**Delicate Security Situation on the Durand line**

[M Alam Brohi](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/m-alam-brohi/)

April 3, 2024

Pakistan, since its inception, has been unsuccessfully striving to have a friction-free relationship with Afghanistan. Both countries, more often than not, are described as inseparable Siamese twins with a sizeable Pashtun population living across the Durand line bound with each other by blood, linguistic, cultural and spiritual links and economic interdependence including the border and foreign trade.

The Afghan leaders, for unfathomable reasons, have indulged in hostile acts against Pakistan right from its emergence obstructing its membership in the UN; repudiating the Durand line as the international border; supporting the bogey of Pakhtunistan; harbouring rebel Baloch nationalists; providing sanctuaries to the TTP with space to carry out militant attacks across the border.

Given Pakistan’s tension-free relations with the first Taliban regime, and its decades-long sympathetic and, in a way, useful contacts with them, our military and civil leadership genuinely harboured hopes for the return of stability in bilateral relations between the two neighbours as and when the ground conditions obtaining in Afghanistan signified the collapse of the Ghani regime after the withdrawal of foreign forces. Precisely for this reason, Pakistani leadership had hastily expressed gratification over the Taliban’s ascent to power.

Given Pakistan’s tension-free relations with the first Taliban regime, our military and civil leadership genuinely harboured hopes for the return of stability in bilateral relations as and when the ground conditions signified the collapse of the Ghani regime.

We have had a few expectations from the new Afghan rulers, so to speak of: i) controlling the RAW-supported Baloch insurgents’ subversive activities from Afghanistan; ii) dismantling sanctuaries of TTP within their territory and disarming its militants; iii) granting Pakistan access to Central Asia in a mutually advantageous framework; iv) recognizing Durand Line as the international border. This, in our perception, could herald a new era of cordial political, economic and strategic relationship with Afghanistan. The dismantling of the TTP sanctuaries on the Afghan territory proved the stumbling block.

The TTP had crossed the porous border from the erstwhile FATA and taken refuge in Afghanistan when the security operation ‘Zarb-e-Azab’ was launched in 2014. Though the Afghan rulers were warned to seal the border to prevent the entry of the militants into their territory, they chose to look the other way. The TTP reassembled its force and recruited new militants to organize intermittent terrorist attacks within Pakistan from across the border during the pre-Taliban regimes. However, these terrorist attacks have grown in frequency and intensity during the past three years.

Pakistan exercised utmost restraint employing all persuasive diplomacy to underscore the compelling need to redress the scourge of TTP that was not only threatening its security but fuelling tension between the two neighbours. These initiatives included formal bilateral contacts and officially sponsored visits to Kabul by Ulema and Pashtun leaders, and even an offer of joint operation against the TTP.

Pakistan exercised a bit of coercive diplomacy too including the repatriation of the non-registered Afghan refugees; the fencing and sealing of the border, tightening control over entry and exit of visitors; reducing the volume of border trade and reviewing tariffs on the transit trade and conducting unpublicized strikes on terrorist havens across the border. All this failed to induce any positive response from the Afghan Interim regime.

However, the militant attack of 16 March in North Waziristan by the Gul Bahadur Group of militants in which seven soldiers and two officers were martyred proved the proverbial straw on the camel’s back and provoked a swift retaliation from Pakistan on Monday 18 March with airstrikes on the terrorists within the Afghan territory killing 8 militants. The strikes were meant to punish the terrorists for their crimes, and not violate the sovereignty of Afghanistan.

In our perception, this was strategically important to let all know i) Pakistan would go to any length to confront the challenge of militants; ii) it recognizes the sovereignty of neighbours and expects them to not let their territory be used for terrorism across the border; iii) no terrorist attack from now on would go unpunished; iv) the direct pursuit of militants across the border in future would not be ruled out.

What we should hope for is that both countries would make conscious efforts to prevent the situation from spiralling into a military confrontation. The responsibility for this rests more with the Afghanistan regime than Pakistan. The former may have political and strategic compulsions to go soft on the TTP. The TTP had reportedly extended support to the Afghan Taliban in their fight against the occupying foreign forces gaining the goodwill of some TTA commanders in the field. This gives credence to current reports that TTA is divided on the question of TTP with the latter enjoying the support of a powerful Kandahar-based faction.

There are multiple militant organizations active in the Afghan territory including the powerful Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) which has proved a thorn in the body of the Afghan Interim regime with intermittent terrorist attacks within the country. The TTP reportedly enjoys strategic closeness with IS-K and could quickly switch over its allegiance to it in case of any hostile move against it by the Afghan regime. Notwithstanding all this, Pakistan cannot remain oblivious to its security compulsions.

One wonders whether Pakistani policymakers lacked respect for the independence and sovereignty of Afghanistan; was the principle of the equality of sovereign states missing in our interaction with Afghan leaders? Were we seeking strategic depth in Afghanistan treating, as Afghan leaders blame, that country as a satrap land? These questions need to be probed and answered honestly for any course correction. Probably, we were unwise to depend on the TTA against TTP. The TTP has established a nexus with Baloch insurgents and religious militant groups in the former tribal regions and Balochistan and is supported by foreign powers inimical to Pak-China friendship as reflected by the continuous suicidal attacks on the Chinese citizens working on China-funded projects in Pakistan.

It has to be disconnected from these groups by a combination of kinetic and political strategies. The threats of retaliation and hot pursuit would compound our difficulties. We should concentrate on further strengthening our border security and disrupting and defeating TTP within our territory with our military leadership focusing on this menace more than anything else.

*The author was a member of the Foreign Service of Pakistan and he has authored two books.*