

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

VOLUME XX | ISSUE 3

p.1

Briefs

Jacob Zenn

p.3

Al-Hasakah Prison Break
Sparks Fear of Islamic
State Resurgence in Iraq

Jacob Weiss

p.5

The Taliban Takeover in
Afghanistan and Militant
Mergers Bolster Baloch
Insurgents in Pakistan

Zia Ur Rehman

p.8

Ties that Bind?
Deconstructing the Afghan
and Pakistani Taliban's
Partnership and Counter-
Terrorism Options for

Pakistan
Abdul Basit

Chinese Interests Come Under Pressure in Myanmar's Insurgency

Jacob Zenn

China's involvement in economic projects in Pakistan has riled ethnic-based insurgent groups, which believe their peoples' interests are being ignored, or worse, trampled upon ([Terrorism Monitor](#), May 7, 2021). In Myanmar, however, this trend of targeting Chinese interests only now appears to be gaining momentum. On January 7, for example, the Tigyain Township People's Defense Force (PDF) claimed the bombing of three electricity towers at a Chinese-run nickel plant in Saigaing, near the Chinese border ([irrawaddy.com](#), January 18).

This nickel plant began operations in 2008, and despite being China's largest in Myanmar, has never been targeted prior to this attack. Moreover, the assault achieves three objectives for the insurgents: first, it can dent China's relations with Myanmar's military rulers, who prove unable to thwart such attacks; second, it reduces the amount of money that Myanmar's rulers can extract from the plant, which amounts to around \$725 million annually in the hands of the rulers; and, third, it can win the insurgents sympathy from civilians, who have complained about the plant's environmental consequences.

Although this was not the first time Chinese interests were targeted during the insurgency against Myanmar's ruling junta, it was the most militant action taken against Chinese interests. Previously, in March 2021, protesters in Yangon conducted arson attacks on Chinese

factories as a way to demonstrate opposition to Myanmar's China-backed junta (nikkei.com, March 16, 2021). Three months later, in June, the same attack pattern occurred at other Chinese factories in Yangon after the military's coup leader, Min Aung Hlain, announced on television that Chinese investments would be protected in the country (irrawaddy.com, June 11, 2021). The arson attacks were nonetheless lacking in scope compared to the nickel project bombing in Saigaing, which required greater planning and sophistication.

China reacted to the latest attack on the nickel plant by demanding Myanmar's National Unity Government (NUG), which opposes the junta, to refrain from carrying out attacks (irrawaddy.com, January 24). The NUG, in turn, further acknowledged that it has no strategy aimed at attacking countries neighboring Myanmar, such as China. However, it asserted that soldiers loyal to the military rulers had been using Chinese factories and plants as bases from which to launch attacks against the insurgents and, therefore, could come under attack.

Although the NUG views China as an adversary, it does have an incentive to condemn forms of militancy or terrorism within the country. The NUG is seeking international recognition as the legitimate government of Myanmar, and to achieve this, it needs to preserve its reputation and credentials as a peaceful resistance movement (myanmar-now.org, April 16, 2021). Thus far, international recognition has not been forthcoming, despite the establishment of a "representative office" in the Czech Republic from which it intends to conduct outreach with the international community. Ultimately, they seek to use diplomacy to turn the tide against Myanmar's military rulers and restore Constitutional democracy to Myanmar (dw.com, January 18).

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.

French Soldiers Face Mixed Success in the Sahel, as Russia Looks On

Jacob Zenn

On January 19, four French soldiers from Operation Barkhane were injured by an improvised explosive device (IED) in Burkina Faso (lefigaro.fr, January 19). They had been traveling on the road from Ouahigouya airport, which indicates their movements were likely monitored. Although neither al-Qaeda-aligned Group for Islam and Muslims (JNIM) nor Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) claimed responsibility for the attack, both groups operate in the tri-border region between Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali, where the attack occurred. Ouahigouya also saw an unclaimed attack by jihadists on December 26, 2021, in which 41 people were killed, most of whom were members of anti-jihadist civil self-defense forces (aljazeera.com, December 26). Thus, the area is no stranger to jihadist attacks.

IED attacks have become among the most effective of JNIM tactics for restricting or endangering the movements of national armed forces. JNIM, for example, conducted another IED attack on February 1 near Burkina Faso's border with Côte d'Ivoire, injuring two Burkinabe soldiers (minute.bf, February 1). The attack also demonstrated the group's expansion from the tri-border region toward coastal West African countries, including also Togo, Benin, and Ghana (Terrorism Monitor, April 23, 2021).

Despite the IED attacks, Operation Barkhane has seen some successes. Less than two weeks after the IED explosion in Ouahigouya, Burkinabe soldiers who were part of Operation Barkhane announced that they had destroyed four jihadist bases, uncovered arms caches, and discovered six IEDs planted in the ground near a roadway. Further, a JNIM commander, Mdouli (alias Abdramane), was killed (Twitter/@Menastream, February 1).

The challenge of constraining JNIM comes at a time when France is reducing its military presence in the Sahel from 5,500 men to 3,000 (aljazeera.com, July 9, 2021). French president Emmanuel Macron even noted in July 2021 that while France would not withdraw entirely from the Sahel, it would end Operation Barkhane sometime in the first quarter of 2022 (France24.com, July 14, 2021). The broader context of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the subsequent takeover of the country by the Taliban, highlights the “worst case scenario” of France leaving the Sahel. JNIM, which is loyal to the Taliban’s newly re-announced Islamic emirate, could take over at least parts of the Sahel.

France’s seemingly waning commitment contrasts with Russia’s increasing engagement in the region, mainly through the widely reported training of Malian soldiers by the Wagner Group (france24.com, January 21). Russia, moreover, is indifferent to the current military rulers in Mali who came to power last year, whereas France’s ambassador has been critical of the rulers and was ordered to leave the country in January. As a result, Russia is in a prime position to gain influence in Mali through these military training partnerships, while France appears to be comparatively marginalized both diplomatically and militarily (mondafrique.com, February 3). The widening and seemingly inexorable jihadist violence in Mali and neighboring countries is, however, unlikely to be diminished by a growing Russian presence in the region.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.

Al-Hasakah Prison Break Sparks Fear of Islamic State Resurgence in Iraq

Jacob Weiss

Islamic State (IS)’s territorial control in Iraq after 2014 was preceded by the organization’s “Breaking the Walls” campaign of prison breaks in 2012-2013. It is not surprising, therefore, that IS’ January 20 assault on al-Sina'a prison in al-Hasakah, Syria, which aimed at freeing thousands of individuals linked to IS, led to concerns of the group’s resurgence spilling across the border into neighboring Iraq.

Following the operation, Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi visited the Iraq-Syria border in Nineveh province, and ordered an increase to border security, including \$10 million worth of concrete slabs to cover a 50km distance (Rudaw, January 26). In an interview with CNN, one of al-Kadhimi's advisors also called for increased Iraqi Armed Forces intelligence capabilities and underlined the need for technical movement-sensing equipment in border areas (CNN, January 21). Meanwhile, Iraqi President Barham Salih confirmed the importance of uniting Iraq's security forces to enhance domestic security in the face of a possible resurgent IS (Iraqi Presidency, January 22).

Whether IS achieved any strategic advantage following the operation at al-Sina'a prison remains unclear. Some estimates suggest more IS militants died during the subsequent ten-day battle in the prison than escaped after the initial assault (Iraq Security Media Cell, February 3). Nevertheless, the operation did lead to a “we are still here” moment for the group. For Iraq’s IS militant cells, such morale boosters are vital. With the militants forced to focus on smaller-scale insurgency tactics, sporadic high-profile operations, even if in neighboring Syria, remind all IS fighters that one day its endgame of re-establishing large-scale territorial control is still conceivable.

IS' Status in Iraq

IS can no longer establish significant territorial control in Iraq. [1] Instead, IS maintains an embedded presence of small militant cells in rural areas of Iraq's al-Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Salahuddin, Baghdad and Nineveh provinces. [2] While IS cells launched over 250 attacks in 2021 in Iraq, most incidents remain localized within rural areas ([Rudaw](#), January 29). Iraqi military sources state that the group's largest operations have been conducted by no more than seven to ten militants ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), January 30). Regardless of their operational limitations, IS still remains a persistent threat, particularly in Diyala and Kirkuk provinces, where the group launches regular assaults, improvised explosive device (IED) attacks, and hit-and-run attacks on security force outposts and villages ([Terrorism Monitor](#), January 14).

Despite IS' highly decentralized nature and its focus on rural areas, the group still has achieved sporadic success in bringing its insurgency to urban Iraq and causing mainstream disruption. In 2021, for example, IS carried out three high-casualty bombings in Baghdad and launched a sustained and coordinated campaign targeting Iraq's electricity infrastructure. [3]

IS' Opportunities in Iraq

While IS' capabilities in Iraq have been significantly degraded since it began losing territorial control in 2017, there remain two opportunities for it to rebuild gradually in 2022. The first factor that could strengthen IS' hand is the withdrawal of U.S. combat troops from Iraq. The U.S. ended its six-year combat troop deployment to Iraq to fight the group on December 31, 2021. While the US military remains in an advisory, training, and intelligence-gathering role in Iraq, there are significant concerns over Iraq's ability to conduct independent anti-IS combat missions. According to a Pentagon report, issued only months before the U.S. withdrawal, Iraqi

security forces had made no recent improvement in their ability to carry out military operations independent of U.S. assistance, and communication and coordination between the Iraqi forces remained poor. [4] The professionalism of the Iraqi forces was also dramatically called into question following an IS attack on an army barracks in Diyala province on January 21, which killed 11 Iraqi soldiers. Both al-Khadimi and the Diyala governor attributed the success of the IS attack to military negligence ([Rudaw](#), January 21).

Secondly, the continued presence of several Shia militias embedded within the state security organization, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), in Sunni majority areas will continue to fuel sectarian tensions that IS can exploit. The PMF took a leading role in liberating several northern Sunni regions of Iraq from IS control in 2014-2017. However, since 2017, there have been clear indications of PMF militias pursuing demographic change in several northern Iraqi regions and expelling Sunni residents ([Rudaw](#), May 3 2021). Additionally, IS attacks targeting PMF units have resulted in arbitrary PMF retaliatory massacres of Sunni civilians, such as the PMF attack of Nahr al-Imam in October 2021 ([al-Jazeera.net](#), October 28, 2021). The insecurity caused by sectarian Shia militias in Sunni majority areas could aid IS recruitment drives.

The Iraq-Syria connection

Given the questionable effectiveness of independent counter-IS operations by the Iraqi armed forces and the potential for soldier recruitment in 2022, cutting off supply lines to IS cells in Syria from Iraq will be vital. The group regularly uses border crossings to transit militants and equipment from al-Hasakah, Syria to Nineveh and further inland in Iraq. [5] Without securing these borders, Iraq will remain vulnerable if IS succeeds in neighboring Syria.

Al-Kadhimi's recent border reinforcements are insignificant when security and

governance conditions on both sides of the border still remain chaotic due to complex multi-party conflicts. On Iraq's side of the border in Sinjar, the Iraqi authorities have thus far failed to implement the 2020 Sinjar agreement to re-establish direct state control over the area ([Daily Sabah](#), November 21, 2021). This means that potential counter-IS operations in vital border areas remain in the hands of smaller Yazidi militias and the Kurdish militant organization, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which operate in the region.

However, the failure of the Sinjar agreement has also meant that Turkish military operations targeting the PKK have increased ([al-Jazeera.net](#), February 2). This has indirectly strengthened IS in the area, with both Yazidi militias and the PKK unable to prioritize fighting the organization. The situation on the Syrian side of the border is similar. Turkey's targeting of the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which has taken a leading role alongside the U.S. in combating IS, has undermined SDF capabilities and further destabilized the area.

Conclusion

The prison break attempt in al-Hasakah is unlikely to have a significant impact on IS operations in Iraq, and there remains little risk that the group will re-establish territorial control in the country in the coming year. However, the complex and fragmented Iraqi security force structure, coupled with the U.S. withdrawal, could provide the organization with greater breathing room to rebuild its capabilities, including in Syria, as IS waits for the next opportunity to establish its caliphate.

Jacob Lees Weiss is an analyst specializing in the MENA region at Healix International and HX global. He holds an MA in Contemporary Arabic Studies from the Autonomous University of Barcelona. Prior to working at Healix, he spent time volunteering for NGOs and studying in Algeria and Egypt.

Notes

[1] IS managed to briefly capture Lahaiban village in the disputed territories north of Kirkuk before Iraqi and Peshmerga forces recaptured the village on December 6, 2021 ([Al-Arabiya](#), December 6 2021).

[2] See "Operation Inherent Resolve Quarterly Report July-September 30, 2021" (U.S. Department of Defense, November 2021).

[3] See Michael Knights and Alex Almeida, "The Islamic State at Low Ebb in Iraq: The Insurgent Tide Recedes Again," (Combating Terrorism Center, January 2022).

[4] U.S. Department of Defense, November 2021.

[5] See Knights and Almeida, January 2022.

The Taliban's Takeover in Afghanistan and Militant Mergers Bolster Baloch Insurgents in Pakistan

Zia Ur Rehman

On January 20, a bomb blast at a crowded market killed three civilians and injured more than 25 others in Lahore. The attack was executed by the Baloch Nationalist Army (BNA), a newly formed Baloch ethno-separatist group, who made its presence known in Pakistan ([Dawn](#), January 21). Although the attack was considered mainly as an "attention-grabbing" act, security analysts are investigating it in the broader context of the evolving security situation in the country. Pakistan's volatile environment primarily relates to the Afghan Taliban's takeover in neighboring Afghanistan in August 2021, which has emboldened Pakistani insurgencies, including both Islamist and ethno-

separatist groups, to increase their attacks in Pakistan.

Besides the BNA, the Baloch Liberation Front (BLF), another major ethno-separatist group, killed 10 security forces personnel in an attack in Balochistan's Kech district on January 25 ([The News](#), January 28). Pakistan's military also claimed to have repelled nighttime assaults on February 2 on two army bases in the Panjgur and Noshki districts of Balochistan, which killed around 15 soldiers and civilians, and 15 militants of Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), an ethno-separatist group ([Urdu News](#), February 3). These onslaughts, which are among the deadliest on the Pakistani military in recent years, indicate the formidable challenge Pakistan faces in curbing a resurgent ethno-separatist insurgency in Balochistan.

Rifts, Splintering, and Mergers among Baloch Insurgents

Since Pakistan's inception in 1947, Balochistan has seen a succession of short-lived insurgencies against political centralization and resource exploitation. However, the fifth insurgency in the province that began in 2003-2004 has become the longest and most violent ([Voice of America Urdu](#), July 9). Of the 77 militant groups banned by the Pakistani government, 14 are now ethno-separatists from Balochistan that primarily seek independence from Pakistan and target state security forces. Furthermore, they have targeted Chinese investments since the establishment of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in 2015, which is Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)'s flagship project ([Dawn](#), August 25, 2021).

From 2017 to 2019, most of the ethno-separatist militant groups in Pakistan faced internal rifts. Because of this, Balochistan's insurgency, despite seeing sporadic attacks, endured a continuous operational decline ([ACLEDE](#), September 4, 2020). Three major Baloch ethno-separatist groups Hyrbyair Marri-led BLA, Brahamdagh Bugti-led Baloch Republican

Army (BRA), and Mehran Marri-led United Baloch Army (UBA), for example, fragmented after their field commanders, from the lower-middle classes, challenged the groups' heads, consisting of wealthy, traditional Baloch tribal chieftains living in Europe in self-exile. The differences led to new mergers and alliances. In 2017, Aslam Baloch, a field commander who masterminded the November 2018 attack on the Chinese consulate in Karachi, formed a new BLA faction while Gulzar Imam led his own faction of BRA from August 2018. [1]

After months of negotiations and cooperation, BLA's Aslam Baloch faction, BRA's Gulzar Imam faction, Allah Nazar-led BLF, and Bakhtiar Domki-led Baloch Republican Guards (BRG) announced their forming the Baloch Raji Ajoi Sangar (BRAS), an alliance aimed at targeting primarily Chinese interests ([Terrorism Monitor](#), September 20, 2019). After the killing of Aslam Baloch in a suicide bombing in Kandahar, Afghanistan, Bashir Zaib became the BLA faction's new leader ([MM News](#), June 30, 2020).

On January 11, Gulzar Imam and Sarfaraz Bangalzai, a UBA field commander, merged their factions to form BNA, and then announced their joining BRAS to further "expand the national resistance war and to unite the Baloch resistance forces against fascism of the Pakistani military" ([Voice of America Urdu](#), January 20). Security officials, however, see BNA's creation as a further factionalization of the insurgency, and expect the Pakistani state to exploit it in order to convince more fighters to surrender. [2] In accordance with the government's February 2017 amnesty policy, such fighters would join 1,000 other Baloch ethno-separatist fighters who have surrendered in return for financial assistance ([Express Tribune](#), October 30, 2021). However, BNA's formation and its inclusion in the BRAS is part of a Baloch ethno-separatist strategy whereby groups pool together human and financial resources to extend their geographical outreach, improve operational

coordination, and diversify attack targets in the country. [3]

BRAS further formed an alliance with the Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army (SRA), an ethno-separatist group from Sindh, in July 2020. This suggests that Baloch ethno-separatist groups want to expand their operational areas to identify and attack new strategic targets. The attacks in Karachi that targeted the Chinese Consulate on November 23, 2018 and the Pakistan Stock Exchange building (whose 40 percent strategic shares are owned by a consortium of Chinese companies) on June 29, 2020, are key examples of BRAS' expanding attack portfolio (Dawn, June 30, 2020).

The Afghanistan Factor

Since the beginning of 2020, a significant rise in terror attacks from Baloch ethno-separatist groups has been observed. In 2021, for example, there were more acts of violence in Balochistan compared to 2020, with the numbers of attacks increasing by 93 percent and civilian fatalities increasing by 43 percent (PIPS, January 4). This resurgence of Balochistan's insurgency can be linked to the increasing pressure on Baloch ethno-separatist groups that were once sheltered in Afghanistan and since August 2021, have been forced by the Taliban to relocate across the border to Balochistan in Pakistan. Following the Lahore attack on January 20, Pakistan's interior ministry admitted that incidents of terrorism in the country had increased by around 35 to 38 percent since the fall of Kabul on August 15, 2021 (Express Tribune, January 22).

As Ashraf Ghani's administration in Kabul had long been accused of hosting militants from Baloch ethno-separatists' groups who fled from Pakistan to escape crackdowns, Islamabad, as well as Beijing, have been optimistic that threats from the Baloch insurgency will subside once the Taliban consolidates control in Afghanistan. Indeed, as predicted, after the Taliban came to power in August 2021, it launched

a crackdown on Baloch ethno-separatist groups in Kandahar and Nimroz, which are Afghanistan's two provinces that border Balochistan. Several Baloch militants, along with their family members and properties, were seized (The Balochistan Post, October 6, 2021).

Conclusion

Merging or forming alliances among Baloch ethno-separatists, therefore, has been a part of their strategy to survive and sustain their insurgency in the new geopolitical situation. Whether this will succeed depends on Pakistan's counterterrorism and reconciliation strategy with the Baloch insurgents, and the political and security situation of Afghanistan in the near future.

Zia Ur Rehman is a Pakistani journalist and researcher, and writes for The New York Times, The News International and Nikkei Asia, among other publications. He also assesses peace and conflict development in Pakistan for various security think-tanks and policy institutes.

Notes

[1] Telephonic interview with Kiyya Baloch, a journalist reporting insurgencies in Balochistan, January 23, 2022.

[2] Telephonic interview with a law enforcement official posted in Balochistan, January 23, 2022.

[3] Telephonic interview with Abdul Basit, a research fellow at the Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore, January 23, 2022.

[4] Ibid.

Ties that Bind? Deconstructing the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban's Partnership and Counter-Terrorism Options for Pakistan

Abdul Basit

In late December 2021 and early January 2022, Afghan Taliban fighters stationed at the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, also known as the Durand Line, disrupted the border fencing near the Kunar and Nimruz provinces ([Dawn](#), December 23, 2021; [Express Tribune](#), January 3; [Terrorism Monitor](#), January 14). [1] On one occasion, the Afghan Taliban even took away the rolls of barbed wire and came face to face with Pakistani troops. Subsequently, on January 7, the Afghan Taliban briefly detained and released seven Pakistani paramilitary forces near Paktika province ([Twitter/@abdsayyed](#), January 7). The mounting Afghan Taliban-Pakistan border tensions are in sharp contrast to the popular perceptions of the former's subservience to the latter as a proxy.

The breakdown of the Afghan Taliban-mediated peace talks between Islamabad and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and the uptick in the latter's attacks against Pakistan, preceded the Pakistan-Afghanistan border tensions ([Daily Times](#), December 11, 2021). Following the lapsing of the one-month ceasefire on December 9, the TTP did not extend the truce. Instead, the TTP carried out 45 attacks in Pakistan, which was more than any month in 2021 ([Radio Mashal](#), January 13). [2] Currently, efforts are underway to restart the peace talks ([Radio Mashal](#), January 24). Pakistan's Interior Minister, Sheikh Rasheed, has also claimed that the Afghan Taliban, on Pakistan's insistence, has promised to relocate TTP fighters to remote areas of Afghanistan far from the Pakistan-Afghanistan border ([Twitter/@IhsanTipu](#), January 8).

Against this backdrop, it is important to explore why Afghan Taliban-Pakistan

tensions are rising, and how it is linked to the former's deep-rooted relations with the TTP. The article will also unpack the reasons behind the Afghan Taliban's non-committal attitude towards Pakistani demands to expel, disarm, or pacify the TTP and the implications of this for Islamabad. Finally, the article will outline options for Pakistan to tackle the TTP's threat.

Pakistani Assumptions and Expectations from the Afghan Taliban

When the Afghan Taliban overtook power in Afghanistan last August, it was perceived as a strategic victory for Pakistan to neutralize India's presence in Afghanistan and "secure" its north-western border ([Express Tribune](#), August 22, 2021). Pakistan's military establishment believed the Afghan Taliban would look after Pakistan's strategic and security interests in return for helping them achieve victory in Afghanistan ([Dawn](#), December 14, 2021). [2] Islamabad was of the view that after coming to power, the Afghan Taliban would need Pakistan's help more than before to act as a bridge between the militant group and the international community ([Express Tribune](#), September 1, 2021). Hence, Islamabad was confident that the Afghan Taliban's return to power would also result in a decline in the TTP's threat ([Express Tribune](#), January 9).

At the very least, Islamabad was confident that the Afghan Taliban government would disarm the TTP and prohibit it from launching attacks against Pakistan, consistent with its counter-terrorism commitments under the Doha Agreement ([Express Tribune](#), September 2, 2021). As per the Doha Agreement, the Afghan Taliban promised not to allow Afghan soil to be used for terrorism against any other country ([Hindustan Times](#), August 17, 2021). However, not only has the Afghan Taliban been reluctant to act against the TTP, but it has also turned a blind eye to the latter's terrorist attacks from their Afghan hideouts against Pakistan ([Dawn](#), January 6). [4]

Last August, Pakistan also handed over a list of most wanted TTP figures to the Afghan Taliban ([Express Tribune](#), August 23, 2021). The Afghan Taliban's Supreme Leader, Maulawi Haibatullah Akhundzada, also formed a three-member commission to probe the Pakistani demands ([Voice of America](#), September 6, 2021). However, the Afghan Taliban not only overlooked the Pakistani security concerns, but its response has been rather tame. For instance, last August, the Afghan Taliban's Information and Culture Minister, Zabiullah Mujahid, stated Pakistan "has to determine whether the TTP's war is legitimate or not and how to deal with it ([Geo Tv](#), August 28, 2021)." The Afghan Taliban's non-committal attitude has frustrated the Pakistani security establishment ([The News International](#), August 30, 2021).

The Afghan Taliban has been urging Pakistan to settle the latter's differences with the TTP through negotiations ([Dawn](#), November 14, 2021). On the Afghan Taliban's insistence, Pakistan gave peace "another chance" with the TTP. However, the TTP discontinued the peace talks after the one-month ceasefire ([The News International](#), December 12, 2021). The purported negotiations also disrupted Pakistan's effective anti-terror strategy enshrined in the 20-point National Action Plan, a counter-terrorism and extremism roadmap forged after the Army Public School massacre in 2014. The NAP adopted a no-talks-with-terrorist-groups approach to deal with extremism and terrorism in Pakistan ([National Counter Terrorism Authority](#), 2014).

Afghan Taliban-TTP Relations and Pashtunwali

The Afghan Taliban-TTP relationship is longstanding, and cuts across ideological and ethnic linkages ([Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies](#), September 16, 2021). The TTP considers the Afghan Taliban's self-styled Islamic Emirate a model of a theocratic regime worth emulating in Pakistan. The TTP accordingly treats the Afghan Taliban Supreme Leader,

Haibatullah Akhundzada, as its own emir, and pledges the oath of allegiance to him. Both the TTP and the Afghan Taliban also belong to the Deobandi Hanafi school of jurisprudence. They are, in essence, ideological twins with separate geographical mandates in Afghanistan and Pakistan, respectively. [5] Last September, during an in-camera session of the parliament, the Pakistani military establishment, therefore, termed the TTP and the Afghan Taliban as "two sides of the same coin ([Express Tribune](#), July 5, 2021)."

Similarly, the TTP shares fraternal-ethnic linkages with the Afghan Taliban. The TTP sheltered the Taliban in the ex-FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas), now merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, not just because they have the same ideological outlooks but because of ethnic bonds as well ([Express Tribune](#), July 31, 2021). Thus, the TTP's policy of hosting and fighting alongside the Afghan Taliban is part of the Pashtun tribal code of Pashtunwali, whereby Pashtuns protect the honor and life of their guests with their lives. Likewise, the Afghan Taliban, after assuming power, are reciprocating the same ethnic gesture of hospitality by protection and sheltering the TTP.

Alongside al-Qaeda, the TTP was further instrumental in helping the Afghan Taliban achieve victory in Afghanistan. While al-Qaeda provided strategic guidance, expertise, and training in bombmaking and battlefield planning, the TTP trained hundreds of suicide bombers for the final phase of the Afghan Taliban's offensive in Afghanistan. [6] Meanwhile, the Afghan Taliban itself trained another 2,600 suicide bombers for that final offensive ([Geo Tv](#), January 20). The TTP's emir, Nur Wali Mehsud, subsequently was the first jihadist leader to congratulate the Afghan Taliban on their victory, and renewed his oath of allegiance to Haibatullah Akhundzada ([Twitter](#), August 17, 2021).

Arguably, the TTP engaged in peace talks with Pakistan not to create any legal

challenges for the Afghan Taliban or to embarrass them in front of Pakistan. Under the Doha Agreement, the Taliban are bound to cooperate with Pakistan to address its counter-terrorism concerns, such as not allowing Afghan soil to be used for terrorism against any other country. For instance, Pakistan conveyed to the Afghan Taliban that tackling the TTP would be a test case to establish the former's credentials in dealing with terrorism in the eyes of the international community ([Express Tribune](#), January 9). This was preceded by a demand, both from Pakistan and China, for the Afghan Taliban to make a clean break from the TTP and Uyghur militants ([Express Tribune](#), July 28, 2021). In a way, the TTP participated in peace talks to fulfill the Afghan Taliban's demand to help the latter satisfy Pakistan and show that it was taking some measures to pacify the TTP without the use of force. Otherwise, given the diametrically opposite position of both Pakistan and the TTP, peace talks were a non-starter ([Terrorism Monitor](#), October 21, 2021). [7]

The Afghan Taliban's Reluctance to Act Against TTP

If the Afghan Taliban, on Pakistan's insistence, dislodges the TTP from its sanctuaries in Afghanistan, it will push the TTP commanders and fighters towards Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP), the former's ideological arch-foe. The TTP's current operational strength is estimated to be between 7,000 to 10,000 fighters, while ISKP numbers are anywhere between 3,000 to 5,000 fighters, with the TTP's former renegade factions forming the core of ISKP ([United National Security Council](#), June 1, 2020), Hence, the Afghan Taliban are extremely careful in their handling of the TTP so as to not empower ISKP. [8]

Furthermore, there is tremendous reverence and sympathy for the TTP in the Afghan Taliban rank-and-file. If the Afghan Taliban crack down on the TTP, it will exacerbate the former militant movement's factional divisions ([Al-Jazeera](#), September 23, 2021). The Afghan Taliban cannot

afford internal divisions at this critical juncture when their grip on power in Afghanistan is tenuous and they need to maintain their organizational coherence and internal unity to consolidate their rule. [9]

In addition, the Afghan Taliban have been positioning themselves as the so-called champions of Pashtun nationalism in a bid to win the hearts and minds of Afghanistan's Pashtun community. [10] Not recognizing the Pakistan-Afghanistan border is a central pillar of Pashtun nationalism. The Afghan Taliban not only has desisted from recognizing the border, but it has physically opposed its fencing ([The News International](#), December 25, 2021). Likewise, resisting the border's fencing and ex-FATA's merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is part of the TTP's revived militancy against Pakistan. Hence, the issue creates a win-win both for the Taliban and the TTP ([Terrorism Monitor](#), September 24, 2021).

The TTP provides the Afghan Taliban tremendous strategic leverage against Pakistan, which the former would not like to lose. Despite depending on Pakistan for shelter and medical and logistical assistance, the Afghan Taliban's ties with Pakistan were always trouble-prone ([Dawn](#), December 24, 2021). The Afghan Taliban did not trust Pakistan, and detested its security institutions for their blackmail and strong-arm tactics. [11] Therefore, the TTP remains a bargaining chip that the Afghan Taliban will use strategically to push back against any Pakistani blackmails ([Dawn](#), June 9, 2021).

Options for Pakistan

Pakistani authorities know that they cannot afford to alienate the Afghan Taliban, similar to the way the latter cannot estrange the TTP. For Pakistan, having a friendly regime in Kabul, notwithstanding differences over the TTP, that can stabilize Afghanistan is more important than souring ties with the Afghan Taliban over the TTP. [12] The trade-off between a weakened

Afghan Taliban regime pushing Afghanistan towards a civil war, resulting in massive wave of refugees towards Pakistan, versus managing the TTP's terrorist attacks means Islamabad will live with the existing status quo.

Pakistan will try to explore the possibility of a negotiated settlement once again, hoping to woo the more malleable TTP elements and divide the group ([The Nation](#), January 18). Apart from peace talks, Pakistan will resort to covert operations in Afghanistan to eliminate key TTP leaders. In recent weeks, two key TTP commanders, Khalid Balti (alias Muhammad Khorasan) and Mufti Burjan, were assassinated in Afghanistan's Kunar province, while another important commander, Faqir Muhammad, narrowly escaped a drone attack when the two missiles failed to explode ([Dawn](#), January 13; [Tolo News](#), December 17, 2021). At the same time, Pakistan will try to fortify its border security and reassess gaps in its intelligence gathering to disrupt and eliminate the TTP's cells, which have revived in different parts of Pakistan.

Abdul Basit is a research fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. His research focuses on jihadist militancy and extremism in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Notes

[1] The Taliban, like all previous Afghan governments, do not recognize the Pakistan-Afghan border as a legitimate international frontier and consider it an imposition of the British colonial era, which divided the Pashtun families living on both sides of the disputed border.

[2] The TTP's attacks against Pakistan have been rising steadily since August 2020 when the various splinter factions of the militant group rejoined under Mufti Nur Wali Mehsud's leadership. As per the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security

Studies' data, as compared to 2020 there was a 56 percent increase in terrorist attacks in Pakistan, the majority of which were carried out by the TTP.

[3] Pakistan was instrumental in bringing the Afghan Taliban leadership to the table with the U.S., culminating in the Doha Agreement, which paved the way for the militant group's victory in Afghanistan. Pakistan also provided sanctuaries, medical assistance and logistical assistance to the Afghan Taliban whose leaders view Pakistan as their second home. Several Afghan Taliban commanders' families still live in Pakistan.

[4] Asfandyar Mir, "After the Taliban's Takeover: Pakistan's TTP problem," *United States Institute of Peace*, January 19, 2022.

[5]. The TTP is a conglomerate of numerous tribal jihadist groups from the Pakistan-Afghan border region who banded together in 2007 to form a unified front. They draw inspiration from the Taliban movement.

[6] Abdul Syed, "The Evolution and Future of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 21, 2021.

[7] The TTP demanded the imposition of the Afghan Taliban style Sharia rule in the ex-FATA region, the release of 100 prisoners, and the permission to open a political office in a third country as pre-conditions for peace talks. On the other hand, Pakistan asked the TTP to renounce violence, offer a public apology for its past attacks, and promise to obey Pakistan's law and live like normal citizens to avail indemnity.

[8] Author's interview with a Pakistani security official on January 10, 2022.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Anatol Lieven, "An Afghan Tragedy: The Pashtuns, the Taliban and the State,"

Survival, Vol. 63, Issue 3, (May 2021), pp. 7-36.

[11] Tricia Bacon, "Slipping the Leash? Pakistan's Relationship with the Afghan Taliban," *Survival*, Vol. 60, Issue 5, (September 2018), pp. 159-180.

[12] Asfandyar Mir, "After the Taliban's Takeover: Pakistan's TTP problem."