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Kinetic Victory, Institutional Vacancy: Evaluating Pakistan's Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2014–2021)

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Abstract

This article assesses the Pakistan's counter-terrorism policy in the year 2014-2021, covering the time between the attack on Army Public School and the re-emergence of the Taliban in Kabul. It examines the potential of the National Action Plan to secure, rather than merely suppress, violence, using the concepts of securitization theory, Agamben's state of exception and civil-military relations theory (Feaver's principal-agent model; Desch's structural context model). The analysis, based on official documents, independent security-incident reporting, and human rights reporting, indicates that kinetic and punitive actions were taken in full, whereas administrative and ideological reforms were not. Casualty figures dropped by about 87 percent, but were coinciding with the rerouting of emergency courts, the marginalization of the National Counter Terrorism Authority, suppression of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement and also a drop in civil liberties and civilian oversight. The paper claims that this is because of a single cause: an unaccountable security apparatus that resorts to the tools it already has at its disposal. It concludes by proposing a reform structure for civilian institution-building. The article discusses national action plan, counter-terrorism, securitization, civil-military relations and state of exception in Pakistan.

Keywords: *Civil-Military Relations, Counter-Terrorism, Nap, Securitization, State of Exception.*

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1. Introduction

In the Army Public School in Peshawar, on 16 December 2014, gunmen, suspected to be affiliated to Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, killed 132 children and nine staff. In no time did the moratorium on death sentence for terrorist convictions get lifted and an All-Parties' Conference was called, followed by a twenty-point National Action Plan, the most institutionalized and resource-intensive counter-terrorism exercise in Pakistan's post-independence history. During the next seven years, this resulted in the biggest domestic military operation that the Pakistani Army had ever conducted (Zarb-e-Azb), a constitutional amendment that now allows military trial of civilians, a new structure for coordination of intelligence, and an explicit promise to tackle not just the movement, but its ideology and financial backing. This record is a "feel bad" one, not just a "bad" one. This is a wonderful and measurable security gain for terrorists, as their casualties dropped by more than 500% from above 3,000 in 2013 to under 400 in 2021. Meanwhile, separate indices of civil liberties, media freedom and civilian oversight of security institutions fell during the same period, military courts were put in place as an emergency measure but remain long after, and the civilian coordinating body that was constitutionally mandated to administer the strategy, NACTA, failed to gain access to classified intelligence, which was one of its core requirements. The central argument of this article is that these two records are not contradictory, but they are the same and they are both read from different perspectives, and the theories outlined below explain why one institution was the one that would always receive what it wanted and the other would not. The following is organized around two questions. First, empirically is the decrease in violence the result of the strategy or of factors external to it and the latter could include militant fatigue, a changing regional situation, or the "relocation" of the conflict? Secondly, normatively: is a strategy that leads to a reduction in attacks in the short-term that eventually leads to a loss of the civilian institutional base essential to maintaining the reduction a successful strategy or is it a successful operation?

1.1. Literature Review

Sahill offers a thorough overview of the NAP and concludes that it facilitated coordination between the civilian and military leadership, reduced short-term losses, and was, in its implementation, uneven, with military operations always outstripping ideological and administrative reform, which was hampered by lack of political commitment and monitoring. There is insufficient research that has looked at the impacts of uneven implementation on NAP's overall counter-terrorism effectiveness (Sahill, 2018).

While Basit blame the coordinated military operations, intelligence integration and policy changes for reducing terrorist violence, there is no in-depth analysis on whether post-2014 reduction is in terms of the ideology being tackled or the sustainability of the

gains. It does not explain whether the violence was simply quelled or if it was resolved or not (Basit, 2020).

Reviewing the empirical literature on counterinsurgency, Yamin conclude that successful military efforts in the tribal areas of Pakistan did lead to a real territorial denial, and disruption of safe havens, but that the success of such military operations in restoring local governance and citizen trust was not necessarily translated into such outcomes. The post clearance governance gap is identified but not addressed (Yamin, 2019).

Critically Rahman et al., draw on Pakistan's past experiences of selective engagement with militant groups to conclude that before 2014, the divide between tolerated militants and targeted militants based on policy interests compromised the credibility and coherence of the counter-terrorism policy, which they do not consider to have happened after the APS attack (Rahman et al., 2023).

There has been a link between internal security failures and weak governance and ideological extremism instead of any particular security shortfall, which this article's chapter on madrassa registration and empowerment in Baluchistan provides an overall support for the causal claim made by (Niaz, 2017).

The authors of the report Marath, attribute the onset of militancy in peripheral regions to weak governance and the lack of state presence, and argue that while removing safe havens is important, it is not enough without combating deep-rooted extremist belief systems, a statement which was directly tested against the NAP's almost non-existent implementation of counter-narrative and de-radicalization sites (Marath, 2019).

Usman et al., analyze the 21st Constitutional Amendment and the military courts it establishes separately and both draw similar conclusions, that the courts' deviations from the norms of ordinary criminal procedure (the lower standard of proof, closed trials and limited appeal) create unresolved due-process problems that cannot be addressed by the higher conviction rate (Usman et al., 2023).

This article records the effects of the state-of-exception's normalization dynamic, including self-censorship among the media, the broad use of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016, which was originally enacted to counter-terrorism, and the incremental shift from civilian policing to paramilitary policing in Karachi (Waseem, 2021).

The literature as a whole is in agreement that 2014–2021 was definitely a change in the counter-terrorism practice of the previous decade, which was disjointed, selectively enforced, and was not considered to be effective for short-term gains, and that the policies of Zarb-e-Azb and NAP did provide short-term security gains. The same gap is also pointed to, but only occasionally and in passing, in the context of the same period: the absence of any study reviewed here that considers the period as a single coherent strategic

period and balances the costs of institutional, democratic, and social costs against the gains of security. This article tackles that directly.

2. Material and Methods

The qualitative approach applied in this study is a historical-analytical type where the process tracing is combined with the structured theoretical approach based on the theory of securitization, the theory of state of exception of Agamben, and civil-military relation theory (principle-agent model of Feaver and structural context model of Desch). The sources of evidence are official government and NAP documents and committees' minutes, independent security incident data (South Asian Terrorism Portal, Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies, Global Terrorism Database), human rights and press freedom reporting (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, Amnesty International, Freedom House, V-Dem) and investigative journalism. The 20 points of the National Action Plan were assigned to categories of kinetic/punitive, administrative/regulatory, and ideological/structural, and the 20 points were then documented with respect to their status of implementation, and the status of implementation for each point was compared with the categories of institutional preference structure predicted by the principal-agent and structural context models.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Securitization and the Making of the National Action Plan

Securitization and the Making of the National Action Plan the APS attack was a securitizing event in the Copenhagen School sense of the term (Amjad, 2018). in this sense, APS was an event that brought in a large securitizing coalition of army leaders, the civilian prime minister, opposition party leaders, and religious leaders, all together The National Action Plan was prepared and adopted by Parliament in a span of 10 days after the attack (National Counter Terrorism Authority (Ghani, 2019). Public opinion data gathered early in 2015 indicates that the public actually supports military courts and the restored death penalty rather than creating such opinions. However, securitization theory also suggests that this “permeability” diminishes once the “acute shock” has passed, and indeed, the record shows that by the end of the study period there was a growing consensus in the legal community, of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement and of the open criticism from the elite media about the implementation gaps (Meernik, 2015).

3.2. Kinetic Operations

During Operation Zarb-e-Azb (2014-2016) approximately 30,000 soldiers were deployed in North Waziristan displacing around 1 million civilians, and by independent estimates, the operation was indeed effective in destroying the Pakistani Taliban's ability to conduct large scale training camps within Pakistani borders (Wolf, 2016). It did not, however, destroy the organization, as a large portion of fighting strength moved across the border into Afghanistan in the completion of the clearance, and proceeded to continue

cross-border attacks (Qureshi, 2024). In 2017, Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad (2017 – 2021) moved from the concept of territorial clearance to intelligence-led operations on a national level, and its most prominent achievements have been in Karachi, where targeted paramilitary and police operations reduced violence by approximately 66 percent at the end of 2016 (Marath, 2019). The number of casualties due to terrorism incidents has dropped by nearly 87 percent from 3001 in 2013 to 398 in 2021. This is an actual and relatively unique counter-terrorism success. It is also, on the evidence reviewed, a suppression rather than an elimination of the threat: the same organization is back in operation from Afghan sanctuary since the 2021 change of government in Kabul and the conditions of both periphery and the marginalized communities and the underlying conditions have, to a large extent been left largely untouched (Patro, 2024).

3.3. What the National Action Plan Actually Delivered

When considered on a point-by-point basis, the result looks sharply patterned and not the random and incomplete result that Basit and Wahab suggest. The death penalty, military courts, operations in the tribal area and targeted operations in Karachi were put into practice, either fully or partially, in places where their use was already a part of the military and intelligence services' repertoire. Minimal or cosmetic measures to implement real political cost on constituencies capable of resisting were taken, including the madrassa registration, counter-narrative programs, empowerment of Baluchistan, and resolving missing persons issues (Basit, 2020). This gradient is exactly as the principal-agent model proposed by Feaver (2003) and the structural context model proposed by Desch (1999) would predict, where an agent (the military) has an information advantage and an indispensable operational capacity (a military machine), this will exert effort toward measures that solidify his/her institutional standing; where a principal (civilian government) is experiencing severe internal security threat, the principal has correspondingly little bargaining leverage to demand otherwise. Shah's (2014) historical study of the institutional self-conception of the Pakistani military (as a protector not a servant of the state) provides the missing link: officers who have been schooled in distrusting politicians will not easily surrender ground on issues they regard as integral to the military's mission.

3.4. Case Studies in Implementation and Consequence

3.4.1. The 21st Constitutional Amendment and Military Courts (2015–2019 and beyond)

Military courts were decided upon on 6 January 2015 by the House of the People (Parliament) by unanimous vote, as a result of low conviction rates and backlogs in the civilian anti-terrorism court system. While the courts achieved near 100 percent convictions in civilian courts it was 5-10 percent closed proceedings and limited access for defense attorneys preclude independent verification of the accuracy of the convictions

whether due to tighter standards of proof or more accurate prosecutions. The courts stayed in operation long after the law took effect, which was supposed to last only two years. Effect: “constitutional exception” became a lasting parallel system of ‘civilian' courts for anti-terrorism, and these courts, which had been described as 'dysfunctional' and therefore the rationale for reforming the constitution, were never adequately repaired (Wolf, 2016).

3.5. The National Counter Terrorism Authority (2014–2021)

It was a civilian coordination wing for counter-terrorism policy, and had never been granted statutory access to classified intelligence from the ISI and Military Intelligence, it was always under budget pressures and had a high turnover of leadership, often linked to changes in civilian government (Basit, 2020). Consequently, an institution with a full formal mandate and very limited operational powers nan inexplicable single case of the principal-agent shirking that is the core prediction of civil-military relations theory (Lenhardt, 2020).

3.6. The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (2018)

A nonviolent civil society movement built upon documented grievances, such as enforced disappearances, landmine clearance, checkpoint restrictions, collective punishment in the territory of former conflicts (Jafri, 2021). It's organizational and leadership elements were watched, subjected to administrative obstructions of public assembly and in some cases prosecuted under anti-terrorism laws created for armed fighters by the government (Jawad, 2022). Result nonviolent political dissent is subjected to emergency law, just the kind of normalization that framework foretells would occur as a result of the existence of emergency powers without an expiration date.

3.7. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016

The wide drafting of PECA has been repeatedly invoked by the Federal Investigation Agency's (FIA) cybercrime wing against social media users for politically criticizing the military or intelligence agencies, without any link to terrorist content. Outcome: the use of the securitized threat environment for the purpose of ordinary political control, a tendency of the state of exception to spread beyond initial domains (Saleem, 2026).

3.8. Fragility of Civilian Oversight

There is not only a lack of formal civilian authority in counter-terrorism policy making in Pakistan but it is structurally weak and that is, the institutions which have authority to formally oversee the counter terrorism policy, lack information, budget and legal power to do so, while the institution being overseen, has all three information, budget and legal (Nawaz, 2016). This is apparent in the governance indicators compiled for this study, where civilian oversight over security operations and the conviction rates in the anti-terrorism court rank as the two worst indicators during the time period, both immediately downstream of NACTA's marginalization and the military courts'

replacement of civilian justice (Basit, 2020). Civil liberties and media freedom indicators are slightly higher, but come with documentation of intimidation of journalists and misuse of PECA (Imran & Kazmi, 2025). None of this is a lack of competence or will on the part of individual civilian officials, it's a predictable result of a system in which the only means of knowing whether a policy is working is for the agent responsible for executing it. None of this is due to some failure of individual civilian officials' competence. It is the predictable output of a system in which the only means of knowing whether a policy is working is for the agent responsible for executing it.

3.9. When the Guns Fall Silent, Who Answers?

A-cleared valley looks good on a photo. Does not exist a functional supervisory committee. This imbalance in visibility was not an accident of the way the National Action Plan era is going to be remembered it’s almost the entire reason why one half of the 20 points was completed and the other wasn't. No one makes a press announcement that the financial audit of a madrassa has been completed on time. No one makes a press announcement that a madrassa financial audit has been completed on time. It's not that no one does, but someone does, and says so when a militant commander dies. But the politics of counter-terrorism give more credit to the visible, reversible-looking victory than they do to the slow, unglamorous job of creating an institution that can ask the tough questions of the security establishment, and get solid answers. NACTA was still not able to get a threat assessment from ISI eight years after the APS attack. That fact will not be recorded on any casualty chart, but that is more of an indicator of how long what was accomplished will hold up than any casualty chart.

3.10. The Sustainability Gap

The question of sustainability, which is raised in this article, is answered by Pakistan's experience since 2021. The casualty data for the last year of the study period (2021) suggests that already, after seven years of decline, there is a slight rise in casualty numbers after the Taliban's return to power in Kabul, with Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) also resuming its cross-border activities, building up a centralized command structure like its Afghan and incorporating smaller militant groups (Ali & Verma, 2025). This is just what a suppression-without-resolution account foresees, and this is just what an elimination account cannot tell. There is absolutely no need for additional research to understand why the gains are not being sustained; these are the twenty points which were never seriously attempted, that are sitting as they did in 2015, in the exact same places as in that year (Basit, 2020). A structurally incentivized for kinetic gains and structurally protected from the consequences of non-kinetic failures will continue to produce this same pattern until the incentive structure changes not just the threat environment (Ali & Verma, 2025) .

4. Policy Recommendations and Reform Framework

To fill the sustainability gap, the structure of institutional incentives must be changed, rather than the military. The next framework is an immediate consequence of the pattern documented above.

4.1. Institutional Reform: Empower Civilian Coordination

1. Make NACTA a statutory, enforceable access to classified threat intelligence and require intelligence agencies to provide it, rather than just asking them to do so, which they might refuse.
2. Support NACTA with adequate resources, reflecting its formal responsibilities, and keep its leadership from the whims of the civilian administration.
3. Call for an annual (public) report, reporting on every one of the twenty NAP points, rather than just casualty statistics.

4.2. Judicial Reform: Fix the Civilian System Instead of Bypassing It

4. Spend on witness protection, forensic capability, and case-management systems for civilian anti-terrorism courts large enough to render military courts essentially obsolete.
5. A gradual phasing-out of the military-courts system on an absolute time frame, linked to measurable civilian-court capacity targets.

4.3. Parliamentary and Democratic Oversight

6. Provide parliamentary security committees staff, security clearance and subpoena like powers to access operational information from the security establishment.
7. Certainly, make it clear that PECA is not intended to be an instrument for political speech or journalism; that's what has allowed it to be used against the critics of the security establishment.

4.4. Address the Root Causes the NAP Left Untouched

8. Ensure that registration and financial monitoring of madrassas are done on a fixed, mandatory schedule and not on an indefinite basis.
9. Place the socioeconomic development of the former FATA and Baluchistan on a dedicated budget line which is different from other budget lines and is not subject to discretionary allocations.
10. Solve cases of missing persons in an independent judicial commission with enforcement authority as a condition to rebuild trust in state institutions in the communities which suffered the greatest costs of the conflict.

4.5. Protect Nonviolent Political Space

11. Categorize nonviolent political action and activity related to terrorism in such a way as to prevent anti-terrorism rules or regulations from being applied against protest groups like the PTM.

4.5.1. Institutionalizing Oversight While the Political Will Still Exists

Time is the one major threat to this reform program. Political consensus to enact any of the above is most easily formed after a shock and most difficult to be achieved after the immediate threat passes when reform in institutions is most needed and least likely to occur. The recent situation of renewed tension with the region and the resurgence of Taliban in Afghanistan has pushed Pakistan's security establishment back to the old trajectory of externally-oriented and kinetically driven priorities since 2021. That pull won't stop for institutional repair. Unless NACTA's statutory mandate, civilian capacity building and parliamentary oversight is provided in this window, the cycle of full mobilization of kinetic capacity, indefinite deferral of civilian capacity building that has been evidenced in this article will simply repeat in the next crisis.

4.6. Conclusion

The counter-terrorism strategy of Pakistan between 2014 and 2021 was a real security success and it was a real cost to the institution, and the central theme of this article is that the two are not competing arguments, but two parts of the same causal story. Securitization theory provides a framework for understanding how APS attack enabled the introduction of extraordinary measures into politics. So why did they endure and grow beyond their intended scope of work? The state of exception, for instance, has been invoked against those measures, once they were promulgated, and was consequently extended and expanded beyond their original military rationale, the journalists targeted by PECA and the PTM under emergency powers. The theory of civil-military relations, however, sheds light on why the implementation split so clearly between the military's existing capability and the need for a new civilian institutional capacity, through Feaver's theory of principal-agent, Desch's theory of structural context and Shah's account of the military's institutional self-conception. The three frameworks do not all cover the same record. These two, collectively, depict a national security apparatus that has managed to cut down on casualties by approximately 87 percent without in any way resembling what is needed to create institutions that can achieve such a reduction over the long term. As the thesis premise states, the question remains whether Pakistan can now do the more mundane and less flashy job of implementing the civilian side of its counter-terrorism strategy (not because the threat has returned, but because the will that was generated to create the twenty points in the first place).

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