

Counter Terrorism and Radicalization in South Asia: Challenges, Strategies, and the Role of Community Engagement

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Abstract

Political instability, socio-economic inequalities and historical grievances have combined to leave South Asia vulnerable to terrorism and radicalization. This article uses securitization theory, relative deprivation theory and social identity theory to examine counter terrorism and radicalization across the region, to explain why extremist mobilization persists despite sustained state responses. Pakistan, India, Afghanistan and Bangladesh are confronted with different but related threats shaped by sociopolitical, economic and religious factors. Governments have pursued military operations, intelligence-led policing, and legal reform, but these approaches frequently fail to address the root causes of radicalization and can contribute to increased tensions among marginalized groups. Pakistan, India, Afghanistan and Bangladesh face different but related threats shaped by socio-political, economic and religious factors. Governments have turned to military operations, intelligence-led policing and legal reform, but such measures often do not address the root causes of radicalization and may actually exacerbate tensions within marginalized groups. Employing comparative case analysis, the paper advocates for the synergy between grassroots initiatives and state-led efforts and contends that a comprehensive counter-terrorism framework that takes cognizance of cultural diversity and underscores community engagement is vital in countering radicalization at its roots. A synthesis of security policy and social reform, inclusive governance, intercultural dialog and international cooperation, South Asia has a more sustainable way forward for long-term regional security.

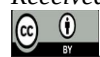
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Introduction

South Asia is central to contemporary counterterrorism because of its long-term exposure to terrorism and violent extremism and the wider implications for global security. South Asia's strategic geography, with its porous borders and proximity to long-standing conflict zones, intersects with deep ethnic, religious, and political diversity shaped by the legacies of colonialism and unresolved post-partition disputes. Transnational terrorist networks operating in the name of jihad, ethno-nationalist insurgencies, and ideologically driven separatist movements, all based on localized grievances but increasingly linked through global ideological, financial, and digital networks—they are all forms of terrorist violence in the region.

Counterterrorism approaches in South Asia are largely grounded in securitization theory; terrorism is an existential threat, which justifies extraordinary state measures such as military opera-

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tions, expanded surveillance, and emergency legal structures. Securitized responses, while achieving short-term tactical successes, have often led to political exclusion, restricted civil liberties, and societal polarization, thus undermining state legitimacy and reinforcing factors that fuel further radicalization.

To understand these dynamics, this study uses the theory of relative deprivation, which posits that radicalization occurs when individuals or groups experience a large discrepancy between their expectations and their actual socio-economic and political conditions. Structural inequalities, youth unemployment, and limited political participation have heightened the sense of marginalization, especially in conflict-prone areas, across South Asia. Extremist groups take advantage of these situations, turning socioeconomic discontent into ideological attachment and sometimes violent mobilization.

The paper also draws upon social identity theory to explain how collective identities, religious, ethnic, or national, are politicized within radicalization processes. In polarized environments, people tend to construct their identities around what they see as the out-group, and extremist narratives intentionally enhance this process by means of selective historical memory, symbolic victimhood, and moral dichotomization.

This study argues that counterterrorism strategies that rely on force are not enough. Radicalization in South Asia is not just a security issue but is deeply connected to social and political factors. Therefore, the paper suggests community involvement as a way to manage overly security-focused counterterrorism and as a way to reduce fear that helps governments rebuild trust, challenge extremist ideas, and deal with problems where they start (Aradau, 2004). The paper compares Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh to show how the integration of security actions and community-focused strategies.

Research Objectives

The study objectives are

- To analyze the structural and contextual factors of radicalization in South Asia by applying securitization theory, relative deprivation theory, and social identity theory to explain how political exclusion, socioeconomic inequalities, and extremist mobilization.
- To investigate how extremist groups develop and exploit collective identities to legitimize violence and sustain in-group cohesion in the region.
- To evaluate community engagement initiatives as mechanisms of counter-radicalization and desecuritization, focusing on grassroots participation, inclusive governance, religious dialogue, and youth empowerment.
- To conduct a comparative analysis of Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh to identify convergences and divergences in radicalization pathways and counterterrorism responses.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case-study to examine the dynamics of radicalization and counterterrorism. Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan are selected as cases because they represent diverse political, social, security, and historical contexts within South Asia while

sharing significant challenges related to terrorism, violent extremism, radicalization, and state responses. The comparative approach enables the study to identify both common patterns and country-specific differences in the causes of radicalization and the effectiveness of counterterrorism strategies.

Pakistan is examined as a case where regional conflicts, ideological movements, political instability, and the historical effects of the regional conflict have shaped militant extremism. The analysis focuses on Pakistan's counterterrorism policies, institutional responses, deradicalization initiatives, and community-level approaches. Afghanistan is selected because of the prolonged presence and transformation of militant organizations, particularly the Taliban, and the country's central role in regional security dynamics. India provides a case of a large and diverse state confronting multiple forms of terrorism and radicalization associated with communal tensions, separatist movements, and regional security concerns. The study considers India's legislative, institutional, intelligence, policing, and community-based responses. Bangladesh is included because it provides an important case of radicalization in the name of Islam and the state's efforts to address violent extremism through security measures, prevention initiatives, community engagement, and counter-radicalization policies.

Data will primarily be collected through document analysis of academic literature, government policies, legislation, official reports, international organization publications, and credible research studies, supplemented where appropriate by secondary accounts and expert perspectives. The data will be analyzed thematically and comparatively to identify recurring patterns, differences, causal mechanisms, and policy responses across the four cases. Through this comparative framework, the study seeks to develop a contextual understanding of radicalization and assess how different counterterrorism approaches have addressed the underlying political, social, and security challenges in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan.

Theoretical Framework

The study focused on securitization theory, relative deprivation theory, and social identity theory. Securitization theory helps explain how terrorism and radicalization are constructed as security threats and how such framing influences state responses. Relative deprivation theory examines how perceived political, economic, and social inequalities may contribute to vulnerability to radicalization. Social identity theory helps analyze the role of identity, belonging, exclusion, and inter-group relations in radicalization processes.

Literature Review

Radicalization and Counter Terrorism

Radicalization is a gradual process through which individuals or groups adopt increasingly extreme ideas, beliefs, or ideologies that may legitimize violence to achieve political, religious, or ideological objectives. In South Asia, radicalization is influenced by a combination of structural factors and boundary problems, including poverty, inequality, marginalization, and weak governance. and political factors, such as state repression, political instability, and unresolved conflicts. Also identity-related factors, including religious extremism, nationalist ideologies, social exclusion, and online extremist propaganda.

Counterterrorism traditionally focuses on preventing terrorist attacks and disrupting or dismantling militant organizations through intelligence, law enforcement, military operations, and legal mechanisms. However, contemporary approaches increasingly recognize that counterterrorism alone may not address the underlying causes of radicalization. Consequently, counter-radicalization has gained importance, emphasizing prevention, community engagement, social inclusion, education, rehabilitation, and the development of alternative narratives to extremist ideologies. An effective counterterrorism framework therefore requires a comprehensive approach that combines security measures with preventive and community-based strategies to address both the immediate threat of terrorism and the conditions that facilitate radicalization.

Radicalization in South Asia

Radicalization in South Asia is a complicated combination of political, socio-economic, identity-based, ideological, and technological factors. No one factor adequately explains radicalization across the region. It varies considerably among Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan, reflecting differences in political institutions, conflict histories, religious and ethnic dynamics, socioeconomic conditions, and state responses. The linkages between terrorism, political violence, development, governance, and, in many instances, ongoing processes of nation- and state building, reflect the complexity of the challenge of countering terrorism in South Asia. Nonetheless, they also indicate a number of intervention points through which national initiatives, international actors, and multilateral organizations might make an effective contribution to confronting terrorism. (Eric, 2009)

Political and Governance Factors

Political instability in South Asia takes multiple forms. It can be visible in frequent changes of government, coalition breakdowns, contested elections, or the weakening of constitutional norms. It can also appear as chronic legitimacy crises, where citizens do not trust institutions, and political competition becomes zero-sum. In some cases, instability becomes violent, producing insurgencies, terrorism, communal riots, or separatist movements. Even when violence is not constant, instability often reduces governance quality: policies become short-term, reforms are delayed, corruption increases, and state capacity to provide security and services becomes uneven. These internal weaknesses matter for regional security because South Asian states share borders, ethnic groups, rivers, migration routes, and economic linkages. Instability in one country—such as Afghanistan—can trigger refugee flows, militant movement, and arms trafficking that affect multiple neighbors (Hayat, 2026).

Socioeconomic Inequalities

The influence of inequality goes beyond individual or household behavior. Inequality also affects the ability of people to act collectively, the institutions they set up, and the ways in which resources are allocated for the benefit of the group. A salient case is the provision of public goods, where inequality can have effects of opposite signs. On the one hand, in a very unequal society, the better off typically have more power and are more effective at pulling in resources for the public goods they value. On the other hand, a high degree of inequality makes it more tempting for the better-off to opt out of public services altogether (Rama, 2015).

Identity, Religion, Ideology and Social Polarization

Identity, religion, and ideology constitute important conceptual dimensions of radicalization, particularly when collective identities become politicized and are combined with perceptions of exclusion, discrimination, or threat. Social Identity Theory explains how individuals develop a sense of belonging through group membership and how strong distinctions between “in-groups” and “out-groups” can contribute to prejudice, polarization, and inter group hostility. Identity politics, which appeals to ethnic, religious, and cultural identities to obtain support, is historically a major cause of political polarization in Southeast Asia. Identity politics can foster group rivalry and promote inequality and injustice. Thus, political leaders must prioritize policies that benefit all citizens, promote national unity, and build trust in democratic institutions to reduce political polarization. Identity-based politics must give way to social cohesiveness, equitable chances, and inclusive development (Mukrimin, 2023).

Globalization and Digital Media

Digitalization has added a transnational dimension to radicalization by enabling extremist organizations to circulate propaganda, recruit supporters, and create virtual communities across borders. However, the impact of digital media also varies according to internet access, political conditions, organizational networks, and levels of digital literacy. Online platforms that have developed due to the digital revolution have entered every aspect of human lives. Online platforms have now become a medium used by extremists and radical groups to spread their political ideologies and initiate social movements. Terrorist organizations, use political communication and propaganda methods in order to establish and maintain a relationship with the target audience. They have increased their perception and propaganda power in online areas with the development and diversification of mass media tools relying on technology (Erdoğan, 2023).

Evaluation of Counter Terrorism Strategies

South Asian states have significantly expanded their counter-terrorism, intelligence, surveillance, and law enforcement capabilities after 9/11. Adopted unanimously by the UN General Assembly on September 8, 2006, the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy marked the first time that all UN member states agreed on a common framework for addressing the terrorist threat. Its four-pillar plan of action consists of measures to address conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism; measures to prevent and combat terrorism; capacity building; and ensuring a human-rights and rule-of-law-based approach to countering the threat (Eric,).

Its broad-based framework includes measures

1. To address conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism;
2. To prevent and combat terrorism;
3. To build states' counterterrorism capacities; and
4. To ensure respect for human rights and the rule of law in the fight against terrorism. (UN Document, 2026)

The UN Strategy offers South Asian states, and the region as a whole, a framework endorsed by the international community, including all the states of the region, to develop a response that can effectively address the complex threat over the long term.

The primary regional organization in South Asia where peace and security issues are raised, SAARC, includes India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan in its membership and has had the issue of terrorism on its agenda since well before the 9/11 attacks. More than 20 years ago, SAARC adopted a Regional Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism that called for cooperation among its member states on extradition, evidence sharing, and other information exchanges to address “terrorist acts.” In 1995, SAARC also established a Terrorist Offences Monitoring Desk (STOMD) to support the implementation of the convention by collecting, assessing, and disseminating information on terrorist offenses, tactics, strategies, and methods. Cooperation on combating terrorist financing was then included in an additional protocol to the convention in 2002, and a SAARC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance was approved at the 15th SAARC summit in August 2008. The objective of the agreement is to overcome the need for separate bilateral agreements by harmonizing the domestic legal systems of member countries. SAARC countries will hopefully find it easier to cooperate on counterterrorism investigations and the prosecution or extradition of terrorist suspects when the Convention enters into force. If the past is prologue, however, the chances of member states agreeing on which individuals and groups should be the target of such cooperation are likely to be limited. (Millar, 2009)

In April 2008, counterterrorism experts from SAARC countries decided to share intelligence for curbing terrorism and other transnational crimes. Sharing intelligence on the subcontinent, however, has been complicated by concerns that connections between state intelligence services and terrorist organizations could allow sensitive information to be misused. Nonetheless, India and Pakistan did reach an agreement in April 2008 to exchange intelligence regarding recent attacks and to discuss the prospects for strengthening cooperation against terrorism. (Millar, 2009)

A further weakness in South Asian counter-terrorism policy is the relatively limited institutionalization of deradicalization, disengagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration (DRR) programs. The argument here is that counter-terrorism should address not only the immediate capacity of militant organizations but also the conditions that contribute to continued radicalization and recidivism.

DRR programs can combine education, psychological counseling, vocational training, ideological engagement, family participation, and community-based support. Such interventions move beyond a purely punitive approach by addressing the cognitive, psycho-social, socioeconomic, and relational dimensions of radicalization.

The key argument is that sustainable counter-terrorism requires a shift toward a more comprehensive, preventive, and rights-based framework. Security operations remain necessary to address immediate threats, but they should be complemented by the rule of law, institutional accountability, rehabilitation, community engagement, and social resilience.

Pakistan as a Case Study

Pakistan represents one of the most significant and complex cases of counter-terrorism and radicalization in South Asia. Its strategic location, prolonged involvement in regional conflicts, porous borders, and internal sociopolitical challenges have contributed to multiple forms of violent extremism. These include sectarian militancy, ethno-nationalist insurgency, and transnational terrorism in the name of jihad.

The roots of radicalization in Pakistan can be traced to the Islamization and pro-Sunni policies of Zia and Iran's policy to back Shia militant groups against Saudi Arabia's support for Sunni militant groups, which promoted sectarianism in Pakistan. Moreover, Pakistan's decision to become an ally of the US in the War on Terror against radical and extremist groups poses serious challenges for the country. After this decision, the number of terrorist incidents and bomb blasts has increased significantly in Pakistan. The government of Pakistan and the Pakistan Army responded actively against these emerging threats and launched different operations, including Operation Rah-e-Rast, Operation Rah-e-Nijat, and the most successful operation, Zarb-e-Azab. Despite all these efforts, it is also a fact that radicalization and extremism are still the biggest challenges faced by the government of Pakistan. (Tanoli, 2018)

Radicalization has been particularly significant in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Balochistan, and parts of KPK. In these areas, militarization, underdevelopment, and limited political participation have intersected with the dynamics identified by relative deprivation theory. However, these factors should not be understood as automatic causes of radicalization. Rather, they can create conditions that militant organizations may exploit for recruitment and mobilization.

Pakistan's counter-terrorism response has largely been shaped by a securitization framework. Terrorism has frequently been constructed as an existential threat requiring exceptional security measures. Large-scale military operations, including Operation Zarb-e-Azb (2014) and Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad (2017), significantly disrupted militant infrastructure and contributed to a substantial reduction in major terrorist attacks (Elahi & Javaid, 2019).

The National Action Plan (NAP), adopted in December 2014 following the Army Public School attack, represented a major institutional response to terrorism. It included measures relating to legal reform, restrictions on extremist organizations, madrassa regulation, countering terrorist financing, and improved inter-agency coordination. However, its implementation has remained uneven.

Community-Based Counter-Terrorism and Rehabilitation

The human development approach emphasizes the importance of education, law and order, and democracy, along with considering income level in the economy. The government of Pakistan should strengthen and practice democracy in its true sense. Similarly, rather than just focusing on income level in the economy, it would be preferable to consider development indicators like education, health facilities, governance, and institutional quality while formulating macroeconomic policies. (Tanoli, 2018)

Deradicalization initiatives in KPK that incorporate psychological counseling, vocational training, education, and family involvement show the potential of localized, community-centered interventions. Nevertheless, their long-term effectiveness depends on political continuity, institutional capacity, community acceptance, and integration with broader governance reforms. But in Balochistan, state policies do not exist & they do not have any plan to resolve due to community basis.

The Pakistani case ultimately supports the argument that effective counter-terrorism must combine security measures with preventive and rehabilitative strategies. Inclusive governance, socio-

economic development, political participation, community-based prevention, and the rule of law are essential for addressing the longer-term drivers of extremism. The sustainability of Pakistan's counter-terrorism strategy consequently depends not only on its capacity to defeat militant organizations but also on its ability to reduce the grievances, institutional weaknesses, and social vulnerabilities that can facilitate renewed radicalization.

India as a Case Study

As one of the world's largest democracies, India confronts multiple forms of political violence, including ethno-nationalist insurgencies, left-wing extremism, and cross-border militancy. These security challenges are embedded within distinct regional, political, and socioeconomic contexts.

Separatist insurgencies, particularly in Jammu and Kashmir and parts of Northeast India, have been associated with contested political authority, identity-based grievances, perceptions of political exclusion, and prolonged militarization. These factors can contribute to political alienation and create conditions that militant organizations may exploit for recruitment and mobilization.

Left-wing extremism, particularly the Naxalite-Maoist movement, represents another significant dimension of India's internal security challenges. The movement has drawn support in some areas from communities affected by land dispossession, economic marginalization, inadequate state services, and limited political representation. These conditions are broadly consistent with the assumptions of relative deprivation theory, which links perceived inequality and deprivation to political mobilization.

Various other states, such as Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Assam, Jammu and Kashmir, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh have been running their own counter-radicalization programmes, which involve innovative and effective, multi-vector approaches. (Rasheed, 2019)

India's counter-terrorism framework emphasizes intelligence coordination, specialized security forces, legal mechanisms, and counterinsurgency operations. In conflict-affected regions, the state has also relied on exceptional legal provisions and sustained security deployments. This reflects a broader securitization approach, in which terrorism and insurgency are constructed as exceptional threats requiring enhanced state powers.

These strategies have achieved important tactical outcomes by disrupting militant networks, restricting their operational capabilities, and expanding state security capacity. However, their long-term effectiveness remains contested. Prolonged militarization and allegations of human rights violations, particularly in Jammu and Kashmir, can contribute to political alienation, distrust, and perceptions of state repression. Such consequences may weaken the legitimacy of counter-terrorism policies and potentially provide extremist actors with narratives that facilitate recruitment and mobilization.

Democratic Institutions and Community-Based Approaches

India's democratic institutions and diverse civil society provide important mechanisms for addressing radicalization through political participation, social dialogue, and community engagement. However, their effectiveness depends significantly on the inclusiveness, responsiveness, and accessibility of political institutions.

Community-based initiatives focusing on education, interfaith dialogue, youth engagement, and conflict resolution demonstrate the potential of non-coercive approaches. Such initiatives can complement state security measures by strengthening social cohesion, building community trust, and addressing grievances before they develop into violent mobilization.

Thus, Indian security agencies have so far engaged families of suspects, community leaders and elders, religious preachers and imams, and civil society members to counsel, apprehend, de-radicalize, and, wherever possible, rehabilitate suspects to contain the problem without allowing sensitive matters to spiral out of control.

Curiously, Indian security agencies have preferred to employ sociological approaches instead of purely security-centric measures towards counter-radicalization and have employed social, theological, psychological and cultural means for defusing the problem without taking recourse to heavy handed measures.

As part of its de-radicalization measures, Indian security agencies have initiated post-surrender and post-detention programs, such as

- a) Ideological or religious counselling,
- b) Vocational education,
- c) Recreational and psychological rehab,
- d) Behavior modification programmes,
- e) Drug de-addiction centers
- f) Personality development centers for youth
- g) Inter-religious or inter-communal discourse programs,
- h) Post-release surveillance and care, as well as
- i) Involvement of family members and civil society to foster rehabilitation etc.

In this regard, the state of Maharashtra has launched an effective deradicalization programme and has reportedly reclaimed many individuals affected by ISIS indoctrination. The programme is said to focus on the four aspects of the individual, family, religion and psychology and seeks to bring about a lasting change in the individual's belief system.

In the state of Jammu and Kashmir, attention is being given to reclaim drug addicts who often become victims of terrorist designs. Various other states, such as Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Assam, Jammu and Kashmir, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh have been running their own counter-radicalization programmes, which involve innovative and effective, multi-vector approaches.

The Indian government has also introduced schemes for greater engagement with communities affected by the scourge of radicalization, their religious and political organizations, civil society, educational centers (schools and colleges), research and social activist groups. (Rasheed, 2019)

Bangladesh as a Case Study

Bangladesh presents a distinctive case of radicalization and counter-terrorism in South Asia, characterized by extremism and violence within a context of relatively strong state capacity and political stability.

Although Bangladesh has achieved significant socioeconomic progress, youth unemployment, political polarization, perceived social exclusion, and identity-based grievances continue to create vulnerabilities to radicalization. Consistent with relative deprivation theory, radicalization does not necessarily arise from absolute poverty. Rather, perceptions of exclusion, injustice, and limited opportunities can contribute to extremist mobilization among particular social groups.

Bangladesh experienced a decrease in terrorist activity in 2020, accompanied by an increase in terrorism-related investigations and arrests. In 2020 there were three specific terrorist incidents, resulting in no deaths. As in prior years, the Bangladeshi government denied Bangladesh-based terrorists have meaningful ties to transnational terror groups, including ISIS or AQIS. An appeal is pending before the Bangladeshi Supreme Court following the CT Special Tribunal's 2019 sentencing of seven individuals to death for supporting roles in the 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery attack, in which attackers claiming allegiance to ISIS killed 20 people, including one American. Ongoing deficits in Bangladesh's judicial system, magnified by the constraints of operating during a global pandemic, contribute to a decade-long backlog of terrorism cases and a conviction rate estimated at less than 15 percent. The Bangladesh government continued to articulate a zero-tolerance policy toward terrorism and the use of its territory as a terrorist safe haven. In January the government's new national Antiterrorism Unit began standing up operations, to eventually assume a role as a lead counterterrorism agency.(US Dept of State; 2020)

However, the Bangladeshi state adopted a zero-tolerance counter-terrorism policy based primarily on intelligence-led policing, legal measures, disruption of militant networks, and rapid operational responses. Unlike the heavily militarized approaches observed in some other South Asian contexts, Bangladesh's response has remained predominantly law-enforcement-oriented.

The authorities have conducted sustained operations against militant organizations, including Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), al-Qa'ida-affiliated networks, and Neo-JMB, an ISIS-linked faction. These measures contributed to a substantial reduction in the frequency and scale of terrorist violence.

Community Engagement and Ideological Prevention

A defining feature of Bangladesh's counter-terrorism strategy is its increasing emphasis on community engagement, ideological prevention, and police–community cooperation.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs of Bangladesh and the National Committee on Militancy, Resistance, and Prevention worked with imams and religious scholars to build public awareness about terrorism. The government included CVE in its National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security, and a U.S.-funded grantee mentored and developed the skills of at-risk youths to reduce the risk of their joining terrorist organizations. Law enforcement authorities worked with local universities to identify missing students and curb terrorist radicalization among university

students. Local research institutions, including private think tanks and both public and private universities, continued to engage in CVE-related research.

In the future, to control radicalization, Bangladesh's organizations continued cooperative activities through the Country Support Mechanism under the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund.

Community policing has also emerged as an important mechanism for strengthening police–public trust and collective prevention of radicalization. Despite these achievements, digital radicalization represents an increasingly important challenge. Online platforms, social media, and encrypted communication channels can facilitate extremist propaganda, recruitment, ideological dissemination, and transnational networking. Countering these activities requires effective digital monitoring and prevention mechanisms while maintaining an appropriate balance between national security, privacy, and freedom of expression (Amit et al., 2021)

Bangladesh's rehabilitation and reintegration programs, which combine psychological, social, and religious support with family involvement, illustrate the potential of a multidimensional approach to preventing recidivism and supporting reintegration (Sasakawa Peace Foundation, 2023).

Bangladesh's record of social unity, harmony, and cooperation within the communities of Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, and tribals is a perfect example of how social cohesion creates harmony and relationships within the community.³⁷ One of the most significant benefits of community engagement is that the participation of all community members, from elite to marginalised people, in both national and local politics, alongside the involvement of those members in religious and national festivals, creates a feeling that they are all a part of this country and are in no way alienated from mainstream social and political practices. Thus, a cohesive community includes people and safeguards working against radicalisation and violent activities. On the contrary, 'marginalization' and 'alienation' pave the way to unifying extremists to execute their violent actions. (Ferdous, 2022)

Afghanistan as a Case Study

Afghanistan represents one of the most acute and protracted cases of radicalization and violent extremism in South Asia. Decades of armed conflict, foreign intervention, institutional fragmentation, and socioeconomic deprivation have contributed to the persistence of militant networks and the normalization of violence as a means of political contestation.

The foundations of radicalization in Afghanistan can be traced to the Soviet invasion, subsequent civil war, and war on terror after 9/11. These processes militarized Afghan society and facilitated the development of transnational militant networks. Prolonged conflict also reinforced rigid in-group and out-group identities, frequently constructed around religious, political, and ethnic divisions.

Governance fragmentation, corruption, institutional weakness, and contested political legitimacy further undermined public confidence in state institutions. Widespread poverty, displacement, and persistent insecurity created conditions broadly consistent with relative deprivation theory, in

which perceptions of deprivation and exclusion can contribute to political mobilization and conflict.

Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, counter-terrorism in Afghanistan has remained a major concern for regional and international actors. The Taliban have conducted sustained operations against Islamic State–Khorasan Province (ISKP) and have reduced the group's capacity to conduct large-scale attacks in some areas. However, continuing concerns regarding the presence of allied militant organizations and the Taliban's relationship with transnational militant networks complicate assessments of its counter-terrorism performance.

The expansion of madrassa education and religious instruction under Taliban rule has also generated concerns regarding the potential reproduction of exclusionary ideological narratives. These developments demonstrate that the suppression of immediate terrorist threats does not necessarily address the broader ideological, institutional, and social conditions associated with radicalization (Schroden, 2025; U.S. Institute of Peace, 2024).

Community-Based Approaches and Desecuritization

Afghanistan has experienced relatively limited and fragmented community-based counter-radicalization and rehabilitation initiatives. Decades of conflict have weakened traditional social structures and local mechanisms of dispute resolution. At the same time, the absence of an inclusive political settlement has constrained opportunities for political reconciliation and desecuritization.

From a desecuritization perspective, sustainable security requires more than the suppression of militant organizations. It also requires the restoration of legitimate political institutions, social trust, and mechanisms for non-violent political participation.

Afghanistan's radicalization dynamics are also fundamentally transnational. Cross-border militant mobility, regional networks, ideological linkages, and external support demonstrate the limitations of counter-terrorism strategies confined within national boundaries. Effective responses therefore require regional intelligence cooperation, border management, diplomatic engagement, financial controls, and coordinated approaches to preventing militant mobility.

The United States and its allies could also expand their cyber collection activities to penetrate digital networks in Afghanistan, including those used by the Taliban GDI. An expanded open-source collection, with an emphasis on social media apps, such as Facebook and Telegram, is another avenue for generating information to resolve differences in assessments and identify actionable intelligence that can be explored. (Schorden, 2025)

Recommendation

The Role of Community Engagement

Community engagement is a critical component of effective counter-terrorism and long-term radicalization prevention in South Asia. State-led security measures remain necessary to address immediate threats, but they cannot independently address the social, political, and ideological processes that contribute to radicalization.

The main argument is that sustainable counterterrorism requires a predominantly state-centric security model and a participatory and preventive governance framework. From a desecuritization perspective, community engagement broadens counter-terrorism beyond security institutions and treats communities as partners in prevention rather than potential security threats.

Inclusive Governance

Political inclusion and responsive governance are essential for reducing grievances that may contribute to radicalization.

When communities have legitimate powers to express grievances, negotiate interests, and seek legal remedies, the legitimacy of state institutions is strengthened. This can weaken extremist narratives that portray violence as the only effective means of achieving political or social change.

Education and Youth Empowerment

Education constitutes an important mechanism against ideological manipulation and extremist recruitment. Educational programs that promote critical thinking, civic responsibility, media literacy, and digital literacy can strengthen youth capacity to evaluate extremist narratives and misinformation.

However, education is insufficient. Employment opportunities, vocational training, and meaningful youth participation should complement educational interventions. These measures can reduce socioeconomic vulnerabilities and provide constructive alternatives to organizations that exploit unemployment and political frustration.

Religious and Cultural Dialogue

Engagement with religious scholars, educators, cultural leaders, and community organizations can challenge extremist interpretations and promote alternative narratives grounded in widely accepted religious and ethical values.

Gender and Family-Based Approaches

Families and women can play an important role in early identification, prevention, rehabilitation, and reintegration. Women may contribute to community resilience through education, economic participation, family support, and community leadership.

However, women's participation in frontline community-policing initiatives remains institutionally constrained in cultural contexts.

Evaluation and Context-Specific Approaches

Community engagement should not be inherently effective. The success of countering violent extremism (CVE) interventions depends on their design, implementation, local context, and measurable outcomes. Evidence-based evaluation is therefore necessary to determine which interventions reduce radicalization and which may have limited or unintended effects (RAND Corporation, 2020).

The broader argument is that community engagement should complement or replace conventional security measures. Its value lies in addressing vulnerabilities, strengthening state & society trust, and creating early mechanisms for preventing radicalization.

Regional and International Cooperation

The transnational character of terrorism makes regional and international cooperation essential to sustainable counter-terrorism in South Asia. Militant organizations operate across borders, exploit weak regulatory systems, use transnational financial networks, and take advantage of political and institutional divisions between states.

From the perspective of regional security complex theory, security threats in South Asia are interconnected. Instability within one state can generate security consequences for neighboring states (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). However, longstanding geopolitical rivalries, particularly between nuclear-armed states, have restricted institutionalized cooperation and weakened mutual trust.

Intelligence and Border Cooperation

Effective regional cooperation requires systematic intelligence sharing, coordinated border management, joint monitoring of militant mobility, and improved information exchange.

Countering Terrorist Financing

Differences in financial regulations and enforcement capacity can create vulnerabilities that militant organizations exploit. Coordinated mechanisms for identifying suspicious financial transactions, money laundering, and disrupting terrorist financing can therefore strengthen regional counter-terrorism efforts.

International Institutions and Capacity Building

International organizations can contribute through technical assistance, institutional capacity building, training, information sharing, and the development of common counter-terrorism standards. International engagement can also support the diffusion of norms relating to human rights, rule of law, terrorist financing, and the protection of vulnerable communities.

Community-based approaches address the local social and political conditions that facilitate radicalization, while regional and international cooperation addresses the transnational networks through which terrorism operates.

The broader argument is that South Asian counter-terrorism cannot remain exclusively territorial bounded. Sustainable security requires a multidimensional framework that combines effective law enforcement, inclusive governance, community participation, preventive interventions, regional intelligence cooperation, financial controls, and international capacity building. This approach can improve both the operational effectiveness and long-term legitimacy of counter-terrorism strategies.

Conclusion

Counter-terrorism and radicalization in South Asia are interconnected political, social, and security challenges that cannot be addressed by measures alone. Military operations, intelligence-led policing, and legal reforms have disrupted terrorist networks and contributed to a decline in major attacks in several states. However, their impact remains limited when the structural, political, socioeconomic, and ideological drivers of radicalization are not simultaneously resolved. Governance deficits, socioeconomic inequalities, identity-based grievances, political exclusion, and long-term unresolved conflicts continue to create conditions that extremist organizations can exploit.

The comparative analysis of Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh demonstrates that radicalization is a multidimensional and context-specific process shaped by both domestic conditions and transnational dynamics. The findings indicate that counter-terrorism strategies are more sustainable when security interventions are combined with inclusive governance, socioeconomic development, political participation, and community-based prevention. Community engagement is particularly significant because it can strengthen early-warning mechanisms, build social resilience, improve state–society trust, and support deradicalization, rehabilitation, and integration.

The analysis also highlights the critical importance of regional and international cooperation. The transnational character of militant networks, terrorist financing, ideological dissemination, and cross-border mobility makes unilateral approaches insufficient. Enhanced intelligence sharing, coordinated border management, financial monitoring, capacity building, and institutional cooperation are therefore necessary. However, geopolitical rivalries and mutual distrust continue to constrain meaningful regional collaboration.

The argument of the study is that sustainable counter-terrorism requires a predominantly securitized paradigm toward a comprehensive, preventive, and rights-based framework. Hard-security measures remain essential for addressing immediate threats, but they must operate alongside inclusive governance, human rights protection, socioeconomic development, community participation, rehabilitation, and regional cooperation.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of counter-terrorism should be measured not only by the reduction of terrorist attacks but also by the prevention of them. The state's capacity to prevent renewed radicalization, strengthen institutional legitimacy, and build resilient communities. A holistic approach that integrates security capabilities with social and political interventions therefore offers the pathway toward sustainable peace, stability, and human security in South Asia.

Counter-terrorism and radicalization in South Asia are interconnected political, social, and security challenges that cannot be addressed by measures alone. Military operations, intelligence-led policing, and legal reforms have disrupted terrorist networks and contributed to a decline in major attacks in several states. However, their impact remains limited when the structural, political, socioeconomic, and ideological drivers of radicalization are not simultaneously resolved. Governance deficits, socioeconomic inequalities, identity-based grievances, political exclusion, and long-term unresolved conflicts continue to create conditions that extremist organizations can exploit.

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