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Resurgence of Tehrik-I-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) after Taliban's Return to Power and Islamabad's Policy: An Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Pakistan was hopeful that the Taliban, after the takeover of Kabul, would facilitate a reconciliation between Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Islamabad, as they had an upper hand over TTP, but it proved worthless. In the post-Taliban takeover period, a tremendous increase has been observed in militant attacks inside Pakistan, along with more than 3000 fatalities. TTP has proven to be the deadliest group under the regime's patronage. Pakistan has been employing both soft and hard approaches to tackle the issue. The soft approach worked on stressing the Taliban regime to push the militants towards table talks. But the soft approach has proved to be unproductive in the face of intensifying militancy by TTP. Islamabad, after failure of 'soft approach,' launched intelligence-based air strikes on TTP hideouts in Afghanistan, moving from a 'soft' to a 'hard' policy approach'. This paper focuses on the credibility of Pakistan's approaches and their drawbacks. The major research questions this study tries to address is: what is the impact of Taliban's comeback to power on growing TTP resilience and how effective are Pakistan's policy responses? Both exploratory and analytical research methods have been employed, relying mostly on printed and electronic sources.

Keywords: Resurgence, Soft Policy, Hard Policy, TTP, IS-K, Militancy, Negotiations, Security Dilemma.

INTRODUCTION

Taliban's August return to power in Kabul raised expectations about preventing TTP insurgencies inside Pakistan. The regime facilitated negotiations between Pakistani officials and TTP and a ceasefire was reached. ISI's chief, Lt. Gen Faiz, during his celebrated visit to Kabul, assured journalists that things were moving in the right direction (Ahmed & Younus, 2023). However, those hopes failed when, after a short interval of peace, cross-border clashes erupted. Pakistani government found itself in dismay over the TTP, given its close links to Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban. Pakistan has been carefully dealing with the Taliban, despite evidence of their patronage of the TTP, due to its close ties with the regime (Mir, in a major rift, Pakistan ramps up pressure on the Taliban, 2023). Over the years since 2021, a 25% increase has been recorded in terrorism sponsored by the TTP operating from Afghan soil (Ahmed & Younus, 2023). A noticeable surge in Taliban support for TTP has been

observed (Gul, 2024). Such an attitude has distanced Islamabad from Kabul and relations between the de facto regime and Pakistan have become strained (Gul, 2024). This article sheds light on the surge in TTP-led terrorism in Pakistan, Taliban's support for it and its consequences for the future of Pak-Afghan relations and the efficacy Pakistan's policy response. The study uses a security dilemma lens to examine the prospects of the issue.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Security Dilemma is a theory of Political Science that explains the phenomena of security and insecurity. It connotes that actions taken by State-A to increase its own security and reduce its risk profile can lead to decrease in State-B's security. The term was first used both by Joh H. Herz, a German scholar, and Herbert Butterfield, a British Historian. They referred to the situation as an "absolute predicament and irreducible dilemma." The arms race during cold war between former USSR and US is a glaring

example of security dilemma. In South Asia, nuclear and missile arms race between India and Pakistan is also viewed through this lens.

In the context of Pakistan and Afghanistan, recent actions in which Pakistan has been taking hard measures against TTP hideouts inside Afghanistan can be seen as best illustration of this dilemma. There is a saying in IR that the failure of diplomacy can lead to active confrontation. This is evident in the case of TTP, which is backed by Taliban. Pakistan's counter-efforts may exacerbate tensions with Taliban regime and further destabilize the region. This framework can be used to evaluate Islamabad's approach to combating TTP resurgence, including the effectiveness of military operations, intelligence gathering and efforts to win hearts and minds of communities affected by terrorism.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What is the impact of Taliban's return to power on growing TTP resilience?
- How effective are Pakistan's soft and hard policy responses?
- What are the draw backs of Pakistan's current approaches for the future of Pak-Afghan relations?

METHODS AND ORGANIZATION

The study utilizes a qualitative data analysis format, taking into consideration both primary and secondary data sources. The research undertakes exploratory and mixed analytical methods to draw conclusions. Firstly, the issue has been highlighted with Taliban's return to power in Kabul. Secondly, Pakistan's soft approach and diplomacy with TTP through Taliban channels have been discussed. Following this, the core discussion focuses on the rise in militancy after failure of negotiations and Pakistan's subsequent hard approach, including air strikes in Afghanistan targeting TTP and its affiliates. The conclusion suggests that the issue could be resolved by a mix approach of "push and full", putting pressure on the Taliban regime to push the TTP leadership toward a peaceful settlement with Pakistan.

EMERGENCE OF THE TEHRİK-I-TALIBAN PAKISTAN

Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) was formed by Baitullah Mehsud, who came into prominence after Nek Muhammad Wazir was killed by a US missile strike in Ex-FATA in 2004. TTP's emergence can be traced back to the post-Taliban period, when their Islamic Emirate

collapsed, leading to militancy aimed at subduing the post-Taliban setup in Kabul (Semple, 2016). Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to say that TTP and Afghan Taliban are two sides of the same coin, having similar perceptions, goals and anti-liberal values (anti-western values). It has been established that despite ideological resemblance, Pakistani Taliban or TTP never really merged into the Taliban led by Mullah Omar, instead keeping its own identity (Abbas, 2008, p. 1).

During its formative phase, it was observed that a powerful militia (known as TTP) was launched under Baitullah Mehsud (as its commander) in Ex-FATA region by merging 27 major militant groups (Siddique, 2010). A study suggests that the number of major organizations that entered the alliance were 40 (Hussain, 2019). TTP came into limelight in Dec, 2007 by adopting its own administrative mechanisms and operational procedures. Baitullah had established strong connections with Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda. He also formed his own council, named "Shura Ittehad Al Mujahideen" (United Council of Mujahideen). They imposed strict Sharia regulations in Ex-FATA region and banned school education. At that time, Baitullah led some 20 thousand fighters from different countries, including Uzbeks and Chechen. He established his own governance model (a state within state), where all types of music were banned, female education was stopped and shaving beards was forbidden. Some reports revealed that couples were stoned to death who were found guilty of love marriage (Shehzad, 2006).

The Uzbeks were keen to strike against Pakistan than to launch offensives against US and NATO in Afghanistan (Mahsud, 2010). Baitullah was allegedly behind many high-profile attacks on Pakistan's government officials and security agencies and has also been held responsible for the assassination former Pakistan's PM Benazir Bhutto (Wadhams & Cookman, 2009). A peace deal was made with Mehsud, which was criticized and reported as defeat for Pakistan in its fight against terrorism-potentially giving Baitullah more time to strengthen his position (Wadhams & Cookman, 2009). Due to strategy of the organization to operate from populated areas, the authorities were thoughtful of the people besieged by the terrorists. Many tribal elders were assassinated by TTP labelling them as spies for Pakistani government. It has been observed that a total 200 tribal elders have been martyred and killings continued (Abbas, 2008). IT has also been observed that TTP has had a broader agenda

compared to its Afghan counterparts. The major objectives of TTP include:

1. Establishment of Strict Sharia Regulations in the controlled region.
2. Launching strong offensives against Pakistan's security forces and law enforcement.
3. Removing security check posts from North Waziristan.
4. No future peace deals with Pakistani authorities.
5. Promoting religious extremism against sects other than Sunni Islamists.
6. Promoting the narrative of Sharia or Shahada (fundamental Islam or martyrdom).

Due to its strong offensive and operational capabilities, it has been an established fact that TTP's core goals were not limited to Sharia or fundamental Islam but to generate a strong resistance against Pakistani government. They were actively working on the agenda of dismantling the government's writ. While ideologically connected with the Afghan Taliban, who were fighting against foreign forces in Afghanistan, TTP launched its war against Pakistan's authorities and security agencies, a war that continues to this day. Now the situation has become more complex. Foreign forces have left Afghanistan and Taliban have regained their ruling position, yet TTP continues its militant agenda against the state of Pakistan, not from within but from their safe havens in Afghanistan, allegedly under active patronage of the Taliban.

TTP AFTER TALIBAN RETURN TO POWER

Taliban return to power in Kabul after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan was a great inspiration for terrorist groups such as TTP and IS-K to continue their anti-state agendas against Pakistan. Therefore, besides other factors, the comeback of Taliban to power was one of the major reasons for the resurgence of TTP in Pakistan. Both TTP and Islamic State of Khorasan Chapter (IS-K) adhere to their separate religious doctrines for establishment of their sects-styled (faith centred) Islamic caliphates. TTP is working towards establishing an Afghan-Taliban-Styled political set up by overthrowing the incumbent political system in Pakistan. IS-K and its affiliates drew inspirations from the ISIS Caliphate governance model, which was briefly established in parts of Syria and Iraq for a short interval (South Asia Terrorism Portal, n.d.). The National Security Policy brief of 2022 cautiously adhere to the growing instability in Afghanistan and

associated security risks for the country. The policy focuses on non-traditional elements e.g. economic connectivity and human security. As the policy was focused on the non-traditional economic and human security, it explained that Pakistan's push for peace and stability in Afghanistan was dictated by the country's need for westward connectivity "given that eastward connectivity was held hostage to India's regressive approach (National Security Policy 2022-2026, n.d.). The neighbouring countries have great concerns for regional security after the Taliban takeover of Kabul.

There is a significant gap between the political agendas of IS-K and TTP, but they both are equally dangerous for Pakistan having similar anti-Pakistan designs. It is also important to analyse what encouraged TTP resurgence – ultimately, it was the Taliban's return to power and the subsequent release of TTP militants, which gave them the ground to resume violence in Pakistan (Mir, 2022). Negotiations mediated by the Taliban provided time and space for the TTP militants to reorganize its network within Pakistan and launch the deadly attacks on Pakistani security forces, thus undermining national interests. The Peshawar Mosque attack in January 2023, in which 100 people were martyred, is an example of the TTP barbarism and its criminal ends. The sudden rise of terrorism during 2020-2023 has been cited as, "the monster of terror regaining its ugly head," which was thought to have been crushed a few years earlier. The Taliban's patronage of TTP in Afghanistan (providing them with space) and their silence on TTP's, IS-K styled terrorist campaigns against Pakistani agencies and civilian make "the whole saga suspect" (Centre for Preventive Action, 2023). A study has explained the basis of cooperation among militant groups by observing that ideological affinities can lead terrorist groups to cooperate against a common opponent (Khan, 2023). It further categorizes levels of cooperation from "high-end to low-end". The high-end cooperation is referred to be 'strategic and long lasting,' whereas the low-end cooperation is 'short lived and for tactical gains. Another perspective on the Taliban policy is that, after resuming power, they took stern action against IS-K but showed sympathy toward TTP which speaks of their dual policy on cross border terrorism in Pakistan. Pakistan's former PM Imran Khan was optimistic about the prospects of peace after negotiations with TTP, backed by Taliban government, and supported their return to their homes after submitting to the law and constitution. But the

pause has given them time to reorganize and restart their deadly campaign against Pakistan. There is also possibility of them establishing their links with likeminded militants inside and outside Pakistan (Khan, 2023).

According to Syed (2021), TTP regenerated after Taliban assumed power in Afghanistan. With the Taliban's support, the group felt encouraged to pursue its goal of Sharia and a Taliban- styled Emirate in Pakistan's tribal region. It has been proven by available literature that three important phenomena have strengthened TTP nexus with its increased combat potential i.e. Taliban return to power and patronage, TTP's connections with IS-K and likeminded militants in Pakistan and Pakistan's failure to carry its anti-terror policy and adopt working strategies to diminish the menace of terrorism properly.

TTP'S CHANGING STRATEGY

After Taliban resumed power in Kabul, the TTP quandary hit Islamabad. The group has changed its strategy, focusing on diminishing Islamabad's influence in tribal areas and Pakhtunkhwa province at large. They are

striving to establish their strong base in these areas and gradually stretching their influence further. The resurgence of TTP and the increase in terrorist violence in Pakistan can be attributed to two key factors: the Afghan Taliban's takeover of Kabul and Pakistan's persistent pursuit of peace talks with the TTP (Sial, 2023). In 2022, Pakistan witnessed a concerning 27% rise in terrorist incidents, largely fuelled by the TTP. The Afghan Taliban's ascendancy created an environment conducive to TTP regrouping, while Pakistan's peace negotiations inadvertently provided the group space to operate. Insecurity along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border escalated as the Afghan Taliban adopted a stricter stance. Additionally, the Islamic State's Khorasan chapter intensified its attacks. Policymakers and security agencies have recognized these threats, prompting proposed measures such as the National Counter-Terrorism Department (NCTD). Pakistan's removal from the FATF grey list reflects its efforts to combat terrorism financing. Effective counterterrorism requires a comprehensive approach, including redefined Afghan policy and strengthened domestic security mechanism.

Table 1. Terrorist Attacks in Pakistan in 2022.

Region	Attacks	Killed	Injured
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	169	294	393
Balochistan	79	106	271
Punjab	3	6	30
Sindh (Karachi)	6	8	31
Sindh (excluding Karachi)	2	0	0
Islamabad	2	5	9
Gilgit Baltistan	1	0	0
Total	262	419	734

Source: PIPS: Pakistan Security Report (2022).

The Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) report 2022 highlights the presence of significant terrorist groups in Afghanistan, including Al-Qaeda, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), TTP and IS-K. Since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, there has been a notable increase in the movement of militants across borders, leading to heightened attacks by groups like TTP and IS-K in Pakistan (Pakistan Saw 51 percent Rise in Terrorist Attacks in Year Since Taliban Took Over Afghanistan: Report, 2022).

The Taliban has primarily focused on countering IS-K due to its active challenge to the Taliban's authority. Of

particular concern is the return of TTP militants from Afghanistan, creating fear and discomfort among the people of KP. In April 2022, TTP and its affiliates carried out 20 terrorist attacks in Pakistan, resulting in casualties, including the killing of seven army soldiers in North Waziristan. Certain areas in Pakistan, such as Peshawar, Swat, Dir and Tank, have witnessed a gradual expansion of militant activity. This has raised questions about how and why the TTP has resurged and relocated in the northwest, with speculation about possible government-militant deals. Overall, terrorism has escalated in both frequency and intensity, according to the report.

Table 2. Comparison of Terrorist Attacks & Casualties (2022 vs. 2021).

Province/Region	Number of Attacks (% Change)	Killed (% Change)	Injured (% Change)
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	+ 52%	+ 74%	+ 222%
Balochistan	- 2%	- 22%	- 21%
Punjab	- 40%	- 57%	- 41%
Sindh	Unchanged	- 38%	- 11%
Islamabad	2; unchanged	5 compared to 2 in 2021	9 compared to 2 in 2021
Gilgit Baltistan	1 compared to 0 in 2021	0	0
Total	+ 27%	+ 25%	+32%

Source: PIPS: Pakistan Security Report (2022).

The late 2022 survey conducted by Afghan Peace Watch offers a sobering glimpse into the destabilizing aftermath of the US-led coalition's departure from Afghanistan. This organization, known for its impartial analysis of Afghan peace and security, uncovered a disturbing pattern: the thriving black market for sophisticated military equipment, including night vision thermal guns, M4 rifles and M16 rifles, abandoned by retreating coalition forces. These weapons are finding their way into Pakistan, posing a significant security risk.

The current situation highlights the enduring threat posed by the TTP, which maintains close ties with the Afghan Taliban. It highlights the formidable challenges Pakistan faces in safeguarding its security forces and restoring peace. Islamabad's claims that terrorist organizations are finding sanctuary in Afghanistan, countered by Afghanistan's denials, further reveal the complexity and urgency of the situation. Regional cooperation and concerted efforts are imperative to counteract the ominous developments outlined in the text (Mehmood, 2023). Since the Afghan Taliban's return to power in Kabul, Pakistan has experienced a growing security threat, witnessing a 27% increase in terrorist incidents in 2022 compared to 2021. These incidents have become deadlier, exemplified by the Peshawar Police Lines Mosque suicide bombing in January 2023, which contributed to one of the deadliest months in Pakistan's history, with 134 people killed and 254 injured in 44 terrorist attacks across the country. The Afghanistan-Pakistan border has become a major hotspot for insecurity, with frequent attacks in KP and Balochistan indicating a rise in terrorism. Terrorist groups like TTP, Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), Baloch Nationalist Army (BNA), Sindhudesh People's Army (SPA) and IS-K have been posing significant threats.

Terrorist from militant organizations such as IS-K, BLA and TTP have contributed to escalating violence, drawing strength from the evolving situation in Afghanistan. Pakistan's efforts to engage the TTP in talks have proven challenging, compounded by a lack of political will to implement the National Action Plan (NAP) effectively. The Afghan Taliban's reluctance to curtail TTP and other anti-Pakistan elements operating on Afghan soil has exacerbated the situation (Khan, 2023).

DATA FROM PICCS DATABASE (2022-23)

In 2022, Pakistan experienced 512 terrorist attacks, resulting in 980 fatalities and 750 injuries, with KP and Balochistan being the hardest-hit regions. In the Provinces of Punjab and Sindh, a decline in violence was observed, the overall number of attacks in Pakistan exceeded 300 for the first time since 2017. Sectarian-related incidents also increased. During the first half of 2023, Pakistan witnessed a total of 271 terrorist incidents, resulting in 389 deaths and 656 injuries. In comparison, the same period in 2022 witnessed 151 militant attacks, causing 203 deaths and 487 injuries. The comparison of corresponding periods in the years 2022 vs. 2023 represents a staggering increase of 79 percent militancy during the first half of 2023. Additionally, 228 attacks were reported in the last half of 2022, causing 246 deaths and 249 injuries. The first quarter of 2023 showed an 18% rise in terrorist attacks compared to the last quarter of 2022, resulting in 18% more fatalities than the previous year, bringing the overall increase to 58% in fatalities and 88% in injuries. In response to these escalating threats, Pakistan's security forces eliminated 236 militants and detained 295 suspected militants during the initial half of 2023.

REGIONAL BASED ANALYSIS

The region-based comparison of fatalities underscores

that KP Province has been the most affected region, with 174 militant attacks reported. Total number of lives lost in these attacks stands at 266. If analyzed by mainland vs. tribal, we find that the mainland received 100 militant attacks resulting in 188 fatalities and 354 injuries, while the Ex-FATA region experienced 74 attacks, resulting in 78 deaths and 109 injuries. Compared to the initial half of 2022, militancy increased by 51% with fatalities decreasing 10% to 15% compared to the previous year. In the first half of 2023, KP province experienced a 108% increase in terrorism compared to the same period in 2022. During the second half of the same year, a 25% rise was observed compared to the second half of the previous year. Fatalities increased by 53% and 132% in the first six months of 2023 compared to the initial half and last six months of 2022, respectively. Another affected region is Baluchistan province, with 75 terror incidents in the first six months of 2023, resulting in 100 fatalities and 163 injuries. In 2023, 103% rise in militant attacks was reported compared to the first half of in 2022, while a 14% increase was reported compared to the last half of the previous year. Fatalities in the province rose by 61% and 64% in the initial half of 2023, compared to the same periods in the previous year. Sindh province recorded a slight decrease in militancy, with 13 terror incidents reported in the first half of 2023, resulting in 19 fatalities and an equal number of injuries. When the data is compared to terror incidents in 2022, it is found that

during the first half 2023, 19% decline was observed, while a 44% rise was reported in the last half, respectively. Fatalities in the initial half of 2023 decreased by 27% compared to the same period in 2022, while an increase of 171% was recorded compared to the last half of the previous year.

Punjab province witnessed a rise in terrorism during the first half of 2023, with 08 militant attacks resulting in 06 reported fatalities and 10 injuries. When compared to the first half six months of 2022, only one terror-attack had occurred, while in the last half of the same year, two terror-attacks were reported. A concerning and significant surge have been witnessed in suicide attacks during the year 2023. In the first six months of the year, 13 suicide attacks happened resulting in 142 fatalities and 309 injuries. Compared to the same period in 2022, only five suicide attacks were observed, resulting in 77 deaths and 225 injuries, respectively. During the second half of 2022, 10 suicide attacks were reported, which caused 24 deaths and 65 injuries. The analysis above presents an escalating threat of terrorism in Pakistan in the post-Taliban takeover (in Afghanistan) period, with a significant rise in terror-based fatalities and casualties in Pakistan with KP and Balochistan, the worst-hit regions. The surge in suicide attacks has been concerning and Pakistan faces a big challenge in countering insurgency and maintaining the security intact in the affected regions.

Table 3. Terror Hike analysis in the 1-Half of 2023.

Province	Terror Incidents (1H 2023)	Deaths (1H 2023)	Injuries (1H 2023)	% change in incidents 2023 vs. 2022
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	174	266	463	N/A
Malakand KP	100	188	354	108%
Tribal Region	74	78	109	51%
Balochistan	75	100	163	103
Sindh	13	19	19	-19%
Punjab	8	6	10	N/A
Suicide Attacks	13	142	309	160%

Source: PICCS Institute Data from July 2, 2023 - September 1, 2023

NALYSIS OF ISLAMABAD’S POLICY APPROACHES

Soft Policy Approach

Pakistan's Taliban policy has been under spin and has faced failures despite Islamabad efforts to engage with TTP via the Taliban administration, through official and unofficial channels, yet the issue of terrorism has become

more severe. Even, there has been direct confrontations between Pakistan army and the regimes forces along the Pak-Afghan borders and the airstrikes on the terrorist hideouts inside Afghanistan have deepened mutual mistrust. However, experts believe that due to struggling economies and a history of trust and goodwill between

the Taliban regime and Pakistani establishment, there is little chance of further escalation. There is strong resentment in Kabul toward Pakistan's "pushing and force" policy against the TTP. Qari Muhammad Afzal (spokesman for the defense ministry in Kabul) has stated that such a policy seems feckless and ineffective, arguing that it may loosen the regime's control over TTP and push them closer to ISIS-K or the Islamic State's Afghanistan branch (Rehman, 2024). It is evident that Islamabad celebrated Taliban's coming into power and there was great enthusiasm among the high ranks of military and government. Unfortunately, the regime is now playing a double game by patronizing TTP and using it as a proxy against Pakistan (Operation against terrorist sanctuaries of TTP, 2024). In Islamabad such a policy speaks of the shortsightedness on part of the regime, which received moral, political and economic support from Pakistan. Pakistan has been suffering from instability in Afghanistan for a couple of decades and its people alongside the people of Afghanistan, have faced socio-economic and political problems. It is time for the regime to revise its "terrorism sponsorship policy" if it wants to build a roadmap of regional peace and stability; otherwise not only will Pakistan suffer, but the whole region could be affected, which in the long run can unshackle the weak foundation of the regime. In such a complex situation, it's time for the regime to come to the table to find a durable solution to the issue and pressurize TTP leadership to stop its war against the people and government of Pakistan. It has been observed that things have moved in the wrong direction after 2022. Despite Islamabad's active patronage of the Taliban and the initially good perceptions, Taliban have proved to be untrustworthy. Their success has supported militancy in the region. Taliban provide likeminded militant groups, e.g., TTP, with safe haven and moral and material support. This has led to hike in militancy inside Pakistan. The recent rise in tension between Pakistan and Taliban is ultimately driven by the Taliban's active patronage of "transnational terror and extremist groups". The history of vibrant trust between Taliban and Pakistani establishment makes things further complex. Pakistan has viewed the previous as its proxy, aligned with its strategic interests. According to some analysts, the current disagreement is a result of failed expectations about support and recognition, leading to a power display through their support for TTP. There is another complex facet to the Taliban-TTP relationship: TTP's previous

support for the Taliban has created 'reciprocal expectations' – meaning that Taliban's rise to power would strengthen TTP's cause. Despite Taliban's denial of patronage and support to the TTP, the ideological similarities and close affinity between TTP and Taliban pose a significant threat to the stability of Pakistan. The current TTP-Taliban nexus has jeopardized Islamabad's expectations of trade and connectivity with CARs via Afghanistan. The activation of land routes and trade connectivity could revive economic prosperity. Pakistan has been repatriating Afghan refugees and increasing check posts along the Pak-Afghan border to check terrorist mobility and avoid any miscalculation.

Some analysts call it a strategic failure on the part of Islamabad that despite applying both soft and hard policy options, the TTP conundrum remains unresolved- raising queries about what would be the next strategy. In the aftermath of March 2024, airstrikes targeting TTP and its ally Hafiz Gul Bahadur prompted escalation on the borders (Yousun, Rahman, & Firdous, 2024). But analysts believe that there is meager possibility of full-scale war or a larger confrontation. However, the long-term consequences of maintaining such a relationship with Afghanistan will be burdensome for Pakistan. The country aims to distance itself from the label of being a 'state at war' and instead become a country that provides investment opportunities, especially considering its current dire economic situation (Yousun, Rahman, & Firdous, 2024). Pakistan, while being a contributing partner to the Taliban's success in Afghanistan, was not a party to the larger conflict that started in the aftermath of 9/11, yet it faced the consequences. After the overthrow of the Taliban regime in Kabul and then following their return to power, the ripple effects reached Pakistan. "There would have been no TTP had there been no Taliban," expressed Touqeer Hussain. "They are but two sides of the same coin" (Hussain T., 2023). " These developments are placing Pakistan's security, economy and regional stability in the hot seat.

Hard Policy Approach

In economic terms, Afghanistan offers two-pronged opportunities to Islamabad e.g. providing transit trade facilities and playing a major export market for Pakistani goods, estimating for about 50%. Pakistani goods are the most favored choice for Afghani traders and businessmen because of easy access to market and comparatively lower prices. It has been estimated that almost 40% of Afghan customs revenue is generated from border

crossings with Pakistan, which accounts for 60% of Taliban's total revenue.

Pakistan has tightened the rules of transit trade for Afghan traders by imposing bank guarantees and a 10 percent duty on certain imported commodities. The Afghanis containers using Pakistan's ports have been limited, thus putting pressure on the regime and border crossing restrictions are exerting additional strain on the nascent Afghan economy. If these steps fail, escalation can take place by unleashing military options and surgical strikes against the TTP hideouts inside Afghanistan (Mir, In a major rift, Pakistan ramps up pressure on the Taliban, 2023). The outcome of such actions can trigger retaliation and sympathy for TTP. However, the previously such actions have borne fruit, under pressure from the regime, the TTP had agreed to a ceasefire and negotiations.

Pakistan could also move against Taliban by supporting the opposition to the regime but the outcome of such an attempt remains unclear. The fragmented and weaker opposition may not be effective. Pakistan has a history of minimal interaction with anti-Taliban sections due its prior support for the Taliban. The region has a record of forging unlikely alliances. Nonetheless, the anti-Taliban segments may look towards Pakistan in light of the current stagnation in Pak-Taliban relations. Pakistan, being adept in this domain, has a competency in rallying opposition against the Kabul in the previous years.

On the other hand, TTP's duplicitous policy and the recent hike in the activities in border regions and KP manifest a weak policy on the part of Islamabad. The TTP has proven dishonest in negotiations, treating them as a time-buying tactic to gather much-needed support from the regime. The reconciliatory policies of the PTI government proved ineffective in appeasing TTP (TTP issues threat to PPP, PML-N in mmajor policy shift, 2023). Therefore, the political and military elites are now stressing the need to employ hard options against rebellious groups (also called Kharijites or Khawarij) (Pakistani FM Zardari slams previous governments's TTP policy, 2023). The threat would prevail as long as sympathies for the militant group persist. The National Security Committee demands clear and defining role from Taliban regime in Kabul. It wants the regime to completely dissociate itself from the terrorist factions operating across Pak-Afghan border. Pakistan has to redefine its red lines for the regime, making it sure that any breach could provoke a strong retaliation on the part of Islamabad. Yet, there is a dire need to devise a clear, all-

out combined policy against the TTP.

Pakistan needs to build a troika of anti-terrorist communication and collaboration with regional partners like Iran, China and most importantly, the Taliban regime, to control cross-border terrorism (Khan N., n.d.). Pakistan should also consult its international partners and seek their support against the TTP resurgence and its implications both regionally and globally. Pakistan must consider that dialogue and negotiations with the TTP are just a waste of time. Therefore, it has to keep the regime under pressure to get things done. If things continue to go amiss, there is possibility of a military operation along Pak-Afghan border. But the group follows a strategy of not restricting itself to any one place and instead launches guerilla war using its sleeper cells inside Pakistan. Military action within the tribal belt gathers huge resentment from the locals, making things more complicated. People would not be willing to leave their homes and become IDPs. Therefore, the probability is carrying out limited "intelligence driven" operations against the terrorists (Ahmad & Younus, 2023). Pakistan has already carried out limited intelligence-based strike inside Afghanistan, which garnered great reaction from the Afghan Taliban regime. Such a move remains a possible, but less likely, option for Islamabad. The top military command, including Qamar Javed Bajwa (former C-in-C), former ISI-Chief Gen. Faiz have stated that the Afghani Taliban and TTP are "two faces of the same coin" (Ahmad & Younus, 2023). Triggering a holistic military campaign both across borders and inside Pakistan could further strain Pakistan's already oscillating economy. The strength of TTP fighters ranging from seven to ten thousand, is another problem. Even the advent of military operations against TTP sanctuaries in Afghanistan could instigate Taliban to mobilize TTP as its proxy against Pakistan. The enemy countries could also take advantage of the miserable situation and use the Afghan soil against Pakistan. Pakistan should work on raising anti-TTP tendencies and create space for those movements that oppose militants e.g. Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (a movement for the protection of Pashtun traditions). The tribal people, particularly from the Malakand division, have staged protests against the TTP resurgence in their regions. Now, it is a responsibility of the security agencies to build public confidence and take steps to stop youth from gravitating towards extremists.

If they continue to view the world through a pre-2001 lens, they will lose the trust of their allies both

domestically and globally.

The regime needs to act responsibly by denying support to the group and its leadership. Though it has repeatedly claimed that it would not harbor (import and export) terrorism, it has failed to prove it in the case of TTP and its operations against Pakistan. The TTP has no declared international agenda except to wage war against Pakistan. There is a probability of links between TTP and ISIS-K, due to which the US has pledged its support to fight against TTP. If the Taliban want broader international support and recognition, they must fulfill their commitments to not harbor terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda, ISIS-K and TTP. If they continue to view the world through a pre-2001 lens, they will lose the faith of their friends both domestically and globally. Pakistan has given concessions to militant groups who pledged to not work against the state and help the authorities in fighting extremism but they failed to uphold these promises. One such example is Hafiz Gul Bahadur, who had previously signed a pact with the army but later violated it and launched a terrorist campaign against the state. Pakistan need not to differentiate between militant as “good” and “bad” but treat all armed groups with the similar approach. Pakistan also needs to continue exerting pressure on Taliban regime through regional players (such as China) to avoid support militancy against their immediate neighbors. The presence of ISIS-K, TTP and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan is seen as a threat by the regional countries like China, Iran and Pakistan, while they also pose a broader international security threat if these groups are allowed to regroup and expand. Pakistan needs to engage the international stakeholders to assure them that it now follows an all-out, no-distinction policy against the militancy. The US should also work closely with Islamabad against both the TTP and ISIS-K.

POLICY ISSUES AND SHORTCOMINGS

Policy Coordination Issues

Decision making is an all-inclusive process, meaning that all stakeholders should be engaged e.g. public opinion, political elite, think tanks and military elite. Unfortunately, in Pakistan, security policy is totally dominated by the military experts. As a result, public opinion, civil society responses and input from think tanks and academician are ignored, resulting to weak policy responses. Decision making, argued Tariq Khan (Lt. Gen, retired), is rarely based on solid, ground-level research; rather, it relies mainly on secondary data, which

makes the problem more severe.

While decision-making is the responsibility of the civil government, it must acknowledge their responsibility and enhance its capacity in this regard (PIPS consultation-4 on Afghan peace and reconciliation, Islamabad, 2022). Foreign policy formulation is a complex and demanding task that requires skill and expertise on the part of its designers. Not everyone is an expert on foreign policy; therefore, except for officials from the Foreign Ministry, no other person should express definitive opinions on the matter. Inam-ul-Haq, former diplomat, expressed “foreign policy is the subject of the Foreign Ministry and it is their responsibility to speak on it” (Haque, 2022). Pakistan needs to avoid unilateral action against the Taliban and should tackle the issue in collaboration with regional and international partners. Pakistan needs not to intervene in Afghan affairs nor should it become a mouthpiece for the international community regarding Taliban or Afghanistan. Pakistan should leave it to the Taliban and the international community to decide the future prospects of either Taliban or Afghanistan on their own (Sail, 2023).

Drawbacks of Pakistan's Policies

Pakistan has been facing significant challenges in tackling the TTP nightmare under the Taliban regime. Islamabad's soft policy approach, focused on Taliban mediated table talks with TTP, has almost failed. Pakistan has been engaged with the Taliban during this period, but militancy did not subside. Considering Taliban as a mediator while ignoring the deep ideological links between Taliban and TTP has proven ineffective. Therefore, it is imperative to understand how the groups gained its current strength. Pakistan has become vulnerable due to the Taliban's reluctance to fully cooperate in curbing the TTP's resurgence. The hard policy approach, which includes launching airstrikes and carrying out intelligence-based operations against TTP inside Afghanistan, has created misconceptions among the regime and Afghan people. Although these operations have achieved some tactical successes, they have also disrupted Pak-Afghan relations. These strikes are seen as a violation of the Afghan soil and could booster anti-Pakistan feelings, which could further escalate cross-border terrorism.

Pakistan's current policies claim to address the root causes of terrorism, most specifically in TTP operational areas such as socio-economic disparities and illiteracy.

These current approaches could create *violence cycle* by pushing Taliban and TTP towards more coercive engagement with Pakistan. This contributes to a security dilemma and intensifies TTP's insurgencies. Pakistan's approaches (both hard and soft), have met failure in achieving its goals. Pakistan's response has weakened its regional diplomacy, lowered its leverage on Taliban and intensified internal security challenges.

CONCLUSION

In the aftermath of US/NATO strikes in Afghanistan, the members of Al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations took refuge in Pakistan's bordering regions of Ex-FATA and Balochistan. Due to Pakistan's facilitation of the US operations inside Afghanistan, Taliban and other pro-Pakistan elements also turned against Pakistan and established links with extremist, anti-state (separatists) and sectarian organizations. Between 2006 to 2010, they targeted almost every target with full competency and destructive capacity. After military operations, most of the terrorist fled to Afghanistan and writ of the government was re-established to some extent. TTP's current surge in militancy in Pakistan would not have been possible without Taliban regime's support from within Afghanistan. Pakistan's current policy may yield mixed outcomes either pushing the Taliban toward a peaceful settlement with Pakistan or driving the region toward new threats in the form of a TTP and Taliban alliance. Therefore, instead of unilateral actions, Islamabad should involve regional and international stakeholders to pressurize Taliban regime. There is a need for a firm and long-lasting strategy and planning a national peace framework to fully eliminate terrorism, extremism and sectarian divide from Pakistan.

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