

THE INTERNAL SECURITY CHALLENGE

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1. Introduction

The year 2021 was significant for Pakistan's security and militant landscape in many ways. First, the Afghan Taliban took power in Kabul that many believe will only embolden the religious-ideological movements and militant groups operating in the region, including Pakistan. Secondly, episodes of violent protests by Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), and the way the government eventually surrendered to the group leaders' demands, as well as continuing incidence of faith-based individual and mob violence once again highlighted the persisting threat of violent and nonviolent shades of religious extremism in the country - in one of such incidents, a Sri Lankan national was lynched to death in Sialkot on the allegation of blasphemy. Thirdly, for the first time since 2013, the number of reported terrorist attacks in 2021 has posted an upsurge which was a reversal of the gradually declining trend witnessed over the past few years.

According to the Pak Institute for Peace Studies' (PIPS) annual security review of 2021, different religiously inspired, nationalist insurgent and violent sectarian groups perpetrated as many as 207 reported attacks in Pakistan in the year, which marked an increase of 42 percent from the year before. These attacks claimed 335 lives – an increase of 52 percent from those killed in such attacks in 2020 – and injured another 555 people. As many as 66 percent of the total attacks recorded in 2021 targeted personnel, vehicles, and posts of security forces and law enforcement agencies across Pakistan.²

As the situation across the border in Afghanistan is not getting stabilized, Pakistani militant groups would certainly try to take its benefit and flex their muscles on the Pakistani side of border. Experts have been highlighting the cross-border terrorist threats for a long time, which they believe has exacerbated after the fall of Kabul to the Afghan Taliban. Pakistan has serious concerns about the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) sheltered in

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² Pakistan Annual Security Report 2021 is available at PIPS' website www.pakpips.com

Afghanistan and has expressed hope, time and again, that the new Taliban administration in Kabul will not allow the anti-Pakistan terrorist groups to operate from their soil. At the same time, some reports indicated a growing relocation of Pakistani and other militants sheltered in Afghanistan to Pakistani bordering areas in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and Balochistan. For instance, a media report, in September 2021, quoting intelligence sources claimed that militants of anti-Pakistan terror outfits including the TTP, Baloch insurgent groups and Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) were already entering Pakistan and many of them were regrouping in Balochistan.³

The article mainly documents and analyses emerging militant and security landscape of the country with a special reference to how it has already started to change after Taliban's takeover of Kabul. Second section briefly discusses key security and militancy-related challenges facing Pakistan and how the country can effectively cope with these.

2. Pakistan's militant landscape in 2021

The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), different Baloch insurgent groups as well as

Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) were the main highlights of Pakistan's militant landscape in 2021. They were believed to be involved in most of the terrorist violence witnessed in the country during the year.

The TTP and affiliates have been constantly increasing their presence and activities in the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and other parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) from the beginning of the year. Indeed, after being rooted out from its bases in ex-FATA in 2014, the TTP has gradually made a strong comeback in Pakistan and now poses a significant threat to the country. The final phase of its comeback was initiated when, in 2020, the group started to bring many new groups and former splinters into its fold, adding to its operational strength and ability as well as geographical outreach. A media report in March 2021 claimed that while the TTP chief Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud was instrumental in bringing various groups under the TTP umbrella, he also "moved the TTP headquarters from eastern Afghanistan – Kunar and Nangarhar provinces – to the southeast in Paktika province, where the remote Bermal district provide[ed] his men easy access across the border into the former

³ Amjad Bashir Siddiqi, "After escape from Afghanistan: Anti-Pakistan terror outfits regrouping in Balochistan," *The News*, September 27, 2021, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/895710-after->

[escape-from-afghanistan-anti-pakistan-terror-outfits-regrouping-in-balochistan](https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/895710-after-escape-from-afghanistan-anti-pakistan-terror-outfits-regrouping-in-balochistan)

TTP stronghold of South Waziristan.”⁴ That also highlighted the security implications of the evolving Afghan situation for Pakistan and the wider region.

In July 2021, when the Afghan Taliban emerged as a more critical component in the Afghan power calculus by reportedly extending their control “roughly [over] a third of all 421 districts and district centres in Afghanistan,”⁵ the TTP also started intensifying attacks against Pakistani security and law enforcement personnel. PIPS) monthly security reports for July and August noted that the TTP and affiliates had perpetrated 33 attacks mainly against police and army personnel in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa causing 47 deaths. However, the TTP’s Omer media claimed the group had carried out 58 terrorist attacks in KP districts in July and August, causing 56 deaths in such attacks in July alone.

A July 2021 report by the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, established under a UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution, also warned that the TTP “continue[d] to pose a threat to the region with

the unification of splinter groups and increasing cross-border attacks.”⁶ The report further said that while being based in Afghanistan, the TTP had increased its financial resources from extortion, smuggling and taxes. It validated the concerns expressed by many in Pakistan that as the Afghan Taliban gained ground in Afghanistan, the terrorist threat by the Pakistani Taliban would only grow. A month later, in August to be precise, the TTP chief Noor Wali Mehsud said in his reported interview with the CNN that the TTP had the ability to take [back] control of Pakistani tribal areas if forced to leave Afghanistan. He also categorically said that Pakistan was their major enemy, and they would continue fighting its security forces.⁷

⁴ Daud Khattak, “The Pakistani Taliban is back,” *The Diplomat*, March 9, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/the-pakistani-taliban-is-back/>

⁵ Aljazeera, July 5, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/4/taliban-seizes-key-districts-in-afghanistan-as-govt-forces-flee>

⁶ Anwar Iqbal, “Al-Qaeda present in 5 Afghan provinces,” *Dawn*, July 26, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1636932/al-qaeda-present-in-15-afghan-provinces-un>

⁷ Umair Jamal, “The TTP has redefined its goals: Should Pakistan be worried,” *The Diplomat*, August 11, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/the-ttp-has-redefined-its-goals-should-pakistan-be-worried>

The TTP and affiliates, Baloch insurgents and Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) province were the major actors of violence in Pakistan in 2021.

- The TTP was believed to be involved in 87 terrorist attacks (78 in KP, 5 in Balochistan and 4 in Punjab and Islamabad), which is an increase of about 84 percent from the attacks it perpetrated across Pakistan in the year before. These attacks by the TTP claimed 158 lives.
- Different Baloch insurgent groups carried out 74 terrorist attacks in Pakistan (71 in Balochistan and 3 in Karachi) which claimed 96 lives and injured 151 others. As many as 63, or over 85 percent, of these attacks were carried by the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and Baloch Liberation Front (BLF) alone.
- The IS-K affiliates perpetrated a total of eight terrorist attacks including seven (7) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and one in Balochistan. In all, 21 people lost their lives and another four were injured in these attacks.

Another worrisome development of the past year was TTP's increasing focus on Balochistan, especially Quetta, where Islamic State (IS) affiliates and Baloch nationalist insurgents are already active. The TTP claimed responsibility for two suicide attacks in Balochistan in 2021 including the suicide bombing in the parking lot of the city's Serena Hotel on April 21. The attack attracted international attention because the Chinese ambassador was staying at the same hotel though he was not present there at the time of the explosion. Not only Quetta but other

Pashtun-populated areas of Balochistan, mainly the areas along the Afghan border including Zhob and Chaman, are also becoming a new hub of the Taliban militants. Apparently, that is largely linked to the evolving Afghan situation and its fallout for the security of bordering areas of ex-FATA and Balochistan, as noted earlier. Even before the Afghan Taliban's takeover of Kabul on August 15, the TTP men were fleeing from Afghanistan and entering Balochistan. For instance, a group of TTP fighters led by Ainuzaman Akhunzada fleeing from Spin Boldak, Afghanistan, had been regrouping and recruiting for quite some time now in Zhob and Loralai districts of Balochistan.⁸

Not only the TTP, but the militant Islamic State terrorist group's so-called Khorasan chapter or province (IS-K) has also become active in Pakistan, where it carried out multiple attacks in the year under review on Hazara Shias, alleged Afghan Taliban members, and associated religious scholars, as well as political leaders/workers in Balochistan and KP; several of its associates were also arrested from parts of Sindh and Punjab in multiple search operations conducted by law enforcers during the year. For one, the Counter Terrorism

⁸ Amjad Bashir Siddiqi, "After escape from Afghanistan: Anti-Pakistan terror outfits regrouping in Balochistan," *The News*, September 27, 2021, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/895710-after->

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Department (CTD) arrested Hafiz Mohammed Omar bin Khalid in January 2021 in Karachi, who was a final-year student at the NED University of Engineering and Technology and “[he] was involved in sending money to families of militants linked with the militant IS group in Syria.”⁹ The group claimed the Peshawar killing of an Afghan Taliban commander Nek Muhammad Rahbar in the first issue of its Urdu-language magazine *Yalghar* (Invasion) published a few months before; it also claimed the killing of Hazara coalminers in Bolan (Balochistan) in the magazine. Apart from terrorist attacks perpetrated by the group, security forces also kept entering into sporadic armed clashes with its militants mainly in Balochistan. For instance, in April security forces killed four IS-K militants in an intelligence-based operation carried out in the mountainous Aab-i-Gum area of Bolan district. According to police, the operation foiled a major joint terrorist plot by the banned Lashkar-i-Jhangvi and IS-K.

Meanwhile, across the border in Afghanistan, IS-K has increased its attacks significantly. The group perpetrated 339 attacks in Afghanistan in 2021 compared to 82 such attacks it claimed

in the country in 2020; it also claimed to have carried out 19 attacks inside Pakistan’s KPK province;¹⁰ PIPS, however, counted eight attacks by the group in Pakistan in 2021. According to the latest United Nations Security Council (UNSC) assessment report of Afghanistan, over 2,000 Daesh militants are present in Afghanistan who could pose a serious security threat to Pakistan also through their associates. In a country like Pakistan, where sectarian discord is rife and a multitude of extremist groups exist, groups like IS-K or Daesh can easily find associates and operative to their targets. For one, former members of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Jamaatud Dawah were in past found affiliated with the group in Pakistan.

Although Al-Qaeda has not been found involved in terrorist violence in Pakistan in recent years, yet it has its presence and affiliations with local groups in Pakistan and neighbouring Afghanistan. It has maintained ties with the Afghan Taliban and has reportedly also helped the Pakistani Taliban group TTP in recovering and regrouping in recent years; some AQ-aligned Pakistani groups even joined TTP.¹¹ In April 2021, the

⁹ Imtiaz Ali, “Varsity student held for sending funds to IS-linked families in Syria,” *Dawn*, January 19, 2021.

¹⁰ A tweet by Sweden-based researcher Abdul Sayyed: <https://twitter.com/abdsayedd/status/1476827070307127298>

¹¹ Asfandyar Mir, “Afghanistan’s terrorism challenge: the political trajectories of Al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, and the Islamic State,” Middle East Institute, October 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2020-10/Afghanistan%27s%20Terrorism%20Challenge.pdf>

CNN media group claimed based on its interviews with two Al-Qaeda operatives that the group would step up its operations and fight in the region after the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. The report claimed that the group was planning a comeback by relying on its enduring partnership with the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban.¹²

Baloch insurgent groups have apparently also increased the number of attacks in Balochistan, mainly targeting security forces and alleged supporters as well as non-Baloch workers. While five Baloch insurgent groups were at the forefront in claiming responsibility for different terrorist attacks reported from the province in 2021, the BLA and BLF perpetrated over 80 percent of this violence. While it is still early to establish a link of this growing insurgent violence in the province to the Afghan situation, some experts argue that the increasing pressure on Baloch leaders/militants sheltered in Afghanistan is forcing them to relocate to Balochistan and that could be one of the causes. Experts also underscore that the Baloch insurgents will certainly draw inspiration from the changing environment and will further increase and intensify their attacks. Others pundits assert

that Baloch insurgent leaders have established closer ties with Iran after being chased from Afghanistan. There is a third argument as well that contends both ideas cited earlier and asserts that Baloch insurgency is mainly being led by the Baloch insurgent commanders and fighters, who are not living in exile but are present largely inside Balochistan. Subscribers of this view believe that insecurity in Afghanistan and Pakistan will only encourage the Baloch insurgents to exploit the situation to their advantage. PIPS data for 2021 suggested, as cited earlier, that Baloch insurgents had intensified attacks against diverse targets including security forces, non-Baloch workers, shops/stalls selling Pakistani flags, government officials, civilians as well as Chinese engineers and workers. They also carried out a few high-impact attacks, including against security forces, Chinese engineers, and non-Baloch workers/settlers. The suicide blast perpetrated by BLA against the convoy of Chinese engineers near Gwadar was a prime example of Baloch insurgents' growing reliance on high-profile and high-impact attacks.

Meanwhile, a Sindhi nationalist insurgent group, Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army, perpetrated three attacks in interior Sindh. Few

¹² Nic Robertson and Saleem Mehsud, "Al-Qaeda promises 'war on all fronts' against America as Biden pulls out Afghanistan." CNN, April 30, 2021.

statements and reports released during 2021 by law enforcement agencies hinted at the growing nexus between Baloch and Sindhi nationalist insurgents, at least at the operational level.

3. Challenges and recommendations

3.1 The Afghan situation

While the political and security situation in Afghanistan is still fluid, concerns are growing inside Pakistan about the possible fallout including in terms of insecurity and militancy, cross-border terrorism, border insecurity or conflict, influx of refugees, and economic instability. Another key factor will be the Afghan Taliban's response towards Pakistani demands for acting against anti-Pakistan groups and ensuring border security. Despite their repeated promises to not allow anyone to use the Afghan soil against Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban have yet not seriously considered to act against or influencing the TTP in support of Pakistani concerns, except having facilitated talks between the Pakistani government and the TTP which have also not shown any successes so far. Nonetheless, there have been critical statements about Pakistan from some Taliban officials on multiple occasions. Nonetheless, tensions have been rising along the Durand Line, from where in

multiple incidences the Afghan Taliban have either tried or damaged the border fencing erected by the Pakistani security forces to prevent cross-border infiltration of militants.

Pakistan needs to increase vigilance and surveillance at the border and conflict-prone areas such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. It should also try not to be seen as fully aligned with the Taliban because the Taliban do not have the sort of political clout in the international community that Pakistan needs to pursue its economic security, which is at the core of the newly announced National Security Policy. Pakistan also needs to activate the parliamentary and political action to step up implementation of the National Action Plan, mainly those clauses that deal with countering extremism and extremist narratives. Lastly, it should try to establish friendly relations with its neighbors including, China, Iran, and India to avoid any proxy war in Afghanistan, which will certainly hurt Pakistan the most.

3.2 The FATF challenge

Although Pakistan has adopted a range of legislative, institutional, and administrative measures to combat financing of terrorism (CFT) in recent years, it still remains on the Financial Action Task Force's (FATF) grey list, which not only puts stress on Pakistan's economy but also negatively bears upon the

country's foreign policy. Experts argue that Pakistan's 'serious efforts to address the deficiencies in its CFT regime' have come largely because of the FATF pressure. Secondly, a comprehensive institutional response mechanism is still missing which will take time to evolve and become fully functional following the strengthening of regulatory frameworks and bodies and effective coordination among institutions dealing with CFT and Anti Money Laundering (AML). A zero-tolerance policy against all radical and violent religious groups will remain an overarching factor in the state's resolve and policy action to curb terrorism and its financing.¹³

3.3 Countering Violent & Nonviolent Extremism (CVE/CE)

Religious extremism presents a critical challenge to Pakistan's efforts to counter terrorism and achieve security and social harmony in the country. In 2021, multiple events and developments indicated that a persistent challenge of violent and nonviolent extremism confronted the country, including a 46 percent reported an increase in the incidence of terrorist violence in the country, growing incidents of communal or faith-based

mob violence, reported episodes of violent protests by the TLP workers that forced the state to bow down to their demands, and an overall environment of intolerance and persecution in which Pakistan's minorities continued to feel insecure.

For the state to develop effective CVE/CE policies and strategies, it is recommended to first develop a clear and functional definition of extremism and clarify its thinking and stance on the challenges posed by religious extremism in the country. The parliament should initiate and lead that discourse. Secondly, religionizing politics have had devastating consequences for the country. Pakistan as a state and society has little option but to refrain from exploiting religion for political purposes. Thirdly, to neutralize violent extremist tendencies, detach the conventional militant groups from terrorism landscape and curbing hate speech, the government has to initiate a deradicalization and reintegration scheme, which shall also partner with civil society.

3.4 Negotiating with the militants

Political parties in the opposition as well as Pakistan's Supreme Court were apparently not convinced with the government unilaterally pursuing talks with the TTP. The opposition

¹³ Muhammad Amir Rana, "FATF compliance," *Dawn*, June 13, 2021.

parties asserted that the parliament is given the responsibility to decide about that; many also questioned, in the first place, the government's decision of talking with the TTP, which had killed thousands of Pakistani people. Similarly, the Supreme Court summoned Prime Minister Imran Khan for questioning the implementation of court orders regarding the 2014 Army Public School attack and the government's talks with the TTP.¹⁴

On the other hand, despite its tall claims to reach out to the Baloch insurgent leaders to end ongoing conflict in the province, the government has done little to act on that promise that also forms a clause of both original and revised drafts of National Action Plan. During his visit to Gwadar on July 5th last year, PM Khan said he was considering holding talks with insurgents in Balochistan, adding that he had always planned that whenever his party came to power, it would pay attention to the province. He later also appointed Jamhoori Watan Party MNA Shahzain Bugti as his special assistant on reconciliation and harmony in the province. But the reconciliation process has practically remained a nonstarter so far. Apparently, instead of initiating an effective reconciliation

process, the government's exclusive focus remains on Peaceful Balochistan Program, which entails providing financial and rehabilitation support to the Baloch insurgents surrendering before the authorities, and quitting violence.

3.5 National Action Plan & National Security Policy

The government has revised the 20-point NAP to an abridged version of 14 points. While many clauses have been retained as such from the original draft, some have been amended, and a couple of new ones have been included in the revised plan. However, experts see it as a very vague plan that can be interpreted and thus misused in several ways. "For example, the fourth clause talks about acting against the spread of terrorism through media (electronic, print, and social media), communication, and cyber networks. One can imagine how such clauses could be used to further restrict the freedom of press and media."¹⁵

The government has also approved the country's so-called first-ever ***National Security Policy*** (2022-26) putting economic security at the core, which is envisaged to bolster military and human security in return.

¹⁴ Haseeb Bhatti, "APS carnage: SC grills PM Imran," *Dawn*, November 10, 2021.

¹⁵ Muhammad Amir Rana, "Security policy impasse," *Dawn*, December 26, 2021.

The overall framework of the new policy, as stated by the National Security Advisor Moeed Yusuf, is the safety, security, and dignity of citizens. The opposition parties in the Senate called into question the NSP which they said was framed without taking parliament on board.

Although Pakistan needs to restructure its anti-terrorism and national security regimes to enable it to cope with the emerging challenges, that should be done through exclusive, bureaucratic practices. First, there is a need to give a leading role to the Parliament. Secondly, to make NAP implementation effective and progress measurable, there is a need to devise well-defined, realistic, and achievable plans/objectives with effective monitoring and evaluation systems against individual NAP goals/clauses. Thirdly, the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) be strengthened, and the prime minister may take ownership of NAP and use the NACTA platform to regularly review the status of and progress on NAP provisions. Fourthly, Pakistan needs to reform the criminal justice system with much greater urgency and focus.

The revised NAP also places emphasis on introducing reforms in merged tribal districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa including ensuring an adequate share in the National Finance

Commission (NFC), capacity building of law enforcement agencies, and introduction of political-administrative structures like local government elections and land reforms. Although the process of introducing reforms and new political, judicial, and administrative structures in ex-FATA is underway, but it is quite slow. There is an adequate need to rehabilitate the internally displaced persons from ex-FATA and develop educational, road, and other infrastructure in these areas. The establishment of police stations and training of law enforcement agencies also needs to be stepped up. The reconstruction and up-gradation of educational and health facilities and making necessary arrangements to manage basic health units is urgently needed. Indeed, healing and rehabilitating citizens of ex-FATA has become more urgent and significant after the fall of Kabul to the Taliban. Pakistani Taliban had been exploiting political-administrative, judicial, and governance-related voids in ex-FATA to get public support and recruit youths and they should not be allowed any such spaces there this time.