

PAKISTAN'S TERROR FACTORIES AND INFRASTRUCTURE MAYHEM

AT HOME AND BEYOND BORDERS

The strategic community that emerged in Pakistan following Partition viewed itself as a materially weaker state facing an existential adversary in India.

Conventional military asymmetry encouraged the exploration of sub-conventional and irregular warfare as cost-effective alternatives¹. Over the years, militant groups came to be seen not merely as tactical assets but as instruments of statecraft-capable of exerting pressure externally while shaping internal political dynamics. Soon they were embedded in Pakistan's regional strategy, particularly in Kashmir and Afghanistan² and became influential players in the domestic arena.

The logic was straightforward: irregular forces required comparatively minimal financial investment relative to conventional military modernization while offering strategic leverage. They provided plausible deniability in international forums, complicating attribution and shielding the state from direct accountability. Domestically, such networks could also serve to manage dissent, influence political actors, and enforce ideological conformity.

Religion became the unifying framework. Surrounded by Muslim-majority states and seeking ideological consolidation, the Pakistani establishment drew upon Islam as the legitimizing force behind mobilization. Militant networks were framed not as irregular combatants but as defenders of faith, transforming geopolitics into religious obligation. Over decades, this architecture expanded beyond external projection to encompass internal security dynamics.

¹ C. Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War* (Oxford University Press, 2014)

² Stephen P. Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan* (Brookings Institution Press, 2004)



The logic of proxy warfare under nuclear deterrence has also been explored through the stability–instability paradox, wherein nuclear weapons reduce the likelihood of full-scale war but create space for sub-conventional conflict³. Pakistan's support for militant actors has frequently been justified within this framework.

In its 78-year history, Pakistan's economic and institutional fragility has contrasted sharply with the growth of extremist networks. According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), dozens of active and inactive militant organizations operate or have operated within Pakistan's territory. As per South Asian Terrorism Portal (SATP) there are 80 proscribed or extremist groups, 45 terrorist and insurgent groups and 26 inactive terrorist / insurgent groups in Pakistan. The list of morphed and fringe extremist and insurgent groups and radical religious organisations that rule the streets are not included⁴.

As a consequence in Pakistan alone, last year in 2025, over 4000 fatalities were reportedly linked to terror-related incidents, including security personnel, civilians, and insurgents. Across the first quarter of the twenty-first century, cumulative deaths in Pakistan exceed

74000⁵. The infrastructure once intended to destabilize adversaries now generates sustained domestic violence.

Harbouring Al Qaeda, the exchange programme of terror groups in Pakistan with Hamas, and the international influence of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have serious implications. Many major terrorist strikes in the world have roots in Pakistan. The world must recognize the enduring threat Pakistan's creation and sustenance of terror infrastructure poses and must endeavour to dismantle the same for larger global peace.

The Soviet–Afghan War and the Institutionalization of Jihad

The transformation of Pakistan into a frontline state during the Soviet–Afghan War was a decisive turning point. With the support of the Central Intelligence Agency and Saudi funding, billions of dollars flowed into Pakistan to arm, train, and mobilize Afghan resistance fighters. The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) became the primary conduit for resources and operational coordination⁶.

A vast network of *madrasas* emerged along the Afghan border and within Pakistan's tribal areas. Recruitment was facilitated through ethnic affinity—particularly among Pashtun populations straddling the Durand Line—and through ideological indoctrination. Fighters were valorised as *mujabideen*, defenders of faith against atheist communism. The conflict was reframed not as geopolitics but as a civilizational struggle between belief and disbelief⁷.

These institutions offered food, shelter, education, and identity to impoverished youth from Pakistan and

Afghanistan. For many families, enrolment in religious seminaries alleviated economic burdens. The promise of martyrdom conferred spiritual prestige and social meaning. Radicalisation was not merely ideological; it was socio-economic and institutional.

Under General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, Islamisation policies penetrated the military establishment itself. Religious symbolism and doctrinal reinterpretations were integrated into training and institutional culture. This era cemented the fusion between security policy and ideological mobilization. The militant ecosystem was thus formalized—no longer an ad-hoc wartime necessity but a structural component of strategic planning.

The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP): Blowback and Internalization of Jihad

The post-9/11 environment marked a strategic inflection point. Pakistan's alignment with the United States in the Global War on Terror produced internal fragmentation among *jihadist* networks. In 2007, various militant factions operating in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) coalesced to form Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) under Baitullah Mehsud.

Unlike the Afghan Taliban, whose primary objective was control of Afghanistan, the TTP directly targeted the Pakistani state. Its goals included enforcing a hard line interpretation of Islamic law, supporting *jihad* in Afghanistan, and confronting Islamabad's authority⁸.

The distinction proved consequential. The TTP conducted mass casualty attacks against civilians,

³ Glenn H. Snyder, "The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror," in Paul Seabury (Ed.) (Scranton: Chandler, 1965).

⁴ <https://satp.org/terrorist-groups/pakistan; Pakistan-Terrorist, insurgent and extremist groups>.

⁵ <https://www.satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/fatalities/pakistan; Annual Fatalities Database>.

⁶ [https://www.irreview.org/articles/pakistan-judas-of-the-american-alliance; "Pakistan: Judas of the American Alliance"; Joe Clark; May 25, 2023](https://www.irreview.org/articles/pakistan-judas-of-the-american-alliance;)

⁷ Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁸ <https://www.dni.gov/nctc/groups/ttp.html>



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mosques, schools and security forces. One of the deadliest incidents was the Army Public School, Peshawar massacre, where 150 individuals—mostly children—were killed.⁹ The attack galvanized public outrage and led to intensified counterterrorism operations.

Pakistan launched military campaigns such as **Operation Zarb-e-Azb**, pushing TTP fighters across the border into Afghanistan. However, sanctuary dynamics persisted. Following the 2021 Taliban takeover in Kabul, the TTP regained momentum. The ideological victory of the Afghan Taliban reinforced the narrative that sustained insurgency could defeat a modern state.

Cross-border accusations intensified. Islamabad alleges that the Afghan Taliban tolerates TTP sanctuaries; Kabul denies these claims. Escalatory episodes—including cross-border strikes and retaliatory fire—have heightened tensions and led to conflict between the two governments. The Durand Line remains a volatile fault line. The TTP case illustrates a core paradox: **proxies cultivated for strategic leverage may reorient against their patron when political alignments shift.**

The Baloch Insurgency: Ethno-Nationalist Resistance

In South-western Pakistan, Balochistan has witnessed recurring insurgency since 1948. Local

narratives argue that accession to Pakistan was contested and imposed. The economic marginalization, political exclusion, and resource extraction grievances fuel periodic uprisings. Groups such as the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) conduct guerrilla operations targeting state infrastructure and security forces. The development of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) intensified tensions, as many Baloch groups perceive projects as extractive rather than developmental and no benefits have accrued to the local communities.

Attacks have included assaults on trains and rail infrastructure such as the Jaffer Express and coordinated offensives like

“**Herof 1.0**”¹⁰ and “**Herof 2.0**.”¹¹ Foreign nationals and Chinese-linked installations have also been targeted. Unlike *jihadist* networks, Baloch insurgents frame their struggle in ethno-nationalist rather than religious terms, though fragmentation persists. The persistence of this insurgency underscores that Pakistan’s internal instability is multidimensional—religious militancy coexists with secular separatism.

Transnational Jihadist Actors

Pakistan has willingly proffered its territory to global *jihadist* networks and has tried to hedge them as security leverage.

Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISKP). Islamic State – Khorasan Province emerged around 2015 as a regional affiliate of ISIS. Drawing defectors from TTP and other militant groups, ISKP promotes a transnational and sectarian vision. While primarily active in Afghanistan, it has expanded influence in Pakistani border areas, exploiting governance vacuums.

Al Qaeda. The presence of Al-Qaeda in Pakistan gained international attention when Osama bin Laden was killed in Abbottabad during **Operation Neptune Spear**.¹² Historically, Al-Qaeda operatives

⁹ International Crisis Group, “Revisiting Counter-Terrorism Strategies in Pakistan,” 2015.

¹⁰ <https://sundayguardianlive.com/editors-choice/balochistan-on-the-boil-as-bla-carries-out-operation-herof-20-169054/>

¹¹ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/herof-2-0-explained-balochistan-is-exploding-again-and-why-it-matters-for-pakistan-and-world/articleshow/127860325.cms>; “Baluchistan is exploding again”; Feb 02, 2026.

¹² <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2234142/ai-gleaned-information-about-emerging-threats-future-plots-from-bin-laden-raid/>; “AI Gleaned Information About Emerging Threats, Future Plots From bin Laden Raid”; June 26, 2020; By David Vergun

utilized tribal regions and urban centres such as Karachi and Quetta for logistical coordination. Collaborative linkages with Deobandi militant outfits have been documented.

The continued intersection between local and global jihadist actors has complicated counterterrorism efforts and reinforces perceptions of selective enforcement. Engagement and sharing of knowledge has enhanced the capacities of the other groups operating against the State and outside as well. This has resulted in the world looking at the Pakistan establishment negatively.

Kashmir-Focused Militant Organizations

Since the late 1980s insurgency in Jammu & Kashmir, Pakistan-based groups have operated with varying degrees of overt and covert support. The **Muttahida Jihad Council** (also known as **United Jihad Council**) was formed in 1994 to coordinate *jihadist* outfits under centralized direction.¹³ Among the most prominent

organizations are Hizbul Mujahideen, Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed. These groups have faced international designation yet continue to morph organizationally to evade sanctions. Rebranding through front entities and shifting nomenclature reflects adaptive survival strategies to avoid global scrutiny.

While primarily Kashmir-focused, their operational footprints have extended beyond the region. Their persistence illustrates the enduring utility of proxy warfare in Pakistan's India policy.

Sectarian and Peripheral Militancy

Sectarian militancy further fragments Pakistan's security environment. Sunni extremist groups such as Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan and its offshoot Lashkar-e-Jhangvi have targeted Shia communities.¹⁴ Responding to the violence perpetrated by State supported Sunni extremist groups, a few Shia militant groups have grown in Pakistan. These are Sipah-e-

Muhammad Pakistan, Tehreek-e-Jafaria, Ansar-ul-Hussain, and Khatam-ul-Anbia. They operate against the extremist Sunni organisations but have not been effective.¹⁵

In Sindh, separatist rhetoric under banners such as the Sindhudesh Liberation Army reflects localized grievances, though insurgent capability remains modest. Gilgit-Baltistan also experiences sectarian undercurrents, often linked to broader Sunni-Shia tensions.

Pakistan's militant infrastructure today is not monolithic but layered comprising *jihadist* proxies, sectarian militia, ethno-nationalist insurgents, and transnational terrorist networks. What began as a strategic instrument to offset conventional inferiority evolved into a complex terror ecosystem with an autonomous momentum.

Implications for India: Persistent Proxy Conflict

Pakistan's reliance on militant proxies has had its most sustained

¹³ [https://www.efsas.org/publications/study-papers/pakistan-army-and-terrorism%3B-an-unholy-alliance/#:~:text=The%20jihad%20outfits%20w%20h%20are,Harkat%20Dul%20Ansar%20C%20Tebrik%20De%20Jihad%20C%20Tebrik%20Dul%20Mujabideen%20C%20Jamaat%20Dul%20Mujabideen%20C%20A; Pakistan Army and Terrorism; an unholy alliance"; European Foundation for South Asian Studies \(EFSAS\), Amsterdam; August 2017](https://www.efsas.org/publications/study-papers/pakistan-army-and-terrorism%3B-an-unholy-alliance/#:~:text=The%20jihad%20outfits%20w%20h%20are,Harkat%20Dul%20Ansar%20C%20Tebrik%20De%20Jihad%20C%20Tebrik%20Dul%20Mujabideen%20C%20Jamaat%20Dul%20Mujabideen%20C%20A; Pakistan Army and Terrorism; an unholy alliance)

¹⁴ [https://www.efsas.org/publications/study-papers/pakistan-army-and-terrorism%3B-an-unholy-alliance/#:~:text=The%20jihad%20outfits%20w%20h%20are,Harkat%20Dul%20Ansar%20C%20Tebrik%20De%20Jihad%20C%20Tebrik%20Dul%20Mujabideen%20C%20Jamaat%20Dul%20Mujabideen%20C%20A; Pakistan Army and Terrorism; an unholy alliance"; European Foundation for South Asian Studies \(EFSAS\), Amsterdam; August 2017](https://www.efsas.org/publications/study-papers/pakistan-army-and-terrorism%3B-an-unholy-alliance/#:~:text=The%20jihad%20outfits%20w%20h%20are,Harkat%20Dul%20Ansar%20C%20Tebrik%20De%20Jihad%20C%20Tebrik%20Dul%20Mujabideen%20C%20Jamaat%20Dul%20Mujabideen%20C%20A; Pakistan Army and Terrorism; an unholy alliance)

¹⁵ <https://satp.org/Terrorism%20in%20Pakistan; Terrorist Groups in Pakistan; accessed on Feb 19, 2026>



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external impact on India. Since the late 1980s insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir, irregular warfare has functioned as a calibrated instrument of strategic pressure. By maintaining groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed, and Hizbul Mujahideen within an ecosystem of selective tolerance, Pakistan has sustained a low-intensity conflict designed to internationalize the Kashmir issue and stretch Indian security resources.

The operational logic rests on what analysts describe as the **“stability–instability paradox.”** Following reciprocal nuclearization in 1998, overt conventional war became increasingly costly. Under the nuclear umbrella, however, sub-conventional operations appeared to carry manageable escalation risks. Militant attacks could inflict political, psychological and economic costs while remaining below the perceived threshold of full-scale war.

For India, this has necessitated a transformation in counter-insurgency doctrine, intelligence coordination, border management and internal security architecture. Major attacks attributed to Pakistan-based groups have repeatedly generated crises that risk horizontal and vertical escalation. Even when India has exercised restraint, the cycle of provocation and retaliation has hardened bilateral hostility and constrained diplomatic engagement.

Moreover, the adaptive rebranding of militant outfits—through front organizations and diffuse digital

propaganda—has complicated attribution. Hybrid warfare tactics, including misinformation and radicalisation via online platforms, have supplemented kinetic operations. The cumulative effect has been the normalization of a protracted shadow conflict between two nuclear-armed neighbours.

Internal Implications for Pakistan: Strategic Blowback and State Fragmentation

While militant proxies were initially cultivated for external leverage, their internal consequences have proven profound. The emergence of TTP symbolized the internalization of *jihad*.

Groups once aligned against external adversaries redirected violence toward the Pakistani state itself. The scale of violence over the past two decades underscores the magnitude of blowback. Tens of thousands of civilians, security personnel and militants have been killed in terrorist incidents. Recurrent military operations in tribal areas—often involving displacement of civilian populations—have deepened grievances and fostered cycles of radicalisation.

The persistence of militancy has also distorted civil–military relations. Counter Terrorism imperatives have strengthened the political centrality of Pakistan’s Armed Forces, reinforcing a security-dominant state structure. Democratic institutions, already fragile, operate within a constrained environment shaped by internal security narratives.

Economically, chronic instability deters foreign investment, elevates defence expenditures, and diverts resources from social development. International financial scrutiny, including monitoring by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), has periodically placed Pakistan under pressure to curb terror financing networks. Although compliance measures have been undertaken, structural ambiguities persist.

Societally, decades of ideological mobilization have embedded sectarian and extremist narratives into segments of the population. Madrasa networks, radical preachers, and militant propaganda have influenced social discourse in ways that complicate de-radicalisation. The result is a fragmented internal security environment in which *jihadist*, sectarian and ethno-nationalist violence coexist.

Afghanistan–Pakistan Dynamics: Sanctuary, Sovereignty and Escalation Risks

The Taliban’s return to power in Kabul in 2021 fundamentally altered regional security calculations. The ideological affinity between

the Afghan Taliban and the TTP has created persistent friction between Islamabad and Kabul. Pakistan accuses the Afghan authorities of tolerating TTP sanctuaries; the Afghan side rejects these allegations and frames violence as Pakistan's internal problem.

Border skirmishes, artillery exchanges and drone strikes illustrate the volatility of this relationship. The Durand Line remains contested not only geographically but politically. For Afghanistan's Taliban leadership, suppressing the TTP risks alienating ideological allies; tolerating it risks diplomatic isolation and retaliatory action from Pakistan. The triangular relationship between Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban, and the TTP thus generates structural instability. It demonstrates how proxy networks, once empowered, develop autonomous agency that complicates interstate diplomacy.

China, Iran and Regional Security Spillovers

Pakistan's militant landscape also intersects with broader regional actors. For China, stability in Pakistan is critical to the success of the CPEC. Attacks by Baloch insurgents on Chinese nationals and infrastructure have heightened Beijing's security concerns. While China has deepened security cooperation with Pakistan, persistent violence raises questions about long-term project viability.

Iran, sharing a border with Balochistan, has also experienced cross-border militancy involving Sunni extremist factions. Periodic tensions between Tehran and Islamabad underscore the transnational

dimensions of insurgent networks operating in border regions. Collectively, these dynamics illustrate that Pakistan's internal militancy is not geographically contained; it radiates outward, shaping the security perceptions of neighbouring states.

Global Counterterrorism and Transnational Jihad

Pakistan's territory has intersected historically with transnational jihadist actors such as Al-Qaeda and Islamic State – Khorasan Province. The killing of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad during **Operation Neptune Spear** intensified global scrutiny of Pakistan's counterterrorism commitments. Although Pakistan has conducted significant operations against certain militant factions, international scepticism persists regarding selective targeting-distinguishing between “good” and “bad” militants based on strategic utility. This perception complicates intelligence-sharing partnerships and affects Pakistan's global diplomatic standing. Furthermore, the diffusion of

jihadist ideology through digital platforms means that militant narratives developed within the Afghanistan–Pakistan theatre can inspire actors far beyond South Asia. The region has historically functioned as an incubator of transnational *jihadist* thought, with reverberations visible in the Middle East, Central Asia and Western countries.

The Nuclear Shield and the Proxy Warfare Paradox

The central strategic paradox underlying Pakistan's terrorist policy is the assumption that nuclear deterrence provides space for sub-conventional aggression. While nuclear capability may deter large-scale conventional war, it does not eliminate escalation risks arising from high-casualty terrorist attacks. The 88-hour intense military “**Operation Sindoor**” after the dastardly terror attack in Pahalgam in India by Pakistani proxies called out the nuclear bluff and exposed the very concept of nuclear shield¹⁶.



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¹⁶ <https://www.wionews.com/india-news/-india-exposed-pak-s-nuclear-bluff-bit-deep-and-hard-some-airbases-still-in-icu-pm-modi-1753796549254>; ‘India exposed Pak's nuclear bluff, bit deep and hard; some airbases still in ICU’: PM Modi; Anuj Shrivastava; Jul 29, 2025.

Each major crisis between India and Pakistan has demonstrated the fragility of escalation control. The interplay between non-state actors and nuclear-armed states introduces unpredictability. A mass-casualty attack attributed to Pakistan-based militants could compel conventional retaliation, triggering rapid escalation before diplomatic channels intervene. Thus, the very shield intended to provide strategic insulation may amplify instability when combined with proxy warfare.

Strategic and Policy Implications

Several policy implications emerge for Pakistan from this analysis.

- **Dismantling Militant Ecosystems.** Selective counter terrorism is unsustainable. Distinctions between strategically useful and hostile militants erode over time as networks fragment and reconfigure. Pakistan is unlikely to dismantle the infrastructure invested over eight decades. It has to be encouraged and assisted.
- **Civil–Military Rebalancing.** Durable counter-extremism requires strengthening civilian governance, rule of law and political inclusion rather than relying exclusively on kinetic operations.
- **Regional Confidence-Building.** India–Pakistan crisis management mechanisms must adapt to hybrid threats and rapid escalation cycles to avoid conventional wars or nuclear sabre-rattling. The region afflicted by the Pakistani terror infrastructure will have to push for the dismantling of the same.
- **Border Governance.** The much hyped and sought after strategic depth myth of Pakistan has been busted. To avoid war with Afghanistan some coordination on border management is essential.
- **Socio-Economic Integration.** Addressing grievances in Balochistan, former FATA regions, and marginalized provinces is critical to undermining recruitment pipelines. However, the entire process if military led is unlikely to yield any results.

To Sum Up

Over nearly eight decades, Pakistan's terrorist

infrastructure evolved from an asymmetric instrument against India into a multi-dimensional ecosystem encompassing *jihadist* proxies, sectarian militias, ethno-nationalist insurgents, and transnational terrorist actors. What began as a low-cost strategic equalizer matured into complex security architecture with deep domestic and regional consequences.

Externally, it has entrenched hostility with India, destabilized Afghanistan, and generated friction with neighbouring states. Internally, it has inflicted heavy human and economic costs, strengthened the military's dominance over civilian institutions, and embedded extremist narratives within segments of society.

The strategic logic of proxy warfare under nuclear deterrence has produced diminishing returns. Terror networks, once cultivated, acquire autonomy and adaptability that defy centralized control. The long-term implications extend beyond South Asia, affecting global counterterrorism efforts and international security norms. Without structural reforms, Pakistan risks perpetuating a cycle in which tactical gains yield strategic losses.

Pakistan is now at a critical inflection point. Whether it transitions from selective management of militancy to comprehensive dismantlement will determine not only its internal cohesion but also the trajectory of stability in South Asia and the broader international system.



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