[**Dangerous arena**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1733684/dangerous-arena)

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THE withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan had been widely anticipated, with hopes of improved security and peace to follow. Such hopes were quickly dashed. Instead, we saw the US exit immediately followed by jailbreaks that released hardened militants back in the public. A subsequent surge in terrorism incidents, uprooting of border fences, firing on Pakistani border security forces and an attack on the Pakistani diplomatic mission in Kabul have negatively impacted expectations for peace.

Sharing of information related to terrorism, border security, and Pakistani prisoners in Afghan jails were some of the things Pakistan had high hopes for, yet no substantial improvement has been observed. Globally, border security is a bilateral affair, but in the Pakistan-Afghanistan context, it remains a unilateral pursuit, hence increasing security challenges for Pakistan. Another expectation was that the new Afghan administration would use its influence to persuade militant groups to stop their activities, but this has not yet been achieved. Instead, there has been a surge in terrorism incidents with a changed modus operandi and against new targets ever since the withdrawal of US troops and the failure of subsequent peace talks. The militants seem to have bought plenty of time, if not space, thanks to the peace talks in question.

The prime function of any state is not only to maintain peace within its territorial limits but also to respect the sovereignty of its neighbours. The question is, in the absence of foreign militaries, how will militant groups justify their existence, and how will the presence of militant groups on Afghan soil be justified by the Kabul administration?

The Afghan theatre today has some conflicting dynamics. The ISK-P aspires for a ‘khilafat’, the Taliban seek an ‘emirate’, while modern states are expected to function on democratic principles and the concept of shared sovereignty. Increased conflict between the ISK-P and the Taliban can spill over and have negative implications for Kabul’s neighbours. Militants switching from other groups to the ISK-P will further complicate the security mosaic and also strengthen the sectarian fault lines in the neighbourhood.

How will militant groups justify their existence?

After the withdrawal of foreign forces, the Afghan army and police, trained by the US and allied forces, had instantly disintegrated. For those with limited options to earn a living, carrying a gun can become an easy choice. Those who previously served in the Afghan security forces are neither skilled workers nor have many employment prospects in other fields. Many may have no other option but to join other militants; not for ideological or romantic reasons, but for economic ones.

In Pakistan, divergent approaches taken by the criminal justice system, the community, and political leadership have also benefited the militants. The judiciary strictly adheres to due process and procedure, whereas the leadership of LEAs and the security apparatus prefer kinetic options. The community also seems divided, with the presence of countless sympathisers and active contributors and facilitators making countering terrorism much more difficult. Our policy remains heavily reliant on kinetic means and reactive measures despite two decades of experience. Efforts to isolate extremists, their sympathisers, financiers and facilitators remains a weak area.

During the ceasefire phase, the militants took advantage of Pakistan’s internal upheaval, marked by political polarisation; a transition in military command; the ongoing merger process in former Fata; government engagements on multiple fronts, such as the economic crisis; the change of the federal government; floods; and the unbridled growth of social media.

After the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban, certain militant groups have miscalculated their strength in comparing themselves with the Afghan Taliban. They forget that the struggle of the Afghan Taliban may have been motivated by religiosity, but it was against foreign occupiers and Afghan nationalism was a strong driving factor. It had popular support as well. Afghanistan’s context cannot be applied to or compared with Pakistan. Pakistan is a functional democracy and a nuclear power with a professional security apparatus and governance structure.

Gaps in policy and actions always benefit anti-state elements, and identifying such gaps is probably more important than filling them. With the changed scenario and new challenges, revisiting our response — legal, procedural and institutional — as well as the coordination apparatus is inevitable. The wounds are four decades old; haste may further complicate the surgery. Clarity may bring relief and sustainable peace.

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*Published in Dawn, January 26th, 2023*