

Taliban's Takeover of Afghanistan and Pakistan's Security Challenges

Despite friendly relations between the two countries, the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan has been far from an unmixed blessing for neighbouring Pakistan. Zahid Shahab Ahmed provides the context and assesses the security challenges that Pakistan faces arising out of the Taliban's rule over Afghanistan.

As the US troops began withdrawal from Afghanistan during July–August 2021, the Taliban began taking over the country. They now fully control the country and have established an interim government, which they claim as inclusive. Internationally, Pakistan is seen as the Taliban's key partner and Islamabad also views the Taliban-led regime as friendly but increasingly fragility in Afghanistan continues to have adverse effects on Pakistan's security. This article aims to assess Pakistan's terrorism problem since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021.

Background

A bit of a historic background is important to understand Pakistan's national interests in connection to Afghanistan. At its independence from the British Empire in 1947, Afghanistan was the only state that [opposed](#) Pakistan's membership in the United Nations. Kabul's position was guided by its opposition to the validity of the Durand Line agreement between Afghanistan and the British Raj. The bilateral relationship got worse during the 1950s following Afghanistan's attacks into Pakistan's Balochistan and former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (ex-FATA). Under Daoud Khan, Afghanistan began supporting Pashtun and Baloch groups in Pakistan. Eventually, Islamabad was forced to develop a better plan to gain some influence in Afghanistan. This happened under Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's era when the Afghan Cell was established in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Pakistan began establishing [relations](#) with Afghan Islamists like Burhanuddin Rabbani.

A major opportunity knocked at Pakistan's door after the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979. Then Pakistan became a [frontline](#) US ally in its proxy engagement in Afghanistan for which Pakistan played a key role by recruiting, training and supporting mujahideen against the Soviet troops in Afghanistan. After the Soviet withdrawal, Pakistan maintained its influence and hosted various Afghan political actors in 1992. This meeting led to the [signing](#) of the Peshawar Accord and interim government was established in Afghanistan. Due to differences among the key actors, the Peshawar Accord collapsed triggering a civil war in the country. The Taliban ultimately emerged as a political entity and managed to establish the Islamic Emirate (IEA) in 1996.

After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the US, Washington tried to convince the IEA to handover Al Qaeda's leadership to the US, but the Taliban refused because of Pashtun code of conduct (Pashtunwali) that demands protecting guests. The US-led NATO troops attacked Afghanistan and their victory was quick as the IEA quickly collapsed and many of its key leaders took refuge in Pakistan.

The Taliban's Takeover

Despite joining the US-led 'War on Terror', Pakistan did maintain a relationship with the Taliban. This was reflected in various ways, for example, Islamabad hosted Afghan peace dialogues and supported dialogues hosted by other actors, such as the US, China, Qatar and Russia. Like other regional actors, Pakistan backed peace negotiations between the Taliban and the US. Hence, Islamabad was supportive of the US–Taliban peace deal which was [signed](#) in Doha in 2020.

As part of the peace deal in which the Ashraf Ghani government was not a party, the US was bound to withdraw all troops from Afghanistan. With the change of leadership in the US, the Biden administration [announced](#) a full withdrawal by the twentieth anniversary of 9/11 (September 11, 2021). While the US troops were leaving during July–August 2021, the Taliban began their offensive by taking over more territories in Afghanistan. Quite remarkably, the Taliban faced no major [resistance](#) from the Afghan National Army.

Since the Taliban's takeover, Pakistan has been [lobbying](#) regionally and internationally to ensure that the international community remains committed towards Afghanistan. Islamabad is concerned about the spillover which could be caused by a major humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. Pakistan has therefore used all channels, including bilateral and multilateral, to demand more humanitarian aid for Afghanistan. Still Pakistan's worries are not over as increasing fragility in Afghanistan is a major cause of growing terrorism in Pakistan.

Pakistan's Growing Terrorism Problem

During the period of US-led NATO mission in Afghanistan, Pakistan suffered tremendously from a sudden increase in terrorist incidents in the country. During 2001–2021, Pakistan [suffered](#) a loss of more than 80,000 lives and economic damages of over US\$100 billion. This was mainly due to the reallocation of Al Qaeda terrorists from Afghanistan to Pakistan. After successive military operations, Pakistan has managed to achieve a significant success against terrorism but all that is now at risk because of the presence of anti-Pakistan terrorists in Afghanistan. In 2020, a UN report had [warned](#) about the presence of over 6,000 anti-Pakistan terrorists, mainly belonging to Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), in Afghanistan.

An immediate adverse effect on Pakistan's security is already visible in the shape of rising terrorism. Since August 2021, TTP's [activities](#) in Pakistan have grown manifold through fundraising, recruitment and attacks in areas beyond ex-FATA. Simultaneously, Islamic State-Khorasan Province has also been attacking inside Pakistan and was [responsible](#) for an attack on a Shia mosque in Peshawar in March 2022. According to South Asia Terrorism Portal, there were 272 terrorist [incidents](#) in Pakistan during August 2021 and March 2022.

Despite TTP's offensive, the government of Pakistan's initial reaction was to reach a political settlement with the group. These negotiations were facilitated by the Taliban, especially Siraj Haqqani who is the first deputy leader of the Taliban since 2016. The TTP initially also wanted the government to reverse its decision on ex-FATA's merger with KP but then [withdrew](#) this demand as the negotiations proceeded. In November 2021, the TTP announced a ceasefire in exchange for the government releasing TTP prisoners. In December 2021, Pakistan [released](#) 80 TTP prisoners. Still, the TTP suspended the ceasefire in December 2021 by blaming the government of Pakistan for not keeping its commitments such as releasing 102 TTP prisoners before November 2021. Also, the TTP [blamed](#) the government for violating the ceasefire agreement through security operations against the group in Lakki Marwat, Swat, Bajaur, Dir and Swabi. This could be because the government had reached no decision regarding [amnesty](#) for TTP. There are ongoing clashes involving Pakistan army and TTP terrorists with casualties on both sides.

Conclusion

Considering that the Taliban has a relationship with TTP, Islamabad has approached Kabul to address its growing terrorism problem. The Taliban did intervene as a mediator between Islamabad and TTP but so far there is no breakthrough and the clashes between Pakistan army and TTP continue. Despite Pakistan's uncomfortable relationship with the Afghan Taliban, Islamabad has no better option than to continue its engagement with the Taliban to address its terrorism problem. Pakistan does realise that it alone cannot handle the situation in Afghanistan to avoid a major spillover, therefore, is relying on its other partners, such as China and Gulf states, to ensure that humanitarian aid continues towards Afghanistan. While the Taliban-led new government in Afghanistan is not recognised by any state, Pakistan has limited options for an open engagement. Islamabad has however decided that it would not unilaterally recognise the new government. This shows a desire to work with regional and international actors for addressing the situation in Afghanistan. For now, there is a greater focus on the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, but Pakistan needs to take a leading role for the development of a counterterrorism mechanism at a regional level.

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