

POST 2021 CHANGING STRATEGIC DYNAMICS IN AFGHANISTAN: IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN

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Abstract

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 changed Afghanistan's strategic dynamics. The Afghan Taliban now control the whole Afghanistan and have taken some adverse measures that affect not only Pakistan but also regional and global security. After 2021, Transnational terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) and East Turkestan Islamic Movement operate in Afghanistan with greater impunity and freedom. The Afghan Taliban also welcomed India to Afghanistan after 2021 to get financial assistance and support in reconstruction and development. But India's renewed hybrid warfare from Afghanistan has seriously jeopardised the internal security of Pakistan. Pakistan-focused groups like TTP, BLA, and ISKP suddenly got reorganised under the umbrella of India in Afghanistan. They started a vicious cycle of violence against the civil and military installations of Pakistan in Balochistan and the ex-FATA region, besides attacks on the Chinese citizens to disrupt CPEC and slow down FDI to Pakistan. This article analyses the whole debate under the regional security complex theory, which evaluates that simple physical adjacency generates more security interaction among neighbours than among states located in different areas. Adjacency is potent for security because many threats travel more easily over short distances than long ones. The RSCT aptly applies to Afghanistan's changing strategic dynamics and regional implications, focusing on Pakistan.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Terrorism, TTP, IMU, BLA, ISKP, Al-Qaeda, Afghan Taliban.

Introduction

The United States of America withdrew from Afghanistan after direct negotiations with the Afghan Taliban. It inked a landmark deal to end one of the longest and costliest wars in the modern era.¹ The US almost lost 7000 soldiers, 8000 contractors and post-war 30,000 suicides of war veterans due to psychological reasons.² The Afghan war also imposed a gigantic financial cost of up to US\$2.3 trillion.³ The peace agreement between the US and Afghan Taliban is known as the Doha Agreement. It set the stage for the US withdrawal. In return, the Afghan Taliban guaranteed that Afghanistan would neither be used as a launch pad for any future transnational attacks

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nor would it harbour, shelter or support transnational terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda besides ensuring human rights, etc.⁴ But despite all those assurances, today, Afghanistan is a haven for Al-Qaeda, TTP, BLA, IMU, East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and ISKP. The presence of transnational terrorist groups entails severe implications for regional and global security. In recent times, Pakistan has faced a dramatic surge in terrorist attacks by TTP, BLA and ISKP. The security situation is grim and getting worse day by day. After the US withdrawal in 2021, the Afghan Taliban increased their operations against other opposing groups, and violence increased during the first six months of 2021.⁵ Afghan Taliban captured the whole of Afghanistan within no time. They established relative peace in a war-torn country with a weak economy, dwindling security, lack of international political legitimacy and no clear plans for regional connectivity. In the meantime, the Afghanistan Taliban faced numerous challenges to cope with. After 2021, the Afghan Taliban faced significant challenges, which entailed the presence of transnational terrorist groups, including Al-Qaeda, TTP, IMU, ETIM and ISKP. The overall situation in Afghanistan is grim and leading to the humanitarian crisis. According to the UN, 95% of the Afghan population is facing food insecurity, an estimated 3.5 million children are malnourished, and almost 6 million people are at grave risk of famine. The Afghan Taliban are unable to cope with this situation and facing extreme pressure, which leads to instability and turmoil.⁶ Now, the Afghan Taliban are controlling the whole of Afghanistan with meagre force, which created a power vacuum in many parts of the country and led to the resurgence of transnational terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda, TTP, ISKP and others. Some of these terrorist groups are closely aligned with the Afghanistan Taliban, but groups like ISKP are seriously challenging regional security. This article focuses on the post-2021 changing strategic dynamics in Afghanistan and its implications for Pakistan.

Transnational Terrorism in Afghanistan: Theoretical Framework

Regional security complexes (RSC) are defined as distinct and stable patterns of security interaction between actors. They are distinguished from one another by degrees of interaction. The level of interaction between members of the same RSC is high, while it is comparatively low between members of different RSCs. As the name implies, regional security complexes are by nature geographical, consisting of neighbouring actors and being insulated from one another by natural barriers such as oceans, deserts, and mountain ranges. Individual states can also function as such "insulators" between RSCs.⁷ This theory is applied in this study to understand the implications of Afghan security for regional security. The theory emphasises that neighbouring states' insecurity impacts other contiguous states because of their proximity and frequent interaction. This is what has been observed in this study post-2021. Afghanistan's security situation directly impacts regional countries, including the Central Asian republics, Iran, and Pakistan. However, other states away from this region are in relative peace, for example, the European countries, despite their active military engagement in Afghanistan for almost two decades. Moreover, the RSC

postulates that actors' actions and motivations in international security are heavily regional. This means an actor's security concerns are primarily generated in its immediate neighbourhood. The study also asserts that Afghanistan's immediate neighbourhood would face far-reaching implications due to the instability and turmoil. Soon after the US withdrawal in 2021, the Afghan Taliban openly settled the senior leadership of Al-Qaeda in Kabul. Taliban's link with Al-Qaeda was exposed when the US killed Aimen Al-Zawahiri, Al-Qaeda Chief in the Sherpur area of Kabul.⁸ Later, the UNSC report also declared that the Taliban forged deeper ties with transnational terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda, TTP, IMU and others.⁹ The transnational terrorist organisations now enjoy greater freedom on Afghan soil. They recruit, train and enjoy safe havens under the Afghan Taliban's incumbent regime. The security of each actor in a region interacts with the security of the other actors. Most security concerns do not travel well over distances, and threats within an actor's immediate neighbourhood are most likely felt the strongest. As Buzan and Waever state, "Simple physical adjacency tends to generate more security interaction among neighbours than among states located in different areas", a point also emphasised by many other writers that adjacency is potent for security because many threats travel more easily over short distances than over long ones.¹⁰ Soon after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan was the most affected state in South Asia because of the instability and turmoil in Afghanistan. Pakistan-focused groups like TTP, BLA, and ISKP operate from Afghan soil and for the last three years, they have carried out numerous terrorist attacks on Pakistani soil in which hundreds of soldiers and innocent civilians lost their lives. It seems that insecurity in Afghanistan will haunt the neighbouring states for a more extended period and may entail severe implications for regional peace and security.

Afghanistan is facing severe issues of transnational terrorist groups after the US withdrawal. Some of the groups enjoy shelter under the Afghan Taliban and use Afghan soil for regrouping, reenergising and training. At the same time, others are capitalising on the Afghan Taliban's economic woes, like overstretched military and lack of resources and gaining strength in areas with the most diminutive Taliban presence. It is reported that Al-Qaeda, TTP, ETIM, IMU and Haqqani Network are considered allies of the Afghan Taliban. Whereas the former Northern Alliance is now working as the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (NRFA) and carrying out a low-intensity insurgency against the Taliban. Lack of coherence, vibrant leadership, and shortage of funds for unity make NRFA a weak force against well-equipped, united, highly motivated and robust Afghan Taliban. However, most often, they conduct violent attacks against the Afghan Taliban. The ISKP is one of the terrorist groups that seriously challenges the Afghan Taliban. After 2021, the Indians also came to Afghanistan and managed their proxies TTP, BLA and ISKP effectively against Pakistan, playing havoc with the security of the latter.

According to the UNSC report, "terrorist groups enjoy greater freedom in Afghanistan than at any time in recent history".¹¹ The US withdrawal and peace deal with the Afghan Taliban opened gates for transnational terrorist organisations to roam

around in Afghanistan with greater impunity and risk regional and global security. Now, these terrorist groups may lack the ability to carry out transnational terrorist attacks, but after a few years, once they consolidate their position in Afghanistan, regroup and reenergise, they may pose more significant security risks to the countries beyond Afghanistan or South Asia. There are three main factors in the resurgence of terrorist outfits in Afghanistan.

- Taliban's close ideological affiliation with Al-Qaeda and others allowed them to establish their safe havens for training, recruitment, planning and execution.
- The Afghan Taliban's incapacity and lack of resources/troops to establish the writ allowed other transnational terrorist groups to capitalise on the Taliban's socioeconomic vulnerabilities and fill the power vacuum in areas where the Taliban's presence was weak.
- India's use of Afghan soil for strategic purposes. Indian intelligence agencies have already been funding terrorist groups like TTP and others to create mayhem and chaos in Pakistan.¹² Now, after the US withdrawal, India is back in Afghanistan and calling the shots against Pakistan.

President Joe Biden, in 2021, reiterated that the US wants to ensure that Afghan soil is not used against the US homeland.¹³ However, since the withdrawal, the transnational terrorist problem has worsened. Al-Qaeda is gaining ground in Afghanistan and may achieve the potential to carry out transnational terrorist attacks against the US or its European allies.

Reemergence of Al-Qaeda as a Transnational Terrorist Organisation

Al-Qaeda faced huge setbacks after 9/11 in Afghanistan. Especially Pakistan killed and captured hundreds of Al-Qaeda senior commanders, including Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, the mastermind of 9/11. However, after the US withdrawal, Al-Qaeda is gaining momentum in Afghanistan. Top Al-Qaeda commander Ayman Al-Zawahiri's death in a drone strike in Kabul depicts that the Taliban are sheltering Al-Qaeda leadership in Afghanistan.

According to a report, Al-Qaeda is running terrorist training camps in Afghanistan, generating funds from illicit trafficking and networking and attracting militants to orchestrate deadly attacks worldwide.¹⁴ Today, Al-Qaeda is not just confined to one country or base. They are present in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia. Nevertheless, Al-Qaeda is on the decline in Yemen and the Middle East, but it is gaining strength in the Sahel region of Africa and Afghanistan. The most critical area for Al-Qaeda is Afghanistan, where the US has no base around. Gradually, the US ground intelligence is weakening, especially after the killing of Ayman Al-Zawahiri. Al-Qaeda and the Taliban are more cautious in their operations.¹⁵ After the death of Ayman Al-Zawahiri now, Al-Qaeda is led by Saif al-Adel, who is also allegedly hiding

in Afghanistan under the Afghan Taliban's patronage. It seems that Al-Qaeda and the Taliban are exhibiting 'calculated strategic silence' to get international legitimacy for the Afghan Taliban and avoid any backlash for them for hosting Al-Qaeda. As per the US estimates, in 2021, Al-Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan was around 100-200 fighters. But now, Al-Qaeda's number has grown exponentially. According to the UNSC report, Al-Qaeda may have 30-60 core leaders and 400 fighters in Afghanistan. The worrisome fact is that there is no check on Al-Qaeda and Taliban.¹⁶ It is expected that Al-Qaeda will grow in Afghanistan and may seek help from local affiliates like TTP and IMU, which may pose a severe threat to regional countries.¹⁷ Al-Qaeda has always been closely aligned with the Afghan Taliban, TTP, IMU and Haqqani Network. Al-Qaeda worked as their mentor and transferred technical expertise of IEDs making, guerrilla warfare tactics and intelligence evading techniques to all these groups. This strategic collaboration will continue in the foreseeable future, enhance the capabilities of their affiliates, and impose heavy damages on Pakistan and other countries in the region and beyond.

Resurgence of TTP

TTP emerged in Pakistan after 9/11, gained momentum in 2007 and carried out a series of terrorist attacks against civil-military installations. After 2014, the Pakistan military dislodged TTP in Operation Zarb-i-Azb from Pakistan. TTP maintained a low profile after 2015 in Afghanistan; their command-and-control network was destroyed, and most of their top commanders were killed by the US drone strikes and the Pakistan army's consistent military operations. But TTP saw a ray of hope after the US pullout from Afghanistan in 2021. TTP welcomed the Afghan Taliban and celebrated their victory. The Afghan Taliban's coming into power proved to be a new lifeline for TTP.¹⁸ Pakistan asked the Taliban to act against TTP militants, but as expected, the Afghan Taliban gave a cold response and instead advised Pakistan to negotiate with TTP. TTP's ultimate agenda is to establish the 'Emirate of Waziristan' and withdrawal of Pakistani troops from the ex-FATA region. Such demands were unacceptable to Pakistan, and negotiations ended without any results.¹⁹ After 2021, TTP regained strength under Mufti Noor Wali and carried out lethal attacks on Pakistani forces in the ex-FATA region and other parts of Pakistan, which resulted in Pakistan's reprisal attacks on TTP positions in Kunar and Khost in 2022. After the inaction of the Afghan Taliban, the Pakistan military carried out air strikes on TTP hideouts in Khost and Kunar provinces, which resulted in the casualties of 47 people.²⁰ Aerial attack by Pakistan met with diplomatic backlash from the Afghan Taliban. Since then, TTP has enjoyed shelter in Afghanistan, and now it has consolidated its position, strengthened command and control, recruited more fighters, and activated its sleeper cells in Pakistan. Since 2021, Pakistan has seen a dramatic increase in terrorist attacks across Pakistan. According to a recent report, in the year 2023, Pakistan suffered almost 1,524 casualties in more than 789 terrorist attacks across the country.²¹

Most of the terrorist attacks took place in Balochistan and KPK. Both these provinces share a long, volatile border with Afghanistan. TTP and other terrorist

outfits operate from Afghanistan with greater impunity. It is reported that TTP may amalgamate with Al-Qaeda to expand its outreach and increase its impact. TTP and Al-Qaeda's alliance is not at all a new phenomenon. Both terrorist groups collaborated after 9/11, combined their efforts against common enemy Pakistan, Karzai & Ashraf Ghani Governments and NATO forces.²² TTP facilitated Al-Qaeda in many high-profile attacks against the US forces in Afghanistan. In one such attack in 2009, Al-Qaeda, in collusion with TTP, carried out the deadliest suicide bombing on CIA forward operating base Chapman in Khost. In which a triple agent of the CIA blew himself up and killed seven CIA operatives.²³ This was one such example in which both terrorist groups collaborated and carried out the deadliest attack on the CIA. Now, it has been observed by the UNSC that TTP may align themselves closely with Al-Qaeda to expand their influence in the region and beyond.²⁴

According to the report, many terrorist groups, including TTP, operate from Kunar and use training centres there, along with other transnational terrorist groups, to sharpen their guerrilla warfare skills.²⁵ Such a merger between TTP and Al-Qaeda will be devastating for Pakistan's internal security. Though TTP does not enjoy physical space in Pakistan and lacks the popular support of the masses, however a haven in Afghanistan will allow TTP to plan some high-profile attacks in Pakistan through their sleeper cells. As per the UN document, more than 20 terrorist organisations are operating from Afghanistan, which may designate Afghanistan as a country sponsoring terrorism.²⁶ The TTP is a serious threat to Pakistan's security. In recent times, TTP carried out some high-profile attacks in the ex-FATA region and Balochistan, killing many Pakistani soldiers, FC and Police officials. Pakistan needs to take adequate measures to counter the increasing threat of TTP through direct and indirect approaches, sincere effort at the regional level, considerable scale intelligence-based operations across Pakistan, counter-narrative by Islamic scholars and well-calibrated joint efforts by Pakistan Army, FC, Police, Rangers, ISI, IB and MI.

Islamic State Khorasan Province: Emerging Threat

The ISKP is the offshoot of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), but most of the people in ISKP are of Pakistani origin and ex-TTP fighters and commanders. ISKP emerged in this region after 2014 when Pakistan launched decisive military operations in the North Waziristan Agency and the Khyber Agency. Operation Zarb-i-Azb and Kheyber-1,2,3,4 destroyed TTP's command and control centres and eliminated their safe havens. Top leadership was on the run, and others in TTP were not sure about the future of this group. Many TTP fighters changed their dress and gathered under the banner of ISKP. The First Emir of ISKP was Saeed Khan, the TTP commander of the Orakzai Agency. Today, ISKP entails militants from many countries, especially Afghanistan, India, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, China and Russia. The ISKP has become a lethal terrorist organisation and has carried out many high-profile terrorist attacks against Pakistan, Russia, Afghanistan, the US forces and other regional powers.

Recently, ISKP claimed to have carried out one of the deadliest terrorist attacks on Moscow's Crocus City Hall. The attack left 133 dead and over 100 injured. Russia blamed Ukraine for this attack, whereas the US believed that ISKP carried out this carnage. This was not the first high-profile attack by ISKP in and around this region. It has conducted many deadliest attacks in Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan in the recent past.²⁷ ISKP's previous fatal attack was on the Kabul Airport in August 2021, in which 13 US soldiers and more than 170 Afghans were killed. In addition, the ISKP also claimed responsibility for a rocket attack on the Uzbek city of Termez and Tajikistan in 2022.²⁸ The ISKP targeted a shrine in Iran in 2023 and killed almost two dozen people. The same group also targeted Pakistan and Russian Embassies in Afghanistan in the year 2022. However, Pakistan suffered most of the terrorist attacks by ISKP since the US pullout from Afghanistan.²⁹ The ISKP suffered huge setbacks initially in 2014 by NATO, Afghan national security forces and the Afghan Taliban. Initially, their fighters were close to 4000, but due to consistent operations by the US, ANSFs and Taliban, their number shrunk to 1000 in 2021. But now, this group has gained momentum again. Two of the dreaded enemies of ISKP, the US and ANSF, are no more to challenge them, whereas the third enemy of ISKP, the Afghan Taliban, is now overstretched. The power vacuum allowed the ISKP to reorient itself as a dreaded terrorist outfit to carry out regional attacks against all the states bordering Afghanistan. The ISKP does not control Afghanistan's territory except a few pockets in Kabul, Northern Afghanistan, and Kunar and Nangarhar provinces. The ISKP has improved their position, and the recruitment process has recently accelerated. After the US pullout, the ISKP's numbers grew to almost 4000 fighters. Currently, the ISKP is led by Sanaullah Ghafari (also known as Shahab al-Muhajir), an Afghan national. Other key figures in ISKP are Sultan Aziz Azam, Maulvi Rajab Salahudin, and Aslam Farooqi. Many former Afghan soldiers and Afghan intelligence members also joined the ISKP to continue their armed struggle against the Afghan Taliban.

It has been observed that currently, ISKP cannot launch an attack on the US homeland. Still, at the same time, they have orchestrated that Afghanistan and regional countries will not escape from their wrath. This group is lethal in tactics, brutal in execution and does not care about religion, caste, creed or ethnic background. They even claimed attacks on mosques and against all sects. The resurgence of ISKP is devastating for regional security, especially in Pakistan. Pakistan security forces must pool resources, coordinate efforts among all intelligence agencies, and conduct consistent but comprehensive intelligence-based operations to eliminate this group. In addition, Pakistan must also maintain working relations with neighbours, especially Afghanistan and Iran, to team up against this common threat. Pakistan has already conducted counter-terror exercises with Russia. It is necessary that Pakistan, Russia, Iran, Afghanistan and CARs, along with China under the SCO banner, coordinate efforts, share intelligence, conduct regular counter-terror exercises, improve capacity by sharing good practices and carry out concerted efforts to eradicate ISKP from this region.

Resurgence of BLA: The Indian Factor

Balochistan has become an Achilles heel for Pakistan because of its geostrategic significance, Gwadar port, relations with China and access to the broader Indian Ocean region. However, the situation in Balochistan is worsening daily due to instability and turmoil. Pakistan is facing a low-intensity insurgency in Balochistan, mainly led by the BLA, which wants to establish an independent Balochistan and is against Chinese investment in Gwadar and beyond. BLA operates from Afghanistan and the Balochistan part of Iran. This group also gets financial support from India.³⁰ The insurgency in Balochistan is not a new phenomenon. There had been many instances in the past, especially in the 1970s, when India, Russia and Afghanistan supported insurgency in Balochistan, and Pakistan barely survived because of the Iranian help and support. The recent wave of terrorism and insurgency started after the death of Baloch leader Nawab Akbar Bugti. Subsequently, insurgent groups carried out deadly attacks against FC, the Army, military installations and Chinese workers in Pakistan. The frequency of terrorist attacks increased after the announcement of the CPEC.³¹ Since then, India carried out covert operations in Pakistan to disrupt CPEC. It has been reported that India has established a secret Unit in the Indian intelligence to create instability & turmoil in Balochistan, fund, nurture and train BLA militants, carry out attacks on Chinese workers, maritime installations, especially Naval assets and promote negative propaganda against Chinese investment and try to disrupt CPEC to slow down the economic growth of Pakistan. To achieve these goals, India deployed senior Naval officer Kulbhushan Sudhir Yadav in Chabahar to maintain ties with Baloch insurgents, transfer funds, and ignite violence in Balochistan and Karachi and maritime attacks on Pakistani vessels. After the arrest of Kulbhushan Yadav in 2016, Pakistan enjoyed relative peace for a few years. Still, soon after the US withdrawal, the Taliban invited India to complete infrastructural projects in Afghanistan and provide financial assistance to the cashless Afghan Taliban. India came to Afghanistan primarily for economic compulsion and strategic impulse. India has become the most significant population at 1.43 billion in 2024; its economic growth will be 6.8% in 2024, with a GDP of about \$4.1 trillion.³² She needs access to natural resources to sustain her economic growth and provide adequate resources to her population. Afghanistan is rich in natural resources. India wants to extract Hagigah Iron Reserves worth US\$420 billion to sustain its economic growth, besides supporting anti-Pakistan terrorist groups like TTP, ISKP and BLA to create instability and turmoil in Pakistan.³³ There had been irrefutable evidence that implicates India in instability and unrest in Pakistan. Former Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel said in a statement that India finances problems for Pakistan from Afghanistan. In addition, senior TTP commander Latif Mehsud was nabbed by the US in Afghanistan during a raid on a secret meeting among TTP leader, RAW and Afghan Intelligence. Later, he confessed that India and Afghanistan support militancy in Pakistan. India's incumbent national security advisor, Ajit Doval, believes in defensive offence operations, in which you go to the enemy territory and neutralise threats. Under this approach, India is using proxies like BLA, ISKP and TTP to create chaos in the ex-FATA region and Balochistan. The US

declared BLA as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist group in 2019. Currently, BLA stands at 1,000 well-equipped fighters, and this group operates from Afghanistan and the Balochistan region of Iran.³⁴ In 2007, a senior commander of BLA, Nawab Zada Balach Marri, was killed in a NATO air strike in the Helmand province.

The presence of the senior commander of BLA was not a surprise for Pakistan, as Afghanistan has always been a base for fleeing Baloch insurgents because of its proximate borders.³⁵ In 2018, a senior commander of BLA, Aslam Baloch, was killed in a suicide attack in Kandahar, Afghanistan. Aslam Baloch was also wanted in many terrorist attacks on Chinese citizens and Pakistan security forces. His killing in Kandahar city adjacent to Balochistan shows that BLA commanders prefer to be in Afghanistan to manage their terrorist activities, arms supplies, funds transfer and recruitment.³⁶ Afghanistan is being used as a base for BLA militants, which is not a good omen for Pakistan. Now, India, being in Afghanistan, can easily approach BLA militants and provide them with funds, training and crucial intelligence support, which may work as a force multiplier for this group. In 2021, a senior commander of BLA, Mir Abdul Nabi Bangulzai, was killed in an armed attack in Kandahar, Afghanistan, which shows the active presence of BLA militants in Afghanistan. However, the Afghan Taliban deny the presence of TTP or BLA militants on their soil. Bangulzai's killing was a big blow to BLA and their morale and operational capabilities.

The presence of BLA leaders in Afghanistan was exposed by their enigmatic deaths in the respective state. A senior commander of BLA, Raziq Mandai alias Engineer, was killed in Kunar province of Afghanistan over a monetary dispute on January 12, 2022. He was allegedly involved in many terrorist attacks against Pakistan and supplied funds, weapons and ammunition to the militants in Balochistan.³⁷ On October 15, 2023, Pakistani security forces killed Saddam Hussain Muslim, a key commander of BLA, in an Intelligence-based operation. The security forces also eliminated his close confidante, Maqsood. Later, the security agencies also recovered a large cache of arms and ammunition from their hideout. According to ISPR, he was involved in more than 93 terrorist attacks, which included grenade attacks, ambushes, landmines, destruction of railway lines and target killing across southern Balochistan, which resulted in the killing of 131 people.³⁸ On January 30th, 2024, BLA militants carried out a brazen attack on Pakistan's military installations with sophisticated weapons in the city of Mach. After facing huge losses, the BLA has changed its modus operandi, and now it is targeting less secured isolated outposts of the Pakistan Army, FC or police. Such attacks are meant to create chaos, dissuade FDI, frighten Chinese workers, and slow down the pace of CPEC. BLA accepted the responsibility for this attack as well. On March 26, 2024, BLA terrorists carried out a ferocious attack on the Pakistan Navy's airbase in Balochistan in which one FC personnel was martyred, and Pakistani security forces successfully foiled the attack and killed all five attackers. This was not the only attack on Pakistan's naval bases.³⁹ Previously, the PNS Mehran base was attacked, and the Pakistan Navy's maritime patrolling aircraft was targeted, which clearly shows that TTP militants had nothing to do with the marine assets of Pakistan,

nor did those capabilities threaten the TTP in FATA. However, these maritime surveillance aircraft significantly impacted India in the Arabian Sea.

These aircraft prevented Indian submarines from entering Pakistani waters. Such attacks clearly show that India is behind these attacks to weaken the Pakistan Navy. Recently, a senior Baloch militant commander, Sarfraz Bangulzai of the Baloch National Army (BNA), along with his 70 fighters, surrendered to Pakistani security forces. This is a welcome development as it is the first time a senior Baloch commander has surrendered. Previously, Pakistan apprehended another senior commander of the BNA, Gulzar Imam, who was also considered to be the founding member of the BNA. The BNA carried out many attacks on the Chinese citizens, FC and Army in Balochistan. It has been reported that Gulzar Imam persuaded Sarfraz Bangulzai to lay down arms because they realised that they were fighting an endless war and were being used by India and Afghanistan. More Baloch youths are expected to realise that negotiation is the ultimate solution to all issues. It is futile to fight a nuclear weapon state with a powerful military. Pakistan will never accept Indian involvement and the creation of Independent Balochistan. After the surrender of BNA, the operational capacity of the other militant groups will also be compromised. If BLA and BLF get financial assistance, intelligence support, arms supplies, and training from India, Afghanistan, or elsewhere in that case, it is expected that this group will continue terrorist attacks on the Chinese workers in Balochistan and may also attempt more attacks on Pakistan's naval installations, cargo or oil tankers enroute to Pakistan from the Persian Gulf.⁴⁰ India's close collaboration, financial and intelligence support to Balochistan-based terrorist groups would continue from Iran and Afghanistan. The idea is to disrupt CPEC, undermine Pakistan's maritime security & economic activities in the Arabian Sea, frighten the Chinese citizens with frequent attacks, maintain pressure on Pakistani security forces and dissuade foreign direct investment to the country. The threat is real and creating consistent chaos and instability in Pakistan. The state of Pakistan must work for the socioeconomic uplift of Balochistan to root out the causes of militancy to dissuade external actors from destabilising Pakistan. Pakistan needs to improve its overall security apparatus, human intelligence and spy network in Balochistan, Afghanistan and the Tribal areas of Pakistan. Pakistan must penetrate these terrorist organisations and know their strength, weaknesses and areas of operations. Pakistan must forge regional alliances with like-minded countries to counter this menace of terrorism through implementation of effective counterterrorism strategies. In this regard, Pakistan is already closely collaborating with China and Russia. Pakistan's security forces regularly carry out counterterror exercises, share good practices and modern techniques and learn from each other's counterterror experiences. It is necessary for Pakistan and these friendly states to share actionable intelligence about these terror networks and coordinate with each other to end this menace of terrorism and extremism.

Conclusion

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan played havoc with the security of Afghanistan with far-reaching implications for regional and global security. After the US pullout, the Afghan Taliban gained physical control of the whole Afghanistan. The changing strategic dynamics in Afghanistan after 2021 seriously impacted Pakistan and other regional states. Transnational terrorist groups are now flourishing in Afghanistan; after almost two decades, they have physical space in a country where there are no military operations, consistent drone strikes, or the presence of a solid military to challenge their extremist tendencies. Al-Qaeda is much more robust in Afghanistan, with a discrete presence to avoid any backlash for their strategic allies, the Afghan Taliban. However, the Afghan Taliban will never cut their ties with Al-Qaeda, and this bond will continue to get stronger with time. Soon, Al-Qaeda will achieve the potential to repeat 9/11-type transnational terrorist attacks against the US or their allies around the globe. Another major threat to regional and global security is ISKP, which is now strengthening its position in Afghanistan. The power vacuum after the US, the Afghan Taliban's strategic weakness to cover the whole Afghan territory, and the dwindling economy allowed the ISKP to strengthen their position and emerge as a lethal and capable terrorist organisation that not only attracts foreign fighters but also executes deadly terrorist attacks across the region. The ISKP has proved that despite the lack of large-scale physical space in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the group has imposed heavy damages on Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, CARs and Russia. It is expected that the ISKP will continue the violence spree in the coming years unless concerted efforts are planned at the regional level to curb this ferocious terrorist outfit. Pakistan's geostrategically important province, Balochistan, is facing a resurgence of BLA. In 2021, the Afghan Taliban welcomed India to Afghanistan for financial aid and infrastructure development. But at the same time, Pakistan witnessed a record increase in terrorist attacks by BLA, ISKP and TTP. All these groups had links with India one way or the other. India's hybrid warfare is in full swing, aimed at disrupting CPEC. However, despite all these odds, Pakistan and China are committed to the early completion of CPEC. Many Baloch insurgent groups have surrendered, and many militants linked with BLA have been killed. But still, they are carrying low-intensity violent attacks with the support of their external handlers. The study concludes that instability and turmoil, diplomatic paralysis with the Afghan Taliban, Indian presence on the Western Front and transnational terrorism from Afghanistan are severe challenges for Pakistan. The state of Pakistan must achieve political stability as early as possible, improve economic conditions, carry out concerted counterterror efforts and join hands with like-minded states like Russia, China, CARs and others to eliminate this threat of transnational terrorism. Only then can Pakistan become a peaceful and prosperous country.

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