

Journal of Social Sciences Research & Policy (JSSRP)**The Changing Dynamic of Terrorism in Pakistan: Trends, Challenges, and State Responses (2021 - 2026)****Dr. Saiful Islam¹, Dr. Sarfaraz Khan², Dr. Hassan Shah³**

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Abstract: The period from 2021 to 2026 witnessed a significant transformation in Pakistan's terrorism landscape, marked by the resurgence of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the intensification of Baloch insurgency, and the emergence of more sophisticated and decentralized militant networks. The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 altered the regional security environment, providing new opportunities for militant groups to reorganize, recruit, and expand cross-border operations. Consequently, terrorist violence shifted from conventional attacks to targeted killings, suicide bombings, intelligence-based assaults, and coordinated attacks against security forces and strategic infrastructure. This study critically examines the evolving patterns of terrorism in Pakistan by analyzing the political, ideological, and geopolitical factors driving militancy. It further evaluates the effectiveness of state responses, including military operations, intelligence-led counterterrorism strategies, border management, and diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan. The study argues that while Pakistan has achieved tactical successes against militant organizations, the persistence of terrorism reflects deeper structural challenges, including governance deficits, regional instability, ideological radicalization, and cross-border sanctuaries. A comprehensive and multidimensional counterterrorism framework is therefore essential for achieving sustainable peace and long-term national security.

Introduction

The security landscape of Pakistan has undergone a profound transformation between 2021 and 2026, making terrorism one of the most critical challenges to the country's political stability, economic development, and national security. While Pakistan achieved considerable success in weakening militant networks through large-scale military operations such as *Zarb-e-Azb* and *Radd-ul-Fasaad*, the return of the Afghan Taliban to power in August 2021 significantly altered the regional strategic environment. Rather than marking the end of militancy, this development created conditions that facilitated the resurgence of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which rapidly restructured its organizational

framework, expanded recruitment networks, and intensified attacks against security forces and state institutions (Basit, 2024, pp. 1–23). The changing dynamics of terrorism in Pakistan are characterized not only by the resurgence of TTP but also by the growing convergence of religious extremism, ethno-nationalist insurgencies, and transnational militant networks. Terrorist groups have increasingly adopted decentralized structures, sophisticated propaganda mechanisms, targeted assassinations, intelligence-based attacks, and coordinated assaults on critical infrastructure. The concentration of violence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan demonstrates how terrorism has evolved from a conventional insurgency into a multidimensional security threat with local, regional, and international implications (Khana & Kaunert, 2026, pp. 474–491).

Additionally, the persistence of terrorism highlights the limitations of a predominantly military-centric approach. Despite enhanced border management, intelligence operations, and counterterrorism campaigns, militant organizations continue to exploit governance deficiencies, socio-economic inequalities, ideological radicalization, and instability along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Recent studies argue that the resurgence of terrorism is closely linked to regional geopolitical shifts, the collapse of peace negotiations, and the ability of militant groups to adapt to changing security environments (Abbasi, 2024; Ahmad, Khan, & Abbas, 2024, pp. 192–200). Therefore, understanding the changing dynamics of terrorism in Pakistan from 2021 to 2026 is essential for evaluating emerging trends, identifying evolving challenges, and assessing the effectiveness of state responses. This study seeks to provide a critical analysis of how terrorism has transformed during this period and what policy measures are required to establish sustainable peace and long-term national security in Pakistan.

Literature Review

The literature on terrorism in Pakistan between 2021 and 2026 highlights a significant transformation in the nature, structure, and operational patterns of militant violence. Scholars generally agree that the return of the Afghan Taliban to power in August 2021 created a favorable environment for the resurgence of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which has emerged as the most potent security threat to Pakistan. Basit (2024, pp. 1–23) argues that the TTP successfully reinvented itself through organizational restructuring, strategic mergers, enhanced propaganda capabilities, and a shift from indiscriminate violence to more targeted and intelligence-driven attacks. This transformation enabled the group to regain influence in former tribal regions and challenge the authority of the Pakistani state. A growing body of research links the resurgence of terrorism to regional geopolitical developments. Akhtar and Ahmed (2023, pp. 285–306) contend that the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan fundamentally altered the security dynamics of South Asia by providing ideological inspiration and strategic space for militant groups operating against Pakistan. Their analysis suggests that while structural factors such as poverty, weak governance, and political instability remain relevant, contemporary terrorism is increasingly shaped by transnational networks and cross-border sanctuaries. Likewise, Ali and Verma (2025, pp. 151–166) emphasize the role of the Taliban–TTP nexus in strengthening militant capabilities. They argue that the Afghan Taliban's reluctance to dismantle TTP infrastructure has enhanced the group's operational mobility, recruitment potential, and resilience against counterterrorism measures. Consequently, Pakistan has experienced a renewed wave of attacks targeting security personnel, public institutions, and strategic installations. From a policy perspective, researchers have questioned the effectiveness of Pakistan's counterterrorism strategy. Mahmood and Shah (2023, pp. 16–31) maintain that although military operations have reduced the immediate operational capacity of terrorist organizations, they have failed to address deeper drivers of militancy such as ideological radicalization, governance deficits, and socio-economic exclusion. Likewise, Ahmad

et al. (2024, pp. 192–200) argue that sustainable peace requires stronger intelligence coordination, border security, institutional reforms, and community-based counter-radicalization initiatives.

Despite these important contributions, the existing literature remains largely focused on the resurgence of TTP rather than the broader evolution of terrorism in Pakistan. Limited scholarly attention has been devoted to examining how terrorist organizations have adapted their strategies, how security challenges have diversified, and how state responses have evolved during the period 2021–2026. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of the changing dynamics of terrorism in Pakistan, the challenges confronting national security, and the effectiveness of contemporary state responses.

Problem Statement

Despite extensive military operations, counterterrorism campaigns, and enhanced border security measures, terrorism continues to pose a serious threat to Pakistan's national security. The resurgence of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the increasing sophistication of militant networks, and the evolving nature of terrorist violence after 2021 raise critical questions about the effectiveness of existing state responses. The persistence of terrorism suggests that underlying political, social, and regional drivers remain inadequately addressed. Therefore, there is a need to critically examine the changing dynamics of terrorism in Pakistan between 2021 and 2026 and assess whether current counterterrorism strategies are capable of ensuring sustainable peace and security.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the changing dynamics, emerging trends, and operational patterns of terrorism in Pakistan during the period 2021 - 2026.
2. To evaluate the effectiveness of Pakistan's state responses, including military, intelligence, border management, and counterterrorism strategies, in addressing evolving terrorist threats and ensuring national security.

Research Questions

1. How have the patterns, trends, and operational strategies of terrorist groups in Pakistan evolved during the period 2021-2026?
2. To what extent have Pakistan's state responses, including military operations, intelligence measures, border management, and counterterrorism policies, been effective in addressing the changing dynamics of terrorism?

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Securitization Theory (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998), which explains how states transform issues into security threats requiring extraordinary measures. The theory is particularly relevant for understanding how Pakistan has framed terrorism as an existential threat to national security since 2021. It provides an analytical lens to examine the relationship between evolving terrorist threats and state responses, including military operations, intelligence measures, and border management. The theory further helps assess whether these responses have addressed the root causes of militancy or merely managed its symptoms.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to examine the changing dynamics of terrorism in Pakistan between 2021 and 2026. The research relies on primary source of data. Primary data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with security experts, academics, policymakers, and counterterrorism practitioners, while secondary data will be obtained from scholarly articles, government reports, think-tank publications, policy documents, and media sources. A thematic content

analysis approach will be used to identify emerging trends, challenges, and patterns of terrorism as well as evaluate the effectiveness of state responses. The study is guided by Securitization Theory, which provides the analytical framework for understanding how terrorism has been perceived and addressed as a national security threat in Pakistan during the selected period.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the understanding of the evolving nature of terrorism in Pakistan by examining emerging trends, challenges, and militant strategies between 2021 and 2026. It provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of state responses and highlights gaps in existing counterterrorism policies. The findings will assist policymakers, security practitioners, and researchers in developing more comprehensive and sustainable strategies for national security and peace building.

Conceptual and Theoretical Understanding of Terrorism

Terrorism is one of the most contested concepts in political and security studies. Despite the absence of a universally accepted definition, terrorism is generally understood as the deliberate use or threat of violence against civilians or non-combatants to achieve political, ideological, religious, or strategic objectives. Historically, terrorism has evolved from localized revolutionary movements and nationalist struggles into a transnational phenomenon characterized by sophisticated networks, technological adaptation, and global ideological linkages. The attacks of September 11, 2001, marked a significant turning point in the evolution of terrorism, transforming it into a central issue of international security and leading to the emergence of the Global War on Terror (Hoffman, 2017, pp. 1–38). In the contemporary era, terrorist organizations increasingly operate through decentralized structures, digital communication platforms, social media recruitment, and cross-border alliances. Modern terrorism is no longer confined to territorial control; rather, it seeks to influence public perceptions, challenge state legitimacy, and exploit political instability. This transformation has made terrorism more resilient, adaptive, and difficult to counter through conventional security measures alone.

Scholars have developed various theoretical approaches to explain the causes, motivations, and persistence of terrorism. Rational Choice Theory views terrorism as a strategic instrument employed by non-state actors to achieve political goals when conventional methods are perceived as ineffective. Psychological approaches emphasize identity crises, perceived injustices, and group dynamics in shaping extremist behavior. Conflict Theory argues that terrorism emerges from structural inequalities, political exclusion, and socio-economic grievances that generate resistance against established power structures (Crenshaw, 2011, pp. 13-36). Constructivist scholars further contend that terrorism is shaped by social narratives, collective identities, and political discourse. These perspectives collectively demonstrate that terrorism is not solely a security issue but also a political, social, and ideological phenomenon influenced by multiple interacting factors. Consequently, effective counterterrorism requires a comprehensive understanding of the underlying drivers that sustain militant violence.

Among contemporary approaches, Securitization Theory provides a particularly useful framework for understanding terrorism and state responses. Developed by Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998, pp. 21-47), the theory argues that security threats are socially constructed through political discourse rather than existing solely as objective realities. An issue becomes a security concern when political leaders successfully portray it as an existential threat requiring extraordinary measures beyond normal political procedures. In the context of terrorism, securitization explains how governments justify military operations, emergency legislation, intelligence expansion, and enhanced surveillance in response to perceived threats. The theory highlights the relationship between threat perception and policy action, demonstrating how states mobilize resources and public support for counterterrorism initiatives. At the

same time, it encourages critical examination of whether security-centered responses address the root causes of terrorism or merely manage its manifestations. Therefore, Securitization Theory offers a valuable analytical lens for examining both the evolution of terrorism and the effectiveness of state responses.

Global and Regional Trends in Terrorism

Recent global trends indicate that terrorism continues to evolve despite extensive international counterterrorism efforts. According to the Global Terrorism Index, terrorist violence has increasingly shifted toward fragile states affected by political instability, weak governance, and ongoing conflict (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, pp. 2–25). The emergence of decentralized extremist networks, lone-actor attacks, cyber-enabled radicalization, and the use of digital technologies has transformed the operational landscape of contemporary terrorism. At the regional level, South Asia remains a critical arena of terrorist activity due to geopolitical rivalries, unresolved conflicts, porous borders, and ideological extremism. The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021 altered regional security dynamics and contributed to the resurgence of militant organizations, particularly Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). These developments demonstrate that terrorism has become increasingly interconnected with regional political transformations, making it a multidimensional challenge that requires coordinated national and international responses. Understanding these evolving global and regional trends is therefore essential for analyzing the changing dynamics of terrorism in Pakistan and assessing the effectiveness of contemporary counterterrorism strategies.

Changing Dynamics and Trends of Terrorism in Pakistan (2021-2026)

Resurgence of TTP after 2021

The security environment in Pakistan underwent a significant transformation following the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021. One of the most notable developments was the resurgence of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which re-emerged as the country's most formidable terrorist threat. Although Pakistan's military operations had substantially degraded the group's operational capabilities during the previous decade, TTP successfully reorganized itself through factional reunification, leadership consolidation, and enhanced recruitment mechanisms. The group's resurgence was further facilitated by the changing political landscape in Afghanistan, which provided ideological momentum and strategic opportunities for militant expansion. As a result, terrorist attacks against security forces, law enforcement agencies, and government installations increased significantly, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (Basit, 2024, pp. 1–23).

Contrasting its earlier phase, the post-2021 TTP demonstrated greater organizational discipline and strategic sophistication. The group shifted from large-scale conventional attacks to targeted operations designed to maximize psychological impact while minimizing operational exposure. This transformation reflected an adaptive insurgent strategy aimed at sustaining long-term confrontation with the Pakistani state.

The contemporary terrorism landscape in Pakistan is characterized by evolving operational patterns and increasingly sophisticated tactics. Terrorist organizations have adopted decentralized command structures, allowing local cells to operate independently while maintaining ideological alignment with central leadership. Such decentralization has enhanced operational flexibility and reduced vulnerability to counterterrorism measures.

Modern terrorist groups increasingly rely on intelligence-based attacks, targeted assassinations, ambushes, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and coordinated assaults on security checkpoints. Digital

technologies and encrypted communication platforms have further enabled militants to recruit supporters, disseminate propaganda, and coordinate activities across geographical boundaries. According to Ressler and Mir (2023, pp. 45–68), militant organizations have become more adaptive and technologically aware, allowing them to survive despite sustained military pressure. The growing use of social media and online radicalization has expanded the influence of extremist narratives beyond traditional conflict zones, creating new security challenges for the state.

Religious Extremism, Baloch Insurgency, and ISIS-K

The changing dynamics of terrorism in Pakistan cannot be understood solely through the activities of TTP. The country faces a multidimensional threat environment shaped by religious extremism, ethno-nationalist insurgencies, and transnational terrorist networks. Religious extremist organizations continue to exploit sectarian divisions and ideological grievances to recruit followers and justify violence. These groups often target religious minorities, educational institutions, and state representatives, thereby undermining social cohesion and political stability. Simultaneously, Baloch insurgent organizations have intensified their activities, particularly against security forces, infrastructure projects, and economic initiatives associated with regional connectivity and development. Unlike religiously motivated groups, Baloch militant organizations frame their struggle in terms of political marginalization, resource distribution, and provincial autonomy. Their increasing operational coordination and use of suicide attacks demonstrate a notable evolution in insurgent tactics.

Another growing concern is the emergence of Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), which has established itself as a significant regional security threat. ISIS-K seeks to exploit instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan by promoting a transnational extremist agenda. The group's attacks on civilians, religious gatherings, and security institutions reflect its strategy of generating fear, sectarian polarization, and political instability (International Crisis Group, 2024, pp. 5–18). The coexistence of TTP, Baloch insurgents, and ISIS-K has created a complex security environment where multiple forms of militancy intersect and reinforce one another.

Cross-Border Militancy and the Afghanistan Factor

The Afghanistan factor remains central to understanding terrorism in Pakistan. The porous nature of the Pakistan - Afghanistan border, combined with long-standing tribal, ethnic, and social linkages, has historically facilitated the movement of militants across the frontier. Following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, concerns regarding cross-border sanctuaries, militant mobility, and security cooperation intensified. Numerous studies argue that the persistence of terrorism in Pakistan is closely linked to the existence of safe havens and operational networks across the border. While the Afghan Taliban publicly committed to preventing Afghan territory from being used against neighboring states, Pakistan has repeatedly expressed concerns regarding the activities of TTP elements operating from Afghanistan. This situation has contributed to diplomatic tensions between Islamabad and Kabul and complicated regional counterterrorism efforts (Sayed, 2022, pp. 1–29).

The resurgence of cross-border militancy illustrates that terrorism in Pakistan is no longer merely a domestic security issue but a regional challenge embedded within broader geopolitical dynamics. Consequently, sustainable counterterrorism success requires not only effective domestic policies but also enhanced regional cooperation, intelligence sharing, border management, and diplomatic engagement. Without addressing the transnational dimensions of militancy, efforts to achieve long-term peace and security are likely to remain incomplete.

Challenges and Implications for Pakistan's National Security

1. Political and Governance Challenges

The persistence of terrorism in Pakistan is closely linked to political and governance challenges that continue to undermine state authority and institutional effectiveness. While military operations have succeeded in dismantling many terrorist infrastructures, long-term peace remains difficult to achieve because governance deficits, weak institutional coordination, and uneven implementation of public policies create opportunities for militant groups to re-establish their influence. In many conflict-affected regions, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, inadequate service delivery, limited political inclusion, and public distrust of state institutions have contributed to an environment in which extremist narratives can gain traction. According to Fair (2023, pp. 115–132), terrorist organizations often exploit governance vacuums and public grievances to challenge state legitimacy and recruit local support. Consequently, terrorism in Pakistan should be understood not only as a security problem but also as a governance challenge requiring effective institutions, accountable leadership, and inclusive political processes.

2. Border Security and Regional Instability

Border security remains one of the most significant challenges confronting Pakistan's national security framework. The Pakistan-Afghanistan border has historically served as a corridor for militant movement, arms trafficking, and cross-border insurgent activities. Despite extensive fencing efforts and enhanced surveillance mechanisms, the porous nature of the border, combined with complex tribal and ethnic linkages, continues to facilitate militant mobility. The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in 2021 further intensified regional security concerns by creating a more uncertain geopolitical environment. Cross-border attacks, allegations regarding militant sanctuaries, and limited security cooperation between Islamabad and Kabul have complicated counterterrorism efforts. Johnson and Mason (2022, pp. 74–89) argue that regional instability in Afghanistan directly affects Pakistan's internal security because militant groups often operate across interconnected territorial and ideological spaces. As a result, border management has become a critical component of Pakistan's broader counterterrorism strategy.

3. Radicalization and Recruitment Networks

One of the most concerning dimensions of contemporary terrorism is the growing sophistication of radicalization and recruitment networks. Different traditional militant movements that relied heavily on physical training camps and localized recruitment, modern extremist organizations increasingly utilize digital platforms, social media, encrypted communication applications, and online propaganda to attract supporters. These tools enable terrorist groups to disseminate ideological narratives, recruit vulnerable individuals, and maintain operational connectivity across geographical boundaries. Research indicates that feelings of political exclusion, identity crises, perceived injustice, and ideological manipulation continue to play a significant role in the radicalization process (Schmid, 2020, pp. 58–79). In Pakistan, extremist organizations have demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt their recruitment strategies to changing technological and social environments, making counter-radicalization efforts more complex and resource-intensive.

4. Socio-Economic and Security Implications

The resurgence of terrorism has profound socio-economic and security implications for Pakistan. Persistent insecurity discourages domestic and foreign investment, disrupts economic activities, damages infrastructure, and increases public expenditure on security measures. Terrorist violence also

affects tourism, education, and development initiatives, particularly in regions already facing economic challenges. Beyond economic costs, terrorism generates psychological insecurity, social polarization, and public fear, thereby weakening social cohesion and trust in state institutions. According to the United Nations Development Programme (2023, pp. 12–27), prolonged insecurity can undermine sustainable development by diverting resources from social welfare and economic growth toward security-related expenditures. Consequently, the impact of terrorism extends far beyond immediate physical violence, affecting governance, development, and national stability. Addressing these multidimensional implications requires a comprehensive approach that combines effective security measures with political reforms, socio-economic development, educational opportunities, and community-based resilience initiatives. Only through such an integrated strategy can Pakistan effectively confront the evolving challenges posed by terrorism and strengthen its long-term national security.

State Responses and Counterterrorism Strategies

1. Military Operations and Intelligence based Actions

Pakistan's response to terrorism has been shaped primarily by a robust security-centered approach that combines military operations with intelligence-based counterterrorism measures. Over the past two decades, the state has launched a series of large-scale military campaigns aimed at dismantling terrorist infrastructures, eliminating militant leadership, and restoring state authority in conflict-affected areas. Operations such as *Zarb-e-Azb* and *Radd-ul-Fasaad* significantly degraded the operational capacity of militant organizations and disrupted many terrorist networks. However, the resurgence of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) after 2021 demonstrated that tactical military successes do not necessarily translate into lasting strategic victories.

Recognizing the changing nature of terrorism, Pakistan increasingly shifted toward intelligence-based operations that rely on surveillance, targeted raids, intelligence fusion, and interagency coordination. These measures enabled security institutions to prevent numerous attacks and neutralize key militant operatives before they could execute their plans. According to Abbas (2023, pp. 187–205), intelligence-led counterterrorism has become one of Pakistan's most effective tools because it minimizes collateral damage while enhancing operational precision. Nevertheless, the adaptability of terrorist groups and their ability to exploit regional instability continue to challenge the effectiveness of purely security-oriented responses. Militants have increasingly adopted decentralized structures, making them more difficult to identify and eliminate through conventional military means alone.

2. National Action Plan and Counterterrorism Policies

The National Action Plan (NAP), introduced in 2014 following the Army Public School attack in Peshawar, remains the cornerstone of Pakistan's counterterrorism framework. Designed as a comprehensive strategy, NAP sought to address both the operational and ideological dimensions of terrorism through legal reforms, enhanced intelligence coordination, regulation of religious seminaries, action against hate speech, and the disruption of terrorist financing networks. While NAP initially contributed to a substantial decline in terrorist violence, its implementation has faced significant challenges. Scholars argue that progress has been uneven due to institutional fragmentation, inconsistent political commitment, and varying levels of coordination among federal and provincial authorities. Ahmed and Yousaf (2022, pp. 94–112) note that although the plan successfully strengthened the security architecture of the state, several non-military components particularly those related to counter-radicalization, educational reform, and community engagement remain inadequately implemented.

The post-2021 resurgence of terrorism exposed these shortcomings. The re-emergence of militant violence highlighted the need for a more comprehensive and adaptive policy framework capable of addressing evolving threats. Contemporary counterterrorism strategies increasingly recognize that terrorism cannot be defeated solely through force; rather, sustainable success depends upon addressing ideological extremism, governance deficiencies, and socio-economic grievances that contribute to radicalization.

3. Border Management and Diplomatic Engagement

Border management has emerged as a critical pillar of Pakistan's counterterrorism strategy, particularly following the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan. Given the historical role of the Pakistan–Afghanistan border in facilitating militant mobility, arms trafficking, and cross-border insurgency, Islamabad has invested considerable resources in strengthening border security. The construction of border fencing, the establishment of new checkpoints, and the deployment of advanced surveillance technologies represent significant efforts to restrict unauthorized movement and enhance state control over frontier regions. Despite these measures, border security remains a complex challenge. The rugged terrain, longstanding tribal connections, and socio-cultural linkages across the border continue to complicate enforcement efforts. Furthermore, the presence of militant sanctuaries and differing threat perceptions between Pakistan and Afghanistan have created persistent tensions in bilateral relations. According to Sayed (2022, pp. 15–29), effective border management requires not only physical barriers but also sustained political cooperation and intelligence sharing between neighboring states.

Diplomatic engagement has therefore become an essential complement to security measures. Pakistan has repeatedly emphasized the importance of regional cooperation in addressing terrorism and has sought dialogue with Afghan authorities regarding cross-border militant activity. However, divergent strategic priorities and mutual distrust have limited the effectiveness of these initiatives. The persistence of terrorism demonstrates that regional security challenges cannot be resolved through unilateral actions alone and require broader diplomatic engagement involving regional and international stakeholders.

4. Evaluation of State Responses and Policy Gaps

A critical evaluation of Pakistan's counterterrorism strategy reveals a mixed record of achievements and limitations. On one hand, military operations, intelligence-based actions, and enhanced security measures have significantly reduced the operational capabilities of many terrorist organizations and prevented numerous attacks. These efforts have strengthened the state's capacity to respond to immediate security threats and improved overall counterterrorism preparedness. On the other hand, the recurrence of terrorist violence after 2021 suggests that important structural challenges remain unresolved. Existing policies have been more successful in managing the symptoms of terrorism than addressing its underlying causes. Governance deficits, political exclusion, socio-economic inequalities, weak local institutions, and ideological radicalization continue to create conditions that facilitate militant recruitment and mobilization. As Cronin (2023, pp. 221–245) argues, counterterrorism strategies that prioritize kinetic operations without addressing broader political and social drivers often achieve only temporary success.

Another significant policy gap concerns the absence of a fully integrated national strategy linking security, development, education, and governance reforms. While Pakistan has invested heavily in military and intelligence capabilities, comparatively less attention has been devoted to community resilience, deradicalization programs, youth engagement, and conflict prevention initiatives. Moreover, coordination challenges among federal institutions, provincial governments, and law enforcement

agencies continue to undermine policy effectiveness. Therefore, the changing dynamics of terrorism require a multidimensional response that moves beyond traditional security approaches. Future counterterrorism efforts must combine military effectiveness with political inclusivity, economic development, institutional strengthening, and regional cooperation. Such a comprehensive framework is essential not only for reducing terrorist violence but also for addressing the root causes that enable extremism to persist. The sustainable peace and national security in Pakistan will depend upon the state's ability to balance immediate security requirements with long-term structural reforms.

Conclusion

The period from 2021 to 2026 marked a critical phase in the evolution of terrorism in Pakistan, characterized by the resurgence of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the persistence of Baloch insurgency, the growing threat of ISIS-K, and the increasing sophistication of militant networks. The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan significantly altered the regional security landscape, creating new opportunities for terrorist organizations to reorganize, expand recruitment, and intensify cross-border activities. Consequently, terrorism in Pakistan evolved from a predominantly localized security challenge into a complex and multidimensional threat with domestic, regional, and international implications. The study demonstrates that while Pakistan has achieved notable successes through military operations, intelligence-based actions, border management initiatives, and the implementation of the National Action Plan, these measures have largely addressed the operational manifestations of terrorism rather than its underlying causes. Persistent governance deficiencies, political marginalization, socio-economic inequalities, ideological radicalization, and regional instability continue to provide fertile ground for militant mobilization and recruitment. The adaptability of terrorist groups further highlights the limitations of relying solely on traditional security-centered approaches.

Applying Securitization Theory reveals that the Pakistani state has effectively framed terrorism as an existential threat requiring extraordinary responses; however, sustainable peace requires more than securitized policies. Long-term success depends on integrating security measures with political reforms, economic development, educational opportunities, community resilience, and regional cooperation. Therefore, addressing the changing dynamics of terrorism in Pakistan demands a comprehensive and multidimensional strategy that tackles both the symptoms and root causes of militancy. Only through such an approach can Pakistan strengthen its national security, enhance state legitimacy, and achieve durable peace in an increasingly complex security environment.

Findings

1. The return of the Afghan Taliban in 2021 significantly contributed to the resurgence and operational expansion of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).
2. Terrorist groups in Pakistan have increasingly adopted decentralized structures, intelligence-based attacks, and digital recruitment strategies.
3. The convergence of TTP, Baloch insurgent groups, and ISIS-K has transformed terrorism into a multidimensional security threat.
4. Cross-border militancy and the Pakistan - Afghanistan border remain critical drivers of terrorist activities and regional instability.
5. Governance deficits, political exclusion, and weak institutional capacity continue to facilitate militant recruitment and radicalization.
6. Online propaganda and social media platforms have enhanced the reach and effectiveness of extremist recruitment networks.

7. Military operations and intelligence-led actions have reduced terrorist capabilities but have not eliminated the underlying causes of militancy.
8. The implementation of the National Action Plan (NAP) has achieved mixed results due to coordination gaps and inconsistent policy execution.
9. Border fencing and security measures have improved border management, yet cross-border militant movement remains a persistent challenge.
10. Sustainable peace in Pakistan requires a comprehensive approach that integrates security measures with governance reforms, socio-economic development, deradicalization initiatives, and regional cooperation.

Recommendations

1. Pakistan should adopt a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy that combines military measures with political, social, and economic reforms.
2. Intelligence-sharing mechanisms among military, law enforcement, and civilian institutions should be further strengthened to prevent emerging terrorist threats.
3. The government should fully implement the National Action Plan, particularly its provisions related to counter-radicalization and extremist financing.
4. Border security management along the Pakistan–Afghanistan frontier should be enhanced through advanced surveillance technologies and bilateral cooperation.
5. Community-based deradicalization programs should be expanded to counter extremist narratives and prevent youth recruitment.
6. Greater investment in education, employment opportunities, and social development is essential to address the root causes of militancy.
7. Religious institutions and civil society organizations should be actively engaged in promoting tolerance, moderation, and social cohesion.
8. Pakistan should strengthen regional diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan and neighboring states to address cross-border militancy collectively.
9. Counterterrorism policies should focus equally on preventing radicalization and eliminating terrorist networks.
10. Long-term national security requires good governance, institutional effectiveness, and inclusive political participation in conflict-prone regions.

Future Directions of Research

1. Examine the impact of artificial intelligence, social media, and cyber-radicalization on the evolving strategies of terrorist organizations in Pakistan.
2. Investigate the long-term effects of the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan on regional militancy and cross-border terrorism in South Asia.
3. Assess the effectiveness of deradicalization programs, counter-extremism initiatives, and community resilience strategies in preventing terrorist recruitment.
4. Explore the relationship between governance, socio-economic inequalities, youth marginalization, and the persistence of terrorism in Pakistan.

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