

Bordering on blame game

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With several attacks along Pakistan's western border with Afghanistan, security remained fragile in 2016.

The most prominent attack was a suicide bomb during Friday prayers in a mosque in late September, killing 34 people. The outlawed Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan's splinter group Jamaat-ul-Ahrar claimed responsibility, arguing the naïve notion that the slain people were part of the pro-government peace committees. Locals say majority of those killed were children as they were standing in the last rows.

Like other Pakistani armed groups, Ahrar is also seen as a threat to the security in the border regions. The splinter group was launched in August 2014 after differences emerged in the Taliban ranks.³¹⁶ Today, the group, which mainly comprises of the former TTP militants from Mohmand tribal region, has emerged as a major threat, claiming several deadliest attacks in which mostly civilians lost their lives.

On November 26, a group of four bombers attacked a Frontier Corps camp in Mohmand agency and killed at least two security personnel and injured 14 others, according to the military spokesman. Ahrar claimed the attack and released an image of the four bombers.³¹⁷

One of the contentious issues by attacks along the border areas is about their location. Pakistani officials believe Ahrar's militants operate from the Afghan side of the border. The same is said of some other leaders. Afghan leaders – President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Dr Abdullah Abdullah – have publicly said

Afghan forces have conducted a series of operations against Maulvi Fazalullah (the TTP's chief) but failed. In a way, therefore, the Afghan leaders accept that Pakistani militant leader is hiding in the Afghan border region.

Hafiz Saeed Khan, chief of the Islamic State of Daesh for the Khurasan region, was killed in a U.S. drone strike in Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar province in August.³¹⁸ Several other senior Pakistani Taliban leaders were also killed in Afghanistan this year, including Omar Mansoor alias Narai and Azam Tariq, strengthening the notion that Pakistani Taliban leaders have sanctuaries in Afghanistan's border regions.^{319 320} Pakistani journalists who cover terrorism-related issues, mostly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, say they routinely receive phone calls on Afghani SIMs when the militant groups claim responsibility for attacks in Pakistan.

Pakistani Taliban, however, have never publicly confirmed they are hiding on the Afghan side of the border. A Pakistani Taliban leader once said that pushing them to Afghanistan "would be more dangerous for Pakistan."³²¹ Afghan officials, on their part, insist that Taliban, whom they call armed opponents, operate from the Pakistani side of the border, which is the main source of tension between the two countries. Afghan ambassador in Islamabad, Omar Zakhilwal, in an interview with Waqt TV news channel in December, said his country is "asking Pakistan not to allow space for Taliban recruitment, space for their meetings and space for their leadership."³²² In May 2016,

Afghan Taliban chief Mullah Akhtar Mansoor was killed - in Pakistan's Balochistan province.³²³ Afghan government leaders insist that the Taliban elected their new "Amir-ul-Momineen" or commander of faithful in a gathering in Balochistan.

There are signs that various factions of the Taliban may form an alliance at least for joint or coordinated operations and attacks in Pakistan. There are even reports of at least two meetings of the representatives of the TTP, TTP Ahrar, other TTP splinter groups – Khain Said and Shaheryar groups – in which they have agreed on combined operations. Moreover, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Daesh now coordinate attacks; Daesh provides manpower and Lashkar facilitate the attacks. This way, Lashkar seems to have shifted focus to Daesh from its longstanding association with al-Qaeda. The Taliban groups' new alliance and the Daesh-Lashkar strategy could be seen as a new challenge for Pakistan. It seems security challenges could remain for a long time as Pakistan and Afghanistan are not taking serious measures to deal with the threat.

Pakistan is now facing a dilemma of the presence of the Pakistani militants in Afghanistan border regions, and the mistrust between Pakistan and Afghanistan hinder the efforts to secure the border.

Border management

The traditional blame game and public accusations are unhelpful and further widen mistrust which also affected efforts by both countries to agree on any effective border management. A senior Pakistani official believed that border management is now more important even than Pakistan's quest for helping in encouraging the Afghan Taliban to join the peace process. Pakistan seemed serious in the border management and did not budge an inch from its plan to make travel documents for Afghans entering Pakistan. The plan was first introduced at Torkham, one of the busiest crossings from June 2016.³²⁴

Pakistan army's spokesman Lt Gen Asim Bajwa said last year the new border management system will also be put in place at 18 crossing points to check the cross-border movement. More people would be recruited for the Frontier Corps, mainly responsible for the border security with Afghanistan.

Earlier, thousands of Afghans, especially those living in the border region, would cross the border without valid travel documents. Spokesman for the Pakistan's Embassy in Kabul, Akhtar Munir, says the Embassy and the country's four consulates in Afghanistan would issue nearly 2000 visas daily but up-to 18,000 people from Afghanistan would enter Pakistan, majority without travel documents, on a single day.

Pakistani officials argue militants would take advantage of the loose border control and would enter without any proper check. They also claim that the militants who were involved in the attacks on the Bacha Khan University in Charsadda district (January 2016); the Pakistan Air Force residential colony near Peshawar (September 2015); and the Army Public School in Peshawar (December 2014), had entered Pakistan via Torkham from Afghanistan.

On their part Afghans have serious suspicions about Pakistan's new border mechanism and view it as a move to push for the recognition of the border. Afghan officials disagree with Pakistan's stance and instead insist that the militants have various routes in the rugged mountains to cross the border.

Whatever arguments Pakistan and Afghanistan might have been, both the countries facing are security challenges and will have to eventually agree on some sort of mechanism to address to the border security.

Pakistani and Afghan troops were involved in clashes for days in June this year at Torkham, the busiest border crossing between the troops of the two countries, after Afghan forces tried to prevent Pakistan from building a gate. Afghans insisted construction of the gate was in violation of the understanding between the two countries and that Pakistan cannot

take any unilateral decisions regarding the border issues.

Pakistan disagreed with the notion and argued that the gate, now completed and formally inaugurated, was over 30 meters inside the Pakistani side of the border, which Afghans call as "Durand Line." Some Afghans viewed the development as a move by Pakistan to push for its longstanding quest to get the Durand Line recognized. Although Pakistan considers Durand Line as a closed chapter, Afghanistan says it is an unresolved issue. Afghans have deep suspicions about every step taken regarding the border.

Cross-border movement of the militants will remain one of the major irritants in relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan unless they agree on a strategy to jointly secure the porous border. Mistrust and suspicion have hindered efforts to agree on a joint mechanism to monitor the porous nearly 2600 kilometers border, which the Afghan call "Durand Line."

Both have failed to reactivate the Border Coordination Centers along the two major crossing points – Torkham and Chaman. They were part of the trilateral coordination centers along with ISAF until the U.S.-led NATO forces formally ended their combat mission by end 2014.

The coordination centers were crucial for sharing information on the illegal

movement by the militants. The uneasy neighbors had initially agreed to revive the Centers when the relations warmed up following the visit to Pakistan by President Ashraf Ghani in November 2014. But it never happened in the wake of tense relationship and deep suspicions among Afghans, who view any action about the border by Pakistan as an attempt to get the Durand Line recognized.