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## The Future of Insurgency in Pakistan: The Case of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

## Budoucnost Povstalectví v Pákistánu: Příklad Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

### Abstract

This paper examines the evolution of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and assesses how its capacity and capabilities may develop in the medium-term horizon of 2026–2031. It analyzes the TTP's goals, structure, tactics, propaganda, and alliances, while evaluating Pakistan's counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy and regional dynamics. Using NATO's alternative futures analysis (AFA), the paper identifies Afghan Taliban support and Pashtun civilian support as decisive variables and constructs four scenarios: Hollow Insurgency, Strategic Decline, Homegrown Resistance, and Rising Emirate.

**Keywords:** Alternative futures analysis, TTP, insurgency, COIN, Pakistan.

### Abstrakt

Tento text zkoumá vývoj organizace Tahrík-e Tálibán Pákistán (TTP) a hodnotí, jak se její kapacity a schopnosti mohou dále vyvíjet ve střednědobém časovém horizontu 2026–2031. Analyzuje cíle, strukturu, taktiky, propagandu a spojeneckých TTP. Zabývá se i pákistánskou protipovstaleckou strategií (COIN) a regionální dynamikou. Pomocí analýzy alternativních budoucností podle metodiky NATO tento příspěvek identifikuje podporu afghánského Tálibánu a podporu civilistů paštunského původu jako rozhodující proměnné a sestavuje čtyři scénáře: Vyprázdňené povstání, Strategický úpadek, Domácí odpor a Vzestup emirátu.

**Klíčová slova:** Analýza alternativních budoucností, TTP, vzbouřenectví, COIN, Pákistán.

## Introduction

Since its establishment in 2007, the TTP has been a persistent threat to the Pakistani government. It began as an alliance of several militant groups in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region with a shared ideology and the goal of enforcing a conservative understanding of Sharia. Pakistan used various strategies to counter this emerging threat: military operations, targeting of TTP leaders, and peace talks. These strategies have resulted in cyclical trends of the TTP's decline, followed by its resurgence after periods of regrouping.<sup>1</sup>

Recent developments have sparked discussion and uncertainty regarding the situation in the country. In 2019, Pakistan declared victory over the TTP after a series of intelligence operations targeting militant leaders. However, the TTP underwent a complete reorganization under the leadership of Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud. The changes led to better coordination among local TTP leaders, a new ideological narrative, and new strategic plans.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the Afghan Taliban's takeover in 2021 further motivated the TTP to pursue a similar path in Pakistan. Since then, there has been a severe escalation of cross-border hostilities between Afghanistan and Pakistan due to material and training support for the TTP. Owing to this support, the TTP has become more active again and, consequently, Pakistan has become the target of renewed terrorist attacks after a two-year pause.<sup>3</sup>

This paper seeks to answer the question: **How might the TTP's capacity and capabilities evolve in the near future?** To find the answer, this paper uses an alternative futures analysis explained in the NATO handbook. It is a tool for exploring potential development using unpredictable factors that have a strong impact. This paper proceeds as follows: First, it establishes a theoretical framework using primarily Mao Zedong's and David Kilcullen's concepts of insurgency. Second, the methodology section describes the method used and its limitations. Sections 4-6 provide a structural understanding of key actors in the conflict. Section 7 applies the AFA method to generate four alternative future scenarios. Lastly, the conclusion answers the research question.

## Theoretical frameworks

### Conceptual definition of insurgency, terrorism, and hybrid actor

In academic literature, there is no single universally accepted definition of insurgency. However, for the purposes of this paper, we adopt the definition by David Kilcullen. He defines insurgency as a politico-military struggle that aims to weaken and undermine the government's control and legitimacy while strengthening the power of

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<sup>1</sup> SAJJAD, Mohammad Waqas and Ahmed JAWAD. 2026. "The Evolution of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP): Ideology, Strategy, and Aspirations". *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 10(1): 90–100. DOI: 10.19165/CBDL5433.

<sup>2</sup> SAJJAD, Mohammad Waqas and Ahmed JAWAD. 2026. "The Evolution of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP): Ideology, Strategy, and Aspirations". *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 10(1): 90–100. DOI: 10.19165/CBDL5433.

<sup>3</sup> FONG, Clara. 2026. "Why Are the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan in an 'Open War'?" Online. *Council on Foreign Relations*. March 18, 2026. <https://www.cfr.org/articles/why-are-the-afghan-taliban-and-pakistan-in-an-open-war>

insurgents.<sup>4</sup> In these types of conflicts, the boundaries between state and non-state actors can be blurred. Non-state actors can adapt and take over state functions in places with low state presence, such as tax collection and the provision of a parallel judiciary.<sup>5</sup> Through these actions, non-state actors can influence the civilian population's perception of their political authority and legitimacy.<sup>6</sup>

To add to Kilcullen's definition, we also use Mao Zedong's theory of protracted people's war. He formulated three successive phases of revolutionary guerrilla warfare. The first phase is strategic defense, in which insurgents focus on building political infrastructure, mobilizing the rural population, and creating safe zones. The second could be described as the phase of a strategic stalemate. It occurs when insurgents attain capacities that allow for more extensive offensive operations. The third phase is strategic offensive, in which insurgents gain sufficient military capacity and political legitimacy to conduct conventional operations and defeat the state.<sup>7,8</sup>

Insurgents can also adopt terrorism as a tactic. Bruce Hoffman defines it as "the deliberate creation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in pursuit of political change... it is aimed to have far-reaching psychological impacts beyond the immediate victim of the attack."<sup>9</sup> The TTP is primarily an insurgent movement, but uses terrorist tactics to psychologically paralyze the opponent, demoralize the civilian population, and gain media attention.<sup>10</sup> Actors who combine various irregular methods, such as insurgency and terrorism, with conventional military capabilities are classified as hybrid actors.

## Methodology

This paper is designed as a qualitative case study focused on the insurgency development of the TTP in Pakistan since its leadership change in 2018. The goal is to answer the main research question: **How might the TTP's capacity and capabilities evolve in the near future?** To answer this question, this paper utilizes an alternative futures analysis (AFA). This method is ideal for exploring possible directions of development in highly uncertain situations. Its goal is not to predict exact outcomes but rather to define hypothetical scenarios.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>4</sup> KILCULLEN, David. 2010. *Counterinsurgency*. New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-973748-2.

<sup>5</sup> KILCULLEN, David. 2020. *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*. New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0190265687.

<sup>6</sup> KILCULLEN, David. 2020. *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*. New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0190265687.

<sup>7</sup> MAO, Zedong. 1937/2000. *On Guerilla Warfare*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press.

<sup>8</sup> MAO, Zedong. 1938/1967. *On Protracted War*. Beijing: Foreign Language Press.

<sup>9</sup> HOFFMAN, Bruce. 2017. *Inside Terrorism*. Third edition. New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>10</sup> KHAN, Alamgir and Christian KAUNERT. 2026. "The TTP Challenge in Pakistan: Role of Legitimacy and Its Impact on Securitisation Process and Counterinsurgency Efforts". Online. *The Round Table*, March, 1–18. doi:10.1080/00358533.2026.2641030.

<sup>11</sup> NATO. 2017. *The NATO Alternative Analysis Handbook*. ISBN (PDF Version) 978-92-845-0208-0.

AFA consists of several steps. In the first step, the focus issue must be identified. In the case of this study, the focus issue is determined by the research question. The second step involves identifying the key factors that might shape future development. From these, the two factors that are the most unpredictable and impactful are chosen. The next step includes determining the high and low points for each of the two factors and generating two axes – one for each of the factors – with the low and high points placed at opposite ends. Next, the generated axes are crossed, producing four quadrants that represent potential future developments. Each of the quadrants then represents a hypothetical scenario of development based on the combination of factors. Lastly, the analytical evaluation depicts how they fit into the research question and what implications come from them.<sup>12</sup>

Several limitations apply to this type of study. First, the method itself works with uncontrollable and unpredictable factors. Therefore, the evaluation of the results must account for this uncertainty. Second, there may be propaganda from both sides. In this study, for example, the TTP and the Pakistani government may try to portray the situation according to their preferred version. To address this limitation, this study methodologically assigns greater analytical weight to corroborating evidence from independent international bodies (e.g., the UN), journalists, or academic analyses, rather than relying primarily on claims from the actors' official media platforms.

## The TTP

### Historical roots and evolution of the TTP

The TTP was founded in December 2007, after a shura of 40 senior military leaders established it as an umbrella organization to unify previously independent militant groups.<sup>13</sup> All parts of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) along with various districts of the then North-West Frontier Province were included and represented.<sup>14</sup> The first leader was Baitullah Mehsud, who was a high-ranking and influential military commander from South Waziristan.

The historical roots of the TTP can be traced back to 2001, when the US and NATO invaded Afghanistan, with the primary goal of capturing Osama bin Laden and destroying Al-Qaeda as a reaction to the 9/11 attacks.<sup>15</sup> As a result, many Al-Qaeda and Afghan Taliban fighters fled across the border into Pakistan. Subsequent Pakistani military incursions into FATA, a region that had a high level of autonomy during that time, caused a mobilization of local militant groups, which gradually networked with each other and grew bigger and more complex.<sup>16</sup> The most critical factor that contributed to the strengthening of local militants was the systematic elimination of

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<sup>12</sup> NATO. 2017. *The NATO Alternative Analysis Handbook*. ISBN (PDF Version) 978-92-845-0208-0.

<sup>13</sup> ABBAS, Hassan. 2008. "A profile of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan". *CTC Sentinel*, January 2008, Volume 1, Issue 2. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/a-profile-of-tehrik-i-taliban-pakistan/>

<sup>14</sup> ABBAS, Hassan. 2008. "A profile of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan". *CTC Sentinel*, January 2008, Volume 1, Issue 2. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/a-profile-of-tehrik-i-taliban-pakistan/>

<sup>15</sup> Imperial War Museums. 2021. "Afghanistan War: How did 9/11 lead to a 20-year war?" Online. *Imperial War Museums*. August 18, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> ABBAS, Hassan. 2008. "A profile of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan". *CTC Sentinel*, January 2008, Volume 1, Issue 2. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/a-profile-of-tehrik-i-taliban-pakistan/>

traditional tribal leadership in the area. The most prominent example is the assassination of approximately 200 tribal elders, who were accused of being connected to the Pakistani government and/or being American spies.<sup>17</sup> After that, the TTP established itself as an alternative authority and saw growth in political and military power.

The TTP quickly became one of the deadliest organizations in Pakistan. The Pakistani government accused the group of the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in December 2007, although no evidence was ever found to officially support this claim.<sup>18</sup> Under Baitullah's successor, Hakimullah Mehsud, the TTP demonstrated transnational and more complex ambitions. In May 2010, Faisal Shahzad attempted a car bombing in New York's Times Square and the TTP swiftly claimed responsibility.<sup>19</sup> In October 2012, it claimed responsibility for the shooting attack on Malala Yousafzai, a schoolgirl and education activist, who survived the attack.<sup>20</sup> The most devastating attack occurred in December 2014, when the TTP's fighters stormed the Army Public School in Peshawar, resulting in the deaths of more than 140 people, approximately 130 of whom were children.<sup>21</sup> It was this massacre that served as a turning point for the popularity of the TTP. This event thoroughly alienated the Pakistani public and triggered an unprecedented military and political response from the state.

The same period, which was described above, was also characterized by successful assassinations of multiple TTP leaders. The first leader, Baitullah Mehsud, was killed in August 2009 in a US drone strike, whereas Hakimullah Mehsud was killed in November 2013.<sup>22</sup> The next leader was Mullah Fazlullah, who was the first leader from a different tribe than the Mehsud one. During Fazlullah's leadership, the TTP suffered internal fragmentation, most visibly during the 2014 split of the powerful Jamaat-ul-Ahrar faction.<sup>23</sup> The combination of internal fragmentation and the Pakistani military operation Zarb-e-Azb caused the TTP to lose most of its organizational coherence and operational capacity. Fazlullah was killed in June 2018 in a US drone strike, and the weakened TTP appointed Noor Wali Mehsud as the new leader.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>17</sup> ABBAS, Hassan. 2008. "A profile of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan". *CTC Sentinel*, January 2008, Volume 1, Issue 2. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/a-profile-of-tehrik-i-taliban-pakistan/>

<sup>18</sup> BENNETT-JONES, Owen. 2017. "Benazir Bhutto assassination: How Pakistan covered up killing". Online. *BBC*. December 27, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42409374>

<sup>19</sup> MUELLER, John. 2011. "Case 34: Times Square". Online. *Political Science*. December 31, 2011. <https://politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/34TMSQ7.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Malala Fund. 2026. "Malala's Story". Online. *Malala Fund*. <https://malala.org/malalas-story>

<sup>21</sup> KAROCK, Ulrich. 2014. "The Peshawar Army Public School attack: From nightmare to greater darkness?" Online. *European Parliament*. December 18, 2014. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2014/536429/EXPO\\_ATA%282014%29536429\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2014/536429/EXPO_ATA%282014%29536429_EN.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> BBC. 2013. "Obituary: Hakimullah Mehsud". Online. *BBC*. November 1, 2013. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-24464506>

<sup>23</sup> ZAHID, Farhan. 2020. "Mukaram Khan: Hizb ul-Ahrar – The New Security Challenge in Pakistan". Online. *Jamestown*. April 2, 2020. <https://jamestown.org/mukaram-khan-hizb-ul-ahrar-the-new-security-challenge-in-pakistan/>

<sup>24</sup> ROGGIO, Bill. 2018. "Pakistani Taliban appoints new emir after confirming death of Mullah Fazlullah". Online. *Long War Journal*. June 23, 2018.

This resulted in the return of Mehsud tribe leadership. Mehsud initiated the most successful reconstruction in the TTP's history, which will be analyzed in the following sections.

## Strategic goals and ideological framework

The declared goal of the TTP is the overthrow of the Pakistani government and the replacement of the state system with an Islamic emirate based on the Deobandi movement, an orthodox Sunni Islamic revivalist movement.<sup>25</sup> Achieving this goal involves several key tasks. They include driving security forces out of the Pashtun region, systematically disrupting the capabilities of the Pakistani army and demoralizing its personnel, destabilizing economic infrastructure, and strategically expanding from rural areas into urban centers of key regions such as Sindh, Balochistan, and Punjab.<sup>26</sup>

Ideologically, the TTP's foundation rests on the concept of offensive jihad against the Pakistani government and foreign interveners, whom it considers illegitimate rulers who do not follow strict Sharia law.<sup>27</sup> Since 2018, however, the TTP has been undergoing systematic doctrinal rebranding under the leadership of Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud. The group distances itself from attacks on civilian targets and its targeting policy aims at security forces and other government-allied structures, for example Inter-Services Intelligence or the Counter-Terrorism Department.<sup>28</sup> This shift serves as a tool to enhance political legitimacy and to create the impression of an organized liberation movement. In reality, this is often violated. For example, the suicide bombing attack on a court in Islamabad in November 2025 killed 12 civilians.<sup>29</sup>

## Organizational structure

A key innovation under Mehsud's leadership is the transition to a more formalized structure, which mirrors the organizational model of the Afghan Taliban.<sup>30</sup> The TTP has also successfully integrated many previously independent factions (for example, the

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<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/06/pakistani-taliban-appoint-new-emir-after-confirming-death-of-mullah-fazlullah.php>

<sup>25</sup> JACKSON, Alice. 2025. "Who are the Tehrik-Taliban Pakistan and why are they important to Afghanistan-Pakistan relations?". Online. *Pivot*. August 5, 2025.

<https://pivot.mias.org.au/2025/08/05/who-are-the-tehrik-taliban-pakistan-and-why-are-they-important-to-afghanistan-pakistan-relations/>

<sup>26</sup> SAYED, Abdul. 2025. "TTP projecting power outside Pakistan's Northwest". Online. *Jamestown*. June 11, 2025. <https://jamestown.org/ttp-projecting-power-outside-pakistans-northwest-2/>

<sup>27</sup> Counterterrorism Guide. n.d. a) "Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP)". Online. *Counterterrorism Guide*. <https://www.dni.gov/nctc/groups/ttp.html>

<sup>28</sup> SAYED, Abdul and Tore HAMMING. 2021. "The revival of Pakistani Taliban". Online. *Combating terrorism center*. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-revival-of-the-pakistani-taliban/>

<sup>29</sup> ELLIS-PETERSEN, Hannah. 2025. "Pakistan Taliban claim responsibility for deadly terror attack in Islamabad". Online. *The Guardian*. November 11, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/nov/11/terror-attack-islamabad-pakistan-state-of-war>

<sup>30</sup> FIRDOUS, Iftikhar. 2025. "The reinvention of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan". Online. *XCEPT*. [https://www.xcept-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/The-reinvention-of-the-Tehrik-e-Taliban-Pakistan\\_a-case-study.pdf](https://www.xcept-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/The-reinvention-of-the-Tehrik-e-Taliban-Pakistan_a-case-study.pdf)

Mehsud and Jamaat-ul-Ahrar factions), to which it grants significant operational autonomy under a unified doctrinal umbrella.<sup>31</sup> As a result, the TTP increased its number of fighters and strengthened its operational capacity, which also resulted in more terrorist attacks.<sup>32</sup>

In 2024, the United Nations estimated that the TTP had around 6,000 to 6,500 active fighters.<sup>33</sup> This increase was also supported by the release of 5,000 imprisoned militants from Afghan prisons in 2020 and possible recruitment in Afghan refugee camps.<sup>34</sup> Recruitment is carried out mostly through Deobandi schools and online propaganda. The Pakistani army's operations inevitably generate collateral damage and casualties and thus, according to Kilcullen's model, incorporate previously neutral populations into the conflict in the role of accidental guerrillas.<sup>35</sup> The financial stability of the group relies on internal taxation (mostly zakat), systematic extortion, smuggling, and foreign financial support. For example, the United Nations estimated that the TTP received approximately USD 43,000 monthly from the Afghan Taliban alone.<sup>36</sup>

### Evolution of tactics and hybrid operational capacities

The tactical development of the TTP occurred primarily after the Afghan Taliban's successful offensive in 2021. It can be described as transformation into an advanced hybrid actor. Quantitatively, the number of incidents rose from originally 149 claimed attacks to 3,573 claimed attacks in 2025.<sup>37,38</sup> This quantitative leap is due to the integration of military equipment abandoned by NATO forces in Afghanistan. The adaptation of commercial drones (quadcopters) for reconnaissance and strike missions may also have had an effect in this regard.<sup>39</sup> This technological advance

<sup>31</sup> AKHTAR, Shahzad and Shahab Ahmed ZAHID. 2023. "Understanding the Resurgence of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan". *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 16 (3): 285–306. doi:10.1080/17467586.2023.2280924.

<sup>32</sup> AKHTAR, Shahzad and Shahab Ahmed ZAHID. 2023. "Understanding the Resurgence of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan". *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 16 (3): 285–306. doi:10.1080/17467586.2023.2280924.

<sup>33</sup> United Nations. 2024. "S/2024/556". Online. *United Nations*. July 22, 2024. <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/191/91/pdf/n2419191.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> BBC. 2020. "Taliban talks: US peace envoy 'not happy about' release of prisoners". Online. *BBC*. September 14, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54155768>

<sup>35</sup> KILCULLEN, David. 2009. *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*. New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN: 978-0195368345

<sup>36</sup> Usman. 2025. "UN Report Exposes Afghan Taliban's Financial and Logistical Support to TTP". Online. *Modern Diplomacy*. February 17, 2025. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/02/17/un-report-exposes-afghan-talibans-financial-and-logistical-support-to-ttp/>

<sup>37</sup> JADOON, Amira and Abdul SAYED. 2021. "The Pakistani Taliban is reinventing itself". Online. *9DASHLINE*. October 28, 2021. <https://www.9dashline.com/article/the-pakistani-taliban-is-reinventing-itself>

<sup>38</sup> MEMRI. 2026. "Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) claims 3 573 terror attacks in 2025, says its fighters killed 3481 Pakistani security personnel and wounded 3818". Online. *MEMRI*. February 5, 2026. <https://www.memri.org/jttm/tehreek-e-taliban-pakistan-ttp-claims-3573-terror-attacks-2025-says-its-fighters-killed-3481>

<sup>39</sup> SULAIMAN, Sadia. 2026. "Introduction of Drones to Militants: Changing Tactics of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)". Online. *RSDI*. March 30, 2026.

allows the TTP to achieve capacities that were previously exclusively the domain of states.

The security forces remain the primary target of the attacks.<sup>40</sup> The level of operational sophistication is best represented by complex attacks on military and police bases. For example, the suicide bombing attack near a security checkpoint in Bannu in May 2026 resulted in the death of 14 police officers.<sup>41</sup> Other examples include attacks on military convoys, such as the attack in North Waziristan in June 2025, which resulted in at least 13 deaths.<sup>42</sup> This demonstrates the TTP's complex technological capabilities.

### Information warfare and social and legal infrastructure

The propaganda of Umar Media (the TTP's main information platform) represents a de facto full-fledged Ministry of Information and one of the most advanced media platforms in the contemporary jihadist space.<sup>43</sup> Aside from news and magazines, Umar Media also systematically distributes AI-generated content, videos of operations, obituaries, and doctrinal podcasts across Telegram, X, and other social platforms.<sup>44</sup> The aim is to legitimize the insurgency, portray the Pakistani state as a corrupt and unjust, and maximize recruitment outreach.

The TTP, alongside military activities, also develops elements of so-called soft power by building social infrastructure in peripheral districts where state administration chronically fails. This is primarily achieved by operating parallel Islamic courts that provide swift justice, redistribute finances to locals, and issue legal opinions on specific topics.<sup>45</sup>

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<https://rsdi.ae/en/publications/introduction-of-drones-to-militants-changing-tactics-of-the-tehrik-i-taliban-pakistan-ttp>

<sup>40</sup> Counterterrorism Guide n.d. b). "Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) (as of April 2026)". Online. *Counterterrorism Guide*.

[https://www.dni.gov/nctc/terrorist\\_groups/ttp.html#:~:text=Since%202018%2C%20the%20group%20has,and%20IEDs%20to%20conduct%20attacks](https://www.dni.gov/nctc/terrorist_groups/ttp.html#:~:text=Since%202018%2C%20the%20group%20has,and%20IEDs%20to%20conduct%20attacks)

<sup>41</sup> KHAN, Riaz and Ahmed MUNIR. 2026. "Death toll rises to 14 in Pakistan suicide attack as Pakistani Taliban breakaway group claims responsibility". Online. *PBS News*. May 10, 2026. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/death-toll-rises-to-14-in-pakistan-suicide-attack-as-pakistani-taliban-breakaway-group-claims-responsibility>

<sup>42</sup> Al Jazeera. 2025. "At least 13 soldiers killed in suicide bombing in northwestern Pakistan". Online. *Al Jazeera*. June 28, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/6/28/at-least-13-soldiers-killed-in-suicide-bombing-in-northwestern-pakistan>

<sup>43</sup> BASIT, Abdul. 2025. "Evolution, expansion and diversification: Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan's Umar Media". Online. *Global Network on Extremism and technology*. September 15, 2025. <https://gnet-research.org/2025/09/15/evolution-expansion-and-diversification-tehreek-e-taliban-pakistans-umar-media/>

<sup>44</sup> BASIT, Abdul. 2025. "Evolution, expansion and diversification: Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan's Umar Media". Online. *Global Network on Extremism and technology*. September 15, 2025. <https://gnet-research.org/2025/09/15/evolution-expansion-and-diversification-tehreek-e-taliban-pakistans-umar-media/>

<sup>45</sup> BOONE, Jon. 2014. "Pakistan's parallel justice system proves Taliban are 'out-governing' the state". Online. *The Guardian*. June 16, 2014.

## Dynamics with other Islamic groups in the region

A crucial external factor in the current resilience of the TTP is its operational connection to the Afghan Taliban, to which the group has pledged allegiance. Despite public denials, the Afghan Taliban provides the TTP's fighters with shelter, training camps, and logistical bases across the Durand Line.<sup>46</sup> Both groups are connected by historical military solidarity, Pashtun identity, and ideology.<sup>47</sup> The TTP also maintains cooperative ties with Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and pragmatically coordinates actions with Baloch separatists in attacks on foreign and infrastructural targets.<sup>48,49</sup> By contrast, it maintains an openly hostile relationship with the Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISKP), which is considered its rival jihadist group.<sup>50</sup>

## Structural impacts and evaluation of the TTP's current state

The impacts of the TTP's campaign on Pakistan are devastating and cumulative. In 2025 alone, official Pakistani sources reported that the losses of security personnel amounted to 664 fatalities, with as many as 580 additional casualties among civilians.<sup>51</sup> Security and military expenditure consumes a massive portion of the state budget. For example, Pakistan's overall military budget in 2025 was approximately USD 11.9 billion.<sup>52</sup> The situation disrupts bilateral trade, reduces the volume of foreign direct investment, and leads to internal displacement of hundreds of thousands of civilians, with the latest example of such migration being more than 70,000 people fleeing the Tirah region.<sup>53</sup>

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/16/pakistan-parallel-justice-system-waziristan-taliban-outgoverning-state>

<sup>46</sup> PALMER, Alexander and Alexander MARGOLIS. 2026. "Why Did Pakistan Announce 'Open War' Against the Taliban?". Online. CS/S. February 27, 2026.

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/why-did-pakistan-announce-open-war-against-taliban>

<sup>47</sup> PALMER, Alexander and Alexander MARGOLIS. 2026. "Why Did Pakistan Announce 'Open War' Against the Taliban?". Online. CS/S. February 27, 2026.

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/why-did-pakistan-announce-open-war-against-taliban>

<sup>48</sup> GUL, Ayaz. 2024. "UN: Al-Qaida, Afghan Taliban Assist TTP With Attacks in Pakistan". Online. VOA. February 1, 2024. <https://www.voanews.com/a/un-al-qaida-afghan-taliban-assist-ttp-with-attacks-in-pakistan-/7466250.html>

<sup>49</sup> PATRO, Bantirani. 2023. "An Emerging Nexus between the TTP and Baloch militants". Online. *Indian council of world affairs*. October 23, 2023.

[https://www.icwa.in/show\\_content.php?lang=1&level=1&ls\\_id=10076&lid=6427](https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=1&ls_id=10076&lid=6427)

<sup>50</sup> KIDWAI, Saman Ayesha. 2022. Rivalry Between the Taliban and ISKP: The Collision of Terror. Online. *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, 78(4), 544–557. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09749284221127791>

<sup>51</sup> DAWN. 2025. "PICSS terms 2025 'deadliest' for militants in Pakistan with 2,115 fatalities". Online. DAWN. December 28, 2025. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1963742>

<sup>52</sup> Security Risk Monitor. 2026. "India Pakistan Defence Budgets Spike Post Operation Sindoor: SIPRI MILEX 2025". Online. Security Risk Monitor. April 27, 2026. <https://www.security-risks.com/post/india-pakistan-defence-budgets-spike-post-operation-sindoor-sipri-milex-2025>

<sup>53</sup> Al Jazeera. 2026. "Tens of thousands flee northwest Pakistan's Tirah over fears". Online. *Al Jazeera*. January 28, 2026. <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2026/1/28/tens-of-thousands-flee-northwest-pakistan-over-fears-of-military-operation>

Through the prism of Mao Zedong's theoretical framework of protracted war, the TTP is currently transitioning from strategic defense to initial strategic stalemate and can be considered a hybrid actor. The TTP does not possess forces capable of capturing Pakistan's state centers. However, its operational sophistication, widespread expansion, and tactical brutality sufficiently block Pakistan's ability to effectively govern its territories.

## Pakistan's counterinsurgency

Pakistan has engaged in a predominantly enemy-centric counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy, meaning its primary objective is defeating the enemy through military means, with less focus on civilians and their safety.<sup>54</sup> Since 2001, Pakistan has conducted approximately 22 major military operations in the disputed Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region. In 2025 alone, it conducted over 14,000 intelligence-based operations. Yet, the dissatisfaction among local civilians has risen due to the destruction of homes and forced displacement. The local government has also expressed its disapproval of any additional military operations in the region.<sup>55</sup>

The key problem lies in the inability to address the structural grievances within civil society that help sustain the insurgency<sup>56</sup> such as poor governance and economic and social marginalization of the region.<sup>57</sup> The military operations, combining the Pakistani Army, Air Force, Navy, and Police, were successful in eliminating insurgent sanctuaries in the past, such as Zarb-e-Azb (2014) or Radd-ul-Fasaad (2017).<sup>58</sup> However, the TTP was always able to regroup over time, pointing to the lack of population-centric COIN.

## Regional dynamics and foreign secondary actors

### Afghan Taliban and the Durand Line

The most influential state-level actor shaping the TTP's contemporary capacities is Afghanistan, specifically after the Afghan Taliban took over the country in August 2021. The takeover provided the TTP not only with ideological inspiration, but also with support across the Durand Line. This is a historically disputed Afghan-Pakistani border area, where predominantly Pashtun communities live.<sup>59</sup> Afghanistan officially denies supporting the TTP, but it is a documented fact that the support ranges from logistics

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<sup>54</sup> PAUL, Christopher et al. 2013. *Paths to Victory: Lessons from Modern Insurgencies*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.

<sup>55</sup> KHAN, Alamgir and Christian KAUNERT. 2026. "The TTP Challenge in Pakistan: Role of Legitimacy and Its Impact on Securitisation Process and Counterinsurgency Efforts". Online. *The Round Table*, March, 1–18. doi:10.1080/00358533.2026.2641030.

<sup>56</sup> KHAN, Alamgir and Christian KAUNERT. 2026. "The TTP Challenge in Pakistan: Role of Legitimacy and Its Impact on Securitisation Process and Counterinsurgency Efforts". Online. *The Round Table*, March, 1–18. doi:10.1080/00358533.2026.2641030.

<sup>57</sup> KHAN, Aamir. 2025. "The Assessment of Counter Insurgency Strategy Against TTP in Tribal Belt". *Journal of Social Sciences Review*, 5(1): 403–411. DOI: 10.62843/jssr.v5i1.501.

<sup>58</sup> WARRAICH, Saqib Khan, Muhammad Mumtaz Ali KHAN, and Imran ALAM. 2021. "Terrorism, Military Operations and Counterterrorism Strategies for Pakistan". *Journal of Politics and International Studies*, 7(1): 37–46. <http://jpis.pu.edu.pk/45/article/view/93>

<sup>59</sup> National Geographic. n.d. "The Durand Line". Online. *National Geography*. <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/durand-line/>

and financial support to military training.<sup>60</sup> Pakistan's reaction to this support has escalated from diplomatic protests to direct airstrikes on Afghanistan's territory. It culminated in February 2026, when Pakistan launched direct military strikes against Afghanistan, specifically the Taliban regime.<sup>61</sup>

## India

India plays a crucial role in the conflict dynamics, as Pakistan consistently accuses the country of being one of the main external sponsors of the TTP. The Pakistani government has repeatedly accused India's intelligence (RAW) of giving logistical and financial help to the TTP and to Baloch separatists.<sup>62</sup> India is a historical enemy of Pakistan and this alleged intervention plays a crucial part in the regional dynamics. Since the 2021 Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, India has built relations with the new government. In turn, Pakistan calls Afghanistan a proxy state of India, which aims to destabilize Pakistan.<sup>63</sup>

## China

China acts as one of the biggest investors in Pakistan through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is a flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative. Consequently, the TTP and other insurgent groups in the area have repeatedly targeted Chinese infrastructure and workers, as a means of halting the project.<sup>64</sup> Such repeated attacks resulted in significant pressure from China on Pakistan to strengthen its COIN strategy to protect Chinese interests. For this reason, China plays a pivotal role in Pakistan's COIN strategy, as it has economic interests there.

## Iran

Iran and Pakistan share a border area which is historically very problematic – Balochistan. It is an unstable and poor area where Baloch separatist groups operate transnationally. The airstrikes between Iran and Pakistan in January 2024 demonstrated how quickly cross-border militancy can escalate into an interstate

<sup>60</sup> PALMER, Alexander and Alexander MARGOLIS. 2026. "Why Did Pakistan Announce 'Open War' Against the Taliban?". Online. CS/S. February 27, 2026.

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/why-did-pakistan-announce-open-war-against-taliban>

<sup>61</sup> FONG, Clara. 2026. "Why Are the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan in an 'Open War'?" Online. *Council on Foreign Relations*. March 18, 2026. <https://www.cfr.org/articles/why-are-the-afghan-taliban-and-pakistan-in-an-open-war>

<sup>62</sup> KHETRAN, Mir Sherbaz. 2017. "Indian Interference in Balochistan: Analysing the Evidence and Implications for Pakistan". Online. *Strategic Studies*. October 16, 2017. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Indian-Interference-in-Balochistan%3A-Analysing-the-Khetran/888f00eba61a3dd6a8909b121349c822918d8563>

<sup>63</sup> SHANKAR, Priyanka. 2026. "Has India's influence in Afghanistan grown under the Taliban?". Online. *Al Jazeera*. February 27, 2026. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/2/27/has-indias-influence-in-afghanistan-grown-under-the-taliban>

<sup>64</sup> MANHAS, Neeraj Singh. 2025. "Amid Geopolitical Tensions, Baloch Militant Attacks Undermine Sino-Pakistan Projects". Online. *Jamestown*. July 30, 2025. <https://jamestown.org/amid-geopolitical-tensions-baloch-militant-attacks-undermine-sino-pakistan-projects/>

conflict.<sup>65</sup> Iran is not officially linked to the TTP, but the broader instability of the Balochistan region shapes the regional dynamics. This is reinforced by the TTP's pragmatic cooperation with Baloch fighters to fight Pakistan.

### Gulf states and the United States

The Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, are known to fund Deobandi networks in Pakistan, which form the ideological recruitment base of the TTP.<sup>66</sup> Support comes not only from the state but also from private sponsorship networks, which sustain the religious Deobandi infrastructure of the TTP. Therefore, Saudi Arabia also plays a key role in shaping the dynamics of the current situation.

The US withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021, resulting in significantly reduced COIN cooperation in the region. It left behind a substantial quantity of military equipment, which fell into the hands of various insurgent groups, one of them being the TTP. The US withdrawal from the region led to the strengthening of the TTP, allowing it to grow rapidly with the help of the Afghan Taliban.

## Alternative futures analysis

### Focus issue

The focus issue is derived from the research question: **How might the TTP's capacity and capabilities evolve in the near future?** To answer the question, we must first identify the key factors and driving forces to create a matrix of four alternative futures that explore the possible versions of the future development of the TTP's capacity and capabilities.

It is also necessary to understand the following scenarios as model hypotheses rather than predictions of the most likely future development. One of the reasons is that in such an asymmetric conflict environment, access to data for the chosen variables is limited. This method also deliberately simplifies a complex security environment into two most influential yet most unpredictable variables and explores their possible combinations. Other impactful variables are therefore excluded from the matrix but remain relevant as contextual or intervening factors.

### Key factors and driving forces

Afghan support for the TTP has been historically consistent and has become even more visible after the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan. It provides the TTP with logistical support, training, and sanctuaries. However, amidst the current geopolitical tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the future scale of support for the TTP may be uncertain. As explained by Galula, civilian support remains one of the key factors,<sup>67</sup> and even though the TTP has undergone internal changes, it can return to the old approach of targeting civilians, which could further reduce the civilian support.

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<sup>65</sup> IISS. 2024. "The tit-for-tat conflict between Iran and Pakistan". Online. IISS. <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2024/03/the-tit-for-tat-conflict-between-iran-and-pakistan/>

<sup>66</sup> AFZAL, Madiha. 2019. "Saudi Arabia's hold on Pakistan". Online. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/saudi-arabias-hold-on-pakistan/>

<sup>67</sup> GALULA, David. 2006. *Counterinsurgency Warfare: theory and practice*. Westport: Praeger Security International. ISBN: 0-275-99269-1.

The effectiveness of Pakistan's COIN is essentially shaped by the combination of approaches and by whether Pakistan continues to rely on kinetic operations or combines them with a population-centric approach. The TTP's internal cohesion refers to the stability that was achieved by Mehsud's leadership; the uncertainty is whether it can uphold it or return to the old practices. Finally, the TTP's cooperation with other militant actors plays a vital role in the conflict, ranging from its rivalry with ISKP to cooperation with AQIS or Baloch separatists.

### Generating axes

| Low point                                  | Factor                                        | High point                                                    |
|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Minimal / withheld                         | Afghan Taliban's external support for the TTP | Full / increased                                              |
| Minimal / withheld                         | Civilian support within the Pashtun region    | Full / increased                                              |
| Low / focus only on enemy-centric approach | Effectiveness of Pakistan's COIN              | High / combination with population-centric approach           |
| Low / return to civilian targeting         | TTP's internal cohesion                       | High / focus on military and state targets                    |
| Limited / focus on the rivalry with ISKP   | TTP's cooperation with other militant actors  | Active / further cooperation with AQIS and Baloch separatists |

Table 1. Axis end points

### The futures matrix

All five factors represent valuable variables that may influence the future development of the conflict. In accordance with the AFA logic, civilian and Afghan support were selected as the representative factors, as they demonstrate both high potential impact and uncertainty regarding future developments over the 2026–2031 horizon.

Civilian support was chosen because it plays a vital role in insurgency dynamics. Kilcullen argues that “insurgents cannot operate without the support – active, passive, or enforced – of the local population.”<sup>68</sup> The significance of this factor is further emphasized by the fact that securing civilian support is one of the core objectives of a successful COIN strategy, for example, cutting the ties between insurgents and the population, building intelligence networks within the contested population, or mobilizing it.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, securing population support becomes the primary objective for both

<sup>68</sup> KILCULLEN, David. 2010. *Counterinsurgency*. New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-973748-2.

<sup>69</sup> KILCULLEN, David. 2010. *Counterinsurgency*. New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-973748-2.

sides of the conflict, as it dictates intelligence flow, territorial control, and recruitment capabilities, among other operational factors.

External support was selected for similar reasons, as disrupting such backing is also a fundamental pillar of COIN operations. Assistance from neighboring states can be political, economic, ideological, territorial, or cultural, often based in ethnic ties. Furthermore, state actors may utilize insurgents as proxies to advance their own strategic objectives.<sup>70</sup> Such external backing provides insurgents with safe havens for regrouping, alongside critical financial and material resources, thereby substantially increasing their resilience and operational capacity.

Pakistan's COIN strategy was also evaluated as a highly consequential variable factor due to its direct interaction with both civilian and external support. However, it is considered to exhibit a lower degree of uncertainty. Historically, Pakistan has repeatedly relied on an enemy-centric approach focused on military operations. While Pakistan may adopt a population-centric approach in the future, the historical continuity makes the shift in COIN approach less likely.

The TTP's internal cohesion is another significant factor that is subject to high uncertainty. In contrast to various other insurgencies, such as those observed in Africa, the TTP promotes a robust, unifying core ideology. This ideological foundation successfully unites militant groups under the TTP umbrella, balancing organizational cohesion and operational autonomy.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, despite facing several setbacks following successful Pakistani military operations, the organization has consistently demonstrated the ability to regroup, largely due to its access to sanctuaries in Afghanistan.

The TTP's cooperation with other militant groups in the region exhibits a high degree of uncertainty. Mohammad Waqas Sajjad and Ahmed Jawad note that factions currently allied with the TTP may have their own approaches and may diverge from the broader TTP agenda since Noor Wali Mehsud took over the leadership.<sup>72</sup> Consequently, these inter-group relationships remain significantly more fragmented and volatile than the systematic support provided by the Afghan Taliban.

Following the comprehensive evaluation, civilian and external support were selected to construct the scenario axes, as these two variables combine particularly high potential impact with considerable uncertainty. The horizontal axis represents the degree of civilian support from the Pashtun region ranging from *minimal*, where civilians might become the primary targets of insurgents and cease to supply and support them, to *full*, where civilians support the activities of insurgents against the state. The vertical axis represents the level of Afghan Taliban support for the TTP, ranging from *minimal*, where Afghanistan ceases its support for the TTP due to external political pressure, to *full*, where Afghanistan continues its systematic support

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<sup>70</sup> RICH, Paul B. and Isabelle DUYVESTEYN. 2012. *The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*. New York: Routledge. ISBN 978-0-415-56733-6.

<sup>71</sup> SAJJAD, Mohammad Waqas and Ahmed JAWAD. 2026. "The Evolution of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP): Ideology, Strategy, and Aspirations". *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 10(1): 90–100. DOI: 10.19165/CBDL5433.

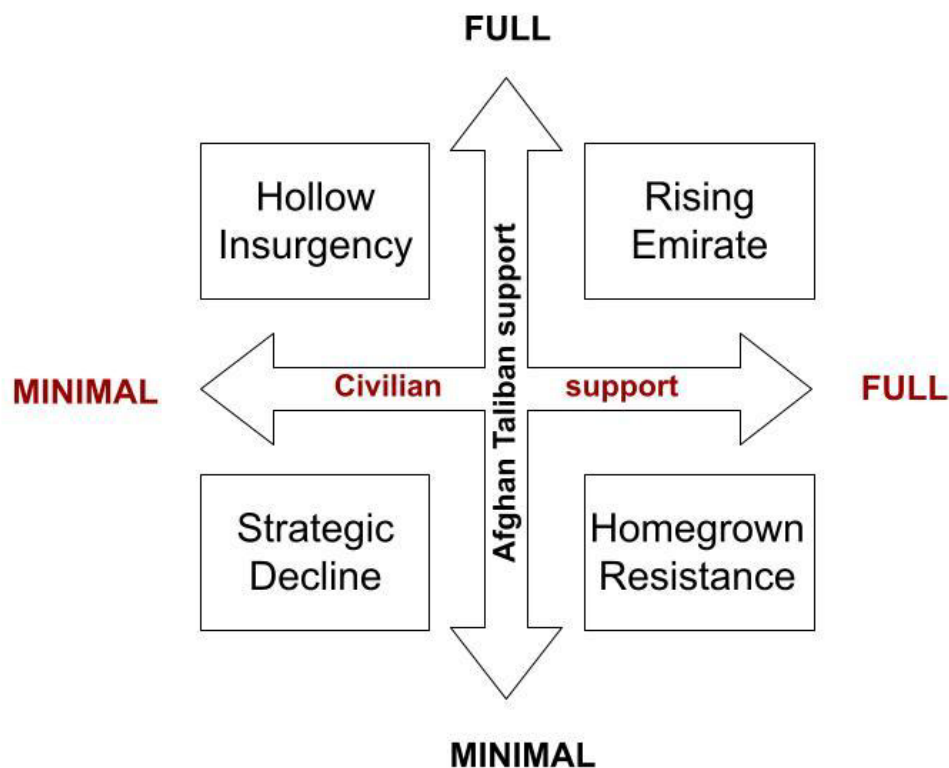
<sup>72</sup> SAJJAD, Mohammad Waqas and Ahmed JAWAD. 2026. "The Evolution of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP): Ideology, Strategy, and Aspirations". *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 10(1): 90–100. DOI: 10.19165/CBDL5433.

regardless of political pressure and/or as a result of Indian encouragement. These axes were crossed to create a matrix of four scenarios.

However, both factors are constrained by the limitations of the availability and reliability of data that could indicate the direction in which the alternative future is headed. Comprehensive surveys on civilian support from the Pashtun region are unavailable. Information on the TTP's capacity in the form of funding or external support, such as supplying weapons, may be unclear and difficult to verify due to the TTP's propaganda exaggerating the data.

The following section further explains the plausible futures that impact the TTP's capacity and capabilities over a medium-term horizon of 2026–2031. The time frame chosen provides sufficient time for the effects of the escalation between Afghanistan and Pakistan to develop. These effects may include civilian support, external assistance, Pakistan's COIN adaptation, or the reactions of other regional actors. Thus, the five-year horizon provides sufficient time for further development without extending the scenarios too far into the future.

Figure 1. Axes of possible future scenarios



### Scenario narratives

#### *Hollow Insurgency*

This scenario assumes that the TTP continues to receive substantial support from the Afghan Taliban while losing legitimacy and therefore support from civilians in the Pashtun region. These conditions still allow for the flow of logistics and access to sanctuaries and training facilities within the Afghan borders. However, the TTP would face a greater challenge of controlling the Pashtun territories, since gathering

intelligence from civilians, as well as securing their help with logistics and recruitment, would become significantly more difficult.

Afghanistan may still find greater motivation for supporting the TTP despite the escalation between Pakistan and Afghanistan in 2026. For example, Afghanistan, unlike Pakistan, has never recognized the Durand Line as an international border.<sup>73</sup> In this context, the TTP may be a tool of pressure on Pakistan to resolve the disputed border. In addition, with formal relations between Afghanistan and India being established, the Afghan Taliban may feel emboldened to continue its open support of the TTP.

At the same time, civilians in the Pashtun region may become more hostile toward the TTP's activities, particularly if the group returns to targeting civilians. In the context of the history of targeting civilians by the TTP and the possibility of this recurring, the bond between civilians and the TTP may become too eroded, leading to the insurgency losing its sustainability.

Indicators for such a scenario may include a change in rhetoric on Umar Media toward tribal leaders and local civilians, portraying them as collaborators of the enemy (state) and/or as communities that must be brought back to the right path according to the TTP's ideology. Such a shift could suggest an erosion of the TTP's legitimacy in the region. This could be the result of an increase in attacks against civilians. At the same time, there could be evidence of cross-border activity between Pakistan and Afghanistan, suggesting that the TTP continues to profit from the Afghan support.

#### *Practical implications of Hollow Insurgency*

This scenario demands a complete shift in Pakistan's COIN strategy to prioritize the protection of civilians and exploitation of the conflict between the local population and the TTP to strengthen human intelligence (HUMINT). Security and intelligence forces would have to focus on the activities on the Durand Line to disrupt the flow of external support from the Afghan Taliban. Regionally, the continued Afghan support despite Pakistani pressure would likely result in prolonged diplomatic hostilities and cross-border military actions, maintaining a highly destabilized border environment.

#### *Strategic Decline*

This scenario assumes a simultaneous decline in Afghan Taliban support as well as in the TTP's legitimacy among civilians in the Pashtun region. In this scenario, the escalation between Afghanistan and Pakistan could become unsustainable because of the rising political, military, and economic costs. In addition, external pressure from actors with significant economic interests in Pakistan, such as China, might also persuade Afghanistan to rescind its support for the TTP by withholding or significantly reducing its material and training assistance and restricting the TTP's freedom of movement on Afghan territory.

Like the Hollow Insurgency scenario, Strategic Decline assumes civilians could also become more antagonized by the insurgents' actions. This could be the result of the TTP's activities, such as increased coercion, taxation, or the rise in the number of

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<sup>73</sup> KAURA, Vinay. 2016. "The Durand Line Dispute". *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 77(1): 117–126. ISSN-0019-5510.

attacks on civilians. Assuming civilians would lose the motivation to further support the militant group, the TTP could lose access to intelligence, recruits, and other resources.

This scenario further assumes that even if the TTP lost some of its capacity and influence in the Pashtun region, the group would not fully vanish. Rather, as in the past, it could rebuild lost resources, recruit new members, or link with other militant groups in the area over time. This assumption draws on historical experience, when Afghanistan provided sanctuaries for the group to regain power. This could later turn into a frozen conflict over a disputed area, with escalating violence over an extended period.

Indicators may include political or military restrictions imposed by Afghanistan on the TTP, as well as decreased cross-border activity. The intensity and complexity of the TTP's attacks against Pakistan's military or infrastructure targets could decrease. On the other hand, the civilian cooperation with Pakistan and disputes between the TTP and the Pashtun locals could increase.

### *Practical implications of Strategic Decline*

This scenario presents a critical window of opportunity for Pakistan to transition from an enemy-centric to a population-centric COIN strategy. The primary focus would be on local policing, justice, and addressing structural grievances rather than conducting large-scale military operations. Security and intelligence forces must focus on monitoring splinter factions and preventing the remnants of the TTP from merging with other actors, such as AQIS. Regionally, decreased activity of the TTP would provide a more stable environment for economic projects like the CPEC and temporarily ease geopolitical tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

### *Homegrown Resistance*

This scenario assumes a decline in Afghanistan's support for the TTP while the strong local civilian support in the Pashtun region is retained. Under these conditions, the TTP could become externally vulnerable, while retaining a strong base and legitimacy in the disputed region with a steady supply of resources, intelligence, and recruits.

Due to external political pressure, Afghanistan may limit cross-border movement, access to training facilities, weapons supplies, and other assistance. Therefore, the TTP could become more vulnerable. However, if the structural problems remain unaddressed, the situation may allow the TTP to develop into a population-embedded insurgency model. This scenario would correspond to the first phase of Mao Zedong's insurgency framework. With limited external support, the TTP would focus on building political infrastructure, mobilizing the rural population, and creating safe zones. The paradox of the withdrawal of Afghan support is that it could produce a more resilient insurgency in the long term that would not rely on external actors. At the same time, the outcome would also depend on other factors, such as relations with other militant actors, the effectiveness of Pakistan's COIN strategy, and the TTP's internal cohesion.

Possible indicators of this scenario may include political or military restrictions imposed by Afghanistan on the TTP, as well as decreased cross-border activity, as in the Strategic Decline scenario. We could also observe a decline in more sophisticated

operations by the TTP, due to the lack of logistical support from Afghanistan. At the same time, a growing emphasis on the Pashtun identity, local grievances, and calls for defense against the government of Pakistan may be observed on Umar Media. To cope with the decline in external support, the TTP could also raise taxes.

### *Practical implications of Homegrown Resistance*

This scenario shows that the enemy-centric COIN approach by Pakistan would become highly counterproductive, because it would further anger the Pashtun population and strengthen the TTP's local legitimacy. Security and intelligence forces would have to urgently adopt a comprehensive population-centric approach, with a focus on political integration and psychological operations to break the insurgents' local support base. Intelligence gathering would be severely degraded due to a lack of civilian cooperation. Regionally, the smaller role of Afghanistan might ease border tensions, even as internal instability reaches critical levels.

### *Rising Emirate*

This scenario assumes a simultaneous increase in external support from Afghanistan and in local civilian support in the Pashtun region. These conditions could allow the TTP to expand its recruitment, resources, intelligence networks, and overall legitimacy and political control over the Pashtun region. With this stable external and local support, the TTP could conduct more sophisticated operations against Pakistan, posing a greater threat. At the same time, the TTP could become more embedded in the region and take on the role of a legitimate actor where state control is weak.

In such a scenario, there is a risk of moving into the third phase of insurgency, as explained by Mao Zedong. This type of insurgency could allow the TTP to gain enough capacity through the external support of the Afghan Taliban and the political legitimacy gained by elevated levels of support among civilians. The TTP could then initiate offensive conventional-like operations against the government and become an existential threat to the survival of the state. The development would also rely on other influential factors, such as the TTP's internal cohesion, the effectiveness of Pakistan's COIN measures, or international response from other powerful regional actors, like China. This scenario does not imply the path toward the destruction of Pakistan, but rather a possible strategic stalemate.

Some indicators may include the prevailing structural grievances that would continue to remain unaddressed by the government due to the lack of a population-centric approach toward COIN. As a reaction, the TTP could shift its rhetoric toward governance and present the militant group as a legitimate alternative to the state. At the same time, we could observe an increase in attacks against military and political targets and more frequent cross-border movement. The TTP's territorial expansion throughout the whole former tribal belt could also be another indicator.

### *Practical implications of Rising Emirate*

This scenario would result in severe implications for Pakistan's COIN strategy. It signals the failure of the current COIN models and would necessitate a potential transition to conventional military engagements to prevent the TTP from capturing key administrative centers. Security and intelligence forces would face highly sophisticated

hybrid operations, requiring a shift toward advanced technological surveillance as local ground networks would be fully compromised. Regionally, the situation would be extremely unstable, likely triggering political intervention or heavy pressure from regional stakeholders. This would include especially China and India, which would seek to protect their strategic interests in a rapidly deteriorating security environment.

## **Evaluation**

The alternative futures are built upon unpredictable factors. The chosen factors – Afghan Taliban's support and civilian support for the TTP – are uncertain in the near future. The TTP would lose civilian support only if it changed its approach and began conducting systematic attacks on civilians. As shown above, losing civilian support could significantly weaken the TTP's insurgency in the future. On the other hand, Afghanistan's reduction of support could lead to the strengthening of the TTP in the Pashtun region – but only if civilian support remained.

Therefore, the most dangerous scenarios for Pakistan are Homegrown Resistance and Rising Emirate, where civilian support is present in both and could strengthen the legitimacy of the TTP, further embedding it in the regional political and security structures.

## **Conclusion**

This paper focused on the TTP, specifically on its current state, the complex regional dynamics, and how the situation may evolve over the medium-term horizon of 2026–2031. The analysis showed that since its restructuring under Mehsud's leadership in 2018 and after the Taliban's 2021 takeover in Afghanistan, the TTP has consolidated into a hybrid actor with growing operational sophistication, expanded recruitment, advanced propaganda via Umar Media, and parallel governance structures. From the perspective of Mao's theory, it is transitioning from strategic defense to strategic stalemate, thus being able to attack Pakistani government structures and civilians effectively and consistently, undermining the state's legitimacy.

Pakistan's enemy-centric COIN can destroy the TTP's military assets, but it fails to find a solution to the country's structural problems, specifically those affecting civilians. At the same time, the TTP operates within a broader regional environment where its operational capabilities are shaped by Afghanistan's assistance, cooperation with other militant actors, and the strategic responses from other regional states.

Utilizing Alternative Futures Analysis, this study generated four scenarios – Hollow Insurgency, Strategic Decline, Homegrown Resistance, and Rising Emirate – based on two critical uncertainties: the extent of external Afghan support and the level of local civilian backing. These variables were selected because they combine a high potential impact on the TTP's capabilities with a significant degree of uncertainty. Consequently, these scenarios must be treated as hypothetical models rather than definitive predictions, while they do not imply that these are the only operative factors shaping future developments.

Based on the analysis of these scenarios, civilian support appears to function as a highly influential variable shaping the TTP's ability to recruit, gather intelligence, control territory, and establish political legitimacy. However, its ultimate impact depends on the combination of other influential inputs, such as external support.

Similarly, backing from the Afghan Taliban has been shown to be crucial for the TTP's operational capabilities, providing sanctuaries, training facilities, and material or financial resources. Nevertheless, external assistance alone could not fully compensate for a complete loss of local civilian support. The most severe scenario for Pakistan would be one combining sufficient external resources with a durable local support base, enabling the TTP to expand its political and military influence and become an exceedingly difficult actor for the state to contain.

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