

Navigating the Strains: Terrorism's Impact on Pak-Afghan Relations

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Introduction

In the early hours of March 16, terrorists launched a deadly suicide attack on a check post of the Pakistan army in the town of Mirali in North Waziristan in which seven Pakistani soldiers including a lieutenant colonel and a captain were killed.¹ Pakistan responded with an intelligence-based operation (IBO) in North Waziristan in which 8 terrorists were killed² as well as airstrikes targeting terrorist hideouts in Afghanistan. The latter action resulted in heavy cross-border fire between Pakistani and Afghan border forces, as the Afghan authorities blamed the Pakistani side of killing civilian women and children while warning Pakistan of dire consequences of such 'reckless' actions.³

Quite ironically, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar was assured by his Afghan counterpart Amir Khan Muttaqi during a telephone call on the day of the terrorist attack in Mirali of cooperation in trade and counter-terrorism as well as people-to-people contacts.⁴ Although trade, people-to-people contacts, and counter-terrorism cooperation is the way forward for the two countries, they are finding it hard to move past the animosity arising out of terrorist activities in Pakistan linked to their hideouts in Afghanistan. The recent terrorist attack, Pakistan's airstrikes in Afghanistan, and the border clashes between the security forces of the two countries have further complicated any early chances of normalization of relations as trade remains suspended and the situation remains tense along the border.

This paper attempts to analyze the trends in terrorist violence in Pakistan since the assumption of power by the Taliban government in Afghanistan and

the impact it has had on the relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan, including on trade and transit as well as people-to-people relations.

Terrorism as the Key Factor in Pak-Afghan Relations

Since the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, its relationship with Pakistan has been marked by an upsurge in terrorist activity. Pakistan has repeatedly attributed this violence to the safe havens that terrorists have across the border in Afghanistan.

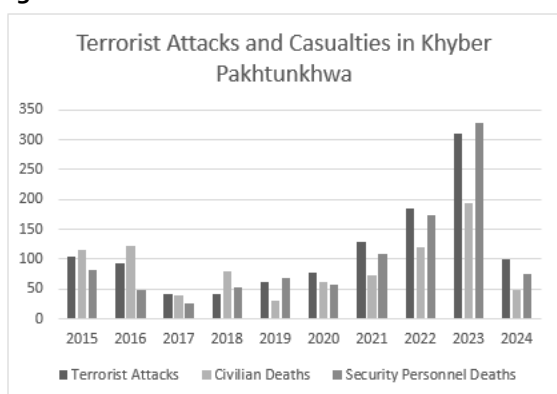
As depicted in Figure 1 below, terrorist attacks in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan, which borders Afghanistan, have been increasing rapidly since the Taliban interim government took power in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the number of security forces casualties has also risen significantly, with a peak in 2023 of 310 terrorist attacks resulting in the deaths of 193 civilians and 329 security forces personnel. Observing the graph below, one can conclude that the number of terrorist attacks in the province, as well as the casualties from those attacks, were the highest in 2023 for the whole past decade. The consistently increasing figures of the casualties of the security forces from the terrorist attacks since 2021 also indicates the increasing sophistication of the terrorist attacks that are being planned and orchestrated from the sanctuaries available to the terrorists in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has long regarded the safe havens in Afghanistan, where terrorists affiliated with the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) operate, as a key element in their recent success in targeting high-profile individuals and escalating the deadliness of their assaults. Pakistani authorities believe that there

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could be as many as 5,000 TTP terrorists enjoying safe residence in Afghanistan.⁵ While the two countries have had several rounds of negotiations on the subject, it seems intractable as the Afghan side exonerates itself by stating that Pakistan is needlessly blaming it for its internal challenges. As the relationship between the two countries has remained unpredictable, it has had serious implications for trade and transit as well people-to-people interactions between the two countries.

Figure 1



Source: Based on data from the South Asia Terrorism Portal⁶

Pak-Afghan Trade during Taliban 2.0

Pakistan has a great potential of exporting goods and commodities to Afghanistan. Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan include "cereals (25%), sugar and sugar confectionery (4%), edible vegetables, roots, and tubers (7%), fruits, nuts, and peels of melons and citrus fruits (15%), salt, Sulphur, earthstones (13%), animal or vegetable fats and oils (7%), plastics and articles thereof (5%), pharmaceutical products (13%), wood and articles of wood, wood charcoal (6%), and iron and steel (5%)."⁷ Furthermore, a strong potential exists to diversify Pakistan's exports into other fields as well.

As mentioned in the previous section, the history of relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan since the takeover of the Taliban demonstrates that the issue of terrorism has dominated the diplomatic discourse between them. This has had implications for economic relations

between the two countries as well. As is evident from Figure 2 below, Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan have witnessed a downward trend since the arrival of the Taliban in Kabul in August 2021 except for a brief spike in February-March 2022.

Figure 2

Pakistan's Exports to Afghanistan

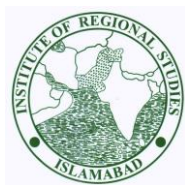


Source: Based on data from the State Bank of Pakistan

While the two countries have set themselves a target of increasing their bilateral trade to \$5 billion, the business community believes that given the ups and downs in the diplomatic relations between them, it will be very difficult to achieve the desired target even though the potential is there as demonstrated by the \$2.5 billion trade between them in 2010.⁸

The businessmen involved in Pak-Afghan trade also identify the loopholes in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) 2010 and smuggling of transit trade goods back to Pakistan. These issues have led to the frequent imposition of bans on certain transit trade goods, which hinders the progress of economic relations between the two countries.⁹ Such challenges of economic policy could, however, be easily resolved through mutual consultations between the two governments as well as with the business communities of the two countries if the diplomatic relations improve.

The slump in diplomatic relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan is also affecting the potential of Pakistan's trade connectivity with the



Central Asian Republics (CARs). Consider, for instance, the case of the \$1.2 billion worth 1,270km CASA-1000 power transmission line from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan for the export of hydropower to Pakistan via Afghanistan. The World Bank has already given a go-ahead to the project, which will be constructed in a ring-fenced manner excluding the Afghan Interim Government.¹⁰ The future of the project as well as the potential of Pakistan's trade connectivity with CARs, however, is held hostage by the downward spiral in the diplomatic relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan owing to terrorism concerns in the border region.

Afghan Refugees and the Dilemma of Improving People-to-People Relations

While Pakistan and Afghanistan have longstanding civilizational, historical, and cultural linkages, people-to-people interactions between them have remained hostage to diplomatic relations between them. Despite Pakistan's long-term hosting of a significant refugee population from Afghanistan, there is a significant gap in the grassroots interactions between the two countries. While the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has registered around 1.3 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan as of June 2023,¹¹ Pakistani authorities estimate another 1.7 million unregistered Afghans living illegally in Pakistan.¹²

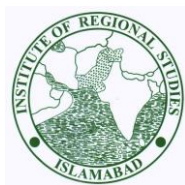
In September last year, the Government of Pakistan decided to ask all undocumented—and thus illegally residing—Afghans to leave the country by early November. Since then, as per Pakistan's Ambassador to Afghanistan, 503,261 illegal Afghan migrants have returned to Afghanistan until March 2.¹³ Although Pakistan is well within its sovereign rights to ask any illegal aliens on its soil to leave the country, the illegal Afghans against whom the drive was initiated last year have been residing in Pakistan for a long time. The action against them came at a time when there was a dire need for improvement of relations with the Afghan interim government. Therefore, it did not help the situation. In addition, it did not improve the perceptions of the Afghan

population about Pakistan. On numerous occasions in their recent interactions with the concerned Pakistani authorities, the representatives of the Afghan interim administration have raised concerns with regard to the well-being of Afghans residing in Pakistan and any positive gesture towards the people of Afghanistan whether residing illegally in Pakistan or not goes a long way in building a positive perception among Afghans living in Afghanistan. Now that it is reported that the second phase of the drive to deport illegal Afghan migrants to Pakistan is also on the cards, starting in April, it could further escalate tensions between the two countries and animosity between their people.¹⁴

Conclusion

The recent uptick in confrontation between Pakistan and Afghanistan on the issue of terrorism and the aerial bombardment of targets inside Afghanistan by Pakistan Air Force, which did not sit well with the Afghan authorities, has intensified the existing mistrust between the two sides. There is a serious need for the governments of both countries to sit together to discuss their differences and come to an agreed upon solution. The Government of Pakistan has so far been resisting the calls of the Afghan interim government for holding talks with the TTP. Even though the use of terrorist violence by the TTP as well as some of their demands make negotiation with the group very difficult, Pakistan has a history of negotiating with these groups. Pakistan also has a good working relationship with the Afghan interim government. This provides some basis for initiating a meaningful dialogue process with the Afghan interim administration on the subject.

In addition, while negotiations between the two sides on the subject of terrorism could take a long time to reach any meaningful conclusion, it should not affect trade and people-to-people relations between them. Pakistan's security concerns should not determine its economic policies towards Afghanistan and vice versa. With better trade and economic opportunities, the two countries could



create positive synergies among their people that would discourage anti-state elements from both sides against attempts at scuttling relations between them. Moreover, Pakistan's better handling of Afghans living on its soil could also be used a soft power measure to win over the hearts and minds of the people of Afghanistan which could influence the Afghan interim administration to heed Pakistan's

demands with regard to cooperation against terrorism emanating out of Afghanistan. A compartmentalized approach to the various facets of Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan, i.e., security, economy, and people-to-people relations, will assist in improving the bilateral relations between the two countries in the long run.

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