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The Fallacy of State Rhetoric: Pakistan, Haqqani Network and Terror in Afghanistan

Abstract

This SADF Focus is based on the notion that terrorism is a political strategy and can be utilized by any actor whether they be individuals, organized groups or loose networks, domestic and international organizations, or even states. Subsequently, the article argues that states can be also terrorist actors and that state terror has to be included in the study of terrorism. Against this backdrop, the analysis sheds light on Pakistan's role in supporting terrorism as an instrument to achieve its foreign policy goals, especially in Afghanistan. By elaborating on the latest 19 April 2016 terrorist attack in Kabul, it will be pointed out that Pakistan's counter-terrorism campaign is aimed primarily at improving internal security and is conducted at the expense of the fight against cross-border terrorism. Furthermore, the anti-terror activities did not primarily eradicate terrorism but rather strengthened the formal role of the military in Pakistani politics. This article is not only questioning Pakistan's earnestness and credibility in counter-terrorism but assumes its actions further stifle changes in the country's foreign and security policy. In consequence, it appears that Pakistan still follows the old patterns of state support for terror/state-sponsored terrorism.

Keywords: Pakistan, Haqqani Network, Cross-Border Terrorism, State Terrorism, Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, India-Pakistan relations, Civil-Military Relations

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Introduction: Pakistan and the State-Terror Nexus

Since the attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001 (9/11) by Al-Qaeda, Pakistan has come to be perceived as the world's epicentre of Jihadist activities. While - of course - it is senseless to blame the country for all terrorist activity in the contemporary world/recent history. Nevertheless, there are an increasing number of analysts stating that a remarkable number of major terrorist attacks since 9/11 have some connection with Pakistan. Either they are conducted directly by Pakistanis, by people of Pakistani origin/descent, or the respective terrorists have contacts and/or received support (like training, weapons & explosive, financing, or logistic) in Pakistan. In this context, the article argues that the 'world of terror' is not solely the domain of non-state actors. There is the severe claim, that Pakistan is not only 'flirting' with militant Jihad but has been [using terrorism](#) as an instrument of state policy for decades. As a matter of fact, the interaction of Pakistan Inter-Services-Intelligence (ISI) with terror groups [are well documented](#). In order to camouflage this, Pakistan security circles are following an ambiguous counter-terrorism strategy: certain militant groups known as anti-Pakistan are identified as targets, while other terrorist organisations (primarily those operating outside the country) are getting spared/dismissed. This observation has not only been confirmed by international experts but even by Pakistani elites themselves. In this context, the most remarkable example is [the statement by former President Asif Zardari](#), in which he admitted publicly that the country deliberately created and nurtured terrorist groups, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad, as a way to achieve short-term tactical objectives/victories. There is no doubt that these two cases are only the tip of the iceberg of militant groups enjoying 'beneficial attention' from the army's top echelon and the ISI, the country's premier intelligence agency. These findings are especially significant as Pakistan's home-grown Jihadist structures are not only operating within the country but also produce/foster terror and fear in neighbouring countries such as [India and Afghanistan](#).

Pakistan: Still using proxies in Afghanistan?

One of the latest dramatic examples was the [terrorist attack](#) against a [building of the National Directorate of Security](#) (NDS)¹ on April 19 in the central political-administrative district of Kabul. This highly sensitive area also houses the US embassy, NATO headquarters, as well as some Afghan ministries and other government offices. The assault in this highly sensitive area was carried out by two gunmen and one suicide bomber. By [murdering 70 people and injuring 347 people](#), it was one of the deadliest terrorist attacks in the capital in years. As it happened one week after the [Taliban announced its annual ‘Spring Offensive’](#), they were ‘officially’ [claiming responsibility](#).

However, taking into account the complexity and difficulties of this attack, the Afghan government and its security agencies have once again [blamed Pakistan for supporting Islamic militants](#). More concretely, Afghanistan authorities, especially the NDS, are stating that the Haqqani Network organized and executed the attack, and not the Taliban. However, in the wider process of potential Kabul-Islamabad rapprochement, peace process in Afghanistan, and Pakistan ambiguous role in Afghanistan, this remains a rather technical differentiation because both [groups are operationally and ideological very close](#) and both are enjoying shelter and support in Pakistan. This is reflected in a statement by the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, saying that his country “[no longer expects Pakistan to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table](#)”. In other words, Afghans are highly critical towards any successful rapprochement efforts towards/by its eastern neighbour. Both the Afghan government and many Afghans are convinced that Pakistan is the major/primary source of political instability and armed conflict in their country. Consequently, many Afghans are convinced that [Pakistan will never relinquish its proxy forces](#), especially the Haqqani Network. That the Haqqani Network is a clear proxy of Pakistan is best expressed in the words of former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Afghanistan [Admiral Mike Mullen](#): “we believe the Haqqani Network — which has long enjoyed the support and

¹ The building of the National Directorate of Security (NDS) is Afghanistan’s primary foreign and domestic intelligence agency. The offices under attack belonged to the VIP protection unit of the NDS.

protection of the Pakistani government and is, in many ways, a strategic arm of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Agency [...]”.

The Haqqani Network: The Engine of Jihad in the Af-Pak Region

The Haqqani Network is an Afghan and Pakistani terrorist group and is recognised as one of the most experienced and sophisticated militant organisations in the region. Launching its [first activities](#) in the 1970s in Afghanistan, the network is believed to be located in North Waziristan, a mountainous tribal area at the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, also known as the Durand Line. The main reason for its presence in Pakistan is that it enjoys the backing and protection from Pakistani security agents, especially the country's intelligence establishment. As a result, the Haqqani's evidently benefitted not only from official impunity but were granted a sanctuary in which they could regroup and regain strength in order to persistently challenge foreign and Afghan troops during these last years. Needless to say the [outreach of the Haqqanis](#) would be far more limited without the material, tactical and logistical support of powerful influentials in Pakistan.

Apart from the beneficial interaction with Pakistan's security forces and the United States, represented by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), in the earlier years of its existence, the Haqqanis developed [various alliances](#) with other groups. Most significant are their [close ties](#) with the Taliban and their extensive cooperation with Al-Qaeda. Furthermore, the [Haqqani Network shares similar ideological notions](#)/traits with the Taliban but also drew on teachings of Hizb-i-Islami for much of its ideology. Hizb-i-Islami is Afghanistan's oldest Islamist party and fostered has a strong anti-monarchy and anti-Soviet movement during the civil war. In contrast to Al-Qaeda, the Haqqani Network has a regional focus rather than a global focus. As such, the core values of the Haqqani network are both inspired by nationalism and deeply entrenched in a radical Islamic fundamentalist mind-set derived from a narrow, distorted interpretation of Islam. As they are [inspired by the Jihadi ideology](#) of Taliban and Al-Qaeda, the [Haqqanis share two main goals](#): to restructure the government into a strictly Sharia-following state and to drive

foreign troops and influence out of Afghanistan. As such, analysts maintain that the [Haqqani Network has grown from](#) a CIA-backed anti-Soviet group into one of the most dangerous anti-Western militant organisations in the Af-Pak region. At this time the Haqqani Network is primarily focusing on Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), foremost North Waziristan, and Southern and Eastern Afghanistan, [where it has given shelter and support to terrorist groups](#) (that are either of foreign origin or operating abroad in countries like India, Central Asia, or China). Some of these groups include the Uighur separatists, Uzbek Militants, Lashkar-e Taiba, Lashkar-e Jhangvi, Sipah-e Sahaba, and Jaish-e Mohammed. As such, the Haqqanis promoted Jihadi ideology and terrorism far beyond Pakistan's borders. Overall, it played a significant role in the evolution of militant Islamic fundamentalism in the Af-Pak-region and contributed tremendously to the genesis of 'Global Jihadism'. These findings are highly disturbing to the [international community engaged](#) in general and the US in particular. It was both worrying and confusing to Washington to see the Pakistan government support these organisations (well known for their [armed anti-US/NATO activities](#).) in spite of the large sums the US provided Pakistan with to carry out counter-terrorism. This not only eroded trust between Pakistan and the US, but also [undermined peace and stability](#) in its neighbouring countries, Afghanistan and India. For similar reasons, China feels uneasy seeing how militant groups residing in Pakistan fuel instability in Afghanistan but remain largely untouched by Pakistani armed forces.

The fact that some of these Pakistan based terrorist groups are also targeting China's interests and investments inside and outside the country is increasing/feeding into the threat perception and is highly significant to the ongoing development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Besides having a [keen interest in stability and security in Afghanistan](#), Beijing has made it clear that a secure environment for the CPEC and respective Chinese development projects and workers are a top priority. Taking this into account, it seems likely that Pakistan security circles will focus on the improving domestic security rather than striking against terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan or India. In other words, it seems that the processes of

peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan is a low priority for Islamabad. This observation goes against all promises and statements of Pakistan's decision-makers that peace and the stability in Afghanistan is their utmost concern, as expressed in the numerous rounds of talks about potential peace negotiations. Until this day, 'Pakistan's ambiguity' has a tremendous negative impact on the security situation in Afghanistan and it is obvious that the success of the peace process largely depends on [Pakistan's role](#). Its obvious reluctance to focus on terror groups operating abroad continues to raise tremendous international anger/concerns, especially in Kabul. With every passing day it seems more and more likely that Islamabad is not willing to fulfil its promises to launch operations against the terrorists who have sanctuaries on Pakistani soil. In 2015, in order to appease the international criticism, the Pakistani authorities officially [banned the Haqqani Network](#). However, it remains to be seen whether or not this official policy will translate into effective counterterrorism actions on the ground or whether it is merely a way to save face vis-a-vis the international community.

Pakistan – Trapped in old patterns and the fallacy of its rhetoric

In order to respond to international critics, Pakistan officially condemned the latest attacks in Kabul. Military and political elites seek to portray Pakistan as a victim of terrorism ([even the biggest one](#))², and refer to its counter-terrorism activities like banning militant organizations, the formulation and implementation of the [National Action Plan \(NAP\)](#) and subsequent numerous military operations, especially [Zarb-e-Azb](#)³. These last operations were [launched during the summer of 2014](#) with the official goal to flush out all foreign and domestic terrorists using North Waziristan as a hideout. The comprehensive operation⁴ involved most of the weapon systems available (and were able to function on this difficult terrain), like aircrafts, tanks, artillery, and a large number of ground troops. In official statements, Pakistan's government said to target

² Pakistan's security circles are pointing especially at the Peshawar school massacre and the attack on Karachi airport, serving as critical junctures in the country's security considerations.

³ Meaning 'Strike of the Prophet's Sword' or "sharp and cutting strike".

⁴ Zarb-e-Azb was initially planned for nine months (and declared to be ended) but got extended in time and space, meaning the operation is still ongoing and the area of operations covers the whole country. It's noteworthy that the respective decisions were made by the military autonomously.

(among others) Al-Qaeda, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the East Turkistan Islamic Movement, Bahadur's faction, and the the Haqqani Network. The civilian and military leadership did their utmost to emphasize that the military operation has an [‘all-inclusive’ approach](#) and that it was not excluding any specific group such as the Haqqani Network.

However, despite these efforts there are serious doubts about the motivations behind Operation *Zarb-e-Azb*. The [big question](#) remains whether Pakistan has indeed ended the distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Taliban and whether certain terror groups are still identified as strategic assets. In this context, it should be interesting to see whether Pakistan includes groups targeting India in its counter-terrorism campaigns. If not, this should be an indication that Pakistan continues to hold on to old patterns, using terrorism as an instrument of foreign policy and one could question the overall earnestness applying the ‘all-inclusive approach’.

After officially declaring the end of the initial phase of *Zarb-e-Azb*, the Army announced that the campaign was a major success and claimed more than 90% of the area had been ‘cleared’. According to different sources, approximately 3000-3500 terrorists were killed during the attacks, and large amounts of weaponry and explosive devises have been seized. However, assessing the validity of these claims is difficult as the operation was declared to be an ‘internal matter’ so that it would not require any ‘specific communication’. As a result, no media or neutral observers were allowed to enter the areas in which military activities took place and no independent data about *Zarb-e-Azb* is available.

While we cannot verify the immediate results, the number of terrorist attacks in Pakistan dropped after *Zarb-e-Azb*, while terrorists in Afghanistan appear to be getting persistently stronger. In this context, analysts are alluding to the fact that the Taliban remains as significant and powerful as ever and continues to challenge the stability and security of the country. Most importantly, the Haqqani Network seemed to have gotten even stronger which raises questions about the efficacy, real goals, and motives of Pakistan's anti-counterterrorism efforts.

First, what made Pakistan ban the Haqqani Network despite several experts claiming that Islamabad considered them to be a strategic asset? It seems that one of the major reasons for the ban was to show the international community that Pakistan is finally following a comprehensive approach in its counter-terrorism strategy. In more concrete terms, Islamabad wanted to convince Washington that this time it is seriously pursuing the militants instead of nurturing them. Pakistan's decision-makers most likely wanted to demonstrate that they are no longer pursuing a [differentiation between "good" and "bad" militants/terrorists](#). This could be interpreted (if taken at face value) as Pakistan announcing (officially) that it looks to end affiliation with state-sponsored terrorism. As mentioned above, for years observers have been accusing Pakistan's security sector agents of supporting the Haqqani Network and other militants and of using them as a proxy to gain political and military leverage in Afghanistan and contain the growing influence of its archrival [India](#). However, international analysts continue to doubt/question the extent of the ban and whether it is an earnest effort to curb terrorism or if it is just part of a larger strategy to justify bolstering an increase of the soldiers' role in Pakistan's internal affairs. Therefore, the ban doesn't only have to be seen in the light of international pressure but also in relation to the military's willingness to underline its dominant position in the country's political arena. As a matter of fact, the military has been entrusted with a new martial law against terrorist groups through the proclamation of the [21st Amendment](#). Out-lawing the Haqqani Network meant that military brass would absorb/gain tremendous decision-making power, which would enable them to act without [judicial accountability](#) or any remarkable parliamentary oversight.

In this context, it is noteworthy that the aforementioned [21st Amendment](#) not only paves the way for direct military interference, but also resembles a well-planned and gradual strategy intended to build up a formal role of the military in the country's political landscape. Some people would call it a '[soft](#)' or '[constitutional](#)' coup, diminishing all democratic achievements of the last years. In sum, all significant decision-making areas will be guided by the same security paradigm defined by an ingrained threat towards India and Afghanistan. In this context it is important to recall that Pakistan historically identifies New Delhi and Kabul as a threat to its national identity and national integrity. Therefore, despite severe counter-terrorist activities by

Pakistan military, intelligence and civilian government, one should not expect an extraordinary shift in its security-dominated foreign policy. In other words, Pakistan will most likely stick to its approach of using proxies to achieve foreign policy goals.

The political ban of Haqqani Network without any consequent military implementation is a clear indication to assume continuity of these strategies, and due to the lack of independent information and transparency it is difficult to measure the success of [military against the Haqqanis](#) as well as Pakistan's claimed 'new willingness' to finally fight terrorism in a comprehensive manner. All in all, despite numerous military operations in FATA, it seems that the Haqqani network continues to have remarkable leverage inside Pakistani territory and maintain links to some powerful quarters within the Pakistani security establishment.

Final thoughts

It's high time for Pakistan's security sector agents and the civilian government to move beyond the rhetoric of condemning terrorism and take actions that are comprehensive, transparent and lead to an 'all-inclusive counter-terrorism' strategy. Until this day it appears that Pakistan's establishment is still playing by the rules of its traditional 'double-game' or 'two-track-diplomacy': on one hand the country is carrying out massive military campaigns against militant groups, enforcing law and order by newly established military courts, banning several terrorist organisations among other things. On the other hand, all these measures have a strictly domestic focus, which means that only anti-Pakistan elements are identified as targets. This two-track approach is seriously questioning the credibility of counterterrorism campaigns by Pakistan. Additionally, most of the counter-terrorism measures strengthen the formal role of the military in Pakistan politics at the expense of the civilian decision-making process rather than generate a sustainable solution of the terrorist challenge. The fact that a neutral assessment of the military activities is not possible and that attacks by Pakistan based terrorists abroad continue leads many to question the country's stand in fighting cross-border terrorism. To a certain degree, it is understandable that Pakistan tries to get his own house in order first, especially taking into consideration the [Chinese pressure](#) to ensure a safe environment for the CPEC project without

any further delays. In the words of Chief of the Army Staff (COAS) [General Raheel Sharif](#): “We [Pakistan’s security forces] will not stop unless we achieve our end objective of a terror-free Pakistan” irrespective of the costs. [These costs are reflected in](#) impressive human and material resources but also in [the willingness of the soldiers to sideline the civilians and to scrutinize](#) the latest achievements in democratic transitions for the sake of CPEC implementation. However, as the distinction between “good” (operating abroad) and “bad” (operating domestically against Pakistan’s state and society) terrorists persists, Pakistan continues to rank as the world’s top producer of terrorism but also as its greatest exporter.

The latest Kabul attack shows that Pakistan is not willing to cooperate seriously with the Afghan government and the US. Furthermore, Pakistan has proven to be unable and/or unwilling to keep its promises made during the latest quadrilateral to eradicate anti-Afghan forces within Pakistan’s border. Nevertheless, one should expect some kind of collaboration in order to deal with militant elements threatening both Afghanistan and Pakistan. This is, however, most likely an outcome of the ongoing CPEC developments rather than a serious rapprochement between Islamabad and Kabul. Additionally, the ongoing violent incidents at the border with India, terrorist attacks on Indian soil carried out by Pakistani based Jihadi groups and the persistently recurrent statements by Pakistani officials that India is still interfering in Balochistan, indicate that the decision-making process still follows [the old patterns](#).

Subsequently, the suspicion revolving around Pakistan’s verbal expression/commitment to fight terrorists/terrorism do not result in any real changes in the country’s policies not only remains resilient but is getting more substance. It appears that Pakistan’s security circles still need to learn three major/important lessons: Firstly, they don’t internalise the experience with the Pakistan Taliban and other affiliated elements. More concretely, the establishment does not understand/believe that groups like the Haqqani Network are not an asset but a double edged sword that can easily be turned against Pakistan. Second, ignoring the demands and the mood of the common people and rising public tension, often times leads them to challenge or overthrow the administration. Having said this, while most of the media, academics, and politicians ignore

the extraordinary increase of formal political powers of the army, they oppose the continuation of Pakistan's ambiguous counter-terrorism strategy and [demand the end](#) the 'double game' of fighting only some militants while supporting those who are perceived as a strategic asset. Third, Pakistan must finally realise that the international community will not accept their ambiguous manoeuvres in counter-terrorism. In addition to criticism by Afghanistan, India, and the US, China is increasingly engaging in- and defining a new architecture for security, trade, and regional cooperation. These goals require peace and stability in South Asia and do not leave any room for state-supported terrorism. Pakistan would be well advised to reassess its relationship towards Haqqani Network and other Jihadist groups who aim to produce terror, fear, and destabilise Pakistan's neighbours. If not, it will not only remain in regional isolation but also risk its economic cooperation with China, namely the CPEC. The corridor might be the last chance to bring the country on the right track.

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