Terrorism's Persistence in the Newly Merged Districts (NMDs): An Examination of Inter-Group Militant Cooperation and Rivalries

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Abstract

Following US withdrawal and Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, the militant landscape of Pakistan's Newly Merged Districts (NMDs) has been in a constant flux. As it evolves, the old militant groups are reviving, while the new ones are also emerging. Three broad trends underpin the evolution of the NMDs' militant landscape: decentralized organizational structures of terrorist groups have been replaced with centralized ones, divisions and splintering have given way to mergers and alliances, and globalized and regionalized militant narratives, barring the Islamic State of Khorasan, have been replaced with localized ones. Against this backdrop, this article has used the framework of inter-group terrorist cooperation and rivalries to unpack the persistence of terrorism in the NMDs. Consistent with the inter-group cooperation and rivalries of terrorist groups, the fraternal and antagonistic ties of terrorist groups in the NMDs are positively linked to terrorism's persistence and endurance in the region.

Keywords: NMDs, Terrorism, Cooperation, Rivalry, Persistence.

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1. Introduction

After a five-year lull (2015-2019), terrorism resurged in the Newly Merged Districts (NMDs) in 2020 and has steadily increased since Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)'s and Hafiz Gul Bahadur (HGB)'s revival.[1] The Taliban's return to power had a rejuvenating impact on the Pakistani militant groups, providing them with a triumphant narrative and sanctuaries in Afghanistan. According to open-source data, terrorism has surged by 73 percent in Pakistan since the Taliban' return, and the NMDs remain the most-affected area.[2]

Put differently, terrorism in the NMDs persisted despite a brief lull, and the absence of violence was confused with the restoration of peace.[3] Erroneously, it was assumed that the Afghanistan-Pakistan border fencing, US withdrawal and Taliban's return to power will neutralize major militant networks in the NMDs.[4] However, the opposite happened and these factors, among others, revived the militant networks. In fact, the militant networks in their current incarnation are far more lethal than their previous iterations.[5] At any rate, the NMDs are in throes of a new and more lethal phase of militancy with no end in sight. Against this backdrop, this article has examined the existing trends of militancy in the NMDs

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[1] Zahid Hussain, "The Frontiers of Conflict," *Dawn,* April 27, 2022, https://www.dawn.com/news/1687057.

[2] "Terror attacks increased by 73 percent in Pakistan since Taliban takeover," *Pak Institute for Peace Studies*, May 31, 2023, https://www.pakpips.com/article/7646.

[3] The decline in terrorist attacks is a poor indicator of security's improvement. It is misleading, instills a false security and can result in complacency of counterterrorism forces as witnessed in the NMDs between 2015 and 2019.

[4] Hussain Haqqani, "Pakistan's Pyrrhic Victory in Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs*, July 22, 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-07-22/pakistans-pyrrhic-victory-afghanistan.

[5] Haq Nawaz Khan and Rick Noack, "Taliban success emboldens Pakistani militants, and deadly attacks surge," *Washington Post*, November 10, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/11/10/taliban-pakistan-afghanistan-ttp/.

and the factors which have sustained them. Concerning militancy in the NMDs,[6] three main discourses are found in the policy discourse and academic literature. The most dominant theme is fragile state's ungoverned spaces which serve as safe havens for terrorist groups.[7] From this view, the NMDs, then referred to as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, were stereotyped as "the most dangerous place on earth",[8] "Ground Zero of Terrorism"[9] and the "epicentre of global terrorism,"[10] etc. Such a reductionist approach over-simplistically reduced the NMDs to a terrorism blackhole.

Likewise, the dichotomous centre-periphery relations are the second most dominant theme in the context of militancy's persistence in the NMDs. Until September 11, 2001 attacks, the NMDs remained semi-autonomous with highly porous border.[11] After the US invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan Army moved its troops in the NMDs to man the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.[12] Concurrently, the military also launched operations to catch on the run Taliban and Al-Qaeda elements who shifted to North and South Waziristan tribal districts.[13] At the same time, the US initiated its drone campaign to decapitate militant leaders in the

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[6] This study will use terrorism and militancy interchangeably to refer to attacks from groups like TTP,HGB, Lashkar-e-Islam (LI), the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK), Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP), among others.

[7] At that time, fragile states were referred to as failed states.

[8] Shuja Nawaz, "A Most Dangerous Place: Meeting the Challenge of Militancy and Terror in FATA," *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, January 2, 2009; Imtiaz Gul, *The Most Dangerous Place: Pakistan's Lawless Frontier* (Penguin Books Limited, 2010).

[9] Rohan Gunaratna and Khuram Iqbal, *Pakistan: Terrorism Ground Zero* (Reaktion Books, 2011).

[10] Rohan Gunaratna and Anders Nielsen, "Al Qaeda in the Tribal Areas of Pakistan and Beyond," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31, no. 9 (2008): 775-807, DOI:10.1080/10576100802291568.

[11] Shahzad Akhtar, "Explaining Rebellion in a Weak State: A Case Study of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)," (PhD Thesis, The University of Auckland, 2016), https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/handle/2292/30460.

[12] Shuja Nawaz, "The Pakistan Army and its Role in FATA," *CTC Sentinel* 2, no. 1 (2009), https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Vol2Iss1-Art7.pdf.

[13] Syed Adnan Ali Shah Bukhari, "The threat of talibanisation of Pakistan: A case study of federally administered tribal areas (FATA) and the north west frontier province (NWFP)," (PhD Thesis, Nanyang Technological University, 2015), https://dr.ntu.edu.sg/handle/10356/65418.

NMDs, such as Nek Muhammad, etc.[14] Taken together manning of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, along with kinetic operations and US drone strikes created strong resentments in the Pakhtun tribes. Such sporadic rebellions with strong overdose of Pakhtun tribalism and Political Islam set the stage for the rise of militancy in the region.[15]

The third most common theme in literature in the context of militancy in the NMDs is intersection of geo-politics and geo-strategy. Afghanistan, and the NMDs by extension, have been the battlegrounds for the Old and New Great Games,[16] the Cold Wars' final phase (or the Afghan-Russia war) and the War on Terror.[17] Geography has never been kind to the NMDs. Combined, the tyranny of geography and the geo-political upheavals involving great powers have never allowed the NMDs to witness peace. The spillover of militant violence in Afghanistan created like-minded militant groups,[18] such as Tehreek Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi (TNSM) and TTP, in the NMDs. Critically, this stream of literature also discusses Pakistan's alleged use of the NMDs as a staging ground for its geopolitical interests in Afghanistan, especially during the Afghan Jihad, and beyond, necessitating the recruitment, training and hosting of militant groups in the region.[19] In sum, geography, major wars and the use of the NMDs as a springboard for proxy wars fostered a culture of militancy, which continues to date in different shapes and forms.

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[14] Ziauddin Najam, "Military Operations by the Pakistan Army in FATA: The War Within," in *Evolving Dynamics of FATA: Reflections on Transformations*, eds., Noel I. Khokhar, Manzoor Ahmed Abbasi, and Ghani Jafar (Islamabad: National Defence University, 2014), 135-148.

[15] Akbar S. Ahmad, *The Thistle and The Drone: How America's War on Terror Became a Global War on Tribal Islam* (Vanguard Books, 2003).

[16] Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, "The New Great Game in Afghanistan and Pakistan," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 1 (January 3, 2009): 36-40.

[17] Khan Faqir, Bilal Haider and Sumbal Jameel, "Geneses, Causes, and Ramification of Militancy in FATA in the Post 9/11 Scenario," *Global Political Review* 2, no. 1 (2017): 61-71.

[18] Mohammad Zaher Shah and Razia Sultana, "Afghan Factor in the Rise of Militancy in FATA," *FWU Journal of Social Sciences* 11, no. 1 (2017): 72-81.

[19] A. Z. Hilali, "FATA: The Strategic Depth of Pakistan," *Margalla Papers* (2010): 18-50.

Such explanations still hold relevance and are useful in putting together several pieces of the puzzle of militancy's persistence in the NMDs. However, some scholars paint the NMDs as a passive recipient of wars and geopolitical developments and undermine its agency. They overlook the region's unique history, tribal dynamics and politics. More importantly, the NMDs as obvious from the nomenclature have been merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.[20] Also, the US has withdrawn from Afghanistan, and it has lost its geopolitical eminence in the US strategic calculus. Hence, the space for more localized explanations is open to forward a vernacular explanation of militancy's persistence. This article seeks to fill this gap.

While exploring local causes of militancy, the article seeks to unpack why militancy persists in the NMDs and how terrorists' inter-group alliances and rivalries have added to its longevity? To this end, the inter-group cooperation and rivalries among terrorist groups in the NMDs offer a useful framework.[21] The terrorists' cooperation-rivalry framework assists in situating the existing trend of militancy in the region in recent (localized) developments, such as the Afghanistan-Pakistan border fencing, the region's merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. Paradoxically, the inter-group cooperation and rivalries of terrorist groups are positively linked to their endurance. The article posits that after the US exit and Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, opposing on-ground kinetic operations, the Afghanistan-

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[20] Sohail Ahmad, *The FATA merger with Khyber–Pakhtunkhwa: Governance Challenges and Development Opportunities* (London: Routledge, 2020), 21.
[21] Abdul Basit and Zahid Shahab Ahmed, "The persistence of terrorism in Pakistan: An analysis ofdomestic and regional factors," in *Terrorism, Security and Development in South Asia*, eds., M. Raymon Izarali and Dalbir Ahlawat (London, Routledge, 2021), 157-174.

Pakistan border fencing,[22] NMDs incorporation into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa,[23] along with an armed-struggle for an Islamic Emirate-like theocracy in Pakistan under Taliban's patronage has actively sustained militancy in the region.[24]

Adopting a deductive approach, this article uses primary and secondary sources to explain militant cooperation and rivalries. The pledges of allegiances secured by TTP, HGB and ISK from other militant factions, their joint attacks and the ISK-TTP ideological battle are adequately explained by this framework. To triangulate open-source information and fill some empirical gaps, the author has relied on expert interviews. It bears mention that most of the studies using terrorists' inter-group cooperation and rivalries are quantitative and rely on big-N data. However, this article has adopted a qualitative approach due to difficulties of obtaining reliable, primary data on militant groups operating in the NMDs. Also, the sample size for this study is too narrow. In total, it has studied four groups, namely TTP, HGB, ISK, and LeI. The Taliban's influence on these groups as a patron or rival has also been factored in (See Appendix 1).

Nevertheless, despite a narrow sample size, the framework is still useful to unpack the existing trends of militancy in the region and arrive at some preliminary findings. In future, researchers can pick up some of the themes discussed in this study and do more in-depth quantitative research. Still, the article has used a numerical criterion to select militant groups for examining their rivalries and cooperation. For instance, the average age of the main groups examined is eight years or above, and they have carried out large-scale attacks,

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[22] Abubakar Siddique and Majeed Babar, "Pakistani Taliban Attempts Land Grab To Boost Insurgency Against Islamabad," *Radio Free Europe*, September 16, 2023, https://www.rferl.org/a/pakistani-taliban-land-grab-insurgency-islamabad/32595679.html.
[23] Pazir Gul, "TTP refuses to budge from demand for Fata merger reversal," *Express Tribune*, June 30, 2022, https://www.dawn.com/news/1697452.
[24] Anwar Iqbal, "TTP wants to push govt out of KP to establish Sharia," *Dawn*, March 1, 2023, https://www.dawn.com/news/1739661.

including suicide terrorism. Similarly, they have a base in the NMDs, and the average size of the group is around 1,000 fighters or above.

Furthermore, the paper focuses on inter-group cooperation and rivalries and avoid intra-groups partnerships and antagonism. Hence, the ongoing disagreements between TTP and its rebel faction Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA), as well as any other intra-group animosities, fall outside of its preview.[25] Though ISK comprises breakaway TTP factions, over the years, ISK has evolved further with the inclusion of Afghans and Central Asian militants.[26] So, while ISK is a TTP splinter, due to its evolution in subsequent years, it has been treated as an independent group. At the same time, though Taliban regime is an outside group to the NMDs, but given its pronounced influence on TTP and HGB as well as its rivalry with ISK, omitting it will amount to ignoring the elephant in the room.[27]

The terrorists' inter-group cooperation rivalry framework is useful for understanding the current and emerging dynamics of militancy in the NMDs. Given the fact that this framework has not been applied to study militancy in the NMDs before, makes it a pioneering work on the subject. However, this study has three key limitations. First, though it is helpful in advancing an explanation of terrorism's persistence, it does not say much about its future trajectory or the impact of cooperation and rivalries on terrorist groups' strategic objectives. Second, the emerging alliances are in their incipient phase, and it is difficult to

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[25] Brian Carter, Kathryn Tyson and Peter Mills, "Salafi-Jihadi Movement Weekly Update," *Institute for the Study of War,* September 7, 2023, https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/salafi-jihadi-movement-weekly-update-september-7-2023.
[26] Lucas Webber & Riccardo Valle, "The Islamic State's Central Asian Contingents and Their International Threat," The Hudson Institute, October 16, 2023, https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/islamic-states-central-asian-contingents-their-international-threat.
[27] Asfandyar Mir, "After the Taliban's Takeover: Pakistan's TTP problem," *United States Institute of Peace*, January 19, 2022, https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/01/after-talibans-takeover-pakistans-ttp-problem.

give a definitive verdict while such patterns have not fully crystallized. Third, the intra-group interactions shape inter-group dynamics, and vice versa, so overlooking the intra-group intricacies simplifies a complex problem. However, it must be acknowledged that this is a structural compulsion that the framework imposes by default. Spanning over three sections, the first part of this article examines the NMDs' militant landscape, followed by an explanation of terrorists' inter-group alliance and rivalry framework, and finally applies this framework on the militant animosities and partnerships in the NMDs.

2. The NMDs: A Landscape in Flux

Terrorist groups do not operate in a vacuum; hence, the NMDs' existing landscape has to be situated in recent geopolitical changes in the region and their after-effects.[28] Likewise, inter-group relations, whether congenial or antagonistic, among different terrorist groups are not carved in stone. They are very dynamic and evolve across time and space. In the NMDs, a plethora of groups operate in close proximity trying to recruit, mobilize funds, compete for influence and resources.[29] Hence, the NMDs' threat landscape is in a flux where old groups, such as TTP and HGB are reviving and new ones like TJP are emerging.[30]

The NMDs' militant landscape is complex and multi-actor, engendering a competitive operational environment. In this volatile and fluid environment,

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[28] Abubakar Siddique, "Collision Course: Will the Afghan Taliban Choose Pakistan or The Pakistani Taliban?" *Radio Free Europe*, November 28, 2023, https://www.rferl.org/a/afghan-taliban-pakistani- taliban-choice-allies/32703521.html.
[29] Abdul Basit and Zahid Shahab Ahmed, "The persistence of terrorism in Pakistan: An analysis of domestic and regional factors."
[30] Iftikhar Firdous, "Does Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP) Actually Exist?" *The Khorasan Diary,* April 29, 2023, https://thekhorasandiary.com/en/2023/04/29/does-tehreek-e-jihad-pakistan-actually-exist.

various militant groups operating in and out of the NMDs have split, merged, re-split and re-merged.[31]Therefore, various militant groups in the NMDs (except ISK) can be viewed as a movement of loose networks, individuals and groups that adhere to a common ideology and engage in a dynamic relationship.

The present landscape is underpinned by four main trends, i) decentralized organizational structure of militant groups have been replaced with centralized ones, ii) divisions and splintering have given way to mergers and unifications, iii) globalized and regionalized ideological narratives have weakened in the face of growing localization of goals and objectives, and iv) reliance on violence has been matched with robust propaganda or information warfare.[32] These changes point to a generational shift in militant groups from old school to new school. The Gen-Z of militants is politically more astute, strategically smarter and more tech-savvy compared to its predecessors.[33]

Since the Taliban's returned to power in Afghanistan, TTP has been focused on re-absorbing its splinter factions back into its fold. TTP's current chief Nur Wali Mehsud has maintained strict organizational discipline through a code of conduct and built bridges with other like-minded militant groups.[34] This is why TTP has not only re-absorbed its splinter factions, but is also negotiating a possible merger with HGB and Lashkar- e-Islam (LeI). Similarly, the increased focus on localization is a direct outcome of the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan

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[31] Abdul Basit and Zahid Shahab Ahmed, "The persistence of terrorism in Pakistan: An analysis of domestic and regional factors."

[32] Farhan Zahid (Counter Terrorism Scholar), Interview by the Author, March 5, 2024.

[33] Iftikhar Firdous and Ihsanullah Tipu Mehsud, "Creeping Ideology; The 'Generation-Z' Freelancers of the ISKP," *The Khorasan Diary,* August 31, 2023, https://thekhorasandiary.com/en/2023/08/31/tkd-exclusive-creeping-ideology-the-generation-z-freelancers-of-the-iskp.

[34] Amira Jadoon and Sara Mahmood, "Fixing the Cracks in the Pakistani Taliban's Foundation: TTP's Leadership Returns to the Mehsud Tribe," *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 11 (December 2018): 21-25, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/CTC-SENTINEL-122018.pdf.

that the creation of a Sharia state with strategic patience and perseverance is achievable. TTP's discriminate targeting strategy of hitting hard targets and avoiding soft targets is also a lesson learnt from Taliban's insurgency.[35] Similarly, the reconstitution of a hierarchical structure, despite a devolved spread of TTP's network, is an imitation of the Taliban's organizational framework. In sum, the current landscape is qualitatively different from its previous iterations and poses a long-term threat to Pakistan's internal security which can be best understood throughterrorist groups' inter-organizational cooperation and rivalries.[36]

3. Terrorists' Inter-Group Cooperation and Rivalries

Terrorists' inter-group cooperation and rivalry add to their longevity and lethality. Multi-actor threat landscapes where alliances and antagonism occur are dynamic and volatile. Resultantly, they evolve at a rapid pace, making counterterrorism a difficult task.

4. Inter-Group Cooperation

Typically, it is counterintuitive to assume that terrorist groups, as clandestine organizations and norm-violators, will enter into alliances with each other. Generally, cooperation or alliances occur between states, require guarantors as enforcers and are secured through formal agreements. On the contrary, terrorist groups operate at the informal level, so even if they reach an understanding, the lack of credible enforcing mechanisms makes compliance a

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[35] Shahzad Akhtar & Zahid Shahab Ahmed, "Understanding the resurgence of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan," *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 16, no. 3 (2023): 285-306.
[36] Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, "The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan After the Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover," *CTC Sentinel* 16, no. 5 (May 2023):1-12, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/CTC-SENTINEL-052023.pdf.

tall order.[37] Hence, terrorist groups risk a lot by getting into alliances. For instance, they can be infiltrated by hostile intelligence agencies. Likewise, in alliances terrorists have to give up their organizational freedom and operational autonomy and abide by the parameters of the coalition framework. Yet, terrorist alliances are common place and take several shapes.[38]

Terrorist alliance can be defined as "joint or complementary actions for the same (intermediate) purpose." Terrorist coalitions are like "investments, they require resources for their creation, over time they depreciate and require maintenance that is not cost-free."[39] Terrorist groups ally to add value to their relationship, gather resources, balance external threats whether from a rival terrorist group or an adversarial state,[40] expand their lifespans (survive), gain lethality and extend their areas of operation by pooling resources.

As in any cooperative relationship, "terrorist alliances occur when benefits outweigh the costs incurred."[41] Cooperation helps terrorist groups in overcoming mobilization challenges, assist in attacks through collaboration and resource aggregation, all of which boost their reliability. The greater the number of alliances, the larger the lifespan and lethality.[42]

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[37] Tricia Bacon, *Why Terrorist Groups Form International Alliances* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 51.
[38] Tricia Bacon, *Why Terrorist Groups Form International Alliances.*
[39] Terrorists cooperate when it is to their mutual benefit, especially when they carry out attacks that one group could not carry out on its own.
[40] Navin A. Bapat and Kanisha D. Bond, "Alliances between Militant Groups," *British Journal of Political Science* 42, no. 4 (March, 2012): 793 – 824.
[41] Victor H. Asal, Hyun Hee Park, R. Karl Rethemeyer & Gary Ackerman, "With Friends Like These …Why Terrorist Organizations Ally," *International Public Management Journal* 19, no. 1, (2016): 1-30, https://doi.org/10.1080/10967494.2015.1027431.
[42] Brian J. Phillips, "Enemies with benefits? Violent rivalry and terrorist group longevity," *Journal of Peace Research* 52, no. 1 (2015):62-75.

Terrorist alliances are asymmetric and involve unequal relationships.[43] Usually, small groups seek alliances with larger (successful) groups to forestall competition and increase their own stakes among their peers by association with the successful group.[44] Networked terrorist groups with large sizes that carry out high-profile attacks, such as suicide bombings, more frequently are most sought-after alliance partners.[45] They have the spare resources (people, resources, knowledge, training, etc.) to invest in relationships and capable of weathering counterterrorism pressures. The more activity a terrorist group generates, the more connections it is likely to make.[46]

Conditions and Characteristics of Cooperation

A host of pre-existing environmental conditions makes inter-group cooperation of terrorist outfits more likely, and thus facilitate the alliance formation process.[47] The groups involved in a cooperative relationship must share the same ideology, such as jihadism or ethno-separatism.[48]

Likewise, characteristics of the country where terrorist groups operate in is a key determinant of the form of cooperative relationships terrorist groups forge.[49] Proximity breeds cooperation: closer the location, higher the chances of cooperation.[50] Terrorist organizations in the same country have more options to

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[43] Brian J. Phillips, "Enemies with benefits?"
[44] Brian J. Phillips, "Enemies with benefits?"
[45] Among the terrorist groups, violence is considered the main marker of success because it takes skills, knowledge and resources. The more attacks a group carries out, the more attention it grabs, draw funds and recruits as compared to less active groups.
[46] Victor H. Asal, et. Al., "With Friends Like These ...Why Terrorist Organizations Ally."
[47] Terrorist alliances in this study refer to inter-organisational cooperation and leave out intra-organisational alliance patterns.
[48] Victor Asa, Brian J. Phillips and R. Karl Rethemeyer, *Insurgent Terrorism: Intergroup Relationships and the Killings of Civilians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022): 169-171.
[49] Victor Asa, Brian J. Phillips and R. Karl Rethemeyer, *Insurgent Terrorism*, p. 158.
[50] Victor Asa, Brian J. Phillips and R. Karl Rethemeyer, *Insurgent Terrorism*, p. 164.

cooperate and coordinate, including direct communication.[51] Hence, their "home base" should be the same, or, at least, they should be in the same region with permissible operational environment where it is easy for them to interact. Permissible operational environment offers sanctuaries which provide terrorist groups with a conducive atmosphere to develop trust and form lasting relationships.[52]

In similar vein, the allying groups' conception of an ideal polity should be identical, and they should be working towards the same end goals.[53] Moreover, for alliances to work, terrorist groups should have a common enemy and similar threat perceptions. Finally, terrorist organizations having the same patron are more likely to forge alliances. The same patron is likely to nudge like-minded groups working towards the same goal against a common enemy towards making an alliance for better coordination and greater impact on the battlefield.[54]

Forms of Terrorist Cooperation

Terrorist alliances are asymmetric or unequal relationship where smaller groups seek cooperative ties with the larger groups. Broadly, inter-organizational relations between terrorist groups span a spectrum ranging from high-end to low-end cooperation.[55] The high-end cooperation includes mergers through pledges of allegiances and strategic partnerships, while the low-end cooperation involves tactical and transactional dealings.[56] Trust is a key component in facilitating

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[51] Victor Asa, Brian J. Phillips and R. Karl Rethemeyer, *Insurgent Terrorism*, p. 165.
[52] Victor Asa, Brian J. Phillips and R. Karl Rethemeyer, *Insurgent Terrorism*, p. 158.
[53] Emily Kalah Gade, Michael Gabby, Zane Kelly and Mohammed M. Hafez, "Networks of Cooperation: Rebel Alliances in Fragmented Civil Wars," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63, no. 9 (February, 2019): 2071-2097, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002719826234.
[54] Emily Kalah Gade, Michael Gabby, Zane Kelly and Mohammed M. Hafez, "Networks of Cooperation," p. 175
[55] Assaf Moghadam, "Terrorist Affiliations in Context: A Typology of Terrorist Inter-Group Cooperation," *CTC Sentinel* 8, no. 3 (March 2015): 22-24, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/CTCSentinel-Vol8Issue318.pdf.
[56] Assaf Moghadam, "Terrorist Affiliations in Context."

high-end and low-end ties among terrorist groups. Groups which have greater trust bond forge high-end cooperation, while those with low trust engage in low-end interactions.[57] High-end cooperation is more enduring than low-end cooperation, and vice versa.[58]

High-end Cooperation

In high-end cooperation, trust level between terrorist groups is very high, the duration of partnerships is long-lasting, and it takes two shapes: mergers and strategic alliances. According to Moghadam, in mergers, the most complete type of cooperation, a smaller group is fully absorbed, barring some exceptions, into the larger group by pledging an oath of allegiance.[59] Merging groups in essence shed their independence while creating a new entity whose roles are binding for all entities. In this form of cooperation, the smaller group surrenders its logo, ideological narrative, finances, command and control and fighters and adopt those of the larger group.[60] Such ties span the full spectrum of cooperative activities, ideological, logistical and rarely operational as well.[61]

The second form of high-end cooperation is strategic alliances where partner groups share know-how, skills, resources and facilities. They are also based on high trust but limited in scope as compared to mergers. Strategic partnerships are also long-lasting and based on shared sense of ideological affinity and common goals.[62] However, in a strategic relationship both allies retain their operational autonomy, organizational independence and ownership

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[57] Tricia Bacon, *Why Terrorist Groups Form International Alliances,* p. 51.
[58] Sedef A. Topal, "Pathways to Cooperation: A Relational Theory of Rebel Alliance Formation," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (2024), https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027241232955.
[59] Sedef A. Topal, "Pathways to Cooperation: A Relational Theory of Rebel Alliance Formation," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (2024), https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027241232955.
[60] Assaf Moghadam, Nex*us of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors* (NewYork: Columbia University Press, 2017), 108.
[61] Assaf Moghadam, Nex*us of Global Jihad.*
[62] Assaf Moghadam, Nex*us of Global Jihad,* p. 109.

of their resources. They cooperate with each other on a range of activities, including logistical, operational and tactical. If strategic ties exist for an extended period, they can morph into mergers as well.[63]

Low-end Cooperation

Low-end cooperation involves limited partnerships on specific issues at the tactical and transactional levels and the trust level is very low. Furthermore, low-end cooperation comprises loose, and informal ties and the parties involved retain their independence. Such ties are not very long-lasting where pragmatism and opportunism prevails over ideological affinity.[64]

Based on on-off cooperation, tactical alliances comprise select areas of mutual interests, such as joint attacks, trainings or cohabitation. Such cooperation can also result in coalitions between ideologically dissimilar groups to survive adverse circumstances or put up a joint front against a common enemy without high expectation.[65] In civil war and insurgencies, it is common for ideologically incompatible groups to establish marriages of convenience on overlapping transitory benefits.[66]

Transactional ties are like barter trade where one group cooperates in return for cooperation from the other side. Located at the bottom of the spectrum, transactional partnerships are the lowest form of material and ideological cooperation.[67] Transactional ties could be regular or on-off limited cooperation on one aspect of a single domain, such as a joint attack, provisions of weapons or extension of any other favour. Transactional ties could also involve contractual

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[63] Assaf Moghadam, Nex*us of Global Jihad.*
[64] Assaf Moghadam, "Terrorist Affiliations in Context," 23.
[65] Assaf Moghadam, "Terrorist Affiliations in Context," 24.
[66] Assaf Moghadam, "Terrorist Affiliations in Context."
[67] Assaf Moghadam, "Terrorist Affiliations in Context."

obligations of regular supplies of specific goods or services in return for another good or service by the other partner.[68]

5. Inter-Group Rivalries

As mentioned, inter-group rivalries are also positively linked to terrorist groups' resilience and lethality, but their occurrence is not as frequent as inter-group cooperation.[69] At any rate, terrorist groups are byproducts of chaos and conflicts; adversity is a way of life for them. Moreover, if the adversity plays out in the form of rivalry, it gives terrorist groups more reasons to be competitive. They not only survive in challenging circumstances but excel through resilience and adaptation.[70]

Rivalries compel terrorist groups to learn new skills, innovate and improve their propaganda, recruitment and fundraising techniques.[71] In a hostile operational environment, only the most competitive and resilient survive and excel, while others perish. A terrorist group's size and age are directly proportional to its rivalry with others.[72] The larger a group in size and the longer it lives in a multi-actor competitive environment, greater the chances of its antagonism with others.[73] Larger groups, due to their size and extra resources, tend to encroach into territories of other groups to increase their control, resulting in enmities.[74]

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[68] Assaf Moghadam, "Terrorist Affiliations in Context."
[69] Victor Asa, Brian J. Phillips and R. Karl Rethemeyer, *Insurgent Terrorism*, 195.
[70] Brian J. Phillips, "Enemies with benefits?"
[71] Assaf Moghadam, Nex*us of Global Jihad,* 24.
[72] Joseph K. Young and Laura Dugan, "Survival of the Fittest: Why Terrorist Groups Endure," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 2 (April, 2014): 1-23.
[73] Victor H. Asal, Hyun Hee Park, R. Karl Rethemeyer & Gary Ackerman, "With Friends Like These ...Why Terrorist Organizations Ally."
[74] Victor H. Asal, Hyun Hee Park, R. Karl Rethemeyer & Gary Ackerman, "With Friends Like These ...Why Terrorist Organizations Ally."

In rivalries, terrorist groups try to undermine each other's ideological legitimacy, and outsmart each other through outbidding violence.[75] It bears mention that in outbidding violence, competing terrorist groups carryout large scale attack rather than engaging in one-on-one clashes. Also, they try to influence the broader militant movement instead of government or local public.[76]

Finally, adversity also comes in the form of heavy-handed counterterrorism operations, which reinforces terrorist groups "internal cohesion."[77] It is like jujitsu politics where counterterrorism measures inspire more support for terrorist groups from their core constituents: "outgroups threats produce in-group solidarity and cohesion."[78]

6. Inter-Group Alliances and Rivalries in the NMDs

Inter-Group alliances and rivalries of terrorist groups in the NMDs extend beyond the region to Afghanistan and other parts of Pakistan as well. This is consistent with framework's parameters, i.e., the groups coalescing or competing should be based in the same "home base" or operate in the same region.[79]

7. Cooperation

Strategic Cooperation: Mergers

The most frequent high-end cooperation between terrorist groups in the NMDs is mergers where they are engaging in full-spectrum collaboration. The mergers between jihadist groups are publicly announced from official platforms

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[75] Brian J. Phillips, "Terrorist Group Rivalries and Alliances: Testing Competing Explanations." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 19 (August, 2019): 997-1019.
[76] Brian J. Phillips, "Terrorist Group Rivalries and Alliances."
[77] Brian J. Phillips, "Enemies with benefits? Violent rivalry and terrorist group longevity."
[78] Brian J. Phillips, "Enemies with benefits? Violent rivalry and terrorist group longevity."
[79] Victor Asa, Brian J. Phillips and R. Karl Rethemeyer, *Insurgent Terrorism.*

through oaths of allegiances, which refer to "declaration of a loyalty and unconditional obedience to a leader upon joining the group under him. It is a form initiation rite for a person who is accepted into or has agreed to join the group."[80]

Ahead of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, TTP's chief Nur Wali Mehsud renewed his group's oath of fealty to the Taliban's Supreme Leader Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada to continue living under his regime's protection umbrella in Afghanistan.[81] The Taliban-TTP close ideological affinity, apart from ethnic and battlefield associations, has been instrumental in reviving militancy in the NMDs.[82] The Taliban have refused Pakistani demands of withdrawing support from TTP, expel it from the Afghan territory or disarm it.[83] The Taliban's support system to TTP through the oath of allegiance, among several other factors, has allowed TTP to be offensive in its militant posture in the NMDs.[84]

Likewise, since July 2020 TTP has secured oaths of allegiances from more

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[80] Muhammad Haniff Hassan, "An Analysis of Bai`ah Al-Mawt (Pledge of Death) in Jihadist Groups' Practice and Islamic Tradition," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 14, no. 3 (June, 2022): 24-30.

[81] Thomas Joscelyn, "Pakistani Taliban's emir renews allegiance to Afghan Taliban," *FDD's Long War Journal*, August 19, 2021, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2021/08/pakistani-talibans-emir-renews-allegiance-to-afghan-taliban.php.

[82] Abdul Basit, "Ties that Bind? Deconstructing the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban's Partnership and Counter-Terrorism Options for Pakistan," *James Town Foundation,* February 8, 2022, https://jamestown.org/program/ties-that-bind-deconstructing-the-afghan-and-pakistani-talibans-partnership-and-counter-terrorism-options-for-pakistan/.

[83] "TTP a matter Pakistan must take up, not Afghanistan: Taliban spokesman," *Geo News*, August 28, 2021, https://www.geo.tv/latest/367651-ttp-a-matter-pakistan-must-take-up-not-afghanistan-taliban- spokesman.

[84] TTP's NMD-centric demands from Pakistan to enter a political settlement are the reversals of region's merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Afghanistan-Pakistan border's fencing as well implementation of Shariah in the area. For details, see "TTP-Pakistan peace talks: The pitfalls and their implications," *Observer Research Foundation*, August 18, 2022, https://www.orfonline.org/expert- speak/ttp-pakistan-peace-talks

than 44 militant groups across Pakistan.[85] The average size of a group joining TTP is between 20-30 fighters, while the larger ones can be as big as 50-100 fighters. The allegiance and absorption of these militant groups into TTP has added to its operational strength and expanded its geographical reach beyond the NMDs. It corroborates the alliance-making frameworks' observation, i.e., the more a group is allied, the more lethal and resilient it becomes.[86]

Since taking TTP's charge in 2018, Nur Wali has focused on two things, a) bringing organizational discipline in the group through a code of conduct and unification of jihadist factions.[87] In the first phase, he succeeded in winning back loyalties of several TTP splinter factions, such as Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA) and the Shehryar Mehsud faction, among others.[88] In the second phase, the allegiances came from militant factions from other groups, such as Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-continent (AQIS) and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ). Two factions of AQIS have joined TTP, while LeJ's Qari Khushi Muhammad group has also become part of the group.[89] The greater interest of several jihadist factions to join TTP is consistent with the observation that larger groups which frequently carry out attacks are most sought-after partners for alliance-making. Presently, TTP's negotiations are in advanced stage with HGB and LeI groups to join it officially.[90] This pattern also confirms that if terrorist groups share a common

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[85] Farhan Zahid, Interview.

[86] Abdul Sayed, "Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan's Latest Merger Enables Renewed Attacks in Pakistan,"*James Town Foundation*, August 13, 2021, https://jamestown.org/program/tehreek-e-taliban- pakistans-latest-merger-enables-renewed-attacks-in-pakistan/.

[87] Amira Jadoon and Sara Mahmood, "Fixing the Cracks in the Pakistani Taliban's Foundation: TTP's Leadership Returns to the Mehsud Tribe."

[88] "New militant group joins TTP," *Express Tribune*, December 23, 2022, https://tribune.com.pk/story/2392466/new-militant-group-joins-ttp.

[89] Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, "The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan After the Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover."

[90] "The merger between two major organisations of the Pakistani Taliban is currently being discussed," *The Khorasan Diary,* February 28, 2024, https://x.com/khorasandiary/status/1762735976269459559?s=20/.

patron, enemy, goal and ideology, they are most likely to ally and merge.[91]

ISK is the only group in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region which has gone against the prevalent norm by challenging the Taliban's hegemony and successfully carved out a place for itself. Despite the hostility shown by the Taliban and their affiliates, ISK has shown resilience by leveraging its alliances with like-minded militant groups in the region. ISK became the Islamic State's (IS) official affiliate in the Khorasan region in early 2015.[92] It primarily comprised of breakaway factions and disgruntled elements of TTP, including the Orakzai chapter. Later, TTP's Bajaur faction under Qari Abu Bakar also pledged its oath of fealty to ISK.[93] Across time and space, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), whose one faction later retracted, LeJ and Jandullah also joined ISK.[94] By challenging the Taliban's monopoly over the Afghan-Pak's jihadist landscape, ISK positioned itself as an anti-Taliban and anti-Shia group.[95] It allowed ISK to win over loyalties of anti-Shia outfits like LeJ and Jandullah. Over the years, in the face of Taliban's ruthless ground offensive, ISK has survived and regenerated itself by capitalizing on the alliances it has forged, which added to its resilience. On a limited scale, some jihadist factions in North Waziristan tribal district have pledged their oaths of allegiances to HGB group as well.[96]

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[91] The Taliban's patronage of these groups in Afghanistan has been pivotal in their alliances and mergers.

[92] "Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K): Backgrounder," *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, November 9, 2018, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/181113_ISK_Backgrounder.pdf?LgtpuuPVxjdGU6g_idQlIH4cI1ILgZ0t.

[93] Abdul Basit, "IS Penetration in Afghanistan-Pakistan: Assessment, Impact and Implications," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 3 (June, 2017): 19-30.

[94] Abdul Basit, "IS Penetration in Afghanistan-Pakistan"

[95] Amira Jadoon, "Allied and Lethal: The Islamic State of Khorasan's Network and Organizational Capacity in Afghanistan and Pakistan," *CTC West Point* (December, 2018): 50-58.

[96] "Multiple militant commanders hailing from different areas of tribal districts have pledged allegiance to North Waziristan based militant group, Hafiz Gul bahadur (HGB) and merged with HGB," *Khyber Scoop,* March 8, 2024, https://twitter.com/KhyberScoop.

Logistical and Operational Cooperation: Joint Attacks and Material Assistance

The most prevalent forms of logistical and operational cooperation in the NMDs have been joint attacks and temporary material assistance. For instance, soon after its emergence ISK relied heavily on JuA, at that time the group did not rejoin TTP, LeJ, Jandullah and LeI for joint attacks and material support to maintain its lethality, influence and boost its global image, while the smaller groups received funds. ISK's collaboration with LeJ and JuA accounted for 72 percent of deaths and 84 percent of all injuries attributed to its attacks in Pakistan between 2014 and 2018.[97]

In some instances, ISK provided finances and suicide bombers for terrorist attacks, while logistical support was arranged by JuA and LeJ in the NMDs and Balochistan, respectively. Though it is hard to find primary evidence for such informal forms of cooperation, circumstantial evidence helps in connecting the dots. For example, following ISK's emergence in 2015, JuA indirectly praised the group and signalled willingness to cooperate. In a statement about IS[K], JuA noted in 2015, "We respect them. If they ask for help, we will look into it and decide."[98]

JuA's opportunistic behaviour is in sharp contrast to TTP's emphatic rejection of IS founding leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi in a 60-page statement and subsequently renewing the pledge of allegiance to the Taliban to dispel the impression that after Bajaur and Orakzai factions' defections, the whole group has joined ISK.[99] During this period, JuA was in secret negotiations with IS to appoint its leader Omar Khalid Khorasani as the Emir of its Hind Wilayat (South

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[97] Amira Jadoon, "Allied and Lethal: The Islamic State of Khorasan's Network and Organizational Capacity in Afghanistan and Pakistan," p.6.
[98] Amira Jadoon, "Allied and Lethal"
[99] Thomas Joscelyn, "Pakistani Taliban rejects Islamic State's self-professed caliphate," *FDD's Long War Journal*, May 27, 2015.

Asian branch).[100] Given JuA's larger size and superior operational capability, it refused to pledge allegiance and subordinate itself to Hafiz Saeed Khan's much smaller faction.[101] During this period, according to the Global Terrorism Database, there are at least nine attacks which have been jointly claimed by JuA and ISK, including the 13 July 2017 attack against police in Quetta.[102] Eventually the negotiations collapsed and JuA was reabsorbed into TTP.

Likewise, LeI's operational partnership with ISK is also an interesting case of inter-group logistical cooperation in the NMDs and adjoining areas (read eastern Afghanistan's Nangarhar province). At one time, LeI was ISK's implementing partner in Nangarhar.[103] After being ousted from Khyber tribal district, LeI relocated to Nangarhar where it co-existed with ISK after concluding a power sharing agreement. By entering into a power sharing agreement, LeI, already suffering from the Pakistan Army's counterterrorism offensive, forestalled any move by ISK to destroy it. In return, LeI through its influence over smuggling networks helped ISK to move resources between Nangarhar and Orakzai base of ISK.[104] Both groups also cooperated in suppressing local militias in Afghanistan's Achin district, using suicide bombers. It is the only example of a joint attack by both groups. This short-lived tactical and operational relationship was based on a pragmatic approach where both had a transitory overlapping interest: survival. Later, the relationship soured as ISK tried to encroach into LeI's mineral-rich forested areas in Achin district, resulting in

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[100] Iftikhar Firdous (Editor, Khorasan Diary), Interview by the Author, March 6, 2024.
[101] Iftikhar Firdous, Interview.
[102] As quoted in Amira Jadoon, "Allied and Lethal: The Islamic State of Khorasan's Network and Organizational Capacity in Afghanistan and Pakistan."
[103] Khuram Iqbal, "Evolving Wave of Terrorism and Emergence of Daesh in Pakistan," in *Countering Daesh Extremism: European and Asian Responses* (Singapore: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2016), 61-72.
[104] Khuram Iqbal, "Evolving Wave of Terrorism"

clashes.[105]

Since the Taliban's return to power, TTP and HGB have also come closer in the operational domain. At the time of TTP's formation in 2007, Hafiz Gul Bahadur left TTP after remaining part of it for a brief period as its deputy head.[106] HGB group was focused on assisting the Taliban in Afghanistan and was opposed to violent attacks in Pakistan. He struck a peace agreement in 2007 which lasted until Operation Zarb-e-Azb in 2015 in North Waziristan.[107] Following its ouster from North Waziristan, HGB group moved to Afghanistan but kept its focus on fighting the US troops in Afghanistan. Following the US withdrawal and the Taliban's return to power, it has now shifted its focus on fighting the Pakistani troops in the NMDs for a Taliban-like Sharia state in Pakistan. In recent years, TTP and HGB have carried out 12 joint attacks in the NMDs and adjoining areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.[108] As mentioned, both groups are also negotiating a possible merger of HGB group into TTP. Taken together, similar ideological goals, similar "home base", a common enemy and the Taliban's patronage have shaped logistical and operational cooperation between the two groups while there are strong indicators that it will eventually morph into a long-term strategic relationship.[109]

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[105] Casey Garret Johnson, "The Rise and Fall of the Islamic State in Afghanistan," *United States Institute of Peace* November 2016, 4, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR395-The-Rise-and-Stall-of-the-Islamic-State-in-Afghanistan.pdf.

[106] Charlie Szrom, "The Survivalist of North Waziristan: Hafiz Gul Bahadur Biography and Analysis," *Critical Threats,* August 6, 2009, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/the-survivalist-of-north- waziristan-hafiz-gul-bahadur-biography-and-analysis.

[107] Fakhar Kakakhel and Umar Farooq, "Pakistan's war and loss of hope for those displaced," *Al-Jazeera*, June 15, 2015, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2015/6/15/pakistans-war-and-loss-of-hope-for-those-displaced.

[108] Iftikhar Firdous, Interview.

[109] Multiple militant commanders hailing from different areas of tribal districts have pledged allegiance to North Waziristan based militant group, Hafiz Gul bahadur (HGB) and merged with HGB," *Khyber Scoop.* March 2, 2024, https://x.com/KhyberScoop/status/1765988977729810744?s=20.

8. Rivalries

Inter-group rivalries in the NMDs are not as frequent as inter-group cooperation. Nonetheless, the rivalry patterns conform to the conceptual framework of antagonistic ties between the jihadist groups, allowing them to endure through adaptation, innovation and by learning new skills. While the Taliban-ISK rivalry has generally played out in Afghanistan but given the latter's existence closer to the NMDs, it has spilled over into this area as well. Meanwhile, the ISK-TTP enmity falls in the grey-zone where both groups have kept their ideological differences alive without escalating them further.

ISK-Taliban Antagonism

ISK has carved out a niche presence by going against the prevalent norm of subordinating to the Taliban's ideological supremacy in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. It is the only group which has successfully challenged the Taliban's ideological and operational dominance on its own turf.[110] In doing so, ISK has taken existential risks, but it has survived by innovating, adapting to hostile environments, learning new skills and leveraging ties with other like-minded groups, discussed above.[111]

For instance, after losing territorial control in the Nangarhar province, ISK devolved its organisational structure from a hierarchical-centralized framework

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[110] Hollie McKay, "The rivalry between Taliban and ISIS: what it means for Afghanistan," *The New York Post*, August 27, 2021, https://nypost.com/2021/08/27/the-complex-rivalry-between-taliban-and-isis/.

[111] Abdul Sayed, "Why Islamic State Khurasan Poses an Indigenous Threat to the Afghan Taliban," *George Washington University*, May 9, 2022, https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/ISK-Poses-Indigenous-Threat-to-Taliban_Sayed_May-2022.pdf.

to a decentralised-horizontal model.[112] Furthermore, it changed its focus from holding and capturing territory to carrying out largescale urban attacks. During this period, the Taliban were negotiating with the US and after concluding the Doha Agreement 2020, paused their attacks against the foreign troops in Afghanistan's main cities. Exploiting this vacuum, ISK quickly moved in by carrying out largescale attacks in Kabul and claimed monopoly over urban terrorism in Afghanistan.[113] At the same time, ISK relentlessly targeted the Taliban through its propaganda accusing them of giving up "jihad" and entering into a deal with the "devil." Through largescale urban attacks and anti-Taliban propaganda, ISK portrayed itself as the true transnational jihadist group in the region.[114]

Following the Taliban's takeover, ISK further sharpened its anti-Talban propaganda along with escalating attacks against the Taliban fighters and commanders.[115] Through these operational and tactical adjustments, ISK hoped to lure disgruntled elements of the Taliban, TTP and Al-Qaeda. After the Taliban's ruthless ground offensive, ISK relocated its manpower to the NMDs where it is fighting a battle of survival and relevance. In the NMDs, ISK has launched a concerted campaign of targeted assassination and attacks against Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Fazal (JUI-F), especially in Bajaur. In sum, ISK's

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[112] Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines, "Broken, but Not Defeated: An Examination of State-led Operations against Islamic State Khorasan in Afghanistan and Pakistan (2015-2018)," *Combatting Terrorism Centre* (2020): 13.

[113] Ihsanullah Omarkhail and Liu Guozhu, "The trajectory of Islamic State Khorasan Province and Afghan Taliban rivalry," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* (2023), https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2023.2288450.

[114] Riccardo Valle, "Islamic State in Khorasan Province Counters Taliban with Formidable Media and Propaganda Offensive," *James Town Foundation*, December 16, 2021, https://jamestown.org/program/islamic-state-in-khorasan-province-counters-taliban-with-formidable-media-and-propaganda-offensive/.

[115] Fazelminallah Qazizai and Chris Sands, "Faith and Vengeance: the Islamic State's War in Afghanistan," *New Line Magazine*, August 1, 2022, https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/faith-and-vengeance-the-islamic-states-war-in-afghanistan/.

continuous adaptation in the face of evolving hostile environment has allowed it to survive and regenerate itself.[116]

The main innovation that has allowed ISK to endure in a competitive and antagonistic environment is the duality of its organisational structure. ISK has an inner layer of core elite comprising foreigners which is hidden and plans overseas attacks.[117] Then, it has an outer layer which consists of local and regional fighters and is engaged in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Taliban's offensive has damaged the outer layer, but the highly mobile inner layer has stayed intact.[118] This is the reason why ISK's external attack capability increased (instead of decreasing) despite losing territory. The possession of territory or safe havens are pivotal in planning and executing overseas operations. Groups like Al-Shabab, Al-Qaeda, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and IS which carried out overseas attacks had a stable sanctuary. ISK is the only exception to this rule due to its organisational duality.[119]

Lastly, ISK's robust propaganda capabilities and sharp social media acumen has not only allowed it to stay relevant but ahead of its rival groups as well. Through its slick propaganda, ISK has changed the entire complexion of how terrorist group recruit, propagandise and fundraise in the Afghan-Pak region. By leveraging its social media propaganda, ISK has reached out to educated segments of urban middle and upper middle-class. Combined, ISK's adaptation to changing environment, organisational flexibility, narrative adjustments and sharp social media propaganda has helped it endure and expand.

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[116] Fazelminallah Qazizai and Chris Sands, "Faith and Vengeance."
[117] Aaron Y. Zelin, "ISKP Goes Global: External Operations from Afghanistan," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, September 11, 2023, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iskp-goes-global-external-operations-afghanistan.
[118] Aaron Y. Zelin, "ISKP Goes Global."
[119] Aaron Y. Zelin, "ISKP Goes Global."

ISK-TTP Soft Rivalry

Keeping in view that ISK's first incarnation comprised TTP's Orakzai and Bajaur factions, their rivalry should have been sharp and lethal. As mentioned, TTP denounced IS founder Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in a 60-page fatwa and renewed its oath of allegiance to the Taliban, so as to distance itself from ISK.[120] However, the ISK-TTP rivalry is far from that and falls in the grey-zone.[121]

TTP and ISK have not only avoided attacking each other or engaging in outbidding violence, but they have also somewhat desisted from propaganda battle as well. Interestingly, ISK refers to TTP's top leaders in its publications as "deviants" or "apostates", but its tone towards the group's militants is less harsh and more accommodative.[122] ISK refers to them as "fighters" instead of "mujahideen."[123] The group's accommodative tone is akin to leaving the door ajar for TTP fighters to join ISK.[124]

Similarly, in the operational domain, ISK and TTP have co-existed in Afghanistan and the NMDs as well. In 2023, following ISK's attacks against JUI-F leaders and workers in Bajaur, TTP indirectly criticised it,[125] which the latter retaliated against.[126] However, this rare instance of propaganda skirmishes

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[120] Thomas Joscelyn, "Pakistani Taliban rejects Islamic State's self-professed caliphate."

[121] Abdul Basit Khan, "The counterinsurgency implications of the diplomacy between Pakistan's many militant groups," *Arab News,* March 29, 2023, https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2277706.

[122] Abdul Basit Khan, "The Counterinsurgency Implications."

[123] "ISKP's Al-Azaim media has recently released a new video where they showcased their propaganda against JUI (F)," *Khyber Scoop*, August 18, 2023, https://x.com/KhyberScoop/status/1692536303567384592?s=20.

[124] "ISKP's Al-Azaim media," *Khyber Scoop.*

[125] "TTP has released a new condolence video over the suicide attack that occurred at the JUI-F workers' convention in Bajaur District," *Khyber Scoop*, August 5, 2023, https://twitter.com/KhyberScoop.

[126] ISK's propaganda arm, Al-Azaim Foundation criticised TTP for its comments on the Bajaur attack against JUIF's workers convention and the subsequent video where TTP commanders condemned it. The video concludes by urging TTP to unite with ISKP.

did not spill over into the operational domain. ISK ridiculed TTP for being beholden to the Taliban.[127] However, soon afterwards both sides de-escalated this information warfare immediately.

ISK has found the NMDs as more welcoming and permissible as compared to the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. ISK and TTP have kept their rivalry in manageable limits by not stepping on each other's ties out of pragmatic reasons of surviving and not allowing the Pakistani State to benefit from this inter-group jihadist rivalry.[128]

9. Conclusion

The examination of the inter-group cooperation and rivalries in the NMDs offers policy-relevant and deep insights into evolution of its militant landscape. As the old groups are reviving, they are exploring avenues to enhance and strengthen their cooperation based on shared strategic interests, common ideology, enemy and their proximity. Evidently, the terrorist groups in the NMDs have matured and grown smarter strategically, operationally and tactically. By virtue of that, they are far more dangerous as opposed to their previous iterations. Barring some exceptions, such as the TTP-ISK rivalry, the patterns on inter-group cooperation and rivalry in the NMDs largely conform to the framework, i.e. both cooperation and rivalry are positively linked to resilience and longevity of terrorist groups. More importantly, the availability of a permissible environment in Afghanistan under the Taliban's protection will be the glue that will hold the alliances intact to the detriment of Pakistan's internal security.

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[127] ISK's propaganda arm, Al-Azaim Foundation criticised TTP for its comments on the Bajaur attack against JUIF's workers convention and the subsequent video where TTP commanders condemned it. The video concludes by urging TTP to unite with ISKP.
[128] Farhan Zahid, Interview.

Pakistani policy makers will have to work out ways to rupture these alliances to weaken the terrorist groups in the NMDs.

TTP's ability to secure oaths of allegiances from more than 44 militant groups and factions confirms that large-size groups which frequently carry out high-profile attacks are most sought-after alliance partners. The HGB group has not attracted as many groups or not even half of what TTP has lured into its organisational fold. Likewise, ISK's continuous adaptation in the face of an ever-evolving hostile environment and rivalry with the Taliban has sharpened its ability to learn new skills and innovate to endure.

Finally, the analysis shows that given recent geopolitical developments in the region, the NMDs' militant landscape is at an inflection point where decentralisation is giving way to centralisation, divisions have been replaced with alliances and mergers and regional and global narratives have weakened in the face of rising local militant narratives and agendas. The Pakistani security experts will have to understand current lay of the land before devising a new counterterrorism strategy. As the efficacy of kinetic means has declined in providing a decisive strategic advantage to nation-states against their (asymmetric) adversaries, investing in non-kinetic measures is extremely crucial for stemming over the tide of militancy in the NMDs.

Appendix 1

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan	
Formed	December 2007
Ideology	Pro-Taliban, anti-Pakistan, Deobandi, Islamic Emirate in Pakistan
Strength	12,000-15,000
Area of operation	NMDs and Afghanistan
Patron	Taliban
Leader	Mufti Nur Wali Mehsud

Lashkar-e-Islam	
Formed	2004
Ideology	Deobandi
Strength	1,000-1,500
Area of operation	Khyber district and Nangarhar, Afghanistan
Patron	--
Leader	

Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group	
Formed	2006
Ideology	Pro-Taliban, anti-Pakistan, Islamic Emirate in Pakistan
Strength	3,000-4,000
Area of operation	North Waziristan
Patron	Taliban

Leader	Hafiz Gul Bahadur

The Islamic State of Khorasan	
Formed	January 2015
Ideology	Pro-IS, Caliphate, Transnational Jihadism
Strength	2,500-3,000
Area of operation	Cell structures in Afghanistan and Pakistan
Patron	Islamic State
Leader	Sanaullah Ghaffari aka Shabab al-Muhajir