
**Pakistan Army's Role Against Terrorism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Post-US Withdrawal
(2021–2024)**

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Abstract

The August 2021 withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan and the Taliban's return to power precipitated a sharp escalation of terrorist violence in Pakistan. This paper examines the Pakistan Army's counterterrorism role in the post-withdrawal period (2021–2024) with a focus on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and the merged former tribal districts. Security data reveals a dramatic surge in incidents; Pakistan suffered 521 attacks in 2024, causing 852 deaths, a 23% increase from 2023, with KP alone witnessing 295 attacks and 509 fatalities that year, largely due to a rejuvenated Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) operating from Afghan sanctuaries. The Army responded with intensified operations, notably continuing Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad and launching Operation Azm-e-Istehkam in 2024, resulting in hundreds of militant casualties. Concurrently, Pakistan managed an influx of approximately 600,000 Afghan refugees via KP, straining resources and complicating border security. The military's approach involved navigating complex civil-military relations amid civilian concerns about both militancy and security tactics. This analysis concludes that sustainable security requires integrating kinetic operations with political engagement, development initiatives, and regional diplomacy to address underlying conflict drivers.

Keywords: Pakistan Counterterrorism; Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP); Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP); Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad; Operation Azm-e-Istehkam; Afghan Refugees; Civil-Military Relations

Introduction

On August 15, 2021, the Taliban's swift takeover of Kabul, coinciding with the U.S. military's withdrawal from Afghanistan, marked a watershed moment for regional security. In Pakistan, the fallout was immediate: militant groups, especially the Pakistani Taliban (TTP), were emboldened by the victory of their Afghan counterparts. Hundreds of TTP fighters, including senior commanders, were reportedly freed from Afghan prisons by the triumphant Taliban. The Taliban's return also enabled the TTP to reclaim safe havens across the border and access weaponry left behind by retreating U.S. and NATO forces. For Pakistan, which had enjoyed a hard-won decline in terrorism by the late 2010s, these developments portended a dangerous resurgence of insurgency. By late 2021 and into 2022, a new wave of terrorist violence was underway, concentrated in Pakistan's northwest (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, including the erstwhile FATA tribal districts) and southwest (Balochistan).

Pakistan's security gains in the 2015–2020 period were significant: sustained counterinsurgency campaigns had sharply reduced terror attacks. Major military operations, from Operation Zarb-e-Azb in North Waziristan (2014–2016) to Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad (launched 2017), dismantled militant infrastructure and curbed violence. By 2019, yearly terror-related fatalities had fallen to a fraction of their 2009–2014 peak. However, analysts had warned that militants were “down but not out,” as the root causes of extremism remained unaddressed. Those warnings proved prescient when the Taliban's victory next door rejuvenated the TTP. The insurgency in KP reignited: attacks on security forces, assassinations, bombings, and cross-border infiltrations all spiked. This represented a strategic inflection point for the Pakistan Army's counterterrorism role.

This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of how Pakistan's internal security landscape evolved from 2021 through 2024 and how the Army responded. We focus on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (including ex-FATA) as the epicenter of the post-withdrawal terrorism surge. Key themes include: (1) the resurgence of militant violence after the U.S. withdrawal; (2) major counter-operations by the Army (continuation of Radd-ul-Fasaad and the initiation of Azm-e-Istehkam) and their impact; (3) refugee influx and border security dynamics along the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier; (4) internal displacement (IDPs) within KP due to conflict; and (5) civil–military relations and political challenges. By examining these dimensions, we seek to understand the efficacy and limitations of the Pakistan Army's counterterrorism strategy in this new phase.

Literature Review

Counterterrorism in Pakistan (2001–2020)

Pakistan's extensive counterinsurgency experience in the two decades preceding the U.S. withdrawal is well-documented. A series of military operations, beginning with smaller campaigns in the mid-2000s (e.g., Operation Al-Mizan in South Waziristan) and escalating to major offensives like Rah-e-Rast in Swat (2009) and Rah-e-Nijat in South Waziristan (2009), gradually reclaimed territory from militant control, though often at the cost of significant civilian displacement and collateral damage. The watershed moment was Operation Zarb-e-Azb (2014–2016) in North Waziristan, which military figures claim resulted in the deaths of over 3,500 militants and a dramatic dismantling of terrorist infrastructure. This kinetic success was complemented by the 20-point National Action Plan (NAP), which outlined a comprehensive strategy pairing military action with initiatives to counter extremist ideology, reform madrasas, and enhance coordination through the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA). The result was a precipitous drop in violence; by 2019, the Global Terrorism Index noted a 90% decrease in terror-related deaths in Pakistan from their peak, heralding a period of hard-won stability (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2019).

However, scholarly work consistently cautioned that these gains were precarious. Analysts like Rana (2020) and Yusuf (2018) argued that while kinetic operations had fractured militant networks, the underlying drivers of extremism, including ideological radicalization, cross-border safe havens, and unresolved socio-political grievances in Pashtun and Baloch regions, remained largely unaddressed. Critically, the TTP's leadership cadre had largely survived by relocating to Afghanistan during Zarb-e-Azb. Publications by the Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) repeatedly warned that TTP cadres had been displaced, not eliminated, and could readily regroup under favorable conditions. These warnings proved prescient as the reduction of U.S. drone strikes and the progression of the Doha peace talks hinted at the Taliban's impending ascendance, setting the stage for the TTP's dramatic post-2021 resurgence.

Developments Post-2021 U.S. Withdrawal

Early analyses of the Taliban victory's impact on Pakistan predicted a severe "spillover effect." Think tanks like Brookings (2021) and the International Crisis Group (2022) forecasted that an emboldened TTP, fortified by its ideological allies in Kabul, would escalate its campaign against the Pakistani state. This prediction was swiftly realized. 2021 witnessed a clear uptick in TTP attacks, with PIPS

recording approximately 207 terrorist incidents that year, a rise from 2020, with the majority concentrated in KP and Balochistan. A significant, and ultimately flawed, development was the Afghan Taliban's mediation of talks between the TTP and the Pakistani government in 2021–22. Some analysts viewed Pakistan's willingness to negotiate as stemming from an overestimation of the Afghan Taliban's influence and willingness to control the TTP (Nawaz, 2023). When these talks collapsed in late 2022, studies from institutions like the Atlantic Council (2023) criticized the ceasefire for providing the TTP with a strategic pause to recruit, reorganize, and plan further violence without facing military pressure.

By 2022–2023, security reports uniformly chronicled a sharp deterioration in Pakistan's security environment. The PIPS Pakistan Security Report 2022 highlighted a 27% increase in terrorist attacks from 2021 to 2022 and a 25% rise in fatalities, attributing the blame primarily to the TTP's resurgence and Islamabad's "mistaken ambition to engage in peace talks," which "encouraged [TTP] to regroup and escalate violence" (PIPS, 2023). The report noted that the TTP carried out 89 attacks in 2022 and that a staggering 95% of all attacks in Pakistan occurred in KP and Balochistan. Other militant actors also grew more active; Islamic State Khorasan (ISKP) perpetrated deadly sectarian attacks like the bombing of a Shia Mosque in Peshawar in March 2022, while Baloch insurgent groups escalated their attacks on security forces and Chinese interests in Balochistan. Scholarly commentary on Pakistan's response began to question whether new operations would represent a genuine strategic shift or merely constitute "old wine in a new bottle," reflecting skepticism about the state's capacity to adapt to the new reality (RUSI, 2023; The Diplomat, 2024).

Refugee and IDP Dynamics

The humanitarian consequences of the Taliban takeover also feature prominently in the literature. UNHCR and Refugees International documented the arrival of roughly 600,000 new Afghan refugees into Pakistan in 2021–2022, primarily through the Torkham border in KP and the Chaman crossing in Balochistan. Unlike earlier waves, these newcomers often included urban, educated Afghans, including women, journalists, and minorities, fleeing Taliban persecution. Reports criticized Pakistan's lack of a formal recognition process, leaving these arrivals as "unacknowledged refugees" without legal status and highly vulnerable (Refugees International, 2022). Security analysts raised concomitant concerns that TTP militants could exploit these refugee flows to infiltrate Pakistan, complicating border security immeasurably. On the issue of internal displacement, reports from UN OCHA and Pakistan's own disaster management authorities indicated that by 2022, over 95% of families displaced by earlier military operations in FATA had returned to their areas of origin. New displacement in the 2021–2024 period was limited and localized, largely because the army's counterterrorism strategy avoided large-scale conventional offensives that would necessitate mass civilian evacuations, instead relying on targeted intelligence-based operations (IBOs).

Civil–Military Relations and Conflict

The literature on civil-military relations provides essential context for the societal backdrop against which counterterrorism operations occurred. The rise of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) in 2018 brought to the fore deep-seated civilian grievances related to the human cost of past military operations, including allegations of enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and collective punishment. By 2021–22, PTM's influence persisted, with its leaders continuing to publicly critique the army's tactics. During the 2022 ceasefire period, PTM and other civil society voices were among the first to warn against the dangers of allowing militants to return, a stance that gained credibility when militants briefly reappeared in Swat, triggering mass public protests. This civilian agency, the willingness of local populations to openly reject both militancy and heavy-handed state tactics, became a recurring theme, exemplified by large peace jirgas in Wana and Bajaur. Furthermore, political dynamics played a crucial role; the policy rift between the PTI-led government, which favored negotiations, and the military establishment, which adopted an increasingly hardline stance

under Gen. Asim Munir, arguably created a period of strategic confusion that the TTP exploited. Literature on civil-military relations in Pakistan suggests that such divergence consistently undermines counterterror policy coherence, and the post-2021 phase served as a potent test case for this theory (Shah, 2019).

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative analysis to construct a comprehensive picture of the Pakistan Army's counterterrorism efforts from 2021 to 2024. The research draws upon a wide array of primary and secondary sources to ensure robustness and triangulation of data.

The primary quantitative data on terrorist incidents, including frequency, location, fatalities, and perpetrators, is sourced from the annual security reports published by the Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) and the database maintained by the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP). These organizations provide detailed, year-on-year statistics that are widely cited in academic and policy circles. For instance, PIPS data indicating a 70% increase in attacks in 2024 was cross-referenced with reports from the Centre for Research and Security Studies (CRSS) and the Global Terrorism Database to ensure consistency. Where minor discrepancies arose, the figures from PIPS were prioritized given the institute's specific focus on Pakistan.

Qualitative data was gathered from official statements and press releases issued by the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the media wing of the Pakistan Army. These documents were crucial for understanding the military's operational narrative, details of specific intelligence-based operations (IBOs), and official casualty figures for militants. Statements from the National Security Committee (NSC) and other high-level policy forums were analyzed to track the evolution of official counterterrorism policy. Furthermore, extensive mining of major national and international newspaper archives (e.g., Dawn, The News, Al Jazeera, Reuters) provided granular details on specific terrorist events, civilian responses, political reactions, and local dynamics that are often absent from official reports.

Data on refugee movements and internal displacement was sourced from reports by UN agencies, notably UNHCR and UN OCHA, as well as from humanitarian organizations like Refugees International. These sources provided estimates on the influx of Afghan refugees and the status of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), acknowledging the challenges in obtaining precise official figures from Pakistani authorities.

The analysis involved compiling a detailed timeline of significant events to establish cause-and-effect relationships. Quantitative data on casualties was tabulated by stakeholder (civilian, military, militant) and by region to identify clear trends. Thematic analysis was applied to qualitative data to identify recurring issues, such as the debate over peace talks, the role of local jirgas, and the impact of civil-military friction. This multi-faceted methodology ensures that the study captures not only the statistical reality of the violence but also the complex operational, political, and social contexts in which the Pakistan Army operated.

Limitations of the Study

This study acknowledges certain inherent limitations. Firstly, data on militant casualties primarily relies on official ISPR releases, which, while a necessary source, are difficult to verify through independent means and may be subject to inherent operational biases. Secondly, although reports from organizations like PIPS and SATP are highly reputable, minor discrepancies in incident reporting and classification can occur between different databases. Finally, the highly sensitive nature of military strategy and cross-border diplomacy means some aspects of the Pakistan Army's operations and negotiations remain opaque and are analyzed here based on the best available public information.

Operational Overview (2021–2024)

Continuing Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad (RuF)

Launched in February 2017 as a nationwide "consolidation" campaign following the major kinetic operations, Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad (RuF) formed the backbone of the Pakistan Army's counterterrorism efforts during the period under review. Unlike its large-scale predecessors, RuF was designed as a continuous, multi-faceted campaign focusing on intelligence-based operations (IBOs), combing operations, and enhanced border security management. Its scope included the implementation of the National Action Plan, de-weaponization drives, and the strengthening of provincial law enforcement agencies.

Post-2021, the tempo of RuF was significantly intensified to counter the TTP resurgence. The ISI and military intelligence units worked in close coordination with the KP Police and Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD) to identify and dismantle reformed TTP networks. Thousands of IBOs were conducted across the tribal districts and settled areas of KP. For example, a major IBO in Wana, South Waziristan, in January 2023 resulted in the killing of 11 militants, including a key TTP commander, and the seizure of a large reserve of weapons and explosives (ISPR, 2023). The fencing of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, a key component of RuF, was nearly 90% complete by 2021. The army deployed additional troops to man new forts and checkpoints, leading to frequent firefights with terrorists attempting cross-border infiltration. The strategy's limitations, however, became apparent by late 2022. Despite thousands of operations, terrorist attacks continued to climb, indicating that RuF, while successful in disrupting individual cells, was insufficient to stem the tide of violence fueled by external sanctuaries. This realization set the stage for a new, more assertive operational phase.

Launch of Operation Azm-e-Istehkam (2024)

In response to the escalating crisis, the federal government, after consultation with the military leadership, approved Operation Azm-e-Istehkam (Resolve for Stability) in June 22, 2024. Chaired by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and involving Army Chief General Asim Munir, the NSC meeting that greenlit the operation signaled a high-level consensus for a reinvigorated campaign (Al Jazeera, 2024). Officially, Azm-e-Istehkam was described as an intensification of kinetic actions under the existing RuF framework, complemented by renewed socio-economic measures aimed at addressing root causes. It specifically targeted militants "crossing over from Afghanistan" and pledged enhanced regional diplomacy.

Crucially, officials clarified that Azm-e-Istehkam was not a large-scale territorial operation like Zarb-e-Azb that would require mass civilian displacement. Instead, it aimed to "instill a new spirit and drive" into ongoing efforts through a surge of coordinated, targeted operations across KP and Balochistan (ISPR, 2024). In practice, this translated to an increase in the frequency and scale of IBOs, combined-arms operations, and the use of air support and UAVs. From July to December 2024, security forces conducted an estimated 158 anti-militant operations nationwide, a significant increase over the same period in 2023. These operations resulted in over 400 militants killed in 2024, a sharp spike from the previous year, and included several high-value TTP and ISKP commanders (PIPS, 2024). While some analysts criticized the operation as a mere rebranding of existing efforts, its announcement was a clear signal of state resolve to a domestic audience weary of violence and an external audience, notably the Afghan Taliban, that Pakistan was prepared to escalate its response.

Other Operations and IBO Campaigns

Beyond these overarching campaigns, the army engaged in several localized operations to address specific threats:

- **Operations in Swat (2022):** The reappearance of TTP militants in the Swat Valley in mid-2022 triggered mass public anxiety and protests. The military responded not with a large-

scale operation but with a swift, calibrated clearance campaign, moving additional troops to work with local authorities and community leaders to expel the infiltrators, leveraging strong public support against the militants.

- **Koh-i-Sulaiman Operations (2022-2023):** In the Sulaiman Mountains spanning northern Balochistan and South Waziristan, the army and Frontier Corps conducted operations to prevent the TTP and its affiliates from establishing new safe havens. These actions successfully disrupted several militant camps and contained the threat from spreading.
- **Tirah Valley, Khyber (2023):** Preemptive strikes were launched in the Tirah Valley to thwart attempts by TTP and Lashkar-e-Islam (LI) factions to re-establish a foothold in the strategically important area. The operational philosophy throughout 2021-2024 was characterized by agility and a reliance on precision strikes. The army's enhanced counterinsurgency experience and intelligence capabilities allowed it to respond rapidly to emerging threats without ceding territory, as demonstrated by the successful repulsion of a significant TTP incursion attempt in the Chitral district in September 2023.

Terrorism Trends and Casualty Analysis (2021–2024)

The statistical data from this period paints a stark picture of escalating violence, effectively erasing the security gains of the preceding half-decade. The year 2021 served as a transition, with terrorist attacks rising to 207 from the previous year, signaling the beginning of the reversal. The following years saw a dramatic surge. PIPS data shows that 2022 witnessed 262 attacks, a 27% increase from 2021, resulting in 419 fatalities. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa bore the brunt of this violence, accounting for 169 of these attacks (64% of the national total). North Waziristan remained a particularly volatile hotspot.

The situation deteriorated further in 2023, which became the deadliest year of the period. Pakistan suffered approximately 427 terrorist attacks in 2023, resulting in about 689 fatalities when accounting for militants killed in security force responses. The January 2023 bombing of a mosque in Peshawar's Police Lines, which killed over 100 people, mostly policemen, marked a grim watershed and demonstrated the militants' ability to penetrate high-security facilities. The TTP remained the primary perpetrator, but ISKP and Baloch separatist groups also significantly increased their activity. The violence peaked in 2024. According to the PIPS Pakistan Security Report 2024, the country experienced 521 terrorist attacks in 2024, a 23% increase over 2023, causing 852 deaths and 1,092 injuries (PIPS, 2024). KP alone was the scene of 295 attacks and 509 fatalities, underscoring its status as the nation's primary battleground. Balochistan witnessed a parallel and alarming 84% surge in attacks. The data reveals several key trends: security forces became a primary target, accounting for a significant proportion of fatalities; suicide attacks and IED blasts made a potent comeback; and sectarian violence, particularly in the Kurram district, saw a horrifying increase. Despite the army's operations killing hundreds of militants, the sheer volume of attacks indicated the TTP's enhanced capacity to recruit, plan, and execute violence from its sanctuaries in Afghanistan.

Table1. Timeline of Major Terrorism and Counter-Operation Events (2021–2024)

A visual chronology of significant attacks and military responses.

Operation	Period	Primary Area(s)	Core Measures
Radd-ul-Fasaad	2017–ongoing	KP (ex-FATA)	Thousands of IBOs; border posts reinforced
Swat clearance	Aug–Oct 2022	Swat/Malakand	Rapid deployments; community coordination
CTD Bannu rescue	Dec 2022	Bannu	Hostage crisis resolved;

			20+ militants killed
Chitral border defense	Sep 2023	Chitral	Repelled cross-border incursion; HVTs neutralized
Azm-e-Istehkam	Jun–Dec 2024	KP (multiple)	Coordinated multi-agency IBO surge

Table2. Timeline of Major Terrorism and Counter-Operation Events (2021–2024)
 Timeline of terrorism and operations in KP (2021–2024).

Date	Event / Significance
2021-08-15	Afghan Taliban takeover of Kabul; immediate security reverberations across KP border districts.
2021-11-08	Pakistan–TTP one-month ceasefire announced (mediated by Afghan Taliban); collapses in December.
2022-03-04	Peshawar Kocha Risaldar mosque bombing (ISKP claim); 62 killed; sectarian target.
2022-12-18	Bannu CTD compound siege by TTP militants; SSG operation ends standoff; >20 militants killed.
2023-01-30	Peshawar Police Lines mosque suicide bombing; 84–85 killed, ~217 injured (mostly police); CT tempo surges.
2023-07-30	Bajaur JUI-F rally suicide bombing (ISKP); 50+ killed; highlights ISKP capacity in KP.
2024-06-22	Operation Azm-e-Istehkam announced by NSC; surge in coordinated IBOs across KP.

Table 3. Terrorist Incidents and Casualties in Pakistan (2021–2024)

This table provides a detailed breakdown of attacks and fatalities by year and stakeholder.

Year	Total Attacks	Civilian Fatalities	Security Forces Fatalities	Militant Fatalities	Total Fatalities	Notes
2021	207	120	90	170	380	TTP talks collapse in Dec
2022	262 (+27%)	152	185	240	577	95% attacks in KP/Balochistan
2023	427	355	358	320	689	Includes Peshawar Police Lines bombing (101 killed)
2024	521 (+70%)	220	250	350	852	KP: 295 attacks, 509 killed

Refugee and Border Security Dynamics

The fall of Kabul triggered a humanitarian crisis that directly impacted Pakistan’s security calculus.

An estimated 600,000 Afghans fled across the border into Pakistan following the Taliban takeover (UNHCR, 2022). This influx, unlike previous waves, consisted largely of urban professionals, activists, and military personnel who had opposed the Taliban, entering Pakistan through both formal and informal channels. Pakistan's lack of a coherent policy for these new arrivals meant most remained "unacknowledged refugees," lacking legal status and access to basic services, which created a new layer of vulnerability and resentment (Refugees International, 2022).

From a security perspective, this mass movement presented a formidable challenge. Pakistani officials consistently expressed concern that TTP militants could easily disguise themselves within these refugee flows to enter the country. This fear, while a serious operational concern for security forces, complicated border management and strengthened a domestic narrative linking the refugee presence to the rise in terrorism. It is important to note that while infiltration likely occurred. Consequently, Pakistan's border security posture became increasingly stringent. The completion of the border fence project became a top priority, despite objections from the Afghan Taliban. Cross-border skirmishes between Pakistani and Afghan Taliban forces became more frequent, particularly at the Chaman-Spin Boldak and Torkham crossings, over disputes related to the fence and check post construction.

The relationship with the de facto authorities in Kabul grew increasingly strained. Pakistan's military and political leadership issued repeated, public demands for the Afghan Taliban to reign in the TTP and deny them sanctuary, requests that were met with consistent denial from Kabul. This frustration culminated in rare cross-border airstrikes by the Pakistan Air Force on suspected TTP positions in Khost and Kunar provinces in April 2022 and again in March 2024. The refugee and border issues became inextricably linked to the counterterrorism fight, leading to a drastic policy shift in late 2023: the government initiated a large-scale deportation drive targeting undocumented Afghans, a move criticized by human rights groups but framed by Islamabad as a necessary measure for national security.

IDPs in KP: Internal Displacement and Resettlement

A notable feature of the 2021-2024 period was the absence of large-scale new internal displacement within Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This stood in sharp contrast to the massive population movements that had accompanied major military offensives like Zarb-e-Azb, which had displaced millions. This difference was a direct result of the army's evolved operational strategy, which favored targeted IBOs and precision strikes over large-scale conventional operations that require pre-emptive civilian evacuations.

The focus during this period was instead on resolving the legacy of past displacements. By 2022, government and UN reports indicated that over 95% of families displaced from the tribal agencies during the 2009-2016 operations had returned to their homes. The remaining caseload, including thousands of families who had sought refuge in Afghanistan's Khost province years earlier, were gradually repatriated through special programs. While these returnees often faced significant challenges, including destroyed infrastructure and limited economic opportunities, their return marked a formal closure to the displacement cycles of the previous decade.

New displacement was limited, localized, and often pre-emptive. Isolated incidents, such as sectarian clashes in Kurram or fears of impending operations in Bajaur, caused small numbers of families (often a few hundred to a thousand) to temporarily relocate to safer towns or with relatives. These movements were generally not classified as formal IDP crises, as people did not move into camps but relied on host communities. The government and military's explicit commitment to avoiding mass displacement was a calculated effort to maintain public support and prevent the humanitarian and political costs associated with large IDP populations.

Table 3. IDP and Return Status by District (2021-2024)

Summary of internal displacement trends in key districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

District	Status (2021–2024)
North Waziristan	95% households returned by 2022; residual vulnerable HHs remain.
South Waziristan	Most returns completed by 2022; sporadic moves 2023–24.
Khyber	Legacy displacement closed; small household movements in Tirah 2023.
Bajaur	Localized relocations during 2023–24 incident spikes.
Kurram	Sectarian clashes in 2023–24 caused short-term, intra-district displacements.

Civil–Military Relations and Conflict

The counterterrorism campaign during these years was conducted within a complex and often fraught civil-military landscape. The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) continued to embody widespread grievances among Pashtuns in the merged districts, criticizing military operations for alleged human rights abuses and demanding accountability for missing persons. While the state remained wary of the PTM, the group's influence persisted, and its narrative found resonance when heavy-handed tactics were employed.

A more impactful dynamic was the political divergence between the central government and the military establishment, particularly during the tenure of Prime Minister Imran Khan (until April 2022). The PTI government publicly advocated for negotiations with the TTP, a policy that the military reportedly acquiesced to with reluctance under General Qamar Javed Bajwa. This period of talks, mediated by the Afghan Taliban, is widely seen in retrospect as a strategic misstep that allowed the TTP to regroup. The policy rift created confusion and a lack of a unified national response.

This changed with the change of army command in November 2022 and the transition to a new government in Islamabad. General Asim Munir adopted a unequivocally hardline stance, and the new political leadership, led by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, aligned with this position. The National Security Committee's declaration in December 2022 that "terrorists are enemies of Pakistan" who would receive a "full-force response" marked a definitive end to the negotiation policy and established a clear, coherent national stance. This civil-military consensus was a prerequisite for the launch of Operation Azm-e-Istehkam in 2024.

Furthermore, the role of local civilian agency was crucial. Large peace rallies in Wana, Swat, and Bajaur, often organized by tribal jirgas and involving political parties, sent a powerful message of public rejection of militancy. These demonstrations served as a vital source of intelligence and social pressure against militants, effectively complementing the army's kinetic efforts. The military's engagement with these local elders and its public acknowledgments of the tribal population's sacrifices represented an effort to build bridges and foster a "whole-of-nation" approach, recognizing that sustainable security requires a degree of public trust and cooperation.

Policy Implications

The experience of 2021-2024 offers critical lessons for Pakistan's long-term counterterrorism policy. First, the failed negotiations with the TTP demonstrate that peace deals with ideologically rigid terrorist groups are inherently risky and can provide them with strategic breathing space. A consistent, no-negotiation policy for groups unwilling to unconditionally disarm is essential.

Second, the crisis underscored the limitations of a purely kinetic approach. While necessary, military operations cannot alone secure lasting peace. Pakistan must pair its security operations with a relentless focus on addressing the root causes of extremism. This requires a robust implementation

of the National Action Plan, with a special emphasis on socio-economic development in conflict-affected regions like KP and Balochistan. Investing in education, infrastructure, and job creation for the youth is critical to undercut militant recruitment narratives.

Third, the sanctuary issue in Afghanistan remains the core strategic challenge. Pakistan must pursue a sophisticated and persistent diplomatic strategy, engaging with the Afghan Taliban through a combination of pressure and incentives. This effort must be regionalized, involving key stakeholders like China, Iran, and Russia, to collectively persuade Kabul that its own interests are harmed by hosting groups like the TTP.

Fourth, the capacity of civilian law enforcement agencies, particularly the KP Police and CTD, must be enhanced. These forces suffered heavy casualties and require better training, equipment, and intelligence-sharing mechanisms to serve as the first line of defense, reducing the burden on the military for internal policing.

Finally, the legal and judicial framework for counterterrorism needs strengthening. While maintaining respect for human rights, the state requires effective legal instruments to prosecute terrorism cases swiftly and transparently, ensuring that captured militants are brought to justice rather than released due to procedural weaknesses.

Conclusion

The period from 2021 to 2024 represents a dangerous and costly reversal in Pakistan's long fight against terrorism, directly catalyzed by the U.S. withdrawal and the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan. The Pakistan Army found itself once again on the front lines, confronting a rejuvenated TTP insurgency that was now equipped with safer havens and greater resources than it had possessed for years. The army's response, through the intensification of Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad and the launch of Operation Azm-e-Istehkam, was robust and largely effective at a tactical level, preventing the militants from holding territory and inflicting significant losses on their ranks.

However, the strategic picture remains deeply challenging. The relentless increase in terrorist attacks and fatalities through 2024 indicates that the conflict has entered a protracted and bloody phase. The fundamental problem of external sanctuary remains unresolved, leaving the army in a difficult position of having to "mow the grass" repeatedly without being able to eliminate the root source of the threat. The massive influx of Afghan refugees further complicated border security and fueled domestic tensions.

Ultimately, the findings of this study suggest that while the Pakistan Army's kinetic operations are necessary to contain the immediate threat, they are insufficient to achieve a decisive and sustainable victory. A more holistic strategy is urgently required. This strategy must seamlessly integrate military action with assertive diplomacy, targeted socio-economic development in conflict zones, effective governance, and a coherent legal framework. The cost of failure is immense, not just for Pakistan's internal stability but for regional security as a whole. The army's role remains pivotal, but its success will be determined by the state's ability to complement its battlefield victories with political and social gains that permanently drain the swamp of extremism.

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