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US Withdrawal from Afghanistan: Time for an Indigenous Pakistani Counter Terrorism Discourse?

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Abstract

While the US has withdrawn from Afghanistan, the Taliban are back in power in Kabul, and the War on Terror (WOT) has ostensibly ended, terrorism in Pakistan has not.[1] On the contrary, after witnessing a significant slump between 2015 and 2020, the frequency and potency of terror in Pakistan has once again increased substantially in 2021.

Following the reunification of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in August 2020, and an alliance of the Baloch and Sindhi separatist groups against the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), terrorism (which witnessed a lull between 2015 and 2020) has increased in Pakistan.[2] At the same time, some religious groups from communities not known for aggressive religio-political behaviour, such as the Barelvi Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP), have earned notoriety for using street agitation and disruptive politics in pursuit of their ideological goals.[3] The misplaced enthusiasm of these radical groups will further stifle free speech in Pakistan, and constrict the space for peaceful coexistence and critical thinking.[4]

The purpose of this paper is to generate a debate in Pakistan for a more contextualised and indigenised counter terrorism (CT) discourse, which is neither antagonistic to the practise of Islam, nor locates Pakistan's policy choices since the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as the singular or sole driver of extremist trends in society.

This paper examines the evolution of terrorism and the CT discourse in Pakistan. It argues that following the US exit from Afghanistan, Pakistan should take a long view of the terrorism challenge to move away from post-9/11 CT discourse. It conceptualises what constitutes extremism and terrorism in Pakistan's context.

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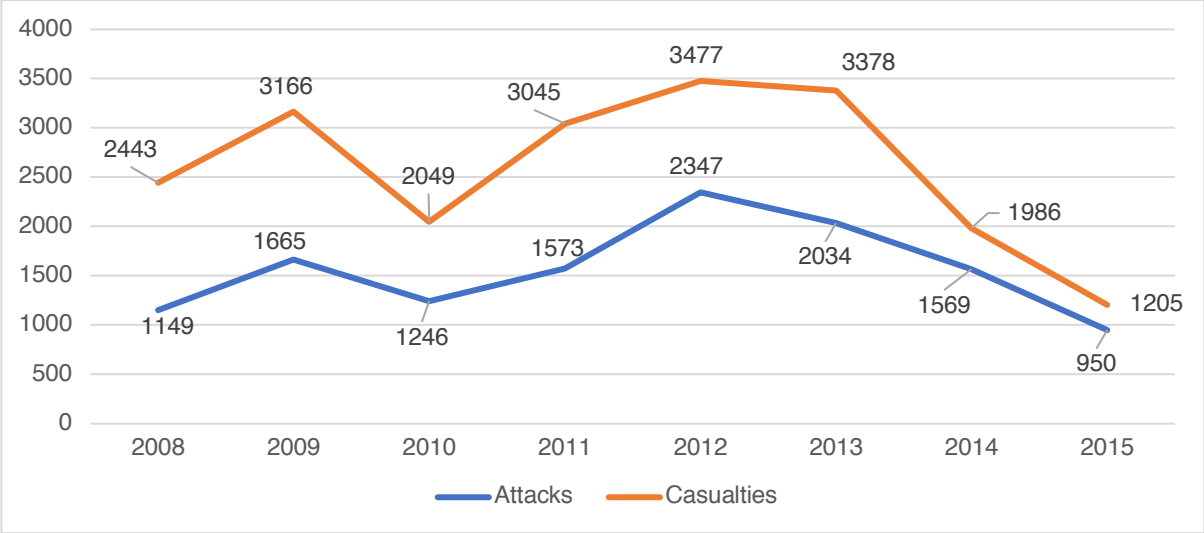
1 Introduction

Pakistan was no stranger to terrorism before the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, and in the ensuing US-led global war on terror (WOT), Pakistan became a so-called "frontline state." The global WOT fundamentally altered terrorism in Pakistan. In the early days of the US/NATO invasion of Afghanistan, as the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda remnants entered Pakistani territory—both through the formerly Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), and through Balochistan—an intense and qualitatively different form of violent extremist insurgency began to take root in Pakistan. One obvious indicator was suicide attacks, which increased dramatically from 2008 to 2013, making Pakistan one of the worst affected countries in the world.

1.1 An Altered Landscape

As the global WOT continued, over 80,000 Pakistanis were killed, economic losses of over $150 billion were incurred, and the massive internal displacement of millions took place. In the Western media, the cliched and stereotypical framing of Pakistan (for valid and invalid reasons) as a security threat, ranged from the country being described as "the most dangerous place on earth", to the oft-cited American complaint of Pakistan being an "ally from hell". The human, economic, social, and reputational costs Pakistan has incurred in the last two decades continue to pile up, and the country will likely be recovering from them for years to come.

Chart 1: Terrorist Attacks and Casualties in Pakistan (2008-2015)



Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal (https://www.satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/fatalities/pakistan)

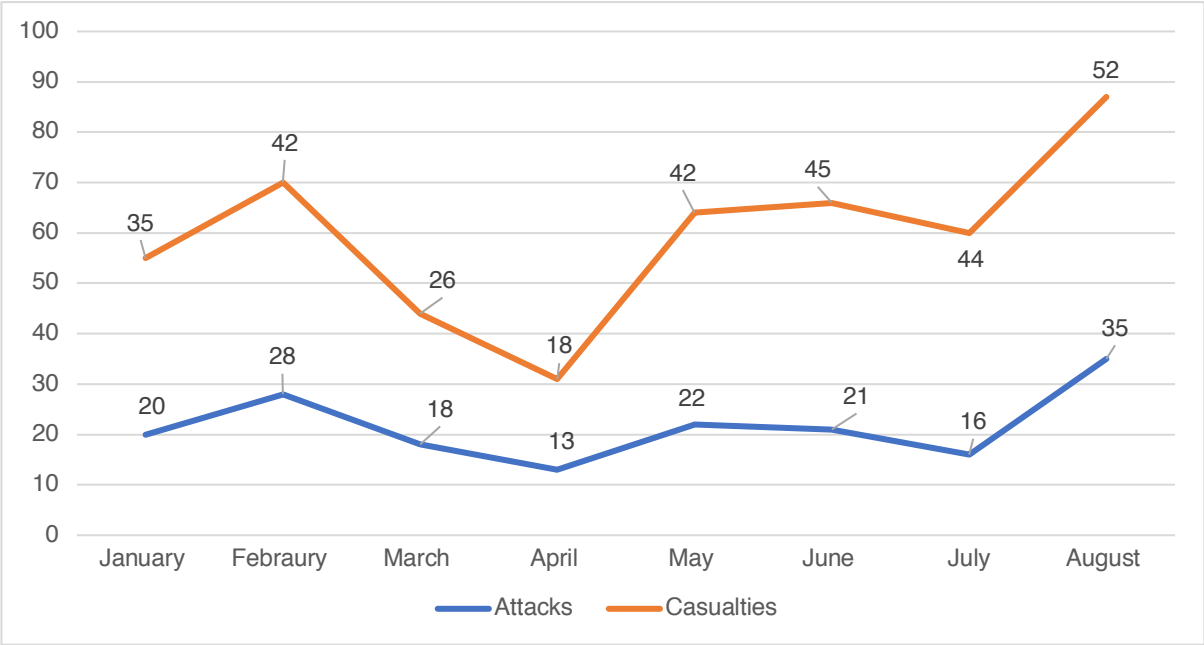
1.2 Likely Impact of the US Withdrawal from Afghanistan

While the US has withdrawn from Afghanistan, the Taliban are back in power in Kabul, and the WOT has ostensibly ended, terrorism in Pakistan has not.[5] On the contrary, after witnessing a significant slump between 2015 and 2020, the frequency and potency of terror in Pakistan has once again increased substantially in 2021.

For years to come, Afghanistan and its neighbours will have to grapple with the by-products of the global WOT, such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), and the Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K). The US withdrawal will give fillip to these groups, increasing their space to operate and enabling events like large scale prison breaks and escapes. An estimated 5,000 to 7,000 militants, including several high-profile Al-Qaeda members, have reportedly already fled from the Bagram and Pul-e-Charki prisons.[6] The Taliban's return to power, and the accompanying triumphant narrative of anti-state religious extremists, will strengthen the pre-existing bonds of the Taliban with

violent extremist groups in Pakistan, nearly all of whom reflect a jubilant and celebratory mood. The narrative of a Taliban victory will create a deep, long lasting, and complicated set of issues for Pakistan.[7]

Chart 2: Terrorist Incidents and Casualties in Pakistan in 2021



Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal (https://www.satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/fatalities/pakistan)

Though the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan may seem to address Pakistan's longstanding concerns of Indian interference, it has emboldened the religious violent extremist groups in the region and around the world.[8] It is probable that these outfits will become more aggressive in their activism, and will likely be emboldened in their exercise of violence and vigilantism.[9] Pakistan must carefully assess the post US withdrawal environment in Afghanistan. This is neither a time to be complacent nor joyous about the return of the Taliban[9], nor a time to be apologetic for the pursuit of security and safety—regardless of Western media portrayals. Instead, it is time for Pakistan to try to establish an organic, indigenous, and sustainable national discourse about its counter terrorism (CT) doctrine—one that endures across different threats and different regimes in the region, and more globally. This paper seeks to establish the historical context, performance, impacts and outcomes, and future trajectory for a new Pakistani CT discourse.

1.3 The Post 2015 Terrorist Profile in Pakistan

Following the reunification of TTP in August 2020, and an alliance of the Baloch and Sindhi separatist groups against the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), terrorism (which witnessed a lull between 2015 and 2020) has increased in Pakistan.[9] At the same time, some religious groups from communities not known for aggressive religio-political behaviour, such as the Barelvi Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP), have earned notoriety for using street agitation and disruptive politics in pursuit of their ideological goals.[10] The misplaced enthusiasm of these radical groups will further stifle free speech in Pakistan, and constrict the space for peaceful coexistence and critical thinking.[11]

The counter terrorism discourse failed to evolve organically in Pakistan in great part due to the US intervention in Afghanistan requiring consistent Pakistani intelligence, logistic, and security cooperation.[12] In other words, domestically, Pakistan's CT policies and operations were seen as an extension of the US-led WOT, with many in Pakistan considering it a war of necessity. Though the US has withdrawn from Afghanistan, the twin threats of extremism and terrorism in Pakistan persist.[13] This presents Pakistan both with an opportunity and a challenge to revisit its terrorism and CT discourse.

While externalising the extremist trends in Pakistan is not without merit, the multi-decade sustenance of extremist groups, ideology, and organisational networks—combined with the incredible power of social media as a force multiplier for extreme political and social ideas and narratives—means that the bulk of the burden of extremism in Pakistan in 2021 is domestic, and not foreign. There is little doubt that external support for extremist and terrorist groups operating in Pakistan exists—but this support serves as an enabling factor. It is not the engine that generates terrorism. Today, that engine is largely a domestic public policy challenge.

1.4 Why a New CT Discourse?

The purpose of this paper is to generate a debate in Pakistan for a more contextualised and indigenised CT discourse, which is neither antagonistic to the practise of Islam, nor locates Pakistan's policy choices since the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as the singular or sole driver of extremist trends in society. The diagnosis needs to be deeper and more evidence-based than the binaries that are commonly adopted in wider CT discourse around Pakistan and the policy choices it has made with respect to Afghanistan.

It is important to clarify that this paper is neither an apologia for Pakistan's policy choices in Afghanistan, nor an attempt to deflect attention from the prevalent intolerance in Pakistani society. It is also not dismissive of the post-9/11 Western strategies or scholarship on counter terrorism. Indeed, they have had utility, for those countries as well as for Pakistan. But this utility has had substantial limits. On balance, a cookie cutter CT discourse borrowed from the US driven global WOT cannot effectively help Pakistan address its complex, deep-rooted, and multi-layered extremism and terrorism problems. These problems are inextricably linked to the country's convoluted domestic identity matrices, and perhaps, an indigenised and contextualised CT discourse can offer a way forward.

This paper will examine the evolution of terrorism and the CT discourse in Pakistan. It will argue that following the US exit from Afghanistan, Pakistan should take a long view of the terrorism challenge to move away from post-9/11 CT discourse. It will then conceptualise what constitutes extremism and terrorism in Pakistan's context or otherwise. Terrorism in Pakistan is not confined to religiously inspired militancy only. Singling out religious groups, whilst overlooking grievance-based ethnic extremist violence in Sindh and Balochistan, overlooks Pakistan's complex and heterogenous terrorism landscape. In this regard, a Western CT-lens becomes especially problematic, meriting reflection and work towards a more organically evolved CT framework.

1.5 Note of Caution: "Fortress of Islam" or "Bastion for Muslims"

It is important to point out that reversing the tide against extremism and terrorism in Pakistan will require a generational effort. In this regard, the longstanding contradictions and confusions within Pakistan's national discourse, emanating from convoluted compound identity, over whether it is an Islamic or a moderate Muslim state, is a major stumbling block.[14] As long as this debate is not settled and these confusions are not addressed, various extremist groups and confessional movements will continue their efforts to redefine Pakistan's nationalist discourse in line with their ideological frameworks. This lies at the heart of the effort to push back against extremism and terrorism in Pakistan. This paper will also expand the discussion of religious extremism in Pakistan to incorporate non-violent extremism. It will reflect on why Pakistan needs to pay close non-securitised and non-militarised attention to this aspect within the broader Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) framework. This paper will conclude with some policy recommendations.

Using open-source data, this paper employs a descriptive-analytical approach to highlight various facets of Pakistan's terrorist landscape. However, while it identifies these complexities, exploring and explaining them in greater depth is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, by drawing attention to them, the aim is to initiate an indigenous debate to revisit Pakistan's CT discourse in the aftermath of US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Though this paper argues for an indigenous approach grounded in local scholarship in Pakistan and identifies the deficiencies and inherent biases of Western approaches, it is not outrightly dismissive of the latter. Their limited utility remains, but Pakistan will have to come up with its own answers to its internal security problems.

2 Point of Departure: Why a Pakistan CT Discourse?

In the West, barring some exceptions, Pakistan remains overanalysed but least understood. In fact, the country is seen as an object of research to be countered or deterred, rather than subject of research to be understood in its right context.[15] The Western tendency is to view religious violent extremism that uses Islam and Islamic symbols as the most dangerous threat to have emerged after the post-Cold war bipolar competition. Consistent with that view, the US and its Western allies have framed Pakistan in stereotypical terms, reducing a country of 220 million people, and the second largest Muslim nation, to merely a supporter and facilitator of terrorism.[16]

Pakistan's reluctance to act against the Taliban, and its prioritising kinetic action against anti-Pakistan terrorist groups had two reasons.[17] First, Pakistan wanted to target those groups which were attacking Pakistani security institutions, people, and infrastructure. Being a resource-scarce country, Pakistan gave precedence to these groups over the Afghanistan-focused groups which took refuge in the country along with three million Afghan refugees. Second, Pakistan knew that the US and its Western allies would leave sooner or later, and the former would have to live and deal with these groups in the aftermath. Hence, the country's security establishment took its decisions keeping in view its regional interests, security environment, and ground realities.

Pakistan's reluctance to act against the Afghanistan-focused groups frustrated the US and the West. They persistently portrayed Pakistan as "the most dangerous place on earth," "an ally from hell," and even "the epicentre of global terrorism." This reductive characterisation of Pakistan as a security threat conveniently overlooks the fact that Pakistanis are the primary victims of terrorism emanating from this country—around 80,000 Pakistanis have lost their lives since 9/11.[18] Furthermore, after the US intervention, Al-Qaeda, which was pushed into Pakistan's tribal regions abutting Afghanistan, were not Pakistan's creation. Rather, they were the by-product of the US' irresponsible and unilateral withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, following Russia's defeat.[19] Pakistan was left alone to deal with the aftermath of the Afghan conflict by the US.[20]

The flawed Western approach of viewing Pakistan through the narrow Afghan lens since 9/11 helped neither its WOT in Afghanistan, nor its ties with Islamabad. Since the West considers all forms of Islamist radicalism as malevolent and sees it in apocalyptic terms, Pakistan has remained in the spotlight of doomsday prophets and alarmists.[21] Typically, religious violent extremist organisations are viewed as the extension of the Pakistani state, or worse, Pakistani society. Such superficial analyses which depict Pakistan as a danger to the world are problematic.[22] It becomes important, then, to disengage the analysis of terrorism in Pakistan from a one-dimensional post-9/11 lens, and acknowledge it as an indigenous problem. To start an indigenous discourse, the country must look inwards while appreciating the regional and external dimensions of what still is primarily an internal threat.

It is a fact that the WOT neither had clearly defined goals nor a requisite strategy to curb terrorism.[23] The US invaded Afghanistan in anger, outraged by Al-Qaeda's 9/11 attacks, and departed in utter confusion and disarray, leaving behind a trail of chaos and an unmitigated disaster.[24] The US approach in Afghanistan constantly fluctuated between population-focused counterinsurgency and enemy-centric CT approaches.[25] Likewise, there was confusion over whether the aim was to eliminate Al-Qaeda or defeat the Taliban. If the goal was to eliminate Al-Qaeda, the assassination of Osama Bin Laden in 2011 was the best opportunity for the US to bring the WOT to a logical conclusion.[26] However, the war dragged on without ever achieving much. For instance, after announcing a troop surge in 2009 to reverse the momentum of the Taliban's insurgent campaign, then President Barack Obama also announced December 2014 as the withdrawal date.[27] Such contradictory messaging clearly signalled to the Taliban that the US was desperate to leave Afghanistan by creating a face saving mechanism for itself through a troop surge. Such confusing and fluctuating polices produced hedging attitudes towards Afghanistan among regional countries, including Pakistan.

Pakistan's sacrifices during the WOT are conveniently ignored by the US and the West. It is a fact that none of the 9/11 perpetrators was a Pakistani national, nor had Pakistan asked the Taliban-led regime of Afghanistan to shelter Osama Bin Laden. Pakistan was caught in the crosshairs of the Afghan civil

war in the 1990s and the blowback of the US invasion of Afghanistan after 9/11. The country was trying to manage the negative spill over of instability emanating from great power interventions in Afghanistan.

At the same time, while the US conveniently blamed Pakistan left, right, and centre for providing logistical support to the Afghan Taliban, sanctuaries of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Baloch separatist groups in Afghanistan were not only ignored but almost no concerted action was taken against them. Afghanistan's soil was used by hostile regional countries to destabilise Pakistan. For instance, the Peshawar school massacre in which 143 children were killed,[28] and the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA)'s devastating 2018 attack on the Chinese consulate in Karachi. were both planned and executed from Afghanistan.[28] Subsequently, the mastermind and BLA commander, Aslam Achu was killed in a bomb blast in Kandahar.[29] So, while the US demands from Pakistan to "do more" continued, the latter's demand for dismantling TTP and BLA sanctuaries in Afghanistan were ignored. In sum, such a hostile environment, where the so-called WOT allies engaged in mutual recriminations and worked at cross-purposes, was hardly conducive to forging an organic terrorism and CT discourse in Pakistan informed by the local context and dynamics. Without addressing the underlying causes fuelling terrorism in Pakistan and devising well thought out CT strategies, Pakistan's terrorism challenge will outlast the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

3 The Terrorist Threat Landscape in Pakistan

Acknowledging and appreciating the complex and heterogenous nature of terrorism in Pakistan, which is not just confined to religiously inspired militancy alone, is fundamentally important.[30] Ethno-separatist violence by Baloch and Sindhi sub-nationalist groups has existed in Pakistan even before the 1980s' Afghan war. Pakistan has fought four different waves (1947-1958, 1959-1962, 1963-1964, and 1973-1977) of the Baloch insurgency since its creation.[31] Of course, this is not to say that the Pakistani state's policy of ignoring the grievances of Baloch tribes did not have a role in stoking those fissiparous tendencies. However, the Western fixation on religiously inspired militancy ignores the diversity of factors contributing to Pakistan's extremism challenge.

The reality is, Pakistan's multi-actor terrorism landscape is diverse, heterogenous and complicated.[32] The twenty years of WOT in neighbouring Afghanistan and its negative spill over has brought more volatility to Pakistan's threat landscape. These developments forced Pakistan to place troops at the Western borders with Afghanistan, which complicated its ties with the Pashtun tribes living in the ex-FATA region, now merged with the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

Broadly, two types of terrorist and insurgent groups operate in Pakistan: religious violent extremist groups, and sub-nationalist or ethno-separatist groups. Over the years these groups have forged alliances, and witnessed fragmentations, re-mergers, and re-splintering.[33] The fragmentation is marked by inter- and intra-group rivalries over the distribution of resources, ideological disagreements, questions of leadership, and diverging operational approaches to achieve strategic goals. Some of the local violent extremist and sub-nationalist factions in Pakistan also forged links with hostile regional agencies.

3.1 Religious Violent Extremist Groups

The religious violent extremist groups in Pakistan fall into three categories:

- anti-Pakistan, such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan,
- anti-Shia, like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and the Islamic State of Khorasan, and
- Afghanistan and Kashmir focused groups, such as the Haqqani Network and Jasihe-e-Muhammad, among others.[34]

The typological differentiations in these groups based on their diverging regional focuses and accompanying ideological agendas are not clearly demarcated. While the classifications are useful in developing a broader understanding of the multi-actor violent extremist landscape, these boundaries are hybrid and overlapping. As part of Pakistan's violent extremism ecosystem, they cohabitate and recruit from the same social pool, and both leaders and operatives have often switched sides for varying reasons. Changes in the operational environment or the geopolitical situation are the main reasons behind continuous changes in the organisational structures, operational agendas, cooperation, and rivalries of these groups.

While Pakistan's violent extremist landscape is primarily dominated by local actors, global violent extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) have their local franchises in Pakistan: Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and IS-K.[35] IS-K primarily comprises of some disgruntled leaders and operatives from a faction of the TTP which jumped on the IS bandwagon when the group was at its peak in 2014-2015.[36] On the other hand, AQIS leadership and fighters are primarily drawn from former Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami (HUJI) and Harkat-ul-Jihad, among others. AQIS' regional ties, both with the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, are deep rooted and longstanding.[37] However, this does not mean that Al-Qaeda and IS-style transnational terrorism, as witnessed in countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, persists in Pakistan—except a brief period when Al-Qaeda remnants planned attacks like the London bombings 2005, which was traced back to the ex-FATA region.[38]

The fragmentation and mushrooming of violent extremist groups is directly linked to the onset of the Afghan war and the WOT. The escalation of conflict resulted in a surge of religious violent extremist groups, and as the war situation fluctuated, mergers, splits, re-mergers, and re-splits became the order

of the day. Therefore, Pakistan's religious violent extremist landscape remains in constant, ever-evolving flux.

3.2 Sub-Nationalist & Ethno-Separatist Groups

Sub-nationalist and ethno-separatist groups are equally fractured and divisive. The sub-nationalist groups operate in Balochistan and Sindh, and until recently, they were operating from their hideouts in Afghanistan and Iran with the Indian assistance.[39] The return of the Taliban in Afghanistan will deprive them of their sanctuaries in that country. Likewise, China's growing influence in the region following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, particularly given the Iran-China deal, is likely to deprive Baloch separatists of their sanctuaries in Iran as well.[40]

Baloch separatists have more than ten groups representing different tribes, as well as a portion of middle-class youth joining from the Makran coastal belt and adjoining areas.[41] Over the years, the Baloch separatist groups have splintered due to inter-personal rivalries among tribes, and differences over the division of funds. For Baloch separatist groups such as the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and the Baloch Republican Army (BRA) whose leaders are in exile, their local commanders have created separate factions under the same names in Pakistan (Balochistan). In 2018, the Baloch separatist groups formed an alliance, the Baloch Raji Ajoi Sangar (BRAS) (discussed later).[42]

Sindhi separatists have two main groups: the Sindhudesh Liberation Army (SLA), and the Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army (SRA). After staying defunct for several years, SRA has become active once again in Karachi and some areas of interior Sindh, mostly targeting government infrastructure, security institution personnel, and Chinese nationals.[43] The Baloch and Sindhi separatist groups have forged an alliance against CPEC (discussed later).[44]

3.3 The Religious Violent Extremist Worldview

Ideologically, there are three dominant views in Pakistan's religious violent extremist landscape—that both complement and compete with each other: the "Caliphate" narrative, the "Ghazwa" narrative and the "Emirate" narrative.

3.3.1 The Caliphate Narrative

The advent of IS in 2014 introduced the Caliphate narrative which was popularised on social media and gained traction among Islamist radicals in different parts of the world.[45] In Pakistan, banned outfits like Hizbut Tahrir also subscribed to the Caliphate narrative without necessarily subscribing to IS's brutal and violent methods.[46] Some radical pockets, albeit very limited, of urban and educated youth from middle- and upper-middle-class families in Pakistan also bought into the IS narrative.[47] While their numbers were negligible, the traction of extremist ideologies among educated and urban youth can indicate potentially more damaging consequences.

3.3.2 The Ghazwa Narrative

In retaliation to the IS Caliphate narrative, Al-Qaeda announced its South Asian branch AQIS in September 2014. AQIS latched on to the idea of Ghazwa-e-Hind, the Final Battle of India—an eschatological prophetic narrative which claims that Muslim warriors will conquer the Indian sub-continent after a battle with Hindus.[48] However, the use of Ghazwa-e-Hind in the South Asian context was not new. Various groups before Al-Qaeda, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, have used this narrative before for insurgencies in Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK). Compared to the IS Caliphate narrative, Ghazwa-e-Hind is more nuanced concerning atrocities against Muslims in Kashmir, Afghanistan, and the Rohingya in Myanmar. Following the US-Taliban deal signed in February 2020, AQIS changed the name of its Urdu-language monthly magazine from Nawa-e-Afghan Jihad to Nawa-e-Ghazwa-e-Hind—a clear indication that the group would focus on India in future.[49]

3.3.3 The Emirate Narrative

In concert with Al-Qaeda's Ghazwa-e-Hind narrative, the Taliban's military victory reviving their Islamic Emirate will serve as an endorsement of the religious violent extremist doctrine that a Shariah State can be established through militancy, insurgency, and/or terrorism. This narrative is bound to resonate not only with a plethora of Pakistani violent extremist groups, but a wider panoply of religious extremists

too.[50] New groups may emerge while old ones will likely reactivate to demand a theocratic state in Pakistan.

In sum, Pakistan's threat landscape is volatile, divisive, multi-actor, and extends beyond the typical western framing of religiously inspired militancy. Moreover, it is dynamic and evolves at a rapid pace.[51] The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan and the Taliban's return to power with a triumphant religious violent extremist narrative will redefine Pakistan's threat landscape. Arguably, it will embolden violent extremist groups, while far right wing extremist groups will become more aggressive.[52] In a way, it could potentially make the state's relationship with right wing religious discourse at large, more conflict-prone. And where religious violent extremist groups are concerned, the antagonistic equation will become even more volatile.[53] The romanticisation of the Taliban within the wider array of religious violent extremist and radical spaces would generate demands for a replacement of the Pakistani republic with a "Shariah" system in Pakistan—regardless of how amorphous and impractical such demands may be.

4 Ideology and Motivation in the Pakistani Extremist Landscape

Pakistan is a religiously and ethnically heterogenous society with diverse communities and multiple denominations of Islamic practices in different parts of the country. Though these diverse communities have several common attributes, their cultural traditions and customs are distinct. Hence, the one-size-fits-all Western approach of looking at all violent extremist groups, as well as groups that espouse extremist views without adopting violence, with a uniform lens and approach falters in the context of a Muslim-majority country like Pakistan.[54] Neither are all religious violent extremist groups themselves the same, nor can all extremist and radical right wing groups be dealt with by adopting a linear or cookie-cutter approach.[55]

The two-decade global WOT has made it clear that the knee-jerk bans on these organisations and a heavy-handed kinetic approach have not successfully stemmed the tide of their ideological and political appeal.[56] On the contrary, hard-headed approaches seem to fuel more extremism and radicalism. Among the constituents of radical groups and extremist organisations, there is substantial evidence that proscription is in fact viewed as a source of legitimacy. This is not to suggest or justify the differentiation of the good versus the bad Taliban nor to endorse any kind of appeasement of religious radicals.

4.1 A Broad Spectrum of Extremisms

Pakistan's religious diversity further complicates the already convoluted spectrum of extremist groups—from the hardcore violent extremists to the more subdued, but sometimes more potent, right-wing radicals. These groups differ with each other over operational interpretative doctrines. For instance, within the predominant Deobandi militant outfit TTP, there are Panjpiris who are violently intolerant of Sufi practices, as well as orthodox Deobandis who differ with Sufism but are not violent. Apart from these ideological differentiations, disagreements over operational tactics and organisational goals also persist. It is beyond the scope this paper to unpack these differences. However, keeping these ideological variations in view is extremely important for nuanced CT and PCVE interventions.[57]

Hence, developing a deeper understanding of the ideological makeup, organisational structures, and operational tactics of these groups, in the post-US withdrawal scenario from Afghanistan, is paramount to devising tailor-made strategies.[58] Flawed understandings result in flawed policies and strategies, leading to more radicalism and extremism.[59] While this is an arduous undertaking, without investing intellectual capital to grasp the varied religious narratives and ideologies, a nuanced approach is unlikely to emerge.[60]

4.2 The Need for a Shift in Emphasis: Less Kinetic

Keeping this in view, evolving robust non-kinetic responses is perhaps more important in the post-US withdrawal scenario, as compared to kinetic capabilities which are already well-established. Terrorism and extremism are multifaceted and complex problems in Pakistan, and they require equally elaborate and sophisticated non-kinetic responses in addition to kinetic approaches. Though the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) has evolved well-defined institutional structures and broader policy frameworks, their implementation remains less than satisfactory.[61] The purpose of NACTA's creation was inter-institutional coordination to spearhead CT and PCVE efforts in Pakistan.[62] NACTA was not meant to be a think-tank. Moving forward, the non-kinetic response must be three-pronged: counter narrative, deradicalisation (individual-focused) and countering radicalisation (environment-focused).[63]

Pakistan started deradicalisation centres in Swat in 2009 as a pilot project with a view to expand them at the national level without much avail.[64] Likewise, the Punjab police initiated some deradicalisation initiatives which were discontinued due to shortage of funding.[65] Some deradicalisation programs were launched in parts of the ex-FATA region as well.[66] These programs provided religious and psychological counselling, as well as technical and vocational training preceded by thorough evaluation of each individual's radical trajectory to understand the underlying factors behind their radicalisation.[67]

4.3 The Need for Nuance & Granularity

One approach in CT discourse argues that there is no need to "over-intellectualise" terrorism, i.e., it considers investing time, resources, and intellectual capital in understanding the ideological narratives of these groups redundant.[68] It is a fact that the role of ideology in instigating radicalism and extremism is over-exaggerated.[69] And further, it has been documented that most radicalised individuals at the lower levels of recruitment in militant organisations have a poor understanding of Islam. Indeed, no ideology in and of itself is peaceful or violent, rather it is passive or static.[70] How an ideological doctrine is operationalised through different narratives and strategies is what determines the degree to which it is violent or peaceful. Thus, the inclination to place the blame for radicalisation on Islam, or unilaterally defining the concept of jihad as problematic is flawed.

For instance, in the context of Pakistan, cliches of categorisation that suggest that Deobandis are extreme, Salafis are more extreme, while Barelvis are moderate, are misleading. Violent tendencies are linked to behavioural dispositions, not ideological leanings. In fact, the result of the misguided and oversimplistic idea of promoting Barelvi-Sufism as a counterweight to Deobandi-militarism was TLP.[71] Such post-9/11 approaches and debates driven by Western scholarship have not been helpful in Pakistan's context. In a religiously heterogenous society like Pakistan, playing one religious sect against the other was a dangerous and poorly conceived idea.

While understanding the ideological leanings, doctrinal debates, and variations thereof, is important, they are not the main drivers of extremism and terrorism. Thus, a productive CT debate must go deeper to unpack why some young people are convinced by these ideologies. Arguably, ideologies are vehicles of justification providing a legal-religious and moral cover to violent acts.[72] Hence, adding adjectives and "isms" to Islam as moderate, extremist, or creating categories like extremism and jihadist or jihadism, has only added to existing confusions and polarisations.

It can be argued that extremism and terrorism primarily emanate from socio-political and economic issues where systemic failures to accommodate radical and extremist elements results in violence of varying degrees.[73] In other words, it is the result of a wide variety of socio-economic and political grievances expressing themselves in religious idiom. Hence, efforts should be made to address socio-economic grievances instead of stepping in ideological minefields.[74]

Islam does not have to be in the dock or on trial when analysing these organisations and their internal debates.[75] The superficial understanding of radicalism in Pakistan which uses superficial markers such as men sporting beards, women donning hijabs, or people expressing their identity in public opinion surveys as 'Muslim first and Pakistanis' later tell us nothing about radicalism in the country.[76] In a Muslim-majority country, these practices and identity markers are part of the Muslim culture, and confusing them with radicalism is not only depriving people of their religious freedom but borders on judging them for who they are. Good public policy should not compel citizens to be apologetic for who they are in order to denounce radical and extremist tendencies within society.

4.4 Don't Forget Grievances

In Pakistan, grievance-based ethnic extremism, also referred to as ethno-separatism of nationalist-separatist insurgencies, pre-dates the Afghan War and the WOT. While the Western focus remains fixated on religiously inspired extremism in Pakistan, scant attention has been paid to this form of extremism, notwithstanding the fact that the US placed some Baloch separatist groups on its list of designated terrorists. In fact, two prominent Baloch separatist leaders Brahumdagh Bugti and Hyrbair Marri have been given asylum in the Geneva and London from where they are strategically guiding violent insurgency in Balochistan.[77] This is not to absolve state apparatus of the excesses committed in Balochistan or of exploiting the province's natural resources without giving it its due share. However, overlooking this facet of Pakistan's internal security is manifestly reductive.

So far, the Pakistani state has used a carrot-and-stick approach to tackle grievance-based extremism and political violence in Balochistan with mixed results.[78] However, these efforts have been intermittent, lacking a comprehensive and concerted strategy with a long-term approach and vision.[79] The result, then, has been more people joining the insurgency despite some conciliatory efforts to incorporate the Baloch youth into the mainstream.

5 The Evolution of Pakistan's Threat Landscape Since 9/11

Since 9/11, Pakistan's threat landscape has evolved in four broad phases ranging from the initial denial of threat to an ambivalent attitude, and finally to taking ownership of the extremist and terrorist threat—an ownership that has begun to show signs of slipping.

5.1 Phase One: 2001-2007

Pakistan reluctantly joined the US-led WOT after the infamous "with us or against us" warning. The decision to become the so-called "frontline state" in the WOT and the US' most allied non-NATO country was highly unpopular domestically, where anti-American sentiments were quite high because of the invasion of Afghanistan.[80] In Pakistan, much like the rest of the Muslim word, for right or wrong reasons, the WOT was viewed as a pretext to invade Muslim countries. Subsequently, the US invasion of Iraq in January 2003 over the false pretext of the presence of Weapons of Mass Destruction[81] further strengthened the impression that "Islam is under attack" from the West, and that the WOT was a war against Islam.

These hostile anti-US sentiments in Pakistan formed the basis for viewing Pakistan-US CT cooperation unfavourably. Consequently, the terrorist threat in Pakistan was seen as the negative spill over of instability in Afghanistan emanating from the US invasion, Pakistan's assistance to the US in attacking and occupying a Muslim country and allowing CIA-led drone attacks on the Pakistani soil.[82]

Consequently, the Pakistan Army's decision to place troops on the north-western borders for the first time in its history, in order to stop the flow of militants from Afghanistan into Pakistan, was met with great resistance in the ex-FATA region. It was alleged that troops have were stationed in response to American demands.

As a result, violent attacks on the Pakistan Army and other security institutions by tribal militant factions were seen as a reaction to the state choosing to side with the US in the WOT and placing troops in then FATA.[83] It was erroneously believed that terrorism, a violent reaction to Pakistan's cooperation with the US, would end if the latter ended its alliance with the former. More importantly, these trends radicalised some sections of Pakistani society. During this time period (2002-2007), the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), a six-party alliance of religious parties, governed the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces. The MMA was not only opposed to Pakistan's alliance with the US but held a degree of sympathy for the Taliban as well. [84] It is unsurprising, then, that Talibanisation increased in Pakistan's tribal region at an alarming rate. By 2007, TTP had occupied the entire FATA region and challenged the government's writ in Swat and adjoining districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.[85]

During this time, Pakistan's CT approach fluctuated between intermittent peace deals and piecemeal military operations.[86] This poorly thought out carrot-and-stick approach fuelled extremism and terrorism in Pakistan. Hostile and violent reactions to military operations earned tribally-aligned violent extremist groups—who would band together in December 2007 to form TTP—more recruits.[87] Victims of drone attacks in then FATA also joined these organizations to avenge the killings of their loved ones. The peace deals were likewise poorly considered, emboldening various violent extremist groups in the area to the detriment of the people and the state. The deals became a vehicle for these groups to further expand their control in the ex-FATA region and erode the writ of the state.

The Pakistan Army's lack of experience with asymmetric warfare also hindered its ability to effectively pursue the violent extremist groups that were active in the region.[88] This was a trial-and-error period which had mixed results. As a whole, there was a lack of the ownership and popular support needed to push back against extremist groups. Manifestations of Pakistan's problematic alliance with the US, particularly drone attacks, the Red Mosque Operation, and a public attitude that was at once hostile and confused, further emboldened extremist groups in Pakistan.[89]

5.2 Phase Two: 2008-2014

The 2008-2014 period which culminated with the killing of 144 children and teachers in the 2014 Peshawar school massacre, resulted in the softening of the public attitude from hostility to

ambivalence.[90] A long string of attacks—including the targeted assassination attempt on Malala Yousafzai by the TTP in 2013, preceded by the killing of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in 2007, as well as attacks on the Marriott Hotel Islamabad in 2008, and on the Pakistan Army's General Headquarters (GHQ) in 2009—created a consensus in public opinion that the WOT was not Pakistan's war, but that the country was sucked into it. There was thus a partial endorsement for the Pakistan Army's military operations in FATA. One major reason for the change in public opinion was the restoration of democratic rule. Unlike General Musharraf's military regime which took unilateral decisions, the coalition government let by the Pakistan People's Party had popular support.[91]

During this period, the Pakistan Army launched a series of military operations[92]: Rah-e-Rast in Swat, Rah-e-Nijat in South Waziristan, Sher Dil in Bajaur agency, among others (See Table 1), to restore the writ of the state by eliminating terrorist infrastructure and destroying their command and control. By this time, the Pakistan Army had evolved from its earlier trial-and-error period to engage in asymmetric warfare with more precision. It developed sound intelligence pertaining to groups based in then FATA, particularly TTP, and regarding the terrain.[93] More significantly, the idea of negotiating with the militants was shelved and a consistent counter-insurgency and counter terrorism campaign was launched.

Table1: Major Military Operations in Pakistan (2003-Present) (Pak Institute for Peace Studies, 8-13)

No.	Name	Year	Area	Target
1	Waziristan Operation	2003	North Waziristan, Darra Adamkhel	Al-Qaeda
2	Wana Operation	2004-05	Wana, South Waziristan	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
3	Shakai Operation	April 2004	North Waziristan	Gul Bahadur Group
4	No name	January 2008	South Waziristan	TTP
5	Operation Sherdil	August 2008	Bajaur Agency	TTP-Bajaur chapter
6	Rah-e-Rast	May 2009	Swat	TTP-Swat chapter
7	Rah-e-Nijat	September 2009	South Waziristan	TTP-central
8	Bia Darghalam	2009	Bara, Khyber Agency	Lashkar-e-Islam (LI)
9	Karachi operation	2013	Karachi	MQM Militant wing
10	Zarb-e-Azb	2014	North Waziristan Agency	Gul Bahadur Group, Haqqani Network and Al-Qaeda
11	Rad-ul-Fasad	2016	Nationwide	All groups

After clearing Swat of militant presence, the Pakistan Army also launched deradicalisation centres[94] in the Malakand Division to deradicalise, rehabilitate, and reintegrate teenagers and children who joined militant groups (See Table 2). They adopted a no-blood-on-hands principle. In these centres, religious and psychological counselling was offered alongside vocational and technical training, as well as formal education.[95] These centres were launched as pilot projects with a view to expand them at a national level. Similar centres were also introduced in Punjab and some parts of the then FATA regions (Bajaur, Khyber and Mohmand).[96] However, the deradicalisation effort in Punjab was discontinued due to funding issues, while the one in the ex-FATA region became a victim of changing government priorities and a general lack of interest.[97]

Table 2: De-radicalisation Schools in Pakistan

De-Radicalization Schools	Target Audience	Area
Sabaoon and Rastoon	Juveniles	Swat
Mashal	Adults	Mingora
FEAST	Females	Swat
Sparlay	Families of detainee militants	Tank, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)
Navai Sahar	Adults	Bajaur Agency
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Programme (3 Centres)	Adults	Khyber Agency
Punjab Rehabilitation Programme	Adults	Punjab (dysfunctional)

Following the 2013 general elections which voted in the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN), one final effort was made to sort things out with the TTP through negotiation. However, the killing of then TTP chief Hakimullah Mehsud in a US drone strike brought the peace process to an abrupt end.[98] Mullah Fazlullah, who was subsequently appointed the new chief of the TTP, later spearheaded the APS school attack in December 2014.[99]

5.3 Phase Three: 2015-2020

The APS attack, sometimes referred to as Pakistan's 9/11, was a turning point in the country's fight against the twin threats of extremism and terrorism.[100] In a way, the 2014-2020 period can be considered a high point of Pakistan's CT evolution. Outraged by the Peshawar school massacre, public opinion swayed unanimously in favour of a military intervention to eradicate extremism and militancy from Pakistan.

During an All-Parties' Conference in 2014, a national consensus was forged, and the mandate was given to the Pakistan Army to launch Operation Zarb-e-Azb.[101] Similarly, the National Action Plan (NAP), a 20-point counter extremism roadmap, was devised to complement the kinetic action under Zarb-e-Azb with non-kinetic measures like reforming madrassas, overhauling the criminal justice system, curbing hate speech, and instituting policies against terrorist financing. At the provincial and district levels, apex committees were formed to implement NAP.[102]

Operation Zarb-e-Azb eliminated no-go areas in the ex-FATA region, Karachi, and Balochistan, by restoring the writ of the state. The operation also destroyed the infrastructure of the region's terrorist groups, particularly TTP and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi,[103] forcing the remaining members to flee to Afghanistan. Consquently, the TTP disintegrated into several factions including Jamaatul Ahrar, Shehryar Mehsud Faction, Khan Said Sajna Faction, among others. The reasons underlying this disintegration included leadership disputes, organisational differences, ethnic divisions, and differences of opinions on operational strategies.[104] Some disgruntled TTP factions gravitated towards the IS after its rise in Iraq and Syria and founded its Af-Pak affiliate, IS-K.[105]

As a result, terrorist attacks declined in Pakistan precipitously. For instance, according to the Global Terrorism Index (GTI), a 90 per cent decline was witnessed in terrorism-related casualties in Pakistan in 2020.[106] Furthermore, of the 37 terrorist groups active in Pakistan in 2015, only ten were functional in 2020.[107]

However, it is important to point out that certain primary reasons for anti-state violence in Pakistan—such as ethnic grievances, perceived marginalisation, relative deprivation, and the state's high-

handedness towards disenfranchised communities in the ex-FATA region and Balochistan— didn't merely persist but worsened further. It appears, then, that the improved security environment in Pakistan was more a result of the absence of violence, than of a restoration of comprehensive peace. Furthermore, Pakistan's internal security situation remained largely dependent on the evolving conflict in Afghanistan.

5.4 Phase 4: 2021- Present & Key Inflections Shaping the Threat

Since the US withdrawal announcement, Pakistan's militant landscape has evolved at a rapid pace, reversing some of the gains of the 2015-2020 period. Though Pakistan has fenced major portions of its border with Afghanistan, terrorist attacks have increased.[108] Likewise, the Baloch and Sindhi separatist groups have become more active, particularly against CPEC, forging an alliance (discussed below). TTP has also reunified ahead of the US exit from Afghanistan. Similarly, non-violent extremists or Islamic radical groups have become emboldened by the Taliban victory in Afghanistan, and are growing increasingly more aggressive in their street activism, bordering on violence and vigilantism.

Compared with the fractured and fragmented 2015-2020 threat landscape, which was marked by inter- and intra- group fighting, splintering, splitting and defection, the present landscape is punctuated by reunifications, mergers and alliances. Likewise, indiscriminate violence has ostensibly been replaced with selective violence, both by TTP and ethno-separatist groups.

5.4.1 TTP's Reunification

The TTP, after witnessing a lull period marked by leadership disputes, ethnic divisions, internecine fighting, and differences over operational strategies has reunified under its incumbent chief Nur Wali Mehsud.[109] He is credited with disciplining, reorganising, and reunifying various TTP factions. Al-Qaeda is reported to have mediated in TTP's reunification process, underscoring its continuous influence over the terror group.[110] Nur Wali in his voluminous book Inqilab-i-Mehsud always urged unity and discipline among the religious violent extremist ranks. Since its reunification, TTP has increased its violent attacks in Pakistan.[111]

TTP has also become more selective and discriminating in its targeting strategy. Now it confines its attacks, barring some exceptions, to the Pakistani security institutions and law enforcement agencies.[112] Likewise, TTP has restricted its agenda from the longstanding rhetorical position of turning Pakistan into a self-styled theocracy through violent militarism, to limiting its agenda to the ex-FATA region. In a July interview on CNN, Nur Wali articulated this new vision for the TTP, with the aim to wage an armed struggle to separate FATA from Pakistan and turn it into a Shariah state.[113] Given the timing, TTP's move to enter into the ethno-separatist space is very suggestive and potentially dangerous.[114] TTP is trying to exploit the Pashtunistan issue to sustain and prolong its militancy against the Pakistani state after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. At the same time, by confining TTP's struggle to the ex-FATA region, Wali localised his armed struggle and steered clear of transnational militant groups like Al-Qaeda and IS. By playing the ethnic card, TTP likely hopes to make some inroads among the ex-FATA's Pashtun community with the expectations of winning their support or sympathies.

Under Nur Wali, TTP is behaving like an insurgency without being one. The group lacks territorial control and public support to qualify as an insurgency, but it is certainly taking steps to move in that direction— limiting its goals to FATA and a more selective targeting strategy. Such groups which behave like an insurgency without being one can be classified as "proto-insurgencies."[115] This potentially makes TTP a more dangerous and long-term threat. From its hideout in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime, TTP can hurt Pakistan in the ex-FATA region consistently and on a long-term basis.[116]

5.4.2 Baloch and Sindhi Separatist Alliance Against CPEC

The Baloch separatist groups have repaired their intra-group differences and divisions in recent years, culminating in the formation of an alliance called the Baloch Raji Ajio Sangar (BRAS) in 2018.[117] Four Baloch insurgent groups, the Baloch Liberation Front, the Baloch Liberation Army, the Baloch Republican Army, and the Baloch Republican Guard, have coalesced to form BRAS. In 2020, BRAS established a trans-provincial alliance against CPEC with a little-known Sindhi separatist group, the Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army (SRA).[118] A statement issued after the BRAS-SRA alliance formation

noted, “Sindh and Balochistan are equally affected by the expansionist and oppressive resolves of China.[119] Through the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China aims to subjugate Sindh and Balochistan and occupy the coasts and resources from Badin to Gwadar.”[120]

In June 2020, BLA carried out an attack on the Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSE) in Karachi with the help of SRA, which left seven people dead and as many injured.[121] The militants were neutralised at the site of the PSE, where China has 40 percent shares.[122] The BLA’s post-attack statement indicated that “the attack was aimed at undermining the Pakistani economy and Chinese economic interests, in response to China's exploitative plans in Balochistan.”[123]

The BRAS-SRA alliance has provided Sindhi and Baloch separatist groups a common platform against a new target, aside from the Pakistani government and security institutions—CPEC,.[124] This alliance might increase the operational outreach of Sindhi and Baloch separatist groups, resulting in higher security costs for CPEC projects in Pakistan.

In 2020, most of the attacks in Balochistan were concentrated in the Makran region where the CPEC projects are located.[125] China’s growing presence in the region is viewed as hegemonic ingress by Sindhi and Baloch separatist groups in their respective provinces.[126] These ethnic grievances and existing mistrust towards the state in Balochistan and Sindh drive recruitment and separatist violence.[127]

5.4.3 Non-Violent Extremism

The policy discourse on radicalisation in Pakistan needs to be expanded beyond violent extremism to include non-violent extremism. In the past, non-violent extremist organisations such as Tanzeem-e-Islami and Hizb-ut-Tahrir have faced defections of their members to militant groups. Conceptually, violent and non-violent extremism are two sides of the same coin: one is action-based extremism, the other is value-based extremism.[128] The goals of violent and non-violent extremists are more or less the same, and both have similar political and ideological narratives. As such, non-violent extremists do not rule out violence, but de-emphasise it as a matter of strategy, not principle. To plug existing gaps within the operations of these organisations, targeted policy-interventions along with the initiation of dialogue for internal reforms, would be needed.

In the last few years, Pakistan’s far-right groups have become increasingly aggressive, using their agitational politics and street power to force the state to accede to their demands.[129] A neo-Barelvi political group, TLP, in particular, has gained the reputation of repeatedly bringing the state to its knees to accept its demands.[130] The state has found it difficult to clear the streets of the TLP cadres every time the organization has come out to protest. To restore its writ and normalcy, the state chose the easy way of appeasing the group, allowing it to keep expanding its space in society.[131]

5.5 The Impact of Afghanistan’s Taliban Takeover

Against the backdrop of the Taliban “victory” in Afghanistan, several far-right groups in Pakistan see the Taliban’s victory as their own, drawing strength and inspiration from their ideology and methodology. Several religious-political parties such as Jamaat-e-Islami and Jamiat Ulamae Islam Fazal (JUIF), among others, have congratulated the Taliban on their victory and wished for a similar form of Shariah system in Pakistan as well.[132] This jubilation and camaraderie between Pakistan’s far-right groups and the Taliban would redefine the Pakistani state’s relations with these religious groups. Arguably, they could become aggressive in their demands and hostile in their approach.

Although there is no imminent need to securitise this trend or view it as a threat or a security challenge, the Pakistani state will find it increasingly difficult to deal with these groups, especially the younger cadres who are more aggressive and ambitious than the older generation of religiously motivated extremists who worked patiently within the broader parameters defined by the state. The generational divide between the young and old religious extremists will be at heart of this evolving equation. The younger generation views the older as outdated and status quo-oriented. Meanwhile, they themselves are action-driven, ambitious, and PR-savvy, with an instinct for using social media as a force multiplier to amplify their message, attract new members, form virtual communities, and even collect funds. Unlike

the old generation, which was patient and non-violent, the activism of the present one borders on violence and vigilantism.

The Taliban victory will add to their aggression and make their demands more extreme. The idea of creating a Shariah state through an armed struggle will resonate with them, and some of them might gravitate towards existing militant groups, while others will likely be tempted to form their own organisations.

6 Recommendations & Conclusions

6.1 Policy Research Gap

Despite the enormity of the violent extremism (VE) threat in Pakistan, there is a lack of evidence-based research on this subject. Most of the work on violent extremism in Pakistan lacks scientific rigor and context-specific scholarship. For the longest time, Pakistan did not have a central database mapping various themes and sub-themes of violent extremism in the country. Recently, NACTA has launched its database, but it is not fully operational.

Currently, two types of research exist on VE in Pakistan: survey-bases and secondary-source research. The former is quite localised and detailed but—as with all survey research—it has a shelf life. The latter is more macro in its focus but, beyond recycling existing scholarship on the topic, it does not advance the current understanding of VE in Pakistan.

This is further compounded by the gap between researchers and practitioners. It is synonymous with the dilemma highlighted by terrorism scholar Marc Sageman that, "[we] have terrorism research in which intelligence analysts know everything but understand nothing, while academics understand everything but know nothing."[133] This gap needs to be bridged so that PCVE research and policy initiatives become operationally relevant.

6.2 Less is More

In resource-scarce countries like Pakistan with a higher magnitude of violent extremist threats, clarity in PCVE focus is critical. Concentrating on key sectors and reforming them with cost-effective, implementable, and actionable strategies is more important than scattering the narrow resource-base and expertise into multiple sectors.

A lot of CVE work in Pakistan is donor-driven and in the last few years international agencies like the United Nations (UN) have started linking issues like poverty reduction, education reform, youth development, and empowerment, among others, with the PCVE agenda. This approach of linking issues from the development sector with PCVE has created a twin dilemma: a) those who have some expertise in PCVE have started focusing on development sector issues, and b) those with no professional experience in PCVE have jumped into PCVE projects.

In essence, this approach has hurt PCVE programming in Pakistan, where poverty is a way of life, and unemployment is rampant. In this environment, linking PCVE with such issues is unrealistic.

6.3 Counter Narratives

The threat of cyber radicalisation in Pakistan is real and requires monitoring of cyber communities where extremist narratives are discussed, disseminated, and promoted. Militant recruiters easily reach out to students through social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, and Instagram. There are around 30 million Internet users and as many as 23 million Facebook subscribers in Pakistan. Social media has lowered the entry-barriers for youth participation in militancy. Pakistan's counter-extremist responses have to factor in strategies for dealing with the dissemination of radical narratives in social media and cyber space.

Pakistan's education system does not equip students with the critical thinking needed to question sources of information, or to look for alternative discourses to find their answers. There is an urgent need to build a national counter-narrative and cultivate an environment of open conversation on issues considered taboo in Pakistan.[134] Alternative narratives promoting pluralism, inclusivity, and diversity presenting a moderate outlook of Islam should be promoted.[135]

6.4 Promoting Moderation

The conversation of promoting enlightened moderation, which became highly politicised during General Pervez Musharraf's time, can be relaunched, keeping in view the challenges and requirements of the current era. The moderation debate dovetails with the idea of settling the question of Pakistan's

convoluted compound identity challenge. By articulating a moderate and enlightened vision for the state where differences of opinion, diversity of views and opposing ideas about life, religion and politics coexist would create a resilient society capable of resisting the allure of radical and extremist ideologies.

While states blunt the sharp edge of the terrorist threat, societies overwhelm extremist narratives through peaceful coexistence and cohesion. Pakistan's social fabric is quite diverse, and the syncretic Islamic practices here are rooted in a tolerant and pacifist ethos which ensured that multiple denominations of Islam in Pakistan lived in peace and harmony historically. This dynamic started changing with the onset of the Afghan jihad and, subsequently, the war on terror. To reverse engineer this, a generational effort would be needed under a whole-of-state-and-society approach. This has to be a bottom-up process where diversity and heterogeneity have to be accommodated as a strength rather than viewing them as agents of divisions and polarization. A vibrant democratic culture based on inclusive political practices is the potential starting point of this conversation.

6.5 Youth Policy

Around 64 per cent of Pakistan's population is below the age of 30, which is expected to rise to 230 million by 2030 and 280 million by 2050. This makes youth the most important demographic group in Pakistan. Depending on how we develop this human capital, youth will become an asset or a liability for Pakistan. In recent years, growing radicalisation among the country's educated youth has raised new counter terrorism and extremism challenges. Educated youth's quest for significance, self-worth and the desire to serve a higher purpose in life have pushed a radical fringe towards militancy.

The radicalisation of educated youth in Pakistan is directly correlated to the state's pro-militancy policies in the past, which fostered a conducive environment for the growth of radicalism. A revision of the strategic paradigm, which has afforded physical and ideological spaces to different militant groups, is needed. A mere doctrinal shift in counter terrorism and extremism policies at the tactical level can deliver temporary respite, but structural reforms are necessary for a long-term solution.

6.6 Conclusion

This paper has chronicled the story of Pakistan's post-9/11 approach to dealing with the twin threats of extremism and terrorism. Notwithstanding Western apathy and negative focus, Pakistanis are the main victims of terrorism in Pakistan, and the country will have to push back against radical and extremist forces, both kinetically and non-kinetically. However, without addressing Pakistan's convoluted compound identity problem such efforts will struggle to bear fruit. As long as that remains unaddressed, various extremist movements such as the Lal Masjid Movement, the TTP, and the Tehreek-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi will continue to emerge, ebbing and flowing with the news cycle. At the same time, there is a need for Pakistan to evolve an indigenised and organic counter terrorism discourse by graduating and evolving beyond the post-9/11 Western discourse, which tends to end at the identification of Pakistan as a security threat, lacks relevance and rigour, and does not in any substantial manner, advance the objective of counter terrorism efforts that protect the people of Pakistan and the wider region.

In this paper, a modest effort has been made to initiate an indigenised counter terrorism discourse which focuses both on religiously inspired violent extremism and militancy as well as on grievance-based ethnic extremist violence. It has attempted to illuminate various facets of the country's complex and diverse threat landscape. Separate research would be needed to comprehensively unpack these issues against the backdrop of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the Taliban's return to power. A deeper investment of effort is also required to analyse and critically examine Pakistan's legal mechanisms, institutional landscape, and organizational architecture for counter terrorism. Pakistan's much publicised pivot "from geopolitics to geoeconomics" will remain elusive unless there is an effective tackling of the threats of extremism and terrorism, and a dismantling of the roots of these challenges. A new Pakistani counter terrorism discourse represents the first step in that long and arduous journey.

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