**[The lethal troika](https://www.dawn.com/news/1832832/the-lethal-troika)**

[Tariq Parvez](https://www.dawn.com/authors/3134/tariq-parvez) Published May 11, 2024 Updated 2 days ago

MANY factors were responsible for the defeat of the erstwhile Soviet Union and then the US in Afghanistan. A common factor was the existence of a combination of extremely resilient militant groups resisting both superpowers. This combination consisted of three categories of militants: local Afghan militants resisting foreign invaders; Pakistani militants crossing over to help their Afghan brethren; and thousands of mujahideen from various countries, particularly in the Middle East, participating in the Afghan jihad. With some variations in their composition, role and external supporters, they fought together against the US and USSR for 30 years, forcing them to withdraw. Alarmingly, after the [US withdrawal from Afghanistan](https://www.dawn.com/news/1643653) in 2021, this Afghanistan-based lethal troika now targets Pakistan.

The situation necessitates a fundamental shift in the terrorist threat assessment in Pakistan — from focusing exclusively on the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan to broadening the threat calculus to the troika of the TTP, Afghan Taliban, and Al Qaeda.

Concerning the nexus between the Taliban and TTP, the [latest UN report](https://www.dawn.com/news/1810228) on Afghanistan states that the Afghan government was supplying weapons, training facilities and regular financial packages to the TTP. Al Qaeda’s primary goal, after lying low in the region for many years, is to revive itself without annoying its Afghan hosts or attracting the West’s adverse attention.

In view of this, it seems to have opted to carry out its activities in Pakistan through the TTP, while staying below the international radar. The importance Al Qaeda gives to the TTP is evident in that it selected 15 of its commanders to assist the group conduct terrorist attacks in Pakistan. It also supplied armed fighters to the TTP in its attack in Chitral in September 2023, which killed four security officials. Al Qaeda’s camp in Kunar, headed by Hakim ul Masri, is responsible for training suicide bombers for the TTP.

The TTP, which has been the most lethal terrorist group in Pakistan over the last three years, is on the same page with the Taliban and Al Qaeda not only because of an ideological affinity and a shared history of fighting foreign invaders in Afghanistan, but also due to similar goals of Sharia enforcement in Pakistan.

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There were reports of the TTP helping the other two members of the troika by killing Taliban members defecting to the rival Islamic State-Khorasan Province in Afghanistan. The basic point is that while the troika is united on targeting Pakistan, the members play different roles. The Taliban are likely to help TTP discreetly in Afghanistan by providing sanctuary, with Al Qaeda supporting both openly in Afghanistan through mentoring and in Pakistan through its sympathisers. With its edge, the TTP is likely to carry out ground attacks in Pakistan and lead a campaign to build up its narrative of violent extremism.

As far as the strategy and tactics to be adopted by the troika go, the TTP intends to replicate in Pakistan what the Taliban did in Afghanistan. In a recent interview to Khorasan Diary, TTP ameer Noor Wali Mehsud stated, “our jihad in Pakistan … has entered a decisive phase”. He went on to say ominously: “Pakistani security agencies have unjustly occupied our homeland” and “our goal is to liberate our homeland and implement the divine law”. In a nutshell, the TTP seems to be falling back on the two-point narrative of resistance in Afghanistan, ie, ‘liberation of homeland’ and ‘enforcement of divine laws’.

This brings us to the likely impact of the troika on the terrorist threat landscape in Pakistan. Since 2021, the number of [terrorist attacks](https://www.dawn.com/news/1823158) in Pakistan has been consistently increasing every year. This is likely to continue in 2024, with three possible changes. One, the number of Afghan nationals taking part in terrorist attacks in Pakistan may increase — we recall here the suicide bombing against military personnel in 2023 in Bannu by Afghans. Two, given its penchant for high-profile attacks, Al Qaeda may train the TTP to carry out such attacks. Three, given that the top Al Qaeda and Taliban instructors will train TTP members, the quality and sophistication of the attacks in 2024 are likely to be enhanced.

Another area likely to be impacted by the troika is infiltration. Earlier, in the 1990s, Al Qaeda infiltrated educational institutions such as Karachi and Punjab universities to recruit educated youth. These recruitment cells in universities may be reactivated.

Also, to stay abreast of latest government planning in counterterrorism, the TTP, like the Taliban did in Afghanistan, may attempt to infiltrate government departments, including intel agencies.

The third and most important dimension of infiltration is that of the military, which was carried out by Al Qaeda in Pakistan in the late 1990s. It may be pertinent to mention that the last attempted terrorist attack by Al Qaeda was in 2014 in Karachi, when a group of naval officers tried to hijack a navy frigate and crash into a US ship in the open seas.

Al Qaeda worked somewhat openly in Pakistan from the 1980s to 2001, and built up an elaborate network of civilian volunteers in many cities of Pakistan, who assisted in collecting funds, recruiting volunteers, and providing hideouts for the group. These sleeper cells might again be contacted by it and reactivated. Similarly, there were some Pakistani militant organisations of the 1980s, like the Harkatul Mujahideen, Lashkar-e-Taiba, etc, sympathetic to Al Qaeda and lying low these days. Al Qaeda may re-establish contact with them and get their support for the TTP.

Finally, both the Taliban and Al Qaeda are known for their high-quality propaganda campaign. The TTP media wing lacks that finesse. In the light of guidance from the Taliban and Al Qaeda, we are likely to witness a significant improvement in the quality of propaganda.

As Sun Tsu stated, “if you know your enemy and you know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles”. Sadly, it seems that Pakistan is erring in assessing the collective capabilities of the TTP, supported by the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

*The writer is a former police officer who was Nacta’s first national coordinator.*

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