

PAKISTAN'S INTERNAL CHALLENGES, SHIFTING DYNAMICS

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Taliban security personnel at the Pakistan-Afghanistan border in Torkham | Photo Credit: AFP

Former Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani's persistent efforts to engage Pakistan to rectify its strategic errors in Afghan policy, faced unmet expectations. In a critical meeting in May 2021 between Mr. Ghani, the Pakistan Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, the head of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, Lt. General Faiz Hamid, and the Chief of Defence Staff of the United Kingdom, Gen. Sir Nicholas Patrick Carter, it became evident that promises made by the Pakistani military were often diluted through their chain of command. Mr. Ghani noted a consistent drop in implementation percentages, as orders traversed from Gen. Bajwa to Gen. Faiz Hamid to subordinate field commanders. This decline, attributed to a sympathetic disposition of mid-level commanders towards the Taliban, underscored the complexities within Pakistan's military.

However, following the Taliban's unexpected triumph in Afghanistan, the mood shifted dramatically within Pakistan. A sense of victory, liberating Afghanistan from a perceived oppression, led to celebrations and jubilation among military and political leaders. Yet, as the international community's views transitioned from jubilant acceptance to the condemnation of the Taliban's actions, Pakistan's claims of being a victim of terrorism found little traction. A similar scepticism resonated from within Pakistan, where doubts persisted about the military's narratives.

Mr. Ghani's insistence that Pakistan's chosen military approach in Afghanistan represented a lose-lose-lose scenario remained steadfast.

In the wake of the Taliban's seizure of Kabul, Pakistan witnessed a shift that caused concern. The Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) saw almost 40 allied groups joining its ranks, triggering a surge in insecurity that was marked by a rise in suicide attacks. Pakistan now found itself as the new battleground. The TTP's emboldenment fuelled this transformation through the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan, while Pakistan grappled with an intensifying phase of radicalisation.

Strategically, Pakistan's military, facing criticism and security lapses, sought to shift focus from its Afghan policy. The Afghan Taliban became the target of blame, with accusations of inaction against the TTP, which allegedly exploited Afghan soil for attacks inside Pakistan. Contrarily, the Afghan Taliban dismissed TTP as a domestic concern, revealing internal divisions and mutual

distrust.

The TTP emerged as a more potent force, displaying heightened sophistication across domains — structural, communication, and public relations. Bolstered by existing grievances and the marginalisation of the Pashtun and Baloch communities, the TTP capitalised on radicalised groups across Pakistan, particularly in Punjab. Can Pakistan effectively combat the TTP? The outlook is grim. Ingrained structural grievances, widespread radicalisation, and a degree of local sympathy all play into the TTP's favour. Noor Wali Mehsud, the Amir of TTP, outlined the group's resurgence in his book, *Inqilab Mehsud*. The text emphasises local alliances and organisational discipline, while mirroring the Afghan Taliban's provincial structure with a focus on urban insurgency. Employing slick media tactics, the TTP strategically comments on financial, governance, and corruption issues, in order to rally public support.

The TTP leverages a potent narrative that resonates with Pakistanis, exploiting existing divisions and grievances while presenting Afghanistan's Taliban success as a model for governance. In contrast, Pakistan's present government narrative is feeble due to economic struggles, governance lapses, a fragmented political elite, and societal divisions. Events such as those on May 9 in Pakistan, underscore public frustration with the military's role. Additionally, the absence of support from the United States in terms of intelligence, drone operations, and financial aid further compounds Pakistan's challenges.

A significant shift in strategy has become evident. Pakistan's historical pursuit of strategic depth in Afghanistan, which encompassed the backing of non-state actors against amicable governments, has undergone a notable alteration. The dynamic has reversed with the Afghan Taliban securing a strategic foothold within Pakistan. This was achieved through the backing of entities such as the TTP and other radical groups operating within Pakistan. Should the Taliban decide to take action against the TTP, it risks forfeiting its leverage against Pakistan in its future dealings. The TTP, formerly aligned with the Afghan Taliban, is now engaged in 'jihad' inside Pakistan, signifying a multifaceted partnership that has spanned over two decades.

There are several reasons why the Afghan Taliban cannot and will not take solid military action against the TTP. First, the Afghan Taliban avoids strong action against the TTP to avert internal division, preventing the potential loss of its ranks to the TTP or other extremist factions such as the Islamic State—Khorasan Province and al-Qaeda. Second, the Taliban comprehend that antagonising the TTP could result in them losing secure havens across Durand Line which they once utilised when facing off against international forces and Afghan security (all under the shelter of the TTP's umbrella). The TTP has the capability and a strategic geographical edge that could challenge the Taliban's authority in Afghanistan. Should the Afghan Taliban's dominance be contested, the TTP has the potential to forge alliances with other groups to mount a formidable challenge. Third, Pakistan's historical use of religious madrasas to exert influence and issue fatwas against Afghan governments is now in the hands of the Afghan Taliban. Their extensive network established in the last 25 years within Pakistan, involving students, teachers, and friends across thousands of madrasas, provides substantial support. Fourth, while Pakistan once tolerated public charity drives to fund the Afghan Taliban, according to many local sources, similar support is now flowing from Afghans to TTP groups, complicating the situation and indicating a paradigm shift.

Navigating a way forward demands a thorough re-evaluation of Pakistan's policy on cultivating radical Islamist groups, domestically and internationally, for the sake of foreign policy gains. Notably, while many nations that once supported Afghan resistance against the Soviet invasion, including the Gulf states in the 1980s, have abandoned the practice of backing global Jihadist and Islamist militant groups, Pakistan remains steadfast in continuing this policy, a choice that now casts a shadow over the nation's trajectory. Rather than seizing the opportunities presented

by the era of globalisation, and economic growth, Pakistan has persisted in channelling its resources toward cultivating terrorist organisations. Hence, it is imperative that the nation's military redefine its role to prioritise the interests and welfare of the populace, respecting the mandate of civilian governance.

The Pakistan military must lend its support and create a partnership with the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM). This movement advocates regional peace and takes a stand against Pakistan's dual-centric policy, which involves nurturing militancy to safeguard the military's interests along the Pakhtoon belt of Pakistan across the Durand Line.

Moreover, the urgency of veering away from exporting radicalism is underscored by rampant radicalisation within the country, pervasive poverty, the beleaguered state of the economy, and India's continued advancements. Pakistan stands at the crossroads, where adopting a new path is imperative to secure a more stable and prosperous future and establish working relationships with its neighbours, specifically India and Afghanistan.

Tragically, the price of the recent abysmal policies executed by the military leadership is borne by the innocent citizenry. It is disheartening to witness individuals with abundant talent and resources grappling with the harsh reality of mere survival; and for some, even survival is a distant aspiration.

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