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The Pakistan-Afghanistan Border Conflict and Its Regional Implications

Clashes between Pakistan and Afghanistan have reached a new apex since the 21st December TTP attacks in Pakistan, leading to the deaths of 16 Pakistani soldiers. Since then, the escalation between the two sides has been simmering. Frequent border clashes between the two countries have further destabilized the region.



Rising Terrorism and Its Impact on Pakistan's Stability

Pakistan, once accused as the patron of the Afghan Taliban*, is struggling to counter the terrorism emancipating from Afghanistan. Numerous terrorist organizations, including TTP, BLA, and ISIS*, are using Afghan soil to conduct terrorist activities in neighboring countries. Since the Afghan Taliban's takeover of Kabul in 2021, terrorist activities have soured in Pakistan. In 2023, more than 1500 Pakistanis were killed due to terrorist activities in the country. The year 2024, with 521 terrorist attacks, observed a 70 percent increase in terrorism

as compared to the previous year. Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) states that the ratio of these activities in 2024 has reached levels comparable to 2015 or before.

Stability in Afghanistan could not be achieved without having cordial relations with neighboring countries

This sudden rise in terrorist activities has further impeded the already stagnant economy of the country. Moreover, the destabilization of the country has further increased due to this surge in terrorism. Pakistan's international standing and relations are also suffering due to the country's deteriorating security situation. Pakistan is the host of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)'s flagship project – CPEC. However, frequent terrorist attacks on the Chinese engineers working on this project have jeopardized its completion and security.

Pakistan and China have enjoyed cordial relations since the latter's independence. China has always acknowledged Pakistan's anti-terrorism efforts. Nonetheless, the ongoing surge in terrorism is proving detrimental to this relationship as well. In June 2024, a Chinese official, during his visit to Islamabad, stated that the worsening security situation in Pakistan was the key impediment to the success of CPEC. He further warned that this predicament is “shaking the confidence of Chinese investors.”

This implies that terrorist attacks in Pakistan are detrimental to its ties with regional neighbors. Pakistani officials have long been asking the Afghan interim government to control Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan (TTP). However, the Afghan officials have never taken these appeals seriously. Ideological symmetry between TTP and Afghan Taliban*, and the former's military assistance to the latter against US and NATO forces, prevent the interim Afghan government from taking any serious actions against it. Despite Pakistani authorities' multiple warnings, TTP continued to conduct terrorist activities in Pakistan using Afghan soil. Pakistan officially conducted airstrikes in Afghanistan's Paktika province, which borders Pakistan's South Waziristan district, targeting TTP hideouts.

In response to these airstrikes, Afghan Information Minister Khairullah Khairkhwa stated, *“We must honor the Afghan nation's commitment to safeguarding these guests, and friends.”* The interim Afghan Taliban government targeted several regions across the Pak-Afghan border, in its retaliatory attempt against Pakistan. The burgeoning escalation between the two sides has exacerbated the regional security situation. Scores of casualties have been reported from both sides of the border due to ongoing clashes between Pak-Afghan forces.

The Wake of Border Clashes and Pakistan's Plan to Invade Wakhan Corridor

Reportedly, Pakistan is planning to invade Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor, a critical region that separates Tajikistan from Pakistan. This narrow strip also connects Afghanistan with

China. By invading the Wakhan corridor, Pakistan could gain access to Central Asian markets, while the latter can access warm waters and link with CPEC. Moreover, Pakistani influence on the Wakhan corridor would minimize the threat of terrorist attacks by ISIS and other terrorist organizations in China. Allegedly, the latter has also greenlighted Pakistan to occupy the Wakhan corridor.

Pakistan's DG ISI General Asim Malik has recently visited Tajikistan. The latter is one of Afghanistan's regional rivals and hosts anti-Taliban Afghan nationalist leaders. Commanders of the National Resistance Front (NRF) of Afghanistan, who are mostly Tajik ethnically, have also sought shelter in Tajikistan. Allegedly, the actual purpose of this visit by a high-level military official of Pakistan was to seek assistance from Tajikistan in invading the Wakhan corridor. Moreover, this implies that Pakistan intends to support anti-Taliban and democratic groups in Afghanistan.

Tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan have further simmered due to the former's alleged plan to invade the latter's territory. Although Pakistan holds military supremacy over Afghanistan, it could see a new wave of terrorist attacks from the sleeping cells of TTP and BLA inside the country if it invades the Wakhan corridor. This will further jeopardize the security situation in the country, leading to increased economic and political instability. On the other hand, significant economic and human losses will be incurred in Afghanistan, aggravating the already worsening humanitarian crisis in the country.

Afghanistan seeks to establish trade and diplomatic ties with China, meanwhile Pakistan is a significant ally of the latter. This incentivizes the two sides to resolve the conflict peacefully. Stability in Afghanistan could not be achieved without having cordial relations with neighboring countries. Therefore, the Afghan Taliban* need to realize that they are no longer a militant group but an established government, which has significant domestic and foreign responsibilities.

Providing shelter to terrorist groups that conduct terrorist activities in any of the neighboring countries is also a violation of the Doha agreement. If a limited war between Pakistan and Afghanistan commenced, it would have far-reaching consequences for the whole region. Thus, regional powers, especially Russia and China, need to play their role in resolving this dispute diplomatically. Otherwise, this conflict would destabilize the whole region, providing the rival forces an opportunity to impinge on Chinese and Russian interests in South Asia.

*- *banned in Russia*

Abbas Hashemite, January 09, 2025

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