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Amid Chinese Diplomatic Push, Afghan Taliban Begin Settling Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) Fighters In North Afghanistan, Prompting Fears That Waziristan-Style Jihadi Situation Could Emerge In Central Asia Along Afghan Border

By **Tajfar Ahmadi*** reshaping the region around Afghanistan as part of a wider policy being dubbed "eastern multilateralism in the Gulf,"[1] that includes: getting Riyadh to join the Shanghai Organization Cooperation (SCO); brokering the historic rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia which will, among other things, let the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) emerge as "a stronger organization";[2] and embarking on "a well-defined path as a new superpower in the 21st century"[3] as seen in its policy toward Moscow and a clamor to mediate in the Ukraine conflict. Beijing is now also changing the dynamics of the Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship.

At the trilateral foreign ministers' conference held in Islamabad on May 6, 2023, China advanced Pakistan's demand, repeatedly ignored by Kabul, that the Afghan Taliban act against Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Pakistani Taliban organization that has launched a series of persistent terror attacks in Pakistan, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. At the meeting, the Taliban agreed to heed Beijing's pressure, and are implementing an effective policy toward TTP.



From Left to Right: Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang, Pakistani Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto, and Afghan Taliban Foreign Minister Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi in Islamabad

During the two-decade war against the U.S. and NATO forces, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA, i.e., the Afghan Taliban) was aided by the TTP, which supplied many suicide bombers. After the Afghan Taliban seized power in Kabul in August 2021, the TTP emir Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud formally described the TTP as "a branch of the Islamic Emirate"[4] and the 14th UN Security Council Report released in June 2023 confirmed that the Afghan Taliban also consider TTP "as part of the Emirate."^[5] This is not new, as TTP commanders and leaders of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates since Osama bin Laden have offered bay'a ("oath of allegiance") to the emir of the Afghan Taliban, a position now held by Mullah Hibbatullah Akhundzada.

Afghan Taliban Begin Policy Of Settling TTP Fighters In Northern Afghanistan

The tripartite conference in Islamabad was attended by Foreign Ministers Bilawal Bhutto of Pakistan, Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi of the Afghan Taliban, and Qin Gang of China. A subsequent joint statement read: "The three sides stressed on the need of not allowing any individual, group or party, including the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), etc., to use their territories to harm and threaten regional security and interests, or conduct terrorist actions and activities. All three sides underscored the need to refrain from intervening into internal affairs of Afghanistan, and to promote Afghan peace, stability, and reconstruction."^[6]

The statement hides more than it reveals about the minds of the Afghan Taliban. However, a policy change toward TTP is being implemented. On June 16, 2023, Afghan website Aamaj News published a Dari-language report, quoting unidentified local sources in Takhar province, that the Islamic Emirate's government has "relocated more than 300 members of the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) armed with light and heavy weapons in the village of Qam Qashlaq in the Dashti Qala district" of the northern province.^[7]

The province of Takhar is situated along Afghanistan's 1,400-km border with Tajikistan, whose government leans toward the Tajik communities in Afghanistan, thereby causing a rift with the Afghan Taliban rulers, who are predominantly Pashtun. In June 2022, a new jihadi organization was also established in Afghanistan called Tehrik-e-Taliban Tajikistan (TTJ), which "aims to establish shari'a rule in Tajikistan while overthrowing the secular government of Tajikistan."^[8] In September 2022, Tajik Foreign Minister Sirajuddin Mehruddin told the UN General Assembly: "Afghanistan is rapidly becoming a safe haven for terrorist groups."^[9]

The Afghan leaders, especially those who belong to northern and northeastern provinces, fear the consequences of the Islamic Emirate's new policy to shift TTP's jihadi fighters and their family members from the Afghan-Pakistan border region to the distant northern Afghanistan.

This policy seems to have been triggered for the following reasons: Beijing is putting a pressure on the rulers in Kabul to accept Pakistan's demand and act against the TTP; the Afghan Taliban are beholden to the TTP and cannot hand over its fighters to Pakistan; the TTP is waging a battle in mainly Pashtun areas, especially Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, which could become a part of the larger Islamic Emirate should the TTP succeed in establishing a shari'a-based government; the Taliban government, and indeed the previous Afghan governments, have never recognized the Durand Line, which demarcates the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Concern Over The "Unprecedented And Organized Invasion Of The Pashtuns" In North, Likely Crisis And War Between North And South

The Taliban's rise to power in Kabul has caused concern among non-Pashtun communities, especially the Tajiks and Uzbeks who live in northern parts of Afghanistan. According to one analysis of the post-Taliban situation, "Tajiks have always been a target of the Taliban as according to the latter, involvement of this ethnic heterogeneity in local and national politics holds the power to overpower the Taliban's rule, defusing their grip on Afghanistan."^[10]

Although the Islamic Emirate does not acknowledge that it has reached an agreement, the pro-Taliban Urdu daily Roznama Ummat reported that an agreement is in place between Pakistan and Afghanistan. According to the report, the Afghan Taliban government will provide land to the members of TTP in northern Afghanistan, while Pakistan will give agricultural machinery and other equipment to settle their families.^[11] Media reports say the TTP mujahideen will also be settled in Badakhshan, and ahead of the implementation of this policy, the Islamic Emirate has replaced its Tajik Taliban officials from their positions by the Pashtun Taliban in Badakhshan, which is also a northeastern province adjoining Takhar.^[12]



The Afghan Taliban have already settled more than 300 TTP fighters near Tajikistan's border

In recent weeks several Afghan leaders have voiced concern over the Afghan Taliban's policy of settling the members of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan in northern Afghanistan. On June 16, 2023, Marshall Abdul Rashid Dostum, who at various times in the past has been a dreaded warlord, Afghanistan's first vice president, and leader of National Islamic Movement Party, tweeted in Dari that the residents of western and northern Afghanistan will not tolerate foreign terrorists in their lands.^[13] Dostum warned that this policy adopted by the Taliban rulers to relocate Pakistani citizens to northern Afghanistan will be "severely creating hate and wars in the future."^[14]

The Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF), one of the anti-Taliban resistance groups that emerged over the past year or so, issued on June 15, 2023, a Dari-language statement criticizing the Taliban for moving TTP fighters in this way, calling the policy "a dangerous act" and urging the world and regional countries not to remain spectators and to act for the restoration of democracy in Afghanistan.^[15]

On June 8, a Twitter account, which tweets in Dari about the activities of the anti-Taliban resistance movements, said that the commanders of the anti-Taliban resistance forces in Andarab district of Baghlan province have urged the residents of northern Afghanistan to rise against the Taliban and fight. "A very big conspiracy is being implemented by the Taliban; the transfer of terrorists from the tribal areas of Pakistan under various titles will turn the North into a second Waziristan. Your fight today will ensure the survival of future generations," it said.^[16]

On June 8, Dr. Latif Pedram, leader of the National Congress Party of Afghanistan and former Member of Parliament from Badakhshan province, tweeted in Dari saying that the unprecedented and organized invasion of the Pashtuns to the North would cause a crisis and a war between the North and the South.^[17] "Finally, the Persian-speaking and Turkic-speaking people and other tribes will not tolerate it," the former lawmaker warned.^[18]



Sirajuddin Haqqani, the Afghan Taliban's minister of the interior, who is on the FBI's Most Wanted list.

In a Dari-language statement dated June 10, the National Resistance Council for Salvation of Afghanistan, another anti-Taliban resistance group, expressed concern: "This move [to resettle TTP fighters] is actually turning northern Afghanistan into a safe haven for terrorists on the one hand and on the other hand it is changing the demographics of the northern parts of the country, which in both cases, makes Afghanistan deeply dangerous."^[19]

Warning of "the unfortunate consequences of this move by the Taliban," the resistance group said it "considers it a safe platform for terrorizing and exporting terrorism from Afghanistan to the region, to the Central Asian countries and the world. If serious attention is not given to prevent it, the scope of Taliban's proxy war will go beyond the territory of Afghanistan."^[20] It is because of this realization, that a Waziristan-like situation could emerge around the northern borders of Afghanistan, that an unidentified Russian diplomat told Aamaj News on June 13 that Moscow will soon react to the relocation of Pakistani terrorists to northern Afghanistan.^[21]

The Afghan Taliban leaders, though they have begun implementing this policy of settling the TTP mujahideen in northern Afghanistan, are also deeply aware that this policy could sow the seeds of divisions between the northern and southern regions of Afghanistan, engendering a long-term schism between the Pashtun and non-Pashtun tribes. On a visit to Jawzjan province, the Afghan Taliban's Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani addressed a meeting where he tried to blame the "enemy" for seeking to divide Afghanistan between the north and the south, though he added that such efforts have failed in the past and all Afghans are equal whether Uzbek, Pashtun, or Tajik.^[22] Taliban leaders like Sirajuddin Haqqani must say who the enemy is: China, Pakistan, or themselves?

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[1] MEMRI Special Dispatches Series No. 10602, Article In Pakistani Daily Examines 'Eastern Multilateralism In The Gulf Region' After Riyadh Joined Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): 'Saudi Arabia And Other Gulf Countries Have Made A 'Pivot To Asia' Regarding Their Geo-Economic Strategy', March 10, 2023.

[2] MEMRI Special Dispatches Series No. 10555, 'How America Will See This Reconciliation'; 'Attempt To Snatch The Iran Card From The Saudi-Israel Agreement'; 'Regarding Yemen, Iran Will Have To Make A Major Change In Its Policy', April 6, 2023.

[3] MEMRI Special Dispatches Series No. 10543, Column In Pakistan's Leading Urdu Daily Examines Chinese President Xi Jinping's Visit To Moscow: 'China Is Now Embarking On A Well-Defined Path As A New Superpower In The 21st Century', March 10, 2023.

[4] MEMRI JTTM Report, Pakistani Taliban Emir Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud Says TTP Is Branch Of The Islamic Emirate Of Afghanistan, Travels Through Pakistan's Border Regions, December 21, 2021.

[5] MEMRI Daily Brief No. 492, UN Security Council Report Says Afghanistan's Taliban Rulers Have Appointed Al-Qaeda Commanders To Government Positions, Provide Them With Monthly Salaries, Training Camps, June 15, 2023.

[6] FMprc.gov.cn (China), May 9, 2023.

[7] Twitter.com/aamajnews_24, May 16, 2023.

[8] MEMRI Daily Brief No. 492, UN Security Council Report Says Afghanistan's Taliban Rulers Have Appointed Al-Qaeda Commanders To Government Positions, Provide Them With Monthly Salaries, Training Camps, June 15, 2023.

[9] ToloNews.com (Afghanistan), September 26, 2022.

[10] ThePrint.in (India), April 17, 2022.

[11] Roznama Ummat (Pakistan), June 14, 2023.

[12] Twitter.com/aamajnews_24, June 12, 2023.

[13] Twitter.com/MDustom, June 16, 2023.

[14] Twitter.com/MDustom, June 16, 2023.

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[16] Twitter.com/AndarabRF, June 8, 2023.

[17] Twitter.com/LatifPedram, Ju ne 8, 2023.

[18] Twitter.com/LatifPedram, June 8, 2023.

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[20] Twitter.com/nrcafghanistan, June 10, 2023.

[21] Twitter.com/aamajnews_24, June 13, 2023.

[22] YouTube.com/watch?v=dfFdGidluH4, accessed June 19, 2023.