

JAN
2013

Bacha Khan Airport Attack: Peshawar, Pakistan



[TRADOC G-2 Intelligence Support Activity
\(TRISA\)](#)

Complex Operational Environment and
Threat Integration Directorate (CTID)





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Purpose

- To inform the Army training community about the details of the Bacha Khan Airport attack in Peshawar, Pakistan.
- To illustrate the tactics, techniques, and procedures used in the Bacha Khan Airport attack in Peshawar, Pakistan.
- To provide information on the configuration of the attack teams.
- To provide background information on the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).
- To provide information on the Bacha Khan Airport.
- To compare this attack with previous attacks on two other Pakistani military installations.

Executive Summary

- On 15 December 2012, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) launched an attack with affiliated IMU members on the Bacha Khan Airport, which operates both as a commercial airport and a military facility for the Pakistan Air Force (PAF).
- The attack began at 2035 with five rockets. Three rockets fell short and caused civilian damage and casualties in a village outside of the airport, and two landed on the airfield.
- A vehicle laden with explosives detonated prematurely at the western perimeter wall, destroying a portion of the wall, killing all five passengers.
- Airport security personnel were anticipating an attack and quickly moved to the point of the explosion where they repelled an attack from a follow-on force of five assailants.
- The follow-on force retreated to a safe house in a neighborhood in the vicinity of the attack where they were found the next morning. Three insurgents were killed in a firefight with security forces and two assailants killed themselves by detonating suicide vests.

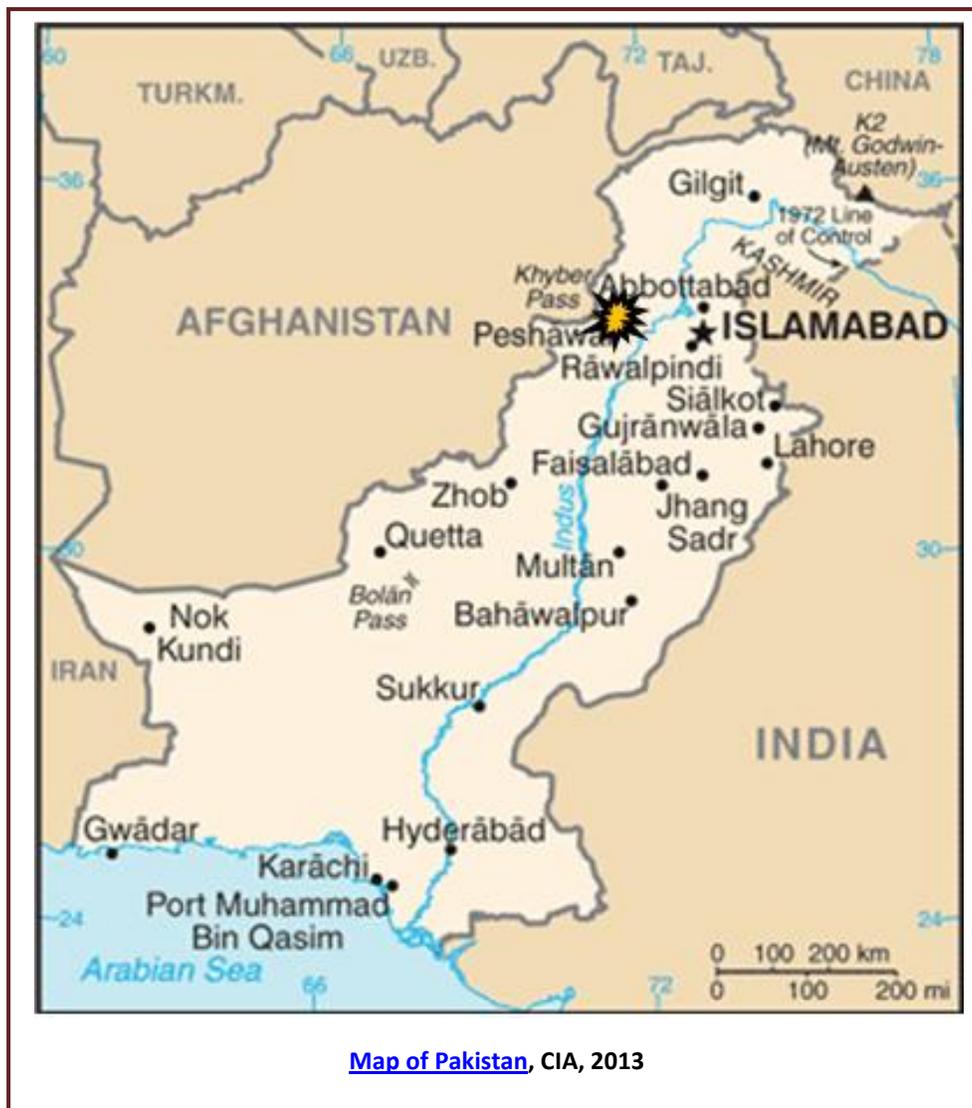
Cover photo: [Bacha Khan Airport, Peshawar, Pakistan](#), Wikipedia, 2013.



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Map





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Introduction

On 15 December 2012 beginning at 2035, insurgents conducted a complex attack on the Bacha Khan Airport in Peshawar, Pakistan. The TTP took credit for the attack, yet some, if not all, of the attackers were members of the IMU. The attack ultimately failed, in part due to intelligence that pointed to an eminent attack on the airport, the quick reaction of Pakistani security forces, and failures of the insurgents to execute their plan. Previous attacks on the Mehran Naval Air Base in Karachi, Pakistan and [Minhas Air Force Base in Kamra](#), Pakistan were tactically more successful, but differed in approach. Whereas the two previous attacks were conducted by stealth, the Bacha Khan Airport attack was an audacious assault beginning with indirect fire that signaled an attack with a vehicle borne improvised explosive device (VBIED), grenades, and small arms. Whether this represents a growing confidence in the TTP's ability to attack military targets in more overt ways or not is yet to be seen. At a minimum, the TTP and IMU will learn from the experience and adapt tactics to increase the chance of success in future attacks.

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

The TTP is a loose confederation of militant groups led by commanders who are often rivals, primarily from the Mehsud tribe. The TTP formed in December 2007 with the purpose of facilitating the communication and cooperation between the numerous pro-Taliban groups operating in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province (previously known as Northwest Frontier Province) of Pakistan. The TTP's major objective is to overthrow the Pakistani government and install an Islamic government based on a fundamentalist Deobandi form of *Sharia* (Islamic law). The TTP carries out attacks on Pakistani security forces, Shia Muslims, and rival Sunni Muslim groups such as [Lashkar-e-Taiba](#) (Soldiers of the Pure). The 2007 suicide assassination of Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto was the first high-profile attack attributed to the TTP.

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)

There is evidence that the Bacha Khan Airport attack was conducted by members of the IMU. The IMU has a long history of cooperation with the TTP dating to before the TTP's formation. Tahir Yuldashev founded the IMU in 1998. Yuldashev offered the founder of the TTP, Baitullah Mehsud, the services of his more than 2,500 fighters. The TTP provided a sanctuary for the IMU's efforts in northern Afghanistan in exchange for the use of IMU fighters against Pakistani security forces. American drones killed both Mehsud and Yuldashev in August 2009. The death of its leader and pressure from Pakistani security forces required the IMU to relocate from South Waziristan to North Waziristan. The TTP and the IMU continue to work in tandem with each other to target Pakistani security forces. It is likely that the IMU – with TTP support – conducted the [Bannu jail break](#) in Peshawar, Pakistan in April 2012. Since its move to North



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Waziristan, the IMU has also developed alliances with al-Qaeda and the Haqqani network. Pakistani investigation of the Bacha Khan Airport attack identified at least some of the participants as members of the IMU.

Bacha Khan Airport

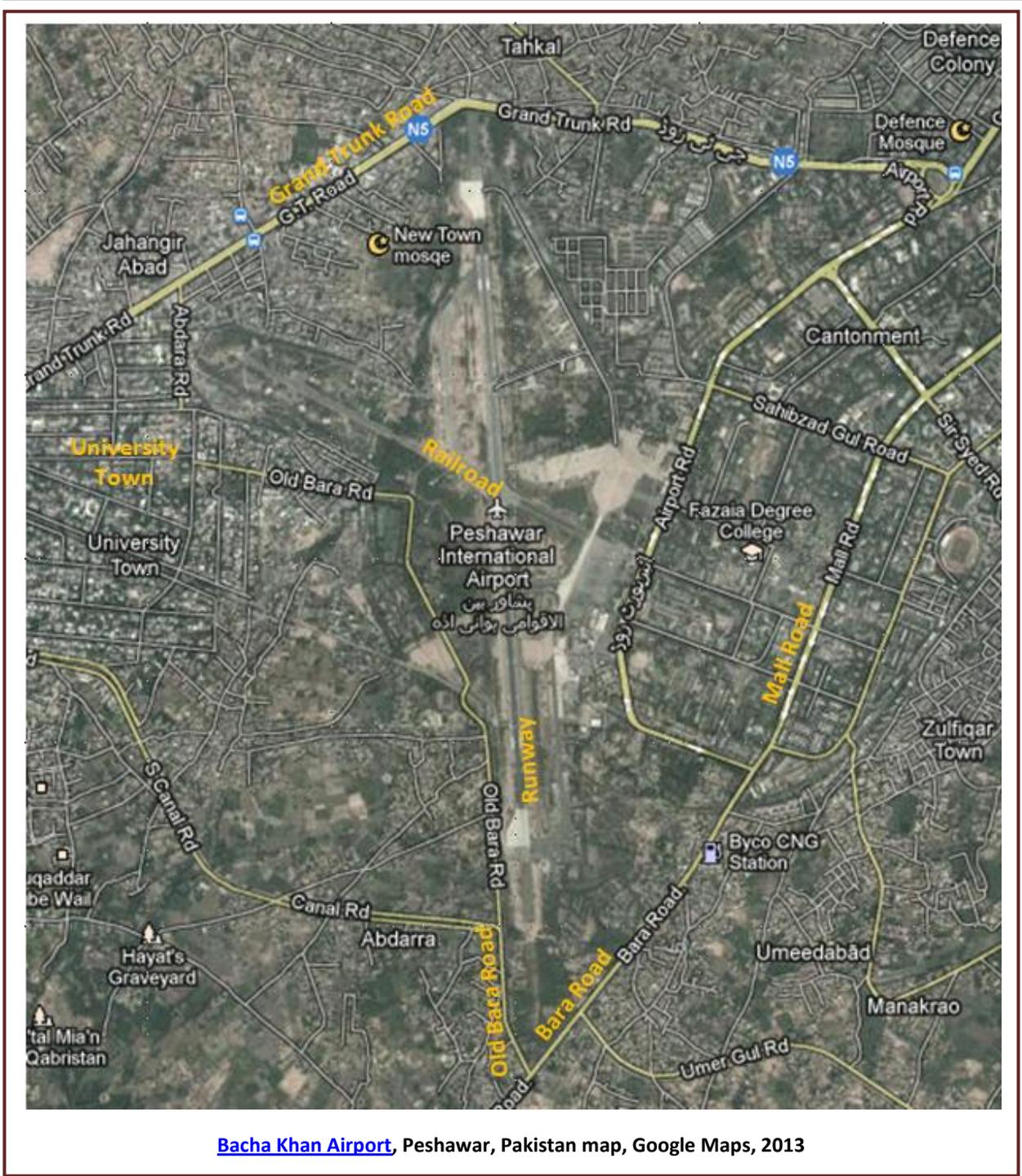
The Bacha Khan Airfield, established in 1927, is strategically located and used for both civilian and military purposes. The airfield is jointly shared by the Pakistani Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) and the PAF and is located in Peshawar, the gateway to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Its geography and dual use make the Bacha Khan Airfield both an inviting and vulnerable target.

The Bacha Khan Airport is vulnerable to attack due to its location in an urban area surrounded by Peshawar neighborhoods and its proximity to the insecure areas of northern Pakistan. The airport is used by the Pakistan International Airlines as well as several other domestic and international airlines. The PAF base is positioned on the eastern side of the airport and runs toward its western boundary from where the 15 December 2012 attack took place (*see map below*). The eastern and southern sides of the airport are situated in the cantonment area whereas the western and northern sides are outside it. The Grand Trunk Road runs along the northern tip of the airfield. The Bara Road/Mall Road runs parallel to its eastern perimeter and intersects the Old Bara Road at the southern tip of the airfield. A railway track passes through the middle of the airfield from a southeast to northwest direction. Barricades block all roads leading to the entrance of the airport and airbase for civilians and at present only a single road running from Mall Road is being used for civilian traffic. Security personnel operate a checkpoint to search all vehicles before they enter the main airport entrance. According to the CAA, the runway is 9,000 feet long and 150 feet wide.

While the Bacha Khan Airfield's urban location is generally vulnerable, the western perimeter is particularly susceptible to an attack. The Old Bara Road runs parallel with the western perimeter until it intersects with roads leading into an upscale residential area known as University Town. Particular areas of exposure and concern for the western perimeter include the Old Bara Road that hugs the outer boundary wall along the south western portion of the airfield and is accessible by anyone, in a vehicle or on foot. In addition, the road has very little traffic at night and has several close villages that can provide infiltration and exfiltration routes.



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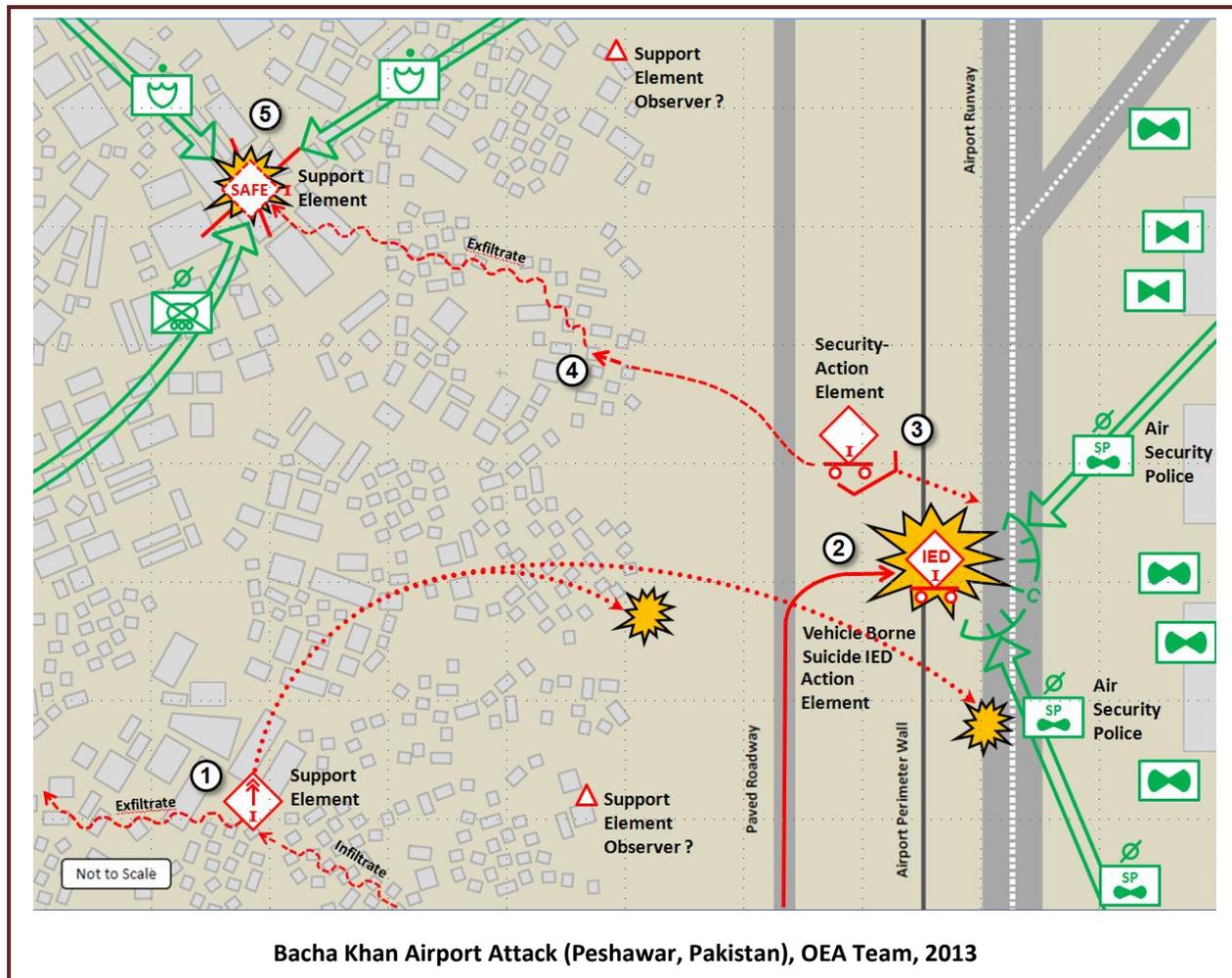




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15-16 December 2012 Attack



The preceding diagram is a tactical representation of the events that occurred on 15-16 December 2012. The locations are approximate. The following description corresponds with the numbered events in the preceding diagram.

In late November, Pakistan security forces captured a member of the TTP. Intelligence gathered from interrogations revealed that the TTP was planning an attack on the Bacha Khan Airport. Security forces on the airfield were on heightened alert and expecting an attack when insurgents began their attack.



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- ① The attack began at about 2035 hours, local time, on 15 December 2012 with a volley of five rockets. Three rockets fell short and struck a neighborhood where up to ten civilians were killed and thirty injured. Two rockets hit the airport runway and airport security forces responded.
- ② An insurgent vehicle with the mission to create a breach in the perimeter wall drove off the road toward the perimeter wall. The vehicle full of explosives, hand grenades, rocket propelled grenades (RPG), automatic weapons, and five passengers detonated prematurely at the perimeter wall. While it destroyed a portion of the wall, all five passengers were killed before they could penetrate the damaged portion of the perimeter wall.
- ③ Due to the explosion from the first vehicle, Pakistani security forces quickly ascertained the point of the attack and engaged insurgents in a second vehicle with an additional five passengers. The security force prevented the attackers from entering the perimeter wall or detonating explosives in their vehicle.
- ④ After the second group of five insurgents witnessed the first vehicle explode and half its team killed, they were met with overpowering force from airport security forces. The insurgents in the second vehicle then retreated to an under-construction building about one mile from the point of attack.

The Pakistani security forces completed clearing operations around 0200 hours on 16 December 2013. All commercial flights at the airport resumed after a 17 hour delay.

- ⑤ The second group of five insurgents stayed in the partially finished house overnight. Ayub Khan, a brick mason, arrived before his laborers early in the morning on 16 December 2013. Khan stated the insurgents demanded at gunpoint that he not contact police and that he arrange for shawls and a vehicle. The police were notified where the insurgents were, either by Khan or others in the neighborhood who noticed the men were not from the local area and spoke a foreign language.

Police, backed by the military, launched a raid on the insurgents' hideout early on 16 December 2013. In the shootout that ensued, three militants and a policeman were killed and two other police officers were wounded. After six hours, the last two insurgents detonated their suicide vests inside the building. With the death of the final two insurgents, all ten of those believed to have taken part in the attack on the airfield were dead.



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A bomb disposal spokesman stated that the suicide vests found at the scene were not crude, home-made vests, but appeared to be machine-sewn with a higher level of craftsmanship. The jackets contained steel ball bearings and compressed high-intensity explosives. Additionally, bomb disposal personnel found seven bombs in steel containers indicating the mission of this second insurgent group was to enter the opening created by the first vehicle and blow up targets on the airfield. A TTP spokesman said that the target for the attack was not the civilian airfield, but the military jets and helicopters located there. The TTP spokesman also stated that more attacks would follow this one. Of note, Pakistan's recently acquired Chinese-Pakistani manufactured JF-17s, worth roughly \$20 million each, are located at this airfield.

Evidence points to at least some of the insurgents being affiliated with the IMU. Villagers who were questioned stated that the men did not speak Urdu or Pashto. In addition, some had tattoos on their backs, a strictly forbidden Islamic practice. Pakistani law enforcement believes the tattoos point to the insurgents coming from the Russian Federation before taking up the cause of militant Jihad in Pakistan.

Analyst Assessment

The Bacha Khan Airport is not the first attack conducted by the TTP or its affiliates on Pakistani military installations. In May 2011, insurgents armed with RPGs and small arms destroyed two P-3C maritime surveillance aircraft and killed ten soldiers during an attack on Mehran Naval Air Base in Karachi. On 16 August 2012, Pakistani insurgents climbed the walls at Minhas Air Force Base in Kamra, killed one soldier and damaged a Swedish-manufactured surveillance aircraft. The Bacha Khan Airport attack, however, is unique in the overt nature of the attack. While militants stealthily entered the bases in Kamra and Karachi, the insurgents who attacked the Bacha Khan Airport began their attack with rocket fire, followed by a VBIED intended to breach the perimeter wall.

The Bacha Khan attack was unsuccessful, mainly due to intelligence gathered from interrogation of a captured TTP member in late November 2012 and the premature detonation of the VBIED along the western perimeter wall. Security forces, already on heightened alert, were able to quickly ascertain the point of the attack and place security personnel in position to stop the follow-on insurgents from entering the gap in the wall. Met by overwhelming force, the follow-on Taliban team decided to retreat to the safety of an urban neighborhood near the point of attack. This group may have been able to escape, but had no backup plan. The insurgents panicked and their aggressive threats and demands brought attention to themselves, leading to notification of security forces.



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Had the attackers not lost half their force in the initial breaching operation and had the follow-on personnel been able to enter the breached wall, the outcome would have been much different. The number of suicide vests found indicates the ten-man force had no intention of surviving the attack. The TTP acknowledged that its targets were military aircraft. It is conceivable that, had the operation worked as planned, the attackers could have reached the aircraft or, at a minimum, damaged the Pakistani security forces' image as capable of protecting key installations. Minimal incursions can have significant effect on confidence in security forces.

The Bacha Khan Airport is particularly vulnerable to attack due to its geographic location. The airport is located in Peshawar, the gateway to the ungoverned northern area of Pakistan where the TTP and other insurgent groups have free movement. The fluid nature of movement in and out of Peshawar creates increased security concerns. The airport is also located in a densely populated urban area where insurgents proved they can blend back in with the population. The second group of insurgents could easily have escaped had they had a stand-by vehicle and not drawn attention to themselves through threats against local citizens. Finally, the road that runs closely parallel with the western perimeter wall is not heavily traveled at night, when the attack occurred, and not well guarded.

Training Implications

- Heightened vigilance based on quality intelligence can make a significant difference in responding to attacks.
- Insurgents are subject to the same tactical failures as friendly forces, which can be capitalized on.
- Geographic vulnerabilities require increased levels of security and attention.
- A small force is capable of significant damage, either in direct physical damage or in confidence in security forces.
- Insurgents may be comprised of affiliated groups who operate together based on common goals and interests.

Related Products

Follow these links to view related products:

- [Attack at PAF Base Minhas](#)
- [Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan \(TTP\)](#)



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- [Bannu Prison Attack](#)
- [Lashkar-e-Taiba](#)

See also the [Red Diamond Newsletter](#), which contains current articles on a variety of topics useful to both soldiers and civilians ranging from enemy TTP to the nature and analysis of various threat actors.

For detailed information on weapons and equipment, see the [Worldwide Equipment Guide](#).

AKO: <https://www.us.army.mil/suite/portal/index.jsp>

Threat Products: AKO“Easy-Link”

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POCs

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