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STATE POLICY AND CRIME CONTROL IN PAKISTAN: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE NATIONAL ACTION PLAN (2014 & 2021) IN LIGHT OF CRIME RATE TRENDS

Mr. Hassan Shah[1], Dr. Ihsan Ullah Khan[*2], Mss. Anila Ara[3], Dr. Azizullah Jan[4]

[1]*MPhil Scholar Sociology, Department of Social and Gender Studies, University of Swat*
[*2]*Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Swat*
[3]*MPhil Scholar Sociology, University of Chitral*
[4]*Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Chitral*

[1]hassansociologist727@gmail.com, [*2]ihsanullah@uswat.edu.pk, [3]anik7565@gmail.com, [4]aziz.jan@uoch.edu.pk

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Corresponding Author: *
Dr. Ihsan Ullah Khan

Abstract
This paper presents a qualitative content analysis of Pakistan's National Action Plan (NAP) in its 2014 and 2021 versions, examined in relation to national terrorism and crime trends from 2014 to 2025. The study identifies four overarching policy themes embedded within the NAP framework: (1) hard security and kinetic operations; (2) ideological and narrative regulation; (3) administrative and governance reforms; and (4) human security and cross-border management. These themes are then aligned with longitudinal terrorism data to identify temporal associations between policy evolution and security outcomes. The findings demonstrate that NAP's early emphasis on coercive enforcement corresponded with the sharpest decline in terrorist incidents, while later shifts toward ideological regulation and governance reform aligned with sustained reductions in high-impact attacks and long-term stabilization. The study contributes to criminological and sociological scholarship by offering a systematic textual and contextual analysis of how Pakistan's most comprehensive counterterrorism document evolved over seven years and how those evolutions correlate with observable patterns in political violence. Policy implications and directions for future research are discussed.

1. INTRODUCTION

Pakistan's experience with terrorism represents one of the most complex and sustained cases of political violence in the contemporary world. Over two decades, the country has faced an evolving spectrum of militant threats from al-Qaeda-affiliated networks and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) to sectarian violence and insurgencies in Baluchistan and the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The societal and economic cost has been staggering: estimates suggest over 70,000 lives lost and economic losses exceeding $310 billion (Wahab, 2021). Within this context, Pakistan's National Action Plan (NAP), introduced in December 2014 in the immediate aftermath of the Army Public School (APS) massacre in Peshawar, represented a watershed moment in the country's counterterrorism policy. For the first time, a cross-party, civil-military consensus produced a structured, 20-point national framework aimed at dismantling militant networks, countering extremist ideologies, and reforming security institutions. Seven years later, a revised and

expanded NAP 2021 updated these priorities, incorporating lessons from implementation and addressing emerging threats such as digital extremism and sectarian violence. Despite its significance, the NAP has received limited systematic academic analysis particularly through the lens of content analysis that examines what the plan actually contains, how its priorities evolved between 2014 and 2021, and how those priorities align with observable patterns in crime and terrorism data. This paper addresses that gap. This paper extracts and presents the content analysis component as a standalone scholarly contribution. No causal claims are made; rather, the analysis traces temporal associations between policy emphasis and security outcomes, contributing to a sociologically and criminologically grounded understanding of national counterterrorism frameworks.

1.1 Research Objectives

1. To identify and categorize the thematic content of NAP 2014 and NAP 2021 through systematic document analysis.
2. To examine how the policy priorities embedded in the NAP evolved between the 2014 and 2021 versions.
3. To identify observable temporal associations between the thematic focus of NAP provisions and national terrorism and crime trend data from 2014 to 2025.

1.2 Research Question

1. What thematic priorities are embedded in Pakistan's National Action Plan (2014 and 2021)?
2. How do these priorities align with observable patterns in national terrorism and crime trends over the period 2014 to 2025?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Pakistan's counterterrorism trajectory must be situated within its broader geopolitical and historical context. Saeed, Syed, and Martin (2014) trace how terrorism in Pakistan evolved through three distinct decades: the Afghan Jihad era (1980s), which introduced weapons and militant networks; the 1990s, dominated by sectarian and ethnic conflict particularly in Karachi; and the post-9/11 period, which witnessed a dramatic escalation of suicide bombings and the emergence of the Pakistani Taliban (TTP). This evolving landscape made fragmented, reactive policy responses increasingly inadequate. The NAP emerged from this crisis environment. Rana (2019) situates it within Pakistan's strategic pivot after the APS attack a moment of national unity that provided the political conditions for sweeping reform. Building on earlier frameworks such as the National Internal Security Policy (NISP) and operations like Zarb-e-Azb, NAP represented the most comprehensive attempt at institutionalizing counterterrorism across civilian, military, and provincial domains (Rahman et al., 2023). Comparative literature reveals Pakistan's experience as part of a broader global pattern. Following the 9/11 attacks, the United States, United Kingdom, European Union, Russia, and Indonesia all adopted integrated counterterrorism frameworks combining hard security with ideological and community-based approaches (Byman, 2015; Kaunert & Leonard, 2020). These frameworks reflect a shared recognition that terrorism cannot be suppressed through kinetic force alone a principle echoed in Pakistan's NAP evolution from 2014 to 2021. Content analysis as a methodology has been increasingly applied to policy documents in criminological and security studies. Selvi (2019) establishes qualitative content analysis (QCA) as a rigorous tool for systematically interpreting policy texts, enabling researchers to identify themes, trace discursive shifts, and assess alignment between stated priorities and observable outcomes. Applied to NAP, this approach allows for a structured examination of what the plan says, what it emphasizes, and how its language and priorities evolved over time. Theoretically, this study is anchored in Deterrence Theory (Beccaria, 1764; Bentham, 1789), which holds that criminal behavior is discouraged when punishment is severe, certain, and swift dimensions directly reflected in NAP provisions such as military courts, capital punishment, and expedited prosecutions. This framework enables critical inquiry into whether NAP's provisions were sufficient to alter the cost-benefit calculations of potential offenders.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This paper employs a qualitative content analysis (QCA) design. The secondary data sources are the official text of NAP 2014 and NAP 2021and national terrorism and crime trend data drawn from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), and UNODC reports covering 2014 to 2025, analyzed through systematic thematic coding.

3.2 Analytical Framework

Content analysis was conducted in three stages. First, all NAP provisions were read iteratively and assigned preliminary codes based on their primary policy focus. Second, codes were grouped into broader thematic categories through constant comparative analysis. Third, the resulting themes were juxtaposed with annual terrorism and crime statistics to identify temporal patterns. Four overarching themes emerged from this process: (1) hard security and kinetic operations; (2) ideological and narrative regulation; (3) administrative and governance reforms; and (4) human security and cross-border management. These themes provide the organizational structure for the findings below.

3.3 Crime and Terrorism Data

The crime and terrorism statistics presented in this paper are drawn from secondary sources and reflect reported figures for Pakistan as a whole. Given well-documented challenges of under-reporting in Pakistan particularly in conflict-affected regions the data are treated as indicative of broad trends rather than precise measures. No causal inferences are drawn from the observed associations between policy content and trend data.

Table 1: National Terrorism and Crime Trends in Pakistan (2014–2025)

Year	Total Attacks	Total Casualties	Major Incidents
2014	150	220	10
2015	140	210	9
2016	130	195	8
2017	110	170	7
2018	95	125	5
2019	125	189	15
2020	115	175	12
2021	100	160	10
2022	85	130	7
2023	68	100	5
2024	55	78	3
2025	47	59	2

Source: Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS); UNODC Pakistan Reports; Secondary Compilation

4. FINDINGS: CONTENT ANALYSIS OF NAP 2014 AND 2021

The qualitative content analysis of NAP 2014 and NAP 2021 produced four overarching themes. Each theme captures a distinct policy trajectory, and each is examined below in relation to the temporal pattern of crime and terrorism data presented in Table 1.

4.1 Theme 1: Hard Security Measures and the Immediate Decline in Terrorism (2014–2018)

The first and most dominant theme in NAP 2014 centers on hard security and kinetic counterterrorism operations. In the immediate aftermath of the APS attack, the state's response was framed around a war-like approach, privileging coercive, punitive, and surveillance-oriented tools. Key provisions under this theme include:

- Execution of convicted terrorists and establishment of special military courts for terrorism-related offences.
- Disarmament of armed militias and disruption of terrorist communication networks and SIM cards.
- Intensified intelligence-led operations and measures to choke terror financing.
- Tightening of border security and cross-border movement controls.

Together, these provisions signal a clear shift toward a coercive, deterrence-based security paradigm in which the state sought to rapidly degrade the organizational capacity and operational space of militant groups. Temporally, these measures correspond with the sharpest decline in recorded terrorist activity during the early NAP implementation years. Terrorist attacks decreased from 150 incidents in 2014 to 95 in 2018, representing an approximate 37% reduction over four years. Total casualties declined from 220 to 125 in the same period (approximately 43%), while major violent incidents halved from 10 to 5.

This trajectory mirrors global counterterrorism patterns. Following the 9/11 attacks, both the United States and United Kingdom expanded law enforcement powers, enhanced surveillance, and introduced exceptional legal measures approaches that initially prioritized operational disruption before incorporating broader sociological interventions (Byman, 2015). Similarly, Indonesia's post-Bali bombing response (2002) involved declaring terrorism an 'extraordinary crime' and deploying extraordinary responses, an approach directly comparable to Pakistan's use of military courts under NAP (Wulandari, 2019). Within the European Union, coordinated responses to the Madrid, London, Paris, and Brussels attacks resulted in the creation of the European Counter Terrorism Centre and adoption of Directive (EU) 2017/541 — paralleling the institutional logic of NAP's hard-security provisions (Kaunert & Leonard, 2020). The Pakistani data from 2014–2018 are most consistent with this pattern: the largest reductions in attacks, casualties, and major incidents occur during the phase when executions, military courts, and network disruption were most prominent. Theme 1 thus underscores that NAP's initial, steep decline in terrorism is most closely synchronized with the implementation of its coercive and operational components.

4.2 Theme 2: Ideological and Narrative Regulation and Reduction of High-Impact Attacks

The second theme reflects NAP's substantial and evolving emphasis on ideological control, narrative management, and regulation of extremist communication. NAP 2014 provisions in this domain include:

- Actions against hate speech and bans on extremist publications and their glorification in media.
- Registration and curriculum oversight of madrassas.
- Monitoring of sectarian material and extremist messaging through electronic and print media.

NAP 2021 significantly expanded this theme to include digital counter-radicalization: monitoring of online platforms, social media regulation, and formal counter-extremism programming targeting cyber-enabled recruitment and radicalization pathways. This expansion reflects recognition of the technological evolution of militant communications. The crime data indicate that ideological and narrative interventions correspond with a progressive decline in high-impact terrorist attacks. While overall attack numbers fluctuated during the mid-period (2019–2021), major incidents show a persistent decline from 10 in 2014 to 2 in 2025. This pattern suggests that disrupting extremist messaging may have contributed to reducing militants' capacity to

orchestrate large-scale, highly coordinated attacks, even when smaller incidents persisted. This finding aligns with international literature on counter-radicalization. Following the 2005 London bombings, the United Kingdom implemented counter-radicalization initiatives emphasizing narrative monitoring and educational reform, designed specifically to reduce the resonance of extremist messaging and disrupt pathways to high-impact violence (Lum et al., 2006). In Swat specifically, Shah et al. (2020) document how militant groups used FM radio broadcasts and propaganda to impose social norms illustrating precisely the kind of ideological infrastructure that NAP 2014 and 2021 sought to dismantle. The sustained decline in major incidents over the 2014–2025 period is most consistent with long-term disruptions to the ideological and communicative foundations of militancy, rather than with any single operational intervention. This underscores the importance of narrative-focused provisions within NAP as a complement to hard-security measures.

4.3 Theme 3: Administrative and Governance Reforms and Long-Term Stabilization (2019–2025)

The third theme captures a gradual but significant shift toward institutional consolidation and governance reform that characterizes the later period of NAP implementation, particularly from 2019 onwards. Relevant provisions across both NAP versions include:

- Reforms in the criminal justice system to ensure swifter and more effective prosecution of terrorism-related cases.
- Mainstreaming of the former FATA into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, with restructured policing and judicial arrangements.
- Empowerment of provincial governments to take responsibility for internal security.
- Regulation of NGOs and non-state actors; rehabilitation and return of internally displaced persons (IDPs).

The 2021 NAP broadened this governance orientation by emphasizing community engagement, reintegration of ex-combatants, and socioeconomic measures addressing structural vulnerability to extremism. Crime data from 2019 to 2025 reflect a pattern of gradual normalization. After a spike in 2019 (125 attacks, 189 total casualties), the data show a steady downward trend: attacks fell from 125 in 2019 to 47 in 2025, casualties from 189 to 59, and major incidents from 15 to 2. This stabilization period aligns more closely with the phase of governance consolidation than with any single operational surge. The comparative and national literature strongly supports this interpretation. Ullah, Khan, and Marwat (2024) argue that NAP reshaped the institutional landscape for policing, intelligence, and justice but that longer-term security gains depend on how well civil institutions are rebuilt. PIPS (2016) similarly notes that coordination gaps, weak investigative capacity, and uneven provincial implementation limited NAP's impact, calling for sustained institutional reform. Nyborg and Nawab (2021), writing on Swat specifically, document the emergence of 'hybrid institutions' combinations of civil police, military actors, and community mechanisms that helped restore order but also reflected the fragility of civilian governance in post-conflict settings. Taken together, the data from 2019–2025 are most consistent with a picture in which governance reforms help lock in and normalize earlier security gains, even as significant institutional challenges entrenched corruption, weak investigative systems, irregular FIR registration persist and continue to shape community experiences of crime and safety (Ibrahim et al., 2025).

4.4 Theme 4: Human Security, Refugee Management, and Cross-Border Control

The fourth theme highlights the human-security and cross-border governance dimensions of NAP. Unlike the preceding themes, which emphasize operational enforcement or institutional reform, this theme recognizes that terrorism is shaped by transnational movement, displacement, and porous borders. NAP provisions in this domain include:

- Regulated repatriation and monitoring of Afghan refugees, with enhanced documentation and surveillance.

- Strengthened border surveillance to curb cross-border militant movement and logistical support.
- NAP 2021 expanded these measures to include comprehensive deradicalization, IDP rehabilitation, and community reintegration programming.

These provisions acknowledge Pakistan's particular vulnerability to regional spillover effects. Rana (2019) emphasizes that conflict-affected regions such as Swat and the former FATA are especially susceptible to cross-border militant mobility, making border governance and refugee management central to national security planning. Comparative scholarship reinforces this emphasis. Ganguly (2009) argues that South Asia's vulnerability to terrorism is intensified by limited regional policing cooperation, and that unilateral border management must be complemented by multilateral frameworks. Chotani et al. (2009) document the profound social and psychological consequences of large-scale IDP displacement from Swat — up to 2 million displaced during the 2009 operations showing how forced displacement creates long-term crime vulnerability, livelihood loss, and social fragmentation that formal crime statistics frequently miss. This theme functions as an enabling condition for the other three: without effective management of refugee flows, cross-border militant networks, and displacement-related social disruption, the gains of hard security, ideological regulation, and governance reform remain fragile. The sustained decline in infiltration-driven violence and major incidents over the 2020–2025 period is most consistent with the gradual consolidation of these human-security measures alongside the broader NAP framework.

5. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: NAP 2014 vs NAP 2021

The following table synthesizes the thematic evolution from NAP 2014 to NAP 2021 across the four identified themes, highlighting continuities, expansions, and new additions:

Table 2: Thematic Comparison of NAP 2014 and NAP 2021

Theme	NAP 2014 Focus	NAP 2021 Additions/Evolution
Security Measures	Military courts, executions, SIM network disruption, intelligence operations, militia disarmament	Continued security enforcement with refined targeting of militant financing
Ideological Regulation	Hate speech control, extremist publications ban, media restrictions, madrassa registration	Enhanced digital counter-radicalization, social media monitoring, cyber extremism
Governance Reforms	Criminal justice reform, FATA oversight, cross-border regulation	FATA mainstreaming into KPK, provincial empowerment, NGO regulation
Human Security	Refugee monitoring, border controls, IDP rehabilitation	Expanded community reintegration, deradicalization programs, psychosocial support

Source: Author's content analysis of NAP 2014 and NAP 2021 documents.

Across both versions, the NAP reflects a progressive shift from reactive, kinetic operations toward more preventive, institutional, and community-oriented approaches. NAP 2014 was forged in crisis, prioritizing speed, coercion, and operational disruption. NAP 2021 retains these foundations while adding a more sophisticated recognition of ideological, digital, socioeconomic, and human-security dimensions. This evolution mirrors global trends in counterterrorism policy, in which early post-attack responses are gradually

supplemented by more nuanced, multi-actor strategies (Renard, 2021).

6. DISCUSSION

The content analysis presented in this paper reveals that NAP functions not as a static policy document but as an evolving framework that has progressively broadened its conceptual scope. This finding has significant implications for both academic scholarship and policy practice. Theoretically, the temporal alignment between NAP's coercive provisions and the initial steep decline in terrorism (2014–2018) is consistent with classical deterrence theory. If individuals weigh the costs and benefits of criminal behavior, then the combination of capital punishment, military courts, and intensified surveillance all hallmarks of the early NAP should raise the perceived costs of militant activity. The crime data suggest this logic operated, at least in the short term. However, deterrence alone cannot explain the sustained decline in high-impact attacks over the full 2014-2025 period. The persistence of narrative and governance-focused provisions in NAP, and their alignment with longer-term stabilization trends, suggests that legitimacy-based mechanisms consistent with Tyler's (1990) procedural justice framework and Beetham's (1991) legitimacy theory are also at work. Communities that perceive the state as fair, consistent, and responsive are more likely to cooperate with law enforcement, reduce tolerance for extremist actors, and resist militant recruitment. From a sociological perspective, the findings underscore that crime and terrorism in post-conflict settings are not reducible to individual rational choices. They are shaped by displacement, institutional fragility, narrative environments, and the quality of state–society relations. NAP's evolution from a hard-security instrument to a more multidimensional framework reflects an implicit recognition of this complexity though significant gaps in implementation, coordination, and community-centered investment remain.

A key limitation of this analysis is the reliance on secondary crime data. Pakistan's formal crime statistics are well-documented to be affected by under-reporting, irregular FIR registration, and institutional weaknesses that distort official tallies (Ibrahim et al., 2025). The associations observed between policy content and crime trends should therefore be understood as indicative rather than definitive.

7. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has presented a systematic content analysis of Pakistan's National Action Plan in its 2014 and 2021 versions, identifying four thematic trajectories hard security, ideological regulation, governance reform, and human security and examining their temporal alignment with national terrorism and crime trend data from 2014 to 2025. The findings demonstrate that NAP's evolution reflects a progressive and increasingly sophisticated policy learning process. The initial phase, dominated by kinetic operations and legal exceptionalism, produced the most immediate reductions in attack frequency and lethality. The subsequent expansion into ideological regulation, digital counter-radicalization, governance reform, and human-security programming correlates with more durable stabilization over the medium and long term. These findings contribute to criminological and sociological scholarship in two ways. First, they provide one of the few systematic textual analyses of NAP as a policy document, establishing a replicable framework for future content analyses of national counterterrorism plans. Second, they demonstrate the analytical value of aligning policy content with longitudinal crime and terrorism data even when causal inference is not possible to illuminate the sociological dimensions of counterterrorism governance.

7.1 Policy Recommendations

1. Strengthen interagency coordination mechanisms to address persistent fragmentation between provincial and federal counterterrorism institutions.
2. Invest in sustained rehabilitation and reintegration programming, including psychosocial support, vocational training, and

community acceptance mechanisms for ex-combatants and IDPs.
3. Expand digital counter-radicalization infrastructure to keep pace with evolving online extremism, particularly targeting youth-facing platforms.
4. Establish systematic monitoring and evaluation frameworks for NAP implementation at the district level, enabling evidence-based policy learning.

7.2 Directions for Future Research

Future scholarship should examine NAP implementation at the district and provincial levels using primary crime data to test whether the national-level associations identified here hold at a finer geographic scale. Comparative studies examining NAP alongside counterterrorism frameworks in comparable South Asian contexts India's AFSPA, Bangladesh's counter-extremism policies would further enrich the field. Additionally, longitudinal qualitative research tracking practitioner experiences of NAP implementation over time would add important depth to the policy analysis presented here.

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