

SIPEG POLICY BRIEF II

AUGUST 2026

PAKISTAN'S CHANGING SECURITY PARADIGM

National Security, Governance and Counterterrorism

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SHAFQAT INSTITUTE FOR PAKISTAN AND EMERGING GEOPOLITICS

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1,139 Terrorism deaths in Pakistan, 2025	#1 Pakistan's rank on the 2026 Global Terrorism Index	\$150bn+ Estimated economic cost since 2001	64% Of the population is under age 30
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief argues that Pakistan's security paradigm is entering a new phase. Going forward, the country's security will not depend on military predominance over terrorist organizations alone. It will depend on building institutions that can prevent extremism before it escalates, coordinate across federal, provincial and local levels, and earn public confidence in the state. Counterterrorism, in other words, is not just a security or intelligence function; it is a national governance challenge that calls for coherent leadership, institutional resilience, sustained political commitment, and a prevention architecture the provinces genuinely own, and are not merely asked to implement.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

01	Pakistan's security paradigm is entering a new phase, from managing threats to preventing them.
02	Military operations have weakened terrorist networks, but cannot by themselves fix weak institutions, unemployment, or governance gaps.
03	The National Security Policy (2022–2026) broadens the definition of security, but offers little operational guidance on implementation (see Table 2).
04	The 2024 National Prevention of Violent Extremism (NPVE) Policy gives Pakistan a prevention framework on paper, but it remains poorly synergized with the NSP and under-resourced at the provincial level.
05	Governance is the missing link: institutional resilience, not just military strength, determines long-term security.
06	The brief proposes six strategic priorities for moving from security management to security governance, including a whole-of-society prevention architecture (see Tables 3 and 4).

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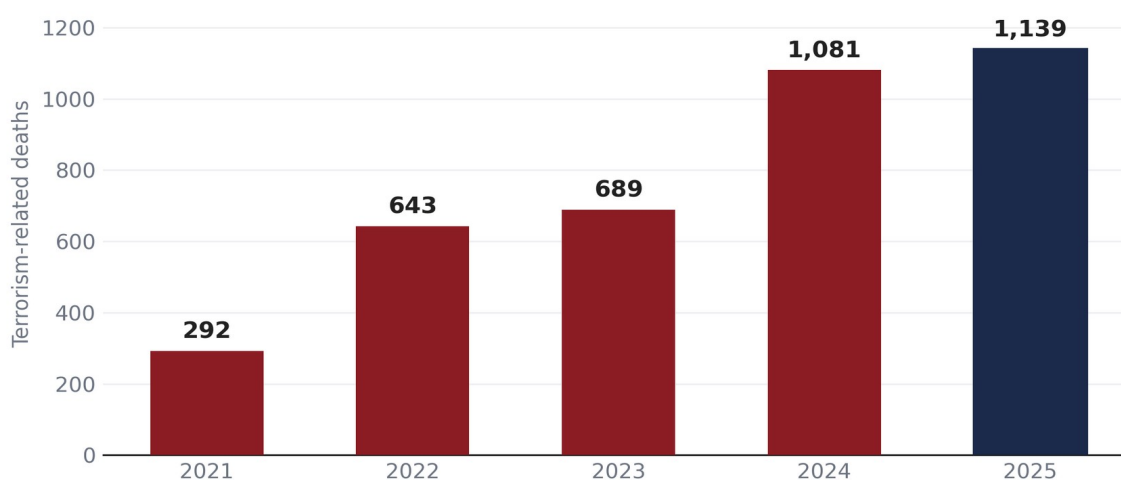
Introduction

The nature of national security has changed fundamentally. Territorial integrity and military preparedness remain essential responsibilities of the state, but they are no longer enough on their own. Globalization, transnational terrorism, technological disruption, cyber warfare, economic interdependence, climate change, pandemics, and irregular migration have all pushed the meaning of security well beyond conventional military threats. A state's resilience today depends as much on the strength of its institutions, the legitimacy of its governance, and the health of its economy as it does on its capacity to defend its borders and, ultimately, on whether citizens still trust the institutions that govern them.

Pakistan illustrates this shift clearly. Since independence, its strategic outlook has been shaped mainly by interstate rivalry, territorial disputes, and geopolitical competition in South Asia, so national security was understood largely in terms of military capability, deterrence, and external defense. That changed with the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, and then more dramatically with 9/11 in 2001. Pakistan's participation in the Global War on Terror turned internal militancy into the country's foremost security challenge. Terrorist violence spread across the country, striking civilians, security forces, schools, places of worship, and public infrastructure, and internal insecurity became impossible to separate from regional instability, particularly developments in Afghanistan (see Figure 1).

Pakistan's response has been costly, at times muddled, but persistent. Thousands of civilians and members of the armed forces lost their lives fighting terrorism, and the economy absorbed enormous financial losses and social disruption. Successive military operations weakened terrorist organizations significantly and restored state authority over areas that had slipped beyond government control; real achievements by any measure. Yet Pakistan's experience also shows the limits of an approach built mainly around kinetic operations. Military force can dismantle terrorist networks, reclaim territory, and disrupt organized violence, but it cannot by itself remove the conditions that let extremism persist or return. Weak institutions, uneven development, poor educational opportunities, youth unemployment, governance gaps, ideological polarization, and a weak civilian law-enforcement system continue to erode the durability of security gains. The resurgence of terrorist violence after 2021 makes this point hard to ignore, and strengthens the case for a broader understanding of national security.

Pakistan: Terrorism-Related Deaths, 2021-2025



Source: Global Terrorism Index (GTI) 2022–2026, Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP).

Figure 1. Terrorism-related deaths in Pakistan rose for a sixth consecutive year in 2025, the sharpest annual increase in a decade; Pakistan topped the Global Terrorism Index for the first time in the 2026 edition, which is based on 2025 data.

Source: Global Terrorism Index (GTI) 2022–2026, Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), as reported by Dawn and Vision of Humanity.

Pakistan's National Security Policy (2022–2026) grew out of recognition of these changing realities; the country's first real attempt to set out an integrated vision of national security. The Policy rightly treats economic resilience, human development, social cohesion, and institutional effectiveness as indispensable components of national power, marking an important shift away from a narrowly state-centric view of security toward one that links economic development with national security.

But conceptual innovation on its own is not enough; it has to be matched by institutional change. The Policy broadens Pakistan's understanding of security, yet it leaves a central question unanswered: how should the state organize itself to address terrorism and violent extremism in an increasingly complex regional environment? The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, the resurgence of the TTP, shifting patterns of great-power competition, technological change, and continuing economic uncertainty all call for a more integrated, operational approach than the Policy currently offers.

Pakistan's security paradigm is entering a new phase. Its future security will depend less on maintaining military superiority over terrorist organizations, and more on building institutions that can adapt to changing threats, coordinate across sectors, and earn public confidence in the state.

Counterterrorism, then, should be understood not as an isolated security function but as a national governance challenge; one that requires coherent leadership, institutional resilience, and sustained political commitment.

The discussion that follows traces the evolution of Pakistan's threat perceptions and security environment, then turns to a critical assessment of the National Security Policy (2022–2026) — its conceptual achievements as well as its operational limitations. It closes by setting out the essential elements of a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy meant to strengthen Pakistan's institutional resilience while advancing the wider goals of national security, economic stability, and democratic governance.

The Evolution of Pakistan's Threat Perceptions

National security is not a fixed idea. It shifts with changing patterns of conflict, technological innovation, economic transformation, and geopolitical realignment. Through the Cold War and well into this century, Pakistan's strategic thinking centered on conventional military threats, territorial integrity, and regional power politics, particularly vis-à-vis India. Since independence, and especially after 1971, developments in Afghanistan have kept concerns about Pakistan's western frontier and regional strategic balance very much alive.

These external challenges still matter, but Pakistan's security environment has changed profoundly over the past twenty-five years. Pakistan's participation in the Global War on Terror, the rise of transnational terrorist networks, and the emergence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have reshaped the country's threat perceptions. Internal security has steadily overtaken conventional interstate conflict as Pakistan's most pressing concern. Today's security landscape, which includes terrorism, violent extremism, cyber insecurity, economic fragility, climate-induced disasters, and institutional weaknesses, is far more complicated than traditional strategic thinking ever anticipated. Three interrelated transitions help explain this change:

- From external defense to internal security — terrorism moved from a border concern to the country's foremost domestic challenge.
- From military operations to institutional capacity — defeating terrorist networks is no longer the central task; preventing their regeneration is.

- A conceptual shift — national security is now judged as much by institutional quality as by military capability.

Transition One: From External Defense to Internal Security

For more than five decades, Pakistan's national security doctrine focused on protecting territorial integrity, maintaining strategic deterrence, and, in vaguer terms, “defending ideological frontiers.” Military preparedness was naturally seen as the main instrument of national survival. This made sense given the geopolitical realities Pakistan faced, but it also meant internal security issues received comparatively little strategic attention.

That changed with the events of 11 September 2001. Pakistan's decision to join the international campaign against terrorism placed it at the center of one of the most consequential geopolitical conflicts of this century. The war in Afghanistan, the movement of militant networks into Pakistan's border regions, and the rise of the TTP turned terrorism from an external concern into an internal security crisis. Suicide bombings, attacks on schools, sectarian violence, assaults on military installations, and terrorism aimed at civilians tested not just public safety but the authority and legitimacy of the state itself (see key statistics, page 1).

Pakistan responded with a series of major military operations — Rah-e-Rast, Rah-e-Nijat, Zarb-e-Azb, and Radd-ul-Fasaad (summarized in Table 1) — through which the state dismantled terrorist infrastructure, reclaimed territory previously held by militant groups, and rebuilt public confidence in many affected areas. These operations cut deeply into the operational capacity of terrorist organizations. But Pakistan's experience also shows that military operations alone cannot uproot terrorism.

Since 2001, Pakistan's major counterterrorism initiatives have generally followed major attacks rather than anticipated them — a pattern of Attack → Response → Reform, rather than Risk Identification → Prevention → Resilience. Reversing that sequence is the central operational challenge this brief addresses.

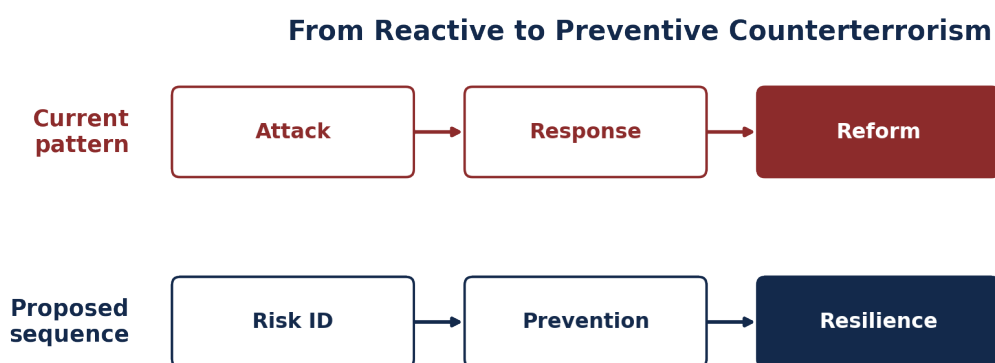


Figure 1a. Pakistan's post-2001 counterterrorism cycle has been reactive; this brief argues for an anticipatory sequence instead.

Table 1. Major Counterterrorism Military Operations

Operation	Launched	Primary Area	Stated Objective
Rah-e-Rast	2009	Swat, Malakand Division	Dislodge Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) forces and restore state writ in the Swat valley
Rah-e-Nijat	2009	South Waziristan	Root out TTP strongholds and command-and-control infrastructure
Zarb-e-Azb	2014	North Waziristan (FATA)	Nationwide offensive against militant sanctuaries following the Peshawar Army Public School attack
Radd-ul-Fasaad	2017	Nationwide	Eliminate residual militant networks and consolidate gains; broadened counterterrorism and border-security focus

Source: Government of Pakistan / ISPR statements; U.S. Congressional Research Service (CRS), "Pakistan and Terrorism" backgrounders.

The resurgence of terrorist attacks after the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 is a stark reminder that military success, essential as it is, needs to be matched by long-term institutional resilience and effective governance.

Transition Two: From Military Operations to Institutional Capacity

The second transition is harder to see but arguably more important. Pakistan's biggest security challenge today is no longer simply defeating terrorist organizations; it is preventing them from regenerating. That requires shifting the center of gravity of national security from military operations to institutional capacity.

Counterterrorism tends to be seen as a job for intelligence agencies and the armed forces. These institutions remain essential, but Pakistan's experience shows that sustainable security depends just as much on the effectiveness of civilian institutions; police services, the criminal justice system, local government, schools, financial regulators, border-management authorities, and provincial administrations. Weaknesses in any of these areas give extremist organizations room to recruit, mobilize, finance, and reorganize.

Governance, then, is the critical variable that links security and development. Effective governance builds public trust, strengthens the rule of law, improves service delivery, reduces social exclusion, and expands economic opportunity. Weak governance does the opposite; it creates the conditions in which violent extremism flourishes. Governance is not simply a development objective; it is a strategic national security asset.

Transition Three: A Conceptual Shift

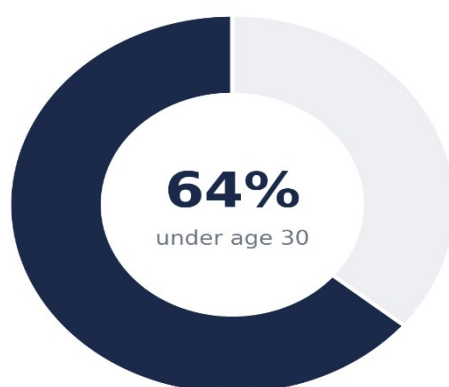
This is an important conceptual shift. National security is increasingly judged not only by military capability but by the quality of public institutions and their ability to anticipate, coordinate, and respond to evolving threats. Institutional resilience, the capacity of state institutions to adapt, learn, coordinate, and recover from crises, should therefore become a central objective of Pakistan's national security strategy.

Pakistan's National Security Policy (2022–2026): A Conceptual Innovation, an Operational Deficit

Pakistan's National Security Policy (2022–2026) reflects official recognition of this broader shift. For the first time, a national policy document puts economic security at the heart of national security, while treating governance, human development, technological innovation, food security, climate resilience, and regional connectivity as essential elements of national power. This marks a real departure from earlier approaches that viewed security mainly through a military and geopolitical lens, and it acknowledges that economic instability, demographic pressure, environmental degradation, and governance deficits can undermine national security just as profoundly as conventional military threats.

Security, then, is no longer defined solely by the protection of territory — it also depends on the resilience of institutions and the well-being of society. Pakistan is one of the youngest societies in the world, with 64% of its population under the age of 30, a rapidly growing urban population, and rising demand for education, employment, public services, and economic opportunity (see Figure 2). Managed well, this demographic profile is a tremendous national asset; left unaddressed, it risks becoming a source of social instability, political polarization, and radicalization. Rapid urbanization, technological disruption, and climate-related challenges likewise call for governance systems that can anticipate complex risks rather than simply react to them.

Pakistan's Youth Bulge



Source: UNDP Pakistan, National Human Development Report "Unleashing the Potential of a Young Pakistan" (2017/18 series).

Figure 2. With 64% of Pakistanis under 30 — roughly two-thirds of the population — the NSP treats the country's youth bulge as either a demographic dividend or a source of instability, depending on how it is managed.

Source: UNDP Pakistan, National Human Development Report; Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Labour Force Survey 2024–25.

Pakistan no longer needs to redefine national security — it needs to operationalize the broader vision it already has, through effective policy coordination, institutional reform, and a shared sense of purpose. Governance has become an indispensable pillar of national security. Security begins not only at the nation's borders but within its institutions: in classrooms that educate rather than exclude, in police services that command public confidence, in courts that uphold the rule of law, in local governments that deliver essential services, and in public institutions that respond effectively to citizens' needs. Counterterrorism cannot succeed unless military operations are reinforced by educational reform, economic opportunity, institutional coordination, effective policing, judicial efficiency, strategic communication, and inclusive political processes.

Governance is the first line of national security; military capability is its indispensable guarantor.

The Taliban's return to power, following the disorderly U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, shows just how significant this gap is. The NSP does identify terrorism, violent extremism, sectarianism, organized crime, and hybrid threats as continuing national security challenges. What it does not do is set out a comprehensive institutional framework that can coordinate prevention, intelligence, law enforcement, judicial reform, education, financial regulation, border management, strategic communication, and provincial implementation into one unified strategy. Terrorism is acknowledged as a threat, but the mechanisms for anticipating, preventing, and responding to its evolving forms remain underdeveloped, as Table 2 summarizes.

NSP: A Critical Assessment — Five Implementation Deficits

Table 2. *NSP Implementation Deficits*

#	Deficit	In Brief
1	No operational counterterrorism doctrine	The NSP articulates strategic vision but not the institutional architecture to operationalize it; the roles of federal ministries, provincial governments, intelligence agencies, law-enforcement institutions, and NACTA need clearer mandates and stronger accountability mechanisms.
2	Prevention is under-weighted	Human security is acknowledged, but educational reform, community engagement, strategic communication, digital resilience, youth development, and civic inclusion receive comparatively limited attention; counterterrorism remains skewed toward response over prevention.
3	No measurable coordination mechanism	A whole-of-government approach is advocated, but no measurable mechanisms exist for inter-agency cooperation, information sharing, policy monitoring, or periodic evaluation.
4	Weak federal-provincial linkage	Policing, education, local governance, public health, and social welfare are largely provincial subjects, yet the NSP offers little guidance on translating national priorities into provincial action plans, indicators, or implementation mechanisms.
5	No indicators for measuring progress	The Policy lacks clearly defined benchmarks against which implementation can be assessed — without measurable objectives, periodic review, and transparent evaluation, progress is difficult to verify.

Despite these limitations, the Policy has broadened how Pakistan understands security. The task now is to turn that broader vision into an operational strategy capable of responding to an increasingly complex security environment.

That means moving from conceptual innovation to institutional innovation. Pakistan needs a comprehensive counterterrorism framework that connects national strategy to implementation across federal, provincial, and local government — one that brings together intelligence coordination, police modernization, judicial reform, educational policy, economic opportunity, financial regulation, border management, cybersecurity, and strategic communications within a single architecture of prevention, resilience, and response. Only then can Pakistan move from a security state focused on managing threats to a resilient state capable of preventing them.

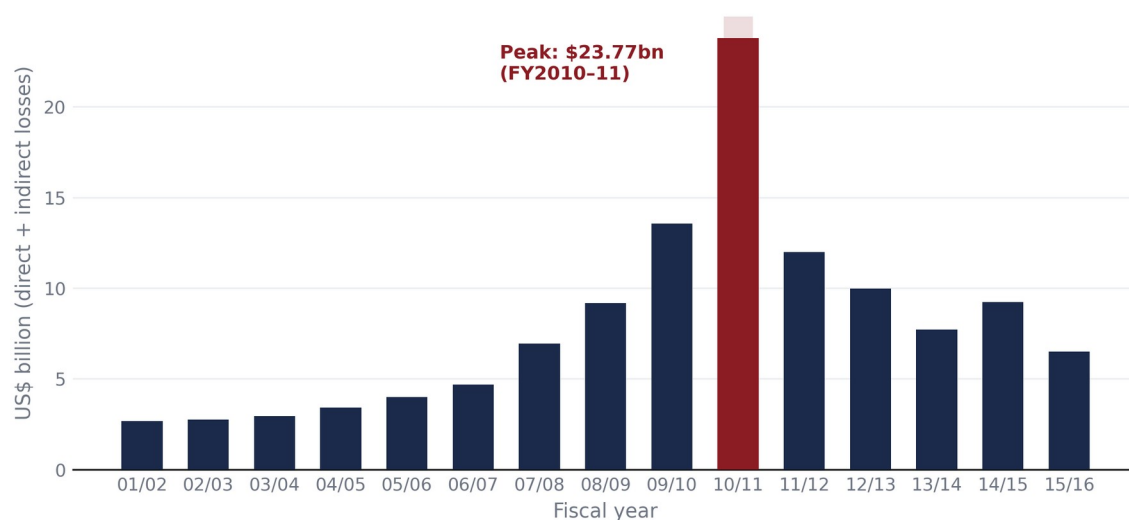
From Security Management to Security Governance

The next phase of Pakistan's national security strategy should move beyond security management toward security governance. Where security management responds to threats after they emerge, security governance works to reduce the structural conditions that allow those threats to develop in the first place.

In December 2024, Pakistan's federal Cabinet approved the National Prevention of Violent Extremism (NPVE) Policy, developed by NACTA, the country's first dedicated national framework aimed specifically at preventing radicalization and violent extremism. It offers strategic guidance on prevention, resilience-building, community engagement, education reform, youth empowerment, women and family engagement, rehabilitation, reintegration, strategic communications, and research, monitoring, and evaluation. Since its approval, though, the NPVE has functioned more as an appendix to the NSP than as an integrated part of it, and implementation continues to run into funding, capacity, and coordination constraints, especially at the provincial level. What is needed now is not another framework, but a way to bring the NSP and the NPVE together into a single operational architecture, the subject of Priority 6, below.

This shift calls for a whole-of-government approach that brings together military capability, effective civilian institutions, democratic governance, economic resilience, and regional diplomacy. A comprehensive national counterterrorism strategy should rest on six mutually reinforcing strategic priorities, summarized in Table 3.

Annual Economic Cost of the War on Terror to Pakistan



Source: Economic Survey of Pakistan 2016-17 / 2017-18, Ministry of Finance, Government of Pakistan.

Figure 3. Economic losses from terrorism rose sharply through the 2000s, peaked in FY2010-11, and declined as counterterrorism operations and the National Action Plan took hold, illustrating why the brief treats economic security and counterterrorism as linked.

Source: Economic Survey of Pakistan 2016-17 / 2017-18, Ministry of Finance, Government of Pakistan.

Six Strategic Priorities at a Glance



Figure 4. The six strategic priorities in brief, before the detailed breakdown in Table 3.

Table 3. Strategic Priorities for a National Counterterrorism Framework

#	Priority	Description
1	Strengthening NACTA for Institutional Leadership and Strategic Coordination	National security responsibilities are distributed across numerous civilian and military institutions; system effectiveness depends on coordination, not the performance of any single institution. – Extend NACTA's role beyond information-sharing to strategic planning, policy integration, implementation monitoring, inter-provincial coordination, and periodic national threat assessments. – Bring in Parliament, provincial governments, academia, the private sector, and civil society so counterterrorism remains a national enterprise, not solely a security-sector one. – Commission an in-depth national threat assessment covering domestic and external sources as the first step in devising the strategy.
2	Building Preventive State Capacity	The most successful counterterrorism strategies prevent radicalization before it manifests as violence. – Invest in educational reform, vocational training, community policing, digital literacy, youth engagement, and local development. – Revive and strengthen local governments, through regular local body elections and genuine devolution, and improve service delivery, reduce regional disparities, and expand economic participation; public confidence in institutions reduces vulnerability to extremist mobilization. – Assess extremism and terrorism at three levels: local (domestic context), regional (neighboring countries), and global, where Pakistan is increasingly, and problematically, framed as an epicenter of terrorism.
3	Modernizing Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice	Police modernization is a national strategic priority: forensic science, intelligence-led policing, cybercrime capability, witness protection, border surveillance, financial investigation, and inter-agency information systems. – Judicial reform: efficient prosecution, specialized counterterrorism courts, improved evidentiary standards, prison reform, and rehabilitation programs.

#	Priority	Description
		– Professionalize provincial police counterterrorism capacity and reduce routine reliance on paramilitary Rangers, whose extended deployment in policing roles can entrench resentment and undermine the standing of the security forces even as it restores short-term order. – Convert Elite Force and Dolphins units into specialized units trained in technology-enabled intelligence gathering, interrogation and negotiation, and crowd management.
4	Integrating Economic Security with National Security	Fiscal stability, technological innovation, employment generation, energy security, food security, and regional connectivity strengthen the state's capacity to withstand shocks; prolonged economic distress creates conditions extremist organizations can exploit through recruitment, illicit financing, and social polarization. – Integrate economic planning with national security planning through coordinated investment in infrastructure, digital transformation, education, and regional trade. – Draw lessons from China's 15th Five-Year Plan, which links economic goals with technological innovation, industrial policy, and security needs.
5	Institutionalizing Policy Review and Strategic Learning	Security environments evolve faster than institutions. Effective national security requires continuous institutional learning. – Subject counterterrorism policy to periodic review, evidence-based evaluation, parliamentary oversight, and independent strategic assessment. – Update national threat assessments regularly, define implementation benchmarks clearly, and adjust policy as domestic and international conditions change.
6	Building a Whole-of-Society Prevention Architecture	Prevention is broader than education or employment schemes. Synergizing the NSP and NPVE requires an operational toolkit and a genuinely provincial, gender-aware delivery model: – Operationalize prevention: early-warning systems, local prevention networks, community policing, disengagement and rehabilitation programs, prison interventions, family support, and online/cyber prevention. – Treat radicalization as multi-causal: social networks, relative deprivation, identity grievances, the quality of critical-thinking education, psychological vulnerabilities, and cyber-enabled recruitment interact as push and pull factors, and each needs a different response. – Make prevention provincial: provinces should adopt their own PVE Action Plans, provincial coordination cells, and district-level prevention committees, delivered through trusted local actors — religious scholars, teachers, women's organizations, and civil society (see Table 4). – Recognize women's multiple roles in prevention — as first identifiers of radicalization within families, as educators and community influencers, and, at times, as victims — and resource them accordingly. – Prioritize rehabilitation and reintegration: not every individual drawn into extremism should be viewed solely through a law-enforcement lens. – Modernize strategic communications — counter-narratives, alternative narratives, and engagement with digital influencers — to match the sophistication of extremist messaging online. <i>Prevention succeeds only as a whole-of-society, whole-of-government, and whole-of-state effort — not a security-sector add-on.</i>

Operationalizing Prevention: A Multi-Agency Architecture

Because prevention cuts across policing, education, welfare, communications, and community life, no single institution can deliver it alone. Table 4 maps the principal actors and the roles they should play within a coordinated, whole-of-society prevention ecosystem.

A Multi-Agency Prevention Architecture

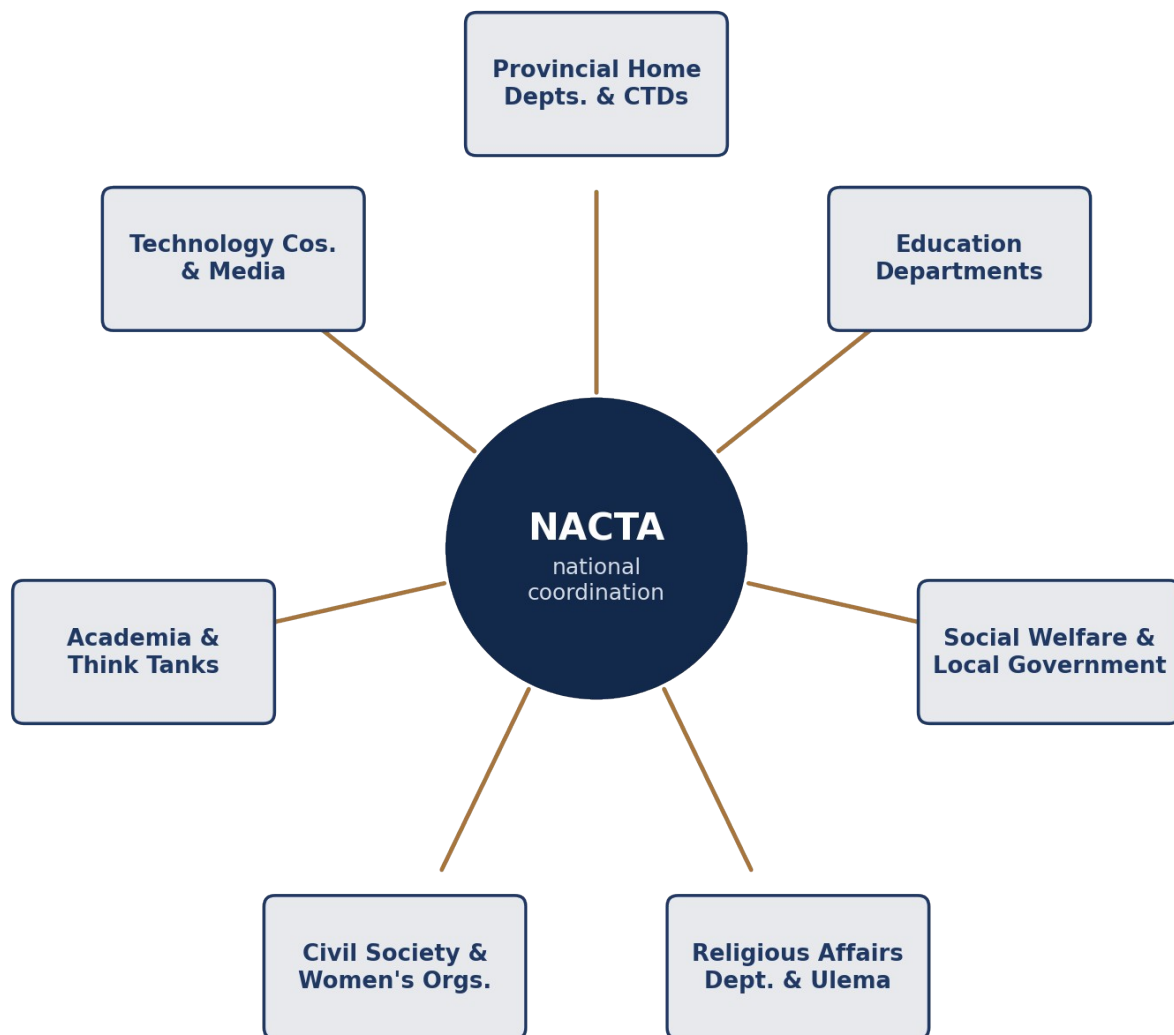


Figure 5. NACTA sits at the center of a prevention ecosystem that depends on provincial, community, and private-sector actors, detailed in Table 4

Table 4. A Multi-Agency Prevention Architecture

Actor	Role in Prevention
NACTA	National coordination; PVE Center of Excellence; monitoring and evaluation of the NPVE and NSP together.
Provincial Home Depts. & CTDs	Provincial PVE Action Plans; intelligence-led, community-facing policing.
Education Departments	Curriculum reform, critical-thinking pedagogy, and teacher training on early warning signs.
Social Welfare & Local Government	Youth engagement, community programs , and last-mile service delivery.
Religious Affairs Dept. & Ulema	Credible counter-narratives and community trust-building.
Civil Society & Women's Organizations	Local ownership, family support, and early identification of radicalization.
Academia & Think Tanks	Threat assessment, research, and independent policy evaluation.
Technology Companies & Media	Content moderation, strategic communications, and digital literacy.

Pakistan stands at an important strategic juncture. It has demonstrated considerable military capability in confronting terrorism and defending its sovereignty, although the situation in Balochistan and along the Afghan border remains troubling. The challenge now is to consolidate these gains by strengthening the institutions that sustain long-term peace. The evolution of Pakistan's security paradigm, from external defense to internal security, from military operations to institutional resilience, and from state security to comprehensive security, reflects a broader transformation in the nature of national power in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

The central argument of this policy brief is that Pakistan's future security will depend less on its capacity to respond to crises than on its ability to build resilient institutions that prevent crises from emerging in the first place. Counterterrorism, then, is not solely a military or intelligence function, it is a governance project, one that requires capable institutions, accountable leadership, an independent judiciary, professional law-enforcement agencies, quality education, inclusive economic growth, and constructive regional diplomacy.

The strongest states are not simply those with superior military capabilities. They are the ones whose institutions are resilient, whose governance is effective, whose leadership is farsighted, and whose citizens have confidence in the future.

Pakistan's next generation of national security reforms must move from security management to security governance. This does not mean military capability becomes less important, it remains an indispensable guarantor of national sovereignty. But durable security ultimately rests on institutions that command public trust, deliver justice, create opportunity, and adapt to changing strategic realities. For Pakistan, building such a state is not merely a development goal; it is the most enduring foundation of national security in an era of profound geopolitical change.

Glossary

Term	Meaning
NSP	National Security Policy (2022–2026), Government of Pakistan
NPVE	National Prevention of Violent Extremism Policy (2024)
NACTA	National Counter Terrorism Authority
PVE	Prevention of Violent Extremism
TTP	Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan
CTD	Counter-Terrorism Department (provincial)
GTI	Global Terrorism Index, published by the Institute for Economics and Peace
GWT	Global War on Terror

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