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# WHO TO BLAME FOR BLURRED NATIONAL INTEGRITY STRATEGY TO PREVENT CORRUPTION IN BANGLADESH: STRUCTURE OR AGENCY?

DR NURUL HUDA SAKIB\*

## Abstract

*This study examines Bangladesh's National Integrity Strategy (NI-Strategy) and contends that its reliance on institutional isomorphism fails to effectively address corruption. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative data from a national survey and qualitative insights from interviews with key stakeholder informants. This allows for a comprehensive analysis, ensuring data triangulation to establish the strength and validity of the study's findings. The study demonstrates that the NI-Strategy mainly failed due to structural problems, such as weak institutional capacity, lack of coordination, little mutual reinforcement and manpower shortage. Results from two surveys found that all major institutions were very weak and lacked capacity. The study identified the agency problem, developed as a strategic response to international pressure on Bangladesh by policy makers. The policy makers enacted this response to satisfy international donors and procedural requirements. The study also suggests that most of the strategy's components are fragile, with Bangladesh lacking the capacity to effectively combat corruption using this framework.*

**Keywords:** National Integrity System, anti-corruption, corruption, Bangladesh, strategic response

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## **Introduction**

Bangladesh's efforts to combat corruption, such as the National Integrity Strategy (NI-Strategy), were formed in response to donors, such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and were modelled on international anti-corruption frameworks, such as Transparency International (TI)'s National Integrity System (NIS). The NIS is a mainly a horizontal accountability framework which ensures accountability through 'mutual reinforcement' between two or more organisations.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, donors have raised the profile of their governance and anti-corruption strategies through analytical and practical activities. In the 1980s and 1990s, a wave of corruption swept across the West and became a global concern. Several multilateral international and regional government organisations, including the Organisation of American States (OAS), the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), the African Union (AU), the Council of Europe (CoE), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, adopted international conventions and guiding principles to combat corruption. New anti-corruption government networks, such as the Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), were created to assist countries in combating corruption. Furthermore, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), such as Transparency International (TI), emerging as new 'integrity warriors', were included by the ADB and JICA as they sought to raise awareness against corruption. At the same time, TI and its national chapters, along with many donors, raised public awareness and exerted pressure on decision-makers to adopt and implement anti-corruption

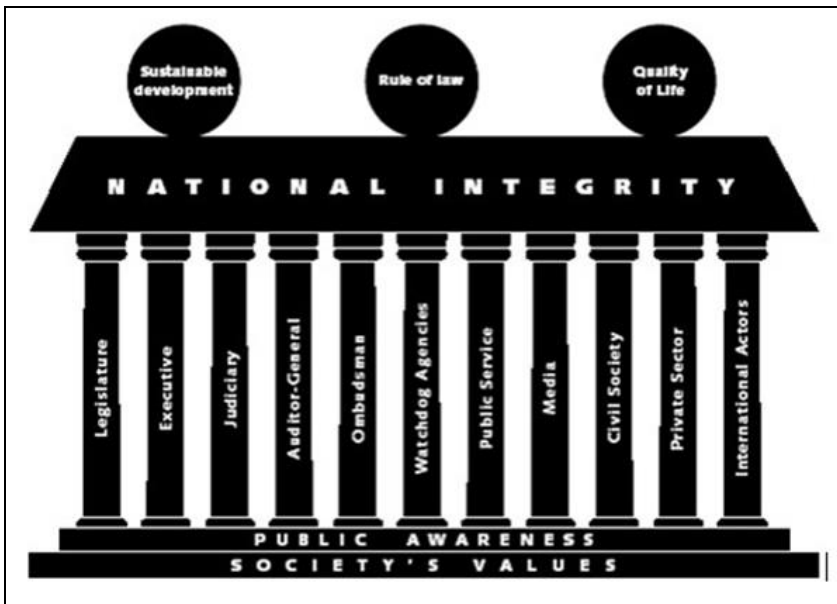
reforms. The international community (mainly donors) either suggested or exerted pressure on governments to prescribe packages of anti-corruption measures, such as TI's National Integrity System (NIS) model which uses the "Greek temple" metaphor.<sup>2</sup>

Not surprisingly, anti-corruption reforms since 1990 have affected Bangladesh. After opening its Bangladesh chapter, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) exerted immense pressure on the country to establish the National Integrity System (NIS) framework. This study critically examines the outcome, namely, the National Integrity Strategy (NI-Strategy)<sup>3</sup> through the lens of the structure–agency debate. This debate seeks to explain social phenomena by exploring the interplay between institutional structures—formal rules, resources and systems—and the actions of individuals or groups who, despite often being constrained by these structures, also have the capacity to influence them. The study's main argument, in its comprehensive analysis of the failure of the NI-Strategy, is that the failure can be attributed to both structural and agency problems.

### **The National Integrity System Approach as Isomorphic Policy**

In the 1990s, TI co-founder Jeremy Pope created the NIS framework for 'horizontal accountability.' As Pope (2000) stated, democratic societies have vertical and horizontal accountability, with vertical strategies for fighting corruption usually failing. Pope implemented the National Integrity System (NIS) approach which supported horizontal accountability. In the horizontal accountability framework, the government's organs and governance indicators constitute the 'pillars' for societal intervention, according to Pope,

forming a 'virtuous circle', thus distinguishing the NIS model from vertical accountability systems. Figure 1 depicts Pope's NIS framework as the 'Greek Temple'.



**Figure 1: Institutional Pillars of the NIS Framework, known as the "Greek Temple"<sup>4</sup>**

Each pillar serves a purpose, with the core (guardian) agencies investigating, deterring and educating against corruption. Civil society and the media condemn unsuccessful programs and support corruption victims.<sup>5</sup> The Greek temple structure implies that all institutions are accountable to each other. Watchdog organisations focus on corruption in all areas, with civil society and the media focusing on their performance. The courts and legislature oversee civil society and the media to avoid bias. Public consciousness and social aspirations underpin the temple. The three 'keystone symbols' symbolise sustainable development, rule of law and quality of life. For these balls to

stay in place, all pillars must be parallel.<sup>6</sup> Most countries share the national integrity pillars and follow 'rules and practices' that indicate their strengths and weaknesses, although the pillars in different cultures may vary.

The NIS framework seeks to address corrupt 'high risk' behaviors, not those that are 'low risk'. Maintaining checks and balances with this integrity structure can reduce corruption, even if some pillars do not perform well. This study examines Bangladesh's NI-Strategy's strengths and weaknesses in light of the critical assessment of the National Integrity System (NIS).

### **Theoretical Framework: Structure and Agency Debate**

Structure and agency are central ideas in social theory which examines how the activities of individuals (agency) interact with social, political and economic systems (structure). The word 'agent' is defined as an individual or collective entity (e.g., a group or organisation) that has the capacity to act independently and make free choices. Therefore, the word 'agency' denotes the capacity to choose an action from different options, learning from prior experience and achieving the best outcome from the action taken. On the other hand, the word 'structure' is defined as that which 'empower[s] different aspects of social existence'. In other words, structure authorises what it designates. Alexander Wendt<sup>7</sup> describes structure as being shaped by material conditions, interests and ideas. Different agents in the structure understand their roles by adopting the standards that they learn through the process and other structured behaviours. The process functions in two ways: firstly, agents internalise the standards that are compatible with individuals' values and, secondly, they set the benchmark for their structures by analysing other agents' behaviour and actions. Establishing a poverty-free society, achieving development and good

governance by combatting corruption in developing countries is challenging. However, the moral decadence of individuals and groups cause corruption with its severe socio-political consequences. This problem can be labelled as an agency problem.

The structure–agency debate examines power dynamics and the extent to which individuals or institutions shape and are shaped by broader systemic structures. Scholars in social sciences, including Carlsnaes (1992), Hobson and Ramesh (2002) and O'Neill *et al.* (2004), debate at length whether social phenomena are predominantly influenced by overarching structures—rules, norms and resources—or by individual agency which denotes the capacity to choose, adapt and initiate change. Giddens defines structure as the “rules and resources that are intricately involved in the continuation of social systems”, with these not only supporting but also constraining individual agency.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, agency emphasises individual or collective autonomy in action, allowing individuals to learn from past experiences and enact changes within the bounds of societal structures.<sup>9</sup>

Dowding highlights that this debate is central to an understanding of how power operates within institutional settings, with structure focusing on the design of power systems and agency on the capacity of actors to leverage or resist these systems.<sup>10</sup> In the context of corruption and governance, structure might be understood as the institutional frameworks—laws, norms and accountability mechanisms—that govern behavior, while agency reflects the actions of policy makers, public officials and other actors within these frameworks. The structure–agency dilemma is particularly relevant in anti-corruption frameworks, where successful reform relies on mutual reinforcement between structure and agency. For example, Bäckman<sup>11</sup> shows how global anti-corruption frameworks can encourage countries

to adopt integrity measures, but also how local political cultures and institutional capacity substantially impact their implementation. In countries where institutional corruption is deeply embedded, structural constraints can hinder effective policy implementation. Similarly, Mungiu-Pippid illustrates that, without addressing underlying structural issues, such as patronage networks and lack of political will, national integrity strategies may remain superficial and fail to produce meaningful change.<sup>12</sup>

While structural considerations are important, national integrity strategies are also greatly influenced by agency. Whether undertaken by people, legislators or bureaucrats, both individual and group efforts can spur reforms and combat unethical behavior. Rose-Ackerman, for example, highlights the value of public advocacy and engagement in promoting accountability and transparency.<sup>13</sup> Through citizen mobilisation and the development of a sense of agency, civil society movements can pressure governments to take more moral action. Furthermore, the priorities and values of people in positions of authority (leadership) frequently influence integrity strategies. While leaders who uphold the status quo may serve to strengthen current structural barriers to reform, those who place a higher priority on integrity and accountability have the power to affect institutional change.

In this study, these theoretical perspectives offer valuable insights. Structural constraints can include legal frameworks, institutional norms and cultural values that shape the definition and enactment of integrity within a country. Conversely, agency is reflected in the actions of policy makers, civil society and citizens who actively engage with, or resist, these structures. This study elaborates on this debate, with a central focus on Bangladesh.

## **Data Collection Method**

This study examined the anti-corruption efforts in Bangladesh through the NI-Strategy, exploring its impact through a multidimensional research methodology approach. The NI-Strategy's performance in Bangladesh was investigated using in-depth analysis, citizen surveys and documentary analysis. In total, 42 in-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholder informants at various locations in Bangladesh. The in-depth interviewees were selected using purposive sampling, the main criteria being their ability to contribute to the research (questions, objectives, propositions) and to manage the accessibility constraints.<sup>14</sup> The study divided interviewees into significant groups, such as present and former top-ranked anti-corruption officials; present and former secretary and additional secretary of the government; academics from various universities; a top journalist who covered news on corruption; and non-governmental organisation (NGO) and civil society members who actively work to prevent corruption, etc. The interviews were conducted in two phases: the first phase between September 2015 and April 2016, and the second phase between September 2019 and April 2020.<sup>15</sup>

Data gathered through small surveys (Bangladesh Citizens' Survey [BCS] 2015–2016 and BCS 2019–2020) were an important part of the research, aiding in the testing and validation of the TIB survey elements. The survey's primary purpose was to gather information on citizens' perceptions of the NI-Strategy in Bangladesh. These results were then integrated with the qualitative data to support the arguments. The total sample for BCS 2015–2016 was 302, while for BCS 2019–2020, it was 271. The samples were stratified according to region, gender, age, occupation and education to accommodate all divisions in Bangladesh, thus representing the whole society. In addition to in-depth interviews and citizens' surveys, official



documents were reviewed for this study. Keywords, such as 'NIS', 'National Integrity Strategy of Bangladesh', 'anti-corruption strategy of Bangladesh', etc. were used, with the internet searches conducted.

### **United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) and Origins of Bangladesh's NI-Strategy**

In Bangladesh, some major reforms conducted since 2000 have failed to mitigate corruption. Therefore, in 2004, the Bureau of Anti-Corruption was abolished to create the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC). Bangladesh joined the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) in 2007 when the military-backed caretaker government was in office. Bangladesh has passed various laws since 2004, including the *Anti-Corruption Commission Act 2004*; *Public Procurement Act 2006 and Rules 2008*; *Right to Information Act 2009*; *Whistle Blowers' (Protection) Act 2011*; *Prevention of Money Laundering Act 2012*, etc. In 2012, the government created the NI-Strategy to fight corruption.

When the military-backed caretaker government took office in 2007, international donors such as the ADB and JICA exerted pressure on Bangladesh to implement reforms. In February 2007, Bangladesh signed the UNCAC, believing that this would help Bangladesh to establish democracy, the rule of law and human rights, constitutional freedom, equality and justice. The then-government received a US\$150 million loan from the ADB in 2007 to support the Good Governance Programme (GGP), economic growth and public service access. The ADB also provided technical support for project set-up.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the ADB, with expert advice from BRAC University's Institute of Governance Studies (IGS), helped Bangladesh's Cabinet Division to create its NI-Strategy. With support from the Cabinet Division, Deputy Commissioners, district administrations and local dignitaries, 53 focus group sessions were organised across Bangladesh, with these sessions crucial to the approach.

The government also identified the most pressing issues and suggested pillars for the plan

However, due to concerns that an elected administration could take over, the military-backed government did not accept the strategy. In 2009, the Awami League (AL) won the general election with a landslide majority. The AL, in its electoral manifesto, promised “multi-purpose action” to fight corruption. The AL government created laws, rules, policies and plans to establish good governance to fulfil this promise. Bangladesh’s signature on the UNCAC helped the country to adopt this legislation and these action plans. An UNCAC signatory must organise a conference of state parties within a year “to achieve the objectives outlined in this Convention and to promote and review its implementation” (Article 63.1). Additionally, state parties must verify legislation and pass new laws or establish bodies in accordance with UNCAC standards.<sup>17</sup> Bangladesh met the deadline, with increased pressure from donors for UNCAC ratification.<sup>18</sup> After the new government achieved stability in 2009, international donors and local consultants submitted the “Commitment for Golden Bengal: National Integrity Strategy of Bangladesh”, the NI-Strategy to the head of the government. Before delivering the NI-Strategy to the Prime Minister, Cabinet Secretary Musharraf Hossain Bhuiyan sought assistance from government policy makers and other stakeholders over a three-year period. Subsequent meetings and suggestions led to revision of this document. The Cabinet finally adopted this approach on 18 October 2012 (GoB, 2012c). The Prime Minister, believing that this strategy was necessary, authorised its implementation.

After Bangladesh adopted the NI-Strategy,<sup>19</sup> the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) supported its implementation, believing that it was essential for good

governance in Bangladesh. The NI-Strategy Support Project began in October 2014 to create an implementation framework.

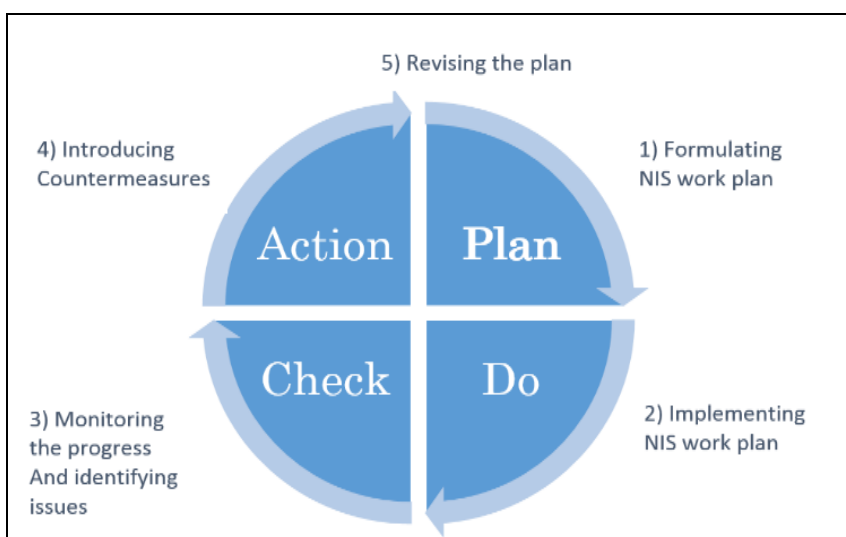
### **The NI-Strategy: How it Works**

The NI-Strategy is characterised by a robust legal framework and an extensive array of objectives, strategies and action plans. These are designed to enhance the autonomy, productivity, responsibility, efficiency, transparency and efficacy of both government organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The NI-Strategy has clear similarities with, and differences to, Pope's (2000) NIS framework, developed for Transparency International (TI). The NIS and NI-Strategy both comprise state and non-state institutions. In total, the NI-Strategy has 16 pillars. The 10 state pillars are: Parliament; ministries and divisions; the judiciary; local government institutions; Attorney-General; Public Service Commission (PSC); Election Commission; Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC); Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG); and Office of the Ombudsman. The six non-state pillars are civil society, political parties, NGOs, the private sector, the media and the family.<sup>20</sup>

Additionally, the government established the National Integrity Advisory Council on 29 November 2012, led by the Prime Minister and comprising 49 members, including cabinet officials, legislators and representatives from various sectors, with its aim being to spearhead the implementation of anti-corruption measures in Bangladesh. The Executive Committee convenes biannually to assess progress and issue directives. The Cabinet Division orchestrated the National Integrity Implementation Unit (NIIU), overseen by the Cabinet Secretary and spearheaded by an additional secretary. Ministries were mandated to form ethics committees, ensuring adherence to the NI-Strategy. These committees, led by high-ranking officials, were tasked with fostering integrity within their respective ministries. Integrity focal points within ministries liaised with the Cabinet Division for

coordinated efforts. Administrative oversight was centralised under the Cabinet Division, while the NGO Affairs Bureau and Ministry of Commerce monitored integrity in NGOs and corporations, respectively. Notably, integrity awards were instituted to commend exceptional contributions to combatting corruption. This multifaceted approach aimed to instil a culture of integrity across public, civil and corporate sectors, facilitating effective implementation of anti-corruption measures in Bangladesh.



**Figure 2: NI-Strategy Monitoring Framework of the Executive Committee<sup>21</sup>**

In addition, Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) were prepared to review and monitor the progress of the NI-Strategy for each body. Thus, the Executive Committee was expected to undertake the NI-Strategy's 'plan-do-check-action cycle' steps (see Figure 2).

### **Some Positive Measures to Make the Strategy Effective**

The development of this strategy was a key milestone for Bangladesh. It created an opportunity for policy makers to combat

corruption and promote good governance. One government official interviewed for this study, who is actively involved with the NI-Strategy implementation, argued that it has been developed not only to combat corruption but also to expand good practices across society. The goal of the NI-Strategy is to break down every day petty corruption in all sectors and bring 'integrity' into public life.<sup>22</sup> Thus, it is a living document in Bangladesh society and provides a very good start for Bangladesh.<sup>23</sup> Although the strategy has only been operational since 18 October 2012, it has achieved some positive outcomes.

Firstly, key aspects of the NI-Strategy include pillar-specific goals, problems and plans. The JICA helped to construct ethics committees, raise corruption awareness, identify Inclusive Finance Project (IFP) assignments and create National Integrity System (NIS) monitoring standards. The NI-Strategy describes the status, functions, performance targets and difficulties of each institution and organisation. Implementation time frames are provided for action plans. These are short term (one year), medium term (three years) and long term (five years). The NI-Strategy is a living document that allows for new action plans and implementation as needed. Organisations or institutions must format their actions as shown. Besides these action plans, the NI-Strategy has reformed numerous laws and passed new anti-corruption laws. Parliament strengthened the Fifteenth Constitutional amendment to increase judicial independence. In the Ninth Parliament, 180 laws and 33 work plans and policies were passed from 2009–June 2012 to combat corruption and promote integrity. A few of these laws have been useful. The *Right to Information Act 2009* allows citizens to request government information. If officials deny citizens information, they can complain to the Information Commission which holds a 'public hearing' and makes a ruling on the complaint.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, modernising land administration and planning is helping to resolve land disputes,

with land-related documents now stored digitally through the database. The average individual can now easily access services more often.<sup>25</sup>

S. No.	Interventions	Performance Indicator	Time Frame	Responsibility	Supported by
1.	Modernisation of land administration and planning	Digitalised land administration system	Medium term	Ministry of Land	Ministry of Public Administration

**Table I: Example of an Intervention of the NI-Strategy**

Secondly, the NI-Strategy accountability mechanisms comprise an annual performance agreement (APA), a grievance redress system (GRS) and e-filing. The APA is a legal agreement between the Cabinet Secretary, who represents the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, and the relevant ministry or division secretary, who represents the Minister. Government performance management systems are used to promote transparency, accountability, resource allocation and efficiency. This agreement describes the ministry or division’s strategic goals, the activities needed to attain them and the metrics used to evaluate them. At year’s end, the ministry or division's actual successes are compared to the agreed-upon targets. The GRS, run by the Cabinet Division, allows citizens to complain about government services. Citizens can report anonymously or with their contact details. The Cabinet Division handles public claims.<sup>26</sup> To eliminate public service delays and administrative errors, the government has implemented e-filing.<sup>27</sup> The NI-Strategy emphasises the use of social media to make the public service more responsible. Social media complaints and information sharing in Bangladesh have shown promise in improving public services.<sup>28</sup>

Thirdly, the NI-Strategy implementation body prioritises addressing corruption by officials and stakeholders, as well as to raising integrity awareness. Thus, it holds frequent seminars and workshops in ministries, divisions and departments. To help promote the NI-Strategy, civil society groups, bureaucrats, lawyers, university teachers, legislators, students and media professionals attend these seminars and workshops, which also uncover NI-Strategy flaws and offer solutions. Bangladesh Television has broadcast a best practices documentary from the NI-Strategy implementation body. This has encouraged anti-corruption activists and created integrity role models. Journalists were trained to promote the NI-Strategy in the media at a special session.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, awareness raising and 'on-field actions' have been part of the plan. Some activities include ministry and department public hearings. With ACC assistance, several government agencies now willingly hold public hearings to identify public service delivery issues. Public hearings allow citizens to question and criticise personnel in front of ACC officials and respected department heads. This has opened the way to new corruption solutions. Public hearings by the ACC in the land sector, especially at Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (RAJUK) but also at other land offices, have had a big impact. In these extremely well-attended hearings, citizens could protest about officials, with officials agreeing to resolve these issues within two days and without taking bribes. The ACC, the Deputy Commissioner's (DC) Office and TIB tracked these concerns and their resolutions. Government officials have also started a mobile court to address private sector issues including food adulteration and land grabbing. High-ranking Cabinet Division and ACC officials are also conducting surprise inspections in various places. These tours seek public input, identify corruption issues and take action against corrupt individuals in selected areas.<sup>30</sup> Corruption in Bangladesh needs

major attention, according to these NI-Strategy measures, with a few of these measures promoting public service delivery.

### **Why NI-Strategy Implementation Remains Blurred: Structure or Agency?**

Despite achieving a few targets, the NI-Strategy still lacks practical implementation due to structure and agency problems. Although some positive feedback has been received, the strategy's overall performance has been very disappointing. This study draws attention to the point that the implementation of the National Integrity System (NIS) has been only ceremonial due to these problems. Successful anti-corruption efforts require support at both the structure and agency levels. With the NIS implementation, this study has found both structure and agency problems, resulting in an NIS that is ineffective.

### **Problems with the Structure**

The patterns in Figures 4 and 5 identify failures in the overall NI-Strategy, the model developed by international donors and the Bangladesh government, to combat corruption. The results are discouraging. The entire structure, designed by the strategy, lacks coordination and intensity, and is incapable to achieving all targets in the strategy.

Both surveys (Bangladesh Citizens' Survey 2015–2016 and 2019–2020) found that citizens judged many of the pillars to be ineffective. Most survey respondents thought many of the pillars were either weak or very weak in performing their specific roles to combat corruption. According to survey respondents, the institutional structures required for the strategy have remained ceremonial only, with no effective measures to prevent corruption. One interviewee signalled the quality of the institutional structure as follows:



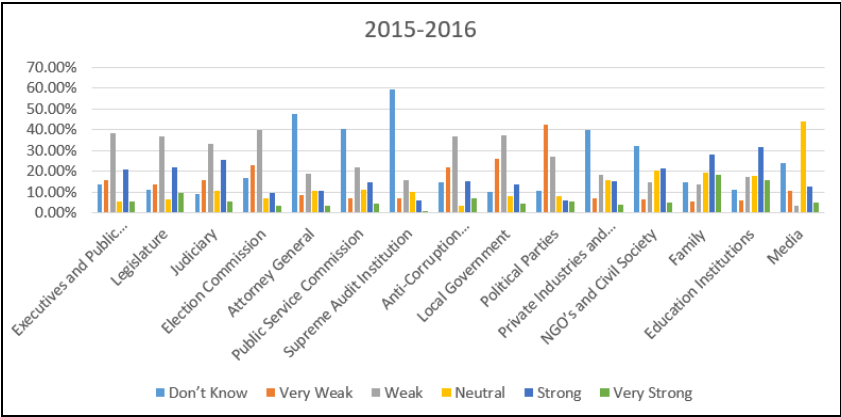
*Unlike many other countries, we [Bangladesh] have all the institutional mechanisms to combat corruption. There are ACC, Parliament, C&AG, National Board of Revenue (NBR) and so on. But what role are they playing? I guess nothing. Parliament, Election Commission, the ACC, all the institutions cannot perform their actual duty due to the complex societal structure. I think the NI-Strategy is just another ceremonial strategy to minimise corruption that has massive flaws.<sup>31</sup>*

This study's interviews showed that interviewees were dissatisfied with the performance of six major institutions: the parliament, the judiciary, the executives, the Election Commission, the ACC and political parties, all perceived to have fewer structural measures to prevent corruption.

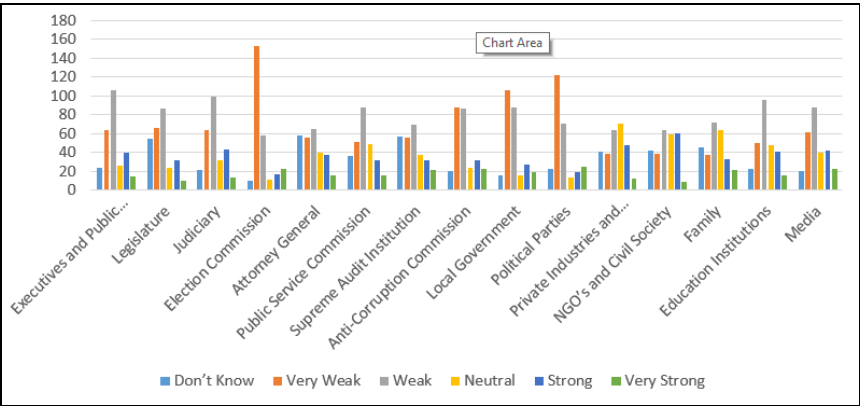
For example, in the BCS 2015–2016 only 9.6 per cent rated the legislature as very strong and 21.9 per cent rated it as strong, while 36.8 per cent and 13.9 per cent rated it as weak and very weak, respectively, in combatting corruption. Similarly, the BCS 2019–2020 found only 3.69 per cent rated it as very strong and 11.81 per cent rated it as strong.

The functioning of the parliament of Bangladesh faces many problems, including the dominance of executives, disregard for the recommendations of parliamentary committees, improper use of resources and a relatively small budget.<sup>32</sup>

Problems are also found within the parliamentary culture, as Members of Parliament (MPs) spend time debating trivial issues during question and answer sessions, such as praising party leaders and the head of the government. In addition, quorum crises occur as MPs spent considerable time outside the parliament to manage their businesses.<sup>33</sup>



**Figure 4: Citizens' Attitudes to NI-Strategy Specific Pillar (2015–2016)**



**Figure 5: Citizens' Attitudes to NI-Strategy Specific Pillar (2019–2020)<sup>3435</sup>**

**Source:** Bangladesh Citizens' Survey (BCS) 2015–2016

The entire NI-Strategy is based on support from the executives. Although some ministries were very active in implementing their action plans, hardly any positive changes were found. Both the BCS 2015–2016 and the BCS 2019–2020 found the executives to be as weak, if not weaker, than the legislature and the judiciary. In all, 54.3 per cent of citizens thought that the executives were either weak (38.4

per cent as per BCS 2015–2016 and 39.11 per cent as per BCS 2019–2020) or very weak (15.9 per cent and 23.1 per cent, respectively) in tackling corruption. The lack of prosecution for high-ranking officials and politicians may contribute to this finding and could also explain the judiciary's perceived weakness. Bangladesh has massive problems with judicial independence, with the government regularly coming into conflict with the judiciary. A different set of causes, increasing every day, probably explains the perception of local government as the weakest government institution (63.6 per cent as per BCS 2015–2016 and 71.1 per cent as per BCS 2019–2020). Local government lacks autonomy and resources, but it is also the level of government with which citizens interact most often. Many of these local interactions involve petty corruption which often appears to go unchecked.

Citizens view the Election Commission as having very limited strength in combatting corruption. The absence of free and fair elections has become a critical issue over the years in Bangladesh, damaging the process of democratic consolidation. The lack of a well-organised, efficient and non-partisan Election Commission has become a key challenge for Bangladesh.<sup>36</sup> Citizens' evaluations of political parties are highly critical, rating them the weakest of all the pillars. While political parties in Bangladesh frequently campaign on anti-corruption platforms, once in power. They often fall short in upholding citizens' rights. This discrepancy highlights a pattern of unfulfilled promises, leaving citizens highly aware of the gap between political rhetoric and actual governance. This awareness fosters a sense of disillusionment, as citizens see politicians leveraging anti-corruption messaging to gain votes without a genuine commitment to integrity or accountability.

These gaps within the institutional pillars result in serious structural flaws when implementing the NI-Strategy. With experts

doubting the applicability of the model in developing countries, the survey results indicate why the NI-Strategy is perceived as merely ceremonial. Moreover, the strategy as a whole has some major structural problems, such as little mutual reinforcement, shortage of manpower and technical skills, insufficient monitoring, and inappropriate tools and indicators, with the details defined below.

### **Little Mutual Reinforcement by Different Pillars**

The NI-Strategy is based on the concept of each pillar making the other pillars accountable. In practical terms, this feature is still missing in Bangladesh. As discussed before, Bangladesh has a dysfunctional parliament which has minimal legitimacy. Civil society and the media are controlled by rival interests and lack integrity. In a more concrete example, the ACC cannot effectively fight against financial corruption as it does not receive cooperation from other organisations, such as the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG), Bangladesh Bank and the National Board of Revenue (NBR). Thus, the concept of mutual reinforcement has not yet been realised.

### **Shortages of Manpower and Technical Skills**

Without effective implementation, much of the NI-Strategy remains as a set of paper documents.<sup>37</sup> The strategy requires that staff not only have integrity and ethics, but they also must have technical and other expertise. To date, the strategy has lacked expertise, creating major problems in its implementation.<sup>38</sup> In one example, the NI-Strategy implementation body released a video to be telecast on Bangladesh Television (BTV). Most people today do not watch BTV, instead relying on private channels. The video has never been telecast on any of these channels. Moreover, the video content does not correctly highlight the NI-Strategy's aims and the examples depicted are not outcomes of

the strategy. Overall, the entire video project appears amateurish and fails to create a useful level of awareness among ordinary citizens.<sup>39</sup>

### **Insufficient Monitoring of Initiatives**

Initiatives taken under the NI-Strategy have mostly been fragmented and have lacked coordination. Many individual success stories have been told, however, the NI-Strategy bodies have failed to monitor or properly integrate those initiatives. As stated by one government employee interviewed for this study:

*...most of the time [the Strategy] remains [as] seminars and workshops, some tours [at] home and abroad, and training. So, to me, it is a paper document and will finish when the project stops. This project has funds for January 2017 ... but you will only get the framework. Inside, there is nothing significant. I don't see any visible action of NIS. However, they will try to get credit for some of the efforts taken by public officials to the field level. But it was not because of NIS; it was their efforts to make it happen. They try to integrate those and take the credit.<sup>40</sup>*

Another interviewee observed that the appearance of activities and initiatives was more important than their effective monitoring or coordination:

*.... but the thing is the government is not a big deal, and the strategies lack political commitment. These strategies look to be in good shape, and this will make the donors happy. Because the government did it as it is prescribed. I don't think it will take us anywhere.<sup>41</sup>*

### **Tools and Indicators were not Well Defined**

Another major drawback of the strategy is that most of the pillars lack well-defined tools and indicators. This makes it very difficult to determine how to achieve them and to know when they have been achieved. For example, the strategy aim of the executive organ and public administration has been identified as the 'establishment of a

transparent executive organ responsive to the demands and needs of people.' This aim is very general and ignores the realities of an executive administration that is politically motivated. The NI-Strategy has become a project that does not map a clear future with specific goals. As a result, those involved in the NI-Strategy implementation who genuinely support the project face an arduous task.

### **Agency Problem: Strategic Responses from Policy Makers**

The agency dilemma arises when global reformers, such as the World Bank, enter networks of participants in local agencies who are hostile to an agenda for change set externally.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, these reformers have significant difficulties in enacting any new policy through participation by local citizens. To address this, Christine Oliver (1991) creates a thorough model of tactical local reactions to isomorphic pressure. She makes the case that local groups or officials with a significant influence on policy making constantly work to reduce institutional pressure via a tactical response. She also highlights that organisations do not always respond strategically to institutional forces in the same manner.<sup>43</sup> Organisations, in terms of their strategic behaviours, respond differently to these isomorphic challenges. When institutions are under isomorphic pressure from a parent organisation, Oliver outlines five forms of strategic behaviour that they attempt to adopt. The Bangladesh government's NI-Strategy, which it developed in response to pressure from foreign donors, contains all five forms of these strategies, as discussed in this study. During the creation and execution of the NIS, the agency, in this instance, a ministry, specific bureaucrats or politicians, attempt to adopt certain behaviours. The use of each of these tactics is briefly examined below:

## **Acquiescence**

Oliver (1991) argues that acquiescence may take alternative forms, such as habit, imitation and compliance. Habit refers to blind or unconscious ways of following or granting rules; imitation refers to conscious or unconscious mimicry of the institutional model; while compliance is conscious obedience to, or incorporation of, values, norms or institutional requirements.<sup>44</sup> The NI-Strategy in Bangladesh is a result of acquiescence, a strategic response to international demands. The NI-Strategy first mimicked Transparency International (TI)'s NIS model for promoting good governance. In doing so, the NI-strategy, in most cases, followed their norms and made massive reforms to comply. In the case of citizens' engagement, this study found compliance with international practices in the establishment of Corruption Prevention Committees (CPCs) and the ACC's integrity units. Internationally successful models were mimicked to comply with international donors' expectations. The government representative involved in this initiative indicated that the strategy was to comply with donors.

## **Defiance**

Organisations or actors can dismiss, challenge and/or attack institutional pressures, depending on the reforms or type of situation with which they are confronted.<sup>45</sup> Defiance against promoting the NI-Strategy has frequently occurred since its establishment, with policy makers attempting to dismiss the project several times. As mentioned by one of the interviewees involved in the project:

*We always looked for a suitable opportunity to implement the project as we feared that the people from the government might not like it. Several of our attempts have been denied by the policy makers as they do not want to implement the project.*<sup>46</sup>

Even after the strategy's initiation by donors, all of its pillars have either faced challenges or attacks, or have been dismissed by other actors. Most attacks have been by individual agents who do not want to see the project succeed. More recently, outright defiance of international actors has become more rare, but different Bangladesh governments unwilling to undertake the reforms have attacked civil society members when they have commented on various flaws of the state machinery, such as the Parliament.<sup>47</sup>

### **Avoidance**

Oliver (1991) suggests that institutional pressure is also disregarded by disguised disobedience via concealment, buffering and evasion strategies. Although politicians in Bangladesh have been less equipped to refute foreign allegations of corruption, they might still have sought to evade the most significant adjustments urged by international funders. As previously stated, the NI-Strategy was created in 2007 but not adopted until October 2012.<sup>48</sup> These delays seem to have been implemented with the expectation that the reforms would fail or, alternatively, by allowing enough time for corrupt players to adjust to the new regime.

### **Compromise**

Compromising becomes a strategic option through balancing, pacifying or bargaining. Actors or stakeholders with conflicting demands and expectations resist by compromising to reduce institutional pressure.<sup>49</sup> The strategy of compromise was applied by the Bangladesh government when it had to submit to pressure from donors, civil society and citizens due to the massive growth in corruption. Reforms, such as the NI-Strategy, were eventually adopted but in a weakened form, satisfying international donors but failing to operate as effectively as they should. For example, reforming and implementing 180 laws and



33 work plans and policies for the prevention of corruption and promotion of integrity in three years (from 2009–June 2012) was a massive task that needed an in-depth review. An interviewed expert expressed his frustration as follows:

*Legal matters always need time to [be made] flawless, accurate and, more importantly, context-based. But 180 laws within three years does not make any sense to me. These laws and plans have several flaws, gaps and, ultimately, will not work at all in our country. These are created due to donor pressure to implement the strategy as a part of compromise.*<sup>50</sup>

### **Manipulation**

Of the five forms of strategy defined by Oliver (1991), manipulation is the most proactive reaction by organisations to institutional forces. In reaction to external institutional pressure, manipulation leverages the organisation's authority to manage domestic processes and insulate them from additional pressure.<sup>51</sup> The major factor in Bangladesh's reaction to isomorphic pressure has been manipulation. Multiple institutional players within the NI-Strategy have been weakened via manipulation. When the ACC was founded, for instance, its personnel were not selected independently, with many posts filled with officials from its ineffectual predecessor, the Bureau of Anti-Corruption.<sup>52</sup> Through these and other means, the administration was able to claim it had an anti-corruption body in place while the new ACC was simultaneously weakened. Similar tendencies were prevalent in other institutions, such as the Parliament, Election Commission and the judiciary.<sup>53</sup> According to one interviewee:

*The party in power usually takes these measures (such as reforming ACC, NI-Strategy) on one hand and uses their political influence to control these institutions or strategy on the other. For example, the government passed the Whistleblowers' Protection Act 2011 to*

*make an anti-corruption protest at the bottom level. At the same time, the government passed the Digital Security Act 2018, which made whistleblowers remain silent. Because of the misuse of the Act, people were scared of making a protest against influential people.*<sup>54</sup>

As a result of the varied strategic responses, the NI-Strategy faced some serious flaws when it came to appropriate implementation. Although the strategy had some positive sides, it still lacked effectiveness. Many interviewees had barely heard of the strategy even after nine years had passed. Again, another interviewee's response was of interest:

*I never heard about such a strategy. Are you sure it exists? Because every government took these donor-driven policies only to please the donors. Instead of this sort of policy, government should focus on key institutions and make them effective to prevent corruption.*<sup>55</sup>

Finally, one of the major setbacks of the strategy was the 'integrity award' which showed manipulation and defiance-related problems. According to several interviewees, the integrity award was given to people who were very supportive of the government or to officials who were very close to government but could not be accommodated through promotion. Therefore, at the end of their career, the government rewarded them with the integrity award. Many government employees given integrity awards were later found to be facing various charges of corruption, moral decay, etc. For example, the District Commissioner in the Jamalpur district was accused of a sexual scandal and was suspended in 2019.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, in recent times, a former highly-ranked police official was found to be involved in corruption and building illegal assets: he had also been awarded the integrity award while in charge of the Bangladesh Police.<sup>57</sup> Both cases showed that the government manipulated the 'integrity award', using it as a way to promote its image for personal gain.

## Conclusion and Discussion

The evidence in this study suggests that Bangladesh is not ready to implement its significant isomorphic international agenda, as the country lacks the capacity and capability to fulfil the pillar-specific challenges. Looking at the pillar problems, the micro and macro problems and the present status of the NI-Strategy, the strategy has become solely a paper document that has only pleased the donors. Citizens' responses, key stakeholder interviews and various reports and assessments on the NI-Strategy pillars show that most major components have critical weaknesses on the main issues, with it being challenging for countries like Bangladesh to solve such massive problems. As mutual reinforcement is not happening, the government is unlikely to punish corrupt officials even if the ACC performs flawlessly. Thus, one of the interviewee comments was found to be of interest:

*.... but the thing is the government is not a big deal, and there is a lack of political commitment. These strategies look good in shape, and they will make the donors happy. Because the government did as prescribed. I don't think it will take us anywhere.<sup>58</sup>*

Maybe donors will find many targets are being achieved (through statistics). But the reality is that people are continuing to suffer due to the strategy's lack of success. For example, much funding, including climate change financing, has been used illegally by associated stakeholders, with complaints made of massive corruption. Similarly, the NI-Strategy has become one of those projects without a clear future and lacking specific goals. Thus, those involved in the NI-Strategy implementation have an arduous task ahead as most of the strategy's essential components have major problems (e.g., political influence). The entire NI-Strategy needs a massive level of political will for it to be implemented which, considering the present condition of the country, appears to be a blurred expectation.

## End Note

1. The National Integrity Strategy (NI-Strategy) is the policy implementation of Pope's (2000) concept of the National Integrity System. The acronym 'NIS' would normally be used in both cases. To avoid confusion in the current study, I have used 'NIS' for 'National Integrity System' and 'NI-Strategy' for the National Integrity Strategy of Bangladesh.

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# WEIGHING THE ENVIRONMENTAL PEACEBUILDING DYNAMISM BETWEEN PAKISTAN AND INDIA: THE STRATEGIC METAMORPHOSIS FROM CONFLICT TO COOPERATION

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## Abstract

*This research spotlights the interlinked environmental dynamism between India and Pakistan. Pakistan and India geographically share the most risked environmental space on earth; the region of South Asia. Both countries have always been engaged in enduring geopolitical conflicts and water-sharing disputes. But in the contemporary era, both countries face dire environmental challenges that severely impact their populations and drive a wedge between both states. This paper assumes that both countries share inevitable and joint environmental dynamics that set the pace for cooperation in the environmental sector. Therefore, the paper examines the potential of environmental cooperation and the prospects of a peaceful relationship between both countries. It explores the factors responsible*

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*for this shared dynamic, mechanisms needed to be carried out, and prospects of the future relationship between the two countries. The research employs the environmental peacebuilding framework as a theoretical toolkit for the case in examination and opts for expert opinion, document analysis, and thematic analysis as the methodological tools to reach the findings. Findings illuminate that adopting the environmental peacebuilding approach suggests a pathway of cooperation rather than conflict. The research presents findings in collaborative resource management, joint adaptation, mitigation strategies, shared participation in renewable energy initiatives, cross-border disaster management plans, and shared environmental conservation efforts that both countries can employ to foster mutual trust and cooperation. The suggested outcomes of the three-pronged approach, consisting of reconceptualisation, reorientation, and restrategising, can address environmental challenges and resume the dialogue process between both countries, which has been halted because of multi-dimensional political and security issues. These can also serve as a foundation for improved bilateral relations between both countries for a sustainable and peaceful South Asian environment.*

**Keywords:** Pakistan, India, environmental peacebuilding, conflict, cooperation, water/natural resources, disaster management

## Introduction

This study aims to examine the shared environmental challenges of Pakistan and India. It accentuates the shared environmental dynamism between both states that could become a viable source of conflictual relationship between them. This research employs the environmental peacebuilding approach that provides avenues to metamorphose the environmental domain from conflict to cooperation.

This research hypothesises that Pakistan and India share transboundary environmental challenges that could set the pace for ecological cooperation between both states and hence lead towards establishing peaceful relationships between conflicting states and

belligerent neighbours. The study seeks to investigate why the environmental peacebuilding approach is essential to deal with the transboundary ecological challenges of Pakistan and India and what mechanisms could establish environmental peace between both states.

Scant literature focuses on the environmental peacebuilding approach to address the antagonism between both states. The focus of these studies has been highlighting both countries' ecological challenges. For instance, Khan (2023) and Aslam (2022) have highlighted the shared environmental problems and suggested that there should be a joint mechanism to deal with these issues. This study peculiarly focuses on the ecological transboundary problems and dynamism of interdependence regarding these challenges or the certainty of dealing with these challenges jointly. Further, the emphasis lies on analysing whether such coordination has the potential of spilling environmental peacebuilding over to other conflicting domains.

### **The Historical and Contemporary Context**

Pakistan and India have always been daggers drawn with each other in multiple conflicting domains. The prominent among these are the disputed territory of Kashmir and water-sharing sources between both countries. Both countries fought in 1948, 1965, and 1971 and confronted two significant war-like situations in glacial Siachen (1984) and Kargil (1999). There have been several border skirmishes and persistent low-intensity conflicts throughout the history of the bilateral relationship.

In the context of contemporary environmental dynamics of South Asia in general and Pakistan and India specifically, water resources and resultant disputes have become more relevant to the conflictual dynamic of the bilateral relationship. Water resources and consequent conflicts are not the only domains regarding the bilateral relationship between both countries. Instead, given the environmental

dynamics, attention and cooperation are needed in several domains and challenges.

The current environmental situation in South Asia is constantly deteriorating. This region is plagued with the highest ecological risk in the world.<sup>1</sup> It is being affected in numerous ways. For instance, it is expected that as the earth's atmosphere gets warmer and more humid, South Asia will get severe heatstrokes along with the Persian Gulf and parts of China. Likewise, in Sub-saharan Africa and South Asia, the soil and air will be drier, and the percentage of water required for plants will be insufficient. This environment will serve as a breeding atmosphere for the plant-eating insects. There could be frequent famines and floods.<sup>2</sup> South Asia has already faced extreme heat waves, with temperatures reaching up to 50 degrees centigrade in some areas of Pakistan in April and May 2022.<sup>3</sup>

Both India and Pakistan are the major states of the South Asian region and are grappling with dire environmental challenges. According to the Global Climate Risk Index, Pakistan is the 5<sup>th</sup> most vulnerable country globally.<sup>4</sup> It is one of the countries immensely affected by catastrophes and consistently takes the due place on the list of most affected countries of the world, both in the long term and index of every year. From 2009 to 2019, it ranked 8<sup>th</sup> amongst the top ten countries.<sup>5</sup>

India, likewise, is struggling in the environmental domain through frequent heatwaves, floods, droughts, and cyclones. India is amongst the bottom ten countries in the climate risk management system.<sup>6</sup> Researchers have discovered that the mortality rate in India from 2001 to 2020 has increased because of climate changes and heat waves that have halted India's progress regarding the targeted Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>7</sup>

### **Environmental Peacebuilding: Meaning and Framework**

Given the abovementioned situations in both countries vis-à-vis their long conflictual relationship and tremendous environmental

challenges, the ecological peacebuilding approach addresses relationship challenges in multi-dimensional domains. Therefore, it is essential to understand the nuances of this approach.

Environmental Peacebuilding debates emerged parallel in political and academic domains in the 1990s. United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) began discussing water in different forms, like its scarcity and mismanagement, as potential causes of future conflicts. UNEP also recognised that 40 per cent of armed conflicts are directly related to natural resources like water; therefore, environmental peacebuilding can be the best option for the peaceful management of natural resources in disputes.

According to Ide et al. (2021), environmental peacebuilding could be defined in multiple ways. It consists of various methods and processes that can manage integrated environmental challenges and assist in preventing, mitigating, resolving, and recovering them. Among multiple available definitions, the definition we opt for in this research is as follows: "the process through which environmental challenges shared by the (former) parties to a violent conflict are turned into opportunities to build lasting cooperation and peace."<sup>8</sup>

The theory of Environmental peacebuilding mainly deals with three different dimensions. Firstly, in the context of security, environmental peacebuilding advocates that an all-encompassing and sustainable management of natural resources could preempt conflictual situations based on the utilisation and consumption of natural resources. It further advances that inequitable allocations and distribution of natural resources also lead to conflict in the areas where natural resources are extracted. Besides, mismanagement of resource utilisation without the due share of adjacent or indigenous communities at the expense of human security could generate conflict and trigger violence.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, employment insecurity and poor economic indices lead to conflict and violence by raising the grievance scale amongst the populace. Therefore, in post-conflict conditions,

ensuring the successful and sustainable address of environmental issues helps achieve water and food security. Reducing the disaster risk factor through good governance is essential to deal with the destruction of ecological infrastructure. Thirdly, in the socio-political domain, the theory predicts that environmental issues are shared challenges that may bring different groups together despite hostile relations based on trust deficit. It also supports the idea that to address the ecological problems, a process of negotiations based on +ve sum coordination may lead towards achieving cooperation, integration and conflict prevention regarding other outstanding political issues among different actors or groups. This concept is considered the core idea behind environmental peacebuilding theory.<sup>10</sup>

There have been three generations of employing environmental peacebuilding approaches among scholars. The first generation dealt with the transboundary water challenges and instrumentalised the conservation areas as 'peace parks'. This generation focussed on cooperation at the international level. Experts in the practical domain played a key role by delivering empirical understandings and policies through multilateral platforms.

The second generation emerged after establishing the UN peacebuilding mission in 2005. It arose in 2009 and focussed on post-conflict situations at the intrastate level and concerning civil war dynamics. On the other hand, the third generation is quite recent and still in emerging status. It has integrated various fields and introduced the interdisciplinary pursuit in the environmental peacebuilding domain. Scholars from different fields focus on managing natural resources in post-conflict venues.<sup>11</sup>

The scholars have focussed on identifying different factors that pitch into the debate of environmental peacebuilding by highlighting the role of bottom-up approaches or communities, gender, artificial intelligence and monitoring and evaluation programs. They also,

however, accentuate the need to identify the underlying tensions and prevent smokescreens or novel exceptions.<sup>12</sup>

### **Methodological Toolkit: Methods and Techniques**

In order to explore the potential of environmental peace-building approach vis-à-vis shared environmental challenges of India and Pakistan, relationship between both countries has been taken as a case. Case study is a well known and widely used method among qualitative researchers for in-depth and context-specific explanation and exploration of any phenomenon. For data collection, both primary and secondary sources have been utilised. The documentary data is mostly based on secondary sources with exceptions. To fill this gap, authors through to grab the opportunity to approach key personnel in the policy making and decision-making circles. The interaction with these people ranged between taking a general view on our research theme to a brief interview based on four to five questions. It also included brief consultative and discussion meetings.

For data analysis, thematic analysis has been considered most relevant. Thematic analysis refers to finding patterns or themes in the data to make sense of any investigated phenomenon. We considered to examine this phenomenon through descriptive analysis, however, it did not seem to serve the purpose when it came to objectives of study and sharing findings in more comprehensible manner. For instance, the purpose of selecting thematic analysis as an analytical tool is to unravel the findings of research by making prominent themes of joint dynamic or shared spaces of environmental challenges and potential avenues for collaboration in a more explicit and clear manner. Besides, the collected data manifested categorisation or dimensions that linked to the variables of our study separately as well as in relation to each other. The themes that appeared in data analysis have been presented in the form of headings as follows.

### **Transcendence beyond Borders: Indo-Pak Ecological Challenges**

In light of the above-mentioned theoretical premises of environmental peacebuilding, the relationship between Pakistan and India could be subjected to this approach. The environmental peacebuilding approach could apply to the relationship between those states that face joint problems in ecological domains. Further, it is also important that problems be equally harmful to both states, and these should have a rigorous potential to oblige both parties to cooperate and consequently achieve peace.<sup>13</sup>

### **Water Resources and the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT)**

The water sources, firstly, transcend the borders between both countries. Pakistan and India share the Indus River Basin as the primary water source for both countries' agricultural sectors. The billions of inhabitants from both countries depend on these water sources.<sup>14</sup> Six distributary rivers originate from this basin. The water from these rivers has been distributed between both countries under the Indus Waters Treaty signed in 1960. Pakistan has almost unobstructed water access to western Jhelum, Chenab, and Indus. India has such access to eastern Ravi, Sutlej, and Bias. The treaty also conditioned both parties to exchange information in case of construction, monitoring the water flow and mediatory process.<sup>15</sup>

The conflict on treaty violation has often been the case for already sour bilateral relationship. The conflict had emerged since the partition between both countries with the baggage of multi-dimensional conflicts and trust deficit and the geographical characteristic of Pakistan as the lower riparian and India as the upper riparian country. The dispute has prevailed since India started constructing water reservoirs on the water sources allocated to Pakistan. Our respondent said, "India is constructing water reservoirs violating the Indus Waters Treaty, so these constructions may become strategic issues in future, which may impact relations between both countries."<sup>16</sup> The distributary mechanism of water

resources is becoming more important because of ecological challenges and the depletion of freshwater sources.

Although the IWT has survived wars and low-intensity conflicts, given the environmental challenges, it could not be the case if left unattended. Further, according to US and British state officials, the cooperation on IWB can spill over into the Kashmir conflict between both countries because most rivers rise in Kashmir, and advantageously, it lies within the Indus River Basin.<sup>17</sup> However, IWT has been criticised for providing technocratic solutions to socio-political and historical problems. An extension of scholars have emphasised this treaty in the political and economic domains through hydro-diplomacy.

### **Trans-boundary Air Contamination**

The Punjab regions of both countries are prominent in the agricultural sector. For cultivation purposes, conventional activities of burning crops occur in both countries, actively contributing to smog, affecting each country and transmitting air pollution across the border.<sup>18</sup> This conventional activity of burning crop leftovers is termed 'parali.' In northern India and Eastern Pakistan, the smoke keeps covering the sky. It causes smog in the winter season in both countries and causes serious health concerns for millions of people.<sup>19</sup>

Major cities of both countries have been at the top among the world's most polluted cities. Pakistan and India are among the world's top vulnerable countries regarding smog. It affects people, the environment, and the economy by reducing tourism and trade and making energy resources and healthcare systems more expensive. The cost per annum of air contamination for Pakistan and India is 5.88 per cent and 8.5 per cent of their GDPs, respectively.<sup>20</sup>

### **Environment-Sensitive Territories and Habitations**

The areas ridden with environmental sensitivity and declared so by national or international authoritative bodies are called



environmentally sensitive or protected areas. Siachen is the most extended glacial territory in the Karakoram range of the Himalayan mountains and the second longest in non-polar zones. This area is also one of the disputed territories between both countries.

Likewise, the conservation of shared ecosystems is very important for both countries. The habitations of the Indus Dolphin and Indian Bustard are important because both are precious and depleting species. The Indus Dolphin is one of the five species of dolphins worldwide, and its habitats are in the river Indus and its tributary Bias. Bustard is a bird species found in the Thar desert of Rajasthan state of India, Rann of Kutch (the disputed territory), and Punjab between India and Pakistan. According to the Protection of Environment Act 1972, it has been declared a scheduled species. These dimensions serve as the potential areas of environmental cooperation between both countries.

### **Torrents, Famines, and Heatwaves**

In Pakistan, disasters are caused by floods and droughts almost every year. Pakistan has confronted extreme floods in 2022 that have cost the loss of approximately 3.3 trillion Rupees and damages of 3.2 trillion Rupees.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, in 2019, India suffered acute rainfall that caused displacement of 1.8 million people, 1800 deaths, and 11.8 million affected, along with financial losses of US\$10 billion.<sup>22</sup> India has also faced six 'very severe' cyclones. The cyclone termed Fani in May 2019 affected 28 million Indians and caused 90 deaths in India and Bangladesh, along with financial damages of 8.1 billion US dollars.<sup>23</sup>

Heatwaves are also a common characteristic of weather patterns in India from March to June every year. 90% of India is vulnerable to heat waves. These are becoming frequent and long-term.<sup>24</sup> In 2019, India confronted a heatwave in 2016 that resulted in many casualties.<sup>25</sup>

### **Recommendations on Joint Avenues for Environmental Peacebuilding**

The following mechanisms could be considered as joint avenues for a coordinated approach regarding environmental challenges and peacebuilding between India and Pakistan.

#### *Collaborative Resource Management: Updating Indus Water Treaty*

IWT provides the technocratic solution to a socio-political and historical problem of trust deficit. Further, it has been restricted as the treaty that has provided the distributary mechanism of the water resources rather than facilitating water cooperation to other domains. Besides that, the Indus River Basin has also been cited as the ecologically sensitive basin with a very high precipitation levels, making it the second most strained basin globally.<sup>26</sup>

It reflects that the Indus Water Treaty only limitedly addresses the problems related to the basin. For instance, the amount or quality of water is a common concern for both countries, irrespective of how this water is being distributed. The treaty, therefore, has insulated two conflicting parties that hinder the cooperative space, measures, and avenues. IWT needs to be updated in terms of restructuring its covenants and providing more areas of coordination other than the conflicting situations on water distribution.

#### *Joint Adaptation: Mitigation Strategies and Disaster Management Plans*

India has initiated a National Air Clean Program as a redressal mechanism.<sup>27</sup> Such actions could be adopted in coordination with the neighbouring country. Technological advancements and artificial intelligence could be better utilised through a joint mechanism and by creating an economic resource pool that could assist in predicting the weather patterns or monitoring and evaluating the targeted measures adopted by both countries.

### *Joint Environmental Conservation Efforts*

The environmentally sensitive areas in India and Pakistan overlap with the geopolitically important conflicting points, for instance, Siachen. The joint mechanism to deal with this ecological sensitivity could help pave the way for managing geopolitical conflict. Likewise, the conservation of the ecosystem of the Indus River and Thar desert is crucial for fauna and protecting associated cultures and livelihoods for the betterment of people on both sides.

It could also contribute in conserving and developing tourism venues and promoting international tourism between both countries and from across the world. It could regenerate and sustain economic activity. Complementarily, it has been stated and acknowledged internationally too that, in the shared environmental conservation efforts, the conservation areas are the lands that could help preserve natural and cultural resources, protect human health and employment opportunities, and contribute to sustainable development.<sup>28</sup>

### **Metamorphic Strategies from Environmental Conflict to Environmental Cooperation**

An appraisal of environmental challenges faced by both countries reveals that despite of enormous potential for cooperation, the relationship dynamic and challenging environmental domains that are being emphasised at the policy level belong to the first generation of environmental peacebuilding approach. As mentioned above, first generation deals with managing water resources and joint conservation efforts.

However, the shared challenges and potential joint areas of cooperation between both countries are beyond the limits of the first-generation and delve into the second and third generations as well. As evident, geopolitical and geostrategic domains overlap with the environmental common grounds and set the pace for the post-conflict situations as happened in the case of the Indus Water Treaty.

IWT emerged in a post-conflict scenario of 1948 war between both countries and has survived various conflicts and wars after that. However, the third generation of environmental peacebuilding proponents needs particular attention in this scenario.

To this end, three-pronged strategies are essential: re-conceptualisation, reorientation and re-strategising. It also emphasises that these generations cannot be cut neatly into different domains, and that an integrated approach of these generations could help achieve the objective of peace and security.

### *Re-conceptualisation*

It refers to the reconceptualisation of the concept of security from traditional to non-traditional security. As stated, we “are yet to recognise and realise the scale of the threat that non-traditional security poses to the region; thus, the entire regional security agenda is dominated by traditional threats where military threats take precedence over non-traditional security threats.”<sup>29</sup>

Non-traditional approach pitches the debate of human security and brings forth the environmental dimension as the most immediate danger of war and traditional conflicts.

As it has been stated that: “multiple things and variables come together to create openings. Practically one factor does not change relationships; there will be multiple things, and non-traditional issues, by definition, must be part of that discussion.”<sup>30</sup>

Another respondent highlighted that: “Melting of glaciers gives rise to other issues related to human rights and human welfare, which are not on the radar of a state that is paranoid about security. It is the tragedy of a security paranoid state; it should reduce its security and start work on this dimension.”<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, reconceptualising the security dimension could help pitch the environmental peacebuilding approach into practice.

### *Reorientation*

Reorientation needs the solution of geopolitical and geostrategic conflicts through non-conventional and environmental approaches and reorienting the policy by setting the environmental domain as a precursor of geopolitical conflict management. Although some view it in another way, for instance, one of the experts even prioritised the sub-dimension of environmental challenges to look at this matter in the following words:

“When we discuss foreign policy, we should have water reservoirs as part of that conversation, but we need dialogue. So first thing is that the overall environment should be developed in such a way that may initiate dialogue, and once there is a dialogue, then climate can be included.”<sup>32</sup>

Reorienting by changing the direction of the redressal mechanism contributes in a multi-dimensional way. As stated, “there will be two benefits of this; first, we will be able to study the melting of glaciers scientifically. Second, when we sit across the table with India on any issue, the situation may change, and we may start discussing other issues.”<sup>33</sup>

Further, it has been highlighted in the following words:

“This (traditional conceptualisation) is evident from the amount of resources dedicated to military threats and the amount of resources compared to non-traditional security threats; there is a massive difference. Secondly, when the securitisation agenda is determined, we have to see speech act (what is being communicated) along with the allocation of resources.”<sup>34</sup>

### *Re-strategising*

Re-strategising makes space for novel techniques in foreign policy and the advocacy of cooperation between countries through geo-environmentalism and diplomatic conflict resolution techniques for instance, environmental diplomacy.

Aptly stated by one of the respondents, “wouldn’t it be suitable for the intelligentsia and civil society, media and academia of both countries to highlight that no doubt the Kashmir issue isn’t getting resolved but we can initiate collecting data about melting glaciers in some areas with their intensity. Composite Dialogue is closed now, but it is not suspended. It may resume any time, and if it gets resumed, then first of all, issues like environment, climate disaster and melting of glaciers should be included.”<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

This research has examined the interlinked environmental dynamism between India and Pakistan. Both countries have been and are facing dire environmental challenges that severely impact their populations and drive a wedge between both states. This paper has argued that both countries share inevitable and joint environmental dynamics that have the potential to provide a joint platform for cooperation in the environmental sector.

It has explored the factors responsible for this shared dynamic, mechanisms needed to be carried out, and prospects of future relationships between the two countries. The research has employed the environmental peacebuilding framework as a theoretical toolkit for the case in examination and opts for expert opinion, document analysis, and thematic analysis as the methodological tools to reach the findings.

Findings illuminate that adopting the Environmental Peacebuilding approach suggests a pathway of cooperation rather than conflict. The research presents findings in the domains of collaborative resource management, joint adaptation and mitigation strategies against air contamination and consequent smog, cross-border disaster management plans for natural and man-made disasters, and shared environmental conservation efforts that both

countries can employ to foster mutual trust and cooperation to preserve ecological systems and endangered species.

The suggested outcomes have been consolidated in a three-pronged approach at the state level by focusing on the following principles: re-conceptualisation, re-orientation and re-strategising. These principles emphasise the non-traditional conception of security, precedence of the environmental dimension as a confidence-building measure for bilateral relationships, and novel diplomatic techniques. These can also serve as a foundation for improved bilateral relations in other domains for a sustainable and peaceful environment in South Asia.

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# SIGNIFICANCE OF AFGHANISTAN IN EVOLVING REGIONAL SECURITY DYNAMICS: FUTURE CHALLENGES AND OPTIONS

DR SAMAN ZULFQAR\*

## Abstract

*Afghanistan being located at the crossroads of regions has been a determining factor in transforming security dynamics of the broader region. Its landlocked geographical status and ethnic polarisation enhances its dependence on neighbouring states. Since the past four decades, continuous conflict and war in Afghanistan has affected the whole region while hindering the prospects of political stability and economic progress and development in the neighbourhood. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan under Doha Agreement paved the way for Taliban's assumption of power in August 2021 but after three years in power, Taliban have been unable to allay the fears of the neighbouring states. This paper highlights Afghanistan's prominence as an insulator state and its centrality in preserving peace and regional stability. It identifies emerging challenges that can lead to renewed conflict among states as well as explores less contentious issues regarding non-traditional security and economic cooperation that can create conducive environment to make regional peace an achievable goal.*

**Keywords:** *Regional Security Complex, connectivity, water conflict, counter terrorism, border security, climate diplomacy.*

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## **Introduction**

Since the past four decades, Afghanistan has been a complex regional actor. Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the subsequent Afghan resistance against this occupation paved the way for the involvement of regional as well as extra-regional states in Afghan affairs. Soviet Union withdrew its troops from Afghanistan under the terms of Geneva Accords without formulating any agreed upon mechanism for future political set up in Afghanistan. Being a multi-ethnic state, lack of power sharing formula gave rise to infighting thus bringing in neighbouring and regional states in the Afghan conflict. By the mid 1990s, a Pashtun faction, i.e., the Taliban established its control over eighty per cent of the areas in Afghanistan except the northern frontier where Ahmed Shah Masood, a veteran Tajik, resisted the Taliban's advances with the help of Afghanistan's northern neighbours as well as India, Russia and Iran.

Over the years, the conflict in Afghanistan has been transforming the security dynamics in the broader region. Afghan conflict has been a regionalised conflict with regional states' active participation in matters of peace and war in Afghanistan. Peace initiatives put forward at bilateral or multilateral levels could not help in ending the conflict or in bringing peace to Afghanistan. The continued war and chaos as well as the willingness of the warring parties provided an opportunity to the dissident groups from neighbouring states and the trans-national terrorist organisations to seek asylum in Afghanistan and to have sanctuaries on Afghan soil from where they attacked their opponents and the governments of neighbouring countries.

Al-Qaeda had been one of such organisations that was blamed for 9/11 terrorist attacks whereas Taliban for hosting the leadership of a terrorist organisation were held responsible for the attacks as well. The subsequent war on terror that uprooted the Taliban regime continued for almost two decades while making it America's longest war to date. The end of war was signalled with the signing of Doha Agreement in 2020 between the United States and the Taliban representatives. As per the provisions of the agreement, the Taliban were to fulfil certain pledges; formation of inclusive government, respecting and promoting human rights and to abandon supporting terrorist organisations and not allowing the Afghan territory to be used against any other state. Before ensuring the compliance of Taliban with Doha Agreement especially before achieving intra-Afghan reconciliation, the hasty US withdrawal from Afghanistan paved the way for Taliban takeover leaving space for renewed conflict.

Taliban's assumption of power has alarmed international community in general and regional neighbouring states in particular as these states have high stakes in the stability of Afghanistan. The paper highlights the significance of Afghanistan vis-à-vis its geographical location in regional security architecture, its policies towards issues of mutual concern and regional states policies to accommodate Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. While regional security has been a contested concept, the paper has used it with regard to avoidance of conflict in the broader region, it identifies factors having potential to lead to conflict and war as well as highlights likely options that can enhance regional cooperation. The paper contextualises Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as its

theoretical construct that will be discussed in succeeding section.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To identify a middle ground between national security and international security, Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) has been enunciated by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever. The theory builds on the foundations of neo-realism while influenced by Copenhagen School. The concept of Regional Security Complexes (RSCs) has been widely used for empirical studies vis-à-vis regional security.

Regional security in the context of RSCs perceives the world as consisting of three phenomena; RSCs, insulator states and global level powers. All states are part of one RSC except global powers having global outreach and influence over multiple regions while between these two levels there is a third level, i.e., the insulators that are not a part of any region or RSC but on the intersection of regions.<sup>1</sup> RSCs are characterised by four inevitable features; clearly defined geographical boundaries, anarchic structure, power polarity and socially constructed patterns of amity and enmity (that can be perceived as security interdependence).<sup>2</sup>

The term insulator and buffer has been used in the same definitional context which Buzan tries to differentiate as a buffer is internal to the RSC maintaining a space among powers of the particular region whereas an insulator is located 'in the zone of indifference' keeping two or more RSCs separate from one another. With the context of RSCs, the insulators have been conceptualised in terms of 'relative indifference' as security interdependence could not be same but there have been zones

with less security interdependence on either side where two or more RSCs existed. Insulating states fall on the boundaries of indifference between the autonomous regions on both sides.<sup>3</sup> The notable examples of insulator states are Burma (between South and South East Asia), Turkey (between Middle East, Europe and Commonwealth of Independent States), Nepal (between South Asia and Northeast Asia) and Afghanistan (between South Asia, Middle East and Central Asia).<sup>4</sup> Depending on the complexity of security interdependence, insulator states can serve as mini-complex providing neighbours an opportunity to get involve in the territory that borders them. Mini-complexes are relatively small, have less power and may leave room for non-state actors to thrive in the area.<sup>5</sup>

Afghanistan has been a classical example of insulating the three separate RSCs doing more to separate them than to unite them. Afghanistan has been facing issues with Pakistan and Iran as well as with Central Asian Republics (CARs). Prior to 9/11 attacks and the subsequent war on terror, Afghanistan had been facing civil war that was accelerated due to meddling of neighbouring and regional states. Contrary to the logic of insulators, Afghanistan has not been a passive state. Rather, it has been serving to enhance transnational links between non-state actors, terrorist networks, ethnic or religious movements, performing its insulator role as a mini-complex.<sup>6</sup>

### **Volatile Regional Security Environment**

The external security environment of Afghanistan has been characterised by regional security complexes and bilateral relations of Afghanistan with the neighbouring states that have been discussed in the following sections.

### **Regional Security Complexes (RSCs)**

Afghanistan is situated at a place where three regional security complexes exist and in the past these security complexes had immense impact on dynamics of Afghan conflict. These three regional security complexes are Central Asia, South Asia and West Asia. Central Asia, where Russia has been a predominant external military power and net security provider to weak and fragile states to meet their security needs vis-à-vis Afghanistan; South Asia, where India-Pakistan rivalry also extended to Afghan territory; West Asia, where Saudi-Iran ideological conflict contributed in harnessing conflict in Afghanistan as well.<sup>7</sup>

As regards Central Asian regional security complex, after independence in 1991, Central Asian states maintained close defence and security ties with Russia. Their relations have been regulated through Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan are the members of CSTO whereas Uzbekistan has begun defence collaboration with Russia and has re-joined CSTO that it had left in 2012. Through CSTO and bilateral agreements, Russia has been able to retain military bases in Central Asian states, to extend military training facilities and to be the main arms supplier to these states.<sup>8</sup> Tajikistan, a member of CSTO not only hosted Russia's largest foreign military base but also leased its base near Afghan border to Russia till 2042.<sup>9</sup> China and Russia along with Central Asian states, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan announced the formation of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in June 2001 with mutually agreed objectives to fight three evils; terrorism, separatism and extremism. The rationale behind the formation of SCO had been



to collectively deal with the security threats emanating from Afghanistan due to continued war and conflict as well as Taliban's meddling in neighbouring states' affairs.

China has increased its involvement in the region that was historically dominated by Russia as its area of influence. Initially, China's presence in the region was in economic sphere through low interest loans and infrastructure development projects<sup>10</sup> and these bilateral economic ties were further strengthened by Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that was announced in Kazakhstan in 2013. Over time, it has also increased its military ties with regional states in the form of joint military exercises, arms sales as well as training of security forces. In future, Chinese and Russian cooperation with Central Asian states in economic and military field will strengthen the regional cooperation but the possibility of strategic competition between the two cannot be ignored as propagated by Western scholars. In the past, to challenge the Russian dominance in its near abroad, US occasionally intervened in the region. Though insecurity and instability in Afghanistan was also a factor but it was mainly due to this competition that trade, transit and energy projects through Central Asia could not be materialised.

As regards South Asian regional security complex, India's Afghan policy has always been Pakistan-centric. Throughout the Cold War, India supported Afghanistan's anti-Pakistan political rhetoric but changed circumstances during the first Taliban regime (1996-2001) limited India's influence in Afghanistan. Rather, it contributed in harnessing Afghan civil war by providing material as well as political support to anti-Taliban Northern alliance. The US war on terror and the post-Taliban political structure provided India with an opportunity to reassert

its lost influence in Afghanistan. In the last two decades, India has emerged as a major donor, relying on using soft power to create a conducive environment to achieve political influence by creating a positive image among Afghan people. Moreover, India extended military training facilities and supplied arms as well as military equipment to boost the capabilities of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). It has been averse to the concept of peace talks between Afghan Taliban and the US government but as Taliban came into power a significant improvement in India-Afghanistan relations has been noted. Similarly, Pakistan's Afghan policy has been formulated while keeping in view its relations with India. Security has been a predominant concern in its relations vis-à-vis Afghanistan and India. Since 1980s, Pakistan has been proactive to ensure the security of western border, to check the increasing Indian influence especially in Pakistan-Afghan border region and to have a neutral, if not a friendly government in Afghanistan that would not allow its territory to be used against Pakistan by India.

Lastly, the West Asian security complex had immense impact on Afghan conflict vis-à-vis Saudi-Iran rivalry, particularly their ideological conflict. Saudi Arabia's pursuance of ideological foreign policy has led to its involvement in Afghan War during 1980s and later its recognition and support to Afghan Taliban reflects the continuation of same policy. Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman's tough stance against terrorism and extremism brought about a change in Saudi foreign policy. On the other side, due to ideological and security reasons, Iran has been an advocate of protecting and ensuring the rights of Persian speaking population and Shiite Hazara community of Afghanistan. Iran has a history of opposing the Taliban and

during the 1990s it had been actively supporting the Northern alliance along with Russia, India and Central Asian states against the Taliban. Notwithstanding its previous policy in Afghanistan, Iran initially supported US-led war on terror and helped in toppling the Taliban regime but later to safeguard its interests; it has been reportedly funding and arming the Taliban factions to weaken the US position in Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup>

Due to Afghanistan's status as an insulator state located at the crossroads of regions, these regional security complexes have had profound impact on dynamics of Afghan conflict that in return has been a defining factor influencing their security calculations. The following section highlights Afghanistan's bilateral relations with neighbouring/regional states.

### **Bilateral Relations between Afghanistan and the Neighbouring States**

Another important element that contributed in transforming regional security environment has been the nature of bilateral relations between Afghanistan and its neighbours. Among its neighbours, Iran and Pakistan while sharing historical, cultural and religious ties with each other as well as with Afghanistan have been the most consequential regional actors in Afghan affairs since early 1980s. In the current scenario, Afghanistan's relations with Pakistan have been turbulent and other players, especially China and Central Asian states have also factored in Afghanistan's calculations.

Afghanistan shares its longest border (i.e., 2640 kilometres) with Pakistan. Pakistan-Afghanistan relations have seen many ups and downs in the last four decades. Pakistan supported the Afghan resistance force (along with Western

countries, China and Muslim states) against Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, played a role in seeking intra-Afghan reconciliation in early 1990s. Later, it recognised the Taliban regime and extended support to them. After the 9/11 attacks, it reversed its policy and supported Western coalition in the war on terror and facilitated Doha Peace Process between Afghan Taliban and the US Administration for withdrawal of American troops. Since Taliban took over in Afghanistan in August 2021, Pakistan has been struggling to sort out its differences and issues with the Taliban regime but bilateral relations have remained strained due to border fencing, issue of terrorism from the TTP and the repatriation of Afghan refugees.<sup>12</sup>

Iran shares 971 kilometre-long border with Afghanistan. Both states have enjoyed cordial relations before Soviet invasion in 1979. The same year Iranian revolution also resulted in change of regime in Iran. Iran had been proactive in protecting the rights of Afghan minorities and in this regard, bilateral relations between the two states have suffered during first Taliban government. At present, the most pressing issue between the two states has been the discord over sharing of Helmand River water. On political and security issues, both states have been trying to accommodate each other while not highlighting any differences.

Afghanistan's northern boundary was inherited from Soviet Russia by three Central Asian states; Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. River Oxus, the longest river of Central Asia flows for over 1000 kilometres along with Afghanistan's borders with Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.<sup>13</sup> After gaining independence in 1991, the nascent states' nation building challenges were accelerated by security

challenges such as threats of religious extremism, drug trafficking, trans-border terrorism, and the influx of refugees, mainly emanating from turbulent Afghanistan.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the emergence of ethnicity-based independent states in Central Asia added new dimensions to Afghan conflict vis-à-vis its national and regional characteristics.<sup>15</sup>

Uzbekistan shares its shortest but strategic (140-kilometre-long) border with Afghanistan. Termez was the Soviet military hub during Afghan war and was serving during war on terror as a supply line for non-military goods to NATO-ISAF forces for almost two decades. Uzbekistan also hosted an American airbase in the adjoining area.<sup>16</sup> Possessing a rich cultural legacy, Uzbekistan has been the largest state in Central Asia in terms of demography and has the largest Uzbek diaspora in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Of all the Central Asian states, Uzbekistan has been diplomatically proactive in participating in regional initiatives to resolve Afghan conflict.<sup>17</sup> It has been highly concerned about drug trafficking and counter-terrorism challenges vis-à-vis its relations with Afghanistan has participated in counter-terrorism exercises conducted by the Chinese police force.<sup>18</sup> During the previous Taliban government, Uzbekistan's major concern had been the Taliban's support to Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Given its security concerns, Uzbekistan has been reluctant to allow refugees into its territory. Though it initially established refugee camps along Uzbek-Afghan border, the refugees were still repatriated after a few weeks.<sup>19</sup>

Tajikistan, among CARs shares the longest border of 1374 kilometre with Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> Besides conducting military exercises with either Russia or China, after Taliban takeover

Tajikistan mobilised its reserve force along Tajik-Afghan border and also accepted asylum seeking members from Afghan security forces.<sup>21</sup> Tajikistan has been collaborating with China over border security and has announced the planned construction of 11 border posts on Tajik-Afghan border and one border-guard training centre. It is worth noting that in 2019, in view of the prospective US withdrawal, China's military outpost was established near China-Afghanistan-Tajikistan border.<sup>22</sup> Tajikistan has been concerned about lack of inclusive government and the marginalisation of Tajik population in Afghanistan that outnumbers the Tajik population in Tajikistan. Tajikistan's Afghan policy has been characterised by past experience of infiltration of militants from Afghanistan into Tajikistan.<sup>23</sup>

Turkmenistan shares almost 800-kilometre-long border with Afghanistan and due to its adherence to permanent neutrality it had not opposed the Taliban even during their previous rule. Like Uzbekistan, it kept its consulates in Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif and Herat open and operational and Turkmen officials have been holding discussions with the Taliban officials occasionally on issues of mutual interest.

China-Afghan border (less than 100 kilometre) located in Wakhan Corridor is isolated and non-traversable for most of the year and has been heavily fortified by China.<sup>24</sup> China's predominant concern vis-à-vis Afghanistan remains security that has been directly linked to its internal stability in Xinjiang. China had not recognised the previous Taliban regime but it occasionally conveyed its concerns to Taliban leadership regarding presence and activities of East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in Afghanistan.<sup>25</sup> China has been pursuing a

policy of non-interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs and after Taliban's assumption of power. It has reiterated this non-interference pledge and has sought guarantees from the Taliban for not allowing the Afghan territory to be used against China. Chinese concerns regarding terrorists include the use of Afghan territory as a base for training, organising or for spreading propaganda. China fears the spillover effects of these activities into neighbouring countries in Central Asia or South Asia which are high priority areas for China in terms of economic investments and security of Chinese nationals.<sup>26</sup>

## **Potential Areas of Conflict – Challenges to Regional Security**

### **Presence of Non-State Actors in Afghanistan**

Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP) has been perceived as a common threat by almost all the regional states. The real concern behind this has been IS-KP's capability to target the foreign nationals from neighbouring states. It reportedly fired rockets targeting Uzbek and Tajik cities as well as attacked a Shia shrine in Iran causing massive casualties. IS-KP also claimed the responsibility for attacks on the Russian and Pakistani embassies in Afghanistan in 2022 in addition to targeting Chinese nationals staying in a hotel in Kabul.<sup>27</sup> Taliban while utilising counter-insurgency skills have been successful in bringing down the level of violence in the past two years but the most daunting challenge vis-à-vis IS-KP has been to counter its recruitment policy. IS-KP has been using regional languages as propaganda tool for selecting its targeted audience not only in Afghanistan's minorities but also in Central Asian Republics. Iran and Russia blame the US for supporting and backing IS-KP

operatives whereas Taliban accuse regional states for providing safe heavens to IS-KP.<sup>28</sup>

Besides IS-KP, the presence of militants in northern Afghanistan and their likely contribution in generating unrest or inciting rebels in respective states has been a cause of concern for Central Asian Republics. Learning from the past experience, neighbouring states have been insisting on the formation of inclusive government in Afghanistan so that armed groups could not incite the sentiments of minorities nor could seek outside support to justify their cause. Notwithstanding the concerns of regional states, Taliban without consulting neighbouring states have devised a unique strategy of disbanding the fighters, dislocating them to different areas and trying to integrate them in Afghan force while giving them monetary incentives.<sup>29</sup>

Contrary to militants in northern Afghanistan that pose latent security threat to other states, the militants in eastern Afghanistan such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has been posing actual threat to Pakistan's security as the intensity of violence in the country has been on the rise since Taliban came to power in Afghanistan.<sup>30</sup> Pakistan has adopted various strategies to deal with the threat, taking diplomatic measures including direct negotiations as well as multilateral negotiations involving China, Russia and Central Asian Republics; fencing the border and closing border crossings; launching air strikes to target TTP hideouts in Afghanistan as well as the forced repatriation of Afghan refugees in December 2023. All the measures taken by Pakistan have not achieved the desired outcome. Rather, they have contributed in further straining the bilateral relations.<sup>31</sup>



Moreover, regional states fear that the Taliban victory might encourage and embolden the restive Islamists in their countries to try to launch insurgency in their respective states. The very fact that a superpower has been defeated in its longest war by an insurgent group not matching its power and capability attracts people and the implications go far beyond the region.

### **Counter Terrorism – Challenges Ahead**

Presence of non-state actors in Afghanistan shows that the Doha Agreement failed to identify any mechanism to ensure the compliance of terrorism related provisions. As the US withdrawal of troops drew near, regional states' concerns increased and, in this regard, a meeting of regional countries including Pakistan, Russia, China and Iran was convened in May 2020 calling for strict action against Al-Qaeda, ISKP, ETIM, TTP and other terrorist organisations functioning against the interests of regional countries.<sup>32</sup>

Counter terrorism cooperation between Taliban (depending on their willingness) and the regional states can be initiated either on bilateral or multilateral/ regional level. As regards bilateral negotiations, Pakistan's efforts could not succeed to achieve the desired goals regarding presence of TTP in Afghanistan. Another initiative, a trilateral dialogue, i.e., China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Minister Dialogue had been in place. The fifth dialogue was held in Islamabad in which foreign ministers from three countries pledged to enhance mutual cooperation in the fields of security and counter-terrorism. China asserted that it had opposed any form of terrorism and had been willing to initiate cooperation in fighting terrorism under

regional multilateral frameworks, enhancing cooperative mechanism to Afghanistan's neighbouring countries.<sup>33</sup>

As regards the existing counter-terrorism regional mechanism, Afghanistan has been a member of two regional organisations; South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). SAARC has been among the first regional organisations that adopted binding treaty regarding counter terrorism. During the third Summit held in Kathmandu in November 1987, the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism was adopted that came into effect on August 2, 1988, following its ratification by member states.<sup>34</sup>

An Additional Protocol was adopted at twelfth Summit held at Islamabad in 2004, to modify the Convention in accordance to Security Council Resolution 1373 and the International Convention for Suppression of Financing of Terrorism. The Additional Protocol entered into force on December 6, 2006 after ratification of member states. It has criminalised the collection and acquisition of funds for terrorist purposes as well as it has empowered states to deny refugee status to a person who had committed terrorism related offense.<sup>35</sup> Given the nature of relations between SAARC member states, the effectiveness of SAARC counter-terrorism measures remained questionable.

The second regional mechanism regarding terrorism has been SCO's Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Extremism and Separatism that was adopted on June 15, 2001 and entered into force on March 29, 2003. Besides terrorism, the convention also identified extremism and separatism as equally important threats.<sup>36</sup> While adhering to universal initiatives to

combat terrorism, it has adopted its own definitions on account of regional realities and has created Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) represented by national security services. It aims at enhancing coordination as well as data-exchanging with member states along with blacklisting individuals and organisations.

In 2009, to bring clarity to definitional aspects, terrorism has been defined as equivalent to political violence to achieve objectives by influencing decision makers through threats of violence or intimidation of individuals, society or state. Incorporation of new provisions allowed member states to enter the territory of other states (with permission of the concerned state) in pursuit of any suspect.<sup>37</sup> Given the military nature of prevalent counter-terrorism approaches, SCO also considers the application of International Humanitarian Law in dealing with these evils.

As compared to SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism, Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Extremism and Separatism seems more comprehensive and effective instrument to deal with the Afghan issue. Moreover, it was formulated in the wake of emanating threats from Afghanistan and presence of China and Russia as member states enhances its political value. However, counter terrorism regional mechanisms have been insufficient to deal with menace of terrorism and needs to be supplemented by UN regulated bodies and watchdogs to monitor the developments in Afghanistan.

### **Lack of Effective Border Management**

Besides the presence of non-state actors on Afghan soil and Taliban's denial and lack of action against them, another major hindrance in the materialisation of regional security cooperation has been the lack of trust between Afghanistan and the regional states. Regional states have been apprehensive of Taliban's decision to deploy armed militias on borders as border security forces. They have been concerned about true identity of these militias, their capability as well as intentions to check illegal migration, smuggling of drugs, military equipment and ammunition. Similarly, Afghanistan has been raising questions about the infiltration of anti-Taliban forces in the country. It has been showing concern about regional states' unwillingness except Iran to hand over military equipment worth billions of dollars that was left by the US forces (it either was in possession of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) that fled to neighbouring states or got into the hands of common people which Taliban have already recovered). Neighbouring states' reluctance reflects their concerns about the future use of that ammunition and equipment.<sup>38</sup>

The issue regarding border security between Afghanistan and its neighbouring states can be addressed by negotiations. Ensuring effective border management could check the illicit trade, flow of migrants as well as arms and drugs and will remove the major irritant, i.e., cross border movement of militants and terrorists. In this regard, Pakistan and Tajikistan have been vocal in expressing their concerns, Pakistan began working on fencing the porous border even before the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan but had been facing criticism not only from previous Afghan government but Taliban

also, with the continued policy of opposing border fencing as well as non-recognition of Durand Line as International boundary.

Apart from Pakistan, Tajikistan has been the second most concerned country regarding border security and has suggested establishing a 'security belt' around Afghanistan that could serve as a buffer against militants operating from Afghanistan and could also allay the concerns of Taliban regarding infiltration of anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan.<sup>39</sup> This proposal was endorsed by almost all the neighbouring countries showing their willingness to collaborate with Afghanistan in improving border management, providing professional training to border security forces and supplying border screening equipment.<sup>40</sup> A further proposal of joint patrolling could also be a feasible option as it will help removing misconceptions about each other's actions.

### **Lack of Water Sharing Mechanism – A Source of Conflict**

Contrary to the expectations, the first issue that emerged as a contentious subject between Afghanistan and its neighbouring states has been the water issue that even led to skirmishes between Afghanistan and Iran. Afghanistan has five river basins, i.e., River Oxus (Amu Darya) streaming towards Central Asian Republics (i.e., Uzbekistan and Tajikistan); Murgab shared with Turkmenistan; Harirud with Iran and Turkmenistan; the Helmand River streaming towards Iran and Kabul River in the Indus Basin, streaming towards Pakistan.<sup>41</sup> Afghanistan has been an upstream country but due to lack of water infrastructure, it has been losing almost 75 per cent of its water to neighbouring states.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, only one of Afghanistan's rivers is regulated by water-sharing agreement while others are being governed

with regard to international customary law on the basis of principle of equitable share of water. After 9/11, while facing shortage of water, successive Afghan governments have been planning the construction of dams but the process was accelerated by the Taliban government, however, enhancing the chances of conflicts with the neighbouring states. In this regard, the two contentious issues that are mentioned below got prominence.

The first issue emerged in the north regarding the construction of 285 kilometre-long Qush Tepa Canal on Amu Darya<sup>43</sup> aiming at irrigating 50,000 hectares of land in three provinces of northern Afghanistan.<sup>44</sup> The construction work began in March 2022 and as per international law obligations, Afghanistan had to inform water sharing states before initiating construction but Taliban did not fulfil this obligation. After the completion of the canal, 15 per cent of water from Amu Darya will be diverted, leaving downstream Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan with shortage of water.<sup>45</sup> Afghanistan has been funding the project with its national budget and due to financial constraints, it has provided the contractors with mining rights instead of cash payments. In August 2023, a summit meeting was convened by three Central Asian Republics sharing borders with Afghanistan to discuss the situation regarding water sharing but these states have since been avoiding bringing up the issue with the Taliban government, mostly due to Taliban's reaction to Iranian objections.<sup>46</sup> Uzbekistan as a goodwill gesture offered technical assistance to Afghanistan to fix the technical fault causing the wastage of water.

The second water issue emerged in southern Afghanistan with the construction of dam over Helmand River, the longest

river (1000 kilometres) of Afghanistan that has paramount importance for irrigation of arid southern province. Afghanistan and Iran share water from Helmand River guided by the rules laid down in a treaty signed in 1973. The construction of dam could affect 70 per cent wheat production in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province.<sup>47</sup> Since Taliban took over in 2021, there have been occasional clashes over the issue but the latest clash in May 2023 resulted in a few casualties on both sides. Iran closed Malik-Zarang border post, an important commercial crossing and accused Afghanistan of its non-adherence to international law and border protocols.<sup>48</sup> The Taliban's disregard is evident from the fact that in the middle of negotiations with Iranian officials, Afghanistan announced the construction of Bakhshabad dam on Farah Rud, another river flowing into Iran.

The third water conflict likely to erupt in the near future might be between Pakistan and Afghanistan over construction of dam on river Kabul. The river basin covers 53,000 square kilometres within Afghanistan and 14,000 square kilometres within Pakistan.<sup>49</sup> The construction of planned dams will result in reduction of water flow into Pakistan affecting irrigation and electricity generation in the north-western region.

Afghanistan's disregard of the concerns of neighbouring states can be attributed to the fact that Afghanistan exports almost 75 per cent of its electricity from other states while aspiring to be self-sufficient in hydroelectric projects. Moreover, the construction of dams will help irrigating lands in southern Afghanistan where water demand has been continuously rising after Taliban banned poppy cultivation and farmers shifted to cultivating alternative more water intensive crops.<sup>50</sup>

### **Regional Initiatives – Way to Peace and Stability**

After highlighting challenges that may contribute in generating insecurity, it is pertinent to identify areas of cooperation that seem comparatively less contentious and could have potential to enhance stability and security in the region.

### **Economic Initiatives – Regional Connectivity Projects**

Given the logic of economic interdependence, economic incentives bring about a change in government policies by reducing the motivations for conflict. As regards Afghanistan's resource base, according to estimates it has been blessed with huge mineral resources; copper, iron ore, lithium, and rare earth worth at least \$ 1 trillion.<sup>51</sup> These resources have remained untapped and could not be utilised initially due to financial constraints and later due to conflict and war that had plagued Afghanistan for decades. Dictated by geography, Afghanistan has served as a historical trade route and due to its geo-strategic location, it has always been portrayed as a hub of trade, energy and transport corridors to ensure its economic survivability. In this regard, many ambitious connectivity projects were proposed from time to time in the past three decades but these could not be materialised due to insecurity and instability in Afghanistan.

After Taliban's assumption of power in 2021, the debate about Afghanistan's economic survival has been renewed. Landlocked Central Asian states identify the significance of connectivity with South Asian states to increase their economic viability and political relevance in regional politics. Major road and rail networks through Afghanistan can provide these states



access to either Chinese-built Gwadar or Russia-India funded Chabahar Port.<sup>52</sup>

In this regard, a major challenge faced by Central Asian states has been lack of collective intra-regional collaborative efforts for trade and economic activity. Moreover, they lack resources to fund their projects and rely on foreign investment.<sup>53</sup> Over the years, these states have developed economic relations with China that has been funding their major projects and has become their largest trading partner, surpassing Russia. In 2022, China's trade with the Central Asian states amounted to US\$ 70 billion whereas Russia's trade accounted for US\$ 40 billion.<sup>54</sup>

It is worth noting that keeping in view China's non-interference policy, the Taliban officials have sought Chinese investment to sustain the aid-dependent economy.<sup>55</sup> In 2008, China was given mining rights of Mes Aynak copper mine in the Logar province that has been estimated as the second largest copper reserve in the world.<sup>56</sup> The second important bilateral project signed in 2012 was oil extraction project from Amu Darya basin but due to fall of Ghani government the project has been re-negotiated by the Taliban government with China making it the first major foreign investment project in Afghanistan after Taliban's rise to power.<sup>57</sup>

Encouraged by China's lead in economic sphere, Central Asian states also negotiated with the Taliban regarding developing transport networks.<sup>58</sup> Uzbekistan, a double landlocked state concerned about its logistical issues established Free Economic Zone Termez in 2018 and later in 2020, Termez International Trade Centre was established extending facilities for storage, logistics and services to the traders.<sup>59</sup> To increase connectivity, Uzbekistan had proposed 760 kilometre-long

Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan railroad project that will pass through Termiz, Mazar-I-Sharif, Logar, Peshawar reducing cargo delivery time by five days. The three countries have already signed a roadmap strategic plan to construct a 573 kilometre Trans-Afghan railway connecting Central Asia with Arabian Sea ports.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Iran critical of Taliban's policies to marginalise Shiite Hazara community in the north has not abandoned its proposals, developing Chabahar port and linking it with rail road that will connect to Herat and further northward to Azerbaijan and Russia.<sup>61</sup>

Like Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan has shown its willingness to continue with the projects that were launched before the Taliban takeover. It has been negotiating with the Taliban government to restart working on the Afghan part of TAPI and its associated projects. Islamic Development Bank has funded the construction of infrastructure on Turkmenistan side and may fund the same on the Afghan side as well. Western countries and their agencies have adopted a hands-off approach on projects regarding Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover.<sup>62</sup> As regards Tajikistan, World Bank suspended work on CASA-1000, of which 15 per cent work was completed and rest was under construction. The resumption of work will depend on Taliban's future policies and its relations with Tajikistan as it has been the only Central Asian country not to allow the visit of Afghan delegation.<sup>63</sup>

The lack of material resources has left Afghanistan as well as Central Asian states on the mercy of external powers to fund the projects. United States had been supporting the regional connectivity projects but the Taliban takeover has changed its policies towards Afghanistan. Russia's involvement in the

Ukraine War and imposition of sanctions has constrained it from funding mega economic connectivity projects in Central Asia or Afghanistan. China seems to be the only major power having capability and will to pursue such projects on long term basis.

### **Climate Diplomacy – Need for Collective Action**

Central Asia has been highly vulnerable to climate change and climate impacts can be observed in the form of melting glaciers, unstable river flow, unusual droughts and floods as well as declining agricultural productivity that ultimately lead to enhancing economic inequalities and inter-state political conflicts over distribution of scarce water resources.<sup>64</sup> It is estimated that due to changing climate patterns almost 15 per cent drop in water volume of Syr Darya and Amu Darya Basin is expected by 2050.<sup>65</sup>

As per statistics of Global Climate Risk Index (2019), Afghanistan was ranked as sixth most affected country by climate impacts.<sup>66</sup> Due to melting glaciers and unseasonal rains, Afghanistan has experienced three devastating flash floods. It also underwent the worst drought in last three decades that affected 25 out of 34 provinces, destroying livelihood of 80 per cent of the population.<sup>67</sup> These climate impacts were highlighted by former President Ashraf Ghani while addressing United Nations General Assembly's 75th session on September 23, 2020 where he called for seeking a regional solution, imitating international models to address the challenge of climate change.<sup>68</sup>

Like every field, Taliban regime also changed the climate policies and abolished the National Water Affairs Regulation Authority (NWARA) that had been established by the previous

government to oversee water management in the country. After Taliban came to power, technical experts, including head of Afghanistan's National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) fled the country.

Following the overall policy, Afghanistan was excluded from global climate change initiatives and its access was blocked to key UN climate funds including Green Climate Fund (GCF). The Conference of the Parties (COP) Bureau of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) announced the non-recognition of any Afghan institution as representative of Afghanistan (fearing that Afghanistan's inclusion in the process might grant recognition to Taliban regime).<sup>69</sup> Later, Afghanistan was not invited at COP28 climate change conference held in Dubai in November-December 2023. Moreover, with economic and developmental sanctions in place, the climate related projects for Afghanistan have also been halted including \$ 21.4 million rural solar energy project backed by the International Green Climate Fund (GCF) and \$ 36 million project to create a national carbon inventory funded by the Global Environment Facility.<sup>70</sup>

In this regard, an initiative was taken in September 2023 when an EU-funded climate adaptation project worth 3.3 million Euros was negotiated by the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee (NAC) for capacity building of local communities in seven provinces, enabling them to learn climate-smart agriculture techniques and natural resource management.<sup>71</sup>

As regards regional initiatives, The Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program, a group of 11 countries from Central Asia, South Asia, Caucasus, Mongolia and China has been working to increase regional cooperation to

mitigate the challenges confronted by climate change such as clean energy generation, water resource and disaster management.<sup>72</sup> In this context, Central Asia Climate Change Conference 2024 (CACCC-24) was also held in Almaty, Kazakhstan in May 2024 to discuss the issues related to climate change and to explore ways to enhance collective efforts.<sup>73</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Afghanistan due to its geographical prominence has been instrumental in evolving security dynamics in the broader region. After two years in power, Taliban's approach to key issues seems less compromising as it has not complied with the provisions of peace deal with the US, formation of inclusive government, promotion of women rights and denying space to terrorists. Keeping in view the ethnic polarisation in Afghanistan (as infighting among different ethnic groups caused foreign interference in Afghan affairs), the formation of inclusive government has been a pre-requisite for not only ensuring peace and stability inside the country but also determining the future role of Afghanistan in regional affairs. Mounting resistance against the Taliban rule has been reported in the northern Afghanistan and the Taliban's continuation of policies vis-a-vis marginalisation of women and ethnic minorities will provide recruits to opposing factions, thus enhancing the chances of conflict.

Due to Taliban's non-compliance with the provisions of the Doha Agreement, the regime was denied formal recognition and Western states as well as international organisations initially refused to deal with the Taliban. Notwithstanding such policy, regional and neighbouring states including Russia and China

having high stakes in the peace and stability of Afghanistan and the region have been engaging the Taliban and have accorded quasi-recognition to the Taliban government but durable relations will depend on reflection of political will by the Taliban in addressing the issues of concern.

Regional security and stability hinges on Afghanistan's peace and stability as continued Afghan conflict has hindered the development of the whole region. The contentious political issues such as presence of non-state actors, counter terrorism, water issues and lack of border management have the potential to lead to conflict and their resolution will take time but non-traditional issues such as climate change and economic ventures should be given priority as these can enhance challenges to human security as well.

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# A TRI-SECTORAL POLICY ANALYSIS OF PAKISTAN'S POLITICAL INSTABILITY, ECONOMIC VOLATILITY, AND INTERNAL INSECURITY (2018–2024)

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## Abstract

*Political instability in Pakistan has long hampered economic development. Although prior studies have focused on examining the economic impacts of political crises, such as fiscal imbalances and dwindling investor confidence, there has been a limited understanding of how they effect influence internal security in Pakistan. This paper examines the impact of political instability on Pakistan's economic performance and explores whether it has increased internal insecurity between 2018 and 2024. By conducting an extensive literature review analysis of various secondary sources, such as government reports, think tank publications, and media assessments, to explore the relationship between political disruption, economic instability, and public unrest in Pakistan, the research results indicate that political turbulence has led to inconsistent policy frameworks and a deteriorated economic environment. At the same time, it has exacerbated growing*

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*insecurity in the form of renewed terrorist attacks, public dissent in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The study recommends that decision makers should prioritise political stability by enhancing political dialogue, people-centric governance, and conflict-sensitive economic management in areas prone to insecurity, with robust institutional frameworks to mitigate internal security threats so that Pakistan can move toward an economic trajectory of growth and prosperity.*

**Keywords:** Political instability, insecurity, economic stagnation, governance

## Introduction

The political landscape of Pakistan since its inception has been marred by political instability, repeated government changes, and a lack of institutional continuity, resulting in dysfunctional governance.<sup>1</sup> The tussles of gaining the lever of power between civilian governments and the military have trapped the country in a vicious cycle of inconsistent policymaking, dysfunctional administration, fiscal indiscipline, and poor governance.<sup>2</sup> Between 2018 and 2024, all of this became evident when the wave of political turbulence led to economic stagnation and amplified insecurity and insurgency in various parts of Pakistan. The 2018 election brought a weak anti-status quo party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), into power with promises of reform and anti-corruption. However, soon growing institutional friction, deterioration of the civil-military relationship, political gridlock, protest movements, and a worsening economic crisis resulted in an unstable government.<sup>3</sup> The subsequent departure of PTI from power in 2022, with Imran Khan failing the vote of confidence, led to a renewed combination of political unrest and economic downturn.<sup>4</sup> The Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), a coalition of major opposition parties rose to power in an environment of immense political fragility and instability, whose rule ended with the general election of 2024, after the general election of 2024 where a hung Parliament aroused faced challenges to its legitimacy and aggravated

economic and social instability.<sup>5</sup> There is a widely held consensus among researchers that countries with unstable political systems often struggle to maintain steady economic growth.<sup>6</sup> This is because political instability affects everything from investor confidence and capital inflow to public spending and fiscal planning. In the context of Pakistan, periods of political crisis have historically coincided with reduced foreign direct investment, budget deficits, currency depreciation, and rising inflation<sup>7</sup> which have exacerbated economic deprivation, especially in underdeveloped regions like Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, providing fertile ground for militant ideologies to prosper.<sup>8</sup> With the Afghan Taliban back in Kabul and their tacit support to Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), who shelter and operate from Afghanistan, Pakistan's insecurity has intensified. Meanwhile, to counter this looming threat, successive governments have resorted to short-term populist political fiscal incentives in these conflict-ridden hotspots rather than implementing long-term structural reforms. The misappropriation in the allocation of Annual Development Programme (ADP) funds tells a different tale, where in Balochistan, the fund often falls into the hands of political and bureaucratic elites, who divert resources toward their constituencies or personal interests, rather than areas with genuine development needs.<sup>9</sup> This strengthens patronage politics and exacerbates economic deprivation while deepening structural socio-economic problems, which in turn deprive, marginalise, and disgruntle people from the state; heightening insecurity in the process, as evident in Balochistan.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, the broader economic landscape paints a similar picture. The political polarisation augmented economic quagmire, which caused high volatility in the capital market in responding to political events such as leadership crises, geopolitical crises, judicial rulings, and major protests.<sup>11</sup> The literature also points out that the fear of chronic instability has caused successive governments to delay or, at times, abandon necessary but unpopular reforms, such as broadening the tax

base or removing inefficient subsidies to the elites. These economic disruptions have been well-documented, especially by economists, financial analysts, and policy think tanks. But what remains relatively underexplored is how political instability and economic decline intersect to affect internal security, a crucial dimension in Pakistan's fragile governance environment. When the economy weakens due to political instability, the consequences are not confined to government budgets or investor decisions, they also shape the daily realities of ordinary citizens. Similarly, the economy is projected to grow at an average of 2 per cent over the next five years, which is lower than the projected population growth rate.<sup>12</sup> This has not only raised poverty to 42.3 per cent but has also caused public frustration, often manifested in protests, unrest, and resistance toward state authority.<sup>13</sup> In Pakistan, where public trust in institutions is already low, the political and economic crisis quickly spills over into the security realm. The emergence of this pattern has been quite evident: protests sparked by economic hardship have escalated into violent confrontations with the state; regions already dealing with marginalisation or ethnic tensions become hotspots for disorder when governance and development collapse. Despite this recurring trend, some academic studies have connected the dots between political instability, economic volatility, and the subsequent heightened insecurity. Most research tends to treat economic and security issues separately, even though, in practice, they are deeply interlinked. This study addresses that gap by exploring the three-way relationship between political instability, economic disruption, and rising internal insecurity in Pakistan. It argues that these elements do not operate in isolation but are part of a reinforcing cycle where political crises damage the economy, economic stress breeds insecurity, and insecurity further destabilises the political environment. The study focuses on the period between 2018 and 2024, a time of major political transitions, economic shocks, and rising unrest. It draws upon qualitative content analysis of

secondary data sources, including government reports, think tank publications, international financial assessments, and credible media coverage. Sources as mentioned above, provide valuable insights into how decisions taken during political crises have affected both economic management and internal security.

The research aims to investigate how the political instability in Pakistan affects economic performance and contribute to rising internal insecurity? To answer this question, thematic analysis of core economic indicators like fiscal balance, inflation, exchange rates, and investment trends is carried out. Secondly, the paper also investigates the complex relationship between economic stagnation and rising insecurity. It examines how insecurity reinforces political instability. Finally, the study proposes policy recommendations to break this cycle, focusing on institutional resilience, policy continuity, and integrated economic-security planning. This research is important for several reasons as it advocates for a new lens of cross-sectoral approaches in our understanding of state fragility. It also aims to add empirical value by focusing on recent political and economic events in Pakistan, particularly the shifts in governance and policy after 2018. For policymakers, the study offers practical recommendations on how to manage economic policy in times of political uncertainty and how to prevent economic crises from escalating into security threats.

## **Literature Review**

The effect of political instability on economic development has been studied extensively in both global and regional contexts. The literature suggests that political instability does undermine economic growth as it disrupts policymaking, discourages investment, and erodes public trust in institutions. In this context, Alesina and Perotti in 1996, drawing on data from 71 countries over 25 years, offered a foundational theoretical framework wherein they tried to link income inequality with socio-political instability and poor economic



performance, exacerbating income inequality, which in turn heightens societal discontent, thereby fuelling political unrest.<sup>14</sup> This unrest, in turn, creates a climate of uncertainty that discourages private investment, one of the key engines of economic growth. Their two-equation model shows that political instability is not merely a symptom of weak governance but a key transmission channel through which inequality undermines growth. Although their core focus was inequality, the causal chain they identified was instability, reduced investment, and growth. Building on this, Aisen and Veiga in 2013 provided a robust empirical evidence of the detrimental impact of political instability on economic growth, a relationship that strongly aligns with the Pakistani context. Utilising data from 169 countries between 1960 and 2004 and applying a system-GMM estimator, their study demonstrates that frequent cabinet changes (used as a proxy for political instability) significantly reduce GDP per capita growth rates.<sup>15</sup> Specifically, one additional cabinet change per year reduces growth by 2.39 per cent. This impact primarily operates through a decline in Total Factor Productivity (TFP), along with weaker accumulation of physical and human capital. Moreover, the study's observation that institutional variables like economic freedom and ethnic homogeneity foster growth, offers further insights for Pakistan, a country with entrenched ethnic divides and weak institutional checks and balances. Their work further illustrates that political instability generates policy uncertainty, which limits both public and private sector investment in infrastructure, industry, and social development.

Similarly, Tabassam, Hashmi, and Rehman in 2016 show that political instability in Pakistan generates policy uncertainty, which deters both public and private investment.<sup>16</sup> Using Autoregressive Conditional Heteroskedasticity (ARCH) and Generalized Autoregressive Conditional Heteroskedasticity (GARCH) models, they find that terrorism, elections, and regime changes significantly reduce economic growth by increasing investment volatility. Javaid et al. in

2024, by using the Autoregressive Distributed Lag (ARDL) bounds testing approach on annual data from 1987 to 2022, analysed the causal link between political and economic stability in Pakistan.<sup>17</sup> The study finds a significant and positive relationship between political stability and economic stability in both the short and long run. In particular, increased political stability, measured through the World Governance Indicators, labour force participation, trade openness, and real discount rates, was found to enhance economic stability and contribute to reduced GDP volatility. Meanwhile, government expenditure had a destabilising effect, possibly due to inefficiencies or fiscal mismanagement. Likewise, several studies have explored the complex interaction between political instability (PI) and economic growth, producing diverse findings across regions and time periods. For instance, Dimitraki, in 2011, while analysing panel data spanning 55 years across Western Europe found a negative correlation between political instability and economic growth.<sup>18</sup> He further argued that both variables are jointly endogenous, reinforcing the bidirectional nature of their relationship.

Earlier, Alesina et al. in 1996 conducted a study covering 113 countries between 1950 and 1982 and also identified a negative association between PI and economic performance.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Fosu in 2001, focusing on Sub-Saharan Africa by utilising an augmented production function to examine the effects of elite-led political instability events, such as successful coups, attempted coups, coup plots found that failed coups tend to harm growth more severely, likely due to the uncertainty they generate, unlike successful coups which may establish temporary stability.<sup>20</sup>

In a cross-regional study, Zureiqat in 2005 examined the role of political stability, interpreted as democracy, on economic growth across 25 countries in Africa, Southeast Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Central and Eastern Europe between 1985 and 2002. The

results showed a significant positive link between democratic stability and economic development.<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile, Feng in 1997 explored data from 96 countries between 1960 and 1980 and concluded that democracy contributes to growth indirectly. His analysis emphasised that democratic regimes reduce the likelihood of both regime and constitutional changes, which in turn creates a more predictable environment for economic progress.<sup>22</sup>

Dogar and Khalid examined the economic implications of political instability in Pakistan, concluding that it often results in short-term, populist fiscal policies such as increased public spending, subsidies, and tax relief.<sup>23</sup> Measures like these, which are done out of political expediency, lead to fiscal imbalances, rising public debt, inflation, and exchange rate volatility. They further argue that frequent policy reversals and uncertainty undermine investor confidence.

Meanwhile, Clements, Gupta, and Nozaki (2013) underscored the difficulty developing nations face in maintaining sound fiscal management, particularly during episodes of political unrest and economic downturns.<sup>24</sup> During times of economic crisis, governments tend to adopt reactive fiscal strategies that involve expanded public spending or hastily designed tax measures, which only tend to exacerbate budgetary imbalances. These short-sighted decisions, largely influenced by the need to satisfy immediate political pressures, compromise long-term fiscal discipline and development prospects. Similarly, Gupta, Clements, and Inchauste in 2004 emphasised how frequent political transitions and unstable governance contribute to fiscal mismanagement.<sup>25</sup> In such settings, budget planning is subject to reversals, and fiscal decisions are often guided by electoral considerations rather than economic prudence which leads to the erosion of fiscal sustainability. Likewise, Ahmed and Iqbal in 2021 found a strong correlation with political stability, as evidenced by the performance of the Pakistan Stock Exchange, whereby political

disruptions such as leadership resignations, widespread protests, or military involvement tend to trigger notable declines in market indices.<sup>26</sup> These reactions are largely attributed to investor apprehensions regarding potential economic mismanagement and an unpredictable business climate during such periods. The State Bank of Pakistan (2020) concurred this assumption, quantitatively demonstrating that political uncertainty has a statistically significant adverse impact on the stock market, underscoring the broader economic risks associated with an unstable political environment.

Political instability in Pakistan yields both immediate and prolonged fiscal consequences.<sup>27</sup> Akhtar & Zaman in 2019 found that in the short run, governments often resort to increased public expenditures, particularly on defense and subsidies, or higher levels of borrowing to defuse emerging crises or appease political constituencies.<sup>28</sup> While such measures may offer temporary political or economic relief, they frequently come at the cost of long-term fiscal health. Zaidi (2015) argues that persistent political transitions and abrupt policy shifts weaken fiscal discipline and deter foreign investors, who tend to favour predictable and stable policy environments.<sup>29</sup> The recurring dependency on the IMF for bailouts has exacerbated Pakistan's structural deficits. This is because successive administrations failed to implement fiscal reforms, as Hussain and Ahmed in 2020 concurred.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, short-term fiscal strategies were adopted under politically unstable administrations, often intended to maintain order and allure interest. But this inflicted lasting harm on economic stability. Giving credence to this notion, Dogar and Khalid in 2024 provided a focused analysis of how political instability deters fiscal policy and investor confidence in Pakistan.<sup>31</sup> Using qualitative data, they contended that political instability leads to erratic budget planning, abrupt policy shifts, creating an environment of uncertainty that damages investor sentiment as short-term political calculations often take precedence over long-term economic

strategies, which contribute to fiscal imbalances and declining FDI. While this research adds value to the academic discourse by offering specific policy examples, it remains narrowly focused on economic implications and does not engage with the security consequences that often emerge alongside economic crises in politically unstable contexts.

Further studies by Abbas, Ahmed, and Husain in 2015 examined the influence of political stability and macroeconomic uncertainty on aggregate investment behaviour in Pakistan over the period 1960–2015.<sup>32</sup> Using the ARDL model, their study explored both short-run fluctuations and long-run equilibrium relationships in investment. They measured macroeconomic uncertainty through real exchange rate volatility, modelled using a GARCH specification. Their findings revealed that political stability and macroeconomic uncertainty significantly shape investment dynamics in the country.

In addition to these factors, the study highlighted the role of several other key determinants of investment, including GDP growth, the user cost of capital, credit availability, nationalisation policies, and trade openness. The impact of physical infrastructure was found to be positive in the long run, while its short-run effect was negative though statistically insignificant. Their results reinforces neoclassical flexible accelerator model, manifesting that output growth influences investment over time. Their short-run analysis affirmed the McKinnon-Shaw hypothesis, suggesting that limited financial resources constrain investment activity in the absence of well-developed financial markets.

Despite the depth and breadth of economic analysis in the literature, a critical gap persists in understanding how political instability and economic disruption contribute to internal insecurity in Pakistan. Globally, some studies have begun to touch on this tri-sectoral relationship. Like, Julio and Yook in 2012 analysed how political uncertainty shapes corporate investment decisions and can indirectly contribute to economic stagnation and social instability.<sup>33</sup>

However, their focus remains on investor behaviour rather than public insecurity. In fragile states, where institutions are weak and public services are inconsistent, the failure to manage political and economic crises simultaneously often leads to civil unrest. Yet, much of the mainstream academic research continues to treat economy, governance, and security as separate policy domains. Most existing studies deal with these issues in isolation, failing to analyse how one amplifies the other in real-world governance. This research aims to fill that gap by adopting a qualitative content analysis approach to examine the reinforcing loop between political instability, economic deterioration, and internal unrest in Pakistan between 2018 and 2024.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Understanding the complex interplay between political instability, economic performance, and internal insecurity requires an interdisciplinary theoretical foundation. This study draws primarily from Political Economy Theory, State Fragility Framework, and elements of Human Security Theory to explain how political decisions, economic shocks, and governance breakdowns interact in a mutually reinforcing cycle. The aforementioned frameworks offer a lens through which to analyse the causes as well as the consequences of instability, which extend beyond isolated economic or political explanations, emphasising instead the systemic nature of fragility in developing countries like Pakistan.

## **Political Economy Theory**

Political Economy theory (PET) provides an analytical framework for understanding how different political, non-political interest groups, and pressure groups in the political environment compete to influence and achieve respective economic outcomes. The application of this theory is highly relevant for a country like Pakistan, where instability is often the norm, characterised by regime changes due to strained civil-military relations often resulting in inconsistent

economic policies. Hence, at times like these, fiscal decisions are often made to cater to and safeguard short-term political interests as evident by UNDP contending that elite groups, including the corporate sector, feudal landlords, the political class, and the military, consume \$17.4 billion, or roughly 6 percent of the country's economy.<sup>34</sup> This culture of rent seeking leads to abrupt policy shifts, changes in budget priorities, and exacerbates investment climate uncertainty. This deters investor confidence as key reforms are often delayed, and challenges like inflation, capital outflows, burgeoning current account deficit, and rising debt tend to pose a significant threat to the economy's viability, as was evident during 2018 to 2024.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, exemptions to sectors like agriculture, retail, and real estate, and imposition of indirect tax measures have deterred domestic investors' behaviour, who have withdrawn or withheld capital when faced with unpredictable tax regimes. Furthermore, endemic corruption, as well as the stranglehold of the elites has exacerbated income inequality, which has been the driving factor behind capital flight.<sup>36</sup> This theory also helps explain how myopic political objectives like electoral gain, coalition management, or appeasement of power centres are done via increasing political constituency development funds that often override sound economic judgment.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, this theory also explains how such economic mismanagement due to political volatility creates societal stress that can spill over into public unrest or insecurity.<sup>38</sup> In a nutshell, this theory will provide a foundational tool to trace the interconnected cycle of instability, economic fragility, and insecurity.

### **State Fragility Framework**

The State Fragility Framework (SFF) argues that persistent political instability and economic mismanagement erode state's capacity to govern. As fragile states are vulnerable to exogenous shocks because of their dependency on remittances and overseas aid

for economic viability.<sup>39</sup> In this backdrop, the framework becomes highly important as Pakistan is under the strain of both external and internal shocks, like repeated regime changes, weak rule of law, and politicised institutions are hindering the state's ability to carry out sustained economic growth. Between 2018 and 2024, the erosion of state capacity to deliver became stark when rampant political turbulence became a norm, which not only undermined democracy and growth but also raised insecurity to an unprecedented level.<sup>40</sup> Resultantly, stark differences led to the 2022 vote of no-confidence motion whereby the hybrid model came to an end.<sup>41</sup> After the motion, a new setup came into being, which took successive policy reversals, resulting in uncertainty around the IMF program, which, afterward, ended with the IMF program discontinuation.<sup>42</sup> Hence, further weakening the state's ability to alleviate socioeconomic concerns. Thus, making this framework essential to understanding why governance structures in Pakistan have struggled to respond adequately to rising insecurity, protests, and economic hardship.

## **Human Security Theory**

Human Security Theory (HST) shifts the focus away from a myopic state-centric security lens to the threats posed by poverty, unemployment, food insecurity, political exclusion, and institutional neglect, which are equally detrimental to human life and dignity. In broader terms, HST encapsulates freedom from 'fear,' freedom from 'want,' and life with dignity. While looking at the human security situation in Pakistan, the country is trailing behind its peers in South Asia by scoring 0.44 in 2021 in the Human Security Index.<sup>43</sup> From 2018 to 2024, the situation became so tenuous that the macro-level political and economic instability deteriorated Pakistan's human development indicators. During this period, Pakistan witnessed staggering inflation, massive job losses, food insecurity, and widespread uncertainty, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2022 change of



government made the matter worse. In this backdrop, inconsistent mixed policy messaging, exacerbated unrest, insurgency, and terrorism activities in volatile provinces like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, which had witnessed the worst form of terrorism since the Soviet Union's entry in Afghanistan. Moreover, public dissatisfaction reflected a growing trust deficit in state institutions due to a sense of exclusion from decision-making processes. Thus, the theory becomes pivotal in exploring how instability is not just a political or economic problem but contributes to a human crisis. Also, the theory's applicability in explaining how localised unrest and ethnic grievances showcases that phenomenon like these are not mere isolated incidents but are outcomes of systemic neglect, showcasing the state's failure to safeguard human dignity. This creates a link that views national security to be an inherent part of the social and economic well-being of the people, and that restoring stability requires protecting both. These three theoretical lenses, when combined, help create an interdependent relationship between political instability, economic fragility, and internal insecurity in Pakistan. Like, PET explains how rampant political instability disrupts economic trajectory, the SFF reveals how these events disrupt and erode state capacity to deliver on basic needs. HST illustrates how the consequences of fragility further lead to insecurity, unrest, and protest in society. Together, these models offer a robust analytical framework to help understand and address deeper structural challenges about governance, economy, and internal peace.

## **Methodology**

The study employs a qualitative research design to examine the relationship between political instability, economic fragility, and internal insecurity in Pakistan between 2018 and 2024. The research is based entirely on secondary sources that include policy reports, publications by think tanks, government data, reports from international financial institutions, and credible media coverage. A

thematic content analysis of the aforementioned data is carried out to identify patterns across three core areas: political instability, economic performance, and internal security. The data was reviewed to extract key themes such as political instability, fiscal uncertainty, inflation, public protests, and insurgent activity in regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan to understand the cumulative effects. While the research does not involve primary fieldwork, the use of multiple, triangulated secondary sources ensures both analytical depth and credibility.

Thematic Analysis Table

Main Theme	Sub Theme	Key Developments	Source	Theoretical Link	Causal Impact
Political Instability	Regime Transitions	PTI forms government post-2018 election on reformist agenda; weak anti-status quo party with fragile support.	Raja, 2020	Political Economy Theory (PET): Weak mandate undermines reform sustainability.	Weak mandate → Unstable governance → Reform paralysis
	Civil-Military Tensions	Civil-military relations deteriorate, leading to political gridlock and crisis in governance.	Hussain & Ahmed (2020); Dogar & Khalid (2024)	State Fragility Framework (SFF): Institutional conflict weakens governance.	Institutional friction → Governance breakdown → Economic volatility
	Cabinet Volatility	Frequent cabinet changes reduce GDP growth by 2.39% annually.	Aisen & Veiga (2013)	PET: Political instability directly reduces economic output and planning capacity.	Cabinet turnover → Decline in productivity
	Constitutional Insecurity	Regime/constitutional changes lower predictability and investor confidence.	Feng (1997)	SFF: Legal and institutional uncertainty discourages investment and disrupts stability.	Legal uncertainty → Investor flight
	Political	Political	Clements	PET:	Political

	Gridlock	polarization, protest movements, and institutional breakdown result in ineffective governance.	et al. (2013); Dogar & Khalid (2024)	Populism and political uncertainty hinder governance continuity.	standoffs → Policy delays → Investor uncertainty
	Leadership Change	Vote of no-confidence removes Imran Khan in 2022, intensifying unrest.	Al Jazeera, 2022	SFF: Regime transitions erode state authority.	Government change → Policy reversals → IMF disruption
	Hung Parliament	No clear majority in 2024 elections raises concerns over institutional resilience.	Fitch Solutions, 2024	SFF: Electoral ambiguity increases fragility.	No clear majority → Coalition instability → Weak reform mandate
	Policy Inconsistency	Frequent reversals in budget and reform policies are due to political survival concerns.	Aslam (2017a)	PET: Political expediency undermines long-term reforms.	Leadership changes → Reform inconsistency → Budget uncertainty
	Electoral Volatility	Political disruptions (protests, resignations, rulings) sharply impact public trust and markets.	Tabassam et al. (2016), Ahmed & Iqbal (2021); State Bank of Pakistan (2020)	PET: Electoral crises damage economic stability.	Electoral events → Market reaction → Capital flight
	Coalition Management	PDM and post-PTI coalitions struggle with fragmented authority and limited legitimacy.	Al Jazeera, 2022; Fitch Solutions, 2024	SFF: Weak coalitions paralyze policy effectiveness.	Disunity in coalition → Delayed decisions → Economic stagnation
Economic Volatility	Capital Market Instability	Pakistan Stock Exchange is highly sensitive to political events and institutional	Ahmed & Iqbal (2021); State Bank of	PET: Political instability undermines investor confidence.	Instability → Market panic → Investment withdrawals

		changes.	Pakistan (2020)		
	Populist Fiscal Spending	Subsidies and short-term giveaways expanded to gain political mileage, worsening fiscal health.	Dogar & Khalid (n.d.); Clements et al. (2013); Akhtar & Zaman (2019)	PET: Political short-termism drives unsustainable policies.	Pre-election spending → Fiscal deficit → IMF pressure
	Delayed Structural Reforms	Reforms like subsidy cuts and tax broadening are delayed or cancelled.	Zaidi (2015); Hussain & Ahmed (2020)	PET: Reforms avoided due to political costs.	Reform delays → Fiscal stress → Development freeze
	IMF Program Disruption	IMF program disrupted post-2022 due to shifting leadership and policy reversals.	Hussain & Ahmed (2020)	SFF: Inconsistent leadership undermines macroeconomic stability.	Policy flip-flops → IMF withdrawal → Investor concern
	Rising Inflation and Poverty	Growth below population increase; inflation and poverty surge (42.3%).	World Bank, 2025	HST: Economic hardship erodes public well-being.	High inflation → Poverty rise → Social unrest
	Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) Decline	Political uncertainty and abrupt policy shifts reduce investor confidence.	Zaidi (2015); Hussain & Ahmed (2020)	PET: Investment declines under volatile governance.	Uncertainty → Reduced FDI → Currency depreciation
	Fiscal Erosion	Budget decisions made for elections compromise discipline.	Gupta, Clements & Inchauste (2004)	PET: Politically motivated spending undermines fiscal sustainability.	Electoral needs → Fiscal imbalance
	Growth Collapse	Each instability episode linked to declining growth.	Dimitraki (2011); Alesina et al. (1996)	PET: Instability creates an environment where long-term growth is	Instability → Growth decline

				undermined.	
	Political Instability and Economic Growth	Negative correlation between political instability and economic growth. Both variables are jointly endogenous, highlighting their bidirectional relationship.	Dimitraki (2011)	PET: Growth suffers from compounded fragility	Instability ↔ Low investment
	Trade Openness	Trade openness linked to long-run macro stability.	Javaid et al. (2024)	PET: Economically open systems are more resilient to internal shocks if governed effectively.	Openness → Buffers against instability
	Recurring IMF Dependency	Structural weaknesses and poor revenue collection force repeated IMF bailouts.	Hussain & Ahmed (2020); Dogar & Khalid (2024)	SFF: Crisis governance replaces long-term planning.	Repeated bailouts → Donor fatigue → Sovereign risk
	Exchange Rate Volatility	Currency markets respond negatively to political uncertainty and policy instability.	State Bank of Pakistan (2020); Abbas et al. (2015)	PET: Instability weakens monetary and fiscal management.	Political turmoil → Exchange fluctuation → Inflation risk
	Tax Evasion and Narrow Base	Elite-focused tax exemptions and reluctance to broaden base hurt revenue.	Dev Kar (2023)	PET: Political interference blocks tax justice and economic efficiency.	Elitism in tax → Low revenue → Budget deficit
Internal Insecurity	Ethnic Grievances & Marginalization	KPK and Balochistan face unrest due to state neglect and lack of inclusion.	Mushtaq and Mirza (2021)	HST: Exclusion drives sub-national unrest.	Neglect → Regional alienation → Insurgency
	Coups and Crisis	Failed coups harm growth more than	Fosu (2001)	SFF: Failed transitions harm long-	Attempted coups → Lasting

		successful ones due to uncertainty.		term governance.	damage
	Public Protests and Civil Unrest	Rising unemployment, inflation, and economic stress trigger national-level protests.	Naz et al. (2012)	HST: Economic deprivation leads to collective action.	Inflation + job loss → Protests → Institutional backlash
	Renewed Terrorist Activity	Instability and underdevelopment triggered insurgency revival.	Dogar & Khalid (2024); Tabassam et al. (2016)	SFF & HST: Poor governance leads to violent expressions of grievance.	Instability → Security gaps → Terror resurgence
	Income Inequality → Unrest	Inequality fuels instability and stifles investment.	Alesina & Perotti (1996)	PET, HST: Socioeconomic inequality creates political unrest and weakens legitimacy.	Inequality → Discontent → Political violence
	Trust Deficit in Institutions	Public confidence declines due to inflation, insecurity, and exclusion.	Ali (2022)	HST: Weak institutions fail to maintain societal cohesion.	Institutional failures → Citizen distrust → Governance crisis
	Political Exclusion	Democratic instability marginalizes weaker regions.	Zureiqat (2005)	HST: Exclusion from political processes fosters rebellion or disengagement.	Democratic breakdown → Group alienation
	Security-Governance Link	Rising insecurity mirrors political and economic dysfunction.	CRSS Annual Security Report (2023)	PET, SFF, HST: Vicious cycle between instability, economy, and security.	Poor services + weak state → Violence → State legitimacy erosion
	Fragile Infrastructure	Weak institutions and poor services trigger	Julio & Yook (2012);	HST: Poor service delivery	State neglect → Civil

		resentment.	Abbas et al. (2015)	drives communities to resist the state.	resistance
	Post-COVID Human Insecurity Surge	COVID-19 aftermath deepens unrest with increased food insecurity, unemployment, and public anger.	Khan (2021)	HST: Socioeconomic shocks magnify human vulnerability.	Pandemic shock → Food/job insecurity → Local unrest

**Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

The study investigated and analysed how political instability in Pakistan affected economic performance and contributed to rising internal insecurity between 2018 and 2024. Drawing on thematic content analysis of secondary sources the research found that these three dimensions are not separate policy challenges but form an interlinked and reinforcing cycle of state fragility. Political instability indeed weakened policy continuity and created an uncertain environment. Later, it translated into broader macroeconomic volatility, resulting in rising inflation, burgeoning fiscal deficits, lower investment, and declining productivity resulting in low growth. In turn, this economic distress triggered public unrest and exacerbated the divide between the state and its people, resulting in internal insecurity and a breakdown in state authority, particularly visible in urban protests and the resurgence of militancy in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan.

The analysis confirms that political instability undermines not just the economy, but the very institutions needed to uphold law and order and deliver basic services. It also shows that economic grievances, when unaddressed, morph into security threats as public frustration turns into protest, agitation, and in some regions, support for anti-state actors. This creates a mechanism of feedback loop where insecurity not only further erodes state writ, fuels political polarization, and discourages both investment and civic trust. The interdependence

of these crises suggests that partial or single-sector solutions will not be effective in restoring stability or rebuilding public confidence.

## **Policy Recommendations**

### **Decouple Economic Reforms from Political Expediency**

The prevalence of an entrenched zero-sum mindset in the mainstream political parties has heightened adversarial politics discourse in the national stream. This not only cemented deadlock on key important policy issues but also throttled necessary reforms for economic growth. Thence, a national charter on the economy, agreed upon across political parties, is the need of the hour that must decouple economic trajectory from short-term political expediency. A non-negotiable reforms on subjects like taxation, energy pricing, and social protection must be adopted that remain intact across administrations; this would signal policy continuity and build investor confidence.

### **Institutionalise Political Dialogue for Policy Continuity**

A structured political dialogue among key stakeholders including major political parties, the military establishment, and civil society can help reduce polarisation and prevent governance deadlocks that often lead to unrest. Establishing a long-term, cross-party framework for safeguarding the necessary strategic economic interest would minimise abrupt policy shifts that erode investor confidence and stall reforms. A political consensus on core national priorities such as fiscal discipline, counterterrorism, and institutional reform would provide stability and predictability in governance. This would allay insecurity and the risks of regional insurgencies with one stone and would restore public trust in the political process. Ultimately, political cooperation is essential for breaking the cycle of economic disruption and rising internal insecurity in Pakistan.



**Strengthen Rule of Law and Autonomy of Institutions**

The tussle for power and more resources has politicised and subservient institutions, which has not only dented institutions' autonomy but has also minimised the economic pie. Hence, restoring the independence of these bodies is essential for long-term economic stability. Necessary steps like depoliticising civil services and shortening the size of government, and protecting bureaucrats from retaliation would allow consistent policy implementation regardless of who is in power.

**Integrating Human Security into Economic Planning**

The focus on GDP growth and debt servicing has overshadowed the state's ability to deliver on issues such as employment, food access, education, and safety. A human security whole of a government approach prioritising livelihood protection, basic services, and local conflict prevention should be integrated into national and provincial economic planning.

**Enhance Civil-Military Clarity in Governance Roles**

Persistent civil-military tensions contribute to institutional fragmentation. There must be a clearer delineation of civilian and military authority, especially in policymaking and internal security management. Institutions like NACTA must be empowered and revitalised for tackling internal insecurity and ensuring civil-military balance because, without such clarity, governance paralysis and public confusion are likely to persist, damaging both state legitimacy and performance.

**Reprioritise Investment in Conflict-Affected Regions**

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces have borne the brunt of militancy. Hence, targeted development programs that go beyond counterterrorism must be implemented on a priority basis. Investments in education, infrastructure, and local governance should

be accompanied by inclusive political dialogue. This will help prevent these regions from becoming long-term security liabilities.

### **Build Early Warning Mechanisms for Political and Security Risk**

Pakistan lacks institutional mechanisms for identifying and responding to escalating political or economic crises before they turn violent. A national crisis monitoring unit comprising representatives from the political parties, the impartial election commission members, the central bank, civil society, and security agencies could help forecast risk and coordinate response.

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# TRENDS AND TRANSFORMATION IN TERRORISM IN PAKISTAN: CHANGING DYNAMICS AND THREAT PERCEPTION

SAAD AL ABD\*

## 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

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developed under Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto in the early 1970s and culminated in President General Zia ul Haq's era during 1980s. 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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