

The Afghan Taliban–TTP Nexus: Evolution from the First Emirate to Post-2021

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Introduction

The relationship between the Afghan Taliban and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has been among the most consequential dynamics in South and Central Asian security for nearly three decades. Both groups are rooted in the Deobandi Islamist tradition and school of thought, and both emerged from the same socio-political milieu of Pakistani religious seminaries (madrassas), tribal borderlands, and jihadist mobilization after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, culminating in the Afghan War (1979-89). Yet, while the Afghan Taliban primarily sought to establish an Islamic emirate in Afghanistan, the TTP has waged an insurgency against the Pakistani state at the behest of the Afghan Taliban, as the TTP considers itself an extension of the Afghan Taliban. Their ties have oscillated between fraternity, operational collaboration, and strategic divergence since the TTP's formation in 2007.

From the rise of the first Taliban regime in 1996 to the post-9/11 Global War on Terror and, finally, the Taliban's triumphant return to power in Kabul in August 2021, the Afghan Taliban–TTP nexus has continually reshaped Islamist militancy and terrorism across the region, especially in Pakistan. It has tested Pakistan's counterterrorism strategies, complicated Afghanistan's search for legitimacy, and posed broader challenges for international security.

This article traces the historical evolution of this relationship. It analyzes their relationship before the formation of the TTP, i.e., the first Taliban regime (1996–2001), during two decades of insurgency and the rise of the TTP (2001–2021), and finally in the post-fall-of-Kabul period (2021–present). It concludes with analytical reflections on the ideological solidarity and strategic ambiguities that continue to define the Afghan Taliban–TTP connection and their implications for Pakistan and the wider region.

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The First Afghan Taliban Regime (1996–2001)

When the Afghan Taliban captured Kabul in September 1996, they quickly established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, which was recognized by only three countries: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. During this period, the Afghan Taliban leadership, under the supreme leader Emir ul Momineen Mullah Mohammad Omar, consolidated its rule over much of Afghanistan, imposing a strict interpretation of Sharia law.

While the TTP, as an umbrella organization, did not yet exist—it would not formally emerge until 2007, after the beginning of Pakistani military operations in former tribal districts neighbouring Afghanistan—the seeds of its future were being sown during these years. Many Pakistani militants who would later form the TTP leadership were radicalized, trained, and ideologically nurtured in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and at Al-Qaeda-run jihadi training camps. The Taliban's emirate provided safe havens for jihadi groups from around the world, especially Pakistani outfits such as Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Jaish-e-Muhammad. As Ahmed Rashid has documented, the Afghan Taliban regime encouraged these groups to use Afghanistan as a base for the Kashmir jihad (Rashid, 2010).

Cross-border tribal linkages also played a decisive role. The Pashtun belt straddling the Durand Line ensured that Afghan Taliban fighters and Pakistani militants often shared kinship and madrassa networks. Seminaries in Pakistan's tribal areas and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, such as Darul Uloom Haqqania in Akora Khattak, Nowshera district of KPK province, were already instrumental in producing tens of thousands of cadres loyal to the Taliban cause. These early years laid the foundations for what would later evolve into the TTP: a Pakistani Taliban movement inspired by and aligned with the Afghan Taliban.

Pakistan, at this stage, was a staunch supporter of the Taliban regime in Kabul. Islamabad viewed it as a friendly government that could secure strategic depth against India. Islamabad largely ignored the presence and gathering of Pakistani and foreign Islamist militants in Afghanistan. This permissive environment strengthened the embryonic Taliban–Pakistani militant nexus.

The Global War on Terror and the Rise of TTP and the Exodus

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, transformed the Taliban landscape. The Taliban regime collapsed within two months, and its leadership retreated into Pakistan's tribal areas, particularly Quetta and North Waziristan. This cross-border exodus reshaped the region's militant geography.

For the Afghan Taliban, Pakistan became the primary rear base for regrouping and launching an insurgency against U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan. The so-called Quetta Shura, Waziristan Shura, and Girdi Jungle Shura were established, and field commanders operated on both sides of the border, i.e., from sanctuaries in former FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) districts of KPK province and Baluchistan.

The Birth of TTP

The early 2000s conditions, including Pakistan's alliance with the U.S. in the Global War on Terror, military operations in FATA, and the 2007 Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) operation (Operation Silence) against Islamist militants in Islamabad, unified various Pakistani militant groups. In December 2007, Baitullah Mehsud declared the creation

of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan. Since its start, TTP has been a loose collection of groups rather than a single, unified entity.

The TTP declared its objectives as enforcing Sharia in Pakistan, waging jihad against the Pakistani military and state, and supporting the Afghan Taliban in their struggle against the US and allied forces in Afghanistan. Their objective was to remove American troops from Afghan soil and pave the way for the Afghan Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. Abbas (2008) has emphasized that the TTP emerged not only as a militant group but also as a movement reflecting deep grievances in tribal areas against the presence of the Pakistani military, while borrowing ideological and tactical inspiration from the Afghan Taliban.

Mutual Support and Operational Overlap

The Afghan Taliban and TTP had different political focuses, with one concentrating on Afghanistan and the other on Pakistan. However, they were closely connected in practice. The Afghan Taliban used Pakistani tribal areas as safe havens and often gained fighters from the TTP crossing into Afghanistan. Conversely, the TTP received training, logistical support, and ideological guidance from both the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda, along with foreign fighters from various Islamist groups. U.S. forces consistently reported that Pakistani Taliban fighters took part in cross-border attacks. Antonio Giustozzi (2009) observes that Afghanistan's insurgency grew more transnational, with the Taliban attracting fighters from throughout the region, including Pakistan.

Al-Qaeda's Bridging Role

Al-Qaeda played a crucial role as the connective tissue between the Afghan Taliban and TTP. Figures like Osama bin Laden and later Ayman al-Zawahiri cultivated ties with both movements, providing ideological justification for targeting Pakistani civilians and military targets, while remaining loyal to the Taliban emirate project. Vahid Brown and Don Rassler, in *Fountainhead of Jihad*, demonstrate how Al-Qaeda's presence in the borderlands created overlapping areas of influence and facilitated cooperation (Brown & Rassler, 2013).

Pakistan's 'Good Taliban vs. Bad Taliban' Dilemma

Pakistan faced an internal contradiction during these years. Pakistani security policymakers were unable to realize the nexus between the TTP and the Afghan Taliban and their ideological affinities. Though Pakistani forces fought against the TTP, they did not do much against the Afghan Taliban. This gave rise to the 'good Taliban vs. bad Taliban' dichotomy, where the Afghan Taliban were not touched, while the TTP were treated as existential threats.

The TTP responded with ferocity, launching some of the deadliest attacks in Pakistan's history, including the 2009 attack on the General Headquarters (GHQ) in Rawalpindi and the 2014 massacre at the Army Public School in Peshawar. Yet, despite intense counterterrorism campaigns like Operation Rah-e-Nijat and Operation Zarb-e-Azb, the TTP remained resilient, partly because of sanctuaries in Afghanistan and support from like-minded networks. By 2020, weakened by Pakistani military operations and internal splits, the TTP had survived. Its long-standing relationship with the Afghan Taliban remained intact, waiting for a shift in the regional balance of power.

Post-Fall of Kabul: 2021–Present

The TTP Resurgence

The Taliban's return to power in Kabul in August 2021 dramatically altered the regional security landscape. For the TTP, it was a moment of vindication. More than 8,000 of its fighters, imprisoned in Afghan jails, were released by the Afghan Taliban authorities. Recruitment surged, and the group expanded its operational reach inside Pakistan.

Despite formal denials, credible reports indicate that the TTP leadership operates from sanctuaries in eastern Afghanistan, particularly Kunar, Nangarhar, and Khost. Pakistan has repeatedly raised this issue with the Taliban government, but Kabul has neither expelled the TTP nor curtailed its activities. The Taliban's reluctance reflects both ideological solidarity and the practical difficulty of confronting fellow militants who once fought alongside them against US forces. Multiple UN reports have highlighted the continued presence of terrorist groups, including Al-Qaeda, in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, which indirectly supports the TTP's operations (United Nations Security Council, 2022).

Failed Peace Talks

In late 2021 and 2022, Pakistan sought to negotiate with the TTP through Afghan Taliban mediation. While temporary ceasefires occurred, talks soon collapsed when the TTP demanded the reversal of FATA's merger into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the release of all TTP prisoners, and the implementation of Sharia law. Islamabad deemed these demands unacceptable, resulting in renewed conflict. The negotiations' failure underscored the Afghan Taliban's hesitance or possible complicity in pressuring the TTP to make concessions. Moreover, Pakistan voiced its disappointment.

Escalation of Violence

Since 2022, Pakistan has witnessed a sharp escalation of TTP attacks, particularly targeting security forces in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Pakistani authorities accuse the Taliban government of harbouring and facilitating the TTP. The Afghan Taliban, in turn, maintain plausible deniability, insisting that Afghan soil will not be used against others, while tacitly tolerating TTP presence. TTP Emir Noor Wali Mehsud was openly roaming in Kabul and adamant on attacking Pakistan.

This situation has strained Pakistan–Afghanistan relations and prompted debates in Islamabad about revising its Afghanistan policy. For the Taliban, however, openly confronting the TTP risks alienating a powerful ally and fragmenting their movement at a delicate stage of governance.

Analyzing the Nexus

At the heart of the Taliban–TTP relationship lies an ideological brotherhood: both are products of the Deobandi jihadist tradition, both invoke Sharia as their goal, and both draw legitimacy from resistance narratives. Nevertheless, their strategic objectives diverge: the Afghan Taliban prioritizes governing Afghanistan, whereas the TTP aims to destabilize the Pakistani state. This creates tension: Kabul cannot openly endorse the TTP's war, but neither can it betray its ideological kin.

Moreover, the Durand Line has long been a contested boundary. The Afghan Taliban's refusal to formally recognize it as an international border complicates cooperation with Pakistan. The porous frontier allows TTP mobility, while Pakistan struggles to enforce security. This structural factor ensures the persistence of the Taliban–TTP nexus.

For Pakistan, the TTP resurgence poses an existential threat, undermining state authority in its western provinces. For Afghanistan, tolerating the TTP undermines claims of being a responsible government and damages relations with its most important neighbour. Internationally, the Taliban's inability to restrain the TTP raises concerns that Afghanistan remains a sanctuary for transnational militancy. Multiple UN reports have revealed the presence of Al-Qaeda in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The Afghan Taliban–TTP relationship is best understood as a continuum of ideological fraternity, tactical collaboration, and strategic ambiguity. From the Taliban's first emirate in the 1990s through the insurgency years of the Global War on Terror to the present post-2021 period, the nexus has shaped militancy across South Asia. For Pakistan, this relationship is among the gravest contemporary security challenges, as TTP violence escalates under the shadow of Afghan Taliban protection. For Afghanistan, refusing to confront the TTP risks international isolation and internal instability. The trajectory suggests that unless Kabul decisively severs ties with the TTP, militancy will continue to destabilize Pakistan and cast a long shadow over Afghanistan's quest for legitimacy. The Afghan Taliban and TTP may differ in political objectives, but their enduring relationship underscores the difficulty of disentangling militancy from the complex geopolitics of the Afghanistan–Pakistan frontier.

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