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Policy Brief

Behind the veil of
Tehrike–Taliban Pakistan:
Dynamics of Afghan–
Pakistani relations

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The March 16 terrorist attack in Waziristan, has deteriorated the rather thin relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Soon after, On March 18, 2024, both sides of Durand Line exchanged with a military strikes on the targets of each other's territory. Shahboz Sharif's government blamed the Taliban government for allegedly cosying up with Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and carrying out [recent attack in Pakistan's soil](#). Such a bold move could be interpreted as flexing military muscle since newly elected prime minister of Pakistan has finally got over rather difficult elections. Pakistan's such a decisive move appears to be an acme of worsening relations between the neighbours therefore, this incident seems to be a tip of the iceberg the beneath of which could potentially transcend current events and go deeper where Islamabad's political disappointment of Taliban lies.

Pakistan's disappointment

To some extent, Pakistan might genuinely believe that it played principal role in Taliban's subsequent victory over the allied forces in Afghanistan. Therefore, Islamabad has so far been striving to create a friendly government in Kabul since, there are so many at stake considering Islamabad's political, security, economic and trade relations with Afghanistan.

However, the Taliban government's contemporary behaviour towards Islamabad can by no means be satisfactory to [Pakistan](#). Political elites in Islamabad appear to have a deep consensus over the Taliban's potential desire for being independent and avoiding any external pressure. This situation might have given rise to an avoidance of Pakistan from recognizing Taliban government.

Islamabad seems to deeply believe that current government in Kabul is [providing assistance](#) to the Tehrike-Taliban Pakistan, which have intensified its activities, especially during the general elections. Actually, Pakistan's recent border airstrikes appears to be an accumulation of an enduring disappointment of Kabul. For while, the government of Sharif has been busy

with an arduous election process. However, having consolidated its power, the newly-elected prime minister has decided to deal with the destructive forces in the country. Furthermore, Islamabad believed that the Taliban's alleged [interference](#) into the internal affairs of Pakistan on top of its complete "U-turn" from Pakistan has been unprecedented development which Islamabad apparently failed to anticipate.

Islamabad's political pressure on the Taliban mixed with its other coercive measures including "artificially" [closing trade routes](#) passing through its territory further have further infuriated the Taliban. Therefore, the March 18 incident might just be a spark of a larger political conflict between the parties.

Changing priorities?

There has been a quite obvious change seems to be underway in contemporary Taliban's governing strategy. Taliban has probably accepted the fact that for successfully running the country it will definitely need to bring about some level of change in its behaviour. Therefore, as soon as it has taken over entire Afghanistan, despite not being recognised, Taliban has been pushing proactive foreign policy, first of all towards its immediate neighbours.

The Taliban's proactive foreign policy could be stemmed from fear of being overly dependent on a single stakeholder such as Pakistan, rather than opportunity driven one representing the entire afghan communities' interests.

The geography of the Taliban's proactive diplomacy:

1. Northward
2. Eastward
3. Westward
4. Southward (possibly India)

Northward – Taliban has been improving its relations with Central Asian Republics (CAR) in various spheres including [diplomatic, trade and logistics](#). Thus, contrary to the widespread conventional beliefs about Afghanistan potentially being a safe haven for terrorism and exporter of a

radical ideology elsewhere have not sustained. This in turn, created convenience for CAR to further improve their relations with Taliban.

Eastward - Intensified Taliban – China diplomatic exchanges could also be looked at through the lens of deteriorated Taliban-Pakistan affairs. Obviously, at the early stage of the Taliban rule, Chinese seemed to be relying exclusively on Pakistan for its Afghanistan affairs. However, it has changed overtime due partially to the worsening relationship between Pakistan and the Taliban government in Afghanistan. This, in turn, might have been pushed Beijing to build [its own approach](#) towards Afghanistan, essentially based on directly engaging with the Taliban itself rather than relying on any third party, in this case Pakistan. Increasingly frozen relations between Taliban and Islamabad have potentially created a room for China to get directly engaged with the Taliban.

Westward - Kabul is establishing [relations with Azerbaijan](#), which could provide a corridor to the European market and Turkiye. In the Arab world, Qatar appears to be a clear supporter of the Taliban. Namely, Doha became a negotiating platform for the Taliban with the international community.

Southward – deteriorating relations with Pakistan due mostly to Islamabad’s political and economic pressure as well as reluctance to treat Taliban as an equal partner might eventually trigger the Taliban to seek closer relations with India.

It’s important to note that Pakistan’s existing rather inferior approach towards Taliban might probably be the result of Taliban’s vanishing interest to being a stark “listener” of Pakistan. In another words, Islamabad’s clear unwillingness to recognise the Taliban government can also be perceived as a gesture of politically reducing the status of the Taliban and still regarding it as a movement not a full-fledged government of Afghanistan.

In its relations with Pakistan, the Taliban perhaps is using Tehrike-Taliban Pakistan as a political leverage. Thus, Kabul wants to show that the

country is not the “little brother” of Islamabad and can influence the internal affairs of Pakistan. Through the TTP, Kabul wants to force Islamabad to recognize the second Taliban government and treat it as an equal partner. However, Islamabad’s reluctance to accept the existing status quo increases tension and could lead to a major political scandal.

TTP challenge

Islamabad’s accusations of Kabul on supporting Tehrike-Taliban Pakistan might possibly give rise to the idea that the TTP is becoming a source of animosity between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

TTP was founded to achieve absolute eradication of the political system in Pakistan which they consider not completely Islamic, but as the heir to the British system as well as creation of a true Islamic emirate in Pakistan based on pure Sharia. In this regard, there are certain ideological resemblances between TTP and the Taliban government’s ideological leaders.

In the long run, constant animosity between Pakistan and the Taliban government over the TTP question could potentially extend into [involving other actors](#) and turn TTP into a destructive force in the interests of larger external forces. In any case, the TTP’s manipulation by both actors might not necessarily solve some of the deep-seated fundamental issues in the region such as the Durand Line and Pushtunistan as the TPP is itself seemingly a “dark horse” whose future actions are complex and difficult to predict.

Conclusion

To conclude, the March 18 clash appears to be mere surface of more fundamental problems both sides of a Durand Line are experiencing today therefore, the deepest disagreement seems to rest on questions of loyalty, recognition and political status.

In addition to the Pakistan’s obvious economic coercion against Taliban as well as Islamabad’s clear reluctance towards the question of political recognition has infuriated Taliban. All these factors combined with the Taliban’s rather unusual strive for creating alternative partners have

contributed to the Taliban's slow distancing from Islamabad thus, eventually gave birth to a proactive diplomacy.

Speaking of TTP, it is important to note that the transformative nature of Afghan-Pakistan relations is appeared to be greatly influenced by the Taliban's alleged interference in internal affairs of Pakistan through manipulating TTP.