



BLA'S DESIGNATION: A SIGN OF IMPROVING PAK-US RELATIONS

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In a recent move by United States in July 2019, the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) has been listed as Specially Designated Global Terrorist Group (SDGT). The decision by US was highly appreciated by Pakistan as this move will limit the terrorist activities of this Indian-sponsored group in Baluchistan.¹ BLA is a global terrorist organization listed by Pakistan, United Kingdom and United States. Initially, the group started terrorist activities on small scale in Baluchistan in 2004 against the State of Pakistan. Its main area of operation during the past was Baluchistan with involvement in attacks against innocent civilians, security forces and foreigners. Pakistan has already declared BLA as a proscribed organization since 2006. However, this terrorist outfit is still managing to survive and is responsible for several attacks in Baluchistan and across the country. Pakistani security agencies have been fighting terrorists in Baluchistan for over two decades ago now. The problem of militancy by BLA attracted international attention when it targeted both Chinese personnel and projects under China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in Pakistan. Recent attacks included bombing of the Chinese Consulate in Karachi in November 2018 and Gwadar Hotel attack in May 2019.

¹ Syed Irfan Raza, "BLA Declared Terrorist Organisation, Banned", *DAWN News*, April 10, 2006

According to a statement by Pakistan's Foreign Office, this designation of BLA as a terrorist organization will minimize its capabilities to operate in Pakistan on external sources.² The list by US will help in handling the perpetrators, organizers, external supporters and financiers, and those who are trying to glorify BLA terrorist activities against Pakistan. While Pakistan has appreciated this move by US, an important question here is: what has actually changed the circumstances under which US has taken this decision, considering the fact that just a few months ago, Washington was threatening Islamabad with sanctions.³ In addition to this, the pressure exerted on Pakistan in terms of FATF in the same context cannot be ignored. To this end, the move seems to be a forward step in the form of possible continuing collaboration between US and Pakistan on the Afghan peace process, as well as countering BLA's malicious presence in Baluchistan which was of great concern to Pakistan, particularly with regard to its use by India for covert operations inside the country. This listing is also part of US acknowledgement of Pakistan's efforts for peace in the region, and will also endorse and legitimize Pakistan's actions to curb terrorism and extremism across the country.

US designation of BLA as a terrorist organization through Executive Order 13224 is noteworthy.⁴ The Executive Order 13224 was signed by former President Bush on September 23, 2001, and it gives power to the US to impede terrorism financing and funding, and lead international efforts to end the evil of terrorist activity across the globe. This particular order authorizes the Secretary of the State in consultation with Attorney General to designate individuals and entities who are involved in acts of terror. Once designated, the authorities take actions to freeze their assets and also direct US financial institutions to block such entities. These actions freeze all the assets and blocks the donations to such entities from their sympathizers. BLA's designation on the SDGT list will definitely break the chain of its international donors/ contributors, and which will help in securing Pakistan's security environment.

From Pakistan's perspective, the issue of militants in Baluchistan in the form of BLA finding safe havens in Afghanistan is a great matter of concern. Such safe havens are used to destabilize security situation in Baluchistan and also undermine the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and other Chinese funded development projects across the country. The current successful pace of peace process in Afghanistan has increased the influence of Pakistan in the region. Geographically, India does not share direct border with Baluchistan, so the avenue of its intervention is only via

² Zia Ur Rehman, "What's behind the US decision to proscribe a Baloch militant group?", *TRT WORLD*, July 19, 2019, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/what-s-behind-the-us-decision-to-proscribe-a-baloch-militant-group-28363>

³ "US threatens to unveil anti-Pakistan actions", *The Express Tribune*, January 3, 2018.

⁴ US Department of State Official Website <https://www.state.gov/executive-order-13224/>

Afghanistan which makes the scenario more complex to understand. India is totally dependent upon the Afghan route to plant insurgency in Pakistan. Now, when Pakistan's relevance to the Afghan peace process has become crucial, it will be very difficult for India to support and train BLA insurgents in Afghanistan with the same pace as it was doing in the past.

The involvement of missing persons in Gwadar attack makes the situation little more complex than other cases. Missing persons appearing in the form of militants endorsed Pakistan's stance that BLA has not only established sanctuaries regionally, but also may collaborate with Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) to create hurdles in counter terrorism efforts by Pakistan. BLA's involvement in cross-border terrorism may be noted from the fact that its key commander Aslam Achu was killed in a suicide bombing in Kandahar province of Afghanistan.⁵ Aslam was the mastermind of the Karachi Chinese consulate attack and was hiding in Afghanistan. It has been almost more than two years that Indian PM Modi first talked about Baloch separatist movement in a independence day Speech,⁶ and which had confirmed what Pakistan was saying about the RAW's involvement in Baluchistan in the form of making Hybrid Warfare against Pakistan. This speech had created problems for RAW sponsored BLA militants, and it is highly probable that Aslam was killed in a false flag operation by India to pin blame on Pakistan. US designation of BLA as a Specially Designated Terrorist Group depicts Pakistan's major victory on the diplomatic front especially at the time when the country is being assessed by Financial Action Task Force and government is facing immense pressure. The timing of this move is also noticeable as couple of weeks before, the visit of Prime Minister Imran Khan to US shows that relations between the two states are improving in an upward trajectory since 2011. Designation of BLA is certainly a step towards that direction for bridging gaps and overcoming trust deficit.

⁵ Jalal Noorzai, "Mastermind of Chinese consulate attack killed in Afghanistan" , *SAMAA TV*, December 25, 2018, <https://www.samaa.tv/news/2018/12/mastermind-of-chinese-consulate-attack-killed-in-afghanistan/>

⁶ People of Balochistan, Kashmir thanked me: Modi on India's Independence Day, *DAWN News*, August 15, 2016.