

Evolving Competitive Militant Landscape of Pakistan and its Implications

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The Pakistani policymakers and academia did not envisage an escalation of attacks in Pakistan after the ascendancy of the Afghan Taliban in August 2021.¹ In fact, many commentators and analysts in Pakistan viewed the rise of the Taliban after the Doha Agreement as a harbinger of a new era in South Asia. However, despite the pledges made by the Taliban and the interim government in Afghanistan, Pakistan has been getting mired in violence. For a fourth consecutive year, Pakistan has seen a surge in violence after the Taliban's takeover of Kabul. According to 'Pakistan Security Report 2024', a total of 521 terrorist attacks took place in Pakistan in 2024—including nine suicide bombings—which killed 852 people and injured 1,124, amounting to a 70 per cent increase in the number of attacks from the previous year (see Figure 1).²

Uncertainty and instability in the newly merged districts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and Balochistan have now engulfed Pakistan in an inescapable polycrisis of sorts. The resurgence of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the transfer of advanced leftover United States' (US) weaponry, after the fall of Kabul, into the hands of insurgent groups in Afghanistan have

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been the most significant fallouts of the Taliban's return to power. Recently, the relations between the Taliban and Pakistan have worsened considerably. This deterioration is linked to the Taliban's tacit support of the TTP and the Hafiz Gul Bahadur (HGB) group. Founded in 2007, both the TTP and the HGB have emerged as the most influential and violent anti-Pakistan terrorist outfits in South Asia. Unlike the Afghan Taliban, the TTP does not enjoy favourable relations with policymakers in Pakistan as it seeks to overthrow the state and replace it with a Sharia-governed polity. The TTP and the HGB have perpetrated some of the most high-profile attacks in Pakistan in the 21st century, including the 2014 Army Public School (APS) massacre in Peshawar³ and the 2024 suicide bombing at Bannu Cantonment.⁴

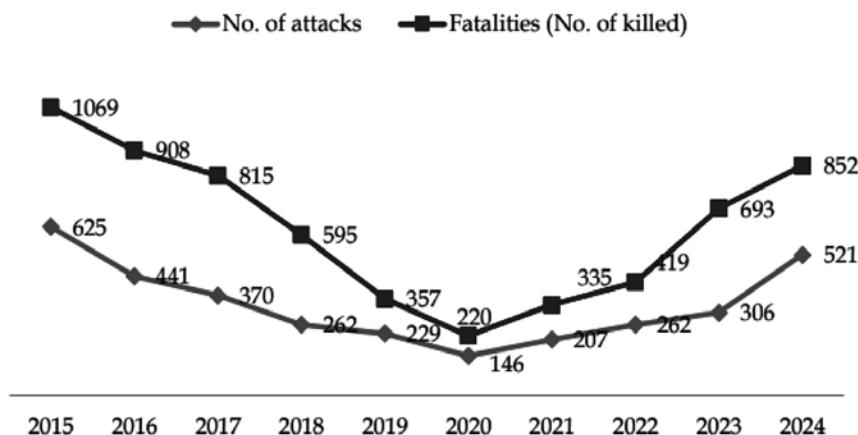


Figure 1 Comparison of Terrorist Attacks and Fatalities in Pakistan, 2015–24

Source: 'Pakistan Security Report 2024', Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), Vol. 17, No. 1, 2025, p. 15.

Pakistan, today, is witnessing intensified terror attacks and kinetic counterterrorism operations. As the onslaught in the tribal areas continues, hopes of reinstating the dialogue process are quickly fading away.⁵ The resolution of differences between the Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA) and the TTP⁶ and the retaliatory drone strikes by Pakistan along the Durand Line mean that continued counter-terrorism challenges will persist for Pakistan. Given the affinity and ideological support of the Afghan Taliban for most of the outfits in Pakistan—except Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)—and Pakistan's waxing and waning bilateral relations with the Taliban, emulating

a strategic success akin to that of Operation Zarb-e-Azb (June 2014) remains a distant dream for the country.⁷ The Afghan Taliban also appear unable, or unwilling, to control the cross-border infiltration of militants into Pakistan.⁸ Pakistan's heavy-handed measures, such as deportation of Afghan refugees and trade restrictions at border crossings like the Chaman border, are also contributing to soaring tensions between the two countries, further straining the security situation in Pakistan.⁹

A multitude of factors have brought about a shift in the militant landscape of Pakistan. The mergers, emergence of new factions and soaring tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan have resulted in increased threats to Pakistan's security apparatus. Despite the success in eliminating key commanders, like Hakimullah Mubariz Kochwan and Ameer Rahimullah, in 2025, Pakistan's reliance on kinetic operations remains short-sighted. The situation in the merged tribal districts of ex-Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) does not necessitate an over-reliance on kinetic operations to counter terrorism; rather, there is need for a comprehensive national strategy. Failing to address broader issues or causal factors of violent extremism, such as persecution of leaders of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement, like Ali Wazir, the deportation of Afghan nationals, disregard for the local *jirga* (tribal council), lack of political will to engage with the civil society groups, exploitation of natural resources and growing poverty, will lead to a lopsided strategy.

RESTRUCTURING OF TERROR OUTFITS IN PAKISTAN

Insurgency in tribal areas began in 2004; since then, Pakistan has seen varying intensity of conflict in these areas. According to Pakistan's National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) data, 2004 was a watershed year for insurgency in Pakistan (see Figure 2). The period between 2004–07 was characterised by unorganised tribal militia fighters from FATA, primarily veterans of the Afghan Jihad and fighters who assisted the Taliban in fighting the Northern Alliance. They attacked the Pakistan Army for its support to the US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in Afghanistan. The emergence of tribal leaders laid the foundations of the TTP. Nek Mohmmad, Baitullah Mehsud and Maulvi Nazir established the TTP with the help of Al-Qaeda-allied militants in Pakistan, to wage jihad and liberate Afghanistan from 'infidel' US/NATO forces.¹⁰ Additionally, the TTP's objectives were to: conduct a defensive jihad against the Pakistani Army in FATA; enforce Sharia law in Pakistan; abolish security checks; force

the end of military operations started by the Pakistan Army in 2002; and ensure secure release of the cleric of Lal Masjid, Abdul Aziz.¹¹

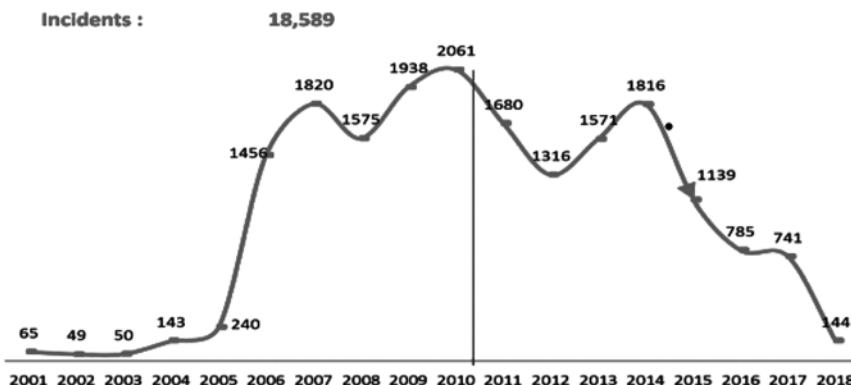


Figure 2 Terrorist Incidents across Pakistan since 2001

Source: NACTA, 2021.

By 2007, resentment against the state galvanised and consolidated the TTP as an umbrella jihadist outfit of 40 faith-based terrorist groups in Pakistan.¹² During 2007–14, the TTP was responsible for multiple attacks in major cities as well as sectarian bombings. In North Waziristan, certain groups, like the Lashkar-e-Islam (LeI) and the HGB, became active in supporting the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network. During this period, the TTP perpetrated some of the bloodiest attacks and took control of large swaths of Pakistan's tribal areas, like Swat. However, the US-led drone strikes and Pakistan's major military operation, Zarb-e-Azb, had a damaging effect on the cohesiveness within the militant organisation.¹³ The death of Hakimullah Mehsud led to internal factionalism,¹⁴ and contestation between the Khan Said Sajna (Mehsud) faction and the Mullah Fazlullah (non-Mehsud) faction proved to be the final straw for internal divisions within the TTP.¹⁵ Under Fazlullah, the TTP indulged in kidnapping, extortion and indiscriminate use of force, which led to heavy criticism from the Al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban,¹⁶ the Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS),¹⁷ the TTP (Sajna faction) and the JuA.¹⁸ In fact, due to the TTP emir Fazlullah's policies, many TTP fighters shifted their allegiance to other groups, like the ISKP, the JuA, the Hizb-ul-Ahrar (HuA) and Sajna faction of the TTP. Subsequently, the jihadist landscape was divided among various groups, namely, the JuA, the HuA, the ISKP, the TTP and the HBG. It was after the death of its

emir, Mullah Fazlullah, that the TTP rectified its organisational structure and refined its objectives against the Pakistani state.

The current emir, Noor Wali Mehsud, has been instrumental in implementing several new measures, like establishing a centralised command and governance structure; laying out clear, legitimate targets; giving up transnational jihadism; and creating a 'code of conduct' for all fighters. Under him, the TTP has almost given up on the indiscriminate use of violence against civilians.¹⁹ The TTP's current organisation is the result of a rebuilding process that included the integration of splinter groups. Almost 80 groups have pledged allegiance to the TTP since 2020 and the 10th merger of this year. Noor Wali Mehsud has also worked extensively to increase cohesion within the groups, restrict sectarianism, improve internal discipline and be a more unifying figure. In his book, *Inqilab e Mehsud*, Noor Wali has highlighted the failure and errors of past leaders and charted a way forward, with an aim to win local support and gain asymmetry over the military.²⁰

Today, the TTP operates a loosely knit constellation of subgroups with allied ideologies. The decentralised nature of these outfits has enabled them to expand rapidly in a contested militant landscape. In the case of the TTP, the group has been divided into several administrative units across Pakistan; in 2023, the TTP announced several *wilayats* across Pakistan.²¹ In addition, the TTP consists of many local emirs, who enjoy affinity among their tribes and have their own vested interests. For example, the Swat Taliban have traditionally been interested in enforcing Sharia in Malakand, whereas Wazir and Mehsud leaders are fighting for the reversal of FATA merger, the removal of security checkpoints and the removal of the Pakistan Army from FATA. Noor Wali, so far, has attempted to accommodate groups from Balochistan, KPK and Punjab, knowing that each group has different priorities and that their degree of enmity towards the Pakistan Army varies. According to the 2020 United Nations (UN) report, each chapter of the TTP is under a shadow governor and is responsible for sustaining its operations. Transit/toll taxes, kidnapping for ransom, timber trade, donations from madrasas and other groups, illicit trade of minerals and smuggling of drugs and guns are some of the ways to generate funds.²² The TTP consists of multiple departments, such as finance, intelligence, justice, welfare and military. Operational under Noor Wali Mehsud, most KPK districts are divided into North and South Zones. The *Doulati Shura* and *Rehbari Shura*, consisting of 11 and 9 members respectively, are placed above the heads of the chapters.²³ The central shura members now exclude shadow ministers of

various chapters,²⁴ highlighting the separation of power and centralisation of control of Noor Wali Mehsud.

Apart from the TTP, perhaps one of the most influential militant groups in North Waziristan is the HGB, which remains a potent threat to the Pakistani establishment. Arguably, the HGB group has a numerical advantage over the TTP in North Waziristan, both in terms of fighters and suicide bombers. Most of its fighters hail from the Uthmanzai Wazir tribe and neighbouring tribes in North Waziristan. Initially, Bahadur, leader of the HGB, was solely focused on operations to support the Haqqani Network and the Taliban in Afghanistan (unlike the TTP, which was Pakistan-centric) and therefore, he entered into a peace agreement with the Pakistan Army in 2006.²⁵ When the Pakistan Army launched a major offensive in North Waziristan in 2014, that is, Operation Zarb-e-Azb, the HGB group's stance towards the army changed. After the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, the HGB group has reoriented itself as a leading jihadist force. The group consists of around 60–70 different factions, who have pledged allegiance to the HGB. These factions are mostly centred around North Waziristan and Bannu district. Just like the TTP, the HGB group is also transitioning swiftly. In this regard, the HGB has not only established various departments, but between February and March 2024, it also set up two commissions—the Economic Commission and the Reform Commission—to enact rules to govern the behaviour of affiliated militants.²⁶

Similarly, groups aligned with the HGB are also changing: for instance, Jabhat Ansar al-Mahdi Khorasan (JAMK) now has five departments similar to the HGB and is in direct contact with the commissions established by the HGB.²⁷ Given the limited numerical strength and area of operations of the HGB, the organisation is slowly being reorganised, with only JAMK emerging as a major sub-faction.²⁸ The HGB has been cautious about increasing its operations in terms of number of attacks and damage intended against the Pakistan military. Once touted as the 'Good Taliban' by the Pakistani establishment, the HGB now has no choice but to redefine its objectives if it wants to preserve its turf in the face of rapidly increasing competition in the militant landscape, especially against the TTP.

Thus, the HGB and the TTP have gradually reorganised themselves like the Afghan Taliban. Both the militant organisations operate in a loosely knit constellation of sub-groups with allied ideologies. Sub-groups and factions have become ostensibly independent entities and have transitioned from ragtag militias to complex, dynamically evolving entities. The convoluted militant environment, the quest for tribal dominance and the direct/indirect

support of the Afghan Taliban have resulted in the restructuring of militant outfits in KPK.

THE EMERGENCE OF NEW FACTIONS AND COMPETITIVE TERRORISM IN PAKISTAN

Since early 2023, new groups and factions have surfaced, which makes Pakistan's security landscape much more intricate and dynamic. The Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP) and the Ansarul Jihad have emerged as new groups, capturing the headlines with deadly attacks on Pakistan Army. The TJP is suspected to be the TTP's ploy to divert attention from the support it receives from the Afghan Taliban.²⁹ Similarly, different factions affiliated with the HGB group have also surfaced since 2023. The JAMK, Ittehad Mujahideen Khorasan (IMK), Majlis-e-Askari (MA), Jabhat al-Junood al-Mahdi (JJM), Jaish-e-Fursan-e-Muhammad (JFM) and Jaish-e-Omari (JeO) are some of the sub-factions of the HGB group.³⁰ The intensification of attacks by these groups has become a major worry for the security forces.

Often, competitive terrorism erupts between two or more terrorist organisations and groups due to scramble for power, resources, ideology and influence. Each group looks to establish its writ and dominate other ideologies; in the case of Pakistan, competition is in terms of tribal rivalry, ideology and the sphere of influence. The TTP (except a few splinter groups and foreign fighters) and the HGB follow the Deobandi school of thought, whereas the ISKP follows Salafism.³¹ The competition between the ISKP and other Taliban-allied groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan is driven by ideology as well as the objective of the group. As mentioned earlier, tribal rivalry is also one of the critical determinants of competition among the militants. Indeed, Waziristan is fraught with tribal rivalries, with Wazirs, Bhittanis and Mehsuds being the major tribes inhabiting North and South Waziristan. Traditionally, there is animosity between Wazirs (both Uthmanzai and Ahmedzai) and Mehsuds in Waziristan.³² The rivalries persist in the minds of top cadres of the militant outfits, with each tribe looking to gain a sphere of influence over the resources.

While competition exists among these groups, cooperation is also highly probable. In 2009, at the behest of the Haqqani Network and Mullah Omar, Wazir, Bhittani and Mehsud tribes worked together to form the Shura-Ittehad-al-Mujahideen (United Mujahideen Council), overcoming their tribal rivalries.³³ The intended aim of the council was to support Mullah Omar and the Al-Qaeda and repel Pakistan's military operations. As a result, Baitullah

Mehsud, Maulvi Nazir and Hafiz Gul Bahadur joined hands.³⁴ Although the alliance was short-lived, it highlights the plausibility of potential mergers to resist Pakistani military. For instance, the TTP has recently collaborated with both the LeI³⁵ and the HGB.³⁶ Earlier in 2024, militants of the TTP and the HGB hinted at a possible merger on online platforms.³⁷ Also, the reintegration of key JuA leaders³⁸ into the central shura of the TTP, in 2024, hinted that the talks with the HGB and the LeI had reached the desired output; however, since then, an attempt at developing strategic cooperation between the HGB, the TTP and the LeI is still being made. There is, thus, growing strategic cooperation between the groups, and the primary aim of discussions and negotiations between them is to come together to sustain the armed struggle against the Pakistani state under one flag.

With the TTP's reach and magnitude, it looks to subsume the AQIS, the LeI, the Lashkar-e-Khorasan and the HGB. On the other hand, the HGB and other groups would not like to pledge allegiance to a Mehsud but rather work together strategically. Despite the collaboration, old jihadist vanguards favour existing independently to protect their turf. The emergence of the latest terror group, Harakat Inqilab Islami Pakistan (IIP), in March 2025³⁹ and the formation of a new alliance, Ittihad-ul-Mujahideen Pakistan, by the LeI, the IIP and the HGB represent an attempt at forging unity by the HGB group in North Waziristan. Since the emergence of small groups, like the JAMK, JeO and the JFM, in early 2023, the HGB has been attempting to unify them under its umbrella to pre-empt poaching by the TTP. The formation of Ittihad-ul-Mujahideen Pakistan in 2025 is similar to the TTP's attempt to form a new shadow outfit, TJP, to divert the attention of Pakistan Army. Cooperation and competition are, thus, a stark reality of jihad in Pakistan. Both the TTP and the HGB have tried to broaden their coalition against the Pakistan military by closely aligning their propaganda with other marginalised and ethnic nationalist movements. The transformation of loose-knit umbrella militant groups to a hybrid entity with political and economic goals is nearly complete. The emergence of smaller militant groups, like the IIP and the TJP, is an attempt to create confusion for the Pakistan Army and to avoid large-scale retaliation by the state. This trend is likely to grow in the future.

CONCLUSION

After the fall of Kabul to the Afghan Taliban, security challenges have become critical to the stability of Pakistan, with ramifications for its economy, demographics and internal security. Despite an attempt at centralisation, the

coalition of smaller formations of militant outfits led by local emirs remains fragile at best due to ever ever-present possibility of factions disagreeing on certain issues. Negotiations and agreements are, therefore, the biggest challenges to such attempts at centralisation. An assortment of sub-factions also indicates the fluidity of changing loyalties and poaching of fighters by other groups. This is a severe threat considering fighters from some groups, like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba, may join the TTP or the ISKP. Pakistan is already facing a second wave of terrorism after the Radd-ul-Fasaad operation in 2017. The attempts at mergers and reorganisation only illustrate a complex interplay of cooperation and competition within the militant groups. Ideological alignments, influence over tribes and the quest to gain resources are the key drivers behind these restructurings and the adaptive nature of militancy in Pakistan.

Pakistan requires a nuanced and multi-pronged approach, emphasising both kinetic and non-kinetic measures to counter the evolving security situation. Today, Pakistan stands at the critical juncture in its fight against insurgency in the country. Continued political instability is leading to increased polarisation within the KPK, which is utilised by the TTP, the ISKP and other groups. Increased radicalisation and sectarianism are potential long-term fallouts of the current predicament. The growing insurgency has renewed instability in the already volatile region of Afghanistan–Pakistan, with South Asia and Central Asia facing the fallout. Pakistan needs to focus on a broader political dialogue with local jirgas and shuras, and focus on rebuilding local economies to stop the security situation from worsening in the country.

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