



**Counterterrorism Strategies in Pakistan:  
A Critical Analysis of the National Action Plan (NAP) (2014-2018)**

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**Abstract:**

This research aims to generate an insightful discussion on the National Action Plan approved by the parliament as a Counterterrorism strategy in Pakistan on December 24, 2014. NAP was designed with a purpose to eliminate terrorism and extremism from Pakistan not only by eliminating terrorists and extremists but also their mindsets. Some 20 points were unanimously approved by political parties and civil-military leadership of Pakistan. It was claimed by the state institutions that tangible and productive measures taken under the NAP had reduced violence in the state. However, an in-depth analysis of the NAP (2014-2018) along with its appraisal in the light of the UN Global Counterterrorism Approach concludes that the NAP actually fell short of attaining the conceived objectives of eliminating terrorism from Pakistan. The study concludes that NAP was initiated by the policy makers with a Rational Choice Approach as it was not productive for the common masses rather it largely aimed at attaining and maximizing interests of the few.

**Keywords:** Counterterrorism, National Action Plan, Pakistan, NACTA, Military Measures, Political Measures.

**INTRODUCTION**

Counterterrorism has been defined in a variety of ways. The US State department (2007) defines it as offensive measures taken to prevent, deter and respond to terrorism. For Andrew Silke (2011) it means strategies, policies and tactics used for combatting terrorism and dealing with its consequences.

Alex P. Schmid (2011) calls it a proactive effort to combat, deter and prevent politically motivated militancy and violence against civilians using measures including law enforcement, psychological, political, economic and social. Richard J. Chasdi (2010) used the term as efforts to suppress or

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constraint terrorist assault practiced dominantly by non-state actors. From the above definitions it can be concluded that counterterrorism refers to a forceful response to acts of terror and it is a comprehensive combination of hard and soft powers. This paper provides an insight into the National Action Plan (NAP) as a counterterrorism strategy in Pakistan in the light of the UN Global Counter Terrorism Approach (2014). Major points of the approach are to:

- address conditions that are contributing to the spread of terrorism;
- take measures to prevent and counter terrorism
- ensure protection of human rights.

Due to dearth of literature on counter-terrorism studies, the scholars use the literature on public policy theory to get insights and appraisal of the counter-terrorism policymaking (Renard, 2021).

Keeping this in view, this research makes an appraisal of the NAP using Rational Choice Theory. It is quite noteworthy that scholars use Rational Choice Theory for economic issues. However, Green (2002) identified that Radnitzky and Bernholz (1987), Becker (1976), Green and Shapiro (1996), Hogarth and Reder (1987) and Swedberg (1990), have used the rational choice approach beyond conventional economic issues to political and social issues. Key assumptions of Rational Choice Theory used for this study include; Individual actors behave rationally and act as self-interested, self-calculating and self-maximizing. All actors “hold a set of logically consistent beliefs about the outcomes that will result from their actions. Actors will optimize across actions and go for actions that will provide them the highest utility” (Ogu, 2013). This study uses ‘individuals’ of RCT as set of individual i.e, political and military leadership of Pakistan. Keeping this theoretical underpinning in view, this research addresses the questions: 1. Whether the National Action Plan as a strategy to counterterrorism really contributed in preventing and combating terrorism in Pakistan. 2. To which extent conditions that are contributing to the spread of terrorism in Pakistan are addressed in the National Action Plan? 3. Whether NAP really ensured protection of human rights in Pakistan. 4. Why the NAP failed to meet the set goals? Reminder of the paper is as follows: Section two describes the background of the wave of terrorism in Pakistan in the post-9/11 decade. Section three addresses the reasons of formation of the National Action Plan. Section four and five take in to account military and political measures taken to prevent and counterterrorism and protect human rights. Last section concludes the study.

### **BACKGROUND OF THE WAVE OF TERRORISM IN THE POST 9/11 DECADE IN PAKISTAN**

On November 19, 1995, a truck loaded with explosives blew up outside the Egyptian embassy in Islamabad, killing 15 people, including four diplomats, and injuring 59 others (Khan, 1995). The terrorist attack took place in the aftermath of the PPP government’s decision of sending back 400 Egyptian activists of Ikhwan-ul-Muslimeen to Egypt after convincing their government in 1995. The follow-up of PPP’s decision in the form of a report was submitted to the Interior Ministry in July 1997, almost 4 years before the 9/11 incident. The report besides revealing that some Islamic countries were responsible for promoting sectarianism in Pakistan which must be countered seriously, warned about the presence of some 11,000 foreign fighters who took part in Afghan Jihad and never went back to their native states. The report clearly stated that in case of negligence in eradicating terrorism, the matter could go from bad to worse in the coming years (Abbas, 2017).

In the following years, the state remained politically unstable due to a tussle between the elected PML-N government and other state institutions such as the military and judiciary leading the state towards a political crisis. Amid the entire situation when the democratic government of PML-N was seeking its survival, the biggest threat for the state pointed out in the 1997 report presented to the Interior Ministry was neglected. Furthermore, as soon as the army took over the power dismissing the PML-N government in October 1999, some other priorities such as getting legitimacy and accommodation for the military regime at the national and international levels were set by the state. Again, countering the likely threats to the state's security were ignored by the state institutions.

The tragic incident of 9/11 and their aftermath brought Pakistan in to limelight. On one side, the US and its allies pressurized Pakistan to cooperate for their operations in Afghanistan in the war against terror. On the other side, the state's policy to be an ally of the US in the war against terror turned those non-state actors residing in Pakistan into anti-state actors. These non-state actors earlier backed Pakistan's policies during the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan and later supported and strengthened the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. These non-state actors joined hands with those foreign fighters whose presence was pointed out in a 1997 report presented to the Interior Ministry. Prominent among those included Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) –an umbrella organization of almost 13 groups established under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud in 2007. The origin of TTP can be traced to 2002 when the Pakistan army conducted incursions into tribal areas to combat foreign terrorists fleeing from Afghanistan to Pakistan. Furthermore, the US Drone attack on Tehreek-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi (TNSM) madrassa in Bajaur resulted in the killing of 80 students in October 2006 and the Lal Majid Operation conducted in 2007 led to the formally announced establishment of TTP. TTP declared war against the state and attacked government institutions, armed forces, and those who supported the government's efforts in the war on terror (Islam, 2016). Even, the education institutions, hospitals, and public places targeted by TTP resulted in massive casualties (Ahmed, 2010).

Briefly, negligence of the state in the late 1990's led to organization of political motivated groups and deepened roots of violence in Pakistan.

### **Why National Action Plan was Formulated?**

The war against terror under the state patronage reached the hideouts of the terrorists for the first time with the launching of Operations al-Mizan (2002-2006) in South Waziristan, Operation Zalzal (2008) in South Waziristan, Operation Sher Dil in Bajaur, Rah-e-Haq and Rah-e-Rast (2007-2009) in Swat and later with Operation Rah-e-Nijat in South Waziristan (Khan, 2012). After achieving political consensus among all stakeholders including religious and political parties and the military leadership, the military operation Zarb-i-Azb launched on 15 June 2014 in North Waziristan along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border was a chain of a series of military operations against the terrorists (Naazer, Farooq, & Khattak, 2017). All military operations including Zarb-i-Azb were confined to a few of the specific areas of FATA and Swat. Some security analysts believe that it was the military operation Radul-Fasad that hinted at the state's decision to defeat the ideology of terrorism and extremism as it was launched in the entire state. The launching of operation Rad-ul-Fasad received country-wide support from the political parties and they demanded that it should be conducted

without any discrimination against all the terrorists. No doubt, a consensus was developed at the national level to eliminate all terrorists and all sorts of terrorism after the APS school incident.

The terrorists attacked the APS school killing 132 children on 16/12 led the Pakistani nation to decide to counterterrorism with consensus. The Prime Minister in his televised address to the nation said that the tragic incident had drawn a line between “coward terrorists and the Pakistani nation.” According to him, on one side are the coward terrorists and on the other side stands the Pakistani nation” (Days of Terrorists are Numbered, 2014). The incident seemed to be a watershed to abridge the division that existed within the state on different levels; between the government and military, among the political parties, and/or between the government and civil society. The Prime Minister said,

“The Peshawar atrocity has changed Pakistan. We need to eradicate the mindset of terrorism to defeat extremism and sectarianism. This horrendous attack has shaken the nation as the terrorists attacked the future of this country” (Ibid).

Since the start of the counterterrorism efforts, it was the first occasion when the state announced to expand its efforts to counterterrorism taking them from chasing hideouts to eradicating the mindset of terrorism. A clear shift in state policy was pointed out as the war to counterterrorism from hard zones was extended to the soft zones as it was planned to destroy the safe havens of the terrorists and eradicate the mindset promoting terrorism. A National Action Plan was designed with the consent of political parties and civil-military leadership. Earlier, what was an ambiguous and unclear narrative polarizing and misleading the nation on counterterrorism seemed to be replaced with a new united narrative representing the aspirations of the entire nation. The plan comprising 20 points also vowed to eliminate terrorism and extremism by eliminating not only terrorists and extremists but also their mindsets. It is clearly depicted that Pakistani leadership used rational choice approach to attain maximum outcomes of maintaining state writ and peace in conflict affected areas. As per preferences of the leadership hideouts of the militants were destroyed in order to achieve highest outcomes of wiping out terrorists. To achieve so, some military, as well as political measures, were suggested. Military measures were set as preferences to wipe out terrorists and political measures were used to change mindset of terrorists and spread of terrorism ideology. Actually both military and political measures largely aimed maximization of civil-military leadership’s interests. Military and political leadership on one page unanimously formulated NAP that showed that they acted as individuals making policies of the state. The details of the military and political measures are given below:

### **MILITARY MEASURES: COUNTERING TERRORISM AND PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS**

Some military measures were initiated to win the war in hard zones that aimed to end terrorism.

Under the NAP, it was decided to establish military-led speedy trial courts for the execution of convicted terrorists, take action against armed militias and activate National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA). Moreover, the NAP also envisaged establishing a counterterrorism force and vowed to accomplish the goals of the Karachi Operation (*National Counter Terrorism Authority*. n.d).

Initially, the military courts were suspected by the various groups of the society. But later, in an All Parties Conference (APC) held on December 24, 2014, all political parties came up with a

unanimous decision of setting up the military courts for speedy trial against the militants. After the APC, the leader of the opposition Syed Khursheed Shah informed,

Only terrorists would be tried in these military courts and these would not be used for political objectives. According to him, "The aim of setting up military courts is to ensure the speedy trial of terrorists, there are so many loopholes in our judicial system and it has failed to deliver (P.M Sharif Announces, 2014)." He said that all the political parties had agreed to amend the Constitution to facilitate the establishment of the military courts.

In a series of developments, 21st Amendment to Constitution was passed by both houses on January 7, 2015. This amendment led to providing a legal cover for the setup of the military courts. The Act also amended Article 175 of the Constitution, which then led to further amendments to the first schedule of the Constitution (i.e. clause XXXIX of The Pakistan Army Act 1952, VI of The Pakistan Air Force Act 1953, XXXV of The Pakistan Navy Ordinance 1961, and X of the Protection of Pakistan Act 2014) (Parliament Passes 21<sup>st</sup> Constitution Amendment, 2015).

The International Commission of Jurists referring to the military source reported that the military courts had convicted 274 since January 2015 and out of these 161 had been sentenced to death (Pakistan Law Allowing, 2017).

The working of military courts has been under immense criticism since their establishment under the 21st constitutional amendment. On the recommendation of the provincial governments, the Ministry of Interior sends cases to the military courts for trial. These courts are blamed for operating secretly. Several questions are left unanswered such as whether the courts just try hardcore terrorists and whether the evidence based on which the accused is convicted is conclusive. They are also blamed for debarring the convicted from hiring a counsel of their own choice (Zaidi, 2016).

It is further argued that the special military courts add to the power of the military and pave the way to undermine civilian institutions and democracy in return (Ibid).

The tenure of the military courts expired on January 7, 2017. The government in consensus with all the parliamentary political parties decided to revive them. The bill recommending a two-year extension in the term of military courts was passed by the national assembly with a great majority on March 21, 2017, and Senate on March 29, 2017. The 28th Amendment Bill it was demanded in the 28<sup>th</sup> Amendment that law of evidence should be implemented and suspect should be brought in the court within 24 hours and must be given right to have a lawyer of his choice (NA passes bill, 2017).

Again, there existed some differences of opinion among the major political parties over the revival of the military courts. PPP's Sayed Naveed Qamar criticized that the government had failed to reform the judicial system and for that reason was relying on the military courts to maintain peace in the state (BBC News, 2016). In the end, despite reservations all the major political parties voted in favor of reinstating the military courts for two years.

The government's decision of abolishing the moratorium on the death penalty in terrorism-related cases had also been under question. Since lifting the moratorium on the death penalty, 345 prisoners have been executed. In the second year of the NAP's implementation, the figures for

execution crept to 419. Some reports blamed that not all hanged were the terrorists as just one out of 6 was a terrorist (Zahid, 2016). Moreover, some critics claimed that for capital punishment offenses unreliable investigation methods of the police and chronic corruption also made the entire process of charging. For them, it is a wrong assumption that capital punishment prevents offenses and criminal activities from taking place (Against Execution, 2016).

On the other side, the state authorities strongly believe that lifting the ban on the moratorium and establishment of the military courts have improved the security situation in the entire state. According to them, the terrorist attacks have decreased from 1,823 in 2014 to 1,009 in 2015 and fatalities from 1,761 in 2014 to 1,081 in 2015. Even some of the reports also suggest that fatalities due to violence in the state were 7,611 in 2014 which dropped to 4,653 in 2015. In the first three quarters of 2016, 2,061 people lost their lives in terrorist-related incidents (Salahuddin, 2016). It is claimed that the overall security situation has been improved in terms of statistics. However, it is also argued that some recent blasts in Lahore and Sewan Sharif killing over 100 people indicate that terrorism has not been eliminated in Pakistan as claimed.

One of the points of the National Action Plan includes strengthening National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA)-the anti-terrorism institution. Khawaja Khalid Farooq, Former Inspector General of Police (IGP), Punjab, and NACTA head said that the declared objectives of the institution included the establishment of a Joint Intelligence Directorate (JID) for their effective coordination to fight collectively against terrorism. Some concerns do exist regarding NACTA's performance that included not holding meetings of NACTA's board of governors and its failure to form JID, having representatives of different civilian and military security agencies. The NACTA's head defending the institution pointed out that passive response from some agencies is hampering the creation of JID. According to him, if a meeting is held some of the military and security agencies send their junior officers which shows just their non-serious presence. It has also been pointed out by the analysts that the institution was supposed to be under the control of the Prime Minister but Interior Ministry was keeping it under its control which strongly indicates that the government lacks the political will to make NACTA an effective institution for counterterrorism (Ahmed, 2016). The federal government claims that it is determined of making NACTA an effective institution and in this regard, the federal government has promised to release more funds for JID. They informed that the budget of NACTA, was Rs 95 million, Rs1.25 billion, and Rs 1.559 billion in 2013-14, 2014-15, and 2016-17 respectively (Gishkori, 2017).

One of the members of NACTA, Dr. Tipu further added that despite limited resources and manpower, the institution has performed well as it has successfully designed the first-ever National Security Policy 2014-18 to protect the national interests. The NACTA authorities also claim that the most commendable achievement of the entity is developing a vigorous national narrative on terrorism and extremism. They also claim their success to maintain a "red book" of terrorist organizations and groups with complete information and profiles including the recently added Jamat ul Ahrar (JuA) and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al Alim (LeJA) (National Action Plan, 2016). However, it is widely speculated that the government has largely failed to counter the militant organizations and their outfits. For instance, it is claimed that banned organizations and outfits are renaming themselves and performing their old tasks and activities, such as Jaish-e-Mohammad has renamed itself as Khudam ul Islam, and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) now operates under the umbrella of Jamaat-

ud-Dawa (JuD). Therefore, a perception is created that the government is just targeting a few of the militant organizations sparing some others (Zahid, 2016). However, the government denies such allegations. It claims that going through the NACTA's website it can be found that the government has placed JUD on a watch list as per UNSC 1267 Sanctions and has listed some other organizations in the second schedule of ATA 1997 (as amended).

Some raise observations that even banning terrorist organizations or groups have not enhanced prospects of countering terrorism in Pakistan as according to some reports the proscribed organizations have been enjoying immense freedom from holding rallies and public gatherings to getting airtime spreading hatred and bigotry. The political opponents allege the government for backing some of the militant outfits of the state more specifically in Southern Punjab (Zehra, 2017). According to them, one of the biggest proofs was the shocking victory of Masroor Nawaz Jhangvi, the son of Haq Nawaz Jhangvi (founder of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi) in the by-election (Salahuddin, 2016).

The government officials denying these allegations claimed that the killing of the Emir of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi as well as his deputy and 14 other members in a police encounter in Southern Punjab. (Gabol, 2015) showed that the government had been taking action against all terrorist groups without any discrimination. The government officials further added that the recent detention of Jammāt-ud-Dawa's Amir, Hafiz Muhammad Saeed is also an example of the state's sincerity to eradicate extremism and militancy by taking action against all the suspects.

Summing up NACTA's performance, its coordinator Ihsan Ghani's briefing must not be ignored which stated that the Intelligence Agencies' performance must not be undermined as law enforcement agencies have killed 2, 159 terrorists and arrested 1, 724 under the NAP in intelligence-based operations. According to him, 142,335 suspects were arrested in 122,772 combing operations. Around 2,012,765 Stop and Search Operations and 4,230 Intelligence Based Operations (IBOs) were carried out (NACTA release Statistics, 2016).

Some progress can be observed in the deployment of the Counter-Terrorism Force in all provinces of Pakistan. Elite Police<sup>4</sup> and Counter-Terrorism Force in Punjab, Counter-Terrorism Force in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Anti-Terrorism Force in Balochistan, and Special Security Unit in Sindh have been established. The critics raise objections over the skills and training as well as the equipment provided to these forces which make them less effective to control terrorism. It has been observed that in some of the attacks, terrorists are more trained than the police and are well equipped with modern weapons.

Summing up, it can be noted that military measures taken under the national action plan contributed in preventing and combating terrorism in Pakistan to a limited extent, while violation of human rights was noted on a large scale.

#### **NAP: POLITICAL MEASURES TO COUNTERTERRORISM IN PAKISTAN**

Some of the political measures taken under the NAP to counter-terrorism in Pakistan included empowering the Balochistan government for political reconciliation with all stakeholders including

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<sup>4</sup> The Punjab police first raised this special anti-terrorist police force in 1997, due to the increasing number of sectarian attacks in the Punjab province

the dissident groups, bringing about administrative and development reforms in FATA, and ensuring the speedy return of internally displaced persons. The plan also added to develop a strategy for the repatriation of Afghan refugees, ban the glorification of terrorists in media, dismantle the communication network of the terrorists and choke financing for the terrorists and their organizations. It was decided to take action against those spreading sectarianism and disallow the defunct outfits to operate under any other name to leave no room for extremism in the country (National Counter Terrorism Authority. n.d.). The above mentioned measures aimed largely to counter terrorism.

Analyzing the progress in the above-mentioned areas we can find that the Balochistan government having Chief Minister Abdul Malik in 2015 initiated a reconciliation plan and under that amnesty was offered to Baloch militias who were willing to surrender accepting the state writ (Khan, 2015). On political grounds, the government has failed to convince the Baloch leadership to end up self-imposed exile. It is also quite noteworthy that the efforts of the Balochistan government faded away as soon as Abdul Malik left office. The government failing to bring the Baloch leaders to give away their enmity towards the state provoked the state authorities. In this connection, the interior ministry informed recently that the FIA would send a formal reference to Interpol within the next few days for the extradition of Brahamdagh Bugti. However, on the official level Balochistan government still claims that the reconciliation process with the Baloch nationalists is underway and in the year 2016, some 800 suspected militants laid down their arms in Balochistan (Baloch separatist, 2017).

One of the major steps on the political ground was introducing reforms in FATA. Under the reform plans, seven agencies of FATA would become seven districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It has been nearly two years to the 25th Amendment under which FATA reforms were initiated; however, it has yet to see any tangible results. Along with repealing Frontier Crimes Regulations, it was decided that a 10-year development program would be initiated. Under that program 3 % i.e Rs 90 billion of resources would be allocated to FATA from the federal divisible pool. On a broader spectrum, while there are some tangible gains for the people of FATA, at the same time many ambiguities and questions are left unanswered (Dogar, 2017). The judicial system for FATA would come up in the enactment of the Riway Regulation for Tribal Areas repealing the Frontier Crime Regulation (1901). Under this, the jirga system would be retained and a council of elders appointed by the court would decide the criminal and civil cases. The riway is criticized for just involving men and malik excluding women (Naseer, Dawar, 2017).

Some of the political developments were also planned to win the war in the soft zones i.e. eradicating the mindset of terrorism. The government under the NAP announced to register all madaris and reform their curriculum. To bring reforms and regulate and register madaris, an agreement was signed by the government with Ittihad-e-Tanzeem-e-madaris. Yet, nothing concrete has come up for reforming the madrassa curriculum. The provincial governments had closed over 2,000 suspected madaris in the state (The Dawn, 2017). Furthermore, some 103 madrassas have been sealed by the Law enforcement agencies for fanning extremism.

Some of the steps to dismantle the communication network of terrorists also remained quite noteworthy. Pakistan has become the only state wherein 100% of mobile SIMs have been verified. In this connection, 98.3 million SIMs have been blocked (Ramay, n.d).



To eradicate the mindset of terrorism over 1,500 books disseminating hatred material have been confiscated and 71 shops where material relevant to militancy was available were sealed. To curb the dissemination of hate speech and material 1,961 suspects have been arrested and 1,893 cases have been filed against the ulama. Of these, 271 have been convicted while 826 cases are still pending before special courts (Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Information, Broadcasting & National Heritage, n.d). Around 7,000 cases have been filed to prevent the misuse of loudspeakers and 6,855 alleged hate preachers have been arrested.

## CONCLUSION

An overview of the progress shows that military operations in Pakistan under the NAP have managed to revive the writ of the state in FATA and other war zones of the state. Now the terrorists are denied the space and resources they enjoyed openly a few years back before launching the military operations more specifically Zarb-e-Azb. Yet, terrorism has not been prevented despite the killing of a huge number of terrorists. It seems that Pakistan has yet to win the war against terrorism on political and ideological grounds. Still, terrorists emerge and target various public places. Moreover, violation of human rights was also noted. This clearly shows that the state authorities actually achieved their self-interests and managed to maximize them as per assumptions of the Rational Choice Theory. However, common people paid the cost by losing their lives and facing economic losses. Briefly political and military leadership preferred self-interest of retaining state's writ while nothing was planned to address the factors promoting militancy such as poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy. In fact, the fleeing of terrorists to Afghanistan or their killing or capturing from the war zone areas is a partial success of the state. Complete success can be achieved only when the inhabitants of the areas facing terrorism have access to all necessities of life. So, National Action Plan was just a rational choice approach based on self-interests of limited groups and had nothing for the well-being of common masses.

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