

FRONTIER SHADOWS: EXAMINING THE SECURITY PARADIGM AND CROSS-BORDER TERRORISM IN PAKISTAN AND AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract

The Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier constitutes one of the most volatile and consequential security environments in the contemporary world. The porous, ethnically complex, and historically contested nature of the Durand Line has long provided insurgent and terrorist networks with geographic depth, social cover, and logistical corridors to sustain cross-border violence against Pakistan's state institutions and civilian populations. Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, this security landscape has undergone a fundamental reconfiguration: Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), and affiliated militant organizations have dramatically escalated their operational tempo, enlisting Pakistan to the most affected country of the world on Global Terrorism Index (GTI) in 2026. Grounded in borderlands theory as its primary theoretical lens with supplementary use of insurgency and counter-insurgency (COIN) framework, this article employs a comparative and empirical content analysis of cross-border terrorism between 2021 and 2026. The study examines the structural historical, ethnic, and geopolitical variables that shaped this security paradigm; interrogates the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's (IEA) role in enabling militant sanctuaries; assesses Pakistan's counterterrorism and border management responses; and situates the bilateral security dilemma within its broader regional and international contexts. The findings demonstrate that the persistence of cross-border terrorism is not merely a military or intelligence failure but a structural consequence of contested sovereignty, deep-rooted ethno-tribal affinities, and governance deficits. The article concludes with evidence-based policy recommendations for bilateral cooperation, regional engagement, and international frameworks.

INTRODUCTION

Few geopolitical fault lines in the modern world carry the weight, complexity, and immediate security consequences of the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier. Stretching approximately 2,670 kilometers through rugged mountain terrain and semi-arid plains, the Durand Line was drawn in 1893 as an administrative boundary of the British Indian Empire, bisecting Pashtun tribal

communities whose social, cultural, and kinship networks have never recognized the colonial cartography that divided them. In today's context, the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderland has become a root cause of security challenges for Pakistan primarily due to the active presence and growing operational capacity of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a radical jihadist organization ethnically rooted in the Pashtun belt and operationally

anchored in the borderlands shared between Afghanistan and Pakistan (Assanbayev et al., 2025).

The withdrawal of United States and NATO forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the subsequent collapse of the Afghan Republic fundamentally altered the strategic calculus along this frontier. Contrary to initial expectations, the Taliban's reconsolidation of power in Kabul did not produce a reduction in regional terrorism. Instead, it emboldened a new wave of militancy, most acutely expressed through the dramatic surge in TTP attacks against Pakistan's targets. In 2023 alone, TTP conducted 1,215 terrorist attacks – up from 858 in 2022 and 903 in 2021 representing a near 70% increase in two years (Janjua et al., 2024).

This article seeks to make a rigorous analytical contribution to scholarship on frontier security and cross-border terrorism by placing the current Pakistan-Afghanistan security paradigm within the theoretical architecture of borderlands theory and the empirical realities of post-2021 militant dynamics. The Durand Line is a decided territorial divide but immensely influenced by tribal governance, militant networks, and transnational ideology. This seminal analysis delves into the intricate tapestry of borders, where transnational ethnic, social, and economic networks intersect, evolve, and are redefined through the interplay of policy, violence, and grassroots social dynamics – unraveling the profound implications for Pakistan's security architecture (Assanbayev et al., 2025).

Research Objectives

This study is guided by a set of following objectives:

1. To examine the historical, ethnic, and geopolitical factors shaping the Pak-Afghan frontier as a zone of persistent militancy, and to analyze the role of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) in enabling TTP and ISKP sanctuaries in the post-2021 security environment.
2. To assess the scale and patterns of cross-border terrorist activity in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan (2021–2026), and to evaluate

the strategic effectiveness of Pakistan's counter-terrorism and border management responses.

3. To identify the structural drivers of cross-border militancy within the broader regional context, and explicate evidence-based and lucid policy recommendations for achieving durable security improvements along the Pak-Afghan frontier.

Research Questions

Following are the research questions of this study.

RQ1: How has the Taliban's returned to power in August 2021 reconfigured security dynamics along the Durand Line?

RQ2: To what extent does the IEA's ambivalent posture toward TTP and ISKP reflect ideological affinity, institutional incapacity, or deliberate strategic calculation?

RQ3: How do the ethno-tribal social networks of Pashtun borderlands communities enable cross-border militant movement?

RQ4: What regional and international frameworks, cooperative mechanisms, and incentive structures offer the most promising pathways for sustainably reducing cross-border terrorist activity in the frontier zone?

Significance of the Study

This study makes substantive contributions to knowledge at four distinct levels, justifying its place in the scholarly and policy literature on South Asian and frontier security. The study contributes at four interrelated levels. Theoretically, it advances borderlands theory by applying it to a security context, challenging state-centric frameworks that have struggled to explain persistent militancy, and highlighting the Durand Line as a dynamic and socially constructed frontier (Deleixhe et al., 2019; Tariq et al., 2020). Empirically, it offers a systematic analysis of conflict patterns, militant organization, and policy responses in the post-2021 period (2021–2026), a critical yet under-examined phase in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. At the policy level, it generates evidence-based implications for Pakistan's counter-terrorism strategy and bilateral relations, particularly in light of high terrorism-

related fatalities (GTI, 2025). Regionally, it situates the frontier within broader South and Central Asian security interdependence, underscoring its relevance for neighboring states and the wider global counter-terrorism framework.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework-Borderlands Theory and the Durand Line

The scholarly literature on borderlands provides the theoretical foundation for this study. Baud and Schendel (1997) established the crucial distinction between "borders" as legal-administrative lines on maps that reproduce the state's self-description and "borderlands" as inhabited social spaces with their own political logics, economic dynamics, and identity formations. This distinction is foundational for the Pakistan-Afghanistan case, where the Durand Line simultaneously functions as an internationally recognized state boundary. But Afghanistan views it as an illegitimate colonial imposition that bisects a living Pashtun cultural community. According to scholars specializing in border security such as Wermuth and Riley (2007), border regions are particularly significant security challenges because they serve as origins of risks hubs for illegal trade, drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and transnational violent extremism.

The primary theoretical lens is borderlands theory, which challenges the Westphalian assumption of clearly demarcated, sovereign state territories and repositions border zones as distinct socio-political spaces characterized by overlapping jurisdictions, plural loyalties, and the constant negotiation of identity, authority, and legitimacy (Baud & Schendel, 1997). Borderlands theory offers a foundational understanding of local communities situated in unstable and securitized border zones: such communities develop within a constrained set of possibilities they may adapt or resist prevailing socio-political conditions. Tariq et al., (2020) applied borderlands theory directly to the Pak-Afghan context, demonstrating that the shared Pashtun identity, tribal governance structures, and kinship networks create conditions structurally hospitable

to cross-border militant movement. Their work established that the border's social permeability is not a temporary security failure but a conspicuous feature of the borderlands environment, a finding that directly informs this study's central argument. Tariq (2018) further noted that Pashtun tribes on both sides of the border maintain a way of life and social norms to which they adhere and enforce within their territory, despite legal measures by Pakistan and Afghan authorities alike.

TTP: Origins, Evolution, and Post-2021 Resurgence

Siddique (2010) provided the foundational account of the TTP's emergence, highlighting its umbrella structure and identifying ideological, tribal, and political drivers of its growth in Pakistan's North-West. He argued that the TTP is not a monolithic organization but a coalition of around three dozen militant groups united by opposition to the state and a Deobandi jihadist ideology, an insight that explains both its resilience and internal fragmentation. Formed in December 2007 under Baitullah Mehsud, the TTP initially brought together 27 groups under a centralized command (Siddique, 2010). Its stated demands have included the implementation of Sharia, release of imprisoned members, reduced military presence in KP, and restoration of rights linked to the FATA-KP merger, framing it partly as a response to governance grievances. Post-2021 dynamics, as noted by Janjua et al. (2024), show three key drivers of resurgence: Afghan sanctuary after the Taliban takeover, release of TTP prisoners, and collapse of peace talks by November 2022. Rehman (2023) documents its expansion into Balochistan, while Akhter (2024) highlights limited tactical cooperation with Baloch militants, and Basit (2023) argues this expansion is strategically aimed at countering ISKP influence.

The Islamic Emirate and Afghanistan's Security Governance

The literature reflects a fundamental tension between the IEA's Doha Agreement commitment to preventing Afghan territory from being used

for terrorism and the observable reality of TTP's continued operational presence on Afghan soil. Afghanistan International (2024) reported credible allegations from former Pakistani envoy Asif Durrani that senior TTP leaders were operating openly in Kabul, constituting a direct violation of international commitments. Mohanty (2024) described the Afghanistan-Pakistan border as "simmering terrain," documenting IEA ambivalence and Pakistan's growing frustration since 2021. Gohel (2023) identified insufficient intelligence sharing, limited border control capacity, and deficient political will as key structural gaps, highlighting the Haqqani Network's influence within the IEA as a particularly consequential enabler of TTP's sanctuary. This frustration reached its peak when Acting Prime Minister Anwar ul Haq Kakar publicly declared IEA inaction "unacceptable" in 2023 (Ariana News, 2023).

Pakistan's Security Responses, Governance and Socio-economic Context

The literature documents significant institutional investments in Pakistan's counter-terrorism and border management alongside persistent strategic limitations. Bakrania (2017) established that

ethnic, social, and economic networks are fundamental enablers of conflict persistence that physical infrastructure alone cannot address. Samaa News (2024) reported that Pakistan completed 98% of its Durand Line fencing project by April 2023, with border forts and sensing infrastructure intended to disrupt militant transit. However, Shaikh (2024) argued that Pakistan's predominantly coercive approach in Balochistan has consistently failed to address underlying political grievances, resource exploitation, and state repression sustaining the insurgency. This is corroborated by Pandya and Shah (2024), who demonstrated using Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) that Baloch separatist activity doubled in 2024 compared to 2023, with coordinated attacks on August 25-26 killing over 70 people. This trajectory reflects what analysts term the "fifth wave" of Baloch insurgency – an ongoing cycle beginning in 2004 and intensified by the 2006 killing of Nawab Akbar Bugti, distinguished from the four earlier waves (1948, 1958-59, 1962-69, 1973-77) by greater organizational capacity, urban warfare, and CPEC-focused targeting (The Geopolitics, 2025). Fresh data confirms this escalation is continuing rather than plateauing:

Period	Metric	Figure
2024	Attacks in Balochistan	938 attacks (+53%); 1,002+ fatalities
2025	Recorded security incidents	1,557 incidents
2025	Attacks (PIPS methodology)	254 attacks (+26%)
31 Jan 2026	Coordinated multi-city attacks	31 civilians + 17 security personnel killed across ~ 10 cities
24 May 2026	Quetta train bombing	24 killed, 50+ injured

Sources: Balochistan Post/CTC West Point via Pandya and Shah (2024); PIPS (2026); PICSS (2026); Al Jazeera (2026).

Niaz (2024) provided crucial economic context, documenting that approximately 70% of Balochistan's population lives below the poverty line, establishing the socio-economic conditions that militant organizations exploit for recruitment. Inayatullah (2024) further documented the sectarian dimension, reporting

deadly tribal clashes in Kurram district during September–November 2024 resulting in 115 fatalities across seven incidents of religious violence. Data extending into 2026 reinforces this pattern: on 31 January 2026, BLA-led coordinated attacks across multiple Balochistan districts triggered Operation Radd-ul-Fitna-1, in

which security forces reported killing 216 militants alongside 22 security personnel and 36 civilian deaths (PICSS, 2026); by May 2026, a suicide bombing on a Quetta-bound train killed 24 people, with the Global Terrorism Index (2026) also naming the BLA responsible for Pakistan's largest terror attack of the year (Al Jazeera, 2026). These studies collectively demonstrate that Pakistan's security challenge is simultaneously militarily, political, economic, and social in nature.

Research Design and Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design. The qualitative design is epistemologically appropriate given the complexity and context-dependency of the security phenomena under examination. The study treats security phenomena in complex frontier zones as irreducible to statistical aggregates and best understood through analytical frameworks that integrate political history, social geography, and ideological contestation, all core components of the borderlands theoretical approach.

The methodological approach combines two complementary techniques. The first is empirical content analysis, involving the systematic examination of official documents, security reports, government statements, think tank publications, conflict databases, and peer-reviewed literature. The second is comparative analysis, applied at two levels: comparing TTP with other regional militant groups such as ISKP and Baloch separatists, and comparing Pakistan's counterterrorism responses across different insurgencies to assess continuity and variation in approach.

Primary sources include government statements, parliamentary records, and conflict monitoring databases principally Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) and Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS). Secondary sources include peer-reviewed journals, policy papers from institutions such as Chatham House and the Jamestown Foundation, and investigative journalism from outlets such as Deutsche Welle and Eurasia Review. The temporal scope of the study spans 2021 to 2026, capturing the security

dynamics that followed the Taliban's return to power.

Data was analyzed through qualitative thematic coding to identify recurring patterns and causal relationships, followed by comparative analysis to draw broader analytical insights. The subsequent sections proceed sequentially from historical and geopolitical context through post-2021 militant dynamics, Pakistan's policy responses, and regional dimensions. Each section is interpreted through the lens of borderlands theory and counter-insurgency (COIN) frameworks to build a cumulative account of the structural and immediate drivers sustaining cross-border terrorism along the Durand Line.

The following sections present findings from the comparative and empirical content analysis of the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier. Proceeding sequentially, the analysis covers the historical and geopolitical context, post-2021 militant dynamics, Pakistan's policy responses, and the regional dimensions of the security dilemma. Each section draws on the documentary sources identified above, interpreted through borderlands theory and COIN frameworks, to build a cumulative account of the structural conditions sustaining cross-border terrorism along the Durand Line.

Historical Background: The Durand Line and Its Security Implications

The Durand Line, established in 1893 by Sir Henry Mortimer Durand and Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, divided Pashtun tribes such as the Mohmand, Afridi, Waziri, and Mehsud, whose social organization was based on kinship and customary ties rather than state boundaries. Afghanistan has never formally accepted this border, viewing it as a colonial imposition, which contributes to a legitimacy deficit in border enforcement and complicates efforts to prevent militant sanctuaries. During the Cold War, the borderlands became a proxy theatre, especially after the 1979 Soviet invasion, when CIA-supported and facilitated mobilization of fighters produced radicalized networks that persisted beyond the conflict. The post-Soviet vacuum enabled the Taliban's rise, while post-9/11

interventions further displaced militant groups into frontier areas where they regrouped.

TTP's emergence in 2007 under Baitullah Mehsud marked a turning point, as the state began facing an internal militant threat rooted in earlier proxy structures (Siddique, 2010). Military operations between 2014 and 2021, including Zarb-e-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasaad, significantly weakened TTP capacity, while FATA-KP merger (2018) aimed to extend governance into former tribal regions. However, the Taliban takeover in 2021 rapidly reversed many of these gains, exposing the persistence of underlying structural drivers of militancy.

Post-2021 Security Dynamics: TTP Resurgence and the IEA Factor

The Taliban's capture of Kabul on August 15, 2021 created a permissive operating environment in which TTP rapidly reconstituted across eastern Afghan provinces including Nangarhar, Kunar, Khost, Paktia, and Paktika (Assanbayev et al., 2025). Former Pakistan's envoy to Afghanistan, Asif Durrani, publicly acknowledged that senior TTP leaders were operating openly in Kabul, underscoring the depth of the sanctuary problem (Afghanistan International, 2024).

The resurgence is reflected clearly in conflict data. Pakistan recorded 903 terrorist attacks in 2021, rising to 1,215 in 2023, nearly a 70% increase over two years (Janjua et al., 2024). The Global Terrorism Index 2025 confirmed a 90% increase in TTP-attributed deaths by 2025, making it one of the world's deadliest terrorist organizations (GTI, 2025). TTP's methods include attacks on security forces, extortion of local businesses, and systematic targeting of civilians cooperating with authorities.

Despite repeated IEA assurances that Afghan territory would not be used to attack neighboring states, Islamabad remained deeply skeptical of the gap between Taliban words and actions (Assanbayev et al., 2025). A ceasefire brokered by Afghan Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani in late 2022 collapsed, and by November 2022, TTP unilaterally resumed full operations. By spring 2023, documented militant infiltrations from Afghanistan included direct threats against

Pakistan's Prime Minister and Foreign Minister (Assanbayev et al., 2025). Acting Prime Minister Anwar ul Haq Kakar's statement in November 2023 that IEA inaction was "unacceptable" captured Islamabad's growing frustration (Ariana News, 2023), as Pakistan conducted cross-border strikes against TTP positions, drawing sharp diplomatic protests from Kabul. Mohanty (2024) aptly characterized the Afghanistan-Pakistan border as "*simmering terrain*," reflecting persistent volatility punctuated by acute diplomatic and military crises since 2021.

Compounding Threats: Balochistan Insurgency and ISKP

The Balochistan Dimension and TTP Expansion

While Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) has borne the heaviest direct burden of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) violence, Balochistan presents a distinct yet increasingly interconnected security challenge. The province has long experienced a separatist insurgency led by the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF), and Baloch Republican Guards (BRG). This insurgency is driven by grievances related to resource distribution, political marginalization, and perceived state repression, and has periodically targeted state officials as well as Chinese interests associated with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Assanbayev et al., 2025).

Since 2023, the TTP has expanded its presence in Balochistan, operating in areas such as Quetta, Chaman, Kalat, and Zhob (Rehman, 2023). Reports suggest it has sought links with local militant actors to broaden its operational reach, while some groups have remained ambivalent about its presence (Akhter, 2024). ACLED-based analysis shows that 2024 witnessed a sharp rise in Baloch separatist violence, with major attacks in August causing significant casualties and demonstrating growing organizational capacity (Pandya & Shah, 2024). Attacks on Punjabi workers and Chinese nationals have intensified, further complicating Pakistan's internal security and foreign relations. Shaikh (2024) noted that reliance on coercive counter-insurgency failed to

address underlying political grievances, a challenge also evident in other conflict-affected regions.

ISKP: The Transnational Dimension

The Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP), emerging in 2015 as the Islamic State's regional affiliate, represents a distinct security threat compared to TTP due to its transnational ideology, multi-ethnic recruitment, and capacity for mass-casualty attacks. Its network includes former TTP members, Uzbek militants, and sectarian extremists, distinguishing it from TTP's largely Pashtun, Pakistan-focused insurgency. Since 2021, ISKP has exploited the Taliban takeover to expand operations, targeting Taliban officials, Hazara Shia communities, and foreign interests in Afghanistan.

For Pakistan, ISKP poses a qualitatively different challenge requiring separate analytical and operational responses. Gohel (2023) highlights preventing ISKP cross-border movement as a key border security concern, noting its more centralized command structure compared to TTP's tribal networks. This centralization was reaffirmed in February 2026, when Pakistan's military confirmed strikes on ISKP hideouts operating under a unified "Wilayah Khorasan" command spanning Afghanistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa structurally distinct from its more autonomous Pakistan-focused sister franchise, the Islamic State Pakistan Province (The Diplomat, 2026a). Although ISKP is in violent conflict with both the Taliban and TTP in Afghanistan, tactical opportunism persists along border regions where weak state control allows overlapping militant activity: Pakistan's February 2026 airstrikes struck TTP and ISKP camps within the same cross-border operation, and both groups continue to draw on shared safe havens in eastern Afghanistan despite their rivalry (International Crisis Group, 2025; The Diplomat, 2026b).

Pakistan's Counterterrorism Response and Border Management

Pakistan's counterterrorism response since 2021 has been multidimensional, combining military

operations, border fencing, diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan, and limited governance and development efforts in conflict-affected regions. The most prominent initiative is the Durand Line fencing project, with officials reporting 98% completion of the 2,611-kilometre border and most forts installed (Mohanty, 2024); satellite imagery reviewed in March 2026 confirmed that fencing activity was still expanding, with new sections built in Paktika province amid disputed claims over territorial encroachment (BBC Dari, 2026). Despite Afghan objections and disruptions, Pakistan has continued construction, viewing it as a key security measure, although critics argue that physical barriers cannot address the social and kinship networks that sustain militancy (Bakrania, 2017; Samaa News, 2024). Military operations in KPK and Balochistan achieved tactical gains by disrupting militant networks and restoring temporary state control, but they couldn't fundamentally alter underlying security dynamics. This persistence is linked to structural and institutional factors, including reliance on kinetic approaches and weak civilian law enforcement capacity, despite evidence that effective counter-insurgency requires addressing socio-political roots: a 2026 national security assessment found that Pakistan's intensified kinetic operations, expanded surveillance, and drone-strike reliance improved short-term operational reach but left the deeper governance deficits and political polarization that militants exploit largely unaddressed (PICSS, 2026). Economic vulnerabilities further compound the challenge, with rising poverty rates and high deprivation in Balochistan enabling militant recruitment and parallel patronage systems (Niaz, 2024). In addition, sectarian tensions in areas like Kurram in 2024, resulting in multiple waves of fatalities and requiring military intervention, highlight the continued fragility of inter-communal stability and the ease with which militant actors exploit local fault lines (Inayatullah, 2024). This fragility persisted well into 2025, when a January peace agreement collapsed within days as renewed clashes and an attack on the district's deputy commissioner

exposed the limits of tribal jirga-brokered truces (The Express Tribune, 2025).

Table 1: Trends in Terrorism, Militant Dynamics, Border Security and Counterterrorism Responses in Pakistan (2021–2025)

Indicators	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
A. Pakistan – Global Terrorism Index Rankings & Fatality Burden					
GTI Global Rank	9 th	7 th	4 th	2 nd	2 nd
GTI Score (0–10)	5.61	7.00	8.18	8.37	8.574
Terrorism Deaths	~500	~937	~1,524	~1,078	1,139
Terrorist Incidents	~903	~858	~1,215	1,098	1,045
Injuries	N/A	N/A	N/A	~1,400+	1,595
Hostages Taken	N/A	N/A	N/A	101	655
Incidents vs. 2020 Baseline	~1×	~2×	~3.4×	~3.1×	~6×
Share of Global Terrorism Deaths	~8%	~11%	~15%	~18%	~20%
B. TTP – Operational Activity & Lethality (2021–2025)					
TTP Attacks	~487	~481*	~595*	481	595
TTP Deaths Attributed	~400*	~490*	~800*	555	637
TTP Share of Pak Deaths	~55%*	~57%*	~60%*	~55%	56%
TTP Tactical Evolution	Guerrilla	Complex attacks	Suicide ops	IED + raids	Drones + assassinations
TTP Fighters in Afghanistan	~3,000*	~4,000*	~5,000*	~6,000*	6,000–6,500
Peace Talks / Negotiations	Exploratory	Ceasefire (collapsed Nov 2022)	Negotiations failed	No talks	No talks
TTP Global Ranking	Not in top 4	Not in top 4	Top 4	Top 4	3 rd deadliest globally

C. BLA Activity & Balochistan Insurgency						
BLA Major Attacks	Low	Moderate	High	Very High	Very High	
CPEC-Targeted Attacks	Occasional	Increasing	High	High	Escalating	
Baloch Activity vs. 2023	–	–	Base-line	Doubled	Sustained	
D. Afghanistan–Pakistan Border: Cross-Border Terrorism Data						
Pak-Afghan Combined Attacks	~1,200*	~1,500*	~1,700*	~1,900*	~2,892 (3yr total)	
TTP Border Attack Share	~80%	~83%	~85%	~85%	85%	
IEA–TTP Sanctuary	Immediate post-takeover	Taliban facilitating TTP	Full sanctuary confirmed	6,000+ fighters in Afghanistan	Open conflict trigger	
Pak Border Fencing	~70% complete	~90% complete	98% complete	Ongoing	Operational	
Pak–Afghan Diplomatic Relations	Strained	Severely strained	Crisis level	Near breakdown	Open conflict (Feb 2026)	
Global Border Terror Trend (% attacks <100km from border)	~60%	~61%	~62%	~63%	64%	
E. ISKP Activity & Threat Trajectory						
ISKP Attacks in Pakistan	Emerging	Moderate	High (Peshawar mosque 100+ dead)	Persistent	Persistent	
ISKP in Afghanistan	Expanding	Resilient	Resilient	Active	Active	
ISKP Transnational Threat	Limited	Moderate	High	High	High	
F. Pakistan's Counterterrorism Responses						

Military Operations	Zarb-e-Azb legacy	Multiple CT ops in KP	Intensified CT ops	Operation Azm-e-Istehkam (limited success)	Continued CT operations
Cross-Border Strikes	None	Initiated	Multiple strikes	Multiple strikes	Ongoing
Poverty Rate (KP & Balochistan)	~38.6%	Rising	Rising	~39.5%	~40%*
FATA Governance Reform	Merger (2018) partial	Incomplete	Incomplete	Incomplete	Incomplete

Developed by Authors

Sources: Institute for Economics and Peace (2026), Janjua et al. (2024), Pandya and Shah (2024), ACLED Conflict Watchlist 2025; Samaa News (2024); GTI 2022, GTI 2023, GTI 2024, GTI 2025, GTI 2026 (IEP).

Results and Discussion

The comparative and empirical content analysis presented in the preceding sections supports a set of inter-connected findings that together constitute this study's central analytical contribution. Table 1 below provides a structured summary of the content analysis on the emergence of TTP and its impact on Pakistan's security, modelled on the analytical framework of Assanbayev et al. (2025).

The first key finding is that cross-border terrorism along the Durand Line is a structural phenomenon shaped by the following enduring conditions: the ethno-tribal social fabric that enables militant recruitment and mobility, and persistent governance deficits on both sides. These long-standing factors predate 2021 and continue to sustain illicit flows, including migration, arms smuggling, and militant movement, while weakening bilateral coordination.

The second finding highlights that the Taliban's return to power significantly changed operational conditions by removing institutional constraints on TTP activity. The IEA's ambivalent stance toward TTP reflects ideological affinities, administrative limitations in border regions, and strategic calculations vis-à-vis Pakistan, making external pressure necessary but insufficient.

Third, Pakistan's counter-terrorism measures including border fencing, military operations, and diplomatic engagement have achieved limited tactical gains but have not addressed the underlying structural drivers of militancy. This has triggered growing policy debate within Pakistan regarding Afghanistan policy recalibration, though reduced engagement also risks weakening prospects for long-term stability. Finally, at the regional level, weak Pakistan-Afghanistan cooperation and the absence of effective multilateral security frameworks remain as major gaps. This underscores the need for more integrated, flexible governance approaches that move beyond state-centric models and recognize borderlands as shared spaces of interaction rather than fixed peripheries (Assanbayev et al., 2025).

Policy Recommendations

On the basis of the structural analysis and empirical findings, this study advances the following interconnected policy recommendations for Pakistan's policymakers, the IEA, and the international community.

- For Pakistan's Comprehensive Counter-terrorism Strategy:** Military operations alone cannot eliminate militancy. Pakistan must pair counter-terrorism efforts with governance reform,

justice access, and economic development in KPK and Balochistan. The FATA-KP merger's reform agenda must be completed. With ~70% of Balochistan below the poverty line, targeted development investment is strategically essential, not optional.

2. For Pakistan–Afghanistan Relations: Incentive-Based Bilateral Frameworks: Bilateral engagement should move beyond mutual blame and adopt incentive-based approaches. Economic initiatives such as CPEC, the CASA energy project, and Afghan market access should be linked to verifiable security commitments, while cooperation on border management and intelligence should be strengthened through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

3. For the International Community: Conditioned Engagement with the IEA: Limited engagement with Afghanistan has failed to contain security spillovers, with Pakistan and the Central Asian states bearing most of the resulting costs. Conditioned support tied to measurable counterterrorism and governance benchmarks would better serve regional stability. Cross-border economic integration should also be funded to create local stakeholders for peace.

4. Reimagining the Borderlands: Beyond Securitization: Fences and force are necessary but insufficient. Cross-border trade, Pashtun cultural exchanges, joint infrastructure, and community policing rooted in tribal structures must complement security measures. Treating frontier regions as shared spaces rather than peripheries to control is the only path to durable stabilization.

Conclusion

The Afghanistan–Pakistan security paradigm in the post-2021 period represents a convergence of historical legacies, structural vulnerabilities, and contemporary militant dynamics that resist simple analytical frameworks and simple policy solutions. This study set out to analyze the structural and operational dimensions of cross-border terrorism along the Durand Line frontier, guided by a central question about the persistence of militancy despite sustained interventions and four subsidiary questions

addressing specific dimensions of this security challenge.

The findings indicate that cross-border terrorism continues due to underlying structural factors, including contested sovereignty, ethno-tribal networks, and governance gaps, which have not been adequately addressed by existing policy responses. As Assanbayev et al., (2025) concluded that the ongoing dysfunction in Pakistan–Afghanistan relations will remain a pressing issue in the short and medium term, and resolving it is a necessary condition for normalizing bilateral relations. The current resurgence of TTP activities is directly linked to the Taliban's rise to power in 2021, which provided TTP with legitimacy, ideological momentum, and operational sanctuary, while the significant trust deficit between Islamabad and Kabul creates favorable conditions for TTP to actively target Pakistan. The application of borderlands theory has proven analytically productive, revealing dimensions of the problem that state-centric frameworks obscure.

The Durand Line transcends its conventional perception as a static territorial demarcation, emerging instead as a vibrant, pulsating social ecosystem – a crucible where the intricate dance of state authority, tribal governance, and militant factions unfolds, each vying for supremacy, legitimacy, and dominion over this strategically pivotal landscape. Achieving enduring security in this complex frontier necessitates the crafting of inclusive governance paradigms that seamlessly bridge both sides of the border, underpinned by a mutually endorsed bilateral framework – a harmonized pact embraced by both nations as the definitive blueprint for managing their shared boundary. This, in turn, demands calibrated regional and international synergy that meticulously aligns external stakeholder interests with the imperatives of security and holistic development for the borderlands' populace. The shadows across the frontier - including the networks, movements, and insurgent groups that take advantage of the narrative about the Durand Line's ambiguity and weak state presence, will continue as long as the underlying structural conditions that enable them are not addressed.

Pioneering research, anchored in borderlands theory and insurgency/counter-insurgency (COIN) paradigms, is imperative to transcend traditional state-centric models – unlocking cross-border cooperation, hybrid governance, and adaptive strategies that metamorphose conflict-ridden frontiers into vibrant hubs of collaborative governance and enduring peace

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