[Abdul Basit](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/abdul-basit)

December 31, 2020

**2020 s threat landscape**

In the last five years, Pakistan has remarkably turned around its fight against the twin threats of extremism and terrorism. The Global Terrorism Index (GTI) 2020 also acknowledged this fact.

As per GTI 2020, the downward trajectory of terrorist incidents has resulted in a 90 percent decline in terrorism-related casualties. Furthermore, of the 37 terrorist groups active in Pakistan in 2015, only ten were functional in 2020. The majority of the terrorist attacks in 2020 were concentrated in peripheral areas, mainly in the ex-Fata region and Balochistan, with fewer incidents witnessed in the major cities.

Nevertheless, abolishing the terrorist and insurgent networks and addressing the underlying causes of anti-state violence in Pakistan remains a work in progress. Arguably, geopolitical changes in the region, ideational transformations within the terrorist milieu and functional developments (leadership changes, factional alliances and evolving tactics) have morphed the operational agendas and purported political goals of various Pakistani insurgent and terrorist groups.

The US exit from Afghanistan, the ongoing intra-Afghan negotiations and China’s growing economic footprint are reshaping Pakistan’s internal security landscape. In the context of devising counter-strategies, these transformations require closer monitoring. The current terrorist threat, albeit less intensive, to Pakistan’s internal security comes from the TTP and the Baloch insurgent groups.

The two most significant developments in 2020 were the reunification of the TTP; and the reported alliance between the Baloch Raji Ajoi Sangar (BRAS), a conglomerate of four Baloch insurgent groups, and a lesser-known Sindhi separatist group, the Sindhu Desh Revolutionary Army (SRA).

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the US-Taliban deal signed in February 2020, which binds the latter not to harbor foreign terrorist groups on Afghan soil, prompted the merger of various TTP factions. Current TTP chief Nur Wali Mehsud’s emphasis on alliance building might also have been instrumental in the merger. The relocation of some TTP elements in the ex-Fata region should also be viewed in this context.

In 2020, the TTP mostly targeted the personnel of Pakistani security institutions. This observation is also corroborated by the two most frequently used tactics by TTP militants in 2020 – IEDs (72) and firing (85). These are guerrilla warfare tactics used against hardened targets. This possible shift from indiscriminate to less discriminate targeting strategy underscores the TTP’s desire to transform from a terrorist to an insurgent group without territorial control or public support.

Conceptually, in its current form the TTP can be classified as a proto insurgency or a hybridised terrorist group. Critically, the TTP’s reunification and re-evaluation of its operational strategy may extend its life cycle. However, the militant group is past its prime and is incapable of carrying out large-scale terrorist attacks on mainland Pakistan.

Between 2015 and 2019, the Baloch insurgency weakened substantially due to internecine fighting, particularly between the Baloch Liberation Army and the Baloch Liberation Front, a successful military operation and the surrender of several Baloch militants by availing the government’s amnesty policy. In this four-year period, only 37 insurgent attacks were witnessed across Balochistan. However, in 2020 this figure jumped to 38 attacks– mostly clustered around the Makran region (Kech, Panjgur, and Gwadar districts), where most of the CPEC projects are located. The BLA-BLF rapprochement and BRAS-SRA coalition possibly account for the slight uptick of violence in Balochistan.

Three factors explain the overall decline in violent incidents and related killings in Pakistan.

First, Pakistan’s status as the so-called front-line state in the US-led global ‘war on terror’ fueled terrorism in the country after 9/11. However, this situation has reversed now. Instead of supporting Washington’s war effort, Islamabad has played a significant role in convincing the former that there is no military solution to end the war in Afghanistan. In fact, the incumbent government has been one of the most vocal critics of the ‘war on terror’. Pakistan’s backchannel diplomatic efforts were pivotal in brokering the US-Taliban agreement in February and jumpstarting the intra-Afghan talks in Qatar.

Second, successful counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency operations in the ex-Fata region and Balochistan have reduced anti-state violence in Pakistan. While Operation Zarb-e-Azb dislocated major terrorist and insurgent networks from different parts of the country, Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad focused on the residual terrorist and insurgent threat by targeting their sleeper cells, aiders and abettors. In the last two years, under the Financial Action Task Force’s approved 27-point action plan, Pakistan has significantly improved its countering terrorist financing and anti-money laundering regime as well.

Finally, border fencing with Afghanistan and Iran has been pivotal in deterring attacks on Pakistan. The work on border fencing, despite the Covid-19 contagion, continued throughout 2020. Around 1,700 kilometers of the 2,600-kilometre border with Afghanistan has been fenced. The remainder of the border will be fenced by February 2021. Likewise, about 100 kilometers of the 900-kilometer with Iran has been fenced and the rest would be fenced by the end of 2021. The Pak-Iran border starts at Koh-e-Malik Salih mountain and ends at Gwadar Bay in the Gulf of Oman.

The security gains of the 2015-2020 period need to be solidified into political advantages through informed decision-making and evidence-based policy interventions. In this regard, a reassessment of evolving goals and operational strategies of Pakistan’s terrorist and insurgent networks is warranted.

Pakistan needs a flexible and adaptable internal security framework that is condition-centric rather than group-specific, and which goes beyond addressing the symptoms to tackling underlying causes of anti-state violence. The PTI government’s decision to establish a commission ‘for implementation of the national narrative, and development of structures against violent extremism and radicalisation’, which includes a policy review board, among other points, is a welcome step.

The writer is a research fellow at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore.

Twitter: @basitresearcher