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Good Taliban, Bad Taliban

**Tracing the Resurgence of the Tehrik-e-Taliban
Pakistan (TTP)**

Good Taliban, Bad Taliban: Tracing the Resurgence of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

Introduction

The fall of Kabul to the Afghan Taliban in August 2021 has introduced a new era of uncertainty for regional security in South Asia. Despite the organization's pledges to the contrary, international observers have expressed concerns that the Taliban could once again transform Afghanistan into a safe haven for international terrorist organizations, as had been the case prior to the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 (Byman, 2012). The Taliban's conduct after August 2021 has also rung alarm bells in Pakistan. Although many factions of Pakistan's military and political establishment have been long-standing supporters of the Taliban (Pakistan's now-deposed Prime Minister (PM) Imran Khan, sometimes also referred to as '*Taliban Khan*', described the Taliban's victory as being synonymous with "*breaking the chains of slavery*" (quoted in Chatterjee Miller, 2021)), relations between the Taliban and Pakistan have somewhat deteriorated. This deterioration is primarily linked to the Taliban's support for the Pakistani offshoot of the Taliban, known as Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which the Taliban has claimed to have "*very good relations*" with (quoted in Vohra, 2021).

Since its founding in 2007, the TTP has emerged as the most influential and violent anti-Pakistan terrorist outfit in South Asia. Unlike its Afghan namesake, the TTP does not enjoy favorable relations with Islamabad: in a bid to emulate the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan, the TTP seeks to overthrow the Pakistani State and replace it with a *Sharia*-governed polity (Afzal, 2022). The TTP has perpetrated some of the most high-profile attacks in Pakistan in the 21st century, including the 2014 school massacre in Peshawar. The group has primarily operated out of Afghanistan since 2014 and underwent a consolidation process on the back of the Taliban's peace accord with the United States. Since the Taliban's re-ascendancy to power, the TTP has regained much of the strength it lost in the face of American and Pakistani counterterrorism operations. Afzal (2022) outlines that since the TTP has re-consolidated control over different militant factions, TTP attacks in Pakistan have grown dramatically, registering a 42% increase in 2021 when compared to 2020.

The Taliban support for the TTP indicates that the Taliban victory in Afghanistan has quickly turned out to be a pyrrhic victory for Islamabad. After taking over Kabul, the Taliban immediately released senior TTP members who had been incarcerated in Afghan prisons (Mir, 2022). Since then, Taliban forces have stopped Pakistani fencing operations along the Afghan-Pakistani border and Taliban authorities have refused to recognize the Durand Line as the *de jure* border between both countries. The Taliban has also repeatedly refused to leverage its influence over the TTP to contain the TTP's attacks in Pakistan: in 2021, a Taliban leader asserted that "*We are not Pakistan's puppets, we are independent*" (quoted in Vohra, 2021). Disappointing hopes in Pakistan, the Taliban's rise to power has thus exacerbated rather than confined Pakistan's own terrorism challenges.

Following the ousting of Khan, who had stressed that the international community would need to ultimately recognize and collaborate with the Taliban regime, and faced with continuing TTP violence, influential sections of the Pakistani security establishment also seem increasingly willing to openly challenge the TTP on Afghan soil. In April 2022, the Pakistani

Air Force conducted a series of air raids in the Afghan provinces of Khost and Kunar, where the TTP is believed to be based (Goldbaum & Padshah, 2022). In response to the strikes, which mainly killed civilians, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid lamented that such attacks were “*paving the way for enmity between Afghanistan and Pakistan. We are using all options to prevent repetitions of such attacks and calling for our sovereignty to be respected*” (quoted in Janjua, 2022). The TTP’s resurgence and its continued cooperation with the Taliban, in combination with the Taliban’s unwillingness to prioritize its relations with Pakistan over that with the TTP, consequently spell trouble for Pakistan’s national security.

This submission retraces the emergence of the TTP and examines the prospects of its operations in Pakistan. Initially, the paper discusses the TTP’s emergence post-2007 and the background of its anti-Pakistan ideology before elaborating on the TTP’s links to other dominant jihadi organizations in Afghanistan and Pakistan: the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). Lastly, the paper discusses how the TTP’s resurgence is likely to implicate Pakistan’s national security.

Emergence and ideology

The background of the TTP’s organizational emergence is linked to the support Pakistan provided to militant factions in Afghanistan during the Afghan-Soviet War and the Afghan Civil War. Under the military regime of Zia ul-Haq, Pakistan emerged as a major State sponsor for terrorist outfits in South Asia from the late 1970s onwards, initially supporting various mujahideen factions in Afghanistan before eventually focusing its support on the Taliban, which primarily recruited its fighters from the Afghan refugee population in Pakistan. A Pakistan-friendly Taliban regime in Kabul, it was assumed in Islamabad, would provide Pakistan with strategic depth vis-à-vis India. While fighting in Afghanistan, the Taliban became a *de facto* Pakistani proxy force, with the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) providing the Taliban with financial and logistical support, including safe residence, allowing Taliban fighters to be treated in Pakistani hospitals, delivering Pakistani passports to Taliban officials, and fostering business opportunities for Taliban officials in Pakistan. Through its increasingly close ties with the jihadist scene in Afghanistan and northwest Pakistan, the ISI also created and sponsored Islamist groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) which were then given access to Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) to start an anti-Indian insurgency in Indian-administered J&K from the late 1980s onwards. Alongside the intensifying fundamentalization of Pakistani society under Zia, the use of terrorist groups as proxy forces thus became a dominant component of Pakistan’s regional security policy.

The Al Qaeda and Taliban presence on the Pakistani side of the border dramatically increased following the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. After Kabul had fallen to the Taliban in 1996, the Taliban had invited Al Qaeda operatives to use Afghanistan as a safe haven from where Al Qaeda coordinated subsequent attacks against US targets, including the 1998 embassy bombings in East Africa, the 2000 attack against the *USS Cole*, and, ultimately, the 9/11 attacks. When the US and its allies invaded Afghanistan in October 2001 and rapidly dismantled the Taliban regime, many Taliban and Al Qaeda operatives fled into the tribal, Pashtun-dominated borderlands stretching over the Durand Line (International Crisis Group, 2006). In the Pakistani province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and the Federally Administered

Tribal Areas (FATA), which have since become administratively integrated into KP, Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters were welcomed by Pakistani jihadists, many of whom had fought alongside the Taliban against the Soviets and other Afghan sections and shared the Taliban's Pashtun background (Sayed, 2021). The lack of comprehensive State control on either side of the Durand Line, as well as the historical support jihadist groups had enjoyed in Pakistan, allowed the Al Qaeda-Taliban alliance to regroup in the tribal areas. This process rendered the tribal areas a main staging ground for US-led counterterrorism operations.

The escalation of US counterterrorism operations in the tribal areas and Pakistani support for these operations began to disconnect the Pakistani security establishment from some of the jihadi scene it had long supported. After 9/11, then President Pervez Musharraf faced growing international pressure to clamp down on jihadists in Pakistan (Yamin, 2015). While ramping up counterterrorism operations in the FATA, especially in North and South Waziristan, the Musharraf administration granted significant “*staging and overflight support*” for American air force and drone operators, including through the lease of an airfield in Balochistan to the CIA (Haqqani, 2016, p. 336). The ISI, elements of which continued to work with the Taliban, further provided intelligence concerning Taliban and Al Qaeda operatives to the CIA, effectively enabling the execution of these operatives on Pakistani soil by US drone operators (Khan, 2018). By becoming a main partner in the US' counterterrorism campaign, Pakistan subsequently began to undermine its long-standing relations with the region's broader jihadi scene.

Anti-government sentiment in Pakistan's jihadi community intensified in the build-up to the 2007 founding of the TTP. In July 2007, the Pakistani Army laid siege to the Red Mosque in Islamabad, in which Islamist teachers and students had barricaded themselves while advocating for the nation-wide implementation of *Sharia law* (Sayed & Hamming, 2021). When the Army stormed the mosque, it killed up to 40 Islamists (Gall & Masood, 2007). The siege on the Red Mosque was a major provocation for large parts of Pakistan's Islamist scene, already disillusioned by the State's support for the US. In the months following the siege, Pashtun jihadi leaders gathered in the FATA and held a *Shura* (Pashto for ‘council’) that culminated in the founding of the TTP. The *Shura* elected Baitullah Mehsud, a member of the Mehsud tribe, as its first Emir (Jadoon & Mahmood, 2018). As is the case with the Taliban, the TTP was founded not as a homogeneous, coherent whole, but a broader umbrella organization bringing together different factions and elements that often continued to operate independently from each other (Afzal, 2021). Despite its heavily ingrained bias towards ethnic Pashtuns, the anti-Islamist violence of the Red Mosque siege also motivated non-Pashtuns to join Al Qaeda-supervised TTP training camps in the FATA (Sayed & Hamming, 2021). The TTP concurrently became heavily sectarian by poaching experienced fighters from radical anti-Shia groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) (Sayed, 2021). The TTP's birth as a militant outfit was consequently inexorably linked with Pakistani military operations in the tribal areas, creating a heavily internalized anti-Pakistan drive. The social-ideological proximity to the Taliban simultaneously created inherent affinities between the TTP and the Taliban (and, subsequently, Al Qaeda).

Based in the tribal areas, the TTP began to radically restructure the social fabric of the local Pashtun communities by introducing and enforcing violent interpretations that aligned closely with the Taliban's vision of an Islamic society. The TTP started to systematically murder

hundreds of Pashtun tribal leaders (*maliks*) and elevated members of the social classes traditionally marginalized in the tribal system (Sayed, 2021; Walsh, 2020). In the areas where it exercised control, the TTP also began implementing a Taliban-inspired interpretation of *Sharia law*. The social presence and ideological influence of Al Qaeda and Taliban operatives rapidly de-indigenized the traditional social fabric of the tribal communities by merging traditional tribal identities with radicalized Islamist identities, resulting in the enforcement of more violent Salafi cultural norms (Walsh, 2020). The support TTP factions had initially provided for the Taliban and Al Qaeda simultaneously forged deep-rooted connections to both organizations, in the process boosting the TTP's prestige in the broader jihadi scene in South Asia.

The TTP's birth as a reaction to American and Pakistani counterterrorism operations and its close ties with the Taliban and Al Qaeda have decisively shaped its overarching ideological framework. The TTP seeks to fulfill what it interprets as the core objective of Pakistani nation and Statehood: the establishment of a 'truly' Islamic State (Sayed, 2021). By conducting a "*defensive jihad*" against Pakistan, the TTP aims to overthrow the Pakistani State (Center for International Security and Cooperation, 2022). Reflecting the TTP's close ties with the Taliban, the TTP furthermore seeks to establish a united front with the Taliban to maintain a Taliban regime in Afghanistan and expel the "*American stooges*" supposedly controlling both countries (Sayed, 2021). The TTP has partially justified its fight against the Pakistani State in reference to *Ghazwa-e-Hind*, translating into the 'fight for India'. *Ghazwa-e-Hind* is referenced in the Hadith, with Hind/India here referring not to the modern territory of India but the Indian subcontinent as a whole (Haqqani, 2016). Recently, however, the TTP's rhetoric has shifted to focus solely on 'purifying' Pakistan, potentially also to limit its official affiliation to Al Qaeda and make itself less of a target for US counterterrorism operations (Sayed, 2021). The TTP's Pakistan-specific focus emulates the Taliban's Afghanistan-specific focus, with these effectively nationalist orientations differentiating both the Taliban and the TTP from pan-Islamic groups such as Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS).

After 2007, the TTP launched a large-scale terrorist campaign in Pakistan that was defined by its indiscriminate targeting of civilians. Pakistani authorities have blamed the TTP for the 2007 assassination of PM Benazir Bhutto in Rawalpindi, a charge TTP representatives have denied (Rafiq, 2022). The TTP has repeatedly made use of suicide attacks, including an attack on a weapons factory that killed 66 people in 2008 and an attack on an American military base in Afghanistan in 2009 (Center for International Security and Cooperation, 2022). Other major attacks include the school massacre in Peshawar in 2014 (149 victims killed, mostly children and teenagers), a 2009 car bombing in Peshawar (125 victims killed), and multiple attacks on Shia mosques throughout Pakistan. Although both the Taliban and Al Qaeda officially reprimanded the TTP's indiscriminate targeting of civilians, neither organization halted its support for the TTP (Sayed & Hamming, 2021). Through its ties with both organizations, the TTP was able to raise as a highly dangerous terrorist force in Pakistan.

The TTP's stronghold in the tribal areas was eroded through the expansion of counterterrorism operations in the FATA from 2014 onwards, pushing the TTP to operate out of Taliban-held areas in eastern Afghanistan. Following the TTP's attack on an airport in Karachi in June 2014, the Pakistani Army launched Operation Zarb-e-Azb ("*sharp and cutting strike*") against TTP bases in the FATA just days later (Afzal, 2021). The Army's militarized response displaced up

to one million people and has seen the Army accused of widespread human rights abuses against the local Pashtun population by organizations such as the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) (Kakakhel & Farooq, 2015). Presumably to reduce coverage of war crimes, the Army also severely restricted the access of journalists and media outlets to the FATA (Afzal, 2022). The military offensive was effective in eroding TTP influence in the FATA, with the TTP shifting its base of operations to Taliban-controlled areas in eastern Afghanistan after 2014. The TTP is currently believed to be particularly present in the Afghan provinces of Khost, Kunar, Nangarhar, and Paktika (Mir, 2021). Kunar Province appears a particularly important base for the group: since 2020, most TTP attacks have taken place in the Bajaur Agency of KP, directly bordering Kunar Province (Sayed & Hamming, 2021). Operation Zarb-e-Azb thus failed to eradicate the TTP.

Operation Zarb-e-Azb and internal fragmentation from 2013/2014 onwards nevertheless severely weakened the TTP. In 2013, Maulana Fazlullah succeeded Hakimullah Mehsud as the TTP's first non-Mehsud Emir. Fazlullah's status as a non-Mehsud weakened the support of other TTP factions and coincided with the growing reach of ISKP, motivating a number of high-ranking defections to ISKP discussed in depth further below. Other TTP factions simply halted their support for the now Fazlullah-led TTP. Internal fragmentation because of Hakimullah Mehsud's death, in combination with the impact of Operation Zarb-e-Azb and the rise of ISKP, severely undermined the influence of the TTP. ISKP's first Emir, a TTP defector named Hafiz Saeed Khan, went as far as suggesting that ISKP would eventually absorb the TTP (Jadoon et al., 2022). The TTP's internal fragility, a consequence of its umbrella-like structure, was exposed by growing external pressure and increased competition (Sayed & Hamming, 2021). The TTP's resurgence post-2020 was subsequently hardly a foregone conclusion: after 2014, the group was close to becoming irrelevant.

The TTP has managed to consolidate itself both due to internal and external developments from 2018 onwards. With Noor Wali Mehsud, a Mehsud returned to the helm of the TTP after Fazlullah was killed in a US drone strike in 2018. Noor Wali Mehsud has sought to reconsolidate and strengthen the organization by (1) making it more politically palatable in Pakistan and expanding its political clout and (2) reintegrating previous TTP factions to deepen the operational core. In 2018, the TTP published the "*Operation Manual for Mujahideen of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan*", in which Mehsud stressed the centrality of internal cohesion and argued that attacks should focus on State institutions and security forces rather than indiscriminately targeting civilians (Sayed & Hamming, 2021). The TTP has also sought to become integrated into broader State-opposed/critical networks in Pakistan, aiding secessionists in Balochistan while rhetorically supporting non-violent movements such as the PTM. As discussed above, the TTP has also reduced its (overt) support for Al Qaeda. These measures, aimed at rebuilding the TTP's public image, have been accompanied by attempts to enhance the group's operational capacity. The return of a Mehsud as TTP leader has motivated the reintegration of previous factions while the 2020 peace agreement and the 2021 Taliban victory boosted the prospects of a similar feat being achievable in Pakistan as well. The TTP is now believed to have up to six thousand fighters under arms (Sayed & Hamming, 2021). As an umbrella organization, the TTP is furthermore attractive due to its logistical and ideological connections with Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Through a change in leadership and shifts in external conditions, the TTP has re-established itself as a key player in the jihadi scene in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Over time, the TTP has developed and implemented a multi-pronged funding and recruitment strategy. Historically, the TTP has raised funds through kidnappings and ransom payments, resource smuggling, illicitly taxing local populations in the FATA, and receiving gifts from international benefactors (Center for International Security and Cooperation, 2022). The lack of State capacity and oversight in the FATA has presumably allowed the TTP to continue these operations to some degree after 2014. Prior to Operation Zarb-e-Azb, TTP also registered a pronounced presence in urban areas. Home to a significant Pashtun population, Karachi emerged as a hub for the TTP's activities after 2009, seeing the TTP raising funds through extortion and ransom payments (Rehman, 2013). The TTP was notably preferred by some communities in Karachi as it performed State-like functions, for instance through the quick delivery of *Sharia* justice against local criminals. Alongside Deobandi-Wahhabi madrassas, the TTP primarily recruits young men from internationally displaced person (IDP) camps, especially in the FATA (Center for International Security and Cooperation, 2022). In short, the TTP exploits the political space created by a lack of Pakistani State capacity.

Retracing the roots of the TTP indicates that the group's resurgence was not a linear process - instead, it is the result of enhanced internal cohesion and changed external conditions that have re-enabled the group to establish a stronger position in the saturated militancy scene in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The TTP's history is inexorably tied to the reorganization of the Taliban in Pakistan after 2001. For the Taliban, the groups that ultimately formed the TTP have, in many ways, been more reliable allies than Pakistan. Current tensions between Pakistan and the Taliban reflect this lack of trust and the divergence on key policy issues, including the nature of the border and the role of the TTP. For the Taliban, the TTP is a more natural and dependable ally than Pakistan. Since August 2021, it has become increasingly clear that this is likely to define the relations between Kabul and Islamabad.

The TTP's links to other regional terrorist organizations

The previous section has shown that the trajectory of the TTP is closely linked to that of other regional groups, including the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and, to a lesser degree, ISKP. While the connection to the Taliban and Al Qaeda has been key for the TTP to ensure survival, for instance by providing training and safe haven, the TTP's relations with ISKP are less constructive. This section first discusses the TTP's relations with the Taliban and Al Qaeda (which can be considered as directly interlinked) before examining the TTP's ties with ISKP.

Relations with the Taliban & Al Qaeda

The TTP's connection to the Taliban and Al Qaeda has, as discussed before, arguably been the key factor on which the TTP's organizational survival has hinged. The Taliban's support for the TTP after 2014 essentially reciprocated the support different Pashtun factions offered Taliban and Al Qaeda operatives following the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. By insulating the TTP from Pakistani counterterrorism operations, the Taliban created a political (and physical) space in which the TTP could regroup in the aftermath of Operation Zarb-e-Azb. The TTP's close ties with the Taliban and Al Qaeda also played a part in the organization's re-

consolidation from 2020 onwards and has effectively enabled the escalation of Pakistan-based terror attacks since 2021 (Afzal, 2021). In short, the TTP has for significant periods depended on the Taliban to remain operationally capable in any meaningful way, which, in theory, provides the Taliban with leverage to contain the TTP's activities. The Taliban being as openly willing to support the TTP at the expense of its relations with Pakistan illuminates both the Taliban's distrust towards Islamabad and the Taliban's perception of the TTP as a legitimate ally (Sayed & Hamming, 2021). As such, the practical capacity of Pakistan to get the Taliban to use its leverage over the TTP is severely limited (Sayed, 2021). By consistently distinguishing between the Taliban it could support and those it had to fight, Pakistani authorities have remained oblivious to the leverage Pakistan has possessed over the Taliban.

The Taliban's influence over the TTP is observable in the TTP's ideological and operational scope. Originally referring to itself as a Taliban affiliate, the TTP has continuously emphasized the close ties between groups, inserting itself into the network of Taliban-linked groups and claiming a form of ideological legitimacy within this broader network. Allegiance with the Taliban is what characterizes the TTP to a significant degree: after the Taliban took Kabul in August 2021, the TTP renewed its pledge of allegiance to the Taliban high command (Afzal, 2022; Sayed, 2021). This commitment to the Taliban's cause and ideology also transcends a purely rhetorical commitment, with the Talibanization of the FATA after 2001 indicating that Taliban ideology has a clear behavioral relevance for TTP cadres (Wang, 2010). The TTP has also emulated the Taliban's organizational-operational structure: Sayed (2021) highlights that TTP operatives have sought to *"replace the quasi-tribal structure of TTP management with the Afghan Taliban's centralized bureaucratic system"* as this *"structure was [viewed as] best suited for expansion"*. In 2020, the TTP appointed Taliban-style shadow governors for different parts of Pakistan and established a centralized training system. Embodying this form of ideological and operational imitation, Noor Wali Mehsud suggested that *"the TTP can only be victorious in Pakistan if it follows in the footsteps of the Afghan Taliban"* (Sayed, 2021). In sum, the identity and existence of the Taliban directly feeds into the organizational identity of the TTP. Although the Taliban and the TTP partially operate separately from one another, the degree of connectivity between both organizations has remained decisive in shaping the Taliban's policy towards the TTP and, therefore, Pakistan.

The specific role of the Haqqani Network (HN) in shaping the Taliban's relations with the TTP is worth noting. As with the TTP, there is no homogenous Taliban organization - rather, the organization consists of different factions that enjoy different degrees of influence and partially have (somewhat) diverging political objectives. The post-August 2021 coverage of the Taliban has frequently emphasized the role of the HN, the leader of which, Sirajuddin Haqqani, currently serves as the Taliban's Interior Minister. A 2021 report by the United Nations Security Council highlights that *"[t]he Haqqani Network remains a hub for outreach and cooperation with regional foreign terrorist groups and is the primary liaison between the Taliban and Al Qaida"* (p. 10). The HN espouses particularly hardline positions, for instance regarding women's rights, that contradict more moderate elements in the Taliban (Davis, 2017). The Taliban-internal importance of the HN creates a need for the TTP to maintain constructive ties with the HN. The TTP now depends on the HN for access to Afghanistan and HN and TTP units have occasionally fought alongside each other in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Center for International Security and Cooperation, 2022). The HN has also functioned as a mediator in the ceasefire negotiations between the TTP and the Pakistani government in late

2021 (Mir, 2022). The Network's presence in North Waziristan and its central role for negotiations is further believed to have been among the key reasons why the Pakistani Army did not clamp down further in North Waziristan in Operation Zarb-e-Azb (Kakakhel & Farooq, 2015). The coordinating function of the HN thus incentivizes constructive relations between the Network and the TTP.

Although historically pronounced and relevant for operational reasons, the TTP's relations with Al Qaeda have grown less obvious over time, which can be viewed as a reflection of a pragmatic reorientation rather than a disagreement over immediate strategic objectives. The support of Pashtun groups for Al Qaeda operatives after 2001 created a deep sense of appreciation for the TTP within Al Qaeda and the broader global jihadi community (Sayed, 2021). Support by Al Qaeda has been pivotal to recruit fighters as the prestige of being supported by both the Taliban and Al Qaeda grants the TTP enhanced legitimacy when compared to other Islamist groups operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Al Qaeda has also provided organizational support to the TTP: the post-2020 reconsolidation of the TTP, for instance, is believed to have been decisively mediated by Al Qaeda (Sayed & Hamming, 2021). In turn, Al Qaeda views the TTP as a decisive partner in ensuring access to the tribal areas as a space in which Al Qaeda agents can effectively operate with impunity (Mir, 2021). Although these operational links continue to exist and remain decisive for the TTP, also due to the interlinked connection to the Taliban and the HN, the TTP has taken some measures to at least rhetorically distance itself from Al Qaeda. In 2018 the TTP claimed that it would solely focus on conducting a *jihad* in Pakistan (Sayed, 2021), later even suggesting that it would collaborate with major powers to bring down the Pakistani State (Rafiq, 2022). This focus can be interpreted as seeking to avoid counterterrorism operations and garnering political legitimacy rather than reflecting underlying strategic disagreements between the TTP and Al Qaeda.

The prevailing and deep relations between the TTP and the Taliban/Al Qaeda indicate that major parts of Pakistan's military establishment have significantly underestimated the extent of appreciation for the TTP within the Taliban while overestimating the appreciation the Taliban holds for Pakistan. Pakistani authorities have long claimed that the TTP was simply a result of the American presence in Afghanistan and anti-Pakistani collaboration between the Afghan and Indian intelligence services (Mir, 2022). The Taliban's policy towards the TTP post-2021 has highlighted just how inaccurate of an assessment this has turned out to be.

ISKP

The TTP's relations with ISKP, in contrast, are less positive, with ISKP's poaching of TTP cadres in the aftermath of Operation Zarb-e-Azb and the death of Hakimullah Mehsud being an alienating factor early on. Mehsud's death and the intensification of anti-TTP counterterrorism operations fragmented the TTP and allowed ISKP to poach TTP cadres. ISKP's poaching strategy notably aimed at every level of the TTP: the aforementioned Hafiz Saeed Khan, ISKP's first Emir, had previously been a TTP commander (Jadoon et al., 2022). Besides ideological differences between the TTP and ISKP (such as ISKP's more pan-Islamist vision compared to the TTP's nationalist focus), defections may have also been motivated by senior Al Qaeda/Taliban/TTP commanders simply seeking to gain more influential positions.

ISKP's growth thus occurred not independent from existing jihadi infrastructure but in opposition to Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and the TTP, consequently limiting the degree to which some of these more established groups were willing to collaborate with ISKP although short-term aims (such as fighting the US and Pakistan) may have converged to some extent. ISKP's opposition to Al Qaeda also replicated the IS-Al Qaeda rivalry observable in other regional theaters. Sayed and Hamming (2021) outline that the TTP's exposure to defections was partially a result of ISKP's even more radical anti-Shia ideology: while the affiliation with groups like LeJ had already given the TTP a heavy anti-Shia bias, ISKP's even more radical narrative attracted hardline elements in Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and the TTP. Following Operation Zarb-e-Azb, ISKP also seemed increasingly capable of taking over the TTP's mantle to fight the Pakistani State. Defections were consequently motivated by a combination of ideological and practical considerations.

Despite the TTP's vulnerability to defections, the organization's post-2020 re-consolidation process indicates that it ultimately proved resilient in the face of ISKP's growing operational and ideological competition. A key factor in ISKP's inability to absorb the TTP was ISKP's relation with the Taliban. The Taliban (and the TTP's) national focus differentiates these organizations from the inherently pan-Islamist ISKP, which has decried Taliban authorities as "*filthy nationalists*" that have betrayed the jihadi cause through their diplomatic engagement with the United States in Qatar (Kapur, 2022). As ISKP continuously operated not in tandem but in competition with more established regional organizations, it could not rival the deep intersocial linkages between the Taliban and the TTP. ISKP's pan-Islamic vision, which essentially aims at the eradication of the State of Pakistan, also de-localized the conflict to a significant degree: defected TTP commanders had to pledge allegiance to the then leader of the IS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was based in Iraq/Syria (Sayed & Hamming, 2021). ISKP's pan-Islamism did and does not align with the more nationally/regionally oriented focus of most local jihadis. Additionally, ISKP failed to translate its anti-Pakistan rhetoric into significant militant action in Pakistan, instead focusing on fighting the US troops and the Taliban in Afghanistan. The ultimate ideological divergence between the TTP and ISKP consequently restrained the space for collaboration.

ISKP's open hostility to Taliban rule in Afghanistan now positions TTP in direct opposition to ISKP despite their partial ideological convergence on combating Pakistani State authorities. After the TTP renewed its pledge of allegiance to the Taliban in 2021, ISKP branded the TTP apostates (Jadoon et al., 2022). Although the TTP and ISKP share convergent short-term aims, most notably regarding Pakistan, their differing relations to the Taliban constitute a main obstacle in facilitating closer ties and reinforce the animosity created by the poaching of senior TTP cadres. The TTP has thus become a broader part of the jihadi anti-ISKP front in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Conclusion: The TTP's prospects

What implications does the TTP's resurgence ultimately have for Pakistan? The immediate answer is not a positive one: the TTP's renewed rise, enabled by the Taliban's steadfast support, will expand the threat of terrorist attacks in Pakistan, including against civilian targets. Although the TTP has committed itself to restraining its activities towards the targeting of security personnel and security infrastructure, attacks and growing volatility will inevitably also produce civilian casualties.

This trajectory is the direct outcome of Pakistan's distinction between 'good' Taliban (the Afghan Taliban) and 'bad' Taliban (the TTP) and the unwillingness of large parts of the establishment to halt its support for Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism in any meaningful way (Afzal, 2021). The distinction between 'good' and 'bad' Taliban has ignored the fact that the TTP's activities are inexorably linked to that of the Taliban and are in fact directly enabled by the Taliban. The continued presence of ISKP in Afghanistan, which factors into the Taliban's struggle to assert and consolidate political control in Afghanistan, also makes the Taliban less likely to rein in the TTP to avoid renewed defections to ISKP (Afzal, 2022). In short, exerting pressure on the Taliban to contain the cross-border activities of the TTP is unlikely to produce satisfactory results.

The TTP operating out of Afghanistan also restricts Islamabad's strategic options vis-à-vis the TTP. Unless Pakistan is willing to severely infringe on Afghanistan's sovereignty, for instance by conducting cross-border air raids, Pakistan's practical options of combatting the TTP are fairly limited if the Taliban remains unwilling to contain the TTP. It is also worth noting that there is no consensus on how the TTP (or the Taliban for that matter) should be approached by the Pakistani State and the military establishment. Prior to his removal, PM Khan had turned towards increasingly anti-American and anti-imperialist rhetoric while voicing ever stronger support for the Taliban in a bid to shore up domestic support following his ousting. Khan's policy positions had been increasingly opposed by major figures in the military establishment, including Qamar Javed Bajwa, the Army's Chief of Staff. Bajwa has re-emphasized the strategic necessity for Pakistan to maintain constructive ties with the United States (Qayum, 2022), echoing the concerns of Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, Chief of Staff between 2007 and 2013, who had already expressed his concerns regarding Pakistani support for the Taliban during his time in office (Coll, 2018). Epitomizing growing tensions over Pakistan's Afghanistan policy within the broader political establishment, the International Crisis Group (2022) recently quoted a senior Pakistani diplomat as inquiring the following: *"Every country has finite diplomatic and political capital. Can Pakistan afford to spend all that capital on backing the Afghan Taliban?"* (p. 24).

Pakistan's policy options are ultimately limited in effectively containing the TTP. Since August 2021 it has become evident that Pakistani authorities have overestimated their influence over the Taliban and underestimated the degree to which the Taliban are willing to assert their role as an independent regional and international actor. As such, pressuring the Taliban to rein in the TTP is unlikely to be a viable policy solution. Large parts of the Pakistani political and military establishment appear to have realized this. Restricting the TTP will, ironically, require some form of political settlement and although the State is unlikely to make major political concessions that would undermine its long-term standing, it could make piecemeal concessions in return for a more sustainable ceasefire (Mir, 2022).

For Pakistan, the Taliban takeover of Kabul, initially hailed as a major win, has turned out to be a pyrrhic victory that leaves Islamabad with few good policy options.

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