

The TTP Factor in Pak-Afghan Relations

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Introduction

The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is one of the factors in the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan, affecting their relations negatively. Before the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, Pakistan was of the view that the Afghan Taliban do not support the TTP and that foreign agencies are supporting the TTP.¹ But when the Taliban took over Afghanistan, the TTP was the first to celebrate their success within an hour and show support, also many TTP detainees were released from prisons in Afghanistan. However, the real rift between Pakistan and Afghanistan came after the TTP terrorist attack of 30 January 2022 on police headquarters in Peshawar and another attack in Karachi in next month of the same year. Pakistan called Afghanistan as haven for the TTP while TTP rejected the allegations. Pakistan wants Afghan Taliban to side with Pakistan but due to certain limitations, the Afghan Taliban are unable to bend fully towards Pakistan. As neighbouring countries, Pakistan and Afghanistan need to focus on the factors which are causing conflicts including the issue of the TTP, otherwise both the states will face the consequences in the long term because of their porous border.

Pakistan's Concerns and Demands from Afghanistan

Pakistan is going through the wave of terrorism. In the past, the government has had

ceasefire agreements with TTP² but recent attacks of the TTP worsen the situation for Pakistan internally. One major terrorist attack launched by the TTP was in January 2022 in which more than 100 people were killed Peshawar while they were attending prayers at a mosque within a police facility. The TTP initially claimed responsibility for the bombing, however, the TTP's central leadership later refuted this claim. It was the group's bloodiest assault since its revival in 2021, following the Afghan Taliban's assumption of power in Kabul.³ Pakistan sees a link between rise of Afghan Taliban and the attacks of TTP and believes that the TTP is a subset of the Afghan Taliban. In this regard, Pakistan started demanding from Afghanistan to help Pakistan cope with the TTP.

Afghan Taliban's Perspective

On the other hand, the Afghan Taliban have distanced themselves from the TTP. In an interview, the leader of the Afghan Taliban, Mullah Haibatullah Akhunzada was asked different questions to solicit his response on Pakistan's demands from the Afghan Taliban to stop the TTP from spreading terror in Pakistan. He responded by asking why only one out of its six neighbouring states was complaining of terror from Afghanistan. He added that either Pakistani authorities could not contain terrorism or other states were more committed to stop TTP terrorism instead of blaming the Afghan Taliban.⁴ The Afghan Taliban deny

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allegations of Pakistan that they allow the TTP on its soil to operate against Pakistan.

A day after Pakistan claimed that Afghanistan was involved in a suicide attack in Pakistan, Mohammad Yaqoob Mujahid stated on national TV that Akhunzada had termed attacks outside Afghanistan as war rather than jihad.⁵ Through such statements, the Afghan Taliban want to prove that they and the TTP do not have a coalition.

What do the Taliban want?

In June 2022, a ceasefire for three months was agreed upon between Pakistan and the TTP. The Afghan Taliban mediated the talks. The former chief of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan Lt Gen (Retd) Faiz Hameed visited Kabul and participated in talks. But the talks collapsed in November of that year because the two sides did not agree to compromise on certain demands. Pakistan offered the TTP safe resettlement in Pakistan in return for the TTP not participating in activities against the state of Pakistan.

The TTP demanded a reduction of armed forces in FATA and also the reversal of the FATA merger amendment in Constitution of Pakistan. Pakistan agreed to demand of reduction of army in FATA but the reversal of the amendment was not deemed possible.⁶

Limitations of the Afghan Taliban

The Afghan Taliban have their own limitations in bending completely towards Pakistan. They cannot disown the TTP openly for improving relations with Pakistan because they are afraid that it will motivate the TTP to gravitate towards Daesh. The Afghan Taliban cannot afford such a loss in such critical time because of the internal division in Afghanistan. Since they want to maintain good relations with

Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban have managed to facilitate talks between Pakistan and TTP in Kabul in 2022 but these talks were not successful in extending the ceasefire.⁷ Mistrust between Pakistan and Taliban is also one of the limitations. The foreign policy of Pakistan towards the Afghan Taliban has not been consistent. While it supported them in the 1990s, Pakistan took a U-turn on its foreign policy towards them after 9/11. This mistrust is stopping Afghanistan from relying heavily on Pakistan.

Limitations of Pakistan

While some major political parties may be against a reconciliation with the TTP on their terms, any efforts to reverse the former tribal territories' constitutional merger will also directly affect parliamentary politics, which determines the National Assembly of Pakistan's razor-thin margins and the capacity to form governments.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The TTP is a crucial force impacting the dynamics of Pakistan and Afghanistan's relationship, which is complex and varied. Both nations have faced difficulties as a result of the developing relationships between the TTP and the Afghan Taliban, which have strained relations and raised security concerns. In order to solve the issue, diplomatic engagement, religious diplomacy, and policy modifications are required. By encouraging open dialogue and mutual understanding, diplomacy can aid in bridging gaps. By promoting a more moderate view of Islam, religious leaders could contribute to building consensus and reducing extremism. Extremist ideas can be lessened by addressing the issue of unregistered madrassas and supporting a balanced curriculum. The



equitable distribution of resources across Pakistan's provinces and communities, especially those in vulnerable border regions, must be given top priority. The susceptibility of these areas to outside influence can be reduced by promoting a sense of ownership, inclusion, and shared identity. Both Pakistan and Afghanistan must acknowledge that their fates are interwoven in the face of common difficulties and interests. Cooperation, respect for one another, and a commitment to working together to overcome problems like TTP can lead to better relations, more stability, and a more secure area. These surrounding countries can only overcome the challenges posed by TTP and pave a way to permanent peace and prosperity by coordinated efforts.

Diplomatic Relations

Diplomacy is the tool in international relations used by states to solve different issues. The Doha Agreement of 2020 and the Geneva Accords are good examples of how diplomacy can be used effectively. In February, when the border was closed at Torkham by both sides, the issue was resolved through diplomacy. Pakistani delegates went to Kabul and a week later the border was opened and the visit of Foreign Minister of Afghanistan was planned.⁸ This shows that Taliban 2.0 are open to diplomacy. Similarly, the issue of the TTP can be solved through diplomacy between Pakistan and Afghanistan (the latter acting as a mediator for arranging talks between Pakistan and the TTP). Pakistan can offer assistance in giving the Afghan Taliban international recognition. The two states need to avoid an escalation on the matter as it will have negative impact on the

stability of both the states. Pakistan may go for relative gain instead of absolute gain. That's how diplomacy works that you have to talk for mutual interest but both the TTP and Pakistan are in the search of absolute gain which is one of the causes of failure of negotiations between them.

Religious Diplomacy

In the past, a group of 18 delegates, including a group of Islamic clerics under the leadership of the respected religious scholar Tariq Usmani, went to Afghanistan. The main agenda was to talk about the issue of TTP.⁹ In a similar vein, Pakistan needs to arrange different meetings and should involve more religious personalities in this regard. Because the main objective of the TTP is to enforce *sharia* law in Pakistan as like in Afghanistan. The involvement of Islamic clerics in the meetings will give Afghan Taliban the sense that more religious people are part of policymaking, which could soften their stance towards Pakistan.

Securing Border Regions

The resources of Pakistan are not distributed equally among the provinces, which is creating alienation among certain geographical regions. This makes them susceptible to manipulation by any anti-state elements. In this regard, Pakistan needs to give special attention to the populations living in the border areas of the provinces of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in terms of resource distribution. This would make it difficult for any anti-Pakistan entities to manipulate and use them against Pakistan.

Notes and References

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- ³ "Pakistan-Afghan Taliban Relations Face Mounting Challenges." *Middle East Institute*, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/pakistan-afghan-taliban-relations-face-mounting-challenges>. Accessed 27 August 2023.
- ⁴ Ashraf Jehangir Qazi, "Pakistan's Afghan Policy," *Dawn*, 17 August 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1770589>.
- ⁵ "Afghan Supreme Leader Warns Fighters against Attacks Abroad: Defense Minister," *Arab News*, 6 August 2023.
- ⁶ "Five Things to Watch in the Islamabad-Pakistani Taliban Talks." United States Institute of Peace, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/06/five-things-watch-islamabad-pakistani-taliban-talks>. Accessed 27 August 2023.
- ⁷ "Is Pakistan Poised to Take on the TTP?" *United States Institute of Peace*, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/02/pakistan-poised-take-ttp>. Accessed 27 August 2023.
- ⁸ Pakistan, Afghanistan Agree to Boost Trade, Lower Border Tensions. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/8/pakistan-afghanistan-agree-to-boost-trade-lower-border-tensions>. Accessed 28 August 2023.
- ⁹ Prominent Pakistani Religious Scholar Visits Kabul." *TOLOnews*, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-179121>. Accessed 28 August 2023.