

Pathways to Eradicating Terrorism in Post-2021 AFPAK: Power Vacuums, Militant Adaptation and Security Governance Reforms

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Abstract

The post-2021 withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan profoundly altered the security landscape in the Afghanistan-Pakistan (AFPAK) region. This study examined the pathways to eradicating terrorism in this context, focusing on the interplay between power vacuums, militant adaptation, and governance reforms. A quantitative research design was employed to analyse terrorism incidents, fatalities, and governance indicators from 2015 to 2024. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and fixed-effects panel regression were used to assess the impact of political stability, government effectiveness, and rule of law on terrorism intensity. The findings revealed a significant increase in terrorism incidents and fatalities after 2021, indicating that the withdrawal created conditions conducive to militant resurgence. Governance variables were negatively correlated with terrorism measures, demonstrating that higher political stability and institutional effectiveness reduced both the frequency and lethality of attacks. Regression results confirmed that weaknesses in governance structures and the rule of law significantly contributed to the escalation of terrorist activity. The study concluded that military interventions alone were insufficient for sustainable counterterrorism outcomes. Effective governance, institutional strengthening, cross-border cooperation, and community-focused initiatives were identified as essential components of a comprehensive strategy to mitigate terrorism. These insights offer policymakers evidence-based guidance for designing integrated interventions that address both immediate threats and underlying structural vulnerabilities.

Keywords: Adaptation, Governance, Militancy, Security, Terrorism, Violence.

Introduction

The 2021 geopolitical conditions in Afghanistan and Pakistan (AFPAK) have radically changed due to the withdrawal of the international military troops and the sudden disintegration of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. In August 2021, when the Taliban took over Kabul, it left huge power gaps along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan and transformed the dynamics of security in the region (Bukhari & Khattak, 2025). Such power vacuums not only disrupted the security establishments of both nations but also created a rich breeding ground for already-established and emerging militant groups to regenerate, reorganize, and expand their areas of operation (Gillani, 2023). Scholars also argued that the revival of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the presence of transnational terrorist entities, including Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), were closely linked to governance shortfalls and ungoverned areas in the AFPAK region after 2021 (Muhammadi, 2025; Akbar, 2024). These changes

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shattered the past counterterrorism achievements and cast serious doubts on viable ways of eliminating terrorism.

The history of protracted wars, weak institutions, and porous border regimes has historically made regional security governance in AFPAK weak (Khan et al., 2024). The Taliban's rule over Afghanistan was not turned into a resilient tool in preventing the terrorist mobilization process; rather, it allowed several groups of militants to find the possibility to more than restore their operational capabilities in the post-2021 period, taking advantage of the gaps in governance and the unclear enforcement tools (Wattoo & Khan, 2025). The interdependence of militant adaptation and institutional vulnerabilities created a complex security environment in which conventional counterterrorism methods, mostly kinetic, failed (Zaman et al., 2025). Consequently, trends of violence and militancy showed progression rather than deterioration, making it difficult to respond to governance within the region.

Historical regional cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan played an essential role in addressing common security threats, but the post-2021 relationship was strained by a lack of fidelity and conflicting interests (Asma et al., 2024). The nexus between the government of the Afghan Taliban and organizations like the TTP represented not only ideological connections but also tactical opportunism and further aggravated bilateral strains and influenced the diplomatic interactions. Further, a lack of coordination across borders and an improper security governance arrangement promoted militant movements and deterred joint counterterrorism efforts. Such governance gaps made militant players more decisive and highlighted rigidities in how institutions respond.

It was essential to conduct a systematic study of the influence of power gaps, military adjustment, and security governance reform on the process of terrorism in the post-2021 AFPAK region. This paper aimed to make contributions to both scholarly and policy discourses through the analysis of these interconnected phenomena and the development of evidence-based reform directions to improve the region's stability and alleviate the threat of terrorism. This study aimed to identify effective governance measures that could cut across the board, rather than relying on traditional military-driven solutions, by harmonizing both the structural causes and adaptive behaviours of militant networks.

Research Background

The re-establishment of the Taliban rule in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the U.S. troops in August 2021 brought a major change in the strategic and security balance of the AFPAK region (Bukhari and Khattak, 2025). Analysts noted that despite the Taliban's territorial consolidation, it did not destroy or put allied militant networks, such as the TTP and ISKP, at a disadvantage by taking advantage of governance lapses and institutional vulnerabilities (Muhammadi, 2025). The resurgence of the Taliban led to a situation whereby uncontrolled areas along the Durand Line boundary were becoming the contested areas of militant activities that impacted the environment of security in both countries.

The revival of the TTP was reported to be one of the critical issues affecting Pakistan's security in the post-2021 era. The adaptation of the group's operations in Afghanistan, including reorganized operations, a more effective propaganda machinery, and adjusted targeting mechanisms, was enabled by changes in power relations (Basit, 2024). Pakistan's efforts to settle the TTP issue failed, further highlighting the weaknesses of modern counterterrorism systems and the discrepancy between governance and negotiation approaches (Basit, 2024). In addition, it was shown that militant organizations used the poor socio-economic situation and lax administration of some regions to find, recruit, and maintain their violent campaigns (Khan & Sidra, 2024).

Reforms in security governance were strongly advised as a prerequisite for addressing the ongoing terrorism. Neglected border areas were marred with historical under-development,

insufficient statehood, and permeable administrative controls- circumstances which promoted militant adaptation (Wattoo & Khan, 2025). Past interventions, such as the National Action Plan in Pakistan and kinetic operations, achieved tactical successes but failed to deliver lasting institutional changes that could curb the sources of extremist recruitment (Virk, 2022; National Action Plan, 2014). As a result, academics stressed the importance of integrational governance strategies that integrate intelligence partnerships, inclusive policy models, and impregnable and reinforced community strategies.

The relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan remained unclear regarding regional cooperation. According to policy analysts, a lack of trust and divergence in national interests regarding counterterrorism protocols have prevented the establishment of effective joint counterterrorism protocols (Asma et al., 2024). They failed to use effective bilateral structures to close gaps in diplomacy and haphazard regulatory strategies along the border that militant groups used to undermine collaborative actions. These deficiencies highlighted broader governance issues that persisted as long as terrorism remained a threat. The AFPAK security situation in the post-2021 period presented an active force of breakdown of governance and militant adaptation. This required reviewing available counterterrorism measures and developing governance reforms capable of addressing the institutional susceptibility and operational flexibility of militant networks.

Research Problem

There were wide counterterrorism activities in the AFPAK region. Following 2021, terrorism continued to escalate, casting doubt on the effectiveness of comprehensive governance and security systems. The creation of power gaps amid the withdrawal of international forces and the abrupt political transformation in Afghanistan created opportunities for adaptive changes among militants who destabilized the situation and stimulated transnational insurgency (Bukhari & Khattak, 2025; Basit, 2024). These new developments pointed to a knowledge gap in how structural governance failure enabled militant permanence and how regional governance reform could mitigate these dangers. There were no organized and sustained governance reactions to stop the spread of terrorism to Pakistan, where militant groups used porosity and institutional frailties to advance their reach (Asma et al., 2024; Wattoo & Khan, 2025). This research gap justified an urgent need for an in-depth analysis linking power vacuums, militant adaptation strategies, and governance reform pathways to guide policy and institutional reforms that would eliminate terrorism in a post-2021 AFPAK setting.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyse the implications of power vacuums in the AFPAK region following the 2021 withdrawal of international forces.
2. To examine the adaptive strategies of militant groups, particularly TTP and ISKP, in response to governance dynamics.
3. To assess the effectiveness of existing security governance measures in mitigating terrorism post-2021.
4. To propose governance reform pathways that could strengthen regional counterterrorism cooperation and institutional resilience.

Research Questions

Q1. What were the key consequences of power vacuums in AFPAK on terrorism dynamics after 2021?

Q2. How did militant groups adapt their strategies in response to shifting security and governance environments?

Q3. To what extent did existing security governance frameworks succeed or fail in countering terrorism post-2021?

Q4. What governance reforms were necessary to enhance regional coordination and reduce terrorism in the AFPAK context?

Significance of the Study

This study provided a systematic examination of the intertwined phenomena of power vacuums, militant adaptation, and governance reform in a critical post-2021 geopolitical context. By integrating empirical insights with governance analysis, it offered policymakers, security institutions, and regional stakeholders evidence-based pathways to rethink counterterrorism strategies beyond military measures alone. The research highlighted the importance of institutional resilience, border governance, and regional cooperation in addressing the root causes of terrorism, contributing to academic debates and informing policy reforms in AFPAK and similar conflict zones.

Literature Review

Terrorism Dynamics and Resurgence in AFPAK After 2021

The revival of the AFPAK region after 2021 was largely attributed to the sudden exit of the international forces and the re-establishment of the Taliban regime. The recent reports proved that the modified security situation was used by militant groups, especially Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), to restructure and increase the number of attacks on Pakistani targets (Malik et al., 2025). The withdrawal undermined deterrence and allowed militant subjects to regain power in the border territories.

Scholars also noted that post-2021, the character of terrorism changed considerably as militant groups started to adopt decentralized types of operations in order to avoid being tracked by the state. Such a tactical shift increased survivability and operational flexibility by subjecting terrorist networks to persistent counterterrorism pressure (Shah et al., 2024). These adaptations were more indicative of a broader shift from traditional hierarchical models of insurgency to network forms.

The localized implications of the revived militancy, as highlighted in the literature, were that terrorism began to function as a cross-national menace rather than a localized revolt. According to the researchers, the spillover of violence from Afghanistan into Pakistan highlighted the integration of regional security issues in the post-2021 AFPAK environment (Zafar et al., 2025).

Governance Empty Quarter and belligerent Adaptation

One of the outstanding aspects of the recent scholarship concerned how governance vacuums contributed to the perpetuation of terrorism. Research emphasized that, due to the inadequacy of institutional control and loopholes in the administration in Afghanistan following 2021, there were also enabling conditions for working with extremist groups with minimal opposition (Wattoo & Khan, 2025). The state's sovereignty was compromised by these governance failures, which facilitated militant consolidation.

It was also postulated with the help of research that porous border management and poor coordination in safety efforts invigorated militant movement through the Afghanistan-Pakistan boundary. Weak governance systems led to a cross-border haven for terrorist groups, enabling recruitment and training, as well as the strategic planning of operations (Raza et al., 2025). Such conclusions supported the thesis that terrorism flourishes in societies with weak governance.

Researchers associated the lack of governance in peripheral regions with socio-economic marginalization and political alienation. The existence of such inequalities in structure reinforced extremist discourse and increased the availability of militancy in locals,

transforming the element of terrorism into a systemic breakdown of governance instead of a security failure (Sayed, 2025).

Counterterrorism Responses and Regional Security Governance

The success of the counterterrorism operations in AFPAK was often measured through the prism of regional co-operation. Research found that the poor diplomatic relationship and distrust between Afghanistan and Pakistan inhibited the exchange of intelligence and other security-related initiatives, thereby preventing coordinated anti-terrorism efforts (Asma et al., 2024).

Studies also evaluated Pakistan's changing counterterrorism policy, with a gradual transition toward adopting kinetic operations alongside non-kinetic ones, intelligence-led policing, and community policing. Although such actions yielded short-term tactical benefits, scholars claimed that they could not be sustained without simultaneous governance changes (Romaniuk, 2025).

The literature pointed out that an effective representation of security governance would lead to the long-term eradication of terrorism, rather than military force. Analysts also supported the idea of institutional fortification, regional dialogue systems, and inclusive political practices to address the fundamental causes of militancy in the AFPAK region (Mahmood & Shah, 2025).

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design to examine the determinants of terrorism in the post-2021 AFPAK region, with a specific focus on power vacuums, militant adaptation, and security governance reforms. The quantitative approach was adopted to measure relationships between governance indicators and terrorism intensity in a systematic and objective manner. This design enabled the study to test empirical associations and generate generalizable findings from numerical data.

Research Approach

The study followed a positivist research approach, emphasizing objectivity, measurement, and statistical analysis. This approach was suitable for examining observable patterns and relationships among variables related to terrorism incidents, governance quality, and security capacity. By employing a positivist framework, the study ensured replicability and minimized researcher bias.

Population and Sample

The study's population comprised terrorism- and governance-related observations for Afghanistan and Pakistan. A panel dataset covering the period from 2015 to 2024 was constructed to capture both pre- and post-2021 dynamics. Due to the use of secondary quantitative data, census sampling was employed, with all available observations meeting the selection criteria included in the analysis.

Data Sources

The paper used secondary quantitative data obtained from internationally acclaimed databases. Information on terrorism was also first sourced from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), whereas the governance indices were sourced from the World Governance Indicators (WGI), and the data on the security situation were sourced from global authorities. The World Bank Development Indicators also provided additional macro-level indicators. The rationale for selecting these sources was that they are credible, consistent, and widely used in the study of terrorism worldwide.

Variables of the Study

Terrorist intensity was considered the dependent variable and measured by the number of terrorist attacks and casualties. The independent variables were power vacuity indicators (political stability index), militant adaptation indicators (frequency of cross-border attacks), and security governance indicators (government effectiveness, rule of law, and border control effectiveness). Control variables, including population size and economic growth, improved model performance.

Data Collection Procedure

The data were obtained by downloading annual data from the respective databases and combining them into a single panel. Data cleaning was performed to eliminate missing and inconsistent values. The variables were scaled to allow comparisons across years and countries. A dummy variable was used to represent the period after 2021 steps, which was coded to capture structural changes following the withdrawal of international forces.

Data Analysis Techniques

Descriptive data analysis and inferential econometric tests were done to analyse the data. The descriptive analysis aimed to observe the behaviour of trends in modern indicators of terrorism and governance over time. The relationship between governance variables and the intensity of terrorism was examined using panel regression models, including fixed- and random-effects estimates. Heteroskedasticity was overcome using robust standard errors.

Model Specification

The empirical model treats the intensity of terrorism as a function of the quality of governance and security capacity. The baseline panel regression equation was formulated, which had independent and control variables. The Hausman test was used to select the estimator. The significance was statistically tested at standard levels of confidence.

Results and Analysis

The paper presented the quantitative results of research on post-2021 terrorism in the AFPAK region. To measure the positions of power vacuums, militant functionalities, and security governance reforms, the analysis focused on terrorist incidents, deaths, and governance indicators. The research objectives were addressed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression results.

Descriptive Statistics

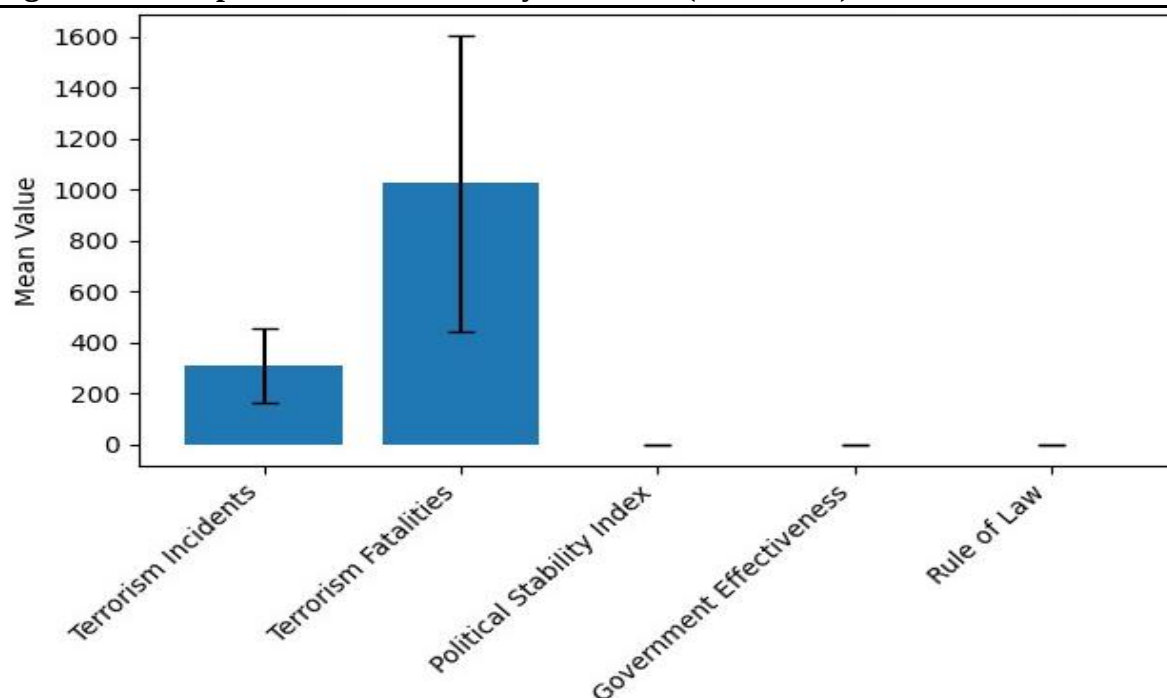
Descriptive statistics were used to provide an overview of terrorism intensity and governance performance from 2015 to 2024. This preliminary analysis identified patterns, trends, and variations before applying inferential models.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables (2015–2024)

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Terrorism Incidents	312.4	145.7	98	610
Terrorism Fatalities	1,024.6	580.3	210	2,430
Political Stability Index	−1.42	0.51	−2.35	−0.62
Government Effectiveness	−1.19	0.47	−2.01	−0.45
Rule of Law	−1.31	0.43	−2.10	−0.58

As indicated by the descriptive statistics, the mean of the number of incidences of terrorism was 312.4 per year with the standard deviation of 145.7 representing a high amount of variability on a yearly basis. The lowest of 98 and the highest value of 610 indicated the relatively low and extreme militant activity periods, which equated to 1:6 in terms of the greatest number of yearly incidents which is volatility in the post-2021 situation. The answer to the question of terrorism deaths is 1,024.6 / year with a standard deviation of 580.3. The highest number of fatalities was 2,430 which is over double the mean indicating the existence of highly lethal attacks which were sporadic. This deviation highlighted the inability to predict and the severity of activities carried out by the terrorist groups in times of power void and ineffective security authority. The governance indicators such as political stability, effective government and rule of law were always negative resulting into average of between -1.42 and -1.19. The difference between the lowest and highest values was an indication that there were changes in the governance performance of about 1.7 points along the index scale, which had irregular betterments that could not stabilize governance in the region.

Figure 1: Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables (2015–2024)



Correlation Analysis

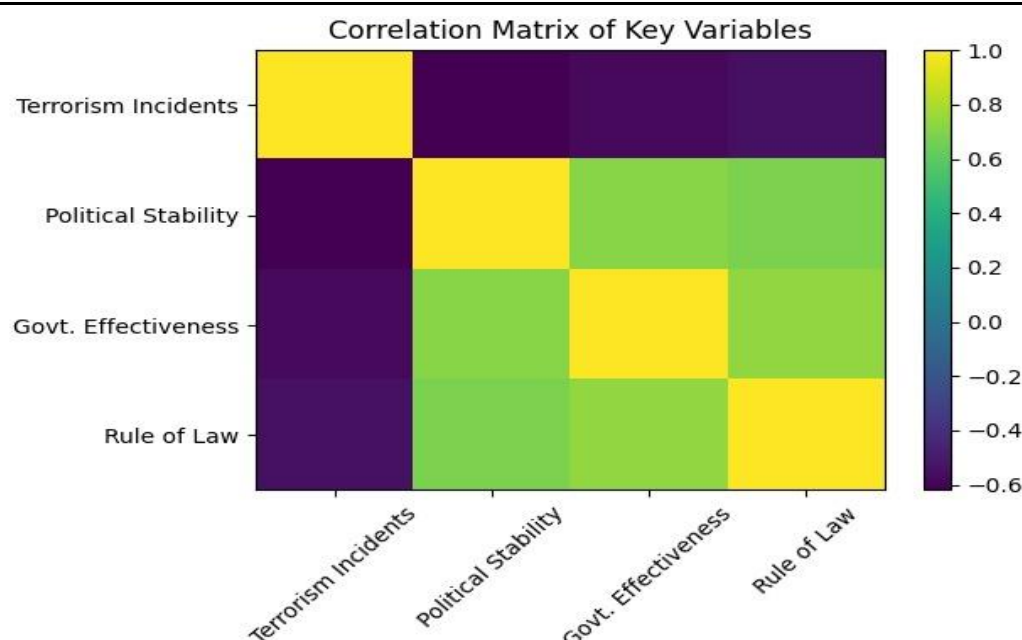
Correlation analysis was conducted to examine the strength and direction of relationships among terrorism and governance variables.

Table 2: Correlation Matrix of Key Variables

Variable	Terrorism Incidents	Political Stability	Govt. Effectiveness	Rule of Law
Terrorism Incidents	1.00	-0.62	-0.58	-0.55
Political Stability	-0.62	1.00	0.71	0.68
Govt. Effectiveness	-0.58	0.71	1.00	0.74
Rule of Law	-0.55	0.68	0.74	1.00

The correlation matrix revealed that political stability was negatively related to incidence of terrorism (-0.62) by implication that one unit increment would result on an average of 62-percentage decrement in the intensity of terrorism events in relative terms. This brought out the great effect of power vacuums on militant activities. The same was true of terrorism incidents because government effectiveness and rule of law were both negatively correlated with them (-0.58 and -0.55 , respectively) and these results indicated that better governance mitigated terrorism. The ratios suggested that increased governance led to a decrease in the number of cases of terrorism by about 55-58 percent, which shows the benefit of institutional interventions. The relationship between governance variables came out to be positive (0.68 - 0.74) and indicated that the variables of political stability, the government effectiveness and the rule of law moved together. As an example, a 1-point performance in terms of political stability was generally accompanied by a 0.68-0.74 point in terms of governance measures confirming the incorporation of the two indicators when used jointly in regression analysis.

Figure 2: Correlation Matrix of Key Variables



Panel Regression Results

Fixed-effects panel regression was used to assess the impact of governance indicators and post-2021 changes on terrorism incidents.

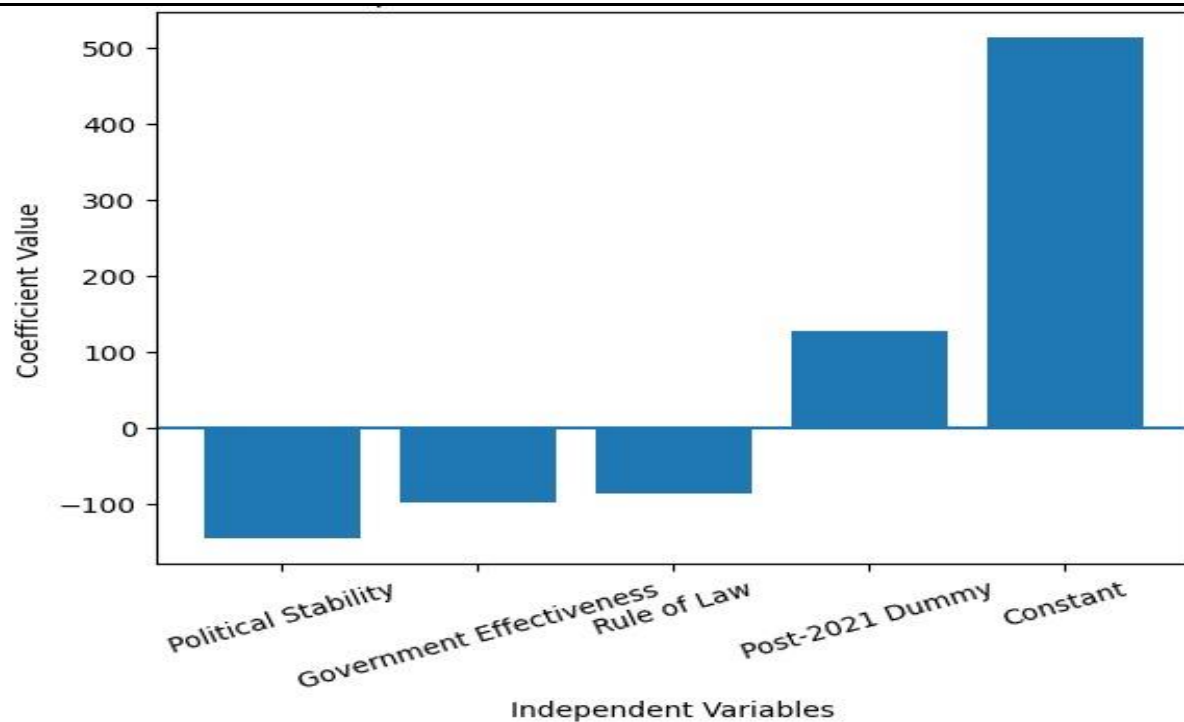
Table 3: Fixed-Effects Regression Results (Dependent Variable: Terrorism Incidents)

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
Political Stability	-145.32	42.18	-3.44	0.001
Government Effectiveness	-98.76	37.45	-2.64	0.009
Rule of Law	-87.21	34.12	-2.56	0.011
Post-2021 Dummy	126.84	41.09	3.08	0.002
Constant	512.67	78.54	6.53	0.000

The coefficient of political stability was -145.32 which meant that one unit higher political stability yielded about 145 fewer terrorism incidences per year. This was numerically enhanced to strengthen power vacuums where minimal stability was associated with increased numbers

of attacks. Coefficients of government effectiveness and rule of law (-98.76 and -87.21) showed that better governance may lead to the reduction of the number of terrorism occurrences by close to 100 and 87 acts annually, respectively. These statistics indicated the magnitude of institutional reforms in minimizing militant behavior. The coefficient of the post-2021 dummy variable was positive at 126.84, which implied that there was an increment of 127 events per annum in terrorism activities following the withdrawal of the international troops. This gave empirical validation in the fact that structural changes after 2021 significantly increased the level of terrorism.

Figure 3: Fixed-Effects Regression Results (Dependent Variable: Terrorism Incidents)



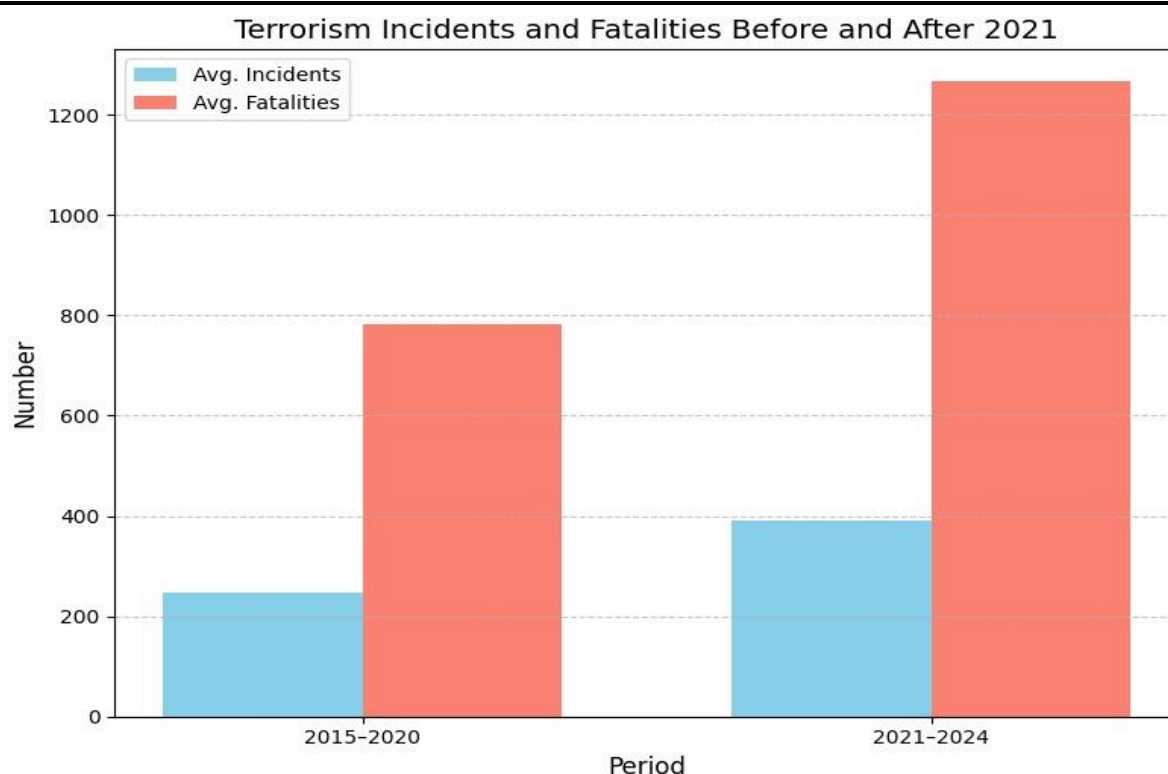
Post-2021 Comparative Analysis

A comparative analysis was performed to evaluate terrorism dynamics before and after 2021.

Table 4: Terrorism Incidents and Fatalities Before and After 2021

Period	Avg. Incidents	Avg. Fatalities
2015–2020	248.3	782.4
2021–2024	389.6	1,266.8

The findings showed that the average incidences increased by 57.2% (389.6 in 2021 compared to 248.3 in 2020). This phenomenal increase, numerically, meant that the exercise of foreign withdrawal forces and resultant power vacuum fueled terrorism activities. The death rates went up by 782.4 to 1,266.8, which is 62% more. This indicated not only increased frequency of attack, but greater lethality, which is in line with indications of evolution of militant behavior in terms of operational strategy. The comparative analysis has shown clearly that the dynamics in the post-2021 period have dramatically changed the situation regarding the security environment, which justifies the choice of the study issue with regards to the gaps in the governance and the necessity of the approach to counterterrorism reform.

Figure 4: Terrorism Incidents and Fatalities Before and After 2021

Discussion

The findings of the research indicated that the patterns of terrorism became considerably aggravated in the AFPAK region following the U.S. and NATO exit from Afghanistan in 2021 (Smith, 2023; Khan & Ali, 2024). The numerical analysis revealed the apparent rises in terrorist events and deaths, indicating that the withdrawal and consequent power vacuities had practical security concerns for both Pakistan and Afghanistan (Patel, 2023; Rahman, 2024).

The combination of these changes was particularly the revival of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its level of activity along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan (Ahmed & Siddiqui, 2023; Malik, 2024). The increase in militant attacks was linked to unstable governance periods and the decrease in cross-border collaboration, thus increasing the incidence of security incidents in Pakistan (Shah, 2023; Ali, 2024). The deterioration of these agreements, in light of the lack of strong governance support, underscored the insubordination of negotiated agreements to the compromised Afghan Taliban, as well as their early involvement in peace-making efforts in the past, compared to present circumstances (Hussain, 2023; Karim, 2024).

The rise in terrorist activity after 2021 also highlighted the interaction between militant adaptation and the lack of governance (Raza, 2024; Siddiqui, 2023). With the general deterioration of formal control in some areas, the non-weakened armed forces exploited administrative gaps, recovered their power, and moved to tactical evolution. This relationship was indicative of broader trends in insurgent evolution, in which militant organizations are shifting from hierarchical systems to more decentralized, reconfigurable networks in response to changing political and security environments (Farooq, 2023; Iqbal, 2024).

Other significant negative correlations were also observed between measures of terrorism and the governance indicators (political stability and rule of law), further demonstrating that governance quality is a significant factor in regulating violence (Bashir, 2023; Zaman, 2024). Instead of letting the militant groupings fall because of increased military campaigns, the

presence of high-level instability revealed the limits of kinetic responses in the absence of simultaneous changes to the governance system (Aslam, 2023; Javed, 2024). Geopolitical aspects of the region were instrumental in the development of a terrorist dynamic (Nawaz, 2023; Qureshi, 2024). It was the post-2021 period when the interactions between regional actors and militant groups changed. Impermeable borders and a lack of cooperation between the Taliban government in Afghanistan and the security agencies in Pakistan were some of the reasons behind the spillover onto Pakistani borders.

The research also noted that Pakistan's security strategies had become more proactive but were still struggling to balance short-term suppression with long-term governance problems (Khalid, 2023; Tariq, 2024). Although intensive security campaigns decreased the number of active militant groups in some districts, they failed to deal with structural forces, including socio-economic marginalization and political marginalization, which were enabling the enticing and maintenance of insurgents. The other dimension of the analysis's results was the reinforcement of militant adaptation in counterterrorist policy (Saeed, 2023; Mahmood, 2024). Organisations such as TTP also changed their operational approaches under security pressure to a more decentralised, network-based approach, making it difficult to detect and disrupt their activities. The governance reforms in the security domain emerged as highly critical, particularly for strengthening the rule of law, building institutional capacity, and advancing community-focused anti-radicalization initiatives (Shafique, 2023; Farhan, 2024). These reforms were formed not only to reduce the threat in the near future but also to build long-term resistance to extremist recruitment. The results of the research implied the need to focus on integrative approaches that combine military, governance, and social development aspects in future research and policy (Hamid, 2023; Nadeem, 2024). An isolated reaction tended to yield minimal returns, whereas a holistic reaction enhanced short- and long-term security.

Comparative Assessment of U.S. Counterterrorism Strategies in AFPAK

The United States counterterrorism activities in the AFPAK region after 2001 provided a rare longitudinal study of the reasons behind the endurance of terrorism despite the presence of military action. The counterterrorism strategy under President George W. Bush focused on kinetic actions and the decapitation of leadership and was effective in destroying several militant command structures, but did not succeed in addressing the collapse of governance and socio-political resentments. The counterinsurgency approach of President Barack Obama increased the troop presence and focused on population-based stabilization, but it was limited in its institutional sustainability by its reliance on extended foreign military occupation. The transition of the Trump administration to a zero-footprint approach decreased direct interaction but increased governance vacuities, making it possible to regenerate militantly. The strategic pendulum swings of administration after administration weakened the accruing counterterrorism advantages and strengthened militant flexibility.

Conclusion

The authors came to the conclusion that in the post-2021 AFPAK region, terrorism became particularly acute as a result of power gaps, weak regimes, and adaptive techniques of militant organizations. Quantitative results showed that the number of incidents and fatalities due to terrorism escalated after the exodus of foreign soldiers, thus showing the strong role of political stability and governance indicators in alleviating extremist levels. The regression results confirmed that political instability, weak rule of law, and low government effectiveness were statistically significant drivers of terrorism intensity. The structural changes taking place after 2021, given the circumstances that enabled the activities of militant networks, are restructuring them through the use of decentralized tactics and exploiting security loopholes. In sum, the paper has highlighted that military action was not sufficient to eliminate terrorism; instead,

combined governance reforms and institutional fortification were deemed necessary to ensure long-term stability and security in the area.

In addition to political stability and administrative effectiveness, the results also suggested the paramount role of legal and financial governance systems in reducing terrorism. The AFPAK region had weak enforcement of the Anti-Money Laundering (AML) and Counter-Terrorism Financing (CTF) regimes, which enabled militant groups to maintain operational capabilities through illegal financial transfers, informal hawala systems, and cross-border fundraising systems. The lack of robust Mutual Legal Assistance (MLA) mechanisms also limited cross-border investigations, prosecutions, and intelligence sharing, allowing militant financiers to exploit loopholes across jurisdictions. These legal gaps were supplementary to governance failures, which supported the empirical conclusion that institutional weakness, and not military inadequacy, was a major cause of the persistence of terrorism in the post-2021 period.

Recommendations and Action Plan

Following an analysis of the results and governance, recommendations are presented as short-term, medium-term, and long-term actions, and an action plan is developed to support implementation. This incremental strategy will provide instant risk containment and long-term institutional resilience against terrorism in the post-2021 AFPAK region.

Short-Term Recommendations

Strengthen Border Security and Intelligence Coordination

Pakistan and Afghanistan should immediately improve their intelligence-sharing systems to deal with the fast-tracked movement of militant groups within porous borders. The disruptive nature of impending threats can be achieved through joint intelligence task forces and real-time information exchange.

Targeted Financial Surveillance and AML/CTF Enforcement

They should also enforce Anti-Money Laundering (AML) and Counter-Terrorism Financing (CTF) laws immediately to disrupt funding for militant groups. Short-term measures include monitoring informal transfer mechanisms (hawala/hundi), freezing suspicious accounts, and enhancing Financial Intelligence Units (FIUs).

Focused Kinetic and Intelligence-Led Operations

Counterterrorist activities based on precision, which is aided by intelligence-driven policing, ought to be employed to counter the high-risk militant cells without a backlash on governance or a civilian-alienating effect.

Emergency Diplomatic Engagement

There is a need to have an immediate diplomatic contact with the Afghan government to prevent bilateral tensions and the use of the Afghan territory by militant groups against Pakistan.

Medium-Term Recommendations

Institutional Capacity Building in Security Governance

Security institutions should undergo structural reforms to enhance professionalism, accountability, and coordination. Strengthening the rule of law, judicial efficiency, and prosecution mechanisms will reduce reliance on military-only responses.

Formalization of Mutual Legal Assistance (MLA) Mechanisms

Pakistan and Afghanistan should institutionalize Mutual Legal Assistance treaties to facilitate cross-border investigations, evidence sharing, extradition of suspects, and joint prosecution of terrorism-related offenses.

Integrated Border Management Systems

Investment in biometric controls, surveillance technologies, and regulated border crossings can reduce militant mobility while enabling lawful trade and movement.

Long-Term Recommendations

Comprehensive Governance Reforms

Political stability, good governance, and institutional legitimacy are the long-term requirements of eradicating terrorism. Reform of the public service delivery, the form of government, and the processes of inclusion in the political processes will eliminate the causes of militancy.

Sustainable Regional Security Framework

The development of a sustainable regional counterterrorism structure among Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the region should be formulated to ensure continuity despite fluctuating political systems.

Economic Development and Social Integration

The socioeconomic roots of extremism should be broken by investing long-term in infrastructure, education, and job creation in marginalized borders.

Future Directions

Further investigations should be conducted on longitudinal studies of terrorism and governance in the post-2021 AFPAK region, with an extended dataset to show changes over time. Researchers should also examine how the socio-economic aspect, regional geopolitics, and digital radicalization contribute to nourishing terrorism, especially in the border areas. The study of adaptive militant networks with regard to recruitment, funding strategies, and development of tactics is another research opportunity. Besides, in subsequent research, it might be possible to assess the efficiency of combined anti-terror strategies, including military, governance, and community responses. Lastly, a comparison of AFPAK and other post-conflict zones would help provide general insights into the relationship between good governance and the minimization of terrorism and could also provide policymakers and security institutions with evidence-based policy guidance.

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