

# PERENNIAL THREAT OF TERRORISM IN PAKISTAN POST-2021: CASE STUDY OF NEWLY MERGED DISTRICTS (NMDs)

*Ehsan Ahmed Khan and Safia Mansoor*<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*Pakistan has been a victim of terrorism in different forms and manifestations for decades now. While the state apparatus has been repeatedly applied to quell this menace, the phenomenon has continued to dominate the security dynamics of Pakistan. In this context, this paper examines the evolving security environment in Pakistan's Newly Merged Districts (NMDs), formerly known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), in light of shifting regional geopolitical dynamics. Despite long-standing state efforts to counter terrorism, militant violence continues to shape Pakistan's security landscape. Focusing primarily on Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the study explores how a gradual process of radicalisation, driven by grievances, networks, ideology, and enabling conditions, has sustained religious extremism in the region. It contributes to existing scholarship by integrating structural and precipitant factors to provide a comprehensive analysis of why terrorism persists in NMDs. Structural factors identified include political exclusion, social disparities, poverty and weak local economies, governance deficiencies, and a porous border with Afghanistan. Precipitant factors encompass TTP leadership dynamics, organisational restructuring, the support of the Afghan Taliban, reunification of splinter groups, political instability, and the proliferation of financial and logistical resources. Employing a qualitative, exploratory approach based on secondary sources, the study argues that no single factor explains the endurance of terrorism in NMDs. Instead, a combination of long-term structural conditions and short-term triggers necessitates a robust, multifaceted mitigation strategy. It concludes that implementing five Lines of Effort (LOEs) is essential to achieving sustainable peace in the region.*

**Keywords:** Terrorism, Newly Merged Districts (NMDs), Structural and Precipitant factors, Radicalisation, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Lines of Effort (LOEs)

## INTRODUCTION

Terrorism is not a new phenomenon; it has appeared in various forms throughout history. Examples include the Sicarii ("dagger men"), a faction of Jewish Zealots in the 1st century who carried out killings and kidnappings of Romans and Jews who collaborated with them,

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<sup>1</sup> Ehsan Ahmed Khan (ehsanahmedkhan471@gmail.com) is PhD scholar of International Relations at School of Integrated Social sciences, University of Lahore. Safia Mansoor (gilani.safia123@gmail.com) is Research Associate at Maritime Centre of Excellence, Pakistan. She is PhD scholar of International Relations at School of Integrated Social sciences, University of Lahore.

and the Thuggee (or Thugs) of 13th-century India, who conducted ritual killings supposedly in honour of the goddess Kali. The term terrorist, however, originates from the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror (1793–94), which witnessed mass executions by the Jacobins (Ben & Heywood, 2023). Until the 1990s, terrorism was largely considered a second-order security concern; the events of 11 September 2001, however, prompted a dramatic reassessment of its nature and significance.

The scourge of terrorism has been a pervasive and persistent challenge in Pakistan since the late twentieth century. For many reasons, the heart of Pakistan's internal security problems has been the tribal belt formerly known as FATA (Library of Congress, 2025). Pakistan has paid a heavy price in lives and property due to terrorist activities originating in this region. According to the South Asian Terrorism Portal, 31,461 terrorism-related incidents occurred across Pakistan between 6 March 2000 and 7 March 2024, peaking at 3,923 incidents in 2013, and resulting in 67,742 casualties, almost half of whom were terrorists (SATP, 2024).

To eliminate this threat, multiple military operations were launched in FATA, ranging from Operation Rah-e-Haq in Swat and Shangla (2007) to the ongoing nationwide Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad (Dawn, 2017). Two major developments were instrumental in addressing FATA's security and administrative challenges: the launch of Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad in 2017, and the merger of FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) in 2018 through the 25th Constitutional Amendment, creating what are now known as the Newly Merged Districts (NMDs). Consequently, terrorist incidents fell by 13 per cent in 2019 and 36 per cent in 2020. Despite these measures, terrorism resurged from 2021 onwards, rising by 42 per cent. Operating largely from NMDs, TTP, and IS-K carried out 128 attacks, killing 236 people (PIPS, 2019; 2020; 2021).

Against this backdrop, this paper re-examines the pervasive and catalytic factors that have allowed terrorism to persist in NMDs post-2021 despite extensive security and administrative interventions. It addresses three core questions: (a) how regional geopolitical developments have affected security dynamics in ex-FATA/NMDs; (b) how radicalisation has sustained religious extremism in the region; and (c) how structural and precipitant factors have contributed to the persistence of terrorism. Building on this analysis, the paper proposes a tangible, prioritised mitigation strategy based on five Lines of Effort (LOEs) for political, administrative, and security decision-makers. Throughout, the term ex-FATA refers to the pre-merger period, while NMDs denotes the post-merger administrative structure.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This research conducts a chronological literature review to trace the evolution of terrorism, particularly in the Newly Merged Districts (NMDs) of Pakistan, over the years.

Orakzai (2009) describes FATA as a peaceful region prior to the 9/11 attacks and argues that terrorism there emerged as a spillover effect of the US intervention in Afghanistan and its subsequent failure to achieve its objectives. The author contends that

propaganda and airstrikes fuelled militancy in the region, enabling militant groups to recruit local youth by exploiting underdevelopment. He advocates dialogue as a means to ensure peace and unlock the development potential of FATA, particularly in the mineral sector.

Feyyaz (2013) asserts that rational decision-making and strategic calculation have transformed terrorism into a structured phenomenon rather than merely an organised form of violence. He identifies several thematic trends, human and political syndromes, criminalised and infrastructural warfare, Realpolitik terrorism, and spatial conquests to explain its evolution. He further argues that terrorism tends to resurge more frequently under military regimes than democratic governments in Pakistan.

Rauf (2019) links terrorism to Pakistan's involvement in the Global War on Terror (GWOT) and highlights the surge in attacks after 2008. Using qualitative analysis, he identifies multiple causes of terrorism, including poverty, ideology, unequal resource distribution, ethnic divisions, weak law enforcement, anti-US sentiment, elite monopolies, and deficiencies in the education system.

Shah et al. (2024) contend that the rise of the Afghan Taliban in 2021 significantly increased TTP attacks in Pakistan. The study underscores the Afghan Taliban's indifference to Pakistan's concerns regarding the TTP's use of Afghan territory to conduct attacks. Employing an intersectionality approach, the authors assess TTP violence through the lenses of ideology, class, gender, and race.

Bukhari and Khattak (2024) examine the strategic landscape in Afghanistan following the US withdrawal and its implications for the region, especially Pakistan. Using the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), they argue that the geographic proximity between Afghanistan and Pakistan has exacerbated Pakistan's security challenges due to post-2021 instability in Afghanistan.

The literature review suggests that, although structural and precipitant factors of terrorism have been discussed, these analyses are often fragmented and partial. A comprehensive examination of the multifaceted structural and precipitant drivers of terrorism in NMDs, and an integrated mitigation strategy addressing all these factors, remains absent. This research seeks to address this critical gap.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical framework of this study examines the underlying reasons that allow terrorism to emerge, permeate, and persist. Three theoretical paradigms guide this analysis: a) the pervasive potential of radicalisation, which highlights how interconnected factors contribute to an individual's radicalisation and eventual association with terrorist groups; b) structural factors; and c) precipitant factors that drive the persistence of terrorism.

Hafez and Mullins (2015) define radicalisation as a gradual process involving the internalisation of extremist belief systems, which, although not guaranteeing violence,

create the conditions for it. According to scholars of radicalisation, several interrelated factors contribute to violent radicalisation: 1) Individual-cum-collective grievances; 2) Interpersonal ties and networks; 3) Religious as well as political ideological inclination; 4) Support structures and conducive/ enabling environment.

The first factor, grievances, includes cultural alienation and economic deprivation, which foster a deep sense of victimisation and disillusionment, often combined with strong opposition to state foreign policies. The second factor, networks, refers to the diffusion of radical ideas through existing kinship or social relationships between radicals and potential recruits. Ideology, the third factor, provides overarching narratives about the world and an individual's role within it. The fourth factor encompasses virtual and physical environments, such as foreign training camps, prisons, social media, and the internet, which offer material and ideological support while reinforcing commitment to radical milieus (Hafez & Mullins, 2015).

According to Crenshaw (1983), a precipitant is an immediate event that triggers the onset or escalation of terrorism, directly precipitating terrorist campaigns. Such factors include sustained political instability, state sponsorship, access to financial resources, organisational strategies, and leadership dynamics, all of which can act as catalysts (Crenshaw, 1983). According to Ross (1993), terrorism is also shaped by structural factors, including political exclusion, deep social inequalities, and widespread poverty. Weak governance, porous borders, fragile economic systems, and other persistent structural deficiencies further contribute to the conditions that enable terrorism to flourish (Ross, 1993).

## **SECURITY DYNAMICS OF FATA/NMDs PRE AND POST 2021**

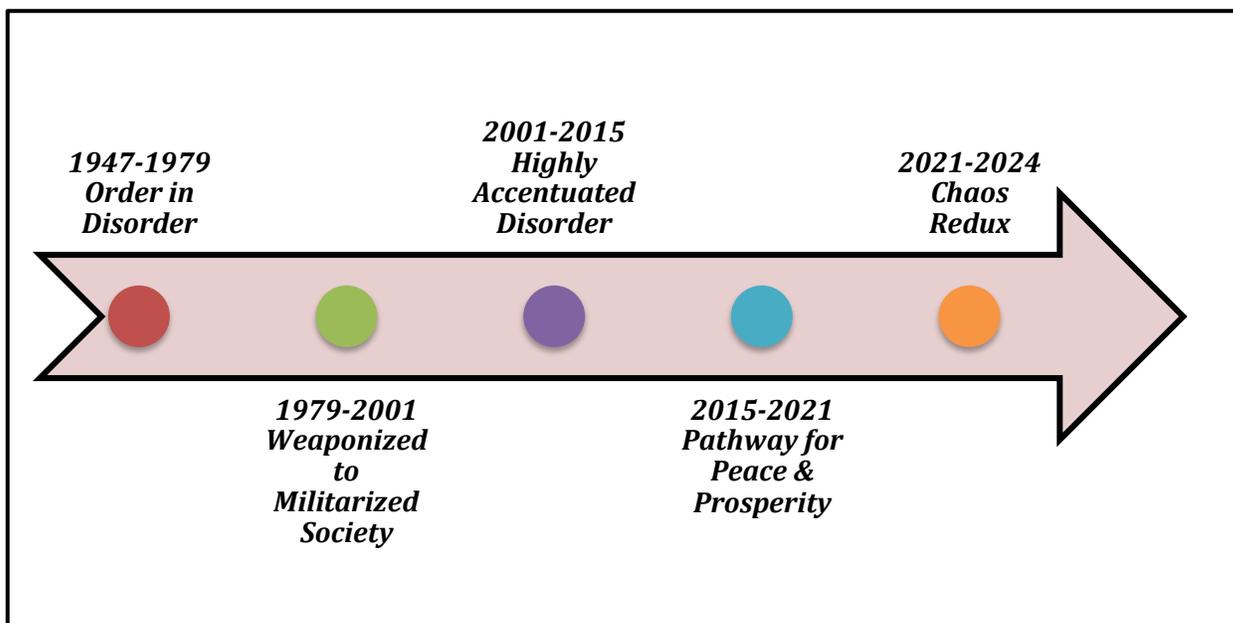
Key phases signify the NMDs' security environment, pre- and post-2021, as illustrated in Figure 1.

- a) **1947-1979:** Despite its unique administrative and governance set-up, FATA largely remained peaceful, reflecting a sense of order in disorder.
- b) **1979-2001:** This period is marked by the post-Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and application of Jihadist proxies to fight against the Soviets (Naval Postgraduate School, 2024). The social structure of FATA transformed from a weaponised to a militarised society; however, it generally remained peaceful.
- c) **2001-2015:** The events of 9/11 and the subsequent US military intervention in Afghanistan had a devastating impact on the region, triggering societal collapse in FATA and severely disrupting its security structures. The Tribal Maliks, who had long been integrated into the governance system and held considerable political influence, were rendered irrelevant as miscreants and militant groups seized control. Political authorities fled the area, creating a power vacuum that was quickly filled by the establishment of a self-proclaimed emirate. In response, major military

operations were launched to eliminate terrorist organisations in FATA and to restore peace and stability to areas overwhelmed by the turmoil of terrorism.

- d) **2015 – 2021:** After immense sacrifices and numerous military operations, including intense door-to-door battles, the capacity and capability of militant groups were significantly reduced. This created an opportunity for peace and stability to return to FATA, enabling the large number of internally displaced persons who had fled the troubled areas to return to their native lands. The 25th Constitutional Amendment, passed in 2018, abolished the Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR) and facilitated the merger of FATA with the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province, forming the Newly Merged Districts (NMDs) (Senate Pakistan, 2024). Following the creation of the NMDs, kinetic military operations under Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad continued, resulting in the full clearance of areas previously dominated by various terrorist organisations. Although the militants’ operational capacity had been substantially weakened, considerable residual potential remained among tribal elements located close to the international border. By 2021, the final terrorist-held pockets had been cleared, and the broader social and security environment had been stabilised sufficiently to allow state institutions to operate and to undertake essential socio-economic and governance functions.
- e) **2021-2024:** The success of Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad and other related initiatives provided relief to civil–military decision-makers and created favourable conditions for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) to return to their respective areas amid an improved security environment. However, this sense of optimism proved short-lived. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan on 15 August 2021 and the subsequent re-establishment of the Islamic Emirate emboldened the TTP, which now enjoys impunity inside Afghanistan. The group carried out 282 attacks in 2021, 367 in 2022, and 881 in 2023 (Ansari, 2024). These violent attacks mark a renewed wave of terrorism, indicating a situation of “chaos redux.”

**Figure 1: Timeline of FATA/ NMDs Security Dynamics (1947-2024)**



*Source: Authors' compilation*

## **FACTORS OF PERSISTENCE OF TERRORISM**

The pervasive threat of terrorism in Pakistan can be principally attributed to the radicalisation of the masses alongside structural and precipitant factors that are discussed in detail below.

### **Radicalisation and Religious Extremism in NMDs**

The five key factors that engender and strengthen radicalisation leading to violent religious extremism are discussed below

#### ***Grievances***

The former semi-autonomous status of ex-FATA hindered the region's integration into the national mainstream. Most notably, the Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR), which vested extensive law-enforcement, judicial, and executive authority in Political Agents alongside the principle of collective responsibility enshrined in Section 21, alienated the local population (Afridi, 2012). The imposition of such archaic laws denied the people of the

region fundamental human rights, a democratic political system, and meaningful economic opportunities, thereby deepening their sense of exclusion from the state (Khan, 2011).

The persistent operational freedom and recruitment capacity of terrorist organisations such as the TTP can be attributed to two key factors: the porous border of FATA (now NMDs), and clusters of migrant and indigenous Pashtuns harbouring political grievances. Collateral human casualties resulting from US drone strikes against terrorists further aggravated the situation. In addition, the repeated use of force by the state to dismantle terrorist groups has fuelled ethno-political grievances against the security forces and the Government of Pakistan (Naseem, 2022). According to the UN Development Programme's 2022 report, ex-FATA remains one of the least developed regions in the country, with two-thirds of the population living in extreme poverty and public services being almost non-existent (Akhtar, 2022).

### *Ideology*

Jihad has significantly influenced Pakistan's regional policy, shaping a national security doctrine in which religion plays a central role. Continued Islamisation efforts transformed Pakistan into both an organisational and ideological hub for the global Islamist extremist movement, particularly during its frontline role in the conflict against the USSR in Afghanistan under the auspices of the United States, which concentrated pro-jihadi elements in the region. Collaboration between jihadist groups and various external actors strengthened both armed and unarmed religious movements, cultivating a violent and radical interpretation of Islamist ideology that has become a persistent threat to Pakistan's security and stability.

The US intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 and Pakistan's subsequent shift to an anti-Taliban policy caused former jihadist allies, now labelled as terrorists, to turn against both the United States and Pakistan, resulting in further radicalisation. Many of these radicalised militant groups consolidated under the TTP, launching violent attacks against the Pakistani military and government institutions. Adhering to a Deobandi ideological orientation, the TTP sought to fight NATO forces in Afghanistan while simultaneously waging jihad against the Pakistani armed forces, who had aligned with the United States after 9/11 primarily in response to the military's operations against militant groups (Sevea, 2023).

### *Networks*

The ideological alignment between the TTP and the Afghan Taliban in pursuing a jihadist project aimed at enforcing a Sharia-compliant order is indisputable. This alignment became even more evident when the TTP pledged allegiance to the Taliban leadership, rendering the former subordinate to the latter. The Taliban chief has also asserted that the TTP is a key component of the Taliban-ruled Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Roggio, 2023).

The TTP has consistently supported and advocated for the Afghan Taliban since its formation, even providing suicide bombers to assist their operations. Both the TTP and the Taliban share a common ally in Al-Qaeda. Moreover, strong wartime and interpersonal

bonds link the TTP to the Haqqani Network, as well as to the political leadership of the southern Taliban. These relationships demonstrate the existence of deep and enduring networks among these groups. In addition, shared ethnic and tribal ties, coupled with widespread hostility towards Pakistan, continue to shape attitudes within both the mid-level leadership and the rank-and-file members of the Taliban (Mir, 2024).

### ***Enabling Environment***

One of the key aspects of the enabling environment is the TTP's social media strategy, through which it portrays itself as a harbinger of peace, a true custodian of Islam, and a liberator. Concurrently, it depicts Pakistan as a mercenary serving US interests. The TTP has designated Umar Media as its official channel for disseminating propaganda videos (Tahir, n.d.). In addition, foreign training camps, such as those provided by Al-Qaeda in Kunar, Afghanistan, offer both material and ideological support to the TTP (Gul, 2024).

### ***Religious Extremism***

Religious extremism remains a root cause of radicalisation in FATA/NMDs. This phenomenon traces its origins to the Islamisation drive orchestrated during the tenure of President General Zia, supported by the United States, against the backdrop of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Subsequently, latent extremist tendencies were further exploited by the settlement of foreign militants in these areas following the Afghan war. The combination of Pashtun cultural affinity, the dominance of Deobandi militant tendencies, and a hardline religious orientation intensified religious extremism in the regions along the Afghan border. The rise of religious extremism in ex-FATA and the consequent formation of numerous militant organisations significantly contributed to the proliferation of terrorism across Pakistan, with ex-FATA at its epicentre.

## **STRUCTURAL FACTORS**

The structural factors contributing to the persistence of terrorism in NMDs are multifaceted and deeply rooted, dating back to the pre-partition era. Despite the administrative reorganisation of FATA through its merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, many governance challenges in NMDs remain largely unaddressed. The following are the key structural factors underpinning the continued persistence of terrorism in the region.

### **Political Exclusion**

The tribal way of life in FATA has historically been misunderstood, which has, in turn, led local tribes to adhere steadfastly to their unique lifestyle and the Pashtun Wali code of conduct. The complex socio-political environment of the region, coupled with widespread misinterpretation of its way of life, has served to isolate its people from the rest of the country. Rather than seeking to understand and accommodate the region's political dynamics and its citizens, external perceptions have remained narrow, with few attempts made to open up, develop the area, or initiate constructive dialogue (Khan, 2011).

The imposition of the Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR), which granted the Political Agent ultimate judicial and executive authority, including the power to enforce collective punishment and formal detention, further reinforced FATA's political exclusion. Under the FCR, all members of a tribe could be held accountable for alleged infractions by any individual tribe member, contrary to constitutional norms, thereby deepening alienation from the state (Dawn, 2016). While the tribesmen's preference for the British-imposed FCR at the time of independence may have aligned with local governance traditions, its continuation until its abolition in 2019 fostered significant mistrust and political grievances among the native population against perceived state oppression.

### **Social Disparities**

Social indicators in the militancy-affected Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), including education, health, employment, and access to water and sanitation, have historically lagged far behind the rest of Pakistan. A survey conducted by the Planning and Development Department of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), the Merged Areas Governance Programme (MAGP), and UNDP indicates that only 3.5 per cent of the population in the Newly Merged Districts (NMDs) have education up to the intermediate level, while approximately two per cent of the educated population hold a bachelor's degree (Ashfaq, 2021). The survey also reported that 52 per cent of the population across the seven districts of NMDs is illiterate, with only 22 per cent having received education up to the primary level.

In terms of healthcare infrastructure, NMDs have nearly 1,000 facilities of varying categories, of which 85 per cent were partially damaged due to years of conflict. Additionally, a 25 per cent shortage of doctors and other medical personnel exacerbates the situation (Momand, 2021). Only 36 per cent of required gynaecologists are available, and female medical staff remain almost non-existent. Even those who obtained medical education under the FATA quota rarely returned to serve in the region due to security concerns.

Accurate employment data for ex-FATA are scarce, as surveys often excluded the region due to the security situation (Finance Division Pakistan, 2023). However, the ex-FATA Development Indicators Household Survey (FDIHS) 2013 to 2014 indicated that unemployment among adults aged 15–64 in ex-FATA was 7.1 per cent, higher than the national average of 5.6 per cent. Youth unemployment was particularly high at 11.8 per cent, compared with the national average of 10.3 per cent. This unemployed demographic has historically been a primary pool for recruitment into militant organisations, either through coercion or enticement (Firdous, 2015).

### **Poverty and Local Economy**

With an area of 27,220 sq. km, ex-FATA is the most underdeveloped, isolated, and impoverished region of Pakistan, as reflected in its abysmally low literacy rate. Since independence, it has largely remained excluded from the social and economic development experienced by the rest of the country. Its semi-autonomous legal status, closely intertwined with the tribal way of life, diverted the attention of federal policymakers,

resulting in minimal developmental initiatives in ex-FATA. The merger of FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) was intended to improve governance, promote economic development, and bring the region on par with the rest of Pakistan.

However, significant developmental gaps persist. The region is characterised by a lack of basic infrastructure, including roads, bridges, electricity, and a clean water supply, limiting its economic potential. Literacy rates remain considerably below the national average, restricting employment opportunities and access to technological and technical skills, thereby perpetuating poverty. The poverty rate in the tribal belt exceeds the national average, leaving communities with limited resources to invest in their own development (Hussain, 2023).

### **Dilapidated Governance System**

The Newly Merged Districts (NMDs) face acute governance challenges due to the slow establishment of governmental institutions, persistent socio-economic underdevelopment, and political marginalisation. The Frontier Crimes Regulations deprived citizens of basic rights and meaningful political participation, generating deep-seated grievances among the population. The integration of ex-FATA into Pakistan's mainstream state was intended to address these socio-economic and political issues, as well as to counter the terrorism and militancy prevalent in the region. Despite the 2018 merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, significant challenges remain, including the effective extension of the formal judicial system to the NMDs. Moreover, the continued military presence in the region has fostered local discontent, with reports of human rights violations and insufficient reconstruction efforts further complicating governance and development initiatives.

### **Porous Border**

The border between Pakistan and Afghanistan was established through an agreement between the British Indian government and the ruler of Afghanistan in November 1893 and is known as the Durand Line (National Geographic, 2024). The 2,640-kilometre (1,640-mile) border divides the Pashtun tribes between the two countries. Afghanistan has not only laid claim to a significant portion of Pakistani territory but has also refused to formally recognise the international boundary (Raja, 2022).

The porous nature of the border, coupled with the ambiguous terms of the Durand Line Agreement granting easement rights, has facilitated unregulated cross-border movement. The border is often described as one of the most volatile and dangerous in the world, largely due to the presence of terrorist safe havens and the absence of effective governmental control. Its permeability has enabled drug trafficking, smuggling, arms trading, and, most critically, the free movement of terrorists across the frontier, thereby exacerbating security threats in the region (Alamgirian & Riaz, 2019). The weakly enforced Durand Line has allowed militants to seek sanctuary in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, easily crossing the border when pursued by security forces (Soofi, 2015).

In response to repeated attacks by Afghanistan-based Pakistani militant groups, Pakistan began fencing the border in March 2017 (Basit, 2021). Despite this, TTP fighters

and other terrorists who have taken refuge in Afghanistan continue to cross back into the NMDs, leading to a resurgence of terrorist activity, particularly in the border areas. Teams involved in fence construction have been attacked by militants and the Afghan Taliban, with sections of the fence torn down and building materials seized. While the fence may slow illegal crossings, it is unlikely to stop them entirely (Farmer & Mehsud, 2020).

## **PERCIPITANT FACTORS OF TERRORISM IN NMDs**

### **Resurrection of TTP under Noor Wali**

Following the assassination of TTP chief Mullah Fazlullah in a US drone strike in June 2018, the Central Shura appointed Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud as his successor. Under Noor Wali's leadership, control of the TTP reverted to the Mehsud tribe, previously led by Baitullah Mehsud (2007–2009) and Hakimullah Mehsud (2009–2013). Noor Wali is recognised as an active Islamist militant, ideologue, and prolific writer (Zahid, n.d.). He has worked to rebuild the group, improve internal discipline, enhance cohesion, and make the group's violence more targeted rather than indiscriminate. Between July and November 2020, he also persuaded eight jihadi groups that had previously left the TTP to rejoin its fold. According to a UN report published in February 2021, this consolidation increased the TTP's strength and contributed to a sharp rise in attacks in the region, with the current estimated fighter strength ranging between 2,500 and 6,000 (Syed & Hamming, 2021). Under Noor Wali, the TTP has been restructured "from a loosely organised central structure to a more tightly controlled, centralised structure, emulating the Afghan Taliban model" to address internal fragmentation and strengthen organisational coherence (Akhtar & Ahmed, 2023).

### **Organisational Restructuring under New Code of Conduct**

In September 2018, the TTP released its 'Code of Conduct', primarily aimed at guiding its ideologues. The document sets out 67 points outlining the group's overall policies, organisational structure, and strategy, including directives on looting, target selection, and the management of defectors and prisoners. The key themes addressed in the Code of Conduct are:

- i) Strengthening central leadership and structure.** The obligation to both the factional emir and the central emir, as well as to the Shura Council, remains indispensable under the section 'Principles Governing Internal Matters Affecting Mujahedeen'. This section emphasises that the factional emir must remain subordinate to the central emir, thereby reinforcing centralised authority.
- ii) Legitimate targets.** The TTP has issued standardised target lists in its Code of Conduct. The 'On Target' section includes state institutions such as the military, government, judiciary, and police. This approach reflects an effort to rebrand the TTP by distancing the group from indiscriminate attacks.
- iii) Dealing with defectors, spies, and prisoners.** Unlike IS-K, the TTP advises its members against taking vigilante or barbaric actions when handling spies and enemy prisoners. Instead, it directs all decision-making in such matters to the Shura

Council, establishing a controlled and centralised process (Jadoon & Mahmood, 2018).

One of the most significant organisational developments within the TTP has been its emulation of the Afghan Taliban's shadow governance structure in 2022. This model comprises nine shadow provinces supported by central organisational units, with ultimate authority vested in the leadership council, which appoints shadow ministers for portfolios such as education, defence, accountability, political affairs, welfare, information and broadcasting. In addition, the structure includes a suicide brigade, training camps, a general directorate of intelligence, an Islamic jurisprudence institute, and a three-tiered court system. As far as the new media strategy of TTP is concerned, the TTP has expanded its written publications, including the magazine Mujalla Taliban and the daily newspaper Manzil (Firdous et al., 2023).

### **Support from the Taliban Government in Afghanistan**

The TTP was the first militant group to officially celebrate the victory of the Afghan Taliban, viewing their ascension to power as a triumph for the jihadist project. The formal renewal of allegiance by Noor Wali Mehsud to Hibatullah Akhundzada, the Taliban emir, underscores the depth of their ties. The Taliban's takeover has strengthened the TTP, as Afghan authorities released hundreds of TTP militants who had been imprisoned by the previous Afghan government and US forces (Sayed & Hamming, 2023).

The Afghan Taliban's disruption of the fencing along the Pakistan–Afghanistan border and their refusal to recognise the Durand Line as the *de jure* border indicate deteriorating bilateral relations. Furthermore, the Taliban's lack of action to prevent TTP attacks against Pakistan implies tacit support for the group. Since 2021, there has been a dramatic surge in terrorist attacks in the NMDs, primarily carried out by the TTP (Akhtar & Ahmed, 2023). A particularly alarming consequence is the revival of the jihadist insurgency, as the TTP continues to exploit safe havens in Afghanistan to launch attacks against Pakistan (Bacon, 2023). The Taliban's victory has emboldened the TTP both operationally and ideologically. Since 2021, the group has restructured its organisation, shifting from a ragtag, quasi-tribal militia to a well-organised, centralised bureaucratic system. This transformation culminated in 2023 with the adoption of a comprehensive operational and administrative model, hierarchically structured on the Afghan Taliban's framework (Firdous et al., 2023).

### **Reunification of Splinter Groups**

According to the 2021 report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (UN), a key factor behind the lethal resurgence of the TTP has been the reintegration of previously splintered terrorist groups under the patronage of Al-Qaeda. This reunification has significantly strengthened the TTP and triggered a series of devastating attacks against Pakistan. The five terrorist groups that rejoined the TTP in 2021 include Hiz-ul-Ahrar, Jamaatul-Ahrar, the Usman Saifullah group (formerly Lashkar-e-Taiba), the Amjad Farooqi group, and the Shehryar Mehsud group (Fahad, 2021). The organisational strength of the TTP has grown considerably due to the merger of these breakaway factions, a

process largely attributed to Noor Wali Mehsud (Sajad, 2020). He successfully persuaded various disgruntled terrorist factions from his own Mehsud tribe, such as the Mukhlis Yar-led Hakimullah Mehsud group, to rejoin the TTP. This rapprochement not only enhances the group's longevity but also strengthens its capacity to conduct high-intensity operations. To further expand its support base, the TTP has sought to appeal to other ethnic groups, including the Baloch and the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement, by expressing support for their demands and highlighting their grievances (Akhtar & Ahmed, 2023).

### **Pervasive Political Instability**

Terrorist groups can be regarded as by-products of political instability and conflict, as such conditions provide fertile ground for their growth. These groups not only promote their narratives but also secure funding and recruits amid political turmoil. Terrorists often exploit power vacuums during periods of social and political chaos to launch attacks on high-security zones, thereby undermining the writ of the state. Since the ouster of Prime Minister Imran Khan in 2022, Pakistan's political environment has experienced severe polarisation. This has diverted the state's attention from addressing critical security challenges, including terrorism, while creating a conducive environment for groups such as the TTP to operate and expand (Basit, 2023). Furthermore, political polarisation significantly hampers the efforts of security forces to build consensus and achieve political ownership of counterterrorism policies and operations.

### **Proliferation of Resources**

The TTP has developed and implemented a multifaceted strategy for recruitment and funding. In addition to extortion and ransom in rural areas, the group has extended its fundraising activities to urban centres such as Karachi. The TTP recruits young men from Deobandi-Wahhabi madrassas and Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps, exploiting the political vacuum created by weak state capacity (EFSAS, 2025). The 2024 UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team report highlights the role of the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda in providing weapons, equipment, and logistical support to the TTP. The Afghan Taliban have reportedly assisted the TTP by joining the group and providing aid packages to the families of its members. De facto Afghan authorities are also said to have given TTP leader Noor Wali Mehsud a monthly stipend of \$50,500. Notably, there has been a surge in Afghan nationals joining the TTP.

Al-Qaeda continues to play a prominent role by offering ideological guidance, training, and operational support, which has enhanced the TTP's capacity to conduct more frequent and sophisticated attacks. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan led to widespread weapons proliferation, including arms left behind by US forces. Reports indicate that Taliban commanders supplied the TTP with weapons such as M24 sniper rifles, M16A4 rifles, and M4 carbines equipped with Trijicon ACOG scopes. The availability of these weapons, particularly those with night-vision capability, has significantly increased the lethality of TTP attacks against Pakistan, particularly targeting security forces (Gul, 2024).

## **Negotiations with TTP**

Since the Afghan Taliban came to power in August 2021, three rounds of negotiations have taken place between the TTP and Pakistan. The first round, held in November 2021, quickly proved ineffective and yielded no positive outcomes. The second round, conducted in May 2022, resulted in a month-long ceasefire, which eventually collapsed, leading to the breakdown of talks. The third round took place in June 2022, but the ceasefire agreed during these negotiations was unilaterally terminated by the TTP in November 2022.

Engaging in peace negotiations with the TTP effectively legitimises a terrorist group responsible for targeted assassinations, attacks on schools, bombings, and human rights abuses. Historically, the TTP's unwillingness to honour agreements is evident from events such as the 2014 TTP-government peace dialogue, which was followed by a lethal attack on Jinnah International Airport just days after a ceasefire was declared. Negotiations with the TTP have often proven counterproductive, providing the group with legitimacy and valuable time to expand its personnel, military capabilities, and financial resources (Azad, 2023).

## **FINDINGS**

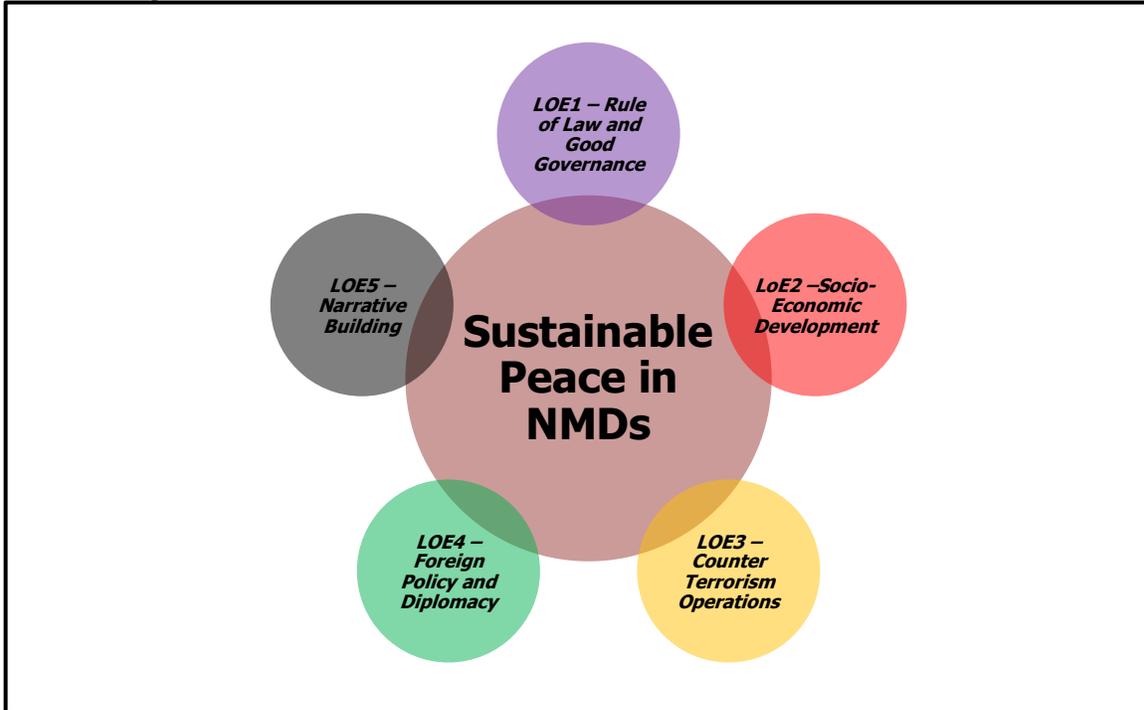
The analysis of persistent structural and dynamic precipitant factors, alongside radicalisation, reveals that structural factors have long been embedded in the socio-economic, political, and security fabric of the country, particularly in the NMDs. These factors cannot be eradicated in a short period. Historical evidence indicates that structural challenges have been pervasive in the tribal belt both before and after the creation of ex-FATA. While the region remained relatively stable during the era of 'Order in Disorder' and even throughout the Afghan Jihad, underlying grievances, rooted in pre-partition history, have persisted due to pernicious political polarisation, lack of economic opportunities, poor social development, and dilapidated infrastructure.

Although structural factors have been predominant in sustaining terrorism in the NMDs, precipitant factors have played a catalytic role in its perpetuation. Since 9/11, these precipitant factors have significantly contributed to the resurgence of terrorist incidents emanating from the NMDs, with the TTP being the most formidable actor. A key element in the TTP's current resurgence is the leadership of Noor Wali Mehsud, who has restructured the organisation under a new Code of Conduct and expanded its ranks by integrating splinter groups. With greater numbers, renewed doctrinal guidance, and dynamic leadership, the TTP has become more effective, selective, and goal-oriented in its operations.

The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has provided TTP remnants with a safe sanctuary, enabling regrouping and reorganisation. The synergy between the TTP, Afghan Taliban, and aligned groups, combining manpower, experience, and combat resilience, has enhanced the effectiveness of TTP operations in Pakistan's border areas. To counter terrorism arising from these multifaceted structural and precipitant factors, a

comprehensive strategy based on five Lines of Effort (LOEs) is essential to achieve the desired end state of sustainable peace in the NMDs, as illustrated in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Lines of Efforts (LOEs) to achieve Sustainable Peace in NMDs**



*Source: Authors' compilation.*

Each LOE has its distinct yet interrelated objectives as mentioned in Figure 3 below.

**Figure 3: Objective of each Line of Effort (LOE)**



*Source: Authors' compilation.*

A thorough assessment of radicalisation, as well as structural and precipitant factors, reveals that a mitigation strategy based on the five Lines of Effort (LOEs) is indispensable for de-radicalising the population and addressing persistent, context-specific structural and precipitant factors. Table 1 presents the mitigation strategies for each LOE, aligned with the desired end state and specific objectives.

**Table 1: LOE- Based Mitigation Strategy for Curbing Terrorism in NMDs**

<b>LOEs</b>	<b>Mitigation Strategy</b>
<b>LOE 1 Rule of Law &amp; Good Governance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Develop political consensus under the National Action Plan</li> <li>- Erase remnants of FCR</li> <li>- Accelerate bureaucratic integration</li> <li>- Encourage political co-optation</li> <li>- Decentralised governance</li> <li>- Adopt good governance practices at all levels</li> <li>- Effective implementation of the national legal system</li> <li>- Enhance provincial government capacity to prosecute militants</li> <li>- Implement FATA merger plan, including the establishment of effective local governance</li> </ul>
<b>LOE 2 Socio-Economic Development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Expeditious implementation of social development programs focusing on health and education</li> <li>- Increase people-to-people contact – community engagement</li> <li>- Establish economic zones and industrial complexes</li> <li>- Optimise natural resources management</li> <li>- HR and skill development through vocational training</li> <li>- Support entrepreneurship and micro financing</li> <li>- Youth focus on employment opportunities</li> <li>- Implement Madrasa reforms to counter radical narrative and promote skill development</li> <li>- Execute Rehab and de-radicalisation programs for misguided youth</li> </ul>
<b>LOE 3 Counter Terrorism Operations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Modernise CTD (Counter Terrorism Department)</li> <li>- Effective border fencing and border control mechanisms</li> <li>- Improved intelligence sharing across the border</li> <li>- Disrupt smuggling and illicit trade</li> <li>- Neutralise Noor Wali</li> <li>- Exploit intra-group rivalries</li> <li>- Decapitate second-tier leadership in terror outfits</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Incentivise defection amongst minor groups through financial rewards, amnesty and rehabilitation</li> <li>- Disrupt financial network, including donation, extortion and illicit trade</li> <li>- Use the local community to discourage the recruitment of youth by terrorist groups</li> <li>- Effective use of human and technical intelligence network</li> <li>- Seamless interagency coordination</li> <li>- Negotiation as a last resort, and that too only from a position of strength</li> <li>- Any negotiation can only be conducted through a credible mediator</li> <li>- Negotiations only after significant dilution of TTP's operational capability</li> </ul>
<p><b>LOE 4 Foreign Policy &amp; Diplomacy</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Engage the US, China and Russia to implement pledges of the Doha Accord and diplomatically coerce them into taking action against TTP</li> <li>- Adopt coordinated efforts with GCC, CARs and Iran to choke disrupt TTP's financial and operational networks</li> <li>- Engage the UN for the implementation of sanctions for not implementing the Doha Accord</li> <li>- Leverage control over trade routes to push the Afghan government to take action against TTP</li> </ul>
<p><b>LOE 5 Narrative Building</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Organise a strong counter TTP narrative to sow decent and resist recruitment</li> <li>- Use religious scholars and local clergy to delegitimise, demonise and discredit Noor Wali</li> <li>- Use Psychological operations and counter-narrative to de-incentivise collaboration with TTP</li> <li>- Build a narrative to induce mistrust in Noor Wali's leadership and the Mehsud Tribe</li> <li>- Build public trust, especially amongst youth</li> <li>- Permeate moderate religious and cultural narrative</li> <li>- Engage clergy and foster inter-sect harmony dialogue</li> </ul>

*Source: Authors' compilation*

## CONCLUSION

This research provides a comprehensive analysis of the factors underpinning terrorism in the NMDs, examining the processes of radicalisation alongside structural and precipitant factors that have entrenched violence in the region. Drawing on these insights, the study proposes a mitigation strategy centred on five strategic Lines of Effort (LOEs) to address the multifaceted drivers of terrorism and promote lasting stability.

Political polarisation and enduring instability continue to impede cohesive national counter-terrorism efforts, affecting both military and non-military domains. The historical entrenchment of rigid religious ideologies in the tribal belt, compounded by the spillover effects of the 2001 US intervention in Afghanistan, has further weakened the security environment and accelerated radicalisation. Consequently, terrorism in the NMDs has demonstrated a remarkable resilience, persisting despite repeated countermeasures.

The findings underscore that addressing terrorism in the NMDs requires a holistic and coordinated approach. No single measure can eradicate the deeply rooted structural and context-specific precipitant factors; instead, sustained attention across all five LOEs is essential. Successful implementation demands a whole-of-government strategy that integrates strategic, operational, and tactical interventions across military and civilian spheres. Only through patient, prudent, and long-term planning, coupled with a pragmatic and inclusive vision, can Pakistan hope to dismantle the enduring structures of terrorism and achieve sustainable peace in the NMDs.

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