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# Trends and Transformation in Terrorism in Pakistan: Changing Dynamics and Threat Perception



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## Abstract

*This explanatory research dilates on the evolution of terrorism in Pakistan and how it impacts the national security of Pakistan. The paper explains various trends in the phenomenon of terrorism including extremism sponsored at the state level from 1947 to 1990s, the religious terrorism that emerged after the 9/11 in the shape of Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, and the recent cycle of ethno-nationalist terrorism in Balochistan seeking separation from the state. It attempts to explain the causes of terrorism in Pakistan and elaborates on the state response in shape of military operations conducted after 9/11 as well as policy and law-making to deny terrorists space in Pakistan. The paper also explains how terrorism has impacted the internal and external security of Pakistan post US withdrawal from Afghanistan.*

**Keywords:** Terrorism, extremism, Pakistan, Taliban, Balochistan

## Introduction

This paper reflects on the evolution of terrorism in Pakistan. It argues that terrorism has its roots in politically motivated religious and nationalistic ideologies that have led to the creation of a monster that developed under Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the early 1970s and culminated in President General Zia ul Haq's era during 1980s.

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Subsequently, during the 1990s it witnessed another idea of adventurism by Pakistan Muslim League (N) i.e., introducing Shariah, whereas, most recently, the idea of *Riyasat-i-Madina* (state of Madina) floated by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI).

All these adventures were mostly for individual political gains. As a consequence of this, the state of Pakistan could not effectively engage the society in a long-term constructive policy, which was essential for establishing strong foundations of the State. Such politics of legitimacy along with regional and international factors nourished extremism that time and again transitioned into terrorism. In some instances, political ambitions have been the primary cause of terrorism, which potentially have been impacting Pakistan's foreign relations, economic development within the state, as well as societal cohesion that has been getting divided on sectarian, political and ethnic grounds.

This paper is divided in five sections, wherein section one provides a brief historical background while succinctly discussing the causes that led to extremism and terrorism in Pakistan. Section two of this paper focuses on the contemporary trends that evolved after the disintegration of Soviet Union and emergence of Al-Qaeda. This section is further divided into different subsections including, emergence of global jihad, appearance of the TTP, and ethno-nationalist terrorism in Balochistan. Moving ahead, section three explains the state's response to terrorism by briefly elaborating both the military operations and policy making by the state. Whereas, section four considers changing dynamics around phenomenon of terrorism, and Pakistan's relations with major international and regional players in a multipolar environment. Lastly, section five recommends some policy initiatives which may be adopted by the State of Pakistan for tackling this menace.

## Historical Perspective

Right after the inception of Pakistan, the debate ensued on the nature of state, i.e., between a secular or Islamic Pakistan. The idea of Pakistan by its founders no doubt was of a progressive Islamic republic, however, no constitutional blueprint ever existed. Thus, a long constitutional tussle arose, which also initiated political impasse and subsequently imposition of martial law by Governor General Iskandar Mirza in 1958. Thus, the period from 1947 to 1958 can be termed as a lost decade of Pakistan as far as building strong ideological foundation is concerned. Some historians and political scientists have argued that it was the political elite, who manipulated religion for their personal gains, thus resulting in heightened intolerance in the country.<sup>1</sup> Whereas there are others, who opine that, partition itself became the reason of weighing politics in religious terms.<sup>2</sup>

In reality, this is a complex phenomenon, which cannot be labelled in black and white while warranting an elaborate understanding of historical events. For achieving strategic ends alliances like South East Asian Treaty Organisation and Central Organisation were formed with the West in mid 1950s, where legitimacy was sought through religion, as Soviet Union was presented as a force of evil and the West as people of the Book.<sup>3</sup> More significantly, under former President General Ayub Khan, religion was exploited in 1965 war with India, as he befriended Syed Abu Ala Maududi, who was not only jailed but his party Jamat-e-Islami also banned by him before the war.

After Ayub, the anti-Ahmedi violence and hate continued. Ahmedis were officially declared non-Muslims in 1974 under Bhutto's regime. As the community was labelled on the state level, therefore, its persecution at the societal level became common and gradually increased.<sup>4</sup> More significantly, under former President General Zia ul Haq, blasphemy laws of Pakistan were hardened even more with the

induction of death sentence by introducing 'Criminal Law Amendment Act 1986', under section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code. Since then, these blasphemy laws have been seen getting used even for personal vendetta against the minority communities of Pakistan including Christians and Hindus.<sup>5</sup>

President Zia's Islamisation program from 1979 to 1985 further radicalised the Pakistani society. Generally, Zia's Islamization was inspired by a section of religious scholars in Pakistan, especially the Jamat-e-Islami. Furthermore, during this period, Afghan Jihad also erupted, whose timing was perfect for the ruling elite, as it gave them international legitimacy.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, it pushed Pakistan into a crisis in the shape of Afghan refugees as well as culture of militancy—that ultimately evolved into religious terrorism—with proponents raising questions in response to US-Pak alliance in war on terror. If jihad was an individual duty against Soviet Union, why was it not against the US? Nonetheless, if seen strategically, Pakistan's entry into Afghan-Soviet conflict was a natural geostrategic response, as the Soviets were issuing statements since early 1950s that they did not recognise the Durand Line as international border. They also supported the Pashtunistan cause of socialists.<sup>7</sup> Yet another significant impact of this era was the mushrooming growth of religious seminaries in Pakistan, mostly under the banner of Deobandis. It is estimated that there are currently 32,000 registered seminaries in Pakistan, with another 22,000 unregistered.<sup>8</sup> Ironically, this number was only 1,745 when Zia had taken over,<sup>9</sup> while at the time of independence of Pakistan, they were merely 150.<sup>10</sup>

The direct and indirect role of religious seminaries in the spread of terrorism in Pakistan is hotly debated. There are two contrasting opinions in academia in this regard. First school of thought opines that they are directly responsible for terrorism.<sup>11</sup> Whereas, the other believes that none of the 9/11 attackers had attended such seminaries. However, to understand the phenomenon in-depth, one

must get out of weighing their role in black and white. There are major grey areas, where these seminaries operate; and that is at the ideological front. The interpretation of Islam or jihad, which the Taliban have championed is the byproduct of these religious schools, inspiring individuals and groups to undermine the state role in declaring war and peace.

Similarly, during the 1990s, former Prime Minister, Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif also tried to experiment with Islam by introducing the Shariah Bill; however, this could never even secure approval of the upper house of Pakistani parliament.<sup>12</sup> Almost all subsequent leaders of Pakistan, other than General Pervez Musharraf, tried to cater for the rightist segment of Pakistani society—which became one of the reasons of religious extremism in the society. One such example is former Prime Minister, Imran Khan, who with his utopian ideas of *Riyasat-i-Madina* (state of Madina), only aimed to seek internal legitimacy, while ignoring the constructivist principles of statecraft that need elaborate long-term policies.

At the political level, it is also significant to note that most of the religious political parties operational in Pakistan today are the by-product of identity politics of pre-1947 and were mostly based in the United Provinces of British India, especially the Deoband as well as the Barelvi schools of thought. Down the years, Pakistan witnessed that these religio-political pressure groups became a major cause of extremism and terrorism in the country.<sup>13</sup> A religious political party inspired by Deoband school of thought, i.e., the Jamiat Ulama-i-Islam (JUI) focused on the village community to garner support, as most of the population was predominantly rural. Thus, they became a significant pressure group dictating the state.

Consequently, it can be seen that the TTP and other terrorist outfits shared similar ideology with them. Moreover, during and after the Afghan jihad, the JUI established thousands of unregistered seminaries with foreign funding, which gave cadre to the TTP.

Whereas, pressure groups like TLP emerged from the core of Bareilvi school, often taking law into their own hands in the name of blasphemy. Both these pressure groups are not significant at the politics of representation, yet they were able to dictate the state at significant policy issues.

## **Contemporary Trends**

This section elaborates on the impacts of global jihad on Pakistan. In the first sub-section, entry of Al-Qaeda and Taliban into Pakistan's Pashtun tribal areas after 9/11 is discussed. In the second sub-section, emergence of TTP is explained, whereas, in the third sub-section, cycles of separatist violence in Balochistan are explained along with impact on Pakistan's national security.

## **Global Jihad of Al-Qaeda and its Impacts on Pakistan**

The success of Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union had boosted the morale of jihadis worldwide. They argued, if they can defeat the Red Army, they can do the same with the US. Thereby, efforts ensued to collaborate on jihadi activities in the Middle East and force the US military out of the region. At the same time, Taliban had captured Kabul and were controlling ninety percent of the Afghan territory.<sup>14</sup> By then Al-Qaeda also relocated to bordering areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan after more than hundred religious scholars issued a decree, declaring jihad against the US an *fard-i-ain* (individual duty). Thus, Al-Qaeda started establishing itself in Afghanistan, where it also planned an attack on the US that culminated in multiple attacks on 9 September 2001.<sup>15</sup>

In response, the US invaded Afghanistan in Operation Enduring Freedom, aimed at eradicating Al-Qaeda.<sup>16</sup> The aerial bombings and ground alliance with the Northern Alliance, forced not only Al-Qaeda but also Taliban fighters to cross eastern border into the then Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). With these developments, also came the pressure on Pakistani state to act against

Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Thus, the impacts on Pakistan then were multivariate: international pressure in countering terrorism; societal pressure and expectations from the state as a bastion of Islam; and regional strategic implications, especially growing clout of India and its exploitation of Kashmir cause, specifically terming the freedom struggle in the valley as terrorism. In fact, these regional geostrategic reservations of Pakistan were also highlighted by former President and Army Chief, General Pervez Musharraf in his memoirs. Musharraf claimed that his decision to side with the US in war on terror was influenced by India's manipulation of changed strategic environment, which could have put Pakistan's defence in danger therefore, it was a must to counterbalance India.<sup>17</sup>

While Pakistan had officially joined the US's alliance on war against terrorism, there were sections in Pakistan, who were not content with official state position. They declared Pakistan as *Dar-ul-Harb* (an enemy territory) and therefore against the interests of Islam and Mujahideen, consequently a legitimate target for Al-Qaeda. The prominent figure from Pakistan among them was Mufti Nizam-ud-Din Shamzai, who was also the signatory of decree that launched Al-Qaeda, as well as the one who termed jihad against the Pakistani state obligatory. Shamzai also termed Pakistani soldiers killed in action against the Al-Qaeda and Taliban in the initial military response on the Western border as *murtads* (out of the fold of Islam).<sup>18</sup>

### **Emergence of Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan**

Less was anticipated that the rhetoric which Shamzai had initiated against the state of Pakistan shall flourish into a violent movement of religious seminary students against the state. However, this narrative was picked by many other Deobandi clerics in Pashtun tribal areas as well as urban centres of Pakistan. Nonetheless, many pundits claim that, TTP was established after the Red Mosque incident in Islamabad, where a military operation was conducted at the orders

of Musharraf in July 2007. The cleric brothers in the Red Mosque, Molana Abdul Aziz, and Abdul Rashid were inciting violence against the state and taking law in their hands by resorting to mob justice on issues they thought were anti-Islamic. For instance, they would distribute pamphlets to barbers not to trim beards; to the music shops not to sell audio/video cassettes and CDs; and to the massage parlours not to entertain their customers. In one such incident, they also kidnaped a Chinese national lady running a massage parlour in Islamabad.<sup>19</sup>

As a consequence of the military operation, various students of seminaries in the erstwhile FATA leaning from Deobandi school of thought gathered to launch a violent terrorist movement under Baitullah Mehsud in 2007, which they called Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) to enforce their interpretation of Islam in Pakistan. Many scholars also consider US drone attack in Bajaur a year earlier in 2006, killing eighty seminary students as the *casus belli* behind the formation of TTP.<sup>20</sup> Yet, it must be argued that it was already there functioning in the tribal areas first under Abdullah Mehsud and later under Nek Muhammad Wazir, who was killed in a US drone strike in June 2004. Whereas, Lal Masjid operation and Bajaur drone strike had only intensified their actions against the state of Pakistan as well as its propagation in other areas, especially the Malakand division. Given this scenario, the years from 2007 to 2011 were the worst in terms of violence in Pakistan, culminating in the Army Public School Peshawar attack in 2014, where a splinter group of TTP claimed responsibility of killing 130 innocent children.

TTP also introduced suicide bombings to Pakistan, something that the country had hardly seen before 9/11. The only incident where suicide attack was used prior to 9/11 was against the Egyptian embassy, where an Al-Qaeda suicide bomber blew himself up in 1996 killing at least sixteen and injuring scores others.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, after 2002, suicide bombings witnessed an exponential rise with a total of



estimated 674 such incidents until 2025.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, in TTP related terrorism acts, an estimated 80,000 casualties have been reported which include civilians, terrorists and personnel of security forces. The economic cost of terrorism is yet another factor that is estimated to be more than a hundred billion dollars since US's invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the TTP has impacted Pakistan drastically. Accordingly, the researchers in terrorism studies like Eamon Murphy have concluded that TTP's agenda throughout its existence in Pakistan remained political rather than religious.<sup>24</sup>

At the strategic level, TTP has also been exploited by the Indian intelligence agency Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), as it offered India a great opportunity to destabilise Pakistan. Since 2024, TTP's use of religion for political purposes is openly called out in traditional as well as social media with the group recently christened as *Fitna-al-Khawarij* (out of the fold of Islam) and an official notification in this regard issued by the Ministry of Interior on July 31, 2024.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the spokesman for the Pakistani armed forces, Lieutenant General Ahmed Sharif Choudhary also called them *Khawarij* in his press release of August 5, 2024.<sup>26</sup> Also, their links to the Indian intelligence and designs are shared publicly to inform public. Whereas, their hideouts in Afghanistan have also been targeted by air strikes by the Pakistan Air Force to neutralise key leaders, who are hiding in safe havens there.

### **Ethno-Nationalist Terrorism in Balochistan**

Balochistan remains a hotbed for ethno-nationalist terrorism. The current round of violence is the fifth such cycle since the inception of Pakistan. The first such insurgency started immediately after the creation of Pakistan, while ending in 1948. The second and third insurgencies were initiated during the rule of General Ayub Khan in 1958-59 and 1962-63 respectively, which were successfully repelled after launching military operations as well as seeking cooperation from

Iran.<sup>27</sup> It re-emerged immediately after Ayub because of General Yahya's appeasement policy. Nevertheless, during Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's era, with the help of Shah of Iran, Muhammad Raza Shah Pahlavi, Pakistan again launched a military operation that also remained successful. The crucial factor in this success was Iran's provision of 30 cobra attack helicopters, and 200 million US dollars in aid.<sup>28</sup>

The fifth and the longest wave began in the early 2000s and has continued since, when series of attacks were launched against the Chinese engineers by Baloch separatist groups who were then working on the Gwadar port.<sup>29</sup> In response, the military was sent and separatist leader and former Chief Minister and Governor Balochistan, Nawab Akbar Bugti was killed in a military operation in 2006. The prominent groups that are involved in terrorism include Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), i.e., Marri and Bugti tribes dominated group; Baloch Liberation Front (BLF), and Baloch Nationalist Army (BNA), with their leaders in exile either in Afghanistan, Iran or the West. These terrorists deliberately target the projects of economic development, especially the Chinese investments and workers involved in CPEC initiative. The agenda is to derail the progress, and spread uncertainty in the Chinese minds. Nevertheless, in the ongoing counter-terrorism operations, the state has decided to flush them out once and for all. Which can be estimated by the fact that only in 2025, 637 terrorists have been killed, suggesting zero tolerance from the state.<sup>30</sup>

The primary cause of the current surge in violence presumably are Chinese investments in Balochistan, especially through CPEC, which the enemies of Pakistan like India do not see favourable for their own designs of instability in the Balochistan province. This in addition to the vested interests of some political opportunists in Balochistan who create an atmosphere of anarchy. Here, it is also pertinent to mention that most of the Balochistan, as it appears today, is the British formation with additional purchase of Gwadar in 1958 from the Kingdom of Oman, especially with significant efforts by the then first

lady of Pakistan, Begum Viqar-un-Nissa Noon.<sup>31</sup> So, it does not make sense to the present construction of a port in Gwadar as a grievance or laying claim to the entire province where almost half of the population is of ethnic Pashtuns.

The grievances which are often cited, are unequal distribution of resources, not enough representation of Baloch in the Army and other institutions of the state, enforced disappearances as well as extra judicial killings of the Baloch youth.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, the resource distribution after the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment has been largely resolved, where greater autonomy to provinces has been accorded, however, like stated above, the conflict arises only because of Baloch sardars' lust of seeking more power. Similarly, representation of Baloch in the army is in fact more than their share of the total population. Whereas, enforced disappearances may be a concern, but it too is highly politicised, given the fact that there is an active ongoing separatist movement in Balochistan that continuously targets military and national interests. Thereby, often the liquidated terrorists are declared disappeared by the political wings of separatists.

More importantly, Balochistan's separatist problem is often termed as an insurgency, which is contextually and legally wrong. At the moment, while various tribal sardars from Mengal, Marri, and Bugti form the major challengers, however, they are not homogenous in their objectives.<sup>33</sup> The violence is politically motivated, which is aimed at gaining concessions from the State of Pakistan. In this case it is noteworthy to question how the narrative of insurgency gains popularity? It can be concluded that the hostile intelligence agencies, especially that of India, Iran and Afghanistan were more successful in narrative building during the last two decades. In addition, the administrative dynamics which were introduced by the British as per their own interests are still underway, thereby, impeding enabling of an environment in Balochistan that could bring the province at par with rest of Pakistan.

Since 2024, the Pakistani leadership has made significant overtures to Iran for elimination of terrorism in Balochistan, which culminated in the successful visit of Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif and the Chief of Army Staff to Iran in May 2025. Wherein, it was agreed that both Iran and Pakistan will work together in the form of sharing intelligence and erecting a fence on the border to control the free movement of terrorists from Iran to Pakistan.<sup>34</sup> Not only this, the Government of Pakistan has also officially declared, terrorist groups like BLA, BLF, and BNA as Fitna-al-Hindustan (Indian sponsored unrest) so as to show clarity and intent in dealing with these elements.<sup>35</sup> This also substantiates that Pakistan does not consider them insurgents but terrorists, who are significantly funded by India.

### **Threat Perception: State Response to Religious Terrorism**

How did the state respond, in various phases, at the policy, strategic and operational level to threat of religious terrorism? After 9/11, the state of Pakistan acted as a front-line ally in the war against terrorism while despatching over 100,000 of its troops to its western borders to stop infiltration of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban into its territory. However, because of the 2,640 kilometres long and porous border, as well as receptiveness of terrorists by elements of Pashtun tribes, preventing them from sneaking inside Pakistan was a complicated task. Therefore, Pakistan initially responded with a series of military operations, which are explained briefly in the paragraphs below.

Pakistan at the state level could not counter extremism right from its inception. Instead, time and again it facilitated the pressure groups, which eventually threatened isolation of the country within the international community. Therefore, former President General Musharraf decided to ban all militant activity in the country by the year 2002. Accordingly, counter terrorism operations were conducted across the board without any regard for the groups' ideological

standing. However, the policy did not turn out to be smooth. Some Kashmir-based militants turned against the state, prominent of whom was Ilyas Kashmiri, who earlier served in Pakistan Army's Special Services Group. Kashmiri moved to Afghanistan and launched his operations against the very same Pakistani Army which he had served in. Kashmiri was also part of the assassination attempt on General Pervez Musharraf in 2003, as well as a key planner of the 2009 attack on General Headquarters in Rawalpindi.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, there were some other Kashmir based militants as well who joined the Taliban to fight the US, whereas, the remaining went into hiding.

Musharraf deployed 100,000 of Pakistani army troops in the former FATA who were tasked to initiate several counter terrorism operations against Al-Qaeda and Taliban sanctuaries, especially in South Waziristan. In this connection, Pakistan Army initiated a joint operation christened *Operation Al Mizan*, with the US troops in 2002, which lasted until 2006 albeit without any substantial success. Here it may be added that Al Mizan may be regarded as an umbrella operation consisting of multiple tactical level operations; "*Operation Kalosha*," launched in January 2004 against Al-Qaeda in South Waziristan among the most famous ones. During this operation many Al-Qaeda operatives were arrested, who were subsequently handed over to the US.<sup>37</sup> With the US believing that the ground operations were producing limited success, it decided to launch a missile strike in October 2006 on a seminary in Bajaur on the suspicion that senior Al-Qaeda members were hiding there. The attack resulted in 80 casualties, with most of the victims being innocent students.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, after the TTP came into prominence in Pakistan in 2007, the entire North and South Waziristan tribal agencies, and Mohmand, Bajaur and Malakand went under the de facto control of TTP, who even started collecting their own taxes while banning all kinds of public life for women and girls, even education. In response to this, the Government of Pakistan launched operation *Rah-e-Haq* (just

path) in Swat district of Malakand division in 2007, against Mullah Fazlullah, who using his own FM Radio Station was collecting donations and influencing local public to join his movement against the state of Pakistan. Operation Rah-e-Haq continued for two years in Swat while being conducted in three different phases.<sup>39</sup> During this time, the military initiated *Operation Zalzala* (Earthquake), where local tribesmen also aided the military to clear the fort as well as South Waziristan agency from TTP. Operation Zalzala was a success in South Waziristan, however, its cost was internally displaced persons, where almost 200,000 people had to flee their homes. Moreover, South Waziristan was cleared but terrorists moved into North Waziristan, Mohmand and Bajaur agencies.

In 2008, Pakistan Army launched *Operation Sher Dil* in South Waziristan and Bajaur, especially targeting Molvi Faqeer Muhammad of Bajaur. However, almost during the same time, the TTP shifted its focus to Swat, and became powerful, owing to a deal with the government of Awami National Party. Therefore, it was decided to act against the group and thus *Operation Rah-e-Rast* (Right Path) was launched in May 2009, against them, resulting in success. Similarly, in June 2009, yet another military operation, *Rah-e-Nijat* was initiated in South Waziristan, where TTP's main leadership was stationed. Subsequently, in June 2014, *Operation Zarb-e-Azb* was launched to target terrorists everywhere in Pakistan, whereas *Operation Radd-ul-Fassad* became its continuation while being initiated in February 2017.

Whereas, in June 2024, *Operation Azm-e-Istehkam* was launched with a clear objective to root out terrorism from Pakistan, especially from Pashtun tribal areas, that were merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018, nevertheless, their complete integration in terms of extending universal policy and tax reforms is yet to be seen. Nevertheless, Pakistan army has launched significant economic development projects to inculcate a sense of economic progress.<sup>40</sup> In this regard, a message was also clearly conveyed to the Afghan Interim

Government in Kabul, that Pakistan will no longer accept TTPs or Baloch separatist hideouts in Afghanistan. And on finding any such hideout, Pakistan reserves the right to strike it and root out the threat at its source.<sup>41</sup>

The Pakistani society was greatly impacted after the TTP attacked the Army Public School in Peshawar killing over 130 children. Following this incident, whatever soft corner TTP thought it had, because of its narrative of jihad against the US, faded from Pakistani public. Accordingly, the country witnessed a collective will to fight the menace of terrorism, and demanded strict punishment of terrorists. Consequently, the hard power of Pakistani military got significantly enhanced with societal backing. Thus, Pakistan's response was not limited to military operations, but it also countered terrorism at legal and policy fronts as well. In this context, it is mentioned that prior to 2014, Pakistan only had a few laws related to counter terrorism like Suppression of the Terrorist Activities (Special Court) Act 1975 as well as Anti-Terrorism Act 1997, which provided for special terrorism courts.<sup>42</sup> However, post 2014, the state decided to introduce major policy reforms in this regard. Thus, special measures were carried out, which are briefly listed below:

- National Internal Security Policy (2014-2018): The idea of this policy document was to bring social cohesion, segregating the terrorists, and building capacity of the security forces. The policy also stressed on the need for national dialogue that could give a national response to the ideology of terrorism.<sup>43</sup>
- National Action Plan (NAP), 2014: This was proposed immediately after the APS incident, which amongst other aspects, encouraged quick death sentence to the terrorists. It also insisted on sectarian cohesion. Moreover, it also recommended a ban on glorification of terrorism and ideology of the terrorists on traditional media and internet. Another key

factor of NAP was the registration of all religious seminaries in Pakistan.

- Pakistan Protection Act, 2014: This act defined a militant as a person, who was indulged in initiating a war against Pakistan. It also defined an “enemy alien,” who cannot be traced in Pakistan through available identity recognition channels. Meanwhile, the said Act also allowed a security personnel to shoot a suspect of terrorism with grade 15 or above government official.<sup>44</sup>
- National Internal Security Policy 2018-2022: This policy further improved the previous NISP 2014 and included ISIS, forms of extremism and terrorism online, as well as sectarian hatred as threats to national security. This policy also advised establishing new intelligence units, capacity building of security forces, pro-Pakistan narrative building, reforms in religious madrassas, and elimination of all forms of inequality in Pakistan to fight terrorism in any of its forms.<sup>45</sup>
- National Security Policy 2022-2026: Initiated in 2022, it is dubbed as a holistic policy approach to counter threats to Pakistan. Along with terrorism, NSP 2022 also recognised hybrid warfare as a threat, that may be initiated against Pakistan online. Moreover, economic threats and plans to isolate Pakistan globally are also recognised as threats. On religious terrorism, the NSP advised engagement of clergy to dissuade people from extremist behaviour.<sup>46</sup>

### **Changing Geostrategic Dynamics: Implications for Pakistan**

After the exit of the United States from Afghanistan in August 2021, many political and strategic pundits argued that unipolarity has officially ended and the world has entered an era of multipolarity, where military and economic powers like China, Russia, and India have



started to flex their muscles.<sup>47</sup> Multipolarity influenced Pakistan as well to diversify its foreign policy goals. Thereby, resulting in forging new alliances like China, Pakistan, and Bangladesh trilateral strategic alliance, bringing more depth to its alliance with Turkey and Azerbaijan and working with Iran to achieve shared objectives of peace in Balochistan region. The major aim of these overtures is denying space to anti-Pakistan elements, who exploited global terrorism regime for narrative building against Pakistan.

At the foreign policy level, balancing US and China at the same time has always remained a hot topic in Pakistani academia and intelligentsia. While Pakistan has been successful in dealing with the two powers diplomatically post August 2021, nevertheless, terrorism remains a major concern for both. Given the geographic proximity and investments in Pakistan, China gets impacted by it the most. Other than major infrastructural projects in Pakistan like China Pakistan Economic Corridor, China also has been developing its Western Xinjiang autonomous region, where East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and its offshoots have been a subject of concern. Though the Chinese state has successfully countered ETIM in Xinjiang, nevertheless, its members or supporters still have the capability to target Chinese interests in Pakistan.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, China also faces geopolitical rivalry in the shape of India, that constantly targets Chinese interests in southern Balochistan province through its proxy BLA.<sup>49</sup>

TTP operating out of Afghanistan cannot be ruled out of linking with ETIM to attack Chinese interests, or even work for Indian intelligence on contractual basis. For instance, TTP was involved in the attack on Chinese engineers working on Dasu hydroelectric power project in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, killing five.<sup>50</sup> The surge in attacks against the Chinese interests in Pakistan, is not only of concern for the security establishment of Pakistan but also for the government of

China, that has fought terrorism for two decades and is now eyeing for the socio-economic development of Pakistan.

As far as the US is concerned on the other hand, its interests in the region are not elaborately defined at the policy level apart from immediate concerns on the leftover US weaponry in Afghanistan that is being sold to diverse terrorist outfits operating there and can easily be smuggled out while potentially reaching the hands of international terrorists. Meanwhile, the arguments of the US containment of China are widely spoken of, however, it was not a success story even during the US stay in Afghanistan for two decades. The Northern Silk Route (NSR) project was President Obama's strategy to counter China's mounting influence through BRI. The vision behind NSR was to link Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan with Central Asia to increase trade and cooperation.<sup>51</sup> However, the plan never really took off. When President Trump took office in 2017, his administration dropped the idea, seeing it as impractical and unrealistic.

Similarly, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India (TAPI) gas pipeline as well as CASA-1000 (importing cheap Tajik electricity to Afghanistan-Pakistan) has also been a failure.<sup>52</sup> The initiatives like Blue Dot Network, aimed at competing Chinese BRI and proving its infrastructural projects as substandard could not bring desired results in the region.<sup>53</sup>

In South Asia, it can be stated that QUAD may be the US potential interest that has been operational since 2017 and gives US rights to use any of the Indian ports.<sup>54</sup> But this does not make the US abandon its relationship with Pakistan, as it continues to provide leverage to the US in the Middle East and Central Asia. In fact, in the recent May 2025 India-Pakistan conflict, it was the US President Donald Trump, who played a crucial role in announcing cease-fire between India and Pakistan, while simultaneously internationalising the Kashmir issue. This only confirms that with better economic deals and defence cooperation, the US tilt towards India through QUAD can be

balanced. Whereas, on the counter-terrorism front, Pakistan remains a key player for the US for preventing acts of regional and international terrorism, especially against the US interests.

Regionally, Pakistan is engaged in countering challenges from all fronts, even from the north, where it faced a 'do more situation', from China too on counter-terrorism.<sup>55</sup> Meanwhile, its eastern, western, and southwestern neighbours continue to undermine its security and stability.

As far as its eastern neighbour India is concerned, it has openly resorted to acts of state terrorism by penetrating deep into Pakistani cities to take out targets that it alleged to be involved in the freedom struggle in Kashmir. Dozens of such incidents have happened in major metropolis of Pakistan like Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad. British newspaper *the Guardian* reports that this is part of Indian hawkish policy of neutralizing threats on foreign soil and is directly ordered by the central government in New Delhi.<sup>56</sup>

Most recently, on May 7, 2025, India tried to exploit terrorism as a tool of foreign policy when it exhibited unprovoked aggression and violated Pakistan's sovereignty while targeting so-called sites of terrorism in nine locations of Pakistan. This, quickly culminated into a conflict albeit resulting in shooting down of six Indian air force jets by Pakistan, and launching of strikes deep inside the Indian territory on May 10. This was yet another major escalation between the two arch rivals post-Kargil after both had overtly acquired nuclear weapons thereby, also reshaping the strategic narrative around nuclear deterrence and future threats of escalation.

With Afghanistan, it was expected that relations would normalise post US withdrawal, nevertheless, Afghan Taliban have done too little to address Pakistan's reservations especially its soil being used by the TTP.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, the jingoism within Afghan Taliban ranks is also evident in their statements against the defence and foreign policies of Pakistan. For instance, Taliban have tried to

influence Pakistan's decision of repatriation of Afghan refugees which Pakistan considers essential for bringing stability in its internal security.<sup>58</sup> The rifts among the two countries heightened after the TTP struck a Pakistan Army's post in North Waziristan in March 2024, after which Pakistan carried out retaliatory airstrikes in Khost and Paktika provinces while accurately targeting TTPs sanctuaries.<sup>59</sup> In December 2024, Pakistan again carried out strikes in Paktika on TTP hideouts, thus re-exhibiting its intent that it would not compromise on TTP organising itself in Afghanistan.<sup>60</sup>

Similarly, Iran on the other hand too violated Pakistan's airspace in January 2024 in a missile attack that killed two innocent children.<sup>61</sup> Pakistan immediately responded within 48 hours by striking the BLA terrorists' hideouts in Iran's Sistan province killing scores of them. However, after Pakistan's response, Iran's foreign ministry was quick to stress on the need of brotherly relations between the two countries.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, to strengthen ties amongst the two states, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi visited Pakistan on April 22, 2024, vowing to take bilateral trade to 10 billion US dollars.<sup>63</sup> However, *Reuters* reported that cross border terrorism was an important item on agenda of Pakistani leaders, who discussed their concerns with the Iranian President.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, Iran also offered its help in easing tension between India and Pakistan in May 2025 conflict. Whereas, subsequent visit by Prime Minister of Pakistan and Chief of Army Staff visit to Iran during end of May 2025 is a new hope of improved relations between the two neighbours. Nevertheless, it is yet to be seen how Iran responds to Pakistan's BLA issue that has hideouts in Iran's Sistan province.

At the national level, Pakistan has started restabilising its economy which started going down in 2021. As of 2025, all economic indicators of Pakistan are exhibiting encouraging signs.<sup>65</sup> The political uncertainty in the country, has significantly subsided after the Indo-Pak May 2025 conflict, whereas, the national cohesion in this short

conflict was exemplary with all political parties on same page against India. As far as the political will against terrorism is concerned, it could be clearly seen from Chief of Army Staff's visits to Peshawar in December 2024 and June 2025 respectively, where representatives of all political parties expressed their support and will to eradicate terrorism from Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. Thus, it is not wrong to state that political polarisation has been significantly reduced.

On the other hand, socially, there has been exponential rise in religious extremism in Pakistan. One of the major reasons for rise of extremism is presence of enabling environment for religious pressure groups, which can also be seen in the violent incidents of 1950s and 1970s against the minority Ahmedi community. Currently, such a role is being played mainly by Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) with the group weaponising the blasphemy laws of Pakistan, which it also uses for political mileage.<sup>66</sup>

It is also no hidden fact that religious extremism was the main cause for inciting the murder of former Governor Punjab, Salman Taseer, who was shot by his own security guard in 2011. Since then, the TLP has made ruckus in Pakistan by spreading anarchy through violent protests and mob lynchings. The group is directly linked to numerous extra judicial killings in the name of blasphemy.<sup>67</sup>

A recent report by Islamabad based *Center for Research and Security Studies* is an eye opener to understand the rise in mob lynchings in Pakistan. The report reveals, that while only 59 citizens were murdered over blasphemy allegations, from 1947 to 2014,<sup>68</sup> 30 Pakistanis have been killed extra-judicially only in the last decade over blasphemy, which marks a fifty per cent rise in blasphemy-related extremism.<sup>69</sup> This also coincides with rise of extremist group TLP in Pakistan.

## **Future Prospects**

Extraordinary circumstances need extra-ordinary response(s). Therefore, to address major challenges emanating out of growing extremism and terrorism, Pakistan needs a holistic approach. Firstly, at the policy level, the political will is of utmost significance. In Pakistan, there are numerous laws as already discussed in the section above, nonetheless, it has been witnessed over the years that it is the implementation which has remained to be the major problem. Therefore, there is a need to make all stakeholders agree on across-the-board implementation of law while absolutely disregarding petty political interests.

Secondly, there must be zero tolerance for armed resistance groups, whether religious or ethnic in nature. It has been observed in the recent history with TTP as well as in the broader history with terrorist groups in Balochistan that peace processes were only utilised by these groups to buy time so as to refresh and reignite acts of terrorism against the interests of the state. More importantly, peace processes also give these terrorist groups legitimacy as well as provide them space and agency in the society, which later helps them in their rejuvenation. Though, Pakistan Army has launched several rehabilitation programs as part of its countering violent extremism strategy, however, the major question arises; will this menace be over with only these responses? The answer to this lies in the nature of terrorism. One is ideological, inspired by Deobandi school of thought and complemented by Pashtunwali. Meanwhile, the other is ethno-nationalistic which is fuelled by the desire of separation and complemented by foreign powers, especially India.

As far as terrorism in Balochistan is concerned, an important aspect here is to secure better relationship with Iran as it has already been witnessed in diplomatic history of both states that together they defeated cycles of violence earlier especially during Ayub's and Bhutto's eras. Accordingly, military cooperation in the current

environment can secure Pakistan's interests. It must also be kept in mind, that Iran may have used Baloch terrorists for strategic leverage against Pakistan given the ideological differences between the states, especially after the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the arrival of fundamentalist Zia ul Haq in Pakistan. However, constructive policymaking requires keeping national interests supreme.

Thirdly, it is seen that Pakistan has spent most of its energies on nation building rather than state building. It is the need of the hour that the state while accepting the unity in diversity, moves towards state building by focusing on the rule of law and governance. As there are many examples of multi-nation states functioning excellently, therefore, Pakistan is not an exception when it comes to ethnic diversity.

Lastly, Pakistan has to balance its diplomacy by stressing equal partnership with major players, without becoming a party to any of their conflicts. As it is evident, the US interests in the region are fading therefore, entirely depending on it for uplifting Pakistani economy may not be the correct option. To get out of political and economic quagmire, Pakistan must work on itself by exploiting its existing resources to build better future prospects. Therefore, multilateralism is key for success. As Pakistan must not depend on a single power in its foreign policy; rather explore its options for mutual cooperation to seek economic growth within Pakistan.<sup>70</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This research concludes that in the last two decades, terrorism has significantly evolved. It is not limited to a few ideological groups taking terrorism as a tactics to force states to meet their demands. Rather, after the successful counter terrorism operations by the Pakistani military and other states around the Middle East, the centralised groups have now splintered and often act as proxies or lone wolves of foreign intelligence organisations, which mostly use

them as counterbalancing forces. In Pakistan, though the TTP was successfully defeated and flushed out of its territory, however, it regained momentum in Afghanistan after the second coming of the Taliban regime in August 2021, that now uses the group as a leverage against Pakistani state. Similarly, the ethno-nationalist terrorism in Balochistan also acts as a leverage for India against Pakistan that wants Pakistan destabilised as well as China and its economic interests in jeopardy. The research ascertains that terrorism is greatly aided by the religious and nationalist extremist notions prevalent in Pakistan since its inception. Accordingly, the state must revisit its relations with religious and nationalist pressure groups and demonstrate zero tolerance for politics of violence. This can significantly be achieved by focusing on the principles of state building rather than nation-building. Similarly, in the changed international dynamics after multipolarity, Pakistan has to revisit its external and internal security policies for serving its national interests in constructive and holistic manner. It must balance its relations on the principles of bilateralism with major international players like the US and China; whereas, with regional players like India, Afghanistan, and Iran, it must seek cooperation but not at the behest of its national security.



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