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Change in Afghanistan: Resurgence of TTP in Pakistan

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Change in Afghanistan: Resurgence of TTP in Pakistan

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With the Afghan Taliban's take over of Kabul and subsequent evolving regional dynamics, Pakistan is faced with an elevated threat of a resurgence of Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP) Pakistan.¹ TTP has become emboldened by the rise to power of the Afghan Taliban. Moreover, right-wing extremist groups within Pakistan are seeking inspiration from the Taliban's 'victory'² in Afghanistan. Pakistan's border region has expectedly seen an uptick in violence, which, if spirals, could undermine the hard-won peace and internal security.

The departure of US-led Western forces which paved the way for ascendancy of the Taliban has changed the character of militancy in Afghanistan and the region. The Taliban battled the US and its allies for twenty years, and today are in power. This gives inspiration to other militant groups in the region, including TTP. The arrival of a Taliban-led government in Afghanistan has the potential to provide an enabling environment for TTP to regroup, reorganize and launch attacks inside Pakistan. This poses new security challenges to Pakistan as policy-makers navigate the new situation in Afghanistan.

This brief charts the trajectory of TTP over the years, its present status, and future outlook for Pakistan in the coming months.

TTP: Genesis and Initial Years

The rise of TTP has its genesis in the fall of the Afghan Taliban government in 2001 after the US invasion of Afghanistan, following the 9/11 attacks. After the US military onslaught, thousands of Afghan Taliban members and Al-Qaida operatives crossed into Pakistan, in search of safety.³ They found refuge in parts of now Khyber-Pakhtoonkhwa and Balochistan provinces. Meanwhile, the erstwhile semi-autonomous region of Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) became their hub. It is from here that the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaida operated in the early years of the fight against the US forces. As the Pakistan military, under American pressure, conducted several military operations, it acted as a catalyst for an insurgency against the Pakistani state and the spread of militancy.⁴

As a result, diverse groups emerged around tribal affinities, commanders and territories. With the support of Al-Qaida, these tribal militants, who had earlier fought in Afghanistan, took up arms against Pakistan as they opposed the change in Pakistani policy after 9/11 to support the US

¹ Abdul Sayed, Tore Hamming, "The Revival of the Pakistani Taliban", *Combating Terrorism Center*, Volume 14, Issue 4, APRIL/MAY 2021.

² Muhammad Amir Rana, "Emerging Threats", *Dawn News*, August 8, 2021.
<https://www.dawn.com/news/1639443>

³ Bruce Riedel, "Pakistan's problematic victory in Afghanistan", *Brookings*, 24 August 2021.
<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/08/24/pakistans-problematic-victory-in-afghanistan/>

⁴ Adeel Mukhtar Mirza, "Pakistan Has Contributed Significantly to the Fight Against Terrorism", *The Diplomat*, January 8, 2021.

<https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/pakistan-has-contributed-significantly-to-the-fight-against-terrorism/>

efforts in Afghanistan. In this context, military operations conducted by the Pakistan Army enraged the local population and tribal militants. This anger peaked in July 2007 after a military operation against a mosque and a seminary in Islamabad with direct ties to these militant groups.⁵ Red Mosque operation galvanized tribal militants against the Pakistani state and various groups from South Waziristan, Mohmand, Bajaur and Swat focused on unifying their efforts.

The result was the emergence of TTP by the end of 2007, with the support of Al-Qaida, as an umbrella organization under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud, the militant commander from South Waziristan.⁶ He was assisted by a *Shura* comprising nearly forty local militant commanders from FATA's tribal agencies and many districts of KPK province. TTP's declared goals have been to fight for enforcement of Shariah law in Pakistan; to jointly combat US forces in Afghanistan, and to undertake defensive Jihad against the Pakistan military.

After its formation, TTP became the most dangerous terrorist group inside Pakistan, as it took control of parts of Pakistan's tribal region. From 2007 onwards, TTP launched a deadly violent campaign against Pakistan, attacking civilian and military targets across urban centers, killing thousands of civilians, including children. In response, the Pakistan army launched multiple operations backed by air-power to fight the TTP. Gradually, military operations picked pace, and methodologically, five tribal agencies were cleared by the Pakistan army from 2008-13, except for North Waziristan.

TTP leader Baitullah Mehsud and his successor Hakimullah Mehsud were killed in US drone strikes in 2009 and 2013, respectively.⁷

2014-15: Decisive Turn

Till 2014, Pakistani political and military leaders viewed TTP as a potent threat. In the face of growing attacks of TTP against civilian and infrastructure targets, Pakistan Army launched a major operation named Zarb-e-Azb in June 2014.⁸ This was complemented by intelligence-based operations in urban centers to eliminate sleeper cells. TTP hit back with an attack on school children at Army Public School (APS) Peshwar in December 2014, killing nearly 140 pupils.⁹ It sparked an immediate backlash as the Pakistani government intensified its military campaign

⁵ S.K Saini, "Storming of Lal Masjid in Pakistan: An Analysis", *Taylor and Francis*, 26 June 2009. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09700160902907092?scroll=top&needAccess=true&journalCode=rsan20>

⁶ Mapping Militant Organizations, "Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan", *Center for International Security and Cooperation: Stanford University*. Last modified July 2018. <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/tehrik-i-taliban-pakistan>

⁷ "Hakimullah Mehsud killed by drone, Pakistan Taliban say", *BBC news*, November 3, 2013. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-24776363>

⁸ "OPERATION ZARB E AZB". <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/topic/Operation-Zarb-e-Azb>

⁹ "Peshawar School Attack", *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/tag/peshawar-school-attack/>

backed by expeditious use of law-enforcement and judicial measures, including setting up of new military courts to prosecute terrorists. Hundreds of militants were killed in counter-terrorism operations across the country while dozens of terrorists were hanged in Pakistani jails.

These kinetic and non-kinetic measures degraded the presence of TTP in the tribal region and demolished its operational network. Internal disagreement and infighting further aggravated group cohesion, as hundred of TTP militants crossed over into Afghanistan, taking refuge in eastern Afghanistan bordering Pakistan. The internal discord intensified as Mullah Fazlullah, a non-Mehsud was made head of TTP following the killing of Hakimullah Mehsud. Other factions contested his leadership. As a result, hundreds of affiliate militants defected to the Islamic State, which was a rising star in the Afghanistan's militant landscape at that time.

Present Status

Pakistani authorities have offered demobilization and cash compensation to wean senior and mid-ranking TTP leaders away from the group, in addition to regular operations along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and some artillery fires. These attempts, however, have not hindered TTP's political and military resurgence.

During the past two years present TTP leader, Noor Wali Mehsud, who took reins after the killing of Fazlullah in June 2018, has focused on rebuilding the group by reintegrating factions that had earlier left the TTP fold.¹⁰ According to a United Nations (UN) report published in February 2021, TTP had gained strength and an increase in attacks has been recorded. As per the report, the frightening strength of TTP ranges between 2500 to 6000 members.¹¹ Pakistani officials have also assessed TTP to have around 6000 fighters in June 2021, which are concentrated in Kunar, Nangarhar, Khost and Paktika districts of Afghanistan. This expansion has come despite the fact that Pakistani security forces and earlier Afghan forces maintained pressure on TTP cadres in Afghanistan. Even some mysterious assassinations of TTP commanders in Afghanistan have taken place.

Following the fall of Kabul on August 15, 2021, the Afghan Taliban released deputy chief of TTP, Faqir Muhammad, among others, from the Kabul prison.¹² He was welcomed by TTP militants upon his return. TTP also celebrated the 'victory' of the Taliban in Afghanistan as the

¹⁰ Daud Khattak, "Whither the Pakistani Taliban: An Assessment of Recent Trends", *New America*, August 31, 2020. <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/blog/whither-pakistani-taliban-assessment-recent-trends/>

¹¹ Naveed Siddiqi, "UN report acknowledges Pakistan's efforts against terrorist groups, warns of threat faced from TTP", *Dawn News*, 7 February, 2021. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1606016>

¹² Gaurav Sawant, "Taliban release TTP's Maulvi Faqir Mohammad, other terrorists from Afghanistan prisons", *India Today*, 18 August 2021.

<https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/taliban-maulvi-faqir-mohammad-terrorists-afghanistan-prisons-kabul-1842162-2021-08-18>

US military departed that country.¹³ This development has come at a time when TTP has also sought to renew its network inside Pakistan, with attacks in Balochistan, Karachi, Kohistan region and tribal districts against Pakistani and Chinese citizens.¹⁴

Future Outlook: Tactics, Targets and Options

The outlook of the evolving situation for Pakistan is bleak. The challenge is to prevent the resurgence of terrorism inside Pakistan as TTP is reorganizing in Afghanistan. Pakistan remains wary of the resurgence of TTP. Ground reports indicate that TTP is also regrouping in Pakistan's erstwhile tribal areas and a low-degree presence remains.¹⁵ Pakistani Taliban have been emboldened by the rise to power of the Afghan Taliban. The rise of the Afghan Taliban has enhanced operational space available to TTP for carrying out attacks inside Pakistan.

TTP has revived and is waging a renewed campaign of violence inside Pakistan. From August 1 till September 15, nearly 90 Pakistani soldiers have lost their lives in various attacks across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. The majority of these attacks have been claimed by TTP. The group is gradually morphing into a major threat to the Pakistani state.

Meanwhile, the ability of TTP to forge a new alliance and survive despite the Pakistani onslaught has hardened TTP cadres. TTP has managed to operate in new locations through forming linkages with groups such as Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), and also sought support from India and the previous Afghan government.¹⁶

Similarly, TTP has expanded its targets inside Pakistan. Earlier Pakistani military personnel and installations; and unarmed civilians were the direct targets. Now TTP is also targeting Chinese personnel and Chinese project sites. This, from Pakistan's perspective, is a new and deadly dimension. In April 2021, a TTP suicide bomber attacked Serena hotel in Quetta, where the target was the Chinese Ambassador, who escaped unhurt.¹⁷ Moreover, in July 2021, 12 Chinese engineers working on a Dasu hydropower project were killed in an IED attack.¹⁸ This attack was blamed on TTP by Pakistan and China after a joint investigation.

¹³ "The Taliban Celebrate Victory, with a crisis looming", *New York Times*, 31 August 2021.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/31/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-airport.html>

¹⁴ Syed Fazl-e Haider, "Pakistan's TTP Mounts Comeback Under New Leadership of Wali Mehsud", *Terrorism Monitor*, Volume: 19 Issue: 12, June 18, 2021.
<https://jamestown.org/program/pakistans-ttp-mounts-comeback-under-new-leadership-of-wali-mehsud/>

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<https://ctc.usma.edu/the-revival-of-the-pakistani-taliban/>

¹⁶ Frud Bezhan, Daud Khattak, "The Rise Of The New Pakistani Taliban", *Gandhara*, May 18, 2021.

<https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/the-rise-of-the-new-pakistani-taliban/31261608.html>

¹⁷ "Pakistan hotel bomb: Deadly blast hits luxury venue in Quetta", *BBC News*, 22 April 2021.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56834937>

¹⁸ "Chinese engineers killed in Pakistan bus blast", *BBC News*, 14 July 2021.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57837072>

To keep TTP in check, the Pakistani government appears to be relying on the Afghan Taliban. For now, the Afghan Taliban have assured Pakistan that Afghan territory will not be used for conducting attacks against Pakistan. The implementation of this assurance is a challenging task. With the ascendancy of the Afghan Taliban to power, TTP fighters and commanders have been released from Afghan jails. Crucially, TTP Chief Noor Wali Mehsud and senior leader Faqir Muhammad have pledged allegiance to the Afghan Taliban.¹⁹ This might constrain the ability of the Afghan Taliban to take measures against TTP under Pakistani pressure. In a way, the military victory of the Afghan Taliban has provided a strategic depth to TTP in Afghanistan to the detriment of Pakistan.

From here onwards, the TTP factor will play a crucial role in shaping the contours of the relationship between the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistan government. If, and when, attacks on the Pakistani military and civilians escalate in the coming weeks and months, then Pakistan will face a difficult situation. Pakistan would be constrained to bring additional pressure on the Afghan Taliban to act against TTP inside Afghanistan. In case, Afghan Taliban do not respond positively, then Pakistan would be compelled to take measures including intelligence-based operations and enhancing security footprint along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

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¹⁹ Thomas Joscelyn, "Pakistani Taliban's emir renews allegiance to Afghan Taliban", *FDD's Long War Journal*, August 19, 2021.