



Shrinking Carrots and Added Sticks: Will Pakistan's Afghan Strategy Fetch Results?



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Pakistan's tensions with the Afghan Taliban have intensified and recent developments have been significant, suggesting alterations in Pakistan's Afghan policy. Afghanistan has urged Pakistan to release thousands of containers of imports stranded at Pakistan's Karachi port. Reportedly, more than 3,000 Afghan-bound containers have been stopped at the Karachi port for several months now, and Islamabad is demanding more taxes and duties.¹ This is a complete deviation in Pakistan's position, as this year also witnessed some welcoming initiatives from Pakistan to bolster trade with Afghanistan. In May, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari and Afghanistan's Taliban-appointed Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, agreed to enhance trade along the border, and combat terrorism.² In June, Pakistan authorised barter trade with three countries, Afghanistan, Iran, and Russia, which implied goods in return for goods.³ This was mainly to encourage trade with Afghanistan and also allow trade with Pakistan without pressuring its depleting foreign reserves.⁴ Given the growing strains in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, in a recent policy shift, Islamabad has used its economic leverage over Afghanistan and has taken some stringent measures to tighten the trade regime with Kabul, for example, the imposition of a 10 per cent fee on some imports and tough conditions of bank guarantees.⁵

On September 26, 2023, the Ministry of the Interior of the Government of Pakistan issued the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan, intended to "regulate the foreigners in Pakistan and to ensure that the foreigners staying illegally or overstaying their visa validity are deported back to their parent countries."⁶ In early October, Pakistan officially announced November 1, 2023, as the deadline for illegal foreigners to leave Pakistan. The announcement implied the return of approximately 1.7 million Afghans residing in Pakistan.⁷ In a recent announcement, Islamabad has extended the stay

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of 1.4 million registered Afghan refugees till year end. Reportedly, more than 250,000 Afghans have already returned to Afghanistan.⁸ Many of the Afghans who returned to Kabul were born and raised in Pakistan and have entered Afghanistan for the first time. Although Pakistan has used deportation threats and actions against Afghan refugees in the past, but it was never done on this scale and intensity. Adding to these initiatives is the decision by Pakistan that it will refrain from advocating for Afghanistan's case on an international level.⁹

Pakistan's recent position on Afghanistan, which entails punitive actions, reflects Pakistan's anger and frustration towards the Afghan Taliban's unwillingness to curtail support to the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) from launching relentless terror attacks targeting Pakistan's security establishment. The first half of 2023 witnessed a rise of more than 70 per cent in terror attacks in Pakistan. The caretaker Prime Minister, Anwaar ul Haq Kakar, expressed his anguish on the involvement of Afghans in terror attacks in Pakistan and stated in a press conference, "In the past two years, 2,267 innocent citizens' lives have been lost to this tragic bloodshed, for which the terrorists of TTP are responsible who are conducting cowardly attacks on Pakistani soil using Afghan soil... During this time, 15 Afghan citizens were also among the people involved in suicide attacks. Other than this, till now, 64 Afghan citizens were killed while fighting Pakistan's law enforcement agencies during the counterterrorism campaign".¹⁰ Kakar's statements are critical as they represent the sentiment and position of the military establishment.

The TTP has been emboldened exponentially since the fall of the democratic regime and the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban. The ideological victory of the Afghan Taliban without compromising their terms and conditions in Afghanistan has added to the conviction of the militant group (TTP) that 'victory' is feasible in Pakistan. The TTP swears allegiance to the Afghan Taliban, and Pakistan claims that it is not only using Afghan territory but has also been getting ideological and tactical support from the Taliban. The Taliban have denied extending any support to the TTP. The Islamic Emirate's spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid, categorically refuted the reports of the TTP being based in Afghanistan and said that the TTP problem belongs to Pakistan.¹¹

The TTP is following the footsteps of the Taliban in their approach and tactics, has managed to keep itself united, and uses an extensive social media campaign to promote its ideology and operations. The TTP has imitated the tactic of the Afghan Taliban of naming 'shadow governors', who oversee five or six regional deputies.¹² The TTP has shown no inclination for negotiation or settlement after the breakdown of the ceasefire with the Pakistani government in November 2022.

Various reports suggest that the group has access to the equipment left behind by the Western forces in Afghanistan and is well-trained in their tactics to fight state security forces, as the outfit has matured and gained deeper tactical experience while fighting the Afghan security forces along with the Afghan Taliban during the withdrawal phase.

Repeated warnings, pressure, and punitive measures taken by Pakistan have not shown results (till now) in terms of containment of the TTP's attacks. On the contrary, other militant groups and insurgent movements have tried to leverage the volatile security situation and launched attacks in Pakistan. The regional branches of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) - the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and the Islamic State Pakistan Province (ISPP) - have been active in their operations in Pakistan. Islamabad's revived policies will undoubtedly lead to a deterioration of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, straining the fragile Afghan economy and increasing the burden on the Afghan state with the precipitous return of Afghan refugees from Pakistan. This will intensify the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, as humanitarian assistance at the global level is decreasing for Kabul. The United Nations appealed for US \$3.2 billion in Afghan humanitarian aid, but only 25 per cent has been funded. Around 35-40 per cent of Afghans are experiencing acute food insecurity, according to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification.¹³

The TTP, on the other hand, might emerge as a winner in the whole situation. The militant group has a good chance of leveraging the evolving situation, which could possibly allow the TTP to enhance its recruitment base from the disgruntled and hopeless Afghan youth returning to Kabul from Pakistan. Given the past record of collaborated attacks conducted by the militant outfit, it is possible that there could be a merger of the small militant groups with the TTP.

While Pakistan is redefining its terms of engagement with the Taliban, which involves more sticks and shrinking carrots, the repercussions of its recent decisions would be catastrophic for Afghanistan and the regional stability as a whole. The critical questions here are:

(1) Can these steps coerce the Taliban to curtail their support base for TTP? The probability of the Taliban altering their position with the TTP is low, given the ideological commitment the two share. Pakistan did miscalculate its ability to dictate conditions to the Taliban, who are much more assertive and have redefined their priorities as compared to the Taliban in the 1990s, who were primarily dependent on Pakistan for survival.

(2) Can this phase of complex security dynamics persuade Pakistan's military to do some serious rethinking of its policy of relying on terrorism to conduct its foreign policy in its neighbourhood?

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes:

¹ "Taliban Minister Raises Issue of Refugee Assets During Pak Visit", *The News International*, November 15, 2023, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1129234-taliban-minister-raises-issue-of-refugee-assets-during-pak-visit>. Accessed on November 16, 2023.

² "Pakistan and Afghanistan Agree to Boost Trade and Lower Border Tensions", *Al Jazeera*, May 8, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/8/pakistan-afghanistan-agree-to-boost-trade-lower-border-tensions>. Accessed on November 09, 2023.

³ Zia Ur Rehman, "Pakistani Barter Trade with Afghanistan, Iran, and Russia Stuck in Neutral", *Nikkei Asia*, July 06, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Pakistani-barter-trade-with-Afghanistan-Iran-Russia-stuck-in-neutral>. Accessed on November 08, 2023.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Shahbaz Rana, "Govt Tightens Transit Trade Import Regime", *The Express Tribune*, October 04, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2439142/govt-tightens-transit-trade-import-regime>. Accessed on November 04, 2023.

⁶ "Briefing Note: Deported to What? Afghans in Pakistan", Asia Displacement Solution Platform, Briefing Note, October 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/pakistan/adsp-briefing-note-deported-what-afghans-pakistan-october-2023>. Accessed on November 12, 2023.

⁷ Frances Mao, "Pakistan Orders Afghan Asylum Seekers Out of the Country by November." BBC, October 04, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-67002834>. Accessed on November 10, 2023.

⁸ "Terror Incidents Increased Since the Afghan Interim Government Came to Power in 2021: PM Kakar", *DAWN*, November 08, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1787503/terror-incidents-increased-since-afghan-interim-govt-came-to-power-in-2021-pm-kakar>. Accessed on November 10, 2023.

⁹ Kamran Yousuf, "Pakistan Shifts Stance on Afghan Taliban", *The Express Tribune*, November 09, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2445604/pakistan-shifts-stance-on-afghan-taliban>. Accessed on November 10, 2023.

¹⁰ "Terror Incidents Increased Since the Afghan Interim Government Came to Power in 2021: PM Kakar", n 8.

¹¹ Nazir Shinwari, "Kabul Denies ICG's Claim that TTP is "Based in Afghanistan", *TOLO News*, March 31, 2023, <https://tolonews.com/Afghanistan-182760>. Accessed on June 1, 2023.

¹² Haq Nawaz Khan and Rick Noack "Taliban Success Emboldens Pakistani Militants, and Deadly Attacks Surge", *The Washington Post*, November 10, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/11/10/taliban-pakistan-afghanistan-ttp/>. Accessed on November 12, 2023.

¹³ "Afghanistan: Acute Food Insecurity Situation for April 2023 and Projection for May - October 2023", Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, May 15, 2023, <https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/en/c/1156351/>. Accessed on October 10, 2023.