

Charting the Complexities: Unearthing the Roots of Terrorism in Pakistan Using the Conflict Wheel Model

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Abstract

Pakistan is again facing surge in terrorism since August 15, 2021, when the Afghan Taliban took power in Kabul on the US exit, contrary to the pledge Afghan Taliban made in the Doha Peace Agreement of not letting terrorist groups use Afghan soil against any country. Taliban's victory in Afghanistan injected fresh motivation into Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), unleashing new waves of violence in Pakistan. Despite having almost two decades of experience in kinetic actions against terrorist groups, law enforcement agencies still seem short of completely stopping the TTP from attacks at will. To identify the deeply hidden root causes of the conflict that makes all the measures and efforts by Pakistan to eradicate terrorism insufficient, the conflict wheel model is employed to understand the complexities of the problem. The study assumes that grievances of the Pakistanis living along the Pak-Afghan border, weak writ of the state, poverty, international interests in the region, and failure to understand the goals, interests and positions of the involved actors are the major causes that hinder peaceful resolution.

Keywords: Conflict Wheel Model, Terrorism, Pakistan, Afghan Taliban, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

Introduction

A conflict can be understood as a disagreement or confrontation between at least two parties, where typically, one party intentionally causes harm

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or damage to the other.¹ Conflict analysis helps orientate analysts with the existing situation and suggest the future course(s) of action. Conflicts can be termed dynamic systems where intervention becomes part of such systems. Such interventions should focus on the creative and positive energies in the system or related to the system for peaceful resolution.² Conflict analysis provides a detailed profile of political, economic and social factors that cause a conflict. It is also helpful in planning, carrying out, tracking, and assessing the conflict resolution process. In any conflict, the “5-Ws”; what, why, where, when, who and “1-H” how are crucial to understanding the interests, goals and positions of involved parties.³ According to Weitzman, “Conflict analysis considers all aspects of a conflict to reach a consensus on potential scenarios.”⁴ Conflict mapping provides an independent view of the conflict.⁵ To understand the root causes of terrorism in Pakistan, it is essential to understand the history of the evolution of extremism and terrorism in Pakistan.

In Pakistan, the emergence of extremism is generally linked with the Soviet-Afghan war during the 1980s whereas terrorism is considered as a reaction to Pakistan’s pro-American policy during the United States (U.S.) occupation of Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks. However, the history of irritant relations with Afghanistan started right after Pakistan’s independence in 1947.⁶ Afghanistan opposed Pakistan’s membership in the United Nations Organisation (UNO) for having claims on territories till the river Indus near Attock, Punjab. As a result, successive Afghan governments continued to support various anti-Pakistan nationalist movements in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK).⁷ In December 1979, the then-Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. The U.S. fearing

¹ Roger Fisher, William L. Ury and Bruce Patton, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* (Penguin, 2011).

² Fisher, Ury and Patton, *Getting to Yes*.

³ Samra Farrukh Ansari, Maria Saifuddin Effendi and Riffat Haque, “Problem Solving Decision Making Model in Kashmir Conflict Resolution: Prospects and Challenges,” *NDU Journal* (2019).

⁴ Susan Sturm and Howard Gadlin, “Conflict Resolution and Systemic Change,” *J. Disp. Resol.* (2007): 1.

⁵ Simon Fisher, *Working with Conflict, Skills and Strategies for Action* (Zed Books, 2000).

⁶ Fair, C. Christine, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2014).

⁷ Aitzaz Ahsan, *The Indus Saga* (Roli Books Private Limited, 2005).

communist expansion, rushed to the region and with Pakistan and some Arab countries' help, waged a proxy war popularly known as "Afghan *Jihad*" or holy war.⁸ The Islamisation process in Pakistan during the Afghan Jihad, altered mindset of some segments of Pakistani society, who believed to impose their version of Islam by force. At the same time in Iran, the Shah was overthrown with a popular revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini in December 1979. In less than a year time, in September 1980, the Iran-Iraq war started. The geopolitical environment further exacerbated geopolitical tensions with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait having ideological differences with Iran openly financed and supported Iraq while Syria and Libya supported Iran. Saudi Arabia having significant influence in Pakistan, forced a pro-Iraqi religious movement in Pakistan that led to sectarian-based terrorism between the Sunni and Shia communities against each other making Pakistani society — a rich ground for extremist ideologies.⁹ After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 from Afghanistan, political chaos led to the emergence of the Taliban who brought relative peace in violence-ridden Afghanistan using the narrative of imposition of Sharia. All those who had religious violent extremist mindsets and were mostly on the run from the governments in their native countries in the Middle East and Africa found Afghanistan and the Taliban as a blessing and safe heaven. Due to porous border, Afghans regularly visited Pakistan for trade, health care, religious education and living, making Pakistan the worst affected country by the religious extremism during the 1990s.

The inspirational and motivational impact of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S. soil by al-Qaeda acted as a catalyst for nurturing extremist ideologies in Pakistan. Pakistan's siding with the U.S. in the war against terrorism after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan turned local extremist groups against the Pakistani state. Initially, Pakistan made several efforts to negotiate peace with the Pakistani Taliban groups; it started in 2004 with the Shakai Accord¹⁰, followed by the Sararogha

⁸ Andrew Hartman, "The Red Template: U.S. policy in Soviet-Occupied Afghanistan," *Third World Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (2002): 467-489.

⁹ Moonis Ahmar, "Sectarian Conflicts in Pakistan," *Pakistan Vision* 9, no. 1 (2007): 1-19.

¹⁰ Syed Manzar Abbas Zaidi, "Geographic Trajectories of al-Qaeda and Taliban Terrorist Groups in Pakistan," *Journal of Strategic Security* 3, no. 1 (2010): 1-18.

Agreement in 2005¹¹, and the Waziristan Accord in 2006¹². In December 2007, several Taliban groups in Pakistan merged forming Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) inflicting more violence on Pakistan.¹³ Another agreement called, the Nizam-e-Adl Agreement was signed in 2009¹⁴, but it also failed to achieve stated objectives. Every time peace agreements did provide a temporary respite to the government,¹⁵ but the terrorists used this time for regrouping, resettlement and relocation of their families, resources and planning against the state.¹⁶ According to figures published by the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), “the TTP alone has carried out 3,280 terrorist attacks in Pakistan since its establishment in 2007 which include 301 suicide bombings. These attacks have claimed 7,488 lives including 2577 Law Enforcing Agencies (LEAs) and wounded 15,086 others. LEAs have also killed around 352 terrorists in these attacks.”¹⁷ Since 2001, Pakistan has lost more than 83000 lives including military personnel and has spent US\$ 126.79 million.¹⁸

Pakistan hoped that after the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul, the Indian intelligence agency, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) would have no place in Afghanistan, and the Taliban would stop TTP from launching attacks against Pakistan as per their commitment to the Doha Peace

11 Arshad Ali, “Peace Talks with the Pakistani Taliban: Challenges and Prospects,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 5, no. 4 (2013): 11-13.

12 Khan Zeb Burki, “Rise of Taliban in Waziristan,” *Dialogue (Pakistan)* 5, no. 3 (2010).

13 Khuram Iqbal and Sara De Silva, “Terrorist Lifecycles: A Case Study of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan,” *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 8, no. 1 (2013): 72-86.

14 Justine Fleischner, *Governance and Militancy in Pakistan's Swat Valley* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2011).

15 “Lieutenant General (Retd) Tariq Khan, Former Corps Commander and IG Frontier Corps Remarks during a consultation on Afghanistan on June 9, 2002 at the Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) in Islamabad.

16 Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Bart Schuurman, “The Paradoxes of Negotiating with Terrorist and Insurgent Organisations,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 39, no. 4 (2011): 677-692.

17 Muhammad Amir Rana, “Afghanistan as Seen from Pakistan,” Apr-Jun, 2022. www.pakpips.com

18 Muhammad Tahir Rashid, Rabeel Fatima and Muhammad Wasif, “War on Terror: The Cost Pakistan Paid,” *Annals of Human and Social Sciences* 4, no. 2 (2023): 738-750.

Agreement (DPA).¹⁹ However, the Afghan Taliban on taking over Kabul on August 15, 2021, released all imprisoned TTP fighters from prisons and gave them permission for free movement in Afghanistan. It encouraged TTP to restart attacks inside Pakistan, remove the border fence and create renewed security challenges for Pakistan. Against this backdrop, there is a need to assess the conflict between the state of Pakistan and the TTP for its root causes, connecting issues and manifestations, which would help conflict analysis and conflict resolution. It will help analyse potential scenarios of success and failure, and to gauge the threats posed by the TTP to Pakistani state.

Analytical Framework: The Conflict Wheel

After the devastations of two world wars, the newly born United Nations Organisation (UNO) and several world leaders felt the need to work and ensure the non-recurrence of such destruction in future.²⁰ Scholars and peace experts highlighted that to resolve a conflict peacefully, conflict analysis is essential for understanding the root causes, dynamics, and potential resolutions of disputes. It helps mediators, policymakers, and stakeholders create well-informed strategies to prevent, manage, and effectively resolve conflicts. Conflict analysis helps distinguish between surface-level issues and deep-rooted socio-political, structural, and economic causes.²¹ Conflict analysis can provide early warning signs of rising conflict and may alert mediators and negotiators for timely intervention.

Among the many models developed for mapping and analysing conflicts, the Conflict Wheel, Conflict Tree, Onion Model, Nugget Model, Iceberg Model, Glasl's Escalation Model, Lederach's Pyramid, and Johan Galtung's Conflict Triangle are considered more realistic tools.²² In this study, the Conflict Wheel Model (CWM) is used because it is a 'Meta Conflict

¹⁹ Muhammad Tariq, Muhammad Rizwan and Manzoor Ahmad, "U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan: Latest Development and Security Situation (2020)," *Sjesr* 3, no. 2 (2020): 290-297.

²⁰ Peter Wallensteen, *Understanding Conflict Resolution*. Sage, 2018.

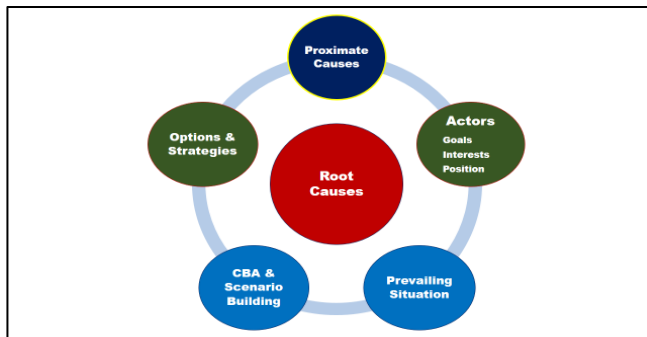
²¹ John Forester, *Dealing with Differences: Dramas of Mediating Public Disputes* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

²² Thomas Homer-Dixon et al, "The Conceptual Structure of Social Disputes: Cognitive-Affective Maps as a Tool for Conflict Analysis and Resolution," *Sage Open* 4, no. 1 (2014).

Diagnostic tool’ that breaks conflicts into six key dimensions, provides a holistic understanding of complex disputes and offers a structured approach to conflict analysis, helping mediators, policymakers, and organisations develop effective resolution strategies. The six key dimensions are Causes, Actors, Dynamics, Context & Structures, Strategies & Approaches, and Intervention & Resolution. Among these six dimensions, three are the causal factors, the fourth deals with the situation on the ground, the fifth looks into the benefits versus risks associated with the different ways available for the resolution of the conflict and paints hypothetical outcomes while the last dimension deals with possible options and strategies.²³

Figure no.1

Conflict Wheel Model



Source: Samra Farrukh Ansari, Maria Saifuddin Effendi and Riffat Haque, “Problem Solving Decision Making Model in Kashmir Conflict Resolution Prospects and Challenges.” *NDU journal* (2019): 6-7, <http://111.68.99.125/website/ndu-journal/pub-new/01-Problem-Solving.pdf>

To chart the complexities that hinder the resolution of the conflict between the TTP and the State, the Conflict Wheel Model has been slightly modified to effectively unearth the root causes, identify the actors involved — their goals, interests and positions, examine the prevailing situation, conduct a realist analysis of associated risks and recommend possible options.

²³ Jinwei Lin, “Wheel Model: An Exposition of Competition and Cooperation,” *SocArXiv Papers* 2018.

The Root Causes

In plants and trees, the roots perform many vital functions, including anchoring the tree, absorbing water and nutrients, and storing food reserves.²⁴ In the same way, every conflict has roots or causes that keep it alive. Identifying the root causes of conflict is, therefore, vital and the first step towards conflict resolution. The root causes can be identified by getting answers to questions like, why the actors of a conflict are engaged in violence and what has made the conflict so protracted and complex that all efforts for peace have fallen victim to mutual paranoia.²⁵

To identify the root causes of the conflict between the Taliban and Pakistan, the Conflict Wheel Model has been chosen because terrorism in this region is not new and has so many actors involved each having their own needs, interests and position that it cannot be understood without a multifaceted and in-depth analysis. The timeline of the conflict is divided into three phases to reach the core of the issue:

(a) From the Soviet Occupation to the 9/11

The first root cause of terrorism in Pakistan can be traced back and connected to the use of the narrative of the ‘Holy War’ (*Jihad*) to fight expansion of the communism into South Asia via Afghanistan. The *Madrasah* network that existed in Pakistan and Afghanistan was used to counter Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Religious leaders were empowered and funded to recruit human resource for Afghan *Jihad*, which led to the radicalisation of some segments of Pakistani society. Soviet involvement in retaliation, started to sabotage activities in Pakistan especially in the Peshawar region during the 1980s to avenge Pakistan for its support of Afghan *Mujahedeen*.²⁶

²⁴ Alastair Fitter, “Characteristics and Functions of Root Systems,” In *Plant Roots*, CRC Press, 2002, 49-78.

²⁵ Frances Stewart, Douglas Holdstock and Antonio Jarquin, “Root Causes of Violent Conflict in Developing Countries Commentary: Conflict — from Causes to Prevention?” *bmj* 324, no. 7333 (2002): 342-345.

²⁶ Fair, C. Christine, “The Militant Challenge in Pakistan,” *Asia Policy* 11 (2011): 105-138.

The second root cause of terrorism in Pakistan was the introduction of the Kalashnikov culture and drugs into Pakistani society as a result of the Soviet-Afghan war. Due to influx of a huge number of Afghan refugees and training camps for Afghan *Mujahideen* in Pakistan's tribal areas, widespread availability of illegal firearms became neo-normal in society. Among these firearms, the most famous one was the AK-47 (Avtomat Kalashnikova 1947) assault rifle, famously known as Kalashnikov (named after Mikhail Kalashnikov, a Soviet engineer and Lieutenant General in 1947) due to its reliability became famous in Pakistan especially in the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and Balochistan. Afghanistan has been one of the major producers of opium in the world and its proliferation into Pakistan significantly contributed to terrorism and instability in Pakistan. Youth having firearms in their hands and under the influence of drugs could be used easily for fuelling violence, militancy, and criminal activities, making it harder for law enforcement agencies (LEAs) to maintain peace. The drug trade became a major source of funding for terrorist organisations in Pakistan, especially after the Afghan war. A nexus between drug lords, war lords, terrorists, and criminal gangs was created against the state LEAs.²⁷

During the same time in 1979, a revolution in Iran unfolded. It can be termed the third root cause as it inspired the minority Shia community in Pakistan which led to sectarian terrorism during 1980s.²⁸ The fourth root cause was the emergence of the Taliban on Afghanistan's political landscape. The political leadership in Afghanistan could not deliver and due to political instability and economic chaos, the Taliban emerged in Afghanistan during 1994-96.²⁹ Taliban delivered quick justice to people in their areas and ensured law and order. It won public support for the Taliban who took power from Tajik leader Gulbadin Hikmat Yar by force in 1996.³⁰ This development added further layer of complexity into the dynamics of extremism in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The fifth root cause in the Pre-9/11 period was the Taliban's narrative of the

²⁷ Riaz Ali, *Faithful Education: Madrassahs in South Asia* (Rutgers University Press, 2008).

²⁸ Hassan Abbas, "Shiism and Sectarian Conflict in Pakistan: Identity Politics, Iranian Influence, and Tit-for-Tat Violence," 2010.

²⁹ William Maley, "The Rise and Rule of the Taliban, 1994-2001," *The Afghanistan Wars* (2002): 218-250.

³⁰ Hassan Abbas, *Pakistan's Drift into Extremism: Allah, the Army, and America's War on Terror* (Routledge, 2015).

imposition of *Sharia* (Islamic law) in Afghanistan which led to the inspiration of hardline youth in Pakistan.³¹

(b) From the Ouster to the Return of Taliban

On September 11, 2001, the Twin Towers in the U.S. were attacked. The attack was blamed on al-Qaeda. The U.S. demanded the Taliban to hand over al-Qaeda's leader Osama Bin Laden which the Taliban refused. The U.S. invaded Afghanistan in October 2001. In the post-9/11 period, the dissipation of the fighters and leaders belonging to al-Qaeda, Afghan Taliban and other such groups into Pakistan's tribal areas in KPK and Balochistan for survival against the U.S. attacks is another cause, which brought Talibanisation into Pakistan.³² The emergence of several extremist organisations such as Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM), Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan etc., in Pakistan to support the Afghan Taliban in another holy war against the U.S. made the situation more complex.³³ Pakistan's decision to side with the U.S. in its War on Terror (WoT), as was otherwise threatened to be thrown into the stone age became a logic for terrorist groups to legitimise violence against Pakistan. Islamabad's decision to provide military bases to the U.S. for logistics and drone operations which targeted Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders and fighters hiding on Pak-Afghan soil brought a new causal argument for revenge against the state.³⁴ The arrest of al-Qaeda and Taliban members by Pakistani LEAs and their handing over to America further turned the Taliban and their sympathisers against Pakistan.³⁵ The military operations Pakistan initiated against the foreign fighters and their Pakistani counterparts living in the tribal areas became another cause of an uptick

³¹ Babar Shah, "Pakistan's Afghanistan Policy: An Evaluation," *Strategic Studies* 20, no. 2&3 (2000): 168-224.

³² Lian Wang, "Talibanisation in the Tribal Areas of Pakistan," *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)* 4, no. 1 (2010): 74-100.

³³ Samir Puri, *Pakistan's War on Terrorism: Strategies for Combating Jihadist Armed Groups since 9/11* (Routledge, 2013).

³⁴ Alan K. Kronstadt, *Pakistan-US Relations*, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2012, <https://crsreports.congress.gov>

³⁵ Muhammad Khalil Khan and Lu Wei. "When Friends Turned into Enemies: The Role of the National State vs. Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in the War Against Terrorism in Pakistan." *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 28, no. 4 (2016): 597-626.

in terrorism. These military operations include the Battle of Wana (2004), Operation *Al-Mizan* (2002-6), Battle of Mirali (2007), First Battle of Swat (2007), Operation *Zalzala* (2008), Operations *Sher Dil*, Rah-e-Haq, Red Mosque '*Lal Masjid*' operation (2007), operation *Rah-e-Raast* (2007–2009), and Operation *Rah-e-Nijat* (2009–2010), Battle of *Bajaur* (2008), operation *Zarb e Azb* (2014), and *Raddul Fassad* (2017).³⁶

(c) The Years after August 15, 2021

The Taliban on taking over power in Kabul released the imprisoned TTP members from prisons and permitting them free movement in Afghanistan.³⁷ It not only emboldened the TTP but also motivated to intensify attacks in Pakistan. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and no more drone attacks to target Taliban in tribal areas of Pakistan also allowed free movement of terrorists in border areas.³⁸ Removal of border fencing by the TTP fighters with the support of the Afghan Taliban has provided easy and safe passages to terrorists coming back to Pakistan.³⁹ Islamabad's agreement to talk with the TTP on the insistence of the Afghan Taliban though resulted in a temporary ceasefire. However, it provided the TTP — a chance to re-position its fighters and their families back inside Pakistan. When the ceasefire ended due to failure of negotiations, the TTP fighters who got re-located during the ceasefire, took up arms once again against the LEAs resulting in a surge in terrorist attacks in Pakistan.⁴⁰ The large cache of arms and ammunition that was left initially by the Soviets and again by the U.S. on its exit in 2021 also played a crucial role in sustaining the Taliban's resistance. The same weapons are being used by the TTP in their attacks in Pakistan.⁴¹

³⁶ Ishrat Afshan Abbasi, Mukesh Kumar Khatwani, and Mazher Hussain, "An Overview of Major Military Operations in the Tribal Areas of Pakistan," *Journal of Academic and Social Research* 1, no. 1 (2018): 1-14.

³⁷ Mona Kanwal Sheikh and Maja Touzari Janesdatter Greenwood, *Taliban Talks: Past Present and Prospects for the US, Afghanistan and Pakistan*, no. 06, DIIS Report, 2013, <https://pure.diiis.dk>

³⁸ Shaikh and Greenwood, *Taliban Talks*, 2013.

³⁹ Lacin Idil Oztig, "Pakistan's Border Policies and Security Dynamics along the Pakistan-Afghanistan Border," in *South Asia* (Routledge, 2021), 50-65.

⁴⁰ Shahzad Akhtar and Zahid Shahab Ahmed, "Understanding the Resurgence of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan," *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 16, no. 3 (2023): 285-306.

⁴¹ Qandeel Siddique, *Pakistan's Future Policy towards Afghanistan: a Look at Strategic Depth, Militant Movements and the Role of India and the U.S.*, No. 2011: 08, DIIS Report, 2011, <https://pure.diiis.dk>

Proximate Causes of the Conflict

As in plants, anything except the plant itself such as the soil condition, water availability, and other flora and fauna in the near vicinity, the sunlight, air quality and the gardener's role is called its environment.⁴² The quality of the product of the plant equally depends on the suitability of the environment. In conflicts too, there are the same factors or relevant causes often given birth by the main root causes and have the potential to trigger or expand the conflict further. Due to the Taliban war against the U.S. and the emergence of terrorist groups such as the TTP, Pakistan initiated military operations in tribal areas.⁴³ It led to alleged sense of ethnic discrimination among Pashtuns living in the border areas of Pakistan from the rest of the country. Despite state's assurances, this sentiment still prevails in this part of Pakistani society. Instability in Afghanistan and Taliban's policies led to foreign involvement especially India, due to its geo-political interests. Smuggling and alleged corruption at the border crossings also cultivated these miscreants. Illiteracy, poverty and unemployment in the tribal belt have also pushed Pakistani youth to join terrorist organisations.⁴⁴ Lack of law enforcement and weak judicial system in Pakistan often results in the acquittal of terrorists captured by the LEAs.

Actors Involved in the Conflict

This part of the conflict wheel model analyses actors involved in a conflict. Identifying actors is crucial in establishing a clear direction as the second step in resolving the conflict. The actors are generally of two kinds; direct actors and indirect actors.⁴⁵ Direct actors are those who have direct claims and bear the major impact of the conflict. In this conflict, there are three primary or direct actors: Pakistan (state actor), the TTP (non-state actor) and the people of Pakistan. An indirect actor in a conflict means parties

⁴² Lalit M. Srivastava, *Plant Growth and Development: Hormones and Environment* (Elsevier, 2002).

⁴³ Khuram Iqbal, "Trends of Contemporary Terrorism in Pakistan," in *United by Violence, Divided by Cause?* (Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG, 2020), 153-176.

⁴⁴ Ghulam Akhmat e tal., "Exploring the Root Causes of Terrorism in South Asia: Everybody should be Concerned," *Quality & Quantity* 48 (2014): 3065-3079.

⁴⁵ Simon Fisher, *Working with Conflict, Skills and Strategies for Action* (Zed Books, 2000).

siding or intervening from a distance or covertly. These secondary actors in this case are the Afghan Taliban, the US, which occupied Afghanistan for twenty years, the Afghan people and the United Nations under whose umbrella the U.S. invaded Afghanistan, India who remained actively engaged with the then Afghan government for its vested interests against Pakistan, Russia being a previous invader and rival of the U.S., and China eyeing its feet on Afghan soil as an investor. Other militant groups (pro-TTP or anti-TTP) such as the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK), al-Qaeda, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA), and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and the newly emerged Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP) are also important as these groups can act both as a facilitator and as a spoiler in the resolution of the current conflict.

Goals of the Conflicting Parties

Generally, actors in any conflict have geopolitical, economic, and ideological goals. Some of the goals would be long term and other would be short term. For example, in case of TTP, Pakistan's main goal is to manage the conflict peacefully as far as possible.⁴⁶ However, TTP's goal at this stage is to prolong the conflict. The conflict between the State and the TTP is basically an ideological one where the state believes in an Islamic republic with democracy as the form of government and equal opportunities for all including women in all spheres of life. Pakistan has also announced its objective of establishing the state's writ in the tribal areas. On the other hand, TTP is pursuing the goal of imposing strict *Sharia* rule, considering democracy as un-Islamic and women are to be restricted to household. The Taliban's main goal is to get recognition and expect Pakistan to take the lead. Taliban also expect concessions from Pakistan regarding transit trade, provision of health care to Afghans in Pakistan and refugee issues. However, after the U.S. withdrawal, the Taliban significantly changed their earlier policy and thought that pressing Pakistan would serve its purpose. Pakistan and the TTP goals are conflicting, which makes it difficult to reach a peaceful consensus.

⁴⁶ Christine. C. Fair, "Pakistan's Own War on Terror: What the Pakistani Public Thinks," *Journal of International Affairs* 63, no. 1 (2009): 39-55.

Interests of the Actors

In every conflict whether as small as a fight between a husband and a wife or as big as the conflict between two states, the conflicting parties have certain immediate or short-term or/as well as long-term interests and can range from a high priority to a low priority.⁴⁷ Therefore, to resolve peacefully, any conflict, actors are to realise that none of the interests of either an individual or a party can be ignored.

Pakistan's Interests

Pakistan as a state has an interest in establishing the writ of the constitution, maintaining the geographical integrity of the country and treating citizens as per the law of the land so that tribal areas of Pakistan are not used as a sanctuary for foreign terrorists and criminal elements. Pakistan wants to develop resistance in locals against the TTP.⁴⁸ Pakistan also wants to socio-politically and economically integrate the marginalised people of tribal areas into the mainstream. Pakistan desires to develop a better understanding among the ethnic Pashtuns and maintain brotherly relations with Afghanistan. Pakistan desires non-interference of the Afghan Taliban in internal issues of Pakistan such as their support of the Sunni tribes in the Kurram area against the Shia community.

Afghan Taliban's Interests

Afghan Taliban's on the other hand want Pakistan to recognise Taliban or the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as the legitimate government. They also desire that the locals should be given easy access at the border due to religious, cultural, ethnic and economic bonds.⁴⁹ Taliban are also opposed to border fencing and want removal of the fence that Pakistan has erected to stop illegal movement of criminals and terrorists through the porous Pak-Afghan border. Taliban insist Pakistan to negotiate with TTP.

⁴⁷ Thomas L Carson, "Conflicts of Interest," *Journal of Business Ethics* 13 (1994): 387-404.

⁴⁸ Muhammad Amir Rana, "Taliban Insurgency in Pakistan: A Counterinsurgency Perspective," *Conflict and Peace Studies* 2, no. 2 (2009): 12.

⁴⁹ Amina Khan and Christian Wagner, "The Changing Character of the Durand Line," *Strategic Studies* 33, no. 2 (2013): 19-32.

The People's Interests

The people of Pakistan and Afghanistan are tired of continuous wars, violence and poverty. During the past four decades of conflicts and violence, hundreds of thousands of people mostly the ethnic Pashtun in the tribal areas have died and are directly affected by terrorism. People on both sides of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border are connected by blood relations and socio-economic ties and are fed up with military operations, internal displacement and the killings of their loved ones by the terrorist groups.⁵⁰ A common Pakistani or an Afghani wants peace, economic development and cultural ties across the border.

Interests of Regional Countries

Iran's interests include the security of the *Shia* community in Afghanistan and Pakistan as Taliban and other groups have been involved in killings of *Shia* community. Iran also has economic interests in Afghanistan and Pakistan including the gas pipelines and the transit trade. Iran believes that the Taliban and other such elements in Afghanistan and Pakistan provide support to terrorist groups operating in the Sistan Balochistan province adjoining Pakistan and Afghanistan border areas. India does not want a stable Afghanistan as it is directly related to peace in Pakistan. Therefore, New Delhi is supporting both religious as well as nationalist separatist elements who can threaten peace in Pakistan.

Interests of Major Powers

The U.S. interest in the post-15 August 2021 scenario is to ensure that the Af-Pak region is not used for acts of terror against the U.S. and its allies. The U.S. does not want to leave the natural resources-rich region unattended to other competitors such as China and Russia. The U.S. and European Union (EU) are also interested in convincing the Taliban on implementing democracy as the system of governance, give freedom of speech and allow

⁵⁰ Mossarat Qadeem, "Peace Education: A Remedy for Preventing Violent Extremism in Pakistan," *Pakistan Journal of Terrorism Research* 3, no. 2 (2021): 1-25.

women to exercise all their rights. China and Russia's interests include securing economic interests in Afghanistan and Pakistan by investing in developing the land routes. Russia and China also want Afghanistan to eliminate sanctuaries of terrorist groups such as the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) on Afghan soil.

The Prevailing Situation

In the wake of the Taliban's takeover of Kabul on August 15, 2021 and the subsequent resurgence of TTP, Pakistan is experiencing the worst kind of terrorism since 2016. The number of people killed in the attacks by the TTP in Pakistan from August 2021 to December 2024 has increased by 138 per cent.⁵¹ On December 12 2023 TJP; an affiliate of TTP attacked a school housing military personnel in the Daraban area of Dera Ismail Khan near Pakistan's tribal districts bordering Afghanistan killing 23 soldiers, the military also killed 27 terrorists in multiple operations on the same day.⁵² The group also attacked an air force base in Mianwali on November 04, 2023 claiming the destruction of more than a dozen aircrafts and killing troops, the government said only three aircraft were damaged.⁵³ In July, the group claimed responsibility for attacking a military base in southwestern Balochistan province and killing 12 Pakistani soldiers.⁵⁴ The TTP and other such groups have carried out more than 1977 attacks killing 3353 Pakistanis while security forces claim the killing of around 2148 terrorists during the same time.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Muhammad Amir Rana, "Pakistan's Afghan Perspective and Policy Options," PIPS, 2023.

⁵² Sarah Zaman, "Pakistan: Militant Attack Kills 23 Troops," *Voice of America (VOA)*, December 12, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-militant-attack-kills-at-least-12-security-personnel-/7394399.html>

⁵³ "Pakistan Troops 'Thwart' Attack on Air Force Base, Killing 9 Fighters," *Al Jazeera News*, Islamabad, 2023.

⁵⁴ Associated Press, "Pakistan's Military Chief Warns Afghan Taliban Against Harboring Militants as Attacks Spike," *NBC News*, July 24, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/pakistan-afghanistan-taliban-militants-attacks-isis-tehreek-e-jihad-rcna94327>

⁵⁵ SATP, "Data Sheet of Terrorist Attacks in Pakistan," 2024, <https://www.satp.org>

Relations between the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan are at the lowest ebb, especially after the cross-border air strikes Pakistan carried out on December 24, 2024 against TTP's hideouts in Afghanistan's Paktika province reportedly killing 46 terrorists.⁵⁶ In retaliation, Afghanistan's Defence Ministry claimed to have targeted several locations within Pakistan, alleging these sites were bases for organising attacks in Afghanistan.⁵⁷ The situation underscores the fragility of their relationship and raises concerns about escalating violence in the region.⁵⁸ Though there are some diplomatic engagements between the two countries, however, due to a lack of trust, the situation is not expected to improve any sooner.

Taliban though had symbolic meetings with the Indian officials since August 31, 2021, the latest meeting took place in Qatar on January 09, 2025, weeks later after the Pakistani airstrikes in Afghanistan, a development that would worry Pakistan. The military had to launch new operations against the TTP, which will put an additional financial burden on the already ailing economy of Pakistan. The Baloch sub-nationalist separatists are also taking advantage of the prevailing situation and have intensified attacks on the military with the help of hostile intelligence agencies who want to cash the occasion. The Taliban are also facing isolation especially after the deterioration of relations with Pakistan which was the only country convincing the world to not disengage itself from Afghanistan. Taliban should revisit their policy of supporting the TTP.

Cost Benefit Analysis and Possible Scenarios

Knowing about the capabilities or resources of the actors determines how controllable or manageable they are. In the current case, terrorism has cost Pakistan far more than all the wars it has fought with India and all the

⁵⁶ Ayaz Gul, "Taliban Hint at Shielding Anti-Pakistan Militants in Afghanistan as 'Guests'," *Voice of America (VOA)*, December 27, 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-hint-at-shielding-anti-pakistan-militants-in-afghanistan-as-guests-/7916430.html>

⁵⁷ Abid Hussain, "Afghan Taliban Hit 'several points' in Pakistan in Retaliation for Attacks," *Al Jazeera News*, December 28, 2024.

⁵⁸ Humza Jilani, "Pakistan's Bet on Taliban Backfires as Violence Surges," *Financial Times*, January 16, 2025.

natural disasters together that have occurred since 1947.⁵⁹ Pakistan has suffered more than 83000 lives and lost more than US\$ 126.79 billion in fighting terrorism since 2001.⁶⁰ The defence budget of Pakistan was increased to the tune of Rs 920 billion in the fiscal year of 2017-2018 mainly due to spending on war against terrorism.⁶¹ The inflation rate in Pakistan averaged 8.34 per cent from 1957 until 2023, reaching an all-time high of 37.97 per cent in May of 2023.⁶² Pakistan's unemployment rate for 2022 was 6.42 per cent while it was 4.83 per cent in 2019.⁶³ Pakistan has tried several strategies including negotiations and ceasefires with TTP since 2007 but every time these strategies failed due to violations of TTP. The Swat Valley known as Pakistan's Switzerland was an internal tourist hub but could not prosper due to terrorism during the last two decades.⁶⁴ Tribal areas of Pakistan are full of minerals and gas reserves but international investors are not willing to invest due to safety concerns.⁶⁵ Millions became Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), yet the desired objectives could not be achieved. Under such circumstances, the option of a full-fledged military operations alone do not seem viable due to the ailing economy and political instability in the country.

As far as terrorist organisations are concerned, political instability, economic crisis and wars favour their survival. The Taliban, TTP and other such groups seem contented with the current situation and are more interested in mounting pressure on Pakistan instead of peace negotiations.

⁵⁹ Ashley J Tellis, "Pakistan and the War on Terror," *Conflicted Goals, Compromised Performance*. Washington, DC (et al.): Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 10 (2008), <https://carnegieendowment.org>

⁶⁰ Muhammad Tahir Rashid, Rabeel Fatima, and Muhammad Wasif, "War on Terror: The Cost Pakistan Paid," *Annals of Human and Social Sciences* 4, no. 2 (2023): 738-750.

⁶¹ Kamran Yousaf, "Defence spending up by 9.5% to Rs920.1b," *Express Tribune*, Islamabad, May 27, 2017,

⁶² Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, "Pakistan Inflation Rate," Trading Economics, 2023, <https://tradingeconomics.com>

⁶³ Statista, "Pakistan: Unemployment Rate from 1999 to 2023," July 05, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/383735/unemployment-rate-in-pakistan/>

⁶⁴ Rehana Wagma, *War, Violence and Women's Agency in Pakistan: The Case of Swat* (Taylor & Francis, 2024).

⁶⁵ Naqib Ullah Khan et al., "A Comprehensive Evaluation of Sustainable Mineral Resources Governance in Pakistan: An Analysis of Challenges and Reforms," *Resources Policy*, Elsevier, vol. 88(C) (2024): 104-383, <https://ideas.repec.org/a/eee/jrpoli/v88y2024ics0301420723010942.html>

Taliban are making efforts to encourage investment in Afghanistan as the country is economically weak, has weak health infrastructure, lesser job opportunities and fragile industry. Taliban may not survive for a long time in such a situation and have been engaged with China, Russia and other countries to invest in Afghanistan.⁶⁶ Pakistan can use its influence on China and the transit trade route advantage to convince the Taliban to either not support TTP or take action against them. TTP on the other hand is to lose nothing in its war with Pakistan and would compromise little even if it agrees to negotiate with Pakistan. TTP is also taking leverage from the Taliban due to the ISK factor.

Peace in the border areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan is highly important for the economic development and prosperity of the entire region. Mega projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan India Gas pipeline (TAPI) and transit trade with Central Asian countries can only be possible with peace in this part of the world.⁶⁷ TTP's ability to hit targets across the country has impacted every sphere of life in Pakistan such as restricting international sports, tourism and foreign direct investments. The resolution of this conflict would bring peace, development and prosperity to Pakistan. It will also pave the way for regional peace and cooperation.

After having an idea about the root causes, actors involved in the conflict, their goals, interests and position, and an overview of the prevailing situation, it becomes easier to paint different case scenarios.

Worst-Case Scenario

In this scenario, both principal actors — Pakistan and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) — eschew dialogue entirely, opting instead for a purely military and violent resolution to their conflict. The confrontation is likely to be prolonged, particularly if Pakistan disengages from the Afghan

⁶⁶ Marta Chiusi and Jagannath Panda, "China's Gamble in Afghanistan: Opportunities and Perils in the Himalayan Context," *Mapping China's Himalayan Hustle* (2024): 189.

⁶⁷ Barnett Rubin, "The TAPI Pipeline and Paths to Peace in Afghanistan," *New Yorker*, December 30, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-tapi-pipeline-and-paths-to-peace-in-afghanistan>

Taliban or if the Taliban refuse to cooperate with Pakistan on this issue. Furthermore, an alliance between the TTP, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), and Baloch sub-nationalist groups could open multiple fronts against Pakistan. The TTP's strategy may include targeting military-operated commercial enterprises and assassinating civilians employed in these institutions.⁶⁸ In response, Pakistan might launch large-scale military operations, resulting in the displacement of local populations and the creation of IDPs. Such operations could lead to the destruction of homes, fields, livestock, and businesses, exacerbating local resentment towards the military.⁶⁹ Additionally, Pakistan may conduct aerial and ground offensives within Afghan territory, prompting the Taliban to retaliate by deploying their fighters, alongside TTP militants, to carry out attacks within Pakistan.

Best-Case Scenario

In conflict resolution, dialogue is considered the best option to address differences and grievances. The best-case scenario – although unlikely, could be the resumption of talks mediated by the Afghan Taliban. The Pakistani religious political parties or scholars from seminaries for whom the Taliban have some respect and regard can become facilitators. In this scenario, TTP might agree unconditionally to talk under the umbrella of the constitution of Pakistan, renounce violence, lay down arms and surrender to the law of the land. In response, the state might agree to address TTP's genuine grievances regarding justice, and development in their areas, bringing them to mainstream society and integrating into a political process. Further, Pakistan might be willing to initiate confidence-building measures (CBMs), establish a truth and reconciliation committee to listen to their genuine grievances, and demands and pledge economic development in the terrorism affected areas.

Middle-Case Scenario

A more pragmatic scenario might envision the Afghan Taliban refraining from severing ties with TTP, but imposing restrictions to prevent the group

⁶⁸ Abid Hussain, "Pakistan Taliban Threatens Military-Run Businesses Amid Rising Violence," *Al Jazeera News*, January 06, 2025.

⁶⁹ Asad Hashim, "In Pakistan's Borderlands, Taliban Quietly Expanding Influence," *Al Jazeera*. December 08, 2021.

from launching attacks against Pakistan from Afghan territory. The Taliban may exert control over specific elements or factions within Afghanistan that provide support to the TTP's operations against Pakistan. In this context, Pakistan's political parties assume a leading role by formulating and debating counterterrorism strategies within the parliamentary framework. The military has always extended and will extend unequivocal support to the political process, ensuring action against all militant entities. Concurrently, the state will be eager to utilise diplomatic channels to garner international support — not for financing the conflict, but to promote socio-economic development in regions adversely affected by terrorism. Initiatives aimed at educating the populace and creating employment opportunities would diminish the recruitment pool for terrorist organisations, potentially compelling the TTP to agree to a ceasefire, if not complete disarmament, in the initial phase.

Strategies and Options

In conflict resolution, five key strategies are employed to foster productive negotiations and effectively manage disputes: avoiding, compromising, collaborating, competing, and accommodating. In the prevailing situation, both Pakistan and the Taliban have been sticking to the competing strategies.

As far as options available to the Taliban and Pakistan are concerned, one option can be that Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban continue their negotiations process for cooperation. Continuity of diplomatic engagement is necessary to understand each other concerns. To avoid ill-intentions of spoilers, the negotiations either between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban or between Pakistan and the TTP should be kept secret. Pakistan should also engage the Kandahari Taliban faction. Economic cooperation, infrastructure development, military assistance in training, border management and security collaborations, trade concessions, cultural and educational exchanges, humanitarian assistance, and respect for each other's sovereignty must be ensured between the two nations. The second option with Pakistan is achieving peace through the complete elimination of TTP with an all-out War. The question arises, does Pakistan has the capacity and will to do so keeping in view the outcome of the U.S. war on terror in Afghanistan? There is a need to rationally and realistically look

into the different strategies before deciding on a particular course of action. Pakistan's strategy should also include charting out of specific measures to address the grievances of the Pakistani people living along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. To ensure implementation of these measure, the state needs to give due role to local governance and community engagement for countering extremism and terrorism in Pakistan.

Conclusion

Analysis using the CWM has identified some genuine root causes or grievances on the part of tribal people for lack of education, health, jobs and socio-political integration. The illiterate and jobless tribal youth often become easy prey to those who do not want peace. Terrorism in Pakistan since 2001 has been driven by a complex mix of historical, social, political, and geopolitical factors. Pakistan's role in the Afghan-Soviet War (1979-89) nurtured militant networks that later evolved into terrorist groups. The spread of Salafism and Wahhabism fuelled sectarian violence, while weak governance, political instability, and underdevelopment, particularly in FATA and Balochistan, allowed militancy to flourish. The marginalisation of ethnic and religious communities led to their alienation and cultivated support for radical ideologies. Poverty, unemployment, lack of education, and a weak justice system also contributed to radicalisation, with religious seminaries (*Madrassas*) playing a role in indoctrinating youth. Poor law enforcement in areas with limited state presence, along with foreign influence, social media, and the lack of a strong moderate counter-narrative, have all perpetuated the spread of militant ideologies, keeping terrorism persistent in Pakistan. International actors such as India and the U.S. have their respective goals and interests and, therefore, have maintained political position, which is unlikely helpful in resolving the conflict peacefully. The cost-benefit analysis reveals that the Taliban as an actor would like to use TTP as a bargaining chip or a pressure group against Pakistan to secure diplomatic recognition and monetary benefits. Pakistan's goal is to ensure the sanctity of the international border and ensure Afghan soil is not used either by the TTP or by India against Pakistan. China is investing heavily in Afghanistan and Beijing's road to Afghanistan goes through Pakistan China seems willing to help Pakistan in fighting the menace of terrorism and exert some pressure on Afghanistan.

Pakistan neither can achieve 'Best-case Scenario' nor it can afford the 'Worst-case Scenario.' Therefore, Pakistan needs to understand that ideology is hard to eliminate by using sheer kinetic measures only and should look for a 'Middle-case Scenario, i.e, Collaborative Approach.' The collaborating strategy can lead to a win-win solution for both Pakistan and the Taliban. To achieve a win-win solution, Pakistan must remain engaged with the Afghan Taliban in bilateral diplomacy. Within Pakistan, targeted Intelligence Based Operations (IBOs) against hardcore TTP fighters should continue, and the window of negotiations with those TTP factions who are ready to talk under the constitution of Pakistan may remain open. TTP as an actor under the prevailing situation would like to prolong the status quo and ensure a persistent security dilemma, against which Pakistan must plan a strategy.

The TTP must recognise that its struggle is fundamentally different from that of the Afghan Taliban, who fought against foreign occupation. Prolonged violence against the Pakistani state and its citizens is likely to become unsustainable due to operational fatigue and could further alienate the public from the TTP's cause. Although the Afghan Taliban possess influence over the TTP, they may be unwilling or unable to exercise this influence in Pakistan's favour due to both limited capacity and ambiguous intentions. Further, to mitigate distrust, Pakistan must engage in trust-building measures with the Afghan Taliban, demonstrating that their interests are better served through cooperation with Pakistan rather than perpetuating the TTP-Pakistan conflict. Effective collaboration between Pakistan and Afghanistan could yield mutual benefits, and will enhance stability in the region.