



CROSS-BORDER TERRORISM AND PAKISTAN'S INTERNAL SECURITY AFTER THE U.S. WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN: A POST-2021 ANALYSIS

Allah Ditta¹, *Dr Naeem Mahboob Malik²

MPhil Political Science, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Punjab, Pakistan.

² Assistant Professor Political Science, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Punjab, Pakistan.



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ABSTRACT

The Taliban seizure of Kabul (up until 15 August 2021) and the U.S. military withdrawal (completed 30 August 2021) changed, but did not alone cause a re-emerging terrorism menace in Pakistan. This paper describes how post-2021 internal-security deterioration was an interaction between foreign enabling conditions in Afghanistan and the domestic uneven capacity to provide state services in Pakistan. It employs a qualitative explanatory case-study design of a systematic documentary analysis, description of pre/post-2021 trends and comparative studies of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan based on design and limited causal-process tracing of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The corpus is empirical in that there are 45 verifiable documents. They are broken down into a pre-withdrawal (1 January 2018-14 August 2021), transitional (15-31 August 2021) and post-withdrawal (1 September 2021-30 June 2026). As evidenced, TTP reunification existed prior to the Taliban takeover and the subsequent cauterianification in the form of the Afghan political transformation offered more opportunities in terms of safety of sanctuary, mobility, leadership and consolidation. This opportunity structure was further enhanced by the November 2022 ceasefire breakdown and the institutional weaknesses in the country. KP demonstrates the most intense Afghanistan-TTP connection; Balochistan is a differently structured and high-exposure scenario with overlapping and often cause-specific separatist, jihadist, criminal and borderland identities and a high number of cross-border claims. External-opportunity reduction and enhancements in domestic institutions is the way to have long-lasting counterterrorism.

*Corresponding Author's Email: naeemmahboob@bzu.edu.pk

INTRODUCTION

The Pakistan-Afghanistan border is a territorial security area whereby; the local and external threats are hard to distinguish. Insecurity can have different paths through geography, kinship and commercial networks, movement of refugees, informal routes, intertwined politics that are dependent on contested borders and through recurring wars in Afghanistan. RSCT is advantageous since it pays attention to the geographically focused security interdependence (Buzan and Waeber, 2003). Proximity is not evidence: the presence of a terrorist activity in KP or Balochistan is defined as cross-border if it can be shown that the planning, facilitation or sanctuary, financing, direction, logistical support, recruiting or transporting the terrorist is located across an international border.

The security track of Pakistan was a course of change even prior to August 2021. Counterterrorism operations had diminished TTP levels of control lands but failed to destroy the organization. The recent studies report TTP mergers and centralization since 2020, which requires an explanation of recovery prior to 2021 which is a necessary rival description (PIPS, 2020; Sayed and Hamming, 2021). The subsequent political power in Afghanistan when the Taliban seized Kabul on 15 August altered the U.S. withdrawal that was to end on 30 August; an independent international coercive and intelligence presence. These are events that are analytically different (U.S. Department of State, 2021; U.S. Department of Defense, 2021).

The situation differs after 2021, with independent datasets depicting a definite decline, but with their definitions varying. PIPS recorded 146 terrorist attacks in 2020, 207 in 2021, 262 in 2022, 306 in 2023, 521 in 2024, and 699 in 2025 (PIPS, 2020-2025). According to its methodology, GTI in 2025 (2026) ranked Pakistan second and first in 2025 (2026) with 1,139 and 1,045 terrorism deaths and 2025 (2026) respectively (IEP, 2025, 2026). Such trends create an issue which needs explanation, and not causal impact of withdrawal.

The causal and relational research problem is presented. External accounts focus on Afghan refugee situation and relations between Taliban and TTP, domestic focuses on governance, grievances, institutional ineffectiveness and economic pressures. Each is not an adequate standalone. Sanctuary becomes more when extremists are able to recruit, transit, fund, hide and access locations; the internal weakness of countries provides no reason as to why outside leadership assurance or mobility across the country boundaries. The article thus poses the question of the nature of the interaction between Afghanistan post-2021 changes and lopsided domestic state capacity towards militant recovery and amplify internal-security pressure.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: How did the Afghan political and security transformation associated with the Taliban takeover and completed U.S. withdrawal alter cross-border enabling conditions for anti-Pakistan militancy, especially the TTP, relative to the 2018-14 August 2021 baseline?

RQ2: How did external enabling conditions interact with domestic structural vulnerabilities to shape Pakistan's internal-security pressure from 1 September 2021 to 30 June 2026?

RQ3: Why did the pathways and consequences of militant violence differ between KP and Balochistan, and what does that variation imply for counterterrorism and border governance?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Research objectives aligned to the research questions

O1 / RQ1: Identify and assess changes in coercive constraints, sanctuary, mobility, command, recruitment, and logistical opportunity associated with Afghanistan's post-2021 transformation.

O2 / RQ2: Trace the interaction between external operational space and domestic vulnerabilities, while assessing rival explanations and grading the evidentiary status of contested claims.

O3 / RQ3: Apply identical structured questions to KP and Balochistan and derive differentiated, evidence-linked policy implications.

TEMPORAL SCOPE

The study confines the periods: pre-withdrawal baseline, the period between 1 January 2018-14 August 2021 and transitional period, 15-31 August 2021 and post-withdrawal period, 1 September 2021-30 June 2026. The period that separates completion of withdrawal of the U.S. on 30 August and takeover of the Taliban on 15 August is the transition. Since annual datasets cannot bifurcate 2021 on those particular dates, 2021 is a bridge year in the tables of descriptive trends, but is not completely classified as one or the other.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The body of literature infiltrates eight related arguments the post-withdrawal regional change, TTP rematerialisation, Taliban-TTP relationship and sanctuary, border and rule, institutional weakness within a state, a nexus of crime and terror, provincial difference, and effectiveness of counterterrorism. The main limitation is a lack of coherence of studies utilizing alternative units of analysis and evidencing criteria as opposed to a lack of research on these topics.

Post-Withdrawal Regional Transformation

The post-withdrawal research concurs that militant opportunity during August 2021 altered, but not that Taliban power is consistently feeble. Giustozzi (2022) highlights the organization sturdiness of Taliban, whereas the ISKP studies indicate that the Taliban rule failed to kill off transnational jihadist competition (Jadoon, Sayed, and Mines, 2022). The narrower question concerns the discriminatory coercive ability: who, whom does the Taliban restrain effective actors with weapons or not?

TTP Organizational Resurgence

An abrupt-2021 explanation is being directly opposed by TTP literature. Factional reunification was reported by Sayed and Hamming (2021) prior to the takeover; the follow-up study by Sayed and Hamming (2023) posits an ideological momentum,

concupation of prisoners, space, and strategic depth direct the reinforced course of improvement. Basit (2024) also describes resurgence as a more protracted change in the organization and Abbasi (2024) highlights its policy implications. Pre-2021 repair is thus a priori, and not a rival narrative which can be disregarded.

TTP-Taliban Relations and Militant Refuge

The most controversial thing is Sanctuary. Repeated statements by the UN Monitoring Team point at the presence and capability of TTP, which includes substantial forces in Afghanistan, but certain claims, particularly that of direct financial aid or that of the attack itself are specifically announced by a single or a few Member States (UNSC, 2023, 2024a, 2024b, 2025, 2026). The very repetition across the reports confirms the existence of the organization much better than each of the claims of direct funding of Taliban, command, or individual responsibility of the attack.

Border Governance

The need to have fencing and not control can be found in the literature of border governance. The rugged topography, informal and formal frontier crossings, trade, trans-border kinship, refugee flows and sovereignty conflicts co-exist on the frontier. Johnson and Mason (2008) determine the social intricacy of past, Herbert and Idris (2024) tie the borderlands turmoil in the present to violent extremism, organized crime, and securitization. Border governance thus encompasses documentation, customs, legal trade, intelligence coordination, policing and livelihood management and border physical barriers.

Domestic Institutional Vulnerabilities

The most evident domestic vulnerability is at institutions which are yet to consolidate. The former-FATA move of 2018 provoked a shift to the prosaic provincial governance. The evidence provided by World Bank and UNDP demonstrates the actual improvement in finance, service delivery, policing infrastructure, and extending the rule of law, in addition, integration is long-term, uneven (World Bank, 2024; UNDP, 2024, 2026). The corresponding notion is the lack of evenness of capacity and not state absence.

Crime-Terror Nexus

Crime-terror studies take caution in making the assumption of merging of organizations. According to Shelley (2014), functional overlap in smuggling, extortion, and weapons, informal finance and

facilitation is highlighted. Funding terrorist activities and narcotics and weapons and human trafficking are individually listed as terrorist finance and illegal human trafficking in the Revised National Action Plan (NACTA, 2021; PID, 2024b), whereas the crime-terror facilitation is specifically mentioned in the 2024 Azm-e-Istehkam clarification (PID, 2024b). UNODC (2023) provides the context of the illicit-market but does not show a particular flow of money financed a certain attack.

Provincial Variation

Variation at province is important since parallel occurrence of aggregate violence may come about due to various actor ecologies. KP is controlled by TTP and their collaborating jihadist violence especially in merged and southern districts. Balochistan is a mixture of separatist, jihadist, sectarian violence, and criminal violence along with the attacks on the security services, infrastructure, transport, civilians, and foreign-oriented projects (PIPS, 2023-2025). Documented by Verma et al. (2025) is a regional aspect to Baloch militancy but huge verification issues. The cross border terrorism is not related to high violence.

Counterterrorism Effectiveness

The policy architecture of Pakistan is already aware, that coercion is not sufficient. Modifications to NAP are added like terror finance, CTD capacity, prosecution, countering violent extremism, criminal-justice reform, Balochistan reconciliation, and merged-area reforms (NACTA, 2021). In 2024 the Central Apex Committee referred to Azm-e-Istehkam as a multi- agency strategy of security, diplomatic, legal, information and socioeconomic (PID, 2024a, 2024b). Implementation and provincial differentiation is the main issue.

RESEARCH GAP AND CONTRIBUTION

The literature reviewed contains a lot of evidence on individual aspects of the issue, thus this article will not suggest that the previous scholarship did not focus on the problem of Afghanistan-Pakistan interaction. The more plausible input is more focused: a lack of existing studies have taken a mechanism-funded analysis of the last most recent change in the region and compared how the external enabling conditions play off the various domestic vulnerabilities of KP and Balochistan. Beyond this, certain policy debates baffle three different

propositions: that there are militants in Afghanistan; that a given attack in Pakistan has a cross-border aspect; and that the Afghan government ordered or even winked at that attack. Those propositions need to have an increase in their evidentiary threshold.

The article makes contributions in four aspects. First, it determines the temporal order and it explicitly involves the TTP reunification prior 2021 as an alternative explanation. Second, it operationalises the concept of the cross-border terrorism in such a way that, the location of provinces alone is not adequate to classify them. Third, it combines within-case causal-process tracing of the TTP with a systematic comparison of two high exposure yet differently-configured provinces. Fourth, it distinguishes between, on the one hand, the directly found evidence, rational inference, and on the other, on doubts or uncertainties, the allegation. This type of evidence-grading is particularly noteworthy in instances where attribution can have strategic motivation by governments, armed groups, and reporting based on intelligence.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

RSCT provides regional level of the explanation. It fundamentally assumes that security threats are geographically clustered in that neighboring states and societies are in closer relationship thanks to the stronger patterns of transmission of threats compared to distant players (Buzan and Waever, 2003). The transmission mechanisms that apply to the case between Pakistan and Afghanistan involve not just the traditional inter state conflict; they are their sanctuary, militant mobility, refugee and kinship relationships, black markets, ideology, diplomatic bickering and mutually enforced border coercion. RSCT thus, justifies the idea that a transformation can take place within the internal-security environment of Pakistan by virtue of the political transformation in Afghanistan without having to suggest that any additional violence is necessarily an externality.

Lack of even state-capacity viewpoints furnishes domestic conditioning phase. Migdal (1988) points out that the level of state capability varies in social and territorial space and is determined by how institutions were able to enforce rules, marshal forces as well as infiltrate local arenas. This concept here is termed as unbalanced or discriminatory ability and not failed state. The Pakistani and Afghan institutions as well as the coercive organizations operate in different places, priorities, and are effective

depending on where they are based and the actors. This allows more specific question: where foreign militant space is available, which home void allows the costs of militant movement and covertness, fundraising, acquisition, coercion, or acquisition of targets to be low?

Table 1. Operationalization of the analytical framework

Theory	Concept	Observable indicator	Expected evidence	Relevant RQ
Regional Security Complex Theory	Regional security interdependence	Security change in Afghanistan is followed by observable changes in militant mobility, diplomatic friction, border incidents, or organizational opportunity affecting Pakistan.	Temporally sequenced evidence linking Afghan political/security change to Pakistan-facing militant opportunity, not merely simultaneous violence.	RQ1, RQ2
RSCT	Cross-border transmission	Movement of personnel, command, logistics, recruitment, sanctuary, or facilitation across the frontier.	Corroborated UN, institutional, or specialist evidence identifying cross-border organizational functions.	RQ1
Uneven state capacity	Territorial and administrative penetration	Variation in policing, prosecution, local administration, service delivery, justice access, and border regulation.	District/provincial evidence of institutional extension, resource gaps, transition, or differential performance.	RQ2, RQ3
Uneven state capacity	Opportunity costs for militants	Militants operate more persistently where state monitoring, lawful economic alternatives, prosecution, and citizen trust are weaker.	Co-location or sequencing between governance gaps and sustained militant activity, supported by more than a single event.	RQ2
Integrated mechanism	External opportunity × domestic vulnerability	External sanctuary/mobility has greater security effects when domestic structures facilitate penetration or persistence.	Within-case sequence plus KP. Balochistan variation consistent with interaction rather than a single-factor explanation.	RQ2, RQ3

Note. The framework treats 'sanctuary' and 'state capacity' as observable, gradated conditions rather than categorical labels. The same event may contain both domestic and cross-border dimensions.

ANALYTICAL PROPOSITIONS

P1 (external-opportunity proposition): in the case where the transformations of Afghan after 2021 led to a decrease in coercive restrictions and more access to the TTP to sanctuary or mobility, we should see more evidence of these effects in the form of higher levels of leadership security, increased cross-border movement, regrouping, or consolidation of the organization after the transition than would otherwise have been due to the reunification alone before 2021.

P2 (interaction proposition): interaction space exterior should generate more domestic-security pressure wherein domestic border control, policing, prosecution, administrative assimilation, or economic control reduces the cost of militant penetration and persistence. Extrinsic protection and internally of the home are thus not mutually adequate but rather reinforcing factors.

P3 (differentiated-exposure proposition): KP ought to exhibit a more explicit and coherently reinforced Afghanistan-TTP connection as compared to Balochistan. Balochistan ought to present a less homogenous conglomeration wherein jihadist, separatist, criminal, and boundary land routes overlap and only certain linkage between actors and events meet the cross-border Level in the article.

P4 (rival-explanation proposal): should the resurgence have a purely TTP reunification explanation prior to August 2021 then there should be minimal extra evidence (post-takeover) of alterations in sanctuary or mobility. As long as it is explicated mainly on the basis of the breakdown of

the ceasefire, which took place in November 2022, the acceleration of operations must take place after the moment of the break-up. A cumulative series such as the recovery of 2021, opportunity growth 2021, speed-up post-ceasefire would be described by a layered as opposed to a monocausal explanation.

OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

Table 2. Operational definitions

Term	Operational definition
Cross-border terrorism	Terrorist violence in Pakistan for which credible evidence links planning, facilitation, sanctuary, finance, command, logistics, recruitment, or personnel/weapon movement to territory across an international border. Location in KP or Balochistan, group identity, or official accusation alone is insufficient.
Internal security	The state's and society's capacity to protect persons, institutions, lawful political authority, critical infrastructure, economic continuity, and human security from organized political violence.
Militant sanctuary / safe haven	External territory in which a militant organization can preserve leadership or personnel, rest, refit, train, plan, communicate, recruit, or organize logistics at materially lower coercive risk. Sanctuary does not require complete absence of sovereign authority.
Domestic structural vulnerability	Durable institutional, governance, socioeconomic, political, or regulatory conditions that lower militant operating costs, including policing/prosecution gaps, incomplete administrative integration, grievance structures, service deficits, illicit markets, and weak state-citizen trust.
Border governance	The institutions and practices that regulate cross-border movement, identity, trade, customs, security screening, intelligence coordination, dispute management, and legitimate borderland livelihoods; it is broader than fencing.
Crime-terror nexus	Functional overlap between militant and illicit/criminal networks in finance, movement, weapons, documentation, extortion, protection, smuggling, or facilitation without presuming organizational merger.
Post-2021 militant resurgence	Sustained organizational and operational recovery after 1 September 2021 indicated across multiple dimensions—attack tempo/fatality, command cohesion, mergers, recruitment/mobility, tactical adaptation, or target expansion—relative to the baseline, while recognizing that TTP reunification began before the takeover.

The design of the study is a qualitative explanatory case-study design that relies on systematic analysis of the documentary with the assistance of descriptive pre/post-2021 trend plot, systematic-focused comparison of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, and some causal-process tracing of the TTP resurgence. Interpretation of documents works well, since usually there is little access to the militant command structures, records of intelligence and decision making in its operations. The design entails a systematic analysis of documents and in-case causal inference, instead of considering accumulated reports to be self-justifying evidences (Bowen, 2009; Collier, 2011; George and Bennett, 2005).

Geographic Scope, Level, Unit and Time

The interaction between militants and security is primarily analyzed: an episode or a long-term pattern of interaction where an armed entity takes advantage of or is supposed to take advantage of cross-border enabling conditions and impacts the internal security of Pakistan. The main organization case is TTP; ISKP is a globally comparative transnational. Balochs are only considered in the analysis of the cross-border when there is evidence on them as actors. The regional (Afghanistan-Pakistan), organizational, and the subnational institutional (KP and Balochistan) level of analysis will be used. The period to be used will be 1 January 2018-30 June 2026 with the above three periods. Trend context is presented by national data, whereas KP and Balochistan are the target cases since they both border on Afghanistan and have a disproportionate rate of recent violence but have variations in how

they militarize their ecology, grievance organization, administrative history, and the strength of evidence linking the cross-border violence (PIPS, 2022-2025). This paper has presented the information on the documentary corpus and source hierarchy in the retained corpus of empirical evidence consists of 45 documents: 12 scholarly/expert analyses; 12 UN, international-organization, or development documents; five official Pakistani/ U.S. policy and transition documents; 14 Pakistani security-monitoring documents and two event documents who are merely used to give dated developments. Corpus material encompasses TTP, ISKP, borderland and Baloch studies, the reports of UNSC Monitoring Teams, UNODC, World Bank, UNDP and GTI publications; NACTA/PID and U.S. official data, PIPS annual reports of 2018-2025, CRSS annual reports of 2023-2025 and Q1-Q2 2026, PICSS June 2026 perspective, Khan (2022), and Reuters (2024). Design was based on five theory/method works; Buzan and Waever (2003), Migdal (1988), Bowen (2009), Collier (2011) and George and Bennett (2005) that are not counted as part of the 45-empirical count.

Four levels of sources include: (1) official primary sources and UN monitoring documents; (2) peer-reviewed and quality specialist literature; (3) known security monitors and development agencies with tracking mechanisms (non-up-to-date); and (4) credible news coverage (used essentially only on events or statements reported in the past). The group propaganda with armed groups were not taken as independent evidence. Where primary material of the militants was analyzed by the specialists, the study referred to the specialist analysis.

Places of Search and Whole Search Terms

Searches were done on 30 August 2026 and the empirical cutoff was 30 June 2026. Subsequent publications were only eligible to those publications that reported on data in the cutoff. Verified metadata (journal/publisher) of searches covered were JSTOR, CTC Sentinel, UN repositories, NACTA, PID, PIPS, CRSS, PICSS, Vision of Humanity/IEP, world bank, UNDP, UNODC and official U.S. pages. Full text (except subscription-only) Scopus/WoS was not presumed; institutional authentication was based on publisher, DOI, JSTOR, and known repository records.

Table 3. Search strings reproduced for transparency

No.	Search string
1	"Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan" AND Afghanistan AND (sanctuary OR "safe haven" OR mobility OR cross-border)
2	TTP AND Pakistan AND Afghanistan AND (resurgence OR reunification OR merger OR ceasefire)
3	"Islamic State Khorasan" AND Pakistan AND Afghanistan AND (cross-border OR attacks OR recruitment)
4	(Balochistan OR "Khyber Pakhtunkhwa") AND terrorism AND (police OR "security forces" OR infrastructure OR civilians)
5	"Pakistan Afghanistan border" AND (governance OR fencing OR "border management" OR smuggling)
6	(crime-terror OR "illicit economy" OR smuggling OR narcotics OR extortion) AND Pakistan AND Afghanistan

No.	Search string
7	site:un.org OR site:documents.un.org "Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team" (TTP OR "Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan" OR ISIL-K) Afghanistan
8	site:pakpips.com "Pakistan Security Report" [2018-2025]
9	site:crss.pk Pakistan "Annual Security Report" [2023-2025] OR "Q1 2026" OR "Q2 2026"
10	site:picss.net Pakistan security "June 2026"
11	site:nacta.gov.pk "Revised National Action Plan" 2021
12	"Global Terrorism Index 2025" Pakistan OR "Global Terrorism Index 2026" Pakistan
13	"Pakistan merged areas" governance policing "Khyber Pakhtunkhwa"

Inclusion, Exclusion and Screening

They were included in documents that spoke about the mechanism or cases that had other relevant evidence, verifiable publication details and provided original evidence, clear monitoring records, strict synthesis or an official record. Duplicates, unprovable or marginal and pure accusatory things were omitted. The number that is retained is 45. No total database-hit count is given since some dynamic institutional sites did not give exportable result sets which were not stable; re-creating one would bring about spurious accuracy.

Data Analysis, Coding and Thematic Analysis

Information was coded by hand into the structured list of evidence of citation, date, tier of source, place, actor, organizational/event evidence, cross-border-linkage, targeted, domestic vulnerability, state response, causal-relevance, rival-explanation, and status of claim. Analysis Software and automated classifier According to many decisive passages in the text, in order to extract attribution language, the context was needed through which to interpret the language.

Afghan transformation, coercive constraint, sanctuary, cross-border mobility, command/logistics codes, tactical adapt, and bloc person and economy, type of target, state response, and human/economic security, status of claim, and grievance code were under deductive codes. Pre-2021 recovery, target expansion, negotiated pauses, inductive codes, provincial heterogeneity, attribution contestation, institutional transition, and cross-border escalation were pre-2021 inductive codes. The results were grouped in six themes.

Triangulation, Inconsistent Assertions & Causation

There were three rules of corroboration. Only under the condition of being supported by either an undisputed primary record, or by at least two independent credible sources were a contested claim established. The repeated UN assessments may create the presence of an organization or wide area of operations, but a statement made by a single Member State was an accusation that would not be valid unless proved independently. Attack attribution had to be of an actor-specific nature outside the geography. Lots

of contradictory accounts were kept instead of being reconciled by the authors.

Process tracing is an experimental test to determine whether the sequence of mechanisms has followed the suggested mechanism and cannot be explained by other mechanisms; it is not experimental identification. The process is politically transforming Afghanistan -> decreased past coercive control should result in greater sanctuary / mobility -> TTP consolidation and maneuvering to tactical adjustments as a result of this and expanded internal-security pressure. When in a time-series, actor-very localized, separately supported, and hard to interpret via an alternate mechanism, then there is stronger evidence (Collier, 2011; George and Bennett, 2005).

Comparing Data and Trends of Description

The single annual series provided by PIPS to do descriptive comparison (pre/post) is a consistent coder of terrorist attack. The sources of validation are CRSS, GTI, and PICSS: CRSS frequently includes a combination of terrorism and counterterrorism violence, GTI employs a global approach and PICSS employs independent militant-incident system. There was no directly exported raw ACLED as an authenticated licensed dataset could not be accessed; pattern developed by ACLED is mentioned only directly via publication, like Tahir and Jadoon (2025).

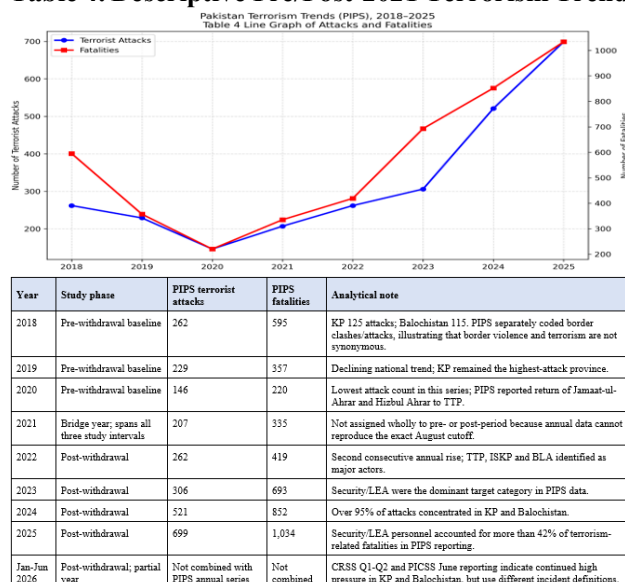
POST2021 SECURITY TRANSFORMATION

This period of transition started on 15 August 2021, when the Taliban forces entered Kabul and the collapse of the Afghan Republic occurred and ended when the United States was performing the last military withdrawal on 30 August (U.S. Department of State, 2021; U.S. Department of Defense, 2021). The change of different components of the security environment occurred as a result of these events. The withdrawal handed the sovereign and coercive power over to the Taliban; the withdrawal was complete eliminated international military presence and the surveillance-related, striking, detentions, and partner-support capabilities. To do causal analysis, the most important question is whether this composite transformation decreased constraints that were particularly relevant to the organizations of militants targeted at Pakistan.

The facts have revealed that the TTP, instead of their organizations falling, were at the point of partial revival at the time of this transition. In 2020, PIPS

said that Jamaat-ul-Ahrar and Hizbul Ahrar had rejoined the TTP and Sayed and Hamming (2021) witnessed an even broader resurgence via mergers and reorganization. This undermines any suggestion straight out that resurgence of the TTP started at zero as a result of Taliban takeover. However, evidence after takeover suggests altered opportunity as well: although there is also evidence of specialist analysis of increased opportunity to access the Afghan territory, release of prisoners, security of leadership, and organizational inertia, series of UNSC reports identify the presence of TTP personnel in Afghanistan in substantial amounts and evaluate the organization to have retained or gained more operational space within the country (Sayed & Hamming, 2023; UNSC, 2023, 2024a, 2025, 2026). The second turning point is the November 2022 collapse of a ceasefire between Pakistan and the Taliban (TTP). The TTP officially terminated the ceasefire on 28 November 2022, and ordered its fighters to attack the country once again (Khan, 2022). This incidence offers an even closer reason as to why the operational tempo increased as it did after the withdrawal than just the withdrawal itself. PIPS recorded 262 terrorist attacks in 2022 and 306 in 2023, rising to 521 in 2024 and 699 in 2025 (PIPS, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025). The series consequently sustains a stratified account: the organizational restoration of 2021 augmented latent ability; the Afghanistan transformation altered exterior chance; until the negotiation and ceasefires deferentially transformed the violence motives; and the November 2022 refractance scrapped the barricade of assault.

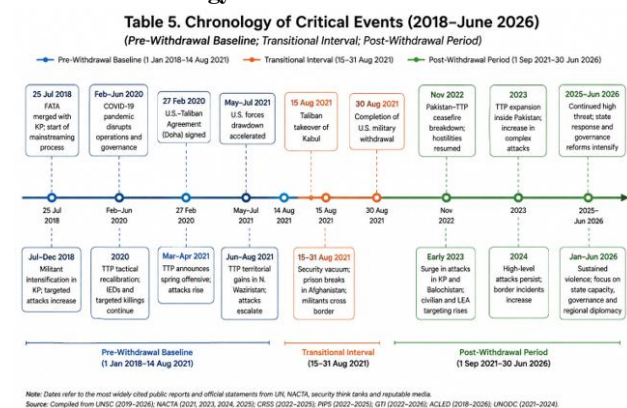
Table 4. Descriptive Pre/Post-2021 Terrorism Trend



Sources: PIPS (2018-2025); CRSS (2026a, 2026b); PICSS (2026). Using full-year PIPS data, the 2018-2020 pre-transition mean was approximately 212

attacks and 391 fatalities per year; the 2022-2025 post-transition mean was 447 attacks and approximately 750 fatalities. These differences are descriptive and are not treated as a causal treatment effect. The 2021 bridge year is excluded from those means.

Table 5. Chronology of critical events and causal relevance



EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Findings 1: TTP opportunity increased (but did not rise) post-2021.

The initial discovery has been mitigated: this Afghanistan after 2021 gave an already resurging TTP more opportunity. Factional reunification, which existed prior to takeover and pre-takeover specialists research (PIPS, 2020; Sayed and Hamming, 2021) is also present, supporting pre-existing recovery. Then, post-2021 evidence is characterized by more personnel concentration, a higher security of leadership, mobility, and more consolidation associated with the territory of Afghanistan (Sayed & Hamming, 2023; Basit, 2024; Tahir and Jadoon, 2025; UNSC, 2024a, 2025, 2026). Acceleration and enablement make the common sense inference, rather than creating the resurgence. The mobility inference made by Tahir and Jadoon (2025) is supported via 615 records of TTP commemoration as opposed to the geography of attacks. Their examination determines wide-ranging Afghanistan-based militant tracks and an unrelenting eastern-Afghan pertinence to the TTP staff. It does not determine who gave the green light to each movement, but it advocates the suggestion that the field in Afghanistan has someone who gives organizational profundity and agility that cannot be countered by fencing of the border.

Finding 2: There is strong organizational support of the importance of sanctuary and mobility; particular claims in support of states need less confidence.

Follow-up UN reports report of high levels of TTP in Afghanistan. In 2024 with the fifteenth report, it was estimated that there were approximately 6,000–6,500

fighters, 2025 with the sixteenth report, it was reported that there were approximately 6,000 fighters in a number of eastern provinces and in 2026, the Thirty-seventh report once again illustrated that TTP was considered one of the highest terror groups in Afghanistan (UNSC, 2024a, 2025, 2026). The repetition throughout the reports and the adherence to independent research, make meaningful Afghan operational space a powerful easel of open sources. Relevant assertions regarding payments to the Taliban, direction or responsibility of particular attacks tend to be based on attribution of narrower responsibility. Any paragraph in the work article where text of UN refers to one Member State, or some Member states, has been maintained in that status unless substantiated its status. Clues to sanctuary are not in any way necessarily clues that a given action was ordered by the authority that was the host. This is one of the main differences of responsible causal and diplomatic attribution (UNSC, 2024a, 2024b, 2025, 2026).

Finding 3: Pressure of the police and security institutions caused by tactical adaptation.

The current TTP violence since 2021 is tactical adaptation spread out as opposed to regaining the territory. According to the specialized studies, ambushes, IEDs, targeted killings, sniper attacks, and attacks on security installations can be mentioned (Basit, 2024; Sayed and Hamming, 2023). According to PIPS data, the institutional cost was top in the targets: security and law-enforcement staff led in instances of targets in 2023, and have over 42 percent of terrorism-associated fatalities in 2025 (PIPS, 2023, 2025). This trend is in line with a policy of creating an increase in the price of state coercive presence.

Neighborhood criminals are also targeted by the police, resulting in resource reallocation to protection, checkpoints, escorts, and emergency response. From the merged districts, the process of constructing model-police-stations and model-police-stations, as well as model-police-stations, district-based police planning, and specialized training, continue to show some improvement and de-merit of post-merger capacity-building (UNDP, 2024). This vulnerability will then be an unbalanced institutional resiliency being continually attacked but not lack of policing.

Finding 4: ISKP is not a comparator that competes with TTP violence, it is a transnational comparator.

ISKP stands out of the TTP due to its hostile attitude towards the Afghan Taliban and transnational-sectarian agenda. Post-takeover studies reveal that

the Taliban pressure did not weaken but only impaired the capability of the ISKP to recruit, breed and execute the high casualty attacks, a fact reflected by the July 2023 bombing of Bajaur to show its Pakistan relevance (Jadoon et al., 2022; Jadoon, Mines, and Sayed, 2023).

This comparison reveals the reason why the relationship between one and the same Taliban-militant cannot be introduced as the one that can be defined as the Afghan safe haven. The Taliban is engaged in a war with ISKP as it has had external evaluations accusing it of tolerating or not repressing the TTP enough. Selective coercive capacity is thus more accurate as compared to generic institutional collapse. The various requirements of a different intelligence, sectarian-protection, and regional-cooperation are also implied by the various agenda and network structure of ISKP (Jadoon, Mines, and Sayed, 2023; UNSC, 2024b, 2026).

Finding 5: Crime-terror nexus is an environment of facilitation, yet there are certain financing routes which are challenging to test.

The networks of the illegitimate borderlands may help with movement, arms trafficking, extortion, exploring informal finance, and documentation. Herbert and Idris (2024) associate the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderland economy with the organized crime and Shelley (2014) offers the encompassing crime-terror framework. Trafficking, terrorist finance, as well as crime-terror facilitation, are also listed among the policy issues determined in revised NAP and the Azm-e-Istehkam clarification (NACTA, 2021; PID, 2024b).

There are less obvious evidences that this or that attack was funded by a particular narcotics flow or even a smuggling flow. UNODC (2023) reports a significant shift in the illicit drug economy in Afghanistan, but not in beneficiary chains in case of isolated acts of terrorism. The result is thus operational capacity, other than estimated terrorist wealth. Facilitators should be targeted and not all informal border livelihoods presumed to be militant finance, should be enforced.

Discovery 6: Internal-security impacts have spill-over to casualties to institutions, infrastructure, economic activity and human security.

In 2023, 2024 and 2025, PIPS documented 306, 521 and 699 terrorist attacks, 693, 1,034 deaths with most more recent violence occurring in KP and in Balochistan (PIPS, 2023-2025). Multiple measurements of terrorism/counterterrorism violence that were separately captured by CRSS documented

a 6-year high in a fatality in 2023 and an even deadlier environment in 2024 (CRSS, 2023, 2024). The various definitions are incompatible in terms of pooling, although their convergence towards the same direction propagates a long-lasting deterioration.

The internal-security dilemma of Balochistan involves transport and infrastructure attacks, violence towards security agencies and civilians. In 2025, PIPS reports on railway/train and other economic data, whereas more precise analysis reports show more and more sophisticated separatist actions against state and foreign affiliated aspects (PIPS, 2025; Verma et al., 2025). Even when a transnational aspect is impossible to ascertain, these are internal-security impacts.

The terrorism cannot be seen as being the source of macroeconomic stress. The 2022 update by the World Bank highlighted the aspects of inflation, vulnerability of externalities, floods, and poverty pressures due to the greater level of economic conditions (World Bank, 2022). Terrorism adds to those stressors as wastes of protection and disruption of transport system, delays in project execution, and administrative diversion. Similar views on borderland insecurity and organized crime are given by Herbert and Idris (2024), who state that both are fueling the already existing national pressures instead of being their source.

The cost of human-security is imposed on the communities that experience militant coercion, security operations, inability of movement, history of displacement and disruption of livelihood. The merged-area program of the UNDP reinforces that the time lag in institutional integration and ineffective institutional integration can cause a lack of trust and destabilizing counter-narratives (UNDP, 2026). Human security then plays the role of counterterrorism effectiveness, by ensuring that the institutional legitimacy has a strong grip in deciding the availability of opportunities to be exploited by the militants.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan Compare and Contrast

KP and Balochistan are on the high exposure and divergently-structured cases. Something similar happens with both sides of the border Afghanistan, and bear an unequal burden of the recent violence, but whose key actors, grievances, pattern of targets and the apparent strength of the linkage across borders varies. The structured-focused comparison does use the same nine questions to both instances:

actors, transnational interconnections, attacks, target, grievances, governance failures, illegal economies, government reactions and institutional/human-security impacts (George and Bennett, 2005).

Table 6. Structured-focused provincial comparison

Structured question	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Balochistan
Principal actors	TTP/allied Taliban; ISKP comparator.	BLA/BLF and other separatists; jihadist/sectarian actors; criminal facilitators.
Cross-border linkage	Strongest evidence: TTP presence, sanctuary and mobility in eastern Afghanistan.	Actor-specific: Afghanistan/Iran links exist, but many current sanctuary/collaboration claims are disputed.
Attack patterns	IEDs, ambushes, raids, targeted attacks; merged/southern districts.	IEDs, suicide/complex assaults, transport and infrastructure disruption.
Targets	Police, military/paramilitary, state facilities; civilians also affected.	Security forces, transport/infrastructure, foreign-linked projects/personnel, civilians.
Grievances	Post-merger contestation, conflict legacy, development and trust deficits.	Resource/representation disputes, autonomy claims, inequality and rights controversies.
Governance gaps	Uneven post-merger police, prosecution, local-government and service capacity.	Large geography, dispersed infrastructure, coordination and center-province trust challenges.
Illicit economies	Smuggling/extortion can facilitate operations; exact revenue shares unproven.	Border trade/smuggling intersect with insurgent geography; financing claims need verification.
State response	CTD/police strengthening, military/intelligence action, fencing, Kabul diplomacy, governance reform.	Security/CTD action, infrastructure protection, reconciliation/development commitments.
Effects	High police/security burden; mobility, fear and trust costs.	Transport/project disruption, civilian insecurity, protection costs, grievance amplification.
Configuration	External TTP space × post-merger capacity gaps.	Domestic separatist conflict × selective regional links × governance/grievance conditions.

Sources synthesized from PIPS (2018-2025), UNSC (2023-2026), UNDP (2024, 2026), World Bank (2024), Herbert and Idris (2024), Tahir and Jadoon (2025), and Verma et al. (2025).

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

KP offers the most direct way of interaction. An assessment report by the UN, and organizational studies confirm the existence and movement of TTP that is associated with Afghanistan (UNSC, 2024a, 2025, 2026; Tahir and Jadoon, 2025). The integration process of merged districts is still long term in nature in the country. Based on the evidence provided by World Bank and UNDP, there are the improvements and the persisting needs in finance, policing, rules of law, and the local governance (World Bank, 2024; UNDP, 2024, 2026). These circumstances create imbalanced ability, rather than a causal element in recruitment.

Since TTP violence is largely focused upon coercive institutions, institutional resilience domestic gets a role to play. The repetitive nature of the attacks may bump up the cost of force-protection, and shift the police to emergency associated operations, as well as ineffective daily service may further erode the trust. The above feedback is a plausible conclusion based on the target and institutional-transit evidence; it is not indicated that the society hit by conflicts helps the militants.

Balochistan

Balochistan is a blend of separatist revolt, jihadist and sectarian attacking, borderline criminality and challenging infrastructure security. PIPS and GTI demonstrate that the most recent Pakistani terrorism is concentrated in Balochistan and KP which are the

key approaches to studying it in the given methodologies (PIPS, 2024, 2025; IEP, 2026). Wholesome violence however cannot be qualified as cross-border one unless there is evidence acted out by individuals acting in a particular way.

In regard to Baloch separatists, there are conflicting signs. Verma et al. (2025) report on historical movement and casualties of the militant leaders in Afghanistan and regional aspect especially towards Iran, albeit, with caution on validating militant assertions. The 2026 UN report documents conflicting Member-State evaluations concerning potential BLA connections with either TTP or ISIL-K: some of them asserted a productive connection among the camps, others did not determine a significant connection (UNSC, 2026). The existing claims on collaboration are consequently not proven to be true, but are disputed.

This policy has some policy implications. It would be both diminishing the role of politics grievances, resource conflicts, representation, inequality of development, and controversy of rights to view all Baloch violence as externally driven and it would deny the well-known regional mobility to see it as purely domestic violence. Policy should thus explore the practices of external facilitation where the evidence is present as they tackle the question of domestic legitimacy and governance on its own (Herbert and Idris, 2024; Verma et al., 2025).

DISCUSSION

The results are in support of the main argument, on a contingent basis. Preexisting organizational preparedness, the enlargement of external opportunity, the introduction of incentives preventive to attack, and the influence of low institutional and border-governance gaps on the localization of pressure together formed the TTP reunification and AFGAN transition, the breakdown of the ceasefire in 2022, respectively. This stratification chain provides a greater explanation than either a sanctuary or domestic only explanation.

The visualization of RSCT can be seen in the flow of militant people, refugee, diplomatic crisis, coercion of borders, and relationships in the organization across the border. The recent (December 2024) case of the Pakistan airstrike against Afghanistan shows how an internal-security crisis can lead to interstate coercion escalation: Pakistan associated airstrikes with the TTP threats and Afghan leaders disagreed with their outcomes and a civilian death toll (Reuters,

2024). The incident shows a sign of interdependence of security in region where there may be disputes in terms of operation details.

The imbalance in the state capacity makes externalization of the problem in the argument impossible. Integration of former-FATA has increased both constitutional, fiscal, service and policing institutions although the process is still a long transition (World Bank, 2024; UNDP, 2024, 2026). The process is not rather basic militant-pressure variation of institutional density, capability and legitimacy, but rather an institutional density, capability and legitimacy variation.

Complementary rival explanations are complementary. The capability is explained by pre-2021 reunification; the shift of incentives proximate by the rupture in the November 2022 ceasefire; the constraint of attention on policies by political and economic crises; weaknesses of police/prosecution in persisting; KP vulnerability in post-FATA transition and leadership/tactical adaptation explain the existence of militant agency (Sayed & Hamming, 2021, 2023; PIPS, 2023; World Bank, 2022, 2024). Collectively they bear-out a conjunctural explanation.

Three propositions need to be kept apart in future analysis: TTP presence in Afghanistan is greatly upheld; that space is a reasonable means of resilience and mobility; that a direct Afghan-authority backing of a single attack is a higher-level claim that frequently is refuted. Attribution by evidence in grades enhances the analysis of causality and magnifies effectiveness of diplomacy.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The causal results translate into policy priorities, such as decreasing the external life cycle of the TTP and enhancing attribution; strengthening police and prosecution, and civilian institutions in the high risk KP districts; ensuring that an actor-specific Balochistan approach is put into place; preventing crime-terror facilitation without making livelihoods illegal; and institutionalizing similar performance measurement.

The involvement of the Afghans should be made conditional based or reliant on observable conduct as opposed to promises. With bilateral and multilateral access, Pakistan ought to put forward proving issues, such as locations, leadership movements, and logistical nodes, as well as evidence-based on the preparations of the attacks. An interagency process to create an unclassified evidentiary summary should be created in the event of a situation where the intelligence cannot be disseminated. This action of

crossing borders, which is also kinetic and has increased, sovereignty and civilian harm risks, should not become a new legal and strategic framework but, instead, should replace border governance or domestic reformation.

Barricades formation against terrorism power. In KP the key is the resilient police and prosecution that can act in such tight situations maintaining the faith. In Balochistan, deployment of intelligence and infrastructure security should be of credible political avenues, redress of grievances, service delivery and faithful enquiry into grievances on rights. The majority of the necessary instruments are already present in revised NAP, the main gaps include implementation, sequencing, provincial ownership and measurement (NACTA, 2021; PID, 2024a, 2024b).

Table 7. Prioritized, finding-linked policy matrix

Priority recommendation	Evidentiary basis	Responsible institution(s)	Timeframe	Implementation constraints	Measurable indicator
1. TTP sanctuary/mobility disruption with evidence grading	Repeated UN/specialist evidence of Afghan TTP presence; support claims vary.	MFA; Interior; NACTA; intelligence; KP CTD/police; border agencies	Short-medium	Taliban cooperation; sovereignty; classified evidence	Corroborated mobility cases; verified disruptions/relocations; decline in attacks with evidenced cross-border preparation.
2. Consolidate merged-KP police, prosecution and civilian governance	TTP targets coercive institutions during a continuing post-merger transition.	KP Home; Police/CTD; Prosecution; P&D/Finance; federal support	Medium	Fiscal pressure; force protection; staffing; trust	Filled posts; case/forensic turnaround; witness protection; district-plan delivery; service/trust indicators.
3. Actor-specific Balochistan framework	Violence is heterogeneous; many separatist attacks lack proven cross-border linkage.	Balochistan Govt/Home/CTD; Interior; Planning; political institutions	Medium-long	Trust/rights disputes; terrain; fragmented groups	Attacks by actor/target; infrastructure disruption; grievance-resolution and oversight metrics.
4. Disrupt crime-terror facilitation, expand lawful trade	Illicit networks can support movement, weapons, extortion and finance.	FBR Customs; FIA; ANF; FMU; NACTA; police	Short-medium	Informal livelihoods; corruption; route displacement	Financial-intelligence actions; seizure-to-case conversion; extortion reporting; legal crossing time.
5. Public monitoring attribution standard	CT and Dataset incompatibility and disputed claims impede evaluation.	NACTA; provincial Home Departments/CTDs; research/statistical partners	Short	Data ownership; classification; definitions	Quarterly dashboard with definitions, actor/target/province data, and cross-border evidence grade.
6. Human-security safeguards	Communities face militant coercion, operations, movement and livelihood costs.	Provincial/district governments; NACTA; police; migration/humanitarian authorities	Medium	Emergency pressures; resources; polarization	Complaint/compensation time; crossing predictability; community-police engagement; trust surveys.

The indicators are monitoring measures, not guaranteed causal outcomes. Baselines should be published before targets are set, and security-sensitive indicators may require an unclassified public aggregate plus a classified operational annex.

LIMITATIONS

This research is based on the documentary evidence of the citizens, and is not able to examine intelligence files, command messages of militants, or diplomacy secretness. Dataving of datasets are set differently and 2021 annual data would not be able to replicate the same cutoff in August. There can be an assertion of sanctuary and backing that can be brought in Member-State reporting, whereas a two-province inference cannot be an epitome of all Pakistani security environs. These restrictions inhibit a degree of assurance in the insidious intention and exact causal extent.

On a reflex level, the Pakistani academic and policy discourses can stimulate the assumptions of the state-

centeredness. A coding system was hence employed to code claim source and evidentiary status, to retain rival explanations but no causal language was used in the context of only temporal connection between KP or Baloch violence and cross-border. The most comprehensible conclusions are related to organizational presence, opportunity, sequence and institutional interaction and covert state intent are less definite.

CONCLUSION

The 2021 terrorism issue in Pakistan may be regarded as a complex process. TTP re-uniting started prior to their Taliban conquering Kabul. The 2021 Afghan change in August that followed, made sanctuary and security of leadership and movement, as well as depth of organization, more valuable; the collapse of the ceasefire in November 2022 further changed the incentives to attacks. These shifts resulted in the creation of long-term strain since they interacted with asymmetric border administrations, policing and prosecution overhead, post-merger institutionalization, political resentments and a black market of facilitation. This is most effective in KP, whereby repetitive UN evidence and specialist evidence confirms the presence and mobility of TTPs, which are restricted to Afghanistan. Balochistan is better orchestrated: separatist, jihadist, sectarian, criminal, and regional levels are particularly interlaced, and only special instances fit the cross-border definition. It will be empirically unsound to consider as foreign-directed all Baloch violence.

The theoretical suggestion is that the lack of interdependence in security between the region and uneven capacity of states are conditioning of each other. External space of operation aids militants to heal up and the impacts arise through domestic routes, institutions, targets, grievances and markets. Internal reformation cannot possibly be enough to root out an organization that is capable of holding on to leadership and regenerating out of the sphere of coercive Islam in Pakistan.

There are a variety of ways policy can break the regeneration cycle: ensure evidence-based attribution and Afghan-facing diplomacy; disrupt proven sanctuary and mobility; enhance police, prosecution, and civilian control in merged KP districts; distinguish Baluchistan actor-specific threats; limit facilitation of crime and terror; and report similar performance metrics. It is aimed at lasting decrease of militant prospects and more firm and legal institutions.

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