



## Nexus of Raw with TTP and PTM: Are they two bodies with the same head and soul? (Part – II)

### Author(s):

Asim Shafique  
(Intern)

### Edited by:

Dr Abdul Rauf Iqbal

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Pakistan has successfully endured a long and hard fight against terrorism for more than twenty years. Pakistan's military, with support of the entire nation, has been able to dismantle terrorist networks inside Pakistan.<sup>1</sup> However, recent rise in terrorist incidents indicate towards the fact that whereas terrorist's physical infrastructure and large scale grouping was successfully defeated through a series of military operations; the main source of terrorism i.e. foreign/ external support to the terrorist groups could not be dismantled completely.<sup>2</sup> Hence, as soon as the foreign funding and support to criminal/ terrorist groups was resumed, post US withdrawal from Afghanistan and arrival of new politico-military leadership; the number of terrorist incidents rose sharply in Pakistan.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, the terrorist groups have also now morphed into more benign-looking political entities like PTM to further their cause of destabilising Pakistan through propagating 'half-truths' only, which makes the job of counterterrorism even harder. In future, there may be several other political entities coming to the scene to further complicate the matters. Moreover, the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan has also changed the security paradigm in the region.<sup>4</sup>

The nexus between TTP and PTM is becoming very clear as both are working towards the same ends i.e., discredit and target Pakistan's military. Both the organisations work hand in gloves just like two bodies with the same head (mastermind) i.e., RAW. On one hand, TTP conducts terrorist attacks against Pakistan's military and LEAs, and when the military conducts operations against the terrorists; PTM criticizes the military action and terms it as illegal and unfair targeting of the Pashtuns in the name of violation of so-called human rights.<sup>5</sup> This narrative is also supported and propagated, wittingly or unwittingly, by a group of national and international media streams.<sup>6</sup> All this indicates the fact that RAW is the mastermind behind these synchronized terrorist and social movement actions.

The sole objective of the relationship of convenience between RAW-TTP-PTM is to discredit Pakistan's military and LEAs and thus destabilise the region. It must be understood that destabilisation of the region remains in the larger geo-strategic interests of US-India nexus within the global context of the US-China rivalry. How much facilitation does India get from the US in its support towards TTP and PTM is a question for Intelligence Agencies to answer? It must be noted that RAW does not only support TTP or PTM; but it is actively supporting other terrorist proxies in Balochistan and Gilgit Baltistan which will be a subject of discussion for another paper.<sup>7</sup> It is no coincidence that TTP and Baloch terrorist groups often target Chinese interests in Pakistan. No wonder that, in recent past, main target of ISKP in Afghanistan has been the Chinese nationals and their interests.<sup>8</sup>

Above in view, there is a need for Pakistan to re-assess its counterterrorism strategy in KPK and Balochistan. This strategy must be based on two basic assumptions: First the Emirate of Afghanistan (Afghan Taliban) and TTP are two distinct and separate entities and do not share

similar politico-military objectives nor similar sources of funding; Second, the Emirate of Afghanistan (Afghan Taliban) do not have the capacity or wherewithal yet to exercise complete control over entire Afghanistan. They have their internal problems and will take time to become a mature political group with the ability to run the government.

Before outlining the basic contours of proposed counterterrorism strategy against TTP-PTM nexus, it is important to understand the evolving domestic and regional environment in which this strategy has to perform. As part of this environment, Pakistan is now confronting a new two-faced terrorist threat, a part of which is political in nature also. Whereas TTP (an amalgamation of area based semi-independent terrorist groups) is a militant organisation but the real threat lies in a more benign political wing represented by PTM and others like minded groups. Like in past, if Pakistan continues to adopt a more kinetic based counterterrorism strategy, it is likely to backfire as organisations like PTM supported by selected media streams would term such military actions 'inhumane' and 'violation of human rights'. With no more US forces conducting kinetic operations in Afghanistan, this false narrative propagated by groups like PTM can easily become a propaganda theme in the hands of pseudo human rights activists, especially in an unregulated (law of jungle) media savvy environment of Pakistan.

Above in view, following are the key strands of a new proposed counterterrorism strategy:-

- Main thrust of the new counterterrorism strategy should be political instead of military (kinetic) as the main threat has also morphed into the political domain. In this regard, district (civilian) administrations suitably assisted by local military commanders (and not vice versa) must exercise control in their respective districts as per existing law of land and "Riwaj", as deemed necessary. This arrangement not only fulfils all the existing legal and constitutional provisions but is sustainable and would enjoy political ownership. It implies that:-
  - Provincial CTDs/ LEAs with support of FC (MoI) and the Intelligence Agencies under the overall umbrella of civilian administration should gradually take the ownership for controlling the anti-state political activity (if any) and conducting kinetic operations against the terrorist (where required).
  - This prong must be accompanied by a decentralised information campaign under the district administration to ensure the credibility of LEAs in the eyes of general public.
  - The challenge in this prong is the supposedly weak capacity of civilian administration to handle such a difficult task. However, capacity building must be achieved by gradual and progressive but continuous and swift roll back of excessive military and intelligence agency domination of national counterterrorism effort.
- Secondary (complimentary) thrust should be kinetic but its focus should shift from large scale military operations to covert "intelligence based selective (small unit) operations". It implies that:-
  - Greater focus and investment into organising and coordinating efficient intelligence networks capable of providing actionable intelligence to local security forces commanders for their timely action.
  - The intelligence network should aim to neutralize two 'centres of gravity' of terrorist organizations: suffocate financial support to terrorists and successfully neutralize top-tier terrorist leadership.
  - In this prong, civilian administrations would provide necessary assistance to IBOs, as and when required.
- As a safeguard, combined arms military capability must be retained in selective garrisons across KPK to provide timely and necessary reinforcements, as and when required.

- Therefore, disregarding temporary rise in terrorist incidents; Pakistan should gradually but swiftly withdraw its army units from KPK and replace them with LEAs suitably reinforced with units of Frontier Corps.
- All above steps must also be suitably supported by a coordinated information and media strategy at the political/ state level. Pakistan must expose nexus of RAW with TTP, PTM, Baloch terrorists in media with proofs for our own public consumption.
- At the federal level, the merger of FATA with KPK must be expedited judiciously as a national security imperative. All constitutional hiccups must be removed so that the promised provincial share from National Finance Commission (NFC) for the development of erstwhile FATA must be deducted “At Source”.
- Similarly, with the help of intelligence agencies, all terrorist incidents must be investigated thoroughly. There should be an expeditious “Logical Conclusion” to all terrorist events culminating into apprehension / punishment of terrorists in public domain through extensive media coverage. It will also help restore public confidence in performance of LEAs and military. For example, investigation related to recent suicide attack in Peshawar mosque and terrorist attack at Karachi police station and others must be taken to their logical conclusion and progress/ result should be shared in public domain.
- Externally, Pakistan should refrain from blaming the Emirate of Afghanistan for terrorist attacks inside Pakistan. Instead, Pakistan should offer all kind of kinetic and non-kinetic support to Afghanistan, in coordination with other friendly countries, to root out the menace of TTP, Baloch

terrorist organisations and others including ISKP from their soil.

- Moreover, Pakistan should emphasize on finding a regional solution to the stability of Afghanistan involving Iran, Central Asian States, China, and Russia especially focusing on its economic development. There is a dire need to replace the “War Economy” of Afghanistan with a model of “Economy based upon Trade, Investment and Connectivity”.

The above strategy is not without its challenges. The foremost challenge for the military is to change course, not physically but conceptually. It must realise that post US withdrawal from Afghanistan, it does not enjoy same freedom of action in border regions of Afghanistan as in past. Moreover, it has successfully dismantled the terrorist group’s networks and it can return to its garrisons in an orderly and gradual manner. If it does not return now, it might be very difficult to return later in face of alleged ‘human rights violations’ which can also occur accidentally or through false propaganda due to large scale military presence in any civil area. Moreover, the global appetite for terrorism is waning. Pakistan’s military will find it very hard to conduct hardcore kinetic counterterrorism operations in absence of international support. The recent rise in terrorist incidents should not distract us from looking at the bigger picture. These incidents might have been designed to keep the new politico-military leadership mired in an unsustainable and confusing security situation. Much to the dismay of RAW and India, perhaps, it is time to re-shift military focus towards Pakistan’s eastern borders, once again.

## References

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<sup>8</sup> Zafar Iqbal Yousafzai, "After the Kabul Hotel Attack: The Taliban and China Confront Security Challenges in Afghanistan", China Brief Volume: 23 Issue: 1. [https://jamestown.org/program/after-the-kabul-hotel-attack-the-taliban-and-china-confront-security-challenges-in-afghanistan/#:~:text=On%20December%2012%2C%20members%20of,%2C%20December%2014%2C%202022\).](https://jamestown.org/program/after-the-kabul-hotel-attack-the-taliban-and-china-confront-security-challenges-in-afghanistan/#:~:text=On%20December%2012%2C%20members%20of,%2C%20December%2014%2C%202022).)