

## Analyzing Civil–Military Response in Pakistan's Counter–Terrorism Efforts (2014–2016)

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**Abstract:** *The study attempts to evaluate the civil–military response in Pakistan's counter–terrorism efforts between 2014 and 2016 as this period was characterized by significant security challenges and decisive state actions. It commences by examining the government's strategic shift in 2014 in response to the escalation of terrorist activities, particularly the Army Public School (APS) Peshawar attack, which marked a critical turning point in civil–military cooperation. The research investigates into the complex relationship between state politics and the rising threat of terrorism, with a particular emphasis on the All–Parties Conference and the development of the 20–point National Action Plan (NAP) that facilitated the cultivation of political consensus. It also examines Pakistan's diplomatic interactions, particularly with Afghanistan, which are designed to promote regional harmony. Operation Zarb–e–Azb (2014–2016) is a critical component of this period, emphasizing the military's operational leadership and collaboration with civilian authorities. By evaluating strategic diplomacy, operational measures, and policy decisions, the article assesses the efficacy and constraints of the civil–military nexus. The results indicate that while cooperation enhanced national security outcomes, long–term counterterrorism success necessitates democratic oversight, inclusive political will, and sustained institutional alignment.*

**Keywords:** Terrorism, Civil–Military Cooperation, Zarb–e–Azb, National Action Plan (NAP), Pakistan, Afghanistan

### Introduction

In response to the 9/11/2001 tragedy, the US government, led by President Bush (2001–2009), initiated a major military operation in Afghanistan after the 1980s to eradicate the leadership of Al–Qaeda. The US also exerted pressure on Pakistan to reverse its support for the Afghan Taliban. Eventually President Musharraf (2001–2008) took a turnabout on Pakistan's Afghan policy and offered logistic and other necessary assistance to the US/NATO forces in their military operations in Afghanistan. (Cassidy, 2012). Thus, worldwide extremist groups redirected their attention toward Pakistan. It is noted that the Afghan Taliban and Al–Qaeda had a significant influence on the tribal areas of Pakistan because of the close connections and common cultural backgrounds of the people living there (Cassidy, 2012).

Following Operation Enduring Freedom (2001–2002) in Afghanistan, the erstwhile FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) and Pashtun tribes served as a secure refuge for the Afghan Taliban, Al–Qaeda, and various anti–American factions seeking concealment within the tribal region of Pakistan. The emergence of terrorism in Pakistan, particularly in the tribal areas, was in its early stages at that time. In June 2002, terrorists launched an attack on Pakistan's military troops in the South Waziristan Agency (SWA), leading to the death of 12 military soldiers who were hailed as martyrs. The military initiated counter–terrorism campaigns and conducted military interventions in the erstwhile FATA and the PATA (Provincially Administered Tribal Areas). The military conducted Operation Al–Mezan in South Waziristan Agency (SWA) from 2002 to 2006. The inauguration of Kalosha occurred at Wana in the year 2004. In 2007, the tribal region witnessed the commencement of Operation Rah–e–Haq and Operation Sher Dil, which were subsequently concluded in 2009 (Abbasi et al., 2018).

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All these military operations were concluded with peace deals between the military and terrorist groups, but the peace deals were, later on, breached by the terrorist groups by conducting terrorist actions (Javed et al., 2025). As a result, Operation Rah-e-Nijat was launched in 2009 in SWA and concluded in 2010 by the military. Due to that operation, Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other terrorist organizations vacated the territory of SWA. However, a significant influx of terrorists relocated to North Waziristan Agency (NWA) and Afghanistan. From 2011 to 2013, the terrorists conducted their attacks from NWA. Throughout that time, the security situation was extremely precarious. Additional extremist organizations, such as the IMU and the Islamic Jihadist Group (IJG), have joined forces with the TTP and posed significant security risks to the national security of Pakistan. In 2013, the TTP carried out 71 suicide attacks, which resulted in the deaths of 2440 individuals. Therefore, the Pakistani military initiated a military operation targeting terrorist organizations in the NWA (Javed et al., 2022). In 2013 the PMLN's government, backed by the Military authorities, engaged the TTP and other terrorist groups in the peace negotiation, but the occurrence of terrorist actions during the negotiating process in 2013 served as evidence that the militants harbored a lack of desire for peace, rendering the peace talks ultimately ineffective (Haider, 2014). However, during the negotiating process, approximately 56 terrorist groups, varying in size, were associated with the TTP and actively engaged in acts of terrorism (Basit, 2014). Despite the government's efforts to restore peace, acts of terrorism continued. Between January and June 2014, 195 people died as a result of approximately 20 terrorist incidents (Javed, 2016). In June 2014, an audacious act of terrorism occurred at Karachi International Airport, perpetrated by terrorists with firearms and a variety of ammunition. Nonetheless, a total of 23 people tragically died as a result of this incident, thereby establishing it as a precursor to Operation Zarb-e-Azb ("Gunmen attack Karachi", 2014).

## Methods

The research is descriptive, analytical, and qualitative in nature. It is based on primary and secondary sources. The evidence is analyzed clearly, and historical events are elucidated through a rational approach emphasizing reason and logic.

## Significance and Scope of Study

This study is significant as it critically analyses the collaboration dynamics between civil and military institutions in Pakistan's counter-terrorism framework from 2014 to 2016. The scope of study provides insight into events such as the horrific APS Peshawar attack, catalyzed a cohesive national response, resulting in programs like the National Action Plan (NAP). This study elucidates the transformations in policy, governance, and public security by examining the government's adaptive methods, the multi-party-political consensus, and the military's operational involvement in Zarb-e-Azb. Comprehending these dynamics is crucial for evaluating the efficacy and durability of Pakistan's counter-terrorism initiatives and for deriving insights relevant to other nations facing analogous internal security challenges.

## Government Strategy against Terrorism in 2014

On June 15, 2014, Pakistani military and civilian leadership initiated a significant military operation in the NWA, known as Operation Zarb-e-Azab. This operation was characterized by its rigorous and resolute approach. The primary goal was to eradicate terrorist safe havens in the NWA region while simultaneously establishing and upholding legal and societal order. The overarching goal was to eradicate the pervasive threat of terrorism. The armed forces neutralized approximately 120 terrorists during the preliminary phases of the operation (Sherazi, 2014). According to the ISPR report, the airstrike primarily resulted in the deaths of approximately 50 foreign terrorists, the majority of whom were from Uzbekistan. The armed forces successfully eradicated their concealed locations in Boya, Degan, and Datta Khel during the nighttime operation (Sherazi, 2014). The civil administration had taken measures to address the escalating prevalence of terrorism and resolved to support the armed forces. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif expressed his intention to undertake a military operation in the NWA during his public address:

*On one hand we were having a dialogue and on the other hand we were being targeted. We were negotiating but we were being targeted from Islamabad courts to Karachi airport. Our places of worship were targeted, our schools were targeted. We will change the destiny of this country and will not allow*

*the country to become a safe haven for terrorists. Despite the sacrifices of our soldiers, we gave top priority to peace talks but our efforts went in vain. The ongoing operation will end with the complete defeat of the insurgents. The ongoing operation will be the beginning of a peaceful start for the country.*

The civil and military authorities cooperated to make the necessary choices for the operation. The opposition parties in the National Assembly, including the PPP, Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), supported the government's plan due to time constraints and deteriorating security conditions. Furthermore, the opposition members of the Senate (upper house) expressed their determination to seek government and military support to tackle the widespread problem of terrorism. Moreover, the US praised the government's move (Haider, 2014). Primarily, General Raheel Sharif (COAS) (2013–2016) provided assurance to the Prime Minister over the army's comprehensive readiness to confront any circumstances in the foreseeable future. Furthermore, he affirmed the army's complete competence in combating terrorist activities in the NWA (Khan, 2014).

Initially, ISPR released a report revealing that 17 operational strikes between July and September claimed the lives of 389 individuals. Furthermore, the report details the martyrdom of 82 troops, 42 of whom actively participated in counter–terrorism operations in the northwestern regions. In the midst of the conflict against terrorism in the tribal areas, a total of 269 soldiers sustained injuries. Simultaneously, a new faction known as Jama’at-ul-Ahrar (J-u-A) emerged under the leadership of Umar Khalid Khorasani, a former commander of the TTP. This organization promptly assumed accountability for several acts of terrorism (Khan et al., 2014). From October to December 2014, the military forces in the NWA region effectively restricted the movements of the extremist groups involved in the battle, leading to a significant territorial acquisition (Khan et al., 2014).

**Table 1**

*The Nature of Attacks in NWA in 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter of 2014*

Nature of attacks (October–December)	Incidents	Killing	Injuries
Operational Attacks	8	139	----
Clashes	1	5	4
Terrorist Attacks	1	1	1
Drone Attacks	11	58	27
Total	21	203	32

Source: (Khan et al., 2014).

**Table 2**

*Casualty type in NWA in 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter of 2014*

Casualty Nature (October–December)	Killed	Injured
Militants	197	27
Civilians	1	1
Security Forces	5	4
Total	203	32

Source: (Khan et al., 2014).

However, 97% of those killed and 84% of those injured in bombings, military attacks, and drone strikes were mainly militants. As a result, the army achieved significant success in this operation. Meanwhile, after December 16, 2014, the dimensions of operation Zarb-e-Azb changed considerably (Khan et al., 2014).

### APS Incident and Civil–Military Response

The Peshawar tragedy occurred on December 16, 2014, a date widely recognized in Pakistan's history. At approximately nine o'clock, a group of nine terrorists disguised in paramilitary dress gained unauthorized access to the educational institution by breaching the barbed wire perimeter located on the rear wall of the Army Public School (APS), situated on Warsik Road in Peshawar, and conducted an attack with heavy guns. During this incident, approximately 121 students, three staff members, and seven SSG commandos sustained injuries, while 131 students lost their lives, including 10 others. Six of the nine terrorists involved

in the incident, identified as suicide bombers, detonated themselves upon entering the educational institution. The Special Services Group (SSG) killed the other three terrorists during a prolonged encounter that lasted approximately seven hours (Khan, 2014). The incident on December 16, 2014, had a profound impact on Pakistan's history. The attack on APS not only targeted a single educational institution but also posed a threat to Pakistan's very existence, resulting in far-reaching consequences. Consequently, a collective aspiration emerged among the populace to eradicate all manifestations of terrorism from the country. The civil government provided assurances to the military leadership regarding the cessation of terrorism, indicating a shared understanding and alignment between the two entities. The objective was to address the pervasive issue of terrorism and mitigate its detrimental impact (Salahuddin, 2015).

The TTP leadership claimed responsibility and blamed the incident on a retaliation action in response to the NWA military operation. As a result, General Raheel Sharif and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif visited Peshawar, conveying their condolences to the victims and engaging in discussions about the importance of continuing the operation until terrorism is eradicated (Salahuddin, 2015). Moreover, the APS tragedy received widespread international condemnation, leading to a unified national response in support of the victims (Mahesar et al., 2018). The opposition in the KP provincial assembly and the government benches strongly condemned the tragic attack on APS and supported the federal government's measures; they solidified the KP administration's alignment with the federal government in combating terrorism, with the goal of protecting future generations from terrorist threats and ensuring a stable and secure future (Jan, 2015).

The Provincial Assembly of Punjab, in addition to other governing bodies, adopted a resolution denouncing a terrorist assault in Peshawar. The resolution expressed solidarity with the armed forces in their efforts during Operation and pledged to persist in combating terrorism until its complete eradication. Furthermore, the chief ministers of the four provinces and the prime minister of Pakistan declared a period of three days for mourning as a gesture of sympathy to the bereaved families. The president of Pakistan also vehemently condemned the attack (Sherazi et al., 2014).

The Peshawar blast's timing with the military's NWA operation caused considerable concern. The incident in Peshawar raises concerns over the failure of intelligence services and security forces, as it resulted in the tragic loss of innocent lives. In addition, the Peshawar incident served as a catalyst for the military, removing any remaining justifications for halting the military campaign. The Peshawar attack was a tragic event that prompted increased efforts from both the military and government leadership in combating terrorism ("New blood-soaked benchmark", 2014). In his speech, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif expressed the sensitivity of the circumstances; the syntax of the speech was that:

*The war against terrorism and extremism is our war and to deal with it an effective and mirroring process of national sentiments should be developed and implemented immediately. However, our armed forces have made immense sacrifices in Operation Zarb-e-Azb, as a result of which countless hideouts and networks of terrorists have been destroyed. The human tragedy in Peshawar is yet another incident of terrorists on the run which will not weaken our national resolve and will and we will continue this war until our land is cleared of terrorists ("Nawaz Sharif's Press conference", 2014).*

### State's Politics and Risks of Terrorism in 2014

In Pakistani politics, the year 2014 has significant importance. The political landscape had undergone transformation. As a result of political fragmentation, Pakistan's political landscape reached a critical turning point. The emergence of political polarization ensued after the leadership of the PTI engaged in street politics in 2014, staging a 126-day demonstration at Islamabad's D Chowk. During this period, the PTI leadership asserted that Nawaz Sharif had fraudulently obtained a significant electoral victory in the 2013 election ("Imran Khan announces", 2014). On the other hand, Dr. Tahir-ul-Qadri, the leader of Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT) and proprietor of Minhaj-al-Quran (M-a-Q), led a protest in Islamabad alongside a multitude of supporters. The objective of this demonstration was to voice opposition against the PML-N administration and call for the resignation of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. The Pakistani army actively participated in counter-terrorism operations within the NWA during this period. Furthermore, terrorists took advantage of the prevailing political circumstances within the nation to carry out their acts



of terrorism. As a result, the political conflict had a direct impact on the progress and effectiveness of Operation Zarb-e-Azb (Walsh, 2014).

Following the favorable outcomes of Operation Zarb-e-Azb, there was a perception that the underlying infrastructure of terrorism had significantly weakened, but the school attack served as a stark reminder that the resurgence of terrorist activities had resurfaced within the country. The Peshawar tragedy showed that terrorists could operate freely and would persist in their activities when the circumstances were favorable for terrorism. However, Pakistani army soldiers' resolute efforts to initiate counter-terrorism operations significantly contributed to the dismantling of terrorist hideouts. However, it was important to note that terrorism still exists and would take time to eradicate (Ghani, 2014).

The incident in Peshawar occurred when the political leadership was focusing on assuring the global community about Pakistan's effective handling of terrorism. The APS attack presented considerable challenges for both the state government and its military leadership. As a result, a wave of anger swept across the nation, signaling to the provincial administration that they needed to sharpen their focus on security issues due to the presence of terrorist factions seeking revenge for military interventions. Political instability was a contributing factor to this situation. During this period, it was imperative for the National Security Committee to assume a more proactive role. Additionally, it was crucial to establish a collaborative approach between the government and the military to devise a comprehensive strategy for military operations and counter-terrorism efforts. However, the political parties' clashes and lack of support for each other on matters of national importance hindered their ability to unite for political stability. Exploiting this rift, the terrorists faced no hindrances in carrying out their activities. Hence, to counteract terrorism, it became imperative to establish a consensus between Imran Khan and the government to address the prevailing concerns, a development of significant import to the military leadership (Ghani, 2014). Considering the temporal vulnerability, Imran Khan declared the protest's termination and assured Nawaz Sharif that the opposition would extend its assistance to the government in all aspects of combating terrorism. This resolution effectively resolved the protracted political impasse, and the political landscape began to shift toward a collective effort of military and civil administrations both to counter the terrorism (Zaman, 2014). During the press conference, Imran Khan said that:

*It is very important for the country to unite around this issue to win this war against terrorism. It cannot be won by unilateral military action. Innocent children have never been targeted like this before. We all agree on this issue and the government will have our full support* (“Imran Khan Press Conference”, 2014).

### **The Multi-Party Conference and Government Initiatives against Terrorism**

The escalation of terrorist incidents had put Pakistan in a perilous position. Terrorist attacks demonstrated a deficiency in the establishment and enforcement of legal principles within the country. Even when the military was fulfilling its responsibilities for combating terrorism, extremism and terrorism still posed considerable threats. At that time, the civil administration and military establishments took numerous key moves toward building a system of law and order by amending the articles of the constitution (Soofi, 2015). In this context, the political parties in Pakistan expressed strong condemnation and demonstrated their allegiance to the state by aligning themselves with the ruling party, PML-N, and the military establishment. On December 17, 2014, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif convened a Multi-Party Conference (MPC) and invited the representatives from major political parties, including PTI, MQM, ANP, J-e-I, JUI-F, and PPP. The conference's main goal was to discuss future anti-terrorism strategies and initiatives (Raza, 2014). Hence, on January 2, 2015, the session of the MPC took place in Islamabad. Nawaz Sharif presided over the conference, providing a personal overview of the meeting's agenda. Additionally, he provided a comprehensive overview of the tragic terrorist incident at APS, highlighting its detrimental impact on the nation's security landscape. He took the opportunity to talk about the country's critical security conditions. Parliamentary leaders and representatives from the military establishment addressed the security situation in the country, with a particular emphasis on upholding the supremacy of Pakistan's Constitution and ensuring effective law implementation (Haider, 2015).

**Table 3***Military and Political Party's leadership in the MPC*

<b>Government Representatives</b>	<b>PPP Representatives</b>	<b>PTI Representatives</b>	<b>Military Representatives</b>
Khawaja Asif/ Defense Minister	Asif Ali Zardari/ Former President	Imran Khan/ PTI Chairman	General Raheel Sharif/ COAS
Ishaq Dar/ Finance Minister	Syed Khursheed Shah/ Opposition Leader	Shah Mehmood Qureshi/ Vice Chairman	General Rizwan Akhtar/ DG (ISI)
Ch. Nisar Ali Khan/ Interior Minister	Makhdoom Amin Faheem	Shafqat Mehmood	General Asim Bajwa DG (ISPR)
Pervaiz Rashid/Information Minister	Ch. Aitzaz Ahsan	Naeemul Haq	---
Ahsan Iqbal/ Planning and Development	Mian Raza Rabbani	Shireen Mazari/ Spokesperson	---
Salman Butt, Attorney General	Rehman Malik/ Former Interior Minister	---	---
Barrister Zafarullah	Farhatullah Babar	---	---
Gen (r) Abul Qadir Baloch/ State and Frontier Region	Sherry Rehman	---	---
Khawaja Zaheer/ Special Assistant to PM	Farooq H. Naik	---	---

Source: (Haider, [2015](#)).

General Raheel Sharif, a participant in this meeting, advocated for the establishment of specialized military tribunals as a measure to address the pressing challenges faced by the nation. This proposal reflects the army's determination to address the urgent needs of the country (Haider, [2015](#)). Nevertheless, the circumstances necessitated the implementation of exceptional measures to manage the situation, a stance that Nawaz Sharif also supported, advocating for the establishment of military courts ("Fojo Adalaty Banayn Gay", [2014](#)). Hence, the political leadership in Pakistan put forth a National Action Plan (NAP) as a measure to combat terrorism. The political leadership in Pakistan established a committee under the chairmanship of Ch. Nisar Ali Khan to develop this plan. The committee comprised representatives from various parliamentary and political parties, along with intelligence representatives from the armed forces (Haroon, [2014](#)). The 20-point agenda of the NAP was formulated by a committee and subsequently endorsed by Parliament on December 24, 2014 (Zubair, [2019](#)). In the meantime, the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) was assigned the responsibility of overseeing the implementation of the NAP in relation to its impact on maintaining law and order.

### The 20 Points of NAP

1. It is argued that individuals convicted of serious crimes such as terrorism and subsequently sentenced to death should invariably be executed by hanging.
2. In order to bring terrorists to justice, the military will establish specialized military courts with a fixed duration of two years.
3. The nation's law and order situation must not be jeopardized by any activities conducted by armed organizations or other armed groups.
4. The jurisdiction of NACTA will be expanded in order to enhance its overall effectiveness and capabilities.
5. In order to address the issue of extremism and intolerance, a robust measure will be undertaken to enforce stricter regulations on literature and magazines that propagate hatred.

6. Stringent actions will be enforced against individuals who provide financial support to terrorist and extremist organizations.
7. Under no circumstances can defunct organizations be permitted to re-establish themselves.
8. The establishment and utilization of a specialized force will be undertaken in order to achieve the goal of counter-terrorism.
9. Efforts shall be undertaken to effectively address and eradicate instances of religious extremism and persecution.
10. All educational institutions affiliated with various schools of thought inside the nation shall be required to undergo registration and adhere to regulatory measures.
11. The prohibition of the glorification of terrorist organizations in both print and electronic media will be implemented.
12. Primary focus on rehabilitating internally displaced persons (IDPs) and implementing reforms related to development and administration in the FATA.
13. All networks utilized for terrorist communication shall be entirely eradicated.
14. Implement stringent steps to prevent the misuse of media and social media for terrorist activities and establish controls to curb their usage.
15. In regards to militancy in Punjab, implement a policy of absolute intolerance.
16. The military campaign against terrorism in Karachi will persist till its intended conclusion.
17. The government of Balochistan would be granted complete authority to engage in political reconciliation with all relevant parties in the province.
18. Implement rigorous measures to address sectarian terrorism within the state.
19. The process of registering Afghan refugees will commence, and a detailed strategy will be formulated to address the issue of Afghan refugees.
20. The state's criminal justice system will undergo reform and restructuring (“National Action Plan, 2014”, 2024).

Additionally, on January 6 and 7, 2015, Parliament and the President approved two legislative measures, namely the 21st Constitution Amendment Act 2015 and the Army Act 2015. Notably, Parliament passed the aforementioned acts within a week of drafting the NAP's agenda. The creation of military courts lasted for two years (Zubair, 2019). Several lawmakers in the assembly, including Aitzaz Ahsan, expressed opposition to the government's proposed constitutional amendment. However, taking into account the prevailing circumstances, a majority of politicians acknowledged and commended the government's decision (Ghuman, 2014).

**Table 4**  
*Military Courts Established in 2015*

Pakistan		
Sr.	Province	Military Courts
1	Punjab	3
2	Sindh	2
3	KPK	3
4	Baluchistan	1
5	Karachi	2
Grand Total		11

Source: (Anwar, 2015: “Army Chief Approves More Military Courts”, 2015).

Meanwhile, the constitutional amendment led to the establishment of 11 military courts across Pakistan in the initial phase, primarily to handle cases involving terrorists (Anwar, 2015). Military courts found 274 individuals guilty between 2015 and 2017. Of these, military courts sentenced 161 individuals to death and condemned 113 others to jail. Simultaneously, their admission of guilt led to the conviction of a staggering 94.5 percent of individuals (Hashim, 2017).

### Peace Diplomacy and Visits to Afghanistan: Steps to Peace

Afghanistan has been a breeding ground for violence and terrorist activities targeted at Pakistan for last many decades. The Pakistan Taliban has effectively utilized the border to carry out their terrorist activities (Rashid, 2015). Mullah Fazalullah, the TTP chief, arranged the 2014 APS attack from Afghan territory. Mullah Fazalullah and Umar Ameer, also known as Aurangzeb, analyzed the tragic incident and attributed responsibility for the attack to Umar Ameer. As a result, Umar Ameer appointed Asif, also known as Haji Kamran, as the operation's commander. Haji Kamran partitioned his entire contingent into two factions and executed the calamitous operation. Therefore, the APS tragedy on December 16, 2014, deeply affected the entire nation (ARY News, 2020).

On December 17, 2014, General Raheel Sharif and Lieutenant General Rizwan Akhtar flew to Afghanistan and met with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani. Following the APS attack, their main goal was to suppress the TTP's hiding places in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the primary objective of this meeting was to handover Mulla Fazalullah to the authorities in Pakistan. During the discussion, General Raheel Sharif conveyed a resolute message regarding Kabul's assistance in combating terrorism, emphasizing the need for joint efforts between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Both authorities exchanged counterterrorism ideas. This step had expanded the scope of the partnership between the two countries (Paliwal, 2016).

Following this visit, the Afghan government demonstrated their commitment to combating terrorism, prompting the Afghan security forces to initiate a military campaign against the hideouts of the TTP in Afghanistan with the aim of eradicating them. The Afghan government's action was commendable. Nonetheless, a group of 16 Afghan parliamentary members traveled to Pakistan and held meetings with Pakistani authorities, including Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Both parties had demonstrated their attentiveness and collaboration in addressing the underlying causes of terrorism. These measures involved a significant focus on combating terrorism in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Nevertheless, these diplomatic initiatives fostered a harmonious ambiance between the two nations. Afghan forces apprehended five militants implicated in the APS attack and subsequently sent them to authorities in Pakistan (Rehan, 2021).

In May 2015, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his delegation, which included Sartaj Aziz, General Raheel Sharif, Syed Tariq Fatem, Aizaz Ahmad Choudhary, Major General Asim Bajwa, and other officials, visited Afghanistan. During the visit, they expressed their admiration for the joint efforts of both countries in combating terrorism. Nawaz Sharif also vehemently denounced the Taliban and their activities in Afghanistan and neighboring region. He pledged Pakistan's support for Afghanistan in the fight against terrorism and emphasized the importance of fostering a strong bond between the two nations. He also popularized the slogan "Pak-Afghan Dosti Pinda Baad" (Long live Pakistan-Afghanistan Friendship). In response, President Ghani also acknowledged the cooperation of Pakistan and ensured that the "enemies of Pakistan were the enemies of Afghanistan" (Haider & Haider, 2015). General Raheel Sharif, during this visit, affirmed Pakistan's unwavering commitment to assist Afghanistan in its endeavors for peace, specifically in combating terrorism. He acknowledged that neither country would use its land for terrorist actions. He also promised to treat "Afghanistan's enemy as Pakistan's enemy" (Haider & Haider, 2015).

In December 2015, President Ashraf Ghani visited Pakistan to attend the Heart of Asia conference. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif welcomed President Ashraf Ghani at Islamabad Airport with a 21-gun salute and a Guard of Honor, a diplomatic gesture that aimed to establish good relations with neighboring countries, particularly Afghanistan. However, it was unfortunate that President Ashraf Ghani questioned Pakistan's performance and efforts in combating terrorism. However, another aspect of Ghani's address focused on the domestic political pressure within Afghanistan, as Afghan politicians believed that Pakistan had provided support to the Afghan Taliban (Mashal & Nordland, 2015).

At that point, Afghan authorities insisted on eradicating Afghan Taliban safe havens in Pakistan. On the other hand, Pakistan demanded that Afghanistan cease the terrorist assaults carried out by the TTP, who are based in Pakistan but operate from Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the United States desired Pakistan to actively participate in the negotiating process with the Afghan Taliban. Subsequently, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the United States collectively initiated peace talks with the Taliban. The Afghan



authorities acknowledged their contentment (Mashal & Nordland, 2015). The Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) convened multiple conferences in 2016 due to the issue of Afghanistan. The QCG aimed to assist Afghanistan in the peace process with the Taliban, potentially contributing to peace and stability (Rehan, 2021).

Subsequently, following the APS incident, the visit of the Afghan delegation to Pakistan fostered a favorable perception between the two adjacent nations (Rehan, 2021). The 2015 visit of Pakistani authorities to Afghanistan was a direct response to the Afghan proposal (Haider & Haider, 2015). Ashraf Ghani's visit to Pakistan in December of the same year proved to be highly unsatisfactory due to both internal and external political dangers. Consequently, he vehemently condemned Pakistan's involvement in the peace process. Future connections between the two countries were therefore characterized by fluctuations and challenges (Mashal & Nordland, 2015). Nevertheless, the two countries maintained cooperation in security efforts, leading to the elimination of the mastermind behind the APS attack and other suicide bombers by a drone strike in Afghanistan in mid-2016 (Khan, 2016).

### **Military Dimensions in the Ground of Zarb-e-Azb 2015–2016**

From June 2014 to November 2015, Pakistani military troops conducted several operations in NWA and effectively seized control of the areas of Miran Shah, Mir Ali, Boya, Darpa Khel Gharushti, Datta Khel, and Dawagar from terrorist groups. The aim of these efforts was to stop terrorists from infiltrating the entire agency. In the meantime, the action claimed the lives of 3 security personnel, injured 15, and killed 25 terrorists. Meanwhile, the Khyber Agency operated as a refuge for illegal activity and terrorism across Pakistan. In contrast, the Khyber Agency's geography had an impact on surrounding agencies, including Kurram, Mohmand, and Orakzai, as well as the Peshawar region. As a result, the Pakistani Army launched Operation Khyber I and II within the agency from October 2014 to May 2015. The action claimed the lives of 44 military personnel and injured 180 others. However, this vigorous approach resulted in the deaths of 177 terrorists and injuries to 157 more. The army successfully eliminated the hideouts and bases of terrorists. However, the success of Zarb-e-Azb in NWA led many terrorists to seek refuge in the Shawal Valley, regarded as their final stronghold. During the Shawal Valley operation (Shallow Cut), the army exerted control over the areas of Ziarat Kai, Asman Panga, and Pari-Garh and participated in several confrontations with militants. During Operation Shallow Cut, the army employed a three-pronged encircling tactic to successfully clear this area. Furthermore, the operation successfully blocked off the Shawal Valley for the movements of terrorists. This operation provided security to the Shakai, Badar, and Ladha/Makeen valleys by gaining control of the passes. This decisive action resulted in the martyrdom of 1 soldier and the injuries of 3 others (Salik, 2019).

Following the military operations in the Shawal Valley, the terrorists attempted to take control of strategically important territory in the SWA. As a result, from September 2015 to January 2016, the military carried out numerous operations, including "Barwand Finale," "Kundi Gar Sar," and "Girni Sar," which effectively eliminated terrorist safe havens. However, a large number of terrorists had relocated to the neighboring frontier areas where the military had less presence or did not exist. In January 2016, the military launched Operation Bora Khel with the goal of destroying terrorists' secure hideouts. The military's participation in Operation Zarb-e-Azb efficiently eliminated terrorist hideouts and logistics hubs (only in the core areas of NWA). As a result, the terrorists relocated to the periphery areas, received logistical support from Afghanistan, and constructed trenches and tunnels in Tochi Valley to fortify themselves against potential artillery and air attacks. Additionally, they received sympathy and assistance from neighboring regions. The army conducted the operation and gained control up to the Dwatoi area. Meanwhile, from February to March 2016, the Army conducted "Operation High Tide," successfully eliminating terrorist hideouts and logistic bases that connected it to Shawal Valley. This military operation resulted in the combat deaths of two soldiers and the neutralization of fifteen terrorists. From April to February 2016, the army conducted operations in the western regions of Data Khel and Memon Panga. The army took these actions to maintain international border security and eliminate extremist influence. 12 terrorists and 2 security personnel lost their lives in combat during these operations. In March 2016, FC launched "Operation Faseel-e-Ahan II" in Bajaur Agency, successfully taking Gardo Top and Sapparai Top. Meanwhile, the security personnel completed their mission without incurring any casualties. To control

and suppress terrorist activities, security forces carried out effective operations in FATA, where terrorists attempted to move from tribal areas and establish themselves in neighboring frontier regions. Intelligence-based operations began in Sawabi, Mardan, Bannu, Nowshera, and Charsada districts. The key stakeholders in these operations were local administrative entities, which successfully achieved their administrative objectives through the planned use of armed forces limited to essential bases (Salik, 2019). Meanwhile, the third phase of the Khyber operation, likely Khyber III, was launched in the Tirah valley, close to the Pak-Afghan border, while Operation Zarb-e-Azb continued in NWA (Hussain, 2019).

Operation Zarb-e-Azb was a significant achievement in the fight against terrorism. The reduction of terrorist incidents across the country began. The security situation in the tribal areas remained stable. The Pakistani government also asserted its authority and ensured law enforcement. Fortunately, the Armed Forces accomplished their objectives through effective efforts and courageously executed combat campaigns in the tribal regions. Nevertheless, the entire Pakistani population played a significant role as a stakeholder and beneficiary of these operations. They wholeheartedly supported the armed forces and embraced the state's security measures. As a result, the armed forces were able to achieve notable successes (Salik, 2019).

### Outcomes of the Nexus of Civil and Military (2014–2016)

From 2009 to 2013, military forces carried out numerous operational strikes in the tribal areas like erstwhile FATA. As a result, a significant number of militants, civilians, and security personnel contracted infections.

**Table 5**

*Operational Strikes and Fatalities in 2009–2013*

Year	No. of Operational Strikes	Fatalities		
		Militants	Civilians	Security Personals
2009	571	5568	525	134
2010	262	2554	64	3
2011	143	1007	30	0
2012	109	919	37	4
2013	90	614	49	10
Total	1175	10662	705	151

Source: (Hussain, 2019)

The decisive initiative of civil government and military establishments from 2014 to 2016 in Pakistan's tribal areas has been successful in controlling terrorist attacks throughout Pakistan.

**Table 6**

*Operational Strikes and Fatalities in 2014–2016*

Year	No. of Operational Strikes	Fatalities		
		Militants	Civilians	Security Personals
2014	131	1940	9	4
2015	143	1545	3	12
2016	95	481	4	7
Total	369	2571	16	23

Source: (Hussain, 2019)

However, during the years of Operation Zarb-e-Azb, militant deaths increased, and consequently, civilian and security personnel deaths decreased in the tribal areas and as well as throughout country (Hussain, 2019). Following two years of operations, Pakistan's position in the world GTI rank improved from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> in 2016 as a result of the government and military stance (Ghazanfar, 2016). The nexus between the civil and military institutions, along with their collaboration with the military and government, made the

decline of terrorism possible. However, the nexus effectively controlled militant attacks on a large scale, enabling the government to achieve its objectives and assert its authority in tribal areas (Nawaz, [2016](#)).

## Conclusion

The study concludes that during the 2013 negotiating process between Pakistan government and terrorist groups was failed because of the lack of understanding the long-term benefits of peace in the behavior of terrorists, and their associates. Furthermore, terrorist attacks on Karachi International Airport and APS in 2014 compelled the government of Pakistan to launch Zarb-e-Azb operation. APS incident even changed the political scenario of Pakistan as two political parties PTI and PAT ended their sit-ins and joined the MPC with the goal of eliminating terrorism. Resultantly, civil and military establishments got united and gained popular support from masses and political parties for launching further military operations against terrorists. In this backdrop, during 2014–2016 various strategic steps were taken by the government. For example, NAP was approved, military tribunals were established for two years and NACTA was given extensive authority. It is a fact that Pakistan’s civil military nexus not only played an important role in improving diplomatic relations with Afghanistan and got its cooperation in preventing cross-border assaults from her soil into Pakistan but also achieved significant victories through Zarb-e-Azb operation and minimize terrorism in the country. As a result, Pakistan's place on the GTI index had improved from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup>. The study finds that Pakistan’s counter-terrorism policies under the patronage of civil and military nexus remained relatively effective from 2014 to 2016; however it is vital to comprehend that applying peace discourse perpetuate the long-lasting peace in the country in particular, and the world in general. Subsequently, savvy economics of peace is the viable solution for the generations to come in this region.

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