

Risks to India's national security from tensions along the Iran-Pakistan border

KEY JUDGEMENTS

Border confrontations between Iran and Pakistan have risen sharply since February 2014, when five Iranian border guards were abducted by the Jaish ul-Adl¹ Sunni militant group and taken into Pakistani Balochistan. More recently, four² other attacks have been recorded on the Iranian side since September 2014 following which both countries exchanged mortar fire along the border.³

We assess that these border tensions are poised to exacerbate as Iran's eastern front remains vulnerable to further strikes by Sunni Baluch militants. The Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) observes that the quality and training of recruits have greatly improved. Emboldened by the rise of the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria, the Jaish ul-Adl is keen to make some gains of its own. Certain tactics such as employing a car bomb mirror those used by the IS in Iraq.

Our assessment in the short term:

- **Jaish ul-Adl is poised to scale up attacks, possibly target bigger towns like Zabol, Zahedan**
- **The Pakistani ISI will have to evaluate the relative importance of its Baloch assets and decide if it is too expensive to continue supporting Jaish-ul-Adl**
- **The Iranian security forces will consider unilateral action to crush Jaish ul-Adl if Islamabad and the Pakistani army fail to rein in the group**

After India and Afghanistan, Islamabad has now strained its relations with Iran. Continued incursions by terrorists from the Pakistani side into Iran and the subsequent military posturing by both countries have major implications for both Pakistan's stability and that of the region as a whole.

In the near term, we believe that these confrontations pose a threat to Indian strategic assets in Iran - the Chabahar port and the upcoming railway network connecting it to Afghanistan.



TRIGGERS

The following factors will influence the direction of the Iran-Pakistan bilateral relationship in the next year:

- **A change in intensity of attacks by Baluchi terrorist groups on Iranian soil**
An increase or decrease in terrorist attacks against Iranian security forces will directly determine the latter's response to the Pakistanis in the border area and in diplomatic or commercial engagements in the region.
- **A change in ISI's perception of Jaish ul-Adl and other anti-Iranian assets**
The ISI has previously demonstrated it is willing to let go of the Jundullah after calculating the costs associated with backing the group. Such cost comparisons vis-à-vis its more elite/prized groups such as those which operate against India and Afghanistan directly affect Pakistan's military strategy with regard to the Iranian border.
- **Pakistan's stance in the Saudi Arabia – Iran regional rivalry**
The close relationship between Riyadh and the Pakistani civilian and military establishments is another factor to be considered. Pakistan's political thrust on promoting Sunni Islam and related extremist forces and its internal sectarian conflict feeds into this larger regional rivalry.
- **The changing nature of IRGC's relationship with the ISI**
In the past (2003-2010), the two security agencies have cooperated in detaining Jundullah terrorists. Pakistan arrested and handed over Jundullah leader Abdul Malik Rigi's brother to Iran even as the latter accused Islamabad of granting refuge to terrorists. However, the more brutal the attacks became, Tehran lost patience, shut the border and launched a unilateral hunt for operatives.
- **Deterioration of law and order situation in Balochistan**
The discordant relationship between the Balochistan province and Islamabad affects the stability of the south-western border region on the Pakistani side. Any deterioration in the law and order situation in the province will have a spillover effect on the anti-Iranian Baluch movement as well. However, the armed Baloch insurgency appears to be weakening with infighting plaguing various camps within movement.

SCENARIOS

The timing and the sequence of these triggers could result in **four** scenarios. We assess that the **most likely** outcome of this conflict is:

Scenario 1 – Rise in attacks by Jaish-ul-Adl followed by the marginalisation of the group

Emboldened by the rise of the Islamic State that threatens Iran on its western front, the militants decide to escalate their use of force. The Baloch militant groups step up attacks on Iranian soil. They increase in intensity and focus on expanding civilian targets within the many border towns such as Zahedan and Zabol.

Tehran demonstrates zero tolerance and shuts the border. The country's ruthless response to the Jundullah and the Mujaheddin-e Khalq (MeK) serves as a blueprint. Khamenei orders the Iran-Pakistan border shut and tasks the IRGC with cracking down and launching a hunt for Jaish-ul-Adl operatives.

Bilateral relations deteriorate further after greater evidence of the ISI's role emerges during the detention and interrogation of Jaish ul-Adl suspects. Key bilateral projects such as the already delayed Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline is stalled indefinitely. Cross-border trading ceases with the main trading point located at Taftan (Zero Point) closed.

At this juncture, Pakistan will have to decide whether it can continue down this path of escalation and if yes, at what cost. We assess that Pakistan finds it can make do without the anti-Iranian Baluch elements in its network of jihadi assets. The cost of harbouring the group will outweigh the benefits and Islamabad assumes a cooperative stance with Tehran and assists in the capture and consequent 'leadership decapitation' of the group. After India and Afghanistan, Pakistan will not be able to afford an active third front on its south-west border with Iran as well.

The three other likely scenarios are:

Scenario 2 - Rise in attacks by Jaish ul-Adl followed by further escalation

This scenario is similar to Scenario 1 except that here, Pakistan prefers to maintain its ties to the Jaish ul-Adl. It proactively harbours, supports and further trains its operatives despite the Iranian backlash, including assisting in conducting operations within Iranian territory. Such a path could be taken if the sectarian conflict within Pakistan worsens and its military adopts a strategy to strike or 'bleed' Iran at its border using all anti-Shia groups at hand, ranging from the Lashkar e-Jhangvi to the Jaish ul-Adl.

Scenario 3 – Iranian-Pakistani Cooperation against Balochi nationalism

In this scenario, the common fear of Balochi nationalism brings the two neighbours closer together. In the past, Iran and Pakistan have cooperated in suppressing Balochi nationalistic movements on their shared border. In spite of Pakistani ISI support for certain terrorist groups, it is not in either country's interest that Balochi groups foment nationalistic passions in the border provinces.

Coordination between the two security agencies - the IRGC and GHQ/ISI – stepped up. The IRGC has been given the mandate to hold point with regard to the attacks and engage with the Pakistani side. Both sides thus enhance their intel-sharing mechanism and fine tune joint counter-terrorism efforts. Such coordination helps expedite the capture of key Jaish-ul-Adl figures and weaken the organization.

Strengthen the border management system. Tighter security is implemented on the Pakistani side to halt terrorist incursions targeting the Iranians. Such commitment reinforces confidence in the bilateral relationship.

Scenario 4 – Remaining Reactionary

The Jaish ul-Adl steps up attacks but in a fashion that suits the Pakistani appetite for the occasional incursion (its “simmer not boil” policy). These low-intensity strikes focus on ‘tolerable’ casualty figures – primarily security personnel and border guards.

The Iranian military in response plays the situation on a case-by-case basis given the primary focus on its western front where it is battling the ISIS. However, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei’s tolerance could dip drastically if the terrorists – (1) flout their ‘no civilians’ rule and engage in lethal strikes or (2) target strategic assets, senior IRGC commanders, or highly influential political leaders.

RISKS TO INDIA’S NATIONAL SECURITY

- **Short-term: Critical economic asset(s) at stake – Chabahar port project.**
Chabahar lies about 50 km from the Iran-Pakistan border. The Union government recently approved the project and India will invest about USD 85 million to develop the port’s container terminal and multi-purpose cargo terminal. The project is expected to finish before 2017. India also intends to lease two berths for ten years. Given these goals, rising border tensions between Iran and Pakistan and the threat from Sunni terrorist elements in the area should be a primary consideration in New Delhi’s calculations. Securing strategic assets, like the Chabahar port and the upcoming railway network, that are central to India’s efforts to connect to landlocked Afghanistan should be included in our near-term agenda.
- **Medium-term: Shared interest with Iran in countering Pakistan-backed terrorism**
New Delhi should seize this opportunity to expand its counter terrorism and intelligence-sharing dialogue with Tehran. The Joint Working Group (JWG) on Terrorism established in 2003 should be expanded to include lessons learnt and actionable data on recruitment, training and operations of terrorist groups active in the western and eastern fronts of Pakistan. The current focus of the JWG - Afghanistan and counter-narcotics operations - will be further strengthened by the information on how different Pakistan-backed groups operate in the region.
- **Long-term: Shia-Sunni Rivalry**
India needs to keep a wary eye on how the Shia-Sunni rivalry plays out in our near-to-immediate neighbourhood and how it affects our 138 million – strong (13.4 percent) Muslim population. The sectarian conflict within Pakistan and the role Iran plays as the protector of the Shia community in the region feed into India’s long-term calculations for the region.

¹ **Jaish-ul-Adl (Army of Justice)** is a successor outfit of the Iranian Jundullah – a group of Sunni Baloch terrorists aiming to liberate the Sunni-majority *Sistan-va-Baluchestan* province from the Shia majority Iranian state. The Jaish ul-Adl was formalized in 2012 under the command of **Salahuddin al-Farouqi**. Farouqi insists that his group does not target civilians but acts against military and economic targets to weaken the Islamic Republic.

² The first attack (September 9, 2014) targeted a border outpost near the border town of Saravan named the “Quds base” which hosted ground-forces of the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC). The armed terrorists tried to capture the outpost. One IRGC guard was killed and two *Basij* (local paramilitary volunteers) injured in the process. According to the IRGC, the attackers were forced to retreat to Pakistan.

The second assault occurred a month later (October 8) within Saravan in which three police officers were gunned down. The perpetrators escaped before police reinforcements arrived in the area.

A third (more audacious) strike was on October 9 when terrorists rammed a car holding 600 kilograms of explosive material into the wall of a police station, once again in Saravan. They were ultimately gunned down after a three hour gunbattle with the forces. The car bomb killed one police officer and three injured.

The most recent strike was on October 16. Two Iranian border police officers were killed and several border guards were injured in an armed conflict with a group of bandits at the border.

³ In a break from past behaviour, Pakistan retaliated against Iran's mortar fire by firing a few shells into Iranian territory.

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