

From Margins to Mainstream: The Enduring Threat of Tehrik- e-Taliban Pakistan

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Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) emerged as a coalition of tribal militant factions in Pakistan with objectives to counteract military operations conducted by the US military and the Pakistani Army. The group served as a focal point for anti-American and anti-Pakistan sentiments, capitalising on the existing infrastructure and ideological groundwork of the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda. This Issue Brief delves into the intricate dynamics of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, tracing its evolutionary trajectory from its initial emergence to its subsequent decline and eventual resurgence. The analysis emphasises the organisation's transformation into a decentralised entity and rigorously scrutinises the multifaceted threats it has posed to the governance and stability of the Pakistan State.



INTRODUCTION

Since the Soviet incursion into Afghanistan, Pakistan has been strategically invested in its neighbouring country, seeking to establish a sphere of influence there. Pakistan has employed a multifaceted approach to realise this ambition over the years. This has ranged from backing the Afghan Mujahedeen during the Soviet-Afghan War to fostering extremist and terrorist organisations within the region, culminating in its extensive support for the Afghan Taliban throughout the 1990s. The security landscape shifted dramatically following the US-led military mission in Afghanistan in 2001, which led to the toppling of the Taliban regime. Subsequently, key figures from the Taliban and Al-Qaeda sought refuge in Pakistan's tribal areas. There, they initiated recruitment drives and founded religious educational institutions, thereby accelerating the process of Talibanization within these regions. During this period, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) emerged as a coalition of tribal factions. Its primary objective was to counteract operations conducted by the US military and the Pakistani Army. The group served as a focal point for anti-American and anti-Pakistan sentiments, capitalising on the existing infrastructure and ideological groundwork of the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

This Issue Brief delves into the intricate dynamics of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, tracing its evolutionary trajectory from its initial emergence to its subsequent decline and eventual resurgence. The analysis emphasises the organisation's transformation into a decentralised entity and rigorously scrutinises the multifaceted threats it has posed to the governance and stability of the Pakistan State.

THE EMERGENCE OF TEHRİK-E-TALIBAN PAKISTAN

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is a coalition of multiple armed factions, primarily based in the Waziristan region of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province. It is an umbrella jihadi organisation encompassing major Islamic terrorist groups, including Tehreek-i-Nifaz-i-Shariat-i-Muhammadi, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Jaish-e-Mohammed. These constituent groups are key players within the TTP framework, contributing to its overall objectives and operations.

Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) was founded in 1994 by Maulana Sufi Muhammad to implement Sharia law in Pakistan's Malakand Division.¹ Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT),

¹ Navid Iqbal Khan, "Tehreek-i-Nifaz-i-Shariat-i-Muhammadi in Malakand Division (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa)," *Pakistan Journal of History and Culture*, Vol.31 (1), 2010. Accessible at:

established in the 1980s, originated as the militant wing of Markaz-ud-Dawa Wal-Irshad and aimed to create an Islamic state across the Indian subcontinent, with a specific focus on the Jammu and Kashmir region.² Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), known by various other names such as Tehrik ul-Furqaan, was founded by Masood Azhar in the early 2000s after his release from an Indian prison. The group's primary objectives are the integration of Kashmir into Pakistan and removing foreign military presence from Afghanistan.³

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) was officially established in 2007 by Baitullah Mehsud, a militant leader from South Waziristan. However, the roots of the organization can be traced back to the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, following the September 11 attacks. In the aftermath of the invasion, key figures from the Taliban and Al-Qaeda sought refuge in Pakistan's tribal regions, specifically in areas that were then part of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and are now incorporated into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province and Baluchistan. This influx of militants prompted the Pakistani Army and US forces to initiate multiple operations in these tribal regions, starting as early as 2002. One notable example is Operation Al-Mizan, launched by the Pakistani Army to counteract terrorist activities within the country. The military operations caused widespread discontent in these areas and accelerated the process of Talibanisation.⁴ Al-Qaeda and Taliban groups used the opportunity and created religious schools to recruit members and re-merge themselves. At that time, the Pakistan Taliban existed as a decentralised umbrella and showed their opposition to the existing structures. This process continued until the official announcement of this organisation in 2007. The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) emerged with a set of distinct objectives. Initially, one of its primary aims was to engage in combat against American and NATO troops stationed in Afghanistan. Another key objective was the enforcement of Sharia (Islamic law). However, the most pivotal goal of the organization was to wage jihad

http://www.nihcr.edu.pk/Latest_English_Journal/6.%20Tehreek-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-%20Muhammadi,%20Navid%20iqbal.pdf

² For in depth information, See, Ashley J. Tellis, "The Menace That Is Lashkar-e-Taiba", *Policy Outlook*, Carnegie Endowment of International Peace, March 2012, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/LeT_menace.pdf

³ "Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM)", *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, https://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/jandk/terrorist_outfits/jaish_e_mohammad_mujahideen_e_tanzeem.htm

⁴ Ishrat Afshan Abbasi, Mukesh Kumar Khatwani, Mazher Hussain, "An Overview of Major Military Operations in the Tribal Areas of Pakistan", *Journal of Academic and Social Research*, Vol, 1 (1), 2018. Accessible at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326225279_An_Overview_of_Major_Military_Operations_in_the_Tribal_Areas_of_Pakistan/link/5b54fac3a6fdcc8dae3c173b/download

against the Pakistani Army.⁵ The overarching rationale for the formation of TTP was to establish a unified front of resistance against military forces.

As mentioned, the TTP began with a decentralised nature due to its factions across the tribal region, and existing groups highly influenced its operations. The prevailing situation compelled the decisions of local commanders to be influenced by local political developments and tribal concerns. As a result, internal and inter-group differences emerged and escalated considerably. For example, Hafiz Gul Bahadur and Mullah Nazir, two influential local commanders, disagreed with the TTP leadership about the attacks against the Pakistani government. Mullah Nazir, killed by a US drone strike in January 2013, remained active against US and NATO troops in Afghanistan. Hafiz Gul Bahadur, a deputy under Baitullah Mehsud, largely distanced himself from the TTP due to rivalries with Mehsud and disagreements about the TTP's attacks against the Pakistan state.⁶

Gul Bahadur and Nazir separated from the TTP core in 2008 and created an independent group called the Muqami Tehrik-e-Taliban or Taliban local movement.⁷ The new group established very close relations with Al-Qaeda and the Haqqani network, but a year later, with the intensity of the US drone attacks in the tribal areas, Bahadur and Nazir aligned with Baitullah Mehsud and committed to intensifying operations against the US Army and NATO in Afghanistan. Likewise, in 2009, there was a deadly attack on the Pakistan General Headquarters, wherein 11 soldiers were killed, for which TTP claimed responsibility; this attack was right after the realignment of Bahadur and Baitullah Mehsud.⁸ Not long after, the leader of TTP, Baitullah Mehsud, was killed in a US airstrike, and another person named Hakimullah Mehsud took over the leadership of this organisation. During the time of Hakimullah Mehsud, the relations of this group with the Afghan Taliban, foreign fighters, and other groups were strengthened; for example, the relationship of the TTP with the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) became closer, which led to a significant increase in the number of terrorist attacks against the Shi'ite minority.⁹ On the

⁵ "Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan," Mapping Militant Organizations, Stanford University, January 2022. <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/tehrick-i-taliban-pakistan>

⁶ "Hafiz Gul Bahadur", *Afghan Biographies*, May 18, 2011, https://afghan-bios.info/index.php?option=com_afghanbios&id=2183&task=view&total=4994&start=790&Itemid=2

⁷ Qandeel Siddique, "Tehrik -e- Taliban Pakistan", *DIIS Report* (12), 2010. Accessible at: https://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/104682/RP2010_12_Tehrik_e_Taliban_web.pdf

⁸ "Timeline of Pakistan's Defense Sites attacked by militants" *Dawn*, August 16, 2012. Accessible at: <https://www.dawn.com/news/742602/timeline-of-pakistans-defence-sites-attacked-by-militants>

⁹ LeJ was founded in 1996 as a militant offshoot of SSP which is a Deobandi and anti-Shia group that emerged in the mid-1980s in reaction to class-based conflict and the Shia revival that followed the Iranian revolution. LeJ seeks to transform Pakistan into a Deobandi-dominated Sunni state, and primarily targets Shia and other religious minorities. See, "Lashkar-e-Jhangvi," *Mapping Militant Organizations*, Stanford University, July 2018. <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/lashkar-e-jhangvi-lej>. Also See, Animesh Roul, "Lashkar-e-

other hand, TTP received substantial financial aid from Al-Qaeda, and other foreign terrorist groups and militias provided logistical and technical assistance to this organisation so that it could carry out its operations in big cities.¹⁰

TTP's upward trend continued until Hakimullah Mehsud was killed in another US drone strike in 2013.¹¹ At this time, the leadership of this organisation was shifted from the Mehsud clan, the largest ethnic minority in South Waziristan, to Mullah Fazlullah, who was from the Swat region of Pakistan.¹² The deadliest attacks took place during Mullah Fazlullah's time, such as the attack on the Jinnah International Airport on June 11, 2014, in which 36 people were killed or the Pakistani Army government school attack in 2014 in which 150 people died and the attack on Bacha Khan University in 2016, which caused deaths of more than 20 people.¹³ However, the change of leadership from the Mehsud family weakened the organisation's cohesion, and the TTP's downfall began under the leadership of Mullah Fazlullah. Several operations of the Pakistani Army and the US forces also played a significant role in the fall of TTP. For example, the Zarb-e-Azb operation, a combined aggression in which 30,000 troops were involved, was one of the most critical operations of the Pakistani Army against the TTP, which caused heavy losses to this organisation, even to the extent that some members of this group fled to Afghanistan.¹⁴ Until the death of Mullah Fazlullah in 2018 in Afghanistan's Kunar province, many experts believed that the TTP would be destroyed.¹⁵ But Noor Wali Mehsud assumed the leadership of this organisation, and once again, the Mehsud clan took over the reins of the Pakistan Taliban.¹⁶ This change caused the

Jhangvi: Sectarian Violence in Pakistan and Ties to International Terrorism”, *Terrorism Monitor* Vol. 3 (11), June 3, 2005.

¹⁰ “Good Taliban, Bad Taliban: Tracing the Resurgence of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)”, *EFSSAS Study Papers*, June 2022. Accessible at: <https://www.efsas.org/publications/study-papers/resurgence-of-the-tehrik-e-taliban-pakistan-ttp/>

¹¹ Abdul Sayed, ‘Evolution and Future of Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan’, *Carnegie Endowment For international Peace*, December 21, 2021. Accessible at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/12/21/evolution-and-future-of-tehrik-e-taliban-pakistan-pub-86051>

¹² Umair Jamal, “Can Islamabad Further Isolate the Pakistani Taliban?” *The Diplomat*, June 27, 2018. Accessible at: <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/how-can-islamabad-further-isolate-the-pakistani-taliban/>

¹³ “TTP claims attack on Karachi airport”, *Dawn*, June 8, 2014. Accessible at, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1111397>; “TTP claim responsibility for Peshawar school attack,” *Express Tribune*, December 16, 2014, Accessible at: <https://tribune.com.pk/story/807574/ttp-claim-responsibility-for-peshawar-school-attack>. “APS mastermind claims Bacha Khan University attack, 21 killed”, *Dawn*, January 20, 2016, Accessible at: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1234200>.

¹⁴ Urwa Elahi, “Operation Zarb e Azb: A Decisive Strike”, *Pakistan Vision*, Vol. 21(1), 2019. Accessible at: http://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/studies/PDF-FILES/32_v21_1_20.pdf

¹⁵ Pakistan Taliban chief Mullah Fazlullah killed in drone attack, *Aljazeera*, June 15, 2018. Accessible at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/6/15/pakistan-taliban-chief-mullah-fazlullah-killed-in-drone-attack>

¹⁶ Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud also known as Abu Mansoor Asim is current leader of TTP, he has served as deputy of TTP under Baitullah Mehsud, and he is an Islamic scholar and writer. See, Abdul Sayed, Tore Hamming, “The Revival

TTP to re-integrate itself, and Noor Wali Mehsud made many efforts to unite the separated branches of the TTP. Consequently, Pakistan witnessed the re-emergence of this organisation and increased the number of attacks. Under the leadership of Noor Wali Mehsud, most of the attacks have been focused on the Pakistan armed forces and political elites.¹⁷

TTP THREAT TO THE PAKISTANI GOVERNMENT

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) poses an escalating threat to an already economically and politically weakened Pakistani government. The group has capitalized on this vulnerability to expand its operations. The resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan has further emboldened TTP, especially in the wake of the U.S. and NATO withdrawal from the region. This has led to a shift in TTP's focus towards intensified attacks on Pakistani military and governmental targets.¹⁸ Moreover, inspired by the Taliban's return to power, TTP has renewed its calls for establishing a similar Islamic state in Pakistan, particularly in its tribal regions. This aspiration presents a significant challenge for the Pakistani government.¹⁹ TTP is emboldened by the notion that if the Taliban could defeat U.S. forces after years of guerrilla warfare, then the Pakistani government—perceived as less resilient than the U.S.—would also succumb to sustained and sophisticated attacks. This belief has been substantiated by a surge in TTP-led attacks: between August 2021, when the Taliban assumed control in Afghanistan, and March 2022, at least 119 Pakistani military personnel were killed by TTP.

After the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan, the Government of Pakistan tried to use the influence of this group to bring the TTP to the negotiating table. For this purpose, peace talks between the two sides were started with mediation by the Taliban, and as a result, the two sides agreed to a ceasefire in June 2022. However, the ceasefire did not last, and the TTP announced on November 28, 2022, that it was no longer bound by the ceasefire and ordered its men to launch

of Pakistan Taliban”, *CTC Sentinel*, Vol 14 (4), April/May 2021. Accessible at: <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-revival-of-the-pakistani-taliban/>

¹⁷ Farhan Zahid, “Profile of New TTP Chief Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud Challenges and Implications,” *Pak Institute for Peace Studies*, April 15, 2019. Accessible at: <https://www.pakpips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Profile-of-New-TTP-Chief-Mufti-Noor-Wali-Mehsud-Challenges-and-Implications.pdf>

¹⁸ Abdul Sayed, Amira Jadoon, “Understanding Tehrik –e- Taliban Pakistan’s unrelenting posture”, *GW Program on Extremism*, August 16, 2022. Accessible at: <https://extremism.gwu.edu/tehrick-e-taliban-pakistan-posture>

¹⁹ Salman Rafi Sheikh, “TTP on verge of a mini-Islamic emirate in Pakistan”, *Asia Times*, June 7, 2022. Accessible at: <https://asiatimes.com/2022/06/ttp-on-verge-of-a-mini-islamic-emirate-in-pakistan/>

massive attacks on the armed forces personnel across the country.²⁰ Just days after it announced an end to the ceasefire, TTP killed three policemen in northern Pakistan. Another TTP-led attack in 2022 was on the counter-terrorism centre on December 18, killing at least 8 Pakistan policemen.²¹

Since then, TTP has been actively targeting Pakistan's security forces. According to the Center for Research and Security (CRSS) report, the number of attacks and fatalities has increased this year compared to 2022. The Pakistan areas bordering Afghanistan have suffered 92% of all fatalities. The report also shows that in the first nine months of 2023, Pakistan's security forces lost at least 386 personnel, 36 % of all fatalities.²²

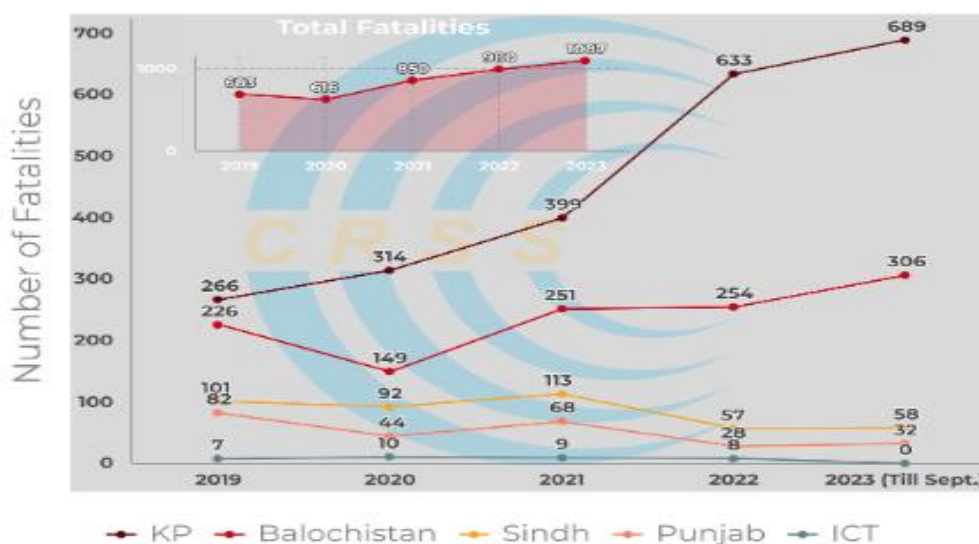


Figure 1. Number of Fatalities and Areas Affected by Militant Violence.²³

²⁰ “Pakistan Taliban Ends ceasefire with Government, Threatens New Attacks”, *Aljazeera*, November 28, 2022. Accessible at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/28/pakistan-taliban-ends-ceasefire-with-govt-threatens-new-attacks>

²¹ Ayaz Gul, “Militants Take Pakistani Officers Hostage at Counterterrorism Detention Center,” *Voice of America*, December 18, 2022. Accessible at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/militants-take-pakistani-officers-hostage-at-counterterrorism-detention-center-/6881580.html>

²² Ayaz Gul, “Report: Surge in Terrorism Kills More Than 700 Pakistanis”. *Voice of America*, September 30, 2023. Accessible at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/report-surge-in-terrorism-kills-more-than-700-pakistanis/7291609.html>

²³ “Security Forces losses Hit 8-year high in first 9 months of 2023”, *CRSS Security Report, Center for Research and Security Studies*, September 30, 2023. Accessible at: <https://crss.pk/security-forces-losses-hit-8-year-high-in-first-9-months-of-2023-q3-records-57-surge-in-violence-crss-security-report/>

Pakistan has witnessed a high number of attacks in August 2023. In a single month, 99 incidents were reported across the country, which makes the highest number in any single month since November 2014.²⁴

Initially, as a principal backer of the Taliban, Pakistan harbored hopes that the group's ascent to power in Afghanistan would afford it the strategic leverage it had long sought, particularly in relation to its regional competitor, India. Pakistan also anticipated that the Afghan Taliban's influence could be leveraged to neutralize the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) threat. Contrary to these expectations, the situation has evolved quite differently.

The Taliban and TTP share a deep-rooted alliance that is not easily severable. United Nations reports estimate that between 3,000 and 5,500 TTP fighters are currently based in Afghanistan. Over the past two decades, TTP has not only supported the Taliban but has also offered sanctuary to the group.²⁵ This intricate relationship complicates Pakistan's strategic calculations and undermines its initial optimism regarding the benefits of the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan.

Another significant threat confronting Pakistan is the intricate network of alliances that TTP maintains with other militant organizations and transnational extremist groups. Notable among these are Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA) and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), which operate under the TTP umbrella.²⁶ The ideological leanings of these groups closely align with those of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS or Daesh) and Al-Qaeda. These affiliations have resulted in numerous attacks targeting religious and ethnic minorities, particularly Shiites, in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Furthermore, the rise of Daesh in the region has led to a migration of members from these groups to Daesh's ranks. Recruitment for both Daesh and Al-Qaeda has been notably active within these areas and among these groups. This complex web of affiliations and ideologies poses a grave challenge not only to the Pakistani government but also has far-reaching implications for regional stability, affecting countries like Iran, Central Asian nations, and India.²⁷

²⁴ "Militant attacks surge in Pakistan, highest in any month since 2014", *Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies*, September 01, 2023. Accessible at: <https://www.picss.net/articles/militant-attacks-surge-in-pakistan-highest-in-any-month-since-2014/>

²⁵ Jeff Seldin, "How Afghanistan's Militant Groups are Evolving under Taliban Rule", *Voice of America*, March 20, 2022. Accessible at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/how-afghanistan-s-militant-groups-are-evolving-under-taliban-rule/6492194.html>

²⁶ Bill Roggio, "Pakistani Taliban kills scores in mosque bombing in Peshawar", *Long War Journal*, January 30, 2023. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2023/01/pakistani-taliban-kills-scores-in-mosque-bombing-in-peshawar.php>

²⁷ Farhan Zahid, "Islamic State –Pakistan Growing Network" *Washington Institute*, January 30, 2017. Accessible at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-state-pakistan-growing-network>

Like Al Qaeda, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan has always called the Pakistan government, a puppet and a spy and emphasised that Pakistan is working for the interests of the US and China. Therefore, there have been many attacks on Chinese citizens and workers working on China's developmental projects in Pakistan.²⁸

In the same way, the access of TTP and its subordinate groups to modern weapons is another serious threat. In some of the videos released by this organisation, it is seen that these fighters have access to the weapons left behind by the American and NATO forces in Afghanistan.²⁹ After the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, a massive cache of weapons and military ammunition of these forces fell into the hands of the Taliban. Therefore, due to the deep connection between the Taliban and other terrorist organisations, including the TTP, there is a strong possibility that these weapons and ammunition are being used against the Government of Pakistan and the interests of other countries in the region. There are many concerns amid Pakistan's prevailing chaotic political and economic situation that the TTP is expanding its operation with impunity in cooperation with other transnational factions (e.g. Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent) and further weakening the Government of Pakistan. In such a situation, Pakistan's weapons of mass destruction (e.g. nuclear weapons) could fall into the hands of these terrorist groups. Although this scenario has a remote possibility, it has a dangerous potential that can threaten the whole world.

CONCLUSION

Since its emergence in Pakistan's ever-growing militant landscape in 2007, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) initially aimed to topple the Pakistani government and establish an Islamic State. This objective was somewhat subdued during the US military presence in Afghanistan, as the group shifted its focus towards cooperation with the Afghan Taliban. However, the recent withdrawal of US forces and the Afghan Taliban's ascent to power have led to two significant shifts in TTP's strategy. First, the group is now more intent on modelling an Islamic Emirate in Pakistan after the newly established Afghan regime. Second, it increasingly concentrates on organised attacks against the Pakistani government, posing a severe challenge to the state.

While Pakistan has long-standing ties with the Afghan Taliban, it finds itself in a precarious position, unable to exert significant pressure on the group to sever its relationship with TTP. This

²⁸ Adnan Aamir, "Pakistani Taliban's 'shadow province' threatens China BRI projects", *Nikkei Asia*, June 21, 2023

²⁹ "TTP Releases new video of training" *ANI News*, August 23, 2022. Accessible at:

<https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/pakistan-proscribed-group-ttp-releases-new-videos-of-training-with-us-weapons-from-afghanistan20220823221245/>

is due to the deep-rooted connections between the two entities over the past two decades. Additionally, TTP's expanding influence and its alliances with other militant organisations have complicated matters for Pakistan. The once-clear distinction between 'good Taliban' and 'bad Taliban,' Pakistan has maintained since 2007, is becoming increasingly blurred. Amidst this backdrop, TTP has capitalised on the power vacuum left by the Afghan Taliban, gaining greater operational freedom. Concurrently, Pakistan is grappling with complex economic, political, and social challenges, hampering its ability to counter groups like TTP effectively. This confluence of factors will likely embolden TTP, enabling it to execute more significant and devastating attacks against the Pakistani government.



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The views expressed in this article are personal.

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