The Political Economy of Intrastate Armed Conflicts: The Feasibility Hypothesis in the Case of Pakistan

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Abstract

This thesis examines the structural conditions that make intrastate armed conflict feasible in Pakistan. While much of the existing literature attributes Pakistan's internal conflicts to ideology, identity, or historical grievances, this study argues that such explanations account for the framing and mobilisation of conflict but fail to explain why violence clusters in specific regions despite similar grievances elsewhere, and why multiple groups with varied motivations operate from the same locations. Addressing this conceptual gap, the thesis employs the feasibility hypothesis as its theoretical lens, which posits that sustained rebellion becomes possible where it is operationally and economically viable.

The central research question asks whether operational and economic feasibility better explains Pakistan's conflict dynamics than ideational or grievance-based accounts. The study adopts a mixed-methods design. The quantitative analysis uses district-level cross-sectional data to test the statistical association of six independent variables (terrain ruggedness, road density, border proximity, human development, poverty, and natural resources) with conflict intensity. This is complemented by qualitative analysis of secondary literature, policy reports, and historical narratives to interpret and contextualise the empirical results.

The findings confirm that rugged terrain, proximity to porous borders (especially with Afghanistan and Iran), and low human development are significantly associated with higher conflict intensity. By contrast, poverty and road density show weak or insignificant effects, while natural resources influence conflict primarily through enabling illicit economies. These results support the argument that intrastate armed conflict persists where structural conditions make rebellion operationally and economically feasible.

Theoretically, the study localises and refines the feasibility hypothesis for sub-national analysis using improved operational proxies. Methodologically, it contributes through a mixed-methods framework linking quantitative modelling and contextual qualitative interpretation. Policy-wise, it recommends strengthening border management, improving local governance, and investing in human development to mitigate structural enablers of violence. The findings advance comparative research on the political economy of conflict by demonstrating how structural feasibility, rather than ideology alone, shapes the geography of rebellion in fragile states.

Dedication

To my late grandfather, **Chaudhary Karam Dad Chattha**, who laid the foundation for a legacy of learning and education in our family.

To my parents, **Muhammad Maqbool Chattha** and **Sakeena Bibi**, for their unwavering support and sacrifices, going above and beyond their means to nurture my educational journey from the first day of school to the achievement of this PhD.

To my younger brother, **Usman**, who shouldered our shared family responsibilities with strength and grace, allowing me to pursue my highest academic goals without worry.

This work stands on your shoulders.

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My heartfelt appreciation goes to both my **parents and brother**, whose sacrifices, prayers, and generous support made this journey smoother. You have been my inspiration from the start.

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To my wife, **Dil Afroz**, and my precious sons, **Alyan** and **Ahmad**, you became a part of my life during this PhD journey. And yes, without your *perfectly timed* appearances, this thesis might have been submitted a couple of years earlier! However, I have no regrets for the delay, because you have enriched my life in a way no academic achievement ever could. I would not trade this journey, with all its joys and challenges, for anything.

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Thanks to all of you, today I can officially be called ***Dr.***, the first in my family to do so. This is not just my achievement; it is a collective milestone shaped by your unwavering belief in me.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Background of the Study

Historically, war has been one of the most significant forces driving global change. While it has created states, it has also destroyed them. Moreover, war has also affected the economic, political, psychological, and social affairs of countries that have experienced it. Therefore, the significance of war has always made it important to understand in depth. This was recognised by early thinkers like Thucydides, who not only documented the *History of the Peloponnesian War* between Athens and Sparta, but also analysed the causes of war (Thucydides, 1996). The pursuit of understanding the nature and strategy of combat was an area of interest for other classical thinkers like Sun Tzu and Clausewitz (Tzu, 2007; von Clausewitz, 1993). The works of these classical thinkers, along with those of many others throughout history, have laid the foundations for understanding the causes and complexities of war. Today, the topic of war still holds a significant place in the International Relations discourse, as we strive to prevent it by focusing on understanding its causes and origins. This is how the probability of its occurrence can be anticipated, and strategies for its prevention and reduction when it breaks out can be formulated.

Historically, warfare was predominantly interstate, especially following the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), which established the modern system of sovereign states. However, the latter half of the 20th century marked a noticeable shift in the types of conflict that became more common, as interstate wars declined and intrastate conflicts increased (Project, 2011). This shift can largely be attributed to post-World War II decolonisation, resulting in internal struggles over power, resources, and representation, as newly independent states often inherited weak institutions, contested borders, and unresolved ethnic or regional tensions. These intrastate wars have resulted

in large-scale human misery, including the death of millions of human lives and costing billions of dollars, which instead could have been better utilised to improve education, health, and infrastructure. Due to the significant human and economic costs, academics and policymakers must understand and address the root causes of these armed conflicts.

Personal Motivation behind the Study

Besides, the historical and global significance of armed conflict is well established; my interest in studying this topic is not only academic, but it is also deeply personal, which traces back to my own experience as a political science student during one of the most violent and uncertain periods in Pakistan's recent history. Between 2008 and 2012, when I was studying for undergraduate degrees in Political Science and International Relations at the International Islamic University in Islamabad, armed conflicts and terrorist attacks were not just in the headlines; they were part of daily life. The term "terrorism" dominated both academic discourse and public debate. However, for me, these events were far from abstract or theoretical, as they left a direct and lasting impact on my personal life.

I still remember the chilling fear and uncertainty that gripped the capital during suicide bombings such as the Marriott Hotel and NESCOM complex attacks in Islamabad, both of which occurred within a one-kilometre radius of where I happened to be at the time. But the most jarring and unforgettable moment came when my own University was attacked. Out of the two bomb blasts that targeted the campus, one occurred in the very block where I regularly attended my classes. On that day, I was walking in that direction and was just two minutes away when the explosion happened. I was among the first to reach the scene alongside a few others. We helped the injured before any emergency or security personnel arrived. There, I witnessed the disfigured

bodies and the blood and flesh smeared on the walls and floor. These horrifying sights, chaos, and the raw pain etched into people's faces are memories I carry with me.

And I could not help but ask a very fundamental question: if the so-called 'ideological motivations' of these Islamic insurgents are real, then why attack a university renowned for its Islamic orientation? The only university in the country that not only offered extensive Islamic courses and a separate campus for female students but also admitted students from madrassas and was actively involved in Islamic legal and economic research. Similarly, ethnic/nationalist insurgency in Balochistan, claiming political marginalisation and lack of development, attacks the workers and infrastructure of development projects in Balochistan. This contradiction, among others, challenged the mainstream explanations being offered in both policy and academic circles. Over time, this combination of personal encounters and intellectual questioning led me to a different set of questions: Why are violent conflicts concentrated in specific regions while others with similar grievances remain relatively peaceful? Why do the same political regimes and policies, applied uniformly across the country, result in armed rebellion and violence only in certain areas?

That sense of being academically engaged in debates about the political roots of violence while simultaneously witnessing it firsthand left a lasting impression. It led me to question the sufficiency of grievance- or ideology-based explanations and explore frameworks that offered more structural explanations. Eventually, when the opportunity came, I decided to critically investigate this topic via what I hope is a more objective lens through my PhD thesis.

So, this thesis is not just an academic exercise. It is a personal journey shaped by the violence I witnessed, the contradictions I questioned, and the conversations that challenged me. I believe it is important to share this background, not only to disclose potential bias but also to be transparent about the lived context that brought me to this topic. These are not just theoretical

questions for me; they are questions I have carried for years, and this research represents my attempt to seek answers.

Statement of the Problem

Across disciplines as varied as anthropology, history, economics, psychology, and philosophy, scholars have investigated the factors associated with civil wars and sustained armed conflicts, employing a wide range of methods. Despite this breadth, the key drivers of many armed conflicts remain unclear: findings often diverge and the methods themselves have recognised limits. What causes a civil war is a profoundly difficult question; accordingly, no single account has convincingly explained why large-scale violence takes root in some places and not in others. The problem is not a shortage of theories but a tendency for approaches to illuminate one part of the picture while leaving other crucial parts in shadow. It remains essential to pursue theoretically grounded and methodologically rigorous approaches capable of identifying the conditions under which civil wars emerge and persist.

The same is true in Pakistan. Much of the existing work is qualitative and examines the phenomenon primarily through historical, ethnic, or ideological lenses. Those studies are valuable, especially for understanding narratives, episodes, and political trajectories, but they do not explain the fundamental question of why violence is geographically concentrated and persistently reproduced in some areas while others, often with similar grievances and narratives, remain comparatively peaceful. The juxtaposition is striking. Religious insurgency in the former FATA/Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region and nationalist insurgency in Balochistan recur in broadly similar geographies. At the same time, areas such as South Punjab, despite longstanding discontent, have not experienced comparable sustained rebellion. Moreover, multiple armed groups advancing different narratives are concentrated in these same regions: parts of Balochistan are home to

religious and sectarian militancy alongside nationalist insurgency, and similarly, areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and the former FATA are known for tribal and sectarian militancy, and even some grievance-based nationalist mobilisation.

This pattern suggests that the question is not only about who claims to fight and why, but about where and under what conditions violent mobilisation becomes possible and sustainable. In other words, beyond narratives and ideas, there are structural conditions that shape feasibility: the terrain through which the state and armed groups must move; the roads by which authority and services reach people; the borders across which men, money, and materiel flow; and the distribution of development, poverty, and appropriable resources that alters the opportunity structure for rebellion. These are not motives; they are enabling conditions. This thesis argues that to understand Pakistan's geography of conflict we must place structural feasibility at the centre of analysis and investigate the structural factors associated with the observed clustering of armed conflicts. In doing so, it helps address a clear literature gap by applying a multidisciplinary framework and quantitative methods to Pakistan's case.

Research Objectives, Questions, and Hypotheses

The primary aim of this study is to objectively investigate structural factors influencing intrastate armed conflicts in Pakistan, using the *feasibility hypothesis* as its theoretical framework. The study does not totally negate, nor does it conduct a head-to-head comparison with ideational accounts; instead, it proceeds beyond them to ask whether structural factors under the feasibility hypothesis help to explain the observed spatial patterning of violence.

Objectives

1. Identify the key variables of operational and economic feasibility and operationalise them at the district level in Pakistan.

2. Estimate the statistical association between these variables and conflict incidence and intensity using multiple regression.
3. Interpret the results with secondary qualitative evidence to clarify mechanisms behind these associations.

Research Questions

1. Which feasibility conditions are associated with district-level conflict incidence and intensity in Pakistan?
2. How and why do the supported conditions operate, and where do the findings apply?
3. How far does structural feasibility explain the clustering of conflict across districts?

Main Hypothesis

Sustained intrastate armed conflict in Pakistan occurs predominantly where rebellion is operationally and/or economically feasible. Feasibility is treated as necessary but not always sufficient: ideas and grievances may ignite or frame mobilisation, but enduring violence requires enabling structural conditions.

Sub-hypotheses

- H1 (Terrain). Rugged terrain is positively associated with higher levels of armed conflict.
- H2 (Road access/state reach). Lower road density is positively associated with higher levels of armed conflict.
- H3 (Border proximity/porosity). Closer proximity to weakly controlled international borders is positively associated with higher levels of armed conflict.
- H4 (Human development). Lower human development is positively associated with higher levels of armed conflict.
- H5 (Poverty). Higher poverty prevalence is positively associated with higher levels of armed conflict.
- H6 (Natural resources). The presence of lootable natural resources is positively associated with higher levels of armed conflict.

Significance of the Study

The research makes significant contributions to scholarship and policy in multiple ways. Conceptually, it moves the discussion in Pakistan beyond grievance or ideological narratives by specifying structural feasibility as the necessary foundation for sustained armed conflicts. This clarifies the role of conditions that make rebellion possible, while leaving space for ideas, identities and historical events to shape how it is framed and ignited. Empirically, by capturing the district level, the thesis addresses the resolution problem in the international literature, which relies on country-level aggregates that cannot capture within-country variation. Methodologically, the study provides an objective, transparent and replicable investigation by adopting a quantitative core to identify associations and then including qualitative evidence to interpret and identify scope conditions and mechanisms. For policy, translating feasibility into concrete indicators helps anticipate where violence is more likely to become entrenched, supporting the targeted allocation of scarce security and development resources. This approach avoids overgeneralization from grievances that are widely shared but unevenly violent in their outcomes. In short, the thesis provides a structured approach to thinking about where conflict is likely to emerge and why it clusters, which are the questions practitioners must address when resources are scarce.

Methodology and Data

This study, employing a pragmatic approach, utilised a mixed-methods design that combined both quantitative and qualitative research methods (quantitative core and qualitative contextualisation) to explore the complex and multidimensional phenomenon of armed conflicts in Pakistan. The study is primarily deductive, testing the feasibility hypothesis using a statistical model (multiple linear regression) at the district level to assess associations between feasibility indicators and conflict outcomes. The primary outcome is measured as annual conflict-related

fatalities per million population, constructed from the Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS) database for the period 2005–2018, and matched to district population denominators to facilitate comparison across districts of varying sizes. Using a rate rather than raw counts helps to avoid conflating population size with intensity.

Indicators capture both operational and economic feasibility. Operational feasibility is proxied by measures of terrain ruggedness (average slope), road density (kilometres of road per square kilometre) as a marker of state reach, and Proximity to porous international borders or adjacency to frontier segments associated with cross-border logistics and sanctuary. Economic feasibility is proxied by human development (district HDI), poverty prevalence (share of the population below the poverty line), and availability of loatable natural resources. The details of measures and sources of these variables are given in the Methods chapter. Qualitative analysis complements statistical results by explaining relationships and addressing data limitations for certain variables.

Organisation of the Study

Organisation of the Study

This thesis is organised into six chapters, each addressing a distinct stage of the research process, from conceptualisation to empirical analysis and policy recommendations. The structure reflects a logical progression from theoretical framing to evidence-based conclusions.

Chapter 1: Introduction outlines the background, research problem, objectives, and significance of the study. It situates the research within the broader debates on intrastate armed conflicts and explains the rationale for adopting a structural approach. The chapter introduces the feasibility hypothesis as the guiding theoretical framework and presents the main and sub-hypotheses. It also briefly outlines why structural feasibility is treated as a necessary but not

sufficient condition for the persistence of conflict. The chapter concludes by explaining the methodological orientation and outlining the thesis's structure.

Chapter 2: Conflict Landscape and Literature on Pakistan provides a comprehensive overview of Pakistan's conflict environment. It traces the evolution of Pakistan's internal security challenges since independence, including the impact of religious identity, regional disparities, and geopolitical tensions. The chapter then examines the patterns of armed conflict across Pakistan's four major regions through visuals produced using conflict incident data, and secondary literature highlighting the nature of violence, key militant actors, and the regional concentration of conflicts. Brief explanatory notes also clarify related terms such as religious insurgency, religious violence, sectarian conflict, and political violence for analytical consistency. The final section integrates a focused review of Pakistan-specific literature, consolidating ideological, identity-based, and historical explanations of conflict and identifying a clear research gap and rationale for shifting the focus to structural conditions.

Chapter 3: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework establishes the theoretical foundations of the study. It discusses the evolution of the feasibility hypothesis and compares it with competing frameworks. It also describes key conflict-related terms and their political implications, which serve as a rationale for choosing more neutral and objective terms that better encompass the phenomena under study. The chapter discusses the key critique of the theory. It clarifies how this research refines and applies the feasibility hypothesis at the sub-national level, defining operational and economic feasibility and their relevance to Pakistan's conflict geography. The final section explains the logic and links the conceptual model to the empirical hypotheses.

Chapter 4: Research Design and Methodology explain the philosophical foundation, the methodological framework and data collection strategies. It justifies the use of a mixed-methods

design, combining quantitative regression analysis with qualitative contextual interpretation. The chapter details the construction and operationalisation of variables, data sources and model specification. It also discusses data limitations, the choice of proxy indicators, and the rationale for adopting district-level analysis.

Chapter 5: Empirical Analysis and Discussion presents the results of empirical analysis and interprets the core findings. The regression results are discussed systematically across the key feasibility dimensions, operational (terrain, road density, border proximity) and economic (human development, poverty, and resource-related factors). The chapter integrates extensive qualitative evidence to contextualise these statistical findings, particularly focusing on cross-border dynamics, illicit economies, and governance capacity in high-conflict regions such as Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This combined analysis demonstrates that while ideational and grievance factors can only motivate, mobilise or frame the conflict, it is structural conditions listed in the feasibility hypothesis that determine where such movements can persist.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Policy Recommendations synthesise the key findings, addresses the research questions and hypotheses, and situates the results within the broader political economy of conflict. It reiterates that structural feasibility is a necessary but not sufficient condition for sustained intrastate armed conflicts. The chapter outlines policy recommendations to address these enabling conditions, including improving border management, strengthening state presence in peripheral regions, and enhancing socio-economic development and local governance. This also summarises the contributions of the study, acknowledges its limitations, and identifies future research opportunities. The chapter concludes by reaffirming how this research advances understanding of the structural underpinnings of conflict and offers a foundation for evidence-based policymaking in Pakistan and comparable contexts.

Chapter 2: Understanding the Conflict Landscape of Pakistan

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of intrastate armed conflicts in Pakistan, situating them within the broader body of scholarship on the country's internal security. It establishes a critical baseline for understanding the socio-political and structural environment that shapes these conflicts. The chapter begins with a concise historical and geopolitical background to explain the roots of Pakistan's security vulnerabilities and the interaction between domestic and external drivers of violence. It then examines regional variations across the provinces, outlining how geography, socio-economic conditions, and governance structures have influenced the form and intensity of conflict in each area. These regional discussions, supported by conflict-incident data and casualty figures, highlight both the diversity and persistence of internal violence.

Building on this contextual overview, the chapter then engages thematically with the existing literature on Pakistan's internal conflicts. Five key dimensions are examined: foreign policy and geopolitics, religious and sectarian mobilisation, identity and centre–periphery politics, socio-economic conditions, and state capacity and governance. Together, these strands capture the multi-dimensional nature of Pakistan's conflict environment and the interplay between internal fragility and external pressures. The discussion relies on secondary sources to trace the dominant narratives, scholarly debates, and policy interpretations that inform our understanding of Pakistan's ongoing insecurity. Rather than presenting an exhaustive empirical catalogue, this chapter aims to synthesise the core arguments and identify the limitations of current explanations. While many studies have explored the ideological, political, and socio-economic causes of conflict, most of these factors are broad in scope and fail to explain the spatial concentration of violence in

specific regions such as Balochistan and the former FATA. The chapter, therefore, moves beyond descriptive accounts to establish the research gap, why certain areas remain persistently conflict-prone despite similar conditions elsewhere, and introduces the rationale for examining the structural feasibility of rebellion as a more precise analytical approach.

Hence, this chapter serves two key purposes. First, it familiarises the reader with Pakistan's complex and varied conflict landscape, clarifying the local conditions, actors, and state responses across regions. Second, it synthesises the national-level literature to demonstrate the need for a structural explanation that links geography, state capacity, and opportunity structures to the persistence of conflict.

Overview of Pakistan

Pakistan, a part of the Indian subcontinent, came into existence on August 14, 1947. The differences between Muslims and Hindus and a quest for preserving Muslims' identity led to its creation. Pakistan, officially known as the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, is situated in the heart of South Asia. The area of this country is 881,913 square kilometres, making it the 33rd largest country in terms of land area. Its capital is Islamabad. It has four bordering countries: Afghanistan to the west, Iran to the southwest, India to the east and China to the northeast. To the south, it has a long coastline along the Arabian Sea. Pakistan has a three-tier governance structure, comprising federal, Provincial, and District levels. It consists of four provinces, namely Punjab, Balochistan, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and approximately 130 districts (Mohiuddin, 2007). It has a varied and diverse geography, featuring plains, mountainous terrains, deserts, and plateaus. Its population was 207.74 million as of the 2017 census report, making it the sixth most populous country in the world (PBS, 2017). The population is a diverse amalgam, characterised by ethnical, linguistic, and religious diversity (Blood, 1996). Pakistan is a parliamentary democracy with a

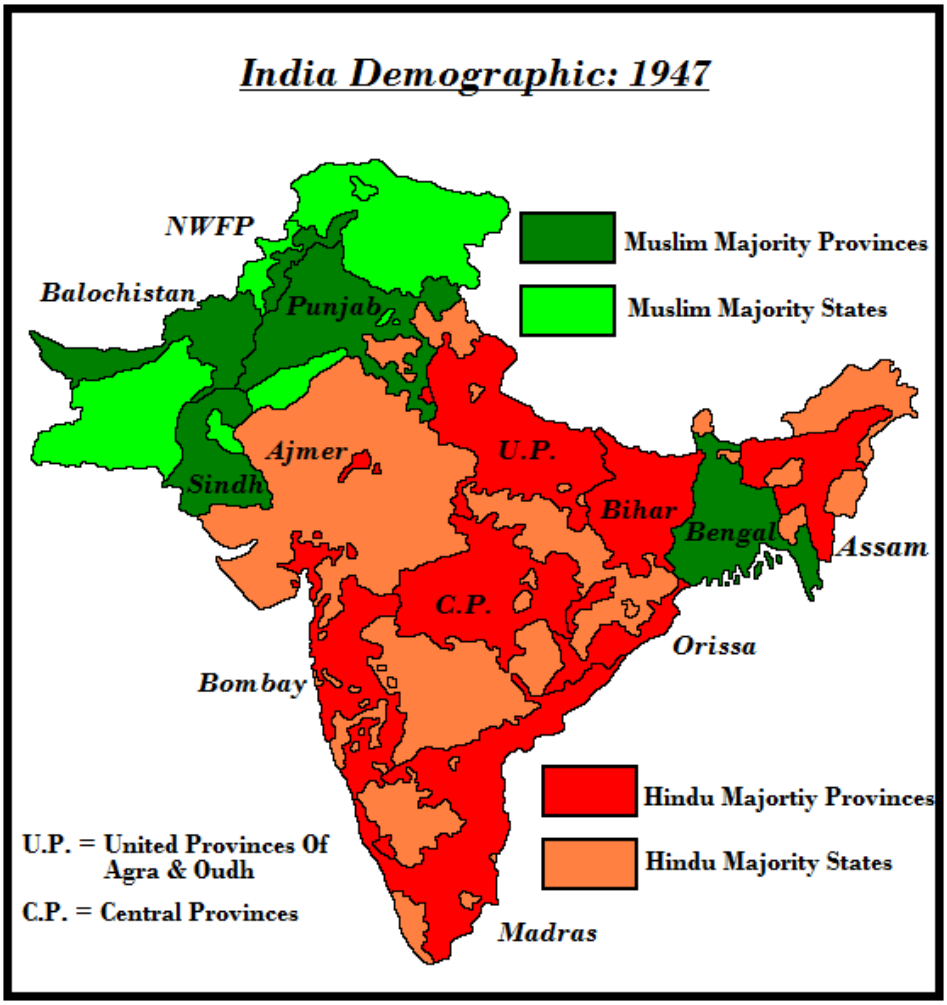
written constitution. However, its politics has gone through various phases of instability throughout history, including several military coups and the secession of its eastern part (now Bangladesh) in 1971.

Besides all this, Pakistan is situated in one of the most strategic locations and at the crossroads of the Eurasian continent (Mohiuddin, 2007). Since its inception, the country has faced several challenges related to law-and-order situations, insurgencies, violent conflicts, sectarianism, ethnic clashes and separatist movements (Weinbaum, 2017). Furthermore, the conflicts in East Pakistan leading to its breakaway and the rebellion, sectarianism and separatist movements in Baluchistan have also put the law-and-order agencies in Pakistan to the test (Hashmi, 2014). The first wave of militancy in West Pakistan was led by the Baluch and Pashtun nationalist groups before the 1970s, with the second wave occurring during the post-Soviet Union phenomenon (Khan, 2019).

Historical Context

It is essential to examine historical context and developments in greater detail to comprehend current scenarios, particularly in the context of security vulnerabilities and their internal and external causes. On June 3, 1947, a plan was made to partition the subcontinent according to the aspirations of the then leading Muslim political leadership of the subcontinent., Finally, on 14 August 1947, when Pakistan gained independence and became a Muslim state, while India gained independence on 15 August 1947 and became a Hindu-majority country. Muslim-majority provinces were declared Pakistan, including Sindh, Balochistan, the Northwest Frontier Province (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), and Bengal, now Pakistan's eastern region (Ziring, 2003). The Radcliffe Award divided Punjab into two provinces and West Bengal into two parts in a similar manner. The local aspirations of the people inspired the border (Khan, 2008).

Figure 1 Demographic Map of India (1947)

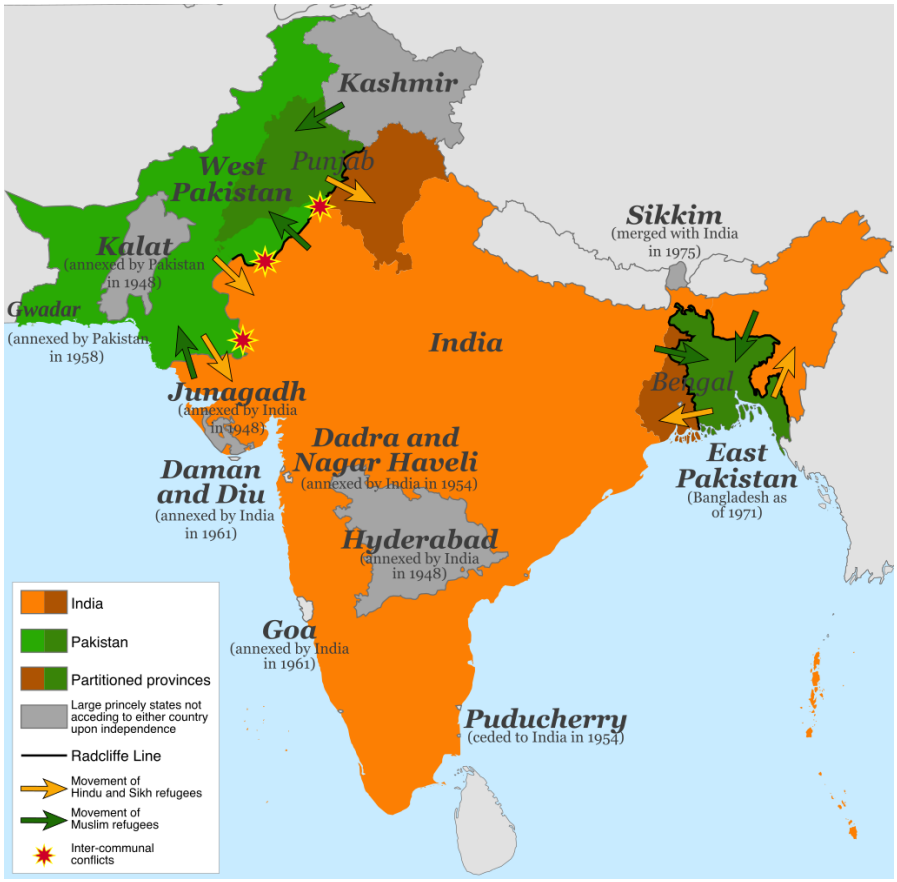


Source: Partition of Punjab in 1947, by PakGeoTagging (2014).

The partition also caused one of the largest mass migrations ever in the history of mankind, with approximately 15 million people murdered on both sides and seventy-five thousand women raped (Dalrymple, 2015). The distinguished historian from Pakistan, Ayesha Jalal, sums up, "The central historical event in the twentieth century in South Asia, a defining moment that is neither beginning nor end, partition continues to influence how the people and states of postcolonial South Asia envision their past, present, and future" (Jalal, 2013). Pakistan expressed strong concerns that the partition plan was not fulfilled under the domains of the prescribed laws and pledges, especially

in the case of the Muslim-majority state of Kashmir (Jalal, 2013). The partition of Punjab occurred under similar circumstances, as the examples of Firozpur and Gurdaspur, two Muslim-majority districts, were given to India, which were also important from a geographical point of view, paving the way for India to capture Kashmir. Stanley Wolpert also expresses the same stance regarding that occasion (Wolpert, 2010).

Figure 2 Political Boundaries of India and Pakistan at Partition (1947)



Source: The Radcliffe Line Between India and Pakistan from Wikipedia contributors.

Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad, a strong proponent of Indian unity, predicted that the hatred between the two states would lead them to focus on the defence of each country instead of development (Ahmed, 2011). Kashmir had a population that was 78 per cent Muslim at the time of the partition of both states. The population of Kashmir wanted to join Pakistan, but the Maharaja,

under pressure from India, signed the so-called accession, which the people of Kashmir rejected. Ultimately, the people rose against the tyranny of the Hindu Maharaja. At the same time, the Pakistan army, which was still under the command of the British, supported the uprising of Kashmiris in this regard. The Indian government sent forces to Kashmir under the condition of accession. In contrast, the so-called instrument of accession was signed, which ran counter to the aspirations of the people of Kashmir (Riedel, 2013). Pakistan was able to gain a small portion of Kashmir only due to the uprising of the locals. At the same time, the UN intervened in the process and stopped the ceasefire between both states under the resolutions both had to go to the free and fair plebiscite, where, according to the will of the people of Kashmir, the future of Kashmir would be decided.

The unresolved issue of Kashmir has become a permanent point of contention in the struggle between the two countries. Aggression has become a permanent issue between the two states. While this makes both states susceptible to each other, Pakistan must engage in a balancing act by combining bandwagoning and hedging against India in this regard. In 1954, a Mutual Defence Assistance Agreement was signed with the US. Pakistan joined the Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO), along with the United States, the United Kingdom, and others. Similarly, Pakistan joined the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO). Pakistan received approximately $508 million in military aid from the United States (US) (Dawn, 2022). Pakistan experienced India's aggressive attitude from 1949 onwards, as seen in the wars of 1965 and 1971, keeping in mind that the great tragedy of the fall of Dhaka happened; these occurrences caused significant issues and questions about the existence of Pakistan. The east-west distance of Pakistan created difficulties in terms of connections, and the insurgency rose in East Pakistan, supported by India. That was the time when Pakistan realised it could not maintain its sovereignty without

balancing against India (Meher, 2015). It was the time Pakistan started its nuclear program in 1974 as a response to this, while at the same time, when India again provoked Pakistan in 1998, Pakistan conducted its nuclear tests to demonstrate its defiance. This occurred despite Bill Clinton pressuring Pakistan not to pursue its atomic capability. The partition and the subsequent wars between the two states have led Pakistan to be perpetually highly concerned about its security. India also increased its presence in the neighbouring country of Afghanistan, a further irritant and issue that intensifies Pakistan's threat perception (Ahmed, 1999).

Pakistan inherited a weak foundation in every aspect. It was economically, politically, and territorially unstable (Hussain, 2008). For nine years, it continued to struggle to establish a permanent constitution through which the country could be governed (Ahmed, 2017). Furthermore, the constant shift between dictatorial and democratic rule further exacerbated the situation of an already struggling country. Four periods of military rule, along with five periods of limited-term political governments, were the struggles that Pakistan has faced (Khan, 2009). Pakistan was created in the name of Islam. The ideology remains dominant in shaping internal and external policies (Pattanaik, 2008). In the name of Islam, the political elite has exploited the country, and in some ways, Islam has not created synergy among different ethnic groups; it has not (Haqqani, 2004-5). This ideology of Pakistan has affected it internally and externally, as the external world used Pakistan for its interests. The most significant proof of this ideological exploitation is Pakistan's role in the Afghan war as a frontline state (Hussain, 2008). This political instability in Pakistan created militant organisations. These religious extremist organisations imposed their ideological narrative in Pakistan (Fayyaz, 2013). When Pakistan tried to neutralise these groups, violence started not just against the government but also against other minority groups, which did not share their ideological stance. To this day, Pakistan is an ideological state, and this ideology

has cost Pakistan in various ways: economically, politically, socially, ethnically, and internationally.

Not only has ideology caused this armed conflict inside Pakistan, but the country is also ethnically divided. There are Balochis, Pashtuns, Punjabis, Sindhis, Kalash, Saraiki and various other groups. These groups are hostile to one another and blame each other for depriving them of their economic and political opportunities. Pashtuns and Sindhis blame Punjabis for being a dominant majority group, and that every development from the government is dominated by Punjabis, causing internal division in Pakistan (Jan, 2010). The Shia-Sunni divide is also an example of ethnocentrism in Pakistan.

The invention of the state system was a very revolutionary episode in the history of mankind. When the state became the sovereign and the ultimate authority to use force within its territory, the social contract of Rousseau also provided it with the responsibility to protect the rights of its citizens (Rousseau, n.d.). It must create opportunities for the citizens. The state must ensure social equality and religious and political freedom. If the government remains unable to ensure these rights for society, armed groups may emerge to bring about change in the state. Terrorism, revolution, insurgency, and civil war are examples of armed struggles aimed at bringing about change. The implications of all these armed struggles vary from society to society, and the intensity of the struggle also varies. In Pakistan, the government has been unable to maintain its control and fulfil the basic needs of society, especially in the peripheral regions of FATA and Balochistan. Weak governance and economic deprivation have led to armed groups standing against the government, seeking to bring about social and political change in society. In Pakistan, the armed groups also gained significant support from the other side of the border, making the feasibility hypothesis only relevant for analysing the dynamics of these armed struggles.

National Conflict Patterns

The historical tensions, unresolved territorial disputes and political instability discussed above have undeniably shaped Pakistan's contemporary security dynamics, creating conditions that facilitated internal unrest and ongoing armed conflicts. Before examining and interpreting the key trends based on the following data, it is essential to clarify how the different categories of conflict are classified for this study.

Religious insurgency refers to organised, sustained armed actions carried out by groups motivated primarily by religious or ideological objectives, such as establishing Sharia rule, reshaping state policy, or challenging state authority. These groups are politically and militarily structured, often operating as insurgent organisations rather than spontaneous mobs. Examples include various factions of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other militant groups advocating religious governance.

Nationalist insurgency includes similar organised campaigns but motivated by ethno-nationalist or separatist objectives, as seen in Balochistan's armed movements such as the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), Balochistan Republican Army (BRA), and related groups. Both religious and nationalist insurgencies encompass incidents perpetrated by such groups against state or civilian targets, as well as state-led operations responding to them.

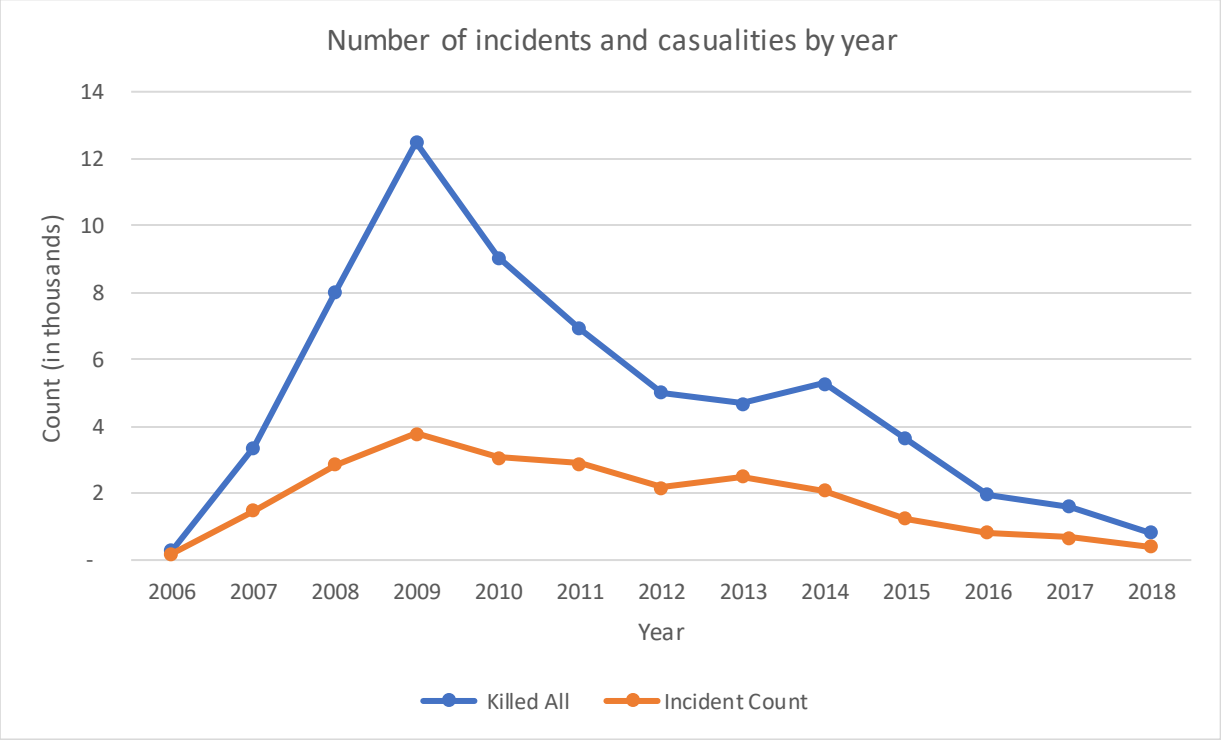
Religious violence in this dataset refers to unorganised, sporadic acts of inter-religious confrontation or mob aggression, often between followers of different religions, for instance, attacks on churches or temples.

Sectarian violence is intra-religious in nature, denoting conflict and attacks between different sects within the same religion, most commonly between Sunni and Shia communities, though it may also involve sub-sects within each group.

Political violence refers to violent incidents driven by political rivalries within Pakistan's formal political arena. These include clashes between political parties, attacks on party offices, candidates, or workers, and election-related violence. Such events are politically motivated rather than ideological or sectarian and usually occur around electoral contests or periods of heightened political competition.

These distinctions clarify that insurgency implies organised, sustained armed conflict against the state, whereas religious, sectarian, and political violence capture smaller-scale, less organised forms of hostility, each driven by different motivations.

Figure 3 Yearly Trends in Conflict Incidents and Casualties (2005–2018)

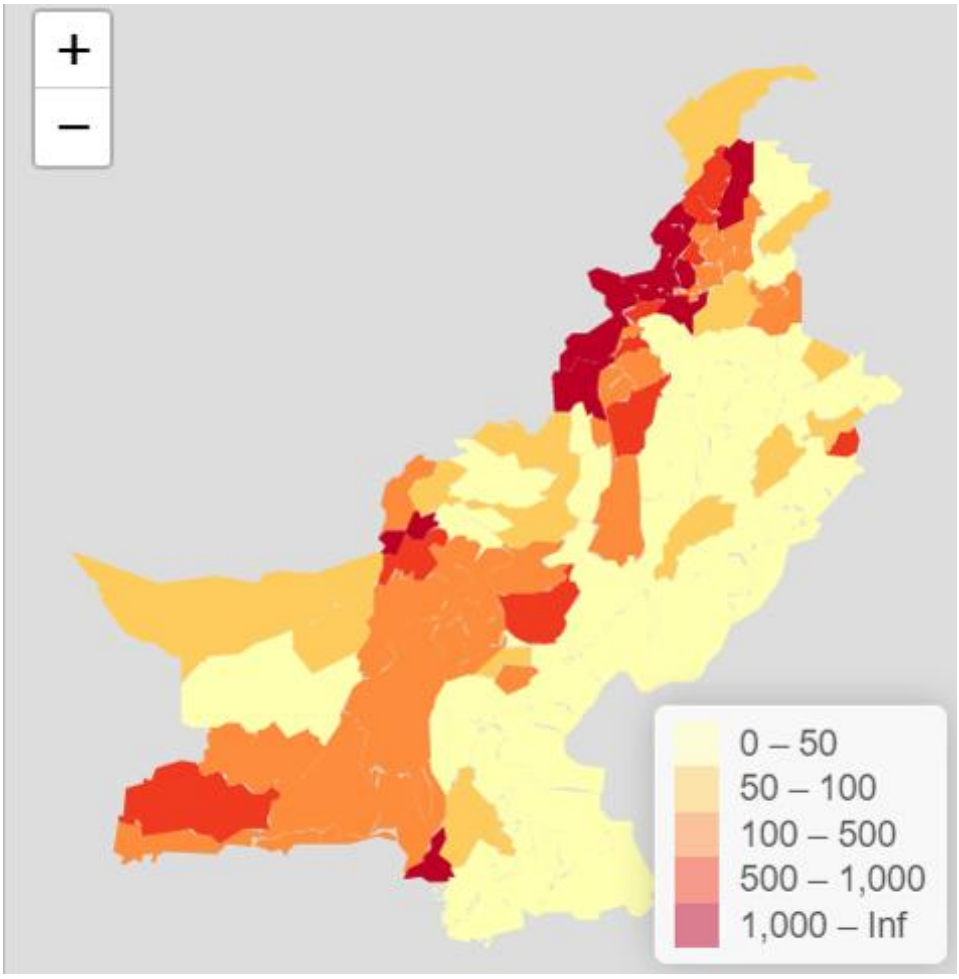


Source: Prepared by the Author from PIPS Conflict data (2021)

Figure 3 presents an overview of the yearly trends in armed conflict incidents and casualties in Pakistan from 2005 to 2018. The data show a sharp escalation beginning in 2007, reaching its peak around 2009. This surge marked a defining period in Pakistan's security landscape,

coinciding with the intensification of militant activity following major internal crises and counterinsurgency responses. After 2009, both the number of incidents and casualties gradually declined, though the overall levels of violence remained significant during 2010–2013. The post-2014 period reflects a steady downward trend, with a pronounced decline in both incidents and fatalities after 2016, suggesting the cumulative impact of sustained counterterrorism operations and improved state control. The figures for 2017–2018 represent the lowest recorded levels in over a decade, indicating a tangible improvement in national security conditions.

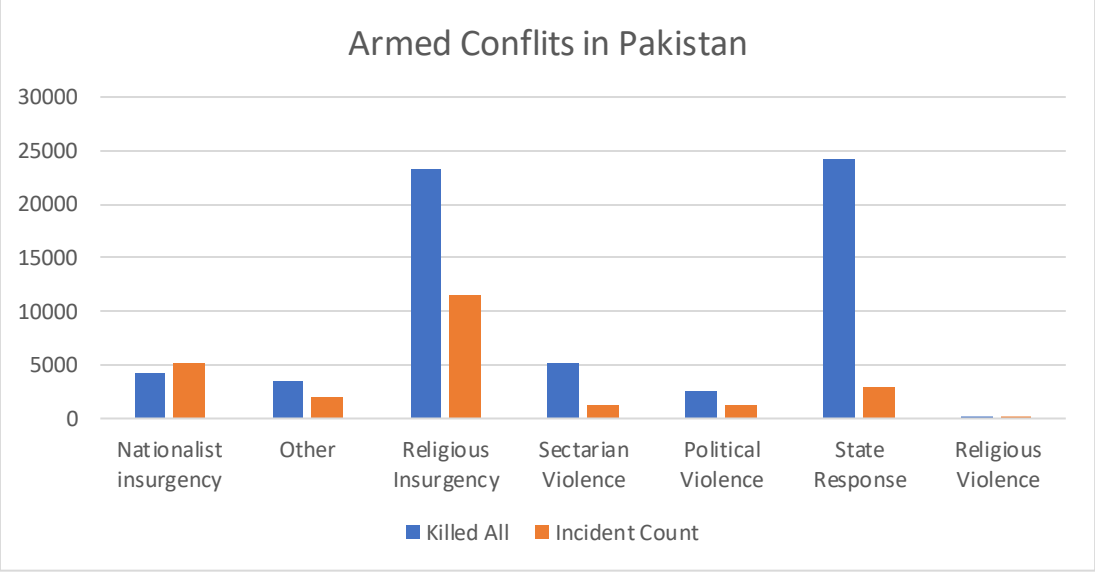
Figure 4 Conflict Intensity Across Districts in Pakistan (2005–2018)



Source: Prepared by the Author from PIPS Conflict data (2021)

Figure 4 maps the intensity of conflict across Pakistan's districts based on total casualties from all forms of armed violence. The pattern is clearly uneven. The north-western belt—including the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa—records the highest conflict intensity, followed by districts in Balochistan. In contrast, Punjab and Sindh remain comparatively stable, apart from isolated incidents in major urban centres such as Karachi and Lahore. The concentration of violent incidents in the western periphery reflects historical governance gaps, difficult terrain, and proximity to conflict-prone border zones. Meanwhile, the relative calm in the eastern and southern regions demonstrates the role of stronger institutional presence and improved security infrastructure. Overall, the spatial variation underscores the highly localised nature of armed conflicts in Pakistan, where violence tends to cluster in structurally weaker and geographically remote districts.

Figure 5 Range of Armed Conflicts in Pakistan

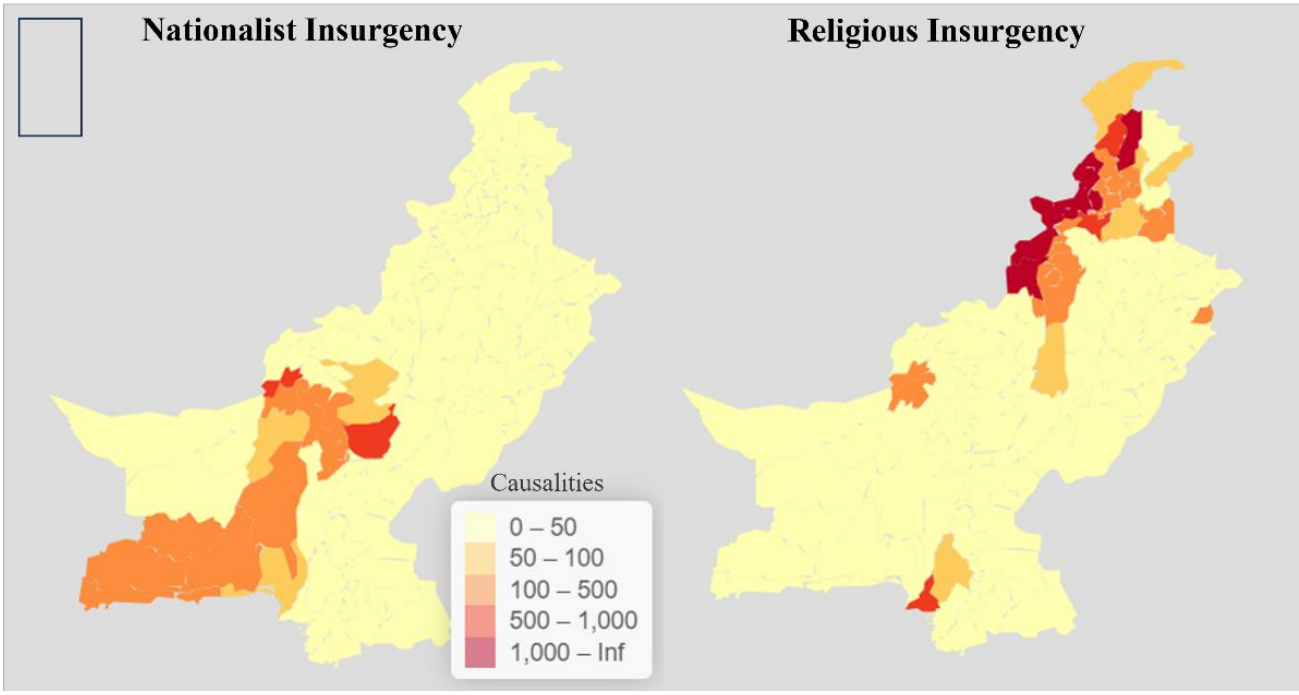


Source: Prepared by the Author from PIPS Conflict data (2021)

Pakistan's internal conflict landscape is diverse and multi-layered. Figure 5 summarises the major types of armed conflict by incident and casualty count. Religious insurgency emerges as

the most dominant form of violence, both in frequency and lethality, concentrated mainly along the Afghan frontier and adjoining regions. This is followed by nationalist insurgency, largely centred in Balochistan, reflecting the enduring tensions around political autonomy and resource distribution. Sectarian and political violence represent smaller yet persistent forms of conflict. Sectarian clashes are most visible in parts of Balochistan, Gilgit-Baltistan, and southern Punjab, while political violence has been concentrated in Karachi. Although these categories record relatively fewer casualties, they contribute significantly to the overall volatility of Pakistan's security environment. Collectively, these data reveal a complex spectrum of conflict drivers, from ideological extremism to regional nationalism and political contestation.

Figure 6 Geographic Spread of Nationalist vs Religious Insurgencies



Source: Prepared by the Author from PIPS Conflict data (2021)

Figure 6 compares the geographic spread of nationalist and religious insurgencies. The contrast is striking. Religious insurgencies are concentrated in the north-western regions, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the former FATA, whereas nationalist insurgencies are

confined largely to Balochistan. This spatial separation reflects the differing origins and motivations of these movements.

Baloch insurgents primarily target government infrastructure, security forces, and resource installations to assert demands for greater autonomy. Religious militants, in contrast, rely on high-casualty tactics such as suicide bombings and coordinated attacks in densely populated civilian areas to achieve broader ideological impact. Sectarian violence further adds another dimension, often linked to regional power rivalries between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which manifest domestically in sporadic but deadly episodes across multiple provinces.

Together, these maps capture the duality of Pakistan's internal conflicts—nationalist movements rooted in territorial and resource grievances on one hand, and religious insurgencies driven by transnational ideologies on the other. The visual distinction highlights how local geography, political context, and external linkages have shaped the contours of violence across the country.

Regional Conflict Dynamics

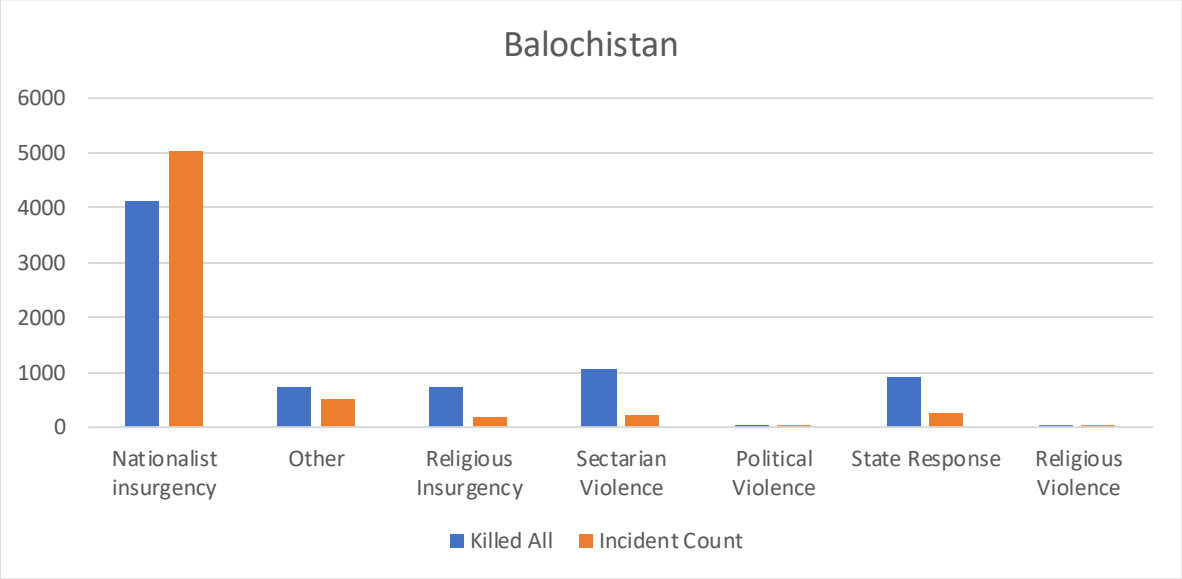
Given these overall national trends, it is essential to examine conflict dynamics at a regional level. Due to its unique geography, ethnicity, history, and socio-political realities, each region exhibits a distinct nature of conflict, patterns, and actors, requiring further analysis. The following sections provide a detailed description of the security challenges province by province, starting with Balochistan, followed by Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Sindh, and Punjab.

Balochistan

Baluchistan is the largest province of Pakistan by area, covering 43.6% of the land, and the least populous one. The capital of this province is Quetta, the largest city, and it is divided into a total of 32 administrative units. This province is located in the southwestern part of the country,

sharing borders with Afghanistan and Iran to the west, and with FATA, Punjab, and Sindh to the north and east. To the southeast lies the Arabian Sea. The major population groups in the province are Baloch, Pashtuns, and Brahui; however, small numbers of Hazaras, Punjabis, and Sindhis have also settled here. Thus, this is the most diverse province both ethnically and linguistically. The physical geography of this province is predominantly mountainous, with only 15% of the land area comprising plains (Nations, 2018). The social organisation takes the form of tribalism (Qasir, 1991). Due to the presence of vast deserts with dispersed settlements, no centralised authority is present here. Therefore, politically, it is a fragmented society.

Figure 7 Conflict Incidence and Casualties in Balochistan



Source: Prepared by the Author from PIPS Conflict Data (2021)

The chart in Figure 7 provides a clear snapshot of the conflict distribution in Balochistan. The data reveal that the province is overwhelmingly dominated by nationalist insurgency, which accounts for the highest number of both incidents and casualties. This pattern distinguishes Balochistan from all other provinces, underscoring its unique conflict profile driven by territorial and political contestations. In contrast, religious insurgency and sectarian violence register

significantly lower figures, suggesting that while they are present, their overall impact is comparatively limited. Political violence and state response appear modest in scale, reinforcing the view that the province's primary instability stems from organised insurgent movements rather than urban or ideological unrest. Overall, Balochistan exhibits a persistent and intense conflict environment, heavily skewed towards nationalist militancy and localised insurgent campaigns. The conflict in this province is often linked to a combination of various historical and grievance-related factors (Khan, 2006; Bresee, 2004; Bansal, 2006). This was initially a homegrown insurgency, but it also has some backing from India (Bansal, 2008).

Baloch Nationalist Insurgency

Prior to Pakistan's creation, Baluchistan had been ruled by the British, who annexed it in 1884. Their primary interest was to establish a buffer zone against the Russian Empire and to provide a route between Sindh and Afghanistan. This area was divided between several countries, while some of its parts became British Baluchistan. The remaining portion was divided into three puppet principalities and the state of Kalat. Indirect rule was established, with political agents serving as the heads of administration. The sole interest here was strategic. Thus, little to no effort was made to economically uplift the region. However, the end of the nineteenth century did bring some development, as the British began improving the infrastructure by building railway lines, roads, post offices, and cantonment areas to facilitate their troops. This development led to enhanced coal mining because of the railway. Consequently, a market economy was established, attracting people from peripheral areas, which led to the exploitation of locals by migrants (Gankovsky, 1971).

Furthermore, another episode of exploitation was brought about by the increased taxes that the British collected from the peasants in the form of wheat. This led to landlessness, resulting

in the emergence of landless labourers and tenants. To fill this void, a mercantile class from Sindh and Punjab was introduced, which created a monopoly over every economic means. Nationalist sentiment was triggered among the locals due to this exploitation. The Baloch nationalists began demanding their state before Pakistan's independence and continued to do so after its establishment. They even refused to be a part of Pakistan.

Baloch dissent in post-partition Pakistan began in 1948. Despite declaring independence, the Khan of Kalat joined Pakistan. After being incorporated into Pakistan, various episodes of armed insurgency were seen. Prince Karim led the first in 1948. In May 1948, Abdul Karim Khan, the younger brother of the Khan family, rebelled against the Pakistani government because he did not accept what he saw as an act of forced entry. There are two views on the reasons behind his revolt. Some believe that he was inspired by socialist ideology and the Russian Revolution and sought to create an independent Socialist Republic of Balochistan. Another view among some Baloch academicians is that this was a reaction to the forced accession of Balochistan to Pakistan. As a result, Abdul Karim Khan was imprisoned for seven years and arrested in 1950.

In 1955, the One Unit system in West Pakistan merged all four provinces into one administrative unit to counter East Pakistan's majority. Baloch leaders expressed concerns and displeasure, as they felt it would limit their independence and potentially lead to unrest. In 1958, the first instance of martial law was imposed, with the army arresting political leaders in Kalat. This marked the beginning of a new rebellion. Following that, agitations over One Unit continued, and two additional waves of insurgencies occurred in 1963–69 and 1973–77. In 1963, the Bugti, Marri, and Mengal tribes rebelled. When the Bugti tribe organised a resistance against the distribution of Baloch land to service members, the Pakistan army carried out aerial bombings.

By the late 1960s, another resistance movement emerged over grievances related to the lack of economic development and unequal sharing of fair compensation for natural resources, such as royalties from natural gas. This developed into a major insurgency in 1973 when Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto overthrew the provincial government. The key Baloch rebels fighting against the Pakistan army included the Baloch Students Organisation (BSO) and the Baloch People's Liberation Front (BPLF). In July 1974, the rebels launched attacks on infrastructure and resource projects. With an extensive military force, the army eventually suppressed this wave of insurgency (Ali, 2005).

The latest phase of insurgency is also linked to the longstanding grievances of Balochis against the federal government. After Pervez Musharraf assumed power through a coup, he initiated major development projects in Baluchistan, including the construction of the Gwadar port and resource exploitation. The BLA began attacking government institutions and energy-related infrastructure. In June 2003, as military forces were deployed to Dera Bugti, Nawab Akbar Bugti resisted. This wave escalated in January 2005, following the alleged rape of a female doctor by an army officer. As the Baloch demanded justice, Musharraf dismissed the accusation. By December 2005, another military operation was launched. Nawab Akbar Bugti was killed in August 2006, escalating the insurgency further (Khan, 2009). Despite efforts, the insurgency persisted, with each wave deadlier than the last.

These historical grievances and rebellions laid the groundwork for contemporary insurgent movements, shaping the motivations, narratives, and tactics of nationalist insurgent groups active today. However, at the same time, the current militancy in Balochistan differs somewhat from past instances. The factors that distinguish it are the emergence of new groups like Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), as well as suicide attacks and the

killing of foreign workers. Previously, insurgent movements were organised by Baloch nationalist tribal chiefs against the state. They were armed guerrillas, typically operating from mountain hideouts. Currently, these violent attacks are no longer confined to mountainous terrain and are carried out throughout the province, whether in urban or rural settings. The primary targets are government personnel and installations. Civilians also suffer in these attacks, both in loss of life and property.

According to the Pakistan Security Report 2018, at least 354 people were killed in various attacks in 2018. Amongst the total attacks in Pakistan, 59% were carried out in Balochistan. Two attacks that were carried out by the BLA (a banned organisation) on Chinese workers stood out based on the modus operandi. In contrast, the rest were carried out by Islamist groups like TTP and ISIS (PIPS, 2019). The conflict in Balochistan has resulted in chaos in this province and around the country. To eradicate insurgent elements, the state has launched military operations by the Army, Air Force, and paramilitary troops in the past as well as in recent times (Gilani, 2017).

Among all the provinces of Pakistan, Balochistan is the poorest, having the lowest per capita income. Due to the climatic conditions (dry and hot), there is limited farming, resulting in nomadic pastoralism as the primary mode of social organisation. Other prevalent economic activities include tending to pasture lands, growing crops on small plots of land, and breeding livestock, such as cattle, sheep, camels, and goats. However, this province is rich in mineral resources. It is rich in gas reserves in Sui and Pir Koh, which meet 80% of the country's demand. Along with gas reserves, the area also contains significant deposits of iron, coal, copper, chromium, silica, manganese, graphite, and antimony. It also has plentiful limestone and marble reserves; 95% of the world’s asbestos is believed to be present here. Despite possessing numerous natural

resources, the living standards and economic conditions of the people are extremely poor, and fundamental rights are denied.

Poverty, illiteracy, and poor performance in social developments like sanitation, electricity, and health facilities lead to anti-government sentiment among the locals (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2006), which triggers insurgency and violent conflict. Maliha Tariq (2014) reported through her research that the present insurgency in Balochistan stems from the grievances of the local population (Tariq, 2014).

These grievances are related to resource exploitation and economic deprivation. According to scholars, Balochistan is a hub of natural resources, including natural gas and minerals, as well as the Gwadar Port and its coastline along the Arabian Sea. However, the share that it gets in return is not proportional to the value of these resources. For instance, the province's share of natural gas is 36% of the total used in the country, while it only consumes 17% of what is produced there. Moreover, a copper exploration project in this province was granted to a Chinese company under an agreement in which the extracting company owns 50%, and the other 50% is shared among the federal and provincial governments, with 48% and 2%, respectively.

The groups that are active in the region, such as the BLA, the BRA, and the Baloch Student Organisation (BSO), capitalise on these apprehensions and challenge the government's writ (Rehman, 2006). These groups target resource-rich areas, such as Gwadar, Sui, Kohlu, and Khuzdar, and attack communication infrastructure, gas pipelines, and other government installations. Insurgents like the Baloch People’s Liberation Front (BPLF), time and again, tried to delay the construction of a 57-kilometre road for oil exploration. The Army intervened and brought these insurgents under control.

Some scholars deny that economic grievances are the cause of instability in Balochistan. Instead, they consider the process of urbanisation as a source of deprivation for some groups in the province (Gul, 2019). Besides economic grievances, the greed factor is also denied on the basis that none of the militant groups has taken over any resources in the country (Gul, 2019)

The quest of Baloch nationalists for provincial autonomy, along with complete control over their natural resources, has long been highlighted as a cause of conflict in the region. There had been indirect rule in Balochistan during British rule and even for some time after the creation of Pakistan (Babar, 2004). After Partition, this province was ruled from the centre. Later, in 1955, a One Unit scheme was implemented in the country, which effectively eliminated Balochistan's territorial identity (Noman, 1990).

Ethnic and Sectarian Militancy

Pakhtuns ethnically dominate the northern part of Balochistan, while the south is predominantly inhabited by Balochs (Ahmad, 1992). In the late 1970s, when Balochistan was declared a province, tensions erupted. The influx and settlement of Afghan refugees (Pakhtuns) in this province added fuel to the fire. This shift in the ethno-linguistic balance in favour of the Pakhtuns created an identity crisis among the Baloch. As a consequence, ethnic tensions erupted between the two groups.

The Baloch aligned with nationalist parties, while the Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PMAP) represented the Pakhtuns, aligning with religious parties such as the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA). This also gave rise to fundamentalism and religious fanaticism in the province. On the other hand, the Baloch nationalists are against the mixing of religion and politics for fear of losing their identity. The MMA in 2003 was dominated by Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam Fazl-ul-Rehman (JUI-F), a Sunni sect, which facilitated the proliferation of madrasas in the province.

During this time, many major processions and mosques of the Shia sect were attacked, with the Shia Hazara community the primary target. All these developments promoted sectarianism and sparked sectarian violence. Hence, this conflict is also labelled as sectarian and ethnic.

State response

Since then, the nationalists have protested and launched several insurgencies, including those in 1958 and the early 1960s. The peak of this demand was reached in 1973, when the political conflict emerged with the ousting of the Awami National Party (ANP) by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). Even the domination of the federal structure by one province, Punjab, acts as an impetus for the uprising by Baloch nationalists. The grievance of political marginalisation, an Achilles' heel of Balochistan, was exploited by external actors like Afghanistan and India, which further inflamed the insurgency.

In 1973, all this led to an armed clash between 55,000 insurgents and 80,000 Pakistani troops. In the aftermath of this rebellion, around 5,300 guerrillas were killed. The Pakistan Army also faced a loss of 3,300 soldiers, alongside the massive killing of civilians (Fulcher, 2006). Provincial status was finally granted in the late 1970s. Therefore, the struggle for provincial autonomy is also recognised as a key factor contributing to this conflict.

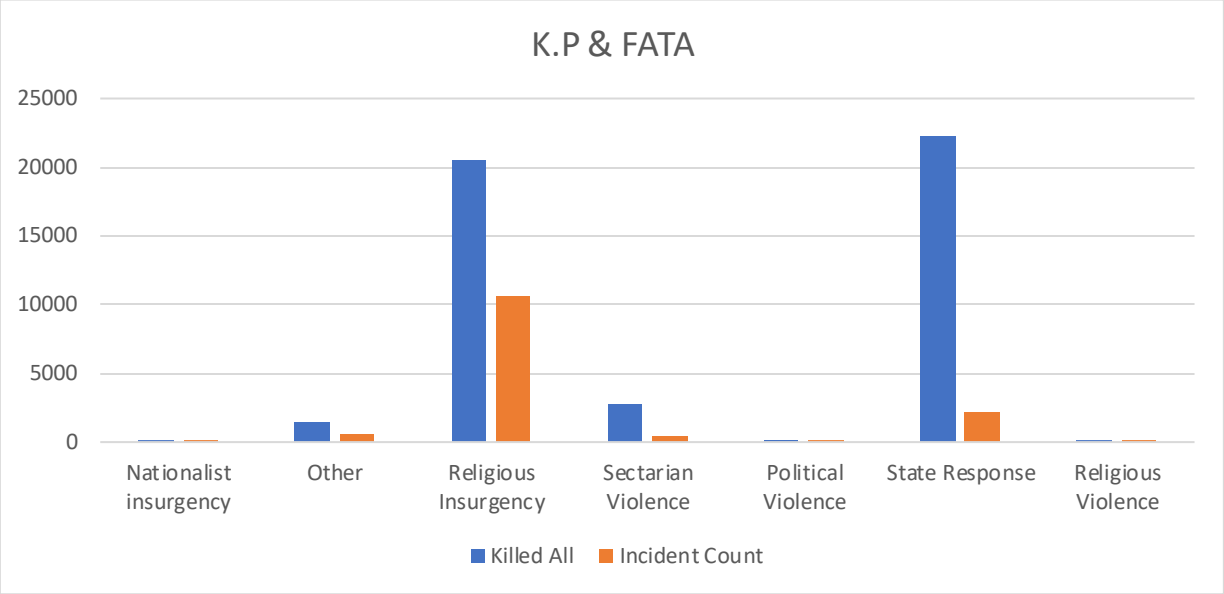
The Baloch nationalists have rarely welcomed military regimes in Pakistan because the army is dominated by Punjabis, with little representation of the people of this province. The projects announced by the 1999 regime, such as the construction of Gwadar Port, exploration of resources around the port, and the establishment of two army cantonments, also caused serious resentment among the Baloch (Kaplan, 2009). In addition, the military-led government dealt with Baloch militancy primarily with force.

In 2002, the situation started worsening when insurgents from Dera Bugti were warned to hand over the terrorists involved in attacking gas installations in Sui. As development projects increased, so did the incidence of violence. An armed conflict was sparked in 2005 between the Bugti rebels and military forces (Shahid, 2006). The exchange of fire and use of rocket launchers led to a heavy loss of life and the displacement of around 84,000 people. This insurgency reached its peak when Akbar Bugti, along with thirty-seven members of his tribe, was killed in a military attack. These military operations against militants have led to an increased pace of violence (ICG, 2006).

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

KP, previously known as the North-West Frontier Province, is a province of Pakistan located in the north. It is the third-largest province by area, with a population of approximately 30 million, accounting for 17.9% of the total population (PBS, 2017). The capital and largest city is Peshawar. Afghanistan borders it to the west, Balochistan to the south, and Punjab and Kashmir to the east. Mountains surround this province, featuring a fertile valley that comprises people of diverse ethnicities, with Pathans as the dominant group, followed by Seraiki- and Hindko-speaking populations. The languages spoken here are Pashto, Seraiki, Hindko, Kohistani, and Khowar (Banerjee, 2000). Moreover, another significant aspect of this province is the FATA region, located to the west of KP, which is a mountainous region comprising seven agencies. This area was unique in that the central authority had limited influence over its internal matters. However, under Articles 246 and 247 of the Constitution of Pakistan, this part has now been merged into the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has experienced different waves of insurgency and violent conflict. The Pakhtoon nationalist movements were among the early waves of armed conflict in this area, with religious insurgency being the most recent.

Figure 8 Conflict Incidence and Casualties in KP and FATA



Source: Prepared by the Author from PIPS Conflict Data (2021)

Figure 8 highlights a sharply contrasting conflict profile in KP and FATA, where religious insurgency emerges as the predominant form of violence. The province records the highest casualty figures nationwide, reflecting both the intensity and lethality of militant operations. The close alignment between incident count and total fatalities indicates that attacks in this region are systematically organised and often designed to inflict maximum harm. The data also show a strong presence of state response, nearly matching insurgent-related casualties, which demonstrates the militarised nature of the conflict. Sectarian and political violence remain comparatively low, confirming that the region's instability is concentrated around militant and counter-militant activity. Overall, KP and FATA stand out as the country's central battleground for insurgent operations, where conflict frequency and fatality rates have remained persistently high throughout the period of analysis.

Religious Insurgency

The onset of this wave of religious insurgency in the tribal region of Pakistan followed the events of 9/11. There is substantial agreement in the existing empirical literature that the root cause of the current insurgency lies in Pakistan's support for the Mujahideen during the Afghan Jihad. For instance, Weinbaum and Harder (2008, p. 29) observe that the ideological and organisational support extended to militants during the Soviet-Afghan War had a far-reaching impact on the internal security of Pakistan. Similarly, Ghufran (2009) considers Pakistan's policies during the Soviet-Afghan War a key factor responsible for the current insurgency. Murphy and Malik (2009) maintain that the social, political, and economic impacts of the Afghan War (1977–1988) contributed to present-day militancy in the tribal areas of Pakistan. Likewise, Bukhari (2011) and Brown (2013) support the view that Pakistan's Afghan policy during the 1980s was the most significant factor influencing the country's internal security landscape. The literature also suggests that India-funded groups are responsible for some aspects of the current militancy in the tribal areas (Ahmad, 2013; Afridi, 2016).

The roots of religious insurgency in the area can be traced back to the early days of the Afghan Jihad (Khan, 2019). Later, it spread to other parts of the country. The religious militancy led by Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and a few other small groups in the border region of Afghanistan is a residual effect of the Afghan situation and the 9/11 saga (Mushahid, 2019). During the 1990s, the General Musharraf regime decided to become an ally of the US in the War on Terror in Afghanistan and adopted specific religion-based policies. First, the MMA, an alliance of six religious parties, was allowed to operate, which facilitated the spread of radicalisation in the NWFP and Balochistan. Additionally, in 2005, the passage of the Hasba Bill, which aimed to

implement Shariah law (although rejected by the Supreme Court), still paved the way for the Talibanisation of the NWFP (Saigol, 2011).

However, outwardly, Musharraf played the role of a US ally. This dual approach infuriated the Mujahideen-turned-Taliban, who in retaliation started a violent conflict in the area (Ghufran, 2009). Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and its tribal belt, FATA, have since experienced extreme turbulence. The conflict in this province is among the most complex in the world, with various forces at play and giving rise to multiple dimensions (Johnson & Mason, 2008; Ahmed, 1983; Crews, 2008). A detailed analysis of these factors is provided in the following sections.

The key element of insurgency in FATA is linked to cross-border transnational Islamist militancy (Shah, 2010; Crews, 2008). However, the key culprit for turbulence in KP is the Taliban (Danspeckgruber, 2009; Johnson & Mason, 2008). The origin of these Taliban, once known as Mujahideen or Jihadists (freedom fighters), was a product of the General Zia-ul-Haq regime of the 1980s. He employed the Deobandi interpretation of Islam, derived from the Maududi school of thought within Jamaat-e-Islami (a radical Islamic party), to expand his political power and legitimise his rule. In the wake of this Islamisation wave, the concept of Jihad led to Pakistan becoming a frontline ally of the US against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. For this purpose, Mujahideen were created and trained according to extremist ideology to fight Soviet forces. They were backed by Saudi Arabia and the US, who funded them with millions of dollars.

These jihadist groups began establishing sectarian outfits in Pakistan's western and northern regions near the Afghan border. However, following the withdrawal of the USSR from Afghanistan and the subsequent retreat of the US, the seeds of extremism in Pakistan took root. During the 1990s, numerous jihadi groups such as the Afghan Taliban, Al-Qaeda, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Uighurs, Sudanese, and East Asian fighters disrupted peace, particularly in the tribal belt (Qazi,

2012). Due to its mountainous terrain and remoteness, this area became a haven for these groups, given the government's weak writ (Rana, 2019). Hizb-i-Islami, led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, became established in Bajaur, while the Haqqani Network spread across North Waziristan. This belt developed into a training ground for militant groups launching insurgencies across Pakistan. These extremist groups gradually expanded their influence, engulfing broader sections of the population, particularly in the NWFP (Saigol, 2011).

In addition, as the Taliban assumed power in Afghanistan in 1996, militant groups also began infiltrating the 2,560-kilometre-long Pakistani border regions, KP, Balochistan, and the Pashtun tribal belt (Gul, 2019; Ghufran, 2009; Yusuf, 2014). The Taliban imposed their ideology by leading several religious movements, such as the Tehreek-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM), advocating Islamic law in Bajaur Agency. Their efforts to enforce Shariah directly challenged the writ of the government, evidenced by attacks on checkpoints and state infrastructure.

This conflict further escalated after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Centre in the US by Al-Qaeda operatives (Khan & Yusof, 2017). The resulting War on Terror, led by the US with Pakistan's support, intensified regional instability. As US operations began in Afghanistan, Afghan Taliban fighters sought refuge in Pakistan's tribal areas (Rashid, 2010). During this process, the Pakistani Taliban began to consolidate in FATA. From 2001 to 2007, local support for the Afghan Taliban solidified (Weinbaum, 2017).

On 14 December 2007, a meeting of around 40 senior Taliban leaders established the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a coalition of various Taliban-oriented groups (Khan, 2019). Leadership was given to Baitullah Mehsud, formerly of the Jamiat Tulaba-e-Islam, the student wing of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam. The TTP had representatives across Tank, Swat, Dera Ismail Khan, Bannu, Malakand Division, Buner, Lakki Marwat, and Kohistan, as well as in all seven tribal

agencies: North and South Waziristan, Bajaur, Kurram, Khyber, Mohmand, and Orakzai. The TTP later expanded throughout Pakistan (Acharya, 2009).

Initially, they began by replacing traditional tribal leadership using coercion and force, executing up to twenty tribal elders on charges of collaborating with the US (Ali, 2008). After 2006, the insurgency escalated dramatically, with over a thousand security forces and officials killed. Suicide bombings targeted mosques, schools, churches, and police stations. As a result, 5.3 million people were internally displaced. As an active partner in the War on Terror, Pakistan launched military operations to suppress these militants.

Tribal and Sectarian Violence

Beyond the Taliban's religious extremism, traditional tribal rivalries have also played a significant role in shaping conflict dynamics, further destabilising the region. The tribal belt comprises various tribes, whose mutual animosities have contributed to localised armed conflicts (Rana, 2009; Ahmed, 1983). One such rivalry exists in Waziristan between the Wazir and Mehsud tribes. This rivalry led to the creation of the Muqami Tehrik-e-Taliban (Local Taliban Movement) in 2007 by Mullah Nazir and Hafiz Gul Bahadur. The group's objective was to counter Baitullah Mehsud and his supporters, including the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (Nawaz, 2009), and maintain their autonomy in North and South Waziristan.

In terms of state-tribe conflict, insurgents have continually challenged the state's authority (Shah, 2010). Historically, religious leaders such as Mullah Hadda, Maulvi Noor Mohammad (the "Mullah of Waziristan"), and Fakir Ipi encouraged tribal members to resist state authority through armed struggle (Johnson, 2008). In the 2000s, following the Army's invasion of FATA, rebellion again surged among the Wazir and Mehsud tribes. To counter the Taliban, the state supported tribal militias in Mohmand and paramilitary groups in Bajaur (Nawaz, 2009).

Another layer to this conflict is undeclared class warfare, especially between two generational groups, Mashar (tribal elders) and Kashar (youth from poorer or marginal families) (McCormick, 2009). This intra-tribal tension emerged in the 1980s, catalysed by the Afghan civil war. The Kashar, often referred to as "tribal entrepreneurs," gained access to resources and political opportunities, using them to disrupt traditional authority (Shah, 2010). The movement intensified post-US invasion, with around 600 elders killed. Charismatic Kashar leaders such as Hakimullah Mehsud (a madrassa dropout), Maulvi Omar (a perfume seller), Baitullah Mehsud (a former bus conductor), and Mullah Fazlullah (a lift operator in Swat) emerged, all of whom sought to dismantle established tribal hierarchies and national peace.

A fourth dimension of the FATA conflict is sectarianism (Nawaz, 2009). A prominent example is found in Kurram, where the Shi'a Turi tribe clashes with the Sunni Bangash tribe (Shah, 2010). Punjabi militants have also targeted the tourists, blocking their access to other areas in an attempt to break their dominance. Similarly, violence in Orakzai has mirrored this pattern. In Khyber, sectarian conflict exists between the Barelvi group, Ansarul Islam and the Deobandi Lashkar-e-Islam (Nawaz, 2009).

State Response

In response to the growing insurgencies discussed earlier, the Pakistani state, acting both under domestic security imperatives and as a partner in the U.S.-led "War on Terror", initiated a series of military and counterinsurgency operations across the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Over time, these campaigns reflected a gradual evolution from enemy-centric kinetic responses to population-centric counterinsurgency that sought to integrate development, governance, and intelligence-based operations. This shift mirrors Pakistan's own learning curve in managing complex internal conflicts, where initial military

actions often produced short-term territorial gains but long-term strategic and humanitarian costs (Mullick, 2009; Weinbaum, 2017).

The first large-scale operation, Al-Mizan (2002–2004), marked the military's unprecedented deployment into the tribal belt since 1948. It aimed to dismantle Al-Qaeda's network and its local supporters through a "search and destroy" strategy involving air and ground offensives in South Waziristan. Though the operation temporarily disrupted insurgent command structures, it also provoked fierce tribal resistance and heavy civilian displacement. Off-record admissions from senior officers indicated that the campaign began largely under U.S. pressure before diplomatic alternatives were exhausted (ICG, 2006). The failure to pair coercion with political outreach deepened local resentment, fuelling militant recruitment and expanding safe havens into adjacent agencies. As Mullick (2009) observed, these early actions relied on force over legitimacy, raising state control costs rather than reducing insurgent operating expenses.

The Lal Masjid siege in 2007 symbolised the internalisation of the conflict from Pakistan's periphery to its capital. The government's decision to storm the mosque, then a hub for radical preaching, reasserted state authority but at a steep social cost. The operation triggered an unprecedented surge in suicide bombings across the country: from seven incidents in 2006 to fifty-four in 2007 (Post, 2007b). The breakdown of existing truces in North and South Waziristan further demonstrates how tactical victories often translate into strategic reversals. The episode strengthened militants' grievance narratives and catalysed the formation of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

By 2008, insurgent networks had consolidated under the TTP's leadership. In response, Operation Zalzala ("Earthquake") targeted the group's strongholds in South Waziristan using extensive artillery and air power (Jones & Fair, 2010). While the government claimed success in

dismantling militant infrastructure, the collateral damage and large-scale displacement, described as "collective punishment" by local witnesses (Dawn, 2008b), deepened alienation. Militants adapted by relocating to Orakzai, Kurram, and Bajaur, highlighting the mobility advantage created by rugged terrain and weak governance.

Operation Rah-e-Nijat (2009) followed as an intensified campaign to eliminate Mehsud-led TTP factions. Although security forces captured key territory and seized arms caches, violence levels remained high nationwide. More than 12,000 people were killed or injured in terrorist attacks that year (Rana, 2010). The recurring cycle of displacement, destruction, and relocation reflected the limits of kinetic approaches when local legitimacy was absent. Each operation demonstrated that coercion without administrative consolidation merely displaced, rather than resolved, insurgent capacity.

Learning from early missteps, the army began integrating local actors into its counterinsurgency strategy. Operation Sher Dil (2008–09) in Bajaur exemplified this shift. The creation of tribal lashkars (local militias) and jirgas underpinned a strategy of "winning hearts and minds" by restoring community agency and trust in state institutions (PIPS, 2008). Coordination with local elders and development initiatives gradually eroded militant influence in some districts. Mullick (2009) identified this period as the first systematic attempt to align military operations with sociopolitical engagement, signalling the maturation of Pakistan's counterinsurgency doctrine.

Following a series of devastating attacks, particularly the 2014 Karachi airport assault, the state launched Operation Zarb-e-Azb ("Strike of the Prophet's Sword") in North Waziristan. This marked a decisive phase in which Pakistan adopted a comprehensive counterinsurgency model combining military force with national coordination through the National Action Plan (NAP)

(Javaid, 2015). The operation dismantled militant command hubs and disrupted transnational networks, leading to a reported 65% drop in civilian casualties by 2015 (Editorial, 2016). Yet, while Zarb-e-Azb significantly reduced insurgent mobility, the challenge of reintegration, internal displacement, and cross-border spillover persisted.

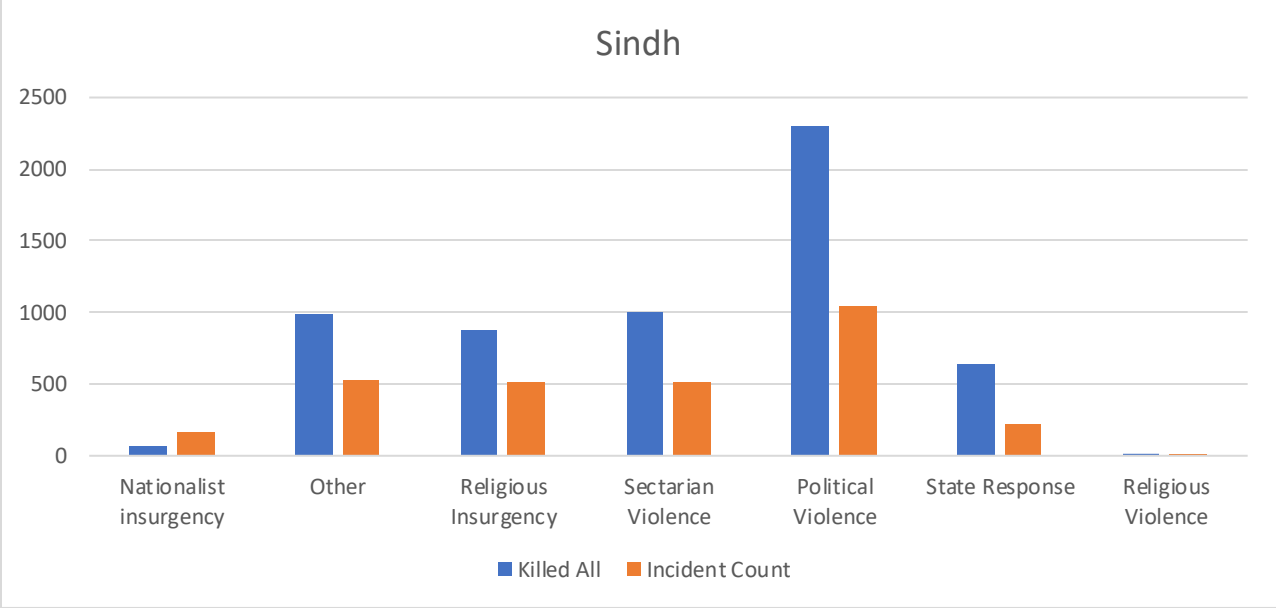
To consolidate these gains, Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad ("Elimination of Discord") was launched in 2017. Unlike earlier theatre-specific campaigns, it emphasised nationwide intelligence-based operations, disarmament, and the dismantling of sleeper cells (DAWN, 2017). It also coincided with the 25th Constitutional Amendment, merging FATA into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a structural reform aimed at extending administrative control and reducing the ungoverned spaces that had historically facilitated rebellion (Wasim, 2018). The coupling of kinetic and governance measures signified a recognition that enduring peace required more than battlefield success; it demanded institutional absorption and development.

Across these phases, Pakistan's counterinsurgency trajectory illustrates the complex interaction between state strategies and conflict feasibility. In the early years, coercive operations expanded the very structural conditions, rugged terrain, weak administration, and population displacement, that enabled insurgent survival. Over time, however, the shift toward intelligence-driven, locally coordinated, and administratively integrated strategies gradually reduced both operational and economic feasibility for militant groups. Yet, the persistence of cross-border sanctuaries and illicit economies in border districts highlights that feasibility is not eliminated, but rather relocated. In essence, Pakistan's evolving state response underscores a central argument of this study: that the state is itself a producer and regulator of conflict feasibility, through its reach, policies, and selective use of force.

Sindh

Sindh is located in the southeast of Pakistan. It is the second most populous province, with 47.9 million people, and the third largest by area (PBS, 2017). Karachi is now the provincial capital and the country's most significant economic and commercial hub, mainly due to its two seaports. It is bordered by Balochistan to the west, Punjab to the north, India to the east, and the Arabian Sea to the south. Moreover, this region is composed of diverse groups, including Sindhis, Balochs, Muhajirs, Pashtuns, and Biharis. The languages spoken here are mostly Sindhi, Balochi, Siraiki, Pashto, and Urdu.

Figure 9 Conflict Incidence and Casualties in Sindh



Source: Prepared by the Author from PIPS Conflict Data (2021)

The data presented in Figure 9 reveal that Sindh's conflict profile is dominated by political violence, followed by sectarian and religious forms of unrest. This distinguishes Sindh from other provinces where insurgency or militancy is the primary driver of conflict. The political violence category, which records the highest number of casualties, reflects the concentration of violent

incidents in Karachi the province's economic hub and most populous urban centre. Sectarian and religious insurgencies show moderate but notable figures, indicating that Sindh continues to experience ideologically motivated attacks alongside politically driven unrest. The relatively lower scale of state response suggests that violence in Sindh tends to be localised and episodic rather than sustained or insurgent in nature. Overall, the data highlight Sindh's complex conflict environment, characterised by political contestation and urban violence rather than large-scale insurgency.

Ethnic Violence

Karachi has remained a hub of ethnic diversity (Verkaaik, 2004). The last census showed that 61.6% of the population were Sindhi, followed by Urdu-speakers (commonly referred to as Mohajirs) at 18.2%, Pashto at 5.46%, Punjabi at 5.31%, Seraiki at 2.23%, and Balochi at 2%.

This diversity in the province has led to acute polarisation between these various distinctive groups. The significant violence has its roots in the province's historical legacy. On the one hand, the conflict was between the Urdu-speakers (Mohajirs) and the Sindhis, while on the other it was between the Urdu-speakers and the Biharis (who travelled from North India to East Pakistan after 1947 and from Bangladesh to Pakistan after 1971) on one side, and the Pashtun on the other side.

After the migration, these Mohajirs faced exploitation because of being in the minority. They considered the elite of this province (mostly Sindhis) to be a cause of this exploitation. To secure their rights, they established the All Pakistan Mohajir Student Organisation (APMSO) in 1978, which underwent several phases, ultimately leading to the formation of the Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM) and other parties, including the Mohajir Punjabi Pakhtun Movement (MPPM). They all had the same motive of being a voice for the migrants and countering the domination of

the Sindhi Nationalist Movement. This ethnic conflict was manifested on many occasions; for instance, an extremely violent clash erupted between Mohajir groups and Sindhis over the issue of Sindhi becoming a provincial language, which resulted in many deaths.

Similar types of ethnic riots were also witnessed between the settled Pashtuns and Biharis. One example is the clashes which erupted in 1985 after the death of a college student named Bushra Zaidi due to being overrun by a bus driven by a Pathan driver (Gayer, 2014). The repercussion of this accident was that Islami Jamiat-i-Tulabah (IJT), the party of the Urdu-speakers, supported the Biharis and attacked the Pashtun community (for allegedly killing the girl). This disrupted law and order in the whole city, causing deadly clashes between both ethnicities. Although controlled to a greater extent presently, the ethnic strife and animosity are still the cause of insurgency in Sindh (Gayer, 2014).

Political Violence

Another glaring dimension of violent conflict in Sindh, and especially in Karachi, is the political tug of war (Gayer, 2014). This violence increased tenfold in the years between 2006 and 2013. The party that ruled the city with force was the Mutahhida Qaumi Movement (MQM), which changed its name from Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM) in 1997. The party splintered into two groups, MQM-Haqiqi and the MQM-Mohajirs. A communal riot was escalated between both parties over the reins of power (Kalyvas, 2012). They started targeted killings, collecting ransoms, and induced a weapons race. Some episodes of street violence also erupted during this period. Other political parties, such as the Awami National Party, Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam Fazl, Sunni Tehreek, Jeay Sindh Qaumi Mahaz, the Balochistan National Party, Jamaat-i-Islami, and the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), are also active in this province. Each party has lost its workers in various political disputes, with each trying to reach the top of the ladder (Verkaaik, 2004).

Sectarian Violence

Another significant aspect of insurgency in Sindh is sectarianism (Amir, 2007). Most sectarian incidents have occurred in this province, followed by Balochistan, KP, FATA, and Punjab. In the whole province, Karachi has faced violent incidents. The groups primarily responsible include the Ahle-Sunnat-Wal-Jammat (ASWJ), a sectarian and political group, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (Lej), Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SMP). Most of these groups, including TTP and the Lej, infiltrated here to escape the ongoing operations in KP and FATA. In addition, the Balochistan nationalist insurgency in the 1970s and 1980s gave rise to religious riots in Karachi, with both complementing each other. The above-mentioned militant groups then exploited this chaotic situation (Rana, 2019).

The targets of these militants are the Shia community, including clerics, professionals, political leaders, police, and tribal leaders. Attacks on processions and schools, targeted killings, and kidnapping for ransom are some of the means of spreading fear across the province (Chandran & Chari, 2015). Besides these larger groups, certain Sunni sub-sects, like the Barelvis and Deobandis, are also in a tug of war, each competing to take control over the religious institutions and impose their ideology (Lamb & Mufti, 2012).

State Response

In the early 1990s, the Pakistani army started "Operation Clean Up" to address the militancy in Mohajir neighbourhoods, but to circumvent the potential criticism of targeting a specific political group, the operation was soon transferred to the Sindh police and paramilitary Rangers (Feyyaz, 2012). This transition to civilian forces led to extensive extrajudicial killings of Mohajir militia members, exacerbating tensions between the MQM and the ruling political parties at different times, namely the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-

Nawaz (PMLN) (Ahmed, 1998). The operation, through extrajudicial means, managed to diminish or eliminate MQM militias, contributing to a decrease in ethno-political violence towards the late 1990s and early 2000s.

However, this period also saw the rise of Sunni Muslim extremist groups targeting Shia Muslims, which led to intense police action against these groups, resulting in a significant reduction of sectarian violence during the late 1990s and early to mid-2000s (Budhani, 2010).

Despite these efforts, Karachi has been surrounded by violence because the dynamics of violence in Karachi have evolved significantly over the first two decades of the 2000s (Bengali & Sadaqat, 2002). Karachi's security landscape is now marked by the presence of multiple criminal gangs, militant groups with sectarian agendas and TTP militants and their affiliates, adding a new layer of complexity and danger to the existing volatile mix of urban violence (Khan, 2014).

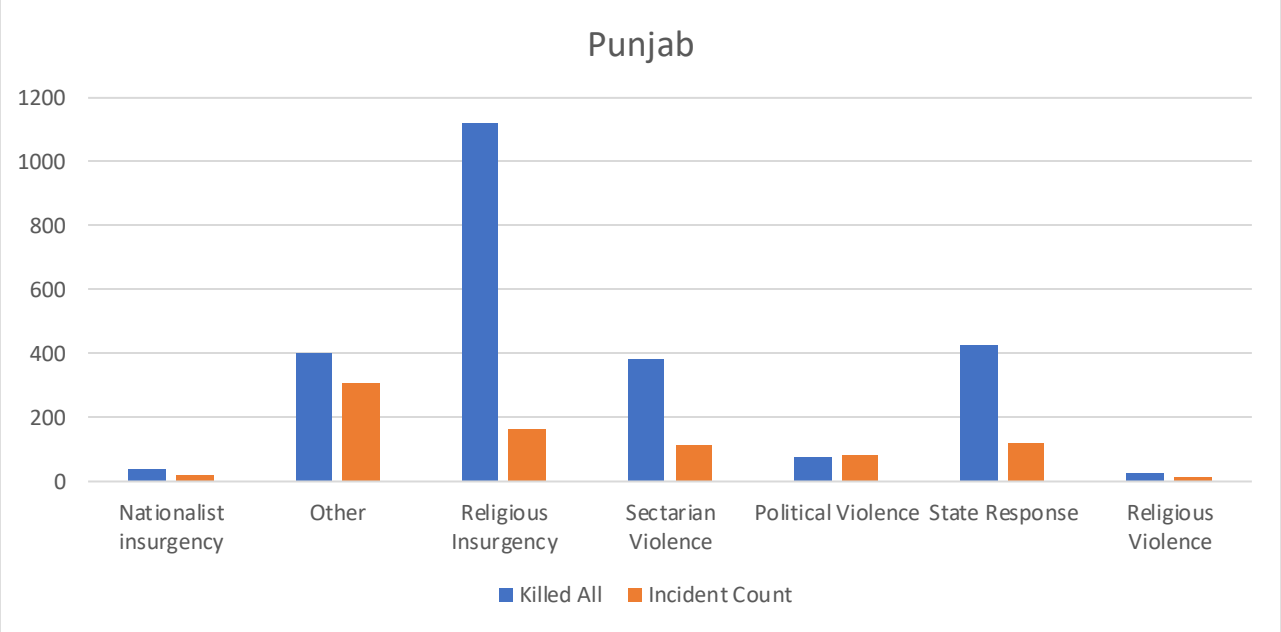
In order to curtail this unique and only urban insurgency in Pakistan, the state has deployed rangers across the province, and the publication of hate speech has been banned. The transfer of funds to any of these groups is also being scrutinised. Search operations are conducted, and the militant outfits have been busted across the board, and the law enforcement agencies have seized a large number of arms and weapon depots (Weinbaum, 2017).

Punjab

The fourth, and most populous, province of Pakistan, with a population of 110 million, is Punjab. By area, it is the second largest after Balochistan. This province shares its borders with KP, India, Sindh, and Balochistan towards the west, east, south, and southwest, respectively. Towards the north, it is linked to Islamabad, the capital territory, and Jammu and Kashmir. The capital of this province is Lahore. It is a fertile region with five rivers, earning it the name Punjab, meaning 'five rivers'. In addition to its vast industrial base, this province also holds a significant

share of agricultural production. It is home to various tribes and clans, and the languages spoken here include Punjabi, Saraiki, Urdu, Balochi, and Sindhi. In contrast to Sindh's urban-centric and politically charged conflicts, violence in Punjab is predominantly sectarian and religiously motivated, but at lower intensities.

Figure 10 Incidence and Casualties of Conflict in Punjab



Source: Prepared by the Author from PIPS Conflict data (2021)

Figure 10 shows that Punjab, despite being the most populous province, experiences significantly lower levels of violence compared to other regions. The data reflect an absence of any single dominant conflict type, with incidents distributed across religious insurgency, sectarian violence, and isolated political unrest. Religious insurgency records the highest fatalities, though the number of incidents remains limited, indicating that violence here is sporadic but often highly lethal. Sectarian and political violence show moderate figures, suggesting that while extremist networks operate within the province, they lack the sustained organisational strength observed in the country's conflict-prone peripheries. Overall, the data suggest a relatively secure and stable

environment in Punjab, with conflict appearing concentrated in specific urban areas rather than being widespread.

Sectarian Violence

The Punjabi Taliban is the most important actor involved in violence in this province (Tankel, 2016; Abbas, 2009). The terrorist activities of this faction were exacerbated after the 9/11 incident (Khan & Yusof, 2017). This group is composed of members of different banned militant groups that are of Punjabi origin, who came into existence with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (Tankel, 2016; Coll, 2004; Ahmed, 2011). The political parties based on religion were nurtured in Zia's regime. These parties backed the sectarian outfit, and sectarian conflicts were at their peak from 1979 to 1990. The organisations related to jihadist ideology amounted to one hundred per cent, while the rise in parties on sectarian lines equalled ninety per cent. The sectarian outfits like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), and so on, started proliferating in Pakistan (Rashid, 1996). They also had strong connections with the TTP and other militant organisations present in FATA and KP (Abbas, 2009). These groups provide mutual support through financial assistance, logistics, manpower, and training. The Punjabi Taliban has stayed active in providing logistics to the TTP to carry out militant attacks in Punjab as well as in the capital of Pakistan (PIPS, 2011; Abbas, 2009).

The hues of sectarianism are also evident in Punjab, according to certain studies. The militants in Punjab have given air to sectarian strife in the country (Tankel, 2016). The two major religious groups – i.e. Sunni Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and the Shia Sipah-i-Mohammad Pakistan (SMP) – have created a fault line between each other. These groups have further split into Deobandis and Barelvis. All of these groups are defending their ideologies and eliminating those who do not adhere to their beliefs (Abbas, 2009). From 2011 to 2017, 1,006 civilians lost their

lives in different attacks, such as suicide bombings, while 257 security personnel were also killed in incidents by these militants. Hence, Punjab has also seen instances of violent conflict at the hands of these militants in the name of religion.

State Response

To curtail this wave of insurgency in Punjab, Operation Zarb-e-Azb, followed by Radd-ul-Fasaad, was conducted by the Army, targeting the militant groups mostly hiding in the Southern Punjab region. Moreover, other intelligence-based operations are also being conducted against these militants and terrorist groups (Tankel, 2016).

Having explored the conflict dynamics across all provinces, it is evident that the origins, motivations, and manifestations of armed conflicts vary by region. Although each province's history, socio-economic conditions, ethnic composition, and governance challenges collectively shape its security environment, at the same time, despite this diversity, it leads to the same conclusion: unrest, necessitating the search for common underlying conditions that contribute to the onset and sustainability of these armed conflicts.

Key Insights from Existing Literature

Having examined the regional patterns and intensity of armed conflicts across Pakistan, it is important to contextualise these patterns within the broader scholarly understanding of the country's political and social environment. Numerous studies have sought to explain the persistence and geography of internal violence in Pakistan, drawing attention to an array of structural, ideological, and geopolitical determinants. This section synthesises key insights from the existing scholarship to illuminate the broader forces that underpin the empirical trends discussed above. It therefore serves as a conceptual bridge between the descriptive analysis of Pakistan's conflict landscape and the theoretical framework that follows.

The reviewed scholarship highlights that Pakistan's internal conflicts cannot be understood in isolation from its foreign policy orientation, religious and sectarian dynamics, centre–periphery relations, socio-economic inequalities, and patterns of state governance. These interlinked dimensions collectively shape both the motivations and the structural feasibility of armed mobilisation. While each strand of literature captures a specific aspect of Pakistan's violent politics, together they reveal a complex system in which external interventions, ideological contestations, economic marginalisation, and institutional weaknesses reinforce one another to sustain recurring cycles of violence. The following synthesis identifies five broad contextual domains emerging from this body of work.

Foreign Policy & Geo-Politics

Scholars widely agree that Pakistan's contemporary militancy cannot be understood without reference to its geopolitical history and foreign policy alignments. The Afghan war of the 1980s under General Zia-ul-Haq marked a decisive ideological and strategic realignment that embedded militancy within Pakistan's political and social fabric. The Afghan jihad fostered the formation of the Mujahideen, armed fighters mobilised to repel the Soviet invasion, while also entrenching new networks of religious activism and external patronage. Works such as Coll (1992) and Hiro (1999) document the influence of foreign actors in shaping Pakistan's strategic calculus, whereas Rashid (2009) and Gregory (2007) view Zia's Islamisation policies as the principal catalyst for the rise of jihadist organisations that later diversified into numerous militant groups.

Following the end of the Cold War, these networks did not dissolve. Instead, state linkages with militant groups persisted, with successive governments perceiving them as strategic assets in regional disputes, particularly in Afghanistan and Kashmir. Swami (2006) and Fair (2007) detail this interaction, showing how Pakistan's security establishment employed militant organisations

to project influence beyond its borders. The literature characterises the 1990s as a period in which domestic political instability, the pursuit of "strategic depth," and regional power competition sustained environments favourable to militancy (Kapur, 2016; Singh, 2017).

The post-9/11 period introduced a profound reconfiguration of Pakistan's internal and external security posture. As a frontline ally in the US-led Global War on Terror, Pakistan launched major counterterrorism operations in its tribal areas while simultaneously facing accusations of providing safe havens to extremist factions. Studies by Mustafa (2010) and Abbasi (2013) describe this duality: Pakistan emerged as both a victim and a suspected facilitator of terrorism. Similarly, Khan (2013) and Khan R. (2016) link the escalation of domestic attacks to the contradictions inherent in this dual role.

A persistent theme in the literature is Pakistan's quest for strategic depth in Afghanistan. According to Fair C. C. (2011) and Lieven (2017), Islamabad's efforts to maintain influence in Kabul, partly to offset Indian dominance, have had unintended consequences, perpetuated cross-border insurgency and undermined internal stability. The porous Pakistan–Afghanistan border, historical tribal linkages, and rugged terrain have allowed militant movement and sanctuary to flourish. Rashid (2009) and Coll (1992) highlight how these conditions blur the line between external and internal conflict arenas, complicating governance in frontier regions.

Tensions with India form another crucial dimension of this geopolitical nexus. Research by Ganguly (2007) and Fair C. (2009) traces how insurgency and cross-border terrorism have reinforced hostility between the two nuclear-armed neighbours, especially in Kashmir. Reciprocal accusations of state sponsorship of militant groups sustain a cycle of mistrust that perpetuates violence on both sides.

The literature also underscores Pakistan's dependence on, and vulnerability to, its external alliances, particularly with the United States and Saudi Arabia. These relationships have significantly shaped the country's internal security dynamics. American financial and military support during both the Soviet-Afghan war and the post-9/11 campaigns, along with Saudi ideological and monetary influence, deepened Pakistan's entanglement with transnational Islamist movements (Rashid, 2009; Hiro, 1999).

Finally, scholars examine the international community's broader response to Pakistan's challenge of terrorism. Works such as Jones (2008) and Fair C. C. (2011) demonstrate how post-9/11 multilateral initiatives, encompassing military aid, intelligence cooperation, and diplomatic pressure, have further internationalised Pakistan's domestic security agenda. Collectively, this body of scholarship situates Pakistan's militancy within an interdependent regional and global framework, demonstrating how external alignments, ideological linkages, and strategic doctrines have intertwined to produce enduring internal instability.

Religious and Sectarian Mobilisation

The comprehension of the ideological basis of terrorism in the region requires an overview of the issue of religious radicalisation in Pakistan. The literature goes into detail about the role of madrasas as places of religious instruction, which have been connected in many ways to the spread of jihadist ideology over time. The number of madrasas increased significantly during and after the Afghan Jihad (Ahmed, 2009; Stern, 2000). Many of these institutions received foreign support and created a climate that encouraged religious radicalisation. As noted by Fair (2007), these madrasas have played an important role in promoting a worldview that glorifies jihad and martyrdom, acting as hubs for the recruitment of different militant groups.

The role of religious education in fostering or combating extremism is another key aspect discussed in the literature. The relationship between educational institutions and radicalisation is complex, with studies highlighting both the positive and negative roles that education can play in the context of terrorism. While some madrasas are known to propagate extremist ideologies and serve as recruitment grounds for militant groups (Stern, 2000; Ahmed, 2009), others provide basic educational services that might otherwise be unavailable in poor communities.

Scholars such as Fair (2007) and Evans (2008) examine the diversity among madrasas and the various factors that influence their role in society. They argue that while not all madrasas are hotbeds of extremism, certain schools, especially those with weak oversight and funding from radical sources, contribute significantly to the problem. This body of work suggests that educational reforms, along with improved regulation and the inclusion of critical thinking and tolerance in curricula, can be practical tools in countering radicalisation.

The religious and sectarian dimensions of terrorism and insurgency in Pakistan are complex, involving many actors, motives, and historical contexts. One longstanding and deadly feature of terrorism in Pakistan has been sectarian violence, mainly between Sunni and Shia populations. The literature provides a detailed examination of the causes, incentives, and effects of sectarian violence in the country. The historical foundations of sectarianism in Pakistan are examined by writers such as Abbas (2005) and Murphy & Malik (2009), who also highlight how government policies and external influences have exacerbated these divisions. Some of Pakistan's most horrific acts of terrorism have been carried out by sectarian militant groups, who have targeted religious leaders, places of worship, and community processions.

The academic literature in this field also explores the state's complex relationship with sectarian groups, which has shifted between tolerance, political use, and suppression. (Rana, 2005)

sheds light on the internal structures, ideological motives, and operational patterns of sectarian groups, emphasising their damaging effects on Pakistan's social cohesion and security. Overall, the literature highlights that sectarian conflict in Pakistan is not only a religious issue but also deeply linked with political competition, social divisions, and the use of religion for strategic purposes.

Identity and Centre–Periphery Politics

Another important aspect of insurgency in Pakistan is the rise of nationalist and separatist movements, especially in Balochistan and the tribal areas. The literature on this subject highlights the struggles for resources and autonomy that drive these movements, along with deep-rooted historical grievances and identity politics. A detailed examination of the Balochistan conflict is provided by Grare (2013) and Samad (2015), who emphasise the complex interactions between tribal dynamics, economic deprivation, and political marginalisation that form the basis of the insurgency. Scholars such as Khan H. (2005) and Andley (2006) also describe how Pashtun nationalism, long-term state neglect, and the use of military force have influenced the insurgency in the tribal areas.

The state's response to these movements, often characterised by alternating cycles of military action and political negotiation with mixed success, is critically examined in the literature. Akhtar, (2007) and Mushtaq (2009) discuss how such policies have affected Pakistan's wider social and political environment, as well as the immediate conflict dynamics.

Overall, the literature provides a comprehensive understanding of the grievances, objectives, and strategies of separatist and nationalist movements, while also suggesting possible approaches towards peace and reconciliation. This body of work remains essential for analysing

the enduring nature of these conflicts and for understanding the structural causes of violence in Pakistan.

Socio-Economic Conditions

A common theme in the literature on the socio-economic aspects of insurgency and terrorism in Pakistan is the connection between poverty and susceptibility to radicalisation. Although poverty may not directly cause terrorism, scholars argue that it creates an environment conducive to the growth of extremist ideologies. Malik & Zaman (2013) and Shahbaz (2013) examine the link between socio-economic status and terrorism, pointing out that factors such as poverty, unemployment, and inflation may influence individuals' decisions to join militant groups. These elements often create feelings of alienation and resentment that extremist organisations exploit to attract new members.

Similar studies by Looney (2004) and Ismail and Amjad (2014) explore how limited economic opportunities and persistent financial hardship make people more vulnerable to recruitment by extremist organisations. They argue that the absence of employment prospects and the financial incentives offered by militant groups can push individuals toward radicalisation. Consequently, this body of literature highlights the need to address socio-economic conditions as a key part of deradicalisation and counterterrorism strategies.

The socio-economic appeal of madrasas, which often provide free education and accommodation, also makes them attractive options for low-income families (Evans, 2008). The process of radicalisation is strengthened by the intersection of economic deprivation and the ideological narratives taught in these institutions. The literature, therefore, provides a detailed account of how socio-economic deprivation, when combined with ideological indoctrination, contributes to religious radicalisation and the expansion of militant networks in Pakistan.

The literature also offers a broader understanding of how poverty, education, and urban–rural dynamics shape the landscape of violence and extremism in Pakistan. Insurgency and terrorism operate differently across these settings due to variations in economic conditions, governance structures, and social networks. Insurgent organisations find favourable conditions in rural and tribal areas because of weak government presence, traditional social hierarchies, and widespread economic underdevelopment. (Montagno, 1963) and (Gartenstein-Ross & Vassefi, 2012) highlight the challenges the government faces in maintaining control and providing services in these areas, which deepens the sense of alienation that fuels insurgency.

In contrast, urban centres present different dynamics. The anonymity and complexity of city life can facilitate terrorist recruitment and operations but also offer better opportunities for surveillance and counterterrorism. (Mehmood, 2014) examines how political tensions, economic inequality, and population density influence the scale and nature of terrorist activity in Pakistan's metropolitan areas.

State Capacity, and Political Stability

The literature on political and governance issues related to insurgency and terrorism in Pakistan focuses on how civil–military relations, political instability, and governance practices have influenced the creation and persistence of these problems. Studies in this area often highlight the role, or absence, of effective government institutions in shaping a climate that enables terrorism and militancy. (Sajjad, 2015) provides valuable insight into the complex interactions among these factors and how they affect Pakistan's security environment, emphasising the need for coordinated and comprehensive strategies to address the challenges of terrorism and insurgency.

Pakistan's capacity to counter insurgency and terrorism has been severely constrained by political instability and frequent shifts between civilian and military rule. Scholars such as Jalal (1995) and Cohen (2004) explain how recurring power struggles and short-term political agendas have hindered the development and implementation of long-term counterterrorism policies. The literature also examines Pakistan's complex and often tense relationship between the military and civilian leadership, noting that the military continues to exert significant influence over key areas of foreign and security policy. This imbalance has significant implications for the quality of governance and the consistency of counterterrorism efforts.

Governance issues such as political patronage, weak service delivery, and corruption are also identified as factors that exacerbate insecurity and undermine state legitimacy. The literature consistently notes that strengthening public administration and governance capacity is essential for improving stability and preventing the spread of militancy. (Shah, 2014) offers a detailed assessment of how weaknesses in foreign policy management, internal security policy, and political institutions contribute to Pakistan's persistent security challenges.

Understanding the state's response to insurgency and terrorism requires attention to Pakistan's internal security strategy, including military operations, law enforcement, and counterinsurgency policies. The development and outcomes of these measures are extensively discussed in the literature. Scholars such as Shahbaz (2013) and Mehmood (2014) analyse Pakistan's military operations against insurgent groups in the tribal and frontier regions, highlighting their achievements, limitations, and broader political and social consequences. The role of law enforcement and intelligence agencies in counterterrorism is also examined, with a focus on their effectiveness, institutional weaknesses, and the need for reform. (Abbas, 2005) and

Rana (2005) discuss these institutional challenges, emphasising the importance of an inclusive and integrated approach to counterterrorism.

Finally, the literature highlights Pakistan's broader counterterrorism efforts, which encompass international cooperation, deradicalisation programmes, and legislative reforms. Collectively, this body of research underlines that sustainable peace and stability in Pakistan depend not only on military strength but also on consistent governance, civilian oversight, and credible state institutions.

Gap for Structural Approach

The review of existing literature and the preceding discussion highlight that Pakistan's internal conflicts have been examined through diverse lenses, religious and sectarian mobilisation, identity politics, socio-economic deprivation, and civil–military governance. These factors are all significant, yet they are also broad and general in nature, manifesting across most parts of the country. A particular regime's ideology, foreign policy choices, or socio-economic pattern may influence the entire state, but the intensity of violence is not uniform. Despite facing similar political, economic, and ideological conditions, some regions experience persistent armed conflict while others remain relatively peaceful. For example, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa demonstrates overlapping forms of violence, tribal, ethnic, sectarian, and religious, often within the same areas. Balochistan, while primarily driven by identity and resource politics, simultaneously faces sectarian and religious insurgencies. These examples show that different types of conflict coexist within the same geographical spaces. Conversely, other provinces such as Punjab and Sindh, which share similar levels of poverty, inequality, and political tension, remain largely stable. This uneven distribution raises a crucial question: why does violence cluster in specific regions despite the widespread presence of similar grievances and ideational drivers?

Existing explanations focused on ideational factors; therefore, they fall short of capturing the structural conditions that make sustained rebellion feasible. Ideational factors refer to the realm of beliefs, identities, narratives, and grievances that motivate individuals or groups to mobilise, such as religious ideology, ethnic identity, or historical injustice. They are treated as causal factors, and they shape the "why" of conflict by providing justification or legitimacy to collective action. In contrast, structural conditions refer to the enduring geographic, economic, and institutional realities that shape the "how" and "where" of these sustained armed conflicts. These include features such as terrain, road access, border porosity, the distribution of development, and the strength of state institutions. While ideational factors ignite motivation, they cannot, on their own, sustain a prolonged armed struggle without enabling structural environments. Hence, this study treats structural conditions as necessary but not always sufficient for conflict to occur. Ideational factors help frame mobilisation and justify action, but they do not, by themselves, explain where and under what conditions such movements can persist. This limitation points to the need for an alternative analytical lens that focuses on the operational and economic feasibility of conflict.

Scholars such as Abbas (2004), Aftab (2008), Nawaz (2009) and Rashid (2009) trace Pakistan's policy trajectory from Zia-ul-Haq's Islamisation through its support for the mujahideen and its post-9/11 alignment in the Global War on Terror, arguing that state choices generated permissive conditions for militancy. These works demonstrate how foreign and security policy influence the domestic conflict arena, but underspecify the subnational conditions under which violence actually concentrates and persists. On the ideational side, Ahmed (2009) and Evans (2008) emphasise religious education and sectarian mobilisation, while Fair (2008) challenges the presumed madrasa–militancy link by showing that many militants were college-educated. Similarly, Malik (2011) finds weak support for purely ideological explanations of conflict

incidence. These studies collectively show that ideology frames recruitment and justifies violence, but they do not identify where violence is most likely to occur within Pakistan's territory.

Analyses of Pakistan's strategic posture and civil–military politics, such as Fair (2011), Lieven (2017), Swami (2006) and Hiro (1999), link external alignments and doctrinal choices to internal security outcomes, while Jalal (1995) and Cohen (2004) highlight how political instability and civil–military contestation undermine coherent counterterrorism policy. These contributions clarify motivations, doctrines, and elite constraints; however, they do not translate into testable subnational implications regarding opportunity structures, such as border sanctuaries, terrain, access routes, or local rents, that could explain the spatial heterogeneity of conflict. Quantitative work, though valuable, also remains limited in scope. Looney (2004), Shahbaz (2013), Mehmood (2014) and Ismail & Amjad (2014) relate broad socio-economic indicators to conflict trends and document macro-level patterns in attack counts and fatalities. However, these studies primarily operate at national or provincial scales and rely on limited variable sets. Few assemble district-level data capable of jointly assessing administrative reach, geography, border adjacency, human development, and local revenue opportunities. As a result, the literature explains why actors mobilise and how the state responded at key moments but offers less insight into where structural conditions make rebellion feasible.

Among the theoretical approaches to intrastate conflict, structural and opportunity-based frameworks, such as those focusing on the material and operational conditions that enable rebellion, provide a systematic way to address this gap. It complements grievance-based perspectives by focusing on the means of rebellion, finance, logistics, geography, and state reach, without dismissing the role of motivation or ideology. Properly applied, feasibility does not rival grievance-based theories; rather, it identifies the enabling structural conditions that lower the costs

and risks of violent collective action. This approach has been applied successfully across diverse contexts, from resource-linked conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa to insurgencies sustained in resource-poor settings through access to rugged terrain and weak state control. Adopting this structural perspective in the case of Pakistan is crucial because it bridges the gap between macro-level narratives and micro-level realities. While many studies explain why people rebel, the feasibility hypothesis explains where rebellion is possible and how it endures. Economically, Pakistan remains a developing country marked by stark regional disparities. Balochistan, despite its resource wealth, remains politically and economically underdeveloped (Memon, 2017). FATA, similarly, has suffered from prolonged neglect and the destructive legacy of the War on Terror. Weak state control in both regions enables militant groups to operate freely. Robert D. Kaplan (2011) observed that Balochistan, though rich in potential, remains marginalised by state policy, making it fertile ground for armed mobilisation. Muhammad, Khan, & Jamil (2020) note similar dynamics in FATA, where economic deprivation, limited opportunity, and poor governance have entrenched militancy.

From a feasibility standpoint, two clusters of mechanisms stand out in Pakistan's conflict landscape: operational feasibility and economic feasibility. Both Balochistan and the former FATA are predominantly mountainous, offering natural cover for insurgent groups. Guerrilla tactics and inaccessible terrain allow militants to evade state control. Despite repeated military operations, these areas continue to serve as sanctuaries due to weak governance and porous borders. Rana (2015) and Khan (2020) highlight how cross-border sanctuaries and fragile administrative control allow insurgent networks to persist even after major security operations. Armed groups also exploit local resources and external funding. Balochistan and FATA host mineral wealth and informal trade routes that sustain militant activity. External actors, including

rival states, have historically supported insurgent and extremist networks for strategic purposes. Paliwal (2017) details how cross-border support from Afghanistan and India has sustained various separatist and religious movements. The long, porous borders facilitate smuggling, arms trafficking, and the mobility of militants (Kronstadt, 2008; Basit, 2021). These economic and logistical conditions ensure that armed groups maintain operational strength despite ideological diversity.

A key contribution of a structural or opportunity-based explanation is its ability to distinguish between conditions of grievance and conditions of opportunity. Poverty, unemployment, and inequality are widespread, yet large-scale violence occurs mainly in peripheral, under-governed, and geographically rugged regions. Central provinces like Punjab face similar deprivation but little sustained armed conflict, indicating that grievances alone do not cause rebellion. It is the interaction between structural opportunities and motivational factors that determines the feasibility of violent mobilisation. Pakistan's unique context, its ideological foundations, ethnic diversity, and geopolitical location between India and Afghanistan further reinforce the relevance of this structural perspective. External influences, porous borders, and local resource economies combine to sustain armed activity. The feasibility framework captures these dynamics better than ideational or grievance-based theories, which often overlook spatial and operational factors.

In sum, this chapter establishes the need for a structural and empirically grounded framework to analyse Pakistan's intrastate conflicts. Such an approach integrates geography, state capacity, economic incentives, and cross-border linkages into a unified explanation of conflict persistence and location. By explaining where and how conflict becomes viable, it addresses the research gap identified earlier and lays the foundation for a systematic, district-level analysis of

conflict feasibility in Pakistan. The next chapter builds on this rationale by developing the Feasibility Hypothesis as the theoretical and conceptual framework, translating these structural insights into measurable variables and testable hypotheses.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined Pakistan's internal conflicts through multiple dimensions, foreign policy and geopolitics, religious and sectarian mobilisation, identity and centre–periphery politics, socio-economic conditions, and governance capacity. Together, these themes illustrate the complexity of Pakistan's conflict landscape and the interplay between historical legacies, political structures, and external influences. They also reveal that any single factor cannot explain the country's internal wars; instead, they emerge from overlapping and mutually reinforcing dynamics that operate at the political, social, and structural levels.

The review highlighted that a mixture of internal vulnerabilities and external linkages sustains Pakistan's conflicts. Foreign policy choices since the Afghan jihad, religious radicalisation, socio-economic disparities, and weak governance have each shaped the contours of militancy. Yet, these broad drivers are visible across most regions of the country, while organised and sustained armed violence remains spatially concentrated, particularly in Balochistan and the former FATA. This uneven pattern indicates that widely shared grievances and ideological motivations alone cannot explain the specific geographic clusters of conflict.

Existing scholarship has provided valuable insights into motivations, doctrines, and policy trajectories, but it remains fragmented across disciplines and largely confined to macro-level analysis. The literature tends to explain why actors mobilise or how the state responds, but not where structural conditions make rebellion possible. This gap underscores the need for a

framework that identifies the enabling conditions of violence, the physical, economic, and institutional contexts that allow insurgent organisations to sustain operations over time.

Building on these insights, this chapter argued for shifting the focus on enabling structural conditions by adopting the feasibility hypothesis as a unifying framework for analysing Pakistan's intrastate conflicts. By emphasising operational and economic feasibility, terrain, state reach, border proximity, resource availability, and human development, the feasibility approach links structural opportunities to the persistence of rebellion. It provides a systematic explanation for why multiple forms of conflict can coexist in the same territory and why only certain areas remain conflict-prone despite widespread national grievances.

In doing so, this chapter has provided the empirical and conceptual foundation for the study. The next chapter develops this argument further by constructing the theoretical and conceptual framework of conflict feasibility. It operationalises the key variables derived from the feasibility hypothesis, formulates testable hypotheses, and outlines the research design used to evaluate the structural conditions shaping intrastate armed conflict in Pakistan.

Chapter 3: The Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Introduction

This chapter develops the theoretical and conceptual foundation of the study. It situates the research within the broader body of scholarship on armed conflict. It presents the framework through which the persistence and spatial distribution of intrastate violence in Pakistan can be explained. The chapter traces the evolution of conflict theory from broad conceptual traditions to the political economy approaches that underpin the present study. It argues that sustained armed conflict emerges not solely from motivation or grievance but from the structural conditions that make rebellion feasible.

The first part of the chapter discusses the role and function of theory in conflict analysis and reviews the principal theoretical frameworks that have shaped the study of organised violence. These perspectives, drawn from International Relations, Peace and Conflict Studies, and Sociology, collectively explain how conflict arises from incompatible interests, structural inequalities, or unmet human needs. The chapter then reviews the evolution of intrastate conflict theories, beginning with grievance-based explanations focused on exclusion and identity, moving through the economic logic of greed-based models, and culminating in the Feasibility Hypothesis, which links conflict onset and duration to operational and economic viability.

The second part of the chapter critically assesses the feasibility framework, addressing conceptual, methodological, and empirical limitations identified in prior research. It distinguishes means from motives, refines the conceptual boundaries of feasibility, and brings measurement closer to mechanism by incorporating contextually relevant variables. The framework is then adapted for the Pakistani context, where weak governance, border dynamics, and uneven

development produce spatially varied opportunities for armed mobilisation. This reconceptualisation defines feasibility as an *interactive and state-conditioned process*, shaped by the interplay of geography, economy, and governance.

The final sections present the conceptual model of the study and the set of hypotheses derived from it. The model integrates both operational and economic dimensions of feasibility, linking terrain, border proximity, and infrastructure with human development, poverty, and natural resources. These relationships are translated into testable hypothesis that form the empirical basis of the next chapter.

In doing so, this chapter establishes the theoretical scaffolding for the thesis. It bridges the gap between motivation and opportunity-based explanations of conflict, offering a refined structural approach that explains *where* and *how* rebellion becomes viable. The next chapter, Methods and Data, operationalises these hypotheses through a district-level empirical design, allowing for a systematic evaluation of the structural feasibility of intrastate armed conflicts in Pakistan.

Role and Function of Theory

The primary purpose of theory in the social sciences is to provide a structured framework for understanding complex phenomena. It offers well-substantiated explanations that connect concepts and identify relationships between variables (AMNH, n.d.; Kerlinger, n.d.). In short, theory organises knowledge, identifies causal linkages, and allows generalisation from specific observations (Reis, n.d.). Theoretical application is therefore essential to explain and interpret intricate social realities.

Events in the international arena and within states can be better understood by identifying how they fit into broader patterns of interaction and behaviour. As Olson (2012) argues, humans

must recognise patterns to make sense of the world's complexity. In today's interconnected world, states do not exist in isolation. The problems they face, economic, political, or social, often create internal pressures that challenge governance. When these needs remain unfulfilled, social groups may resort to violence to compel policy change, while rival states may exploit such vulnerabilities to destabilise their opponents (Cullen, 2017). Understanding these dynamics requires a theoretical lens capable of organising complex political violence into clear causal pathways.

Having established the general purpose of theory in social science and its role in explaining complex social phenomena such as conflict, it is essential to review the principal theoretical traditions that have shaped the study of armed conflict. The following section outlines key frameworks developed across disciplines, including International Relations, Peace and Conflict Studies, and Sociology, that provide the foundation for contemporary approaches to intrastate warfare.

Key Theories on Conflict Research

Tensions among communities and the emergence of armed conflicts are explained through various theoretical perspectives. Scholars of International Relations often view war as a natural outcome of the anarchic structure of the international system. Structural Realism (or Neo-Realism), for instance, argues that limited cooperation and competition for relative gains generate a security dilemma that fuels conflict (Waltz, 1979). In contrast, Feminism assumes armed conflicts are a cause of global patriarchy. Basu and Confortini observe that, since international politics is dominated by men, who tend to be more aggressive, they often become the drivers of conflicts (Basu & Confortini, 2017).

Situated in the literature of Peace and Conflict Studies, Johan Galtung's construction of a conflict triangle defines the source of conflict as the incompatible goals and values that exist

between the different actors involved (Galtung, 1975). He outlines that the three aspects of the conflict triangle are the attitude of the actors involved, behaviour, and contradiction. These aspects function interchangeably. Opposition over goals, such as territorial conflicts, leads to hostile attitudes and, consequently, behaviour. Hostile behaviour can also foster hostile attitudes, which can lead to conflict over shared goals (Galtung, 2009). These frameworks collectively highlight that conflict arises from incompatibilities between actors, whether in values, goals, or access to power, and that sustained peace requires addressing these underlying contradictions.

Another lens through which to understand conflict is provided by Sociology and Psychology in liaison. John Burton (1990) establishes his "human needs approach" based on Abraham Maslow's "hierarchy of needs," which provides psychological motivation. According to Burton, human needs are universal, and to maintain peace and stability in society, these needs must not be denied. Ethnic, sectarian, inter-group, racial, and cultural conflicts fall under the umbrella of depriving the people of their basic needs, values, and interests (Burton, 1990).

Similarly, for Burton (1990), when these groups are denied their identity-related needs, they resort to violence and create chaos in society. Conflicts in this case also arise when another group attempts to neglect, undermine, or suppress the existence of such minority groups within the societal structure. This idea is further elaborated in Edward Azar's theory of Protracted Social Conflict, whereby identity-related conflicts escalate into violence over time (Ramsbotham, 2009). Such human needs and protracted social conflict perspectives are useful for explaining the origins of grievances and social tension. Still, they focus primarily on motivations and identity-based dynamics rather than the material or structural feasibility of sustaining violence.

In summary, numerous theoretical approaches contribute to understanding intrastate conflicts, each emphasising different causal dimensions, from human needs and identity to

structural power relations. Building on these traditions, this study applies a structural perspective that focuses on the economic and geographical feasibility of conflict. This lens enhances our understanding of why certain areas of Pakistan experience persistent violence while others remain relatively stable. Armed groups in Pakistan often operate in peripheral regions where weak state control, difficult terrain, and porous borders make rebellion logistically and economically viable. While ideational and grievance-based theories explain motivation, they rarely address these structural conditions. The next sections develop this structural argument further, situating it within the broader theoretical framework of conflict feasibility.

Evolution of Economic Theory

Building on the contextual discussion in the previous chapter, this section traces the evolution of the theoretical thinking that informs this study. Before the end of the 20th century, scholarship in international relations and peace studies was heavily focused on interstate wars and their impact on global peace, particularly among major and nuclear powers. However, with the end of the Cold War, intrastate conflicts gained noticeable scholarly attention (Wallensteen, 2011a). As a result, this led to an uptick in civil wars, posing a new challenge to the international community and compelling scholars to explore the dimensions of this phenomenon. A range of approaches was developed. Some attempted to explain them via the same traditional lenses of international relations, whereas others declared each conflict unique and emphasised the need for case study approaches. Still others focused on common features and advocated for a more universal understanding of the phenomenon (Wallensteen, 2014). In this way, the trend of systematic and statistically based research on intrastate armed conflicts emerged in the first decade of the 21st century (Wallensteen, 2011b). This section traces that evolution from grievance-centred accounts to political-economy approaches, culminating in the feasibility hypothesis.

Grievance-Based Theories

In the study of this phenomenon, ethnic conflict emerged as a major topic of focus. *Why Men Rebel*, a pioneering work by Gurr, had already gained scholarly attention before 1991, extending its focus to ethnic, linguistic, and religious identity. The first systematic data collection in this category was the *Minorities at Risk* (MAR) project (Gurr, 1993, 2000a, 2000b). This ethnically focused approach secured a significant place in both political and scholarly discussions due to its strong policy implications.

Further exploring the drivers of such conflicts, the grievance hypothesis emerged, focusing on the unmet expectations of groups. In *Minorities at Risk in a New Century*, Gurr (2000a) explained that grievances may stem not only from unsatisfied basic needs but also from a perceived loss of status, political power, or autonomy by a group within society. When a group believes it has been deprived of resources, status, or power to which it feels entitled, this can lead to frustration, aggression, and ultimately rebellion. Such relative deprivation is not limited to tangible resources; threats to cultural or ethnic identity can also generate collective resentment.

Researchers have found that feelings of exclusion are closely linked to the frequency of armed conflict, although these dimensions are difficult to measure due to their subjective nature. Some studies, however, used low GDP per capita as a proxy for deprivation and found a positive relationship with conflict (Wallensteen, 2014). Yet, leading scholars such as Cederman, Fearon, and Laitin challenged the view that ethnicity or identity alone causes intrastate conflict. Their analyses showed that poverty and weak state institutions play a more significant role in increasing the risk of civil war than ethnic diversity itself (Fearon & Laitin, 2003).

Theoretical explanations of civil war and armed conflict governance have also drawn attention to state fragility, weak capacity, and governance quality. Empirical evidence suggests

that extreme authoritarian regimes and deeply rooted democracies are less likely to experience civil war than states in transition (Hegre, Ellingsen, Gates, & Gleditsch, 2001). Many of these conflict-prone states belong to what Collier describes as the "Bottom Billion."[1] The notion that transitional states and semi-democracies are more vulnerable to conflict was challenged by Vreeland (2008) on methodological grounds, who argued that additional institutional and economic factors must be considered. Similarly, Öberg and Melander (2009) found a strong relationship between good governance and the absence of civil war. This line of research broadens the analysis beyond corruption or political repression to include state revenue sources. States that rely primarily on taxation are generally more accountable to their citizens than those dependent on rents, tariffs, or aid (Sollenberg, 2012). Together, these contributions shift the analytical focus from group grievances alone to the institutional and structural conditions that shape political mobilisation.

The Universal Grievance Theory relates conflict to the violent struggle of politically, religiously, or ethnically marginalised groups seeking to resolve their grievances (Ali, 2009). However, this approach was challenged by arguments suggesting that ethnic grievances often reflect deeper struggles for social and economic resources, or manipulation by opportunistic elites seeking personal or political gain. This led to a rationalist turn in the 1990s, represented by Fearon and others, who viewed civil wars through the lens of strategic choice. In this framework, intrastate conflict results not solely from identity-based grievances but from incentives, opportunities, and constraints that shape the decisions of actors.

Economic freedom, political rights, food security, and equality are among the basic needs that the state must fulfil. When these are denied, groups may challenge the state. Intrastate conflicts,

[1] Paul Collier's book referring to the poorest billion people in the world/countries trapped in poverty-conflict cycles as Bottom Billion

therefore, may arise from economic, social, or political deprivation. As the Greed and Grievance theory suggests, these conflicts result from both grievances and the pursuit of material interests (Fletcher, 2017). However, in many cases, greed-related motives also spur armed violence. For example, the Afghan Taliban were not economically or politically deprived; rather, their violence reflected a strategic attempt to monopolise legitimate force, a role traditionally reserved for the state (Jones, 2008). Fletcher (2017) also argues that while deprivation may contribute to conflict, its intensity and spatial variation raise questions about where rebellion becomes organisationally feasible.

Despite providing valuable insights into social and political marginalisation, grievance-based theories alone inadequately explain why similar grievances lead to conflict in some areas but not in others. This limitation suggests the need for an additional explanatory layer, one that considers the structural and contextual conditions that make rebellion feasible and sustainable. This shift in focus marks the transition from grievance-based explanations to political-economy perspectives, which emphasise the interaction between material opportunities, governance, and geography in shaping patterns of armed conflict.

Greed-Based Theories

A major contribution to the study of the political economy of civil war was made by economist Paul Collier and his collaborators. They proposed the Greed Rebellion Theory, which argues that economic opportunities and the financial sustainability of rebel armies are key drivers of conflict, often outweighing grievances (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). Collier and Hoeffler (2000) contend that classifying conflicts solely by cause is inadequate, as most are triggered by multiple and interrelated factors. Their model posits that greed, defined as the pursuit of material gain, better predicts civil war than grievance, which concerns inequality or injustice. When the potential

rewards of rebellion outweigh its costs, the risk of conflict increases. Rational actors assess the state's defensive capacity against the rebels' financial and organisational prospects.

Grievance factors such as identity, inequality, or oppression may still matter, but statistical analyses using proxies for both greed and grievance found greed to be the dominant predictor (Collier & Hoeffler, 2000). Rebellion, in this framework, is viewed as a quasi-criminal enterprise. Rebel armies can be financed by foreign governments, drug production (e.g., opium), or the exploitation of natural resources such as oil and diamonds. These economic incentives make rebellion more sustainable where access to lootable wealth and weak state oversight coincide. However, while these explanations are insightful, they remain incomplete. They tend to overlook geographical and operational conditions, which significantly influence the dynamics of armed conflict, particularly in contexts like Pakistan.

This shift towards a material and incentive-based understanding of conflict marked a decisive move away from purely motivational theories. It placed the economic calculus of rebellion, funding, recruitment, and survival, at the centre of analysis. Scholars such as Ali (2009) expanded this line of reasoning, introducing the concept of horizontal and vertical inequalities and the failure of the social contract as critical factors in conflict within the developing world. Horizontal inequalities, disparities between groups, create resentment and mobilisation potential, while the erosion of the social contract weakens citizens' sense of legitimacy toward the state. When combined with poor economic conditions, these factors can make rebellion both attractive and organisationally viable.

Other studies also highlight how opportunity structures interact with deprivation. For instance, Do and Iyer (2009) found that poverty and favourable geography jointly increase the likelihood of violent conflict, while Deininger (2003) identified underdevelopment as a key driver

of civil strife in Uganda. Similarly, Douma (2006) demonstrated that political exclusion, poverty, and weak institutions underpin much of the violence across sub-Saharan Africa. These findings underscore that grievances and opportunity structures often interact rather than operate in isolation. In economic terms, this relationship is explained through the concept of opportunity cost. Rational decision-makers are more likely to participate in rebellion when legitimate income opportunities are limited, and the expected returns from violence appear greater (Malik, 2011).

However, the link between income and violence is not always straightforward. Krueger and Maleckova (2003), in their study of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, found no significant correlation between poverty and participation in violence. Similarly, a cross-country study using U.S. State Department data by Krueger and Laitin (2007) found weak evidence connecting GDP per capita to terrorism. Conversely, Dube and Vargas (2012), examining Colombia, found that lower income reduced opportunity costs and increased insurgency, while higher income sometimes raised incentives for predation. These contrasting findings indicate that material deprivation alone cannot explain the onset of violence; rather, the interaction between economic incentives and contextual feasibility determines where rebellion can be sustained.

A substantial body of empirical research reinforces this economic logic by identifying specific mechanisms through which material conditions influence conflict onset. Studies on horizontal inequality highlight that disparities between groups, rather than individuals, are particularly destabilising (Østby, 2008; Stewart, 2002). Similarly, the opportunity cost argument demonstrates that when legitimate income opportunities decline, the relative benefits of joining armed groups increase (Becker, 1968; Dube & Vargas, 2012). Other scholars emphasise economic shocks and fiscal crises as key catalysts, since declining state revenues weaken the government's ability to deter rebellion (Bates, 2008). Collectively, these studies reveal that economic deprivation

interacts with opportunity structures, linking macroeconomic vulnerability to the structural feasibility of rebellion.

In summary, greed-based theories advanced our understanding of intrastate conflict by foregrounding material incentives, economic inequality, and financial capacity as central explanatory variables. However, these approaches do not fully capture the spatial and operational factors that make rebellion viable. The next theoretical development, the feasibility hypothesis, builds upon this economic foundation by incorporating geography, state capacity, and logistics to explain not only why but also where conflicts emerge and persist.

The Feasibility Hypothesis

Hirshleifer (1995) proposed the Machiavelli Theorem, which states that *no profitable opportunity for violence would go unused*. Building upon this logic, Collier, Hoeffler, and Rohner (2008, 2009) developed the Feasibility Hypothesis, arguing that the sustainability of a rebel army, its ability to operate both financially and militarily, is the decisive factor behind the occurrence of civil war. They conclude that where rebellion is feasible, it is likely to occur, regardless of its stated political or ideological motives (Ali, 2009).

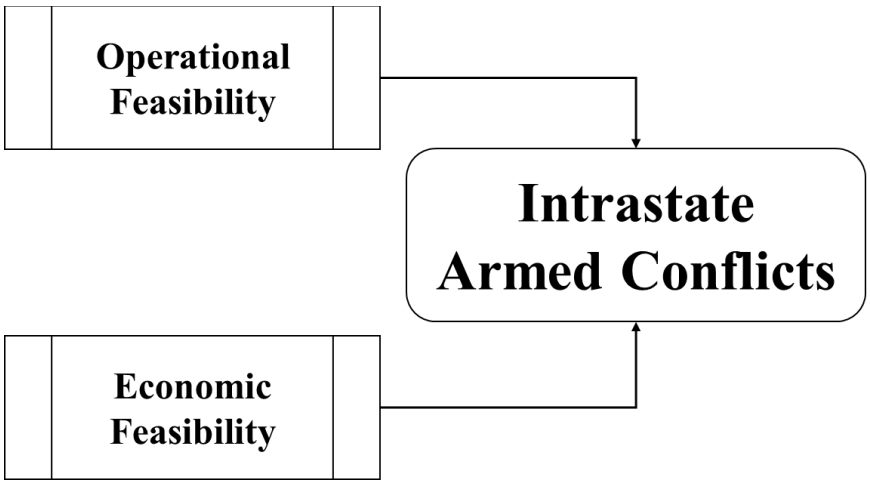
The feasibility hypothesis thus presents an economic theory of civil war, which asserts that rebellion depends primarily on whether it can be organised and sustained. In most cases, establishing and maintaining an armed group is prohibitively costly and dangerous, meaning that rebellion will occur only under relatively rare circumstances where it becomes financially and militarily viable. These enabling conditions, rather than grievances or greed alone, form a crucial part of any explanation of civil war. As Collier, Hoeffler, and Rohner (2009) summarise:

"Where a rebellion is feasible, it will occur: motivation is indeterminate, being supplied by whatever agenda happens to be adopted by the first social entrepreneur to occupy the viable niche, or itself endogenous to the opportunities thereby opened for illegal income."

In practical terms, the feasibility hypothesis shifts attention from why actors rebel to *how* rebellion becomes viable. It focuses on the conditions that lower insurgent operating costs and increase the state's control costs, thus creating opportunities for sustained conflict. Motivation, whether ideological, ethnic, or economic, is treated as secondary or endogenous to these structural opportunities.

Within this framework, economic and operational feasibility are the two main dimensions determining whether armed conflict can occur (Collier, Hoeffler, & Rohner, 2008). *Economic feasibility* concerns the extent to which a challenger group can access or generate financial resources to sustain a campaign, through trade, resource extraction, or external funding. *Operational feasibility* relates to a group's ability to operate effectively in a given environment, shaped by factors such as terrain, state control, and target accessibility (Do & Iyer, 2009). When these two dimensions align, the likelihood of internal armed conflict rises significantly.

Figure 11 Theoretical framework for this Thesis



Source: Prepared by Author (2020)

In their empirical testing, Collier and colleagues proposed several variables to capture these dynamics, including the state's control over territory, economic sources to finance rebellion, opportunity cost of joining the insurgency, availability of recruits, and geographical suitability for sustaining combat. Their results showed that *feasibility rather than motivation* was the decisive predictor of rebellion risk. In other words, structural conditions that make rebellion possible matter more than subjective grievances, which are often fluid and vary over time and space. Empirical evidence from Nepal also supports this proposition (Do & Iyer, 2009; Acharya, 2010).

The feasibility hypothesis has both academic and policy relevance. For scholars, it provides a unifying framework for understanding the onset and persistence of civil wars, encompassing both material and structural determinants. For policymakers, it helps identify regions more prone to violent conflict, providing a basis for preventive intervention. However, as Collier et al. (2009) caution, public debate on conflict is often influenced by political bias and advocacy, underscoring the importance of rigorous, data-driven analysis to identify objective patterns.

Finally, the question arises as to whether theories of civil war, such as the feasibility hypothesis, can also explain other forms of political violence. Historically, before the 1970s, such phenomena were broadly studied as *internal wars*. Many structural variables used to analyse civil wars, terrain, state reach, resource access, and population, are also central to the study of insurgency, terrorism, and rebellion. Consequently, it can be argued that these structural conditions underlie a broader spectrum of internal armed conflicts, not just conventional civil wars (Cunningham & Lemke, 2014).

Refining the Feasibility Hypothesis

The feasibility hypothesis has been influential and valuable, yet scholars have raised several concerns over time. This section reviews key critiques and outlines how this study refines

the theory for the Pakistani context. The main challenges relate to: (1) conceptual positioning that conflates means with motives, (2) macro cross-country designs that obscure within-country processes, (3) the weak validity of proxies used to operationalise "feasibility," and (4) the neglect of the state and its neighbours as producers of feasibility.

Clarifying the Conceptual Positioning

Collier and Hoeffler famously reframed civil wars as outcomes of profitable opportunities rather than as responses to aggrieved populations (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). Their later formulation goes further, proposing that rebellion occurs "when it is feasible", that is, when financial, geographic, and organisational conditions make sustained collective violence possible (Collier et al., 2009).

The problem, however, is categorical. Opportunity conditions such as finance, terrain, and recruitment capacity are enablers, not reasons to fight. Treating feasibility as a rival to grievance or ideology collapses the distinction between predisposing motivations and facilitating conditions (Cramer, 2002; Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Kalyvas, 2006). Feasibility may explain how rebellion is sustained once mobilisation begins, but not why it starts in one place and not another, or why certain groups take extraordinary risks despite high costs.

This study addresses that critique by using the feasibility hypothesis in a reconceptualised form. I explicitly separate means from motives. Feasibility is often treated as a set of enabling conditions, necessary for sustained insurgency, but rarely sufficient on its own. Ideology, identity, and historical grievances remain the motivational channels through which enabling conditions translate into organised violence. This refinement is implemented in two ways. First, the theory section presents feasibility as interactive with, rather than substitutive for, ideational mechanisms. Second, the hypotheses are formulated as conditional claims: rugged terrain, border porosity, and

limited state presence increase the viability of sustained conflict, but only when motivational factors are present. Together, this ensures the framework maintains conceptual clarity: feasibility explains the *capacity* for rebellion, while ideology and grievance explain its *cause*.

Shift from Macro to Micro level

The empirical backbone of the feasibility programme is a large-N cross-country regression. This design provides breadth but sacrifices resolution: the state is the unit of analysis, and national averages obscure crucial variation within countries (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Hegre & Sambanis, 2006). As comparative research has shown, armed conflict is profoundly uneven in space, clustering in borderlands, mountains, and subnational zones of weak governance (Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Kalyvas, 2006). Country-year panels, therefore, produce correlations among aggregates (for example, between low GDP per capita and conflict risk) but cannot disentangle whether the driver is rebel opportunity, state weakness, or historically layered marginality. There is also a temporal resolution problem. Macro-level panels often smooth or average indicators across multi-year windows, diluting short-term triggers and adaptive dynamics (Kalyvas & Balcells, 2010).

To address both issues, I shift the unit of analysis to the district and design the study around Pakistan's stark subnational variation. This micro-level approach captures the mechanisms that actually produce feasibility in practice: border governance, terrain-enabled sanctuary, road access, and administrative presence. Subnational modelling thus resolves the identification problems in macro designs and aligns empirical evidence with the level at which feasibility is produced and contested. These are precisely the dynamics that matter in Pakistan's conflict-affected districts, where border enforcement ebbs and flows, road interdictions shift, and transnational safe havens vary over time. Hence, the district-level design employed here is not merely a methodological

convenience but a necessary correction to the identification problems inherent in earlier feasibility tests.

Appropriation of Variables and Proxies

A further challenge concerns measurement. The feasibility literature operationalises its core ideas using macro proxies that are often indirect. Three examples illustrate this limitation:

- Natural resources and extortion: Primary commodity exports as a share of GDP are used to proxy rebel "lootable" finance, and their correlation with conflict onset is interpreted as evidence of resource predation (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). However, as Nathan (2008) argues, this inference conflates correlation with motive. The proxy does not measure actual extortion and may equally reflect governance failures or rent-seeking politics.
- Diasporas and conflict recurrence: Diaspora size, often measured by emigrant populations in the United States, is used to capture transnational finance rooted in "preserved hatreds." But these data record migration stocks, not political remittances, and the causal direction may just as plausibly run from unresolved grievance to both diaspora mobilisation and renewed conflict (Nathan, 2008).
- Cost of rebel labour: Indicators such as male secondary school enrolment and per capita income are interpreted as opportunity-cost measures that reduce insurgent recruitment when high. However, these same measures also reflect state capacity and human development, making their mechanism ambiguous (Nathan, 2008).

In short, the quantitative elegance of the feasibility model rests on proxies with weak construct validity and multiple causal interpretations. This underidentification of mechanisms limits inference without complementary evidence. Rhea (2011) reaches a similar conclusion:

measurement must be brought closer to mechanisms by moving to the subnational level and selecting indicators that directly map onto logistics, sanctuary, and state reach.

This study addresses the proxy problem by bringing measurement closer to the mechanism and tailoring indicators to the context. Instead of commodity exports, I use the actual presence of lootable mineral resources within districts. Instead of school enrolment, I use the Human Development Index (HDI) as a more comprehensive measure of economic opportunity. Terrain ruggedness, Proximity to porous borders, and road network density capture the operational channels that lower detection risks and facilitate mobility. Together, these choices increase construct validity and align the test with feasibility mechanisms that are genuinely operative in Pakistan.

I also endogenise the state and neighbouring environment: border enforcement posture, force deployment, and administrative density are conceptualised as policy-contingent producers of feasibility. Empirically, border-proximate districts with lower state presence and better insurgent logistics are expected to display higher conflict intensity, *ceteris paribus*. This positions the findings as a designed test of state-produced feasibility, not a post-hoc correlation.

Inclusion of Additional Dynamics

Feasibility is often treated as something rebels possess rather than something states and neighbours produce. However, much of what makes rebellion affordable or risky is co-determined by state strategies, selective withdrawal, permissive border practices, or uneven coercion, as well as regional dynamics such as safe havens and cross-border patronage. Classic supply-side studies point in this direction: low income partly proxies weak administrative capacity, and rough terrain erodes state reach (Fearon & Laitin, 2003).

The feasibility literature, however, tends to keep the state in the background. For Pakistan, this is not a marginal issue: the interaction between border governance, counterinsurgency posture, and militant logistics is precisely what converts grievances and networks into sustained violence. This logic directly informs the empirical strategy adopted here.

In summary, this study retains the central insight of the feasibility hypothesis, that rebellion requires enabling conditions, while correcting its conceptual and empirical limitations. It separates means from motives, raises the resolution to the level where mechanisms are visible, and improves measurement so that variables more closely approximate the processes they represent. The resulting framework treats feasibility as interactive, state-conditioned, and spatially uneven, offering a stronger fit for Pakistan's borderlands and a more precise positioning on necessity, sufficiency, and the interplay between ideology, identity, and opportunity.

The preceding discussion refined the feasibility hypothesis by addressing its conceptual, methodological, and empirical limitations. The next step is to translate this revised understanding into a concrete analytical model suitable for Pakistan's context. The following section presents the conceptual framework of the study, which integrates both operational and economic dimensions of feasibility and identifies the structural pathways through which conflict becomes viable.

Conceptual Framework

Having refined the theoretical foundation through the feasibility hypothesis, this section now develops the conceptual framework of the study. While the preceding discussion explained why feasibility offers a compelling lens for understanding intrastate conflicts, the following sections clarify what is being studied and how the key theoretical dimensions are translated into empirical form. The conceptual framework thus proceeds in three parts. It begins by defining and contextualising the dependent variable, intrastate armed conflict, and explaining the rationale for

adopting this inclusive, neutral term. It then outlines the two structural dimensions derived from the feasibility perspective, economic and operational feasibility, which together shape the conditions under which such conflicts become viable. Finally, the section concludes by translating these conceptual relationships into testable hypotheses that guide the empirical analysis in the following chapter.

Conceptualising Intrastate Armed Conflict

Conflict, in its broadest sense, refers to a state of incompatibility between the interests, values, or goals of individuals or groups. It may manifest in either non-violent or violent forms, yet the focus of this study is on the latter, armed conflict, which encompasses multiple subtypes. Scholars have long debated the fine distinctions among these forms, but the boundaries are often blurred. Terms such as civil war, insurgency, terrorism, and genocide appear interchangeably in both scholarly and policy discourse, at times carrying strong political undertones. These distinctions are not merely academic or semantic; they shape how conflicts are classified, interpreted, and responded to by states and international organisations (Sarkees, Wayman, & Singer, 2003; Ünal, 2016).

Within the state, armed conflicts may involve a wide spectrum of actors, from organised rebel movements and ethnic militias to insurgent networks or politically motivated armed groups. Their objectives may vary, ranging from autonomy and regime change to ideological dominance or social transformation (Bahgat, Barrett, Dupuy, & Gates, 2017), but despite this diversity, they share a common structural core: sustained and organised violence involving at least one non-state actor challenging the state. The differences lie largely in their motivations, scale, and methods rather than in their basic configuration.

Civil War

In the most general sense, a civil war is a politically organised and sustained armed conflict within a state between the government and one or more organised groups capable of mounting effective resistance. Fearon and Laitin (2003) define it as a conflict that results in at least 1,000 battle-related deaths in a single year, while Lacina and Gleditsch (2005) maintain that this threshold merely serves as a consistency measure rather than a moral distinction. What distinguishes civil war from other internal conflicts is the scale of organisation, duration, and the contestation of state authority, typically over control of territory or political power.

Insurgency

Insurgency, by contrast, is best viewed as a mode of warfare, an asymmetric campaign by organised non-state actors to erode or displace the state's authority through guerrilla tactics, coercion, and political mobilisation (O'Neill, 2005; Kalyvas, 2006). An insurgency may occur within a broader civil war or remain below the "war" threshold, depending on its intensity. Its defining feature lies not in the death count but in its method of operation: protracted, adaptive, and often embedded within local populations.

Terrorism

Of all the terms, terrorism is the most politically charged and conceptually contested. It is commonly defined as the deliberate use or threat of violence against civilians or non-combatants to coerce or influence a government or population for political or ideological ends (Schmid, 2011; UN Security Council, 2004). Terrorism may exist as a tactic within an insurgency or civil war rather than as a distinct type of conflict. Its core features, symbolic violence, fear generation, and political messaging, make it a powerful, if morally condemned, instrument of political struggle.

Genocide

Genocide represents an extreme and legally distinct form of intrastate violence, characterised by acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. The concept was first introduced by Raphael Lemkin in 1944 and codified in the United Nations Genocide Convention (1948). Genocide may occur independently or within a civil war, but its distinctiveness lies in the intent of extermination rather than the scale of fighting.

Overlaps and Conceptual Fluidity

In practice, these forms of violence frequently intersect. Insurgents may employ terrorist tactics; civil wars may involve genocidal campaigns; and both state and non-state actors may blend multiple strategies depending on opportunity and capacity. These overlaps reflect the hybrid nature of modern intrastate warfare, fluid, adaptive, and resistant to categorical separation. A single conflict may shift in form over time, evolving from a low-intensity insurgency to a full-scale civil war, or oscillate between terrorism and conventional fighting, depending on the state's response.

This fluidity is not accidental. As the literature shows, motivations and tactics evolve dynamically, often shaped by resource availability, geography, and state policy. For researchers, this hybridisation creates conceptual and empirical challenges: datasets may classify the same events differently, and the same group may appear under multiple labels across studies. The political implications of labelling further compound the definitional ambiguity. States tend to describe such conflicts as terrorism or insurgency to legitimise coercive measures and avoid external scrutiny, while non-state actors frame their campaigns as liberation movements or freedom struggles to gain sympathy and international support. These labels are not neutral; they are tools of framing that influence global perception, legality, and the moral standing of each actor.

In Pakistan, this complexity is particularly evident. The violence in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has often been described as terrorism or religious insurgency, while the Baloch movement is labelled as an ethno-nationalist insurgency. Despite these differing narratives, both share essential characteristics, organised armed violence, political motives, and the weakening of state control in certain territories. The overlap between ideological and nationalist motivations, as well as between insurgent and terrorist tactics, demonstrates that the empirical boundaries separating these conflicts are not as distinct as their political labels suggest. Recognising this definitional and political complexity, this study adopts the broader and more neutral term intrastate armed conflict. This term refers to sustained, organised political violence occurring within a state that involves at least one non-state armed group, regardless of the labels attached by governments, scholars, or the groups themselves. It captures all large-scale, politically motivated violence directed against the state or civilians while excluding purely criminal violence without political intent.

This choice serves several purposes. First, it ensures analytical neutrality and objectivity by avoiding terms that carry political or moral judgment. Second, it promotes conceptual consistency, allowing different types of conflicts, sectarian, nationalist, or religious, to be analysed under the same structural framework. Third, it aligns with the philosophical and methodological stance of this research: a realist ontology and positivist epistemology that seek to explain observable patterns of violence through structural feasibility rather than moral narratives or subjective motivations. Lastly, it enhances comparability, since the dependent variable, measured as conflict fatalities per million population, remains independent of the labels used in official or media reporting.

For the purpose of this thesis, intrastate armed conflict refers to sustained, organised violence within a state involving at least one non-state armed group pursuing political objectives. It encompasses incidents of violence by ethnic, religious, sectarian, or ideological groups against the state or civilians, but excludes acts of purely criminal violence lacking political intent.

This inclusive and neutral definition reflects the empirical reality of Pakistan's conflict environment, where diverse forms of armed violence coexist and overlap. It allows the analysis to remain focused on the underlying feasibility conditions, economic, geographic, and institutional, that make such violence possible and persistent, rather than on the shifting narratives that different actors attach to it. By employing this broader conceptualisation, the study avoids the analytical pitfalls of political labelling. It provides a consistent basis for examining how structural factors shape the geography and endurance of conflict across Pakistan.

Conceptualising Economic and Operational Feasibility

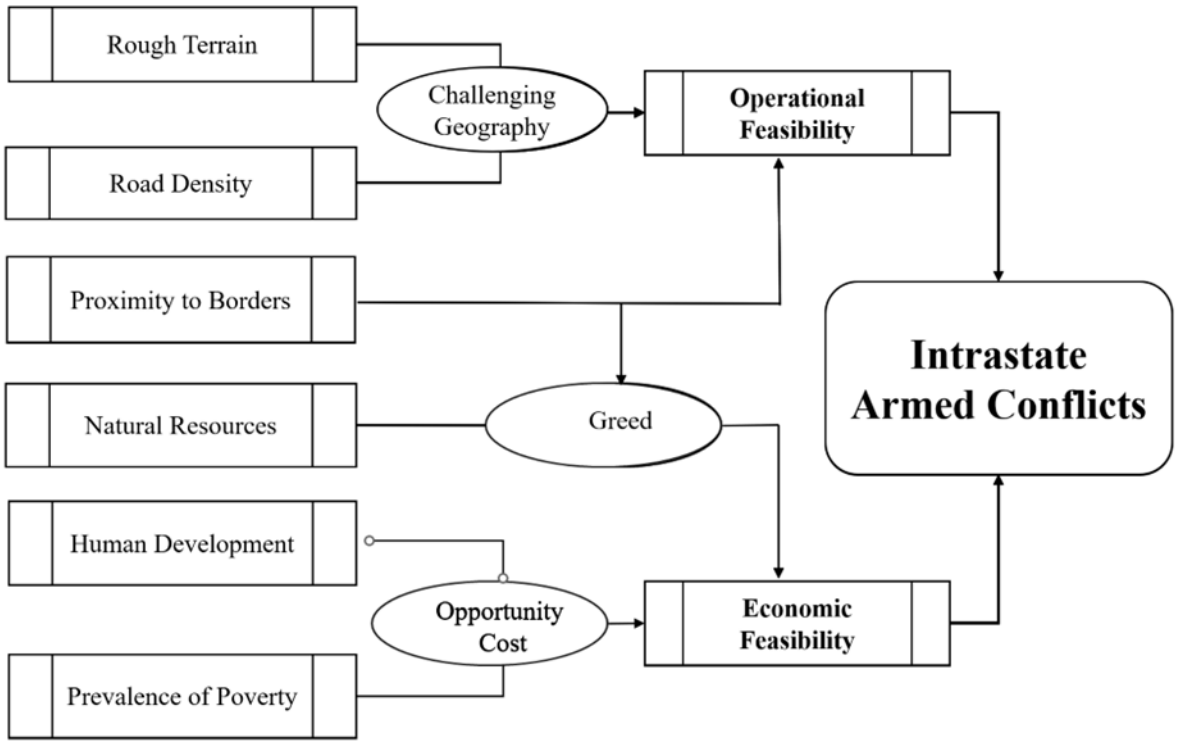
Building upon the refined theoretical framework and conceptualisation of the dependent variable above, this section presents the conceptual model that guides the study. It conceptualises and initiates the key independent variables that determine where and when rebellion becomes viable in Pakistan. The framework assumes that conflict does not occur simply because of grievances or motivations, but when operational and economic conditions make rebellion feasible.

Figure 12 illustrates the final conceptual framework of the study. It brings together the major theoretical components and shows how geographic, economic, and institutional factors interact to shape the feasibility of intrastate armed conflict.

The process begins on the left side of the framework, where each variable represents a condition that affects feasibility. Rough terrain, road density, and proximity to borders together describe the geographic conditions that influence how easily armed groups can move, hide, and

sustain operations. Rugged and mountainous areas reduce state control and increase operational freedom, while limited road access and porous borders provide concealment, safe havens, and supply routes. Collectively, these factors constitute operational feasibility, reflecting how geography and infrastructure shape the practical capacity for violence. The economic dimension focuses on the financial and opportunity structures that sustain rebellion. Natural resources represent financial opportunity, as they can be exploited or taxed by armed groups to finance operations. Human development and poverty levels influence the opportunity cost of participation in conflict. Low development and widespread poverty lower the personal costs of joining armed groups and undermine state legitimacy. These economic pathways contribute to economic feasibility, which captures the financial and material means that allow armed groups to persist.

Figure 12 Conceptual Framework of this Study



Source: Prepared by the Author (2021)

When both operational and economic feasibility are present, the likelihood and intensity of conflict increase. Where geographic conditions favour mobility and concealment, and economic conditions provide financing and recruitment potential, rebellion becomes more sustainable. In contrast, strong state presence, dense infrastructure, and higher opportunity costs reduce the feasibility of violence. This framework, therefore, integrates multiple layers of feasibility into a single model. It demonstrates that intrastate conflict arises not solely from motive, but from the intersection of opportunity, capacity, and environment. Based on the relationships represented in Figure 19, the following section sets out the hypotheses that translate this conceptual framework into testable propositions for empirical analysis.

Formulation of Hypotheses

Drawing on the conceptual framework and the refined feasibility perspective, this study proposes one central hypothesis and six sub-hypotheses. Together, they test whether structural conditions**,** geographic, economic, and developmental**,** shape the intensity and persistence of intrastate armed conflict in Pakistan.

Main Hypothesis

Sustained intrastate armed conflict in Pakistan occurs predominantly where rebellion is operationally and/or economically feasible.

Feasibility is treated as a necessary but not always sufficient condition for persistent violence. Ideological, identity-based, or historical grievances may provide motivation, but sustained rebellion requires the presence of enabling structural conditions that lower the cost and raise the viability of collective violence.

Sub-hypotheses

H1: Terrain Ruggedness; Rugged terrain is positively associated with higher levels of armed conflict.

Challenging topography reduces state mobility and surveillance capacity, providing insurgent groups with natural sanctuaries that enhance operational feasibility.

H2: Road Access and State Reach; Lower Road density is positively associated with higher levels of armed conflict.

Limited transportation infrastructure weakens administrative reach, constrains security force access, and increases insurgent freedom of movement.

H3: Border Proximity and Porosity; Closer proximity to weakly controlled international borders is positively associated with higher levels of armed conflict.

Porous borders facilitate the inflow of weapons, resources, and cross-border sanctuary, increasing logistical feasibility for armed groups.

H4: Human Development; Lower human development is positively associated with higher levels of armed conflict.

Low HDI values reduce opportunity costs and weaken institutional legitimacy, thereby enhancing the economic feasibility of rebellion.

H5: Poverty; Higher poverty prevalence is positively associated with higher levels of armed conflict. Poverty exacerbates local grievances and lowers the perceived personal cost of joining armed groups, contributing to sustained mobilisation.

H6: Natural Resources; The presence of lootable natural resources is positively associated with higher levels of armed conflict.

Resource availability provides a financial base for armed groups, enabling them to sustain operations and lowering their dependency on external support.

These hypotheses collectively represent the structural pathways outlined in the conceptual model. The first two (H1–H2) capture operational feasibility, reflecting how geography and state reach affect insurgent capacity. The last three (H4–H6) capture economic feasibility, linking financial opportunity and human development to the sustainability of rebellion. H3 overlaps between both economic and operational feasibility, as it facilitates both. By testing these relationships at the district level, this study empirically examines how spatial variation in terrain, infrastructure, border conditions, and socio-economic development contributes to the feasibility of intrastate armed conflicts in Pakistan. This design not only operationalises the refined feasibility hypothesis but also allows for an assessment of its contextual validity in a setting marked by geographic diversity and uneven state presence.

Conclusion

This chapter has developed the theoretical and conceptual foundations that underpin this study. It began by outlining the role of theory in explaining complex social phenomena. It introduced the key traditions that have shaped the study of armed conflict, from realist and human-needs perspectives to contemporary models of intrastate violence. Building on this foundation, the chapter traced the intellectual evolution of conflict theory from grievance-based and identity-centred explanations to political economy approaches that emphasise material incentives and opportunity structures. This progression culminated in the Feasibility Hypothesis, which reframes rebellion as a function of the operational and economic conditions that make violence sustainable.

While the feasibility perspective provides a powerful structural account, it also presents conceptual and methodological limitations. The chapter critically examined these challenges,

distinguishing means from motives, addressing the weaknesses of cross-country research designs, and questioning the validity of the macro-level proxies used in previous studies. In response, the study redefined feasibility as a set of enabling conditions that can interact with, rather than replace, motivational/ideational factors such as ideology, identity, and grievance. The refined framework treats feasibility as interactive, state-conditioned, and spatially uneven, emphasising that rebellion is shaped not only by what insurgents possess but also by what states and neighbours permit or produce through governance choices and border dynamics. This reconceptualisation informed the development of the conceptual model that integrates both operational and economic dimensions of feasibility. The model links terrain, infrastructure, and border proximity with resource availability, human development, and poverty to explain the spatial concentration and persistence of armed conflict in Pakistan. From this model, a set of empirically testable hypotheses was derived, translating theoretical propositions into measurable relationships among district-level variables.

In summary, this chapter establishes a comprehensive theoretical foundation for analysing Pakistan's intrastate conflicts through a refined feasibility lens. It situates the study within the broader literature, identifies the limitations of existing approaches, and advances a framework that links structure, geography, and state capacity to the persistence of rebellion. The next chapter outlines the methodological design developed to test these hypotheses, detailing the data sources, variable construction, and analytical strategy employed to assess the structural feasibility of armed conflict across Pakistan's districts.

Chapter 4: Research Design, Methodology, and Data Collection

Introduction

Building on the theoretical foundations developed in the previous chapter, this chapter outlines the methodological framework used to test the feasibility hypothesis within the context of Pakistan's intrastate armed conflicts. The goal is to translate the theoretical constructs of operational and economic feasibility into measurable variables and an empirically testable design. Given the multidimensional nature of Pakistan's conflict landscape, this chapter develops a research strategy that ensures both theoretical coherence and empirical rigour.

The chapter begins by establishing the philosophical foundations of the study, clarifying its ontological and epistemological assumptions. Adopting a realist ontology and a positivist epistemology, the research assumes that social phenomena such as armed conflict can be objectively examined through systematic observation and empirical testing. These philosophical commitments shape the methodological choices that follow, linking the feasibility hypothesis to an evidence-based analytical approach. The second part presents a comparative review of methodological traditions in conflict research, qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method approaches. This discussion evaluates their respective strengths and limitations, showing how each contributes to understanding complex conflict dynamics. On this basis, the study justifies the adoption of a mixed-methods design, which integrates the statistical precision of quantitative analysis with the contextual depth provided by qualitative interpretation. The third part describes the research design and analytical scope, detailing the rationale for adopting a district-level, cross-sectional framework. This micro-level approach captures Pakistan's substantial regional variation in conflict intensity while preserving generalisability across a large number of observations.

Finally, the chapter outlines the operationalisation of variables and data collection strategy, explaining how theoretical concepts are converted into measurable indicators and how high-quality, district-level datasets were assembled for empirical testing. Together, these sections provide a transparent and logically structured roadmap for the study.

Overall, this chapter establishes the methodological bridge between theory and evidence. It explains not only what methods are employed and how data are analysed, but also why these choices were made, ensuring that the study's findings are systematic, replicable, and firmly grounded in both theoretical reasoning and empirical reality.

The Philosophical Foundation

Research in the social sciences makes truth claims about social phenomena, and these claims require a sound philosophical rationale for validity and logical coherence. Philosophy asks two core questions: the nature of being and the nature of knowing. The study of reality is ontology; the study of knowledge, what is knowable and how we know it, is epistemology. Methodology follows from these foundations: research is a combination of being (ontology), knowing (epistemology), and doing (methodology). Ontology concerns what exists and the structure of that existence. It raises questions such as: Do causal relationships in the social world follow consistent patterns? Are there objective regularities? Epistemology extends this by asking how we can acquire, justify, and test knowledge about such regularities.

This study adopts a realist ontology, claiming that an objective social reality exists independently of our perceptions and can be systematically investigated. It also adopts a positivist epistemology, assuming that knowledge of this reality can be generated and evaluated through empirical observation, measurement, and inference. These two positions are interdependent: the belief in patterned social reality motivates the use of empirical methods to detect those patterns.

On this basis, the study is designed to test the feasibility hypothesis with rigorous statistical analysis at the district level, complemented by qualitative interpretation to situate the results in Pakistan's context. Although often left implicit, ontological and epistemological choices shape research questions, the kinds of evidence we treat as persuasive, and the criteria for valid inference (Bhaskar, 2020). Causal analysis in political science typically concerns how changes in x affect y (Hall, 2003). However, it is a mistake to debate methods in isolation from first principles (Scharpf, 1997). Our philosophical stance clarifies what constitutes a cause, what constitutes evidence, and how far findings can be generalised.

Applied here, a realist–positivist stance supports:

- specifying testable claims about structural conditions (feasibility) and conflict intensity.
- using quantitative models to estimate probabilistic effects (not deterministic laws); and
- drawing on qualitative materials to interpret mechanisms and guard against mismeasurement.

This matters for the greed–grievance discourse: both speak to motivations, but our framework requires tools that can identify where conflict becomes organisationally feasible. Hence, the study integrates multiple methodological perspectives, district-level quantitative analysis for estimation and qualitative evidence for mechanism and context, so that blind spots in any single approach are reduced and the overall design remains logically aligned with the study's philosophical foundations.

Comparative analysis of key Approaches

Conflict research has been widely studied across several major social science disciplines, including Political Science, International Relations, Sociology, Psychology, and Economics. Each discipline contributes distinct insights and methodological tools, as well as inherent limitations.

The sociological, anthropological, positivist, and critical approaches have all provided unique perspectives on the dynamics of civil war and intrastate conflict (Galtung, 2009). A significant amount of work on the economics of civil war has been conducted under the positivist approach, utilising quantitative methods to uncover systematic relationships (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Fearon & Laitin, 2003). However, this cross-national econometric tradition has been criticised by critical and anthropological scholars for neglecting local context and claiming universal objectivity in highly diverse social environments (Richards, 2005; Cramer, 2006). Similarly, sociological approaches argue that focusing on a limited set of measurable variables risks overlooking broader structural and historical narratives essential for a complete understanding of conflict (Tilly, 2003; Goodwin, 2001).

Despite these critiques, quantitative research has made substantial contributions by identifying economic and structural drivers of conflict such as resource dependence, poverty, and weak state capacity (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Fearon & Laitin, 2003). This empirical orientation is particularly useful for the current study, which tests the feasibility hypothesis through measurable structural indicators. Quantitative analysis allows for generalisation, replicability, and empirical verification, providing a systematic foundation for evaluating how structural and environmental factors affect conflict intensity.

Qualitative Approaches in Conflict Research

Qualitative research remains indispensable for understanding the complexity of intrastate conflicts. It focuses on meaning, interpretation, and process rather than mere measurement, enabling scholars to explore how people experience, explain, and respond to violence. In conflict studies, it helps uncover the mechanisms through which ideas, identities, and power relations

evolve over time (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Such methods are instrumental in analysing internal conflicts where context, history, and local perceptions are crucial to understanding causation.

One of the commonly used qualitative traditions is ethnography, which relies on fieldwork, interviews, and participant observation. It provides in-depth insights into how conflict impacts daily life, community relations, and local governance. Classic works such as Richards' (2014) Fighting for the Rain Forest and Nordstrom's (1997) A Different Kind of War Story demonstrate how ethnography captures the lived realities of violence, fear, and adaptation during civil wars. These studies show how ordinary people navigate and negotiate power within war economies and fragmented sovereignties. However, ethnographic research in active conflict zones presents challenges related to safety, access, and reliability. Collier (2000b) criticised the use of war stories as data, arguing that they may be subject to strategic misrepresentation by participants. In the context of Pakistan, these constraints are even more pronounced, as direct field access in conflict areas remains highly restricted.

Beyond ethnography, several non-ethnographic qualitative methods have made substantial contributions to conflict research. Case study analysis provides an in-depth understanding of specific conflicts or regions, revealing how structural and proximate causes interact in particular contexts (George & Bennett, 2005). Prominent examples include Kalyvas's (2006) The Logic of Violence in Civil War and Wood's (2003) Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador, both of which use qualitative case analysis to unpack the relationship between state control, local collaboration, and insurgent strategy. Case studies allow theory testing and refinement by tracing causal mechanisms across different stages of conflict but face limitations regarding external validity and generalisability.

Similarly, process tracing focuses on identifying and testing causal pathways within individual cases, often combining historical and contemporary evidence to explain how particular outcomes unfold (Beach & Pedersen, 2013). This approach has been effectively used in conflict studies such as Staniland's (2014) Networks of Rebellion, which traced the organisational evolution of militant groups in South Asia. Process tracing is particularly well-suited to conflict research because it helps link structural variables, such as governance or geography, with specific conflict events and decisions.

Discourse analysis and content analysis add another layer of insight by examining how language, symbolism, and framing shape political behaviour and conflict narratives. For instance, Hansen (2006) and Milliken (1999) show how discourse analysis can reveal the construction of security threats and the legitimisation of violence. In South Asian contexts, Bhatia (2005) employed discourse analysis to examine how media narratives in the War on Terror influenced perceptions of Pakistan and Afghanistan, illustrating the impact of narrative framing in sustaining global and domestic conflict agendas. These approaches highlight the power of ideas and communication in sustaining or mitigating conflict, but can be criticised for interpretive subjectivity and difficulty in replication.

Historical and institutional analyses further extend the qualitative toolkit. They investigate how long-term state formation, institutional capacity, and policy legacies influence present-day conflict patterns (Thelen, 1999; Pierson, 2004). In conflict research, works such as Tilly's (2003) The Politics of Collective Violence and Goodwin's (2001) No Other Way Out exemplify how institutional and historical trajectories shape revolutionary movements and insurgent mobilisation. Historical institutionalism is particularly useful for contexts like Pakistan, where colonial legacies, administrative hierarchies, and regional inequalities continue to shape governance and conflict

dynamics. While this approach provides valuable temporal depth, it often struggles to isolate causal mechanisms in a way that can be empirically tested across multiple cases.

Collectively, these qualitative traditions offer rich insights that complement quantitative analysis. They provide the interpretive and historical grounding necessary to understand why certain relationships exist, rather than only whether they do (Maxwell, 2012). However, they are also constrained by issues of subjectivity, limited replicability, and difficulties in scaling up findings for cross-regional generalisation. Therefore, in this study, qualitative methods are used primarily to provide contextual interpretation and explanatory depth to the statistical results derived from quantitative analysis. The reliance on secondary qualitative sources allows this integration while maintaining feasibility and coherence with the study's broader positivist orientation.

Quantitative approaches in conflict Research

The evolution of quantitative conflict research can be traced back to the late 1950s, when Kenneth Boulding and his colleagues founded the Journal of Conflict Resolution to promote the study of conflict through systematic, scientific inquiry (Boulding, 1957). This development marked the beginning of "peace science," where conflict was treated as a measurable and analysable social phenomenon rather than merely a philosophical concern. The subsequent establishment of the Peace Science Society further institutionalised this research tradition (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2011).

Early pioneers such as Lewis Fry Richardson, whose The Statistics of Deadly Quarrels (1960) introduced the statistical analysis of war frequency and intensity, laid the foundation for empirical conflict studies. This was followed by the Correlates of War (COW) Project, which provided the first large-scale quantitative dataset on wars from 1816 to 1965, including

explanatory variables such as state power, alliances, and geographic contiguity (Singer & Small, 1972). These works established the groundwork for contemporary conflict databases, such as the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) and Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) datasets, which remain the most widely used in quantitative conflict research today.

The quantitative tradition revolutionised conflict studies by introducing systematic data collection and hypothesis testing. It enabled the analysis of large-N datasets to identify cross-national patterns, test causal hypotheses, and assess the relative influence of economic, political, and geographic variables on the risk of civil war. Notable examples include Fearon and Laitin's (2003) landmark study on the structural causes of civil war, which used global data to show that low state capacity, rough terrain, and large populations were stronger predictors of conflict onset than ethnic or religious diversity. Similarly, Collier and Hoeffler (2004) used econometric models to test the greed and grievance hypothesis, arguing that economic feasibility, rather than purely motivational factors, best explains conflict occurrence. More recent studies, such as those by Hegre and Sambanis (2006) and Cederman, Weidmann, and Gleditsch (2011), extended these approaches to include political exclusion, inequality, and horizontal grievances, illustrating how quantitative models continue to evolve with theoretical refinement.

Quantitative methods have several advantages for conflict research. Analysing large datasets enables generalisation across cases, providing robust empirical results with higher confidence levels (Landman, 2003). Moreover, quantitative designs allow researchers to isolate and measure the effects of specific variables by controlling for confounding factors, as demonstrated in econometric studies of resource dependence, state capacity, and border proximity (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006). Finally, the use of statistical techniques

ensures transparency and replicability, allowing findings to be verified and reanalysed by other scholars, an essential feature for cumulative knowledge-building.

However, these advantages come with limitations. Quantifying abstract social concepts such as power, governance, or legitimacy often requires proxy indicators that are only partial representations of the phenomena they intend to capture (Gleditsch & Ruggeri, 2010). For instance, GDP per capita or secondary school enrolment is frequently used as a proxy for state capacity or opportunity cost (Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Collier & Hoeffler, 2004), but these measures may also reflect unrelated economic or developmental factors. This raises concerns about construct validity and the risk of misinterpreting correlation as causation (Call, 2012).

Furthermore, cross-national quantitative designs tend to overlook subnational variation. Aggregating data to the country level can obscure crucial within-country differences, an issue repeatedly highlighted by micro-level conflict research (Buhaug & Gates, 2002; Cederman & Gleditsch, 2009). Conflict is rarely uniform across space; it tends to cluster in specific regions, such as border areas or mountainous regions, where state reach is limited. Recognising this, scholars have increasingly turned to disaggregated, district-level data and event-based analysis, such as those in the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) and UCDP-GED datasets, which enable the mapping of violence with spatial precision.

Methodologically, the quantitative tradition has also evolved to address problems of data rarity and model specification. Because civil wars are statistically rare events, conventional regression models often produce biased estimates (Gates, 2002). Solutions include using rare-events logit models or multi-level models to account for clustering and temporal dependence (King & Zeng, 2001; Hegre & Sambanis, 2006). However, despite these improvements, quantitative conflict research still faces challenges in capturing the recursive relationship between conflict and

its underlying variables, for example, how war simultaneously shapes and is shaped by state capacity or economic performance (Blattman & Miguel, 2010).

In sum, quantitative conflict research has made transformative contributions to the field by identifying structural and economic determinants of civil war, improving data transparency, and advancing statistical modelling. Yet, its reliance on aggregate proxies and cross-national comparisons limits its ability to capture local processes and causal mechanisms. These limitations justify the adoption of a mixed-method and micro-level design in this study, one that retains the strengths of quantitative measurement while integrating contextual understanding through qualitative interpretation. This approach allows for a more nuanced, empirically grounded analysis of Pakistan's conflict dynamics and the feasibility conditions underlying intrastate violence.

Macro-Level vs Micro-Level Approaches

Macro-level analyses typically involve cross-country comparisons, exploring broader trends across diverse contexts. Studies employing macro-level approaches have been influential in identifying common structural factors behind civil conflicts, such as resource dependence, poverty, and governance quality (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Fearon & Laitin, 2003). The strength of these studies lies in their ability to generalise findings across multiple contexts, providing insights that hold broad relevance for policy and theory. They rely on large datasets, offering high levels of statistical confidence and replicability (Landman, 2003; Gates, 2002).

However, macro-level analyses face several limitations. They often overlook crucial within-country variations, relying on national-level indicators that obscure the local dynamics driving conflict. Aggregate measures, such as GDP per capita or state capacity, often lack sensitivity to regional disparities, leading to measurement errors or misinterpretations (Gleditsch & Ruggeri, 2010; Call, 2012). Moreover, strictly defined thresholds for conflict events can create

statistical anomalies, especially given the rarity of high-intensity conflicts in global datasets (King & Zeng, 2001; Gates, 2002).

To address these limitations, the micro-level study of civil wars has emerged as a distinct field of inquiry, focusing on subnational or local levels, such as districts, villages, or even individual cases. These studies utilise high-resolution datasets to investigate how conflict dynamics unfold within countries, providing enhanced accuracy and causal inference compared to macro-level analyses (Weidmann, 2014; Cederman & Gleditsch, 2009). By capturing local variations in geography, state presence, and social relations, this approach reveals how and why violence clusters spatially within specific regions.

The micro-level approach, often referred to as the "disaggregation of civil war," represents a methodological shift towards higher empirical precision and contextual sensitivity (Kalyvas, 2006). It allows researchers to link local-level processes, such as recruitment, resource access, and state control, to national or regional conflict patterns. Furthermore, it bridges quantitative and qualitative traditions by incorporating local histories and using tools such as geographic information systems (GIS) and event-level data (Weidmann, 2014).

Micro-level studies also shed light on the motivations behind mobilisation and the recruitment of fighters (Olson, 1965; Lichbach, 1995). For instance, Wood (2003) finds that individuals in El Salvador's civil war were driven more by perceived benefits of participation than by fear or coercion. Similarly, Kalyvas and Kocher (2007) challenge the "free-rider" assumption by showing that indiscriminate counterinsurgency often exposes civilians to similar risks as combatants. In Pakistan, Blair, Fair, Malhotra, and Shapiro (2012) demonstrate that militant support tends to come from middle-income rather than poor groups, challenging the traditional poverty–conflict nexus.

While micro-level studies provide valuable granularity, they can suffer from limited generalisability and potential selection bias, as findings are often context-specific (Clayton, 2014). Consequently, neither macro- nor micro-level analyses alone can fully explain the complexity of intrastate conflicts.

Rationale and Choice of Research Design and Scope

Research Methodology

From a philosophical standpoint, this study adopts a pragmatic and pluralistic stance, prioritising what works best to answer the research questions comprehensively and reliably. Pragmatism allows methodological flexibility and supports the integration of diverse approaches where each complements the other's limitations. Based on the preceding discussion of the challenges and benefits of both qualitative and quantitative traditions, this study employs a mixed-methods design, which combines the strengths of each approach to enhance the validity, depth, and interpretive power of the analysis.

A mixed-method approach helps overcome limitations related to variable measurement, outlier identification, and omitted-variable bias that may arise in purely quantitative econometric models (Gates, 2002). It also strengthens the credibility of results derived from smaller-N analyses by situating statistical findings within contextual and historical understanding (Lieberman, 2005). Quantitative analysis provides objectivity and precision in identifying relationships between variables, while qualitative analysis complements this by unpacking the rationale and mechanisms that underlie those statistical patterns.

This research utilises both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data involves the calculation and compilation of quantitative indicators for selected variables. In contrast, secondary data are drawn from established literature, academic journals, policy reports, and datasets produced

by reputable institutes and research organisations. The integration of these data types allows a triangulated approach, where each dataset reinforces the reliability of the others.

Methodologically, the study is primarily deductive in nature, since it seeks to test the feasibility hypothesis through statistical analysis and interpretation of empirical results. However, inductive reasoning is also employed at earlier stages, particularly in identifying relevant variables, constructing the theoretical framework, and contextualising patterns that emerge from the data. This combination ensures both theoretical alignment and empirical responsiveness.

Given Pakistan's unique conflict landscape, characterised by substantial regional variation in the type and intensity of violence, but with a persistent concentration in certain hotspots, the study strategically integrates both macro- and micro-level analytical strengths. To achieve this, a district-level analysis was selected as the unit of study rather than the provincial or national level. This decision enables the examination of localised factors, such as terrain, proximity to borders, and human development, that influence the feasibility of armed conflict. At the same time, using district-level data provides sufficient variation for robust statistical analysis, thereby bridging the micro-level precision with macro-level generalisability.

With 125 districts included, this research qualifies as a large-N micro-level study, offering both analytical power and contextual granularity. While a provincial-level design would have restricted the analysis to only four units, the district-level approach captures meaningful intra-regional variations that better reflect Pakistan's subnational conflict realities.

In summary, this methodological synthesis, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches at a fine spatial scale, positions the study as both innovative and empirically grounded. By capturing complex local dynamics within a broader structural framework, this design advances conflict research methodologically. It ensures that findings derived from Pakistan's case contribute

to a broader theoretical and comparative understanding of intrastate conflict. This dual-level design directly addresses the critique that prior feasibility studies rely excessively on cross-country data and overlook the subnational processes through which conflicts are sustained.

Scope and Units of Analysis

Conceptually, this study is deliberately limited to examining the structural and enabling conditions that shape the feasibility of intrastate armed conflict in Pakistan. It focuses on the operational and economic variables that make rebellion possible and sustainable rather than on the motivational or ideational factors that explain why groups choose to mobilise. The study thus positions feasibility as a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for sustained insurgency, emphasising how geography, infrastructure, human development, and state capacity create opportunity structures for violence (Collier, Hoeffler, & Rohner, 2009; Kalyvas, 2006). By focusing on these structural mechanisms, the analysis seeks to explain where and under what conditions conflict is feasible, rather than why it occurs. This distinction maintains theoretical clarity and aligns with the feasibility hypothesis, which posits that operational and economic constraints are foundational to the persistence of armed conflict. While this scope allows for clear empirical testing, it also entails limitations. Ideational, identity-based, and historical factors, though recognised as important, are analytically bracketed to maintain focus and ensure causal precision. These dimensions are discussed contextually but not modelled statistically, leaving space for future qualitative research to explore how structural feasibility interacts with motivation and ideology.

Empirically, the study employs a cross-sectional design, utilising data collected at the district level to capture spatial and structural variations across Pakistan. This choice reflects both theoretical alignment and analytical precision: the district scale captures meaningful variation in

terrain, infrastructure, and development while maintaining sufficient statistical power for quantitative testing.

The analysis encompasses all administrative units of Pakistan, including Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Sindh, Balochistan, and the Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT), as well as the regions formerly known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Following their constitutional merger with KP. Each of the five FATA agencies and the adjoining Frontier Regions (FRs) is treated as a single district for analytical consistency. Two areas, Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), are excluded from this analysis. In addition to their distinct political and governance structures, the datasets available for these regions differ significantly in format and quality from those compiled at the national and provincial levels. Including them would thus create measurement inconsistencies and compromise data comparability. Their exclusion ensures analytical coherence and enhances the internal validity of the findings. To preserve temporal and spatial consistency, newly created districts were merged back with their parent districts where administrative boundaries changed after the study period. This resulted in a final dataset comprising 125 districts, which serve as the core unit of analysis. This design enables the systematic examination of how district-level structural characteristics, such as ruggedness, road density, human development, and proximity to borders, affect the feasibility of sustained conflict.

Choice of Statistical Model

The choice of the statistical model in this study also aligns with its philosophical positioning, which is grounded in positivism and probabilism. Positivism emphasises that valid knowledge is derived from the systematic observation and measurement of empirical data, while probabilism complements this view by recognising that social phenomena rarely exhibit deterministic causality. Instead of seeking absolute causes, where one factor always produces a

specific outcome, probabilism focuses on identifying conditions that increase the likelihood of specific outcomes. Within this philosophical framework, regression analysis offers a suitable methodological tool for capturing probabilistic relationships and testing hypotheses in a scientifically rigorous manner.

Historically, regression analysis has deep roots in the development of empirical social science. The method was first introduced by Francis Galton in the 1870s and later refined by Udny Yule and Karl Pearson in the 1890s (Hepple, 2001). Its core rationale is to identify and quantify the relationship between variables, how changes in one (or more) independent variables affect variations in another (King, 1994; Brady, 2010; Freedman, 2010). This analytical approach aligns directly with the logic of probabilistic causation, where the presence of a factor (X) increases the probability of an outcome (Y), rather than guaranteeing it.

Applied to the feasibility hypothesis of intrastate conflict, this probabilistic reasoning is particularly relevant. The framework posits that certain economic and operational conditions, such as rugged terrain, proximity to borders, and low human development, make rebellion more feasible, thereby increasing the likelihood of conflict. Hence, regression analysis is the most appropriate statistical method for testing how these enabling conditions correlate with varying levels of conflict intensity across districts.

Among different regression models, multiple linear regression (MLR) was chosen over logit or probit models. This is primarily because the dependent variable, conflict intensity measured as deaths per million population, is a continuous variable rather than a binary (conflict/no conflict) or categorical variable. MLR enables the estimation of how incremental changes in independent variables (economic and operational feasibility indicators) affect the degree of conflict intensity, providing nuanced, continuous insights rather than discrete probabilities.

Since the conflict data exhibited positive skewness, reflecting uneven distribution of fatalities across districts, a logarithmic transformation was applied to both dependent and independent variables. This transformation normalises the data, ensuring that model assumptions of normality and homoscedasticity are met and that regression estimates are statistically valid. The data were analysed using the R statistical software, which provides a robust environment for econometric testing and diagnostic evaluation.

In summary, the selection of multiple linear regression is not merely a technical choice but a methodological reflection of the study's positivist and probabilistic orientation. It allows for empirically testing the feasibility hypothesis by quantifying how variations in structural conditions alter the likelihood and intensity of armed conflict across Pakistan's districts.

Qualitative Analysis for Contextual Interpretation

While regression analysis is invaluable for identifying statistical relationships, it cannot by itself capture the full complexity of armed conflict dynamics. Quantitative models reveal patterns and correlations, but they often obscure the causal mechanisms, historical contingencies, and actor-level dynamics that drive those patterns. To complement and interpret the quantitative findings, this study integrates a qualitative analytical component guided by realist and deterministic perspectives.

In a realist view, social phenomena such as conflict are shaped by underlying structures and mechanisms, often unobservable directly, that generate the events we observe (Bhaskar, 2008). Determinism, in this context, implies that specific configurations of these mechanisms, once activated, produce identifiable outcomes under given conditions. Therefore, qualitative analysis offers interpretive depth, enabling this research to move beyond correlations and uncover the causal pathways through which structural feasibility translates into actual episodes of violence. To

bridge the gaps left by quantitative methods, the qualitative analysis draws on secondary literature, historical case accounts, and policy reports to contextualise the statistical results. This involves examining how particular structural variables, such as terrain, road access, and border proximity, interacted with governance, local economies, and security policies in specific districts. For instance, where regression results reveal a strong relationship between border proximity and conflict intensity, qualitative evidence helps explain whether this association stems from cross-border sanctuaries, smuggling economies, or state under-enforcement. In this way, qualitative interpretation serves as a triangulation mechanism, it tests the plausibility of statistical relationships against historical and contextual evidence.

This mixed-method synthesis strengthens internal validity by linking empirical correlations to theoretically informed explanations. The combination of quantitative regression and qualitative contextual analysis thus ensures that the findings are not only statistically robust but also socially and historically meaningful, aligning with the realist principle that knowledge of social reality requires both observation and interpretation.

Data Collection and Operationalisation of Variables

Having outlined the philosophical and methodological foundations of this study, this section translates the theoretical framework into measurable variables and explains the data used for empirical testing. It operationalises the key constructs derived from the feasibility hypothesis, covering both economic and operational dimensions of conflict feasibility.

Each variable, dependent and independent, is defined conceptually and then operationalised through appropriate proxy indicators. The discussion integrates data sources directly within each variable's description to ensure clarity and transparency. This approach allows a clear link between theory, measurement, and data, showing how abstract concepts such as state

reach, geography, and human development are represented empirically. A detail of all variables, their proxies, and data sources is provided in this section.

Dependent Variable

Conceptual Definition and Scope

Understanding and defining the dependent variable, armed conflict, is central to ensuring conceptual clarity and methodological consistency in this study. Civil war and intrastate armed conflict are complex phenomena characterised by organised violence within a state, pursued for political objectives and sustained over time. A consensus in the literature suggests that three essential elements must coexist for such conflicts to qualify as civil wars: (1) the presence of organised actors, (2) the use of sustained collective violence, and (3) the pursuit of political or territorial goals through that violence (Gantzel, 1981). The absence of any of these conditions marks either the non-existence or the termination of a conflict.

In empirical research, the conceptual boundaries of armed conflict often intersect with related terms such as insurgency, rebellion, terrorism, and separatist movements. While these forms of violence vary in scope and framing, they frequently overlap in practice, especially where non-state actors challenge state authority as explained in the previous chapter with great details. This study therefore uses the broader and more inclusive term intrastate armed conflict to avoid the normative or politically loaded labels often attached to such events. The definition adopted here captures all large-scale, politically motivated and organised forms of internal violence that meet the threshold of sustained collective action against the state.

A critical aspect of defining armed conflict concerns its termination and the potential for recurrence. Historically, the end of conflict has been marked by a cessation of violence, yet as scholars such as Staniland (2012) and Autesserre (2009) note, the durability of peace depends

equally on the re-establishment of effective governance and the functioning of legitimate local institutions. In Pakistan, for instance, tribal realignments and changes in state alliances, such as the Wazir-Mehsud case during Operation Rah-e-Nijat, demonstrate how state policy and local political structures can transform the trajectory of violence and promote relative stability.

For the purpose of this study, the operational definition of conflict follows the established conventions used in the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) and the Correlates of War (COW) datasets. According to Kreutz (2010), an intrastate conflict is defined as an incompatibility over government or territory between the state and an organised non-state group that results in at least 1,000 battle-related deaths within a calendar year. This threshold distinguishes high-intensity civil wars from smaller-scale or sporadic violence and aligns well with the feasibility hypothesis, which focuses on the structural conditions that enable sustained insurgency rather than isolated events.

Applying this criterion to Pakistan, the period from 2007 to 2017 is treated as the main decade of active civil conflict. The year 2007 marks the point when the number of battle-related fatalities first exceeded the 1,000 threshold, while 2017 indicates the end of the conflict period, when fatalities fell below it. Beyond defining the temporal scope, this conceptual boundary ensures that the dependent variable reflects sustained, organised, and large-scale violence consistent with the theoretical framework of this study.

This operational understanding recognises that while motivations such as ideology, identity, and grievance initiate mobilisation, the persistence of armed conflict depends on structural feasibility, the economic, geographic, and institutional conditions that make rebellion possible and sustainable. By adhering to this definition, the study situates itself firmly within the comparative civil war literature while maintaining analytical precision for the case of Pakistan.

Measuring Armed Conflict

Once the phenomenon of interest, armed conflict, has been conceptually defined, the next step involves its measurement. Measuring conflict is not a straightforward exercise. Even when there is a broad consensus on the definition of a civil war or intrastate conflict, multiple representations and operational measures can still exist. This is because social phenomena, unlike physical variables, cannot always be captured through a single universal scale.

A variety of approaches have been used to quantify armed conflict, including the number of fatalities, injuries, displacement, or destruction of infrastructure. Among these, the number of battle-related fatalities has become the most widely accepted and comparable measure in empirical research. The reason lies in its relative objectivity and the consistency with which it can be documented across different contexts and time periods. However, even this approach presents several conceptual and methodological challenges, particularly regarding which deaths to include, what threshold defines "war," and whether the indirect effects of conflict, such as famine or disease, should also be considered.

The Correlates of War (COW) project defines a conflict as a war when it results in at least 1,000 battle-related deaths within a calendar year, arguing that this threshold captures the point at which violence becomes both militarily and politically significant (Sarkees & Schafer, 2000). This definition provides a consistent and transparent cut-off that allows for cross-national comparison. Similarly, Lacina and Gleditsch (2005) highlight that while distinguishing between combatant and non-combatant fatalities is empirically difficult, including both categories is methodologically defensible, as civilians often become direct targets or collateral casualties in modern intrastate conflicts.

Alternative measures, such as including injuries, displacement, or property damage, have been proposed to capture the broader humanitarian cost of conflict. However, these indicators face significant limitations in terms of data reliability, comparability, and attribution. In many conflict zones, health information systems collapse, political actors manipulate data for propaganda purposes, and the indirect consequences are often difficult to distinguish from the conflict itself (Murray et al., 2002). Consequently, using fatalities as the primary indicator offers a more transparent, verifiable, and empirically manageable measure, aligning with the focus of this study on the intensity of violence rather than its broader social or economic consequences.

Another methodological consideration concerns whether conflict should be measured in absolute or relative terms. Absolute death counts can exaggerate or understate the severity of violence, depending on population size. For instance, a conflict resulting in 500 deaths in a sparsely populated district may represent a much higher intensity of violence than a similar number in a densely populated one. Therefore, a relative measure, deaths per capita, is generally preferred when analysing subnational variations, as it enables more accurate cross-district comparison and ensures proportionality in the analysis.

Considering these methodological discussions, this study adopts the annual number of direct battle-related fatalities as the most appropriate and empirically valid measure of conflict, while acknowledging its limitations. This choice is consistent with established conventions in quantitative conflict research. It also aligns with the structural feasibility framework, which requires a measure that captures sustained, large-scale violence rather than sporadic unrest or isolated incidents.

In operational terms, the dependent variable, armed conflict intensity, is defined as the number of battle-related deaths per million population at the district level. This indicator captures

both the scale and distribution of violence across Pakistan, enabling meaningful comparisons between districts of varying population sizes. The total fatalities include all individuals killed directly as a result of conflict events, encompassing civilians, insurgents, and security personnel. Indirect effects such as disease, displacement, or economic loss are excluded due to measurement challenges and conceptual ambiguity.

The temporal scope of measurement corresponds to the period 2007–2017, which marks the decade of active, large-scale intrastate conflict in Pakistan. This periodisation follows the principle used in the COW dataset: the conflict year begins when the annual number of battle-related deaths exceeds 1,000 and ends when it falls below that threshold. Accordingly, the year 2007 is identified as the onset of large-scale conflict, and 2017 as its conclusion.

This operationalisation offers several analytical advantages. First, by focusing on the rate of fatalities relative to population size, it neutralises distortions caused by demographic differences across districts. Second, it directly reflects the feasibility framework's emphasis on sustained violent capacity rather than short-term events. Finally, it ensures comparability with both global datasets and regional case studies, providing a solid empirical foundation for subsequent quantitative testing.

In sum, this approach conceptualises armed conflict as sustained and organised violence within the state. It measures it through fatality rates per capita, a method that balances theoretical precision with empirical practicality. The next section details the data source and procedures used to construct this variable for Pakistan's 125 districts.

Choice of Data Source

The evolution of conflict data collection has been gradual, reflecting continuous methodological improvement and the growing availability of systematic information. One of the

earliest contributions in this field was made by Pitirim Sorokin (1937), who compiled data on warfare within his broader study of civilisational change. Subsequent pioneering work by Quincy Wright (1942) and Lewis Fry Richardson (1957) further advanced the systematic study of wars by quantifying their frequency, duration, and severity. Their efforts laid the foundation for what later became the modern discipline of peace and conflict research.

By the 1960s, conflict data collection entered a more empirical and comparative phase with the launch of the Correlates of War (COW) Project, which provided comprehensive cross-national data on interstate and intrastate conflicts from 1816 onwards. The COW dataset remains one of the most widely used due to its extensive temporal coverage and clear inclusion criteria, which define war as a conflict resulting in at least 1,000 battle-related deaths in a calendar year (Sarkees & Schafer, 2000). Other notable projects include the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), which records conflicts involving a minimum of 25 battle-related deaths per year, and the International Crisis Behaviour (ICB) Project, which focuses on the escalation and management of international crises.

The advent of event-based or geo-referenced datasets has marked a significant advancement in the field. Datasets such as the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) and the UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED) have introduced high-resolution data, recording specific incidents with precise geographic coordinates, dates, and actors involved (Buhaug, 2010; Raleigh & Hegre, 2009). These developments have enabled the study of conflict at the subnational level and the investigation of spatial and temporal variations in violence with greater accuracy.

Despite these advances, most global datasets remain limited when applied to the Pakistani context. They often operate at national or provincial scales, where aggregation obscures important

within-country variation. For this study's district-level analysis, such datasets are inadequate because they fail to capture the local dynamics of insurgency, governance, and geography that define Pakistan's intrastate conflicts.

Given the need for spatial precision and contextual relevance, this study employs the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) conflict dataset as the primary data source. PIPS is an independent research organisation that maintains a comprehensive database of conflict-related incidents across Pakistan. The dataset includes district-level details on event type, date, location, actors, and casualties from 2005 to 2018. It is compiled from verified media reports and cross-checked with official statements, offering a level of detail and accuracy unavailable in most international datasets.

The PIPS data are particularly suited to this study for several reasons. First, it provides the granularity necessary to analyse conflict intensity at the district level, which aligns directly with the study's micro-level design. Second, it includes disaggregated categories of violence, such as religious insurgency, nationalist insurgency, sectarian violence, political violence, and tribal or communal conflicts, allowing for the selective inclusion of events that align with the study's theoretical and conceptual framework. Third, PIPS employs consistent coding standards across years, ensuring temporal comparability and reliability.

To align with the definition of intrastate armed conflict adopted in this study, the dataset was filtered to include only events involving organised, politically motivated armed groups engaged in sustained violence against the state or its institutions and infrastructure. Two main insurgencies were identified for inclusion:

1. Religious insurgency, primarily led by Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and associated militant networks operating in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA); and
2. Nationalist insurgency in Balochistan, involving groups such as the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) and Baloch Republican Army (BRA).

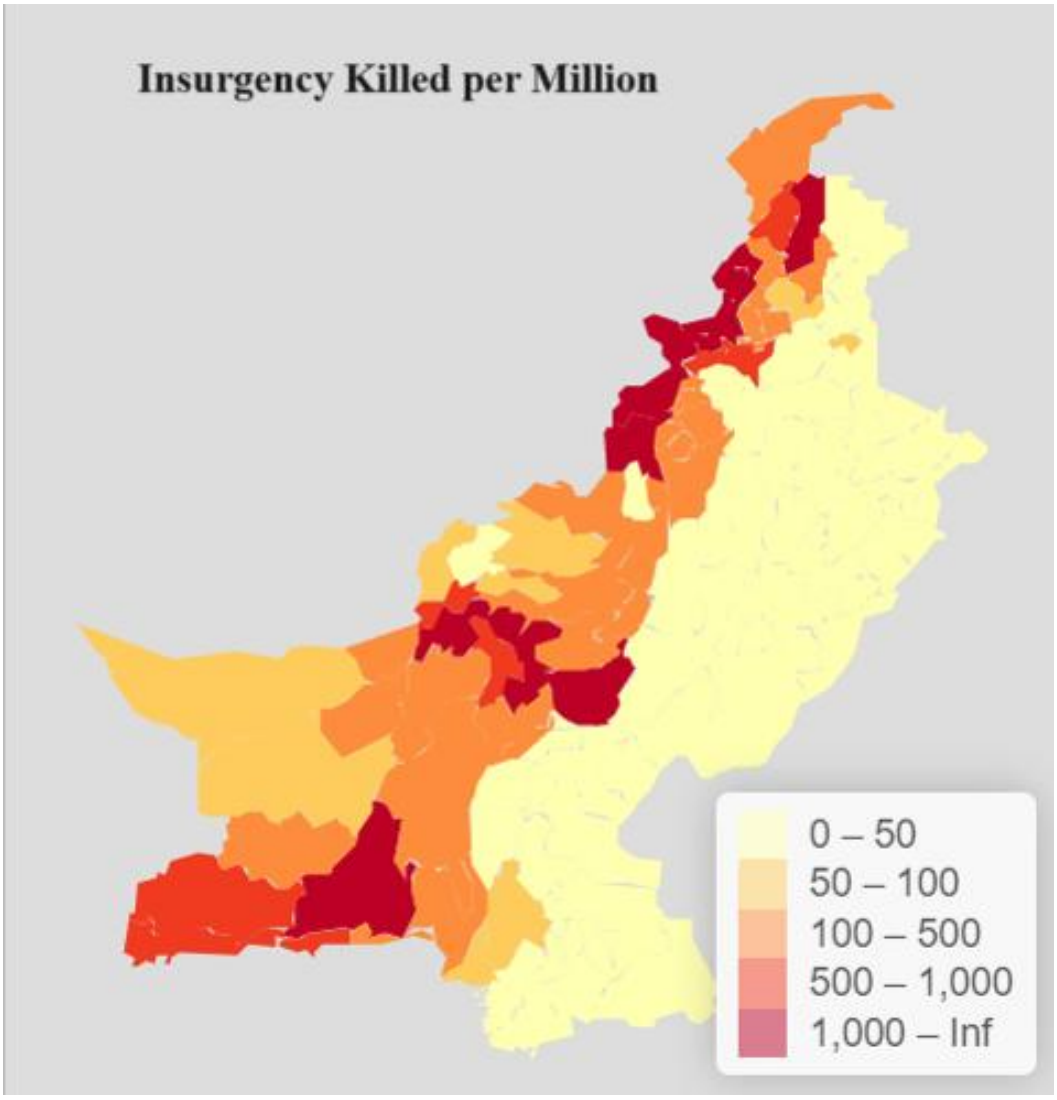
These categories reflect the forms of sustained, large-scale intrastate conflicts that align with the feasibility hypothesis, focusing on regions where structural and environmental conditions make rebellion operationally and economically viable. Events related to political or criminal violence, localised tribal feuds, or isolated acts of terrorism were excluded to maintain conceptual and analytical consistency.

Construction of the Dependent Variable

After filtering and coding, the dataset was processed to construct the dependent variable, conflict intensity, defined as the number of battle-related deaths per million population for each district. This indicator captures both the scale and proportional impact of violence, allowing comparison across regions with different population sizes.

The construction process involved several steps. First, the total number of fatalities per district was compiled from the PIPS dataset for each year between 2007 and 2017. Second, district-level population figures were calculated by averaging the 1998 and 2017 national census counts, thereby accounting for demographic changes over time. Third, the total number of deaths was divided by the average district population and multiplied by one million to derive the death rate per million population. This relative measure provides a more accurate representation of conflict intensity than absolute counts, as it adjusts for population disparities and captures variations in the per capita impact of violence.

Figure 13 Conflict Intensity Across the Country



Source: Prepared by the Author from PIPS Conflict data (2021)

To illustrate the spatial distribution and severity of conflict, a district-level map was generated using ArcGIS software (see Figure 13), showing the geographic concentration and intensity of insurgencies across Pakistan. As shown in the Figure, the highest concentration of insurgent-related fatalities occurred along Pakistan's western border regions, particularly in

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), and Balochistan. The intensity gradually decreases toward the central and eastern parts of the country. This spatial pattern supports the theoretical expectation that conflicts are more likely to persist where structural and geographical conditions, such as rough terrain, weak state reach, and porous borders, enhance the feasibility of rebellion.

By combining high-resolution local data with internationally recognised measurement conventions, the study achieves both contextual accuracy and comparative validity. This dependent variable, conflict intensity measured as deaths per million population, serves as the foundation for testing the feasibility hypothesis in Pakistan. The next section turns to the operationalisation of independent variables, outlining how structural, economic, and geographic conditions are measured to evaluate their relationship with the spatial distribution and persistence of armed conflict.

Independent Variables

Combining the dimensions of operational feasibility and economic feasibility provides the theoretical backbone for analysing the structural dynamics of armed conflict in Pakistan. Within this framework, conflict is assumed to persist not merely due to motivational factors such as grievance or ideology, but where conditions make rebellion both physically and economically sustainable. Accordingly, the task at this stage is to translate these theoretical dimensions into measurable indicators that can be empirically tested.

The identification of independent variables was guided directly by the feasibility framework discussed in Chapter 3. Each variable corresponds to a structural factor hypothesised to influence the feasibility of armed conflict, either by lowering the costs of insurgent operation or by increasing the economic incentives for mobilisation. For each variable, the best available

district-level proxy indicators were selected after a detailed review of existing literature and data availability. These indicators capture the core components of the framework: geography and infrastructure (operational feasibility), and economic opportunity and deprivation (economic feasibility).

To maintain transparency and coherence, each variable is presented below, along with its conceptual justification, operational definition, data source, and method of construction. Where applicable, variables are also contextualised within Pakistan's conflict geography to clarify their relevance and expected directional influence on conflict intensity.

Operational Feasibility Variables

Operational feasibility refers to the structural and environmental conditions that enable or hinder armed groups' ability to operate within a territory. In this study, it captures the physical and infrastructural constraints that shape the state's capacity to project power and the rebels' capacity to mobilise, move, and evade. Two core indicators are used to measure this dimension: terrain ruggedness and road network accessibility. These variables together reflect how geography and infrastructure affect insurgent operations, both by offering concealment and by constraining or facilitating state control.

Rugged Terrain

Rugged terrain has long been recognised as a significant determinant of intrastate conflict due to its role in limiting state access and providing natural sanctuaries to armed groups. Following established empirical research (Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Buhaug & Gates, 2002), this study adopts mean slope as the most effective metric to capture topographical difficulty. Data on average slope for each district were obtained from the AidData GeoQuery Database (Goodman, 2020), which compiles high-resolution elevation data. Districts with higher mean slopes are theorised to offer

tactical advantages to insurgent groups by limiting state mobility, hindering aerial and ground surveillance, and providing natural cover and defensibility. Thus, the mean slope variable directly proxies the physical feasibility of sustaining rebellion in difficult terrain.

Road Density

The second component of operational feasibility is road network density, which serves as an inverse indicator of state reach and accessibility. Roads facilitate administrative presence, surveillance, and the rapid deployment of security forces, while their absence contributes to state weakness and isolation of peripheral communities. To quantify road density, spatial analysis was conducted in ArcGIS software. Two shapefiles were obtained from the UC Berkeley GeoData Library, one containing district boundaries and the other depicting Pakistan's national road network (International Steering Committee for Global Mapping and Survey of Pakistan, 2012). After merging these layers, the total road length within each district was calculated using the Calculate Geometry function. The road density was then computed as total road length divided by the district's area (in km^2). To make the figures more interpretable, values were expressed per 100 km^2 of district area. Lower road density signifies poor accessibility and limited state penetration; conditions theorised to increase operational feasibility for insurgent groups.

Challenging Geography Index

To capture the combined effect of terrain and infrastructure, a Challenging Geography Index (CGI) was developed. This index integrates the two operational variables by dividing road density by average slope, thereby jointly representing accessibility and topographical difficulty. Lower index values correspond to districts that are both rugged and poorly connected, the most challenging environments for state control and, conversely, the most conducive to insurgent activity. In contrast, higher values indicate relatively flat and well-connected regions where

insurgent operations are more easily detected and suppressed. Both the individual variables (mean slope and road density) and the composite CGI were included in the regression model to test their independent and combined effects on conflict intensity.

Economic Feasibility Variables

Economic feasibility refers to the financial and material conditions that determine whether armed rebellion can be sustained over time. Within this framework, two principal mechanisms are considered: opportunity cost, which captures the economic constraints that shape individual and group incentives to participate in conflict, and greed, which relates to the availability of resources and income-generating opportunities that can sustain militant activity. Together, these dimensions reflect how the local economy can either deter or enable violence by influencing the feasibility of mobilisation.

Opportunity Cost

The concept of opportunity cost is grounded in rational-choice theories of conflict, which posit that individuals weigh the potential benefits of rebellion against the economic alternatives available to them. When legitimate economic opportunities are limited, the relative cost of joining an armed group declines, increasing the likelihood of mobilisation.

In this study, opportunity cost is represented through two district-level indicators: poverty prevalence and the Human Development Index (HDI). Both are credible measures of structural deprivation and provide insight into the socio-economic constraints that may influence participation in conflict. The first variable, poverty prevalence, is measured using the Multidimensional Poverty Headcount calculated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). This composite indicator captures deprivations across health, education, and living standards, offering a more holistic representation of poverty than income-based measures. It

reflects the structural inequalities that can reduce opportunity costs and make insurgency recruitment more viable. In highly deprived districts, individuals may perceive participation in militant groups as one of the few available economic options or as a means of gaining social mobility and status. The second variable, HDI, complements this measure by integrating life expectancy, education, and income into a single index of human development. The HDI data used in this study are drawn from the UNDP's 2005 district-level estimates, which predate the major escalation of internal conflict in Pakistan. This temporal positioning strengthens causal inference by mitigating the risk of reverse causality, where conflict itself depresses development outcomes. Lower HDI values are therefore expected to correlate with higher conflict intensity, as they signify weaker opportunity structures and reduced human capital, both of which lower the perceived cost of joining rebellion.

Greed and Economic Incentives

The second mechanism, greed, captures the material incentives that can finance and sustain insurgent groups. In this view, conflict is not merely a response to deprivation but also a means of capturing or exploiting resources. Ideally, the presence of lootable natural resources (such as minerals, gas, or precious stones) would serve as a direct proxy for this mechanism. However, due to the unavailability of reliable district-level data on resource extraction, this variable could not be included in the quantitative model.

Overlapping Variable

Border Proximity

Among the structural factors considered in this study, proximity to international borders occupies a unique position, simultaneously influencing both the operational and economic

dimensions of conflict feasibility. It functions as a hybrid mechanism that facilitates insurgent logistics while enabling access to cross-border revenue streams and illicit trade networks.

From an operational standpoint, border regions, particularly those adjacent to Afghanistan and Iran, are challenging for the state to monitor and control. Rugged terrain, sparse infrastructure, and weak administrative presence allow insurgent groups to move personnel, weapons, and supplies across borders with relative ease. These areas serve as safe havens where militants can retreat, reorganise, and launch further attacks while evading state retaliation.

From an economic perspective, the same geographic and institutional weaknesses that foster informal economies also provide financial resources to sustain insurgencies. Extensive research demonstrates that porous border zones are frequently exploited for drug trafficking, smuggling, and other illicit economic activities that generate substantial income for militant organisations (Felbab-Brown, 2009; Gallien, 2021; UNODC, 2014). Such networks blur the boundary between political violence and organised crime, transforming peripheral regions into lucrative environments for financing rebellion.

To capture this dual function, spatial analysis in ArcGIS was employed to calculate the shortest straight-line distance from each district's centroid to the nearest international border, Afghanistan, Iran, India, and China. Using centroids ensures consistency across districts of varying shapes and sizes, and reduces measurement bias associated with irregular administrative boundaries. Districts closer to porous borders are theorised to experience higher conflict intensity, reflecting both greater operational freedom and easier access to shadow economies.

This overlap between operational and economic feasibility underscores the interdependence of logistical and financial dimensions in sustaining rebellion. Border proximity increases operational feasibility by offering sanctuary and mobility, while simultaneously

enhancing economic feasibility through illicit income streams. These dynamics are not independent but mutually reinforcing: the same rugged terrain that restricts state intervention also conceals and protects the economic activities that fund insurgency.

Recognising this intersection enriches the feasibility hypothesis by revealing how enabling conditions often reinforce one another rather than acting in isolation. It also carries practical policy implications: efforts to improve infrastructure, border surveillance, and economic governance in peripheral districts could simultaneously disrupt both the logistical and financial lifelines of armed groups, thereby reducing the overall feasibility of sustained conflict.

Conclusion

This chapter established the empirical and methodological foundation for testing the feasibility hypothesis within the context of Pakistan's intrastate armed conflicts. Anchored in a realist ontology and positivist epistemology, the research design was crafted to ensure that theoretical assumptions were coherently translated into measurable constructs. These philosophical underpinnings were not treated as abstract principles but as guiding logics that informed every stage of the research process, from conceptual framing and variable selection to data analysis and interpretation.

Recognising the multifaceted nature of Pakistan's conflict landscape, the study adopted a mixed-methods approach that integrates the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative traditions. Quantitative analysis provided a systematic means of identifying statistical relationships between structural conditions and conflict intensity, while qualitative interpretation supplied the necessary contextual depth to understand the underlying causal mechanisms. Together, these methods ensured a balanced and empirically grounded assessment of how structural feasibility conditions shape patterns of violence.

Methodologically, the chapter advanced a micro-level, district-based design, bridging the gap between broad cross-national generalisations and highly localised case studies. By operationalising both operational and economic feasibility at the district level, through indicators such as terrain ruggedness, road density, border proximity, human development, and poverty, the study achieved finer analytical resolution. This approach allowed the research to capture Pakistan's pronounced spatial variation in conflict dynamics, where certain districts exhibit persistent violence despite similar ideological or political contexts elsewhere.

The discussion of data sources and variable construction clarified how theoretical constructs were transformed into measurable proxies using high-quality, spatially disaggregated datasets such as the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) conflict database and UNDP's district-level human development and poverty indices. The rigorous operationalisation of the dependent and independent variables, along with appropriate statistical techniques such as multiple linear regression, strengthened the internal validity and replicability of the analysis.

Finally, the chapter demonstrated how structural factors are not isolated mechanisms but interdependent components of feasibility. The identification of border proximity as an overlapping variable linking operational and economic feasibility underscored the interactive nature of conflict-enabling conditions, providing a more nuanced understanding of how geography, infrastructure, and economics converge to shape insurgent viability.

In conclusion, this chapter has translated the theoretical logic of feasibility into a coherent empirical research design. It has articulated the philosophical stance, justified methodological choices, and defined the measurable parameters through which the feasibility hypothesis will be tested. The next chapter builds directly on this foundation, presenting the empirical results and

evaluating the extent to which Pakistan's subnational conflict patterns can be explained by the structural feasibility conditions outlined in this chapter.

Chapter 5: Empirical Analysis and Discussion

Introduction

This chapter presents the empirical analysis and discussion of the key findings of this research. Its primary objective is to examine how operational and economic feasibility factors influence the patterns and persistence of violent intrastate conflicts in Pakistan. The analysis is grounded in the broader theoretical framework developed in the preceding chapters and seeks to test the feasibility hypothesis in the context of Pakistan's complex conflict landscape.

The chapter is organised into two main parts. The first section presents the descriptive statistics of the key variables, outlining general trends and distributions within the dataset. It also interprets the results of the multiple regression analysis used to test the hypothesised relationships between conflict intensity and the various feasibility indicators. The second section provides a detailed discussion of the results, drawing on relevant empirical studies and secondary literature to contextualise and interpret the statistical findings. This discussion is structured around the major analytical dimensions of the study, operational feasibility, economic feasibility, and external support factors. It explains how these factors interact to shape conflict dynamics in different regions of Pakistan.

In doing so, this chapter also engages critically with the broader debates on the political economy of armed conflict, showing how Pakistan's experience both confirms and extends existing theoretical arguments. The final section summarises the key empirical insights, setting the stage for the next chapter, which integrates these findings within a wider theoretical and policy-oriented discussion.

Descriptive Statistics

The dependent variable, Insurgency Killed/Million, represents the number of insurgency-related deaths per one million population. Higher values signify more severe and prolonged armed conflicts with a higher death toll, while lower values suggest a relatively stable security situation with fewer fatalities. In the dataset, the mean value of approximately 393.9 indicates that, on average, there were around 394 insurgency-related deaths per million people from 2007 to 2017. However, the data are highly skewed, as shown by the higher standard deviation value (SD = 1,111), reflecting significant variation across districts. The maximum value of 10,375 highlights the presence of extreme outliers, with a few districts experiencing exceptionally high levels of violence. Due to this skewness, the dependent variable was log-transformed prior to regression analysis.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

Variable	Min	Mean	Median	Max	SD
Insurgency Killed/Million	0.2	393.9	34.1	10,375.20	1,111.00
HDI Score 2005	0.1	0.4	0.4	0.8	0.2
Average Slope	0.1	3.4	1.5	22.5	4.8
Road Density/100 km2	0.7	21.9	15.4	95.9	19.7
Proximity to Afghanistan	53	654.7	579	1,787.00	393.1
Proximity to China	493	1,328.60	1,162.00	2,549.00	502.7
Proximity to India	30	668.3	569	1,898.00	383.1
Proximity to Iran	133	1,391.40	1,503.00	2,067.00	436.3

Source: Author's calculation based on district-level data via R (2022)

The HDI Score (2005) serves as the principal economic indicator, capturing pre-conflict human development conditions. Higher HDI values reflect better access to healthcare, education, and income opportunities; lower scores indicate deprivation and marginalisation. The mean of 0.4 shows moderate development overall, though the SD = 0.2 suggests substantial inter-district inequality. The Average Slope measures terrain ruggedness, an indicator of operational feasibility. A higher slope value signifies mountainous terrain that offers concealment and a defensive advantage to insurgents, whereas lower values denote flat, accessible areas. The mean slope of 3.4° and maximum of 22.5° highlight Pakistan's diverse topography and the variation in state reach across regions. Road Density per 100 km² serves as a proxy for infrastructure development and, by extension, state accessibility. Higher density indicates more substantial state presence, while lower density suggests remoteness and weaker control. The mean value of 21.9 and high SD = 19.7 reflect stark infrastructural disparities, reinforcing the spatial unevenness central to the feasibility framework. Finally, distance-to-border variables capture each district's proximity to neighbouring states, Afghanistan, Iran, India, and China. These distances, measured in kilometres from district centroids, approximate exposure to cross-border influences, safe havens, and informal economies. The wide range (Afghanistan ≈ 53–1,787 km; Iran ≈ 133–2,067 km) underscores Pakistan's geographic diversity and the differing external linkages that shape local conflict dynamics.

Collectively, these descriptive statistics establish the empirical foundation for the subsequent regression analysis. They reveal significant heterogeneity across Pakistan's districts, suggesting that the structural feasibility of armed conflict is likely to vary markedly across space, a pattern that the following sections examine in detail.

Regression Analysis

In line with the rationale presented in the previous chapter, and consistent with the philosophical alignment and research objectives of this study, I employed a multiple linear regression model, given the continuous nature of the dependent variable. Before running the analysis, I verified the main statistical assumptions, including normality, heteroscedasticity, and multicollinearity. All variables were log-transformed prior to estimation to correct skewness and improve normality in the dataset. I used a stepwise regression approach, testing multiple combinations of variables. The final model was selected based on the highest adjusted R^2 value, ensuring both explanatory strength and optimal model fit. The estimated regression equation is as follows and results of the multiple regression model are presented in Table 2:

$$Y_i = \alpha_0 + \beta_1 HDI_i + \beta_2 AS_i + \beta_3 RD_i + \beta_4 PA_i + \beta_5 PIR_i + \beta_6 PC_i + \beta_7 PIN_i + \varepsilon_i$$

Table 2 Results of the Multiple Regression Model

Insurgency killed per million.			
Predictors	*Estimates*	*CI*	*p*
(Intercept)	5.05	-9.09 – 19.19	0.481
HDI = HDI Score 2005	-1.06	-2.02 – -0.09	**0.032**
AS = Average Slope	0.99	0.72 – 1.27	**<0.001**
RD = Road Density per 100 km²	0.03	-0.44 – 0.51	0.891
PA = Proximity to Afghanistan	-2.60	-3.33 – -1.87	**<0.001**
PIR = Proximity to Iran	-1.88	-2.82 – -0.95	**<0.001**
PC = Proximity to China	3.99	2.28 – 5.69	**<0.001**
PIN = Proximity to India	-0.26	-0.88 – 0.35	0.400
Observations	125		
R^2 / R^2 adjusted	0.721 / 0.704		

Source: Results of Regression Analysis via R (2022)

To explore the operational feasibility dimension further, I also constructed a composite variable, the Feasible Geography Index, by combining the mean slope and the density of the road network. Lower index values represent rough, inaccessible terrain with limited road access, while higher values indicate smoother terrain and denser road coverage.

The regression results revealed a statistically significant and negative relationship between this index and conflict intensity. This means that districts with lower index values (i.e., greater operational feasibility for militants) experienced higher levels of conflict. This finding aligns with the theoretical expectation that rugged terrain and poor accessibility make it harder for the state to project power and easier for insurgents to sustain operations.

To test this further, I replaced the index with its two components, slope and road density, as separate variables. The results revealed that the slope remained statistically significant and negatively correlated with the dependent variable, while road density did not show a significant relationship. This suggests that the terrain variable primarily drove the strong effect of the composite index. For this reason, I decided to retain both variables separately in the final model, as they provide distinct insights and carry different policy implications.

In examining the economic feasibility dimension, I initially considered both multidimensional poverty and the Human Development Index (HDI) to test the opportunity cost hypothesis. However, since the two variables are highly correlated, I selected only the HDI (2005) for inclusion in the final model. I chose this variable because it represents pre-conflict development conditions, reducing the possibility of reverse causality, and because it captures multiple dimensions, health, education, and income, that directly affect opportunity structures.

The regression results show that HDI is negatively and significantly correlated with conflict intensity. This means that districts with lower levels of human development experience

higher conflict intensity, confirming the opportunity cost argument that underdevelopment reduces the perceived cost of joining or supporting armed rebellion.

Lastly, I examined the effect of border proximity as part of both operational and economic feasibility. The results show a nuanced pattern:

- **Proximity to Afghanistan and Iran:** Both are negatively correlated and statistically significant, indicating that districts closer to these borders experience higher levels of conflict. This pattern supports the argument that porous borders with weak enforcement provide opportunities for cross-border movement, safe havens, and illicit trade that sustain insurgency.
- **Proximity to China:** Positively correlated and significant, suggesting that districts closer to the Chinese border experience less conflict, possibly reflecting stronger state control and limited insurgent mobility in that region.
- **Proximity to India:** Not statistically significant, implying that proximity to the India–Pakistan border does not directly affect internal conflict intensity.

Overall, the regression analysis provides strong empirical support for the feasibility hypothesis. Districts characterised by rugged terrain, weak infrastructure, lower human development, and proximity to porous borders exhibit higher levels of armed conflict. These findings affirm that feasibility conditions, rather than purely motivational factors, play a decisive role in shaping Pakistan's internal conflict dynamics.

Discussion

In order to evaluate the hypothesised relationships between the key factors that sustain violent conflicts in Pakistan, I conducted a statistical analysis of the explanatory variables outlined in the previous section. Table 3 presents the variables included in the final regression model and

summarises their statistical behaviour. The analysis was designed to test how both operational and economic feasibility influence conflict intensity at the district level.

Operational feasibility refers to the structural conditions that enable insurgent groups to survive, mobilise, and evade state forces. In Pakistan's context, this dimension is most clearly reflected in geography, particularly the degree of terrain ruggedness and accessibility. Rugged terrain limits state control, provides natural cover for militants, and allows them to establish semi-permanent bases. These factors increase the likelihood of sustained insurgency and help explain why certain districts consistently experience higher conflict intensity.

Economic feasibility, in contrast, concerns the availability of financial and material resources that enable insurgent groups to maintain prolonged campaigns. This dimension includes both "greed-based" incentives and "opportunity cost" mechanisms. The greed-related aspect involves access to revenue streams, such as lootable natural resources, taxation of trade or drug routes, and kidnapping for ransom, that can finance rebel organisations and ensure their operational continuity. Such economic opportunities not only make rebellion feasible but also increase its duration and scale. The opportunity cost hypothesis, representing the other side of economic feasibility, highlights how deprivation and limited livelihood options can encourage participation in armed conflict. The hypothesis suggests that individuals are more likely to join or support insurgent groups when the perceived benefits of rebellion outweigh the potential rewards of peaceful economic activities. In this study, I examined this relationship using the Human Development Index (HDI) as a proxy for opportunity costs, complemented by multidimensional poverty measures drawn from the UNDP's Pakistan Human Development Report. Lower levels of human development, marked by poor education, limited healthcare, and low income, reduce

opportunity costs and, as the regression results confirm, are significantly associated with higher conflict intensity.

Together, these findings demonstrate that both the operational environment and economic context interact to shape the feasibility of sustained violence. Rugged, inaccessible areas with low human development are not merely geographically isolated; they also face chronic institutional neglect and weak economic integration. These overlapping vulnerabilities help explain why certain peripheral regions of Pakistan, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, have become enduring centres of armed conflict.

Operational Feasibility

Rugged Terrain

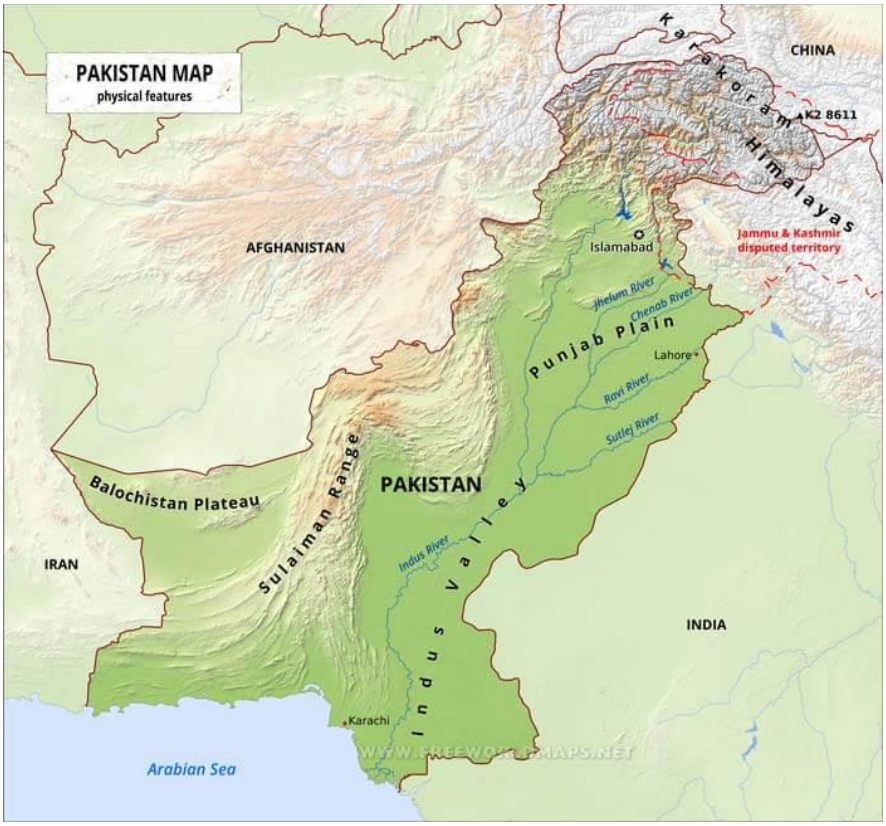
The model in Table 2 presents compelling results, indicating that the mean slope value is a statistically significant predictor of insurgency intensity, showing a positive relationship. This confirms that geography plays a significant role in shaping the conditions that are conducive to conflict. These findings are intuitive and consistent with numerous studies that identify rugged or mountainous terrain as a critical factor influencing the intensity and persistence of armed conflict (Karl & Sobek, 2004; Collier, Anke, & Mans, 2004; Hegre & Sambanis, 2006; Raleigh, 2010).

In Pakistan, the most remote and inaccessible regions are primarily located in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Balochistan, both characterised by steep mountains and sparse infrastructure. In contrast, provinces such as Punjab consist primarily of plains that are more open and accessible. The results confirm that as terrain becomes rougher, these areas become more prone to sustained violence. The FATA region, for instance, has long served as a safe haven for Taliban guerrillas and Al Qaeda affiliates who use the area's topographical cover to launch attacks across Pakistan (Nawaz & Borchgrave, 2009). Such terrain provides natural

defensive advantages to insurgents (Arreguín, 2005). Moreover, extreme temperature fluctuations in these mountainous areas further constrain the army's ability to operate effectively, a dynamic also observed in Afghanistan, where high summer heat hampers troops while local insurgents, accustomed to the conditions, retain their endurance (Gordillo, 2018).

Osman and Suliman (2010) also emphasise the central role of geography in the Darfur conflict, noting that remoteness, coupled with resource endowments and tribal diversity, enabled insurgents to thrive amid weak state presence. Similarly, Do and Iyer (2020) found that conflicts in Nepal concentrated in mountainous and forested regions, where the terrain offered insurgents mobility and concealment.

Figure 14 Geographical Landscape of Pakistan



Source: https://www.freeworldmaps.net/asia/pakistan/map.html

Buhaug, Gates, and Lujala (2009) also found geography to be a decisive factor in explaining why some conflicts last longer. Their model, which incorporated terrain, location, and resource availability, revealed that regions with greater mountain and forest cover tend to experience more protracted conflicts. The difficulty of conducting military operations in such environments prolongs the fighting, as seen in places like Myanmar and Northeast India (Assam, Tripura, and Nagaland), all identified as conflict hotspots. Likewise, along South Sudan's porous borders, the rugged Northern Ethiopian Plateau sustained a liberation war for nearly three decades (Buhaug, Gates, & Lujala, 2009). Raleigh (2010) examined similar geographic variables in African states, including terrain, roads, resources, and population density, and found that while terrain and roads were not statistically significant predictors, densely populated areas exhibited a higher likelihood of conflict. This contrasts with the findings of the present study, highlighting the variation in the relationship between geography and conflict across different contexts. Brochmann, Rod, and Gleditsch (2012) also analysed terrain effects on conflict using a rugged terrain index that accounted for mountains, forests, and swamps. Their findings reaffirmed that the probability of conflict increases in rugged terrain, the hillier the area, the greater the risk of armed confrontation.

This association between geography and conflict aligns with a broader body of research that identifies terrain as a key determinant of state reach and rebel feasibility. In Pakistan, mountainous districts along the western frontier provide natural advantages to insurgents, limiting state access and enabling prolonged resistance. The persistence of violence in these regions thus reflects a global pattern linking geography, governance, and the feasibility of rebellion.

Road Density

The second variable of operational feasibility is road density, measured as the length of roads per square kilometre within each district. This indicator measures the extent of developed infrastructure and the ease of accessibility for security forces in an area. Lower road density constrains the state's mobility and control, creating an environment that enables insurgent activity. Sparse road networks limit the government's ability to project authority, deploy security forces effectively, and maintain a regular law-and-order presence. Areas with few roads can therefore provide safe havens for insurgents, allowing them to manoeuvre, hide, and resist state operations. As Hendrix (2013) observed, "mountainous terrain is not just associated with conflict because it offers hideouts from the state, but also because it undermines the state's operational reach."

However, the regression results suggest otherwise in the case of Pakistan: road density is statistically insignificant in explaining conflict intensity. While, in theory, a well-connected road network should strengthen the state's capacity to maintain order, one plausible explanation for this finding is that the mere presence of roads is insufficient to counterbalance the effects of rugged terrain. In the mountainous regions of the former FATA and Balochistan, even where roads exist, they do not necessarily guarantee effective state presence. Security forces still face significant obstacles due to rugged topography, hostile environments, and weak governance structures. In such areas, insurgents often exploit their superior local knowledge and social networks to offset any logistical advantage roads might provide the state.

Moreover, the existence of roads does not automatically imply their usability or security. In many conflict-prone districts, insurgents control road access or regularly target supply convoys and patrols, rendering the infrastructure functionally irrelevant. Hence, road density, considered in isolation, fails to capture the operational constraints and security dynamics that shape the

feasibility of conflict. Other studies in conflict research reinforce this interpretation. Raleigh (2010), for instance, found no significant relationship between road density and conflict occurrence in African states, noting that the presence of roads may not enhance state control where broader institutional weaknesses persist. Similarly, Brochmann et al. (2012) argue that terrain ruggedness, rather than infrastructure availability, remains the more decisive factor in determining where conflicts can be sustained.

In sum, while testing the role of road density was valuable for examining a common assumption in feasibility research, the evidence from Pakistan suggests that infrastructure alone cannot mitigate the operational advantages insurgents derive from geography and weak governance. Road density must therefore be interpreted in conjunction with other structural and institutional variables to understand its actual influence on intrastate conflict.

Economic Feasibility

Economic Deprivation and Opportunity Cost

The results of this study confirm that economic deprivation is a strong predictor of conflict intensity in Pakistan. The regression analysis revealed a statistically significant negative relationship between the Human Development Index (HDI) and conflict intensity, suggesting that districts with lower human development tend to experience more sustained and violent conflicts. This finding aligns with the opportunity cost hypothesis, which argues that when legitimate economic opportunities are scarce, the cost of joining armed movements or participating in violence decreases. In such environments, the incentives for rebellion outweigh those for maintaining a peaceful livelihood.

This relationship between poverty and violence has been widely documented. Across the developing world, periods of sustained economic growth have been associated with declining rates

of intrastate conflict, while economically marginalised regions remain disproportionately prone to violence. Economic inequality, stagnation, and uneven development all create conditions in which conflict becomes feasible and, in some cases, profitable. As Krueger and Malecková (2003) found, national poverty and inequality can increase the likelihood of civil war, while Collier et al. (2003) demonstrated that lower GDP growth correlates inversely with the risk of conflict. These findings converge with the Pakistani context, where regions with low HDI and high poverty, such as the former FATA and parts of Balochistan, remain at the centre of insurgent activity. Other scholars, including Østby (2008, 2011, 2013), Cederman et al. (2011), and Stewart (2002), emphasise the role of horizontal inequality, the economic and social disparities between groups, as a mechanism that fuels mobilisation. Pakistan's persistent regional inequalities mirror this pattern: economically deprived districts often overlap with ethnically distinct regions, where perceptions of exclusion and neglect compound grievances. Such disparities do not only reflect inequality but also signal weak state penetration, making rebellion both emotionally resonant and logistically feasible.

A similar logic is captured by the opportunity cost argument developed by Becker (1968) and tested in various conflict contexts. When individuals face unemployment, low wages, or few legitimate opportunities, the relative cost of joining insurgent or criminal groups diminishes. Studies, such as those by Benjamin (2012), show that targeted welfare or cash-transfer programs can reduce insurgent recruitment by increasing the opportunity costs. In Pakistan, however, chronic underdevelopment and limited welfare provision in conflict-prone districts have left a large share of the population economically vulnerable, thus sustaining militant recruitment networks.

Yet, as several studies caution, the relationship between poverty and violence is not always linear. Research by de Mesquita (2005) and Berman, Callen, Felter, and Shapiro (2011) argues

that the poorest individuals may lack the skills or resources to join insurgencies, suggesting that economic grievances alone are rarely sufficient. Instead, as shown by Dube and Vargas (2012) in Colombia, both low and high income levels can generate incentives for conflict through different mechanisms, either by lowering opportunity costs or by increasing predatory motives. Pakistan's conflict dynamics seem closer to the former: deprived areas experience persistent violence, whereas wealthier, urban districts remain largely stable despite inequality.

Economic shocks also play a crucial role in shaping feasibility. As Bates (2008) observed, fiscal crises weaken state capacity by reducing revenues and the ability to maintain law and order. In Pakistan, recurrent economic downturns and uneven fiscal distribution have limited the state's reach, especially in peripheral regions. Similarly, global economic instability, such as the 2008 financial crisis discussed by Masoud, Shapiro, and Kalyvas (2008), can exacerbate vulnerability in developing states like Pakistan, amplifying risks of domestic unrest when growth slows or external aid contracts.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that economic feasibility operates through both opportunity and constraint. Poverty and low human development reduce the opportunity cost of rebellion, while economic crises and inequality erode state capacity, creating a dual pathway that sustains intrastate conflicts. In Pakistan, these conditions converge most sharply in underdeveloped, geographically isolated districts, where economic deprivation interacts with operational factors like terrain and border porosity to produce enduring patterns of violence.

Prevalence of Poverty

In line with the theoretical framework of this study, economic feasibility was hypothesised as an important factor influencing the sustainability of intrastate armed conflicts in Pakistan. One dimension of this feasibility was captured through the lens of economic deprivation and lack of

opportunity, commonly conceptualised as poverty. To operationalise this, two proxy indicators, the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) and the HDI, were considered.

However, both variables were found to be highly correlated, posing a risk of multicollinearity in the regression analysis. Therefore, we tested them separately to examine their individual effects. When included in the model, the results showed that the Multidimensional Poverty Index was statistically insignificant. This indicates that district-level poverty, does not have a direct relationship with the intensity of armed conflict in Pakistan.

These findings resonate with a growing body of literature questioning the simplistic link between poverty and insurgency, particularly in the Pakistani context. For instance, Blair et al. (2013) found no link between poverty and militancy in Pakistan after conducting a comprehensive study including 6,000 Pakistanis. In contrast to the widely held belief that militancy and poverty are closely associated, Shapiro and Fair (2009) reveal that economic factors do not influence support for Talibanisation in Pakistan. In his research on terrorism and casualties in 96 countries between 1986 and 2002, James Piazza (2006), another political scientist, challenges the widely held belief among academics and decision-makers about the connection between poverty and violence. Furthermore, he denies the existence of any meaningful connection between political violence and economic progress (Piazza, 2006).

According to Blair et al. (2012) and Fair et al. (2018), the theory that militancy is encouraged by poverty is disproven. They go on to say that because of the infrastructure and their inability to relocate to safer areas, Pakistan's impoverished population is more vulnerable to militant violence and less inclined to embrace terrorism. According to Fair et al. (2018), militant organisations in Pakistan do not advocate against poverty, hence disproving the correlation between poverty and militant support. According to Blair et al. (2013), impoverished people in

Pakistan do not think much of terrorists. According to Krueger and Maleckova (2003), there is a near-unanimous body of research that disproves the notion that material deprivation or poor education are significant contributors to terrorism support or involvement. According to their research, those with the highest incomes and levels of education are more prone to engage in terrorism. They conclude that there is a weak and indirect correlation between political violence and either poverty or education. Akhtar (2016) explains that Islamic insurgencies cannot be explained solely by elements such as poverty and suffering. According to Zaidi (2010), there are more plausible explanations for why radicalisation is encouraged in Pakistan than just poverty. This claim has also been supported by a research study conducted by the Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) in Karachi, Pakistan. The study revealed that wealthy individuals in Pakistan joined militant groups, indicating that poverty and family problems were not the only factors driving individuals towards militancy (The Nation, 2017).

Contrary to our results, a similar study also investigated economic, geographic, and social factors in the case of Nepal. Development indicators were taken for the economic variable. These included the poverty headcount ratio (the proportion of households living below the poverty line), the literacy rate, and the infant mortality rate. A multiple regression analysis was conducted using conflict as the dependent variable. The result showed that the poverty variable was found to be highly significant. A 10% increase in poverty was found to increase conflict-related deaths by 26 to 27. The rationale behind this relationship lies in the opportunity cost paradigm, which suggests that recruiting insurgents is more cost-effective in impoverished regions (Do & Iyer, 2010).

Andersen and Shimokawa (2008) further explored this relationship. Along with poverty, they added poor health and nutritional status. For measuring the poverty variable, the headcount poverty index and poverty gap index were used. They also used the under-nutrition rate and child

malnutrition rate of children under the age of five years. Similarly, the health factor was depicted through the child mortality rate. A discrete-time hazard model was used to find the relationship. Upon regression analysis, the results showed that the child mortality rate and malnutrition rates were significant at the 5% level. This means that with a 10% decrease in the child mortality rate, the onset of conflict is reduced by one percentage point. Additionally, a 5% decrease in headcount poverty resulted in a 0.5% decrease in armed conflict. Similarly, a 5% decrease in child malnutrition under the age of five reduces the likelihood of armed conflict by 1.0–3.5 percentage points. Thus, the result of this study makes it evident that poverty and poor health were the leading factors behind the conflict. This is possible because the individual would find it more feasible to join an insurgent group rather than working for such a lower income, which would mean indeterminate poverty for an extended period (Andersen & Shimokawa, 2008).

Similar results, indicating a lack of nexus between the economic variable and conflict, have been found in various studies for Pakistan. One possible reason for the insignificant relationship between economic feasibility and conflict can be explained in the light of research by Ouimet (2012). He found that the grievance of a particular group becomes a conflict due to the government's lack of a strong writ. Even the groups were found to have a capability that made them become organised groups. This is particularly true in the case of some impoverished areas of Balochistan, where groups such as the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), the Balochistan People's Liberation Front (BPLF), and the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) were formed. This became possible because they had the required assets with a weak writ of the government (Khan A., 2009).

Our results also matched with the study of Mesquita (2005). They incorporated the following variables into their model: tenure, the type of regime, battle deaths per 10,000 population,

and the war's outcome, and used Weibull regression to estimate their model. The lower-income variable was found to have no significant value in initiating a violent movement. The proposed reason was that these individuals may lack essential skills required to join insurgent groups (Mesquita, 2005; Berman & Coutts, 2011). Another study (Okunlola & Okafor, 2020) examined the relationship between conflict and poverty in Africa from 1980 to 2015. They conducted a panel regression to test the effect of disaggregated conflict on the poverty index. The outcome of this study was the same as that of our study: poverty is not a cause of conflict. However, they found other structural, political, and sociological factors related to conflict (Okunlola & Okafor, 2020).

Thus, from the mixed results in the literature and the counterintuitive findings, both from this study and previous research, it can be reasonably concluded that poverty, does not independently explain the persistence of insurgency in Pakistan. This necessitated the inclusion of a more comprehensive indicator, such as the HDI, to capture economic feasibility in a more nuanced manner, which is discussed in the next section.

Human Development Index

Building upon the findings of the previous section, where poverty was found to be statistically insignificant, this study further tested the economic feasibility hypothesis using a more comprehensive measure: the Human Development Index (HDI). Unlike income-based measures, the HDI offers a multidimensional perspective on well-being, encompassing health, education, and income indicators. This makes it a more suitable proxy for assessing the broader opportunity structure within which individuals and groups make decisions about participating in or abstaining from armed conflict.

The HDI data used in this study were constructed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and sourced from the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement

(PSLM) survey conducted by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. The health dimension included child immunisation rates (ages 12–23 months) and satisfaction with healthcare facilities; the income dimension comprised purchasing power parity (Gross National Income per capita in constant 2011 dollars); and education was measured by expected and mean years of schooling.

The regression analysis revealed a statistically significant negative relationship between HDI and conflict intensity. Districts with lower HDI scores experienced higher levels of insurgency-related deaths per million population. This result supports the opportunity cost hypothesis, which posits that lower human development reduces the opportunity cost of rebellion, making participation in insurgent movements relatively more feasible and attractive.

These results align with a broad body of scholarship linking human development and conflict. Collier (2004) observed an inverse relationship between GDP growth and the onset of civil war, using data from 161 countries between 1960 and 1999. His opportunity cost model incorporated variables such as GDP per capita, secondary school enrolment, and duration of peace. Similarly, Collier, Hoeffler, and Rohner (2009) found that poor education and limited economic opportunity heighten the risk of conflict, especially when compounded by ethnic fractionalisation and weak governance. Fjelde and Østby (2014) also found that in Sub-Saharan Africa, regions where specific ethnic groups experience higher levels of socio-economic inequality are more prone to communal conflict. Comparable findings emerge from Banerjee, Bhattacharya, and Jha (2017) in their study of the Maoist insurgency in India, where inequality in wealth was identified as a major driver of rebellion, while literacy and unemployment had little effect. Their work underscores that it is not poverty per se, but rather the combination of inequality, exclusion, and political competition, that makes rebellion feasible, a pattern that resonates strongly with Pakistan's experience.

When contextualised within Pakistan, these global insights take on particular significance. The FATA and Balochistan regions, both epicentres of insurgency, rank consistently lowest on human development indicators. According to Dawn (2012), approximately 58.7 million people lived below the poverty line in 2012. Shinwari (2010) and The Express Tribune (2012) report that unemployment, lack of opportunity, and limited access to education have contributed to radicalisation and militancy in these areas. Behuria (2007) observed that groups like Al-Qaeda exploited jobless youth by recruiting them for as little as $250 per month, while Stern (2000) noted that impoverished families, facing no viable alternatives, often sent their sons to jihad movements.

In these environments, weak governance compounds economic deprivation. The absence of law and order in FATA has allowed criminal and militant networks to flourish (International Crisis Group, 2009; Nawaz, 2009). Weinstein (2007) argues that insurgent leaders often capitalise on such environments, offering financial incentives and a sense of belonging to marginalised youth. In many tribal areas, insurgents have even become an alternative economic structure, with locals benefiting from rents and services associated with their presence, a transactional arrangement that sustains the rebellion. The relationship between HDI and armed conflict also aligns with the contest model of conflict. In this model, competing actors allocate resources between production and appropriation; where human development and state capacity are low, the state's ability to allocate resources efficiently is weakened, making rebellion more likely. Skaperdas (2008) formalised this argument, showing that when institutions are weak and human capital is limited, insurgent groups gain relative advantage in mobilising resources and challenging state authority.

In sum, the findings from Pakistan provide empirical support for the economic feasibility hypothesis, particularly its opportunity-cost dimension. Unlike the Multidimensional Poverty Index, HDI emerged as a robust and comprehensive measure of socio-economic opportunity,

significantly correlated with conflict intensity. The evidence suggests that low human development not only diminishes opportunity costs for individuals but also weakens institutional capacity, thereby expanding the feasibility space for insurgency.

Development/Horizontal inequalities

Horizontal inequalities, disparities in socio-economic and political conditions between groups or regions, are often theorised to generate grievances that can escalate into violent conflict. These inequalities can take many forms, including uneven access to infrastructure, education, or political power, and are thought to foster resentment among marginalised groups.

In this study, road density was employed as an indicator of infrastructure development, serving as a proxy for regional development disparities and thus for horizontal inequality. However, the regression analysis found this variable to be statistically insignificant, indicating that uneven development, as measured by infrastructure accessibility, does not have a significant effect on the intensity of armed conflicts in Pakistan. In other words, horizontal inequalities, at least in terms of physical infrastructure, were not a determining factor in sustaining violence during the period under investigation. This finding challenges the conventional grievance-based explanations and suggests that, in Pakistan's case, structural feasibility factors may have outweighed distributive inequalities in driving conflict dynamics.

A number of studies, however, have reported contrasting findings in other contexts. Gudrun (2008) examined the relationship between polarisation and horizontal inequality using data from 70 developing countries. Distinguishing between economic polarisation (asset ownership) and social polarisation (educational and occupational opportunity), the study found that even a slight increase in horizontal inequality was associated with a 3.7% increase in the probability of conflict onset. Similarly, Uzoh (2016) explored these dynamics in Nigeria through the lens of frustration–

aggression and relative deprivation theories, showing that economic and social disparities, particularly in resource-rich regions such as the Niger Delta, triggered violent mobilisation. Unemployed youth, frustrated by perceived exploitation by multinational oil companies, organised themselves into militant groups like the "Avengers," resorting to kidnappings and attacks on expatriate workers. Comparable patterns were also observed in Nigeria's Middle Belt, where intergroup inequalities among the Hausa-Fulani and Berom communities led to recurring violence. Likewise, Mursheed and Tadjoeddin (2009) assessed the grievance hypothesis in the context of developing countries by measuring horizontal inequality using the Human Development Index (HDI) gap across regions. Their results showed that while inequality per se did not cause conflict, transitional political regimes, those shifting between autocracy and democracy, were especially prone to violence, suggesting that political instability often amplifies the effects of socioeconomic disparities.

When contextualised within Pakistan, the findings of this study align more closely with this latter strand of literature. The insignificance of road density as a proxy for regional inequality indicates that uneven infrastructure development alone does not explain the persistence of violent conflict. Pakistan's conflicts, particularly in FATA and Balochistan, appear less driven by developmental disparities and more by a combination of structural feasibility, rugged terrain, border porosity, and weak state control, and historically rooted political grievances. Thus, while horizontal inequalities may contribute to underlying discontent, their statistical irrelevance in this study underscores that grievance frameworks alone are insufficient for explaining conflict sustainability in Pakistan, where operational and economic feasibility factors provide a more convincing account.

Financial Opportunity/Greed

Role of Natural Resources

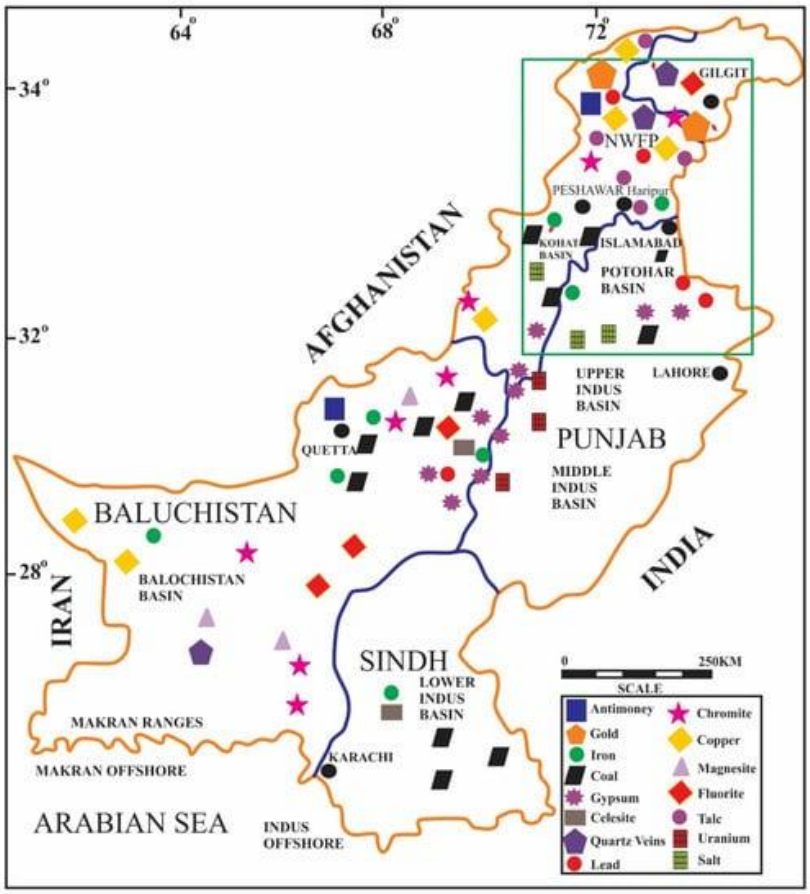
The abundance of natural resources and their exploitation in sustaining armed conflicts is a central theme of the economic feasibility hypothesis, which posits that the availability of lucrative income sources enables insurgent groups to finance, prolong, and institutionalise rebellion. Across global conflict research, access to lootable resources, whether minerals, narcotics, or timber, has consistently been identified as a key mechanism sustaining armed groups.

Ross (2004) examined this linkage through ten testable hypotheses using thirteen case studies of civil wars from 1990 to 2000. His findings established a clear connection between natural resource wealth and conflict, particularly in cases involving non-renewable resources such as oil and minerals. Economic inequality arising from the unequal distribution of natural resource wealth and dependence on commodities or illicit narcotics was shown to heighten the likelihood of conflict. Similarly, Collier (2000), analysing data on 73 civil wars from 1965–1999, found that states dependent on revenues from primary commodity exports, minerals, crude oil, and fuels, face a substantially higher risk of rebellion. Buhaug et al. (2011) further demonstrated that regions with concentrated resource wealth and unequal distribution are especially prone to conflict outbreaks. Schönwälder (2014) later distinguished between lootable and non-lootable resources, showing that conflicts fuelled by easily extractable goods, such as narcotics and alluvial diamonds, tend to be more prolonged and more intense.

While Pakistan lacks a comprehensive district-level dataset on natural resource abundance, qualitative evidence supports the relevance of this mechanism. Both FATA and Balochistan are rich in natural resources, including marble, gold, copper, limestone, natural gas, and timber. These areas have also been hubs of illicit trade and smuggling, providing alternative economic systems

that fund militancy (Mian, 2009). The porous borders with Afghanistan and Iran further facilitate cross-border trafficking in drugs, weapons, and minerals, forming what can be described as the shadow economy of insurgency.

Figure 15 Natural Resources in Pakistan



Source: *Integrated Underground Mining Hazard Assessment, Management, Environmental Monitoring, and Policy Control in Pakistan* by H. T. Janjuhah, M. Ishfaque, M. I. Mehmood, G. Kontakiotis, S. M. Shahzad, and S. D. Zarkogiannis, 2021, *Sustainability, 13*(24).

During the first Taliban regime in Afghanistan (1996–2001), opium production and trafficking surged across both sides of the border (Mian, 2009). Local industries in Pakistan's tribal belt, particularly in Darra Adam Khel and Peshawar, became centres for arms manufacturing and smuggling. The Taliban's annual income from such activities was estimated at over $1.5 billion (Azami, 2018). Alongside narcotics and arms, control over mines, trade routes, and the lucrative

timber economy in North Waziristan also contributed to insurgent financing (Ziauddin, 2016). Together, these informal economies demonstrate how natural resource exploitation and weak governance structures create operational and financial feasibility for armed groups in Pakistan's frontier regions.

However, the economic dimension of resource exploitation in Pakistan is not merely about funding insurgency; it also feeds into a narrative of grievance that insurgents use to justify and legitimise their struggle. This is most evident in Balochistan, where the resource question lies at the heart of the conflict. The province's vast mineral wealth, including natural gas, oil, copper, and gold, has long been seen by the Baloch as a source of economic exploitation by the central government. With gas fields such as Sui, Uch, and Pirkoh Loti accounting for nearly 36% of Pakistan's total gas production, only about 17% of this energy is consumed within the province, while the rest fuels industries in Punjab and Sindh. Baloch nationalists claim that the province receives only a fraction of the royalties and accuse the federal government of perpetuating a colonial-style extractive relationship (Wirsing, 2008).

Moreover, Balochistan contributes nearly 40% of Pakistan's primary energy production, yet remains one of the country's most underdeveloped regions. This imbalance has reinforced local grievances and served as a recruitment narrative for insurgent movements. Militants often frame their struggle as a fight for ownership of local resources rather than mere separatism, thus blurring the line between economic feasibility and grievance mobilisation.

The development of Gwadar Port, part of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), further intensifies this tension. While strategically vital for Pakistan and China, the project is viewed with deep suspicion by Baloch groups, who perceive it as another example of external exploitation. The repeated attacks on pipelines, energy infrastructure, and foreign workers reflect

this sentiment. Companies prefer to invest in relatively secure provinces like Sindh, leaving Balochistan's resource potential largely untapped, a paradox where the very resources that could foster development become drivers of instability.

Thus, the Baloch conflict encapsulates the dual role of resources: they finance rebellion through illicit extraction and simultaneously fuel political grievances rooted in exclusion and inequity. The abundance of natural resources in Pakistan's conflict-prone regions has therefore contributed both materially and ideologically to the sustainability of armed conflict. Economic incentives provide insurgent groups with financial means, while the inequitable distribution of resource benefits deepens resentment, lending moral legitimacy and local support to militant movements.

In sum, this evidence reinforces the greed component of the economic feasibility hypothesis. The interplay between resource abundance, illicit economies, and regional inequality illustrates how material opportunities and political grievances converge to sustain conflict in Pakistan.

Kidnapping for Ransom

Kidnapping for ransom has emerged as a significant source of funding for militant organisations in Pakistan, particularly in Balochistan and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Over the past two decades, incidents of abduction have sharply increased, targeting not only local citizens but also foreigners, NGO workers, affluent businessmen, and religious minorities (Agha, n.d.; Gul & Kakar, 2012). This shift marks a deliberate transformation of kidnapping from a sporadic criminal act into an organised economic strategy for insurgent financing.

A stark example is the abduction of John Solecki, regional head of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in Quetta in January 2009 by Baloch militants. Although the details of the negotiations remain undisclosed due to diplomatic sensitivity, the case highlighted the capacity of militant groups to leverage international hostages for political and financial gains. Similarly, in July 2011, a Swiss couple, Olivier David Och and Daniela Widmar, was kidnapped by TTP militants. Their subsequent escape from captivity in South Waziristan, allegedly following a substantial ransom payment, underscores the complex intersection of insurgency, ransom networks, and survival economies in the region.

Reports also suggest that criminal gangs engaged in ransom abductions maintain operational linkages with militant networks in North Waziristan and Afghanistan, revealing a convergence of economic and ideological interests. Security analysts such as Dr. Hasan Askari-Rizvi and former Federal Interior Secretary Tasneem M. Noorani have confirmed that abductions for ransom constitute a significant revenue stream for militant organisations, particularly the Taliban (Shams, n.d.). Several high-profile cases demonstrate the pervasiveness and profitability of this practice. Ali Haider Gilani, the son of former Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani, was abducted from Multan during the 2013 general election campaign and recovered from Afghanistan after three years during a U.S. military operation against the Taliban. Similarly, Shahbaz Taseer, son of the late Governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, was kidnapped from Lahore and held in South Waziristan by the TTP for nearly five years. While the exact ransom paid remains undisclosed, reports suggest initial demands of up to $10 million (BBC, 2016).

Beyond financial gain, kidnappings also serve strategic purposes. Insurgent groups frequently use hostages to negotiate the release of their detained members or to pressure the state into political concessions. Both Pakistani and Afghan governments have, at times, released

militants or paid ransom to secure the freedom of kidnapped officials and diplomats. These patterns illustrate how kidnapping functions not only as a financial tool but also as a means of asserting symbolic and coercive power over the state.

Within the broader framework of the economic feasibility hypothesis, kidnapping for ransom represents a vital component of the insurgent funding architecture. It complements other illicit economic activities such as smuggling, extortion, and the exploitation of natural resources, forming a diversified portfolio of insurgent financing. By generating substantial revenue outside formal economies and challenging the state's monopoly on coercion, these activities sustain militant operations and extend the duration of armed conflict in Pakistan's border regions.

Other Sources Finance

In addition to revenues generated through natural resources, narcotics, and kidnappings, insurgent groups in Pakistan sustain their operations through a variety of other financial channels, both domestic and transnational. The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), in particular, has been deeply involved in looting markets and extorting businesses across FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) to consolidate territorial control and fund militant activities (Afridi, 2008). Over time, the group expanded its influence into urban centres such as Karachi, where it established criminal networks engaged in bank robberies, extortion, and targeted abductions. These activities serve a dual purpose, fundraising and psychological warfare, spreading fear while simultaneously generating substantial revenue (Khurshid, 2008; Khan, 2008).

The TTP has also developed extensive fundraising networks within Pakistan and abroad. Domestically, it receives donations from the Pashtun business community and sympathetic individuals across FATA and KPK. These funds are often collected during religious gatherings or meetings organised by local clerics or Taliban commanders (Shehzad, 2008). Internationally,

fundraising efforts have focused on Gulf Arab states, particularly the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, where ideological sympathisers and expatriate communities contribute financially. Funds are typically transferred through hawala systems or cash couriers, providing militants with an untraceable financial lifeline that bypasses formal banking mechanisms (Arab News, 2008). Similarly, Baloch insurgent groups have benefited from support within the Baloch diaspora, particularly workers based in Gulf countries, who contribute funds either voluntarily or under coercion (Grare, 2006). These remittances, though relatively small in scale compared to narcotics or resource revenues, play a critical role in sustaining insurgent networks, especially during low-intensity phases of conflict.

Over the past decade, Pakistan has taken significant steps to curb terrorist financing, aligning its domestic regulations with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) framework. These measures have tightened oversight of informal financial systems and charitable organisations suspected of channelling funds to militant groups. However, despite these efforts, the persistence of informal networks and cash-based economies continues to provide insurgent groups with opportunities for covert financing.

Overall, these multiple sources of revenue, spanning extortion, diaspora funding, donations, and hawala transfers, reflect the diversified and adaptive nature of insurgent economies in Pakistan. Within the broader framework of economic feasibility, they demonstrate that the sustainability of intrastate conflicts depends not on a single source of wealth, but on a complex web of formal and informal financial flows that insurgent actors skilfully exploit to survive prolonged warfare.

Role of Border Proximity

Having established the role of internal geographic factors in shaping conflict feasibility in Pakistan, this section turns to external geopolitical influences, particularly how proximity to

international borders affects the intensity and persistence of armed conflicts. Border regions often serve as both physical sanctuaries and conduits of transnational networks, making them critical for understanding the spatial patterns of violence. Proximity to international borders can influence conflict dynamics in several ways. It may reflect deliberate interference by neighbouring states driven by geopolitical rivalries or the spillover of instability from adjacent conflict zones. In Pakistan's case, districts bordering Afghanistan and Iran are particularly significant due to their porous frontiers, shared ethnic populations, and historically weak state control, while borders with India and China represent different political and structural realities. In the following discussion, each neighbouring state is examined separately to understand how these distinct characteristics influence the feasibility of conflict. The analysis considers several possible mechanisms, such as border length, shared ethnicity, conflict spillover, and diplomatic relations, and evaluates how they align with the statistical results. After examining each case, a comparative synthesis is presented through Table 3, which highlights the broader patterns and identifies which mechanism remains consistently associated with conflict feasibility across all borders.

Border Proximity to Afghanistan

Among all of Pakistan's neighbours, the border with Afghanistan remains the most critical in explaining the spatial intensity of intrastate armed conflict. The regression results indicate that proximity to the Afghan border is statistically significant and negatively correlated with conflict intensity, meaning that districts closer to this frontier experience higher levels of violence. This finding aligns strongly with both historical experience and theoretical expectations, as the Afghan–Pakistan border has long served as a porous and volatile frontier shaped by overlapping ethnic networks, spillover effects from external wars, and persistently weak state control.

The case of Afghanistan most clearly demonstrates how adversarial relations and porous geography combine to create conditions of high conflict feasibility. Since 1947, relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have remained tense, shaped by Kabul's rejection of the Durand Line and its claim over Pashtun territories (Ahmed & Bhatnagar, 2007). Successive Afghan governments have periodically supported anti-Pakistan elements, directly or indirectly, to counter Islamabad's influence. Following the Soviet invasion and later the U.S.-led war, Pakistan's shifting policy toward the Taliban deepened mistrust, and both states have repeatedly accused each other of harbouring and funding insurgents (Jones et al., 2006). For Pakistan, Afghan territory has long served as a sanctuary for militants targeting its western districts, making the border both operationally and politically volatile.

The border length between the two countries, stretching 1,640 miles (2,640 km), represents Pakistan's longest and most porous frontier. This sheer length, combined with rugged terrain and limited infrastructure, significantly undermines the state's capacity for control. As Schons (2011) notes, such conditions facilitate cross-border infiltration and insurgent movement, increasing the operational feasibility of rebellion. This aligns with studies by Brochmann, Rod, and Gleditsch (2012), who found that longer borders with weak governance increase the probability of low-intensity conflict due to higher interaction opportunities and logistical mobility for militant groups.

Shared ethnicity across the Afghan–Pakistan frontier further compounds this dynamic. The ethnic and cultural continuity between Afghanistan and Pakistan's Pashtun belt provides fertile ground for insurgent mobilisation and concealment. Pashtun tribes such as the Ahmadzai, Mahsud, and Wazir in North and South Waziristan share kinship, language, and traditions with Afghan tribes like the Durrani, Ghilzai, and Norzai (Schons, 2011). These cross-border ties have historically enabled the flow of information, shelter, and material support to insurgent groups. As

Tellis (2008) notes, Taliban fighters, sharing ethnicity and language with local communities, can easily blend into the tribal landscape, making detection and control exceedingly difficult. Thus, shared ethnicity enhances the social infrastructure of insurgency, amplifying both the operational and recruitment dimensions of feasibility.

The conflict spillover mechanism is perhaps the most decisive in this case. The wars in Afghanistan have had profound and enduring repercussions for Pakistan. From the 1979 Soviet invasion to the post-2001 U.S.-led "War on Terror," each conflict has spilled across the border, reshaping Pakistan's political, social, and security environment. The Soviet–Afghan war, supported by the United States and Saudi Arabia, flooded Pakistan with arms, refugees, and radical ideologies. This period witnessed the rise of what became known as the Kalashnikov culture and the parallel growth of narcotics trafficking, both of which embedded violent economies into Pakistan's border regions (Cheema, 1988). These developments increased both the means and motivations for conflict, sustaining militant capacity long after the original war ended.

The 9/11 attacks and the subsequent U.S. invasion of Afghanistan further intensified these spillover dynamics. NATO operations displaced large numbers of fighters, many of whom crossed into Pakistan's tribal belt, taking advantage of the rugged topography and weak governance of the former FATA region. U.S. operations such as Tora Bora and Anaconda in 2001–2002 failed to capture key militant leaders, allowing hundreds of foreign fighters, including Arabs, Uzbeks, and Chechens, to seek refuge inside Pakistan (ICG, 2006). This transformed the Afghan–Pakistan borderlands into the epicentre of insurgency, where militant sanctuaries, arms routes, and ideological networks converged (Lamb, 2015).

Pakistani officials have repeatedly asserted that this instability was not indigenous but externally induced. As National Security Advisor Lieutenant General Nasir Janjua noted,

extremism in Pakistan is "a direct result of the conflict in Afghanistan" (APP, 2017). Similarly, then–Interior Minister Ahsan Iqbal emphasised that the radicalisation campaign orchestrated during the anti-Soviet jihad left behind enduring ideological and institutional legacies that continue to fuel regional terrorism (Dawn, 2018b). These statements underscore the structural and long-term nature of the spillover mechanism in shaping Pakistan's internal conflict geography.

Finally, border control stands out as the most critical mechanism linking these dynamics together. The Afghan–Pakistan border remains among the world's most difficult frontiers to regulate due to its complex terrain and limited state presence. The region adjoining the former FATA area has historically been outside the direct writ of the federal government, with political agents rather than regular administrative structures overseeing local governance. As the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2011) reported, up to 15,000 to 20,000 people cross the Torkham border daily, often without effective immigration checks. Military presence along much of the frontier remains sparse, allowing insurgents and smugglers to move freely.

Although Pakistan initiated large-scale fencing of the border in 2017, constructing more than 388 new forts and deploying surveillance technologies, complete control remains elusive given the topography and political sensitivities of the Durand Line. The persistence of cross-border movement, arms smuggling, and militant infiltration underscores how porous control continues to sustain the feasibility of rebellion. As Chalk (2007) and Khan (2017) observe, the combination of rugged terrain, weak governance, and contested sovereignty makes this border uniquely vulnerable to exploitation by insurgent groups.

Taken together, the Afghan case exemplifies how multiple mechanisms, border length, shared ethnicity, conflict spillover, and weak border control, interact to produce the strongest and most consistent association with conflict feasibility in Pakistan. While diplomatic hostility and

historical grievances set the broader context, it is the structural and geographic characteristics of this border, especially the lack of effective control, that enable these factors to translate into persistent conflict on the ground.

Border Proximity to Iran

The case of Iran presents a paradox in the statistical results and provides an important contrast to the Afghan border. The regression findings show that proximity to the Iranian border is statistically significant and negatively correlated with conflict intensity, indicating that districts closer to Iran also experience higher levels of violence. However, unlike the Afghan case, Iran's relationship with Pakistan has been relatively cordial, and there is no active conflict on the Iranian side. This makes Iran an analytically valuable case for understanding how different mechanisms interact and why only certain structural factors, particularly border control, remain consistent in explaining the observed conflict pattern.

The border length between Pakistan and Iran is relatively short, at approximately 596 miles, yet it has shown a significant association with conflict intensity. This finding appears counterintuitive when compared with the Afghan border, where length and porosity clearly increase opportunities for militant activity. The shortness of the Iran–Pakistan border should, in theory, make management easier, but persistent instability suggests that other conditions, particularly weak control and illicit cross-border activity, are more decisive than size alone. As Brochmann, Rod, and Gleditsch (2012) note, the effect of border length on conflict is contingent on governance capacity; even a short frontier can become conflict-prone when the state's monitoring and enforcement mechanisms are weak.

Shared ethnicity offers one explanatory layer. Iran and Pakistan share long-standing ethnic, cultural, and linguistic ties. Both countries are historically connected through Persian influence,

shared Aryan roots, and overlapping communities in the borderlands of Balochistan and Sistan–Balochistan (Alam, 2004; Ahmed, 2014; Awan, 2018). These bonds encompass historical, linguistic, and religious dimensions, and Persian culture continues to influence Pakistani art, language, and literature. However, unlike the Afghan–Pakistan frontier, shared ethnicity here does not translate into active cooperation in insurgent movements. Instead, ethnic and sectarian differences, particularly the Sunni–Shia divide, have been instrumentalised by both sides, adding a different layer of tension. Iran has often accused Pakistan of failing to curb Sunni extremist groups such as Jundullah and Jaish-ul-Adl operating from its territory, while Pakistan has alleged that Iran turns a blind eye to Shia militant proxies with ties to networks in Balochistan (Notezai, 2020). Thus, while ethnic and religious affinities exist, they do not serve as a unifying social infrastructure for insurgency; rather, they reflect competing sectarian narratives and proxy dynamics.

The conflict spillover mechanism provides another perspective but does not fully align with the statistical outcome. Unlike Afghanistan, Iran is not a site of active warfare, nor does it face the same degree of transnational militant spillover. Nevertheless, its frontier with Pakistan remains volatile due to transboundary militancy, trafficking, and sectarian violence. Periodic incidents, such as cross-border attacks, kidnappings, and ambushes, are symptomatic of weak enforcement and opportunistic exploitation by non-state actors rather than direct spillover from interstate war. Iran's occasional accusations of cross-border infiltration by Sunni militants (e.g., Jundullah) and Pakistan's concerns over Shia proxies operating with Iranian tolerance illustrate that instability along this border is more a function of permissive geography and limited control than of conflict diffusion per se. Hence, the significance of proximity to Iran in the regression results cannot be

explained by active spillover but by structural vulnerability, where weak oversight allows transnational militant activities to persist in otherwise peaceful interstate relations.

This brings the discussion to the diplomatic relations mechanism, which further complicates the pattern. Pakistan and Iran have generally enjoyed cordial diplomatic ties, characterised by cooperation through regional platforms such as CENTO and RCD (Alam, 2004; Hassan, 2015). Despite this, mutual suspicion persists due to differing geopolitical alignments, Pakistan's historical closeness with Saudi Arabia and the U.S. contrasting with Iran's revolutionary ideology and its ties to Shia movements across the region. However, the key observation here is that friendly interstate relations alone do not prevent instability. As the Iran case shows, even when official diplomacy is cooperative, tacit tolerance of militant or criminal activity in the borderlands can sustain localised violence. In other words, stability at the diplomatic level does not automatically translate into effective control or peace at the subnational level.

Finally, border control emerges once again as the most consistent and explanatory factor. Despite ongoing fencing efforts, the Iran–Pakistan border remains largely porous and difficult to manage. The terrain is vast and sparsely populated, with few formal crossing points. The main legal crossing at Taftan allows movement through permits known as Rahdari cards, which regulate local travel but cannot prevent smuggling or illegal crossings. Iran began fencing the border from Taftan to Mand to strengthen control (UNODC, 2011), but even with these measures, large-scale smuggling of fuel, narcotics, and weapons continues. Weak enforcement capacity and corruption on both sides allow armed groups to exploit these gaps. While Iran has increased security infrastructure, the persistence of militant movement suggests that structural control, not political will, remains the limiting factor.

Thus, in contrast to the Afghan case, where conflict spillover and shared ethnicity reinforce the effects of porous borders, the Iranian case demonstrates that even in the absence of war or deep ideological hostility, weak border control can independently create an enabling environment for violence. The statistical association between proximity to Iran and conflict intensity, therefore, reflects not ideological or ethnic drivers but the operational realities of border governance. The Iranian case confirms that poor enforcement, permissive geography, and the presence of illicit economies can make short and otherwise peaceful borders sites of high conflict feasibility.

Border Proximity to India

The case of India presents an instructive contrast to Pakistan's western borders. Despite being Pakistan's most enduring geopolitical rival, the regression analysis found that proximity to the Indian border is statistically insignificant in explaining conflict intensity. This result is particularly revealing because it challenges the assumption that hostile state relations necessarily translate into higher internal instability. By examining the underlying mechanisms, border length, shared ethnicity, conflict spillover, diplomatic relations, and border control, it becomes clear that while several potential risk factors are present, their impact is effectively neutralised by the exceptional level of securitisation and control along this frontier.

The border length between Pakistan and India is substantial, approximately 2,065 miles, making it the longest international boundary Pakistan shares. In theory, such an extensive frontier should increase the likelihood of cross-border movement and, by extension, the operational feasibility of insurgency. However, the insignificance of this variable in the statistical results indicates that the mere length of the border is not enough to generate instability. The difference lies in the level of governance and military management: unlike the Afghan or Iranian borders, the Indo–Pakistan frontier is one of the most heavily militarised and meticulously regulated borders

in the world. This observation aligns with Brochmann, Rod, and Gleditsch (2012), who argue that the effects of border length on conflict are conditional on enforcement capacity, long borders without control pose risks, whereas those under strict surveillance do not.

Shared ethnicity represents another dimension where the Indian case appears inconsistent with theoretical expectations. Pakistan's Punjab province shares deep linguistic, cultural, and familial ties with Indian Punjab. Punjabi communities on both sides of the border share the same language and many cultural practices, a legacy of the pre-Partition era when the two regions formed a single socio-cultural space. However, these similarities have not translated into any form of cross-border insurgency. The primary reason lies in the clear religious division and the strong national identities that have emerged since 1947. As Durrani (2001) notes, although Punjabis share ethnicity and language, they differ fundamentally in religious affiliation, Muslim in Pakistan and largely Sikh or Hindu in India, which prevents the development of shared rebel networks or mutual sympathies that could support insurgent mobilisation. Hence, while shared ethnicity might enhance the feasibility of rebellion in the Afghan or Iranian contexts, it holds little operational significance here due to tight border control and divergent political identities.

The conflict spillover mechanism also fails to explain the absence of association. While India has experienced its own internal insurgencies, such as the Naxalite movement or the unrest in Jammu and Kashmir, these have not spilled over into Pakistani territory. Instead, Pakistan and India's security dynamics are largely shaped by state-to-state confrontation rather than transnational militancy. Unlike the porous and unstable Afghan frontier, the Indo–Pakistan border is fully fenced and continuously patrolled, with no meaningful refugee flows or militant networks operating across it. This means that the channel for conflict diffusion, whether ideological, organisational, or logistical, has been effectively sealed. The absence of spillover despite high

political tension further confirms that the permeability of the border, not the hostility of relations, determines conflict feasibility.

Diplomatic relations between Pakistan and India have remained adversarial since independence, marked by multiple wars, persistent rivalry, and mutual accusations of interference. The Kashmir dispute continues to dominate the bilateral agenda, and mistrust between the two states runs deep (Hussain, 2019). Yet, paradoxically, this entrenched hostility has not translated into direct internal instability along the border regions themselves. The regression analysis shows no significant correlation between proximity to India and conflict intensity, underscoring that political hostility at the interstate level does not necessarily produce subnational conflict when geographic control is strong. Nonetheless, allegations of indirect interference persist. Pakistan continues to accuse India of sponsoring insurgency and terrorism within its territory, often through third-party channels. The arrest of Indian national Kulbhushan Yadav in 2016 (Dawn, 2017) and reports of India's expanded diplomatic presence in Afghanistan, through multiple consulates allegedly used for supporting separatist movements, suggest that India may pursue influence not through direct infiltration but via proxy networks operating from Afghan soil (Haider, 2023; Mubarik, 2021). This indirect involvement reinforces the notion that state hostility alone does not explain conflict patterns; the spatial and structural conditions of borders do.

Ultimately, border control provides the most convincing explanation for why proximity to India is not associated with conflict. The Indo–Pakistan border is the most secure and technologically advanced among all of Pakistan's frontiers. It is guarded by both states with a high degree of coordination and is reinforced with extensive physical barriers and surveillance systems. As Durrani (2001) describes, this includes multilayer fencing, seismic and magnetic sensors, ground surveillance radars, sensor-activated halogen lights, video cameras, and thermal imaging

systems, supported by a dense deployment of armed forces. The result is an almost impermeable boundary where infiltration or smuggling is virtually impossible. Even in areas of historical tension, such as Kashmir, the presence of large troop contingents and real-time monitoring ensures that rebel networks cannot exploit the border as a logistical route.

The Indian case therefore underscores a key insight of this study: hostile relations, shared ethnicity, or even a long and historically contested border do not automatically translate into conflict feasibility. These factors can only contribute to instability when they coincide with weak enforcement and porous boundaries. The Indo–Pakistan border, despite being politically charged, remains a space of strong control, where high securitisation effectively neutralises the enabling conditions that sustain conflict elsewhere. This finding reinforces the broader conclusion that border control, not the nature of diplomatic relations or the social characteristics of the borderland, is the decisive mechanism determining whether proximity leads to violence.

Border Proximity to China

The China border represents the opposite end of Pakistan's conflict spectrum. The regression analysis shows that proximity to the Chinese border is statistically significant but positively correlated with conflict intensity, meaning that districts closer to this border experience lower levels of violence. This finding is consistent with both historical and geopolitical realities: the China–Pakistan border has remained peaceful, well-regulated, and strategically cooperative since its formal demarcation in 1963. The mechanisms of border length, shared ethnicity, conflict spillover, and diplomatic relations all align coherently with this outcome, reinforcing the central role of strong border control and stable state-to-state relations in minimising the feasibility of conflict.

Starting with border length, the Pakistan–China frontier is the shortest of Pakistan's international borders, extending only about 368 miles. It passes through the Karakoram Range, a high-altitude and sparsely populated region characterised by extreme terrain and harsh climatic conditions. These physical barriers, including glaciers and snow-covered passes, make cross-border movement nearly impossible for large groups. As Ali (2017) notes, the geographical isolation of this area significantly reduces opportunities for infiltration or smuggling, ensuring that the frontier remains structurally secure. The short and mountainous nature of this border, combined with close bilateral cooperation, provides little room for the logistical or operational feasibility of rebellion that is present along Pakistan's western frontiers.

In terms of shared ethnicity, Pakistan and China share virtually no common ethnic, linguistic, or cultural groups along their border. The populations living on either side belong to distinct ethnic backgrounds: Pakistan's northern Gilgit-Baltistan region is inhabited primarily by Shina, Balti, and Burusho communities, while China's Xinjiang province is home to ethnic groups such as the Uyghur, Hui, Kazakh, and Han (Fei, 2017; Irgengioro, 2018; Dincer & Wang, 2011). This absence of shared ethnicity prevents the formation of cross-border kinship or tribal linkages that could support insurgent networks. Unlike the Afghan or Iranian borders, where shared identity and kinship have facilitated the flow of militants and resources, the China border offers no such social infrastructure for rebellion. This ethnic discontinuity thus aligns with the statistical finding that proximity to China correlates with stability rather than violence.

The conflict spillover mechanism is also largely absent in this context. Unlike Pakistan's western neighbours, China has not experienced armed conflicts near its border with Pakistan. The internal unrest in China's Xinjiang region has been tightly controlled and geographically contained, preventing any transnational spread of instability. Furthermore, China has been a consistent partner

in Pakistan's counterterrorism and intelligence efforts, working jointly to prevent militant activity along their shared frontier. The absence of active warfare or refugee flows across this border means there are no spillover effects that could elevate Pakistan's internal conflict risks. This finding further strengthens the argument that geographic proximity alone does not create instability; rather, it is the interaction between border permeability and political control that determines conflict feasibility.

Diplomatic relations between Pakistan and China represent one of the strongest bilateral partnerships in Asia. Since the establishment of formal ties in 1951, the relationship has evolved into a comprehensive strategic alliance based on mutual defence cooperation, economic interdependence, and regional stability (Zeb, 2012; Hussain, Hussain, & Qambari, 2020). The signing of the 1963 boundary agreement resolved all border disputes, turning the frontier into one of the most stable in the region. Major collaborative projects, such as the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), have further deepened this interdependence by linking border security with infrastructure development and regional trade (Kasi, 2018; Khan, 2015). This partnership has ensured both countries maintain a vested interest in keeping the frontier secure, making the China–Pakistan border a model of stability in contrast to the volatility of Pakistan's other borders.

Finally, border control stands out as a defining feature of this stability. The China–Pakistan border is characterised by strong state presence, consistent surveillance, and joint military cooperation. The rugged topography naturally restricts movement, while coordinated security measures ensure effective monitoring of the few existing transit routes, such as the Khunjerab Pass. The level of institutional cooperation between both governments in managing the border is unparalleled among Pakistan's neighbours. This high degree of control is reinforced by shared strategic interests, including the protection of CPEC infrastructure and prevention of extremist

infiltration into Xinjiang. Together, these measures create a security environment that eliminates the operational feasibility of conflict.

In summary, the China case provides the clearest validation of the regression finding that proximity to this border correlates with reduced conflict intensity. Each mechanism, short border length, absence of shared ethnicity, lack of spillover, cooperative diplomacy, and strong control, aligns consistently to explain this pattern. The China–Pakistan border exemplifies how effective governance and mutual strategic interest transform geographic adjacency from a potential risk into a stabilising factor. It underscores the broader conclusion that where border control is firm and state relations are cooperative, proximity serves not as a source of vulnerability but as a foundation for stability.

Comparative Analysis of Key Border Mechanisms

The comparative evidence from all four cases underscores that the relationship between border proximity and conflict feasibility in Pakistan is complex, multi-layered, and context-dependent. Table 3 summarises these findings, highlighting how the four key mechanisms operate differently across each frontier.

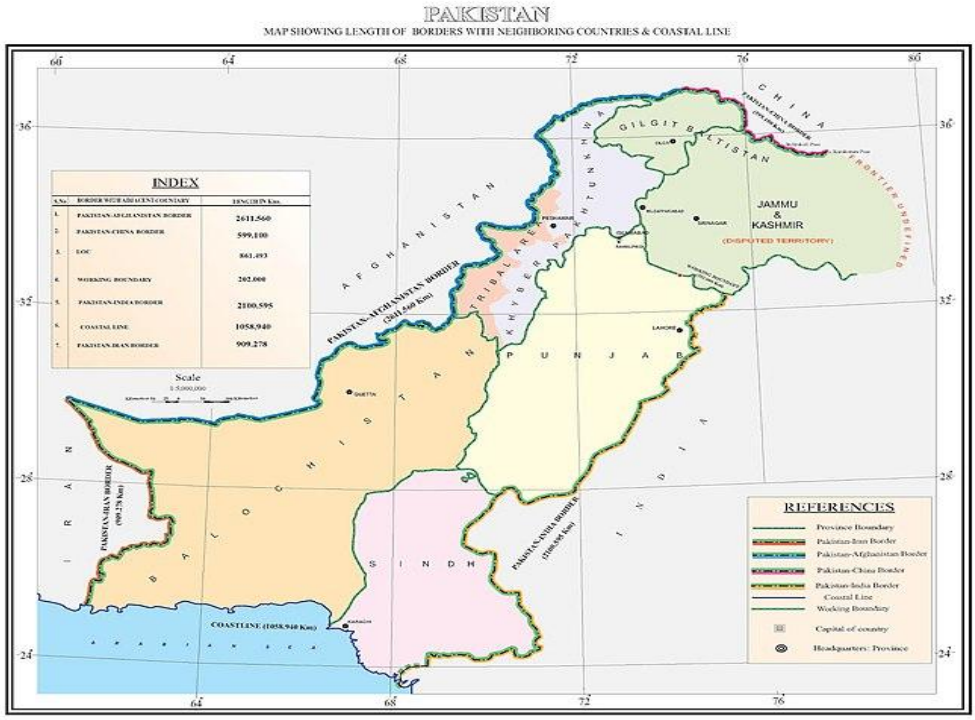
Table 3 Border-Conflict Feasibility Profile

Border	Empirical Link to Conflict	Border Length	Border Control	Shared Ethnicity	Conflict Spillover	Diplomatic Relations
Afghanistan	Negative Significant	Long	Weak	Yes	Yes	Poor
Iran	Negative Significant	Short	Weak	Yes	No	Good
China	Positive Significant	Short	Strong	No	No	Good
India	Insignificant	Long	Strong	Yes	No	Poor

Source: Constructed by the Author (2022)

Examining these patterns together reveals that while these factors may contribute to conflict under certain conditions, they do not consistently explain the spatial variation in violence across all borders. Instead, the only mechanism that aligns systematically with the empirical results is border control, which emerges as the decisive factor shaping conflict feasibility.

Figure 16 Length of Pakistan's International Borders



Source: Map of Pakistan Showing Border Lengths from Simple English Wikipedia

Border length demonstrates a clear inconsistency across cases. The Afghan border, the longest and most porous, coincides with the highest conflict intensity, which is consistent with theoretical expectations. However, this relationship breaks down when compared with other frontiers. The India–Pakistan border is even longer, yet its influence on conflict is statistically insignificant because it is tightly secured and heavily militarised. Conversely, the Iran–Pakistan border is short but still exhibits a significant correlation with conflict intensity, while the short and mountainous China border shows the opposite pattern, strong control and complete stability. These

contradictions indicate that border length alone cannot determine conflict outcomes; its effect is conditional upon the degree of enforcement and governance capacity.

Figure 17 Key Ethnicities Across the Borders in the Regions

Source: The Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, The University of Texas

Shared ethnicity follows a similar pattern of partial relevance. Along the Afghan frontier, shared Pashtun kinship and tribal linkages clearly facilitate insurgent movement and shelter, increasing operational feasibility. Some cultural and religious overlaps with Iran also contribute to low-level instability, particularly along sectarian lines, though these are less direct. Yet, the India–Pakistan border, despite extensive linguistic and cultural commonalities across Punjab, remains peaceful, demonstrating that ethnicity does not necessarily produce conflict when effective border

management and strong national identities exist. In contrast, the absence of shared ethnicity with China correlates with complete stability. Taken together, these examples suggest that shared ethnicity may intensify conflict only when it coincides with porous boundaries and limited state control.

Figure 18 Pak-Afghan Border with Conflict-prone Areas

Source: Tribal Areas and Taliban Influence Map from PBS Frontline

The conflict spillover mechanism also shows a mixed record. Spillover from the prolonged wars in Afghanistan has had a profound and sustained impact on Pakistan's internal security, reinforcing the statistical association with conflict near the western frontier. However, this logic does not hold for Iran, which has no active war but still shows significant correlation with violence. Similarly, China and India, both insulated from transnational conflict spillovers, display either no

or inverse associations with internal violence in Pakistan. These inconsistencies reaffirm that the presence of active conflict in a neighbouring state is not sufficient to trigger domestic instability; its effects depend on the permeability and management of the border itself.

Diplomatic relations present yet another inconsistency. Hostile relations with Afghanistan coincide with instability, but equally adversarial ties with India do not. Conversely, Pakistan's generally cordial relations with Iran have not prevented cross-border militancy, while its cooperative and strategic partnership with China has reinforced border stability. These patterns demonstrate that the tone of interstate relations alone cannot predict internal conflict. What matters more is how interstate politics interacts with local enforcement and whether neighbouring states tacitly allow or constrain non-state actors in the borderlands.

In contrast, border control stands out as the only mechanism consistently aligned with the regression results. Both significant borders, Afghanistan and Iran, share a common feature of weak and porous control, limited surveillance infrastructure, and difficult terrain. These structural vulnerabilities enable insurgent infiltration, arms trafficking, and the flow of illicit goods, all of which sustain the feasibility of rebellion. By comparison, the borders with India and China, despite vastly different political relationships, remain secure precisely because of strong and coordinated control mechanisms. The India–Pakistan border is sealed and electronically monitored, while the China–Pakistan frontier combines natural barriers with active military cooperation. In both cases, firm enforcement neutralises the enabling conditions that otherwise foster internal conflict.

Thus, the synthesis of evidence across all four borders leads to a clear conclusion: border control is the most consistent and explanatory factor in determining the relationship between border proximity and conflict feasibility in Pakistan. Other mechanisms, length, ethnicity, spillover, or diplomatic relations, can only influence conflict outcomes when weak or porous border control

already exists. In the absence of such vulnerability, these factors lose explanatory power. This insight not only strengthens the empirical findings but also ties directly to the theoretical framework of this study. Weak border governance enhances both the operational feasibility of conflict, by providing routes for mobility, arms, and recruits, and the economic feasibility, by facilitating smuggling, resource exploitation, and the illicit trade networks that finance insurgency.

Pours Border as an Overlapping Variable

Having compared the different border mechanisms, it becomes clear that border control is the single most consistent determinant of conflict feasibility in Pakistan. The preceding discussion shows that while factors such as border length, shared ethnicity, and spillover effects matter, they only translate into higher conflict intensity when the state fails to enforce its borders effectively. Weak border governance thus serves as the enabling condition through which other mechanisms operate, shaping both the operational and economic feasibility of intrastate armed conflict.

Operational Feasibility and Pours Border

Pours border enhances operational feasibility by lowering the cost and increasing the practicality of rebellion. Porous borders allow insurgents to move freely between territories, access sanctuaries, obtain supplies, and evade capture. This is particularly evident along Pakistan's frontiers with Afghanistan and Iran, where rugged terrain, ethnic linkages, and limited surveillance have historically undermined state authority. As Hironaka (2008) notes, weak states are especially prone to prolonged insurgency because their inability to project control over peripheral areas enables even small groups to sustain conflict.

The Afghan–Pakistan border provides the clearest example. It runs through some of the most inaccessible terrain in the world, cutting across mountain ranges and tribal regions where federal writ has long been minimal. The former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) were

governed through political agents rather than direct provincial administration, leaving security fragmented and localised. The Torkham crossing, one of the busiest border points, sees 15,000 to 20,000 daily crossings, many unmonitored by the Federal Investigation Agency (UNODC, 2011). The absence of robust enforcement and limited military presence make infiltration easy, allowing insurgents to attack targets inside Pakistan and retreat back into Afghan territory with relative impunity (Chalk, 2007).

This operational fluidity is further facilitated by two interrelated mechanisms: border length and shared ethnicity. The Afghan border's exceptional length and difficult terrain make complete fencing and monitoring economically unfeasible. Simultaneously, shared Pashtun tribal networks straddling both sides of the border offer insurgents natural cover and community support, blending logistics, kinship, and mobility into a single operational system. Fighters can seek refuge with cross-border kin, disguise themselves within local populations, and rely on informal trade routes to transport arms and supplies. Thus, long and porous frontiers combined with shared ethnicity multiply the operational advantages of insurgency when border control is weak.

The Iran–Pakistan border displays a related but more complex pattern. Despite comparatively cordial state-to-state relations, weak enforcement and sparse population density have allowed small militant and criminal groups to exploit the border. Here too, geographic proximity, cross-border sectarian affiliations, and unregulated trade routes provide channels for arms, fuel, and contraband to move with limited interference. The absence of effective coordination between border agencies and the persistence of informal crossings such as the Rahdari system make this frontier vulnerable to both insurgent infiltration and illicit commerce (UNODC, 2011).

In contrast, strong control mechanisms along the India–Pakistan and China–Pakistan borders negate these enabling factors. The Indian border, though long and politically hostile, is among the most heavily guarded in the world, sealed with multilayer fencing, motion sensors, and continuous surveillance (Durrani, 2001). Similarly, the China–Pakistan border combines natural barriers with joint security management and strong diplomatic cooperation (UNICAP, 1963). These conditions prevent insurgents from using cross-border sanctuaries or supply routes, effectively nullifying the operational feasibility of rebellion in adjacent districts.

Economic Feasibility and Pours Border

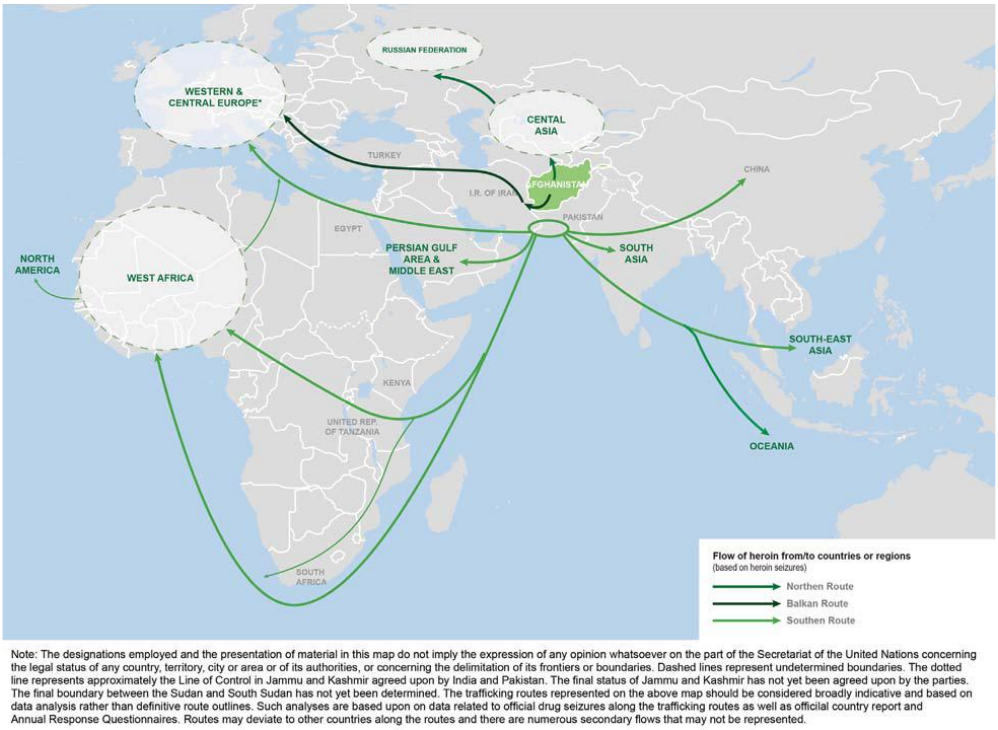
Weak border control also underpins the economic feasibility of conflict by enabling insurgent groups to generate and sustain revenue through illegal trade. Where state authority is limited, cross-border smuggling, narcotics trafficking, and extortion thrive, transforming rebellion into a self-sustaining enterprise. This phenomenon is most pronounced along the Afghan and Iranian borders, where porous terrain and institutional weakness facilitate large-scale illicit flows.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2009), nearly 45 per cent of Afghan opiate trafficking passes through Pakistan, mainly via Balochistan and the former FATA region. This route connects Afghanistan's production centres to Iran, China, and global markets, turning Pakistan's western borders into a vital artery of the international drug trade. UNODC data show heroin seizures in Pakistan increased by more than 550 per cent between 2008 and 2012, highlighting the growing volume of this illicit economy (UNODC, 2015).

The topography of Pakistan's western frontier, its deep valleys, mountain passes, and sparse population, provides ideal conditions for smugglers. In 2013, Pakistan accounted for 16.6 per cent of global heroin seizures, concentrated mainly along the Balochistan–Afghanistan border

and southern maritime routes. Smugglers transport opium, morphine, and heroin through Chaman and onward into Iran, using unmonitored trails and desert crossings.

Figure 19 Indicative Drug Trafficking Routes from Afghanistan



Note: The designations employed and the presentation of material in this map do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. Dashed lines represent undetermined boundaries. The dotted line represents approximately the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir agreed upon by India and Pakistan. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not yet been agreed upon by the parties. The final boundary between the Sudan and South Sudan has not yet been determined. The trafficking routes represented on the above map should be considered broadly indicative and based on data analysis rather than definitive route outlines. Such analyses are based upon on data related to official drug seizures along the trafficking routes as well as officilal country report and Annual Response Questionnaires. Routes may deviate to other countries along the routes and there are numerous secondary flows that may not be represented.

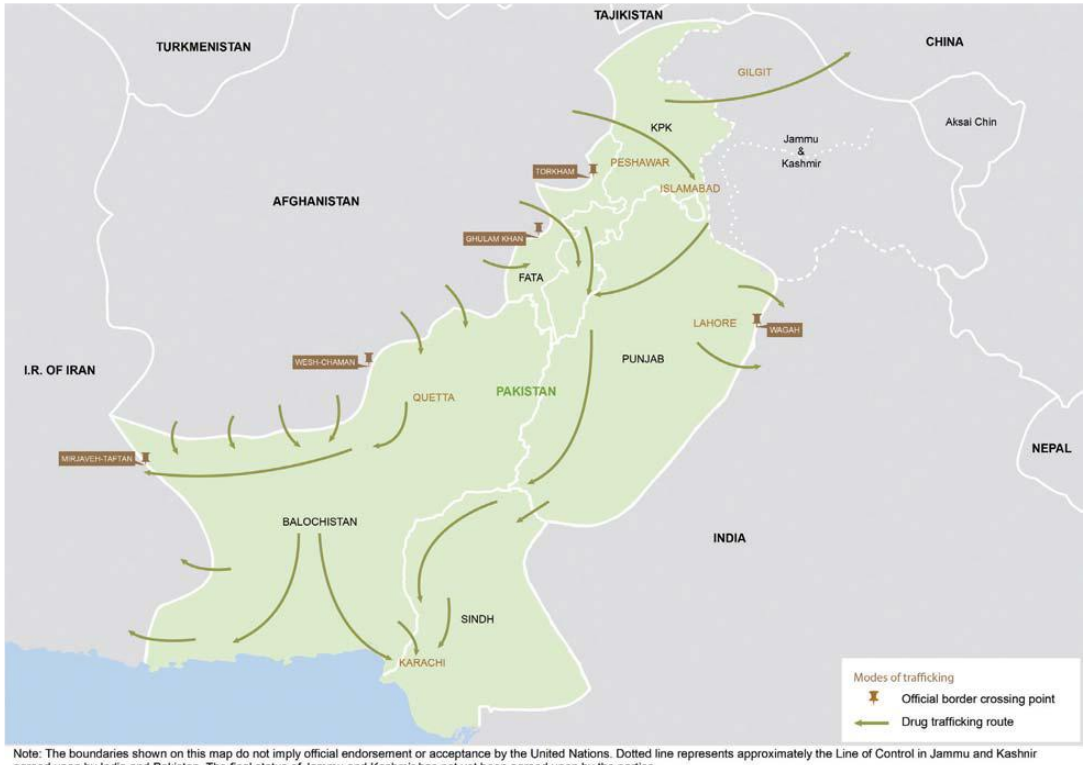
Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime - Report 2015

Pakistan is not only a transit country but also a growing consumer market. A 2012 UNODC survey estimated approximately 320,000 opium users nationwide, with Balochistan showing the highest demand. This combination of internal consumption and cross-border trade ensures that the narcotics economy remains profitable and entrenched.

These illicit networks intersect directly with insurgent financing. Local militant groups in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) tax smuggling routes, extract "protection fees," and sometimes provide security for drug convoys. The Governor of Balochistan revealed in 2005 that approximately €6.4 million worth of arms had been smuggled into the province within six months, despite more than six hundred checkpoints (Hussain, 2008). Militants also engage in kidnapping,

extortion, and car theft, often in partnership with local traders and criminal syndicates (Rana, 2019). Over time, these practices have institutionalised a "war economy," in which violence becomes both a livelihood and a means of governance.

Figure 20 Indicative Drug Trafficking Route into and Through Pakistan



Note: The boundaries shown on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Dotted line represents approximately the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir agreed upon by India and Pakistan. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not yet been agreed upon by the parties.

Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime - Report 2015

Rubin (2000) and Hodes and Sedra (2007) describe how insurgent groups, particularly those aligned with the Taliban, transitioned from looting to organised taxation, charging traders for safe passage along routes linking Karachi, FATA, and Balochistan with Afghanistan and Central Asia. This "security tax" system transformed armed conflict into an economically sustainable enterprise. The revenues derived from drug trafficking and smuggling thus serve as the economic foundation of insurgent persistence, enabling recruitment, arms purchases, and territorial control.

Synthesis

Taken together, the evidence clearly demonstrates that weak border control functions as an overlapping variable, one that links the operational and economic dimensions of the feasibility hypothesis. On one hand, porous borders facilitate insurgent mobility, cross-border attacks, and access to sanctuaries; on the other, they sustain the economic networks that finance these operations. When these two dimensions converge, conflict becomes both logistically possible and materially profitable. In Pakistan's case, the western borders with Afghanistan and Iran epitomise this overlap. Their combination of difficult terrain, shared ethnicity, and inadequate enforcement creates conditions where insurgents can operate across borders while simultaneously exploiting illicit economies. Conversely, the India and China borders, marked by strong control, dense monitoring, and cooperative relations, stand as empirical counterpoints: here, even when political tension or geographic adjacency exists, conflict remains absent.

Therefore, border control is not merely a matter of physical security but a structural condition that determines the feasibility of conflict itself. It acts as the foundational variable through which other mechanisms, ethnic linkages, border length, or regional geopolitics, gain significance. Where control is weak, these factors amplify instability; where control is firm, they lose explanatory power. This dual role of border control, bridging operational and economic feasibility, provides a crucial theoretical insight into Pakistan's conflict dynamics. It confirms that the persistence of insurgency is not only a function of grievance or opportunity but of the state's ability to regulate the spaces, routes, and resources that sustain rebellion.

Conclusion

This chapter has empirically examined the relationship between the key feasibility factors and the intensity of violent intrastate conflicts in Pakistan. Through multiple regression models,

the quantitative analysis revealed how operational feasibility, particularly rugged terrain, weak border control, and proximity to conflict-prone frontiers, creates conditions that allow armed movements to emerge and endure. The findings confirm that geography and spatial accessibility remain decisive structural determinants of conflict.

The results related to economic feasibility also provided important insights. The Human Development Index (HDI) showed a strong negative association with conflict intensity, suggesting that lower levels of human development and opportunity heighten the likelihood of insurgency. In contrast, popular assumptions such as a direct causal link between poverty and conflict, or the idea that proximity to India fuels insurgency, found little empirical support in this study.

The discussion further contextualised these findings through qualitative analysis and secondary evidence. It highlighted that operational constraints, complex geography, porous borders, and uneven state reach consistently explain the persistence of conflict more convincingly than ideological, ethnic, or grievance-based explanations. Importantly, the comparative analysis of Pakistan's four international borders demonstrated that while several mechanisms, such as border length, shared ethnicity, and spillover effects, affect conflict dynamics, their influence becomes significant only when state control is weak. Thus, border control emerged as the most consistent explanatory factor, acting as the structural condition that enables or constrains all other mechanisms.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that Pakistan's intrastate armed conflicts are best understood through a feasibility lens that integrates both structural and economic dimensions. Conflict endures not merely because of grievances or identity-based mobilisation, but because certain environments make rebellion possible and profitable.

The results presented in this chapter form the empirical foundation for the next one, which will synthesise these insights within the broader political economy framework of Pakistan's intrastate conflicts. The following chapter will critically reflect on the theoretical, empirical, and policy implications of these findings and explore what they reveal about the structural nature of violent conflict in Pakistan and comparable contexts.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Background and Context of the Study

Throughout modern history, intrastate armed conflicts, whether labelled as civil wars, insurgencies, genocides, or terrorism, have produced large-scale human suffering, economic devastation, and deep social scars that persist long after the fighting ends. Pakistan's experience has been no exception. Since its inception, the country has grappled with overlapping ideological, political, and structural forces that have repeatedly fuelled violence, particularly in regions such as Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), and Karachi.

Much of the existing scholarship on these conflicts has tended to emphasise grievance-based explanations, focusing on ethnic, sectarian, or socio-economic marginalisation and political exclusion. While these studies have provided valuable insights into the historical and social dimensions of conflict, they have often overlooked the structural conditions that make such conflicts possible and sustainable over time.

This research was motivated by the need to move beyond these subjective explanations and to examine the objective conditions that enable and perpetuate armed conflict in Pakistan. To achieve this, the study employed the Feasibility Hypothesis, which posits that rebellion and insurgency are more likely to occur where they are operationally and economically feasible, regardless of the ideological or political grievances that may accompany them.

The central research problem addressed in this study, therefore, was to understand why intrastate armed conflicts persist in Pakistan despite repeated policy interventions and extensive counterinsurgency operations. Specifically, it sought to determine whether structural factors, particularly those related to operational and economic feasibility, offer a more compelling explanation for the endurance of these conflicts than conventional grievance-based theories.

Accordingly, the primary objective of this research was to empirically test the Feasibility Hypothesis within Pakistan's context. The study evaluated the influence of geographical conditions, border proximity, socio-economic deprivation, and human development levels on the intensity and spatial distribution of insurgency-related violence across Pakistan's districts.

Summary of Key Findings

The empirical findings of this study provide strong evidence in support of the Feasibility Hypothesis, which posits that the persistence of intrastate armed conflicts depends on whether rebellion is operationally and economically feasible, rather than purely on ideological or grievance-based motivations. The results reveal that structural feasibility is a necessary but not sufficient condition for conflict. In other words, while grievances or political motivations may act as sparks, enduring violence requires enabling conditions, geography, access to resources, and weak state control, that make armed rebellion possible and sustainable over time.

The quantitative analysis identified three key structural predictors of conflict intensity in Pakistan. First, rugged terrain and difficult geography emerged as statistically significant and positively associated with higher levels of insurgency-related violence, underscoring how challenging landscapes constrain state reach and offer natural cover to insurgent groups. Second, proximity to weakly governed international borders, particularly those shared with Afghanistan and Iran, significantly increased the likelihood of conflict, reflecting the operational and economic advantages that porous borders provide through sanctuaries, smuggling, and external linkages. Third, low human development, as captured by the Human Development Index (HDI), was negatively associated with conflict intensity, supporting the opportunity cost hypothesis that deprivation and limited life opportunities reduce the cost of participation in armed groups.

Conversely, the findings show that poverty alone is not a statistically robust predictor of conflict intensity, suggesting that broader and more integrated development factors, education, governance, and institutional capacity, matter more than income poverty in determining the persistence of violence. The absence of quantitative data on "greed-based" economic activities such as drug trafficking, illicit trade, and resource exploitation was partially compensated by qualitative evidence, which confirmed that these activities play a substantial role in sustaining insurgent operations in high-conflict regions such as Balochistan and the Former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

These results collectively confirm that feasibility conditions, operational, economic, and institutional, form the structural backbone of conflict in Pakistan. However, they also indicate that structural feasibility does not automatically translate into conflict unless combined with political or social catalysts such as marginalisation, identity-based grievances, or regional rivalries. In this sense, feasibility is a precondition for the possibility of rebellion, not a full explanation of its occurrence or intensity.

By integrating statistical analysis with qualitative interpretation, this research also demonstrates the strength of a mixed-methods approach in understanding complex conflict phenomena. Quantitative results identified the structural patterns underlying conflict distribution, while qualitative insights situated these patterns within Pakistan's distinctive historical, geopolitical, and social context. Together, these complementary methods provided a nuanced and empirically grounded explanation of why certain regions of Pakistan remain chronically prone to violence while others remain relatively stable.

Policy Recommendations

The findings of this study revealed the structural conditions that enable and sustain intrastate armed conflicts in Pakistan. These conflicts are rooted in a complex mix of historical, political, and economic dynamics, yet the results of this research make clear that addressing the enabling environment can significantly reduce both the intensity and feasibility of armed violence. Based on the findings, the following policy recommendations are proposed.

Enhancing State Presence and Surveillance

One of the clearest findings of this study is that rugged terrain significantly correlates with the persistence of conflict. While natural geography cannot be altered, the state's capacity to govern and monitor these areas can be strengthened. The state should therefore reinforce its administrative and security presence in high-risk districts through locally embedded governance structures. Increasing the number of locally recruited security personnel and administrative officers would improve trust, legitimacy, and the flow of local intelligence, critical components in limiting insurgent mobility.

Moreover, the deployment of technological surveillance infrastructure, such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS), satellite imagery, drones, and real-time intelligence systems, can extend state reach into otherwise inaccessible areas. Such investments would substantially reduce the operational feasibility of insurgent networks while minimising the need for large-scale, resource-intensive troop deployments in difficult terrain.

Strengthening Border Management

The findings clearly highlight that porous borders, particularly with Afghanistan and Iran, play a decisive role in sustaining internal conflicts by facilitating cross-border militant movement,

arms trafficking, and smuggling networks. The fencing and surveillance of these borders remain critical but must be designed with both economic practicality and community sensitivity in mind.

While border fencing along the Pakistan–Afghanistan frontier has already improved security, its long-term sustainability depends on careful prioritisation and cost-efficiency. Pakistan could adopt a phased and risk-based strategy for fencing, focusing on high-infiltration corridors and chokepoints first, complemented by advanced monitoring technologies such as motion sensors, drone patrols, and satellite tracking. This approach would balance security imperatives with fiscal constraints, making the policy economically and operationally feasible.

Equally important is community engagement along these borders. In Balochistan, where tribal and ethnic linkages extend across national boundaries, border management strategies must not alienate local populations. Instead, community policing, cross-border trade regulation, and participatory security mechanisms can help transform border communities from passive bystanders into active partners in surveillance and early warning systems. If implemented sensitively, these initiatives can strengthen state–local relations rather than undermine them. At the policy level, Pakistan should also enhance bilateral intelligence-sharing with Afghanistan and Iran, ensuring that border management becomes a shared responsibility rather than a unilateral exercise.

Redressing Socio-Economic Grievances

The relationship between socio-economic deprivation and conflict intensity emerged clearly in this research. Districts with low HDI scores experienced more violence, confirming that exclusion and lack of opportunity foster conditions conducive to insurgency recruitment. Long-term peace requires an integrated human development strategy that targets structural inequalities rather than short-term relief measures. Policy priorities should include:

- Expanding access to quality education, healthcare, and social protection.
- Investing in infrastructure that connects marginalised districts to urban and economic centres.
- Designing youth employment and vocational programmes tailored to conflict-prone regions.
- Enhancing local governance and political inclusion in historically neglected provinces such as Balochistan and the former FATA.

Importantly, all such initiatives must be implemented with community participation, ensuring that interventions are perceived as legitimate and inclusive. Top-down economic measures without local ownership risk reinforcing perceptions of external exploitation, particularly in sensitive areas like Balochistan.

Encouraging Regional and International Cooperation

This study reaffirms that Pakistan's internal security is deeply shaped by regional geopolitics. The persistence of insurgencies cannot be resolved without addressing cross-border linkages, illicit economies, and external sponsorships. Pakistan should therefore pursue a regional cooperative framework that includes:

- Diplomatic engagement to address external support for militant networks.
- Joint counterterrorism mechanisms with neighbouring states.
- Regional dialogues on trade, infrastructure, and shared border management to reduce incentives for illicit activities.

International actors and development agencies can contribute by supporting regional peacebuilding and economic integration, thereby addressing both the operational and economic roots of conflict.

Promoting Dialogue and Reconciliation

While this study's focus was structural feasibility, sustainable peace ultimately depends on the reconstruction of social trust. Security operations and economic reforms must be complemented by inclusive dialogue and reconciliation initiatives that address political and cultural grievances.

Policy actions should include:

- Establishing community-based peace forums in conflict-affected districts.
- Expanding rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for former insurgents.
- Supporting inter-provincial dialogues that address longstanding perceptions of exclusion, especially in Balochistan.

By combining structural reforms with reconciliation, the state can reduce both the capacity and motivation for violence, transforming feasibility into lasting stability.

Contributions of the Study

This research makes several important contributions to the academic literature, methodological practices, and policy discourse on intrastate armed conflicts. While much has been written about the causes of civil wars globally and Pakistan's complex security landscape, this thesis fills key gaps by offering both theoretical and empirical insights grounded in the country's unique political and geographic realities.

Theoretical Contribution

The foremost theoretical contribution of this study lies in applying and extending the feasibility hypothesis to the case of Pakistan's internal armed conflicts. Originally developed by Collier and Hoeffler (2004) for cross-country analysis, the hypothesis has rarely been examined at a sub-national level, particularly within a context as complex and multi-layered as Pakistan's.

By testing the hypothesis empirically across Pakistan's districts, this research demonstrates that operational and economic feasibility are necessary, though not sufficient, conditions for the persistence of armed conflict. While grievances, ideology, or identity may serve as triggers, these cannot translate into sustained violence without enabling structural conditions such as difficult geography, porous borders, or low human development.

This application refines the theoretical scope of the feasibility hypothesis by showing that it retains explanatory power even in conflicts that are often labelled as religious, sectarian, or ethnic. The analysis thus shifts the explanatory focus from actors' intentions to their opportunities and capacities for rebellion. Furthermore, by illustrating how feasibility interacts with historical legacies and geopolitical environments, the study invites future research to bridge the gap between motivational and structural explanations of conflict in other developing regions as well.

Methodological Contribution

Methodologically, this thesis contributes by introducing a mixed-methods framework for analysing Pakistan's intrastate conflicts, an approach that remains uncommon in existing scholarship. Previous studies have predominantly relied on qualitative narratives or case-specific descriptions, often overlooking systematic empirical validation. This research integrates quantitative analysis with qualitative contextualisation, demonstrating how both approaches can complement rather than compete with each other.

On the quantitative side, the study constructs and analyses an original district-level cross-sectional dataset encompassing 125 districts of Pakistan. Through multiple linear regression analysis, it empirically tests how structural variables, such as terrain ruggedness, road density, human development, and border proximity, affect the intensity of armed conflict. This sub-national

lens offers a fine-grained understanding of local spatial variations that national or provincial studies typically obscure.

On the qualitative side, the research synthesises secondary literature, official reports, and historical evidence to contextualise statistical findings. This approach deepens the empirical results by linking patterns in the data to real-world governance, geography, and policy challenges. In doing so, the study contributes methodologically by demonstrating the analytical strength of combining structural data with contextual interpretation, a practice particularly valuable in conflict research in the Global South.

Conceptual Contribution

In addition to its theoretical and methodological advances, this study makes an important conceptual contribution by reinterpreting and operationalising the core phenomenon under investigation, intrastate armed conflict, in a manner that is both analytically neutral and empirically measurable.

The study deliberately moves away from politicised and morally loaded terms such as terrorism, civil war, or insurgency, which often reflect the perspectives of actors rather than the underlying phenomenon itself. By conceptualising these diverse manifestations of violence under the broader and more neutral category of intrastate armed conflict, the research provides a consistent analytical framework that avoids normative bias and remains compatible with both realist ontology and positivist epistemology. This conceptual framing enables the study to focus on structural feasibility conditions, geography, economic opportunity, and institutional reach, rather than ideological justifications or competing moral narratives. Moreover, the study advances the conceptual integration of operational and economic feasibility as two interdependent dimensions of conflict feasibility. While these dimensions are often treated separately in the

literature, this research demonstrates their intersection, for instance, how proximity to porous borders simultaneously enhances insurgent mobility (operational feasibility) and facilitates access to illicit trade (economic feasibility). This integrated framework offers a more comprehensive understanding of how different structural factors converge to sustain armed conflicts within a state.

Finally, by situating the concept of intrastate armed conflict within Pakistan's unique political and geographical landscape, the study refines the empirical applicability of broader conflict typologies. It thus contributes to the conceptual clarity of conflict studies by offering an adaptable, context-sensitive framework that can be employed in analysing other multi-conflict environments beyond Pakistan.

Policy Relevance

Beyond its academic contributions, this study carries significant policy relevance for Pakistan's ongoing struggle with internal insecurity. The findings highlight that conflicts persist not merely because of ideological or ethnic differences but because structural feasibility conditions, rugged terrain, weak border control, and socio-economic deprivation, allow armed groups to survive and operate. By grounding policy recommendations in empirical evidence, the study offers a practical framework for conflict prevention and resolution. It suggests that policymakers shift from reactive, military-centric approaches to structural and preventive strategies that focus on reducing the feasibility of conflict through improved governance, human development, and border management.

These findings are equally relevant for international development partners, humanitarian agencies, and regional stakeholders. They provide a data-driven basis for prioritising aid, designing targeted interventions, and strengthening institutions in conflict-prone regions. By linking structural feasibility to human security, the study bridges the gap between academic theory and

actionable policy, offering lessons that extend beyond Pakistan's borders to other contexts facing persistent intrastate violence.

Filling the Literature Gap

Lastly, this study fills a critical gap in the existing scholarship on Pakistan's internal armed conflicts. Previous research has largely concentrated on ideological, sectarian, or grievance-based explanations, often relying on descriptive or region-specific qualitative accounts. While such studies provide valuable contextual insights, they have generally lacked systematic empirical analysis at the sub-national level capable of testing structural hypotheses across multiple conflict zones. By integrating district-level quantitative analysis with qualitative contextual interpretation, this research offers a more comprehensive and empirically grounded understanding of the structural drivers of conflict in Pakistan. It thereby introduces a new analytical lens for studying intrastate violence, one that combines the explanatory strength of the feasibility hypothesis with the local specificity of subnational data. This contribution extends beyond Pakistan, offering a replicable framework for researchers examining the structural feasibility of conflict in other developing or multi-ethnic states. In doing so, it bridges a long-standing divide between macro-level theories of conflict and the micro-level realities through which such conflicts unfold.

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Limitations of the Study

This research has provided valuable insights, but at the same time, I must acknowledge its limitations that may influence or limit the scope, depth, and generalizability of findings. Recognising and outlining these limitations maintains academic integrity and sets the stage for future research to address these gaps.

Generalizability Beyond the Case Study

The most evident limitation of this study lies in its focus on a single country, Pakistan. This narrow focus enabled a detailed, context-specific analysis but naturally restricts the direct generalisability of the findings. The empirical estimates should therefore not be transplanted to other countries as ready-made predictions or policy prescriptions. Similarly, as the quantitative analysis was cross-sectional, the results represent a particular time frame (2007–2017) and may not hold under significantly altered political or economic conditions. However, the theoretical framework and methodological design developed here, particularly the operationalisation of structural feasibility through district-level data and mixed-methods analysis, can be adapted for comparative applications in other national or regional contexts before drawing broader inferences or policy implications.

Theoretical Scope

Another limitation relates to the theoretical framework adopted. This research was primarily guided by the Feasibility Hypothesis, which emphasises structural factors, operational and economic feasibility, as the necessary enabling conditions for rebellion. However, as argued in earlier chapters, feasibility is necessary but not sufficient for explaining conflict: while it determines where rebellion is possible, it does not alone explain why or when violence erupts. Consequently, this framework excluded grievance-based variables such as ethnic discrimination, political exclusion, or state repression, which may interact with feasibility conditions to influence conflict dynamics. Including such variables could have provided a more holistic model but was beyond the analytical scope of this study and limited by data constraints.

Data Constraints and Limitations

The availability, quality, and consistency of district-level data also constrained the study. Several potentially important variables, particularly those reflecting the "greed" dimension of economic feasibility, such as revenues from natural resource extraction, narcotics trade, or external funding, could not be included due to the absence of reliable and disaggregated data. Similarly, standardised data on political participation, ethnic composition, and counterinsurgency operations were unavailable or inconsistent across time. Consequently, the analysis relied on a limited set of theoretically justified proxy variables, average slope, road density, HDI, and border proximity, to represent operational and economic feasibility.

While these proxies are widely used in relevant research, they may not fully capture the multi-dimensional and context-specific realities of armed conflict. Event data on insurgency-related deaths may also suffer from reporting bias or undercounting, varying across districts and years, which could attenuate or distort the estimated relationships. In addition, certain proxies, such as border proximity as an indirect measure of illicit economies, might conflate multiple mechanisms (e.g., ethnic ties, governance, or geography), thus limiting causal precision. To maintain spatial consistency, the study excluded Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu & Kashmir and merged newly created districts into their parent units; while improving comparability, this may introduce selection or aggregation biases that affect the precision of subnational estimates.

Methodological Limitations

Although the mixed-methods design adopted in this research helped address some limitations of purely quantitative or qualitative studies, it too had inherent constraints. The qualitative component relied entirely on secondary sources and did not include primary fieldwork, interviews, or focus groups due to practical limitations, security concerns, and restricted access to

conflict zones. As a result, the perceptions and lived experiences of conflict-affected communities could not be directly captured.

On the quantitative side, the cross-sectional model did not account for temporal or spatial dependence. Conflicts often cluster in both space and time; hence, ignoring spatial autocorrelation may bias standard errors and underestimate the influence of neighbouring conflicts. Moreover, despite diagnostic checks, omitted variable bias and endogeneity cannot be ruled out, as unobserved factors such as informal governance capacity, policing strength, or external sponsorship might influence both feasibility conditions and conflict intensity. The use of log-transformed variables improved normality but may have understated the influence of extreme high-intensity outliers. A longitudinal or spatially explicit design could address many of these issues in future research.

Exclusion of Post-Conflict Dynamics

Lastly, this study focused exclusively on identifying the structural conditions that make armed conflict feasible. It did not extend to examining the dynamics of conflict onset, persistence, resolution, or post-conflict peacebuilding. Future research could build on this foundation by exploring how these same structural conditions influence the durability of peace or the recurrence of violence after formal cessation.

Future Research Directions

Building upon the findings and acknowledging the limitations of this study, several potential avenues for future research emerge. These directions are important for expanding academic understanding of intrastate armed conflicts and informing more effective conflict prevention and resolution strategies in Pakistan and beyond.

One of the key limitations highlighted above was its single-country focus. Future studies could adopt a comparative cross-country design to test the general applicability of the feasibility hypothesis in different socio-political contexts. By analysing multiple cases of intrastate armed conflicts across various regions, researchers can assess whether the structural feasibility factors identified in Pakistan, such as rugged terrain, border proximity, and low human development, exert similar influence elsewhere or if local political, ethnic, and historical conditions moderate their effects. Such comparative analysis could also help refine the theoretical framework by identifying additional variables that interact with feasibility factors in shaping conflict dynamics.

Another promising direction is to incorporate grievance-based variables into future quantitative models alongside feasibility related factors. This could include indicators such as ethnic exclusion, political repression, state violence, and levels of inequality or discrimination. This allows researchers to empirically test the interplay between factors on both sides and determine the factors which matter more under specific circumstances. A multi-theoretical approach, for example, combining feasibility, grievance, and opportunity-cost explanations, can potentially offer a more holistic understanding of the drivers of intrastate conflict.

This study relied on cross-sectional district-level data, which limited the ability to analyse how structural conditions and conflict dynamics evolve over time. Future research should adopt longitudinal or time-series designs to track changes in conflict intensity, governance capacity, and socio-economic development over multiple years or decades. This would allow for a better understanding of causal relationships and help understand whether the improvements in human development, state presence, or border control contribute to long-term conflict decline. Time-series analysis would also capture the effects of policy interventions, peace agreements, and other political developments on conflict patterns.

A notable data gap in this research was the absence of reliable district-level greed-related indicators, such as proceeds from natural resource exploitation, narcotics trade, smuggling, or external financial support to insurgent groups. Future studies can attempt to collect and incorporate these variables, either through official data sources, field surveys, or third-party databases. Understanding how such financial incentives interact with operational feasibility and socio-economic deprivation would provide a fuller picture of the economic underpinnings of insurgency.

The increasing availability of large-scale conflict datasets and improvements in computational capacity open new possibilities for research. One promising direction is the application of advanced techniques such as machine learning or geospatial modelling, which are better suited for identifying complex, non-linear relationships in the data patterns that conventional regression-based approaches might easily miss. As conflict studies increasingly intersect with data science, this represents an important methodological frontier. For example, machine learning algorithms could help isolate high-risk regions or predict spikes in violence by drawing from a broad combination of structural, economic, and geographic indicators. Beyond just improving predictions, these tools can help uncover unexpected interactions between variables, offering researchers a fresh lens through which to revisit long-standing assumptions. However, their use must be grounded in solid theoretical reasoning and robust empirical validation to avoid misinterpretation or overfitting.

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Appendices

Figure 21 Correlation Independent Variables

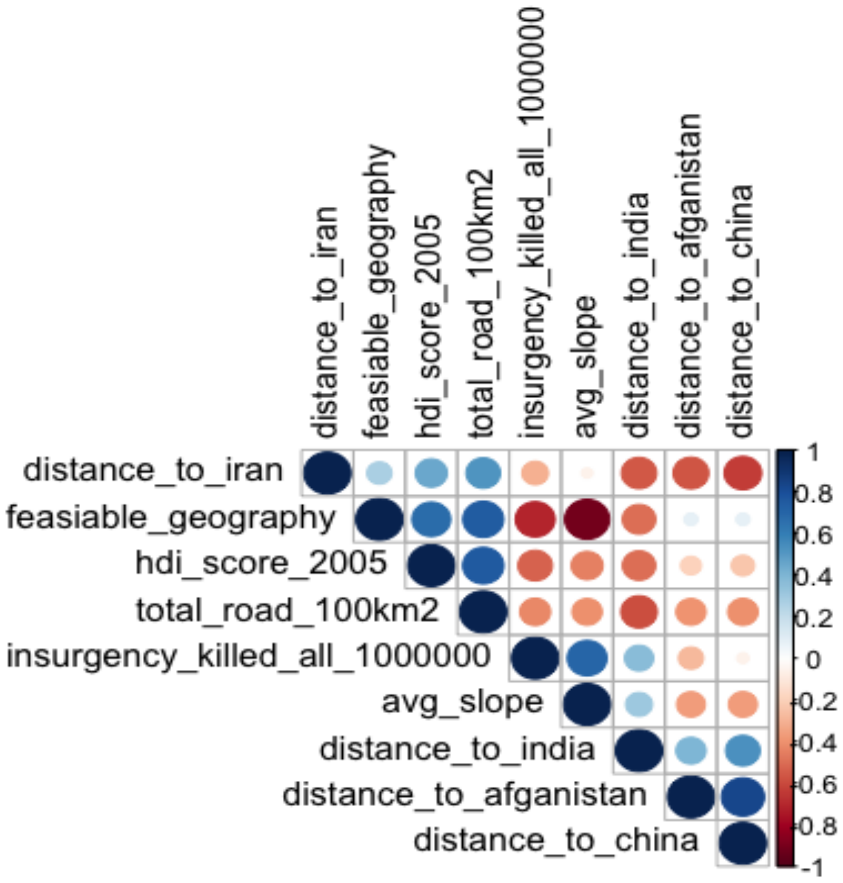

Figure 22 Q-Q plot

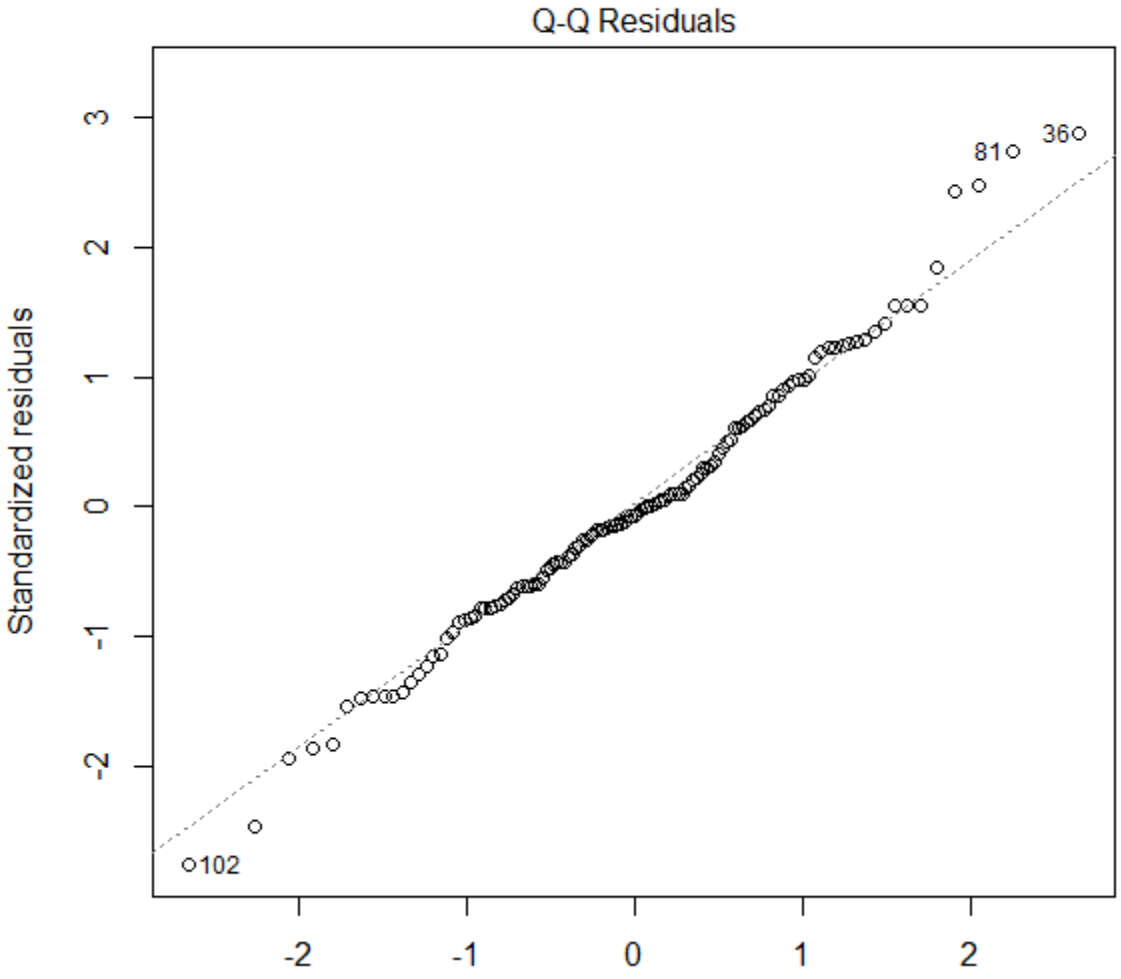

Figure 23 Residuals vs Fitted