



**INSTITUTE OF  
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

**web:** [www.issi.org.pk](http://www.issi.org.pk)  
**phone:** +92-920-4423, 24  
**fax:** +92-920-4658

## Issue Brief

# Pak-Afghan Relations After the Devastating Terror Attacks in Pakistan

**Amina Khan,** Research Fellow, ISSI

February 23, 2017



On February 17, 2017 the Pakistan Army carried out targeted attacks on Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JUA) and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) hideouts located across the border in Afghanistan chiefly in Nangahar and Kunar. In particular, a training camp and four other terrorist hideouts belonging to the Jamaat-ul-Ahrar allegedly run by the group's deputy commander, Adil Bacha were destroyed.<sup>1</sup> More than a dozen JUA fighters including a prominent JUA commander, Rehman Baba, known for training suicide bombers and young terrorists was also killed.<sup>2</sup> The Afghan government also acknowledged that JUA camps were targeted in the Lalpur district of Nangarhar province and Sarkano in Kunar province.<sup>3</sup>

The move comes after a wave of terror attacks took place in Pakistan over a four day period by the JUA and the Islamic State (ISI). The spate of terror began with a suicide bombing in Lahore on February 13 which killed at least 13 people and wounded 83 others and subsequent suicide attack in Ghalanai in the Mohmand Agency on February 15, 2017 in which five people, three Levies and two civilians including a schoolteacher were killed. Prior to this, two blast took place in Baluchistan on February 7 and 13 respectively in which four persons were killed. However, the most devastating attack took place on February 16, 2017 at the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan in which at least 80 people were killed and scores injured. The Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack. A few days later the JUA claimed responsibility for an attack on sessions court in Charsadda on February 21 which killed seven people, and 21 injuries<sup>4</sup> which marked the sixth in a string of major assaults across Pakistan.<sup>5</sup>

Apart from targeting TTP and JUA militant camps in Afghanistan, Afghan Embassy officials were called at the General Headquarters (GHQ) where they were given a list of 76 terrorists hiding in Afghanistan. Simultaneously, the Pakistani military launched an operation across the country to crack down on militants in which so far more than 100 suspected militants have been killed.<sup>6</sup> The military also launched a 'search and strike' operation in FATA, primarily in Khyber (Shalman area), Orakzai, Kurram, North Waziristan (Wucha Bibi) area, as well as in Bannu and Peshawar in which more than a dozen militants were killed.<sup>7</sup> Additionally 4,000 tribesmen from Shinpokh and Samsay villages of Shalman and 400 households in the Samsai area of the Khyber agency have been evacuated as a result of the military operation.

Besides the internal crackdown on militants and beefing up security throughout the country, Pakistan not only deployed additional FC troops along its border with Afghanistan, but also decided to close its border with Afghanistan at Torkham and Chaman. The Afghan government was informed that "no cross-border or unauthorised entry will be allowed into Pakistan from Afghanistan for an indefinite period of time."<sup>8</sup> Subsequently, authorities issued shoot-at-sight orders for those found trying to cross over.<sup>9</sup> Pakistan's Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, highlighted that enhanced security arrangements at the Pak-Afghan border were meant to fight all terrorists, regardless of their affiliation.<sup>10</sup>

As a result of the measures taken by Pakistan, the Afghan government "formally registered its protest over the firing of rockets by Pakistani troops."<sup>11</sup> Deputy Foreign Minister Hekmat Karzai summoned Pakistan's envoy in Kabul to "protest over cross-border shelling by Pakistani forces and accused Pakistan of firing rockets into the Lal Pur area of eastern Nangarhar province and other areas which resulted in the displacement of people."<sup>12</sup> He also conveyed Kabul's "concerns at the closure of the Torkham gate and the arrest of 150 Afghan refugees in Islamabad and Torkham".<sup>13</sup> Subsequently Afghanistan's defence ministry spokesman Dawlat Waziri called for efforts to find a diplomatic resolution of the issue, yet, if diplomacy failed, he said Afghanistan maintains the right to use "all its internal, regional and international power in response to Pakistan's actions" and retaliate."<sup>14</sup> While Pakistan's actions drew vehement opposition from Afghanistan, Pakistani officials stated that the strikes were carried out against militant groups "in an area where Afghan authorities have no control." It was clarified that Pakistan had no intention of violating the sovereignty of Afghanistan, nor targeting the Afghan army or the Afghan people"<sup>15</sup>

Pakistan has long been calling for border management and has made several attempts to explore options for workable and practical solutions through formal negotiations, however successive Afghan governments have been less forthcoming. After the US disengagement and subsequent ANSF takeover of security in Afghanistan (including areas that border Pakistan), there has been a sharp rise in cross-border shelling, and attacks emanating from Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup> Apart from cross-border shelling, the alleged refuge given by Afghanistan to the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) including Mullah Fazlullah Baluch, as well as insurgent groups<sup>17</sup> has been a serious issue of concern for Pakistan. The provinces of Kunar, Nuristan,<sup>18</sup> Paktika, Gardaiz, Nangarhar and Pakista have become the TTP's launching pads for cross border attacks into Pakistan.<sup>19</sup> It is estimated that in the 2012 alone, the TTP were responsible for more than 368 attacks<sup>20</sup> across the border on Pakistani check posts in Chitral, Upper and Lower Dir, and the Kurram and Bajaur agencies in FATA.<sup>21</sup> Apart from targeting check posts, the TTP have also launched major attacks in Pakistan, including the attack on the **Pakistani air force base**, Badhaber in Peshawar, in September 2015 and the attack on the Army Public School in December 2015 which left 140 children dead.<sup>22</sup>

Pakistan has repeatedly asked Afghan authorities to take action against the TTP, splinter groups like the JUA and their hideouts, as well as adopt joint border initiatives, however, Afghan authorities have been less forthcoming. Instead, they have accused Pakistan of “pushing a major series of global terrorist networks into Afghanistan<sup>23</sup> as a result of the Operation Zarb-e-Azb, launched in 2014 by the Pakistani army against the TTP in 2014. For Pakistan, border management has become even more pivotal after the success it has achieved as a result of Operation Zarb-e-Azb which is in its final stage currently been fought in the Khyber agency.

Despite repeated attempts to achieve joint border management and requests to take action against militant groups and their hideouts, including a list of names of 76 terrorists, Afghanistan has failed to comply and has instead allowed the TTP and JUA to carry out attacks against Pakistan from its soil. As a result, non-compliance from the Afghan side has prompted Pakistan since its creation in 1947, and for the first time in its bilateral ties with Afghanistan, to implement border rules. These include the construction of numerous infrastructures (gates at Torkham, Chaman, Arandu in Chitral, Ghulam Khan in North Waziristan, Angoor Adda in South Waziristan, Newa Pass in Mohmand, Gursal in Bajaur, and Kharlachi in Khurram.<sup>24</sup> Valid documents for both Afghans and Pakistanis moving across the border will also now be required. From January 1, 2017, all Pakistani and Afghan citizens would require valid travel to travel to Afghanistan, with the exception of residents of Landikotal who would continue to travel to

Afghanistan under the easement rights as their 'rahdari' (permit) would remain valid for crossing the Pak-Afghan border.<sup>25</sup> As a result of the measures taken, terrorist safe havens in FATA have largely been eliminated<sup>26</sup> and overall violence in Pakistan (with the exception of the latest attacks) has significantly reduced.<sup>27</sup>

While Pakistan continues to implement its crackdown on militants, the recent reassurance from the Afghan Ambassador in Pakistan, Dr Omar Zakhiwal of addressing Pakistan's concerns over the presence of 'terrorist sanctuaries' in Afghanistan is a welcoming development and just may help in reducing tensions between the two countries. Dr Zakhiwal made the statement during a meeting with Prime Minister's Adviser on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz and senior military officials in Islamabad on February 20, 2017. In a tweet, Dr Zakhiwal stated that as a result of the recent interactions at the Foreign Office and GHQ, there would be a " quick de-escalation of the current tension and the creation of a more positive environment for responding to each other's concerns and grievances in a cooperative manner. We have agreed tentatively on a path forward."<sup>28</sup>

The Afghan governments proposal to "take forward the mutual coordination for result-oriented efforts against terrorism"<sup>29</sup> was welcomed by the civilian and military leadership in Pakistan. Afghanistan's overture appear to have cooled tempers as one noticed a more accommodating, and to some extent pacifying response from General Qamar Javed Bajwa who expressed that "Pakistan and Afghanistan have fought against terrorism and shall continue this effort together."<sup>30</sup> He also called for "effective border coordination and cooperation with Afghan security forces to prevent cross-border movement of terrorists, including all types of illegal movement".<sup>31</sup>

While it is hoped that relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan will improve and that both countries can find and implement measures that address the concerns of both countries, unless and until their contentious bilateral issues are addressed, relations will continue to be strained. While Pakistan has handed a list of 76 terrorists hiding in Afghanistan, Kabul too has handed Pakistan the names of 85 Taliban and Haqqani Network leaders.<sup>32</sup> For far too long, both countries have wittingly or unwittingly outsourced the security of their joint border to militant groups and elements whose activities have been detrimental to the vital interests of both Pakistan and Afghanistan. This policy has had a devastating effect on both countries and should no longer be promoted. Both states seem to forget that the problems and challenges confronting Afghanistan and Pakistan are multiple and mutual,

and, therefore require a common approach based on trust. Yet to date, both countries' policies towards each other, for the most part, have been vague, conflicting, and shrouded in ambiguity and suspicion.

Both Pakistan and Afghanistan need to realise that the geopolitical realities are not the same as they used to be. Regional dynamics have changed. There are now more players and new actors that have taken centre stage with new realities. Therefore, there needs to be a realisation and acceptance on both sides to face and own up to the prevailing ground realities. For one, the vicious blame game and mistrust of the past must not be allowed to resurface. Blaming each other for all the ills in Pakistan and Afghanistan respectively is not only naïve, but also counter-productive, and derails improvement in relations between both countries. Both Pakistan and Afghanistan need to take ownership of their responsibilities and failures and should define the parameters of their bilateral relationship by working further to overcome differences between the two states. As a starter, they could focus on those issues that stalled negotiations in the first place - particularly on the proposed Strategic Partnership Agreement, peace talks, Mou between the ISI and NDS, and joint border initiatives. But as an immediate measure, there needs to be a willingness on both sides to move and think beyond the past and focus on addressing the key irritants between them with the aim to find pragmatic and plausible solutions that addresses their concerns and maximises their interests. Until then relations will continue to go downhill.

#### Notes and References:

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Naveed Siddiqui, "Army attacks suspected militant hideouts near Pak-Afghan border," *Dawn*, February 18, 2017
  - <sup>2</sup> "Pak-Afghan border: Trainer of suicide bombers killed in artillery shelling," *Express Tribune*, February 19, 2017
  - <sup>3</sup> "Pakistan army pounds more border hideouts," *Dawn*, February 19, 2017 05:59am
  - <sup>4</sup> Mureeb Mohmand & Tahir Khan, "Seven killed, 21 injured as sessions court in Charsadda comes under attack," *Express Tribune*, February 21, 2017
  - <sup>5</sup> "Army chief Bajwa vows revenge for Sehwan attacks: 'No more restraint'" *Dawn*, February 16, 2017
  - <sup>6</sup> "More than 100 'militants' killed in intelligence-based operations, claims ISPR," *Dawn*, February 17, 2017
  - <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
  - <sup>8</sup> [https://twitter.com/OfficialDGISPR?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/OfficialDGISPR?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw).
  - <sup>9</sup> "Shoot-on-sight orders over illegal entry from Afghanistan", *Dawn*, February 20, 2017
  - <sup>10</sup> Kamran Yousaf, "Afghanistan assures action against "terrorist sanctuaries" on its soil," *Express Tribune*, February 20, 2017
  - <sup>11</sup> Pak-Afghan border: Trainer of suicide bombers killed in artillery shelling, *Express Tribune*, February 19, 2017
  - <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*
  - <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
  - <sup>14</sup> "Kabul reacts angrily to targeting of TTP, JuA camps on Afghan soil," *Express Tribune*, February 19, 2017
  - <sup>15</sup> Kamran Yousaf, "Afghanistan assures action against "terrorist sanctuaries" on its soil," *Express Tribune*, February 20, 2017

- <sup>16</sup> "Afghan cross-border shelling injures two FC personnel," *The Express Tribune*, October 22, 2013, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/620886/afghan-cross-bordershelling-injures-two-fc-personnel/>.
- <sup>17</sup> Rahimullah Yusufzai, "Asylum-seeking rebels," *The News*, February 23, 2011, <http://www.thenews.com.pk/TodaysPrintDetail.aspx?ID=32540&Cat=9>.
- <sup>18</sup> Jon Boone, "Pakistani Taliban selects hardliner Mullah Fazlullah as new leader," *The Guardian*, November 8, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/07/pakistani-taliban-mullah-fazlullah-leader-malala-yousafzai>
- <sup>19</sup> Ammarah Rabbani, "Prospects of Hostilities on Western Border for Pakistan," The Conflict Monitoring Center, <http://www.cmpck.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/cba-complete-report.pdf>.
- <sup>20</sup> Ammarah Rabbani, "Prospects of Hostilities on Western Border for Pakistan," The Conflict Monitoring Center, <http://www.cmpck.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/cba-complete-report.pdf>.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> "TTP bases in Afghanistan: Evidence mounts on Afghan origin of Badhaber attack," *Express Tribune*, September 20, 2015.
- <sup>23</sup> "Pakistan 'pushing a major series of global terrorist networks' onto Afghanistan: Ghani" *Express Tribune*, March 21, 2015
- <sup>24</sup> Iftikhar Firdous, "Pak-Afghan border to shed 'porous' tag soon" *Express Tribune*, May 31, 2016
- <sup>25</sup> Ashrafuddin Pirzada, "Many Pakistanis return from Afghanistan as visa restriction deadline ends," *The News*, January 01, 2017
- <sup>26</sup> Marhherita Stancati and Habib Khan Totakhil, *Wall Street Journal*, January 28, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/militants-driven-from-pakistan-flock-to-afghan-towns-1422490098>
- <sup>27</sup> "Military operations helped reduce violence in Pakistan: US defence intel chief," *Express Tribune*, February 11, 2016.
- <sup>28</sup> Dr Omar Zakhilwal, <https://twitter.com/DrOmarZakhilwal/status/833674679403560960>, February 20, 2017.
- <sup>29</sup> "Islamabad, Kabul to fight terrorism together: COAS," *Daily Times*, February 21, 2017.
- <sup>30</sup> ISPR Press Release 82/2017, <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/C5GUJ97WEAEJW2F.jpg:large>
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> Afghanistan hands list of terrorists to Pakistan, *Samaa*, February 20, 2017, <https://www.samaa.tv/pakistan/2017/02/afghanistan-hands-list-of-terrorists-to-pakistan/>