

PAKISTAN'S COUNTERTERRORISM STRATEGY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF NON-MILITARY MEASURES (2014-2020)

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ABSTRACT

Since 9/11, Pakistan has been employing all means available to fight extremism and terrorism. The Pakistan security forces have launched several military offensives in the tribal belt and across the country. The government has also utilized the softer and non-kinetic approaches, such as National Action Plan 2014, to fight terrorism. By utilizing the official and unofficial sources, this study aims to connect the non-military options and their effectiveness in dealing with violent extremism and terrorism in Pakistan. This paper provides a comprehensive overview and assessment of Pakistan non-military approaches in its counterterrorism policy. It finds that although Pakistan's counterterrorism policy has made some considerable gains in reducing the number and intensity of terrorist activities across the country, however, its fight against extremism and terrorism is far from over. It argues that Pakistan requires a comprehensive counterterrorism policy to gain victory in its fight against the menace of extremism and terrorism.

KEYWORDS: Counterterrorism Policy, Extremism, National Action Plan, Pakistan, Terrorism, South Asia

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INTRODUCTION

Since 9/11, the menace of terrorism has been wreaking havoc in Pakistan, and it has claimed thousands of innocent lives, and by April 2018, it has suffered massive economic losses worth \$126.79 billion (Dawn 2018a). Undoubtedly, Pakistan has been one of the worst affected victims of terrorism in the world (Dudley 2019). Pakistan has been struggling to employ all possible means to fight violent extremism, sectarianism, and terrorism. To combat terrorism, Pakistan launched many military offensives against the terrorists and extremists in the tribal belt and across the country. Along with such a coercive approach, Pakistan also opted for soft and non-kinetic methods to deal with terrorism in the country. This paper examines the soft, non-kinetic strategies that Pakistan took to fight terrorism across the country.

While combating terrorism and extremism, the military launched several military offensives, accompanied by intermittent peace negotiations and agreements with the extremists and terrorists, in the tribal belt and across the country. To further enhance and complement the military offensives, the government sought other non-coercive options to root out violence and terrorism in Pakistan, including formulation and execution of the Counter Terrorism National Action Plan in 2014.

The objective of this article is to assess the non-military approaches, such as employment of the National Action Plan 2014 (NAP), in Pakistan's counterterrorism strategy. It examines the transformation and development of non-military approaches over time and how far such methods have been successful in mitigating the threat of terrorism and extremism in Pakistan. It also investigates the contributing factors for (un)successful none-kinetic counterterrorism strategy of Pakistan. It provides a comprehensive overview and an objective assessment of the developments in the implementation of the NAP to combat terrorism in Pakistan. The following part offers an overview of Pakistan non-military measures, in this case, the National Action Plan.

Overview of Pakistan's Non-Military Measures

The horrific incident of Army Public School (APS), Peshawar, where terrorist attacked and innocent children and faculty members lost their lives. Consequently, after this tragedy, the government devised alternative and comprehensive policy, the National Action Plan to curb growing terrorism in Pakistan. The following section offers an overview of the developments in the implementation of NAP point by point.

Overview and Implementation of the National Action Plan

Lifting of Death Penalty Moratorium

The first point on the NAP agenda was to ratify the 2008 Pakistan People's Party's implementation of a moratorium on the death penalty. Therefore, since 2014 after lifting the six-year moratorium, 483 convicted terrorists were hanged till death (Waqar 2017). The government cites a sharp decline in the number of a terrorist attack across the country from 1570 in 2014 to 137 in 2019 (South Asia Terrorism Portal 2020a) and attributes this to the said policy. Though the number and intensity of violent attacks have significantly reduced, nevertheless, terrorism-related fatalities in the said incident are still significantly high. Moreover, the United States, European Union, and other human rights groups have severely criticized capital punishment.

Military Courts

In 2015, the Pakistan Parliament passed the 21st constitutional amendment, which enabled to establish special military tribunals for the immediate trial of terrorists, till January 7, 2017, for two years. These parallel military courts complemented conventional courts by reducing their burden and fast-tracked the prosecution process of cases related to terrorism. By 2020, the military courts have convicted 344 people, 301 were given prison term, mainly life imprisonment, and acquitted five so far (Dawn 2020).

Complete Eradication of Armed Militias

Although the government has taken some measures to eradicate the militancy across the country. However, it has been cherry-picking in its choice toward specific militant organizations, e.g., Lashkar-e-Taiba, it has been harboring in Pakistan's most populous province, Punjab and had been proscribed in 2002, during General Musharraf regime when Lashkar-e-Taiba's involvement in the attack on Indian Parliament in 2001, was revealed. Despite all this, Lashkar had been operating in Punjab as Jamaat-ud-Dawa. Additionally, by 2016, the federal government has proscribed 212 terrorists/militant/extremist organizations.

Activating the NACTA

Under the NAP, the federal government reiterated to strengthen and restructure the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), which is Pakistan's sole federal level counterterrorism authority. Several security analysts and scholars argue that this body has failed to play any significant role to combat terrorism in the country, and it has restrained to a mere coordinator among the central units. In 2018, Imran Khan, the newly elected Prime Minister, decided to review the functioning and role of the counter-terrorism body, but so far, no significant development has been made to restructure and activate NACTA. In September 2018, Prime Minister Imran Khan decided to retain the NACTA under his control, which would significantly enhance NACTA's influence. Moreover, the NACTA claims that intelligence and security machinery is supporting NACTA's coordination role to combat terrorism (Dawn 2018b).

Curbing Extremist Material

To curb the dissemination of extremist literature and hate speech by the proscribed extremist and terrorist groups, law enforcement agencies are implementing various policies. Therefore, law enforcement agencies booked 1353 cases, made 2528 arrests, and sealed 70 shops in the cases for hate speeches and other extremist literature (Waqar 2017). As the official statistics show that by 2017, the law enforcement agencies have registered 17,795 cases, arrested 18520 people and seized 7,942 pieces of equipment confiscated that were used in violation for the Sound System Ordinance 2015, which implemented to tackle the issue of the hate speech issue (primarily sectarian in nature) (Waqar 2017). Similarly, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) sought to block several blogposts of terrorists and militants across the country. However, such blogs are still accessible via proxies. PTA is also seeking to report numerous social media accounts related to sectarianism and terrorism. In January 2018, the NACTA finalized a national narrative on terrorism and militant, which would help the country in fighting terrorism.

Choking Terrorist Financing

Total elimination of extremism and terrorism from the country necessitates the choking of all sources of terror financing for all extremist and terrorist outfits. Therefore, the State Bank of Pakistan froze around 4000 bank accounts of suspected individuals vis-à-vis terror financing. It must be noted that owing to Intelligence-based Operations, the number of kidnapping for ransom cases, which were the principal source of terror financing, has dropped significantly over the years. Pakistan issued "anti-money laundering and combating the financing of terrorism (AML-CFT)" regulations in 2012 and revised regulations in 2015. The Financial Actions Task (FATF) placed Pakistan on its grey-list in June 2018 as a non-cooperative country in compliance for anti-money laundering (Shakoori 2020) and on February 21, 2020, FATF retained Pakistan on its grey-list till June 2020. This shows that the government has failed to choke terror financing and money laundering.

Averting the Re-emergence of Banned Outfits

Since the employment of the National Action Plan, the government has proscribed many Islamist extremist and terrorist organizations and sought to prevent them from re-emerging across the country. However, several of them have not only re-emerged under different names but actively operating in Pakistan. For instance, proscribed Lashkar-e-Taiba had been labeled as Jamaat-ud-Dawa, and similarly, Jaish-e-Mohammad is now called as Khudam-ul-Islam. The government of Pakistan and security establishment has been cherry-picking whether to target and whom to patronize. However, in 2019, Pakistan issued the list of 68 proscribed organizations across Pakistan and added four others to its watch-list (The News 2019).

Counter-Terrorism Force

Before the National Action Plan, NISP pointed out the establishment of a dedicated counterterrorism force. Under the NISP, the local police had a significant role in combating terrorism across the country. However, the NAP could not provide the guideline for the formulation of a counter-terrorism force. It also failed to define the role of police in this regard. Moreover, the provincial government took initiatives to form special police force, along with already established counterterrorism units. For instance, the Punjab government established a new Counter-Terrorism Force with the deployment of around 3000 policemen, along with its existing Elite Police Force. By 2017, the NACTA has established Counter-Terrorism Force Units in all provinces and administrative units across the country with a combining strength of 9,036 personnel (Waqar 2017).

Implementing Policies to Reduce Religious Persecution

The National Action Plan has failed to implement policy to mitigate religious persecution and better protection of religious minorities in Pakistan. As the Human Rights, Watch has reported that 2018 saw a significant rise of violence against the minorities across the country, and the government could not ensure to protect the religious minorities and religious freedom in Pakistan (Human Rights Watch 2019). However, there are some promising signs as the Sindh provincial assembly has passed a bill against the forced conversion of religious minorities. On the same lines, the Senate has passed the “Hindu Marriage Bill” to ensure the protection of the rights of Hindu minorities in Pakistan.

Registration of Religious Seminaries

The successful dismantling of extremism and terrorism from the country necessitates the uprooting of their breeding grounds, the religious seminaries across the country. For this purpose, the NACTA, in collaboration with the Ittehad-e-Taneemat-e-Madaras-Deenya Pakistan, developed and implemented the regulation and registration process of Madrassahs in Pakistan. By 2019, there are an estimated 26,000 registered religious seminaries in Pakistan, and around 10,000 to 15,000 are still unregistered Madrassahs in the country (A. U. Khan 2019, 4). Furthermore, the idea of the formulation of an Islamic Education Commission was under consideration for the regulation of Madrassahs across the country. By 2016, more than 250 Madrassahs have been closed across the country under the National Action Plan (A. Khan 2016). In March 2019, the government ceased control of 182 religious seminaries, which had links with banned extremist organizations. In April, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan committed that his government is seeking to control 30,000 religious seminaries across the country. By 2018, NACTA has collected 100 percent detail data of religious seminaries in Punjab and Sindh and 28pc in Baluchistan and Kyber Pakhtunkhwa (A. U. Khan 2019, 4). Similarly, NACTA has initiated the geo-tagging and mapping of religious seminaries.

Dealing with the Glorification of Terrorists in Media

The National Action Plan sought to prohibit the coverage of the glorification of extremist and terrorist outfits in electronic and media outlets. Any militant organizations which were disturbing the peace and challenging the writ of the state were banned for their false justification of their violent action (Rehman 2016). Consequently, the National Action Plan undertook stern measure against media outlets that were trying to glorify the hate speech, violent and sectarian activities. Therefore, the Military of Information and Pakistan Electronic Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) had been directed to implement the banning of glorification of terrorist content and activities in electronic and print media.

FATA Reforms

Under the NAP framework, regarding the FATA reforms, the National Implementation Committee was formed on December 18, 2017, and endorsed the merger of FATA in KPK province and also to allow FATA to represent 23 members for KPK provincial assembly for 2018 general elections and on May 31, 2018, through 25th amendment to the constitution, FATA was merged with KPK province (Fahad 2017). Through such development and administrative reforms in FATA, the government of Pakistan sought to facilitate the process of reconstruction and rehabilitation of people of tribal belt and address their grievances.

Blocking Extremist Communications

Another target of the National Action Plan was to take out the communication network of terrorist and extremist groups across the country. The government has blocked nearly 98.3 million cellular SIM cards to demolish terrorists' entire communication network (A. U. Khan 2019, 4). By 2015, more than 5.7 million SIM cards had been registered. Also, the government sought to block Afghan SIMs in border areas along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. NACTA also launched mobile applications such as Tat'heer (cleansing) and Chakus (vigilance) where citizens/netizens can report extremist material on social media to the concerned authorities (A. U. Khan 2019, 4).

Tacking with the Abuse of the Internet for Terrorism

Under the National Action Plan, the government aimed at taking stern measures regarding the abuse of internet and social media for the dissemination of terrorist and extremist activities. By 2016, the Ministry of Information Technology blocked 10 websites and more than 937 webpages of terrorist outfits (Waqar 2017). Despite some necessary measures, the NAP failed to devise a robust framework to disrupt the abuse of internet and social media networks for extremism, sectarianism, and terrorism with the country. In April 2016, the National Assembly of Pakistan passed the "Cyber Crime Bill" to reduce the abuse of the internet for terrorist activities, but human rights activists argue that such bills are against the spirit of freedom of expression and speech.

Curbing Militancy in Punjab

The government of Pakistan announced that under the National Action Plan, there would be zero tolerance for militancy in Punjab province and across the country and militancy and sectarianism to be dealt with iron hands. Punjab province, particularly the southern Punjab, has been a breeding group of extremism and sectarianism in Pakistan. Several Punjabi jihadi and militant outfits have enjoyed robust ties with the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and Al-Qaeda. Similarly, many sectarian groups received support from mainstream political parties. The former Prime Minister Sharif and his government failed to take action against certain sectarian militant groups, either to avoid backlash from such groups and religious circles or to cater to its political calculus (Jaffrelot 2015). In April 2019, Imran Khan's government promised to deal with the sectarian and extremist outfits (Reuters 2019).

The Logical Conclusion of Karachi Operation

The government of Pakistan, in collaboration with Pakistan military, sought to curb the criminal and militant elements in Karachi. The MutahidaQuami Movement (MQM) became the target of the operation in Karachi as the involvement of many MQM party workers in the criminal activities was reported. Therefore, the Pakistan Rangers spearheaded this operation. They raided the party headquarters in Karachi and also arrested hundreds of MQM workers (Ahmed 2017). By 2016, during the Karachi operation, the Pakistan Rangers and other law enforcement agencies have arrested 890 terrorists,

over 6900 criminals, and 1834 murderers and also seized over 16000 weapons. With the successful conclusion of operation in Karachi, the terrorist activities have seen a 98 percent decline within the past four years (A. U. Khan 2019, 4).

Baluchistan Reconciliation

Since 2006, Balochistan province has been witnessing insurgency by the Baluch separatists. In the same year, during the Musharraf regime, the military killed the tribal chief, Akbar Bugti, which added fuel to the fire. Under the National Action Plan, the reconciliation of Baluch nationalists is a vital component of the plan, especially given the ongoing conflict in the province. Under this plan, the Baluch nationalists/separatists have been granted amenity to those who unconditionally and willingly surrender to Pakistan's armed forces. On August 14, 2015, 400 insurgents surrendered to the security forces (Express Tribune 2015).

Tackling Sectarianism across the Country

The government of Pakistan announced that under the National Action Plan, militancy and sectarianism to be dealt with iron hands. However, many sectarian groups received support from mainstream political parties. The former Prime Minister Sharif and his government failed to take action against certain sectarian militant groups, either to avoid backlash from such groups and religious circles or to cater to its political calculus (Jaffrelet 2015). However, the government had taken down several sectarian militants, such as Haroon Bhatti, Malik Ishaq, and several high profile sectarian extremists in Punjab. In April 2019, Imran Khan's government promised to deal with the sectarian and extremist outfits.

The Issue of Afghan Refugees

Under the NAP, the federal government planned to send back around 1.5 million (now 2.3 million) Afghan refugees through a comprehensive policy. These refugees are residing in Pakistan since 1979 after the invasion of the Soviet Army in Afghanistan (Siddiqui 2019). The federal government devised a policy "National Policy on Management and Repatriation of Afghan Refugees" to deal with this issue. For instance, the Islamabad administration demolished a slum in the suburbs of Islamabad city, which resulted in the relocation of over 3000 Afghan refugees from the area. Such examples are regarded as the practical application of the NAP agenda of repatriation of refugees to their homeland, Afghanistan. In 2015, Pakistan repatriated 33,000 Afghan refugees back to Afghanistan (Siddiqui 2019). Furthermore, the government planned to register undocumented Afghan nationals in the country by 2015, but it extended the deadline of Proof of Registration card for refugees till June 30, 2019.

Overhauling the Criminal Justice System

Under the NAP, the government sought to reform and improve Pakistan's criminal justice system. It is a fact that "a reformed and strengthened criminal justice system is pivotal to countering terror threats and containing violent extremism" (International Crisis Group 2015). It is argued that the adjourning the conclusion of criminal cases, fewer convictions in terror-related cases, and the presence of many ambiguities in the current judicial system facilitate the terrorists. Consequently, it necessitates a proper approach to reform and improves the existing judicial system of Pakistan, along with adequate arrangements for the protection of the jury, witnesses, prosecutors, and investigating officials of the courts in terror-related cases.

Assessment of Pakistan's Non-Military Measures

The Pakistan military has launched many minor and major military offensive in the tribal belt and also across the country; however, these were accompanied by non-military approaches, such as Counterterrorism National Action Plan. The successive governments have failed to implement the National Action Plan in letter and spirit. Nevertheless, both military and non-military approaches have made some tangible gains in bringing down the number of terrorist incidents and intensity across the country. It is evident in the South Asia Terrorism Portal statistics regarding the number of terror-related incidents, terrorism-related fatalities, and the number of suicide attacks across the country. According to the statistics, the suicide attacks has seen plummeted sharply over the years, both in number and intensity, for instance, from 85 suicide blasts in 2009 to eight attacks in 2019 (See, Figure 1).

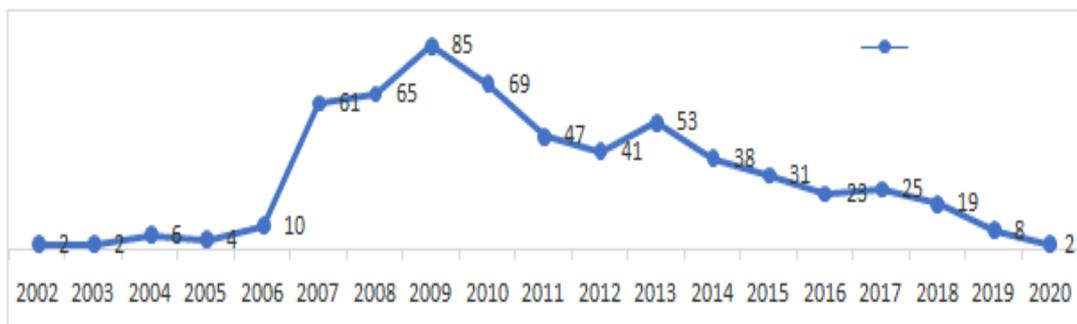


Figure 1: The Number of Suicide Attacks in Pakistan (2002-2020).

Source: (South Asia Terrorism Portal 2020b)

Note: Data until March 26, 2020

Similarly, over the years, the number of violent incidents and terrorism-related fatalities have reduced significantly. For instance, the number of terrorist incidents has decreased from 1246 incidents in 2010 to 137 in 2019. Likewise, the number of terrorism-related fatalities have plunged from 7342 deaths in 2010 to 137 in 2019 (See, Figure 2).

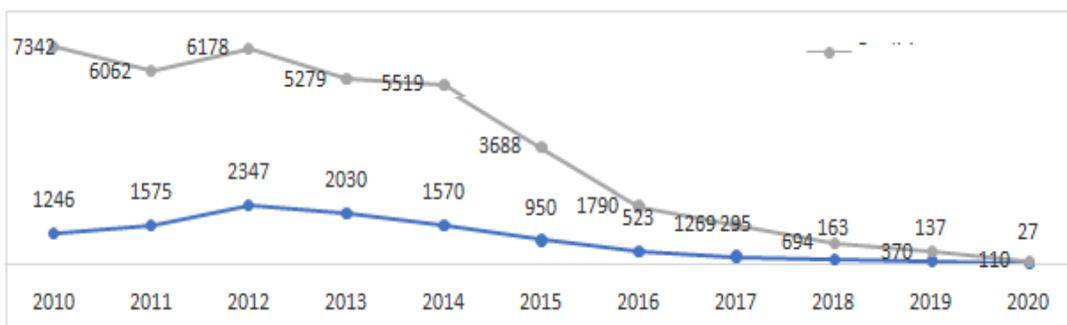


Figure 2: The Terrorism-related Incidents and Fatalities in Pakistan (2010-2020).

Source: (South Asia Terrorism Portal 2020a)

Note: Data until March 26, 2020

The government of Pakistan has achieved many milestones in the effective implementation of the National Action Plan. It has executed 483 convicted terrorism. The government has made noticeable progress in curbing hate speech and extremist material, blocking extremist communication networks, abuses of internet, electronic, and print media. Regarding FATA reform, the FATA was merged with the Kyber Pakhtunkhwa province and also given representation in KPK provincial assembly. The NACTA has registered and mapped the most of religious seminaries across the country. The Operation in Karachi has been concluded and lauded as a success. However, the government failed to extend the term of

special military trial courts. The government has made progress on choking the error financing as Financial Action Task Force has retained Pakistan on its 'grey list,' but it would require political will and time for the Pakistani government before making it to white-list. Baluchistan political reconciliation process is still in progress. The government is struggling to manage the matter of repatriation of Afghan refugees.

Because of the success of Pakistan's counterterrorism strategies, life in the country is getting back to normal. Likewise, tourism is flourishing, and international sports are making a return to Pakistan. The international community is also acknowledging Pakistan's efforts in countering terrorism as the United States and the United Kingdom have relaxed their travel advisory for their nationals. Similarly, the United Nations has regarding Islamabad (the capital of Pakistan) as a family station for its personnel stationed in the country. Several international airlines have resumed or considering to resume their flights to Pakistan; for instance, British Airways has resumed flight to Islamabad (Dawn 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

Pakistan's counterterrorism policy has made some concrete gains in dismantling sectarianism, extremism, and terrorism across the country. Life in the country is returning to normalcy. The number and intensity of terrorist activities have sharply declined across Pakistan. The execution of the NAP has been partially successful in countering terrorism and extremism in Pakistan. The Pakistani government has taken measures to prevent the promotion of extremist literature, and praising of terrorists on media, promotion of terrorism on the internet and social media dismantling terrorist communication network and terror financing and comeback of banned outfits, arrest, and executions of extremists and terrorists, registration of religious seminaries, FATA reforms, successful operation in Karachi,

Specific factors have hindered the effectiveness of soft and non-kinetic approaches to Pakistan's counterterrorism policy. There is a lack of supervision authority, implementation, and uniform reporting mechanism for the NAP. Whiling drafting the 20-points of NAP, the government did not specify any standard to measure or assess the performance of this plan. This article argues that the National Action Plan is a reactionary measure, not a well-devised proactive counterterrorism effort. It lacks proper direction, and coordination among center and units, and ownership of implementation. It has shifted the burden to deal with terrorism on the military, thus militarizing the internal security policy of Pakistan. A purely militarized approach would not help Pakistan in dismantling the roots of terrorism in the country. The government failed to establish a national level counter-terrorism force, political reconciliation of Baluchistan, issue of Afghan refugees, persecution of religious minorities, reforms in the existing criminal justice system.

Nevertheless, both military and non-military approaches have made some tangible gains in bringing down the number of terrorist incidents and intensity across the country. It is evident in the statistics regarding the number of terror-related incidents, terrorism-related fatalities, and the number of suicide attacks in Pakistan, which have sharply declined over the years, both in number and intensity.

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