**US exit: security implications**

BY M U H A M M A D A M I R R A N A 2021-05-16

AFGHANISTAN has recently witnessed a significant upsurge in security incidents. Indeed, experts have been projecting `increased violence` as one of the most probable scenarios post-US troops`withdrawal.SecuritystrategistsinPakistan have been trying to prevent the impact of the increasing insecurity in this country`s neighbourhood, including through fencing the borders. Yet the Pakistani Taliban sheltered in Afghanistan have intensified their terrorist onslaught inside Pakistan, including in the bordering regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. That indicates thatfences can serve their purpose betterif countries develop some joint border security and counterterrorism cooperation.

Pakistan`s political and military leaderships are well aware that instability in Afghanistan will cause insecurity in Pakistan. For one, during his visit to Kabul recently, Army Chief Gen Qamar Bajwa again told Afghan President Ashraf Ghani that a peaceful Afghanistan means a peaceful Pakistan. The major alliance of the Pakistani Taliban and other anti-Pakistan militant groups, the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, shares a sense of victory with the Afghan Taliban. The TTP and its afHliateshaveincreased their presence and operations in Pakistani tribal areas and elsewhere. That is worrisome in the context that the peace process in Afghanistan is not going anywhere as yet.

Pakistan is also concerned about the TTP`s presence in Afghanistan and continuing cross-border infiltrations. According to a media report, the recent spike in terrorist violence in Pakistan as claimed by the TTP followed failed negotiations between the terrorist group and the Pakistani government. The `secret` negotiations happened in 2020 and eventually collapsed in late 2020 or early 2021 with no indication that they might resume, the report claimed citing some active TTP members sheltered in eastern Afghanistan. The Haqqani Network of the Afghan Taliban reportedlyfacilitated the talks.

In November 2020, a former TTP spokesman Ehsanullah Ehsan had also claimed that such talks did take place. The report further said that the talks collapsed due to the TTP not agreeing to cer-tain`conditions`putforth by the Pakistanigovernment. Since the start of the year 2021, the TTP has been quite vocal in claiming responsibility for terrorist attacks in KP and other parts of the country including Karachi and Balochistan.

The emerging developments in Afghanistan will not only add to insecurity and violence in Pakistan`s border regions but also fuel cross-border incursions. It is because of this particular security threat that Pakistan has been busy fencing its border with Afghanistan. These fencing measures are also attacked by the militants. For instance, last month, a large group of TTP militants from Afghanistan tried to enter Bajaur`s tribal region by damaging the border fence. They were spotted by security forces and repelled successfully. Multiple crossborder attacks have reportedly targeted security personnel and others engaged in the fencing work.

Not only the TTP, but the militant Islamic State group has also become active in Pakistan. The IS`s so-called Pakistan chapter claimed the Peshawar killing of an Afghan Taliban commander Nek Muhammad Rahbar in the first issue of its newly published Urdu-language magazine Yalghar (Invasion); the group also claimed the killing of Hazara labourers in Bolan (Balochistan) in the magazine.

The presence of IS affiliates in Balochistan was no secret ever since the group emerged in Iraq and Syria. Last month, security forces killed another four IS militants in an intelligence-based operation carried out in the mountainous Aab-i-Gum area of Bolan district. According to police, the operation foiled a major terrorist plot by the banned Lashkari-Jhangvi and IS. The slain terrorists were identified as Akram Zehri, Ahmedullah, Sikandar, and Shadi Khan. Similarly, some IS affiliates were arrested in Shikarpur (Sindh), which has remained a sectarian flashpoint in the past.

Across the border, IS in Afghanistan has also increased its attacks in that country.The group is suspected of being behind the recent explosions outside a secondary school in the capital, Kabul, which killed at least 85 people, mostly young girls.

Meanwhile, a US-based media group`s report claimed that Al Qaeda is also planning to step upits operations in the region after the US troops` withdrawal from Afghanistan. The report claimed that the group was planning a comeback by relying on its enduring partnership with the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban. All these developments indicate that the transnational terrorist groups would be encouraged toincrease theirinnuence and operations after the US troops` withdrawal.

Another worrisome development is that the TTP is focusing once again on Balochistan, especially Quetta, where IS and nationalist insurgents are already active. The group claimed responsibility for the suicide bombing in the parking lot of the city`s Serena Hotel on April 21, which left at least five people dead and around a dozen injured. The attack attracted international attention because the Chinese ambassador was staying at the same hotel though he was not present there at the time.

The initial statement by the TTP had claimed that local and foreign officials were among the targets.

However, it later said law-enforcement officials were the main target.

After the Serena Hotel bombing, three more attacks on the Frontier Corps and police have been reported from the provincial capital. These attacks once again highlighted the fact that despite extreme security measures in place and a large number of security forces deployed across the province, the militants could still find a way to hit their targets even in highly securitised places such as Serena Hotel. Similarly, the Pal(htun populated belt of Balochistan, mainly the areas along the Afghan border including Zhob and Chaman, are becoming a new hub of the Taliban militants.

The Baloch insurgents will also draw inspiration from the changing environment and could increase and intensify their attacks against security forces and other targets including in and around Gwadar.

Changing security trends demand a constant review of the country`s counterterrorism strategy, and security institutions will have to focus on conciliatory approaches towards non-violent political movements in the regions where terrorists can exploit the grievances of the people. The writer is a security analyst.