

Assessing the March 2024 Pakistan Airstrikes in Afghanistan

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Introduction

On March 18, the Pakistan Air Force conducted intelligence-based airstrikes in Afghanistan, targeting alleged hideouts of the Tehreek Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Hafiz Gul Bahadur (HGB) group. According to sources, more than 12 strikes were carried out across three provinces—Paktika, Khost, and Kunar—engaging seven different locations. While the target of the strikes was TTP and HGB militants, most of those killed were family members of the militants. While it is widely believed that the airstrikes were conducted in retaliation to a terrorist attack in North Waziristan on 16 March, carried out by Jaish-e-Fursan-e-Muhammad (JFM) and Jaish-e-Omari (JeO) factions of the Hafiz Gul Bahadur group, which claimed the lives of seven soldiers, including a lieutenant colonel and a captain, it is essential to recognize that these airstrikes have a deeper historical context which is worth reiterating here.

The Historical Context Behind the Airstrikes

In August 2021, when the Afghan Taliban took over Kabul, there was widespread jubilation and a sense of victory among the strategists and policymakers of Pakistan. The jubilation was evident from the statements from the country's higher officials. For instance, the country's then Prime Minister, Imran Khan, famously heralded the Taliban's takeover as "breaking the shackles of slavery" (Muzaffar, 2021, para 6). And who can forget the smiley face of the then DG ISI, Lt. General Faiz Hameed, who, while commenting on the growing uncertainty in the aftermath of the Taliban took over, famously remarked: "Don't worry, everything will be okay" (Siddiqui, 2021, para 4).

Pakistani officials' jubilation could be attributed to specific calculations they made about the future of Afghanistan, the Afghan Taliban, and TTP and its impacts on Pakistan, specifically in the context of terrorism. The Pakistani strategists, primarily the country's military establishment, were under the impression that since the US had

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withdrawn from Afghanistan, the armed groups in Afghanistan would lose their legitimacy to fight and would stop fighting.

Consequently, they concluded, the TTP would also lose its ideological legitimacy of fighting the Pakistan state, especially considering its origin as a reaction to Pakistan's siding with the United States after the 9/11 attacks. Moreover, in case the TTP continues fighting Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban, whose return to power in Afghanistan was greatly facilitated by Pakistan, would return the favour by reining in the TTP for Pakistan (Mehsud, 2024).

However, soon, these calculations proved to be miscalculations. Neither did the TTP curtail violence within Pakistan, nor did the Afghan Taliban intervene to prevent these attacks. In contrast to what Pakistani officials had anticipated, TTP in Afghanistan became stronger since August 2021. For instance, when the TTP first appeared in 2007, it comprised around nine groups. However, since August 2021, around 47 groups have announced a merger with the proscribed group. Moreover, the TTP has also gotten its hands over modern weaponry, including the sophisticated M24 sniper rifle, M4 carbines, and the M16A4 rifle with a thermal scope (Kakakhel, 2024).

This newly acquired strength is also reflected in the growing number of attacks from the TTP in Pakistan. Since August 2021, the terrorist attacks in Pakistan have surged, with the majority of the attacks claimed by TTP. For instance, in 2021, 294 terrorist incidents were recorded in the country, a 56 percent rise from 187 incidents in 2020. In 2022, the number of terrorist incidents rose to 380; in 2023, the number rose to 645, nearly double the preceding year. A total of 1907 Pakistanis lost their lives in these attacks (Khan, 2024).

On the other hand, the Afghan Taliban have consistently made clear their unwillingness to act against the TTP. This unwillingness stems from several factors, primarily the profound ideological alignment between the two groups. For instance, when TTP emerged in 2007, it declared Mullah Muhammad Omar, the founder of the Afghan Taliban, as the spiritual leader of the group and committed its members to fight alongside the Afghan Taliban against the US in Afghanistan (Abbas, 2023, p. 182). Also, the TTP was the first militant group to celebrate the Taliban takeover of Kabul officially. Not only did it celebrate the took-over of the Taliban, but the TTP chief Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud (alias Abu Mansoor) publicly renewed his group's pledge of allegiance to the Taliban emir Hibatullah Akhundzada and pledged to continue unconditional support to the Afghan Taliban.

Moreover, there is another factor driven by pragmatic considerations that prevents the Afghan Taliban from taking action against the TTP. For instance, the Afghan Taliban greatly feared that if they took action against TTP, the group or at least factions of the group might desert to Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), which is already posing a formidable threat to the Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan. This apprehension is well-placed, especially because the TTP cadre laid the foundation stone of ISKP in 2014. It is also worth mentioning that when the establishment of ISKP was announced officially in 2015, Hafiz Saeed Khan, a key commander of TTP from ex-Fata's Orakzai Agency, was appointed as its first chief (Abbas, 2023, p. 182).

Pakistan's Response

Confronted with this grave situation, Pakistan initially sought to resolve the issue through negotiations with the Afghan Taliban, who subsequently urged Pakistan to sit and negotiate with the TTP. What ensued was a series of negotiations between Pakistan and the TTP mediated by the Afghan Taliban, specifically by the Haqqani group. These

negotiations resulted in a brief ceasefire in November 2021, which soon proved to be short-lived as the TTP unilaterally backpedaled from the agreement and launched attacks in Pakistan (Gurmani & Khan, 2021).

Following the breakdown of the negotiations, Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan underwent a significant shift. A carrot-and-stick approach characterized the new policy Pakistan pursued. The carrot element of the policy entailed supplying Kabul with humanitarian and economic assistance and advocating for greater engagement with the Taliban in international forums. Conversely, the stick component included the threat of border closures and clandestine kinetic operations conducted within Afghanistan to assassinate key TTP commanders (Ahmad, 2023).

However, the Afghan Taliban were still reluctant to take any decisive action against the TTP, with the latter continuing its assault all across Pakistan. Instead of taking action, the Afghan Taliban presented their solution to address the issue: relocating TTP fighters away from the border areas with Pakistan, for which they demanded a payment of 10 billion Pakistani rupees (Gul, 2023). The proposal increased the frustration of Pakistan's military establishment with the Afghan Taliban, with many high officials being of the view that paying for TTP fighters' relocation was nothing less than paying a ransom. Thus, Pakistan did not comply with the said demand.

The growing recalcitrance of the Afghan Taliban would drive another change in Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan. In this new policy, which is reflective of Pakistan's growing frustration with the Taliban, Pakistan added some more sticks while simultaneously shrinking the carrots. The newly added sticks are withdrawing support for the Afghan Taliban in international forums while simultaneously urging the international community to put pressure on the Afghan Taliban to stop sponsoring cross-border terrorism, the repatriation of 1.7 million illegal Afghan immigrants to Afghanistan, borders closures, and increasing kinetic operations in Afghanistan. It was precisely against this backdrop that Pakistan conducted airstrikes on March 18th as a part of its revised policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan.

Motivation and Goal Behind the Strikes

There are many theories regarding the motivations behind Pakistan's decision to carry out the airstrikes on 18th March. For instance, many analysts believed that the strikes were conducted to avenge the killings of soldiers in the March 16th suicide attack. They further stress that the strikes were carried out to dispel perceptions of a weak Pakistani state among the rivals.

However, these authors placed the strikes in Pakistan's broader strategic calculus. The authors are of the view that the 18 March airstrikes were motivated by the success of Pakistan's earlier air strikes in Iran that restored deterrence for Pakistan vis-a-vis Iran. In January this year, Pakistan conducted retaliatory airstrikes inside Iran in response to the Iranian forces' attack in Pakistan, after which the tension subsided between the two countries. The strikes in Afghanistan were conducted with the same goal as those in Iran: to restore deterrence so Pakistan could focus on other pressing issues, such as economic recovery.

Evaluation

There are multiple approaches to evaluate whether the 18 March operation was a success or failure. One such approach involves evaluating whether the operation has accomplished its intended goals. If the operation has achieved its desired goal, it can be termed a success and vice versa. By applying this criterion to the March 18th

operation, one can infer that the operation failed, as it did not achieve its goal of establishing deterrence and preventing future attacks. For instance, multiple terrorist attacks have occurred in the post airstrikes phase, of which the most consequential one was a suicide attack in Bisham that resulted in the death of 5 Chinese citizens on 26 March (Hussain, 2024).

Similarly, many experts have regarded the operation as counter-productive in the long run, especially in the context of countering terrorism. They argue that the strikes, in which civilians have also been killed, can further fan the prevailing anti-Pakistan sentiments in Afghanistan, which subsequently can be exploited by TTP and ISKP. It is worth mentioning that these concerns are not unfounded, mainly keeping in view ISKP's vehement condemnation of the airstrikes and its pledge to retaliate.

Impact Of Strikes on Regional Security

Regarding the impact of airstrikes on regional security, there is growing concern that they might negatively impact regional security. The immediate concern lies in a retaliatory response from the Afghan Taliban. Already, the airstrikes have been met with strong condemnation from Taliban officials and have prompted artillery attacks from the Taliban regime across the Pak-Afghan border region. Furthermore, there is also a growing concern that the Taliban might give a free hand to the TTP to conduct cross-border attacks in Pakistan. This, consequently, could evoke a harsh response from Pakistan, such as more airstrikes or other sort of kinetic operations inside Afghanistan. Such a sequence of events could create a vicious cycle that could lead to a protracted conflict between the two nations.

If such a scenario emerged, the region would have long-term negative security implications. A protracted conflict between Pakistan and Afghanistan could have a destabilizing impact on both countries, especially considering their precarious economic situations. Consequently, it could create a vacuum for groups like the Afghanistan-based Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) to exploit the situation and expand its reach, posing a more significant threat to regional security.

ISKP has already emerged as a security threat to many countries in the region. For instance, ISKP was responsible for the recent attack in Moscow on a concert hall that killed at least 137 people. (Burke, 2024). Similarly, the group was also linked to the January attacks in Iran, which claimed nearly 100 lives, as well as an attack on a church in Turkey. Besides, the group has a rich history of attacking targets in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Maldives (Zelin, 2023). It is pertinent to mention here that ISKP has continued to expand its operations despite active counterinsurgency efforts by the Afghan Taliban, highlighting the persistent threat it poses to regional stability. The potential escalation of conflict between Pakistan and Afghanistan, which could jeopardize the latter's counterinsurgency efforts, could further embolden ISKP and exacerbate security challenges in the broader region.

Pakistan's Considerations and Way Forward

Since August 2021, security considerations have been the predominant factor shaping Pakistan's policy toward Afghanistan. These security considerations are likely to continue to shape the country's policy toward Afghanistan in the future as well especially considering the deteriorating security situation of the country and the Afghan Taliban's reluctance to act against the TTP.

In this context, there are several policy options that Pakistan could opt for vis-a-vis Afghanistan in the future. First, there is growing anticipation that Pakistan will likely continue its policy of “added sticks and shrinking carrots” to put pressure on the Afghan Taliban, which means more coercive measures such as more airstrikes and kinetic operations inside Afghanistan, stringent border control, repatriation of remaining Afghans, and using economic leverage over Afghanistan. Notably, the Pakistani government has already devised a plan to initiate the second phase of repatriation after Ramadan, which entails the return of approximately one million documented Afghans to Afghanistan (Khan, 2024).

Secondly, Pakistan can also engage regional countries, particularly China, to put additional pressure on Kabul. China can be taken on board because the terrorist attacks in Pakistan are also harming Chinese interests and investments in the country. For instance, just a week ago, 5 Chinese were killed in a suicide attack perpetrated by TTP in the north-western part of the country. The incident happened when the convoy, carrying 5 Chinese, was on its way to Dasu, the site of a critical hydroelectric dam being constructed by a Chinese company. Moreover, TTP actions in Pakistan can also inspire Afghanistan-based anti-China groups, such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), to carry out terrorist attacks in China. It is worth mentioning that just like in the case of TTP, some segments within Afghanistan’s General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI) enjoy close relations with ETIM (Firdous & Mehsud, 2024).

China can also be involved for reconciliatory purposes with the Afghan Taliban, especially considering that reconciliation between Pakistan and Afghanistan aligns with Chinese interests. For instance, China has recently made substantial investments in both countries. The protracted conflict between the two countries could jeopardize these investments, particularly its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative. Moreover, China can also be involved in such a role because it has a history of playing it. For instance, in 2017, when relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan were at a bottom rock, China played the role of mediator and helped thaw the relations between the two (Gul, 2017).

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