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The Jurisdictional Security Gap: Cross-Border Militancy and Persistent Insecurity in Pakistan's Western Borderlands

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Abstract

The Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, bringing Pakistan's western border back into focus as a major security concern. Since then, Pakistan has tightened controls through border fencing, surveillance, regulated crossings, counter-terrorism operations, and diplomatic engagement. These steps, however, have not prevented militant violence from continuing in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. The question, therefore, is why insecurity persists even as Pakistan has invested more heavily in controlling its side of the border. This paper examines that question by looking at the limits of containment when militant groups can operate beyond Pakistan's territorial reach. This research uses qualitative document analysis and draws on academic literature, United Nations assessments, official Pakistani documents and security and policy reports. It examines the links between Afghan-side control limitations, militant operational space, cross-border spillover, Pakistan's containment measures, and continuing insecurity in the borderlands. The findings indicate that stronger containment has improved Pakistan's capacity to control movement, monitor the frontier, and disrupt militant activity within the country. However, these measures remain structurally limited when militant organisations retain infrastructure and operational space beyond Pakistan's borders. The paper conceptualises this mismatch as a jurisdictional security gap through which insecurity originating beyond Pakistan's territorial reach continues to produce spillovers in its borderlands. Stronger border-security measures can improve containment but cannot remove threats whose sources remain across the border. Domestic measures may reduce their effects, yet their impact remains limited while militant groups retain operational space outside Pakistan. Lasting security in the borderlands therefore requires both effective domestic containment and reduced space for militant activity beyond Pakistan's borders.

Keywords: Jurisdictional security gap; cross-border militancy; militant operational space; border security; territorial control; cross-border spillover; Afghanistan–Pakistan borderlands; Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP); Pakistan.

Introduction

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 changed the security situation in South and Central Asia, with effects reaching well beyond Afghanistan. The post-2021 government faced serious governance and security problems, including the presence and activities of several militant organizations (United Nations Security Council, 2022, 2024). This was a particular concern for Pakistan. The two countries share a long border with a complicated history, and

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instability, militancy, displacement and other cross-border problems in Afghanistan can affect Pakistan's security (Ahmed, 2022; Herbert & Idris,2024).

The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) also became more prominent after the Taliban returned to power. Its organisational recovery had started earlier, with efforts to consolidate its leadership and bring previously dispersed groups back together (Sayed & Hamming, 2021; Akhtar & Ahmed, 2023). The situation after 2021, however, gave the group greater strategic importance. United Nations monitoring has confirmed the TTP's presence in Afghanistan and its continued attacks against Pakistan. Other research has linked the group's operational space in Afghanistan with its ability to maintain organisational networks and plan attacks against targets in Pakistan (United Nations Security Council, 2024; Assanbayev et al., 2025). Pakistan, therefore, was dealing not only with terrorist violence within its territory but also with a cross-border threat whose organisational and operational base lay outside its jurisdiction.

Pakistan has responded by expanding border management and counter-terrorism measures. These include fencing, border infrastructure, surveillance, regulated crossings, intelligence-based operations and engagement with Afghan authorities regarding militant groups operating from Afghan territory (Radio Pakistan, 2024; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, 2024). These measures have aimed to strengthen control over the border, restrict unauthorized movement and improve Pakistan's ability to contain threats entering or operating within its territory. Yet terrorist and conflict-related violence has remained concentrated in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, the two provinces bordering Afghanistan (Centre for Research and Security Studies [CRSS], 2024; Pak Institute for Peace Studies [PIPS],2025).

This poses the key puzzle of the study: why has insecurity remained in Pakistan's western borderlands despite the expansion of its border-security and containment capacity? The question moves beyond whether border fencing or other security measures have succeeded or failed. Pakistan's improved infrastructure can help manage mobility, monitor the frontier, block infiltration, and respond to militant activity on its own soil. But such measures face a fundamental territorial constraint: Pakistan can exert direct security authority within its jurisdiction but cannot independently eliminate militant infrastructure, networks, or operating space beyond its borders.

This highlights the connection between territorial control and security jurisdiction. Cross-border insecurity is shaped by conditions outside Pakistan's territorial reach and the state's ability to contain their effects within its territory. Where militant organisations retain operational space outside Pakistan's jurisdiction, domestic containment tactics may reduce or disrupt cross-border threats without independently removing their external sources. The analytical dilemma at the heart of this paper is the mismatch between the territorial reach of containment and the cross-border location of the threat.

There is considerable scholarship on the individual elements of this problem, including the Taliban's return, the resurgence and organisational evolution of the TTP, the use of Afghan territory by militant networks, the interconnected nature of the Afghanistan–Pakistan borderlands, Pakistan's changing border-management arrangements, and insecurity in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan (Herbert & Idris, 2024; Assanbayev et al., 2025; Khan & Ahmed, 2025). This literature shows the close relationship between events on the Afghan side of the frontier and insecurity in Pakistan's border regions. Nevertheless, these elements are not sufficiently integrated into an

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explanatory account of how limitations in controlling militant activity beyond Pakistan's territorial jurisdiction interact with containment measures to perpetuate cross-border insecurity.

This paper examines insecurity on the Pakistan–Afghanistan border through a different analytical lens. It focuses not on the causes of border instability, the efficacy of border administration, or the general dynamics of security spillover, but on the jurisdictional asymmetry between the site of a transnational threat and the territorial reach of the state responding to it. Pakistan may greatly enhance its ability to contain militant activity within its borders but remain unable on its own to eliminate the external conditions that perpetuate the threat. This mismatch is conceptualized as a jurisdictional security gap. The key question is therefore why increased domestic containment does not necessarily translate into the elimination of a transnational threat.

The article contends that Pakistan's enhanced border-security capacity is an important attempt at containment whose effectiveness is conditioned by the location of the threat. Physical fortification, surveillance, regulated crossings and intelligence-based operations can improve Pakistan's ability to regulate its frontier and disrupt militant movement but cannot independently eliminate organisational infrastructure and operational capacity beyond its jurisdiction. Limitations in controlling militant activity on the Afghan side, together with the ability of militant networks to exploit cross-border space, create a jurisdictional security gap between Pakistan's containment measures and the broader operational environment from which insecurity is generated. Through this interaction, cross-border security spillovers can persist despite strengthened domestic containment.

The article has three related contributions. First, it gives an integrated analytical account relating Afghan-side control limitations, militant operational space, cross-border spillover, Pakistan's containment measures, and persistent insecurity within its borderlands. Second, it elaborates the idea of the jurisdictional security gap to explain the limits that arise when a state's security capacity does not extend to the full territorial environment within which a transnational threat is organised and sustained. Third, it contributes to understanding the post-2021 Afghanistan–Pakistan security environment by treating the frontier as an interconnected security environment where events on one side can have repercussions on the other.

The paper accordingly asks: How does the mismatch between Pakistan's enhanced domestic capacity for containment and its restricted authority over the external sources of militant activity contribute to the persistence of cross-border insecurity? To address this question, a qualitative research design is adopted, utilising scholarly literature, United Nations assessments, official Pakistani documents and relevant security and policy reports. These materials are analysed thematically through an analytical framework linking territorial control limitations, militant operational space, cross-border spillover, containment, and persistent borderland insecurity.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. The next section establishes the conceptual framework and the link between territorial control, militant operational space, spillover and containment. The following section discusses the research methodology and source-selection approach. The article then reviews the relevant literature before evaluating the post-2021 interaction of Afghan-side conditions, militant activity, Pakistan's containment measures and continued insecurity in its western borderlands. The next section considers the wider implications of the findings, followed by a conclusion summarizing the argument and contribution.

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Review of Literature

The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 was a major shift in the political and security environment in Afghanistan. Although the new regime quickly established its control over the country, United Nations assessments continued to highlight governance weaknesses and the presence of terrorist groups operating from Afghan territory (United Nations Security Council, 2022, 2024). For Pakistan, this is important not only because of the new regime in Kabul but also because developments in Afghanistan could have security implications across the border, particularly terrorism and extremism (Ahmed, 2022).

In this post-2021 environment, the resurgence of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) became a major development. Evidence suggests that the TTP had started to recover before the Taliban takeover through organisational recovery, reintegration of splinter factions, and leadership consolidation under Noor Wali Mehsud (Sayed & Hamming, 2021). Subsequent research identifies increased operational activity, organisational centralisation, and geographical expansion, while United Nations monitoring identifies the TTP as the largest terrorist group operating in Afghanistan and documents intensified attacks against Pakistan (Sayed & Hamming, 2023; United Nations Security Council, 2024; Basit, 2024).

A key issue in the literature is the TTP's continued operational space in Afghanistan. Research identifies its presence in Afghanistan, links with other militant groups, and use of Afghan territory to maintain organisational networks and plan operations inside Pakistan (United Nations Security Council, 2024; Herbert & Idris, 2024; Assanbayev et al., 2025). Thus, Afghanistan functions not only as a sanctuary but as territorial space beyond Pakistan's jurisdiction through which militant organisations can sustain their operational capacity. The literature consequently connects militant sanctuary with cross-border insecurity. The Afghanistan–Pakistan borderlands remain interconnected spaces through which militant activity can generate security effects across state boundaries (Herbert & Idris, 2024; Assanbayev et al., 2025). This gives a space to examine the ways in which these external variables combine with Pakistan's strengthened containment efforts in perpetuating persistent insecurity. Pakistan has increasingly adopted a multilayered approach to border security which includes physical barriers, surveillance, regulated crossings, counter-terrorism operations and diplomatic initiatives. Fencing, forts and other border infrastructure have become an integral part of this approach. By the end of 2024, approximately 3,100 kilometers of Pakistan's western border had been fenced off and 92 per cent of forts along the Pakistan–Afghanistan border had been completed (Radio Pakistan, 2024). These efforts have been complemented by intelligence-driven counter-terrorism activities and sustained engagement with Afghan authorities on militant groups operating from Afghan territory (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, 2024).

The literature, however, points to an important limitation. Border fencing and related controls can regulate movement and constrain cross-border militant activity, but measures implemented on the Pakistani side cannot independently eliminate militant infrastructure beyond Pakistan's territorial jurisdiction. This is reflected in Pakistan's continued engagement with Kabul and repeated calls for Afghan action against the groups operating from Afghan territory (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, 2024). Independent analysis also indicates that Pakistan's military diplomacy and coercive measures have strained relations with the Taliban authorities, while the Taliban has remained reluctant to curb the TTP (International Institute for Strate-

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gic Studies [IISS], 2025). The literature therefore suggests that Pakistan's border-security measures should not be viewed simply as ineffective. Rather, they are instruments of containment whose effectiveness is conditioned by the cross-border location of the threat.

This limitation provides the basis for examining the persistence and wider consequences of insecurity in Pakistan's western borderlands. In recent times, Pakistan's insecurity has remained largely confined to its western frontier, mainly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Research has identified the Afghanistan–Pakistan borderlands as particularly susceptible to violent extremism and other forms of insecurity. PIPS recorded 521 terrorist attacks in Pakistan in 2024, with over 95% of these attacks taking place in KP and Balochistan. CRSS also reported that both provinces accounted for over 92% of deaths and 86% of attacks related to violence in the first quarter of the year (Herbert & Idris, 2024; CRSS, 2024; PIPS, 2025). The implications are wider than simply militant violence. The ongoing conflict and increased security have affected the dynamics between the state and local communities, and the tightening of border controls has disrupted traditional movement, employment, and local market practices based on cross-border networks (Herbert & Idris, 2024; Cheema et al., 2021). The security environment following 2021 has intensified existing vulnerabilities in the former FATA and Balochistan, such as extremism, terrorism, and drug trafficking (Khan & Ahmed, 2025).

Existing scholarship has examined the Taliban's return, the TTP's resurgence, Afghan-based militant activity, cross-border insecurity, Pakistan's border-security response and the consequences of instability in KP and Balochistan. Yet, these dimensions have not been sufficiently synthesized to explain how limitations in controlling militant activity beyond Pakistan's territorial jurisdiction interact with Pakistan's expanded containment capacity to sustain cross-border insecurity (Herbert & Idris, 2024; Khan & Ahmed, 2025; Assanbayev et al., 2025). This study fills that gap by bringing together Afghan-side control limitations, militant operational space, cross-border spillover, Pakistan's containment measures and persistent borderland insecurity within a single analytical framework.

Analytical Framework

International borders are not simply fixed lines separating sovereign states. They are also spaces through which authority, mobility, social interaction and security are organised and regulated (Newman, 2006; Popescu, 2012). This distinction matters to the present study because territorial control is not the same as physically fortifying a border. A state may strengthen fencing, surveillance, regulated crossings and security deployment within its territory without having comparable authority over activities beyond its jurisdiction. This creates what this study conceptualises as a jurisdictional security gap: a mismatch between the territorial reach of a state's security and containment capacity and the wider cross-border environment from which a transnational threat may be organised, sustained or projected. The concept does not suggest a failure of domestic security capacity. Rather, it refers to a situation in which a state can strengthen control and containment within its own territory while lacking the jurisdictional authority to directly eliminate threat-generating infrastructure beyond its borders. This distinction is especially important in interconnected borderlands, where uneven territorial control on either side of an international boundary can create an asymmetrical security environment.

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A key mechanism through which the jurisdictional gap can sustain insecurity is militant sanctuary and operational space. Salehyan (2007) shows that the territorial limits of state coercive authority can allow armed groups to evade repression by organising or maintaining bases in neighbouring states. External sanctuary can give militant organisations space to regroup, retain personnel, mobilise resources and sustain their organisational and operational capacity beyond the reach of the state they target. Martínez (2017) similarly finds that access to cross-border safe havens can contribute to higher levels of insurgent violence in neighbouring territories. The importance of external operational space, therefore, lies not simply in the presence of militants outside a state's borders, but in the ability of such space to preserve the infrastructure and organisational capacity through which violence can be sustained. In the Afghanistan–Pakistan context, Pakistan's ability to suppress militant activity within its territory must therefore be considered alongside the extent to which relevant militant networks retain operational space beyond its jurisdiction.

Cross-border spillover is the process through which militant capacity located outside a state can generate insecurity within a neighbouring country. Research on conflict diffusion shows that insecurity can cross national boundaries through the movement of combatants, arms, populations and transnational networks (Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006). Silve and Verdier (2018) further show that weak territorial control and porous frontiers can facilitate the movement of conflict-related actors and resources between neighbouring territories. Spillover, therefore, is not simply the geographical spread of violence. It also involves the movement of conflict-related actors, resources and security consequences across state boundaries. Where militant organisations retain operational space on one side of a frontier, they may also retain the capacity to project personnel, resources or violence across it. This links external sanctuary with Pakistan’s internal security environment and explains why militant operational capacity beyond Pakistan’s jurisdiction remains analytically important.

Pakistan’s border-security and containment measures are the main means through which the state seeks to reduce these cross-border effects. Border fortification and related controls can restrict the movement of fighters, weapons and other resources, increasing the costs and reducing the operational opportunities available to militant organisations (Blair, 2024). However, containment and threat elimination are not the same. Blair (2024) shows that border fortification can restrict access to external resources and weaken militant capabilities, even though armed organisations may adapt or find alternative sources of support. Pakistan’s efforts to strengthen surveillance, regulate movement, fortify the frontier and conduct counter-militant operations should therefore be seen as meaningful forms of territorial containment rather than measures made irrelevant by the cross-border nature of the threat. Their effectiveness, however, remains shaped by security conditions beyond Pakistan’s territorial jurisdiction. Measures taken within Pakistan can restrict infiltration and disrupt militant activity, but they cannot independently remove organisational infrastructure or operational space located in another sovereign territory.

The framework therefore suggests that persistent insecurity in Pakistan's western borderlands is shaped by the interaction of the jurisdictional security gap, militant operational space, cross-border spillover and territorial containment. Where militant organisations retain operational capacity beyond Pakistan’s jurisdiction, strengthened border-security measures can restrict movement, raise the costs of cross-border operations and improve domestic security capacity without independently eliminating the external conditions sustaining the threat. The central proposition

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of this study is that Pakistan's expanded containment capacity can produce important security gains, but persistent cross-border insecurity remains shaped by the degree of effective control over militant activity in the external territorial environment from which the threat originates. This proposition provides the analytical basis for examining how Afghan-side control limitations, militant operational space, cross-border spillover and Pakistan's containment efforts interact to shape persistent insecurity in Pakistan's western borderlands.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative single-case study design, using framework-guided document analysis and evidence triangulation to examine the Afghanistan–Pakistan border-security environment after August 2021. The case is centred on a specific analytical puzzle: why has cross-border insecurity persisted despite Pakistan's expanded capacity to regulate and secure its side of the border? The Taliban's return to power provides an appropriate setting for examining this question because it transformed Afghanistan's political and territorial order while Pakistan continued to face cross-border militant threats. The analysis therefore treats the Afghanistan–Pakistan frontier as an interconnected security environment in which conditions within Afghanistan interact with Pakistan's capacity to contain threats originating beyond its territorial jurisdiction.

The empirical analysis draws on four categories of evidence: peer-reviewed academic research, United Nations reports and monitoring assessments, official Pakistani government documents, and independent security assessments and datasets. Academic sources inform the conceptual framework and interpretation of developments; United Nations material provides assessments of militant activity, governance, and the wider security environment; official Pakistani sources establish state policies, reported measures, and official positions; and independent reports and datasets help contextualise patterns of violence and broader security outcomes. Sources were selected according to their relevance, credibility, temporal proximity to the post-2021 period, and evidentiary specificity. Important claims were compared across different categories of evidence where possible to reduce reliance on a single institutional or analytical perspective.

Guided by the conceptual framework, the analysis proceeds through five interconnected dimensions. It first examines territorial control and borderland governance, focusing on the extent to which Taliban political and territorial consolidation translated into effective institutional and security control. It then considers militant sanctuary and transnational insurgency, particularly whether the TTP retained operational space within Afghanistan beyond Pakistan's jurisdiction. Third, it examines cross-border spillover and the ways militant capacity can generate security consequences across the frontier. Fourth, it assesses Pakistan's border-security and containment measures, including its capacity to regulate movement, disrupt militant networks, and constrain cross-border threats. Finally, these dimensions are brought together to examine the relationship between Pakistan's capacity to contain the consequences of militancy and its limited ability to unilaterally eliminate the external conditions sustaining the threat.

Different source categories were used for different evidentiary purposes and compared where possible. Official sources were used to establish state measures, reported actions, and official positions rather than as independent evidence of policy effectiveness. These claims were consid-

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ered in conjunction with academic research, United Nations assessments and independent security evidence. This approach allows for an analysis of Pakistan's ongoing attempts to contain cross-border militancy, while independently assessing the security results and structural conditions shaping those efforts.

The study is subject to several limitations. It relies mainly on publicly available documentary evidence and does not seek to establish direct responsibility for every militant attack or explain changes in violence through a single factor. Instead, it examines the broader relationship between territorial control, militant operational space, cross-border insecurity, and the capacity and limits of unilateral containment. The findings should therefore be understood as an analytically grounded interpretation of the conditions associated with persistent insecurity along the Afghanistan–Pakistan border rather than a definitive causal explanation of every individual episode of violence.

Analysis

The Taliban's return as a government in August 2021 resulted in significant political and geographical consolidation across Afghanistan, but not in total governance or security control. Although the Taliban inherited much of the previous state's administrative apparatus and centralised decision-making, their governance model has remained characterised by limited institutional capacity and weak institutionalisation (Hamoon et al., 2025). United Nations evaluations also recognise increasing Taliban consolidation, but continue to underscore large governance and institutional issues (United Nations Security Council, 2024). Afghanistan's post-2021 order can therefore be characterised by greater territorial centralisation without equally comprehensive institutional control.

This distinction is particularly important for militant organisations operating from Afghan territory. United Nations monitoring reports indicate that the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has continued to operate from Afghanistan at a significant scale and remains a major threat to Pakistan, while the Afghan Taliban have proved unable or unwilling to manage the threat posed by the group (United Nations Security Council, 2024). The issue, therefore, is not simply whether a regime controls territory, but whether it can or will effectively restrict armed groups operating within that territory.

For Pakistan, this creates a structural security problem. Taliban consolidation has not eliminated the conditions through which anti-Pakistan militancy can be organised and sustained. Instead, centralised territorial authority in Afghanistan coexists with incomplete control over militant activity relevant to Pakistan's security. As reflected in the conceptual framework, Pakistan can exercise coercive and regulatory authority within its own territory but cannot directly determine how militant organisations are governed or constrained within Afghanistan. This jurisdictional gap helps explain why strengthened border-security measures alone cannot eliminate cross-border insecurity and provides the basis for examining the continued availability of militant sanctuary and operational space for the TTP within Afghanistan.

The ongoing TTP activity since the Taliban's return to power is closely correlated to the sustained availability of operational space within Afghanistan. Afghan territory has enabled the TTP to maintain organisational networks, mobility, training capacity, and logistical access needed for sustained operations (Ali & Verma, 2025; Mehran & Jobard, 2025). The refuge and support of-

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fered by the Taliban, including operational freedom, mobility, recruiting, training, and logistical help, have been vital to the TTP's strengthening since 2021 (Ali and Verma 2025). They claim that the Taliban's refusal to disarm, demobilise, or remove the TTP from Afghanistan allowed the group to build its capacity in the face of Pakistani pressure. Similarly, Mehran and Jobard (2025), using expert interviews and militant-group publications, point to continuing ideological, logistical and operational links between the Taliban and TTP and conclude that Taliban-controlled Afghanistan has offered the group a relatively secure environment to continue its activities. The importance of this sanctuary is also evident in the TTP's continued ability to project violence into Pakistan. Assanbayev et al. (2025) identify periodic infiltration of TTP militants from Afghan territory and conclude that the group uses Afghanistan to plan and execute operations within Pakistan. United Nations monitoring likewise documents the TTP's continued presence in Afghanistan alongside intensified attacks against Pakistan (United Nations Security Council, 2024). Afghan territory, therefore, functions not only as a place of refuge but also as an operational environment in which militant organisational capacity can be sustained beyond Pakistan's jurisdiction. This creates a structural asymmetry in Pakistan's security response. Pakistan can disrupt militant movement, raise the costs of infiltration, and target networks within its territory, but it cannot directly dismantle infrastructure within Afghanistan without crossing a jurisdictional boundary. Its capacity to contain the consequences of militancy therefore exceeds its ability to eliminate the external conditions sustaining it. As long as militant organisations retain sufficient operational space beyond Pakistan's jurisdiction, measures on the Pakistani side can constrain the threat but cannot fully remove it. This provides the basis for examining Pakistan's multilayered border-security response.

Pakistan's response to the post-2021 security situation has involved physical fortification, surveillance, military and intelligence operations, and diplomatic engagement with Afghan authorities. Some elements of this strategy predate the Taliban's return, but its prominence grew with the intensification of cross-border militant activity after 2021. Academic research shows that key elements of Pakistan's effort to reduce vulnerabilities along the Afghanistan–Pakistan frontier include physical barriers, enhanced surveillance, fencing, and military operations (Oztig, 2020; Atiq et al., 2026).

Physical border management has been the most obvious aspect of this policy. By December 2024, Pakistan had completed fencing along approximately 3,100 kilometres of its western border, while 98% of Pakistan–Afghanistan border work and 92% of forts along the border had been completed (Radio Pakistan, 2024). Academic assessment also suggests that physical barriers and enhanced surveillance have mitigated tactical vulnerabilities but have failed to address the broader political and security frictions around the frontier (Atiq et al., 2026).

These measures have been accompanied by military, intelligence and diplomatic action as well. In March 2024, Islamabad publicly described an intelligence-based anti-terrorist operation against hideouts and targets associated with the Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group and TTP inside Afghanistan, while reiterating its preference for dialogue and cooperation with Afghan authorities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). Pakistan has remained concerned about TTP operations and militant sanctuaries in its dealings with Kabul. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported continued engagement in December 2024, although the International Institute for Strategic Studies concluded that Pakistan's military diplomacy and coercive measures had neither resolved the se-

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curity impasse nor prevented further deterioration in bilateral relations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024; IISS, 2025).

Taken together, these measures demonstrate Pakistan's substantial capacity to monitor, regulate, deter, and disrupt cross-border threats. They are best understood as a strategy of containment rather than a guarantee of threat elimination. Pakistan can strengthen control over movement and raise the costs of militant operations, but measures implemented from its side of the border cannot independently dismantle networks or infrastructure located beyond its jurisdiction. Pakistan's security response has therefore expanded considerably, while the elimination of cross-border militancy remains partly dependent on conditions within the external territorial environment.

The continuation of violence in Pakistan's western borderlands following the expansion of security measures should not be seen as evidence of a lack of Pakistani capacity or effort. Sustained operations, border infrastructure, and tighter regulation of cross-border movement have considerably strengthened Pakistan's ability to contain and disrupt militant activity. Yet insecurity remains heavily concentrated in the two provinces bordering Afghanistan. CRSS recorded 2,546 violence-linked fatalities in Pakistan during 2024, with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan accounting for approximately 94% of these fatalities (CRSS, 2024a). This concentration points to the continued exposure of Pakistan's borderlands but does not, by itself, establish that Pakistan's containment measures have failed.

Evidence of sustained counter-militant activity further supports this distinction. PIPS recorded 621 militants killed during operational strikes and 158 anti-militant operations in 2024, indicating continued and substantial pressure on militant organisations (PIPS, 2025). The pattern was also uneven: CRSS recorded a 24% decline in violence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa during the first quarter of 2024, while Balochistan experienced a 96% increase during the same period (CRSS, 2024b). These variations suggest that persistent violence should be distinguished from the state's overall capacity to contain and disrupt militant activity.

The remaining difficulty lies in the external dimension of the threat. Pakistan can restrict movement, disrupt networks, and raise the costs of militant operations within its territory, but it cannot ordinarily eliminate infrastructure located inside another sovereign state. Islamabad has therefore continued to call on Afghan authorities to prevent their territory from being used against Pakistan while affirming respect for Afghanistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). Effective control over Pakistan's territory, therefore, cannot automatically produce control over militant activity beyond its jurisdiction.

The evidence consequently points to a jurisdictional gap rather than a simple failure of Pakistani border management. Pakistan's containment capacity has expanded substantially, but the elimination of cross-border militancy also depends partly on effective action against the external infrastructure sustaining it. Where militant organisations retain operational space in Afghanistan, unilateral Pakistani measures can constrain and disrupt their activities without permanently removing the conditions that sustain the threat. The durability of Pakistan's security gains therefore remains partly shaped by security and governance conditions beyond its territorial jurisdiction.

The empirical evidence suggests that Pakistan's post-2021 border-security challenge arises from the interaction between stronger domestic containment and the continued availability of militant operational space across the Afghanistan–Pakistan border. Taliban territorial consolidation has

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not eliminated the TTP's presence in Afghanistan or its ability to conduct attacks against Pakistan. Independent assessment indicates that the TTP has remained very active in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa while retaining an operational presence in Afghanistan, making it a continuing source of tension between Islamabad and Kabul (IISS, 2025). However, Pakistan has enhanced its ability to secure and regulate the frontier through fencing, border infrastructure, surveillance, intelligence-based operations and diplomatic engagement. These measures have expanded its ability to restrict movement, disrupt militant networks, and maintain pressure on militant organisations. Continued violence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan should therefore be understood as a persistent residual threat rather than evidence of an absence of Pakistani security capacity.

The central finding is that Pakistan's containment capacity has expanded, but the complete elimination of cross-border militancy remains conditioned by militant operational space beyond its jurisdiction. Pakistan can raise the costs of infiltration and disrupt attacks within its territory, but it cannot unilaterally eliminate infrastructure located inside another sovereign state. This jurisdictional constraint is reflected in Pakistan's repeated emphasis on respecting Afghanistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity while seeking action against groups operating from Afghan territory (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). A sustained reduction in the threat, therefore, requires not just continuing Pakistani containment but also effective control of insurgent activity on the Afghan side of the border.

Discussion

The post-2021 Afghan situation shows that political and territorial consolidation does not equal comprehensive security control. The Taliban's capacity to establish authority across most of Afghanistan and centralise decision-making fundamentally transformed the country's political order, but did not necessarily produce effective control over all armed actors operating within its borders. The findings therefore highlight the distinction between the possession of territorial authority and the capacity to exercise effective control over activities within that territory. Territorial control is not only about who rules a geographical place but also whether the ruling authority has the institutional capacity, political incentives and willingness to supervise actors whose actions may have security implications beyond its borders.

This distinction is central to understanding the relationship between state consolidation and transnational insecurity. Even where a governing authority achieves substantial territorial dominance, militant organisations may retain operational space if they are not effectively constrained. The consolidation of authority on one side of an international boundary does not necessarily eliminate the security consequences generated from that territory. For neighbouring states, the key issue is not simply whether authority has been centralised, but whether it translates into effective control over militant activity with cross-border consequences. In the Afghanistan–Pakistan context, this helps explain why Taliban consolidation did not automatically resolve Pakistan's security concerns and left open conditions through which militant sanctuary and cross-border insecurity could persist..

The findings further support the argument that militant sanctuary is a critical mechanism linking uneven territorial control to cross-border insecurity. Sanctuary matters not simply because militants operate beyond the territory of the state they target, but because such external space can provide operational advantages. Where militant organisations can preserve networks, regroup,

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recruit, train, and maintain logistical connections beyond the affected state's jurisdiction, they can sustain organisational capacity despite counter-terrorism pressure. In this sense, sanctuary transforms a territorially bounded security problem into a transnational one.

The Afghanistan–Pakistan case further illustrates how such operational space can generate cross-border insecurity through the movement of militants, resources, and violence. The persistence of TTP activity shows that measures within Pakistan can disrupt militant networks and constrain infiltration without necessarily removing the external conditions sustaining them. The relationship identified in this study therefore follows a connected mechanism: uneven territorial control can permit militant operational space; militant operational space can sustain organisational capacity; and that capacity can subsequently be projected across the international border through cross-border spillover. This distinction separates the location of a threat from the location of its consequences. While militancy is experienced primarily within Pakistan, part of the infrastructure sustaining it remains beyond Pakistan's territorial jurisdiction. The question, therefore, is how far strengthened border-security measures can contain such a threat without eliminating its external source.

The findings challenge any interpretation of Pakistan's post-2021 security situation as a simple failure of border management. Pakistan has significantly improved its capacity to secure its side of the Afghanistan–Pakistan frontier through border fortification, regulated crossings, surveillance, intelligence-based operations, and sustained pressure on militant organisations. These measures have strengthened the state's ability to monitor movement, disrupt militant networks, raise the costs of infiltration, and prevent the re-establishment of sustained militant territorial control within Pakistan. The persistence of violence, however, should not obscure the distinction between the continued existence of a threat and the effectiveness of measures designed to contain it.

At the same time, the findings demonstrate the structural limits of unilateral border-security containment. Border fortification and counter-terrorism operations can restrict cross-border movement and reduce militants' operational opportunities, but cannot independently eliminate infrastructure beyond a state's territorial and legal jurisdiction. Pakistan's experience therefore supports a more precise understanding of border security: effective containment does not necessarily produce complete threat elimination. A state may substantially strengthen its capacity to defend its territory while remaining exposed to insecurity sustained by operational space beyond its borders. Pakistan's security strategy should therefore be understood in relative rather than absolute terms. It has strengthened containment and constrained militant activity, but the durability of these gains remains partly dependent on effective control of the external environment sustaining the threat. This limitation leads directly to the paper's broader theoretical contribution: the jurisdictional security gap..

Taken together, the findings support the paper's central theoretical contribution: the concept of a jurisdictional security gap. Such a gap emerges when a state has substantial capacity to contain a transnational militant threat within its territory but lacks the legal and territorial authority to eliminate the external conditions sustaining it. The Afghanistan–Pakistan case demonstrates that strengthened control on one side of an international border cannot automatically produce comparable control over militant activity on the other. Territorial authority remains jurisdictionally

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bounded, creating a separation between a state's capacity to manage insecurity and its ability to remove its external source.

The concept also clarifies the relationship between sovereignty and regional security cooperation. Pakistan can strengthen border management, conduct counter-terrorism operations, and raise the costs of militant infiltration, but the durable elimination of militant infrastructure inside Afghanistan requires effective action by the authority exercising control there. This does not mean that Pakistan can disregard Afghanistan's sovereignty; rather, sovereignty itself limits the capacity of unilateral measures to address threats rooted beyond national jurisdiction. Consequently, the durable reduction of cross-border militancy depends not only on continued Pakistani containment but also on effective willingness and capacity on the Afghan side to prevent its territory from being used against a neighbouring state..

The broader implication extends beyond the Afghanistan–Pakistan case. In transnational insurgencies, security outcomes may depend on the interaction between domestic containment and conditions outside the affected state's jurisdiction. A state may restrict militant movement and limit violence without being able to independently eliminate the threat itself. The jurisdictional security gap captures the distinction between containing the effects of transnational militancy and eliminating the territorial conditions that sustain it, providing the paper's integrated analytical contribution to the study of borders, militant sanctuary, and cross-border insecurity.

Conclusion

This study examined why cross-border insecurity has persisted along the Afghanistan–Pakistan border despite Pakistan's substantial investment in border fortification, regulated crossings, surveillance, and counter-terrorism operations. Its central argument is that the persistence of insecurity cannot be explained simply as a failure of Pakistan's border-management capacity. Rather, the findings demonstrate that the effectiveness of border security is conditioned by the territorial location of the threat and by the limits of a state's authority beyond its own jurisdiction. Pakistan has considerably strengthened its capacity to regulate and defend its frontier, yet militant activity can persist when the organisational and operational conditions sustaining that threat remain located outside Pakistani territory.

The empirical analysis shows that the Taliban's return to power produced substantial political and territorial consolidation in Afghanistan without necessarily resulting in comprehensive control over all armed actors operating within Afghan territory. This distinction is central to understanding Pakistan's continuing security challenge. The persistence of TTP operational space demonstrates that territorial consolidation and effective control over militant activity are not necessarily synonymous. Where militant organisations retain the capacity to preserve networks, mobility, training, logistical connections, and organisational structures beyond the affected state's territorial reach, insecurity can acquire a transnational character. The Afghan–Pakistan case therefore supports the analytical sequence developed in this study: uneven territorial control can facilitate militant operational space; such space can sustain organisational capacity; and that capacity can subsequently generate cross-border insecurity through the movement of militants, resources, and violence.

At the same time, the findings demonstrate that Pakistan's response should not be understood as unsuccessful or ineffective. Pakistan has developed a multilayered security architecture combin-

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ing physical fortification, border infrastructure, regulated movement, surveillance, intelligence-based operations, counter-terrorism measures, and diplomatic engagement. These measures have strengthened Pakistan's ability to monitor its frontier, restrict militant movement, disrupt networks, raise the costs of infiltration, and prevent the restoration of sustained militant territorial control within its own territory. The persistence of violence in the western borderlands should therefore be distinguished from the absence or failure of state capacity. Pakistan has substantially improved its capacity for containment, even though containment cannot automatically produce the complete elimination of a threat sustained from outside its territory.

This distinction constitutes the study's principal theoretical contribution, conceptualised here as the jurisdictional security gap. The concept refers to the structural difference between a state's capacity to manage the consequences of transnational militancy within its own territory and its ability to exercise sustained and independent control over the external territorial conditions that sustain that militancy. This does not imply an absence of intelligence, awareness, influence, or response capacity beyond the border. Rather, it distinguishes such capacities from sustained territorial control over the external environment in which militant activity is organised and maintained. Border fortification may restrict movement and reduce operational opportunities, but it cannot independently substitute for effective control over the territory from which militant activity originates. The argument therefore differs from approaches that explain Afghanistan–Pakistan insecurity primarily through securitisation, borderland dynamics, or spillover by focusing on the jurisdictional asymmetry between where a transnational threat is sustained and where the affected state can exercise sustained territorial control.

The broader implication is that durable cross-border security requires a combination of effective domestic containment and meaningful action by the authority exercising control over the territory from which threats emerge. For Pakistan, this means that continued strengthening of border-security and counter-terrorism capacity remains necessary, but complete and durable threat reduction also depends on effective measures against militant activity on the Afghan side of the border. Such cooperation must necessarily operate within the principles of sovereignty and territorial jurisdiction. More broadly, the study demonstrates that successful border security should not be assessed solely by the complete disappearance of violence. A state may achieve substantial success in containing, disrupting, and limiting a transnational threat while remaining unable to eliminate its external source. Recognising this distinction is essential for understanding why improved domestic containment can coexist with the continued generation of an externally sustained threat.

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