

Iran's border wall: Shield against terror?

By Samit Gupta
Columnist

OPINION

Iran's recent decision to construct a 295 km wall along its border with Afghanistan is a stark reminder of the regional and global anxieties surrounding the rise of terrorism under Taliban rule. This wall is not just a physical barrier but a symbol of Iran's growing concerns about the spread of extremism and instability from its eastern neighbor. As the world watches Afghanistan transform into a sanctuary for terrorist organizations, Iran's move underscores a collective regional response to a shared threat. The decision to build the wall resonates with the concerns already expressed by Pakistan and other neighboring countries. Since the Taliban's return to power, Pakistan has consistently voiced alarm over the surge in cross-border terrorism. The rise of groups like Fitna-e-Khawarji and ISKP, which have carried out numerous attacks in neighboring countries, further validates Pakistan's concerns. Iran's construction of the wall is a tangible acknowledgment that Afghanistan under Taliban rule has become a breeding ground for extremist activities that threaten regional stability.

The international community has not been silent on this issue. The United Nations and other global organizations have documented the resurgence of terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda, ISIS-K, and others in Afghanistan. These reports highlight the dangers posed by the Taliban's inability or unwillingness to curb these groups' activities. Iran's decision to fortify its border is a proactive step in line with these global concerns, aiming to protect its citizens from the ever-present threat of terrorism.

Iran is not alone in taking such measures. Pakistan has already invested heavily in fencing its border with Afghanistan, a move driven by the same fears that now prompt Iran to build its wall. The porous nature of the Afghan border has long been a source of concern for both countries, with militants exploiting the lack of secure boundaries to launch attacks and evade capture. By erecting these barriers, Iran and Pakistan are sending a clear message: the threat from Afghanistan is real, and decisive action is necessary to counter it.

The implications of this move extend beyond Iran and Pakistan. The entire region is grappling with the consequences of a resurgent Taliban and the spread of terrorist ideologies. Central Asian countries, too, have expressed concerns about the infiltration of extremist groups

from Afghanistan. Iran's wall, therefore, is not just about national security; it is a regional measure reflecting a broader consensus on the dangers emanating from Afghanistan.

The construction of the wall also highlights the limitations of diplomatic engagement with the Taliban. Despite numerous attempts by regional and global powers to engage with the Taliban and encourage them to rein in terrorist groups, the reality on the ground suggests that these efforts have largely failed. The Taliban's governance, marred by internal divisions and a lack of control over various factions, has allowed terrorist organizations to operate with relative impunity. In this context, Iran's wall is a pragmatic response to an increasingly untenable situation.

However, the wall is not without its challenges. The rugged terrain of the Iran-Afghanistan border presents significant logistical difficulties, and the construction process is likely to be fraught with obstacles. Moreover, the wall's effectiveness in preventing the infiltration of terrorists is not guaranteed. Terrorist groups have historically shown a remarkable ability to adapt to new challenges, and it remains to be seen whether the wall will be able to stem the tide of cross-border terrorism.

The wall also raises questions

about the humanitarian impact on the Afghan population. Many Afghans have historically relied on cross-border trade and movement for their livelihoods, and the construction of the wall could disrupt these traditional patterns. Iran will need to carefully consider the balance between security and the potential hardships imposed on ordinary Afghans.

In conclusion, Iran's decision to build a 295 km wall along its border with Afghanistan is a significant development in the ongoing struggle against terrorism in the region. It reflects the growing realization among neighboring countries that Afghanistan, under Taliban rule, poses a serious threat to regional stability. The wall is a defensive measure, a recognition that diplomatic efforts alone have not been sufficient to address the dangers emanating from Afghanistan. As Iran joins Pakistan in fortifying its border, the region must come together to address the shared threat of terrorism and work towards a collective security framework that can effectively counter the challenges posed by the Taliban's Afghanistan.

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Danger of distrust on Iran-Pakistan border



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OPINION

On August 26, the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), a Baloch terrorist organization, launched a series of attacks across Pakistan's Balochistan province, killing more than 70 citizens and military personnel. Such attacks come on the heels of protests over the last few weeks across the province. The attacks themselves represent a new level of sophistication for the BLA, not only in their coordination but also in their targeting of vital infrastructure, such as railway links leading to the city of Quetta. They also represent a continuing commitment on behalf of the BLA to wage its insurgency campaign in the southwestern province. Viewed in a vacuum, these attacks may seem to be an internal security challenge for Pakistan but not a source of instability in its regional security environment. Yet, the attacks are part of a broader insurgency on both sides of the Iran-Pakistan border.

The last year has witnessed several attacks by Baloch terrorists operating within Iran. In response to these attacks, the Iranian military launched a series of deadly strikes in January on Pakistan, reportedly targeting insurgents that had slipped through the two nations' common border. In retaliation, Pakistan launched a series of its own tit-for-tat strikes on suspected BLA militants residing in Iran. Although both powers restored diplomatic relations and agreed to coordinate counterterrorism efforts in the aftermath of the strikes, the incidents highlighted the sensitivity of both nations to the perception that insurgents launching attacks within their respective borders might be operating within their neighbor's. It also highlighted their willingness to use unilateral force in addressing this issue.



People inspect a burned-out vehicle torched by members of the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) terrorist organization after they killed passengers on a highway in Musakhail, Pakistan, on August 26, 2024.

● RAHMAT KHAN/AP



Members of Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) terrorist organization

● THE KASHMIR PRESS

In the weeks leading up to Monday's attacks, several incidents suggested that insurgents were operating on both sides of the porous border.

For one, on July 19, Wahid Kambar, a prominent leader of the Balochistan Liberation Front (a predecessor to the BLA), was arrested by Pakistani security forces. On its face, this may not seem all that troubling, but there has been widespread speculation that the abduction took place on Iranian soil, suggesting that Balochi militants can easily cross the border into Iran and operate there. Moreover, his abduction by Pakistani (instead of Iranian) personnel highlights Islamabad's distrust of Iran's cooperation in counterterrorism efforts.

Another sign pointing toward a cross-border insurgency came in Quetta on August 16. Five bullet-ridden bodies were found hanging from electrical poles. The bodies, identified as Afghan nationals, were just 20 days earlier featured in a hostage video released by Jaish-ul-Adl (JUA), the most prominent of the Baloch insurgent groups operating on the Iranian side of the border. The message JUA is trying to send here is unmistakable: We can operate all across Balochistan, and there is little Pakistani security forces can do to stop us. In light of these incidents, it would be hard for ei-

ther Pakistan or Iran to argue that their respective Baloch insurgent groups were not operating within the other's territory. It would also be hard for either to argue that their counterparts were waging a successful counterterrorism campaign against such groups within their own borders.

One might reasonably point out that such cross-border terrorist ties do not necessarily mean increasing tensions between Iran and Pakistan. There is, after all, a long history of militants operating on either side of the porous border. Furthermore, the agreement on counterterrorism between Iran and Pakistan earlier this year would seem to underscore the degree to which both countries recognize the necessity of cooperation, however imperfect.

Yet, the history of the insurgency on either side of the border demonstrates that these commitments do not necessarily translate into sustained success. Both countries have been aware of the problem of cross-border militants for quite a while, yet engage in recriminations more often than cooperation. In 2009, after Baloch militant groups with links to Pakistan launched attacks in Iran, Tehran accused Islamabad of supporting the militants. After a deadly attack in 2013 that killed 13 Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) members, Iran went so far as to

launch missile strikes on Pakistan in order to target those responsible for the attack. After four Iranian soldiers were kidnapped by Baloch militants in 2014, Iran threatened to send troops into Pakistan. The tensions between the two countries on the Baloch issue have not abated in recent years, either. Rocket attacks by Iran on Pakistan in 2017, Pakistan's alleged downing of Iranian drones in 2017 and 2019, and accusations by Pakistan of Iranian support for Baloch militants as recently as 2023 all underscore the degree of mistrust that undergirds the relationship. Most notably, as Matthew Elliott pointed out in his thesis on the subject, such periods of heightened tensions are almost always followed by some commitment by both parties to jointly address the insurgency, and yet such commitments are rarely enough to prevent the next outbreak of violence.

This history of tit-for-tat retaliation over the failure of joint counterterrorism efforts between Iran and Pakistan, then, is worrying, especially given the sophistication and scope of the August 26 attacks and the failure of both countries' intelligence establishments to stop cross-border terrorist activities in the last few months. Certainly, there is evidence already to suggest that Pakistan's intelligence es-

tablishment does not view this problem as strictly internal, with defense officials pointing toward "hostile intelligence agencies" trying to disrupt Pakistan's infrastructure in the province, centered around the Chinese-owned port of Gwadar and its associated China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This speculation that the militants are targeting CPEC infrastructure was repeated by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on August 27.

Although such comments do not necessarily point the finger at Iran, they do suggest that Pakistan believes 1) international actors are partially responsible for the attack and 2) such actors are opposed to the success of the CPEC corridor.

These attacks represent, if nothing else, a novel and profound blow against Pakistan's strategic efforts to develop and pacify Balochistan. Shocked by the sophistication of the August 26 attacks, distrustful of its neighbors, and looking for a culprit, there is a real possibility that Pakistan may view counterterrorism cooperation with Iran with increasing suspicion. It certainly would not be the first time Pakistan decided to take a more unilateral approach to the Balochistan insurgency.

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