Terrorism in Pakistan: Causes, Implications and Way Forward

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Abstract

Pakistan faces a growing challenge of terrorism and militancy in the security domain, where the country had considerable success after 2014. After the return of the Afghan Taliban, there have been growing incidents of terrorism across the country. Subsequently, after the American exit from Afghanistan, terror groups in Pakistan are seen using the western side of the border to train combatants and have safe exits after committing terror acts in Pakistan. This paper uses a qualitative approach to understand how the growing menace of terrorism in Pakistan is confounding Islamabad's diplomatic engagement with the new administration in Kabul. In addition, the study uses policy documents, research papers, media reports and government content to understand how the internal security and political landscape in the country is constraining the counter-terrorism efforts. The paper argues that political instability, economic stagnation and constitutional crisis are hindering efforts against militant groups. Further deflection from security imperatives due to a pressing internal crisis could undo the positive outcomes reaped due to counter-terrorism efforts after 2014.

Key Words: Terrorism; Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan; Afghan Taliban; Security Landscape; Military Operations

Introduction

For the last two decades, Pakistan has been grappling with an unstable security situation, with threats of violent extremism and terrorism consistently bothering

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policymakers. The country has lost thousands of civilian lives and military personnel due to terror attacks carried out by various outfits in the last 20 years.[3] The writ of the state has been challenged by separatist outfits and extremist militant groups inspired by their exclusive religious understanding. However, the country has used enormous human and security resources while sacrificing many lives in the process to confront the threat of terrorism and bring stability to the security landscape.

Especially after 2014, through various kinetic and non-kinetic measures, Pakistan's security institutions have hit back strongly against terrorist groups that held ground in the northern parts of the country.[4] The erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province have witnessed a firm state response against terrorist groups operating in the region. The Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the banned terrorist outfit that caused the most havoc in the country, largely saw its operational capability being limited after operations from security institutions.[5] These military operations were accompanied by other political and financial measures to curb terrorist funding, improve criminal prosecutions, and dismantle operational and ideological networks supporting terror activities.

Although these measures greatly affected TTP's terror infrastructure and functioning, the group retained its thousands of fighters, financial backing and some

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[3] "Pakistan's National Narrative against Terrorism and Extremism – NACTA – National Counter Terrorism Authority NACTA Pakistan," *National Counter Terrorism Authority*, accessed June 11, 2023, https://nacta.gov.pk/pakistans-national-narrative-against-terrorism-and-extremism/#:~:text=2%2D%20Pakistan%20has%20been%20facing.

[4] Madiha Afzal, "Terrorism in Pakistan Has Declined, but the Underlying Roots of Extremism Remain," *Brookings*, January 15, 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/01/15/terrorism-in-pakistan-has-declined-but-the-underlying-roots-of-extremism-remain/.

[5] Amira Jadoon, "SPECIAL REPORT the Evolution and Potential Resurgence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan," *United States Institute of Peace*, May 2021, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/sr_494-the_evolution_and_potential_resurgence_of_the_tehrik_i_taliban_pakistan.pdf.

operational space.[6] Yet there was a massive reduction in the number of hostilities against military and civilian targets. The casualty figures due to terrorism greatly plummeted as sustainable peace and stability appeared to be in sight. From a dismal security landscape before 2014, the country saw an improving security situation, especially in the northern regions of Pakistan.[7] As time passed, security efforts and military measures to curb terrorism and eliminate terror networks produced positive results. However, the kinetic efforts against terrorist outfits since 2014 did not eradicate the structural causes of terrorism, thereby establishing a negative peace where the threat of violence by terrorist groups still loomed. Although various governmental efforts to establish positive and sustainable peace were witnessed, the presence of militant groups, instability across the Pak-Afghan border, and instances of non-state violence showed the fragile foundations of hard peace laid through ground operations and institutional efforts.

In 2021, the northern parts of the country again appeared to witness bloodshed due to increasing terror activities, with TTP flexing its muscle against military and civilian targets.[8] Security experts and scholars warned of this imminent threat emboldened by Afghan Taliban's return to Kabul (neighboring Afghanistan) after the American exit from a war spanning over twenty years. The security challenge posed by the TTP got further confounded due to its ability to operate on both sides

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[6] Sarral Sharma, "Pakistan: A Looming Military Offensive and Quest for International Support," *ORF*, January 19, 2023, https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/pakistan-a-looming-military-offensive-and-quest-for-international-support/.

[7] Safdar Hussain, "PAKISTAN'S ACHIEVEMENTS in WAR on TERROR but at WHAT COST: A SPECIAL REVIEW of the CURRENT DECADE, *Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) Islamabad*," April 2019, https://www.pakpips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Pakistan%E2%80%99s-achievements-in-war-on-terror-but-at-what-cost-a-special-review-of-the-current-decade.pdf.

[8] Ali Zahid, "The Pakistani Taliban's Re-Emergence in Swat: Reasons and Potential Responses," *Jamestown*, November 4, 2022, https://jamestown.org/program/the-pakistani-talibans-re-emergence-in-swat-reasons-and-potential-responses/.

of the border with sanctuaries established in the bordering areas of Afghanistan.[9] As the TTP again seemed to remerge with a greater thrust, Pakistan's internal political and economic situation deflected much attention from the growing menace of terrorism, ready to again test Pakistan's security efforts.[10]

There are important questions to be addressed for policymakers to accurately gauge the nature of this threat and deal with the problem effectively. How has the state been dealing with the threat of terrorism in the past decade, and why has the TTP upped the ante to expand terror activities in the country? How has the return of the Afghan Taliban to Kabul influenced TTP's reemergence, and has TTP become a cause of tension between Islamabad and the new administration in Afghanistan? What are the internal hindrances that have constrained Pakistan's efforts to eliminate terrorism or mitigate the fundamental problems leading to violent extremism and terrorism?

This paper aims to address these questions while building a context to how Pakistan grappled with the terror question in the past decade. Then, in the second section, the study investigates the role of the Afghan Taliban's return in Pakistan's changing security landscape while subsequently explaining Pakistan's engagement and differences with Kabul over this issue. Lastly, before formulating policy imperatives to cope up with the challenge of terrorism, this paper describes internal socio-economic and political problems that have confounded concrete efforts in curbing terrorism and dismantling terror groups.

Improvement of Security Situation after 2014

Pakistan's counter-terrorism efforts after the deadly Peshawar Attack in 2014 – which killed 149 people, including 132 schoolchildren – led to an improved security

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[9] Umair Jamal, "Pakistan Could Take Its Fight against the TTP to Sanctuaries in Afghanistan," *The Diplomat*, December 8, 2022, https://thediplomat.com/2022/12/pakistan-could-take-its-fight-against-the-ttp-to-sanctuaries-in-afghanistan/.

[10] Madiha Afzal, "Pakistan: Five Major Issues to Watch in 2023," *Brookings*, January 13, 2023, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2023/01/13/pakistan-five-major-issues-to-watch-in-2023/.

landscape in the country. The internal security situation saw a marked shift as a decline was observed in the number of terrorist attacks perpetrated inside Pakistan.[11] The situation started to improve in Pakistan because of various kinetic and non-kinetic policy responses implemented by the subsequent governments. Right after the 2014 school massacre in Peshawar, military operations were being carried out in the northern parts of the country (primarily in the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa).[12] These kinetic measures pushed militants of the banned TTP – the terrorist outfit that claimed responsibility for the 2014 attack – out of various areas it controlled in the past.

The economic losses due to the war on terror plummeted from $23.77 billion in 2010-11 to $5.47 billion in 2016-17.[13] The economic cost, according to the Economic Survey 2017-18, declined over 62 percent in comparison to the previous four years.[14] The Economic Survey 2017-18 attributed the sharp decline in economic costs to the counter-terrorism operations and the framework of National Action Plan. The costs faced by the countries economy due to the deteriorating security situation dipped largely after 2014-15. The total economic costs in the aftermath of 9/11 are considered to be $126.79 billion.

In addition, due to the widespread anger among the population, the Pakistani state was able to take effective measures to confront extremism at institutional and legislative levels. Both the military and judicial institutions worked to deter and punish terrorist acts by intensifying criminal proceedings and convictions.[15] As military and civilian organs were seen on the same page in their fight against

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[11] "Drastic Improvement in Security Situation in Pakistan || UN News," United Nations, accessed June 9, 2023, https://news.un.org/en/audio/2015/12/607762.

[12] "Country Reports on Terrorism 2014 - Pakistan," RefWorld, accessed June 8, 2023, https://www.refworld.org/docid/5587c74453.html.

[13] "62pc Cut in War on Terror Losses," DAWN, April 27, 2018, https://www.dawn.com/news/1404161.

[14] Finance Division, Government of Pakistan, "Pakistan Economic Survey 2017-18," April 26, 2018, https://www.finance.gov.pk/survey/chapters_18/Economic_Survey_2017_18.pdf.

[15] Ghulam Ali, "Pakistan Inches towards Stability," East Asia Forum, April 25, 2023, https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/01/26/pakistan-inches-towards-stability/.

religious extremism, all parties approved the 20-point National Action Plan to chart out a roadmap for countering violent extremism and religious terrorism in the country.[16] Moreover, parliament passed laws aimed at ceding some of its antiterror activities to paramilitary forces and granting cover to military authorities for carrying trials and convictions.

A National Internal Security Policy (2014-18) was formulated to lay out the scope of internal threats and policy objectives to counter these threats. The policy, with an eleven-page summary document, acknowledged the comprehensive nature of threats to internal security while mentioning the danger posed by non-traditional security threats of extremism and sectarianism.[17] The making of NISP was a major step in outlining internal security challenges and charting out the future policy measures needed.[18] In addition, the law enforcement agencies expanded operations against banned militant outfits while cracking down on extremist groups in more stable regions of the country like Punjab. Several legislative measures to curb terrorism were enacted so that terrorist funding, a support base for militant organizations, and operational networks of terror groups could be eradicated.

After 2014, the drastic change in the country's security landscape was acknowledged by a number of research institutes and scholarly studies. According to The Global Terrorism Index Report 2017, by the Institute for Economics and Peace, highlighted the country's improved rank in the list of countries most affected by terrorism.[19] The Sydney-based institute showed an improvement in the overall score to 8.4 out of 10 due to the decline in terrorism incidents and deaths due to terrorist activities. In the

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[16] Zeeshan Salahuddin, "20 Points to Pakistan?," Foreign Policy, June 29, 2015, https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/29/20-points-to-pakistan/.

[17] Shuja Nawaz, rep., *Countering Militancy and Terrorism in Pakistan: The Civil-Military Nexus*, vol. 393 (Washington, 2016), https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR393-Countering-Militancy-and-Terrorism-in-Pakistan-The-Civil-Military-Nexus.pdf.

[18] Raza Rumi, "Charting Pakistan's Internal Security Policy," *United States Institute of Peace*, September 17, 2021, https://www.usip.org/publications/2015/05/charting-pakistans-internal-security-policy.

[19] Institute of Economics and Peace, "Global Terrorism Index 2017 - World," *ReliefWeb*, November 15, 2017, https://reliefweb.int/report/world/global-terrorism-index-2017.

subsequent years of 2014, especially in 2016 and 2017, terrorism-related deaths greatly plummeted – far lower than the peak years of 2012 and 2013.[20] This was due to the fact that the civilian government and military authorities continued with their high-profile efforts to disrupt terrorist networks and eliminate terrorist sanctuaries in the northern region.

Starting in 2018, the state enhanced its capacity and efforts to implement sanctions related to terror-designated activities. The government upped the ante to enforce anti-money laundering measures and counter the financing of terrorism.[21] Measures against terrorist outfits, militant networks and banned sanctioned individuals were being carried out in accordance with the propositions provided by the Financial Action Task Force. Therefore, Pakistan exited the increased monitoring list of FATF in 2022 while completing all 34 items of the action plan provided by strengthening its Anti-Money Laundering/Combating the Financing of Terrorism (AML/CFT) regime.[22] These measures greatly contributed to the improving internal security landscape of the country.

However, the menace of terrorism in the country could not be eliminated altogether as terror outfits continued to hide during military push and bide their time when the security forces consolidated their command over regions previously in the grip of terror groups. In addition, the instances of terrorism and violent extremism confronted the writ of Pakistani state even when the number of these incidents went down. Underlying problems of border security, violent extremism, terror funding, governance vacuums, and political instability (especially in the north-western regions of the country) undermined initiatives for a sustainable and durable peace.

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[20] "Country Reports on Terrorism 2017 - Pakistan," Refworld, accessed June 8, 2023, https://www.refworld.org/docid/5bcf1f8b20.html.

[21] 1. Shahroo Malik, "Pakistan Seeks to Move off FATF's Gray List," *South Asian Voices*, July 6, 2022, https://southasianvoices.org/pakistan-seeks-to-move-off-fatfs-gray-list/.

[22] Web Desk, "After over 4 Years, Pakistan Removed from FATF's 'Grey-List,'" *Business Recorder*, October 21, 2022, https://www.brecorder.com/news/40204447/after-over-4-years-pakistan-removed-from-fatfs-grey-list.

Madiha Afzal of the Brooking Institution noted in 2021 that "terrorism in Pakistan has declined but the underlying roots of extremism remain."[23]

American Withdrawal and the Return of Afghan Taliban

Pakistan's diplomatic role was crucial in bringing Afghan Taliban to the table in order to negotiate an American exit from Afghanistan.[24] The United States was well aware of the influence Islamabad could have in making Afghan Taliban negotiate a balanced peace deal. Pakistan's Afghan policy focused on facilitating a peaceful American exit without worsening the security situation in the Western neighborhood. As the Afghan Taliban took over Kabul, Pakistan directed its diplomatic influence to advocate recognition of the new government in Afghanistan.[25] Simultaneously, Islamabad urged the Taliban to form an inclusive government, respect human rights, and provide no space for militant groups – like the TTP – to hold ground, find strength and carry terror attacks.

As the Afghan Taliban took over Kabul and announced a formal government, the new dispensation facilitated talks between the Pakistani state and the TTP.[26] The secret talks resulted in a ceasefire between the two parties.[27] The cessation of hostilities remained for months. Subsequently, the Afghan Taliban confirmed that they were playing an important role in facilitating the negotiations between Pakistan

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[23] Madiha Afzal, "Terrorism in Pakistan Has Declined, but the Underlying Roots of Extremism Remain," Brookings, January 15, 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/terrorism-in-pakistan-has-declined-but-the-underlying-roots-of-extremism-remain/.

[24] "'Pakistan's Communication with Taliban Led to Doha Agreement,'" The Express Tribune, September 2, 2021, https://tribune.com.pk/story/2318279/pakistans-communication-with-taliban-led-to-doha-agreement#:~:text=Pakistan.

[25] "Pakistan's Hard Policy Choices in Afghanistan," Crisis Group, February 4, 2022, https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/pakistan/pakistans-hard-policy-choices-afghanistan.

[26] Daud Khattak, "Islamabad Hands over Top Pakistani Taliban Commanders to Afghan Mediators in Bid to Revive Peace Talks," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 12, 2022, sec. Pakistan, https://www.rferl.org/a/pakistani-taliban-commanders-handed-over-afghan/31846644.html.

[27] Ismail Khan, "Islamabad, TTP Agree on Indefinite Ceasefire," *DAWN*, May 31, 2022, https://www.dawn.com/news/1692383/islamabad-ttp-agree-on-indefinite-ceasefire.

and TTP. However, the talks could not bring sustainable peace, with the militant group coming up with two important demands.[28] First, withdrawal of the military forces form the former FATA region especially bordering areas along Pak-Afghan border. Second, the reversal of the FATA merger – done through an amendment to the Pakistani constitution. Considering these demands, prospects of a long-term ceasefire remained next to none as the Pakistani state found these demands to be equivalent to total surrender.

As these talks did not produce a long-lasting ceasefire, TTP (further emboldened by the American exit from Afghanistan) again started frequent attacks on civilian and military infrastructures.[29] After the return of the Afghan Taliban, Pakistan saw a 51 percent increase in terror attacks across the country.[30] In under a year, 250 attacks were reported in the country, killing 433 people and injuring 719. The majority of these attacks were claimed by the TTP, whose much of the political leadership and capability is based in Afghanistan. Afghanistan appears to be a safe haven for the TTP, where the group seeks ideological baking, operational space and recruiting ground.[31]

According to the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, TTP pose significant threats to the regional peace with its various sanctuaries in the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. The report by the UN team noted that the Taliban are "generally sympathetic to TTP aims" though the government in Kabul has

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[28] Asfandyar Mir, "Five Things to Watch in the Islamabad-Pakistani Taliban Talks," *United States Institute of Peace*, June 21, 2022, https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/06/five-things-watch-islamabad-pakistani-taliban-talks.

[29] Fahd Humayun, "Pakistan's Security Challenges Necessitate a New Approach," *Www.aljazeera.com*, January 31, 2023, https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/1/31/pakistans-security-challenges-necessitate-a-new-approach.

[30] "Terror Attacks in Pakistan Jump by 51% after Taliban Took over Afghanistan," Business Standard, October 20, 2022, https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/terror-attacks-in-pakistan-jump-by-51-after-taliban-took-over-afghanistan-122102000355_1.html.

[31] Asfandyar Mir, Tamanna Salikuddin, and Andrew Watkins, "Is Pakistan Poised to Take on the TTP?," *United States Institute of Peace*, February 14, 2023, https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/02/pakistan-poised-take-ttp.

rejected the findings of the report as "false accusations".[32] Some Taliban members have also joined the TTP while their members and families are gaining aid packages from the Taliban government. Afghan nationals are increasing in their numbers among the TTP ranks, according to the report, which calls Afghan Taliban's support to have strengthened and emboldened the TTP.

As the group has experienced a strong resurgence after the return of Afghan Taliban, experts have warned of a deteriorating security situation on Pakistan's western frontier.[33] As per the UN estimates, Afghanistan boasts several thousand TTP fighters. TTP's links with other terrorist groups in Afghanistan make it a regional problem for peace and security in the region.[34] As the group trains fighters and plans attacks in Afghanistan, it strikes its targets in Pakistan before slipping back across the border into the Afghan territory.[35] Such blatant activities of the TTP have questioned the seriousness of the Afghan Taliban in eliminating sanctuaries of terror outfits.

Other than the strategic and moral backing, the Afghan Taliban seem to provide the TTP with operational support as well. The above-mentioned UN report also noted that the Taliban commanders have provided the TTP with significant quantities of weaponry, "including M24 sniper rifles, M4 carbines with Trijicon ACOG scopes, and M16A4 rifles with thermal scopes," Weapons and equipment, like night vision

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[32] Ayaz Gul, "UN: Al-Qaida, Afghan Taliban Assist TTP with Attacks in Pakistan," Voice of America, February 1, 2024, https://www.voanews.com/a/un-al-qaida-afghan-taliban-assist-ttp-with-attacks-in-pakistan-/7466250.html.

[33] Shuja Nawaz, "The Unfinished Efforts against Terrorism and Militancy in Pakistan," *Atlantic Council*, March 31, 2023, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/the-unfinished-efforts-against-terrorism-and-militancy-in-pakistan/.

[34] Abdul Sayed, "The Evolution and Future of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 21, 2021, https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/12/21/evolution-and-future-of-tehrik-e-taliban-pakistan-pub-86051.

[35] Samina Ahmed, "The Pakistani Taliban Test Ties between Islamabad and Kabul," Crisis Group, March 29, 2023, https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/pakistan/pakistani-taliban-test-ties-between-islamabad-and-kabul.

capability, have added to the lethality of TTP attacks on Pakistani security forces. The broader concern about such operation and tactical support from the government in Kabul is that it could – and actually has – gone to great lengths in arming the TTP at the expense of Islamabad's national security.

Pakistan's Urge to the Afghan Taliban

Islamabad has recurrently urged the Afghan Taliban to rein in the TTP by evicting the militants and denying them any safe heavens. Through high-level channels and several diplomatic platforms, Pakistani officials have warned the Afghan Taliban that failure to eliminate sanctuaries for the militant group could have consequences for the bilateral relationship.[36] Although Pakistan has urged the international community to play a role in rehabilitating and engaging the Afghan Taliban, it has also voiced its growing concerns regarding militant groups operating on Afghan soil.

Pakistan's prime minister, Shehbaz Sharif, stated in his address (during his first stint as premier) to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2022 that Pakistan shared global concerns about "the threat posed by the major terrorist groups operating from Afghanistan, particularly the Islamic State, ISIL-K, and TTP, as well as al-Qaeda, ETIM, and IMU."[37] In response, the Afghan foreign ministry disregarded these concerns as based on "incorrect information and sources". The Afghan foreign ministry spokesperson denied the presence of any armed group in the country.[38]

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[36] Carolyn Moorman, "With No Help from Kabul, Pakistan Faces the TTP Threat - New Lines Institute," *New Lines Institute*, January 19, 2023, https://newlinesinstitute.org/pakistan/with-no-help-from-kabul-pakistan-faces-the-ttp-threat/.

[37] Kamran Yousaf, "Shehbaz's UNGA Speech Sparks Row with Kabul," *The Express Tribune*, September 25, 2022, https://tribune.com.pk/story/2378510/shehbazs-unga-speech-sparks-row-with-kabul.

[38] Ayaz Gul, "Taliban Tell Pakistan Not to Blame Afghanistan for Mosque Bombing," *VOA*, February 1, 2023, https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-tell-pakistan-not-to-blame-afghanistan-for-mosque-bombing-/6943345.html.

Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, Pakistan's then foreign minister, reiterated Shehbaz Sharif's sentiments by supporting international demands for the Taliban to demonstrate actual progress in preventing global terrorist organisations from attacking Pakistan from their Afghan safe havens.[39] However, the Afghan Taliban have frequently denied the allegation of providing safe havens to terror outfits and not cracking down on them. Despite the claims of the Afghan Taliban, UN estimates indicate that there are more than 4000 to 6500 fighters currently present on the Afghan territory.[40]

After the Afghan Taliban set up a government in Kabul, Pakistan has also witnessed trouble on its western border, where clashes between the Pakistani military and Afghan border guards have grown considerably.[41] Although both sides cooled the tensions through urgent diplomatic exchanges, the border dispute seems to have the potential to be a flashpoint in the bilateral relationship. Last year, the countries saw the closing of the Afghan-Pakistan border at Chaman after an exchange of fire across the border, leaving one Pakistani soldier dead. After the closure, Pakistani officials took up the issue of cross-border attacks with Afghanistan.[42]

Although Pakistan's demand for Taliban's positive role for regional peace and stability is legitimate and appropriate, the strategic balance of power in the region has changed. The Taliban are not facing a counter-insurgency, let alone a war, from a hostile power like they did against Washington. Their dependence on Pakistan's support and engagement for their war effort is a thing of the past. In addition, the government in Kabul has more potential capitals to align with or establish economic

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[39] Vinay Kaura, "Pakistan-Afghan Taliban Relations Face Mounting Challenges," *Middle East Institute*, December 2, 2022, https://www.mei.edu/publications/pakistan-afghan-taliban-relations-face-mounting-challenges.

[40] Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan: World Running out of Patience with Afghan Taliban," *VOA*, November 18, 2022, https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-world-running-out-of-patience-with-afghan-taliban-/6840688.html.

[41] Ghalib Nihad, "6 Dead, 17 Injured in Chaman as Afghan Border Forces Open 'Unprovoked, Indiscriminate' Firing on Civilians: ISPR," *DAWN*, December 11, 2022, https://www.dawn.com/news/1725806.

[42] Iftikhar A. Khan, "Pakistan Taking up Cross-Border Attacks with Afghanistan: FO," *DAWN*, November 25, 2022, https://www.dawn.com/news/1722906/pakistan-taking-up-cross-border-attacks-with-afghanistan-fo.

cooperation, diplomatic engagement and security collaboration. This changing balance of power has impacted Islamabad's past leverage over the Taliban leadership. Yet dialogue among the two states is crucial as Taliban understand that long-term militancy and violence on the Afghan soil could jeopardize the economic and political stability needed for Afghanistan's stable future. Though bilateral channels of communication have helped in the relaxing of tensions between the two sides, a deeper level of engagement is needed to communicate and address the growing security concerns of both parties. Unless Afghan Taliban do not realize Islamabad's security concerns regarding terror outfits and cross-border tensions, cooperation in other areas appears to be impossible.

Issues Constraining Effective Response to Terrorism and Policy Imperatives

As Pakistan's negotiations with the TTP have failed, the policymakers are confronted by the predicament of dealing with the group comprehensively. Talks did not result in a long-term ceasefire since the group is completely against the state's existence and constitution. Moreover, the initiative by the Afghan Taliban to bring the two sides to a negotiated peace has not brought positive results. Instead, its relations with Islamabad have deteriorated due to TTP's presence in Afghanistan.[43] Meanwhile, the TTP has furthered the frequency of attacks in recent months.[44]

In addition, political instability, growing internal polarization and frequent constitutional crises have deflected much attention from the recurrent threat posed by the TTP. As the military establishment in the country is facing internal challenges due to a worsening internal security landscape and violent protests against military leadership for its alleged involvement in Pakistani politics, the issue of rising incidents of terrorism seems to be on the back burner. Political instability and intense

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[43] Raza Khan, "Is a Rift between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban Imminent?," *Aljazeera*, February 6, 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/2/6/a-rift-between-pakistan-and-the-afghan-taliban-may-be-imminent.

[44] Abid Hussain, "What Is behind a Resurgence of Violent Attacks in Pakistan?," *Aljazeera*, December 26, 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/26/what-is-behind-a-resurgence-of-violent-attacks-in-pakistan.

power struggle among political parties have not let the worsening security situation get urgent attention from the current government. Increasing political uncertainty and violent episodes are creating breeding grounds for the deteriorating security situation in the country.

The recent elections in Pakistan, along with the formation of the new governments in Islamabad and provincial capitals, could bring some semblance to stability in the domestic political landscape. The new coalition government at the federal level, though challenged by a host of international and external challenges, enjoys a fresh mandate that could help the policymakers to catalyze and reinforce the efforts for peace, stability and security that had been affected by the recurrent domestic crisis. However, the challenges for the new government are humongous as the problems of governance could directly or indirectly make way for terror groups and extremist outfits to mobilize followers, actualize violent acts and undermine state's ability to maintain a monopoly over the use of force.

The economic crisis, in addition, is another worry for a state willing to fight the remerging menace of terrorism. The government is finding it increasingly hard to have its expenditure within its means without no considerable external help in sight.[45] As Pakistan's debt-ridden economy is getting more vulnerable to a potential default, its ability to fund law enforcement agencies, upgrade security infrastructure, and constrain the destitute population from developing violent tendencies seems to be declining. In addition, the economic predicament is diverting policy attention from growing incidents of terrorism to effective economic management needed to avert a default.

It is increasingly evident that if the worsening security situation in the country is left unchecked due to major political and economic challenges, terrorism could develop into a significant crisis. Violent extremism and terror recruitment become easier in societies and polities where people live during desperate times and look for

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[45] Asif Shahzad, Gibran Naiyyar Peshimam, and Asif Shahzad, "UAE to Loan $1 Bln, Roll over Another $2 Bln to Pakistan - Minister," *Reuters*, January 12, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/uae-roll-over-2-bln-loan-pakistan-provide-1-bln-additional-loan-2023-01-12/.

immediate solutions to their miserable living situations.[46] But there is some important policy advice that the civilian government and military institutions should bear in mind in order to deal with the threat of terrorism and bring peace and stability to the country.

1) **Governance and Deliverance:** After the welcome move to merge erstwhile FATA within Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a lot of promises made to the local people on autonomy, representation and economy have not been fulfilled. Governance in this part of the country – where TTP had several strongholds in the past – is essential to further the writ of the state and mitigate the resentment and grievances of the people that could be used by militant wings for recruitment.

2) **Clear Intent and Policy at the Federal Level:** The government in the center must design a clear vision for policymaking regarding counter-terrorism efforts. The federal government should allocate more resources to law enforcement agencies and security institutions. Moreover, greater coordination should be done between the federal and provincial governments so that all levels of the government can be on the page regarding terrorism and militancy.

3) **Inclusive Policymaking and Policy Actions:** The central and provincial legislative bodies should play an active part in gauging the effectiveness of policies being made to counter militancy. The latest talks with the TTP did not involve any sanctioning from elected representatives, and therefore, the process lacked inclusivity. A closed-door negotiating process would yield little legitimacy and acceptance. So, other actors – civil society, media and local representatives from the erstwhile tribal regions – should not be completely isolated from any negotiating efforts carried out by the state.

4) **A more Comprehensive Approach is Needed:** Military operations in the past had greater success in eliminating strong terror networks in the northern border regions. However, the effort remains unfinished, with the TTP using

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[46] Benoît De Courson and Daniel Nettle, "Why Do Inequality and Deprivation Produce High Crime and Low Trust?," *Scientific Reports* 11, no. 1 (January 21, 2021), doi:https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-80897-8.

both sides of the border to engage in terror activities. Therefore, Pakistan should engage robustly with the Afghan Taliban on this issue while sorting out fencing issues, internal security problems and socio-economic disparities leading to violent tendencies.

5) **Addressing More Pressing Issues that Constrain Action:** To deal effectively with terrorism and militancy in the country, more pressing issues that have sought the government's attention and action space – economic trouble, political instability and constitutional crisis – should immediately be addressed. The more these issues would divert the attention of the state from the growing menace of terrorism, the more difficult it would be to solve the problem of militancy which has remerged with a greater thrust and added complications.

6) **Political Stability and Clear Mandate:** Security challenges could only be effectively grappled with if the country experiences political stability and fair democratic transitions. A fair and strong political mandate is needed to make tough decisions on the security front. Otherwise, more political instability and economic disparities could lead to social unrest, producing fertile grounds for terrorist attacks and militant violence.

Conclusion

This study has clearly shown that terrorist incidents in the country are on the rise due to a number of different factors observed in the last couple of years. As the talks between the Pakistani state and the TTP failed, terror attacks have increased, with the terror group appearing more emboldened due to the return of the Afghan Taliban. Merging of different TTP factions along with greater action space for them to operate from Afghanistan have exacerbated security problems for Pakistan. This, in turn, has produced two concerns for security institutions and the government in Pakistan: 1) how to deal effectively with the internal problem of growing militancy and terror incidents; and 2) how to effectively communicate concerns with the Afghan Taliban without fearing the loss of engagement with the western neighbor.

Meanwhile, little willingness from the new dispensation in Kabul to take on terror groups in the country has caused some anxiety in Islamabad while creating tension with the government in Kabul. Border issues are also creating some headaches for policymakers in both capitals. For Pakistan, the TTP threat is confounded by the country's growing internal predicaments. As the political instability and constitutional crisis are on the rise due to the intense political power struggle, the chances of enormous social unrest have expanded. In addition, the growing economic stagnation and the credit crunch are making it increasingly difficult to run the government and spend more on security institutions and the operational capacity of law enforcement agencies.

The paper has successfully argued that if these issues are not addressed on an urgent basis, a lot of the government's attention will keep on deflecting from the growing threat of terrorism in the country. The government clearly needs to outline a comprehensive vision to address the deteriorating security situation by dealing with an internal crisis, demonstrating a will to use kinetic and non-kinetic means to confront terror outfits, engaging more effectively with the Afghan Taliban on the issue, and inclusively developing policies to deal with the growing threat while incorporating elected representatives, civil society and provincial governments.