

ARE REGIONAL COUNTRIES READY TO HELP PAKISTAN IN COUNTERING TERRORISM?



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INTRODUCTION

Amid a surge in militant attacks in Pakistan, regional cooperation in countering terrorism has become an urgent concern. With over 57 attacks recorded in just 48 hours, security challenges have intensified, particularly in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In this context, the Sanober Institute held a discussion with eminent scholars and experts to analyze the complexities of counterterrorism efforts and the divergent security priorities of key stakeholders.

The discussion featured Dr. Qamar Cheema, Executive Director of the Sanober Institute; Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhary, Former Foreign Secretary and Chairman of the Sanober Institute; and Muhammad Amir Rana, President of the Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS). Key themes included

Afghanistan's role in harboring militant groups, China's strategic concerns in Balochistan, and Iran's position on insurgencies along its border. The conversation also explored India's reluctance to engage in regional counterterrorism initiatives and the broader geopolitical implications of intelligence-sharing gaps.

Additionally, the discussion assessed Pakistan's internal security dynamics, debating whether a regional approach is feasible or if the country must primarily rely on domestic counterterrorism strategies. By analyzing these factors, the session provided valuable insights into the evolving security landscape and the potential for collaborative efforts in addressing transnational terrorist threats.



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SUMMARY:

- Pakistan has witnessed a wave of terrorist attacks, with over 57 incidents occurring within 48 hours, primarily targeting Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
- Regional cooperation on counterterrorism remains weak due to differing security priorities among neighboring countries.



- Afghanistan continues to be a major concern, as militant groups operating from its territory pose a direct threat to Pakistan's stability.
- China, despite its strategic partnership with Pakistan, has prioritized its own security concerns and has not pursued a joint counterterrorism framework.
- India remains disengaged from regional counterterrorism efforts and has been accused of supporting insurgent elements in Balochistan.
- Iran's position is complex, with cross-border tribal linkages influencing security dynamics. While Iran has faced threats from militant groups, it has also been accused of providing safe havens for certain insurgent factions.
- Intelligence-sharing gaps and a lack of a structured regional mechanism hinder effective collaboration against transnational terrorist networks.
- Pakistan's internal security policies require urgent reforms, with experts emphasizing the need for a multi-layered approach to address insurgency, religious extremism, and cross-border terrorism.
- The role of China is significant, particularly in intelligence-sharing and surveillance capabilities, as Pakistan seeks technological support to counter growing security threats.
- A comprehensive counterterrorism strategy must integrate regional cooperation with strong domestic security measures to effectively tackle emerging threats.



Key Takeaways:

Regional Counterterrorism Cooperation:

Efforts to establish a coordinated regional approach to counterterrorism remain weak, as neighboring countries prioritize their own strategic and security interests over collective action. While Pakistan has repeatedly called for stronger regional collaboration, there is no formal mechanism that effectively addresses the rising threat of transnational terrorism. Regional actors such as China, Iran, Afghanistan, and India each have different security priorities, leading to a fragmented response to terrorism in South Asia. Without a structured and cooperative framework, Pakistan continues to bear the brunt of escalating terrorist activities, particularly in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Afghanistan's Role

Afghanistan remains a focal point of concern for Pakistan's security, as militant groups such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other extremist factions continue to use Afghan territory as a safe haven. Despite initial hopes that the Afghan Taliban government would rein in these groups, the reality has been different. The Taliban's internal power struggles, combined with the presence of NATO-era weapons, have created an unpredictable security environment. Additionally, Afghanistan's reluctance to fully cooperate with Pakistan on counterterrorism initiatives has led to growing

tensions. While direct confrontation with the Taliban is not advisable, Pakistan must develop a pragmatic engagement strategy that secures its interests without destabilizing relations with Kabul.



China's Strategic Position

China remains one of Pakistan's closest allies, yet its approach to counterterrorism has been largely self-serving. Beijing's primary security concern is the protection of its investments under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Repeated attacks on Chinese nationals and projects in Pakistan have caused concern in Beijing, leading to calls for enhanced security cooperation. However, China has shown little interest in developing a joint counterterrorism framework with Pakistan. Instead, China prefers intelligence-sharing arrangements and economic measures to secure its interests. Additionally, China's superior surveillance technology and intelligence-gathering capabilities present an opportunity for Pakistan to enhance its counterterrorism operations through stronger bilateral cooperation.

India's Approach

India has largely remained absent from regional counterterrorism efforts and has been accused of actively supporting insurgent elements within Pakistan. Evidence suggests that India has played a role in promoting and funding separatist movements in Balochistan, using its diplomatic and cyber influence to shape global narratives against Pakistan. Indian-backed media campaigns and lobbying efforts have sought to portray the Baloch insurgency as a legitimate independence movement, drawing parallels with separatist struggles in other regions. This has been evident through organized online campaigns, advocacy at international forums, and the financing of anti-Pakistan groups. Given the deep-rooted mistrust between the two nations, any prospect of direct cooperation on counterterrorism remains highly unlikely. Pakistan must, therefore, focus on countering Indian-backed narratives while addressing internal vulnerabilities that allow insurgencies to thrive.

Iran-Pakistan Security Dynamics

Iran and Pakistan share a long and complex border, with security challenges emerging from cross-border tribal movements, smuggling networks, and militant activities. The presence of Baloch insurgent groups on both sides of the border has created tensions, as Pakistan accuses Iran of harboring separatist elements, while Iran claims Pakistan has provided a haven for groups targeting its security forces. The killing of key insurgents in cross-border operations has further complicated relations. Although both nations have a shared interest in neutralizing militant threats, political divergences and geopolitical



rivalries have hindered meaningful collaboration. Strengthening intelligence-sharing mechanisms and conducting joint security operations could provide a viable path forward in addressing these mutual concerns.

Pakistan's Internal Challenges

Pakistan's internal counterterrorism strategy requires urgent reassessment. While military operations such as Zarb-e-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasaad have weakened militant networks, new threats continue to emerge due to gaps in governance, economic instability, and a lack of long-term political solutions. In Balochistan, for example, the absence of an effective political reconciliation process has allowed insurgent groups to gain traction. Additionally, Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts have been primarily security-centric, with limited focus on addressing the root causes of extremism, such as economic deprivation and political marginalization. Enhancing surveillance capabilities, improving intelligence-sharing, and integrating a political component into counterterrorism strategies are necessary steps to ensure sustainable peace.

Recommendations:

- Pakistan should develop a regional counterterrorism framework that aligns with its national security interests while engaging with key regional players like China, Iran, and Afghanistan. A structured approach to intelligence-sharing and joint security operations will enhance Pakistan's ability to counter cross-border threats.
- Afghanistan remains a central factor in Pakistan's security concerns. Islamabad should continue diplomatic engagement with the Afghan Taliban to prevent terrorist organizations like the TTP from using Afghan soil for attacks on Pakistan. A balanced strategy combining diplomatic pressure and security cooperation is necessary to secure long-term stability.
- Pakistan should strengthen intelligence-sharing mechanisms with China to enhance surveillance capabilities and counter transnational threats. China's technological advancements in surveillance and data analysis can be leveraged to improve Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts, particularly in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
- Economic stability is crucial for sustaining counterterrorism efforts. Given Pakistan's financial constraints, large-scale military operations may not be feasible in the long term. Instead, the country should focus on intelligence-driven counterterrorism strategies that minimize economic strain while ensuring maximum operational effectiveness.



- India's role in regional counterterrorism remains contentious. While direct cooperation is unlikely, Pakistan should expose Indian involvement in fueling insurgency through diplomatic channels and international forums. Strengthening cyber defenses and countering anti-Pakistan propaganda in the global digital space will be essential to mitigating Indian-backed influence operations.
- Iran-Pakistan security collaboration needs improvement. Both countries share concerns over Baloch insurgencies, yet trust deficits hinder meaningful cooperation. Establishing a joint security mechanism to prevent cross-border militant activity will be crucial for stabilizing the region.
- Pakistan must revamp its internal security strategy by addressing governance issues in terrorism-affected areas. Political reconciliation, economic development, and enhanced local governance—particularly in Balochistan—are necessary to counter the appeal of militant organizations.
- A stronger counterterrorism legal framework is needed to tackle evolving security threats. Pakistan should enhance its legal and judicial processes to ensure that militants, financiers, and facilitators are prosecuted effectively, preventing terrorism networks from re-emerging.
- China and Pakistan should establish a coordinated security framework for CPEC projects. Repeated terrorist attacks targeting Chinese investments in Pakistan threaten economic cooperation. A joint task force dedicated to securing critical infrastructure will reassure Chinese stakeholders and enhance regional economic stability.

- Pakistan should invest in cybersecurity and digital surveillance tools to counter extremist propaganda and terrorist recruitment efforts. India-backed disinformation campaigns and extremist groups' online radicalization tactics must be actively monitored and disrupted through technological countermeasures.
- A comprehensive national counterterrorism strategy must be developed that integrates political, economic, and military dimensions. A holistic approach will ensure long-term success in eliminating terrorism while addressing the root causes of extremism.

By adopting these measures, Pakistan can effectively counter emerging security threats while fostering regional cooperation to ensure long-term stability.

Conclusion:

Pakistan's ongoing battle against terrorism highlights the urgent need for both regional cooperation and strong internal security measures. Despite the increasing number of attacks, a coordinated regional approach remains elusive, as key neighboring countries prioritize their own strategic interests over collective security. Afghanistan continues to be a major source of instability, with cross-border militant activities posing a direct threat to Pakistan. Meanwhile, China, while invested in Pakistan's security due to its economic interests, has remained focused on its own strategic priorities. India's reluctance to engage in regional counterterrorism efforts and its alleged support for insurgent elements further complicate the security landscape.



To effectively counter these challenges, Pakistan must recalibrate its counterterrorism approach by integrating intelligence-driven operations, diplomatic engagement, and economic stability. Strengthening intelligence-sharing mechanisms with China and Iran, engaging Afghanistan through diplomatic channels, and exposing Indian-backed insurgency efforts on global platforms will be crucial. Additionally, internal security strategies must be enhanced by addressing governance issues in terrorism-affected regions and implementing a more comprehensive counterterrorism legal framework.

Ultimately, Pakistan's security strategy must strike a balance between regional engagement and self-reliance. While international cooperation can provide critical support, Pakistan must take the lead in securing its own stability through well-coordinated policies that address both immediate threats and long-term security concerns. A proactive, intelligence-driven, and diplomatically nuanced approach will be essential in ensuring Pakistan's resilience against evolving terrorist threats.