



CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES

In Focus

New Delhi

Neighbourhood Insights Series

CAPS InFocus: 55/2023

16 November 2023

Mapping the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan's Resurgence

Bantirani Patro

Research Associate, Centre for Air Power Studies



Source: [Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan \(TTP\) chief Noor Wali Mehsud \(left\) with another movement leader in an undisclosed location](#)



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Keywords: Pakistan, TTP, Taliban, Afghanistan

A report by the Center for Research and Security Studies (CRSS), an Islamabad-based independent think tank, expounds that the first nine months of 2023 witnessed a 19 per cent jump in terrorist attacks from 2022, with 92 per cent of them being concentrated in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan.¹ The majority of the attacks were launched by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the primary foe of the Pakistani state. Amidst an ongoing quagmire of political and economic instability, this is adversely impacting the country's security situation. Since the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in August 2021, a watershed moment widely cheered by the Pakistani establishment, there has been a sharp uptick in terror attacks due to the TTP's emboldened posture. Former Prime Minister Imran Khan stated that the Taliban's return presented a 'golden opportunity' to tackle the TTP scourge.² The civil-military leadership hoped that Taliban's return to power would help Pakistan expand its influence in Afghanistan. Two years later, the relations between the two remain frayed, with frequent border clashes stemming from disagreements over border fencing, Afghanistan's refusal to recognise the Durand Line, and the Afghan Taliban's tactical support to the TTP.

The TTP's Resurgence

Following the Pakistan military's counter-terror operations of Zarb-e-Azb in 2014 and Radd-ul-Fasad in 2017, TTP's internal structure was dismantled. It wasn't until the mid-2020s, when the US-Taliban negotiations began, that the TTP started to reorganise its structure. Mullah Fazlullah, the former TTP chief, was killed in 2018, and upon his death, he was succeeded by Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud. Mehsud has pledged allegiance to the Taliban supremo, Hibatullah Akhundzada, and has tried to emulate the Afghan-Taliban structure, i.e., centralise the organisation and form shadow provinces. He has successfully persuaded splinter groups and other militant groups, opposed to Pakistan, to join the TTP. The group's increasingly expansionist nature has sought to move beyond its traditional strongholds, namely the districts of KP, and has been making inroads into Balochistan, forging a nexus with smaller Baloch militant groups by appropriating local grievances and ethno-nationalist sentiments. TTP's media wing, Umar Media, which lies in the bailiwick of its 'Information and Broadcasting Ministry', has been at the forefront of its advancements, ramping up production and recruitment calls, following the Taliban takeover. This ideological arm named after the Afghan Taliban's founder, Mullah Muhammad Umar, actively produces videos, audios, podcasts, and texts in a plethora of languages - English, Urdu, Pashto, Balochi, Persian - to have a broader outreach, which is then circulated on social media platforms. Against this backdrop of aggressive movement, it now has 12 *Wilayats* (administrative units) in Pakistan: seven in KP, two in Balochistan, one in

Gilgit-Baltistan, and two in Punjab.³ This is indicative of a shift in TTP's jihad narrative, which is now more local and regional than global, something that became apparent after TTP abandoned its global jihad rhetoric in its 2018 manifesto.

The 30th report of the UNSC Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team mentions that under Mehsud, "the group has become more cohesive, presenting a greater threat in the region."⁴ TTP is estimated to have 3,000 to 4,000 fighters in Afghanistan, the only group with the largest component of foreign terrorist fighters in the region.⁵ The Monitoring Team, in its 31st report, states that the Taliban takeover has provided a fillip to the TTP's attacks against the security forces.⁶ Although the Taliban refuses this publicly, both groups are cut from the same ideological cloth, hence the inherent religious support to TTP for its jihad against the state. The report also talks about a closer alliance between TTP and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). The former receives intelligence and explosive devices from the latter, and in return, TTP provides manoeuvring space to the ETIM in Pakistan.⁷ The Monitoring Team's 32nd report outlined the possibility of Al-Qaeda merging with the TTP by virtue of a 'strong and symbiotic' equation between them, and given that Al-Qaeda plays an advisory role to the TTP, this aspect necessitates careful examination, no matter how distant the idea looks.⁸

Besides the support TTP receives from the Afghan Taliban, two other elements have been instrumental to its consolidation. Firstly, the TTP's acquisition of sophisticated weaponry left behind by the US and its NATO allies, due to their hurried exit from Afghanistan, has made their attacks more frequent and lethal. This, coupled with the group's deep-seated urge to attack symbols of the establishment, has impelled them to initiate near-daily attacks on Pakistan's security forces while sparing non-combatants. For instance, the November 4, 2023, attack on the Mianwali Air Force training base by Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP)⁹, an affiliate of the TTP, is an indication of the group's increased capability and intention to attack high-value military targets. Secondly, the ceasefires between November 2021 to 2022, and other concessions, including the release of some TTP members and their resettlement in Pakistan, are believed to have provided breathing room to the TTP for reorganisation.

TTP ended the early June 2022 ceasefire, which was mediated by the Taliban, on November 28, 2022, a day before General Syed Asim Munir was sworn in as Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff (COAS). The proscribed organisation cited the following reasons for ending the ceasefire: continued attacks on the group, the non-release of TTP prisoners, the impasse on the reversal of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) merger with the KP province, and the enforcement of Sharia. The

Munir leadership has intensified its objections against the Afghan Taliban for providing a haven to the TTP, repeatedly urging it to rein in the TTP members in accordance with the Doha Agreement. This has become a major irritant in the Afghan-Pak bilateral ties, impeding other facets of the relationship.

Conclusion

The possibility of a high-intensity military operation against the TTP when Pakistan doesn't have the economic wherewithal appears inopportune. And so long as the TTP enjoys a safe haven in Afghanistan, any military offensive will fail and, at most, be a pyrrhic victory. Therefore, if TTP's foray into other regions and its merger with smaller militant groups continues unabated, it will make the border areas more restive with conspicuous security ramifications for the region's stability and growth, particularly in South Asia and Central Asia. Jaish-E-Mohammed (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), both of which have mounted attacks in the Indian territory, have maintained training camps inside Afghanistan. The likelihood of these forces forging connections with the TTP, given its strong presence in Afghanistan and their history of fighting against the US-allied forces, must be watched vigilantly by India. Central Asian countries, too, have expressed their concerns regarding the heightened capabilities and influence of groups operating in Afghanistan, as well as the potential spill over into their regions, especially considering the liberty of action displayed by TTP. A shared security challenge, hence, necessitates close cooperation between India and the Central Asian Republics on counterterrorism to ensure peace in the region.

NOTES:

¹ Ayaz Gul, “Report: Surge in Terrorism kills more than 700 Pakistanis”, *VOA*, September 30, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/report-surge-in-terrorism-kills-more-than-700-pakistanis/7291609.html>. Accessed on November 4, 2023.

² Ikram Junaidi, “Imran planned to settle TTP fighters in ex-FATA”, *Dawn*, January 11, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1731063>. Accessed on November 6, 2023.

³ Harsh Behere, “TTP Unfazed by Pakistan’s New Multidimensional Counterterrorism Strategy”, *The Diplomat*, July 01, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/06/ttp-unfazed-by-pakistans-new-multidimensional-counterterrorism-strategy/>. Accessed on November 6, 2023.

⁴ Thirtieth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution [2610 \(2021\)](#) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, S/2022/547, July 15, 2022, p. 17.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Thirty-first report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution [2610 \(2021\)](#) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, S/2023/95, February 13, 2023, p. 16.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Thirty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution [2610 \(2021\)](#) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, S/2023/549, July 25, 2023, p. 17.

⁹ Gibran Naiyyar Peshimam, “Militants attack air force base in central Pakistan, says military”, *Reuters*, November 04, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/militants-attack-air-force-base-central-pakistan-military-2023-11-04/>. Accessed on November 6, 2023.