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Analysing the Post-2021 Resurgence of Terrorism and Pakistan's Kinetic and Non-Kinetic Measures against Terror

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the resurgence of terrorism in Pakistan after 2021—the withdrawal of US-led Western troops from Afghanistan and the Taliban's capture of Kabul. It also digs into Pakistan's post-9/11 counter-terrorism measures—both kinetic and non-kinetic—which it took to counter terrorism and violent extremism in the country. The post-2021 resurgence of terrorism poses one of the most daunting challenges to the security of Pakistan. Pakistan had a reasonable sense of optimism that the withdrawal of foreign troops and the return of Taliban would bring an end to terrorist violence in the country. That optimism turned into despair, as Pakistan was ranked second on the Global Terror Index (2024-2025)—with 2023 as “the deadliest year” in terms of overall casualties and 2024 as “the bloodiest year” in terms of casualties of security personnel. It shows that terrorism has increased—both in terms of scope and intensity—in Pakistan after 2021. It also indicates that Pakistan's post-9/11 strategy against terrorism—both kinetic and non-kinetic efforts—fell short of the expected outcome: elimination of terrorism from the land. Pakistan carried out over a dozen major military operations and tens of thousands of intelligence-based operations (IBOs) against terrorists in the last two decades. Besides, Pakistan has also tried peaceful means—from the Shakai Agreement (2004) to the Swat Agreement in 2008—and dialogues for peace—from 2013 to 2025—but it has yet to see any respite from terrorist violence. This article sheds light on the post-2021 resurgence of terrorism, Pakistan's post-9/11 counter-terrorism (CT) measures, and the key challenges that it has been encountering in its CT efforts since 9/11. This article is mainly based on secondary sources.

Key Words: Terrorism, TTP, Taliban Regime, Pakistan, Peace Deals, Military Operations.



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Introduction

Pakistan has been facing one of the gravest challenges to its peace and security in the form of terrorism and violent extremism since 9/11. From September 11, 2001, until 2021, Pakistan had lost over eighty thousand civilians and around eight thousand security personnel and had also incurred the loss of over one hundred billion US dollars in its struggle against terrorism (Ahmed, 2021). As late as September 2025, the human loss had reached ninety thousand, and the financial loss stood at \$150 billion (United Nations, 2025). It shows that Pakistan lost around ten thousand lives in the last four years. It is apt to note here that the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan and the Taliban insurgency against them were considered major causes of terrorism and extremism in Pakistan—before August 2021. Logically, one would expect a significant drop in terrorism if the root cause (the presence of Western troops in Afghanistan) was no longer there. The subsequent events defied this logic.

There was a sense of hope for peace after the return of the Taliban to power in Kabul in August 2021. The then prime minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, publicly lauded the Taliban for breaking “the shackles of slavery” (Dawn, 2021), and the boss of its premier intelligence agency assured the world, “Don’t worry, everything will be okay” in Afghanistan—after the withdrawal of the Western troops and the return of the Taliban (Siddiqui, 2021). Even Pakistani officials were so ecstatic over the Afghan Taliban’s victory that they celebrated it in the capital of Pakistan—Islamabad (Maryam, 2022). It shows Pakistan pinned hope for peace on the return of the Taliban to power in Kabul. That optimism, however, is yet to come to fruition—four years after the Taliban capture of power. It brought a newer, more violent cycle of terrorism to Pakistan.

Pakistan has experienced a spike in terrorist violence since 2021. As late as January 2025, Pakistan faced “a whopping 279.8 per cent increase in the number of terrorist incidents from 2021’s 572 to 2,173 in 2024. Likewise, casualty figures shot up by a staggering 231%, from 238 in 2021 to 788 in 2024” (Khan, 2025) The International Crisis Group reported an exponential increase in the violent activities of militant groups in Pakistan in 2024 (International Crisis Group, 2024). As of August 2025, the security situation became so severe that it was called “security chaos”—if state officials, with stringent protection measures in place, did not feel secure, how could civilians, with little protection, feel secure? (Marwat, 2025). According to one estimate, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)—that allegedly enjoys safe havens in Afghanistan—is involved in 90% of the attacks (Hussain, 2023).

Pakistan hoped that once in power, the Afghan Taliban “would rein in TTP and ISIL fighters, but instead attacks have risen” (Maryam, 2022), as planners of most of the attacks were traced back to Afghanistan (Inter-Services Public Relations, 2024). Pakistan blames Afghanistan for providing safe havens and funding to terrorist groups, such as the TTP and IS-K (Islamic State-Khurasan). Pakistani state officials claim that “All evidence related to terrorism can be traced back to the safe havens enjoyed by terrorists in Afghanistan” (Inter-Services Public Relations, 2024).

Furthermore, there is an added layer of concern for Pakistan in the new wave of violence: collaboration between the TTP and the Baloch insurgents. Pakistan draws attention to that alliance between the TTP and BLA—forged by India’s Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) (Baloch, 2024). Pakistan officially told members of the United Nations that regional and world peace is threatened by the presence of “terrorist groups, such as Al-Qaeda, the TTP and Baloch terrorists, including the BLA, and the Majeed Brigade, in Afghanistan” (Dawn, 2025). So, there has been a significantly rapid growth in terrorism-related violence in Pakistan since 2021—with 2023 being the deadliest year



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so far (Hussain, 2024). The above evidence provided—by Pakistani sources—suggests that the Taliban-controlled Afghanistan has a hand in the post-2021 resurgence of terrorism in Pakistan, but they deny any such involvement in violence in Pakistan. What Pakistan has been doing to address the issue of terrorism since 2001 is discussed in the next section.

Pakistan's post-9/11 Counter-Terrorism Measures: An Assessment

Militant have subjected Pakistan to unceasing terrorist violence since 9/11. It lost over eighty thousand of its citizens to terrorism—including around seven thousand security personnel (Ahmed, 2021). Pakistan has tried both non-kinetic measures—negotiations, agreements, etc.—and kinetic measures—military operations—to eradicate terrorism and extremism from its soil. It will be helpful to shine a little light on the peaceful ways of defeating terrorism in Pakistan.

Non-Kinetic CT Measures (Negotiations and Agreements): An Analysis

Pakistan has employed negotiation tactics and signed agreements with militants for peace. It is a bitter fact that most of the agreements proved futile; hence, peace remained illusive—and is still illusive. Pakistan signed its first agreement—the Shakai Agreement (South Waziristan)—with Nek Muhammad, whose fame swings between “the Che Guevara of Wana” (Tajik, 2011) and “petty car thief” (Mazzetti, 2013) in 2004. Its key points were: the militants were granted amnesty; captured militants were to be released; they were to be paid compensation for the damage during military operations, and the militants were not to carry out attacks either in Pakistan or in Afghanistan (Sattar, 2014). Next was the Srarogha Agreement (2005). The state had to sign a peace agreement with Mehsud militant commander, Baitullah Mehsud, as militancy had to spread from the Wazir areas to the Mehsud areas of South Waziristan. According to this agreement, the government agreed to pay compensation to militants for their losses during military operations; the government was not to target Baitullah and his supporters. The militants agreed not to attack Pakistani personnel and installations, and they were also not to provide protection to foreign militants (Khattak, 2012).

The militancy had now spread to North Waziristan. Due to incessant violence, the government signed an agreement with tribal elders of the *Utmanzai* tribe for peace in North Waziristan in September 2006. Its salient features included the following: the government would stop all military operations; it was to pay compensation for the damage done during military operations; it had to release all the arrested people; and it would remove all checkpoints. The tribal elders and religious leaders, on behalf of the militants, assured the government that militants would not attack Pakistani security personnel and state property; they promised not to establish parallel administration in the area; there would be no cross-border infiltration into Afghanistan, etc. (Tajik, 2011). The next was a short-lived agreement in Khyber Agency—with Mangal Bagh of Lashkar-e-Islam and Qazi Mehsud of Ansar ul Islam—in 2008. The militants were not to establish parallel administrations in the area; they were not to attack Peshawar; they would not brandish weapons or block developmental activities in Khyber Agency. The government signed an agreement along similar lines with militants in Bajaur Agency with Maulavi Faqir, but to no avail (Sattar, 2014).

The settled areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa could not remain unaffected by the raging militancy in the tribal areas. Swat was the first to experience a fully fledged militancy. The provincial government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa signed a peace deal with Mullah



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Fazlullah-led militants that included the following points: the militants accepted the writ of the government of Pakistan; they would hand over foreign militants to the government; they would not disrespect the religion of other citizens, etc. The government would provide compensation for the damages during military operations; it would release all the apprehended militants; it would have to impose shariah in the Malakand Division; the military would have to confine itself to barracks, etc (Tajik, 2011).

Besides these agreements, several understandings and ceasefire deals were also signed. The government made several peace efforts—in 2011, 2013, and 2014—but most of them proved futile (Dawn, 2021). As late as November 2021, the government of Pakistan and the TTP agreed to a long ceasefire—from November 1, 2021, to November 30, 2021—and the government would have to release 102 fighters of the TTP (Khan, 2021). In August this year, Jamat-e-Islami Bajaur, on behalf of the government, negotiated peace with the TTP (Dawn, 2025), but it failed, as a military operation was started against militants (Khan A., 2025). The failure of negotiation—and the launching of a military operation in Bajaur—should not be seen as a stand-alone event in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. There is a set pattern in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa since 9/11: violence is followed by negotiations, followed by an agreement, followed by violation, followed by a military operation.

Kinetic Actions (Military Operations and Intelligence-based Operations): An Assessment

Terrorism has been haunting Pakistan since 9/11. Pakistan has used both non-kinetic measures, as discussed above, and kinetic measures. Pakistan carried out more than a dozen military operations to snuff out terrorism from its soil. Some of the major military operations are as follows:

Operation Enduring Freedom (2001–2002); Operation Al Mizan (2002–2006); Operation Zalzala (2008) (Khan, 2014), and Operation Rah-i-Haq-I in Swat and Shangla (2007); Operation Rah-i-Haq-II in Swat and Shangla (2008); Operation Sirat-i-Mustaqeem in Khyber Agency (2008); Operation Sherdil in Bajaur Agency (2008); Operation Rah-i-Haq-III in Swat and Shangla (2009); Operation Black Thunderstorm in Buner, Lower Dir and Shangla (2009); Operation Brekhna in Mohmand Agency (2009); Operation Rah-i-Rast, also known as Swat Operation, (2009); Operation Rah-i-Nijat in South Waziristan (2009) (Abbasi, 2014). The Pakistan Army launched Operation Zarb-e-Azb in 2014 in North Waziristan to break the backbone of militancy in the region (Khan, 2014). The Pakistan Army had to carry out another military operation, named “Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad, Elimination of Discord,” in 2017—to eliminate terrorism from the land (Dawn, 2017).

Besides all these military operations, Pakistan is still in the grips of unceasing terrorist violence—especially after 2021. It was ranked second on the Global Terror Index (GTI) in 2025 (Ahmed, 2025)—with the year 2023 as the deadliest year (Centre for Research & Security Studies, 2023) and 2024 as the deadliest year for security forces (Junaidi, 2024). The government of Pakistan had no option but to launch another military operation—“Operation Azm-e-Istekhkam” in 2024—due to the worsening law and order situation in the country. (Hussain, 2024). As late as July 30, 2025, the Pakistan Army launched a new military operation—“Operation Sarbakaf”—in the Bajaur District of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Khan, 2025). It shows the persistence of terrorism in the face of military operations.

Besides these major military operations, Pakistan has also been conducting intelligence-



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based operations (IBOs). In 2024, Pakistan carried out around sixty thousand—161 intelligence-based operations per day—which resulted in the death of around a thousand militants (Khan, 2025). Pakistani officials point out that “intelligence-based operations are a very effective way of dealing with terrorists”—terrorists suffer heavy losses in such operations (Syed, 2025). The usefulness of IBOs lies in the fact that they result in more human losses for terrorists as compared to their losses in large-scale military operations—and there is little collateral damage in IBOs. Some political parties prefer IBOs to large-scale military operations—military operations displace the local population, hence the loss of hearts and minds (Junaidi, 2025). In short, Pakistan has been using all tools available in its kitty—from peace deals to large scale military operations to IBOs—to fight terrorism on its soil.

Nevertheless, The Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mian Shahbaz Sharif told the UN on 26 September 2025:

Today, we face externally sponsored terrorism, particularly from foreign-funded groups, such as the TTP, Fitna al-Khawarij, Fitna al-Hindustan, BLA and its Majeed Brigade. Operating from Afghan soil, these groups are responsible for some of the most heinous attacks inside Pakistan, including the dastardly Jaffar Express incident earlier this year (Government of Pakistan, 2025)

This above statement of the prime minister of Pakistan points towards the persistence of terrorism and violent extremism in Pakistan. It also shows the grave challenge that terrorism poses to Pakistan. The following section covers the challenges for Pakistan in its fight against terrorism and extremism.

Pakistan’s Fight Against Terrorism: Key Challenges

Some of the challenges that Pakistan is facing in eliminating terrorism and violent extremism from its soil are as follows:

Decentralized Terrorism: Terrorists have found a new way of surviving in the face of persistent onslaught of governments around the world. According to Seth Jones, “the threat is more decentralized and distributed around the world. He adds that the CT efforts of governments have forced militant “groups to disperse and to operate in smaller cells in more locations to survive,” (Jones, 2024). Technology is helping them to survive, grow, and operate wherever they want. Most of terrorist organisations have active internet presence. There are “hundreds of websites serving terrorists and their supporters [...] Terrorist websites target three different audiences: current and potential supporters; international public opinion; and enemy publics” (Weimann, 2004). Pakistan is not an exception. The research of Farhan Zahid shows that Pakistan “continues to be of pivotal importance for global, regional and local Islamist terrorist groups because of its rich jihadi landscape,” which is why militant groups of all hues and cries operate in the country (Zahid, 2021). The decentralized nature of terror organisations makes it difficult to eliminate them once and for all.

Terror-financing: Terrorism is a costly enterprise. Terror organisations need a lot of money for their operations—from recruitment, training, equipping, transporting, and getting the perpetrators of terrorism to their targets. The sources of funding range from “legitimate businesses to criminal activities such as kidnapping for ransom, bank robberies, and using charities as front organisations” (Iqbal, 2021) Some other sources include the Pakistani diaspora’s charitable donations to religious or charity organisations that ended up in militants’ hands, which is why Pakistan had to freeze the



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bank accounts of over two hundred unregistered seminaries several years ago (Sohail, 2025). For state support, Pakistan accuses India (Dawn, 2024) as well as the Taliban regime (Syed, 2025) of supporting Pakistani militants. This evidence demonstrates the existence of a well-functioning funding system for Pakistani militants.

Table 1: “Dual-Spectrum of Terror Financing in Pakistan”

The Dual-Spectrum of Terror Financing in Pakistan	
Source Type	Examples
External	State Sponsorship, Diaspora Donations, INGOs, Foreign Groups
Internal	Extortion, <u>Hawala/Hundi</u> , NGOs

Source: From Ayesha Sohail’s Article (Sohail, 2025)

Legal Hurdles: There are serious legal challenges in countering terrorism. The most basic of all issues is the definition of terrorism. There is no consensus among academics and practitioners on the definition of terrorism (Rana, 2021). The Anti-Terrorism Act (1997) had defined terrorism too broadly, and the Supreme Court of Pakistan came up with its own definition—that is, “the use of force, under an organized plan, for the realization of religious, ideological or political goals” (Bhatti, 2019). The Supreme Court also clarified what includes terrorism (damage to property, spreading of sectarianism, attacking journalists and businessmen as well as state personnel and installations—under an organised plan) and what excludes terrorism (personal enmity, damage done anywhere for personal vengeance, or any acts committed without a design or purpose) (Bhatti, 2019). An additional issue is that states have to protect their citizens from terrorism but have also to ensure fundamental rights and liberties (Khan I. H., 2025). So, the lack of prosecution due to insufficient evidence and implementation of laws, as well as abuse of anti-terror laws, poses a challenge in Pakistan’s fight against terror (Malkani, 2025). Maintaining a balance between protecting citizens from terrorism and ensuring their civil liberties is, therefore, key to successful anti-terror efforts

Safe Havens & Cross-Border Infiltration

As mentioned earlier, there was optimism for peace in Pakistan after the return of the Taliban to power in 2021. Pakistani officials believe that anti-Pakistan militants enjoy safe havens in Afghanistan. Pakistan officials underscore that the TTP is involved in ninety per cent of terrorist activities in the country (Khan, 2025). So, one of the key issues that sours Pakistan-Afghan relations after 2021 is the sanctuaries that anti-Pakistan militants enjoy in Afghanistan Pakistan has been trying to convince the international community to pressurise the Taliban regime for action against those actors who are involved in terrorist activities in the country (Dawn, 2024).

Recommendations

Bolstering Security: Pakistan needs to focus on bolstering its internal security. It needs



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to be an all-encompassing effort—ranging from erecting a solid security architecture that is able to trace, track, and dismantle terrorist activities to a judicial setup that prosecutes and punishes those who perpetrate terrorism.

Eliminating the Push Factors: Some factors that play a role in pushing people towards terrorism and violent extremism are poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, deprivation, powerlessness and voicelessness. Therefore, poverty alleviation, empowering the youth, providing voice to the voiceless, etc., will greatly help build a resilient society against terrorism. For a Pakistan that is free of terrorism and violent extremism, it is, therefore, imperative to recentre the people in policy formulation in every sector.

Narrative-Building and Countering Terrorism: There is a need for a stronger, more coherent counter-narrative to tackle terrorism in Pakistan. The 2019 religious decree signed by around two thousand religious scholars—the *Paigham-e-Pakistan*—that vests the authority of declaring jihad in the state (not in individuals or groups) and forbids the use of force in implementing sharia—can be taken as a starting point.

Re-Setting Pak-Afghan Relations and the Need for a Strict Border Control Mechanism: Pakistan needs to engage the Taliban regime to rein in anti-Pakistan militants. Pakistan can use its diplomatic leverage to put pressure on the Taliban to honour the commitments that they made with the US in the Doha Accord (2020). At the same time, they can, with the help of the Taliban, put in place a strict border control mechanism whereby the flow of people can be effectively checked.

Conclusion

Terrorism has been haunting the world since 9/11. It is a bitter truth that terrorism has wreaked havoc in Pakistan. It was ranked 2nd in the 2024-2025 Global Terrorism Index—with the number of terrorist activities up by forty-five per cent from last year. Pakistan lost over ninety thousand civilians and around nine thousand security personnel to terrorism in the last twenty-five years; it also incurred a financial loss of over \$150 billion in fighting terrorism. Pakistan has employed all non-kinetic tactics—ranging from negotiations to peace deals to local jirgas—but to no avail. It also has tried kinetic measures—ranging from armed locals to fight terrorists to large-scale military operations to intelligence-based operations (IBOs)—to stem the tide of terrorism and violent extremism. It has experienced ups and downs in terrorist violence. The decade (2004-2014) was the bloodiest decade in terrorism-related violence in Pakistan. There was a little respite from such violence from 2014 to 2021. Pakistan saw a resurgence of terrorism after 2021—the return of the Taliban to Kabul.

The year 2023 was declared the bloodiest year in terms of civilian casualties, and 2024 was declared as the deadliest year for the fatal casualties of security forces (police, Frontier Corps, Pakistan Army, etc.). Pakistan accuses the Taliban regime of providing safe havens and financial help to anti-Pakistan militants. It also accuses India of engaging in a proxy war against Pakistan. Some of the key challenges that Pakistan has been encountering in its struggle against terror since 9/11 are the fluid and decentralised nature of terrorism, terror financing, legal hurdles, and cross-border safe havens and infiltration, among others. Pakistan has to overcome all these challenges—with the cooperation between the state and society—if it wants to successfully eliminate the scourge of terrorism and violent extremism from its soil.



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