**The Western Border With Taliban**

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Pakistan saw over 2867 fatalities in terrorist attacks last year, a 50 percent increase from 2021 and thrice the number in 2020. This surge in violence has raised concerns about TTP (Tehreek Taliban Pakistan) based in Afghanistan carrying out attacks on Pakistan. The group, formed in 2007 out of militant networks in the border region, has historical links to the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda. Recent conflicts along the western borders have highlighted the negative impact of a Taliban-governed government. Pakistan’s efforts to manage tensions between Islamabad and Kabul are failing, as its leverage with the Afghan Taliban is slipping. Not only has the Taliban’s control led to a humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan and increased risks for regional and international security, but they are a serious threat to the western border for contesting the Afghan-Pakistan border status as unclear and imaginary.

In September 2021, the Taliban declared the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as a caretaker government to enforce Islamic rule. The swift takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban has raised concerns about US and Western failures, regional and international security implications, and the West’s strategy choices. The majority of the current set up of the Taliban government are Pashtun members from southern Afghanistan and are blacklisted by the US and UN for terrorism-related sanctions. Although Pakistan has been an important ally of the Taliban, the Taliban have been funding terrorist organisations and other outlawed groups in Pakistan, which poses grave risks to national security.

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Before the civil war in 1978, Afghanistan was a monarchy under Zahir Shah, who came to power in 1933. After World War II, the US and the Soviet Union used economic assistance to compete for influence. After the US established military ties with Pakistan in 1954, Afghanistan increasingly turned to the Soviet Union’s support. In 1964, Zahir Shah convened a Loya Jirga to debate a draft constitution for a more representational government, but he did not relinquish any power, political parties were permitted to organize but not to contest elections. Zahir Shah was overthrown by his cousin Daoud Khan in 1973, who had allied himself with one of the factions of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), a Marxist-Leninist party formed in 1965.

After gaining power, Daoud attempted to distance the government from the Soviet Union. The PDPA reunited in 1977 and launched a coup in 1978, killing Daoud and seizing power. The government then launched radical land reform and mass repression, leading to uprisings. The Soviet Union invaded Kabul in 1979, installing Babrak Karmal as president. The Soviet occupation force and Karmal government suppressed uprisings, resulting in one million deaths. The 1988 Geneva Accords ended the war, but the UN failed to establish a transitional process, leading to further efforts until the Taliban came to power.

In 1992, Tajik leader Ahmed Shah Massoud, Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum, and the Hazara faction Hizb-i-Wahdat formed the Northern Alliance. Non-Pashtun militia forces mutinied and took control of Kabul airport, preventing President Najibuillah from leaving Afghanistan. Najibullah stayed in the UN compound for four years. Burhanuddin Rabbani became president of the Islamic State of Afghanistan, while Hikmatyar continued to bombard Kabul. In 1994, Hikmatyar and Dostum launched a civil war, destroying one-third of the city. The Taliban emerged as a result of this fragmentation, with many mujahidin commanders establishing themselves as local warlords. Humanitarian agencies frequently found their offices stripped, their vehicles hijacked, and their staff threatened. The movement gained support from Pakistan, which saw the Taliban as a way to secure trade routes to Central Asia and establish a government in Kabul friendly to its interests. In 1995, the Taliban took control of Herat, preventing Afghanistan’s connection to Iran. In 1996, they took Kabul, prompting Massoud to seek military aid from Russia and Iran. Osama bin Laden returned in 1996, initially under tribal council protection before Taliban control. In 1997, the Taliban renamed Afghanistan the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, with Mullah Omar as commander.

The Taliban attempted to expand their control in Afghanistan from 1997 to 1998, attempting to take control of Mazar-i Sharif, a city controlled by Dostum’s forces. In August 1998, the Taliban took control and massacred at least 2000 people, mostly Hazara civilians. Dostum left Afghanistan for exile in Turkey, while Malik fled and lived in Iran since 1997. The United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan (UNIF) was formed, with Rabbani as president and Dostum, Khalili, and Islami as commanders. The US initiated air strikes against bin Laden’s training camps in 1998, leading to UN sanctions in 1999. The failure to hand over bin Laden led to an expansion of the sanctions on the regime in 2000. In 2001, the US launched airstrikes against Al-Qaeda and Taliban targets in Afghanistan, ending the Taliban regime. Since 2021, the Taliban has regained control of Afghanistan.

Pakistan’s deteriorating ties with the Taliban provide valuable insights for policymakers. The Taliban, similar to the pre-9/11 era, are willing to take risks and prioritize foreign jihadis in Afghanistan, even without diplomatic recognition. This reflects their regime’s lack of nationalist inwardness and international concerns. Policymakers must be realistic about the Taliban’s commitment to preventing Afghan territory use for terrorism. Pakistan should increase economic pressure on the Taliban to review its support for the TTP, as Pakistan is Afghanistan’s main transit trade route and Taliban-led export market. Pakistan’s economic leverage is rooted in its landlocked status, which contributes to over 40 percent of Afghanistan’s customs revenues and nearly 60 percent of the Taliban’s total revenues. To exert more economic pain, Pakistan needs to tighten transit trade rules, impose stringent bank guarantee requirements on Afghan traders, expand a list of goods Afghanistan cannot import via Pakistan, and impose a duty on select commodities imported by Afghanistan.

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