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Smart Power Dynamics in Pakistan's Counterterrorism Landscape

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Abstract

Pakistan's struggle with counterterrorism has been an extended and sophisticated battle, spanning decades of multifaceted, precise, and calculated tactical strategy, yielding both undeniable success and persistent challenges. This study explores the evolution of Pakistan's counterterrorism strategies, examining the effectiveness of hard power/military operations approaches in dismantling hardcore terrorist organizations and assessing the limitations of soft power diplomacy in shaping international perception and nation branding. This paper examines the smart power dynamics at play in Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts. It examines the interplay between military operations, intelligence activities, diplomatic initiatives, and socio-economic

development programs aimed at countering extremist ideologies and eradicating terrorist networks. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of how smart power tactics can be used in complex geopolitical environments to address the root causes of extremism, foster regional cooperation, and enhance societal resilience against radicalization. It offers recommendations for enhancing Pakistan's smart power capabilities to address the root causes of extremism and improve its national security framework more comprehensively.

Keywords: Pakistan, Terrorism, Counterterrorism, Soft Power, Smart Power, Security.

Introduction

Terrorism, though a centuries-old phenomenon, reached an unprecedented level of global concern following the events of September 11, 2001, which brought it to unparalleled global attention. Following the U.S. military operation in Afghanistan, Pakistan's geographic proximity and shared border made it directly affected by the surge in terrorist activity. Pakistan, through military operations backed by strong political and public support, has undeniably eliminated numerous dangerous terrorists from its borders and has emerged as a pivotal player in the global counterterrorism arena. The in-depth investigation into Pakistan's counterterrorism approach offers insights into the complex interplay of military, political, economic, and social factors in combating terrorism. Analyzing this multifaceted approach can deepen the understanding of the challenges and complexities involved in countering terrorism in a volatile and dynamic region. This study analyzes the dynamics of Pakistan's counterterrorism strategy, applying hard power, soft power, and smart power strategies. Military operations, representing hard power strategies, are recognized as a vital component of Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts, often yielding desired outcomes. However, the study suggests that projecting the success of military operations and enhancing relations with major powers and regional states requires a soft power diplomatic course of action. Therefore, a comprehensive and effective strategy must combine aspects of

hard and soft power, along with the national will, to devise an integrated grand smart counterterrorism strategy.

Drawing from Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, the study underscores the importance of cultivating public support for military operations and intelligence initiatives. It advocates for a strategic shift towards approaches that resonate with the masses, emphasizing the reflexive nature of smart power. Failure to adopt such strategies could perpetuate the cycle of violence and undermine Pakistan's credibility on the global stage.¹

This article examines how the state can employ smart power to combat terrorism and influence other nations' foreign policies. It focuses on Pakistan's security challenges and explores how soft power can be used strategically to engage with other countries in a goal-oriented manner. It also discusses how soft power contributes to a more secure international environment.²

The study applied a mixed-method approach. A significant portion of the research was conducted within the framework of qualitative methodology, which focuses on a step-by-step approach to understanding the phenomenon. Relevant literature, comprising books, journal articles, newspapers, government policy papers, and online resources, was reviewed for secondary data collection. Additionally, some survey results and reports were incorporated to support the argument.

¹ Joseph S. Nye, *The Future of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011), 25–30.

² Joseph S. Nye, "The Changing Nature of World Power," *Political Science Quarterly* 105, no. 2 (1990): 178–189..

Primary data was collected through unstructured interviews, and probability sampling was used for its analysis. The discourse analysis approach was employed to examine how the speech acts of major actors define phenomena within the international security system.

This research includes in-depth studies of all terrorist incidents in Pakistan since 9/11, along with major events, key decisions, negotiation rounds, and developments in the country's counterterrorism landscape. Various documents have been cited, including peace agreements between the Government of Pakistan and the Taliban, official reports, policy statements, legislation, and media coverage.

Discussion and Analysis

Power has always been one of the most appealing concepts to social scientists for many decades. The ancient scripts of Aristotle, Plato, Sun Tzu, and Machiavelli are proof of the importance of the concept. Despite such great work and writings, there are still debates on the definition of power, its features, its resources, and its tools. Ardent defined the concept of power as not the property of an individual; rather, it is the ownership of a group, community, or State.³ The concept of power and diplomacy is not new in academic and international relations literature. According to Nye and Keohane, "Power is the ability of an actor to get others to do something they otherwise wouldn't do."⁴ Nye further deconstructed the concept of power into two major components: hard power and soft power and he also coined the third type of power

³ Henry Ardent, *Power in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton Publishing Press, 2008), 26–30.

⁴ Ibid.

which he termed smart power- a judicious fusion of elements hard power and soft power strategies.⁵

Dr. Khurram Iqbal, in his book *The Making of Pakistani Human Bombs*, argues that right after the tragic incident of 9/11, the Islamabad administration made fighting terrorism its top priority and distanced itself from the Taliban-led regime in Afghanistan. It joined the United States-led global coalition in the war against terrorism. Since then, Pakistan has adopted a clear approach to terrorism; it has condemned and rejected all forms of violence and terrorism across the globe. Pakistan emphasizes the need for a clear definition of terrorism and rejects the construct of Islamic terrorism. It has categorically differentiated between a legitimate fight for self-determination and terrorist activities.⁶

Naeem Ahmed is of the view that Pakistan has always condemned all types of terrorism. Soon after the incident of 9/11, academia and practitioners started publishing material on counterterrorism strategies. Multiple scholars came up with different perspectives on how to combat and counter terrorist elements effectively. The Pakistani government devised a military plan to eliminate militants, both domestic and foreign, who were hiding in tribal areas along the borders with Afghanistan. As the primary component of its counterterrorism policy, Pakistan's security services have carried out several minor military operations to destroy militant organizations operating in the tribal areas. Pakistan has put forward some counterterrorism

⁵ Keith Dinnie, *Nation Branding: Concepts, Issues, Practice* (Burlington, MA; Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2008), 23–29.

⁶ Khurram Iqbal, *Making of Pakistani Human Bombs* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), 1–30.

narratives and announced a counterterrorism strategy, and it has seen major victories in eliminating terrorism from many of its regions.⁷

Pakistan army has launched multiple counter-terrorism operations against militants including Operation Al Mizan (2002–06), Operation Zalzalā (2008), Operations Sher Dil, Rah-e-Haq, and Rah-e-Rast (2007–09), Operation Rah-e-Nijat (2009–10), Operation Rah-e-Shahadat (2013–14), Operation Zarb-e-Azb (2014–16), and Operation Radd-ul-Fasad (2017 onward).⁸

The implementation of military operations in Pakistan's counterterrorism strategy yielded notable successes, as evidenced by the destruction of terrorist hideouts and the dismantling of key leadership figures within extremist organizations. However, the unintended consequences of these operations have been significant. Rather than fostering widespread support for the security establishment, they have engendered resentment among segments of the populace. This discontent has been exacerbated by collateral damage and civilian casualties associated with the military campaigns, leading to a growing sense of alienation and distrust toward the government and security forces. Consequently, these dynamics have provided fertile ground for the emergence of multiple insurgent groups across the country, posing new challenges to Pakistan's efforts to maintain stability and combat terrorism effectively.

Since 1990 when Joseph S. Nye coined the term “Soft power” in opposition to hard power, it has become an attractive feature in international relations and diplomacy that explains the need for soft power along with military actions against terrorist organizations and terror support states. Nye defines Soft power as the capacity to influence others' desires or behavior

⁷ Naeem Ahmed, “Pakistan Counterterrorism Strategy and Its Implications for Domestic, Regional, and International Security,” *Working Paper Series*, June 15, 2014, 32.

⁸ Khan J. Khan, “Combating Militancy: A Case of Pakistan Military Operations,” *British Research Institute* 14, no. 2 (June 2018): 122.

without using force or other forms of coercion; in other words, it is the capacity to modify what others do. Literature shows that soft power diplomacy helped states in nation branding and bringing a positive image in the international world, but it didn't prove worthy in countering terrorism from the states and society. Literature shows that states employing smart power diplomacy achieve more fruitful results, as military operations often promote anti-state sentiments in the hearts and minds of people, while soft power alone gives room for notorious criminals to expand their ideology. Smart power is the combination of hard and soft power tools used to achieve desired foreign policy goals. There are three ways to make a state or individual act in a desired way: coercion or force, benefits or payment, and incentives or attraction. Hard power involves coercion and payment, whereas soft power relies on attraction; smart power is a strategic combination of both.

It is critical to recognize that Pakistan must not only advance a foreign policy centered on combating terrorism, but also publicize its victories and setbacks in this struggle. To advance its interests, accomplish foreign policy objectives, and enhance its image in the international community, Pakistan must focus on the strategic use of force. Such a policy would address unrest in the country, unite the fragmented political leadership, and support national interests, nation-building, and global image branding.

Hard power has been overused in the war on terrorism since the tragic events of 2001. Although this approach has not fully eliminated the threat of terrorism, it has prolonged the conflict for nearly two decades. Given the changing global environment, the rise of non-state actors, and their increasing influence, states should complement traditional hard power approaches with smart power strategies that employ persuasive diplomacy as an effective counterterrorism tool.

As the world is facing new threats and Terrorists are introducing new techniques the shift from conventional to unconventional security threats demands to development of strategies and tactics to combat terrorism as part of its security and diplomatic agenda. The role of non-state

actors has become most challenging to the state's capacity to fight against terrorism as it is hard to counter it with only hard power strategies and getting due recognition from the world. In the absence of soft power strategies terrorists got more room for heinous activities and the state lost its legitimacy vis-à-vis non-state actors.⁹

As per Joseph Nye, States need to employ smart strategies rather than only to employ hard power or soft power in certain situations that prove inadequate. He advises that governments must not rely solely on soft power to change the minds and hearts of the Taliban, as this approach alone would not be effective and requires a hard power component to address the challenge. Nye is of the view that, in order to establish healthy relations with the Muslim world, a smart power strategy is necessary, as the excessive use of hard or military power can have destructive effects.¹⁰

According to Chester Crocker, smart power involves the strategic use of diplomacy, persuasion, capacity building, and the projection of power and influence in ways that are cost-effective and possess political and social legitimacy. It requires both hard power, such as military force, and the vital resources of diplomacy through a soft power approach.

Power cannot be smart if the wielding authorities are less knowledgeable about their own goals and capacities. It requires that the wielder knows about the capabilities of his own country and the targeted community as well as the global context. One requires the important tools of statecraft to use smart power effectively at home and abroad.¹¹

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Joseph S. Nye Jr., "Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power," *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 4 (July–August 2009): 160.

¹¹ Ibid.

Smart power means recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of every instrument of power. When applying hard power, it is important to consider what military forces can accomplish and how many objectives can realistically be achieved through its use. Similarly, soft power strategists must assess the effectiveness of initiatives such as exchange programs and determine the extent to which the population can influence their outcomes. The success of either approach depends on the capabilities and wisdom of statecraft, on knowing how to balance coercive, forceful power with attractive, persuasive power to inspire the masses.

It is noteworthy that smart power does not emerge naturally; it requires awareness, enlightenment, and a compelling narrative that can lay the foundation for distinct institutions and a normative culture to support future efforts. Establishing an institutional framework for smart power is more complex than for either hard or soft power. Unlike a country's military arsenal, smart power cannot be easily quantified, and its outcomes are difficult to measure.

According to Halperin and Kanter, a rational foreign policy based on smart power requires recognizing and reforming a wide range of institutional structures and relationships across numerous existing agencies, offices, bureaus, and departments, each with its own norms, values, and institutional rigidities.¹²

In Pakistan's struggle against terrorism, the prolonged conflict has strained its social and economic fabric, hindering investments in new institutions and research on smart power tactics. In a world where power dynamics favor traditional hard power approaches, innovative strategies often take a backseat due to resource constraints and entrenched policymaking structures.¹³

¹² Ibid

¹³ Nye, *The Future of Power*, 25–30.

However, technological advancements have, to some extent, leveled the playing field, enabling both state and non-state actors to employ "smart" tactics. Terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have effectively leveraged media platforms for propaganda purposes, underscoring the urgent need for states to develop sophisticated strategies to counter these evolving threats. In this context, embracing smart power with technological capability becomes crucial. By utilizing technology and fostering international cooperation while effectively managing soft power assets, nations like Pakistan can strengthen their resilience against terrorism and protect their interests in a rapidly changing global landscape.

Any state that aspires to elevate its global standing must construct counterterrorism strategies and foreign policy approaches grounded in smart power principles. Progressive thinkers in the United States argue that a comprehensive agenda promoting freedom, trade, and human rights offers the most sustainable guarantee of national security against terrorism and groups like Al-Qaeda. They emphasize that U.S. foreign policy must be reframed in alignment with this belief. However, this vision should serve as only one component of a broader strategy, one that also supports societies grappling with extremism, underdevelopment, health crises, and environmental degradation. Without a wider foreign policy that is perceived as genuinely liberal and inclusive, targeted efforts to promote democracy and free markets in strategically significant regions will continue to be viewed with skepticism, as manifestations of hypocrisy and narrow self-interest.¹⁴

Smart Foreign Policy and Pakistan

¹⁴ Ernst J. Willson, "Hard Power, Soft Power, Smart Power," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 144, no. 2 (March 2008): 124.

The complex geopolitical dynamics of the region demand that Pakistan adopt smart power diplomatic approaches to manage its relationships with Afghanistan, India, and Iran, and to minimize friction with the United States. Pakistan must explore alternative strategies to move forward and foster positive change in its relations with neighboring countries, recognizing that circumstances will not improve on their own. Smart diplomats and political administrations employ strategic thinking to carve out space and influence in challenging environments.

Moreover, the presence of non-traditional security threats within Pakistan's security landscape highlights the need for a comprehensive understanding of security beyond conventional military capabilities. In a globalized world where threats transcend borders and ideologies, Pakistan must adapt its security policies to address the diverse and evolving array of challenges it faces.¹⁵

The national government has taken commendable steps, including the implementation of a Comprehensive Response Plan (CRP) that encompasses infrastructure development, rehabilitation of terrorism victims, national narrative reconciliation, reintegration, and legal reforms. These initiatives also focus on sustainable and integrated development for the recovery of affected regions and are undertaken in collaboration with the respective provincial governments.¹⁶

It is equally important to direct attention toward diplomatic efforts aimed at fostering global peaceful cooperation. Such efforts are essential to prevent the international affiliations of

¹⁵ *National Internal Security Policy*, Special Report (Islamabad: Official Printers, 2014), 94.

¹⁶ *FATA Sustainable Development Plan* (Islamabad: Official Printers for FATA Secretariat, 2015), 49.

terrorists through activities such as money laundering, forced disappearances, and the transnational movement of biological and chemical weapons.¹⁷

Limitations on Smart Power Application in Pakistan

It is imperative to encourage the application of innovative strategies in counterterrorism, rather than relying solely on coercive approaches, in order to minimize collateral damage. Significant gaps exist in the research field of counterterrorism; therefore, academia and independent researchers should focus more on developing smart power-based counterterrorism strategies. Adequate funding should be allocated for specialization in this subject, and strict monitoring must be ensured to track the effective utilization of these funds.

Currently, the Benazir Bhutto Shaheed Trust, operating under the guidance of the Ministry of Social Welfare and Special Education, is focused on risk assessment and the development of policy-based research in Pakistan. The Pakistan Institute of Rehabilitation Sciences (PIRS), under ISRA University Islamabad, offers a course on the rehabilitation of disabled individuals. However, they also need to expand their focus to include emerging disciplines such as the rehabilitation of ex-militants. Additionally, nationwide campaigns should be launched to promote the importance of tolerance.¹⁸

Most of the de-radicalization programs in Pakistan are run by the military, targeting Swat Valley, and have very little connection to other parts of the country. Police administration, civil society, and some non-governmental organizations are running de-radicalization programs, but

¹⁷ Shehzad H. Qazi, "A War Without Bombs: Civil Society Initiatives Against Radicalization in Pakistan," *Policy Brief* no. 60 (Washington, DC: Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, February 2013), 14, https://www.ispu.org/pdfs/ispu_brief_counterderadicalization_2_14.pdf.

¹⁸ Zubair Azam and Syeda Barisha Fatima, "Mishal: A Case Study of De-Radicalization and Emancipation in Swat, Pakistan," *Journal of Deradicalization* 12 (Summer 2017): 26.

they all are scattered and lack an evaluation of post-program effectiveness. Pakistani security forces and civil society have initiated many steps to counter violent extremist ideologies. It is the time that Pakistan must launch a nationwide de-radicalization program, in this context Saudi program can be helpful to target entire social, political and economic landscape of militancy-hit regions. Furthermore, the de-radicalization program of Swat is focused on diffusing anti-state tendencies, and the structure of other provinces and urban cities is much more complex than Swat valley. Pakistan has successfully given multiple counter-terrorism narrative to counter fundamental ideologies and root out extremist ideologies from the society of Pakistan.¹⁹

It is critical to recognize that Pakistan must not only pursue a foreign policy focused on combating terrorism but must also actively communicate both its successes and challenges in this endeavor. Strategic application of force, aligned with foreign policy objectives, is essential to protect national interests and support international image-building and nation-branding efforts. A comprehensive counterterrorism policy must be introduced that harnesses all available sources of power and is implemented with courage and professionalism. Such a strategy will help address domestic unrest, unify the country's fragmented political leadership, and contribute to national development and a stronger global image.

Since the events of 9/11, hard power has been excessively employed in the war against terrorism. However, this approach has not succeeded in eliminating the threat; instead, the conflict has persisted for nearly two decades. As globalization continues and the influence of non-state actors expands, it is imperative for states to complement traditional hard power approaches with smart power. Employing persuasive policies through diplomacy, alongside

¹⁹ Ibid.

military and economic tools, offers a more effective and adaptive counterterrorism strategy in today's interconnected world.²⁰

Recommendations

Pakistan has undoubtedly achieved significant success in its fight against terrorism. Major militant outfits have been severely weakened, and the overall security situation has improved considerably. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the war is not yet over. Residual threats persist, and navigating the complex geopolitical landscape requires a smart, comprehensive strategy that ensures both external security and domestic stability.²¹ Pakistan's counterterrorism strategy can be made more effective by adopting a smart power approach that incorporates these considerations.

Strategic Measures for Effective Counterterrorism

In order to enhance the effectiveness of Pakistan's counterterrorism strategy, the following measures are recommended for consideration by policymakers, security agencies, and relevant institutional stakeholders:

- i. Invest in education and social development to address the underlying socio-economic grievances that contribute to radicalization. Expanding access to quality education, creating economic opportunities, and ensuring the delivery of essential public services are fundamental to undermining extremist recruitment efforts.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Abdul Basit, "Challenges to the Evolution of Counter-Terrorism Strategy in Pakistan," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 4, no. 9 (September 2012), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.23.7/26351087>.

- ii. Enhance public communication and narrative building by promoting accurate and contextual interpretations of Islam, highlighting the state's achievements in combating terrorism, and actively engaging youth through structured outreach programs both online and offline. This is essential to counter extremist ideologies and reclaim the informational space.
- iii. Strengthen regional cooperation and dialogue by fostering trust-based relationships with neighboring countries, particularly Afghanistan and others in the region.²² Enhanced intelligence sharing and collaborative security efforts are vital to dismantling transnational terrorist networks and addressing cross-border threats.
- iv. Promote cultural diplomacy and international exchange initiatives to project Pakistan's rich cultural heritage, counter negative perceptions abroad, and build constructive international relationships. Such efforts can significantly contribute to soft power and long-term national image-building.²³
- v. Support media freedom and responsible journalism by creating an enabling environment for critical discourse, independent reporting, and fact-based analysis. Encouraging pluralism in the media can serve as an effective tool to challenge extremist propaganda and involve civil society in counterterrorism initiatives.
- vi. Leverage the power of technology and social media to disseminate positive messaging, implement targeted counter-narrative campaigns, and engage the country's youth. A digitally savvy approach is essential to preventing radicalization in the online space and fostering informed civic participation.

²² Nye, *The Future of Power*, 25–30

²³ Ibid.

Operational and Institutional Recommendations

To ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of Pakistan's counterterrorism framework, the following operational and governance-related measures are recommended:

- i. Sustain and refine targeted military operations by maintaining pressure on terrorist networks through precise strikes and kinetic actions. These operations must be supported by a robust and agile intelligence infrastructure to preempt and disrupt planned attacks and dismantle militant infrastructure.
- ii. Enhance law enforcement capacity and border security mechanisms by investing in advanced training, equipment, and institutional coordination. This includes strengthening efforts to prevent terrorist financing, recruitment, and cross-border movement. Effective inter-agency cooperation and real-time intelligence sharing at border checkpoints are critical to these efforts.
- iii. Address internal governance and institutional weaknesses by promoting transparent, accountable governance. Combating corruption, reforming judicial institutions, and ensuring the consistent application of the rule of law are essential to fostering public trust and creating an enabling environment for effective counterterrorism policies.²⁴

Important Considerations

The development of a comprehensive and sustainable counterterrorism strategy must be grounded in several key considerations that extend beyond traditional security measures:

²⁴ Moeed Yusuf, *Pakistan's Counterterrorism Challenge* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014), 75–80.

- a) **Human Rights:** Counterterrorism measures must be designed and implemented in a manner that upholds fundamental human rights. Disregard for civil liberties can alienate local populations, foster resentment, and inadvertently fuel radicalization. Ensuring the protection of human rights enhances both the moral authority and effectiveness of state actions.
- b) **Sustainable Development:** Addressing the root causes of extremism requires sustained investment in social justice and inclusive economic development. Structural inequalities, poverty, and lack of opportunity are often exploited by terrorist organizations. A developmental approach can mitigate these vulnerabilities and strengthen social cohesion.²⁵
- c) **Community Engagement:** Building trust-based relationships with local communities is vital for effective intelligence gathering and operational success. Engaging communities as partners in counterterrorism fosters cooperation, enhances early warning systems, and legitimizes state initiatives at the grassroots level.²⁶
- d) **Transparency and Accountability:** Legitimacy in counterterrorism efforts depends on transparent processes and mechanisms to hold violators of law and human rights accountable. Public oversight and institutional accountability help reinforce citizen confidence and discourage abuse of power.²⁷
- e) **Economic Empowerment through Special Economic Zones (SEZs):** Creating economic opportunities in historically marginalized or conflict-affected areas, such as the

²⁵ FATA Development Authority, "Survey-Enumeration of Industries, Service Sector Entities, Labor Force, and Identifying Constraints in FATA" (October 2014), 25.

²⁶ Johar Khan, "Combating Militancy: A Case of Pakistan Military Operations," *British Research Institute* 22, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 36.

²⁷ Azam and Fatima, "Mishal: A Case Study," 26.

former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), is crucial for long-term peace. Establishing SEZs can stimulate local economies, provide viable livelihoods, and divert at-risk youth from pathways to radicalization.

Conclusion:

The dynamics of smart power in Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts reveal a carefully strategized approach that combines both hard and soft power strategies. While military operations and law enforcement measures remain essential components, the emphasis on addressing root causes, building community resilience, and fostering international cooperation highlights an acknowledgment of the multifaceted nature of the threat. Additionally, initiatives aimed at promoting education, economic development, and social cohesion demonstrate a commitment to long-term solutions. In a smart power strategy, political leadership is crucial for guiding counterterrorism efforts in accordance with democratic principles and human rights standards.

Therefore, it is imperative that political leaders retain authority over strategic decisions, working in close collaboration with parliament to uphold a people-centric approach in formulating policies aligned with national interests.