



Pakistan's TTP Challenge



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The increasing number of deadly terror attacks by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) pose a severe security challenge to Pakistan, which is already grappling with a deep economic crisis and destabilising political chaos. Pakistan's society is polarised, and state institutions stand divided, blaming each other for corruption, favouritism, and taking an undue share of the national resources. The TTP did gather its strength from the Taliban's victory on Pakistan's western borders, and the national pandemonium at the moment (in Pakistan) is definitely providing the group with fertile ground to conduct relentless attacks without fear of retaliation from the Pakistan military. There have been reports that Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban are discussing resettlement plans for the TTP. A high-powered delegation, including Defence Minister Khawaja Asif and ISI Chief Lt. General Nadeem Anjum, visited Kabul with a firm message that the government is no longer willing to negotiate with the TTP. Media reports suggest that the Taliban have proposed a resettlement plan for the TTP, which entails disarming the terror group and relocating them to Afghanistan. The Taliban also proposed that the Government of Pakistan bear the cost of the resettlement plan.

Ever since the Taliban has taken control of Afghanistan (August 2021), the TTP has accelerated the terror attacks. The defeat of the democratically elected leadership in Afghanistan is seen as a major ideological victory by the Taliban. Pakistan has been pressuring the Afghan Taliban to control the TTP and persuade them to declare a ceasefire. There have been talks between the TTP and the government, moderated by the Pakistan Army, which have not been successful. However, the TTP is unwilling to give up its demands, which include the need for imposing Shariah and the reversal of the merger of Pakistan's erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) with the north-western province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

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The TTP has emboldened its posture, and a series of terror attacks specifically targeting police personnel have taken place. A gruesome terror attack in Peshawar on January 30 that killed more than 100 people, the attack on February 5 in Quetta, and the February 17 attack on the Karachi police office indicate serious challenges for the state. Moreover, the group has been holding its head high with unrelenting and implicit tactical support from its ideological allies—the Afghan Taliban. Lately, the TTP has been projecting itself as a nationalist movement and announcing a parallel government. In fact, a closer look at the TTP's expansion indicates that it is following the expansion pattern of the Afghan Taliban. The Taliban's support of the TTP has been a significant point of contention between the Pakistani leadership and the Taliban.

There are ample speculations regarding a military response targeting the group. In addition, conflicting statements have been issued from the regime regarding the state's response to the TTP. However, three options can be evaluated in this context:

1. The Pakistani government brings the TTP back to the negotiating table and attempts a ceasefire. This is less likely because of two factors: First, Imran Khan has been repeatedly held responsible for the rise in terror attacks as his government tried to negotiate with the group and released more than 100 TTP prisoners, which added to the group's strength. Second, the TTP has not shown any signs of willingness to compromise on their demands, which would be unacceptable to the state.
2. Pakistan takes the Afghan Taliban into confidence, and they take on the responsibility of controlling the group. This option has been explored repeatedly by the leadership.¹ The TTP is an ideological extension of the Afghan Taliban and extended support to the Taliban during the US war on terror. The Afghan Taliban now feel obliged to return this favour by providing assistance to the TTP. The Taliban have denied the presence of TTP in their territory and have also warned Pakistan against any attacks on Afghan soil. Strong links between the Taliban and the TTP and the fact that the TTP draws inspiration from the Taliban and views them as role models raise questions on the efficacy of this option, but given the volatile situation in Pakistan, this option seems to be the possible choice for the regime.
3. Counter-insurgency military operations targeting the TTP. The military has previously conducted counter-terror operations; Zarb-e-Azb in 2014 and Radd-ul-Fasaad in 2017. The operations did impact the TTP's numbers and ability to conduct terror attacks, but the group sustained itself and eventually flourished with the Taliban's support. Despite TTP's rising

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number of attacks, the military response from the state has been restrained due to four factors: 1) Counter-insurgency operations in the past led to significant displacement in the tribal areas; 2) Given the alarming economic crisis (and the misery caused due to the floods), any military operation will add massive financial stress on the country; 3) Military operations against the TTP have an immense potential for a blowback from the Afghan Taliban; and 4) Speculations regarding a conspiracy theory suggest that it might be intentional on the part of the military to not control the group's activities and leverage the security situation for attracting US counter-terror aid and assistance.

The TTP challenge is likely to intensify, given the developments in Afghanistan. The Taliban, after coming into power post-US exit, have remained reluctant to alter their position on women's education and rights, apart from multiple other issues to which they committed and have refused to adhere. However, reports suggest that the Taliban (in Afghanistan) have apparently announced their plan to build hundreds of radical schools all across the nation. This will nurture and cultivate a third and fourth generation of radicals.² The Taliban Ministry of Education announced that the Taliban is focusing on a large number of institutions: "...there are around 6,000 religious schools in the country [Afghanistan], and added that the group plans to build 34 large religious schools in each of the provinces to serve up to 34, 000 students at a time".³

The expansion of Taliban's ideology will strengthen the ideological and tactical base of the TTP, presenting Pakistan with serious security challenge. It remains to be seen how the military handles the emerging security dynamics. Will it opt for counter-insurgency military operations, or will it try and leverage its position with the Afghan Taliban to contain the TTP? The fallouts of either of the options will not be easy for the state.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes:

¹ Kamran Yousuf, "Pakistan gets 'fresh commitment' from Afghan Taliban on TTP", *The Express Tribune*, February 20, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2402681/pakistan-gets-fresh-commitment-from-afghan-taliban-on-ttp>. Accessed on February 22, 2023.

² Hashim Wahdatyar, "How Long Will the Taliban Government Last", *Politics Today*, <https://politicstoday.org/how-long-will-the-taliban-government-last/>, February 21, 2023. Accessed on February 28, 2023.

³ Ibid.