

Between Kabul and Islamabad

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The Pakistani Taliban (Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan - TTP) claimed that it has carried out 29 attacks in Pakistan in February 2023, killing 57 members of the security forces and injuring 70 in various regions. Among those it had killed and wounded were members of the Pakistani army, paramilitary forces and police. TTP also said it had destroyed five army and one police patrol vehicles, as well as three police buildings.¹ Most of the attacks were carried out in the Tribal Areas and the northwest of the country bordering Afghanistan.

The TTP attacks against security forces in Pakistan have been on the rise since the Afghan Taliban seized control of Kabul in August 2021 and a shaky months-long ceasefire between the TTP and Islamabad ended in November 2022.

The peak of the terror campaign against the security forces of the Pakistani government occurred on January 30 in a mosque in the city of Peshawar near the border with Afghanistan. The suicide bombing in Peshawar was Pakistan's deadliest terror attack in several years.

The Pakistani defense Minister Khawaja Asif raised concerns that TTP strongholds in Afghanistan are being used to plan attacks on Pakistan but the Afghan Taliban regime rejected the claims.

A high-ranking Pakistani delegation that visited Kabul in February 2023, presented the Afghan Taliban's top leadership with evidences of the TTPs' presence on Afghan soil and urged Afghanistan to take action. The Afghan leadership has been told that if any terror incident happens in Pakistan and Afghan soil is being used against Pakistan will target TTP hideouts in Afghanistan.²

Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban have a long history of cooperation, so it was expected that when the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan, good relations would prevail between the two countries. But the relationship between the regime in Islamabad and the Taliban regime in Kabul is complex, tense, but both sides prefer to avoid an all-out confrontation.

The Afghan Taliban and Pakistani Taliban (TTP) connections

Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan emerged in 2007. The TTP has launched armed attacks in Pakistan during the past 16 years, fighting for stricter enforcement of Islamic laws in the country, the release of their members who are in government custody and a reduction of the Pakistani military presence in the country's tribal-dominated regions. The group has killed nearly 80,000 Pakistanis in almost two decades of violence, according to official estimates.³

The TTP sheltered Afghan Taliban commanders on the Pakistani side of the border between the two countries, provided recruits and helped the Afghan Taliban to launch insurgent attacks against the then-Western-backed government in Kabul and international troops inside Afghanistan.

In recent years, the Pakistani military undertook major offensives against TTP bases in Waziristan and adjoining districts, forcing thousands of militants to flee into Afghanistan.

The crackdown had significantly reduced terrorism in Pakistan, but the return of the Taliban to power in Kabul in August 2021 has resulted in a dramatic spike in TTP-led militant violence. TTP is separate from but a close ally of the Afghan Taliban.⁴

Islamabad said the TTP, which is designated as a global terrorist organization by the United States and the United Nations, is plotting terrorism against the country from its Afghan sanctuaries.

The border regions of Afghanistan are known for harboring fugitive leaders and fighters of the TTP, waging deadly terrorist attacks in Pakistan. The terrorist activity of the TTP from the territory of Afghanistan caused tensions between the two countries and a series of military clashes that both countries are trying to avoid.

The Torkham border crossing crisis

On February 19, 2023, the main border crossing between Afghanistan and Pakistan (the Torkham border crossing) has been closed amid exchanging gunfire and worsening relations between the two countries.

The Taliban said it shut the Torkham crossing over Islamabad allegedly denying Afghan migrants entry into Pakistan for medical care. Pakistan, meanwhile, accused the Afghan Taliban of sheltering armed attackers belonging to the TTP. The Afghan Taliban rejected the claim.⁵

The Torkham crossing is located in Pakistan's northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and the eastern Afghan province of Nangarhar. Torkham crossing is the main point of transit for travelers and goods between Pakistan and landlocked Afghanistan.⁶

Days after the closure of Torkham border crossing a senior Pakistani delegation headed by Pakistani Defense Minister Khwaja, Asif Lieutenant General Nadeem Anjum, the director general of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI) and other top officials met with Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Afghanistan acting deputy prime minister for economic affairs, in Kabul.⁷

On February 25, 2023, the Taliban government in Afghanistan has reopened the Torkham crossing with Pakistan. The decision to reopen the border crossing came after the meetings between the high-ranking Pakistani delegation and the Afghan government.⁸

The suicide bombing of the mosque in Peshawar

On January 30, 2023, a suicide bomber struck a mosque inside a police compound in central Peshawar, the capital city of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan.

According to investigators the suspect appeared on CCTV arriving at the compound gates on a motorcycle before walking through a security checkpoint. The suicide bomber was dressed in police uniform and used 10-12 kg of explosive material, brought to the site in advance of the attack in bits and pieces. The explosion was so powerful that the roof of the building collapsed.⁹

The victims were mostly members of the provincial police force and government officials. Hundreds of police members were attending afternoon prayers inside the Mosque located in police headquarters when the blast erupted. The attack occurred during traditional afternoon prayers and more than 100 men were killed and 250 others were wounded in the bombing.¹⁰

In a post on Twitter, a commander for the TTP group, Sarbakaf Mohmand, claimed responsibility for the attack but several hours later, TTP spokesperson Mohammad Khorasani distanced the group from the bombing, saying it was not its policy to target mosques or other religious sites. The TTP's denial also came after the Afghan Foreign Ministry condemned attacks on worshippers as contrary to the teachings of Islam.

Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA), a splinter group of the TTP claimed responsibility for the suicide blast in Peshawar.

Omar Mukaram Khorasani, head of the Jamaat-ul-Ahrar claimed in a tweet that "Peshawar Police Line Mosque is the 4th suicide attack in a series of operations launched as a revenge killing of ex-TTP commander Omar Khalid Khorasani," he also vowed to "speed up a series of such actions."¹¹

Jamaat-ul-Ahrar founded by former TTP leader Abdul Wali in August 2014, has staged multiple attacks in Pakistan targeting civilians, religious minorities, military personnel, and law enforcement. On August 3, 2016, the U.S. Department of State designated JuA as a specially designated global terrorist group.

The Chaman border crossing crisis

On December 11, 2022, heavy gunfire and artillery shelling by Afghan border forces killed six civilians and wounded another 17, across the border in Pakistan. Pakistani troops retaliated at the Chaman border crossing in southwestern Baluchistan province.¹²

The Pakistan army statement said: “Afghan Border Forces opened unprovoked and indiscriminate fire of heavy weapons including artillery/mortar onto the civilian population.” Pakistan had also approached Kabul to highlight the severity of the situation and demand strict action to avoid recurrence of the incident.¹³

Afghan official in Kandahar, the province on the Afghan side of the border, said the incident was accidental and the situation had returned to normal after both sides had a meeting. The Chaman crossing was reopened after dialog between Pakistani and Afghan Taliban officials.¹⁴

The crisis of April 2022

Pakistani officials have acknowledged a spike in TTP attacks, particularly in northwestern districts on the Afghan border, which reportedly have killed and wounded dozens of soldiers. Pakistani officials said that since the start of 2022, more than 100 Pakistani military officers and soldiers have been killed in TTP-plotted roadside bombings and gun attacks in remote districts on the Afghan border.¹⁵

Following a series of warnings issued by the Pakistani government to the Afghan government led by the Afghan Taliban to halt attacks from its territory, Pakistan responded with a series of air and artillery raids against targets in Afghanistan.

The Afghan Taliban accused Pakistan on April 16, 2022, of launching cross-border military raids inside Afghanistan, which reportedly caused dozens of civilian casualties:

- Pakistani jets bombed several villages in the border province of Khost, killing at least 30 civilians.
- In Kunar province - overnight cross-border shelling by Pakistani troops, targeting civilian areas in the Shultan District. At least six residents were killed in the Shultan District.

The military actions prompted Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi to summon the Pakistani ambassador in Kabul, Mansoor Ahmad Khan, to his office and give an official protest note to him.

The peace negotiations

Chief Afghan Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid, in a statement, stressed the need for resolving bilateral problems through political means.

In order to settle the conflict with Pakistan, the Taliban initiated negotiations between the TTP and the authorities in Islamabad to reach a ceasefire agreement and subsequently to reach a long-term settlement between the parties.

In June 2022, the Afghan Taliban announced an “indefinite” ceasefire between the TTP and Pakistan, adding that this could bring long-term peace, but no agreement has been reached. To break the deadlock, on July 26, 2022, Pakistan sent a delegation of eight leading clerics to Kabul to hold talks with the TTP’s central leader, Noor Wali Mehsud.¹⁶

There has been a fragile truce between Islamabad and the TTP for several months as peace talks brokered by the Afghan Taliban’s Haqqani network took place but TTP, called off its cease-fire deal with the Pakistani government in November 2022.¹⁷

Summary

The regime in Pakistan is facing one of the worst political and economic crises the country has ever known, and the weakness of the government in Islamabad is being exploited by the TTP to expand its control over territory and to carry out a terrorist campaign throughout the country, especially in the areas near the border with Afghanistan.

The TTP has stepped up attacks on Pakistani soldiers and police since November 2022, when it unilaterally ended a cease-fire with the government after the failure of months of talks, hosted by Afghanistan’s Taliban rulers in Kabul.

Pakistan has seen innumerable militant attacks in the past two decades, but unlike the TTP’s previous terror campaign from 2007 to 2014, this time the Afghan Taliban are in control in Afghanistan.

The Afghan Taliban started openly sheltering the TTP when they came to power in August 2021. The Afghan Taliban also released TTP leaders and fighters who had been arrested by previous administrations in Kabul.¹⁸

The Afghan Taliban have repeatedly said they will not allow anyone, including the TTP, to use Afghan soil for attacks against any country, including Pakistan but Pakistani officials say there is a disconnect between the words and actions of the Afghan Taliban.

In spite of the Afghan Taliban’s firm strategic calculus in favor of the TTP, their leadership appears to understand the importance of maintaining a functional relationship with Pakistan — or at least preventing tensions from deteriorating into full-scale conflict. Despite the declarations of the leaders of the Taliban in Afghanistan about their desire to regulate relations with Pakistan, it seems that in

practice they did nothing to prevent the continuation of the presence and activities of TTP from their country.

In the Pakistani regime, there are two opposing approaches regarding the policy it should adopt against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

The "aggressive approach" - believes that it is necessary to act decisively against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and demand that it prevents the presence and activity of TTP in the country's territory. If the Taliban in Afghanistan does not meet the demands, military, political and economic measures should be taken against Afghanistan,

The "moderate approach" - prefers reaching a stable and long-term cease-fire agreement with TTP and for that Pakistan needs the mediation of the Afghan Taliban, as has already been done in the past. Therefore, Pakistan has an interest in maintaining good relations with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and avoiding escalation even if it continues to support the TTP.

The result is that Pakistan's response to the TTP's resurgence and the support of the Afghan Taliban is incoherent — and it is unlikely to improve in the near future.

The presence of the TTP and other Islamic terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Afghanistan constitutes a threat to the security and stability of the entire region. Against the background of the political and economic crises, Pakistan is unable to deal effectively with the terrorism of the TTP and other Islamic terrorist organizations operating from the territory of Afghanistan.

Only a combined international effort led by the US that will put pressure on the Taliban regime in Afghanistan to prevent terrorist activity from its territory and military operations to eliminate terrorist infrastructures on its territory will bring down the threat of terrorism developing in Afghanistan.

Notes:

¹ Pakistani Taliban claims deaths of dozens of security forces since February, The new Arab, March 2, 2023.

² Arshad Mehmood, Pakistan Insists Afghanistan Stop Harboring International Terrorist Groups, the media line, February 28, 2023.

³ Top Pakistan Taliban leader killed in Afghanistan roadside attack, Al Jazeera, August 8, 2022.

⁴ Taliban Condemn Pakistan for Alleged Cross-Border Attacks in Afghanistan, VOA, April 16, 2022.

⁵ Afghanistan reopens key Pakistan trade route, Islamabad to follow, Al Jazeera, February 23, 2023.

⁶ Afghanistan shuts vital border-crossing with Pakistan, residents report shots fired, Arab news, February 20, 2023.

⁷ Pakistan's defense and spy chiefs discuss security with Taliban, Al Jazeera, February 23, 2023.

⁸ Afghanistan reopens key Pakistan trade route, Islamabad to follow, Al Jazeera, February 23, 2023.

⁹ Amir Saeed, Peshawar Mosque attack confronts Pakistan with tough security choice, February 16, 2023.

¹⁰ Death Toll from Mosque Bombing in Pakistan Rises to 100, VOA, January 31, 2023.

¹¹ Arshad Mehmood, Pakistani Taliban splinter group claims responsibility for Mosque Bombing as death toll hits 100, The media line, January 31, 2023.

¹² Pakistan says Afghan forces kill six civilians in cross-border fire, Al Arabiya, December 11, 2022.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Pakistan reopens Afghan crossing shut after border hostilities, Al Arabiya, November 21, 2022.

¹⁵ Islamic State Khorasan Claims Rocket Attack on Uzbekistan, VOA, April 18, 2022.

¹⁶ Salman Rafi Sheikh, Pakistan's peace gamble with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, the diplomat, August 1, 2022.

¹⁷ Top Pakistan Taliban leader killed in Afghanistan roadside attack, Al Jazeera, August 8, 2022.

¹⁸ What's behind the Pakistani Taliban's insurgency? Arab news, January 31, 2023.