

# Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan's (TTP) Threat Spectrum: Assessing Pakistan's Counter-Terrorism Policy in Post-US Withdrawal Era

Noor Bakhsh<sup>1</sup>, Abdul Rab<sup>2</sup> and Jalal Faiz<sup>3</sup>

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## Abstract

*The Afghan Taliban administration has precipitated a substantial shift in regional politics due to the power vacuum left in the wake of the US withdrawal. After the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan has witnessed immense economic challenges, political crises, and security challenges in Afghanistan. Consequently, the chaotic situation in Kabul generated a substantial threat to Pakistan's security. The main purpose of this research is to investigate the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) threat spectrum for Pakistan and its Counter-Terrorism Policy in the post-US withdrawal era. This study adopted a purely qualitative method and collected primary data from the relevant experts through semi-structured interviews. Moreover, it comprehensively discusses and analyses Pakistan's rising security concerns due to the reactivation of TTP in the post-US withdrawal period. The results expose that Pakistan faces various security challenges from Afghan soil in the post-US withdrawal. Unstable Afghanistan and TTP's reactive mod on the Taliban conquering return some indispensable challenges for Pakistan's security and stability. Finally, the findings of the study suggest that fostering cordial relations with the Afghan Taliban administration and proactive countering terrorism policies are crucial for Islamabad to preserve its security interests, particularly countering TTP's threat. Afghanistan and Pakistan should adopt a collaborative approach and prioritize cooperation and mutual trust for eliminating the transborder terrorism to achieve. These practical measures will not only contribute to reducing radicalism, terrorism, and sectarianism but also achieve peace and prosperity on both sides.*

**Keywords:** Afghan Taliban, Pakistan, TTP and US.

## Introduction

Afghanistan is a landlocked state with a landmass of 652,230 sq km, neighboring China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, all of which have crucial importance for Afghanistan (Central Intelligence Agency, Afghanistan). Indeed, its geostrategic location constantly attracted global powers (Parveen, 2023) and led to proxy wars in various phases of history. In the colonial era, Great Britain and Afghanistan fought three wars in 1839, 1879, and 1919 and remained a buffer zone between great powers USSR and British in the 19th century. In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to gain access to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean (Hartman, 2002). During the Soviet-Afghan war, the US sought the support of Pakistan to train and assist Mujahedeen in defeating the forces of the Red Army. Mujahedeen, a militant Islamic

<sup>1</sup>MS Scholar, Department of Political Studies, LUAWMS, Uthal, Pakistan.

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Political Studies, LUAWMS, Uthal, Pakistan.

E-mail: [abdulrab@luawms.edu.pk](mailto:abdulrab@luawms.edu.pk)

<sup>3</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Political Studies, LUAWMS, Uthal, Pakistan.



group largely educated by Pakistani madrassas, had great influence in Afghanistan. A civil war erupted in the country from 1992 to 1996.

Meanwhile, the Taliban's campaign received considerable support, and they overthrew President Burhanuddin Rabbani's government in Kandahar in 1994 and Kabul in 1996, respectively. After 9/11, the US, along with its NATO allies, launched a war against terrorism in Afghanistan. US President George W. Bush ordered an operation, 'Operations Enduring Freedom' against the Afghan Taliban on October 7, 2001. Pakistan stood as a front-line state in the US-led War on Terror and faced security challenges, particularly in the tribal areas of the country. As a result, the Pakistan Army had gone for military operations in former Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province in 2004 to eliminate the threat of terrorism. The deteriorated security situation in Pakistan has generated an adverse impact on its economic growth and social structure (Sargana et al., 2019).

The war-torn Afghanistan always created troubles in the peace, security, and economy of Pakistan. During the Afghan-Soviet war, Pakistan hosted about 3.5 million Afghan refugees who brought socioeconomic and security challenges to the country (Wirsing, 1987). Further, with the help of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), Pakistan continued to welcome Afghan refugees even after the US-Afghan war in 2001. As per the governmental estimations, in 2002, 3.5 million refugees returned to Afghanistan from Pakistan, although 1.8 million remained in Pakistan. The peace deal between the Afghan Taliban and the US, signed in Doha, Qatar, on 29th February 2020, ends the twenty years of war in Afghanistan. Under this pact, the US agreed to withdraw from Afghanistan in 2021, with the condition of avoiding the usage of Afghan soil against any country. Pakistan's role and efforts in this peace treaty are appreciated by all over the world. Taliban also expressed their goodwill towards Pakistan for facilitating these peace talks for a political solution to Afghanistan. However, the withdrawal of the US from Afghan soil without a permanent peace and intra-Afghan dialogue raised serious questions about the country's security and economic stability, which would bring stern challenges for Pakistan, particularly in the economic and security sectors. In this changing discourse of power, Pakistan is at a turning point in history to guarantee the security of its own as well as the region. The departure of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan without securing the peace has brought serious consequences for the stimulation of Pakistan's security. Thus, the study's main purpose is to discuss the TTP threat spectrum and Pakistan's counter-terrorism policy landscape after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

## Literature Review

Security is a crucial element for the stability of any state. It is widely believed that no state can ignore its neighbors in the international system; therefore, border security is essential to the overall security conundrum of states (Popescu, 2015). However, the national interest and security of states are determined by their geographical integrations; proceeding in competing interests among the nations leads to disagreement, mistrust, conflict, and insecurities. During the last two decades, the Pak-Afghan relationship has suffered a constant deterioration due to the implementation of increasingly hostile circumstances in the previous Afghan puppet governments (Idrees & Naazer, 2022). Thus, the current circumstances are estimating the rising security challenges for Pakistan in the wake of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Kabul's chaotic situations give rise to major concerns for Islamabad, as the instability of Afghanistan acts as the bedrock for Pakistan's external and internal security apprehensions (Afridi & Ali, 2020). Hussain and Jahanzaib (2015) argued in their paper "Afghanistan: The Western Withdrawal and its Implications for Security and Economy" that Islamabad's security is intricately knotted with its complicated and crowded border with Afghanistan, emphasizing the bone of contention in their future bilateral relations. Kabul has consistently triggered border security complexities for Pakistan through the flow of regional and local terrorist networks.

Volatile Afghanistan generates an equal threat to the peace and stability of Pakistan; for example, the War on Terror in Afghanistan had a catastrophic impact on Pakistan.

The persistent US-Afghan war culminated with a peace deal agreement in Doha, Qatar, on February 29, 2020, marking the end of the permanent war. This peace agreement set a deadline for the departure of the US and NATO forces permanently from Afghanistan by May 1, 2021. On the other hand, the Taliban assured not to align with Al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations against the US and its ally states (Rubin, 2022, October 31). Moreover, US-Taliban ensured to participate in intra-Afghan talks with the Ghani government to uphold peace in the country. Zalmay Khalilzad, a special envoy for the US during the Trump presidency, played a crucial role in US-Taliban negotiations for the safe withdrawal of American and NATO troops from Afghanistan. Though the Biden administration delayed the time frame till September 11, 2021, the USA and NATO forces completed their withdrawal from Afghanistan before 31st August 2021.

On the contrary, the hastened withdrawal of the US without any permanent solution for the Afghan people will intensify the security situation and exaggerate ambiguity in the country. This uncertainty again becomes a haven for terrorist organizations that disturb the peaceful environment of Pakistan. Indeed, the incompetent and radical Afghan Taliban administration drags Kabul into governance challenges and economic turmoil that could lead to an insurgency, terrorism, and civil war, which will inevitably frighten the security of Pakistan. Consequently, Islamabad must speedily tackle the situation on the arrival of the new Taliban administration with political and strategic solutions.

According to predicted numbers, the existing presence of roughly 2,200 fighters who joined IS-KP in Afghanistan mostly comprises jihadist members originating from the Afghan Taliban and TTP (Doxsee et al. 2021). IS-KP devoted a tragic suicide attack at Kabul airport on 26 August 2021, resulting in the loss of 13 US soldiers and 170 lives during the evacuation of families from Afghanistan. The changing scenario of Afghanistan could align these terrorist organizations for the same purpose. Thus, the current circumstances of the post-withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan are anticipated to give start to another intense wave of terrorism in Pakistan, propagation of a serious threat to peace and stability within the region (Tariq et al. 2021). Similarly, Pakistan must keep collaborating with the US and other regional power countries to engage the Afghan Taliban to establish an inclusive government in Afghanistan. The Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda could develop a retaliation strategy from TTP and other terrorist groups against Pakistan, which might lead to a series of terrorist attacks in urban cities. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces have already suffered from the impacts of Talibanization, sectarianism, and targeted killings.

Afghan Taliban's arrival with a transformative approach in Afghanistan (Ibrahimi, 2017) indicates an escalated threat from TTP, staging an augmented impact on Pakistan's security sector. The TTP's history is familiar to the Pakistani public, as it emerged as an autonomous organization in FATA in December 2007. It shares ideological bonds with Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban. According to the tribal militias views, the 'Pakistani Taliban' was established to subvert the government's anti-terrorist policies, which were implemented in the country against the former Afghan and Arab mujahideen. The tribal and religious linkages of the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda were supported in Pakistan during the Afghan-Soviet war (Akhtar, 2008). In its early years, TTP supported the Taliban to free Afghanistan from the occupation of foreign forces. Afterward, anti-American sentiments were developed inside Pakistan during the US-Afghan war. Thus, the organization had the opportunity to recruit a large number of people, mostly from the tribal areas of Pakistan. In early 2008, the number of militants in TTP was more than 10,000. It has shifted its focus away from a global jihadist narrative towards more local issues (Siddique, 2010). The fighters of TTP have massive exposure to the terrain geography of tribal areas, which is an advantage for its attacks and

guerilla warfare. As a reason, it has become a challenging force for Pakistan's military leadership. The TTP militants have caused heavy military and civilian casualties in Pakistan. Among their attacks, the most catastrophic attack was on the Pakistan Army School (APS) in Peshawar, in which 148 students were killed, shocking the whole nation with anger against the TTP (Brown, 2016).

Indeed, the entry of the Taliban in Kabul incited the TTP to follow their techniques against the Pakistani government to hold its influence in the tribal areas of KP and Balochistan provinces. Consequently, Pakistan has been experiencing a series of terrorist attacks in both provinces since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Verma (2021), in his study work "The Afghan Peace Process: Domestic Fault Lines," highlights the concern of the releasing of TTP and other Afghan insurgent prisoners for Pakistan's security. TTP intensified the new wave of terrorism, carrying out around 170 attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan in the post-US withdrawal era (Sayed & Hamming, 2021). In contrast, Afzal (August 6, 2021), a fellow in the Brookings Institution's foreign policy program, argued that the Afghan Taliban promised Pakistan and the US not to allow any terrorist organization to use Afghan soil against other states.

However, TTP and the Afghan Taliban are the two sides of the same coin. So, the US post-withdrawal situation will not be easy for Pakistan's security. It further exposed the Taliban's incompetency to stop such violence by TTP in the US post-withdrawal, though it is a violation of the US-Afghan peace deal. The moral and logistical support to TTP by the Afghan Taliban is a great threat to Pakistan's national security. There is an alternative tough policy to prevent the infiltration of the TTP into its territories, which is the closure of its busiest and longest 2640-kilometer Pak-Afghan border.

Conversely, this act would inevitably aftermath in Islamabad's relinquishing of its strategic status in Afghanistan, as this action would provoke anger from the Taliban-led administration. The closure of the border would engender religious and nationalist support from both sides, as Pakistan and Afghanistan shared deep-rooted religious and cultural similarities. To preserve the movements of the population on both sides along the border, the buildup of significant checkpoints besides the border fence could be an effective measure. Pakistan's unilateral policy of closing borders would openly allow the nationalist movement alongside border areas. Therefore, a more suitable approach for Pakistan will involve pursuing progressive diplomatic mediations with the Afghan Taliban administration to ensure its security in the border areas (Qayum et al., 2018). Both neighbor countries must enhance border management mechanisms through proactive actions and mutual endeavor, with the same goal of eliminating the perils that are exploiting their shared border areas. Pakistan's diplomatic role and coordination with the new Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan would be crucial to alleviating the challenges in the US post-withdrawal. Pakistan can overcome the menace of terrorism from Afghanistan based on regionally based intelligence cooperation.

In contrast, Pakistan has suffered a prolonged history of terrorism, resulting in a great loss of civilians surpassing 80,000, including women and children, and approximately 5,000 military personnel martyred. This misery situation has ensued due to its participation as a key US ally in the enduring war against terrorism in Afghanistan (Zubaida & Dr. Rani, 2021). Moreover, a series of US drone attacks had resulted in a substantial loss of civilians, exceeding 3000 losses within its tribal areas. Such targeted strikes have not only incited anti-American reactions but also have worsened the prevalence of religious radicalism within the country. In reaction to this situation, Pakistan mobilized 140,000 military personnel in the FATA areas to encounter terrorist activities. The Pakistani army sacrificed over 3,000 of its soldiers, exceeding the number of NATO victims in Kabul (Khalid & Roy, 2016). More importantly, the ramifications of the protracted war have had a destructive impact on the economy of the country. During the

two decades from 2001 to 2021, Pakistan incurred a substantial economic loss, approximating a staggering loss of 200 billion US dollars (Mirza, 2021, January 8).

### Research Methodology

The nature of this research study is purely a qualitative research method. Qualitative research analyzes and interprets texts, stories, interviews, policy documents, policy statements, and observations to find meaningful and descriptive patterns of a phenomenon (Babbie, 2015). The researcher conducted open-ended interviews and asked some structured and semi-structured questions to the participants. The responses of the participants were in the form of statements and paragraphs. The researcher transcribed the responses of the participants for thematic analysis. The essential information addressing the research objectives was specified within the framework of qualitative research.

**Table1: Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents**

Names	Qualification	Profession
Dr. Amir Wali	PhD	Asst. Prof.
Dost Muhammad Barech	PhD	Lecturer
Dr. Shokat Tareen	PhD	Asst. Prof.
Dr. Mir Wais Kasi	PhD	Assoc. Prof.
Dr. Mumtaz Ali Baloch	PhD	Assoc. Prof.
Dr. Saeed Ahmed Rid	PhD	Asst. Prof.
Mr. Nazeer Ahmed Mahar	MS	Lecturer
Dr. Abdul Malik Baloch	MBBS	Politician
Mr. Anwar Sajidi	MA	Journalist
Hammal Aslam	MS	Lecturer

### Result and Discussion

#### Afghan Taliban–TTP Relations: Post-US Withdrawal Perspectives

TTP was established in 2007 by Baithullah Mehsud, which is a radical organization that has posed a challenge to the authority of Pakistan, and this action is still ongoing. It has been active and operated in Pakistan and Afghanistan since the start of the War on Terror against the Taliban and Al Qaeda. It has made a stronghold with thousands of fighters on both sides of the Pak-Afghan border. The origins of this extremist organization date back to 2002, when the Pakistan army began a military operation in the tribal areas to exterminate Mujahedeen fighters from Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Arab states who were seeking shelter in Pakistan's FATA area during the War on Terror in Afghanistan. This organization has long-standing historical connections with the Afghan Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and other radical organizations. The fundamental ideologies of the Taliban and Al Qaeda post 9/11 have deeply influenced the nature of this organization. TTP considered the Afghan Taliban their forerunner and Afghanistan as a safe sanctuary.

Anwar Sajidi, a renowned national-level Journalist of Balochistan, answered a question during his interview and revealed "in the light of sharia law, TTP and Afghan Taliban are repeating their agreed practices in FATA, Baluchistan, and Swat as they did before."

Sajidi further argued that:

*The new rise of TTP after the Taliban government in Kabul has created myriads of security challenges for Pakistan. The recent attack of TTP in former FATA on security forces, attack on a renowned hotel in Quetta on Chinese nationals, and the resurgence of organization in Swat indicate that TTP has strengthened its hold in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover.*



In addition to his statements mentioned above, he gave further valuable suggestions: "The best option for Pakistan to tackle the TTP is to seek support and agreements with Taliban administration in Afghanistan." Furthermore, Dr Abdul Malik Baloch, the President of the National Party (a leading political party of Balochistan) and renowned politician, recommended that "It is preferable for the state to take into confidence and consensus from the public of northern border areas, especially the region of FATA, to reduce the influence of the TTP in the border areas."

The findings of the interviewees showed that the regained power of the Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan is a source of inspiration for TTP to escalate its terror campaigns in Pakistan. TTP called off its months-long ceasefires with Pakistan and fueled the attacks in the country. The findings of the data explored that TTP is a greater security threat for Pakistan with the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan. Taliban's struggle for power in Afghanistan against the US is further intensifying TTP's anti-Pakistan activities. Pakistan is required to establish good ties with the Afghan Taliban administration and to put pressure on their administration to bring TTP to the table talks. The findings suggested that the Pakistani government must adopt a democratic and diplomatic way to win support from the local people against the TTP, particularly by conducting consensus and overcoming the trust deficit between the government and locals. Moreover, the state must initiate some developments on education, health, energy, and employment in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to gain the support of the local people. The implementation of the mentioned measures from the findings has the potential to minimize the threats posed by TTP and other radical Islamist organizations and restrain its influence within the tribal areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan.

More importantly, the Afghan Taliban and TTP shared the same Islamic ideologies and struggled to implement the Islamic Sharia Law in their respective regions. They consider the US and its allies their greatest foes. During the US invasion of Afghanistan, many Afghan Taliban members took shelter in border areas of Pak-Afghan. Correspondingly, TTP regrouped other organizations in the tribal areas and pledged allegiance and support to the Afghan Taliban. These groups announced that they would fight against foreign troops in the region. TTP carried out several attacks on US troops in Afghanistan, including a military base in 2009. After the takeover of the Taliban in Kabul, Islamabad believed that it would be a sign of relief for Pakistan.

Contrary to these expectations, the Afghan Taliban's return has strengthened the capabilities of TTP. It has regrouped different factions in the shape of an alliance (Ahmadzai, 2022). The militant groups have undergone a strong resurgence since the Afghan Taliban and the US pinned down a deal in Doha, Qatar, in February 2020 (Sullivan, 2022). Soon after this historic deal, many militant groups, Jaish-e-Mohammad, Jamiat-ul-Hirar, and others collaborated with TTP, which was disconnected in 2014 (Jadoon, 2021, May). On their arrival, the Afghan Taliban released several members of TTP from prisons, including the key leader Molvi Faqeer Mohammad (Parveen et al, 2022). The group pledged allegiance to the Afghan Taliban and reinforced its narrative, claiming that the Afghan Taliban is a role model for their fighters.

Dost Muhammad Barech, lecturer at the Department of International relations, University of Balochistan, disclosed that,

*Pakistan perceived that groups like TTP and BLA would not be allowed to further establish safe havens in Afghanistan after the takeover of Taliban. On the contrary, the insurgent groups fueled their attacks more violently; for instance, Baloch militants attacked Pakistan military camps in the Noshki and Panjgur districts of Balochistan. Similarly, a new series of cross-border attacks in Pakistan by TTP, especially in the ex-FATA region, highlights these groups have a stronghold in Afghanistan after the takeover of the Taliban.*

Furthermore, Humza and Khan (2022) argued in their research paper "US Withdrawal from Afghanistan—interests of Major Players and Policy Recommendations for Pakistan" that Afghanistan was used as proxy breeding against the sovereignty of Pakistan during the US-Afghan war era. The majority of radical terrorists and Baloch insurgent groups were stationed in Kabul. Thus, it may predict that the TTP or other insurgent groups might hold their influential presence in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal. The Afghan Taliban administration, with a lack of advanced technologies, could not be in favor of Pakistan to trace all networks in Kabul. Consequently, Afghanistan again was a hidden place and easy access to Pakistan for their activities in the post-withdrawal period. Even though Islamabad accommodates the Afghan Taliban and TTP for diplomatic negotiations, it has not succeeded in attaining the desired results for its interests. At the same time, TTP breached its ceasefire with Pakistan, conducting cross-border terrorist attacks on its military forces in the tribal areas. This aggravation of brutality triggered insecurity and instability within the country. Similarly, Hammal Aslam, lecturer at the Department of International relations, BUITEMS, Quetta, added the same views that,

*It has been expected that the control of Afghan Taliban would be favorable for Pakistan about the threats of TTP, but it does not seem so. Afghan Taliban are firm on their territories, and their support for TTP is visible due to their matching ideologies. The administrative nature of both groups is the same, like banning girl's education, oppressing religious minorities, and policing the people ethically.*

He further predicted that,

*If the world does not recognize the Taliban government in Afghanistan, Pakistan may use the leverage of their isolation. In this case, the Afghan Taliban could create security problems for Pakistan by contacting TTP hardliners in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.*

Dr Saeed Ahmed Rid, an assistant professor at Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU), Islamabad, shared some diverse remarks on the same question,

*The residents of the FATA region seem happier to live within the constitution of Pakistan after the merger of FATA into the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. There is not any organized movement or political party to provoke the people in favor of TTP in the tribal areas in past and present.*

The findings of the above data show that Pakistan had great expectations from the newly Afghan Taliban administration to counter the external threats from Afghanistan in the post-withdrawal. However, these expectations were ruined by the TTP's aggressive actions against the state to show its revival and strength on both sides of the border. On the other hand, in a special report of the United States Institute of Peace, Jadoon (May 2021) claimed in her article titled "The Evolution and Potential Resurgence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan" that TTP claimed at least 32 attacks in Pakistan during the first two months of 2021. In this database, the results of the qualitative interviewing data discovered that the chaotic situation of Afghanistan under the control of the Taliban anticipated a serious security challenge for Pakistan as TTP and insurgent groups reactivate their attacks on Pakistan soil. According to the findings of qualitative data, the revival of these terrorist activities in the US post-withdrawal from Afghan soil describes their strong presence and influence in Kabul. The remarks of the interviewee revealed that both TTP and Afghan Taliban shared common ideologies and had morally supported each other during the war on terror era. Thus, the findings predict that the Afghan Taliban administration might not go for hard policies against the TTP in Afghanistan. This could be a challenging position for Pakistan to crush the TTP's network in Afghanistan. The findings showed that FATA's merging with KP province might lower the local support for TTP in the tribal areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Thus, TTP seeks help from tribal leaders from the

Afghan side. The findings further highlight that Pakistan could play a vital role in the Taliban's recognition, particularly in the Muslim world, as the Afghan Taliban Government adopted a transformation in regional politics—for example, Afghan Taliban ministerial visits to China and India after the takeover of Afghanistan. Recognition means a lot to the Afghan Taliban for her international and regional politics to strengthen its position in Afghanistan in the future. In this context, the result data discovered that the Afghan Taliban administration might get help from Pakistan, which will force her to support Pakistan against TTP and insurgent groups in Afghanistan.

### **Pakistan's Counter-Terrorism Policy Landscape**

The banned TTP is generally viewed as the most major threat to the national security of Pakistan. In September 2022, at a United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) address, Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif said “the threat posed by the major terrorist groups operating from Afghanistan, especially Islamic State, ISIL-K and TTP, as well as al-Qaeda, ETIM, and IMU.” Ahlawat and Izarali (2022), in their research article "Security Implications for India and Pakistan from the Taliban Regime since the US Withdrawal from Afghanistan," investigated the findings that TTP and Afghan Taliban factor brought Pakistan to a crossroads. Pakistan neither wants hostile relations with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan nor likes to accept the illegitimate demands of TTP. On the other side, Pakistan's fragile economy cannot bear the financial assistance of the Afghan Taliban, and it is also hesitant to recognize the Taliban government in Afghanistan. At the same time, Pakistan does not want to lessen its strategic depth in Afghanistan because she worries that India will fill the space and malign Pakistani security and interests. Thus, in the context of the above findings, the only policy solution for Pakistan is to deal with TTP in its strength of political and military power.

Hammal Aslam pointed out during the interview that, "the government of Pakistan has tried to bring TTP to a table to talk for peace in the country, but all in vain. And TTP took advantage of these opportunities and released its prisoners from jails."

He further stated that,

*The government must try bringing them in table talks as America did with Afghan Taliban to bring long-lasting peace in Pakistan. Secondly, if the TTP does not agree on negotiations, then the Pakistan military must be dealt with iron hands.*

On the other hand, Dr. Mir Wais Kasi, the Chairperson of (IR) department at Balochistan University, believed that,

*Pakistan has greater security challenges from its northern border after the withdrawal because of the presence of TTP factor who shares ideological ties with Afghan Taliban. If Pakistan tries to push them with the help of Taliban in Afghanistan, then they will join Daesh, which would be a challenging threat for Afghanistan and Pakistan both.*

Ahlawat and Izarali (2022) highlighted two major threats for Pakistan on the northern border: one is TTP, and the second is Daesh. On the other hand, the long-lasting Afghan-US war further skilled their method and techniques, which is more challenging for Pakistan's security. This brings TTP to a stronger position now, and it would be a serious threat to Pakistan.

Dost Muhammad Barech also considers the banned TTP a grave threat to the security of Pakistan and stated that,

*Making better ties in terms of culture, politics, and economy will count in the containment of TTP. Pakistan has a Pashtun population on both sides of the Durand line. Thus, Pashtuns can play a crucial role in the projection of Pakistan's soft power. Pakistan ought to design a comprehensive foreign policy*



*for the achievement of its soft powers to counter its security threats, particularly from TTP.*

He further used the quotation of Joseph and said, "The combination of soft and hard powers is known as the smart power for a state."

Similarly, Dr Mumtaz Ali Baloch thought that, "Pakistan's main objective is to maintain good relations with Taliban in Afghanistan to isolate TTP from Afghanistan." He claimed that, "it is in the strategic opportunities for Pakistan to bring the peace in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa that already been affected at the hands of TTP in the past."

Besides, Dr. Saeed Ahmed Rid pointed out his remarks during the interview that "Afghan Taliban have influenced on TTP which could be used as proxies in the hands of them if Pakistan failed to good relationship."

The above remarks demonstrated that cordial ties with the new Taliban administration should be the top priority for Pakistan. This crucial affiliation could play a vital role in the peace and prosperity of both sides. The findings revealed that collective coordination against the terrorist networks is much needed to counter them with an iron hand. Pakistan has a great opportunity to crush the menace of anti-state elements between the Pak-Afghan borders with the cooperation of Afghan Taliban leadership. The views mentioned above of the participants further illustrate that Pakistan must go for a comprehensive and diplomatic approach instead of a hard policy or a supremacy gain over the Afghan Taliban government. Indeed, the US-Afghan peace deal itself is an example of Pakistan following the constant negotiation for national interest. Both hardcore foes countries could sign peace agreements, so why not? Pakistan can bring TTP for table talks through a famous clerical and tribal leadership of the tribal areas. Pakistan now has leverage over the Afghan Taliban to stabilize its relations with Afghanistan to protect the security interests of Pakistan. The findings suggest that Pakistan should go for diplomacy and negotiations with TTP.

### **US-Afghan Peace Deal: Opportunities for Pakistan**

Direct talks between the United States and the Taliban began in 2018, and finally, the Doha Peace Agreement was signed between the two sides in February 2020. The United States was responsible for ensuring the withdrawal from Afghanistan, while the Taliban was responsible for protecting American troops from attacks. The Taliban were also promised that they would not allow Al-Qaeda or any other militant group to establish camps in Afghanistan under their control. The Pakistani government and all political figures in the country welcomed the US-Taliban peace agreement. Pakistan sees this deal as a great opportunity to bring permanent peace in Afghanistan and address the anti-Pakistan terrorist groups who have counterparts in the country. This peaceful resolution not only ends the protracted war in Afghanistan but can facilitate the stabilization of Pakistan's unstable Pak-Afghan borders in the future.

Moreover, in the context of this agreement, Pakistan has the potential to reduce the Indian influence in Kabul. With dynamic cohesions in Afghanistan's cultural, linguistic, geographic, and ideological, Pakistan can establish a strong diplomatic presence and consolidate its influence. This peace deal also provided a chance for Pakistan to build a mutual understanding that would end the emerging waves of terrorism and create a win-win situation for both sides. Pakistan has established a positive perception to advance peacebuilding efforts in the region via its role in the truce agreement. This offers opportunities for both Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban's administration to strengthen their economy, trade, and borders, as well as normalize long-standing contentious relations. Moreover, the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan diminished Indian influences (Farooq, 2022). However, Hammal Aslam made a contrasting statement and said that:

*The aftermaths of the US-Taliban peace deal could pose threats to Pakistan because Afghans have no control in the affairs of their state. They neither have*

*a national army nor any developed institutions. Thus, it is uncertain for the Taliban administration to control the anti-Pakistan elements and to assure Pakistan that they will not allow any terrorist organization to use their soil.*

He assumed "the government of Pakistan has an opportunity, through the deal, to meet the reservations of anti-elements who are active against Pakistan and secure its future stability."

The historic peace deal between America and the Afghan Taliban provided a window opportunity for Pakistan to externalize its issues faced vis-à-vis Afghanistan with some proactive policy options in the future. While interviewing, Dost Muhammad Bareach said that:

*Pakistan is just like a window for the West due to its geographical significance. The great power rivalries have further intensified Pakistan's policy matters after the US-Afghan deal. Pakistan cannot remain neutral in its foreign policy just because of its fragile economy. US intentions towards Pakistan are to destroy CPEC, and happening so could be very difficult for the economy of Pakistan.*

The findings reveal that Pakistan has established a positive image in the region through its role in the US-Taliban peace agreement. This offers opportunities for peacebuilding, economic cooperation, and the normalization of relations between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban administration. This offers opportunities to enhance its regional influence and normalize the Pak-Afghan relations, which have been fraught with conflict in their early history. More importantly, the contrasting viewpoints of the participants highlight the ambiguity and its impact on Pakistan's security in post-US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The findings disclose the underlying causes of this pervasive uncertainty, which could lead to challenges for Pakistan in preventing terrorist organizations and anti-state elements from using Afghan land. A key issue causing this predicament is the Afghan Taliban's limited control over its affairs and its radical policies. The result suggests that the Pakistani government should carefully deal with the situation to continue effective bilateral relations with Afghanistan and take mandatory measures to maintain its security interests.

In addition, the interviewees' remarks expose another factor that contributes to this predicament, which is the intensified regional power competition, particularly between China and India in the region, and Pakistan's fragile position in this context. The findings recommend that it should actively navigate these underlying dynamics, reassessing its troubling economy and guaranteeing its economic goals, particularly the CPEC. The results further emphasize that Pakistan should evaluate the changing security situation and adopt effective counter-terrorism strategies. Close coordination with the new Afghan Taliban administration, including the regional partner countries, will be vital in this regard.

## Conclusion

This study has discovered that the TTP continues to be a major threat, and there are fears that this group could increase its terror attacks with modern strategies soon. The findings emphasize the need for Pakistan to implement advanced, productive, and integrated policies to counter-terrorism that eliminate the networks of terrorism, particularly TTP. Furthermore, the findings of the qualitative interviewing data also highlight the need for proactive foreign policies regarding the Afghanistan situation in post-US withdrawal. To tackle the TTP, Pakistan needs to develop trust by minimizing misunderstandings and increasing its support and coordination with the new Afghan Taliban government at the regional level. The data also indicated that the complex and porous Pak-Afghan border is the main cause for TTP's carrying out terrorist attacks and operating freely in Pakistan. Thus, the findings suggest that the collective effort by both countries is crucial to push the TTP for negotiations for permanent peace. The study also showed that there are various alternative policies for Pakistan to force the Afghan Taliban to play its role as a mediator in this crucial peace deal.

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