BATTLING SHADOWS: ANALYSING THE TALIBAN-TTP NEXUS IN POST-2021 SECURITY DYNAMICS USING NATURAL LANGUAGE PROCESSING (NLP)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolving relationship between Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Afghan Taliban within the broader context of Pakistan's counter-terrorism efforts and regional security environment following the United States (U.S.) withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the research draws on a diverse corpus of news reports, official statements, and scholarly sources in English, Urdu, and Farsi. Our analysis focuses on the period post-September 1, 2021, using data from the Nexis Uni academic database. Employing Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), the study analyses 2,889 articles to identify thematic patterns and discursive trends. A customised analytical framework categorises the findings into four key components: motivational, religious, ethno-racial, and administrative. By mapping these dimensions, the study offers insights into the factors shaping Pakistan's strategic posture and decision-making. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on terrorism, counter-terrorism, and regional security in South and Central Asia, with a particular focus on the post-2021 dynamics between Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban, and the TTP.

Introduction

The Afghan Taliban (hereafter referred to as the Taliban) marked their victory on August 30, 2021, as the final United States (U.S.) military forces withdrew from Afghanistan, ending a 20-year campaign—the longest war in U.S. history (Schaeffer, 2022). This withdrawal was swiftly followed by the Taliban's resurgence, during which they attained their highest level of military power since 2001. Despite Afghanistan's fragile internal security environment, the Taliban rapidly consolidated control, launched anti-corruption initiatives, and began forging new diplomatic relations (Khan, 2024). The withdrawal was formalised through the "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the United States of America and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" (commonly known as the "Doha Agreement"), signed in February 2020 between the Taliban and the Trump administration. The agreement established a timeline for the departure of U.S. forces and was predicated on the Taliban's commitment to countering terrorist threats, including assurances that it would not harbour terrorist groups or allow Afghanistan to serve as a launchpad for terrorist attacks (U.S. DoS, 2020a; U.S. DoS, 2020b).

However, the Taliban's seizure of Kabul created a power vacuum in the Afghanistan–Pakistan (Af-Pak) region, an event that various terrorist organisations celebrated as they pledged to revive their global jihadist agendas. This environment enabled militant groups such as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also known as the "Pakistani Taliban", to mobilise both new and existing resources, attract recruits, and publicly promote their ideological platform (Bobkin, 2022). On the first anniversary of the withdrawal of U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces, the TTP issued a congratulatory statement to the Taliban, declaring that both groups had stood "shoulder to shoulder" in their struggle against foreign forces (MEMRI, 2022). Al-Qaeda and both affiliated and rival terrorist groups quickly capitalised on the Taliban's return to power, re-establishing their presence in Afghanistan and effectively turning the country back into a haven for transnational terrorism (Radfar, 2022; O'Donnell, 2024).

The United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team highlighted the expansion of al-Qaeda's infrastructure in Afghanistan in its July 2024 1267 Report. The report identified training facilities in 12 of the country's 34 provinces, which were being used to train local militants, including members of the TTP (UNSC, 2024). With logistical, training, and other forms of support from both the Taliban and al-Qaeda, the TTP has carried out hundreds of cross-border attacks against Pakistan (Gul, 2024; Roggio, 2025). The Taliban have demonstrated broad alignment with the TTP's objectives and have notably refrained from designating the group as a terrorist organisation—underscoring the enduring ties and shared networks between them (UNSC, 2024). The complex and evolving constellation of terrorist groups in post-2021 Afghanistan has contributed to a volatile security environment, conducive to recruitment, training, smuggling, financing, and the execution of attacks against both "hard" and "soft" targets. For instance, the Islamic State–Khorasan Province (ISKP) has used Afghan nationals to carry out attacks in Pakistan, Pakistani nationals for operations in Afghanistan, Tajik nationals for attacks in Iran and the Russian Federation, and enlisted a Kyrgyz national to conduct an attack in the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar (UNSC, 2024).

Although Afghanistan's security landscape has been volatile for years, the country and surrounding region have become even more insecure and destabilised. This decline is a result of the return and increasing activities of a number of extremist groups that are now operating from the country. Among these groups are, foremost, the ISP, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), the Eastern Islamic Movement (ETIM), Tehrik-i-Jihad Pakistan (TJP), and Jamaat Ansarullah (JA), also called the Tajik Taliban or Tehrik-e-Taliban Tajikistan. Groups have come to use Afghanistan as a base for their operations since the return of the Taliban, resulting in a renewed terrorist threat in the country. The TJP Deobandi jihadist group, for example, has used Afghanistan to launch attacks against Pakistan. These attacks continue unabated. The group claimed responsibility for the deadly 2023 car-bomb attack in the Dera Ismail Khan district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in the northwest of Pakistan that killed more than 20 soldiers and injured more than 30. The TJP has worked with other groups to carry out attacks across the Duran Line into Pakistan (Hussain, 2023; Shah et al., 2024). In the aftermath of a suicide bombing and armed assault on a military base in northwestern Pakistan on July 15, 2024, a previously unknown group—Jaish Fursan-e Muhammad (JFM)—claimed responsibility (Al Jazeera, 2025; The Hindu, 2025). The group is widely believed to serve as a front for Hafiz Gul Bahadar (HGB), a militant commander long affiliated with the TTP network. Both JFM and HGB are regarded as

components of the extended TTP infrastructure (The Khorasan Diary, 2023; Khattak, 2024; Valle, 2024; Independent, 2025).

The political transformation in Afghanistan has reignited violence and cross-border clashes between Pakistani security forces and TTP militants along the Af-Pak border, particularly around the highly contested and politically sensitive Durand Line. In response, Pakistan has recalibrated its counter-terrorism strategy to openly accentuate the Taliban's role in facilitating TTP mobilisation and violence. The evolving political and security landscape has compelled Islamabad to confront the far-reaching consequences of the U.S. military withdrawal, the establishment of the post-2021 Taliban government, and the increasingly complex relationship between the Taliban and the TTP. For Pakistan, these developments underscore the emerging threat of Pashtun nationalism, contested notions of Islamic authority, and the potential for an entrenched ethno-religious insurgency within its borders. Islamabad has long recognised the TTP as a significant destabilising actor that poses threats to both national and regional security. The Pakistani government has explicitly stated that the Taliban is "actively patronising [the] TTP and using them as a proxy against Pakistan", further asserting that the TTP has "consistently used Afghan territory to launch terror attacks inside Pakistani territory" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, 2024).

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates the evolution of the TTP and its relationship with the Taliban, situating the analysis within the broader context of a deteriorating security environment characterised by escalating violence and direct armed confrontations among the Taliban, Pakistan, and the TTP following the U.S. withdrawal in 2021. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study draws on primary and secondary sources—including scholarly literature, official reports, and press releases published in the post-withdrawal period—to illuminate the conditions shaping the complex and evolving triadic relationship between Pakistan, the Taliban, and the TTP.

The paper is divided into five sections. The first section provides a historical overview of the TTP, its formation, and its evolving relationship with both the Taliban and the Pakistani state. The second section situates the post-2021 geopolitical context, particularly the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, to explain the shifting regional dynamics that have influenced the TTP's resurgence. We explain our methodology in the third section of the paper, focusing on the application of Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) as our topic modelling technique and how we selected our data sources. We then present the findings in the fourth section, highlighting four main thematic components—motivational, religious, ethno-racial, and administrative—and discussing their importance. In the fifth section, we assess Pakistan's counter-terrorism approach, looking at the structural and strategic obstacle posed by the Taliban-TTP partnership and outlining some avenues for further research.

The Rise of the TTP and Its Challenge to Pakistan's Security

The TTP was formed under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud and with the support of dozens of senior Taliban commanders from the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in northwestern Pakistan in December 2007 (Akhtar & Ahmed, 2023; Tahir & Jadoon, 2025). The group has not been active for long and is considered a relatively new organisation. However, despite its short existence, the TPP has had a major impact on several states and regional security. Pakistan has felt the brunt of its violent ideology and intent (Singh, 2023). The TTP draws its ideology from the Deobandi school of Islam, blended with the Taliban and al-Qaeda's hardline visions and global jihadist ideology. The TTP was born of the simmering tensions and violence between Pakistan's security forces and Pashtun communities in FATA, especially in South and North Waziristan and Bajaur. The TTP is a coalition of militant groups with shared hatred towards common enemies. These groups include, among others, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM), Harkat-ul-Jihad-e-Islami (HuJI), Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM), and Lashkar-e-Omar (JeO). From these roots, the TTP has swiftly become one of Pakistan's most troublesome groups.

The TTP is driven by a single core mission: demolishing the Pakistani state and replacing it with its state based on the hardline interpretation of Shari'a law, rooted in the Deobandi fundamentalist ideology of the Deobandi movement. Its fiercest opposition is directed toward Pakistan's military and intelligence institutions, which the group sees as partners of Western powers, especially the US, in the post-9/11 "War on Terror". The TTP's main objective is to end Pakistan's collaboration with the U.S. and NATO,

particularly in the context of drone strikes and counter-terrorism operations in the tribal regions. Additionally, the TTP seeks to consolidate the collective influence of numerous militant groups by uniting them under a single jihadist banner. The TTP, despite its concentration on Pakistan, maintains ideological and operational connections with both the Taliban and al-Qaeda, thereby supporting regional and global jihadist agendas. Furthermore, the organisation opposed democratic governance and secular institutions and instead aimed to eradicate Western-style education, legal systems, and cultural influences from Pakistani society (UNSC, n.d.).

The group's growing operational presence in both Afghanistan and Pakistan has led to numerous violent attacks, heightened tensions between the Taliban and the Pakistani state, and introduced new complexities into the regional security landscape. The TTP's principal source of influence lies in its sustained campaign of terrorist violence, particularly targeting Pakistani security personnel and installations in the tribal belt. Moreover, the group has strategically expanded its recruitment beyond its traditional Pashtun base by exploiting the disenchantment of minority communities, including elements of the Baloch population (Iqbal, 2010; Sayed, 2023; SATP, 2024). The TTP's operational resilience is largely attributable to its capacity to mobilise support across borders by appealing to intersecting ethnic and religious identity narratives. As such, the contested tribal regions remain vital conduits for the group's recruitment and expansion. By the time U.S. military forces withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021, the TTP had undergone significant structural and strategic transformations, reflecting an evolution in its operational doctrine (Raja, 2024). This shift is consistent with the changes articulated in the group's 2018 manifesto, which stressed a renewed focus on targeting Pakistani military and intelligence institutions rather than civilians (Syed, 2021). The TTP has markedly intensified its operations, concentrating its attacks on security personnel and state forces in Pakistan's western border regions (CGRS, 2024).

In 2021, the TTP was responsible for a substantial portion of the 425 documented terrorist incidents in Pakistan. The scale of violence escalated in 2022, with the country experiencing 630 terrorism-related incidents that resulted in approximately 1,000 fatalities—representing the second-highest terrorism-related death toll globally for that year (IEP, 2023; SATP, 2024). The IEP's Global Terrorism Index 2025 ranked Pakistan among the top three countries with the highest increases in terrorism since 2007, noting a 45% rise in deaths from terrorist incidents. The report also highlighted that "The four terrorist groups responsible for the most deaths in 2024 were Islamic State (IS), Jamaat Nusrat Al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), TTP, and Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen (al-Shabaab). Their combined influence continues to increase, with deaths attributed to these groups increasing by 11 per cent to 4,204 deaths" (IEP, 2025, p. 4). The majority of these attacks were attributed to the TTP, highlighting its central role in undermining Pakistan's internal security. This trend continued in 2023, with 920 terrorist incidents reported, and further escalated in 2024, reaching 1,051 attacks by October 25 (SATP, 2024). Between January and August 2024 alone, militants carried out 640 attacks nationwide, resulting in an estimated 757 fatalities. The Pakistani government has consistently attributed these escalating attacks to the "Afghan-based" TTP threat—a claim the Taliban government in Kabul has repeatedly rejected.

In June 2022, the Taliban administration—under the mediation of Sirajuddin Haqqani, then serving as Afghanistan's acting Minister of Interior—facilitated the negotiation of a temporary six-month ceasefire agreement between the TTP and the Government of Pakistan (Roggio, 2022). However, the TTP unilaterally terminated the ceasefire in November 2022, citing the Pakistani government's failure to meet its key demands (Latif, 2022). Since the collapse of the agreement, the ceasefire has not been reinstated, and the frequency and intensity of violent incidents have steadily increased (Akhtar & Ahmed, 2023). In the intervening period, the TTP has expanded its ranks, recruiting hundreds of new members and sympathisers by exploiting common Pashtun ethnic identities and Islamic ideological narratives—particularly in other conflict-prone regions of Pakistan. This resurgence has posed a significant political and security dilemma for both Pakistan and Afghanistan while also raising concerns among regional stakeholders, including China. The group's continued operations threaten to undermine major regional development initiatives, most notably the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) emerging as a key target of TTP activity (CPEC Authority, 2023).

Over a relatively short period of time, the TTP has developed into a powerful and highly capable militant group in the region. Among the numerous factors for the group's ascent to power is the Taliban's complicity in the TTP's terrorist operations against Pakistan and Kabul's reluctance to engage in any direct action against the group. The emergence, increasing power, and operational capacity of the TTP have also been influenced by supportive militant networks (Joscelyn, 2021; Basit, 2022; Ali et al., 2025). Pakistan's many institutional constraints have prevented it from effectively dealing with the growing TTP threat and has turned to several military operations and a variety of coercive measures. One of these measures that the Pakistani government has framed as a part of its counter-terrorism strategy has been the mass expulsion of thousands of Afghans. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR, 2025) reported that nearly one million Afghans have returned to Afghanistan from Pakistan between September 15, 2023, and April 30, 2025. Another response has been a series of Pakistan Air Force (PAF) airstrikes inside Afghanistan in April 2022 and 2024 that have targeted suspected TTP sanctuaries (Jadoon, 2025). Pakinstan's March 2024 airstrikes in Afghanistan's eastern provinces of Paktika and Khost were labeled "intelligence-based anti-terrorism operations". The attacks killed dozens of civilians, including women and children. The December 2024 airstrikes targeted TTP bases in Barmal district and Paktika involved in recruitment and training, claiming that several high-ranking commanders were eliminated. Other responses have included ground operations along the border.

Islamabad has conducted two noteworthy military operations. The first was "Operation Zarb-e-Azb" ("Sharp Strike"), launched on June 15, 2014 and lasting until February 22, 2017. This joint military operation, mostly conducted along Pakistan's tribal belt, targeted the TTP and TTP factions, al-Qaeda and its associated movements, including IMU, the Chechen Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), ETIM, and other jihadi outfits. The success of the operation remains contested. Pakistan claimed to have eliminated thousands of militants and destroyed command centres, as well as other important targets. The operation, however, resulted in hundreds of thousands of displaced civilians (IDPs). Militants from various groups also fled across the border and established new sanctuaries. Although the operation temporarily improved Pakistan's internal security situation and brought "considerable calm to Pakistani cities" (Zahid, 2015), it also shifted the militant threat to other areas and highlighted the lack of Pakistan-Afghanistan cooperation.

In 2024, Pakistan stepped up its military operations against its security threats, principally the TTP, but also against ISKP and some other militant groups. Launched on June 22 as a "direct response to the rising tide of militant attacks in Pakistan, primarily by groups like the TTP and the Hafiz Gul Bahadur group" (Rehman, 2024), the ongoing "*Azm-e-Istehkam*" ("Resolve for Stability") operation has been larger in scope than the previous operation. *Azm-e-Istehkam* has included dozens of airstrikes across the border in an attempt to reduce the TTP's operational capacity. These military operations have failed to address the root causes of TTP militancy and terrorist acts (Jamal, 2024). India condemned Pakistan's airstrikes, calling them a violation of Afghan territory and an "old practice" of Islamabad (Adil, 2025). TTP-led violence has only intensified over time, resulting in profound regional security challenges, strained relations, and worsening political, economic, and security conditions.

Methodology

This mixed-methods study focuses on data points from an array of different text forms: news articles, press releases, and other policy pieces, all of which explore the factors influencing the political and strategic decisions of Pakistan and Afghanistan in their struggle *vis-à-vis* the TTP. We divided our methodological approach into two steps. First, we extracted data for our analysis from the Nexis Uni academic database, restricting our search queries to articles published after September 1, 2021, to capture the most relevant developments in the post-US withdrawal landscape. We used keywords such as "*Tehrik-i-Taliban*" to filter the articles. The search yielded a total of 2,889 articles, which we then exported as Microsoft Word documents for further analysis using Python. In the second stage of our analysis, we used LDA, a natural language processing algorithm (NLP), as our main topic modelling technique. Prior to modelling, the text corpus underwent preprocessing to enhance its analytical consistency. This included the removal of irrelevant content, special characters, numerical values, and common stop words, as well as the conversion of all text to lowercase to facilitate computational efficiency. LDA is a probabilistic generative model designed to uncover latent thematic structures within large bodies of text. It identifies patterns of term co-occurrence and distribution, enabling the automatic classification of documents into topic clusters. This approach allows researchers to analyse extensive unstructured textual data without

requiring a manual review of each document (Ouassini et al., 2022). We applied the LDA model using Python, organising the corpus into four dominant thematic categories: motivational, religious, ethno-racial, and administrative. We then used coherence and exclusivity metrics to evaluate the quality of our model. Both of these confirmed the robustness and distinctiveness of the topics identified.

This process naturally comes with some limitations, both in terms of the dataset and the modelling approach. Although Nexis Uni provides a broad archive of English-language sources, it may not fully represent localised media, especially content in Urdu, which could bring different but equally important themes to the fore or yield insights that are locally rooted or culture-specific. Second, the implementation of LDA rests on the assumption of an even distribution of topics across documents. In reality, thematic prominence is often context-dependent and may fluctuate over time. Third, our use of standard preprocessing techniques—such as the removal of stop words, punctuation, and special characters—might inadvertently obscure important contextual or semantic nuances during tokenisation. Finally, the process of assigning labels to topic clusters requires qualitative interpretation, introducing a degree of subjectivity shaped by the researchers' own perspectives and analytical frameworks.

Table 1 shows the breakdown of each component, as well as the specific associated keywords. The motivational component, for example, covers keywords like "statements", "ministers", and references to media coverage about the TTP and its related actions or results. The religious component was mainly concerned with the religious entities involved, predominantly capturing concepts related to the Taliban and the religious aspect of the conflict. The ethno-racial component refers to the distinct and diverse militant groups in the region, providing an ethno-racial lens through which to examine the matter. The administrative category consisted of both administrative and legal components, ranging from terminology related to documentation, rights, and monitoring.

Table 1. Component keywords

Component	Select representative keywords
Motivational	Strategy, pressure, operation, effort, security, statements, ministers, media, coverage
Religious	Islam, Islamic, *jihad*, *Shari'a*, ideology, Taliban, Afghanistan, religious
Ethno-racial	Pashtun, ethnicity, tribal, race, identity, *khyber*, *pakhtunkhwa*, militant, ethnic
Administrative	Policy, government, diplomacy, law, administration, documents, rights, monitoring, legal

Table 2 shows the primary LDA metrics that offer technical insight into each component. For example, a Topic Coherence Score (TCS) is a measure that indicates the semantic coherence of topics; a higher score suggests that the topic is more meaningful and, as a result, well-defined. Term Frequency-Inverse Document Frequency (TF-IDF) measures the importance of a term within a specific document in relation to the entire document or corpus. The Percentage of Total Documents metric shows the proportion of documents in which the topic was discussed, providing a snapshot of the topic's overall coverage. The Sentiment Score provides an overall sentiment (positive, negative, or neutral) associated with the topic, aiding in understanding the general tone of discussion. Topic Exclusivity measures how unique or exclusive words are to a particular topic, helping to distinguish it from others. The Contribution to the Corpus shows the proportion of words in the entire corpus that belong to the topic, offering insights into its significance. Lastly, Cross-Topic Occurrence counts the number of times the topic appears alongside other topics, which can be useful for understanding its contextual relationships (Jelodar et al., 2019).

Table 2. Component metrics

Metric	Component			
	Motivational	**Religious**	**Ethno-racial**	**Administrative**
TCS	0.72	0.68	0.75	0.7
TF-IDF	0.8	0.7	0.85	0.75
Percentage of Total Documents	41.5%	31.2%	38.1%	34.6%
Word Count	2,500	2,200	2,700	2,300
Sentiment Score	Neutral	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Topic Exclusivity	0.9	0.7	0.85	0.8
Contribution to the Corpus	28%	22%	29%	24%
Cross-Topic Occurrence	300	250	320	275

The motivational component has the highest TCS of 0.72, suggesting that the topics within this component are highly coherent and semantically related and show some form of a relationship. It also has a substantial presence across the corpus, appearing in 41.5% of total documents. The ethno-racial component also stands out with a high TF-IDF score of 0.85, indicating its importance and prominence in the corpus. It also has the highest word count and frequency, implying a broader discourse around ethno-racial topics. In contrast, the religious component has a slightly negative sentiment score, suggesting that discussions around religious topics may often be in a negative context. The administrative component, although it appears in 34.6% of total documents, has a fairly positive Sentiment Score, which could indicate a more positive view of administrative measures in combating the TTP. We analysed the themes generated alongside the political backdrop and existing literature to develop a comprehensive framework that defines the crucial components influencing strategic decisions in response to the TTP.

Strategic Convergence and Ideological Symbiosis: Explaining Taliban Support for the TTP

Taliban support for the TTP's operations is influenced by multiple factors, including socio-political factors, ethno-historical links, and economic dynamics. These factors reveal the multidimensionality of militant networks that operate in the region and the influence they have on regional security. There are several ideological and strategic factors that explain the relationship between the Taliban and the TTP (Jadoon, 2021; Sayed & Jadoon, 2021). Among these is the Taliban's growing desire to reduce their historical dependence on the Pakistani state, which signals a strategic pivot toward greater autonomy in regional affairs. This shift reveals their intentions to seek and pursue alternative avenues to diminish their historically subservient dependence on Pakistan. This is why there are variegated opinions about Pakistan among the Taliban, which also includes a general anti-Pakistani sentiment. This diversity of opinions has played a major role in shaping the Taliban's willingness to partner with Pakistan while collaborating with the TTP.

The priorities of the TTP and Taliban have centred on the following, set against the backdrop of the U.S. withdrawal and the installation of the new Taliban government in Afghanistan in 2021:

i. Defensive jihad against Pakistani security forces on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan and inside Pakistan;

ii. The imposition of Shari'a rule, unique to the Pashtun Islamic perspective, is present in north-west Pakistan and Afghanistan;

iii. Aiding the Taliban in their capture and control of Kabul and the strategic consolidation of the Taliban in the post-US context within Afghanistan;

iv. Forging a Pashtun-centric alliance with the Taliban that seeks tribal hegemony across both Pakistan and Afghanistan;

v. Seeking a form of self-sustainability, create an ecosystem that is independent and parallel to the Pakistani state and that thrives both internally and externally to Pakistan.

The historical relationship between the TTP and the Taliban has a major influence on their contemporary partnerships. The Taliban's support for the TTP is not only ideological but also grounded in the TTP's longstanding assistance during the Taliban's two-decade struggle against coalition forces. This shared legacy of resistance has fostered durable networks that persist despite evolving geopolitical dynamics. In the current context, the Taliban face significant operational challenges, particularly in countering ISKP and other emergent militant threats. These pressures create a strategic incentive to preserve ties with the TTP, leveraging the group's manpower and logistical resources to bolster the Taliban's military capabilities (Iqbal, 2022; Mir, 2023). As a result, the Taliban are reluctant to take decisive action against TTP leaders and operatives, fearing such moves could alienate TTP members, push them toward ISKP, and trigger internal fragmentation within their broader militant ecosystem.

Despite the Taliban's formal mediation efforts between Pakistan and the TTP, their concrete actions against the group remain limited. The continued offer of amnesty to TTP members signals a tacit endorsement of the group's presence in Afghanistan and reflects the Taliban's intent to preserve a strategically useful partnership. When necessary, the Taliban can exploit this relationship, especially considering their limited ability to produce military hardware. In this context, the TTP's resources and mobilisation capabilities are valuable assets. The Taliban may exploit this relationship by encouraging ideologically aligned militant groups to enter Afghanistan for training or operational planning. Moreover, the Taliban's reluctance to suppress the TTP stems from a broader concern: any aggressive stance could drive TTP fighters into the arms of ISKP, thereby strengthening a direct rival and undermining the Taliban's political and military dominance. This strategic calculus underscores the Taliban's preference for containment and cooperation over confrontation.

The Rising Tide of Violence: Pakistan's Struggle with the TTP

Pakistan's response to the TTP has consisted of strategic, diplomatic, and political measures. In April 2022, Pakistan launched targeted military strikes against a TTP faction operating in Afghanistan (Siddique, 2022). This was a decisive move in response to the shifting security dynamics following the U.S. military withdrawal. The absence of U.S. counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency operations created a significant security vacuum, enabling the Taliban to consolidate power in Afghanistan. However, Pakistan did not receive the anticipated security assurances from this new power balance, resulting in a sharp escalation of TTP attacks that peaked in 2024.

The perception of Taliban inaction regarding the escalating TTP threat led Pakistan to adopt drone strikes as a tactical response. This approach effectively positioned Pakistan as a de facto extension of U.S. drone operations targeting terrorist groups in Afghanistan, thereby normalising the use of armed drones (see Afzal & Mahmood, 2013). On April 13, two separate drone strikes in North Waziristan's Shaam and Mirali Khadi areas resulted in six fatalities, including three Pakistani soldiers and three children (Al Arabiya, 2022b; Wazir, 2022). These attacks coincided with Pakistani military assertions that no negotiations were underway with the TTP, although reports contradicted this, suggesting that the TTP leadership had initiated dialogue through a jirga of prominent tribal elders based along the Afghan border.

On April 16, Pakistan conducted drone strikes targeting TTP strongholds in Afghanistan's Khost and Kunar provinces, citing these actions as a response to escalating violence (Fazl-e-Haider, 2022b). Specifically, Pakistan justified the strikes as retaliation for a TTP attack on a military convoy that resulted in the deaths of Pakistani soldiers (Maryam, 2022). These airstrikes reignited widespread anti-Pakistan sentiment among Afghans across the political spectrum, who have historically viewed such incursions as violations of Afghan sovereignty (The Hindu, 2021). Public outrage intensified further due to civilian casualties, particularly among women and children, which they perceived as unacceptable and reprehensible overreaches. These incidents have compounded Pakistan's political challenges, straining its fragile relationship with the Taliban and exacerbating its domestic security situation. The strikes were likely motivated by a surge in cross-border terrorist attacks following the TTP's announcement on March 30 of a spring offensive during Ramadan (Al Arabiya, 2022a; Fazl-e-Haider, 2022a).

The reduction in airstrikes following the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan has granted the TTP greater operational freedom, enabling expanded recruitment, training, and attack preparation. The group's significant presence in Afghanistan, coupled with tacit support within Taliban ranks, complicates efforts by the Taliban to effectively counteract it. One plausible explanation for this tolerance is the growing threat posed by ISKP, which may have prompted the Taliban to maintain a strategic partnership with the TTP. In this context, the strength of the TTP within Taliban circles appears directly proportional to the perceived threat from ISKP. Additionally, some Afghan opposition groups contend that the Taliban's position and the TTP's violent activities serve as a calculated strategy orchestrated by Pakistan's intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), aimed at distancing the ISI from its historical support of the Taliban. The Taliban has shown reluctance to take decisive action against the TTP. Pakistani Defence Minister Khawaja Asif denounced the Taliban's inaction, accusing the administration of neglecting its responsibilities as both a neighbouring and fraternal state (India Narrative, 2023). In contrast, Pakistan's response to the TTP is shaped by strategic, diplomatic, and political factors, reflecting the deteriorating threat environment after U.S. forces left Afghanistan.

Conceptual Framework for Analysing Pakistan-TTP-Taliban Dynamics

This section shifts the focus toward the development of a conceptual framework designed to elucidate the complex dynamics underpinning the interaction between Pakistan and the Taliban in relation to the TTP. Various factors contribute to this strained relationship. Scholars have previously explored this relationship, as well as the TTP as a specific factor in Pakistan-Afghanistan tensions, from various perspectives to gain a more comprehensive understanding of its operations, attacks, and ties to Pakistan and the Taliban (Khan & Wei, 2016; Akhtar & Ahmed, 2023; Kaleem & Iqbal, 2023; Bakhsh et al., 2024). Nevertheless, there is a paucity of attention to the development of frameworks that provide valuable insight and illustrate the political, social, and religious factors that are at the core of the relationship. The framework that we propose aims to capture the interactions between the diverse factors that Pakistan and Afghanistan encounter in their interactions with the TTP: administrative, religious, ethno-racial, and motivational. These are all crucial to Pakistan's political and strategic calculations:

i.   The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan acts as a powerful motivational factor for the TTP by highlighting the Taliban's success and demonstrating the potential effectiveness of their struggle.

ii. The complex religious alignment among the TTP, the Taliban, and rival groups such as ISKP adds an additional layer of challenge that both Pakistan and Afghanistan must navigate.

iii. Ethno-racial dynamics simultaneously marginalise the TTP within Pakistani society and bureaucracy while strengthening their ties with the Taliban government, creating a delicate and tense situation for Pakistan.

iv. The transnational and administrative factors further complicate Pakistan's response, as its partnerships with regional rivals both constrain and weaken its ability to effectively confront the TTP threat.

Table 3. Framework capturing the variables faced by Pakistan and Afghanistan in relation to the TTP

Component	Description	Implications
Motivational	The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, which highlights the Taliban's success, provides motivation for the TTP's struggle against Pakistan (Detrimental dynamic)	The TTP serves as a negotiation tool, compelling Pakistan and other regional actors to engage with the Taliban, thereby reducing the motivation to control the TTP's violent mobilisations (Advantageous dynamic)
Religious	There is an intra-religious symmetry between the TTP, the Taliban, and adversarial alternatives, including ISKP; should Pakistan face the TTP without religious strategic consideration, it risks its relationship with the Taliban and regional Islamists (Detrimental dynamic)	Should the Taliban clearly delineate their political stance and explicitly declare their alignment with either Pakistan or the TTP, a potential alliance with both the latter and ISKP may be imminent (Detrimental dynamic)
Ethno-racial	Ethno-racial dynamics simultaneously alienate the TTP within the confines of Pakistani society and bureaucracy while constantly reinforcing their mutual relationship with the Taliban government. Pashtun tribal loyalties often supersede the state and can influence relationships within and between states (Detrimental dynamic)	The Pashtun ethno-racial similarities and dynamics with the Taliban strengthen their mutual relations, as they have never accepted the territorial boundaries reinforced by the Durand Line. This provides an additional layer of leverage for the Taliban (Advantageous dynamic)

Table 3. Framework capturing the variables faced by Pakistan and Afghanistan in relation to the TTP *(continued…)*

Component	Description	Implications
Administrative	Transnational and administrative conditions complicate Pakistan's approach, creating a situation in which alliances with regional rivals problematise and, to an extent, dilute the force with which Pakistan can confront the TTP (Detrimental dynamic)	The Taliban's quest for legitimacy has forged international partnerships, including with India and China. Cooperation with regional powers puts constraints on the degree to which the Taliban can align with the TTP. The presence of alternative cooperative opportunities outside of Pakistan, however, also creates strategic leverage through which the Taliban can influence Pakistan's positioning with the TTP (Advantageous/detrimental dynamic)

Motivational

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan served as a powerful catalyst, inspiring and emboldening terrorists and radical organisations across Central Asia and the Middle East (Shah, 2021). In 2021, al-Qaeda declared Afghanistan to be an operational base once again, asserting that "The United States is not a problem for our Afghan brothers, but due to the sacrifices in the Afghan war, the Americans are now defeated. Whether Republicans or Democrats – both have made a final decision to pull out of the Afghan war" (quoted in Robertson & Mehsud, 2021). Despite the Taliban's denial that Afghanistan has become a terrorist haven and their stated commitment to preventing terrorist groups from launching attacks abroad, numerous terrorist and militant extremist groups have reportedly sought refuge in the country following the U.S. withdrawal (ICG, 2022; CRS, 2024; Shinwari, 2024).

ISKP, an increasingly significant local, regional, and global terrorist threat, has waged sustained campaigns in Afghanistan against the Taliban, including a notable attack in November 2022 that killed senior Taliban commander Qari Hamdullah (Sayed, 2021). ISKP has also launched cross-border attacks from Afghan territory against neighbouring states, including an assault on a Uzbekistan military installation (Gul, 2022) and rocket strikes targeting military sites in Tajikistan (Ramachandran, 2022). Additionally, ISKP carried out deadly attacks in Iran in October 2022 and August 2023, followed by a January 2024 attack in Kerman. Its most notorious recent operation was the March 22, 2024, attack on Crocus City Hall in Krasnogorsk, demonstrating ISKP's expanding threat, capabilities, influence, and transnational reach—strengthened by its sanctuary in Afghanistan (Jadoon et al., 2024). Militant extremist groups, including the resilient ISKP, have also exploited Afghanistan as a recruitment base, drawing young individuals from across the region to bolster their ranks (Copeland, 2023; Centre on Armed Groups, 2024).

The TTP has strategically leveraged key historical moments to construct and propagate narratives that frame their collective struggle through a dichotomous lens of "Us" (the target society) versus "Them" (terrorists as an existential threat). This binary underpins the "War on Terror" discourse and facilitates what Esch (2010) terms "neo-Orientalist interpretations". Such framing amplifies the perceived threat posed by the TTP, drawing the attention of the Pakistani government, broader society, and local Islamic and ethnic groups, thereby entrenching divisions between in-groups and out-groups within Pakistan. The dynamic relationship between the Taliban government and the TTP is characterised by fluidity, pragmatism, and strategic calculation, positioning the TTP as both an internal and an external security challenge for Pakistan—one of several adverse consequences arising from the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. In this context, the Taliban have used the TTP as a bargaining tool in their competitive and adversarial relations with their southern neighbour.

The Taliban's incentive to suppress the TTP has diminished in light of the growing presence of ISKP in Afghanistan. By tolerating the TTP's continued existence, the Taliban can counterbalance ISKP's operations and activities. Concurrently, the TTP's persistence serves the Taliban's broader strategic interests, as the group has demonstrated a capacity to violently destabilise Pakistani society, including its social cohesion and institutional structures. Moreover, the TTP has assisted the Taliban in resisting pressures from Islamabad, particularly by strategically using refugees and disrupting border crossings, which reinforces its role as an instrument in the Taliban's regional strategy.

Intra-religious

The strategic decision-making processes of Pakistan and the Taliban are further complicated by the intra-religious symmetry shared between the TTP, the Taliban, and their adversarial counterparts. Significant parallels exist between the Taliban and the TTP, notably their shared Pashtun ethno-racial identity and a congruent religious orientation. Both groups adhere to Sunni Deobandi Hanafi jurisprudence—a synthesis of Gulf and South Asian Islamic legal traditions—and exhibit a propensity for employing violence to achieve their political objective of instituting Islamic law across the region (Norris & Inglehart, 2002). This shared religious framework underpins their discourse, framing their struggle as fundamentally Islamic and serving to "sustain membership, consistently promote the division between in-group and out-group actors, and offer members a 'true Muslim' social identity" (Kavrakis, 2023). Their interpretive engagement with Islamic texts and pronouncements from local religious authorities reinforces their cause, providing theological justification for violent mobilisation against perceived adversaries and common enemies. Moreover, local militants who allied with Taliban forces against foreign intervention were united not only by ethnic ties but also by a shared radical ideology that formed the foundation of their collective resistance.

The convergence of ideology, creed, and religious thought is not unique to the Taliban and the TTP; it also includes adversarial groups such as ISKP and various Pakistani jihadist factions, whose influence, although diminishing, continues to be persistent. This presents a complex challenge for Pakistan. Engaging the TTP without carefully considering the religious and strategic implications risks undermining Pakistan's relationships with the Taliban, domestic and regional Islamist actors, and broader public opinion. If the Taliban explicitly clarifies its allegiance by aligning decisively with either Pakistan or the TTP, then there is potential for a formalised partnership between the Taliban, TTP, and ISKP. In this context, a policy of strategic ambiguity serves the interests of all involved actors and is likely to persist until the future trajectories of these adversarial groups become more defined. Furthermore, Pakistan could strategically navigate religious constraints by actively shaping and managing the discourse of normative Deobandi Islam. Tackling the "collective identity vacuum" pointed out by Taylor and Louis (2004) by involving and redefining the boundaries of Islamic identity could be an important move to align religious stories with Pakistan's strategic goals.

Ethno-racial

The Pashtun ethno-racial similarities and dynamics with the Taliban strengthen their mutual relations, which have never accepted territorial boundaries reinforced by the Durand Line. The Pakistani government faces a dilemma because it recognises that Pashtun tribal loyalties often outweigh the power of the state. The consideration of Pashtun ethnicity in Pakistani calculations and engagement with the TTP presents a particularly challenging dilemma, given that Pakistani racial projects have historically treated Pakistani Pashtuns with suspicion, fear, and collective punishments by the Pakistani state. This state has mobilised colonial-era policies, such as the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR), to punish entire communities (Hopkins, 2015). According to Akins (2017: 9), "Much like under British rule, the purpose of the FCR within Pakistan was simply to protect the interests of the state rather than ensuring any notion of justice or civil rights for FATA residents, essentially creating second-class citizens. This arrangement also nurtured loyalty to the Pakistani state among the maliks, whose position and privileges were institutionalized under the FCR". This legislation further positions Pashtuns inside Pakistan, underscoring the primacy of their tribal connections. Instead, Pakistan should consider revisiting colonial-era laws and regulations that have alienated the Pashtuns in Pakistan, integrating Pashtuns into Pakistani military leadership, including supporting Pashtun tribal battalions under the Pakistani Army, and reformulating the nature of its alliance with the Taliban as a step towards increasing and formalising cross-border Pashtun connections.

Administrative

The administrative component complicates Pakistan's approach, creating a situation in which alliances with regional rivals problematise and dilute the force with which Pakistan can confront the TTP. Specifically, Pakistan faces two interrelated challenges: first, the risk that heavy-handed measures against the TTP could drive Afghanistan closer to regional competitors such as India; and second, the implications of external infrastructure and financial investments in Afghanistan for Pakistan's long-term development

and regional influence. Regional powers, particularly India and China, have filled the strategic vacuum left by the U.S. departure by capitalising on the Taliban's pursuit of international recognition and legitimacy through extensive diplomatic efforts (Cogan & Gill, 2022; Zelin, 2024).

In 2023, India's Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar emphasised India's "historical and civilizational ties" with Afghanistan, where New Delhi has invested over US$3 billion in more than 500 civic infrastructure projects, reflecting a significant economic footprint (Biswas, 2025; News18, 2025). Meanwhile, China has adopted a more proactive and engaged posture towards the Afghan government, leveraging diplomatic and economic channels, whereas India has largely maintained a cautious and indirect approach to cultivating diplomatic relations, despite the robustness of its investments (Hakeem & Sulphey, 2023). This evolving regional landscape presents a substantial strategic concern for Pakistan, especially given the historically fraught relationship with India, which has deteriorated markedly following the devastating Pahalgam terrorist attacks (Bose, 2025; Shaikh, 2025). Consequently, the Afghan question assumes heightened urgency for Pakistan's regional security and foreign policy objectives.

Concerns regarding political and economic security and stability significantly shape Pakistan's long-term strategic considerations, particularly in relation to key regional actors such as China. Historically characterised by a relatively passive role in interstate custodianship, China's posture in the region has come under increasing strain following the withdrawal of U.S. and coalition military forces from Afghanistan, along with the shifting interests and activities of both state and non-state actors (NSAs) and evolving security dynamics—especially in the military domain. The TTP has escalated its hostility towards Chinese nationals and entities operating within Pakistan, perceiving their interests as closely aligned with those of the Pakistani state (O'Donnell, 2022). Specifically, the TTP has targeted organisations engaged in BRI projects and cultivated links with adversarial groups, such as ETIM (Greek City Times, 2022; Mushtuq & Shad, 2022). Concurrently, Chinese discourse has grown increasingly antagonistic, with some analysts advocating for direct military action against the TTP, including aerial bombardments (Fazl-e-Haider, 2022c). Such proposals further complicate the security environment for both Pakistan and Afghanistan. Since the Taliban's return to power, Beijing has relied primarily on economic incentives to secure commitments from the Afghan government, seeking assurances that it will provide security guarantees for China's developmental projects in the country. This strategy reflects China's broader regional approach, blending economic engagement with cautious security diplomacy.

Beijing's central strategic objective in the region is the expansion of its BRI through Central Asia, facilitated notably by CPEC and the Gwadar Port in Pakistan. Contrary to some governmental expectations that the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan would usher in a transition from disorder to stability, the so-called new order failed to deliver expected and desired outcomes. Even so, China's interests in Afghanistan remain firmly anchored in connectivity, security, and access to the country's vast natural resources, including rare earth minerals, oil, and gas, despite the Taliban's return to power and the persistent instability. Managing the volatile security environment in Afghanistan thus constitutes a critical administrative and strategic imperative for Beijing.

In January 2023, a US$540 million contract was signed between Kabul and Beijing for oil extraction in the Amu Darya basin in northern Afghanistan (KabulNow, 2023a). Subsequently, in April 2023, Shahabuddin Delawar, head of the Taliban's Ministry of Mines and Petroleum, publicly announced China's intention to invest US$10 billion in Afghanistan's lithium deposits and other rare earth minerals, including copper (Ministry of Mines and Petroleum, 2023). Further advancing these economic engagements, in August 2023, Kabul disclosed multiple mining contracts valued at approximately US$6.557 billion, covering the extraction and processing of gold, copper, iron, lead, and zinc across the provinces of Herat, Ghor, Logar, and Takhar. This announcement followed several months of governmental silence and underscores the intensification of China's resource-driven investments in Afghanistan (KabulNow, 2023b; Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Office – Afghanistan, 2023).

The CPEC and the broader BRI strategically link China's interests in Pakistan—a close partner yet adversary of the TTP—to the administrative and security dimensions of Beijing's engagement with both the Taliban and the TTP. While Afghanistan is not in a state of total chaos, its fragile stability remains a critical concern for China due to Beijing's long-term strategic imperatives encompassing economic, political, and security interests (Kaura, 2022; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, 2023; VOA, 2024). A potential breakdown of security or state collapse could precipitate a large-scale migration of Afghan refugees to neighbouring countries, a scenario of particular concern for China given its geographic proximity to Afghanistan's eastern border.

This concern is heightened by the presence of China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), a predominantly Muslim Uyghur area, which faces significant ethnic and security sensitivities. The influx of refugees—potentially including radicalised individuals—to Xinjiang poses a major security challenge for Beijing. The resurgence of ISKP has further threatened Chinese interests in the region, as exemplified by ISKP's public celebration of the December 12 attack on Kabul's Longan Hotel in its al-Naba newsletter (Kapur, 2022; Webber, 2023; SCMP, 2022). Nevertheless, the Taliban and TTP have acted as counterweights to the ISKP threat, aligning, at times, with China's security objectives. In response, Beijing has increasingly sought to assert a mediating role, not only within Afghanistan but also in facilitating dialogue between Afghanistan and Pakistan, aiming to safeguard its multifaceted strategic interests in the region.

Discussion and Contribution: Terror in Triad—Pakistan, the Taliban, and TTP in the Wake of U.S. Withdrawal

This study sheds light on the complexities inherent in the relationship between Pakistan, the Taliban, and the TTP through a multi-layered analytical framework that highlights key political and strategic variables. First, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan serves as a motivational component for the TTP by showcasing the Taliban's success. Next, the intra-religious symmetry between the TTP, the Taliban, and adversarial alternatives such as the ISKP complicates the relationship between Pakistan and the Taliban. Third, ethno-racial dynamics simultaneously alienate the TTP within the confines of Pakistani society and bureaucracy while constantly reinforcing their mutual relationship with the Taliban government, thereby creating a delicate situation for Pakistan. Lastly, the administrative component complicates Pakistan's approach, creating a situation in which alliances with regional rivals like India problematise and, to some extent, dilute the force with which Pakistan can confront the TTP. The study also underscored the ambiguity surrounding Pakistan's position in Afghanistan-Pakistan interstate security, interpreting Pakistan's involvement with the TTP in Afghanistan as a domestic conflict or internal war. That is, the present arrangement increases the likelihood that Pakistan may have to accept its new, partly imposed role as a counter-terrorism actor against the TTP while maintaining a delicate relationship with an antagonistic and mistrustful Taliban.

Pakistan appears to be fighting a war against itself. Pakistan appears to have chosen conventional military instruments and operations over more subtle and stealthy alternatives, such as drones and special operations units, considering recent events and mounting pressure from multiple fronts, including the West. Presumably, Pakistan is using such actions as a political and military tactic to demonstrate its military might in a conspicuous manner rather than opting for more subtle and safer options or alternatives. However, this choice of tactics does not necessarily indicate Pakistan's willingness or eagerness to adopt this position and carry it out on its own for an extended period. The plethora of threat actors along, adjacent to, and within Pakistan's sovereign territory is likely to aggravate Pakistan's precarious position, which is susceptible to change at any moment. Other terrorist groups and organisations are well-positioned to attain safety in this evolving security environment, which is in a constant state of violent volatility. Pakistan, already struggling to manage several fronts with limited resources and a challenging domestic economic environment, may face additional pressure due to the West's limited options for engaging with the Taliban in Afghanistan, short of direct military intervention or engagement and drone operations.

The newly elected government of Pakistan, inaugurated in April 2024 with Shehbaz Sharif assuming a second term as Prime Minister, has intensified its mass deportation policies, extending these measures to include individuals holding Afghan Citizen Cards (ACC) as part of its second phase of Afghan refugee expulsions (Al Jazeera, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024; Hamidy, 2024). By mid-2025, Pakistan had accelerated this process, resulting in the expulsion of nearly one million Afghan refugees since September 2023 (Daily Pakistan, 2024; Rahman, 2025; UN News, 2025). These developments have exacerbated the deteriorating security conditions in the border regions, raising concerns over their potential to further destabilise the area. Such dynamics may precipitate more extensive and prolonged Pakistani military operations within Afghanistan (Atlantic Council, 2024; France24, 2024). Throughout 2024, Pakistan escalated its counterterrorism efforts by conducting a series of airstrikes targeting TTP positions and hideouts within Afghan territory (News On AIR, 2024). These operations were explicitly framed as retaliatory measures in response to TTP attacks against Pakistani security personnel and civilians. In turn, the Taliban responded with bombardments targeting Pakistani positions, perpetuating a persistent cycle of reciprocal violence. The enduring hostilities between Pakistan and the TTP thus continue to reinforce a pattern of mutual retaliation, further complicating regional security dynamics.

The TTP has sustained its presence in Afghanistan despite Pakistan's military operations, largely because the Taliban government offers the group a safe haven but does not classify it as a terrorist organisation. Consequently, the Taliban leadership in Afghanistan does not perceive the TTP as an existential threat to their governance or national security, a stance that contrasts sharply with the Pakistani government's position. In fact, the presence and influence of the TTP within Afghan territory may confer strategic advantages to the Taliban when confronting rival violent factions, such as ISKP. Pakistan, confronted with escalating security threats along its border with Afghanistan, is likely to face increasing pressure to reevaluate its policy toward the TTP. The TTP, for its part, firmly maintains the legitimacy of its armed campaign against both the Pakistani state and its populace. Meanwhile, the Taliban have publicly reiterated their commitment to preventing Afghan soil from being used to launch terrorist attacks against any country, in accordance with the Doha Agreement and their return to power (Gul, 2023).

Afghanistan's security environment remains volatile and fragile, driven by the Taliban's resurgence, their symbiotic ties with the TTP and al-Qaeda, and the revival of multiple militant groups rebuilding their operational capacities (UNSC, 2023). This deteriorating security landscape stems in part from the Taliban's failure to implement the counter-terrorism provisions stipulated in the Doha Agreement. Furthermore, hundreds of thousands of weapons left behind by U.S. and coalition forces—and later seized by the Taliban—have been lost, sold, or trafficked to militant organisations in Afghanistan and across Central and South Asia (Mehra et al., 2022). Key beneficiaries of these wartime spoils include the TTP, al-Qaeda and its affiliates, IMU, ETIM, Ansar Allah (Houthis), and ISKP, among other groups. Pakistan has encountered persistent obstacles in its efforts to combat violent extremism and terrorism. The examination of this issue in greater detail demonstrates that Pakistan's political will to address it is substantially lacking.

Conclusion

In light of the evolving situation, Pakistan, whose relationship with the Taliban has historically been marked by mistrust and uncertainty, must now navigate a delicate path. Pakistan's strategic assessments of the TTP are vital to the security of both the country and the surrounding region, especially in the context of the years following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. This article reviewed a substantial body of academic literature, as well as secondary sources and grey material, such as news articles, press releases, and reports from government agencies, research centres, and think tanks, to unpack the dynamics that influence Pakistan's strategic and political decisions within the framework of its conflict against the TTP. Our analysis of Pakistan's response to the TTP in a changing security environment was supported by identifying four key components: motivational, religious, ethno-racial, and administrative. The study highlighted the Taliban's involvement in providing a safe haven for TTP, as well as its continued support for the group. This network of dynamics poses a formidable and long-lasting challenge to regional stability (Jadoon, 2021; Sayed & Jadoon, 2021). There is a need for further research to determine how the Pakistani military and state interact with each of the components mentioned in the analytical framework. This will bring into focus how identity, location, religion, ideology, and resources may affect the success or failure of Pakistan's counter-terrorism actions and operations.

Future research should expand on this study's findings by integrating more advanced natural language processing approaches, particularly Large Language Models (LLMs), to conduct deeper semantic and discursive analyses of counter-terrorism narratives, as well as certain militant propaganda and intergovernmental rhetoric. The application of LLMs such as Generative Pre-trained Transformers (GPT), Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers (BERT) derivatives, or domain-specific models trained on regional corpora could improve thematic precision, capture more nuanced shifts in tone, and identify latent discursive patterns that traditional topic models like LDA may overlook. Beyond the model's utilisation, pulling from a much more diverse array of textual sources might also be another layer that can add to the usefulness of the framework. Additionally, combining LLM-driven classification with geospatial-temporal data and actor-network analysis could yield richer insights into the transnational strategies of groups like the TTP, the evolving posture of the Taliban, and Pakistan's recalibrated security doctrine. These developments open up opportunities not only for academic research but also for policy-orientated AI systems capable of forecasting militant activity, evaluating strategic discourse, and guiding more responsive and responsible regional diplomacy.

Richer insights into regional and transnational strategies of the TTP and other militant groups, as well as the Taliban's position and Pakistan's counter-terrorism and security strategy, could also be gained by combining LLM-based classification with geospatial-temporal data and actor-network analysis. Our analytical framework's four components operate in parallel rather than intersect. Future research, however, could expand on this model by incorporating components that interact with or reinforce one another. For example, religious affinity (e.g., Deobandi identity) may intersect with ethno-racial elements such as Pashtun solidarity. This would require methodological adjustments—specifically, modifying the parameters to allow individual tokens or words to be categorised under multiple themes. These developments open up opportunities not only for academic research but also for policy-orientated artificial intelligence (AI) systems capable of forecasting militant activity, evaluating strategic discourse, and guiding more responsive and responsible regional diplomacy.

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