

Resurgence of TTP and ISK: A Daunting Challenge to Pakistan's Counterterrorism Strategy

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Abstract

The militant groups exploiting the name of the religion have long been a challenge for Pakistan's security. The appearance and disappearance of such violent groups in Pakistan illustrate how religious militancy creates a daunting challenge for the stability of a country. This study aims to examine the resumption of violent activities of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Islamic State Khorasan (ISK). The study will answer that how these violent activities severely impacted Pakistan's counter-terrorism strategy in 2020-2023. The article highlights various post-2020 contributing factors such as the role of the resumption of Afghan Taliban's government in Afghanistan and re-emergence of TTP and the rise of ISK with a devastating anti-Pakistan politico-militancy driven agenda seemingly successful in the presence of weak governance and political instability in Pakistan. The article argues that the state needs to adopt a comprehensive strategy that addresses the root causes of religious militancy, issues related to stable governance, and effective counter-terrorism policies to combat the reorganization of the militant groups with clearly spelt out the roadmap of a long-term rehabilitation strategy for those laying down arms and renouncing violence.

Keywords: Religious Militant Groups, Pakistan, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, Islamic State Khorasan, Pakistan's Counter Terrorism Strategy

Introduction

Pakistan has been facing religious militancy for a long time. The presence of various religious extremist groups in Pakistan clearly indicates the complexity of terrorism as a multifaceted challenge to the security. Certainly, the religious militant groups in Pakistan have increasingly modified their tactics as they enhanced their ability to operate within the country and across borders. There are many phases of the rise of militant groups in the country and these phases are Cold War era, the post-cold War, post 9/11 and post Arab Spring periods. The Cold War period witnessed the jihad in Afghanistan which discernibly impacted the Pakistani society. The militant groups inspired by the Afghan's jihad continued their activities in post-Cold War era. Violent groups such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) pursued the implementation of Islamic rules according to their belief in Pakistan by stepping up violence in the post-9/11 period. The extra-regional terrorist entity "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)" established its branch named "Islamic State Khorasan -ISK" or Islamic State Khorasan Province-ISKP in Pakistan and Afghanistan through its association with Pakistani and

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Afghani militant groups since 2015 (Jadoon, 2018). ISK appeared in Pakistan already confronting troubles by religious militancy through TTP, Al-Qaeda, and other extremist organizations (Parvez, 2016). The ISK has so far been involved in several incidents of violence and instability in Pakistan (Jadoon, 2020).

Though, the Zarb-e-Azb operation conducted by Pakistan's military forces in 2014-2017 and operation Radul Fasad since 2017 yielded encouraging results. Combating terrorism, Pakistan witnessed a significant decrease in terrorist-related events from 2014 to 2019 but in the period since 2020, the terrorist activities of TTP and ISK once again registered an upward spiral throughout the country. According to American Bureau of Counter Terrorism, Pakistan observed more terrorist threats in 2020 than the previous year (2019) and the main terrorist organizations involved in violence in Pakistan included TTP and ISK (Bureau of Counter Terrorism, 2020). South Asia Terrorism Portal reported that there were 193 terrorist-related incidents in Pakistan in 2020 resulting in 506 deaths (South Asia Terrorism Portal, n.d.). The report which highlights the resurgence of violent activities of TTP and ISK in Pakistan in 2020 as compared to the previous year, emphasizes that trends of terrorist activities committed by these groups further intensified in the years after 2020 (Khan, 2023). Therefore, the resumption of terrorist activities by these groups targeting citizens, security forces, and government officials caused significant challenges to Pakistan's counter-terrorism strategy containing intelligence gatherings and the military operations against the terrorist groups (Bureau of Counter Terrorism, 2020). According to the data available, TTP and ISK have been hastily returned to target the civilians and military personnel in Pakistan in the years 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023.

Hence, this research assesses the re-return of TTP and ISK to the terror picture in Pakistan and its impact on the counter-terrorism strategy of the country. The study addresses the question of how the reappearance of these two violent groups poses a significant threat to Pakistan's counter-terrorism strategy in 2020-2023? The article explores the various reasons for the reorganization of these groups and the resumption of their violent activities in Pakistan. It highlights the role of variables such as the Afghanistan's conflict specially Afghan's crisis in post U.S. withdrawal era, the return of Afghan Taliban to power's corridors in Afghanistan, the initial lukewarm response to the requests of the Pakistani Government to Kabul for cooperation on TTP, resultant resurgence of TTP in Pakistan and the rise of the ISK, its nexus with the Pakistani militants, anti-Pakistan agenda of these militants and the weak governance and political uncertainty in the country.

Literature Review

The growth and collapse of various religious extremist groups in Pakistan have been documented in numerous studies such as chapter titled, "ISK in Afghanistan and Pakistan" in an academic work, an article, "Identifying causes of terrorism in Karachi," and another paper titled, "ISK and Afghanistan's Future Security." The TTP, Al Qaeda, ISK and other religious extremist groups have exploited the security vacuum in order to establish themselves and carry out attacks both in Pakistan including its tribal regions and abroad (Tellis, 2008). The existing literature has less

focus on the TTP and ISK's reorganization and its various factors including the return of Afghan Taliban to rule Afghanistan, political instability and weak governance structures in Pakistan, and the motivation of uneducated, unemployed and religiously perverted youth to radicalize in 2020-2023. Some of the studies highlighted the role of external factors including the situation in Afghanistan causing the resumption of religious militancy in Pakistan. No doubt, the Afghanistan's conflict has been one of the significant reasons for the upsurge of religious militant groups in Pakistan but emerging circumstances in Afghanistan in the post-U.S. withdrawal era have not been entirely covered by the accessible literature. For instance, an article only confirmed that Pakistan's support in American-led war on terror converted militant groups to an enemy in the post-9/11 era (Saleem, Rahman & Rehman, 2018). The restoration of the Afghan Taliban's government as a source of motivation for religious militant groups such as TTP in Pakistan is a missing aspect in the available scholarly work. Some scholars partially debated that the TTP recurrence means its readiness to follow in the footsteps of the Afghan Taliban and take control of the Tribal areas of Pakistan but they did not explain further (Sayed & Hamming 2023).

Similarly, ISK which boosted up its anti-Afghan Taliban harsh character and resumed its violent acts in Pakistan in the post-U.S. withdrawal era is also out of a large part of the existing literature describing tale that some Pakistani militants pledged allegiance to ISK, and for that, this group has been able to attract recruits from Pakistan (Sarkar, 2021). Weak governance structures and political instability have also contributed to the reorganization of religious militant groups in Pakistan since 2020 but this factor is also not covered by several of the current scholarly contributions. The existence of a large population of impoverished youth susceptible to radicalization has also contributed to the reorganization of religious militant groups in Pakistan but the contribution of this factor in the said period is also out of the published academic work (Sarkar, 2021). The literature concentrates on many other related issues. For instance, an article traced the genesis of ISK and its affiliation with regional and local groups (Jadoon, Jahanbani & Willis, 2018). Another study presenting the detail of the ISK's activities from 2014 to 2018, described that the group in Afghanistan struck in 16 provinces by killing 3220 persons whereas in Pakistan it targeted security forces and faith-related places of worship in all provinces by claiming the lives of 1120 persons (Jadoon, 2018).

Noticeably, like ISK, the TTP also committed deadly assaults including suicide attacks in Pakistan. TTP responded to the military operations with several attacks against the state's interests (Center for Preventive Action, 2023). Apart from the certain areas of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) including its tribal regions, the Baluchistan province is considered more feasible for terrorist activities due to its sparse population, favourable terrain and overstretched law enforcing agencies. Besides regional dynamics, the resumption of TTP and ISK's violent activities also attracted Chinese attention as the Chinese citizens based in Pakistan were also targeted by these terrorist groups. A review of the literature concludes that there are various examples of academic work on the various factors of terrorism in Pakistan, but the existing literature has not a significant concentration on the terrorist activities of ISK

and TTP and its impact on Pakistan's counter-terrorism strategy in 2020-2023 and it is a literature gap which will be filled by this academic exertion.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of social constructivism is the appropriate theoretical paradigm to explain the phenomena of ideological construct initially built and communicated by Al-Qaida by using it as a stool to propagate a particular stream of religious interpretation and indoctrinate Muslim youth across the globe (Spencer, 2012). This constructed brand of jihadist philosophy also was capitalized by supporters of the Afghan Taliban and TTP to achieve their political and ideological objectives (Afridi, 2018). The constructed reality was selectively modified to suit the political designs of terrorist originations, since 9/11; it was a jihad as they considered against an "imperialist power" forcibly occupying Afghanistan by ousting a government of the Afghan Taliban (Shafi, 2019).

According to Vinay Kaura, greatly inspired by the political developments in Afghanistan in 2021, the TTP's leaders declared the Afghan Taliban as a role model and re-initiated a mounting terrorist move from its former base in the North Waziristan, the bordering region of Pakistan (Kaura, 2022). Due to political uncertainty in the country, TTP's construct gained prominence with mixed response from political leadership and religious forces. Though some of the political elites and security forces were convinced that TTP was fighting through using religious ideology as an instrument for political objectives yet, political turmoil is a major stumbling block towards a cohesive counterterrorism strategy. Due to lack of credible counter-ideological narrative and socio-economic incentives in affected regions, TTP gained sizeable ingress into conservatist tribal society and recruited a number of young fighters who possessed the capability to perpetuate the frenzied terror war against Pakistan for many years (Sayed, 2021). The constructivist framework also meets to determine the reasons for the formation of ISK having a supra-state and supra-national identity a diverse political ideology poses threats to a nation-state concept (Mousavi, 2020).

In this study, the authors employ a thematic approach which usually applies when a researcher closely examines a set of data to find common ideas, topics, and concepts that occur repetitively (Caulfield, 2022). The research uses qualitative analysis from academic books, journals, government reports, media and internet sources to analyse the factors contributing to the restructuring of TTP and ISK and their violent activities since 2020 in Pakistan. By using this qualitative methodological approach, the authors make an effort to address the research goals correlated to reasons for the reorganization of these terrorist groups and its impact on the state's anti-terrorist policy and present feasible recommendations in the context.

A Resurgence of TTP and ISK in Pakistan in 2020-2023

Among the terrorist groups, TTP and ISK have been particularly active in Pakistan in 2020-2023. These two groups staged high-profile attacks against Pakistani security installations few of which were included strategic security headquarters. TTP

and ISK's growing influence and corresponding attacks against security forces in 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023, are worrisome development for Pakistani security managers. Taking these time span, the article's aims to analyse the terrorism committed by TTP and ISK and its impact on counter-terrorism policy of Pakistan from 2020 to 2023, the authors presented some of the terrorist incidents committed by these groups in the aforementioned period. Both TTP and ISK have been responsible for many attacks in Pakistan, targeting both civilians and security personnel in the country. According to an article titled, "The Revival of Pakistani Taliban," TTP conducted 149 attacks while ISK's Pakistan chapter committed 13 attacks throughout 2020 (Sayed & Hamming, 2021). In its violent activities in 2020, beside the military forces and police personnel, the TTP also targeted civilians (Sayed, 2021). For instance, South Asia Terrorism Portal narrated that nine persons including five females were wounded in an attack through a hand grenade in Peshawar on January 14, 2020 (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2020). According to another report of the same source, at least four Army personnel were killed during a battle with the militants of TTP at a locality in North Waziristan on March 18, 2020. Pakistan's Military also claimed to kill seven terrorists of this group in this clash erupted because of an intelligence-based operation (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2020). The Hizb-ul-Ahrar (HuA), a faction of TTP took responsibility for the murder of two police personnel on May 26, 2020, in a suburb of Islamabad (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2020). In August 2020, TTP was also accused of an assassination attempt on a lawyer namely Fazal Khan who was seeking justice for the 149 people including 132 children killed by this group in the Peshawar's school terror incident of December 2014 (Dawn, 2020). TTP further strengthened in 2020 when two of its breakaway factions Jamat-al-Ahrar (JuA) and Hizb-ul-Ahrar (HuA) re-united with the mother organisation (TTP) on August 17, 2020 (Agency, 2022). According to a UN report in 2020, most of the around 6,000 Pakistani terrorists based in Afghanistan belonged to TTP (Gannon, 2020).

TTP continued its violent activities in 2021 as five people including a policeman died and 12 others wounded in a bomb explosion at the parking of a hotel in Quetta on April 21, 2021 (Counter Extremism Project, n.d.). The year 2021 was also the period of the beginning of negotiations and a temporary ceasefire between TTP and Pakistani government authorities through a mediation of the Afghan Taliban but the peace process failed in 2022 (Hussain, 2022). After the failure of the truce, TTP not only continued its violence throughout the country, but it further increased the brutal acts as according to the official sources, in the first three months of 2022, a total of "97 Pakistani soldiers and officers were killed in the terrorist attacks" (Gilani, 2022). In the month of April, 24 security personnel were killed and 26 injured in a series of attacks committed by TTP through its "Al-Badr" operation against the state security forces in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province (Dawn, 2022). The period from May 2022 to October 2022 was a period of extension of the armistice between the two sides but soon after the end of this ceasefire, this group enhanced its brutal attacks manifold against the Pakistani security forces. On November 30, 2022, four persons lost their lives in a TTP's suicide attack on a police vehicle in Quetta (Mashal, 2022) and the death of three other police personnel was also reported when TTP admitted an

attack on a police check point in Nowshera area of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa on December 3, 2022 (Crisis24, 2023).

TTP continued its deadly terrorist activities with full force in the year 2023. In this article data from January to September 2023 has been analysed and three incidents presented below as samples of brutalities of this groups in the aforementioned period of the year. These incidents are included target killing of two Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) personnel claimed by Lashkar-e-Khorasan, a TTP-Al-Qaida linked group in Khanewal City in Southern Punjab on January 4, 2023. Responsibility of death of above 80 people in a terror attack on a mosque in Police Line Peshawar on January 30, 2023, was also accepted by TTP. End of month of September 2023 witnessed a fatal suicide attack on a religious procession in Mastung town of Balochistan province killing 53 people, including a high-ranked police officer while injuring 100 others (Gul, 2023). This attack took place on September 29, 2023, and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) denied its involvement in the attack.

Similarly, by increasing its brutal attacks, ISK also reappeared in the terror circumstances of Pakistan in the aforementioned period. On January 10, 2020, a suicide bomber of this terrorist group targeted people praying in a mosque in Quetta causing death of 15 people and injuring 20 others (Gul, 2020). According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, the Government of Pakistan declared such anti-state activities as a challenge and one of the examples could be cited as security forces killed four alleged ISK militants in the Bahawalpur district of Punjab on May 17, 2020 (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2020). Likewise, on May 18, 2020, a court in Karachi sentenced two militants affiliated with the ISK to death for a blast on a Sufi shrine in Seven Sharif, the city of Sindh province (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2020). According to a similar source, in another episode, the Karachi police arrested a militant of ISK on May 30, 2020.

ISK's brutalities in 2021 also proved when the group claimed the assassination of 11 coal miners belonging to Shia-Hazara ethnic community and injured four others in the Karachi Neighborhood of Baluchistan Province on January 3, 2021 (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2021). During this year, terming ISK as more dangerous than TTP, a high-ranked Pakistani police officer said, "ISK a bigger threat to peace in the province than TTP" (Ali, 2022). Even, ISK was declared responsible for killing at least 13 people in an attack on a vehicle transporting Chinese nationals in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province on July 14, 2021 (Shahzad, 2021). In the year 2022, various incidents related to violent activities of the ISK in Pakistan were also reported. At least 56 Shia Muslims were killed and 194 others injured when ISK's terrorists conducted a suicide attack on a mosque during Friday's prayers in Peshawar on March 4, 2022 (Din, 2022). On August 29, 2022, ISK's suspected terrorists killed a Police constable and two construction workers in the city of Karachi and on December 10, 2022, police killed four ISK's terrorists in the mountainous area near the Pak-Afghan border in North Waziristan District (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2022).

2023 also witnessed the continuation of ISK's violent activities in Pakistan.

Bajaur district of KP was one of the hotspots in the context of these activities whereas a prominent figure of a religious political group, “Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F)” namely Noor Muhammad was killed by ISK on June 22. ISK also claimed at least the lives of 54 people and injured more than 100 in the terrorist attack on a gathering of JUI-F in the same area on July 30, 2023 (Rehman, 2023). On September 14, 2023, an attack on another leader of JUI-F namely Hafiz Hamdullah in Mastung District of Balochistan on September 14, 2023 and ISK took responsibility of this attack next day. The month of September ended with the death of at least five people and injuring 12 others in two suicide blasts targeting a mosque located inside the premises of a police station in Hangu District of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) on September 29, 2023. Although, ISK is suspected in connection with this attack, no one claimed responsibility for the attack yet.

Total of 3,125 people including 828 civilians, 1,189 security personnel and 1,108 terrorists or insurgents were killed in 1,179 terror incidents in the different areas of Pakistan and many TTP and ISK-related cases are among these happenings in 2020-2022 and first nine months of (January-September) 2023.

Table 1: Resurgence of Terrorism in Pakistan in 2020-2023

Year	Terror incidents	Non-combatants	Police/Military personnel	Terrorists/Militants	Total Deaths
2020	193	169	178	159	506
2021	267	214	226	223	663
2022	365	229	379	363	971
2023	354	216	406	363	985
Total**	1,179	828	1,189	1,108	3,125

Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal (South Asia Terrorism Portal, n.d.).

Return of Afghan Taliban to Power

U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan which caused access of Afghan Taliban to power corridors was specifically an inspiring source for the religious militant groups like TTP and ISK carrying their separate anti-state strategies in Pakistan under their supra-state ideologies. Thus, besides the other factors, this was the significant reason for the re-emergence of TTP and ISK’s activities in Pakistan. Both groups have distinct anti-Pakistan ideologies using religion to pursue the objectives of an Islamic government or an Islamic caliphate according to their different and particular faiths respectively. By waging the terrorist campaign, in Pakistan, TTP aims to overthrow the current political setup and install an Afghan Taliban’s style government in the country. Alike, ISIS’ Caliphate for a short time in parts of Syria and Iraq was a symbol of inspiration for ISK and other like-minded extremist mindsets in Pakistan (South Asia Terrorism Portal, n.d.).

Although, the Afghan Taliban and ISK in Afghanistan hold separate and adversarial political agendas but TTP and ISK having corresponding anti-Pakistan plans, have similarities in their violent activities in the country. Soon after its return

to power, the Afghan Taliban released all TTP's militants including its leading figures detained by the previous Afghan government and these steps encouraged TTP to use Afghanistan as a base for the resumption of its violent activities in Pakistan (Mir, 2022). In order to pressure the Government of Pakistan and seek concessions on the agenda of negotiations through the mediation of the Afghan Taliban, TTP launched many attacks on the state's security forces and national interests throughout the country. The incident of killing more than 100 people on January 30, 2023, in a suicide blast in a police's mosque in Peshawar could be an example of brutalities committed by TTP to achieve its criminal objectives (BBC, 2023). The rise of terrorism in 2020-2023 in Pakistan was a stark reminder that the monster of terror was again rearing its ugly head which was claimed to have been crushed decisively a few years back. TTP sanctuaries in Afghanistan are a worrisome phenomenon which is linked to ISK's inspired terrorist strikes against Pakistani law enforcing agencies and Afghan Taliban look the other way making the whole saga suspect (Center for Preventive Action, 2023).

ISK separately committed the terrorist attacks in Pakistan in order to pursue its goals the group has the support of some local militants in the context. An opinion article explained the basis of cooperation among militant groups saying that "generally, like-minded and ideologically similar groups forge varying levels (high-end to low-end) of cooperation against a superior common adversary" (Khan, 2023). The high-end cooperation could be strategic and long lasting whereas low-end collaboration could be short-lived for tactical gains. Another factor is that when the Afghan Taliban after its return to power in Afghanistan took strict actions against ISK, this group found Pakistan an easier location for its violent activities.

After taking over the power of Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan, then Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan had expressed optimism that the Afghan Taliban will persuade TTP's figures to negotiate peacefully and gradually return to their homes in Pakistan. However, a series of parley proved unfavourable as TTP misused the pause in the military operations for its regrouping and reorganizing for more deadly attacks against Pakistani security forces. Their demands were unconstitutional and unacceptable to the Government of Pakistan. TTP would strive to keep the state under pressure by colluding with like-minded terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Khan, 2023).

The literature available argued that TTP demonstrated its resurgence after the takeover by the Taliban in Afghanistan because this group felt emboldened to pursue its so-called objectives to enforce Sharia with support from the Afghan Taliban (Sayed, 2021). Asfandiyar Mir's contribution to the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) titled, "After the Taliban's Takeover: Pakistan's TTP problem" (Mir, 2022) dwelt in detail on growing TTP's combat potential, its nexus with ISK in Pakistan and most importantly support from Afghan Taliban, especially after the return of Taliban government in Afghanistan. Particularly, after the failure of its negotiations with the government of Pakistan through the mediation of the Afghan Taliban in the post-U.S. withdrawal era, the TTP showed its capacity to confront the state's security with a number of terrorist attacks.

Weak Governance and Political Instability

Pakistan has a continuous battle against terrorism but despite of its efforts, the country has witnessed a surge in terrorist activities in recent years. According to a report compiled by the Global Terrorism Index 2020, countries with ineffective governance, weak political institutions, and corruption are more vulnerable to terrorist attacks (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2020). Another report referring to the similar situation in Pakistan described that poor governance and weak political institutions have drastically contributed to the security problems in the country (Yasin & Malik, 2014).

Initially, in 2020, an anti-government campaign of an opposition alliance resulted in political uncertainty in the country. The opponent alliance namely Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) organized a series of rallies and protests the government of Imran Khan (the Ex-Prime Minister) in 2020 (Baloch & Ellis-Petersen, 2020). The protests continued till March 2022 diverting attention of the government towards handling political issues and this situation created an environment favourable to the growth of terrorist activities. The whole year of 2022 and the first nine months of 2023 also observed political and economic uncertainty in Pakistan. The TTP and ISK took advantage of the political variability and carried out several attacks on the security personnel and common citizens in the country in 2020, including attacks on security checkpoints in Waziristan and other tribal areas of the country. According to an author, 2021 was marked by a resurgence of TTP in Pakistan, (Afzal, 2022) and the terrorist attacks committed by this group and other terrorist outfits continued in 2022 and 2023.

Weak governance is another significant factor contributing to the growing terrorist activities in Pakistan. According to a study conducted by an American study centre, especially gaps in the governance in northwest frontier regions of the country allowed the TTP to relocate in border areas of the country (Jadoon, 2021). In 2021, the government of Pakistan signed a peace deal with the TTP, (Al-Jazeera, 2021) which permitted the terrorist organization to re-establish its base in Pakistan. Subsequently, in April 2021, the TTP became responsible for killing five people, including a Chinese national near a hotel in Quetta. Thus, ISKP also took advantage of the situation and committed several attacks in the province, including an attack on a bus carrying Chinese engineers, killing 13 people. These examples demonstrate how weak governance and political instability have contributed to the growth of terrorist activities in Pakistan. The research suggests that weak governance and political instability in Pakistan have contributed significantly to the reoccurrence of terrorist activities. The study found that terrorist organizations have exploited the opportunity of weak governance structures to carry out attacks in the country.

Challenges to Pakistan's Counter-terrorism Strategy

Primarily, under the post 9/11 counter-terrorism strategy of Pakistan, the country mobilized its forces on its north-western border regions, particularly the state conducted several operations in 2003-2004 to ensure that terrorists were contained in former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Then President General

Musharraf's strategy partially worked because the U.S. started hurling allegations on Pakistan of double game and not doing enough (Basit, 2013). In 2005 and 2006, General Musharraf tried to find a settlement through a strategy of 3-D (dialogue, deterrence and development), which continued for a short time in tenure of the civilian government (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020).

Pakistan launched further military operations after the red mosque episode of 2007 when terrorists directly confronted the authority of the State. The state's military operations continued under then Chief of Army Staff, General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani with free hand from Pakistan's People Party (PPP)'s government led by then president Asif Ali Zardari in 2008-2013. National Internal Security Policy (NISP) and National Action Plan were among the anti-terrorism projects of that era (Afridi, 2016). Thus, the military cleared militant-infested region of Swat in 2009 followed by a military blitz in South Waziristan in 2010.

Thereafter Pakistan witnessed the climax of terrorist attacks, and the state was rocked with high-profile attacks against civilian targets, military installations and strategic military headquarters. Particularly, the terrorist attack on the military General Headquarters (GHQ) in Rawalpindi in 2009 was an unusual threat to the state's security (Abbas, 2009). Thus, Pakistan's counter-terrorism strategy was reactive by selectively clearing areas posing imminent danger to state sovereignty (Abbas, 2009).

Then mayhem at Peshawar Army Public School (December 2014), claiming the lives of 149 including 132 school children jolted the conscience of the divided political elite of Pakistan (Shah & Asif, 2015). There emerged a national consensus in the form of the National Action Plan of 2015 with the unwavering resolve to dismantle the terror infrastructure from FATA and purging the country from the monster of terror and fear through strict operations. Then a 20-point National Action Plan (NAP) offers a base for national resolve (NACTA, 2014). In 2015, it included the implementation of capital punishment for those convicted in terrorist cases, the formation of special military courts for two years, setting up an anti-terrorism force, a ban on funding and activities of militant outfits and armed gangs, strict action against the literature, media, social media and other communication links involved in promoting hate, terrorism, violent extremism and sectarianism and intolerance (NACTA, 2014). These measures caused a significant reduction in the waves of terrorism till 2019 but it increased in 2020.

The rapid surge in the terrorist activities of TTP and ISK in Pakistan in 2020-2023 has been a matter of serious security concern for the country. A number of TTP and ISK led attacks inside Pakistan underlined the gaps in Pakistan's security apparatus, especially in controlling borders with Afghanistan and security measures throughout the country. It is established that the counter-terrorism policy is not properly addressing the shortcomings and adapting to the changing threat landscape. It is in spite of that the state increased security measures under a National Action Plan (NAP) including improving border security, cracking down on extremist groups, and regulating religious seminaries but in 2020-2023 these actions faced a crucial challenge in the form of brutal activities of the militant groups.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the impact of the reorganization of religious militant groups in Pakistan is a complex phenomenon which requires a comprehensive countering approach. It is verified that the reorganization of religious militant groups in Pakistan poses a significant challenge to the country's counterterrorism strategy. The study distinguishes certain factors that contribute to the reorganization of TTP and ISK threatening the state's ability. These factors included the restoration of the Afghan Taliban's government in the post-American withdrawal era as a motivational source, connections of foreign terrorist organizations such as ISK with Pakistani militants, weak governance, and political instability in Pakistan. Especially, issue of lacking wherewithal of civilian law enforcing agencies including police and other forces should be resolved appropriately and these forces should be suitably equipped to confront the hardened criminals of terrorist groups - TTP and ISK.

The state needs to adopt a wide-ranging policy that addresses the root causes of terrorism especially regrouping of the militant groups and initiate broader efforts to eliminate the threats of violence from the society. It is necessary that the state should remove the socio-economic disparities and promote tolerance and unity, and make necessary steps to provide equal educational and employment opportunities and health facilities to the masses. The study proposes further promising efforts including continuity in the implementation of the National Action Plan of 2015, which outlined a wide-ranging strategy to fight terrorism, and restructuring the judicial system for speeding up of court process including terrorism-related litigations.

Another element is the ideology of the terrorists which could be handed through soft actions. Many of the supporters of the terrorist organizations are brainwashed and are being misused by the seniors of their groups. Apart from social-economic, political deprivations is another issue requiring to be settled properly. To handle the sectarian cleavages, which also one of the causes of sectarian violence, an effort should be made to ensure sectarian harmony in Pakistan. Since terrorism is not a domestic issue, Pakistan should pursue all available avenues of diplomacy and political engagement to deal with the menace of terrorism in a holistic manner; so that regional stakeholders and global actors cooperate in defeating terrorism. In addition, Pakistan will have to enforce stringent measures comprising kinetic and non-kinetic actions for many years before its counterterrorism strategy yields the desired dividends.

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