

# Pakistan's Internal Unraveling: The Strategic Fallout of State-Sponsored Militancy

## Introduction

Over the last several decades, [Pakistan's](#) strategic elite has relied disproportionately on asymmetric warfare via the control and utilisation of Jihadist militants as an instrument of statecraft. The approach, framed during the Cold War and institutionally rooted by the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), initially sought to push back against Indian influence in Kashmir and extend [Pakistani](#) influence in Afghanistan. Organisations such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), and the Haqqani Network emerged to become the prime tools in this policy, with the support of segments of the military-intelligence establishment being either tacit or overt. The expectation was that these [organisations](#) could be tuned to their national security objectives without becoming anti-state. This policy has been there for so long and is now disintegrating under the weight of its own contradictions. As the security situation deteriorates domestically—with mounting terrorist attacks, sectarian violence, and popular disillusionment—it is evident that Pakistan's experiment with [‘good militants’](#) has collapsed. The [strategic implications](#) are no longer exogenous but endogenous, destabilising not merely Pakistan's image in international diplomacy but its very capacity to function as a stable and coherent state.

## The Return of the Tehreek-e-Taliban and the Myth of Controlled Militancy

No place is this blowback more apparent than with the re-emergence of the [Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan \(TTP\)](#). Severely weakened by military operations such as Zarb-e-Azb (2014) and Radd-ul-Fasaad (2017), the TTP has emerged stronger post-Kabul's fall in August 2021. With ideological and operational linkages with the Afghan Taliban, the TTP has a lenient milieu on the other side of the border now, making a meal of the reluctance of [the Taliban](#) to distance itself from it. According to a Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies report, 789 acts of terrorism occurred in Pakistan in 2023, up by 73 per cent from the year before, with the TTP and its factions carrying out the vast majority, PIPS report. The remainder involved well-publicised attacks on security targets, police checkpoints, and even military facilities such as the Mianwali Airbase attack in November 2023.

Although there was initial hope in [Rawalpindi](#) that the Afghan Taliban government would hold in check the TTP's ambitions, the contrary has happened. The 2022 talks between the Pakistani state and the TTP facilitated by the Taliban fell through, [emboldening](#) the group further. The earlier history of the Pakistani state's habit of dealing with extremists—starting from arrangements with Maulana Fazlullah in Swat—has constantly unraveled, frequently permitting the organisations to reconstitute, rearm, and regain influence. It is a reminder of other failed proxy experiments elsewhere in the world,

including the United States support for the Afghan mujahideen during the 1980s, which created [transnational jihadist](#) networks like Al-Qaeda. Islamabad's own misperception is in believing that ideologically motivated actors with local agendas can be kept at arm's length once they have rendered themselves obsolescent. The re-emergence of the TTP not only lays bare the bad strategic calculation of instrumenting militants as an asset but can even potentially destabilise Pakistan's northwestern frontier in perpetuity.

### **Blowback on Diplomacy and the Economy: A China Pakistan Economic Corridor Case Study**

Pakistan's persistent failure to act against militants with urgency also threatened its foreign alignments, the foremost of which is China its 'all-weather friend'. Chinese citizens and interests engaged in the [China-Pakistan Economic Corridor \(CPEC\)](#) have been targeted in a series of deadly attacks in recent years. From the 2021 Dasu bus bombing that claimed the lives of nine Chinese engineers to the 2022 Karachi University suicide attack, [Chinese interests](#) have been repeatedly caught in [Pakistan's](#) internal conflict. In March 2024, most recently, five Chinese engineers were slain in a suicide bombing on the Karakoram Highway in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa—by the TTP-affiliated Jamaat-ul-Ahrar. These accidents not only attest to Pakistan's failure to protect important installations but also unveil the strategic price paid in conceding ground to anti-state militants.

[China](#) has protested both privately and officially to Pakistan regarding the safety not being assured by Pakistan to its citizens and to projects. The idea of [Chinese private](#) security companies, or even troops, in Pakistan is diplomatically sensitive, but it is on the table in Beijing. For Pakistan, it is not only diplomatically embarrassing but also a compromise of sovereignty. And economically, the stakes are apocalyptic. [Pakistan's](#) inability to give security guarantees to CPEC initiatives has been the trendsetter in slowing down implementation to a standstill status, demolishing dreams of economic revival through [infrastructure development](#) and regional integration. The general economic environment also deteriorated. International investors consider [Pakistan risky](#) mainly because of its volatile security environment and unclear counterterrorism strategy. Even after its removal from the Financial Action Task Force's grey list in 2022, there are still doubts about the intent of the nation to stop terror financing rings. This ongoing uncertainty is both economically and reputationally costly for Pakistan.

### **The Social Unraveling: Militancy, Sectarianism, and Ethnonationalism**

Militancy in Pakistan has damaged foreign relations and fractured the social fabric domestically. Sectarian violence profoundly inflicted a hazardous increase in [anti-Shia](#) violence and targeted killings, particularly in the areas of Gilgit-Baltistan and Karachi. The state's failure to take action [against groups](#) such as Sipah-e-Sahaba has only encouraged these actors and has victimized religious minorities through state-sponsored violence.

[Sectarian violence](#) has now returned to Kurram and Parachinar with almost disturbingly [increased](#) ferocity, which had an interstate linkage with the said militant group in the past.

Meanwhile, though, [ethnic grievances](#) are also starting to fester. In Balochistan, nationalist militant groups such as the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) intensified their campaign against Chinese nationals and military infrastructure. The causes behind the insurgency, political marginalization, missing persons, and exploitation of resources continue to add infinitum, with the militarisation of the province on the fast track. Various Sindhi nationalist groups in Sindh are being [radicalised](#), riding the sentiment against centralisation. Meanwhile, the [Pashtun Tahafuz](#) Movement (PTM), albeit peaceful, has also questioned some fundamental issues of extrajudicial killings, land-grabbing, and military intervention in the tribal belt.

### **Conclusion: The Urgency of Strategic Recalibration**

Pakistan stands at a junction today. The [very nature](#) of its post-Cold War national security policy strategic depth via non-state proxies—has begun to collapse in upon itself. The consequences of years of patronizing militancy are now, not just arising in the form of additional terror attacks but are also consuming the very roots of state power, ranging from governance and economy to [international standing](#). Unlike during the 2000s, when blowback was largely episodic and localised, today's wave of militancy is multi-pronged and affects all provinces, communities, and layers of the state.

The age of [selective counterterrorism](#) is over. Islamabad must dismantle all networks of militants, regardless of their perceived utility, and seek earnest reform within intelligence and law enforcement organisations. This involves discarding the securitised model of statecraft and addressing longstanding socio-political grievances in Balochistan, the tribal belt, and urban Sindh. Internationally, Pakistan must afford open and sustained commitment to counter-extremism in order to restore diplomatic and economic confidence. This cooperation must be based on realpolitik, not on sentiment for strategic depth. As Pakistan is in a multipolar system that is becoming more and more intolerant of state-sponsored terrorism, it must decide whether to proceed on a path of strategic self-destruction or redefine itself as a stable, democratic, and responsible republic. It will not be disintegrating through foreign invasion, but through uncontrolled growth of forces that it used to develop deliberately. The sole doubt remaining is whether its leaders shall perceive the need for recalibration before it is too late.

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