

The Escalation of Terrorism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa after Taliban's Return to Power in Afghanistan in 2021-2025

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ABSTRACT

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, following the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces, has significantly altered the security landscape of Pakistan, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). This research investigates the escalation of terrorism in KPK between 2021 and 2025, focusing on the resurgence of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the role of the Afghan Taliban in enabling militant activities. Drawing upon a mixed-method approach combining surveys conducted with residents of KPK and interviews with regional experts the study highlights a sharp rise in terrorist incidents, cross-border attacks, and militant reorganizations. Findings reveal that the Afghan Taliban's ideological, logistical, and financial support, including reported monthly funding to the TTP, has strengthened militancy and undermined Pakistan's internal security. The research also underscores the limited effectiveness of Pakistan's counterterrorism strategies, which remain hindered by weak border management, lack of political consensus, socio-economic disparities, and strained civil-military coordination. Moreover, the failures of peace negotiations with the TTP and inadequate regional cooperation have further exacerbated insecurity in KPK. This study concludes that the Taliban's return to power has directly intensified terrorism in Pakistan's northwestern frontier and strained Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. It recommends a multidimensional strategy that combines robust border management, political consensus, socio-economic reforms, and constructive diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan to effectively counter terrorism and restore regional stability.

Key Words: *Taliban, escalation of terrorism, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, militancy, counterterrorism strategies, political consensus, socio-economic reforms.*

INTRODUCTION

The return of Taliban into power in Afghanistan since 2021, followed by the withdrawal of United States of America and NATO forces from Afghanistan, has posed serious security challenges to Pakistan especially for North-northwestern province - Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is sharing a long and porous border with Afghanistan due which it has suffered a lot and is still facing the issue of terrorism. It is a province which has witnessed several military operations to encounter terrorism and insurgency. It is the most vulnerable province to terrorism due to its close proximity to Afghanistan and historical ties with Afghanistan. Since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, a significant increase occurred in terrorism and militant activities.

The resurgence of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other terrorist groups after Taliban's takeover in 2021 in Afghanistan has occurred and raised serious concerns for Pakistan's national security. These terrorist groups launched deadly attacks on security forces, police forces, law enforcement agencies and civilian as well, which results in multiple numbers of deaths and casualties. These terrorist groups are also posing serious threats to Chinese development projects such as CPEC as many attacks were launched which targeted Chinese personnel in Pakistan since 2021.

Taliban-led government in Afghanistan has been alleged for providing shelter to Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and Afghanistan is considered as the safe haven for terrorist groups in which the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan is the largest terrorist group having 6000 to 6500 militants in Afghanistan. The government of Pakistan demanded Afghanistan to take immediate actions against the TTP. The United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres also called in Afghan Taliban's government to prevent terrorist organizations from attacking Pakistan or any other country from Afghan territory but the Taliban's government didn't take actions as it wants to maintain leverage over Pakistan.

Afghan Taliban's government has provided and is still providing ideological, logistical and financial support to Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan. According to GEO News the Afghan Taliban financially supports TTP, reportedly providing TTP approximately \$43,000 monthly.

This research seeks to investigate the extent to which the Taliban's return has contributed to the resurgence of terrorism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It also examines the effectiveness of Pakistan's counterterrorism strategies and measures and factors leading towards the instability in the region. Through a mixed method approach which combines data through survey from the residents of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and interviews from regional experts, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current security landscape in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa post-2021.

Significance of the study

This research focuses to fill an important gap in the existing literature by focusing on the post-2021 period, which has seen a sharp rise in terrorism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. While various studies have analyzed the Taliban's return in Afghanistan, limited academic work has done on its direct impact on Pakistan's security, the effectiveness of counterterrorism strategies of Pakistan and role of Afghan Taliban in the resurgence of TTP and other militant groups in KPK.

Understanding the Taliban's influence on terrorist activities in KPK can help in formulating more effective policies to curb militancy and encounter terrorism to ensure border security.

Objectives of the Study

1. Examine the escalation of terrorism in KPK after the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021.
2. Analyze the role and support of the Afghan Taliban in the resurgence of the TTP and other militant groups.
3. Assess Pakistan's counterterrorism strategies and their effectiveness in curbing the rise of terrorism.

Research Questions of the Study

1. How has the Taliban's return to power influenced terrorism in KPK?
2. What factors have contributed to the resurgence of the TTP and affiliated groups?
3. What counterterrorism measures has Pakistan taken, and how effective have they been?

RESEARCH METHADODOLOGY

This research follows a mixed method of research - both qualitative and quantitative methods, adopted. Primary data is collected in two ways; firstly, a survey is conducted through an online Google form. The participants were exclusively from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Secondly, Interviews were conducted from regional experts and analysts whose insights are valuable to understand the complexity and nature of terrorism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The history of Taliban is associated with the history of Afghanistan, characterized by foreign invasion, civil war and people surrounded by global politics. In 1989 the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan after a long resistance they had faced from afghan mujahedeen or Islamic guerilla fighters which marked the end of a long term Soviet afghan conflict. These mujahedeen resisted the Soviet through covert assistance of CIA and ISI and have also received support from Saudi Arabia.

A civil war started in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of Soviet Union. Various groups and factions came into being within the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan and each turned against one another for gaining power. In this chaos, the Taliban emerged in 1994 when they entered Kandahar in November 1994 and then by September 1996, they captured Kabul from President Burhanuddin Rabbani. That year, the Taliban declared Afghanistan as an "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" under their leader named Mullah Muhammad Umar, ruling with a theocratic system that was internationally recognized only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirate (UAE). However, their rule was characterized by repression- particularly of women and minorities - and gave a place to foreign extremists- especially to Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda. (Rashid, 2000)

The Taliban supported Al-Qaeda and that support of Taliban for Al-Qaeda led to the downfall of Taliban's government 2001, when the United States of America, backed by NATO and northern alliance (Afghan opposition led by Masood of Panjshir), launched a military operation called "Operation Enduring Freedom" after September 11th 2001 attacks (9/11 attacks). United States of America installed a new pro-American regime of Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan and thus, ended the Taliban government in Afghanistan.

In the next two decades, the Taliban carried out insurgency and resistance against United States of America, NATO forces and Afghan forces, operating mainly in rural areas and mountainous regions near Pakistan's borders. Despite having strong and heavily equipped military force, the US-led coalition struggled to counter insurgency and militancy in order to build a stable and democratic Afghanistan.

After of years of tensions and war in Afghanistan between US-led coalition and Taliban, the United States signed a peace agreement with the Taliban in Doha (Qatar) in February 2022. In this agreement, the US committed to withdraw its forces in exchange of which the Taliban assured that the soil of Afghanistan would not be used to harbor terrorists again. Pakistan played a significant role in Doha peace agreement between Taliban and United States of America.

When Joe Biden came into power in USA, he decided a complete withdrawal of American forces by August 2021. The Taliban launched attacks, capturing districts after districts but they faced no counter resistance and retaliation. Many afghan troops surrendered without a fight. By 15th of August 2021, the Taliban entered into Kabul without facing any resistance, the democratic government of Ashraf Ghani collapsed and thus, the afghan Taliban established their own new government on 15th of August 2021 in Afghanistan. (Watch, 2022)

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021 has had significant repercussions for the internal security and peace of Pakistan, especially of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, with a sudden increase in Terrorism. Terrorism has long been a pressing security threat for Pakistan and especially for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa due to its close proximity to Afghanistan and historical ties with various insurgent groups, due to which Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has witnessed various militant activities. When Afghan Taliban came into power in 2021 in Afghanistan, it had increased insurgency and terrorism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa especially TTP has resurged once again. These militant groups are launching deadly attacks on civilians, police forces and security personnel.

Contemporary Scenario of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa After 2021. Since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has faced a significant increase in terrorism. One of the most suitable examples is the resurgence of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) operations, which includes high-profile attacks on security forces, target killings, and deadly attacks on civilians. The contemporary situation is characterized by increase in cross-border attacks from Afghanistan into Pakistan's tribal districts, such as North Waziristan and South Waziristan. The TTP, strengthened by the Taliban's victory and using Afghan soil as a safe haven, has reorganized and intensified its operations.

In late 2022 and throughout 2023, there were several deadly incidents - for example, the suicide bombing at a mosque in Peshawar Police Lines (January 2023), which killed over 100 people, most of them were policemen. This attack highlighted the resurgence and reemergence of TTP and other militant groups in KPK. It also exposed significant gaps in Pakistan's counterterrorism policies, particularly in intelligence coordination, political will and comprehensive political strategy.

Additionally, the failed ceasefire agreement between the Pakistani state and the TTP in late 2022 led to a increase in attacks targeting police, military convoys, and even polio vaccination teams and undermining not just security, but also social and economic development efforts in KPK.

This is a matter of fact that Afghan Taliban supports TTP both financially and logistically in order to launch attacks across the border in Pakistan. Pakistan is calling upon Afghanistan government to take strong and appropriate actions against TTP to stop militancy and terrorist attacks against Pakistan. However, Afghan Taliban did not and still does not take serious and strict actions against TTP for several reasons. Firstly, Afghan Taliban has no ideological contradictions and differences with Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan. Secondly, Kabul wants to maintain a diplomatic leverage and influence over Islamabad. Thirdly, Afghanistan is reluctant to put too much pressure on Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan. Domestically, it fears the TTP alliance with the regional Islamic state of Khorasan (IS-K), which is conducting operations against Taliban security forces and represents a significant threat to Taliban rule". (Banerjee, 2025)

According to the 15th report of the ISIL (Daesh) and Al-Qaeda/Taliban Monitoring Team, submitted to the UN Security Council, Afghan Taliban and different groups of Al-Qaeda provide operational and logistical support to TTP. (Zaidi, 2024). The UN report highlights that the Afghan Taliban financially supports TTP, reportedly providing approximately \$43,000 monthly. (GEO News, 2025) This financial support has helped in expansion of TTP in various provinces of Afghanistan, including Kunar, Nangarhar, Khost, and Paktika. Furthermore, TTP has increased its attacks against Pakistan, with over 600 attacks recorded during 2024, many launched from Afghan territory. (International THE NEWS, 2025)

Also, the main reason of contemporary tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan is terrorism supported by Afghanistan against Pakistan particularly after Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan since 2021. The recent border skirmishes and the return of Afghan refugees to Afghanistan are bitterness of that main issue. So, the contemporary situations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are not satisfactory and peace is endangered by Afghanistan-backed TTP which is a serious challenge for Pakistan's security forces and law enforcement agencies.

Data Analysis of Research

To analyze the escalation of terrorism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa after the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan since 2021, the opinions of participants and the views of experts were taken under consideration. The statistical analysis is given as under in their respective graphs.

When the participants were asked about the escalation of terrorism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa since Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021, they expressed their opinion, in which 70.9% people said that terrorism has increased, 18.2% said that no increase occurred in terrorism while 10.9% people didn't express their opinion as mentioned in Figure 2. Furthermore, Cross-border terrorism and cross-border movement of militants is also increased since 2021 as the statistics are given in figure 1. These figures show that since the return of Taliban into power in Afghanistan since 2021 has resulted in increased cross border movement of terrorists which led in increased insurgency and militancy in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

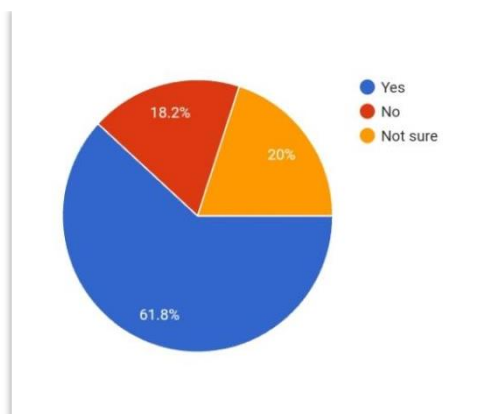


Figure 2. Cross-border Movement

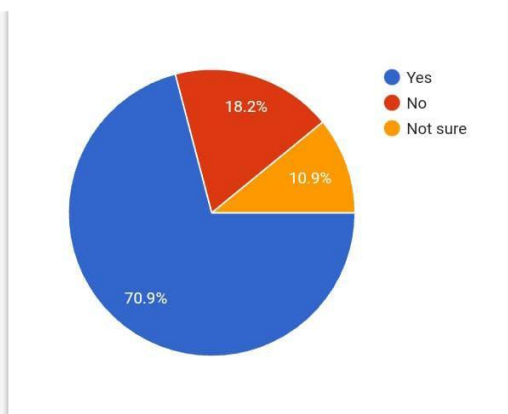


Figure 1. Increase in Terrorism

The return of Afghan Taliban into power since the withdrawal of United States from Afghanistan has directly strengthened the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Pakistan particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and this is evident from the survey in which 56.3% of people were believed that there is a direct impact on the strength of TTP in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as shown in the figure 3. Similarly, the frequency of militancy, insurgency and terrorism is increased since the establishment of Taliban's government in Afghanistan. When the participants were questioned about the increase in frequency of terrorist attacks, they showed different responses. 70.9 % of people were agreed that the frequency has increased while 29.1 % were disagreed, as shown in figure 4.

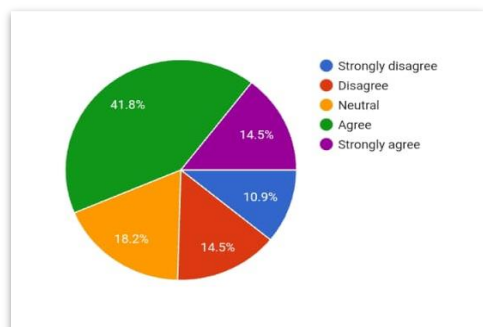


Figure 3. Impact of Afghan Taliban on the strength of TTP

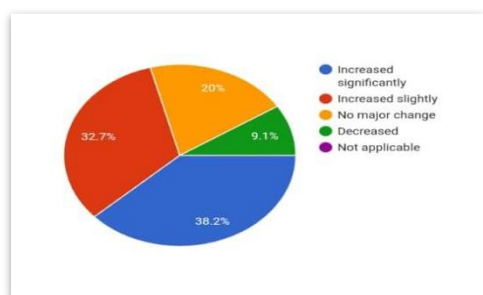


Figure 4. Frequency of Terrorism in KPK after Taliban's return in Afghanistan

The Afghanistan has long been supported TTP since the withdrawal of United States of America from Afghanistan. This support is in the form logistics and finance. There are a lot of evidences regarding this support of Afghan Taliban to Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). For instance, According to the 15th report of the ISIL (Daesh) and Al-Qaeda/Taliban Monitoring Team, submitted to the UN Security Council, Afghan Taliban and different groups of Al-Qaeda provide operational and logistical support to TTP. (Zaidi, 2024). The UN report highlights that the Afghan Taliban financially supports TTP, reportedly providing approximately \$43,000 monthly. (GEO News, 2025)

Similarly' when the participants in survey were asked about the extent of ideological and financial support provided by Afghan Taliban's government for TTP, 67.3% people agreed that Afghanistan is supporting TTP ideologically and logistically in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa but the extent of support is different as shown in the figure 5.

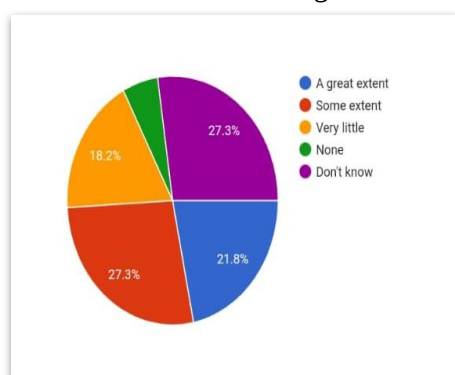


Figure 5. Extent of Support

When the participants were asked that is Afghan government is taking serious and adequate steps and measures to curb terrorism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and prevent cross-border attacks against Pakistan, 40% of people answers with NO, 34.5% answered with YES, while 29.5% were not sure about the steps taken by Afghan government, as shown in the figure 6.

Afghan Taliban did not and still does not take serious and strict actions against TTP for several reasons. Firstly, Afghan Taliban has no ideological contradictions and differences with Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan. Secondly, Kabul wants to maintain a diplomatic leverage and influence over Islamabad. Thirdly, Afghanistan is reluctant to put too much pressure on Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan. Domestically, it fears the TTP alliance with the regional Islamic state of Khorasan (IS-K), which is conducting operations against Taliban security forces and represents a significant threat to Taliban rule". (Banerjee, 2025)

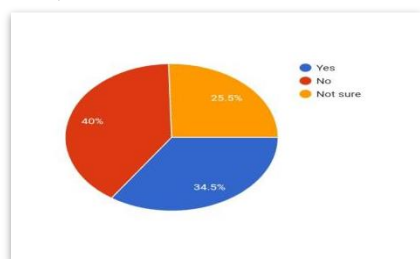


Figure 6. Role of Afghan government to curb terrorism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Pakistan has conducted various military operations to counter terrorism but failed. Experts argue that without addressing the root causes of extremism, such as socio-economic disparities and ideological indoctrination, military actions are not sufficient alone. Efforts to negotiate with TTP have been widely criticized as the government provided opportunity to resettle the TTP, led to further instability. Policies like the National Prevention of Violent Extremism (NPVE) aim to counter terrorism through Non-military means. However, analysts argue that limited resources and limited coordination among institutions are hurdles in its implementation. (Hussain, News, 2025)

In response to a question I posed during an interview, Shams Momand¹, a renowned journalist and writer with deep insights into regional affairs, shared his perspective on Pakistan's counter-terrorism strategies. He explained that Pakistan has designed various strategies and formulated several policies to combat terrorism, including a number of military operations. However, he pointed out that these policies have not been entirely effective in addressing both the immediate threat of terrorism and the root causes of militancy and insurgency in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. According to Momand, a key reason for the limited success of these policies is the significant differences between the military establishment and political leadership in the formulation and implementation of these strategies, which ultimately undermined their effectiveness and prevented the desired outcomes. Furthermore, he noted that, of the many military operations carried out in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the majority were unsuccessful. However, he acknowledged that two operations—Zarb-e-Azb in North Waziristan and Rah-e-Rast in Swat—were relatively successful in curbing terrorism to some extent.

In addition, Shams Momand further emphasized the significant gap in Pakistan's current counterterrorism strategies, which he attributed to a lack of trust and misunderstanding between various key stakeholders. According to him, there is a disconnect between the public and the government, the public and the military establishment, as well as between the provincial and federal governments, all of which are not aligned on the approach to counterterrorism. Shams Momand pointed out that civilians have raised serious concerns and criticized the military, particularly regarding its role in formulating counterterrorism strategies over the past 20 to 25 years, yet without achieving significant outcomes. He argued that the underlying cause of these failures lies in the lack of political will and the absence of meaningful input from the civilian government, which has failed to engage in a comprehensive discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of existing strategies.

Shams Momand also noted that Pakistan should engage in negotiations with its neighbors in a democratic and political manner, taking into account each other's difficulties and compulsions. Proposed solutions should be politically discussed and resolved through dialogue, as not everything can be achieved with force and violence. However, the use of force should be considered when these diplomatic measures fail to counter terrorism effectively.

In essence, the formulation of policies should be carried out by political forces, while the implementation of those policies, along with punishing the brokers and violators of these policies, should be vested in the military forces.

¹ Shams Momand is a renowned journalist and has been fulfilling his responsibilities as an anchor person and as a host in various news channels and Radio for last 30 years. He is also the writer of seven books and still writing columns in different newspapers.

When a question was asked from the participants in survey about the extent of effectiveness of Pakistan's role in securing the Pak-Afghan border since 2021, the respondents showed different responses. Only 18.2% of the participants responded that Pakistan has securing effectively the Pak-Afghan border while 45.5% people were of the opinion that Pakistan has not been effectively securing the border since 2021. Statistics are given as under in figure 7.

People had highlighted various reasons and Factors contributing to the resurgence of terrorism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. One the main factors was the ineffective counterterrorism measures, as shown in graph (A).

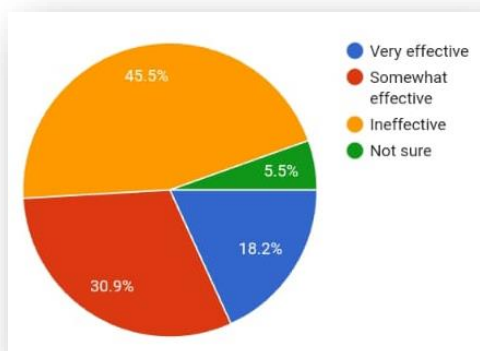
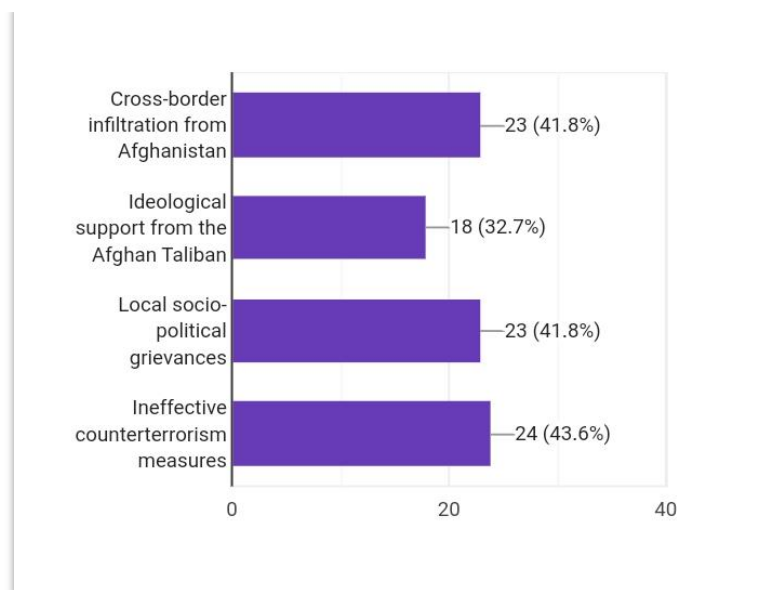


Figure 7. Effectiveness of Pakistan's role in securing Pak-Afghan border since 2021



Graph (A). Factors contributing to Resurgence of Terrorism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

FINDINGS OF THE RESERACH

The findings of this research, based on both primary data (survey responses and expert interviews) and secondary sources (reports, scholarly articles, and official documents), show several critical insights about

the escalation of terrorism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021.

i). A clear majority (70.9%) of the survey participants observed a noticeable increase in terrorism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa following the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan. This perception corresponds with the official statistics and reports highlighting a dramatic rise in militant attacks and fatalities in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa between 2021 and 2024.

ii). Rise in Cross-Border Movement and Insurgency was observed due to cross-border movement of terrorists and militant groups operating from Afghanistan and launching deadly attacks on security forces, law enforcement agencies and civilian. Official reports and international monitoring agencies have similarly documented the cross-border terrorism originating from Afghanistan.

iii). The research findings indicate that the Afghan Taliban's return has directly increased the strength of TTP. Approximately 56.3% of participants agreed that the TTP had gained ideological, logistical, and operational support from Afghanistan, enabling it to reorganize and intensify its operations in KPK.

iv). Afghan Taliban's government is providing ideological and financial support to TTP. International reports confirm that the Afghan Taliban, along with Al-Qaeda elements, have been providing financial aid and logistical assistance to the TTP, facilitating their resurgence and expansion.

v). A significant portion of respondents (40%) believed that the Afghan Taliban government has not taken serious or adequate steps to prevent cross-border terrorism against Pakistan. This finding corresponds with concerns of the international community regarding the unwillingness or inability of Afghanistan to curb TTP activities.

vi). The research also finds the limited effectiveness of Pakistan's counterterrorism strategies in order to curb the terrorism by showing that Pakistan has not securing its Pak-Afghan border effectively since 2021.

vii). Multiple Factors Behind Resurgence of Terrorism such as ineffective counterterrorism measures, cross-border support for militants, socio-economic issues, and lack of trust between the public and institutions were identified as major causes for the resurgence of terrorism.

In short, the above all findings show that the current situation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa remains unsatisfactory. High-profile terrorist attacks, the failure of peace talks with TTP, and rising border tensions with Afghanistan collectively posed serious threats to regional stability. Afghan Taliban's reluctance to curb TTP activities has further strained Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this research clearly show that the return of Taliban into power in Afghanistan since 2021 has escalated terrorism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and has directly impacted the security situations of Pakistan especially of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The majority of participants in survey confirmed the rise of militant activities, cross-border movement and of militants and terrorism, the support of Afghan Taliban's government for TTP both ideologically and financially, and direct impacts of Afghan Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan on the security situations of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The experts views further strength the view that Pakistan's counterterrorism strategies have been only partially effective and have been hindered by weak border management, political disunity, lack of a comprehensive socio-political approach to addressing extremism and lack of trust among the public, government and military establishment.

Pakistan has launched multiple number of military operations and formulated different counterterrorism strategies but despite of all those efforts, Pakistani security forces, law enforcement agencies and civilians are still facing the violence terrorism. The Afghan Taliban's reluctance to counter the violent activities of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) further escalated the terrorism and deteriorated the security situations not only in Pakistan but also disturbed the regional security situations and peace.

Moving forward, it's necessary for Pakistan to review its counterterrorism policies and strengthen these policies by promoting political consensus, coordination among institutions, addressing the root causes such as socio-economic deprivation and enhancing a diplomatic engagement to establish welcoming relations with Afghanistan. Multidimensional and comprehensive strategy is required that combines military, political and socio-economic factors to curb terrorism and extremism effectively.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is necessary for Pakistan to review its counterterrorism policies and strengthen these policies by promoting political consensus, coordination among institutions, addressing the root causes such as socio-economic deprivation, ensure the principle of separation of power so that each institution may carry out its functions and fulfill its responsibilities within its own jurisdiction set by constitution of 1973. It is also crucial for Pakistan to developed friendly relations with all its neighbors but particularly enhancing a diplomatic engagement to establish welcoming relations with Afghanistan. Multidimensional and comprehensive strategy is required that combines military, political and socio-economic factors to curb terrorism and extremism effectively.

Pakistan should engage in negotiations with Afghanistan in a democratic and political manner, taking into account each other's difficulties and compulsions. Proposed solutions should be politically discussed and resolved through dialogue, as not everything can be achieved with force and violence. However, the use of force should be considered when these diplomatic measures fail to counter terrorism effectively. In essence, the formulation of policies should be carried out by political forces, while the implementation of those policies, along with punishing the brokers and violators of these policies, should be vested in the military forces.

Pakistan should also focus on building trust measures to fill the gap of distrust among the public and government institutions, especially in the border regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It should also focus on mainstreaming of Tribal areas and facilitate these areas in every walk of life.

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