

Assassination of TTP Leader in Afghanistan: Context and Implications

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Summary

This paper analyses the potential implications of the assassination of Khalid Balti on the structure of the Tehreek-e-Taliban, ongoing militant rivalries in Afghanistan and relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

On 13 January 2022, the [Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan \(TTP\)](#) confirmed that its former operational commander and spokesperson, Khalid Balti, had been assassinated in Nangahar, Afghanistan. Ever since the news of his death was first reported on 10 January 2022, there has been speculation over the involvement of Pakistan and factions within the Taliban in Afghanistan. While there is little credible information about Balti's assassination, the context in which it occurred suggests that it may have wide-ranging implications on the structure of the TTP, ongoing militant rivalries in Afghanistan and relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The TTP is an umbrella organisation consisting of militant groups inspired by and historically linked to the Taliban. It emerged in 2007 in opposition to Pakistan's support for the United States' 'war on terror' and has waged a violent campaign against the Pakistani state. It has carried out numerous terrorist attacks, including the 2014 attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar in which 149 people were killed. Despite being broadly united by the aim of establishing what it defines as an Islamic system in Pakistan, the TTP is not a monolithic organisation. A number of its factions are also embedded within long running political struggles in the Pashtun areas that straddle the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Since the Taliban gained control over Afghanistan in August 2021, the TTP has escalated its violent attacks in Pakistan. It has benefitted from the fact that the Taliban released several TTP figures detained in Afghanistan by the previous regime. Balti was among those freed. The TTP has also been able to develop its safe houses, bases and training camps in the provinces of Kunar and Nangahar in eastern Afghanistan primarily because the Taliban had thus far not ceded to Pakistani pressure to detain and deport the TTP leaders. This is partly due to the historical, ideological and ethnic links between the Taliban and the TTP. This is also because the Taliban are concerned that any action against the TTP could result in clashes between the two movements and result in factions within the TTP joining or aligning with [the Islamic State-Khorasan Province](#) (ISIS-K). This is a major concern for the Taliban. As it is, there have been scattered clashes between Taliban fighters and the TTP. A few factions within the TTP, like the Lashkar-e-Islam, are already reported to have allied with ISIS-K and are part of its attempts to develop a broad anti-Taliban front.

The Taliban have sought to negotiate a position between, on the one hand, not seeming to support the TTP and, on the other, not seeming to be aligned with Pakistan's attempts to

suppress it. Thus, the Taliban have repeatedly called on the TTP to engage in negotiations with Pakistan. Indeed, the Taliban played a role in facilitating the talks that led to a month-long [ceasefire between Pakistan and the TTP](#) in November 2021. Concomitantly, the Taliban have sought to distance themselves from the aims of the TTP. Notably, a statement by the chief of the TTP, Noor Wali Mahsud, in which he stated that the TTP was a “branch” of the wider “umbrella” of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) was categorically refuted by Zabiullah Mujahid, spokesperson for the Taliban. Mujahid asserted that the [TTP were not part of the IEA](#) and that their objectives were different. On its part, Pakistan seems, till now, to have made the strategic decision that the stability of the Taliban regime was of prime importance. It, thus, refrained from pushing the Taliban too hard on the TTP issue.

To understand the potential implications of Balti’s assassination, it is important to look at the context in which it occurred. It happened shortly after the TTP declared that it would not extend the month-long ceasefire. It also happened in the wake of border tensions between the Taliban and Pakistan. In January 2022, [Taliban fighters demolished parts of a fence](#) erected by Pakistan along the Durand Line. Like previous Afghan regimes, the Taliban have not accepted the Durand Line as a legitimate border between Afghanistan and Pakistan as it divides the Pashtun community. This border incident has been the most significant test to the relations between the Taliban and Pakistan since August 2021. Since these incidents, Pakistan seems to be more assertive about the need for the Taliban to clamp down on the TTP. On 17 December 2021, Pakistan is suspected of having carried out a [drone attack in Kunar](#) targetting the former TTP deputy leader, Faqir Muhammad. Furthermore, it has reportedly asserted that [the TTP is a “test case”](#) of how the Taliban will deal with transnational militant groups based in Afghanistan and that the Taliban’s international credibility is contingent upon it. Such a statement must be viewed in the light of the fact that Pakistan has undertaken wide-ranging diplomatic efforts to legitimise the Taliban regime. These include organising an Organisation of Islamic Countries meeting on 19 December 2021 to establish the mechanisms to deliver aid to Afghanistan.

Looking ahead, Balti’s assassination may accentuate divides within the TTP. Before his death, Balti was reportedly speaking to different factions within the TTP to keep them within the fold and committed to a unified stance. He was a figure respected by varying factions. Such splinters within the TTP could result in it being organisationally, logistically and ideologically weaker. This would benefit the Pakistani state. However, it could also result in more violent attacks by smaller factions. In Afghanistan, it could result in more TTP factions joining ISIS-K; especially if it suspects that the Taliban had a role in Balti’s assassination. This could pose a serious challenge both to the Taliban and Pakistan.

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