

Pakistan's internal challenges, shifting dynamics

Former Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani's persistent efforts to engage Pakistan to rectify its strategic errors in Afghan policy, faced unmet expectations. In a critical meeting in May 2021 between Mr. Ghani, the Pakistan Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, the head of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, Lt. General Faiz Hamid, and the Chief of Defence Staff of the United Kingdom, Gen. Sir Nicholas Patrick Carter, it became evident that promises made by the Pakistani military were often diluted through their chain of command. Mr. Ghani noted a consistent drop in implementation percentages, as orders traversed from Gen. Bajwa to Gen. Faiz Hamid to subordinate field commanders. This decline, attributed to a sympathetic disposition of mid-level commanders towards the Taliban, underscored the complexities within Pakistan's military.

However, following the Taliban's unexpected triumph in Afghanistan, the mood shifted dramatically within Pakistan. A sense of victory, liberating Afghanistan from a perceived oppression, led to celebrations and jubilation among military and political leaders. Yet, as the international community's views transitioned from jubilant acceptance to the condemnation of the Taliban's actions, Pakistan's claims of being a victim of terrorism found little traction. A similar scepticism resonated from within Pakistan, where doubts persisted about the military's narratives.

Mr. Ghani's insistence that Pakistan's chosen military approach in Afghanistan represented a lose-lose-lose scenario remained steadfast.

Pakistan and radicalisation

In the wake of the Taliban's seizure of Kabul, Pakistan witnessed a shift that caused concern. The Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) saw almost 40 allied groups joining its ranks, triggering a surge in insecurity that was marked by a rise in suicide attacks. Pakistan now found itself as the new battleground. The TTP's emboldenment fuelled this transformation through the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan, while Pakistan grappled with an intensifying phase of radicalisation.

Strategically, Pakistan's military, facing criticism and security lapses, sought to shift focus from its Afghan policy. The Afghan Taliban became the target of blame, with accusations of inaction against the TTP, which allegedly exploited Afghan soil for attacks inside Pakistan. Contrarily, the Afghan Taliban dismissed TTP as a domestic concern, revealing internal divisions and mutual distrust.

The TTP emerged as a more potent force, displaying heightened sophistication across domains – structural, communication, and public relations. Bolstered by existing grievances and the marginalisation of the Pashtun and Baloch communities, the TTP capitalised on



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radicalised groups across Pakistan, particularly in Punjab. Can Pakistan effectively combat the TTP? The outlook is grim. Ingrained structural grievances, widespread radicalisation, and a degree of local sympathy all play into the TTP's favour. Noor Wali Mehsud, the Amir of TTP, outlined the group's resurgence in his book, *Inqilab Mehsud*. The text emphasises local alliances and organisational discipline, while mirroring the Afghan Taliban's provincial structure with a focus on urban insurgency. Employing slick media tactics, the TTP strategically comments on financial, governance, and corruption issues, in order to rally public support.

The TTP leverages a potent narrative that resonates with Pakistanis, exploiting existing divisions and grievances while presenting Afghanistan's Taliban success as a model for governance. In contrast, Pakistan's present government narrative is feeble due to economic struggles, governance lapses, a fragmented political elite, and societal divisions. Events such as those on May 9 in Pakistan, underscore public frustration with the military's role. Additionally, the absence of support from the United States in terms of intelligence, drone operations, and financial aid further compounds Pakistan's challenges.

A shift in paradigm

A significant shift in strategy has become evident. Pakistan's historical pursuit of strategic depth in Afghanistan, which encompassed the backing of non-state actors against amicable governments, has undergone a notable alteration. The dynamic has reversed with the Afghan Taliban securing a strategic foothold within Pakistan. This was achieved through the backing of entities such as the TTP and other radical groups operating within Pakistan. Should the Taliban decide to take action against the TTP, it risks forfeiting its leverage against Pakistan in its future dealings. The TTP, formerly aligned with the Afghan Taliban, is now engaged in 'jihad' inside Pakistan, signifying a multifaceted partnership that has spanned over two decades.

There are several reasons why the Afghan Taliban cannot and will not take solid military action against the TTP. First, the Afghan Taliban avoids strong action against the TTP to avert internal division, preventing the potential loss of its ranks to the TTP or other extremist factions such as the Islamic State-Khorasan Province and al-Qaeda. Second, the Taliban comprehend that antagonising the TTP could result in them losing secure havens across Durand Line which they once utilised when facing off against international forces and Afghan security (all under the shelter of the TTP's umbrella). The TTP has the capability and a strategic geographical edge that could challenge the Taliban's authority in Afghanistan. Should the Afghan Taliban's

dominance be contested, the TTP has the potential to forge alliances with other groups to mount a formidable challenge. Third, Pakistan's historical use of religious *madrasas* to exert influence and issue fatwas against Afghan governments is now in the hands of the Afghan Taliban. Their extensive network established in the last 25 years within Pakistan, involving students, teachers, and friends across thousands of *madrasas*, provides substantial support. Fourth, while Pakistan once tolerated public charity drives to fund the Afghan Taliban, according to many local sources, similar support is now flowing from Afghans to TTP groups, complicating the situation and indicating a paradigm shift.

Pakistan needs to introspect

Navigating a way forward demands a thorough re-evaluation of Pakistan's policy on cultivating radical Islamist groups, domestically and internationally, for the sake of foreign policy gains. Notably, while many nations that once supported Afghan resistance against the Soviet invasion, including the Gulf states in the 1980s, have abandoned the practice of backing global jihadist and Islamist militant groups, Pakistan remains steadfast in continuing this policy, a choice that now casts a shadow over the nation's trajectory. Rather than seizing the opportunities presented by the era of globalisation, and economic growth, Pakistan has persisted in channelling its resources toward cultivating terrorist organisations. Hence, it is imperative that the nation's military redefine its role to prioritise the interests and welfare of the populace, respecting the mandate of civilian governance.

The Pakistan military must lend its support and create a partnership with the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM). This movement advocates regional peace and takes a stand against Pakistan's dual-centric policy, which involves nurturing militancy to safeguard the military's interests along the Pakhtoon belt of Pakistan across the Durand Line.

Moreover, the urgency of veering away from exporting radicalism is underscored by rampant radicalisation within the country, pervasive poverty, the beleaguered state of the economy, and India's continued advancements. Pakistan stands at the crossroads, where adopting a new path is imperative to secure a more stable and prosperous future and establish working relationships with its neighbours, specifically India and Afghanistan.

Tragically, the price of the recent abysmal policies executed by the military leadership is borne by the innocent citizenry. It is disheartening to witness individuals with abundant talent and resources grappling with the harsh reality of mere survival; and for some, even survival is a distant aspiration.

With climate change, tackling new disease scenarios

In its latest report released this March, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) delivers a stark warning: climate change heightens the global risk of infectious diseases. The close relationship between climate and disease is being demonstrated every year. For instance, the periodicity of mosquito-borne disease outbreaks no longer follows expected patterns. Dengue manifests in two to three peaks throughout the year. Variability in temperature, precipitation, and humidity disrupt disease transmission cycles. These also alter the distribution of the vectors and animal reservoirs that host the parasite. Heat has been proven to interfere with the genomic structure of pathogens, changing their infectivity and virulence.

Climate change, more infections

Habitat loss forces disease-carrying animals to encroach upon human territory, increasing the risk of human-animal interaction and the transfer of pathogens from wildlife to humans. Viruses which do not harm animals can be fatal for humans. Nipah virus, which has been causing outbreaks in Kerala for many years now, is a good example. An analysis of 2022 published in Nature Climate Change warns that humans now face a broader spectrum of infectious agents than ever before. Over half of all-known infectious diseases threatening humans worsen with changing climate patterns. Diseases often find new transmission routes, including environmental sources, medical tourism, and contaminated food and water from once-reliable sources. While ecosystems shape local climates, climate change is transforming ecosystems. This dynamic introduces invasive species and extends the range of existing life forms. Both these trigger upheavals in ecosystems that are complex and confound ecologists and epidemiologists to



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Protecting ecosystems, fostering collaboration and embracing the 'One Health' paradigm would be the best defences

predict outbreaks. Human-induced climate change is unleashing an unprecedented health vulnerability crisis. India, in particular, has felt the ominous impact, with early summers and erratic monsoons causing water scarcity across the Gangetic plains and Kerala. These climatic shifts are manifesting in severe health crises, including a dengue epidemic in Dhaka (Bangladesh) and Kolkata and the Nipah outbreak in Kerala. Why should we not be surprised at the recent outbreaks in Kolkata or Kerala or at its un-seasonality?

Surveillance and reporting

Changed disease scenarios require a revision of strategies to detect and deal with them. Over the past two decades, India has improved its reporting of outbreaks. The Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme (IDSP) was rolled out in a few States in 2007. From reporting 553 outbreaks in 2008, it last reported 1,714 in 2017. It was phased out in favour of a new, a web-enabled, near-real-time electronic information system called Integrated Health Information Platform (IHIP). IHIP was launched in seven States in 2018. It added 20 additional disease conditions over IDSP's 13 and could present disaggregated data to its users. Tragically, the programme, which would have enabled real-time tracking of emerging disease outbreaks, has not delivered on expectations.

The current design of surveillance is not adequate for the emerging disease scenario. Mitigating the spread of climate change-induced diseases requires safeguarding ecosystems, curbing greenhouse gas emissions, and implementing active pathogen surveillance. A unified approach, termed One Health which integrates monitoring human, animal, plant, and environmental health, recognises this interconnectedness. This approach is pivotal in

preventing outbreaks, especially those that originate from animals. It encompasses zoonotic diseases, neglected tropical diseases, vector-borne diseases, antimicrobial resistance, and environmental contamination.

India must launch One Health and infectious disease control programmes by building greater synergies between the Centre and States and their varied specialised agencies. Animal husbandry, forest and wildlife, municipal corporations, and public health departments need to converge and set up robust surveillance systems. More importantly, they will need to build trust and confidence, share data, and devise logical lines of responsibility and work with a coordinating agency. So far, the Office of the Principal Scientific Adviser to the Prime Minister has been taking this lead but with new World Bank and other large funding in place, this will need greater coordination and management.

'Disease x' and beyond

Globally, there is an obsession with the enigmatic "disease X," but it is the familiar annual cycles of known agents such as influenza, measles, Japanese encephalitis, dengue, diarrhoea among others that will continue to test the public health system. Climate change is not limited to infectious diseases. It also exacerbates injuries and deaths from extreme weather events, respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, and mental health issues. The re-emergence of Nipah in Kerala is a wake-up call, that mere biomedical response to diseases is inadequate. In the face of a changing climate and the growing threat of infectious diseases, protecting ecosystems, fostering collaboration, and embracing the One Health paradigm are our best defences. The road ahead demands concerted efforts, not just to adapt but also to proactively safeguard our planet and its inhabitants.