

## Fighting terrorism: can Pakistan overcome its negative image?

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### Abstract

The debate on whether Pakistan can be considered a trustworthy actor in the international arena has surfaced again. Recent events have shown that Pakistan is capable of prudence and moderation when dealing with non-aligned South Asian powers, which is a welcome, (if relative), improvement in its international image. The fact that Pakistan remains under continuous global scrutiny regarding terrorist-related activities is well known; however, a true commitment to the fight against terrorism by the current government can go a long way in reshaping Pakistan's credibility.

To what extent can Pakistan's counter-terrorist initiatives be trusted is thus far unknown. The task is immense, and it remains to be seen whether Pakistan can transform itself from a country that exports terrorism to a country that promotes peace and harmony both regionally and internationally. This article focuses on this bold new Pakistani ambition, which is led by the country's new government under the leadership of Prime Minister Imran Khan. We have witnessed bans on organisations and networks known to financially support terrorist activities locally, regionally and internationally, and Islamabad has also put forward claims to curb terrorism and militancy. Will we finally witness the rise of Pakistan as a credible and responsible global actor?

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## Introduction

Pakistan has long faced a roaring international outcry over harbouring, and in many ways, supporting terrorist forces both at home and beyond national soil. Yet Pakistan itself remains the main casualty of the various conflicts at play - over 70,000 Pakistani lives have been lost to terrorist activities since 9/11. Internationally, Pakistan is believed to strongly and one-sidedly support terrorist outfits. Although Prime Minister Khan denies this claim, Pakistan's neighbours - particularly India, Iran and Afghanistan - maintain a rather hostile stand towards Islamabad. It is strongly believed that Pakistan not only has maintained so far, but will continue to maintain, clandestine support for militant and armed groups and their terrorist operations.

India accuses Pakistan of preserving its support for Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) led by Maulana Masood Azhar, the suspected architect of the Mumbai Parliament attacks (2001) as well as the Pathankot (2016), Uri (2016), and Pulwama attacks (2019). India also accuses Pakistan of clandestine support to Kashmiri irredentists, which India claims is designed to instigate insurgency on the Line of Control (LoC). Iran has also shown deep concerns regarding terrorist incidences along its borders with Pakistan and has repeatedly accused Pakistan of supporting insurgent groups acting along its borders. On 13 February 2019, one day before the Pulwama Attacks in Jammu and Kashmir, there was an attack on the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, killing its 27 members and injuring dozens. The terrorist car bombing in Eastern Iran, the responsibility for which was claimed by the Pakistan-based militant group Jaish Ul-Adl 'Army of Justice', has further aggravated tensions between Iran and Pakistan (Regenica, 2019).

Tehran and Delhi have both accused Islamabad of harbouring terrorists, and both have vowed revenge and retaliation. Iranian authorities have also claimed that two members of the militant group who carried out the attack in Sistan-Baluchistan (including the suicide bomber himself, identified as Hafez Mohammad Ali) were Pakistani nationals. 'Iran and India suffered two heinous terrorist attacks in the past few days which resulted in heavy casualties', tweeted Abbas Araghchi, Iran's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, 'Today in my meeting with Sushma Swaraj the Indian FM, when she had a stopover in Tehran, we agreed on close cooperation to combat terrorism in the region. Enough is enough!' The recent visit by Mohammed Bin Salman, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia to Pakistan has raised eyebrows in Tehran. An Iranian expert commenting on the visit stated that 'it seems that Riyadh regards the Iranian-Pakistani border areas, where there is a security void, as a soft spot for orchestrating terrorist attacks against Iranian military forces' (Meysum, 2019).

Recently Pakistan's ambassador was convened by the Afghan High Commission in Pakistan to address concerns regarding Prime Minister Khan's speech, which Afghanistan declared amounted to Pakistan meddling in Afghan internal affairs. (Later the Prime Minister offered an official apology.) The issue was none other than Pakistan's breakthrough moment to facilitate peace and acting as a mediator between the US. and the Afghan Taliban (over which it claims to have a diplomatic and political clout).

Meanwhile, with the expected withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, there has been a discussion about a possible Pakistani influence aimed at bringing the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table. Pakistan considers to have some leverage in Afghanistan, as the country believes to have substantial influence on the Taliban. The Afghan government seems to disagree, as its posture regarding Prime Minister Imran Khan can be seen as nothing less than hostile. Perhaps this is but a reflection of the larger issue regarding how Pakistan's neighbours relate to its role in South Asia's geopolitical reality.

## Background

Pakistan's international credibility is low to say the least, and there has been a lot of pressure on Islamabad to do more in terms of halting terrorist organisations operating both within Pakistan and along its borders with India and Afghanistan. The issue has become entangled in regional geopolitics. China supports Pakistan's position regarding Hafiz Saeed and has used its veto power in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to prevent him from being declared a terrorist. The US - along with France, the UK and Russia - supports India's position to label JeM as an international terrorist organisation.

With an ever-mounting international pressure on Pakistan, 44 members of JeM were arrested along with Hafiz Saeed's brother. ([Telegraph India, 2019](#)). There has been a crackdown on JeM, Jammat-ud-Dawa (JuD) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), including state acquisition of financial accounts, and widespread legal action including arrests. Most recently, following the Pulwama attacks Pakistan's Interior Minister said that law enforcement agencies had placed 121 people in preventive detention as part of the crackdown and that provincial governments had taken control over the administration of over 182 seminaries ([News18, 2019](#)).

However, India seems far from satisfied, much less convinced. India has many reasons, both historic and contemporary, not to trust Pakistan. Previous years have shown Pakistan's lukewarm attitude towards curbing terrorism. In fact, Hafez Saeed was released from jail in 2017 on the order of a Punjab Court. (Malik, 2017, p.A6). India has long wished Hafez Saeed to be extradited – a wish Pakistan refuses to fulfil. Note that the US has shown continued support towards India on this issue. Mike Pompeo, the US Secretary of State, reminded on his first state visit to Pakistan in September 2018 that Pakistan should take 'sustained and decisive measures' against terrorists threatening regional peace and stability.

A senior member of the US State Department had issued another stern comment after Pompeo's visit to Pakistan: 'America shares India's concern that Pakistan continues to allow Mumbai attack mastermind Hafiz Saeed roam free despite the reward the US has placed on his head for his role in terror activities'.

Pakistan's efforts to counter terrorist operations have been under heavy criticism by India, Iran and Afghanistan, all of whom accuse Pakistan of using proxies within their countries and instigating terrorists in the region at large. India has long accused Pakistan of its hand in supporting insurgency forces in Kashmir. Iran accused Pakistan of being complicit with Saudi Arabia and the UAE in supporting unrest and insurgency along its borders with Pakistan. The Shia-Sunni rift is a major point of contention between the two countries, and Afghanistan, as discussed before, is wary of the Taliban-Pakistan caucus' meddle in its internal affairs.

President Donald Trump tweeted that 'The United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies & deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools. They give haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help. No more!' (Trump, 2018).

Pakistan dismissed Trump's comment as 'incomprehensible' and of 'no importance'. (Masood, 2018, p.A6). Pakistan has long rejected accusations that it fails to tackle the militants battling both Kabul's government and U.S.-led foreign forces in Afghanistan from sanctuaries within its borders. However, Pakistan has had an important role as a non-NATO ally of the US in Afghanistan, and for this contribution the country paid dearly - the war on terror strained the fragile status quo in its Tribal

Areas (the so-called Federally Administered Tribal Areas) and lead to a series of skirmishes along tribal boundaries.

### Explanation

Far from being commended for its role in fighting the scourge of terrorism, Pakistan is facing a tremendous challenge to overcome its terrorist labelling and be considered an internationally responsible state. The Financial Action Task Force's (FATF) punitive and strict regulations regarding Pakistan is a case in point. The FATF had earlier announced grey-listing Pakistan; more recently the US issued a warning for Islamabad to deliver on its commitments and curb terror financing and money laundering activities within the global financial system (Kiani, 2019).

Dawn News, the most famous Pakistani English-language daily, reported that the Pakistani government has issued an order implement sanctions against those individuals and entities designated by the UNSC. The UNSC's 'Freezing and Seizure' Order was issued earlier in 2019. A key measure of the UNSC's sanction regime against suspected terrorist individuals or entities is the 'assets freeze' action, under which states are required to freeze or seize the assets of designated entities and individuals as soon as the relevant UNSC Sanctions Committee designates them (Siddiqui, 2019). The government has since taken over the control of all banned outfits operating in the country; from now on, all kinds of assets and properties by all banned organizations will be controlled by the national government.

### Pakistan and the issue of terrorism: the Indian factor

*'India talks about including terrorism in dialogue with Pakistan. Terrorism is a big issue facing this region and we want to eliminate it. If someone is using Pakistan's soil [to carry out terror attacks elsewhere], it is enmity with us. It is against our interests'* (Khan, 2019).

Pakistan reacted immediately to the Indian demand to act meaningfully in the post-Pulwama scenario. But as the world saw the showdown among South Asia's two regional powers, speculations were ripe regarding the eventuality of an all-out war. With the triggering of tensions between the arch-rivals India and Pakistan, the future of South Asian peace remains uncertain. Furthermore, Pakistan and India both possess nuclear weapons, and therein lies the deadliest dimension to the conflict. In this context, one fact that needs attention is the unresolved question of Kashmir, a battle zone between the two countries that has remained quite at the centre stage of conflict.

Pakistan shot down two Indian Air Force fighter planes in a dogfight followed by the capture of the Indian Air Force Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman. Islamabad announced that it will release Abhinandan; this many believe to have been done as an act to save the image of Pakistan.

February 27, 2019 marked the first time ever since the 1971 war that the territorial zones between the two countries were subjected to a war-like situation. Other hostile episodes occurred in 1948 and 1965 - not to mention the Kargil war, which was eventually averted.

Current tensions were related to the attack in Jammu and Kashmir. On 14 February 2019, a vehicle-bound suicide bomber in Lethpora, near Awantipora, Pulwama district in Jammu and Kashmir, India attacked a convoy of vehicles carrying security personnel on the Jammu Srinagar National Highway. The attack resulted in the death of 44 Central Reserve Police Forces (CRPF) personnel and the attacker. (Masood Azhar, para 18). Surgical strikes were subsequently launched by India, who claimed to annihilate JeM's hideouts. Furthermore, Masood Azhar, the man behind the attack on the Indian parliament, was detained for a year by Pakistani authorities.

JeM is a highly controversial organization in connection to its role in the 1999 hostage saga of Indian Airlines flight 814, which was orchestrated to demand the release of Maulana Masood Azhar, the mastermind of the Pathankot attack in India. Pakistani authorities took him into 'protective custody' after the Pathankot attack, and this was at the time widely reported as an arrest. India listed Masood Azhar as one of its most wanted terrorists due to his history of militant activities, and has been continuously trying to place Azhar on the UNSC's counter-terrorism sanctions list (Masood Azhar, para 1).

In Addition, Masood Azhar was also heading an outfit of JeM, which had carried out a string of deadly attacks against Indian targets, including the attack on the Indian parliament in December 2001 that brought India and Pakistan to the brink of a full-scale war (Masood Azhar, para 14). Soon after the Indian parliament attack, Masood Azhar was detained for a year by Pakistani authorities (Masood Azhar, para 15).

The current standoff marks a new chapter in the relations between the two countries. Kashmir is India's largest Muslim-majority province, whose maharaja had signed the treaty of accession with

India at the behest of partition arrangements. The Jammu and Kashmir conflict thus occupies a centre stage when it comes to conflict in relations between the two countries and it has been speculated by many to be a nuclear flashpoint.

In July 2016, Burhan Wani, the 22-year-old commander of the Kashmiri separatist Hizbul Mujahideen group was killed by the Indian security forces (Prabhu, 2017). The impact of Wani's killing is perhaps the most significant event in the area since the late 1980s, when an armed rebellion erupted against Indian rule in the region (Shah, 2018).

Furthermore, in 2013 the execution of Kashmiri separatist Afzal Guru, the speculated mastermind of the 2001 attacks against the Indian Parliament, also exacerbated tensions among Kashmir separatists. It is often believed that the road to peace in Afghanistan goes through Kashmir, which entails that there is a visible nexus between the groups that operate in Afghanistan's national liberation and those who operate in Kashmir. The nature of these conflicts may be different, but the goals are almost the same – separatist causes articulated with the ideology of political Islam - and this has proved to be a deadly combination. The only political solution must be grounded on truth and reconciliation.

Countless challenges lie ahead of Pakistan today. While the Operation Zarbe-Azab guaranteed the complete whitewash of terrorist hideouts in the Locally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan, the National Action Plan (NAP) proposed by the previous Pakistani government is still largely neglected. NAP included mechanisms aimed at tracing out and cutting funds used by terrorist organizations operating in Pakistan and attacking their infrastructure. Many believe that the implementation of NAP had been delayed and that only the implementation of the FATF, which grey-listed Pakistan, could advance Islamabad's progress on the issue.

Pakistan suffers from a real economic meltdown with severe burdens on its national exchequer and is preparing to receive a bailout from the International Monetary Fund. The overall growth rate of the country is predicted to stand around a little more than 3 per cent of its Gross Domestic Product. Inflation in the country has risen sharply and the exchange rate of the rupee is at an all-time low. Economic commentators have reacted to the devaluation of the rupee against dollar with tremendous alarm for a variety of reasons, no less because the average cost of commodities has risen and that of fuel has inflated. Lower consumption capacities among the citizenry affects industries and manufactures, wherein investor confidence appears at an all-time low. Given the already very high

interest affecting the country, the IMF's bailout package will unleash a huge burden on the economy, especially the poor and the lower middle-class segments of the population.

The Asia Pacific Group (APG, a regional affiliate of FATF) has identified a lack of cooperation among law enforcement agencies at different tiers of the government and expressed serious reservations over insufficient government action so as to block the flow of funds (Kiani, 2019).

APG's dissatisfaction may turn out to be crucial. Punitive financial actions against Pakistan could follow these doubts regarding Islamabad's political will and action. Just as unfortunate, Pakistan's poor record regarding money laundering activities combined with unsatisfactory progress regarding the suspension of terrorist networks along with their financial machinery may further tarnish its image and in the end amount to a huge loss to its integrity as a sovereign state.

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