

# DYNAMICS OF SUBVERSION AND COUNTER-SUBVERSION IN KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA: HISTORICAL PATTERNS, STRATEGIES, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL STABILITY

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## ABSTRACT

This research analyzes the process of subversion and counter-subversion in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, between the years 2001 and 2025. Using a qualitative mixed-methods approach that combines historical analysis, case studies, and content analysis of policy documents, this research examines the development of insurgent strategy and state counterinsurgency in one of the most volatile regions of South Asia. The results point out three separate conflict phases: post-9/11 Taliban emergence (2001-2007), peak insurgency (2008-2014) and stabilization (2015-2025). Asymmetric warfare methods such as improvised explosive devices, suicide bomb attacks, and ideological recruitment via madrassas became the most important subversive weapons. Focusing on the example of Operations Rah-e-Rast and Zarb-e-Azb, counter-subversion operations transformed from traditional military operations to combined civil-military operations. Intelligence led operations, community engagement, and targeted development initiatives are some of the key success factors identified in this study. However, there are still ongoing obstacles such as the cross-border sanctuaries, radicalization networks and socio-economic frustrations. The research makes a valuable contribution to the literature of counterinsurgency as it shows how context-specific variations of classic counterinsurgency models can provide tangible stability benefits. Policy implications Therefore, sustainable development investments, regional cooperation frameworks, and comprehensive deradicalization programs are needed for long-term peace in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and conflict areas of similar nature.

**Keywords:** Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, subversion, counter-subversion, counter-insurgency, Pakistan, Taliban, FATA, Asymmetrical warfare.

## INTRODUCTION

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the former North-West Frontier Province, is in a strategic location, being the crossroads of South and Central Asia. Bordering Afghanistan to the westward and north, this Pakistani province has for long been a vital buffer zone between conflicting geopolitical interests and gate for trade, migration, and unfortunately, conflict. The region is not only significant in terms of its geographic position, but also includes the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), a semi-autonomous region that was subject to colonial-era regulations until it was merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018, and home to Pashtuns

with a history of tribal autonomy and anti-foreign heritage (Abbas, 2011; Fair, 2014).

The twenty-first century has seen a new level of violence and instability in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa that has made it a prime theatre of battles in the global War on Terror. Following the September 11, 2001 attacks and the subsequent U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, the region has become a hideout for Taliban fighters and Al-Qaeda operatives, as well as all sorts of militant groups that are hiding from coalition forces. This influx gave rise to a complex web of subversive activities that challenged the sovereignty of Pakistan, destabilized

Pakistan's northwestern frontier, and had ripple effects all across the South Asian continent and beyond (Kronstadt, 2009; Rashid, 2008).

Subversion in this context means systemic usually covert attempts to undermine state authority, disrupt governmental structure and delegitimize official institutions by employing insurgency, propaganda, ideological indoctrination and external influence operations (Paul, 2011). These activities range from armed resistance and terrorist actions to psychological warfare and social penetration. Counter-subversion, on the other hand, is the whole set of response mechanisms of the state, including military actions, intelligence, legal system, socio-economic development programs, retarding ideological narratives against the subversive threats and re-establishing state control (Jones 2008; Kilcullen 2009).

The relations of subversion and counter-subversion in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have changed significantly over the past two decades in response to larger shifts in the nature of asymmetric warfare, counterinsurgency theory and regional geopolitics. This evolution brings about important questions about the efficacy of different modes of strategy, insurgent and state actor flexibility, and long-term considerations for stability in the area. A clear grasp of these dynamics is important not only for internal security of Pakistan but also for international endeavours to defeat terrorism, maintain stability in Afghanistan and prevent spread of extremist ideologies in South Asia (Bergen and Tiedemann, 2011; Siddiqa, 2011).

### 1.1 Research Question and Objectives

The central question of this research is as follows: How have the patterns of subversion and counter-subversion evolved in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa from 2001-2025 and what are their impacts on the stability of the region? The big picture question includes a number of sub questions on identifying the main subversive actors and evolution of their strategies, the counter-subversion measures taken by Pakistani security forces, the success and impact of the major military operations, and socio-economic and political forces shaping the conflict.

The main objectives of this study are to:

1. track the subversive movement history in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and determine the analytical periods
2. identify the tactics, strategies, and organizational structures of key subversive actors,

including the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), foreign fighters, and local militant groups;

3. analyze the effectiveness of Pakistani counter-subversion operations through in-depth case studies of major military campaigns.

4. explore the role of socio-economic development, governance reforms, and people's participation in counter-subversion.

5. assess the implications of these dynamics for regional stability, especially in terms of the relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as the counterterrorism efforts in general

### 1.3 Thesis Statement

This paper is based on the concept that the conflict in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is a complex dynamic between adaptive insurgent networks and changing state counter-strategies, in which military victories have to be built upon by continuous socio-economic development and political integration in order to be transformed into long-term stability. While kinetic operations have been shown to degrade the capabilities of militants as well as the territorial control of these groups, a lasting peace situation requires addressing the root causes of radicalization such as poverty, deficits in governance, and dynamics across borders. The study shows that context specific interventions of counterinsurgency principles, especially those that have stressed the importance of population-centric approaches and civil-military integration, have achieved substantial improvements in security indicators. However, enduring structural challenges such as regional instability, transnational ideological radicalization networks, and weak state capacity in previously tribal areas continue to be a threat to these gains.

### 1.4 Structure of the Paper

After this introduction, this paper is divided into seven sections. The Literature Review maps out existing scholarship on subversion and counter-subversion in South Asia, according to theoretical readings, historical contexts and other areas where research is lacking. The Methodology section outlines the qualitative mixed-methods approach used including data sources, analysis techniques and study limitations. Results are presented in thematic subsections of the Results section on the historical development of subversion, actor analysis, counter-subversion strategies and case studies. The Discussion calls to the interpretation of these findings in the frame of theoretical models and discusses policy implications. The Conclusion

examines what we have learned and what the implications of the study are for studies in counterinsurgency. References and Appendices are used to provide supporting documentation and supplementary data.

## 2.0 Literature Review

Over the last twelve years, the literature on subversion and counter-subversion in South Asia, and specifically in relation to the tribal areas of Pakistan, has grown considerably. In this review, we draw together important theoretical frameworks, historical analyses, and empirical studies that explain the conflict in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

### 2.1 Theoretical Concepts of Asymmetric Warfare

Classical counterinsurgency theory offers conceptual frameworks for an analysis of subversion and counter-subversion. David Galula's (1964) classic study of counterinsurgency has established beliefs that continue to exert an influence, including the importance of the political goals over the military goals and the need to obtain the support of the people. Galula's eight-step model of counterinsurgency operations - including the destruction of insurgent forces, embedding of military presence, and the implementation of political and economic programs - have been applied to a wide range of situations, for example in Pakistan's tribal areas (Galula, 2006; Nagl, 2005).

These classical approaches have been numerically developed in recent years. Kilcullen (2009) coined the idea of "competitive control," that insurgencies and counterinsurgencies compete for control over people rather than territory. This framework particularly applies to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where both the state and militant groups have tried to create alternative states. Similarly, Jones (2008) laid stress on political and economic grievances as sustaining factors of insurgencies making it clear that military solutions alone are inadequate if the underlying causes of discontent are not also addressed.

The "hearts and minds" approach, which was the catchphrase of the Malayan Emergency and Vietnam War, has been both adopted and critiqued in current counterinsurgency literature (Nagl, 2005; Ucko, 2009). It is argued that gaining population support through improvement of development and governance is the decisive factor in counterinsurgency success. This is argued to be paternalistic, culturally insensitive, and practically challenging to execute in the intricate sociopolitical landscape of FATA (Gregory 2008). The

case of the Pakistani military in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provides important empirical evidence for weighing these different arguments.

### 2.2 History and Colonization Traditions

The history of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in colonial times and the legacies that extract from it are essential to understanding contemporary conflict, as colonial structures and relationships between tribal groups have continued to inform governance in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The British colonial government introduced the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) in 1901, which set up a legal system that gave considerable autonomy to tribal elders, while keeping the power in the hands of the British rulers (Mahmud 2009). This system continued after Pakistan's independence in 1947, and FATA continued to be semi-autonomous until 2018. It is also argued that the FCR produced governance vacuums which were exploited by militant groups because the traditional tribal authority was unable to deal with modern security challenges (Abbas, 2011; Khan, 2011).

The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979-1989) was the most important conflict that changed the way security was handled in the region. Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) had been responsible for the movement of weapons, training and fighters to the Afghan mujahideen, and FATA was an important base and supply line (Rashid, 2000; Rubin, 2002). This was a time of militarization of tribal society, spread of weapons, and the appearance of jihadi ideologies that would eventually be a factor in Taliban movements. Fair (2014) writes of how Pakistani support for Afghan insurgents during this time had "blowback" consequences, as radicalized militants then began to focus their attentions on Pakistan itself.

The rise of Taliban in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s and the relationship between them and Pakistani state institutions has been well documented (Rubin & Siddique, 2006; Rashid, 2010). Initially, the Taliban in Afghanistan was supported by Pakistan as a mechanism to provide strategic depth vis-a-vis India and for the purpose of having a friendly regime in Kabul. The result of this policy has been a complex set of dynamics whereby Pakistani authorities fought some militant groups while either tolerating or encouraging other groups, a phenomenon various scholars have variously referred to as selective counterterrorism or good Taliban, bad Taliban (Fair & Jones, 2009; Tellis, 2008).

### 2.3 Post-9/11 Conflict Dynamics

The attacks of September 11, 2001 and the ensuing U.S. attack on Afghanistan placed unprecedented strains on Pakistan to rethink its regional policies. Musharraf's (2006) decision to join hands with the United States against terrorism was a strategic policy shift that met the strong domestic opposition, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA where pro-Taliban sympathies were high. This period was marked by the rise of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in 2007, a coalition of militant groups, whose clear aim was the creation of an Islamic state in Pakistan and opposed to the state's close proximity with the United States (Giustozzi & Ullah, 2006; Rana, 2009).

Empirical studies of this period have focused on insurgent strategies, organizational structures and modes of recruitment. Bergen and Tiedemann (2011) reviewed drone attack data, and determined that targeted assassinations eroded TTP leadership but created civilian casualties that fueled anti-state sentiment. Fair and Shapiro (2009) examined the patterns of militant recruitment, and discovered how economic poverty, lack of educational opportunities, and perceived injustices have significant impacts on individuals' decisions to join extreme groups. These results highlight the need to incorporate socio-economic grievances into kinetic operations.

The operational responses of the Pakistani military have been documented by many scholars and policy analysts. Army's institutional culture and doctrinal evolution were analyzed by Nawaz (2008) and Siddiq (2007) who highlighted how Pakistan Army was initially reluctant to be engaged in prolonged counterinsurgency operations because of the orientation towards conventional warfare and apprehension of fighting fellow Muslims. This changed after high profile terrorist actions such as the siege of the Lal Masjid in 2007, and the Swat Valley crisis in 2009, which created popular pressure for stronger action against militants (Hussain 2010; Yusuf 2009).

### 2.4 Counter-Subversion Techniques and Operational Analysis.

Multiple strategic and tactical analyses have been conducted on military operations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The Pakistani counterinsurgency effort changed fundamentally in 2009 in the Swat valley, following Operation Rah-e-Rast, when the military showed capacity to clear and hold territory, while complementing it with political and developmental

efforts (Shah, 2010). Although scholars recognized the effectiveness of the operation in terms of degrading the TTP's capabilities, they also pointed to difficulties that included the temporary displacement of nearly two million civilians and the challenges of changing from a military to a civilian government (Ahmad, 2010; International Crisis Group, 2010).

Operation Zarb-e-Azb (2014-2017) in North Waziristan was the most intensive military operation in FATA that targeted a number of militant hideouts at the same time. Military analysts commended the execution of the operation coordination, application of air power, and the sustenance of resource commitment (Rana & Sial, 2015). However, critics pointed out that a lot of militants escaped to Afghanistan, causing cross-border complications and showing the limits of one sided action without regional cooperation (Fair, 2014; Kronstadt and Katzman, 2008). The operation had a number of tactical victories, including the capture of Miranshah and significant reductions in the number of terrorist incidents within the Pakistani borderlands, but there were questions as to how sustainable this was in the long run.

In addition to kinetic actions, scholars have looked at counter-subversion actions that are complementary to kinetic actions. Madrassa reforms, which are meant to moderate religious education and curb radicalization, have had mixed results (Fair & Hamza, 2018). While some seminaries were complicit in governmental control, others rejected reform initiatives on religious freedom and suspicion of state motives. Development efforts under the Sustainable Development Goals and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) were currently in the pipeline to deliver improved infrastructure and economic opportunities, but their short term effects were constrained by implementation issues and security concerns (Small, 2015; Wolf, 2019).

### 2.5 Gaps in the Literature

Though there has been a lot of research done on security issues in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, there are still certain gaps. First, research has not carefully combined longitudinal analysis of tactical changes by insurgents and counterinsurgents with systematic analysis of multiple stages of conflict evolution. Most research covers particular operations or periods of time and does not provide an overall synthesis over two decades. Second, there is not enough attention given to local-level dynamics, such as tribal leadership positions, community attitudes, and peace-building from the grassroots. Existing literature is biased towards military

and national-level political dimensions and fails to consider micro-level social processes.

Third, the correlation between counter-subversion operations and the overall stability of the region, vis-a-vis Afghanistan-Pakistan and its impact on Central Asian security, needs further examination. While scholars recognize cross-border dimensions, there is a lack of studies that offer whole frameworks for understanding how local conflicts are related to regional geopolitics. Fourth, the long-term effectiveness of non-kinetic counter-subversion measures such as deradicalization programs, economic development, and governance reforms is understudied, partly because of the difficulties measuring the impact of these measures, and partly because of limited access to data on implementation of these efforts.

This work fills these gaps by conducting a comprehensive analysis from 2001-2025, linking the military operations with socio-economic and political dimensions, looking at both the macro-level strategic dynamics and available community-level micro-level views, and measuring implications for the stability of the region, as well. By integrating a wide range of data sources and using mixed methodological approaches this research makes a contribution both to academic knowledge and policy formulation in relation to counter-subversion in complex tribal settings.

### 3.0 Methodology

This research project is qualitative in approach and mixed-methods in design because of the complexity and multi-faceted nature of the dynamics of subversion and counter-subversion in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The methodology combines historical analysis, case study research and content analysis of a variety of sources in order to triangulate the findings and provide analytical rigor. This section explains the study design, data sources, analysis methods, and limitations of the study.

#### 3.1 Research Design

The research methodology followed is the interpretive research paradigm as it acknowledges the socially constructed and context-dependent nature of security phenomena. Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter and difficulty in gaining access to primary participants (active militants and intelligence operatives), the research is based primarily on secondary sources, triangulated across a number of different types of documentation. The time-frame is set from September 2001 (when the post-9/11 dynamics

were triggered) to October 2025 so that long-term trends and recent developments can be analyzed.

There are three methodological components incorporated in the research design. Historical analysis imparts temporal perspective to the process of conflict evolution and makes it possible to discern stages, turning points, and causal processes. Case study approach is a type of research design that provides the opportunity to examine specific military operations in detail, thus allowing for thorough evaluation of strategies, execution and results. Content analysis of policy documents, media reports and analytical publications allows for systematic recognition of patterns, themes and discourses of subversion and counter-subversion.

#### 3.2 Data Sources

No single source of information was used to ensure a thorough representation, therefore the following source categories were used:

**3.2.1 Academic Literature:** Peer-reviewed journal articles, books and dissertations from the political science, security studies and area studies disciplines that offered theoretical frameworks and empirical findings. JSTOR, Project MUSE and Google Scholar databases were used to identify relevant publications.

**3.2.2 Security Databases:** South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), Global Terrorism Database (GTD), and Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) were used as sources of the quantitative data on terrorist incidents, casualty figures, and conflict events. These databases allow a temporal and geographic analysis of patterns of violence.

**3.2.3 Official Sources:** Government publications, military press releases, reports and parliamentary statements provided the official opinions on counter-subversion strategies. Independent assessments were made by the reports of international organizations from the United Nations, International Crisis Group and Human Rights Watch.

**3.2.4 Newspapers:** Pakistani English-language newspapers (Dawn, The Express Tribune, The News International), international news agencies (Reuters, Associated Press, BBC), and specialist security publications (Jane's Intelligence Review, Terrorism Monitor) were used for contemporaneous descriptions of events and analytical commentary.

**3.2.5 Think Tank Publications:** Various reports and analysis publications by the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, Institute for Strategic Studies Islamabad,

RAND Corporation, etc. provided expert views and policy suggestions.

### 3.3 Analytical Procedures

Historical analysis used the chronological mapping method to identify phase separation for conflicts, documenting historical events and actor behaviors and strategic changes. This approach explained escalation and de-escalation, innovative tactics, and adaptation of policies. This analysis revealed three main stages of temporal segmentation (2001-2007, 2008-2014, 2015-2025), which resonate with significant changes in the conflict dynamics.

Case study analysis was done on four major military operations: Operation Rah-e-Rast (Swat Valley, 2009), Operation Rah-e-Nijat (South Waziristan, 2009-2010), Operation Zarb-e-Azb (North Waziristan, 2014-2017) and Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad (nationwide 2017-present). For each operation, the analysis focused on objectives, use of force, tactical approaches, duration, immediate results and longer-term consequences. Cross case analysis revealed best practice and ongoing issues.

Content analysis of policy documents and media reports used both quantitative and qualitative method. Quantitative content analysis was used to trace frequency of specific themes (e.g. military operations, civilian casualties, development initiatives) over time periods, and show changing priorities and discourses. The qualitative analysis looked at framing, narratives and rhetorical strategies used by different actors to legitimize their activities and delegitimize opponents. Data triangulation was used to compare the different types of sources to ensure validity and identify any disagreements. Where there were differences between the accounts, the analysis attributed them to varying gradients of detail – especially where it came to casualty numbers or operational details – and where possible provided reasons for the discrepancies (officially downplayed, propaganda considerations, access restrictions).

### 3.4 Ethical Considerations

There is a deeper issue of ethics involved in research on conflict and terrorism. This research is based entirely on information available to the public, and does not involve access to classified documents or access to sensitive intelligence sources. All casualty figures and descriptions of incidents are based on known databases and reliable sources in the media instead of accounts that may not be confirmed. The research is analytically

objective, showing various sides of controversial events without promoting a particular actor or policy.

The research method was based on the sensitivity to affected populations. While necessarily addressing the topic of violence and its consequences, the study does not wallow in unneeded detail and is respectful of the victims of terrorism and war. The analysis recognises that statistics represent individual tragedies and broken communities. Recommendations focus on civilian protection, human rights observance and sustainable peace building, not necessarily military solutions.

### 3.5 Study Limitations

There are several limitations for this study. First, it is impossible to check many of the claims with primary sources, and access remains restricted to many of the operational details that are still classified. Military operations have tactical and intelligence aspect that states do not publish, thus there are bound to be gaps in knowledge. Second, in contrast to the second wave, accessing insights from active militants or intelligence operatives holds obvious practical and ethical problems that may introduce bias into available sources towards state narratives.

Third, different sources have different levels of data quality. For example, official government statistics, media reports and non-governmental monitoring organizations vary widely on casualty statistics. We are fully aware of these discrepancies and report ranges when available rather than reporting disputed numbers as being fact. Fourth, while the study has a long time frame, it may be too short to evaluate long-term results of the recent counter-subversion efforts, especially in terms of programs on deradicalization and economic development, whose impacts are slow to appear.

Fifth, there is a limitation imposed by the language of analysis which is restricted to English-language sources, potentially lacking important Urdu or Pashto sources and local-level dynamics not reported in English media. Finally, security situations change rapidly, so that assessments that may be accurate at the time of writing may need to be revised as new developments arise. Despite this, triangulation of findings across different sources and rigorous analytical processes increase the level of confidence in the findings and conclusions of the study.

### 4.0 Results and Findings

This section reports the main findings of the study, and they are presented thematically to meet the research

objectives. The analysis starts with the historical development of subversion in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, follows it with a focus on the most important subversive actors and their tactics, the counter-subversion strategies and provides in-depth case studies of the most important military operations.

The development of subversive activities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) can broadly be broken down into three different phases, each of which has different dynamics, actors, and levels of intensity. Table 1 gives a chronological summary of some of the key events that were landmarks in this evolution.

#### 4.1 Historical Development of Subversion (2001-2025)

**Table 4.1**  
**Timeline of Major Subversive Incidents in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (2001-2025)**

Date	Event	Actors Involved	Casualties	Outcomes/Significance
Oct 2001	Taliban/Al-Qaeda fighters entered FATA	Afghan Taliban, Al-Qaeda	N/A	Initiation of militant sanctuary in tribal areas
Jul 2007	Lal Masjid sieged in Islamabad	Militant students, Army	102	Catalyst for TTP formation, surge in violence
Dec 2007	Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) was formally established	TTP under Baitullah Mehsud	N/A	Unified militant organization targeting Pakistani state
Sep 2008	Marriott Hotel bombing, Islamabad	TTP	60+	Demonstrated TTP capability to strike major urban centers
Apr-May 2009	Taliban takeover of Swat Valley	Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi	Hundreds	Prompted major military response (Rah-e-Rast)
Dec 2014	Army Public School massacre, Peshawar	TTP	149	National trauma, intensified counter-terror operations
May 2018	FATA merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Government reform	N/A	Legal integration, extended constitutional rights
Aug 2021	Taliban takeover of Afghanistan	Afghan Taliban	N/A	Resurgence of TTP attacks in Pakistan

**4.1.1 Phase One (2001-2007): Emergence and Sanctuary.** Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters retreated across the Durand Line into Pakistan's tribal areas. The first was of militant sanctuaries especially in North and South Waziristan. During this period, Pakistani military operations remained limited and often ineffective, constrained by political sensitivities, difficult terrain, and military doctrine oriented toward conventional warfare against India. The influx of foreign fighters brought with them not only more radical ideologies but also better fighting techniques to local tribal militants.

**4.1.2 Phase Two (2008-2014): Peak Insurgency.** The development of TTP was greatly increased in December 2007. Under Baitullah Mehsud's leadership, previously fragmented militant groups coalesced into a more unified organization explicitly targeting the Pakistani state. This phase witnessed the highest levels of terrorist violence, with attacks occurring throughout Pakistan, not merely in border regions. Major incidents included the Marriott Hotel bombing (2008), sustained violence in Swat Valley culminating in temporary Taliban control (2009), and

numerous suicide bombings targeting military, government, and civilian targets. The Pakistan Army responded with increasingly large-scale operations, though early efforts suffered from inadequate preparation for counterinsurgency warfare.

**4.1.3 Phase Three (2015-2025): Stabilisation and Residual Threat** Following the devastating Army Public School attack in December 2014, Pakistan adopted a more comprehensive counter-terrorism approach embodied in the National Action Plan. The massive military operation in N.Waziristan (Zarb-e-Azb) and then nationwide intelligence-driven operations like Radd-ul-Fasaad (RF) badly damaged the capabilities of TTP. The number of terrorist incidents sharply diminished and the state regained control over the previously contested areas. The 2018 FATA merger extended constitutional governance to tribal regions. However, the August 2021 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan created new challenges, with TTP elements finding renewed sanctuary across the border and launching limited attacks into Pakistan.

#### **4.2 Most Dangerous Subversive Agents and Means**

Multiple militant organizations have operated in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, employing diverse tactics and maintaining varying relationships with each other and external actors. The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan represents the primary indigenous insurgent organization. Formed as an umbrella group uniting tribal militants, TTP's stated objectives include enforcing Sharia law, resisting Pakistan's alliance with the United States, and establishing Islamic governance. TTP was a loosely organized group with local commanders (amirs) having considerable latitude in the coordination of high-level operations through a central leadership council (shura).

The impact was felt more against foreign fighters, especially of Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Arab countries. These militants had combat experience, technical expertise in bomb-making and ideological fervor that inspired local fighters. Organizations like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and remnants of Al-Qaeda established bases in FATA, intermarrying with local tribes and becoming embedded in the social fabric. Their presence internationalized the conflict and complicated Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts.

**4.3 Military maneuvering dominated military action in the period under consideration.** Improvised explosive devices (IEDs) were used, leading to most of the casualties of security forces. IED designs have developed as militants have found ways to counter-measures and were no longer simple command-detonated devices, developing into more sophisticated radio controlled or pressure plate devices. Suicide bombings, relatively rare in Pakistan before 2007, became a signature tactic, targeting military installations, police stations, government buildings, and civilian gathering places including mosques and markets.

Along with active movements, skilled recruiting and propaganda was employed by the militants. Also, the proliferation of illegal madrassas in the tribal areas provided channels for ideological brainwashing, especially of young men and women with no other source of education. The militants invoked religious rhetoric in their justification for violence through their struggle being portrayed as a defensive jihad against Western aggression and an apostate government. Since 2010, TTP has been increasingly able to spread the propaganda through social media platforms, which have led to the establishment of media wings that have produced videos, magazines, and online content that legitimate attacks and recruit recruits.

There is also an economic factor to insurgency which is worth mentioning. Militants also funded their operations through the following means: extortion from businesses and transport companies; taxation of cross-border smuggling networks; ransom abductions; donations from sympathetic individuals and groups abroad; and the exploitation of natural resources (timber and gemstone mining) in contested areas. These revenue sources allowed them to continue to operate even under military threat.

#### **4.4 Counter-Subversion Strategies and Their Evolution**

Pakistani counter-subversion strategies evolved significantly from 2001 through 2025, reflecting doctrinal learning, operational experience, and changing political contexts. Table 2 provides a comparative overview of major counter-subversion operations.

**Table 4.2**  
**Comparison of Major Counter-Subversion Operations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa**

Operation Name	Duration	Primary Objectives	Key Results	Major Challenges
Rah-e-Rast (Swat)	Apr-Jul 2009	Clear Taliban from Swat Valley, restore government control	Territory cleared, 2 million IDPs, 1,500+ militants killed	Civilian displacement, IDP management, reconstruction needs
Rah-e-Nijat (S. Waziristan)	Oct 2009-May 2010	Dismantle TTP strongholds, secure key terrain	Major bases destroyed, leadership disrupted, militant casualties	Difficult terrain, militant dispersion to other agencies, cross-border escape
Zarb-e-Azb (N. Waziristan)	Jun 2014-Feb 2017	Eliminate all militant sanctuaries in N. Waziristan	3,500+ militants killed, sanctuary denial, 70% drop in attacks	Militants fled to Afghanistan, IED threat, 930,000 IDPs requiring resettlement
Radd-ul-Fasaad (Nationwide)	Feb 2017-present	Intelligence-based operations, consolidate gains	Sustained low-intensity operations, border management improvement	Residual cells, cross-border infiltration, reintegration of cleared areas

Early counter-subversion efforts (2002-2007) relied primarily on negotiated settlements with tribal elders and limited military incursions. The Pakistani military signed multiple peace agreements with militants, most notably the 2006 North Waziristan Accord, which granted militants de facto control in exchange for promises not to attack Pakistani forces. These agreements always failed as militants took a break from fighting to empower themselves, arm themselves, and plot attacks. Repeatedly clashing strategies of negotiation and escalating violence eventually resulted in a higher level of decisive military action.

The 2009 operations in Swat Valley (Rah-e-Rast) and South Waziristan (Rah-e-Nijat) marked Pakistan's transition to large-scale counterinsurgency. These operations displayed improved military capabilities; improved coordination of the army, air force, and intelligence. But, they also conveyed serious challenges. Swat operation affected approximately two million people, and caused a humanitarian crisis that placed pressure on the capacity

of government and aid organization for a time. While military forces successfully cleared Taliban fighters from urban areas, holding and building phases proved more difficult.

Operation Zarb-e-Azb represented the most comprehensive counter-subversion campaign, targeting North Waziristan's long-standing militant sanctuaries. The battle involved a combination of arm tactics such as air attacks, artillery attacks, and land attacks. Rather than announcing premature victory, Zarb-e-Azb mounted pressure for almost three years, as in no other operation. The armed forces created permanent military camps on cleared areas and tried to condition non-return of militants. Quantitative indicators showed significant impact: terrorist incidents in Pakistan declined approximately 70% between 2014 and 2017 according to South Asia Terrorism Portal data.

Non-kinetic counter-subversion measures complemented military operations. The National Action Plan (NAP), adopted in December 2014

following the Peshawar school massacre, outlined twenty comprehensive measures including: establishment of military courts for terrorism trials; moratorium on death penalty lifted for terrorism cases; madrassa registration and regulation; action against hate speech and extremist literature; strengthening of FATA administration; financial sanctions against proscribed organizations; and repatriation of Afghan refugees. NAP was implemented silently in a biased way, with security-based policies being given preference over socio-economic policies.

Development programs to address the grievances in the background and provide other options other than militancy. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government, with federal support, initiated infrastructure projects including road construction, electrification, and telecommunications expansion in formerly isolated tribal areas. Educational programs are being set up to replace radical madrassas in government schools. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) promised substantial investment in regional infrastructure, though security concerns and implementation delays limited immediate impacts. Critics said that development practices were poor relative to demands and corruption and lack of capacity impeded useful delivery.

#### **4.5 Case Studies: How and Why We Got It Right (or Wrong).**

##### **4.5.1 Successful Case: Swat Valley Operation (2009).**

One of the successful military pacification campaigns with consolidation of the political administration and development, is Operation Rah-e-Rast in the Swat Valley. In April 2009, the followers of Maulana Fazlullah of Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) were in de facto control of Swat, imposing extreme Islamic law and torching schools and assaulting security forces. The whole situation took a crisis turn, and militants started migrating out of Swat towards Islamabad, spreading concern at both the domestic and international levels.

The military action employed overwhelming force, with approximately 30,000 troops being employed with the aid of artillery and air power. But within three months, the forces had searched major cities like Mingora and pushed militants to mountainous areas. The military effectiveness of the operation was dependent on several factors: high political will resulting from popular outrage over militant excesses; clarity of purpose on the basis of territorial conquest; adequate troop numbers to provide a period of hold;

and the effective use of airpower on the basis of defensible terrain.

Post-conflict stabilization efforts contributed to Swat's success as a counter-subversion model. The authorities helped with mass return of internally displaced persons, most of whom returned in months after military demobilization. Reconstruction efforts rebuilt the infrastructure like schools, hospitals and markets. The provincial government regained political power and the police. Additionally, the military was at the forefront to prevent militant backlash, which reflects its commitment to long-term security services. By 2011, Swat had returned to relative sanity, with tourism returning, and children going back to schools.

But this triumph of Swat did not last forever. Certain militant leaders such as Fazlullah escaped to Afghanistan from where he would still coordinate operations. Periodically, attacks still demonstrated the potential of militant action. The economy took its time to recover and there was no job growth or poverty. However, Swat proved that the combination of military action and the immediate consolidation of reconstruction of governance could help restore the control and deny militants the chance of return.

##### **4.5.2 Mixed Case: North Waziristan Operation (2014-2017).**

Operation Zarb-e-Azb in the North Waziristan operation is more complex with both significant military victories and unresolved issues. North Waziristan had served as the primary militant sanctuary since 2001, hosting TTP, Afghan Taliban, Al-Qaeda remnants, and Central Asian militants. Previous military operations had avoided North Waziristan due to political sensitivities and concerns about simultaneously fighting multiple militant groups, some with historical ties to Pakistani intelligence.

The start of the operation on June 2014 was preceded by months of preparation including pre-positioning of forces and intelligence gathering. In contrast to the preceding campaigns, Zarb-e-Azb did not target any militancy specifically. This made it possible to clear out key towns such as Miranshah and Mir Ali, to demolish militant infrastructure such as training camps and bomb factories, and to kill or capture thousands of fighters. The military employed advanced tactics such as night operations enabled by thermal imagery, precision air strikes in which little civilian casualties

were killed and selective targeting based on intelligence gathering on leaders.

Quantitative measures demonstrated an effect. According to Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, terrorist attacks declined from 2,050 in 2013 to 625 in 2016, a 70% reduction. Fatalities from terrorism decreased similarly. The military managed to deprive militants of their sanctity that they had enjoyed for more than a dozen years. These victories were bought at a price: it displaced some 930,000 people; destroyed the infrastructure that had to be rebuilt; and imposed a heavy strain on the troop resources that would require long-term investment.

The primary limitation of the operation had to do with relations across their borders. Many militants fled to Afghanistan rather than fight to the death, regrouping in provinces bordering Pakistan. These militants were a source of incessant infiltration, as the Afghan government could not or would not restrain their exploitation of Afghan territory as a safe haven. The August 2021 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan exacerbated this challenge, providing TTP remnants with renewed safe havens and contributing to increased cross-border attacks in 2022-2023. This highlighted the inadequacy of the sole intervention lacking the regional cooperation in the management of transnational militant groups.

#### **4.5.3 Failure Case: Early Peace Agreements (2004-2008).**

Multiple peace agreements negotiated between 2004 and 2008 represent clear counter-subversion failures, providing instructive lessons about militant behavior and effective strategy. The most significant was the September 2006 North Waziristan Accord, wherein Pakistani authorities agreed to withdraw military forces and checkpoints in exchange for militant commitments not to attack Pakistani forces, harbor foreign fighters, or conduct cross-border attacks into Afghanistan.

The militants violated every principle in the book. Instead of limiting the operations, they extended the territorial domination, created parallel systems of authority and improved on recruiting and training. In the case of Afghanistan, attacks across the border actually grew. Foreign fighters did not cease to exist, and in fact grew. The agreement basically ensured that militants would have time and space left to consolidate power, whilst the umbrella of peace was granted. Other treaties have a similar pattern such as the Swat ceasefire in 2008.

These defeats were the consequences of a simple ignorance of militant objectives and of organizational dynamics. Pakistani authorities approached negotiations assuming shared interest in stability and that economic incentives and limited autonomy would satisfy militant demands. However, TTP and allied groups pursued maximalist objectives including nationwide Islamic governance and rejection of Pakistan's democratic system. Negotiations had been tools of breathing space (as opposed to actual peace tracks).

The lessons drawn from failed peace agreements were important ones that shaped future approaches. Military and political leadership were realizing that militancy perceived restraint as weakness, and took advantage of it. Effective counter-subversion required sustained pressure rather than intermittent operations followed by accommodation. The deals with militants should have been accompanied by good verification mechanisms, indeed, as the punishments for noncompliance. Perhaps most importantly, the state could not depend on the capacity of non-state actors to carry the burdens of security without themselves being pushed in more extreme directions. These teachings underpinned the more aggressive policy since 2009.

### **5.0 Discussion**

The findings presented in the previous section illuminate several important dynamics regarding subversion and counter-subversion in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The results are discussed in the following in terms of the current theoretical frameworks, analyzing the policy implications and indicating possible future research directions.

#### **5.1 Theoretical Implications**

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa case largely validates core counterinsurgency principles while revealing context-specific complexities. The privileged outcomes of the purely kinetic over the comprehensive methods are in line with the political priority of Galula over military ends. Operations that included political engagement, development, and reconstruction of governance (Swat) had more sustainable returns than those that focused only on eradication of militancy (operations in early Waziristan). This is in line with the current counterinsurgency doctrine that uses population-based approaches.

Nevertheless, the case also shows the weakness of the classical counterinsurgency theory in its applicability to transnational militancy which spreads through

permeable frontiers. Kilcullen's competitive control framework effectively explains dynamics within Pakistan's borders but requires extension to account for cross-border sanctuaries. The situation in Afghanistan in August 2021 demonstrates that any domestic stability remains under threat so long as neighbouring states are not able or unwilling to take action against militant sanctuaries. This suggests that modern counterinsurgency theory should be more specific to the regional elements and the need for multilateral approaches in the struggle against transnational networks.

The creation of guerrilla tactics and state response is an example of the action-reaction phenomenon of asymmetric warfare. Every time militants made an operational innovation (improvement of IEDs, spread of suicide bombers, spread of propaganda), the state responded with a counter-adjustment (ability to clear streets, intelligence services, counter-propaganda messages). The need to have organizational learning and flexibility in counter-insurgency operations is highlighted by this tactical arms race. Pakistani security forces demonstrated capacity for adaptation, though often reactively rather than proactively.

## 5.2 Policy Implications

A number of policy recommendations are made as a result of this analysis. One, the military benefits must be rapidly transferred to governance and progress measures. There are gaps between the establishment of military clearance and civilian administration which are used by militants. Pakistan should develop standing civil-military integration mechanisms enabling immediate transition from combat to stabilization operations. In order to help normalize post-conflict, governance structures and development resources need to be pre-positioned.

Second, it is important that the issue of radicalization is addressed through an aggressive educational intervention and economic intervention. Though the issue of madrassas is one factor, the problem is the lack of alternative opportunities for young people. Sustained prevention actions like the scaling up of quality education in formerly tribal areas, providing alternative job opportunities to subsistence farming, and providing good economic alternatives against joining armed groups are needed measures to prevent militancy. But the current investments are still far less than the need and need to be expanded massively and over the long term.

Third, the regime for regional cooperation needs to be improved urgently, especially in addressing the cross-border dimension. Afghanistan's August 2021 transition created new challenges but also opportunities for engagement with Taliban authorities regarding TTP activities. Pakistan should pursue bilateral and multilateral mechanisms for intelligence sharing, border management, and coordinated action against militants. Another option, in which further unilateral measures have to be used, has not proven sufficient because of the history of distrust and countering interests.

Fourth, there should be an increase and professionalization of counter-narrative and deradicalization initiatives. Military interventions address the problem of active militants but do not necessarily reverse ideological radicalization of the larger populations. Pakistan's experience with deradicalization centers shows mixed results, suggesting need for improved methodologies, adequate resources, and integration with community-based reintegration support. Exaggerated interpretations need to be challenged and alternative versions of the story must be provided by religious scholars and community leaders.

Fifth, there must be political goodwill and social acceptance. Counter-subversion requires long-term commitment, potentially spanning decades rather than years. Political leadership will need to manage expectations of timelines and continue to show the need for security measures and the costs of such measures. Openness about operations without disclosing secrets in security terms contributes to the confidence of citizens, attacks against militant propaganda that presents the actions of the state as unjust.

## 5.3 Regional Stability: Consequences for the Region.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's security dynamics carry significant implications for broader South Asian stability. The province's position as a buffer between Pakistan and Afghanistan means that instability inevitably affects both countries. Pakistan's success in reducing militant capabilities within its territory has positive spillover effects, reducing threats to Afghanistan and enabling greater focus on development rather than pure security concerns. However, Afghanistan's current instability and Taliban governance create inverse spillover risks that Pakistan cannot fully control.

India-Pakistan relations remain influenced by terrorism concerns, with attacks in Indian-administered Kashmir and India proper sometimes traced to militants operating from Pakistani territory. Pakistan's enhanced counter-terrorism capabilities and demonstrated commitment to eliminating militant sanctuaries could potentially reduce bilateral tensions if sustained and verifiable. However, persistent Pakistani distinctions between anti-Pakistan militants (targeted) and Kashmir-focused groups (tolerated to varying degrees) complicate this potential improvement. India's continued skepticism regarding Pakistan's comprehensive commitment to counter-terrorism reflects this ambiguity.

Due to the transnational nature of militant organizations in the region, one state solutions do not work. Central Asian states face threats from groups like IMU operating from Afghanistan-Pakistan border regions. China has raised objections over Uyghur militants taking refuge in the region. Iran deals with Baloch separatist groups with connections to Pakistani territory. Regional cooperation structures could be based on these common threats but geopolitical tensions and mistrust have not, in the past, enabled efficient coordination. Regional platforms, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, are forums of dialogue, which so far have not produced the concrete cooperation with regard to the operation of the two sides against terrorism.

#### **5.4 Limitations and Future Research Recommendations**

The use of secondary sources and the fact that some of the operational specifics are classified as secret limits the analysis as pointed out in the methodology. Further research that has access to military and intelligence archives can provide finer insights into tactical judgment, strategic planning procedures, and intelligence actions. Additionally, fieldwork in affected communities would enable direct assessment of local perspectives on both militant rule and government counter-subversion efforts, adding crucial bottom-up perspectives to complement the state-centric view predominant in existing literature. Longitudinal quantitative analysis would strengthen understanding of correlation and causation regarding counter-subversion effectiveness. Although this analysis found decreases in terrorist activity following mass operation, more sophisticated statistical

structures that account for confounding effects can better account for the effects of individual policy interventions. Resource allocation decisions would be informed by econometric studies which would examine the relationship between development spending and governance indicators and security outcomes.

Comparative analysis situating Khyber Pakhtunkhwa within broader counterinsurgency experiences would enhance theoretical development. The systematic comparison with other cases such as insurgency in Colombia (FARC), in the Philippines (Mindanao conflict) or in Thailand (Southern provinces) would help to identify the patterns and factors that are common to all in an abstract way and those that are specific to each case in a particular context. Such comparative analysis would extend counterinsurgency theory from the insights that emerge from case-specific analysis towards the goal of generalizability in the form of middle-range theory. Lastly, trends after 2025 need to be tracked further. The long-term sustainability of security gains depends on factors including Afghanistan's trajectory, Pakistan's political stability, economic conditions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and the effectiveness of deradicalization efforts. So far, measurable results that can only be evaluated after a few years or decades will show whether the current approach can be considered as the true conflict resolution and not just a whitewashing of the inner conflict. Researchers are advised that they remain vigilant to this changing state of affairs and reanalyze when more information comes into play.

#### **5.5 Conclusion**

This comprehensive examination of subversion and counter-subversion dynamics in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa from 2001 to 2025 reveals a complex interplay of militant adaptation and state response within a challenging geopolitical context. The debate has identified three periods of conflict: the first stage - establishment of sanctuary after 9/11 (2001-2007), peak of insurgency (2008-2014) and stability with a residual insurgency (2015-2025). Each stage had its own characteristics in terms of militant strategy, state reactions and outcomes.

The study demonstrates that military interventions, while indispensable in terms of disrupting militant potential and depriving of territorial hegemony, are just not enough in the absence of complementary political-economic-social offensives. As such

successful efforts such as Swat Valley incorporated kinetic and non-kinetic elements, providing for a rapid transition between combat and stabilization and rebuilding of governance. More disastrous examples either did not pursue hold-and-build phases or addressing underlying agitations that led to insurgency. The failure of early peace agreements is now well known and illustrates the dangers of making concessions to militants, a weak enforcement system, and simple misunderstanding of the intentions of insurgents.

Key findings regarding subversive actors highlight the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan's role as primary indigenous insurgent organization, the influence of foreign fighters in radicalizing local militants and providing technical expertise, and the adaptive nature of militant tactics in response to counter-measures. By exploiting the weakness of the state and avoiding equal military resources, rebels demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the fundamentals of asymmetric warfare. However, they also were marked by a lack of strategy, in particular a lack of long-term vision in terms of rule, and by an inability to offer an alternative to state power that would be of any lasting popular appeal.

Counter-subversion strategies evolved significantly throughout the period, reflecting organizational learning and doctrinal adaptation. The Pakistan Army, initially oriented toward conventional warfare against India, developed substantial counterinsurgency capabilities through experience and institutional reform. Subsequent operations have been marked by a greater use of intelligence-based operations, precision force, and population-centric operations, as opposed to the use of indiscriminate force in earlier operations. Nevertheless, the long-term effectiveness is hampered by intractable problems of cross-border sanctuaries, lack of state capacity in the previously tribal areas, and the lack of development resources.

The thesis that this paper presents was that context-specific application of counterinsurgency principles including population-centric counterinsurgency and civil-military integration produced significant security gains, but that sustainable peace must deal with root causes via socio-economic development and political integration. These findings support the basis of this thesis. Quantitative indicators are the image of spectacular dumbness of terrorist violence in the form of massive operations like Zarb-e-Azb. The supremacy of the state was a decisive factor for territorial control.

However, the persistence of the militant groups, continuing attacks, and likelihood of reoccurrence in the absence of development over the long-term suggests that military success is necessary but not sufficient to bring about a stable environment.

Regional dimensions complicate Pakistan's domestic counter-subversion efforts. Afghanistan's continued instability, particularly following August 2021 Taliban takeover, creates cross-border sanctuaries that militants exploit. Pakistan cannot unilaterally resolve this challenge without Afghan cooperation or acquiescence. Broader South Asian tensions, including India-Pakistan rivalry and great power competition, intersect with local conflict dynamics in ways that sometimes impede rational security policy. Regional collaboration, intelligence sharing, and collective action will be possible only if transnational militia networks are operational and need to be addressed; this represents an aspiration rather than an operational reality.

For global counterinsurgency studies, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa offers important lessons. It demonstrates that even in a rugged terrain with complex tribal politics, insurgency based guerrilla warfare could be effectively counter-attacked by state forces at least when applied holistic approaches of military size and pressure and political and development operationalization. It demonstrates the importance of long-term investment over a long period in comparison with early declarations of victory after tactical victories. It highlights the importance of regional dimension in combating transnational threat. Most importantly, it emphasizes that counterinsurgency is very much political at heart, and cannot be solved by military means alone.

Looking forward, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's trajectory depends on multiple factors including Afghanistan's development, Pakistan's political stability and economic growth, sustained commitment to development in formerly tribal areas, effectiveness of deradicalization programs, and evolution of regional geopolitics. There are reasons for a guarded optimism: indicators of security have improved markedly, the structure of governance has penetrated areas that were once ungoverned, there are attempts to build even though it is difficult. However, fragility remains. Regression can occur very rapidly from the presence of structural weaknesses. Academic interest and policy focus are still needed.

In conclusion, the dynamics of subversion and counter-subversion in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa from

2001 to 2025 illustrate both possibilities and limitations of state responses to insurgency in complex environments. Although military force was required to suppress militancy, refuse harbour, long term peace would only be achieved when grievances were reduced, the ability to govern was increased, development was supported and extremist ideologies were curtailed. The case not only reaffirms the principles of core counterinsurgency but highlights contextual issues in a case-specific context, including that of transnational elements. As Pakistan continues consolidating gains and addressing residual threats, the lessons learned in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa inform not only domestic policy but contribute to global understanding of counterinsurgency in the twenty-first century.

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