

Resurgence of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan's Second Jihadi Campaign: Implications for Pakistan

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Abstract

The rise of the Afghan Taliban as victorious against the Western military alliance in Afghanistan in 2021 became a fueling force for all types of existing militant movements in the region, but Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a regional Sunni militant organisation in Pakistan's tribal areas, is more to gain, given its closest alliance with the Afghan Taliban. This study explains how and why TTP has been inspired by its mentor—the Afghan Taliban's victory in Afghanistan—and bent on establishing its version of a Sharia state through its second jihadi campaign in Pakistan. TTP's strategic and political goal is perpetual, but its operational and tactical posture has changed, as the U.S. post-withdrawal strategic environment in the Pak-Afghan border—the one that is suited more to all types of terrorists to manoeuvre and the other that will be more difficult for the Pakistani state to counter. The Afghan Taliban have yet to cut the knees of TTP's central command in Afghanistan, an imperative long held demanded by Islamabad to be fulfilled by the Taliban, thus the era of differentiating between the good and bad Taliban is over. Resultantly, this situation will run counter to Pakistan's traditional threat perception that the Afghan Taliban are pro-Pakistan.

Keywords: Afghan Taliban, Durand line, jihadi campaign, national security

Introduction

This study explores the second jihadi campaign the TTP militants have relaunched in Pakistan in a style and with the inclination to follow the Afghan Taliban, who recently occupied Afghanistan altogether in 2021. It furthermore envisages that the TTP is no more different than that of the Afghan Taliban; it is an offshoot of the Afghan Taliban that has long envisioned to achieve the same goal its mentors attained in Afghanistan—a Sunni Sharia state. The study covers the era that started

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in 2018 in which TTP reoriented its entire operational and tactical posture. It vindicates that TTP would be in a better position to manoeuvre in this age, given the range of advantages the group could not entertain in its first jihadi campaign from 2007 to 2015. Furthermore, how and why TTP reoriented its old, rigid, and brutal war-fighting strategy to wage its second jihadi campaign will also be included in this study.

The term ‘pragmatism’ or ‘realist’ mentioned in this article for TTP’s new commander is a metaphor originally used by the TTP fighters on the ground who admired the new leader Umer Wali Masood’s high intellectualism and charisma. The TTP militants are highly encouraged and motivated to launch Afghan-style militancy in Pakistan; posing this threat will make both Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban hostile in the long run, as the latter is unable to run down TTP’s central command in Afghanistan. This situation will ultimately run counter to Islamabad’s old threat perception that the Afghan Taliban are ‘pro-Pakistan. A hostile Afghanistan on its western front will force Pakistan to live in fear of constant paranoia, where the eastern front has historically been hostile with the rise of Hindu nationalist Indian power. From Pakistan’s perspective, this study has a pessimistic orientation as the country’s domestic political and economic situation is highly unstable. When it comes to Sunni militants and, in particular, TTP, the current situation in the region is highly viable for them, given the range of advantages they are enjoying. Take the example of the Islamic State and its regional strands, like the Islamic State Khorasan Province or other Silafi groups; this study suggests that the TTP is more dangerous for Pakistan than the mobile outfits like IS that are not limited to regional gains. Instead, the TTP group has solely focused on Pakistan, and its attacking strategy has proven this.

In this age of the U.S. post-withdrawal strategic environment, this study is a primary contribution to analysing the Taliban’s wider militancy threat spectrum and its impacts on Pakistan. It means the sweeping impacts of the TTP-led so-called second jihadi campaign will be dire, dangerous, and even more difficult for the Pakistani state to counter. For instance, the range of leverages the Pakistani army was enjoying in its first counterterrorism campaign is no longer available for now: weakening public support nationwide for military operations, Pakistan’s isolation on the global level to deal with the TTP threat, waning Islamabad’s leverage on Afghan Taliban, etc. are just a few factors that will ultimately inhibit Pakistan from launching a successful campaign against the TTP.

How the Pakistani Taliban Re-emerged for its Second Jihadi Campaign

The first part of the study explains various factors behind the re-emergence of TTP's second jihadi campaign started in 2018. As indicated above, the victory of the Afghan Taliban against the Western military alliance in 2021 in Afghanistan was a hallmark phenomenon behind the TTP's rebounding in Pakistan. Therefore, the rise of cunning and 'pragmatist' leadership in TTP and changing its entire operational and tactical posture, among others, are other core aspects that provided TTP militants a strong foundation to build what they envisioned for long.

Afghan Taliban Victory against the U.S.—A Fueling Force for TTP to Re-emerge: As the Afghan Taliban gained a spectacular and hallmark victory against the strongest enemy in its history, it energized and inspired the global jihadist movements, but TTP was in the front to attain the most, given its deep and complex ties with the Taliban. Numerous factors contributed to the re-emergence of TTP into a pivotal Sunni militant force in Pakistan.¹ For example, the absence of potent airpower, Afghanistan under Taliban rule; a strategic depth for TTP to regroup, mimicking the Afghan Taliban survival strategy of winning the hearts and minds of masses both in the battle and peacetimes, shadow governance rule, etc. are the main factors that helped the group manifolds. As the US and Pakistan employed effective airpower in the past on both sides of the Pak-Afghan borders, it had not only sandwiched the militants but also delayed them from regrouping and ultimately helped the Pakistani state to counter TTP's eastward expansion.² Therefore, to be better able to deter and defend its zone of influence in the absence of airpower, TTP coalesced its already fraying forces, reorganizing its ranks and files, and convincing or appeasing its splintered Sunni hardliners, which were earlier isolated, neutralized, or to some extent weakened by frequent military operations by the Pakistani state in general and its effective use of airpower in particular.³

In the changing battle zone, that followed, these confused TTP militants exploited this situation in their favour in terms of the range of

¹ Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, 'The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan After the Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover', *Combating Terrorism Centre*, 16:5 (May 2023), Available at :<https://ctc westpoint.edu/the-tehrik-i-taliban-pakistan-after-the-talibans-afghanistan-takeover/>

² Rebecca Grant, 'The Airpower of Anaconda' *Air and Space Forces Magazine*, 1 Sep 2002. <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/0902/anaconda/>

³ Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, *op.cit.*

strategic and operational leverages and translated them into launching their second jihadi campaign against Pakistan.⁴ Notwithstanding, the Afghan Taliban denied any connection with TTP, the latter has not only celebrated the jihadi victory in Kabul but also gets its ideological and spiritual inclination from the Taliban in Afghanistan. Thanks to this, TTP also got refugees deep inside Afghanistan in the past in the face of Pak army operations, while maintaining its command-and-control center there for future attacks.⁵

After the Afghan Taliban's control of Kabul, their survival strategy has become a benchmark for any militant movement to thrive, while TTP envisions benefit even more from this strategy, given its closest ties with the Taliban. For example, shadow governance is an art the Taliban used in Afghanistan smartly: controlling directly and ruling indirectly, while maintaining their plausible deniability at the times of attacks on civilians from both sides.⁶ The TTP also envisions doing the same. For its part, TTP reshuffled its entire old and rigid hierarchical structure, transforming it on the lines of the Afghan Taliban. In so doing, the TTP leadership council which operates under Ameer has the sole authority to decide each and everything, while this situation was not in the past when power was distributed at various strands. After the final decision of Ameer, for example, TTP's leadership council defined the entire hierarchical structure which is now more orderly.⁷

'The leadership council appoints shadow governors in consultation with the emir [*Ameer*] and the deputy on recommendations of the defense ministry and reports from the TTP's accountability commission. The nine shadow provinces correspond to the seven divisions of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, as well as one allocated for the Pashtun-dominated Zhob division in Balochistan and one for the Gilgit-Baltistan province'.⁸

By and large, from adopting a shadow governance model to a shift in operational and tactical situations, TTP has presented itself in the best position to change the entire operational environment in its favour.⁹

⁴ Asfandiyar Mir, 'Pakistan's Twin Crisis', *Foreign Affairs*, 28 February 2023. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/pakistan/pakistans-twin-crisis>

⁵ Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, *op.cit.*

⁶ Gilles Dorronsoro, 'The Taliban's Winning Strategy in Afghanistan', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2009, 18-19. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/taliban_winning_strategy.pdf

⁷ Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, *op.cit.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

Given the changing TTP's war-fighting strategy, the group doesn't want to repeat the mistakes and blunders it made in its first Jihadi campaign in the 2010s. For example, direct occupation of any city or area for a long has created more problems than advantages for TTP in the long run, as it met with defeat when the group occupied Swat City in 2007 of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan and implemented there its version of Sharia Law, which ultimately backfired. Now TTP neither envisions occupying any single city or area for long nor does want to implement Sharia law all over Pakistan, as a range of Pak army operations in FATA have already forced and to a lesser extent convinced TTP that its long-term goal of Shariat is a wishful thinking, at least, for now.¹⁰

Rise of Realist and Cunning Leadership in TTP: Mufti Umer Wali Mehsood, a new TTP Ameer, who led the group since 2018 and set a new order to maneuver in this new age of militancy. He is a religious scholar who favours a 'moderate' and highly cunning approach to launch operations now.¹¹

How and why, Umer Wali adopted a new approach in the changing battle zone is a matter of debate. Since its foundation, brutality, killing civilians, torture cells, and intra-group infighting have been the fashion of TTP.¹² From Baitullah Mehsood—the group's founder and its most charismatic leader that expanded TTP reach from FATA to the settled areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, to Mullah Fazlulla, the last TTP leader that killed in northeastern Afghanistan at the end of the first Jihadi campaign in 2018, TTP leadership employed range of controversial and brutal strategies that ultimately destined to its fracturing. Resultantly, from 2008 to 2015, a range of military operations were launched in FATA and Swat that almost cut the knees of TTP.¹³ Keeping this failure of TTP's first jihadi campaign in mind, its new leadership—Umer Wali Mehsood, aka realist or 'pragmatist' being called by its fighters, overhauled the entire existing hierarchical structure of TTP, making it suitable for both old and splintered militant groups to

¹⁰ Daud Khattak, 'Evaluating Pakistan's Offensives in Swat and FATA', Combating Terrorism Center (CTC), 4:10 (October 2011), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/evaluating-pakistans-offensives-in-swat-and-fata/>

¹¹ Farhan Zahid, 'Profile of New TTP Chief Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud: Challenges and Implications,' *PIPS*, 3-4. <https://www.pakpips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Profile-of-New-TTP-Chief-Mufti-Noor-Wali-Mehsud-Challenges-and-Implications.pdf>

¹² *Ibid.*, 4.

¹³ Abdul Syed and Tore Hamming, *op.cit.*

rejoin or even welcomed the new and energized militant cohorts.¹⁴ He first controlled internal anarchy within TTP and tried to coalesce a range of other militant splintered groups that joined the Islamic State in Khorasan Province or other independent lone terrorist groups that were hamstrung or scattered by heavy military operations.¹⁵

The shift and changes Umer Wali adopted further encouraged other Sunni Baloch nationalists that were earlier limited only to ethnically motivated Baloch insurgency. Expanding Jihadism even in Balochistan, presented TTP as a wider threat to Pakistani state. Central TTP Shura Council—the one which now maintains more outreach and authority even in the tactical situation of attacks, has decreased the older tenet of total autonomy of fighters in battle zones to maneuver.¹⁶ Chitral attack in September 2023 by the TTP militants, for example, witnessed a direct and deep control of TTP’s central command of real-time tactical situation on the ground, where Umer Wali was giving instructions directly from northeastern Afghanistan to the TTP militants attacking in Chitral. When the attack operation was completed, militants abruptly left areas and returned to their safe havens in northeastern Afghanistan.¹⁷ It was a clear adherence of ground fighters to their Ameer in the battle zone. Such strategic persuasion helped strengthen the militant posture for militancy.

This is also a clear indication of TTP’s close allegiance with Al-Qaeda, as the latter advised the former to differentiate between the counterforce and counter-value targets, along with not attacking other sects both Sunni Barelivs and Shias.¹⁸ These sects were at the forefront of the TTP’s brutal terrorism in the past. Given the efficacy of this strategy, the Al-Qaeda central command instructed TTP, the Taliban in Afghanistan had already exploited this strategy, gaining victory against the far-superior enemy, while preserving critical public support at the same time. It means that the TTP’s reorientation of war-fighting strategy

¹⁴ Fred Bezhan and Daud Khattak, ‘The Rise of the New Pakistani Taliban’, Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 18 May 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/the-rise-of-the-new-pakistani-taliban/31261608.html>

¹⁵ Abdul Syed and Tore Hamming, ‘The Revival of the Pakistani Taliban’, *Combating Terrorism Centre*, 14:4 (April/May 2021). <https://ctc westpoint.edu/the-revival-of-the-pakistani-taliban/>

¹⁶ Abdul Syed and Tore Hamming, ‘The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan after the Taliban’s Afghanistan Takeover’, *op.cit.*

¹⁷ Zahid Hussain, ‘The TTP’s New Battleground’, *Dawn News*, 13 September 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1775603>

¹⁸ Abdul Syed and Tore Hamming, ‘The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan after the Taliban’s Afghanistan Takeover’, *op.cit.*

was as successful as it followed its mentor's modus operandi: domination of cunning, or 'pragmatist' leadership in all spheres of operational level, understanding or reevaluation of overall military geography, and the clear analyses of geopolitical situation of regional order which helped the group manifold.

Failure of the Peace Process between the Pakistani State and TTP: If history is any guide, then the era of peace negotiations between the Pakistani State and TTP was on a bumpy path, as each time since 2007, these peace efforts succumbed to failure leading to a military operation against TTP. The majority of the time pro-peace forces on both sides were in the defensive position as compared to skeptical forces to whom initiating the peace process is only a bargaining chip the opposing group is using to attain its messy interests. For instance, skeptical forces in the Pakistani state always supported a heavy-handed approach to dealing with Sunni militants, as they believe that these militants use these peace process only to regroup and relaunch a strong resistance against the military forces.¹⁹ Likewise, skeptical aggressive forces of this type in TTP like the hardliner fighters also believe that each time the Pakistani state used this peace card only to weaken the militants' unity and splintered such hardliner militants from the main militant resistance machine that have a zero tolerance for Pakistani state. Such tactics, they believe, are designed to undermine militant unity, weakening them at the time of heavy military operations.²⁰

At the time of the Afghan Taliban's taking over Kabul in 2021, peace forces in Pakistan re-emerged and they wanted to use this time as an opportunity to influence the Afghan Taliban to appease the TTP through peace negotiations. These pro-peace forces wanted to assimilate and mainstreaming TTP until it could be inspired by the Afghan Taliban victory to launch its operations here in Pakistan.²¹ Amid the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, a new peace process started between Pakistan and TTP from September 2021 to November 2022. Therefore, this campaign again succumbed to failure along with the demise of all pro-peace forces. This was a shocking blow to the newborn peace process. Resultantly,

¹⁹ Iftikhar A. Khan, 'TTP used "peace talks" to swell its ranks: Nacta', *Dawn News*, 9 December 2022. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1725422>

²⁰ Abdul Syed and Tore Hamming, 'The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan after the Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover', *op.cit.*

²¹ Ismail Khan, 'Islamabad, TTP agree on indefinite ceasefire', *Dawn News*, 21 May 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1692383/islamabad-tp-agree-on-indefinite-ceasefire>

some skeptics claimed that TTP could exploit this peacetime as a tool to coalesce its aggressive force to project jihadi power in the future, creating a long-term national security threat for Pakistan.²² Likewise, from the TTP side, resistance and frustration of hardliner groups to this so-called peace process also grew, along with the fear of Noor Wali Mehsud about joining these hardliners to other rival terrorist organizations like ISK or ISPP undermining the destiny of the peace effort.²³

Subsequently, the killing of Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri's in July 2022 in Kabul in a drone strike,²⁴ frustrated the TTP hardliners. Meanwhile, the ouster of Imran Khan from power and the resignation of Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed—the former DG ISI and corps commander Peshawar, who was instrumental to appease and convince various militant groups to come on the table. He could not become Army Chief, as some TTP elements expected Gen. Hameed to see in the GHQ, were the main incidents among others that ultimately frustrated the TTP.²⁵ For example, when former PM Imran Khan along with another pro-negotiation team under Gen. Hameed left the office, and skeptical forces came into the office in November 2022 that had already considered TTP a main source of terrorism, things changed dramatically. It proved to be an opportunity for the TTP hardliners to rise and launch deadly terrorist attacks against Pakistan.²⁶ In sum, there is no denying the fact that anti-negotiation forces had been on the upper hand for majority of the time, over-ambitious and highly optimistic pro-peace

²² Brian Michael Jenkins, 'Complex Calculations Shape Pakistan-TTP Negotiations', *Rand Corporation*, 20 December 2021, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2021/12/complex-calculations-shape-pakistan-ttp-negotiations.html>

²³ Abdul Sayed and Amira Jadoon, 'Understanding Tehrik-eTaliban Pakistan's Unrelenting Posture', *GW Program on Extremism*, 16 August 2022. https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/Understanding-TTP-Posture_Sayed-Jadoon_August-2022.pdf?shem=iosie

²⁴ Abdul Basit, 'The Impact of Ayman Zawahiri's Killing on Pakistan-TTP Reconciliation Talks', *Jamestown Foundation*, 20:20 (October 2022). <https://jamestown.org/program/the-impact-of-ayman-zawahiris-killing-on-pakistan-ttp-reconciliation-talks/>

²⁵ Fidel Rahmani, 'Former ISI chief wanted to bring TTP members back to Pakistan' *Khama Press*, 21 February 2023. <https://www.khaama.com/former-isi-chief-wanted-to-bring-ttp-members-back-to-pakistan/>

²⁶ Sanaullah Khan, 'NSC decides to launch 'comprehensive' anti-terror operation', *Dawn News*, 7 April 2023. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1746397>

forces' approach towards the TTP outweighed the gains they dreamed of. The TTP could not fulfill its obligations to the government.

Operational and Tactical Shift in TTP's Second Jihadi Campaign: It is the game of winning hearts and minds, so changing TTP's old brutal and highly controversial operational strategy has been critical in its second jihadi campaign. Analyzing the shift in operational and tactical situations on the ground, at least, from the previous three years, some factors have been identified and greatly contributed to TTP's new war-fighting strategy: sole focus on attacking security forces, less focus on suicidal terrorism, more commando operations, short-term occupation of both rural and settled areas, utilizing Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), expanding its area of operation from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to Balochistan, and strictly follow and obey the higher command instructions and orders.²⁷ Since 2020, the TTP's new leadership strived to pursue all the above prerequisites it envisioned to apply against Pakistani state. It is becoming increasingly evident that this strategy be frustrating for Pakistan's existing threat perception concerning TTP.²⁸ Keeping the above-mentioned strategies in mind, attacking the Chitral district of Pakistan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in September 2023 by crossing the northeastern Afghan border, for example, TTP militants quickly entered the area, occupied some villages, hitting many Pakistani security forces' target with great precision and abruptly left it until the superior airpower could hunt them down. This strategy was in line with the adoption and persuasion of the Afghan Taliban's old triumphant strategy in Afghanistan.²⁹ Likewise, current TTP Ameer tightly monitors every suicide attack and even a single attack could not be launched without his permission, given the likely chances of more collateral damages.

In a bid to gain geopolitical space, TTP established its operational security not only in Pashtun-dominated northern Balochistan but also established its ties with Sunni Baloch insurgents from majority ethnic Southern Balochistan, establishing there a shadow government

²⁷ Abdul Syed and Tore Hamming, 'The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan after the Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover', *op.cit.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Peter Mills and Kathryn Tyson, 'Salafi-Jihadi Movement, TTP Launches Offensive in Pakistan', *Critical Threats*, 15 September 2023. https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/salafi-jihadi-movement-update-september-13-sdf-lose-legitimacy-in-deir-ez-zor-al-qaeda-and-the-islamic-state-expand-in-west-africa-ttp-launches-offensive-in-pakistan#_edn6e8de73370699ab067bc5f800682d93a91

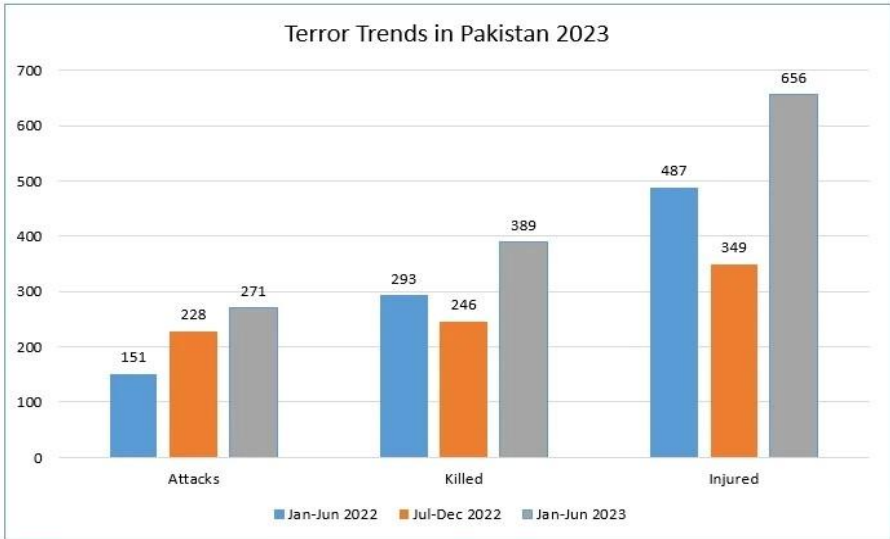
structure.³⁰ Furthermore, TTP clearly expressed its aversion to hitting foreign targets. For instance, the TTP attack on Chinese engineers at Sarena Hotel in Gwadar in 2021 was the wrong target, as it was designed to hit the Pakistani security forces, according to TTP's official social media handling, as later on, the group confessed that the Chinese were not real targets.³¹ In another barbarian attack on Police Mosque in Peshawar in January 2023 by the Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, a newly merged group into TTP that was earlier an independent entity, more than one hundred people were killed, TTP not only condemned it but also declared it a clear violation of TTP's new war-fighting doctrine.³² Moreover, for employing modern weapons in the battle zone, TTP also shifted its focus more on precision and lethal war-fighting approaches; utilizing an M16A4 armed with a thermal scope, M4 carbines with Trijicon ACOG scopes, and a range of other rifles it acquired from the Afghan war, etc., making it a sniper army focusing mainly on killing high-value security targets. Coming sniper fighters into TTP's new ranks and files proved to be advantageous in preventing the counter-value targets.³³

³⁰ Kathryn Tyson, 'Salafi-Jihadi Movement', 21 July 2023. *Critical Threats*, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/salafi-jihadi-movement-weekly-update-july-20-2023#_edne7900db645d7a8bec04700a4e3ab018a43

³¹ Abdul Syed and Tore Hamming, 'The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan after the Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover', *op.cit.*

³² Arshad Mehmood, 'Pakistani Taliban Splinter Group Claims Responsibility for Mosque Bombing as Death Toll Hits 100', *The Medialine*, 31 January 2023. <https://themedialine.org/top-stories/pakistani-taliban-splinter-group-claims-responsibility-for-mosque-bombing-as-death-toll-hits-100/>

³³ Zai-ur-Rehman, 'U.S. arms left in Afghanistan surface in Pakistan Taliban insurgency', *Nikkei Asia*, 12 March 2023. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Terrorism/U.S.-arms-left-in-Afghanistan-surface-in-Pakistan-Taliban-insurgency>



³⁴*Sources: Terrorism in Pakistan Soars 79 percent in First Half of 2023*

The TTP-led IED attacks have been increasing day by day. Mimicking its Afghan Taliban winning tactics, which helped them to win against the far-superior Western mechanised land forces, TTP believes it will also expand its jihadi power by using these weapons here in Pakistan. Two provinces, for instance, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, are witnessing a high number of IED attacks, as TTP is using this weapon mainly against the security forces and hitting or damaging the strategic installations of the Pakistani state.³⁵ In pursuit of Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda's war-fighting strategies and instructions respectively, the TTP has shifted, reorganized, and reevaluated its entire old tactical and operational analysis of the battle zone, especially in this age of changing regional geopolitical dynamics.

³⁴ 'Terrorism in Pakistan soars 79% in First Half of 2023' *PICSS*, 2 July 2023. <https://www.picss.net/articles/terrorism-in-pakistan-soars-79-in-first-half-of-2023/>

³⁵ Islam Uddin, 'Civilian casualties in Pakistan terror attacks doubled in September', *Anadolu Agency*, 5 October 2023. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/civilian-casualties-in-pakistan-terror-attacks-doubled-in-september/3006590>

TTP's Second Jihadi Campaign; Impacts on Pakistan's National Security

The second part of the study highlights how the second jihadi campaign will take place and how it could impact Pakistan's national security in the long run. It further alarms that growing anarchy in Pakistan's northwestern part dominated by Sunni militancy and, in particular, by the TTP could isolate Islamabad not only in its backyard but also at the global level.

Absence of Strong Global Support for Pakistan against TTP: After withdrawing from Afghanistan, the US and its allies have reduced their level of concern about the Sunni militancy and terrorism in the region. When it comes to TTP and its second jihadi campaign the group orchestrated against Pakistan, the US and global community became less concerned to deal with this threat, due to localizing of TTP's militancy only on Pakistan.³⁶ There are internal and external factors that are evident in decreasing the global support Pakistan could not muster against TTP at this time.

Analysing external factors: for example, the rise of Chinese maritime power in both the South China Sea and Pacific Ocean as a direct threat to U.S. naval supremacy on the high seas, the re-emergence of Russian power in the Eurasian heartland, the rise of American public discontent about the endless US wars in this age of tight defence budgeting, and the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan after the Taliban's 'assurance' of not harboring global Sunni jihadists, etc. could prevent the US from massively engaging in the region.³⁷ For internal factors to explore, firstly, Pakistan's long bumpy approach to differentiate between good and bad Taliban with much to the discontent of the US and its allies. Good Taliban, they believe, were those to whom Pakistan provided safe havens to attack US forces in Afghanistan. Bad Taliban, by contrast, were anti-Pakistani militants who got refuge in American-supported Afghanistan, as was blamed by Pakistan in the past.³⁸ Secondly, TTP's inclination to launch local militancy solely

³⁶ Abdul Syed and Tore Hamming, 'The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan after the Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover', *op.cit.*

³⁷ Jacob Ware, 'The United States left Afghanistan to prepare for a war it will probably will never fight', *War on the Rocks*, 28 October 2021. <https://warontherocks.com/2021/10/the-united-states-left-afghanistan-to-prepare-for-a-war-it-will-probably-never-fight/>

³⁸ Leela Jacinto, 'Pakistan's 'good Taliban-bad Taliban' strategy backfires, posing regional risks', *France* 24, 9 January 2022.

against Pakistan is a factor that could disrupt or alienate the Pakistani state to coalesce global support against TTP. Pakistan, no doubt, became the frontline state in the US-led global war on terror; Pakistan will remain a front-line state to bear the terrorism threat, but without the level of global support it enjoyed in the past. With its solo flight, by force or by choice, it would compress Pakistan to live in constant fear of paranoia.³⁹ By analysing both external and internal factors, Pakistan's chances to gain global support against TTP are grim. Rather than eternal love to anyone, the US dealing with global challenges is case-by-case or interest-oriented—a move that will isolate Pakistan to deal with TTP alone.⁴⁰

Even in countering Al-Qaeda's central command that maintains close ties with the Taliban, the U.S. will only employ its airpower to decapitate the terrorist leadership—a likely scenario of limited Pak-US cooperation in counterterrorism. Furthermore, the old mantra of Islamabad in presenting TTP as a byproduct of the US-supported Afghan government and other hostile foreign intelligence agencies at its back has been defused, as now the 'good Taliban' are in Kabul but the threat remains.⁴¹ Continuing its weakening case on TTP, in particular, and the wider Afghan question, in general, will erode Pakistan's credibility of gaining global support against the TTP challenge.

Waning Islamabad's Leverage on Afghan Taliban against TTP: While there is no open justification that Pakistan supports any form of militancy, the U.S. and its Western allies frequently blamed Islamabad for having close ties with the Afghan Taliban-aka 'good Taliban'. This claim, they believe, became evident when Pakistan could not effectively run down all types of militant safe havens in FATA. Taliban's endorsement to participate in the Doha agreement—a hallmark resolution to end the U.S. longest war, further strengthened this dogma

<https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20220209-pakistan-s-good-taliban-bad-taliban-strategy-backfires-posing-regional-risks>

³⁹ 'Good Taliban, Bad Taliban: Tracing the Resurgence of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP),' *European Foundation for South Asian Studies*, June 2022. <https://www.efsas.org/publications/study-papers/resurgence-of-the-tehrik-e-taliban-pakistan-ttp/>

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Daniel L. Byman, 'Don't expect an al-Qaida reboot in Afghanistan', *Brookings Institution*, 4 May 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/dont-expect-an-al-qaida-reboot-in-afghanistan/>

that Pakistan and Afghan Taliban share some common grounds.⁴² Therefore, when the Taliban gained control of Afghanistan, its behaviour changed dramatically and turned against the core interests of Pakistan. The era of Pakistan's long bet to support and differentiate between the good and bad Taliban is over. In the months that followed, the Afghan Taliban exposed themselves as a close patron of TTP, or bad Taliban and they will remain their mentors.⁴³ By contrast, this situation will run counter to the Pakistani state's threat perception of considering the good Taliban off the balance against the bad Taliban.⁴⁴

For example, some main reasons ultimately waned Pakistan's old leverage on the Afghan Taliban like Islamabad's limited role in helping the Taliban in their dire economic needs, the Taliban's half-hearted effort to appease TTP for negotiation, rising rigid Taliban approach on Durand Line, failure of Afghan Taliban to eliminate the TTP safe havens on Afghani soil, and the galvanizing issue of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, etc. To explain it broadly, the issue of Durand Line has again rolled back and misperceived the Pakistanis, as they thought that this issue would be defused if not totally resolved under Taliban rule.⁴⁵

It means, that the Taliban movement is not only religiously motivated but also ethnically driven. While sharing the group's ethnic fault-line with other Pashtun nationalists hostile to Pakistan, will ultimately erode Islamabad's old leverage on the Afghan Taliban it thought would be a 'force of pacifier' on the western borders.⁴⁶ This continuing cowardice of the Taliban has frustrated Islamabad, where

⁴² 'Pakistan's Support for the Taliban', *Human Rights Watch*, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/afghan2/Afghan0701-02.htm#TopOfPage>

⁴³ Raza Khan Qazi, 'As Pakistan's Afghanistan policy fails, the Afghan Taliban moves against Islamabad,' *Atlantic Council*, 6 September 2022. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/as-pakistan-afghanistan-policy-fails-the-afghan-taliban-move-against-islamabad/>

⁴⁴ Abdul Syed and Tore Hamming, 'The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan after the Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover', *op.cit.*

⁴⁵ Vinay Kaura, 'Pakistan-Afghan Taliban relations face mounting challenges', *Middle East Institute*, 2 December 2022. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/pakistan-afghan-taliban-relations-face-mounting-challenges>

⁴⁶ Sachin Khunte, 'The Durand Line Impasse: The Two Taliban And Pakistan', *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-durand-line-impasse-the-two-talibans-and-pakistan/>

skeptical forces have already dominated the Afghan policy. Rising TTP militancy, they believe, is only harboured, and controlled by the Afghan Taliban. In the long-term and after ensuing this mindset in Islamabad, Pakistan will have zero-tolerance even with the Afghan refugees living in Pakistan since the Afghan Jihad back in the 1980s.⁴⁷ Simply put, if the current trajectory of deteriorating relations between Pakistan and Taliban continues, the former will lose its old balancing act against TTP, which, no doubt, it effectively used in a time when Kabul was dominated by an American-supported government. Thus, waning Pakistan's traditional leverage on the Afghan Taliban will be a zero-sum game in all security dynamics and will create more security threats, rather than resolving the TTP question without using force.

Declining Public Support for Military Operations at the time of Political Instability: At a time of political instabilities in Pakistan, its military is witnessing the lowest ebb of public support since partition in 1947. It is evident that without public support, no military can win, while launching a military operation within its territory is even more vulnerable.⁴⁸ Before analysing the waning public support for the military to launch another military operation against the re-emerged TTP threat in FATA, it is suitable to discuss how and why the political instability has become a hindrance in so doing; this usual and easy affair the Pakistani state has enjoyed over the course of the previous two decades.⁴⁹ Since the end of Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) government in Pakistan, the country has witnessed an unstable political situation affecting all walks of life. Things changed dramatically when Imran Khan was ousted from power under the no-confidence motion in the parliament in 2022.⁵⁰ PTI and its supporters considered this motion as deliberately anchored by the Biden

⁴⁷ Simone Shah, 'What to Know about Pakistan's Deportation Deadline for Afghan Refugees,' *The Times*, 31 October 2023. <https://time.com/6330122/pakistan-afghanistan-refugees/>

⁴⁸ Tim Willasey-Wilsey CMG, 'The Looming Crisis in Pakistan' *RUSI*, 11 April 2023. <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/looming-crisis-pakistan>

⁴⁹ Shuja Nawaz and other experts, 'The unfinished efforts against terrorism and militancy in Pakistan', *Atlantic Council*, 31 March 2023. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/the-unfinished-efforts-against-terrorism-and-militancy-in-pakistan/>

⁵⁰ 'Pakistan PM Imran Khan gone after losing no-confidence vote', *Aljazeera*, 9 April 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/9/pakistan-prime-minister-imran-khan-no-confidence-vote>

administration in the US and facilitated by the military establishment in Pakistan.⁵¹

The climax to protests, frustration, and instability came when the coalition government surprisingly arrested Imran Khan by Rangers from the premises of Islamabad High Court on 9 May 2023, while he was registering biometric attendance to appear before court for his pre-arrest bail. In response to this arrest, PTI supporters launched nationwide violent protests against this move and even attacked some strategic installations including the corps commander Lahore house, considering the military establishment behind Khan's arrest. It was a time when Pakistan was experiencing high public anger.⁵² With rising anti-military hatred since May 2023, the Pak Army has yet to restore its soft image and accumulate admiration to launch another effective military operation up to the level of Operation Zarb-e-Azab; the one which was highly effective and had huge public support at its back in 2014.

Away from it, some local and perpetual reasons left the military with no option but to undo its continuing operational approach in FATA. For example, the dissatisfaction of the local Pashtun population with frequent military operations, destruction of public and private properties, and the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) phenomena specifically in this age of dire economic conditions, will prevent the military from launching another effective campaign in FATA.⁵³

Even the launching of the latest military campaign, named Operation Azm-e-Istehkam or 'Resolve for Stability' in June 2024 would not be able to gain its strategic and operational ends. Encompassing kinetic and non-kinetic attributes, this operation has yet to achieve its operational and strategic objectives.⁵⁴ In kinetic terms, destroying

⁵¹ Ryan Grim and Murtaza Hussain, 'Secret Pakistan Cable Documents U.S. Pressures to Remove Imran Khan', *The Intercept*, 9 August 2023. <https://theintercept.com/2023/08/09/imran-khan-pakistan-cypher-ukraine-russia/>

⁵² Adam Weinstein, 'Imran Khan arrest sparks rare violence against police, military across Pakistan', *Responsible Statecraft*, 10 May 2023. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2023/05/09/imran-khan-arrest-sparks-rare-violence-against-police-military-across-pakistan/>

⁵³ Abubakar Siddique, 'Pakistan's Tribal Areas Caught in Limbo Awaiting Integration', *Gandhara*, 16 January 2020. <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/pakistan-tribal-areas-caught-in-limbo-awaiting-integration/30381219.html>

⁵⁴ Mariam Shah, 'Pakistan's Counterterrorism Strategy: Beyond Azm-e-Istehkam', *RUSI*, 1 July 2024, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/pakistans-counterterrorism-strategy-beyond-azm-e-istehkam>

militants physically is very difficult if not impossible, since the militants have more freedom to get refuge in Afghanistan under the Taliban.⁵⁵ In diplomatic and non-kinetic terms, the Taliban in Afghanistan neither would deny giving safe sanctuaries to TTP nor would abide by Pakistan's old demands of handing back TTP commanders.

In both arenas, Operation Azm-e-Istehkam will face more challenges since the U.S. has left Afghanistan, and its concerns about counterterrorism in the region have been lowered if not eliminated. Though this operation has widened its strategic scope including to deal the Baloch insurgency, a lack of critical public support could create more problems.⁵⁶ Further complicating matters, the old Sunni militancy which was considered a byproduct of FATA would not be a case in the future, as the TTP militants have expanded their area of operations from FATA to northern areas and even in Balochistan, making it harder, if not impossible, for the Pakistani army to counter.⁵⁷

Afghan Taliban Victory: A Long-term Inspirational Pulse for Sunni Sharia State in Pakistan: Taliban victory in Afghanistan has encouraged and welcomed other militant outfits to launch their movement in their respective zones. Though TTP is a byproduct of the Afghan Taliban's movement; it is more than that. Its main area of operation and the ultimate goal is to gain a Sharia state in Pakistan.⁵⁸ Its first Jihadi campaign was bloody and ferocious that envisioned to have a TTP-led Sunni Sharia state. But, its second jihadi campaign which is more organized and closely aligned with its mentors' code of conduct in

⁵⁵ Bill Roggio, 'The Bonds are Close' As the Pakistani Taliban Benefits From its Afghan Safe Havens', *Foundation for Defence of Democracies*, 16 July 2024, https://www.fdd.org/analysis/op_ed/2024/07/16/analysis-the-bonds-are-close-as-the-pakistani-taliban-benefits-from-its-afghan-safe-haven/

⁵⁶ Zia ur Rehman, 'What Makes Azm-i-Istehkam different from Operations Past', *Dawn News*, 30 July 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/amp/1848738>

⁵⁷ Kathryn Tyson, 'Salafi Jihadi Movement' Weekly, 21 June 2023, *Institute for the Study of War*. <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/salafi-jihadi-movement-weekly-update-june-21-2023>

⁵⁸ Asfandyar Mir, 'After the Taliban's Takeover: Pakistan's TTP problem', *United States Institute of Peace*, 19 January 2022. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/01/after-talibans-takeover-pakistans-ttp-problem>

Afghanistan, is also desired to achieve the same goal but with new and improved strategies.⁵⁹

Two factors, in part, will contribute to and determine the coming inspiration of the TTP to fight. First, it is unpredictable that the Afghan Taliban's foot soldiers will appear increasingly hostile to the Pakistani state which, no doubt, runs counter to the latter's old threat perception that the Afghan Taliban are best 'anti-dote' against an Afghanistan hostile to Pakistan. The current Taliban fighters' cohort is a superstructure of jihadism that cohabits equally with TTP to attain what they dreamed of.⁶⁰ Secondly, the current rising political dissident in Pakistan will inspire TTP militants to exploit and expand its militancy project countrywide. Analysing the first phenomenon: Taliban movement is not national; rather, borderless—a move that is unprecedented and counter-productive, at least, for the Pakistani security establishment which for long and wishfully thought of the Taliban movement as 'pro-Pakistan'.⁶¹ Publicly, the Afghan Taliban disowned and condemned its fighters' ties with TTP but in reality, the situation is different. Furthermore, Taliban victory in Afghanistan in 2021 has cleared the way for global and local jihadists to launch their next jihadi theatre against Pakistan, while TTP is the sole and only franchise to lead this trajectory.⁶² This grand inspiration of building an Afghan-style Sunni state in Pakistan will not be as easy as was in Afghanistan under the Taliban but will certainly open another door to a new form of militancy which will be more dangerous, and difficult to control.⁶³ When it comes to discussing the second factor in detail, the rise in public anger against military operations, TTP militants are also in the best position to exploit this weakness. The rise of political instabilities, they claim, will help

⁵⁹ Baseer Naveed, 'Pakistan's acceptance of Sharia law in Swat Valley signals weakness to militants', *JURIST*, 20 April 2009. <https://www.jurist.org/commentary/2009/04/pakistans-acceptance-of-sharia-law-in/>

⁶⁰ Abdul Syed and Tore Hamming, 'The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan after the Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover', *op.cit.*

⁶¹ Bill Roggio, 'Afghan Taliban and Al Qaeda aiding Pakistani Taliban's insurgency', *FDD Long War Journal*, 16 June 2023. <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/06/16/afghan-taliban-and-al-qaeda-aiding-pakistani-talibans-insurgency/>

⁶² Dr Antonio Giustozzi, 'The Resurgence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan', *RUSI*, 12 August 2021. <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/resurgence-tehrik-i-taliban-pakistan>

⁶³ Country Report on Terrorism 2021. *U.S. Department of State*, 2021, 181-82. [Country Reports 2021 Complete MASTER.no maps-011323-Accessible.pdf](https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-2021-complete-master-no-maps-011323-accessible.pdf)

expand and project the group's power in Punjab, the most populous province in Pakistan.⁶⁴

Participating Punjabi Taliban fighters in TTP-led ranks and files is as old as the history of the Taliban movement but it mainly belonged to a cohort of the Deobandi school of Sunni sect. Nevertheless, this cohort could expand to other anti-state groups to rebuild and gain what they long dreamed of.⁶⁵ In short, the barbarism and brutalism of TTP militancy in the past left it with almost zero public support. But this would not be the case in the future as the group's ideals of so-called 'pragmatism' and realism in its ongoing second jihadi campaign has focused mainly on counter-force targets; a welcome agenda both for Sunni militant's sleeper cells and other anti-state entities in the country. This shift, they envision, would help convince the public to support TTP militants and their cause in the long run. Thus, this could be hostile for Pakistan's national security in the long run.⁶⁶

Conclusion

The rise of the Taliban as a state power in Afghanistan has made it increasingly evident that Pakistan's old threat perception of considering Indian growing power as an existential threat on its eastern borders may weaken its urgency in the future if not totally eliminated. As the chances of conventional land-warfare between Pakistan and India are decreasing gradually, while gaining strategic stability from both sides has provided them a sense of stability if not a total pacification. To keep this in mind, if the second jihadi campaign of TTP will succeed like the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan, it will first strengthen and expand the group's zone of influence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan and then ultimately pose an existential threat in the Punjabi heartland—an outcome that will decide the fate of TTP's overall so-called second jihadi campaign. The TTP and other Afghan Taliban-influenced Sunni militants have already expanded their terrorist attacks on critical strategic installations, while their attacking strategy of hitting only the counter-force targets is a deliberate move designed to leave the military with less

⁶⁴ Zia UR Rehman, 'Pakistani military adds enigmatic militant group to list of worries', *Nikkei Asia*, 12 November 2023. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Pakistani-military-adds-enigmatic-militant-group-to-list-of-worries>

⁶⁵ Abdul Syed and Tore Hamming, 'The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan after the Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover', *op.cit.*

⁶⁶ Muhammad Akbar Notezai, 'Frankenstein's Monster: The Growing TTP Threat in Pakistan', *The Diplomat*, 10 February 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/frankensteins-monster-the-growing-ttp-threat-in-pakistan/>

public support against the militancy, the level of support it enjoyed in the past. It means that Pakistan will have to maneuver and survive in an increasingly hostile operational environment in the future. In a nutshell, the current and future threat to Pakistan will be more severe and dangerous: one that is religiously motivated and second that is bent on building an Afghan-style Sunni Sharia state in Pakistan.