



## Terrorist Attacks and Conflict Intensity in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa since the August 2021 Taliban Takeover: Pakistan's Response and Operation Azm-e-Istehkam

Abdullah<sup>a\*</sup>, Fehmida<sup>b</sup>, Razaqat Ali<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>MS Scholar, School of International and Public Affairs, Jilin University China. <sup>b</sup>MS Scholar, School of International and Public Affairs, Jilin University China. <sup>c</sup>Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Qatar

\*Email: [abdullahturi12@gmail.com](mailto:abdullahturi12@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** This paper aims to assess the effects of the Taliban's capture of Afghanistan in August 2021 on the security situation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan. The re-emergence of the Taliban has seen a surge in terrorist activities, especially by the TTP and other related groups including the IS-KP. The study reveals that the frequency and intensity of attacks have increased significantly and have led to increased loss of lives of civilians and security forces, thus escalating the insecurity in the region. To counter these threats, Pakistan initiated Operation Azm-i-Istehkam in June 2024, which is a multi-pronged approach that focuses on intelligence gathering, regional cooperation, and socio-economic factors that lead to extremism. This paper evaluates the efficiency of this operation in combating the increasing terrorism in KP, analyses the impact of the conflict at regional and international levels and stresses the importance of the integrated approach based on the military, political and socio-economic strategies for achieving sustainable security and stability in the region.

**Keywords:** Terrorism, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), Operation Azm-i-Istehkam, Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

### 1. Introduction

The Taliban took back control of Afghanistan in 2021 after fighting for twenty years. After the U.S. invasion in 2001, which ended their rule, the Taliban regrouped in Pakistan. Within a decade, they began regaining territory and power. By August 2021, they quickly retook control of Afghanistan as the U.S. pulled out its troops, following a peace deal made with them in 2020 (Maizland, 2023). When the Taliban took over in August 2021, Pakistan expected it would help secure its western border. Instead, this hope was not realized. There was a sharp rise in border tensions and terrorist attacks against Pakistani security forces. Recent reports from the UN Security Council's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team indicate that the TTP has benefitted the most from the Taliban's return, more so than any other extremist group in Afghanistan. e increases in terrorist activities in 2023 caused a major rise in casualties among security personnel, reaching the highest level in eight years. This situation frustrated Islamabad significantly. The TTP's attacks grew bolder following the breakdown of a ceasefire with the government in November 2022 (Lodhi, 2024)

Pakistan's border with Afghanistan stretches nearly 2,600 kilometers, with the majority of this border running through the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province. Although the Taliban's takeover in August 2021 has affected security across Pakistan, KP has been hit hardest. Since the takeover, there has been a marked increase in terrorist attacks in the province, intensifying the security challenges faced by Pakistan (Khan et al., 2023).

In response to the growing terrorism in Pakistan, the government started Operation Azm-i-Istehkam (Resolve for Stability) on June 22, 2024. This operation focuses on improving intelligence operations, boosting regional cooperation, and supporting socioeconomic development. Its goal is to combat the increase in terrorist attacks, address cross-border threats, and show international partners that Pakistan is serious about security and stability (Ahmed & Karikalam, 2024).

This paper explores how the Taliban's return to power in August 2021 has impacted Pakistan, especially in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province. It looks at how the increase in terrorist attacks has affected both civilians and security forces. In response to this rise in violence, the Pakistani government started Operation Azm-i-Istehkam (Resolve for Stability) on June 22, 2024. The paper will also assess how effective this operation will be in dealing with the increased terrorism and stabilizing the region.

## 2. Literature Review

Although there is plenty of research on the Taliban's takeover of Kabul and its effects on Pakistan, there is limited detailed work on the rise in terrorism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) since August 2021. This paper aims to address that gap by specifically examining how terrorist attacks in KP have increased and their impact on the region.

In his analysis, Zahid Shahab Ahmed highlights that since August 2021, the TTP's activities in Pakistan have dramatically increased. This growth includes efforts in fundraising, recruitment, and executing attacks. The group's impact now extends beyond the former FATA region, with incidents of extortion reported in Peshawar, the capital of KP. Ahmed also points out the TTP's opposition to the Durand Line fencing and the FATA-KP merger. Moreover, other militant groups like IS-KP have also intensified their activities in Pakistan since the Taliban's takeover (Shahab, 2022).

Wazir argues that after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the threat from the TTP to Pakistan has increased. He believes that unlike the unified Afghan Taliban, militant groups in Pakistan are fragmented and lack a single leader. Although these groups are linked to the TTP, they are not as coordinated. This fragmentation poses a risk of increased terror attacks. Wazir also points out that these groups have personal conflicts and are attacking each other, making the situation even more difficult for Pakistan. He suggests that the law and order situation, especially in the former FATA region, will worsen following the US troop withdrawal (Wazir, 2022). According to the U.N. report, the frequency of attacks by the TTP against Pakistan has progressively increased over the years. In 2021, the number of such attacks was 573. By 2023, this figure had more than doubled, reaching 1,203 incidents. This upward trend has continued into 2024, indicating that the TTP's aggressive actions are showing no signs of slowing down.

### 2.1 Historical Context

Examining the history of the Taliban movement as a whole is crucial to comprehending why insurgency and terrorist acts in Pakistan, especially in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), have been directly affected by the Taliban's capture of Kabul in August 2021. Radical Islamist ideas serve as the ideological basis for both the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which was founded in 2007, and the Taliban, who now rule Afghanistan. With the Afghan Taliban concentrating on Afghanistan and the TTP attacking the Pakistani government, both organizations seek to impose a rigid version of Sharia law. Many think these groups are two sides of the same coin because of their tight operational and ideological links. The TTP regained strength and support following the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, which enabled it to reorganize inside Pakistan and step up its operations, especially against security and law enforcement officers. The violence in KP has sharply increased as a result of this revival, underscoring the cross-border effects of the Taliban's win in Afghanistan on Pakistan's security. It is essential to know this ideological and historical link in order to understand the present wave of terrorism in Pakistan.

### 2.2 Emergence of Taliban

Shortly after the Soviet Union withdrew its soldiers from Afghanistan in the early 1990s, the Taliban—whose name means "students" in Pashto—emerged in northern Pakistan. The movement, which is primarily Pashtun, is said to have started at religious institutions, many of which Saudi Arabia supported. The rigorous interpretation of Sunni Islam was advocated by these institutions. By pledging to impose a strict interpretation of Sharia law and bring order back, the Taliban were able to win over Pashtun communities along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The Taliban took control of the Herat province, which is close to Iran, in September 1995 after quickly spreading their influence from their base in southwest Afghanistan. September 1996, a year later, saw the Taliban gain control of

Kabul and overthrow the administration of President Burhanuddin Rabbani. One of the main players in the Afghan mujahideen's battle against the Soviet occupation was Rabbani. The Taliban ruled over about 90% of Afghanistan by 1998. Many Afghans, worn out by the corruption, chaos, and internal strife that followed the Soviet exit, first embraced the Taliban. The group's early successes were a result of its attempts to eliminate corruption, reestablish law and order, and provide a secure environment for trade in the areas they controlled. Pakistan was one of the three nations that formally recognized the Taliban during their first government in Afghanistan, together with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Pakistan was also the last country to sever diplomatic relations with the group.

Following the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center, the Taliban gained worldwide attention due to suspicions that they were providing refuge to Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda, the primary suspects. In response, a U.S.-led military coalition launched attacks on Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, which led to the collapse of the Taliban regime by December. Despite an extensive manhunt, Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar and key figures, including Bin Laden, evaded capture. Many senior Taliban leaders are believed to have fled to Quetta, Pakistan, where they allegedly directed Taliban activities, though Pakistan denied the existence of this so-called "Quetta Shura.

### **2.3 Return to Power: The Taliban's 2021 Takeover**

Despite the increasing presence of foreign troops, the Taliban steadily regained and expanded their influence across Afghanistan, making large areas of the country insecure once again. Violence surged to levels not seen since 2001, with the Taliban carrying out numerous attacks, including a high-profile raid on NATO's Camp Bastion base in September 2012. After enduring two decades of conflict with a superpower, the Taliban began capturing vast territories, eventually leading to the fall of Kabul following the withdrawal of foreign forces.

In a swift and decisive campaign, the Taliban swept through Afghanistan, capturing their first provincial capital on August 6, 2021. Within just 10 days, by August 15, they had reached the gates of Kabul. Their rapid advance triggered a mass exodus, with tens of thousands of people fleeing their homes—some seeking refuge in the Afghan capital, while others fled to neighboring countries. This marked the Taliban's return to power, as they once again took control of the country, two decades after being ousted (Who are the Taliban, 2010).

### **2.4 Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan: The Pakistani Wing of the Taliban Movement**

The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) stands as the most significant and lethal militant umbrella organization within Pakistan. Established in 2007 under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud, the TTP represents a major faction within the broader Pakistani Taliban, encompassing the majority, though not all, of the various Taliban groups in the country. The organization maintains strong ties with Al Qaeda and shares affiliations with the Afghan Taliban. However, while the Afghan Taliban primarily targets U.S.-led coalition forces in Afghanistan, the TTP focuses its efforts on fighting against Pakistani security forces.

The three primary goals of the TTP are to defend Afghan Taliban rule in Kabul after US military departure, impose Sharia law across Pakistan, and engage in defensive jihad against Pakistani forces. The TTP's ultimate goal is to topple Pakistan's government and create an Islamic caliphate there (Brumfield & Ng, 2014).

### **2.5 TTP's Resurgence: Intensified Insurgency Post-2021**

Past military operations, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) notably reduced its activities. However, the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan on August 30, 2021, marked a pivotal shift. This withdrawal created a power vacuum that allowed the TTP and its affiliates to seek refuge. Concurrently, internal discord and leadership challenges within the Afghan Taliban diminished their control over border regions, thereby granting the TTP increased operational freedom. The resurgence of the TTP was further exacerbated by the Pakistani government's failure to implement effective counterterrorism measures and reforms (Ahmad & Ahlawat, 2023).

Motivated by the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) aimed to replicate a similar Sharia-based governance model in Pakistan. The TTP asserted that it was well-equipped to carry out attacks throughout the country at its own choosing and timing. This ambition to impose a Taliban-style regime in Pakistan showcased the group's intent to leverage its resources and operational capabilities to destabilize and challenge the Pakistani state, reflecting its broader goal of establishing its version of Islamic law (Gillani, 2021).

### 2.6 Escalation of Terrorist Attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa During 2021

With 111 assaults in total, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) saw the largest concentration of terrorist occurrences in Pakistan in 2021 out of all the regions. 53 of them took place in the tribal territories of Waziristan, leaving 169 people dead and 122 injured. With 37 assaults in 2020 compared to 31 in 2020, North Waziristan stood up as a very volatile region, contributing to more than 33 percent of all recorded events in KP. These attacks resulted in 27 injuries and 50 fatalities. There were 48 deaths overall from the 16 assaults that were reported in South Waziristan and the 12 attacks that occurred in Bajaur.

Nine people were killed in eight strikes in Peshawar, the province capital. A minimum of three assaults were recorded in each of the following districts: Bannu, DI Khan, LakkiMarwat, Lower Dir, Mardan, Orakzai, and Tank. Furthermore, 14 people lost their lives in a single attack on a bus carrying Chinese laborers in Kohistan.

More than 71% of the assaults in KP were directed against law enforcement and security personnel. There were six assaults against police escorts or polio vaccination crews. Twelve assaults also targeted political figures and tribal elders who supported the government. Most of these occurrences were the result of assaults carried out by Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its affiliated local Taliban groups; however, a few attacks, including a suicide bombing in South Waziristan, Peshawar, Kurram, and Bajaur, were also attributed to the Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) (Pakistan Security Report, 2021).

Table 1: Summary of Terrorist Attacks and Impact in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province (2021)

Description	Total
Total Terrorist Attacks	111
Total Casualties (Deaths)	169
Total Injuries	122

### 3. Rising Terrorist Activity in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa During 2022

There was a notable upsurge in terrorist operations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) in 2022, with 169 attacks—more than 64 percent of the 262 events reported overall. This was a significant 52 percent gain over the prior year. In KP, there were 294 fatalities from the violence—nearly twice as many as in 2021—and 393 injuries. With 30 assaults, a minor decrease from the previous two years, North Waziristan continued to be a center for terrorist violence and insecurity. Twelve strikes occurred in South Waziristan, a neighbor. Peshawar (17), Khyber and DI Khan (14 each), LakkiMarwat (13), Bannu (12), and Bajaur (11), were among the other districts with ten or more assaults. In all 21 districts of the province, there have been reports of terrorist events. Roughly 77% of these assaults were directed against law enforcement and security (Pakistan Security Report, 2022).

Table 2: Overview of Terrorist Attacks and Their Consequences in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province (2022)

Description	Total
Total Terrorist Attacks	169
Total Casualties (Deaths)	294
Total Injuries	393

### 3.1 Intensification of Terrorist Attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa During 2023

In 2023, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) remained the most affected region in Pakistan, experiencing 174 terrorist attacks, which accounted for approximately 57 percent of the nation's total. These attacks claimed 422 lives and injured 782 others. While the number of attacks only slightly increased by three percent compared to the previous year, the death toll rose significantly by 43 percent, and the number of injuries nearly doubled, indicating a shift toward more intensified or high-impact assaults by militants.

The southern regions and the province capital region, which includes Peshawar and the nearby Khyber district, were the two main hotspots for terrorist activity in KP. These areas, including the southern districts of North and South Waziristan, Bannu, Tank, Lakki Marwat, DI Khan, Peshawar, and Khyber, saw more than 82% of the assaults in KP. The district of Bajaur has also been a major area of worry, with 10 incidents primarily being linked to the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) faction (Pakistan Security Report, 2023).



Table 3:

Description	Total
Total Terrorist Attacks	174
Total Casualties (Deaths)	422
Total Injuries	782

### 3.2 Pakistan Policy Response to insurgency and terrorism

To address the persistent threat of insurgency and terrorism, Pakistan has conducted several significant military operations since 2007. Operations such as Rad-ul-Fasaad and Zarb-e-Azb were pivotal in targeting and dismantling militant networks across the country. In response to evolving security challenges, particularly the surge in terrorism following the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in August 2021, Pakistan initiated a comprehensive counter-terrorism campaign in 2024 named Azm-e-Istehkam. This new operation aims to tackle the increasing trend of terrorist activities and enhance national security through intensified military actions and strategic measures.

#### Major Military Operations in Pakistan since the Establishment of TTP (2007)

1. **Operation Rah-i-Haq-I:** Conducted in the Swat Valley and Shangla District (2007).
2. **Operation Rah-i-Haq-II:** Continued in the Swat Valley and Shangla (2008).
3. **Operation Sirat-i-Mustaqeem:** Targeted Khyber Agency (2008).
4. **Operation Sherdil:** Joint operation with Frontier Corps in Bajaur Agency (2008).
5. **Operation Rah-i-Haq-III:** Further operations in the Swat Valley and Shangla (2009).
6. **Operation Black Thunderstorm:** Focused on Buner, Lower Dir, and Shangla District (2009).
7. **Operation Brekhna:** Implemented in Mohmand Agency (2009).
8. **Operation Rah-i-Rast:** Commonly known as the Swat Operation, addressing the Swat Valley (2009).
9. **Operation Rah-i-Nijat:** Addressed South Waziristan (2009).
10. **Operation Zarb-i-Azb:** Launched in North Waziristan along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border (2014).
11. **Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad:** A nationwide operation aimed at counter-terrorism (2017) (Dar, 2019).

In August 2021, the Taliban took over Kabul, and Pakistan launched Operation Azm-e-Istehkam (Resolve for Stability) in 2024 in reaction to the recent upsurge in violence. This operation incorporates lessons acquired from prior counterterrorism initiatives, marking a departure from previous tactics. In contrast to previous operations, which had a mostly military focus, Azm-e-Istehkam seeks to take a more all-encompassing and integrated approach.

The objectives of Operation Azm-e-Istehkam include:

- **Targeting Militant Networks:** Continuation of efforts to dismantle terrorist networks and eliminate threats.
- **Addressing Root Causes:** Recognizing the need for a broader strategy that includes socioeconomic development, educational reforms, and community engagement to tackle the factors contributing to extremism.
- **Enhancing Legal and Political Frameworks:** Strengthening legal processes and political stability to support counterterrorism efforts and prevent the resurgence of militant activities (Shah, 2024).

### 4. Evaluation of the Current Situation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)

#### 4.1 Assessment of the Security Dynamics (Post-August 2021)

KP, Pakistan, has experienced a deterioration of security since the Taliban took control in Afghanistan in August 2021. The takeover has altered the security dynamics in the province and has observed a surge in the terrorist activities particularly by the TTP and other militant groups including the IS-KP. The TTP, which has a ideological connection with the Afghan Taliban, has used the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan to regroup and increase its operations in Pakistan, according to the United Nations Security Council's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (Ahmad, 2022).

From August 2021 to mid-2024, terrorist activities in KP have increased, especially the TTP has increased attacks on Pakistani security forces, civilians, and state property. The Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) reported that the number of terrorist attacks in KP rose from 111 in 2021 to 174 in 2023, a 57% rise. These attacks have been more coordinated and lethal and the militants have employed various tactics including suicide bombings, targeted killings, and IEDs. IS-KP has also expanded its operations in the province particularly in Bajaur and

Khyber agencies and poses a significant security concern like the TTP. This increased militant activity is an indication of a general rise in insecurity in KP due to the Taliban in the neighboring Afghanistan and the re-emergence of local insurgent groups (Shah & Mehmood, 2024)

#### **4.2 Impact on Civilians and Security Forces**

The increase in the level of terrorism has led to disastrous effects on the lives of the common people and police officers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The province has seen a sharp increase in the number of deaths, with security forces' death toll being the highest in nearly a decade. The South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) reveals that between 2022 and 2023, 401 security personnel were killed in militant attacks in KP, and more than 780 were injured. This has led to a rise in the number of casualties which has greatly affected the local police forces and their capacity to prevent and control crime and protect the most vulnerable groups (Ishfaq et al., 2022).

The civilian population has been the most affected by this violence, with many high-profile attacks on civilian infrastructure, learning institutions, and places of worship. On 15th January 2023, a suicide bomber attacked a mosque in Peshawar and killed over 100 worshippers, including several children, and over 200 others were injured. This attack, one of the most vicious in recent past, highlighted the fact that the militants are becoming more daring and ruthless in the region. Likewise, a string of extra-judicial killings in North Waziristan, involving the elimination of pro-government tribal leaders and politicians, has created a culture of fear among the locals and hampered governance (Suicide Attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2024).

The constant threat of terrorism has impacted the lives of the people of KP in a very negative way and has eroded the trust of the people in the state's capacity to protect them. Threats have forced schools and marketplaces to be closed at some times, and many development projects have been affected, which has affected economic stability and community resilience. The security situation has also posed a challenge to the government in the process of integrating the former FATA into KP since attacks on the government officials and law enforcement agencies have continued to occur, thus affecting governance and development in these insecure areas (Awan et al., 2019).

### **5. Pakistan's Policy and Military Response**

#### **5.1 Overview of Counter-Terrorism Operations Before 2024**

Pakistan has conducted several counter-terrorism operations in the recent past due to the increasing threat posed by the militant groups especially in areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Among these, the most significant are Operation Zarb-e-Azb and Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad. Operation Zarb-e-Azb was launched in June 2014 to clear the terrorist sanctuaries in North Waziristan which is a significant region for militant activities on the Pak-Afghan border. The operation was effective in neutralizing many terrorist groups and liberating territories that were previously controlled by the militants. The Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS) reported that by the end of Zarb-e-Azb in 2016, more than 3,500 militants were killed and large quantities of arms and ammunition were seized. However, the operation was criticized for its failure to neutralize all the militant groups, especially those considered to be involved in cross-border activities as opposed to internal subversion (Samiullah et al., 2023).

Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad was initiated in February 2017 to further consolidate the successes of Zarb-e-Azb and to target the remaining terrorists and their infrastructure in Pakistan and to eliminate their dormant cells. It was based on intelligence operations and included all the branches of the armed forces, police, and intelligence services. The operation has effectively brought down the rate of terrorist activities, the number of which has decreased by nearly 50% between 2017 and 2020 according to the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP). Nevertheless, Radd-ul-Fasaad also had its problems, such as the re-emergence of groups like the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in KP and the fact that it is not easy to sustain peace because of the regional factors and the existence of militant safe havens in Afghanistan. Such operations, although useful in the short term, revealed the need for a long-term strategy that would target the socio-economic causes of extremism (Zafar et al., 2023).

#### **5.2 Introduction and Objectives of Operation Azm-i-Istehkam**

Operation Azm-i-Istehkam, which began in June 2024, is a new approach to counter-terrorism in Pakistan, which has been adjusted based on previous experiences. This operation is intended to offer a comprehensive strategy to counter-terrorism by integrating the use of force with the reconstruction of the affected societies and the promotion of cooperation in the region. The primary goals of Operation Azm-i-Istehkam are to neutralize the terrorists, build up the intelligence, and redress the socio-economic issues that lead to militancy. Unlike previous operations that

were mainly conducted for military objectives, Azm-i-Istehkam is more inclined towards intelligence led operations to prevent acts of terrorism, building up governance structures and development in the affected regions (Pakistan Counter Terrorism Strategy, 2024).

Another unique characteristic of Operation Azm-i-Istehkam is the emphasis on increasing cooperation with Afghanistan to counter cross-border terrorism. This entails negotiation with the Taliban-led government in Afghanistan to guarantee that Afghan territory is not used as a breeding ground for the militants against Pakistan. Furthermore, the operation seeks to support socio-economic development in KP and the newly merged tribal districts through investment in infrastructure, education and health sectors which are considered as key to countering militant narratives

### **5.3 Expected Outcomes of Operation Azm-i-Istehkam**

The following are some of the positive impacts that are expected to be realized from Operation Azm-i-Istehkam: There will be a decrease in the activities of the terrorists and an enhancement of the security situation in KP and other areas. Through improving intelligence capacities and promoting cooperation with other countries, the operation is to counteract the activity of terrorists and prevent the resurgence of militants. The focus on socio-economic activities is also expected to mitigate some of the root causes of radicalization including poverty, unemployment and lack of basic amenities hence slowing down the radicalization of youths into militant groups.

However, the operation may encounter some challenges in the achievement of the set objectives. The issue of the open border between Pakistan and Afghanistan is still a concern as cross-border militant movement is still a major concern in KP. Political factors such as the relations with the Taliban led government in Afghanistan and internal political instability in Pakistan may also hinder the ability to maintain a coherent and consistent counter-terrorism strategy. Furthermore, international cooperation will be essential to provide sufficient support to Pakistan's actions, such as funding and information exchange, but political instability may influence the degree of international involvement.

## **6. Analysis of Regional and International Implications**

### **6.1 Impact on Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations**

The change of power in Afghanistan by the Taliban in August 2021 has greatly influenced the political and security aspect of the bilateral relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The return of the Taliban has not provided the stability that Pakistan initially desired; instead, it has revived militant operations, particularly by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which is affiliated with the Afghan Taliban. According to a report by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), the TTP has regrouped and stepped up attacks on Pakistan using the Taliban's control of Afghanistan.

Politically, the relationship between Pakistan and the Taliban-led Afghan government is rather strained and characterized by mutual suspicion. While Pakistan has been backing the diplomatic legitimacy of the Taliban regime, it has been accused of not putting enough pressure on the Taliban to act against the TTP. The inability or lack of desire of the Taliban to rein in TTP has placed a lot of strain on bilateral relations, with Islamabad expressing worry over Afghanistan being used as a staging ground for anti-Pakistan activities. This has made Pakistan's foreign policy and diplomatic relations with Afghanistan a dynamic and difficult process as both the countries are still in the process of solving problems of border security, counter terrorism and refugees (Sulaiman et al., 2023).

Terrorist activities have also increased in KP which has also posed security threats in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border area. The rise in violence has also seen a rise in measures to secure the borders, which has seen the Pakistani and Afghan border guards clash often. According to the ICG report in 2023, these border conflicts have impacted on trade and other humanitarian matters like the movement of refugees. The UNHCR estimates that over 600,000 Afghans have crossed into Pakistan since August 2021, which has strained the country's resources and worsened the bilateral relations. These developments demonstrate that security, diplomatic, and humanitarian relations between the two countries are interconnected (Bilal et al., 2024).

### **6.2 Role of International Actors**

The United States, China, and regional organizations are influential in defining Pakistan's counter-terrorism strategies and the security dynamics of South Asia. The United States, which left Afghanistan in 2021, has had a strategic interest in the region, especially in ensuring that Afghanistan does not turn into a breeding ground for

terrorists. The Brookings Institution states that the U. S has offered counter-terrorism aid to Pakistan in terms of intelligence and military support but this aid is contingent on Pakistan's efforts to combat groups such as the TTP and maintain stability in the region (Gul et al., 2021).

China, being a regional power and an ally of Pakistan, has always been interested in the stability of Afghanistan and Pakistan especially because of the CPEC and the possibility of Uighur militants using Afghanistan as a base. CSIS has stated that China has provided diplomatic and economic support to Pakistan's counter-terrorism efforts and has called for a political settlement of the Afghanistan issue with regional integration. However, Beijing is still skeptical about the Taliban's intentions and their ability to fight terrorism and safeguard Chinese assets in the region (Ahmad et al., 2017).

Other international organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) have also dealt with Pakistan in regard to the changing security environment. The SCO, which is concerned with security and counter-terrorism, has offered a forum for Pakistan, China, Russia, and Central Asian states to discuss the consequences of the Taliban's seizure of power. In a report by the SCO in 2023, the member states have resolved to improve on the exchange of intelligence and work together on measures to be taken on borders to prevent terrorism (Zab-Un-Nisa et al., 2020).

However, these efforts are not without challenges. Disputes have arisen because of the different strategic concerns of the major stakeholders, especially the US and China, which makes it difficult to have a common front in dealing with the security threat posed by the militants in the region. Furthermore, the changing security environment has created tensions between Pakistan and its neighbors, particularly India, which claims that Pakistan uses terrorism as a state instrument while Pakistan argues that it is a victim of terrorism from across the border (Ali, 2020).

## 7. Conclusion

The assessment of the situation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) after August 2021 reveals the prospects and threats of combating terrorism in the region. The Taliban's capture of Afghanistan has seen an upsurge in cross-border militant activities especially by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) which has raised security tensions and a spate of terrorist attacks in KP. These attacks have led to the loss of many lives of the civilian population and security forces, which makes it necessary to have a counter-terrorism strategy.

The beginning of Operation Azm-i-Istehkam in June 2024 is a transition to a more complex strategy that combines military operations with the development of socio-economics and regional cooperation. This is a complex approach that seeks to disrupt the terrorist groups, improve the intelligence gathering and deal with the socio-economic factors that lead to terrorism. However, the operation has its challenges such as cross border militant infiltration, political complexities and the need for continued support from the international community.

It is therefore imperative that a comprehensive strategy that involves military, political and socio-economic solutions be employed in order to ensure sustainable security in KP and other similar regions. Enhancing regional integration, good governance, and development partnership are some of the key elements of this strategy. Furthermore, the constant interaction with the international actors, regional states and the world powers is also crucial to counter the emerging threats of terrorism in Pakistan.

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