is not relying entirely on the Taliban for its counter-terrorism actions. Since its withdrawal from Afghanistan, the US has asserted that it would retain 'Over-the-horizon' capabilities to target those planning terror attacks against American interests. It had used that capability in Al-Qaeda Emir Zawahiri's killing in Jul 2022 in Kabul.⁸

Four: The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Factor.

The PTM, led by human rights activist Manzoor Pashteen since Jan 2018, has a slogan “*Yeh Jo Dehshat Gardi hai uske peeche Wardi hai*” (Behind the terrorism there is the uniform [Army]).⁹ Pashtun angst has been exacerbated by the displacement of approximately 1.4 million internally displaced persons in the KP region (figure sourced from the Global Human Rights Defence report of Mar 2024) as well as the destruction of livelihoods and loss of lives resulting from ongoing military operations since 2001. This sentiment has been further exploited by the PTI and its leader, Imran Khan, now a nemesis of the Pakistani Deep State. At a press conference held by the Director General (DG) of ISPR on 22 Jul 2024, it was repeatedly emphasised that the new Operation Ael would not lead to mass displacement of the civilian population and was primarily aimed at countering opposition to the operation by political parties in the Pashtun region.

Five: Durand Line.

The Durand Line is the boundary drawn between Pakistan and Afghanistan in 1893 during the British colonial rule. Initiated in 2017 as a defensive measure, a fence along the Durand Line is now nearing completion in the KP region. According to a DG ISPR briefing in Apr 2023, approximately 3,141 km of the border along Afghanistan and Iran has been fenced to prevent the infiltration of terrorists. He further stated that 98 per cent of the border along Afghanistan and 85 per cent along Iran has been fenced, while 85 per cent of forts along the Afghanistan frontier and 33 per cent with Iran have been completed.¹⁰ Additionally, in Jan 2019, Pakistan withdrew the long-standing facility of a 30-day on-arrival visa for Afghan nationals and began deporting Afghan refugees in 2024. Thus, employing non-kinetic means to counter the radical ethnic-religious mindset in the region will remain a significant challenge for the Pakistani establishment in the future, despite the numerous kinetic measures being undertaken.

Six: Role of the Pakistani Air Force and Pakistan Navy (PN).

Assets of the PAF and PN have been extensively employed in operations in the KP region. For instance, helicopter gunships and fixed-wing aircraft of the Air Force, along with the Navy's special

forces, were heavily utilised in Operation *Rah-e-Nijat* (Path to Salvation) in South Waziristan in 2009. In response, the TTP launched retaliatory strikes on their assets in the hinterland, including the Mehran Naval Base (2011), Kamra Air Base (2012), the Pakistan Navy Ship *Zulfiqar* incident (2014), and the Mianwali Air Base (2023). These attacks were intended to deter their participation in such operations. However, they also highlight the alarming penetration of TTP ideology within some members of the officer cadre and other ranks of the PAF.

Seven: Role of Pakistan Police.

The police have played a crucial role through the Counter Terrorism Department (renamed in 2010) in each province and have been actively involved in counter-terrorism operations. To demoralise their cadre, the TTP executed the Peshawar Police Lines Mosque attack in Jan 2023. In response, an upgradation plan for the Counter Terrorism Department in KP has been initiated.

Eight: The Role of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

There is overwhelming proof of ISI complicity with Al-Qaeda and hiding Osama Bin Laden in Abbottabad for nine years, apart from helping Taliban retake Afghanistan post-2001.¹¹ The ISI's efforts to strike peace deals or ceasefires with the TTP or its earlier versions have repeatedly failed, including the Shakai Agreement (2004), Sararogh Agreement (2005), Waziristan Accord (2006), and ceasefires mediated by the Taliban 2.0 regime in 2021 and 2022.

Implications for India

Firstly, the continued engagement of the Pakistani military on the western front drains its scarce resources, thereby, affecting its capabilities and capacities to engage India from a conventional warfare perspective. Secondly, in the best-case scenario, pressure from an increasingly emboldened emerging middle class, the *Awam* (common public), and economic challenges may compel Pakistan to abandon terrorism as a tool of foreign policy. However, ignoring the rising trend of radicalisation in the neighbourhood would be *fatalis vitium* (fatal) for India's current and future national security interests.

The impressive influx of tourists and the successful conduct of the G20 Tourism Working Group meeting in 2023, coupled with an unprecedented voter turnout during the Parliamentary elections in 2024, could be one reason for ISI's attempts to revive the terror network in an otherwise peaceful Jammu and Kashmir. Hence, as recommended by Dr Soumya in a comprehensive essay in the United Services Institution Journal in 2023, 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 in the region.¹²

Conclusion

Afghanistan under the new Taliban rule seems to have achieved a certain amount of political stability but not security.¹³ Similarly, Pakistan also seems to have achieved some political stability under the Pakistan People's Party and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz coalition. However, to address the worsening security situation, a new operation has been announced, aligned with the 'Whole of Nation Approach', modelled on the National Action Plan, which combines foreign and domestic policy initiatives. Furthermore, the Pakistani Chief of Army Staff would likely aim to ensure the success of Operation Ael, given the supposedly successful but questionable legacy of three previous Army Chiefs, namely Operations SherDil, ZeA and RuF.

Endnotes

¹ Ashok K Behuria, "*Tehrik -e- Taliban Pakistan: Origin: Evolution and Future Portents*", *KW Publications*, 2021, p. 28.

² Ibid.

³ Dr J Jeganaathan, "Afghanistan under Taliban 2.0: Strategic Trends and Trajectories", *Journal of the USI*, Vol. CL III, No. 632, Apr-Jun 2023.

⁴ Avinash Mohananey, "Pak - China Operation against TTP brings Afghan Taliban in Play", *The Economic Times*, 14 Jul 2024

⁵ "490 Pakistan Soldiers, 3,500 Militants killed in Operation Zarb -e-Azb", *The Economic Times*, accessed on 21 Jul 2024, <https://m.economictimes.com/news/defence>

⁶ Sarah Zaman, "Key takeaways from Pakistani PM's visit to China, Voice of America", *Voice of America*, 10 Jun 2024, accessed on 21 Jul 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/key-takeaways-of-pakistani-pm-visit-to-china/7650244.html> ,.

⁷ Avinash Mohananey, "Pak-China".

⁸ Avinash Mohananey, "US punctures Pakistan army chief's mission TTP", *Economic Times*, accessed on 21 Jul 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/opinion/et-commentary/us-punctures-pakistan-army-chiefs-mission-ttp/articleshow/106388739.cms?from=mdr>

⁹ Ashok K Behuria, "*Tehrik -e- Taliban*"

¹¹ "Six takeaways from ISPR DG's maiden presser", *Geo News*, 25 Apr 2023, accessed on 21 Jul 2024, <https://www.geo.tv/latest/483793-six-takeaways-from-ispr-dgs-maiden-presser>

¹² Howard Kleinberg, "To Win in Afghanistan, Destroy Pakistan's ISI", *American Intelligence Journal* Vol. 30, no. 2 (2012): 120–24. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26202023>

¹³ Dr Saumya Awasthi, "Strategic and Geopolitical Shifts: TTP's surging resilience and India's Security Calculus", *Journal of the USI*, Vol. CL III, No. 633, Jul-Sep 2023.

¹⁴ Dr J Jeganaathan, "Afghanistan"