

COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM (CVE) IN PAKISTAN: FROM KINETIC TO NON-KINETIC APPROACHES (2025–26)

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ABSTRACT

Pakistan's security landscape in 2025–26 presents a paradox of structural urgency and institutional inertia. For the first time in the history of the Global Terrorism Index, Pakistan ranked first in 2026, recording 1,139 terrorism-related deaths in 2025, the highest since 2013. This qualitative research paper critically analyzes Pakistan's evolving counter-terrorism architecture, specifically examining the transition from kinetic (military) to non-kinetic (preventive, rehabilitative, and ideational) approaches to Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). Drawing on document analysis of the National Prevention of Violent Extremism (NPVE) Policy 2024, the National Action Plan (NAP) 2021, and provincial CVE legislation, and supplemented by secondary sources from think tanks such as PIPS and NACTA, as well as international organizations including UNODC and the UN, the paper first maps the historical dominance of kinetic operations from Operation Zarb-e-Azb to Operation Azm-e-Istehkam before evaluating their structural limitations. It then assesses the architecture, logic, and critical gaps of emerging non-kinetic instruments including the NPVE's 5-R framework, deradicalization programs, curriculum reform, counter-narrative strategies, and community engagement initiatives. The research concludes that while Pakistan's policy shift toward non-kinetic approaches marks meaningful progress, success depends on resolving persistent institutional contradictions, particularly civilian–military jurisdictional tensions, weak NACTA capacity, and implementation deficits across provinces.

Keywords: Pakistan, Countering Violent Extremism, CVE, CoE-CVE, kinetic approaches, non-kinetic approaches, NPVE Policy, National Action Plan, deradicalization, TTP, NACTA

1. INTRODUCTION

Violent extremism remains one of the gravest threats confronting Pakistan's state, society, and democratic order. Since the inception of the so-called 'War on Terror' following the September 11, 2001 attacks, Pakistan has found itself at the epicenter of global jihadist violence which is a frontline state that simultaneously hosted, enabled, and suffered from the very militancy it was called upon to suppress. The country's security predicament has grown more acute rather than

less: according to the Global Terrorism Index 2026, Pakistan ranked first among 163 nations for the first time in 2026, recording 1,139 terrorism-related deaths in 2025, the highest toll since 2013. This trajectory represents the sixth consecutive year of rising fatalities and constitutes a damning indictment of a security architecture that has relied overwhelmingly on force.

For much of the post-2001 period, Pakistan's response to violent extremism was almost

exclusively kinetic large-scale military operations, intelligence-based strikes, special courts, and expanded detention authority. Operations such as Zarb-e-Azb (2014–2016) produced measurable short-term gains by displacing militants and disrupting organizational networks. Yet violence resurged dramatically following the Afghan Taliban's return to Kabul in August 2021, which provided the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) with an effective sanctuary and renewed operational confidence. The structural drivers of radicalization for example ideological indoctrination, socioeconomic exclusion, governance deficits, and exploitable community grievances remained unaddressed, and the kinetic paradigm's limits became undeniable.

It is against this backdrop that the National Prevention of Violent Extremism (NPVE) Policy 2024 was approved by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's cabinet in December 2024 which is the most comprehensive non-kinetic CVE framework in Pakistan's institutional history. The policy, led by the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), advances a 'whole-of-society' strategy anchored in education, rehabilitation, community engagement, counter-narrative communication, and institutional coordination. Its ambition is significant; its implementation challenges are equally formidable. This paper provides a qualitative, policy-oriented analysis of this transition. It maps the historical architecture of kinetic approaches, critically evaluates the NPVE's non-kinetic framework and its institutional underpinnings, and identifies the structural contradictions that must be resolved if prevention is to complement and eventually supplant force as Pakistan's primary counter-extremism instrument.

2. Objectives

This research is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the evolution of Pakistan's counter-terrorism policy from military to preventive approaches (2015–2026).
2. To analyze major CVE policies, including NAP 2021, NPVE 2024, and provincial laws, for coherence and practicality.

3. To assess key CVE programs such as deradicalization, curriculum reform, counter-narratives, and community engagement.
4. To identify institutional challenges affecting CVE implementation in Pakistan.
5. To suggest policy recommendations to strengthen Pakistan's CVE framework.

3. Research Questions

The research is organized around the following central and subsidiary questions:

RQ1: How has Pakistan's counter-terrorism policy evolved from kinetic military operations to preventive approaches during 2015–2026?

RQ2: How coherent and practically feasible are Pakistan's key CVE policies, including NAP 2021, NPVE 2024, and provincial CVE laws?

RQ3: How effective are Pakistan's CVE programs such as deradicalization, curriculum reform, counter-narratives, and community engagement?

RQ4: What major institutional challenges affect the implementation of CVE policies in Pakistan?

RQ5: What policy measures can strengthen Pakistan's CVE framework to improve both effectiveness and coordination?

4. Significance of the Study

This research carries both academic and policy significance. In academic terms, it contributes to the growing body of literature on CVE in South Asia by providing a contemporaneous analysis of Pakistan's policy framework during a particularly consequential period from 2015 to 2026, when the country simultaneously confronted its most severe terrorism crisis in a decade and launched its most ambitious non-kinetic policy architecture. While much existing scholarship addresses either the kinetic or non-kinetic dimensions of Pakistan's counter-terrorism strategy in isolation, this paper provides an integrated analysis that traces the theoretical tension between force and prevention across historical and contemporary dimensions. From a policy perspective, the study's significance is acute. Pakistan's position at the apex of the Global Terrorism Index 2026 makes the effectiveness of its CVE strategy a matter of immediate and urgent national concern. The NPVE Policy 2024's comprehensive design offers

a credible blueprint for transition, but implementation has historically been the point of failure in Pakistani security policy. By systematically identifying the institutional, political, and programmatic gaps between policy design and operational reality, this research generates actionable insights for policymakers, NACTA officials, provincial governments, civil society organizations, and international development partners engaged in Pakistan's security sector.

The study also has broader regional and global significance. Pakistan's experience with violent extremism shaped by the Afghan Taliban's return to power, cross-border sanctuaries for the TTP, and a complex web of sectarian, ethnic, and ideological conflicts which offers instructive lessons for other states navigating the transition from militarized counter-terrorism toward prevention-centered security governance. Pakistan's successes and failures in this domain will inform CVE practice across South and Central Asia and contribute to global debates about the appropriate balance between kinetic and non-kinetic instruments in counter-terrorism strategy.

5. Literature Review

The academic literature on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) in Pakistan has grown substantially since the launch of the National Action Plan in 2015, though important gaps remain, particularly in the analysis of post-2021 policy developments and the emerging non-kinetic architecture represented by the NPVE Policy 2024.

Early foundational scholarship by Khan (2015), published through the United States Institute of Peace, provided the first systematic mapping of Pakistan's deradicalization programming, documenting the six major programs, namely Sabaoon, Mishal, Sparley, Rastoon, Pythom, and Heila, and critically evaluating the state's self-reported success claims against independent evidence. Khan's analysis established an enduring scholarly concern: the absence of rigorous longitudinal follow-up and independent evaluation made official claims of 99 percent

rehabilitation success rates epistemically unsustainable. This methodological concern has persisted in subsequent literature.

A landmark contribution to the conceptual framing of Pakistan's CVE challenge came from Basit (2015), writing in the IPRI Journal, whose analysis of counter-radicalization and deradicalization initiatives argued that Pakistan's CVE programs operated on an 'ad hoc basis' lacking coherent national policy frameworks. Basit's observation that CVE initiatives are context-bound and case-specific, and that a nuanced understanding of what works in particular environments is essential, anticipated the structural debates that would later surround the NPVE Policy. Basit's more recent scholarship, cited by Al Jazeera in 2025, has maintained this skeptical posture toward the NPVE, questioning whether civilian-led institutions like NACTA can operate independently in a military-dominated security environment.

The relationship between education and radicalization has been extensively analyzed in the Pakistani context. Research published through NACTA's Pakistan Journal of Terrorism Research has examined how textbook content, madrasa curricula, and university environments contribute to radicalization pathways. The Zia ul-Haq era's deliberate Islamization of educational content, which embedded Ghazwa-e-Hind narratives, delegitimizing religious pluralism, and provided state funding for ideologically aligned madrassas, established an infrastructural basis for radicalization that subsequent administrations have struggled to dismantle. The 2025 research by Chromatic, commissioned under the UNODC-NACTA-EU CPTP project, represents the most recent effort to systematically assess provincial curricula for CVE-relevant content, offering an evidence base for the NPVE's 'Revisit' pillar.

Scholarship on the limits of kinetic approaches has been increasingly prominent since the TTP's resurgence following the 2021 Afghan Taliban takeover. Analysis published through the Small Wars Journal in 2026 has argued that Pakistan's new counter-terrorism doctrine remains structurally constrained by the military's institutional preference for force-centric solutions,

the failure to secure genuine political consensus for operations like Azm-e-Istehkam, and the absence of community trust in militarily-administered prevention programs. This literature aligns with NACTA Director of Research Dr. Dayyab Gillani's own assessment that military operations provide only temporary relief without addressing the structural drivers of terrorism. The Institute for Strategic Studies, Research and Analysis (ISSRA) has similarly documented the quantified underperformance of NAP's non-kinetic provisions relative to its kinetic dimensions.

International scholarly and practitioner literature has increasingly emphasized the development-security nexus in CVE, which holds that durable prevention requires integrating counter-extremism goals into socioeconomic development programming rather than treating them as exclusively security-sector concerns. UNDP and UNODC frameworks operationalized in Pakistan through the CPTP project reflect this intellectual orientation, emphasizing community resilience, youth empowerment, victim support, and inclusive governance as foundational prevention strategies. The gap between this sophisticated international framework and Pakistan's historically security-centric institutional culture represents one of the central tensions animating the NPVE's implementation challenge.

Taken together, the existing literature establishes a coherent analytical consensus: Pakistan possesses credible policy frameworks for CVE but has consistently failed to translate them into sustained implementation, due to institutional weaknesses, civilian-military tensions, resource deficits, and the political economy of a security establishment whose identity and influence are tied to kinetic responses. This paper builds on and extends this consensus by providing a contemporaneous analysis of the NPVE Policy 2024 and its implementation context in 2025 to 2026.

Violent extremism remains one of the most critical challenges confronting Pakistan's state, society, and institutional order. The country's security environment has deteriorated markedly since the Afghan Taliban's return to power in Kabul in August 2021, which emboldened the Tehreek-i-

Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and created a strategic sanctuary from which cross-border attacks could be mounted with increasing operational efficiency. According to the Global Terrorism Index 2026, published by the Institute for Economics and Peace, Pakistan recorded 1,139 terrorism-related deaths in 2025, ranking it first among 163 countries for the first time in the index's history. This represented the sixth consecutive year of rising terrorism deaths, with fatalities now at their highest point since 2013.

For much of the post-9/11 era, Pakistan's response to this threat was predominantly kinetic, relying on large-scale military operations, intelligence-based strikes, and paramilitary deployments to suppress militant activity in the tribal belt. Operations such as Zarb-e-Azb (2014 to 2016) temporarily dismantled TTP infrastructure in North Waziristan and produced measurable reductions in terrorism fatalities between 2015 and 2019. However, the resurgence of violence following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan revealed the fundamental inadequacy of militarized responses in the absence of complementary non-kinetic measures that address the ideological, socioeconomic, and governance drivers of radicalization.

Recognizing this structural gap, the Pakistani government approved the National Prevention of Violent Extremism (NPVE) Policy in December 2024, under Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's cabinet. Described as a landmark departure from security-first frameworks, the NPVE promotes a 'whole-of-society' strategy engaging education, media, community organizations, religious leaders, and rehabilitation centers in a concerted preventive effort. Yet the policy has been met with significant skepticism from analysts who question whether a civilian-led institution like the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) can effectively operate in a security environment dominated by military authority.

This paper investigates the theoretical tension between kinetic and non-kinetic approaches to CVE in Pakistan, evaluating both the historical legacy of military operations and the architecture of the emerging non-kinetic policy framework. The paper is organized as follows: after detailing

the research methodology, it provides a brief historical contextualization of violent extremism in Pakistan; it then analyzes kinetic approaches and their limitations; examines non-kinetic instruments across policy, institutional, and programmatic dimensions; and concludes with a critical assessment and practical recommendations.

6. Research Design and Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology and follows a descriptive and analytical research approach. The research design is based on document analysis, which serves as the principal qualitative research method. The study relies primarily on secondary data. The principal sources include official policy documents such as the National Preventing Violent Extremism (NPVE) Policy 2024, the National Action Plan (NAP) 2021, organizational publications of the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), and provincial legislation, including the Punjab Centre of Excellence on Countering Violent Extremism Act 2025. To strengthen the analysis, these documents are supplemented with peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy reports, and research publications produced by Pakistani think tanks such as the Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) and the Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI). Reports published by international organizations, including UNODC, UNDP, and the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), are also consulted. In addition, credible media sources such as Dawn, The Nation, and Al Jazeera provide contextual information regarding recent developments, while the Global Terrorism Index 2026 published by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) offers the broader empirical context for Pakistan's contemporary security environment. The collected documents are analyzed using qualitative document analysis, involving systematic reading, comparison, categorization, and thematic interpretation. The analysis focuses on identifying recurring themes related to policy objectives, implementation mechanisms, institutional coordination, governance capacity, legal frameworks, and operational challenges.

7. Violent Extremism in Pakistan: Historical and Contemporary Contextualization

Pakistan's encounter with violent extremism predates 9/11, rooted in Cold War policies that supported jihadist groups during the Soviet-Afghan War and later in the conflict with India. The unintended consequences became evident with the emergence of the TTP in 2007, which launched an insurgency against the Pakistani state, particularly in FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. By 2009, terrorism had caused widespread human and economic losses.

A turning point came on 16 December 2014, when the TTP attacked the Army Public School (APS) in Peshawar, killing 132 children and nine staff members. The tragedy led to the adoption of the 20-point National Action Plan (NAP), Pakistan's first comprehensive counter-terrorism framework, combining military operations with preventive measures such as madrasa regulation, countering hate speech, and strengthening NACTA. However, implementation remained largely security-centric, with limited progress on non-kinetic initiatives.

The security environment deteriorated further after the Afghan Taliban's return to power in 2021, providing the TTP with greater operational space. Terrorist attacks increased sharply, while the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) intensified attacks on security forces and CPEC-related infrastructure. The March 2025 hijacking of the Jaffar Express contributed to Pakistan ranking as the most terrorism-affected country in the Global Terrorism Index 2026. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan continue to be the primary centers of violence, with the TTP remaining the country's deadliest militant group. These developments have reinforced the need for Pakistan to shift from a predominantly military response toward a comprehensive, prevention-oriented Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) strategy.

8. Kinetic Approaches: Architecture and Limitations

8.1 Military Operations as the Dominant Paradigm

For the greater part of the post-2001 period, Pakistan's counter-terrorism strategy has been synonymous with military force. Beginning with Operation Rah-e-Haq in 2007, the Pakistan Army launched a succession of large-scale operations targeting TTP strongholds in the tribal belt. The trajectory moved through Operations Rah-e-Rast, Rah-e-Nijat, and Khyber-I before culminating in Operation Zarb-e-Azb (June 2014 to December 2016), widely considered the most consequential counter-insurgency campaign in Pakistan's history. Zarb-e-Azb, concentrated in North Waziristan, cleared vast territories from militant control, dismantled TTP infrastructure, and displaced large civilian populations, contributing to a measurable reduction in terrorist fatalities between 2015 and 2019.

These operations reflected a strategic culture shaped by decades of military primacy in Pakistan's national security apparatus. For the security establishment, kinetic success, measured in territory cleared, militants neutralized, and attacks suppressed, represented the most legible and controllable form of counter-terrorism. The military's institutional dominance over civil-military relations reinforced this preference, as civilian agencies lacked the capacity, authority, or resources to mount equivalent institutional contributions.

8.2 Operation Azm-e-Istehkam (2024–Present)

The most recent expression of Pakistan's kinetic doctrine is Operation Azm-e-Istehkam (Resolve for Stability), approved on June 22, 2024 by the Apex Committee on the National Action Plan, chaired by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif. Unlike Zarb-e-Azb, which involved large-scale territorial clearance and mass population displacement, Azm-e-Istehkam was conceptualized as an intelligence-driven intensification of ongoing counter-terrorism efforts rather than a conventional military campaign. The government emphasized that it would not be a large-scale operation and would integrate political,

diplomatic, legal, and socioeconomic measures alongside kinetic action.

In practice, however, the operation was met with immediate political controversy. The Chief Minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Ali Amin Gandapur, publicly stated he had not been consulted prior to the launch, a significant breach of the federalist principles the operation ostensibly championed. A series of protest rallies and tribal jirgas erupted across KP in opposition, revealing the depth of public resistance to continued military operations in affected communities. The lack of political consensus undermined one of the operation's foundational claims: that it represented a unified 'whole-of-nation' approach. Azm-e-Istehkam was also launched partly in response to external pressure from China, whose nationals and CPEC investments had suffered a series of deadly attacks, including the March 2024 suicide bombing that killed five Chinese engineers at the Dasu Hydropower project. This external dimension, providing security guarantees to a strategic economic partner, further complicated the domestic political optics of the operation and raised questions about whose interests were primarily being served.

8.3 Structural Limitations of Kinetic Approaches

The fundamental limitation of kinetic approaches in Pakistan's context lies in their inability to address the structural drivers of radicalization. As NACTA's Director of Research, Dr. Dayyab Gillani, argued in early 2025, the War on Terror has taught us that military operations alone are not a sustainable strategy, and that kinetic successes are often only temporary because they fail to address the drivers and root causes of terrorism. The causes of violent extremism, including ideological indoctrination, socioeconomic marginalization, governance deficits, weak rule of law, and the exploitation of legitimate grievances, are simply not amenable to military resolution.

Pakistan's own experience confirms this diagnostic. Despite the tactical success of Zarb-e-Azb in temporarily degrading TTP capacity, violence resurged with even greater intensity after 2021. The Counter Extremism Project has noted

that most counter-radicalization efforts in Pakistan have historically been initiated by foreign or civil society actors rather than the state, while a 2015 Brookings Institution study concluded that the Pakistani government had been 'largely unsuccessful' in mobilizing public support for its CVE initiatives. The security-centric framing of counter-terrorism alienated affected communities rather than building the trust essential for durable stability.

Additionally, the judicial dimension of counter-terrorism has remained persistently deficient. As of November 2024, 2,273 anti-terrorism cases were pending in Pakistani courts, reflecting an overburdened, under-resourced, and procedurally compromised judicial system. Between 2019 and 2022, 657 individuals were sentenced to death on terrorism-related charges, yet no executions took place during this period, undermining the deterrence logic that animated much of the NAP's punitive architecture. This judicial gap created a revolving-door dynamic in which militants cycled through arrests and releases without meaningful consequences.

9. Non-Kinetic Approaches: Policy Framework and Operational Reality

9.1 The National Prevention of Violent Extremism (NPVE) Policy 2024

The National Preventing Violent Extremism (NPVE) Policy 2024 is Pakistan's first comprehensive non-kinetic CVE framework. Approved by the federal cabinet in December 2024 after years of development under NACTA, the policy adopts a prevention-centered approach based on five strategic pillars, known as the 5-R framework: Revisit, Reach Out, Reduce Risk, Reinforce, and Reintegrate. The policy focuses on curriculum reform, community engagement, and early identification of vulnerable individuals, strengthening social resilience against radicalization, and the rehabilitation and reintegration of former extremists. It adopts a whole-of-society approach, emphasizing the participation of government institutions, civil society, religious leaders, youth, women, and minority communities.

To ensure implementation, the NPVE establishes more than 700 Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), mandates the creation of federal and provincial PVE Centres of Excellence, and proposes dedicated PVE units within police departments. It also promotes the use of traditional and social media to counter extremist narratives and foster social cohesion. The NPVE is aligned with the revised National Action Plan (NAP) 2021 and reflects international best practices promoted by the United Nations and other global partners. Overall, it represents Pakistan's transition from a predominantly military response to a more preventive, institutional, and community-based strategy for countering violent extremism.

9.2 Deradicalization and Rehabilitation Programs

Pakistan's most operationally developed non-kinetic instruments are its deradicalization and rehabilitation programs, which predate the NPVE by over a decade. The first and most internationally recognized of these is the Sabaoon Center for Rehabilitation, established in 2009 in the Swat Valley in the wake of military operations in the Malakand Division. Operated by a Pakistani NGO in partnership with the military, Sabaoon is the only program in the world specifically designed to deradicalize juvenile militants affiliated with the TTP. Its curriculum integrates formal education, corrective religious education, vocational training, psychological counseling, and family engagement sessions, with militants separated into groups based on age and degree of indoctrination.

Pakistan currently operates six main deradicalization programs: Sabaoon, Mishal, Sparley, Rastoon, Pythom, and Heila. Pakistani officials have reported a 99 percent success rate and claim that over 2,500 former Taliban fighters have been 'reformed.' However, independent scholarly evaluation of these claims is limited, and critics have noted that the absence of rigorous longitudinal follow-up makes such figures difficult to validate. The programs' military oversight has also raised concerns about their civilian legitimacy and community trust, particularly in communities where the military is perceived as a party to the conflict rather than a neutral service provider.

The NPVE Policy commits to the expansion and institutionalization of these rehabilitation architectures. Sabaoon's model, grounded in trauma-informed, community-anchored approaches, has been explicitly cited by its head, Dr. Fareha Peracha, as a framework for scaling up provincial CVE engagement. The December 2025 Strategic Planning Workshop for the Punjab Centre of Excellence on CVE (CoE-CVE) marked a critical milestone in this expansion, producing a five-year provincial roadmap for evidence-based, community-centered prevention programming. The Punjab CoE-CVE Act 2025 gave statutory recognition to this institutional architecture, part of a broader provincial legislative alignment with the federal NPVE framework.

9.3 Education Reform and Counter-Narrative Strategies

The ideational dimension of CVE, which addresses the production and reproduction of extremist narratives, has been one of the most contested and least effectively implemented aspects of Pakistan's non-kinetic strategy. The Zia ul-Haq era (1977 to 1988) institutionalized textbook content that promoted a narrow Islamist worldview and delegitimized religious pluralism, establishing a generational legacy that subsequent governments have struggled to undo. The NAP's provision for madrasa regulation sought to bring approximately 30,000 religious seminaries into a formal registration and monitoring framework; by 2023, registration of roughly that number had been achieved under the Ittehad-e-Tanzeem-ul-Madaris Pakistan umbrella. However, analysts note that registration has not been consistently translated into substantive curricular reform, and some madrassas continue to teach extremist doctrines.

The NPVE Policy identifies curriculum reform as a core pillar of its 'Revisit' component, aiming to embed values of peace, tolerance, and critical thinking across the national educational system. In December 2025, UNODC and NACTA partnered with the organization Chromatic to present research examining school curricula and textbooks across grades 9 through 12 and O-Levels in all four provinces and the federal capital,

assessing content related to CVE and PVE goals. The findings informed a policy dialogue attended by education officials, curriculum developers, and civil society actors, serving as a model of evidence-based reform advocacy that the NPVE envisions as standard practice.

On the counter-narrative front, the NPVE directs NACTA to develop and disseminate alternative narratives challenging extremist ideologies through national and digital media platforms. The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) has, under NAP provisions, blocked approximately 1.3 million URLs containing content inciting terrorism, violence, or hate speech as of 2023, representing meaningful progress in the online dimension of counter-narrative work. However, research produced through NACTA has identified social media, particularly Facebook, as a hub of extremist activity, where organizations like the TTP have deployed visual propaganda, including ideologically charged imagery and videos, to recruit and radicalize vulnerable youth. The tension between blocking content and producing compelling alternative content remains unresolved, with the state's counter-narrative output widely regarded as insufficiently creative, targeted, or trusted to compete with extremist messaging.

9.4 Community Engagement and Civil Society Partnerships

One of the most promising developments in Pakistan's non-kinetic CVE landscape is the growing involvement of civil society, academic institutions, and community organizations through structured partnership frameworks. The EU-funded 'Countering and Preventing Terrorism in Pakistan' (CPTP) project, executed by UNODC in partnership with NACTA, has been instrumental in building this ecosystem. Under the project, over 30 grants were awarded to community-based organizations, academic institutions, and civil society actors, supporting activities ranging from interfaith dialogue to youth empowerment workshops.

In May 2025, UNODC, NACTA, and the EU co-organized a Strategic Workshop on Preventing

Violent Extremism and Civic Empowerment in Islamabad, convening over 40 young change-makers, including 15 women, from across all provinces. The workshop produced an initial Action Framework for a NACTA Youth Empowerment Network on PVE, identifying community-level entry points, impact metrics, and gender-inclusive engagement strategies. This initiative reflects an understanding, now embedded in the NPVE architecture, that sustainable prevention requires investing in youth as agents of change rather than treating them merely as objects of vulnerability.

Provincial governments have also begun institutionalizing CVE engagement beyond the federal framework. The December 2025 Punjab CoE-CVE Strategic Planning Workshop brought together the Speaker of the Punjab Assembly, the Minister for Specialized Healthcare, senior officials, security institutions, academia, and development partners to co-create a five-year provincial roadmap. The workshop's grounding in 'inclusive, evidence-based, and community-centered approaches' represented a departure from the top-down, security-centric models that had characterized previous provincial CVE efforts. Balochistan, where the security situation is most acute, has also benefited from CPTP project activities, including an October 2025 exposure visit to France and Belgium by provincial secretaries to study European models of victim support and survivor-centered rehabilitation.

10. Critical Assessment: Persistent Gaps and Structural Contradictions

10.1 The Civilian–Military Institutional Tension

The most fundamental structural contradiction in Pakistan's CVE architecture is the tension between the civilian mandate of NACTA as the designated lead institution for the NPVE, and the pervasive military influence over the country's security policymaking. Critics have consistently questioned whether a civilian body can exercise meaningful operational authority in a system where the military dominates institutional resources, information flows, and political influence. Abdul Basit, a research fellow at Singapore's S. Rajaratnam School of International

Studies, has argued that when a non-militarized framework for violent extremism is effectively implemented by the military, no guarantee of its genuine civilian character exists. Iftikhar Firdous, co-founder of The Khorasan Diary, has raised related concerns about whether NACTA can operate effectively without being perceived as encroaching on the jurisdiction of other law enforcement agencies.

This institutional tension is not merely academic. Pakistan's national security architecture has historically subordinated civilian institutions to military oversight in security-adjacent domains, and NACTA is no exception. The risk is that the NPVE's 'whole-of-society' framing becomes rhetorically compelling but operationally hollow, functioning as a civilian veneer over a security-driven implementation. For the policy's prevention-centered logic to function, NACTA must be empowered with adequate budget allocations, human resources, and statutory authority to coordinate across federal ministries, provincial governments, security agencies, and civil society actors. Currently, the evidence suggests that NACTA remains institutionally underpowered relative to the ambition of the policy it is tasked with leading.

10.2 Implementation Deficits and Provincial Coordination

Pakistan's federal structure creates specific challenges for CVE implementation. Counter-terrorism and internal security are constitutionally shared responsibilities between the federal government and provinces, and the 18th Constitutional Amendment (2010) significantly expanded provincial autonomy. This means that the NPVE, while a federal policy, depends critically on provincial ownership, capacity, and political will for its implementation. The experience of the NAP, where progress on non-kinetic provisions was broadly assessed as unsatisfactory relative to kinetic dimensions, suggests that the NPVE faces similar risks of uneven and selective implementation.

The establishment of provincial Centers of Excellence on CVE represents an important structural response to this challenge. However, as

of 2025 to 2026, these centers are at varying stages of institutional development across the four provinces, with Punjab most advanced and Balochistan facing the most acute capacity constraints relative to the severity of its security crisis. The 700 KPIs embedded in the NPVE provide a theoretically robust monitoring framework, but their value depends entirely on the quality of data collection and reporting systems that provincial administrations are not yet consistently equipped to maintain.

Inter-agency coordination between NACTA, the Intelligence Bureau, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the police, provincial Counter Terrorism Departments (CTDs), and civil administration remains a persistent operational challenge. The NAP's provision for strengthening CTDs has delivered notable improvements in technical capacity, but coordination failures continue to create gaps that militant networks exploit. Pakistan's anti-terror financing controls have recorded progress: the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) removed Pakistan from its grey list in October 2022, but sectarian violence has actually increased between 2023 and 2024, with 18 incidents recorded by October 2024 compared to 12 the previous year.

10.3 The Missing Peace Dividend and Socioeconomic Drivers

Non-kinetic CVE strategy in Pakistan has invested relatively little in addressing the deep socioeconomic drivers of radicalization: unemployment, poverty, educational exclusion, and governance-related grievances. Pakistan's Human Development Index ranking remains low, reflecting chronic underinvestment in health, education, and economic opportunity in precisely those regions, including KP, FATA, and Balochistan, most affected by violent extremism. Radicalization research consistently identifies unemployment and social marginalization as key 'push factors' that make individuals susceptible to extremist recruitment, and Pakistan's deradicalization programs address these factors through vocational training and family reintegration components. Yet the scale of these programs remains grossly insufficient relative to

the magnitude of socioeconomic vulnerability they seek to address.

The NPVE Policy's engagement with socioeconomic drivers is conceptually acknowledged. The Director General of the National Commission for Human Development emphasized the significance of improving Pakistan's Human Development Index position as a PVE imperative, but the policy does not establish clear mechanisms for integrating CVE objectives into broader development programming. International CVE practice has increasingly moved toward 'development-security nexus' approaches that embed prevention goals within economic inclusion, social protection, and local governance reform programs. Pakistan's policy architecture has yet to operationalize this integration at scale.

10.4 Skepticism, Public Legitimacy, and the Credibility Deficit

A recurring concern in the scholarly and analytical literature on Pakistani CVE is the credibility deficit that affects state-led prevention efforts. Public opinion data suggests that while a majority of Pakistanis condemn violent extremism, significant segments of the population, particularly in KP and Balochistan, retain sympathy for certain extremist ideologies, especially when articulated through religious rhetoric. Trust in state institutions, weakened by decades of governance failures, political manipulation of security policy, and the perceived instrumentalization of extremist groups for foreign policy purposes, undermines the legitimacy of government-led prevention programs.

The community-facing dimensions of the NPVE, which include engagement with religious leaders, youth networks, and civil society, represent an attempt to build this trust through non-state intermediaries. NACTA's partnership with civil society organizations under the CPTP project, including the May 2025 youth empowerment workshop and provincial dialogue processes, reflects an understanding that the state alone cannot manufacture the social trust required for effective CVE. However, as long as military

operations in KP and Balochistan continue to generate civilian casualties, displacement, and community grievances, these trust-building efforts will face a structural headwind that no amount of programming can fully overcome.

11. Conclusion

Pakistan stands at a critical inflection point in its approach to violent extremism. The country's ranking atop the Global Terrorism Index 2026 for the first time represents not merely a statistical indictment but a structural verdict on the limits of a security architecture that has for decade's prioritized military force over prevention, punishment over rehabilitation, and security interests over community trust. The NPVE Policy 2024 marks a genuine and historically significant shift in Pakistan's policy discourse, one that acknowledges, at the highest levels of government, that kinetic approaches alone cannot produce durable security.

The shift from kinetic to non-kinetic approaches in Pakistan's CVE architecture is both necessary and, in the current institutional environment, deeply challenging. The NPVE's 5-R framework, comprising Revisit, Reach Out, Reduce Risk, Reinforce, and Reintegrate, provides a conceptually sound and internationally aligned prevention architecture. The CPTP project's community engagement initiatives, the expansion of deradicalization programs, curriculum reform dialogues, and provincial CoE-CVE development all represent meaningful operational progress. Yet these gains remain fragile and unevenly distributed, their realization contingent on overcoming the institutional tensions, implementation deficits, and credibility gaps that have historically caused Pakistan's ambitious policy frameworks to fall short of their stated objectives.

The path forward requires political leadership willing to invest genuine institutional authority in civilian-led prevention, security establishments willing to accept accountability for the community impacts of kinetic operations, and a civil society sector empowered rather than merely consultatively engaged. Pakistan's long-term security is inseparable from its governance quality,

its development trajectory, and the willingness of its state to treat prevention not as a supplement to military power but as the primary instrument of an enduring counter-extremism strategy.

12. Recommendations

Based on the analysis, six recommendations are offered for strengthening Pakistan's CVE architecture.

1. Allocate a dedicated budget, hire specialized civilian staff, and legislate statutory protection for NACTA's operational independence so the NPVE's 700 KPIs translate into real accountability rather than paperwork.
2. Co-develop implementation plans with each provincial cabinet, hold regular Apex Committee reviews of non-kinetic progress, and ensure sustained funding for all four provincial CVE Centers of Excellence, with Balochistan receiving priority attention
3. Embed prevention objectives into CPEC projects, poverty reduction programs, and education initiatives. Vocational training and job creation in KP and Balochistan should be budgeted and recognized as security investments, not charity.
4. Move beyond madrassa registration to actual content change. Establish a time-bound, province-coordinated process to remove intolerant material and introduce peace-oriented content, making curriculum compliance a condition of government recognition and funding.
5. Establish a dedicated digital communications unit within NACTA to produce targeted, credible alternative narratives on social media. Partner with youth creators, civil society, and respected religious scholars to challenge TTP and BLA messaging effectively.
6. Create transparent accountability mechanisms for civilian harm from military operations. Formally consult affected communities in KP and Balochistan when designing local CVE programs, because unaddressed grievances will continue to hollow out even the best-designed prevention efforts.

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