



Journal of Political Science and International Relationship (JPSIR)

ISSN: 3065-6125 (ONLINE)

VOLUME 3 ISSUE 1 (2026)



PUBLISHED BY
E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA

Beyond Ethnicity: Pashtun Identity as a Strategic Variable in Pakistan's Counterinsurgency Strategy in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2018-2024

Nifaz Zaman^{1*}, Augan Malik¹

Article Information

Received: July 21, 2026

Accepted: October 01, 2026

Published: October 15, 2026

Keywords

Counterinsurgency, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement, Securitization, Tehrik-I-Taliban Pakistan

ABSTRACT

Pakistan's counterinsurgency in KP has been studied under the broader rubric of Pashtun identity, which has been accorded a background role in a conflict defined largely by militancy, geography, and state capacity. This article argues that identity is not merely manipulated by other actors; it is strategically constructed by state and insurgent actors and contested and mobilized in ways that affect the legitimacy and durability of counterinsurgency outcomes. The article builds on securitization theory, the civil-war literature on ethnicity and insurgent organization, and the scholarly work on civil-military relations in Pakistan to design a conceptual framework that allows it to differentiate between identity-as-category and identity-as-strategy and test it in Pakistan's frontier policy between 2018 and 2024. The analysis shows that the securitization of Pashtun civic mobilization was closely linked to, and likely facilitated, the rise of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan since 2021, most evident in the newly merged districts where the merger's governance promises were least realized. The article concludes that counterinsurgency strategies that do not institutionalize ethnic identity as a useful distinction between insurgent threat and civic dissent risk inadvertently producing an "identity cleavage" that is self-reinforcing and a source of conflict, and that this applies to frontier and borderland conflicts that extend beyond the Pakistani experience.

INTRODUCTION

The Pakistan-Afghanistan border has not been examined beyond the security issue. The region now called Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), including the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), has been primarily examined using the language of counterterrorism, the presence of militant sanctuaries, drone strikes, military operations, and infiltration from across the border (Abbas, 2014). Scholars generally sympathetic to the region's population have tended to focus on it mainly as a humanitarian and/or development issue, examining the effects of displacement, limited service provision, and underdevelopment on the conflict rather than the opposite: that underdevelopment and limited service provision might influence the nature of the conflict. Both have approached the region's major ethnic group, the Pashtun, as a mere demographic group, and its identity as a fixed, cultural characteristic rather than a political identity that can be defined, claimed, and used as a political tool by both the state and its opponents.

This article suggests that Pashtun identity was a political instrument, rather than just a cultural context, in Pakistan's counterinsurgency policy in KP during 2018-2024. In this period, there are two developments that make it analytically distinct. The first is the constitutional merger of FATA into KP in 2018, which marked the end of the almost 100-year-long special legal status of tribal districts and the integration of the federal administration of FATA into KP. The first is the constitutional merger of FATA into KP in 2018, which brought an end to a nearly 100-year-long exceptional legal status of the tribal areas, and it was planned to ensure complete political and

administrative integration of FATA with KP. The second is the Taliban regime's rise to power in Kabul in August 2021, which not only changed the security landscape in the region but also paved the way for the sudden surge of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in KP in 2023 (Malik *et al.*, 2025; Sayed & Hamming, 2023; Younus *et al.*, 2023). During the intervening period, the state of Pakistan had to make a strategic decision: whether it should pursue an opening as part of the post-merger experience using an identity-sensitive approach to governance, or return to the securitized military posture which had been the hallmark of frontier policy for the previous 20 years. This article argues that the state largely made the decision and that lessons may be drawn from the counterinsurgency literature's analytic treatment of ethnic identity. What is the practical importance of this difference, if there is any, other than conceptual? The two options have distinct policy footprints, which are clearly visible. It would seem logical that a state with an interest in an identity-sensitive mode of consolidation would follow the path of building its civilian institutions, safeguarding space for non-violent political mobilization by Pashtuns, and viewing the articulation of ethnic grievances as a governance issue to be addressed through courts, elections, and service delivery. A state that resorts to securitized control would be likely to view the same expression of grievance as an intelligence and law-and-order issue, regardless of whether it is violent or not, and would involve civic movements as "counter-terrorism". The second stance is more in line with the empirical record of the past years, which eventually led to the state proscribing the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) under anti-terrorism laws in

¹ Department of International Relations and World Economy, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Kazakhstan

* Corresponding author's e-mail: nifazzaman149@gmail.com

2024 (Amnesty, 2024).

This argument is presented in the following five steps. First, it connects the case to three literatures, which do not speak directly to each other, such is the nature of the subject: securitization theory, which posits that issues are framed as existential threats (Buzan *et al.*, 1998); the civil-war literature on ethnicity and insurgency, which has been historically skeptical of direct causality between ethnic difference and civil war (Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Kalyvas, 2006); and literature on Pakistani civil-military relations, which explains the institutional incentives that make security establishments prone to securitization in the first place (Siddiq, 2017). Second, it suggests a conceptual divide between identity-as-category, which is an analytic classification used by both researchers and states, and identity-as-strategy, which denotes the ‘strategic use of identity markers by political and insurgent groups in order to build some legitimacy, attract some supporters, or legitimate some coercion’. Third, it recounts the history of the national development of KP as an extraordinary security space and demonstrates how the previous centuries of frontier government have set the institutional frameworks that were handed over by the post-2018 era. Fourth, it uses the conceptual framework to examine two related processes that occurred within KP from 2018 to 2024: The emergence of Pashtun insurgent narratives that resonated with their grievances and the increasing securitization of Pashtun peaceful civic mobilization by the state. Fifth, it highlights the implications for counterinsurgency practice and theory: If states wrongly equate ethnic insurgent threat with ethnic civic dissent, they risk exacerbating the former into a self-reinforcing insurgent resilience force.

This argument goes beyond Pakistan. What all these insurgencies have in common is that they are located in a region that has had exceptional governance in the recent past, in a state facing an ethnically different political center, and in a neighboring state where the same ethnic group has political influence. Therefore, the way a state deals with the identity aspect of such conflicts, rather than the military aspect alone, is a general issue that doesn’t just pertain to the Pakistani case. In this respect, the KP case is a tough challenge for a more general position, which is that the theory of counterinsurgency hasn’t been systematic enough to deal with the issue of identity management, but not the issue of identity itself. The contribution of this article is, therefore, twofold. Academically, it suggests a conceptual language-the category versus the strategy of identity-that can be transferred to other frontier and borderland conflicts where one ethnic group is the state’s suspected enemy, its claimed citizenry, and the ethnic foundation of an adjacent government. While there are important single-country studies of the PTM, the TTP, and the FATA merger, none has been able to systemically link the three domains within the framework of a shared theoretical lens that can advance arguments that can specify, in advance and not in the end, the conditions under which one can strengthen

the other. The practical implications of the article are that it addresses the questions of security policymakers and analysts who must decide, under often intense time constraints and with limited information, whether an unfamiliar civic movement that arises from a conflict-torn, ethnically divided population is a security threat that needs counterterrorism measures or just another political player that can be dealt with through conventional policing and judicial oversight. The KP case illustrates that this third, “cautious,” category is the least stable of the three, insofar as the strategic actions of a movement, such as its deliberate presentation, for example, of itself as nonviolent change depending on state treatment, so that classification is not only a description but also a production: it is the movement’s actions that shape its classification.

Theoretical Framework

Securitization Theory and the Construction of Threat

The Copenhagen School’s securitization theory states that security is not a physical reality but a discursive construct, that is, that it is an issue that is “made” security by an “actor” who, in a “security speech act,” presents it as an existential threat to a group, and the audience accepts that framing as a reality (Buzan *et al.*, 1998). In the KP case, this framework is helpful in focusing on the question of “how” rather than the “whether,” as it focuses on the issue of whether it is “really” a threat, but also on the question of how it becomes a threat and what consequences follow. When it is successfully securitized, it exits from the space of ordinary political contest and enters into the space of extraordinary measures, such as surveillance, detention, and proscription (Deleixhe *et al.*, 2021). Given the nature of ethnic framing, state actors are more inclined to use it for coercive policy in the Borderland, as a result of the populations’ cross-border ties, historically unique legal status, and geographic proximity to militant sanctuaries (Deleixhe *et al.*, 2021).

Critics of the theory of securitization argue that it offers little insight into the question of what makes some securitization moves effective and others less so, and that its focus on the state can obscure the perspective and agency of securitized populations (Aslam & Neads, 2021). This critique is directly relevant to KP, where the same military/political establishment that securitizes Pashtun civic dissent relies on the distinction between “good” and “bad” Pashtun politics to keep itself legitimate with respect to the wider Pashtun populace it continues to rule. This tension is seen in the Pakistani military’s public discourse on PTM as a genuine representative movement even if it is problematic, and as a means of manipulating it for foreign influence that is seen as hostile (Jan & Khan, 2024). This oscillation itself confirms that securitization is an ongoing process, that is not settled, is a contested process, and that the audience for whom its acceptance is necessary (in this case, the wider Pashtun public) has not been uniformly accepting.

Ethnicity, Insurgency and Primordialist Explanations

There is a parallel and largely independent literature that has focused directly on the linkage between ethnicity and civil conflict. One of the more influential of these works, linked with (Fearon & Laitin, 2003), challenges the common-sense notion that ethnic diversity is a proxy for civil war. Rather, the insurgency is more likely to be the result of conditions conducive to guerrilla warfare, irrespective of ethnicity: low state capacity, challenging terrain, and bad governance in peripheral areas (Fearon & Laitin, 2003). On this view, ethnicity is a less important cause of conflict than a factor that can become available to insurgents and states when conflict has already begun, such as the informational benefits that ethnically concentrated social networks might be able to offer local insurgents versus a state whose agents and networks come from other parts of the country (Fearon & Laitin, 2003). This is very much a case of Pakistan, where the majority of military and civil officials are Punjabi-speaking, and which historically has operated with relatively low levels of social embeddedness in Pashtun tribal areas, a structural imbalance that predates and transcends any specific counterinsurgency campaign (Abbas, 2014). Comparative studies of ethnic conflict also find that it is not simply a matter of ethnic difference; in fact, conflict often persists despite the absence of such difference (Birhan & Christopher, 2024).

The importance of the micro-dynamics of civil war violence complicates the picture even more, as detailed in Kalyvas (2006) study. Kalyvas also suggests that the violence in civil wars must not be seen as a completely random phenomenon or as one that is essentially ideological; rather, it is determined by how much control incumbents and insurgents possess in the territories and by the difficulty of separating combatants from civilians in situations of imperfect information (Kalyvas, 2006). The “identification problem” is particularly pronounced in highly ethnically divided border areas where the state’s lack in reliably distinguish insurgents and the wider population makes it difficult to avoid collective and ethnic suspicion, rather than individual or evidence-based suspicion. In KP, this means that the problem the state has in identifying TTP fighters amongst regular Pashtun civilians is not just a problem of intelligence failure; it’s a structural issue of counterinsurgency in ethnically defined areas where the temptation and ease is to target the civilian population as a whole, instead of the insurgents who are within it. Kalyvas’s typology also suggests that the strength of this temptation ought to correspond to how much state control there was, but how little. And how much the contiguous territory of KP is probably more in line with this than the more settled and pacified regions, or the more strongly insurgent regions.

Staniland (2018) research on insurgent organizations also suggests that the social networks, such as ethnic and kinship networks, before an insurgent organization’s inception are an important factor in determining the extent of cohesion and resilience. All this is consistent with this explanation

of the TTP’s ability to survive despite years of Pakistani military pressure and the presence of long-running social and kinship relations within Pashtun communities on both sides of the Durand Line (Sayed & Hamming, 2023; Younus *et al.*, 2023). As this organizational account reminds us, TTP’s reconstitution is not just due to the political opportunity that ensued in Kabul following the fall of the government, as opportunity per se is not sufficient to explain reconstitution but only one of its prerequisites; the social infrastructure for mobilization must remain, and Staniland’s framework focuses attention right on the prerequisite.

Institutional Incentive to Securitize: Civil-Military Relations

A third literature on civil-military relations in Pakistan provides the institutional logic that links the threat construction that securitization theory offers with the pattern that would be observed in KP. In a pattern of ‘praetorianism’, Siddiq (2017) argues that the Pakistani military has gained institutional and material legitimacy by placing itself as the primary internal and external security provider in the economy and political life of the nation. In this model, the military’s institutional interest is not just to defeat insurgents but to maintain the core of the military in the affairs of government, which would favor the framing of frontier problems as security problems and seek military and intelligence solutions as opposed to solutions involving the building of institutions by civilians, which would imply a reduced, rather than expanded, military role. It is not as if the security establishment in Pakistan is conjuring up threats out of thin air, but TTP’s attacks are not abstract and are supported by the toll of casualties as shown in section 5.1. It is far from the case, however, that when there is a real threat and a clearly defined and non-violent civic movement posing awkward challenges to the military, institutional biases outlined by Siddiq (2017) make it more likely that security institutions will try to avoid separating these two. This civil-military lens provides insight into the fact that the securitizing pattern discussed in this article continued and even intensified over a number of years, despite a consistently non-violent track record of the PTM.

The social bases of rebellion and insurgent organization

These three literatures collectively lead to a gap. Securitization theory offers insights into how identity can be used as a tool to construct state threats, and to date, there is little engagement with the specific dynamics of insurgent recruitment. The ethnicity and civil war literature has been better on the importance of ethnic networks for insurgent organization, but has paid less attention to the extent to which state counterinsurgent practice can contribute to the strengthening of the very ethnic divisions it sought to manage. Civil-military relations literature focuses on the institutional advantages of securitization, but does not usually link

those advantages with insurgent strategy on the other side of the conflict. Though Pakistan-specific scholarly work on the FATA merger and PTM and the post-2021 resurgence of the TTP has documented each of these processes empirically (Akhtar & Ahmed, 2023; Younus *et al.*, 2023), most of the scholars have tended to view them as parallel developments rather than as interacting faces of a single strategic dynamic.

Towards a Conceptual Gap: Identity As a Strategic Variable

To fill that gap, this article suggests that Pashtun identity is not a stable, ethnographic category, but rather one that is vigorously contested and strategically defined and claimed by both the Pakistani state and TTP. It is an extension of the existing literature on Pakistan that has explored the PTM as a human rights movement (Aslam & Neads, 2021), on TTP as a militant organization (Ahmad & Ahlawat, 2023) and on the FATA merger as a governance reform (Ahmed *et al.*, 2021; Khan, 2021), all of them studied in isolation from each other. The next section builds this literature by posing one question: what factors help make a state's management of ethnic identity more effective when it comes to supporting, not hindering, insurgent mobilization in a counterinsurgency setting?

In addition, differences between identity-as-category and identity-as-strategy must be considered in the context of KP's evolving institutional setting following their 2018 merger. The magnitude of the merger was not just one of constitutional integration, but also on the political expectations that the populations had, following an exceptional method of governance. The old tribal areas were formally integrated into KP and demands began to take greater importance for ordinary civilian institutions, for political representation, justice and public services. When these expectations were not met by institutional birth, identity might constitute a means of voicing collective discontent with governance in a language. The recent study on post-conflict Transition in North Waziristan also reveals that there is a close relationship between spatial reordering and other conditions of the conflict such as borderland issues and identities after the formal reduction of conflict (Makki *et al.*, 2024).

Historical Context: From Exceptional Frontier to Provincial District

The tribal belt along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border saw colonial-era regulations, such as those outlined in the Frontier Crimes Regulation, which de facto excluded it from the constitutional and judicial norms of British India and subsequently, Pakistan (Khan, 2021). It was once thought that the reason for this exceptional status was a security one, because it was deemed more appropriate to have a buffer system for indirect rule based on tribal elders (Maliks), and for a legal system based on local custom and Jirga, rather than a formal legal system as elsewhere (Yousaf & FurrukhZad, 2020). This, however,

had long-term consequences, by depriving the region of the services of courts, police and civil administration elsewhere in Pakistan that proved to be highly favorable to the mounting of the sanctuary of militant groups as the region was drawn into the wider regional conflicts of the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Akhtar, 2022; Group, 2013).

The Afghanistan–British India boundary was also drawn in colonial times, separating Pashtun from Pashtun, making it both an ethnic and geopolitical boundary (Akhtar & Niazi, 2024). This border became an insurgent zone after 9/11. In 2007 TTP emerged as a formal umbrella organization comprising many local militant groups and had a significant grip over the tribal areas prior to a series of Pakistani military operations from 2009 to 2017, which eventually weakened its territorial control in major military operations in Swat, South Waziristan, and North Waziristan (Abbas, 2014; Akhtar, 2022). The state's National Action Plan (2014) was a post-2014 response to a major terror attack on a school in Peshawar and introduced a robust counterterrorism strategy and framework across the country, in KP, this included a combination of military campaigns and new legal and administrative strategies to consolidate territorial gains. The military threat and administrative consolidation had significantly limited TTP's operational ability by the mid-2010s, and by 2017 TTP had become divided, lost control of its territory, and had seen its membership dwindle, as (Akhtar, 2022) reported.

The 2018 Twenty-Fifth Constitutional Amendment saw the integration of FATA into KP and for the first time in modern history ordinary Pakistani law, courts and provincial representation was extended to the newly incorporated districts (Ali *et al.*, 2025). This was part of the state's counterinsurgency success and presented as such to Pakistanis. This was the culmination of the state's counterinsurgency victory; once the territory was militarily cleared, it would now be politically integrated, with colonial-era exceptionalism removed and the ordinary provincial citizen substituted in its place. The post-2021 revival as well as the securitized response of the state to Pashtun civic mobilization discussed in the next section needs to be read in the context of an ostensibly settled frontier problem in which military victory was explicitly defined as facilitating a transition to governance rather than only a temporary ceasefire.

The 2018 merger also led to a transition dilemma from the formal integration into the constitution to the practical institutional integration. What went away with the old legal structures, did not go away with the old patterns of governance that re-emerged with decades of exceptional administration. This is because the State's relationship with the population can't be changed by constitutional amendment only. To make formal citizenship a reality in the daily lives of people, they need access to police and to the courts, as well as to local administration, service provision and political participation. The institutional and administrative issues posed by the merger are highlighted

by Khan (2021), and the influence of the reorganization of space and authority on local identity and governance has been shown in the context of post-conflict North Waziristan, wherein the process of reorganization after the conflict period continues to affect local identities and governance (Makki *et al.*, 2024).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design and Scope

This study uses a qualitative single case research methodology to investigate the case of Pashtun identity as a strategic variable in counterinsurgency environment in KP, Pakistan during 2018-2024. The analysis of the collected information takes place by the application of qualitative document analysis, process tracing and the use of secondary quantitative data on security trends, in a descriptive way. This design suits the concerns of the article that situates the issue of whether ethnic identity is a cause of insurgency in its own right, and how it is defined, manipulated, and used strategically by state, insurgent, and civic actors in a dynamic counterinsurgency context. KP is viewed as an example case within a broader historical context of frontier governance, insurgency and counterinsurgency. The analysis of this period starts from 2018, as the merger of the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) with KP is formalized according to the 25th Constitutional Amendment, which has provided a new political and administrative context for the relationship between security, governance, citizenship and Pashtun political mobilization. It also covers the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021, the re-emergence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the proscription of Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) in 2024. The pre-2018 period is used only to provide the historical and institutional context required to understand the post-2018 period.

Sources and Evidence

The study uses the documentary data, data from the study, and quantitative secondary data. The documentary material also contains Pakistani state documents about counterterrorism and post merger governance, including materials under the National Action Plan which are related to the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), and Election Commission of Pakistan records related to electoral incorporation of the newly merged districts. These materials serve as a foundation to prepare the institutional and policy environment in which post-2018 counterinsurgency and political integration took place.

The analysis is also based on the documented statements and public communications related to the PTM, the Pakistani state and military, and the TTP found in the academic and policy literature. Special focus is paid to sources that record Pashtun political grievances, connection between civic mobilization and security discourse, and the employment of Pashtun grievances in insurgent discourses, and to state responses to PTM

in the study period. Reports from human-rights and civil-society groups are also included where they report proscription of PTM and other restrictions on political activity.

Peer-reviewed scholarship is available to offer empirical evidence and a contextual interpretation of the FATA-KP merger, post-merger governance, PTM mobilization, the organizational development and resurgence of the TTP, Pashtun political identity, civil-military relations and community-level mechanisms of conflict management. Some public utterances of political, military, civic and insurgent actors are present in this secondary literature, but not in a separate archive of public statements created specifically for this research; as such, they are seen as documented secondary evidence in this study, rather than a systematic collection of primary source statements.

The qualitative component is complemented by some secondary quantitative security data collected from the annual report of the Center for Research and Security Studies (CRSS) and the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS). The data are analyzed to highlight shifts in the location, volume and intensity of militant activities in KP pre and post the resurgence of TTP in 2021. The quantitative evidence is used descriptively and is not used to develop a statistical model or to estimate the independent causal effect of identity related variables on violence.

Limitations

There are some limitations to the research design. The study is a single case study and qualitative analysis which was based mainly on documentary, scholarly, institutional and secondary quantitative evidence. It thus does not directly reflect the political attitudes of individual Pashtuns and it does not give direct evidence of individual recruitment decisions within the TTP.

Second, the evidence available is not adequate to draw a direct causal link between the securitization and the re-emergence of the TTP after 2021. The plausibility of the proposed identity-based mechanism can be gauged through the use of the temporal relationship, as well as documentary evidence, but this cannot be used to demonstrate, in the absence of state treatment of Pashtun civic mobilization, how the TTP may have evolved.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Pashtun Identity and Insurgent Mobilization

The recent rise of the TTP after 2021 cannot be attributed to any cross border sanctuary. While the Taliban took back power in Kabul, it is undeniable that for TTP, this represented an increase in space and pressure on the Afghan side, it still needed to be combined with a favorable social environment to increase their recruitment and territorial control over KP. In this instance, identity was not just important, but also strategic. Since 2021, TTP's public rhetoric has not only contained religious-ideological narratives but also grievance narratives regarding the mistreatment of Pashtun civilians in past

military operations, forced displacement and the lack of full implementation of the merger of the FATA (Shah *et al.*, 2024; Younus *et al.*, 2023). It is an intentional strategic ploy, as it seeks to expand its base beyond its ideologically committed group of followers by influencing people who are more likely to be fed up with the state's heavy-handedness and often distant approach to Pashtun interests than to religious ideology, and to make insurgent recruitment look like ethnic grievance politics (Ahmad & Ahlawat, 2023).

The extent of the resurgence is reflected in the compiled security trends data of KP that CRSS has prepared. The total number of conflict casualties in the province decreased from 935 in 2018 to a low of 521 in 2020; with the return of the Taliban to Kabul, the conflict casualties started to rise to 642 in 2021, and sharply to 1,366 in 2022 and 2,297 in 2023, when about sixty percent of Pakistan's total conflict casualties were recorded in KP (Studies, 2024). This trend is confirmed by the data on militant attacks as reported in Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICS) for 2023, which shows 423 militant attacks in the year as compared to 186 attacks concentrated in the newly merged districts, which is the territory that was claimed to have solved the frontier problem in 2018 (Studies, 2025). This focus of renewed violence within the newly amalgamated districts is analytically significant as it indicates that the resurgence of TTP is strategically focused on an area where the state's governance promises have not been met, meaningfully following an insurgent strategy of exploiting unmet expectations arising as a result of the amalgamation process (Asghar, 2024).

TTP's organizational strength during this period also aligns with the position of Staniland (2018) that the cohesion of insurgents is not only based on territorial control but also on social networks. Despite territorial control being lost in 2014-2017, TTP managed to hold on to kinship networks and clans within the Pashtun communities that crossed the Durand Line, which served as the social infrastructure that facilitated the reorganization of these communities when the political opportunity of the Taliban's takeover in 2021 emerged (Sayed & Hamming, 2023). Ideologically, the group also has been flexible and has adopted or integrated smaller splinter groups and then recalibrated its lines of appeal to include both a more transnational and more local appeal to Pashtun autonomy and resentment of Punjabi-dominated state institutions (Ali *et al.*, 2025; Shah *et al.*, 2024). The cross-border sanctuary alone is insufficient to explain the post-2021 revival, as it was only a catalyst that enabled a fragile, yet resilient and flexible, social network with an identity-inflected narrative to harness it, in part through ethnic and kinship-based ties.

Securitization of The Pashtun Political Sphere: From PTM to Proscription

TTP's resurgence shows the insurgent aspects of the strategy of identity while the Pakistani state's harsh

response towards PTM movement demonstrates the other side of the coin, namely, the securitizing aspects of the strategy of identity, which has not been sudden in 2024, but has gradually grown over the entire length of the study period. The PTM came into existence in 2018 as a grassroots civil rights movement with demands for accountability for extrajudicial killings, an end to enforced disappearances, demining of the former tribal areas and more complete implementation of the constitutional rights that were promised in the merger (Aslam & Neads, 2021). The movement's opposition to militancy and its appeals to the language of constitutional citizenship, as opposed to ethnic separatism, from its inception, is proof enough of the identity-as-strategy argument for us to understand that the movement leaders knew that they needed to repeatedly and explicitly assert, publicly, that Pashtun grievance articulation was not what threatened the Pakistani state, but rather is itself part of it.

In spite of this framing, state and military communications consistently appeared to frame the movement as a security threat over the course of the year, sometimes stating they were foreign-sponsored, and other times aligning with security threats against the state (Jan & Khan, 2024). This trend continued over time, rather than abating. In the movement's early years, state reactions were focused on isolated detentions of individual protestors and limitations on specific rallies, as one contemporary observer described as 'ad hoc, improvisatory, reactive and not a result of a coherent policy.' In the years that followed, however, the trend took a more institutionalized form, with the movement's leaders, such as Manzoor Pashteen and Ali Wazir, being arrested multiple times for offences against public order and sedition, media reporting of the movement's rallies being limited and, over time, military representatives more frequently incorporating PTM activity into the public discourse on PTM. Foreseeing a political climate that is increasingly more unstable, many external groups have been supporting their own subversion in the old tribal areas (Aslam & Neads, 2021; Jan & Khan, 2024).

In October 2024, the Pakistani government officially declared the PTM a "proscribed organization" under the Anti-Terrorism Act, 1997, accusing it of activities that are harmful to public order and national security (Amnesty, 2024). The proscription allowed for the closure of the movement's offices and its finances, confiscation of its literature and a ban on any public statements or rallies by its members (Amnesty, 2024). This was days ahead of a planned movement gathering and its aftermath saw security forces clashed with activists trying to go ahead with the gathering, resulting in fatalities. The ban was described by human rights groups as being disproportionate and opaque and stated that the ban was used in conjunction with similar bans against other ethnic-rights movements in the region (Amnesty, 2024). At the start of 2026, thousands of PTM members were reportedly still on restrictive administrative lists that severely restricted their movement and political activities,

and several senior leaders were still detained without any formal charges, suggesting that the proscription of 2024 was not a short-term measure, but a long-term shift in the state's approach to Pashtun civic mobilization.

From a securitization theory point of view, this sequence can be compared to a textbook securitizing move by a political actor, the State, in this case the U.S. State, which initiated a sustained speech act to continually redefine a civic movement as an existential threat to security, and reached the exceptional measure it wanted, namely formal proscription under counterterrorism law (Buzan *et al.*, 1998). When read through the lens of the identity-as-strategy created in this article, the sequence has another implication. The state's claim to have absorbed a movement that had long and openly denounced violence with proscribed militias is an erasure of the distinction between Pashtun civic dissent and Pashtun insurgency, and between Pashtun nationalists and pro-ISI militants. The state's attempt to 'merge' a movement that had long and openly condemned violence with proscribed militant groups erases the difference between Pashtun civic dissent and Pashtun insurgency, and between Pashtun nationalists and pro-ISI militants. This is not just a campaign for human rights, it is also a strategic vulnerability as it provides TTP's narrative that the state does not in practice discriminate against its loyal Pashtun citizens and the enemies of the state (Ahmad & Ahlawat, 2023; Younus *et al.*, 2023).

This is especially important for the article's identity-as-strategy argument, since this distinction would be less pertinent to TTP. Both can be connected to the same social context, and address grievances with Pashtun people, but both have different political approaches and agendas. PTM has claimed itself as a civic movement for rights but TTP is an armed militant group. Considering these actors interchangeable, since they are from the same ethnic environment, can lead to the ethnic identity itself becoming a security indicator. While the article had already ended, the continued restrictions to PTM members' freedom of association and assembly following the proscription of the group in 2024 showed the issue of securitization of Pashtun civic mobilization had not been resolved by that time but continued beyond the scope of the article. Amnesty (2024) reported in 2026 that PTM activists had also been subjected to enforced disappearance issues after attending a provincial government meeting, thus showing that the issue of securitization of Pashtun civic mobilization was not resolved by the end of the article, but continued.

Strategic Costs of Securitization

However, the price of this securitizing pattern is exacerbated by the less than complete utilization of the merger in 2018. Direct political representation at the provincial level in the newly merged districts was a real institutional achievement and the first time the region had ever witnessed direct political representation of the districts at the provincial level following the 2019

KP Assembly elections (Ahmed *et al.*, 2021). The rates of turn-out was however lower than the provincial average and women's political participation was lower yet in these districts, a result of bad service delivery, the ongoing insecurity, low party penetration and widespread mistrust of civilian institutions in the areas only recently brought under ordinary governance (Ahmed *et al.*, 2021; Asghar, 2024). In fact, legal integration (courts, policing, compensation mechanisms, basic services in the merged districts) was well underway before substantive political incorporation took place, and has been uneven, even years into the constitutional transition (Khan, 2021).

This governance deficit directly relates to the identity-as-strategy argument. For local Pashtun communities, the reality of the state's citizenship is far more security citizenship than civic citizenship, especially in the districts where the state's citizenship is felt through security operations as opposed to functioning courts and schools, or compensation systems (Alam, 2021; Makki *et al.*, 2024). In this context, both PTM's rights-based approach and TTP's grievance-based approach are reacting to the same reality: of an exceptional form of governance, which has been characterized as security-first, in a region which was formally declared as being normalized. The state's securitization of the nonviolent one does, however, give the legitimization of after-the-fact credibility to the claim of the violent movement that peaceful paths for expression of Pashtun grievances do not work.

In this sense the counterinsurgency efforts in Pakistan have been more about legitimacy than force, and when security institutions are seen as tools of ethnic suspicion, their legitimacy is undermined in the exact manner that this has been done here. This is similar to what Lieven (2017) said in Pakistan that their counterinsurgency has always been local legitimacy oriented and not based on force, and that in that sense, its legitimacy is being undermined exactly as it has been in this case. Furthermore, it fits with Kalyvas' "indistinctness" problem: if a state cannot be certain if insurgents are civilians, it will instead assume that a block of civilians or a more prominent civic block of its citizens is suspect and thus look for signs of insurgency in them. It also fits with Kalyvas' "indistinctness" problem: if a state cannot be certain if insurgents are civilians, it will instead assume that a block of civilians or a more prominent civic block of its citizens is suspect and thus look for signs of insurgency in them.

Gendered and Generational Dimensions Of Identity Securitization

The costs of securitization may not be equally distributed in Pashtun society and the consideration of such internal variations heightens the identity-as-strategy argument further. The academic literature on the state of tribal women after the merger of the districts notes the persisting lack of identity documentation, education and formal political participation, which is a combination of consequences of the three processes of conflict, displacement, and post-merger transition that affected

women in the newly merged districts (Asghar, 2024). This relative invisibility has led to the gendered governance failure being less highlighted than other failures, such as those of the PTM; this is partly a result of the state's identity management strategy being built around the male-centered categories of 'combatant' and 'activist', rather than the wider spectrum of Pashtun civic life, and it also means that gendered post-merger governance failures have been subjected to comparatively less policy attention than the relevance of their scale may warrant.

A generational aspect adds to this trend. Having attracted a younger membership and public profile, much of PTM's base has emerged from those who gained first-hand experience of the state during the era of peak displacement and military operations from the 2000s and 2010s, a era for which the dominant political experience was of the state being primarily security mediated rather than civic (Aslam & Neads, 2021). Whereas the state security policy is limited in geographies of meaning-making and norm-setting around the conflict and applies only to established political organizations, cultural productions of this generation, such as poetry, increasingly have been found to be a means of making sense of the conflict and articulating Pashtun experiences of war and displacement outside of formal-state political processes and channels. This larger-scale, generational grievance processing is not affected by the securitization of formalized movements such as PTM, but just becomes less obvious and less explicitly non-violent one through which it was driving towards organized political expression.

The claim that the identity-as-strategy argument is qualified by the internal diversity of Pashtun society might also be added. This Pashtun identity is not shared equally by genders, generations, localities and socioeconomic status. Documentation, education, political participation, displacement and access to formal institutions have been some of the unique challenges faced by women in the former tribal districts. Asghar (2024) points towards the impact of the merger and conflict on the status of women in the tribes. The differences suggest that a security framework grounded in the predominant politics of armed men might miss key aspects of how legitimacy of the state is felt in day-to-day life.

Discussion

The KP case points to a more general theoretical implication that goes beyond the case of Pakistan: Counterinsurgency policies that do not institutionally distinguish between the treatment of insurgent threat and identity-based civic mobilization are likely to enter a self-reinforcing spiral that securitization of civic mobilization will reinforce the legitimacy claims of insurgent threat. The proposition does not contradict, but elaborates, on Fearon and Laitin (2003)'s result that there is no direct relationship between ethnic diversity and the onset of civil war. The KP case is not an example of the link between ethnicity and insurgency but TTP has a larger and wider ideological programme and core recruitment area, which

predates and does not depend on the existence of Pashtun grievance politics (Ahmad & Ahlawat, 2023). Instead, it is a fact that as soon as an insurgency is taking place and is clearly an ethnic one, the nature of the state's response to identity is a key factor in consolidating or reversing insurgency gains. This rethinking also challenges the civil-military relations literature, since Siddiq (2017) has argued that the determinant of securitization is not an issue of strategic miscalculations which can be rectified by better information, but rather structural because it relates to how security institutions reinforce their institutional position only institutional and not doctrinal reform can make a difference in this case.

Practically, this analysis is that counterinsurgency doctrine would be best coupled with an explicit institutional separation between the units that are responsible for countering militancy and the state's engagement with civic, identity-based political movements, so that the latter is treated through the normal political and judicial processes, not counterterrorism ones. We note that similar dynamics have been noted in other borderland and frontier contexts where securitized minority groups are looking for their own nonviolent political outlet not as an alternative to, but simultaneously with counterinsurgency efforts against armed actors among the same minority group (Deleixhe *et al.*, 2021), implying that the KP pattern is not peculiar in its nature.

This analysis also indicates that there is an importance to the order in which governance reform is implemented. Bilateral investment in courts, policing, and service delivery is required to meet with formal legal integration (such as the merger in 2018), otherwise a legitimacy gap may be created that insurgent actors are well-positioned to exploit, especially when the gap occurs via the same ethnic narrative that insurgent recruitment narratives already uses (Makki *et al.*, 2024). It is worth noting that there are some community-based institutions that can withstand the shock and stress of conflict, such as the Jirga (Alam, 2021; Yousaf & FurrukhZad, 2020) and locally established youth resilience initiatives (Makki *et al.*, 2024), thus implying a specific actionable policy recommendation to include and support the continued autonomous operation of these resilient institutions as complementary to the formal state institutions during the extended transition period that post-merger governance is clearly in need of.

The case also argues that, rather than being an independent cause for resurgence, regional events, in this instance the Taliban's 2021 return to power, would have activated pre-existing vulnerabilities in the state's identity management strategy, producing a materially reduced resurgence had the post merging governance and incorporation of the Taliban been more fully realized by 2021. This does not mean that the cross-border dimension, mentioned in section 5.5, does not have an independent strategic value all by itself, but it does mean that the cross-border dimension is interacting with the shock of the region and the failure of identity management within the country,

and that this interaction is producing the outcome that neither dimension alone would produce.

In reading these results, one should take the necessary precautions with causal inference. While the qualitative and documentary evidence presented here allows us to draw plausible and well-sequenced claims on the link between securitization and insurgent legitimacy claims, it does not, by itself, provide the counterfactual of what the trajectory of the TTP would have looked like without the PTM's proscription or the broader pattern of securitization. Other alternative or complementary explanations, such as the purely material effect of the expansion of sanctuary outside Pakistan's borders since 2021 or persistent shortcomings in the capacity of local police unrelated to any identity dynamic may explain some of the resurgence, and are not considered here as mutually exclusive with the identity-based mechanism proposed. Future studies that also incorporate district-level information on political trust and insurgent recruitment and compare across KP districts with different amounts of post merger services provision would allow for more direct testing of the relative strength of this mechanism than document-based analysis would.

Another illustration of the importance of the separation of the dynamics of one's domestic identity from the regional environment can be seen in the security environment following 2021. The return to power of Taliban in Afghanistan provided the TTP with new possibilities for organizational recovery, but the success of the insurgent organizational recovery is no justification for political relevance of their organizational narratives within Pakistan. KP is still a key focus of Pakistan's militant violence, according to the various security assessments conducted recently. During 2025 KP reported the highest number of violence-related deaths, and KP was still the province most affected by violence in the country during 2026 (Studies, 2024; Studies, 2025).

Strategic Assessment and Policy Implications

The strategic assessment indicates that even though Pakistan's counterinsurgency strategy has proven to be an effective way of inflicting military costs on the militant groups, such a success in the tactical sphere should not be interpreted as a strategic consolidation. The high level of violence in KP suggests ongoing military and intelligence activity is required, though won't be sustainable unless coupled with good governance in the civilian sector. Despite ongoing counterterrorism operations, KP has remained the key battleground in 2025 and 2026 with CRSS data reflecting this.

Therefore, the key policy implication of the policy approach of identity as strategy is the need for institutional differentiation. The counterinsurgency policy has to clearly distinguish between those who are militant and non-violent political players, between ethnic identity and militant ideology, and between the legitimate security needs and normal governance issues. Enhancing civilian institutions and the access to and reach of judicial and

administrative systems, ensuring the protection of lawful political participation, and including citizen customary institutions (such as Jirgas) in the sphere of action can shrink the space of grievances to be turned into insurgent narratives in the merged districts. This would not be an alternative to military counterinsurgency, but rather be a prerequisite to military victories to be sustainable.

CONCLUSION

This paper has reviewed Pashtun identity as a strategic factor in the counterinsurgency environment in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan in 2018-2024. The study has separated the two factors of ethnicity (as a demographic variable) and ethnicity (as an insurgent tool) from each other, instead of assuming that ethnicity is a constant and/or a causative factor in insurgency. This distinction enables a discussion of the various constructions of the Pashtun identity by insurgents, state, civic and community actors in the same context of conflict. The research highlights an interesting nexus between governance in the wake of merger, mobilization of the insurgents and the securitization of Pashtun civic politics. Ethnicity cannot be the sole factor to explain the revival of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan since 2021, nor only one domestic factor. The new regional landscape after the Taliban retook control in Afghanistan, as well as existing social relationships and governance issues in the newly united districts, offered a chance for organizational revival, whilst unresolved governance issues at the local level provided a domestic space in which grievance-based narratives could continue to have political significance. Meanwhile, the rise in the securitization of Pashtun civic mobilization (including the proscription of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement in 2024) is an example of how the securitization of ethnic political mobilization can be institutionally confused with armed insurgency. The theoretical value of the article is that it does not only reflect the importance of ethnic identity in counterinsurgency operations because the insurgents and the population might belong to the same ethnic group – but also because the meaning of ethnic identity is constructed by political actors in a strategic manner. The theory of securitization can be used to better understand how civic mobilization can be (re)constructed as a security threat, and the literature on insurgent organization can be used to better understand how social networks and local grievances may be important to insurgent's organization resilience. The civil-military relations angle also contributes to understanding the nature of the security institutions' willingness to use coercive and/or securitized approaches even in situations where there are political and governance-based approaches available. These are all indicative of the need to consider strategic management of identity as a key element in the counterinsurgent analysis.

The results have practical applications as well. There must be a distinction between armed militant action and nonviolent party-building based on identity in the institutional fabric of sustainable counterinsurgency.

Improving civilian administration, access to justice, political engagement, service delivery and locally legitimate institutions can help to diminish the room for political grievances to be woven into insurgent narratives in the merged districts. These should not be seen as a threat to the security response against the armed groups, but as part of wider political and institutional arrangements that are needed for military success to result in lasting stability. This study does not make any direct claims that the securitization of Pashtun civic politics caused the resurgence of the TTP. Other potential supporting or alternative explanations include cross-border sanctuary, the regional change following 2021, organization change and the lack of local state capacity. The case put forward here is more constrained: that counterinsurgency institutions not maintaining a clear distinction between insurgent violence and peaceful identity-based political expression can undermine the political legitimacy necessary to achieving lasting victory in a counterinsurgency struggle. The hypothesis could be tested more directly in the future by studying it in a comparative district level analysis, in interviews, in survey data, and in data on political trust, governance performance and insurgent recruitment.

REFERENCES

- Abbas, H. (2014). *The Taliban revival: violence and extremism on the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier*. Yale University Press. <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300183696>
- Ahmad, A., & Ahlawat, D. (2023). Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan: Emerging threats and Pakistan's counterstrategies. *Mankind Quarterly*, 64(2). <https://doi.org/10.46469/mq.2023.64.2.2>
- Ahmed, R. Q., Ishaq, M., & Shoaib, M. (2021). The changing political trends in erstwhile FATA: a study of the last three elections. *International Area Studies Review*, 24(4), 335-348. <https://doi.org/10.1177/22338659211013652>
- Akhtar, I., & Niazi, N. (2024). A Review on the great game in Afghanistan: A realist perspective on the geopolitical struggle for control. *Journal of International Relations and Peace*, 1(1), 15-22. <https://doi.org/10.54536/jirp.v1i1.2723>
- Akhtar, S. (2022). *The rise and decline of the insurgency in Pakistan's FATA*. Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003349259>
- Akhtar, S., & Ahmed, Z. S. (2023). Understanding the resurgence of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan. *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, 16(3), 285-306. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17467586.2023.2280924>
- Alam, J. (2021). Jirga system and its role in peacebuilding and development in Pakistan's terrorism-affected pashtun "tribal" districts. *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, 16(3), 352-365. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1542316620986138>
- Ali, H. M., Khan, A., & Khan, A. (2025). Pashtun nationalism and cross-border politics: A historical and political study of the Durand Line dispute. *The Journal of Research Review*, 2(2), 371-378.
- Amnesty, International. (2024). *Pakistan: Authorities must immediately revoke ban on Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/10/pakistan-authorities-must-immediately-revoke-ban-on-pashtun-tahaffuz-movement/>
- Asghar, W. (2024). FATA merger: Impacts on status of tribal women. *Journal of Development and Social Sciences*, 5(2), 386-395.
- Aslam, W., & Neads, A. (2021). Renegotiating societal-military relations in Pakistan: the case of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement. *Democratization*, 28(2), 265-284. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1816965>
- Birhan, A. T., & Christopher, N. (2024). Unraveling the persistence of ethnic conflict in Ethiopia: Examining causes. *American Journal of Arts and Human Science*, 3(2), 10-18. <https://doi.org/10.54536/ajahs.v3i2.2575>
- Buzan, B., Wæver, O., & De Wilde, J. (1998). *Security: A new framework for analysis*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Centre for Research and Security Studies. (2024). *CRSS annual security report 2024*. <https://crss.pk/security-report/>
- Deleixhe, M., Dembińska, M., & Iglesias, J. D. (2021). *Securitized Borderlands*. Routledge.
- Fearon, J. D., & Laitin, D. D. (2003). Ethnicity, insurgency, and civil war. *American Political Science Review*, 97(1), 75-90. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055403000534>
- International Crisis Group. (2013). *Pakistan: Countering militancy in FATA* (Asia Report No. 242). <https://www.crisisgroup.org/rpt/asia-pacific/pakistan/242-pakistan-countering-militancy-pata>
- Jan, F., & Khan, A. (2024). Pakistani military's rhetorical construction of an indigenous civil rights movement. *Media, War & Conflict*, 17(2), 179-195. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506352231186293>
- Kalyvas, S. N. (2006). *The logic of violence in civil war*. Cambridge University Press.
- Khan, S. S. (2021). FATA's merger into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP): Challenges and way forward. *Journal of Contemporary Studies*, 10(1), 103-119.
- Lieven, A. (2017). Counter-insurgency in Pakistan: The role of legitimacy. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 28(1), 166-190. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2016.1266128>
- Makki, M., Iftikhar, W., & Yamin, T. (2024). '(Re) ordering' North Waziristan, Pakistan: Post-conflict transition, borderland dynamics and spatial identities. *Civil Wars*, 26(2), 354-373. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2024.2302722>
- Malik, P., Rahmani, A., Ahmady, W., Arianpoor, Z., Faizi, M. A., & Muhammadi, A. A. (2025). Post-2021 terrorism in Afghanistan and its geopolitical impact on regional security: Case studies of Pakistan and China. *American Journal of Development Studies*, 3(2), 76-82. <https://doi.org/10.54536/ajds.v3i2.5725>
- Pakistan Institute of Conflict and Security Studies. (2025). *Annual security report 2024*. <https://www.picss.>

- net/annual-report-2024
- Sayed, A., & Hamming, T. (2023). The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan after the Taliban's Afghanistan takeover. *CTC Sentinel*, 16(5), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.8598>
- Shah, S. S. H., Mahmood, A., & Kamran, M. (2024). Resurrection of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan amidst Afghan regime's indifference: Threats to intersectional security strands in the region. *Social Inclusion*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.8598>
- Siddiq, A. (2017). *Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's military economy*. Penguin Random House India.
- Staniland, P. (2018). *Networks of rebellion: Explaining insurgent cohesion and collapse*. Cornell University Press.
- Younus, A., Hussain, T., & Khan, S. (2023). Understanding the revival of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan since FATA's merger. *Asian Survey*, 63(5), 768-796. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2023.1997845>
- Yousaf, F., & FurrughZad, S. (2020). Pashtun Jirga and prospects of peace and conflict resolution in Pakistan's 'tribal' frontier. *Third World Quarterly*, 41(7), 1200-1217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1760088>