

THE HUMAN SECURITY PARADOX: ANALYZING THE IMPACT OF ISKP
TRANSNATIONAL MILITANCY ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND
BORDERLAND COMMUNITIES (2021-2026)

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Article Details

Received on 23 May, 2026

Accepted on 28 June,
2026

Published on 30 June,
2026

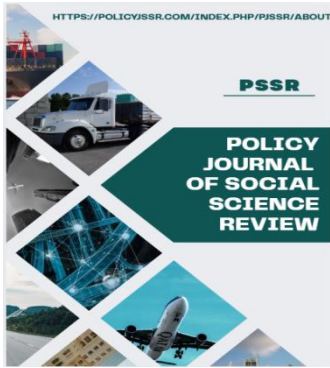
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ABSTRACT

The post-2021 development of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) is analysed in terms of the implications for sustainable development and human security in the Afghanistan-Pakistan (Af-Pak) borderlands and how ISKP's development affects the region. This study examines how the post-2021 evolution of Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) affects human security and sustainable development in the Afghanistan-Pakistan (Af-Pak) borderlands and how the development of ISKP impacts on the region. In this paper, a dual conceptual framework (Human Security Paradigm and Borderland Theory) is applied to the analysis of the "human security paradox" as a different way of looking at ISKP than found in the mainstream security and development studies literature, which tends to focus on a state-centric and kinetic lens disregarding human development. The study adopts a qualitative desk research approach, involving a systematic analysis of content and thematic coding of valid secondary sources from 2021 to 2026. The results indicate that the Pakistan Armed Forces' high-risk kinetic operations have been essential in securing the country against territorial invasion, in combating the urban terror cells and ensuring a necessary level of security but taking a purely military-first approach is not feasible in the long term. The result of these aggressive anti-insurgency measures by the State, including heavy border fencing and market freezes, is to have effects that are unintended at best, and at worst, to shut down borderland economies and to stall UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 8 and SDG 16), thus marginalizing the local population and systematically exploiting them by transnational networks for recruitment. Finally, the paper suggests that military force is a necessary precondition for creating the initial order and that long-term regional stability will only be achieved if there is an immediate shift towards a more comprehensive and community-based civilian administration, with emphasis on flexibility, local economic development, institutional

Policy Journal of Social Science Review



ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

strengthening, and a more flexible approach to human security.

Keywords: Transnational Militancy, ISKP (Islamic State Khorasan Province), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Economics, Development Studies, Borderland Communities, Human Security Paradigm, Borderland Theory, Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs), Af-Pak Borderlands, Durand Line, Post-2021 Security Vacuum, , Torkham and Chaman, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan Armed Forces, Kinetic Counterterrorism, State-Response Catch-22, Economic Growth (SDG 8).

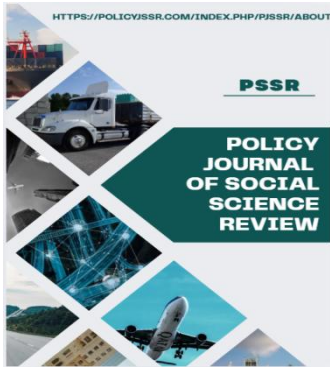
Background of the Study

In August 2021, the pullout of the United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces from Afghanistan ushered in a turning point in the modern security landscape of South and Central Asia. The following year, the Western-backed civilian administration was taken over by the Afghan Taliban and their return to power quickly reshaped the regional militant landscape. The withdrawal of foreign forces did not only leave the disintegrated geography of the Afghanistan-Pakistan (Af-Pak) borderlands unchecked but also left a huge operational and intelligence gap. As multiple armed groups sought to make the best of the new political situation, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) proved to be the most successful, violent, and adaptable transnational threat in the region (United States Institute of Peace, 2024). ISKP was initially established in late-2014 by a motley crew of disillusioned al-Qaeda figures, defiant commanders from the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and radical splinter groups of the Afghan Taliban, and was hit hard by a combination of U.S. led

military operations and concurrent insurgent strikes by the Taliban (International Crisis Group, 2023) between 2019 and 2020 when it lost its territory. But 2021 was a year of paralysis in traditional external intelligence operations enabled the organization to carry out a well-coordinated organizational shift. ISKP's effort was not to hold on to territory, but to be able to shift into a highly decentralized, asymmetrical urban warfare network (Eggink, 2026). In the process, it raised its strategic agenda above a localised borderland conflict to a much wider and international campaign that could extend its violence across the whole of South Asia, Central Asia and into the rest of the world.

The first symptom of ISKP's post-withdrawal approach was the onset of a large-scale increase in urban mass-casualty terrorism aimed at unsettling the government legitimacy now accepted by the Afghan Taliban. The group gained worldwide recognition in the overthrow of Kabul's evacuation process from Hamid Karzai International Airport in August 2021, when it carried out a suicide mission

Policy Journal of Social Science Review



ISSN Online:3006-4635

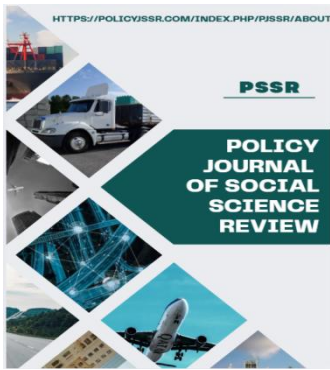
ISSN Print: 3006-4627

at Abbey Gate that killed more than 170 Afghan civilians and 13 U.S. service members (United States Institute of Peace, 2024). This was a calculated atrocity that was a strategic declaration of intent and effectively put ISKP on the front line of Salafi-jihadism as the best, uncompromised force in the world to counter the Taliban (Gohel, 2024) who represented the nation bound governance model. After this sensational attack, ISKP started a systematic programme of domestic subversion. The group attacked critical facilities, religious minorities, especially Shiite Hazara communities and foreign diplomatic missions in Kabul, such as the Pakistan and Russian embassies, and a hotel that is commonly used by Chinese businessmen (Hosseini & Akhgari, 2025) between 2021 and 2023. This campaign was designed to erode the Taliban's image of having internal security, as well as dissuading possible foreign direct investment or diplomatic relations from the regional powers. ISKP's operations then achieved a local-foreign structural dualism, maintaining a fluid presence in traditional strongholds in the eastern provinces, where the erstwhile Durand Line is porous, while simultaneously building up clandestine operational cells north of Durand Line to the northeastern provinces and larger cities (International Crisis Group, 2023). The defensive flexibility enabled the group to some extent

to gain recruits from other extremist groups that were dismayed by the Taliban's tactical diplomatic approach to non-Muslim neighboring states.

The security threats from ISKP were qualitatively transformed by 2024, moving from an insurgency with more localized aspects to a transnational threat on a systemic level. During this period, there were a number of concerning analytical tracking reports by the United Nations Security Council indicating the group's regional operational footprint (United Nations Security Council, 2026). The group made its operations more targeted towards neighbouring states, taking advantage of the historical weaknesses and shared insurgencies of the Af-Pak border war along the Durand Line (Small Wars Journal, 2026). As the conflict over the border spiraled out of control, the escalation of military exchanges and clashes between the two states of Pakistan and Afghanistan created an environment of chaos, which ISKP took advantage of by weaponizing it (Center for Research and Security Studies (2025)). With the traditional military focus of the State fading from one aspect of the border to another, in order to deal with regional separatist groups and the other, to deal with cross-border skirmishing, ISKP took advantage of these security vacuums to carry out a series of devastating sectarian bombings, targeted political assassinations

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ISSN Online:3006-4635

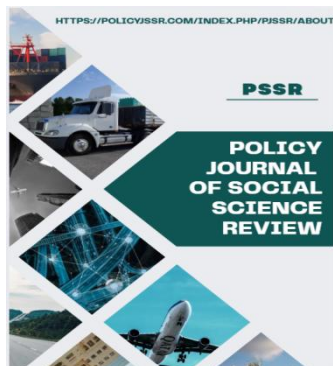
ISSN Print: 3006-4627

and cross-border operations. The first double-suicide bombing in Kerman, Iran, in early 2024 of a memorial service, which verified ISKP's ability to plan and execute within the confines of neighboring sovereign territory, is a prime example of this regional projection (United Nations Security Council, 2026). The sophisticated external operation conducted at the Crocus City Hall in Moscow was followed by the foreign operation carried out by Central Asian networks in the farthest region (Eggink, 2026). At the same time, in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces of Pakistan, ISKP rampaged, carrying out mass casualty bombings at political gatherings and security forces to deliberately unsettle the internal political stability in the province (Center for Research and Security Studies, 2025). The multi-directional projection of violence indicates that ISKP is no longer a secondary actor operating in the shadows of South Asian security but, now, it has begun to come out of the shadows and become a transnational nexus with decentralised command structures to inspire, fund and coordinate mass-casualty events across international boundaries (Institute of Strategic Studies Research Analysis, 2026).

A crucial aspect of ISKP's domination following 2021 is that it has developed a far-reaching propaganda system using its official media outlet, the Al-Azaim

Foundation, and its digital magazine, The Voice of Khorasan, which is widely circulated. (Eggink, 2026) ISKP adapted its digital messaging to the local languages, targeting the ethnic and political divisions in the Af-Pak borderlands and Central Asia by producing Pashto, Dari, Urdu, Tajik, Uzbek and English messages (International Crisis Group, 2023). The communication strategy intentionally aims at the marginalised youth, religious minorities and radicalized security forces in the region. ISKP has been able to enter semi-encrypted, decentralized digital communication channels, embedding violent jihadist narratives in them, and has successfully created virtual recruitment pipelines that surpass the physical barriers and traditional intelligence surveillance faced by governments (United Nations Security Council, 2026). On the volatile borderland corridors where the formal economic livelihoods have been harshly affected by conflict and border fencing, ISKP is able to provide financial gains and ideological safe haven due to its digital reach (Small Wars Journal, 2026). This virtual entrenchment allows the group to be a very resilient threat - if their nodes of physical leadership are eliminated on the ground, another operational node will be created somewhere else in the virtual network and can operate independently. The group's evolution over the past few years has thus been remarkable, evolving from an

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ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

insurgent organization that had been geographically limited to one that is now transnational and can exploit geopolitical tensions, developmental gaps, and undermine the institutional security landscape of several sovereign states in the Af-Pak borderlands and beyond (Institute of Strategic Studies Research Analysis, 2026; United States Institute of Peace, 2024).

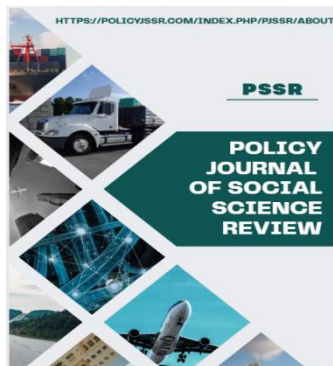
The Conceptual Paradox:

The structural tension between the traditional national security approaches and the comprehensive nature of human development is the conceptual paradox that lies behind this term. The conceptual paradox behind this term is the structural tension between orthodox national security approaches and the comprehensive nature of human development. In the face of transnational threats such as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) on porous borderlands, a nation-state's initial institutional instinct is to use hard-power, kinetic counterterrorism tools. These actions generally involve setting up fixed border fences, setting up checkpoints that are armed with military power and establishing long-term curfews and prohibitions on crossing the border. These strategies aim to cut off the logistical supply lines of militants and to establish state territorial sovereignty, but fail to recognize the borderlands as a dynamic socio-economic socio-ecosystem that is

lived. As a result, it causes a devastating human security impact on the people living in the border areas who are entirely dependent on cross-border trading, day labour and agrarian supply chains. Movement restrictions by the state have immediate consequences in terms of food insecurity, inability to access healthcare in the region, and the inability of local livelihoods to function for these marginalised communities, who rely on informal economies for their livelihood.

Moreover, this imbalance of operation essentially stalls progress on the agenda of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in parts of its agenda that are already being neglected on a systemic level. Under the guise of national security, economic pillars necessary for SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) are being undermined as cross-border mobility is limited and local markets are closed. Concurrently, military operations that are too strong and the marginalization of traditional civic administrative processes hinder the creation of good governance systems, which is directly against SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). This is a vicious cycle: socioeconomic devastation and alienation that grows from aggressive state policies only worsens local grievances, thus reinforcing the extremist threat. Then local despair is used by radical groups such as ISKP to create virtual recruitment

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ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

pipelines and networks that are hidden from police surveillance. Local despair is then exploited by radical groups like ISKP, who use it to recruit people and build networks that police can't see. In conclusion, any security arrangement that undermines the human security of individuals in the name of state security, will ultimately result in a vicious circle that will be self-destructive as long term regional security is not linked to development at the grass root level and to human-centered governance.

Statement of the Problem

The overall issue that has contributed to the continued instability in Af-Pak borderlands is the lack of 'micro-to-macro' linkage and gap between the state level counterterrorism strategy and human development indicators. National and regional security strategies are mostly focused on kinetic interventions, sharing information and intelligence, and military border management to neutralise high-profile transnational threats such as ISKP. Yet, this is an abstracted security polity that exists outside of the socioeconomic dynamics of place, and mostly fails to account for the impact on local human development that is caused by these operations. The success of the state's military apparatus is defined by neutralisations, looted supplies and fortified borders, while the realities of the grassroots show a very different economy

that is being displaced, with faltering agrarian supply chains and increased poverty.

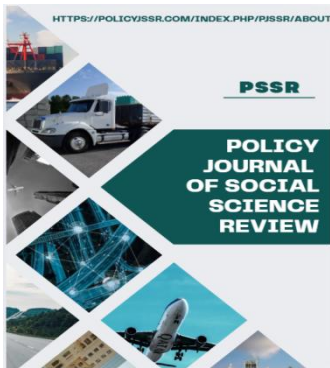
States' policies are oblivious to the close ties between developmental deprivation and recruitment by extremist groups, as they view borderlands solely as operational combat zones, excluding the human ecosystem. The high-level security campaigns tend to go against grass-root measures of human development, and are choking off local day-labor jobs and disrupting local civic administrative systems. Kinetic military victories are only temporary and the governance and security vacuum grows more perilous as the long-term development indicators such as youth employment, food security and institutional trust continue to fall. This deep policy divide also does little to address the underlying vulnerabilities, and instead leaves marginal communities in the borderlands in a dangerous cycle – one in which the social, economic despair that is the target of transnational militant organization becomes the very thing those groups seek to benefit from.

Research Questions

o How will the transnational militancy of ISKP impact local economic and sustainable development structures between 2021 – 2026?

How does state-level kinetic counterterrorism response result in a

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ISSN Print: 3006-4627

"human security paradox" for communities of the borderland?

The significance of the study

The relevance of this study is that it consciously attempts to fill the ever-growing analytical divide between security studies and development studies, which have traditionally worked in two separate spheres. Traditionally, the study of security has been dominated by issues of state sovereignty, territorial integrity and kinetic counterterrorism indicators, while the study of development has been dominated by issues of institutional capacity, economic growth and poverty alleviation. This study brings together these different fields of study in one analytical framework by applying a human lens to the study of transnational militancy such as ISKP in Af-Pak borderlands. It is not just a rejection of a traditional state-centred approach to security, but also a recognition that security cannot be obtained in an environment devoid of development, and development cannot be realised in a purely militarised security environment.

In addition, this research is of great empirical and conceptual importance to the policy makers, international bodies, and scholars involved in fragile zones. It conceptualizes borderlands as not just a place of security threats that are to be controlled through exclusion but as a dynamic socioeconomic human ecology. In sum, this research is important because of

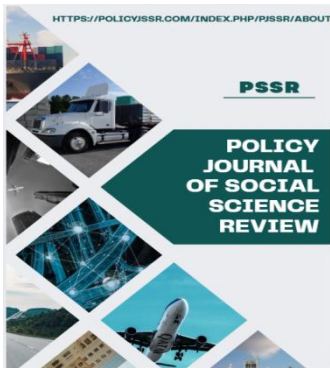
its potential to transform the regional security design, by shifting the focus from a grand narrative of democracy and human rights to a new one that prioritizes “grass-roots” human development indicators, local economic resilience and human security as the main, essential pillars of combating transnational extremism.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

A. War and Peace Paradigm

The Human Security Paradigm is an epistemological shift in the global security paradigm, intentionally shifting the analytical lens away from orthodox, Westphalian conceptions of state sovereignty and towards protecting and empowering the individual human life. This framework directly draws strongly from the foundational intellectual contribution of Pakistan economist Mahbub ul Haq and Indian philosopher Amartya Sen, who structurally re-engineered the global development discourse with the Human Development Report for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1994) where he argued that security should not be understood as the struggle for territorial defense through armaments, but as a much wider concern about human life and human dignity. This is in tandem with Sen's pioneering concept of the “capabilities approach” which holds that development and security should not be measured only in terms of macro-economic

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ISSN Print: 3006-4627

indicators, such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth but in terms of the significant freedom and capabilities that people have to live in ways they have reason to value (Sen, 1999).

If adapted to the volatile territory of Af-Pak, this paradigm requires an in-depth analysis in four overlapping aspects of human security:

Economic Security: Based on the principle of a guaranteed basic income and livelihood opportunities. In marginalised peripheral areas, the structural weakening of local economies leaves people in a vulnerable position where they are often coerced – often through financial incentives – into violent service of non-state armed groups.

Food Security: Physical, social and economic access to adequate, safe and nutritious food for everyone at all times to achieve an active life.

Health Security: Ensuring the basic level of protection against diseases, malnutrition and unhealthy living, which is seriously undermined by conflict destroying local infrastructure.

Personal Security: Security concerns around individuals from physical violence, be it from military crossfire in the name of the State or domestic abuse, and from the predation of transnational terror organizations such as ISKP.

The research examines the borderlands with four lenses: state-centric, kinetic

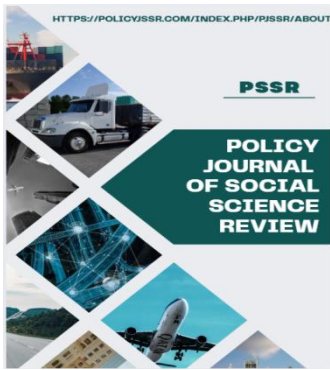
counterterrorism responses that stabilize the state may destabilize individual survival responses, thus creating structural vulnerabilities for community to be co-opted by insurgents; borderlands are geospatial, and in this aspect they serve as contexts for analyzing how insurgents and their allies cultivate, coordinate, and enact their violence; borderlands are cultural, with a focus on how the cultural aspects of borderlands are subject to contestation and negotiation; and borderlands are political, in the sense of how they function as landscapes of political struggle and contestation.

B. Sustainable Development in Fragile Zones

Implementing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in fragile and conflict-affected contexts shows that there are pervasive structural linkages between human development and security baselines. For example, in the field of fragile zones, empirical facts show that systemic violence has a very constraining impact on the effectiveness of the institutions. This phenomenon is especially noticeable when looking at SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions' and SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth' operational targets.

The SDG 16 states that sustainable development cannot occur in vacuum of peace, inclusiveness and transparent and accountable governance architectures

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ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

(United Nations, 2015). Through carefully planned campaigns of violence, transnational networks such as ISKP purposefully disintegrate trust and rule of law within local civic space, and local civic administrative structures. The institutional erosion directly hinders the achievement of SDG 8 - promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth and full, productive and decent jobs for all (United Nations, 2015). Particularly in fragile contexts, where there is no reliable, predictable baseline, there is no ability to save and invest for the long term, and there is no attraction of foreign or domestic investment, leaving the local workforce in extremely unsettled informal day-labor positions. As such, development and security work very hand-in-hand: kinetic security operations that fail to consider institutional resilience and market stability freeze the very development metrics used to foster sustainable, long-term regional peace.

C. Borderland Theory

Borderland Theory provides a critical geographical and sociological approach that goes beyond the image of borders as mere static, cartographic lines on a map or as an expression of Westphalian state sovereignty, and theorizes borders as dynamic and fluid socio-economic ecosystems that are highly vulnerable. In classical political geography the borders of the world were seen as the fixed and

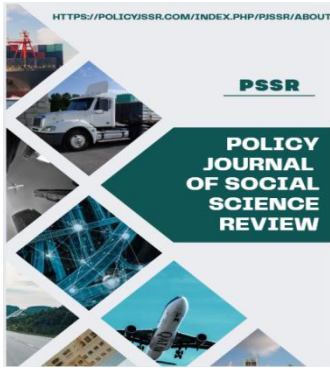
inviolable boundaries of states, which have to be enforced with a border fence and border patrols (Baud & Van Schendel, 1997). Borderland theorists, however, have disagreed with assimilationists and claimed that the borderlands have their own social spaces, with their own, transnational kinship networks, reliance on informal markets and complex cultural hybridity, that function outside of the state's center.

These areas that are often physically remote from the state capital, economically under-invested and have significant governance gaps, are extremely vulnerable to the exploitation of violent non-state actors (VNSAs). Transnational insurgent cartels such as ISKP target borderlands as safe zones for operation and as logistical hubs. They actively exploit the lack of human security or even formal economic opportunities in the State and enter the institutional void to provide alternative governance, parallel judicial systems and illegal trans-border economies. VNSAs expand and intensify the spatial and political antagonism between neighbouring states, around which the socio-economic microlandscape becomes a military frontline of transnational resistance, of border regions as frontlines of the contradictions of state centric security.

Methodology

Based on the complexity of transnational terrorism and human development in the Af-Pak borderlands, this study follows an

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ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

exploratory and rigorous qualitative desk research design. The method is based on a thorough systematic document analysis and meta-analysis of approved secondary data. This design employs careful triangulation of macro-level institutional information, empirical conflict information, and localized digital propaganda text, to avoid primary field data collection in areas of active conflict corridors and thus ensure analytical objectivity and structural replicability.

This desk research is secured in terms of its structural integrity with rigorous Data Sourcing and Verification Matrix with three separate operational layers. Firstly, data from institutional and multilateral sources is collected from reliable sources such as the United Nations Security Council analytical support and sanctions monitoring reports, the security briefs of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), and socio-economic country profiles from the World Bank or the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). They serve as a point of reference for regional governance trends and indicators of human development. Second, empirical conflict indicators are cross-vetted and verified through the use of independent tracking databases such as the South Asia Terror Portal (SATP), the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) and the International Crisis Group's (ICG) deep-dive situational reports. This second

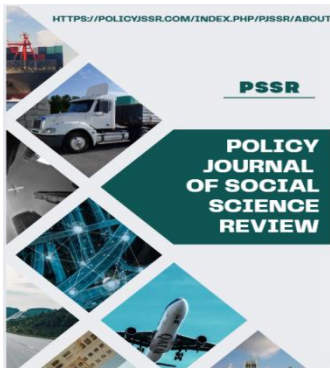
layer filters out political rhetoric in confirming precise casualty counts, tactical locations and the changing dynamics of violence. Third, a main propaganda tracking element is included by the compilation of translated official digital outputs of ISKP's Al-Azaim Foundation, mainly aimed at their English-language flagship magazine, The Voice of Khorasan.

The qualitative content analysis (QCA) is used as the main data analysis method in processing the collected textual data. Inductive and deductive thematic categories are used to systematically code the policy documents, institutional reports and propaganda texts in the specified period of 2021-2026. This analytical approach identifies common patterns or themes, such as themes of the impact of closures on the border, 'infrastructural sabotage' and 'recruitment targeting of marginalised youth'. The coding system enables the study to follow the interaction and influence of high-level operations of the kinetic phenomena and their impact on grass-roots sustainable development frameworks, and provides an open, verifiable way to map the human security paradox across the regional borderlands.

The Destruction of Local Development (2021-2026) is ISKP's Transnational Strategy.

The withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan in August 2021 removed the external security and

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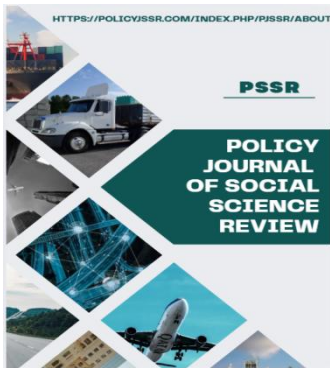
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intelligence structure, resulting in a huge security and intelligence vacuum. The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) before this withdrawal was more of a local insurgency. It was very hobbled by ongoing US drone operations, joint special operations military forces, and the heavy territorial conflict with the defunct Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and Afghan Taliban. But the swift loss of Western air superiority and surveillance completely changed the region's militant ecosystem paving the way for ISKP to conduct an impressive and advanced organisational shift. The group shifted away from resource-intensive and fruitless campaigns for territorial control - that had resulted in heavy losses in Nangarhar and Kunar in the east - and adopted a more decentralised, highly mobile urban warfare strategy. This strategic change in the character of threat put it from a local threat to a powerful regional asymmetrical force. ISKP set up a soft operating base of clandestine urban cells throughout its traditional geography of the Durand Line, operating from the major cities of Afghanistan and now spilling over into neighbouring Pakistan, Central Asia and Iran, where it has introduced violence.

This transnational re-engineered approach has directly aided in the process of regional economic integration leading to an atmosphere of “development sabotage”

that is seriously hindering the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). One of ISKP's key priorities in its plans for 2021 is the deliberate and systematic attack on vital energy infrastructure, cross-border energy projects and development corridors. ISKP has perpetrated several kinetic attacks to challenge the legitimacy of Afghan government and dissuade the international community from recognizing the Afghan Taliban and also to ward off foreign commercial investments and regional connectivity networks. This involves targeted attacks on infrastructure set up by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), both of which play an important role in achieving long-term economic stability in the region. ISKP has managed to raise the political risk premiums for foreign investors through its high-profile operations like the attack on a Kabul hotel that was a frequent destination of Chinese businessmen in the country, and attacks on strategic trade corridors, in December 2022. In addition, the group has been actively threatening to attack-impact major energy projects in the region like Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline and Central Asia-South Asia power project (CASA-1000). ISKP has thus posed permanent security problems along those multi-billion dollar infrastructure corridors and put a brake on

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ISSN Online:3006-4635

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the process of regional integration. This infrastructural warfare directly hinders the achievement of SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), by constraining capital inflows, infrastructural expansion and job creation needed to reduce poverty in the borderlands regions.

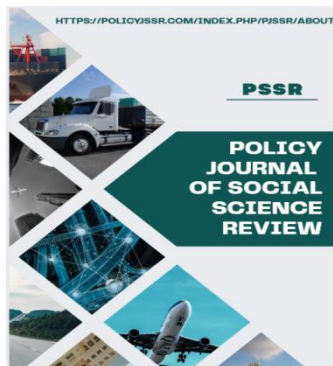
ISKP's transnational approach extends beyond actual physical infrastructure sabotage, and is designed to severely undermine the social base of development, through its systematic attack on local governance systems. At the heart of this campaign is a practice of targeted assassinations of community leaders, elders and civic administrators in the borderland communities. Tribal councils (jirgas) and community elders are key institutions in the Af-Pak border region's traditional socio-political structure for conflict resolution, community resource allocation and cooperation across the border. ISKP strategically targets these community leaders and creates a void in governance within the community. This campaign erodes the traditional non-state administrative structures and the formal civic actors, while threatening to create a non-institutionalized environment in which institutions are not built. This was an intentional degradation of institutions that directly contradicts the SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) target "Inclusive and transparent governance at all levels". Sustainable development cannot

proceed without inclusive, transparent, and accountable governance, both at national and local levels. The lack of local leadership and paralysis of local administrative bodies due to a fear of the state undermines the state's ability to provide basic public services like education, local dispute resolution, and distribution of developmental assistance. This is one way ISKP is able to extend its own parallel, far-flung, extreme authority over weak populations, a form of institutional collapse that it uses to maintain its transnational insurgency.

Human Security Paradox in Borderland Communities

Structural linkages between transnational terrorism and state-centric counter-insurgency in geographies of the periphery create what is conceptually called the human security paradox. In the Afghanistan-Pakistan (Af-Pak) borderlands, it looks like a profound system contradiction: the very system, mechanisms, strategies, and kinetic policies employed by sovereign states to secure their borders and neutralise militant groups like the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) undermine the individual, day-to-day survival mechanisms of the local population (International Crisis Group, 2023; United States Institute of Peace, 2024). The traditional security frameworks focus on Westphalian sovereignty, the state's longevity and the results of military

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ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

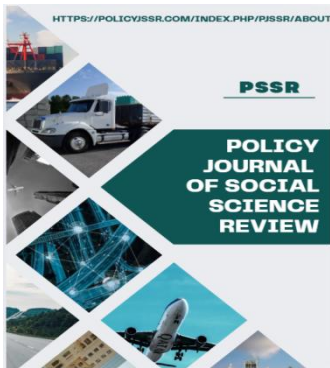
conflict as key indicators of stability. But if these hard-power options are applied to dynamic, tightly interwoven borderland ecosystems, they view these human spaces only as a passive geographical buffer or active “combat zone” (Small Wars Journal, 2026). As a result, there is a stark disconnect between high-level measures of state defense on the one hand and grassroots measures of human development on the other, resulting in a high vulnerability of the borderland communities from both sides of the conflict spectrum (Center for Research and Security Studies, 2025).

The analytical conundrum is the fact that the top-down approach to security is actually a weakness in fragile areas. The kinetic interventions create a buffer that prevents the state heartland from experiencing the transnational contagion of extremist acts of violence, but have disproportionately severe consequences for the borderland periphery. State-centric responses fail to recognize the basic fact that there are borderland communities with their own socio-economic realities, transnational kinship ties and informal survival strategies that don't follow the borders and maps of the state. Security sweeps by the state have a negative effect on the fragile equilibrium of human security, which includes personal, economic, food and health. Such deterioration of well-being not only causes

incidental socio-economic harm; it directly undermines the state's long-term security goals. Hard-power state measures weaken social cohesion by eroding localized institutional trust, challenging the traditional civic-administrative systems and have further deepened the systemic marginalisation (Institute of Strategic Studies Research Analysis, 2026). The human security paradox therefore illustrates a vicious circle: the narrow security goal of exclusively kinetic strategies creates the very conditions of socio-economic marginalisation, decay of institutions and deprivation of human beings that transnational networks such as ISKP systematically exploit, in order to extend their virtual recruitment networks and reinforce their asymmetrical operational networks (Eggink, 2026; United Nations Security Council, 2026).

The economy is being undermined and markets are being frozen. Economy is being sabotaged, markets are being frozen. Transnational terrorism with state-centric border management has evolved into a vicious economic-human security paradox in the Afghanistan-Pakistan (Af-Pak) frontier, with intense economic subversion and market freezes (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2026). At the fringes of these peripheral geographies, the state's main counterterrorism effort against groups such as Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and Tehrik-i-Taliban

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ISSN Print: 3006-4627

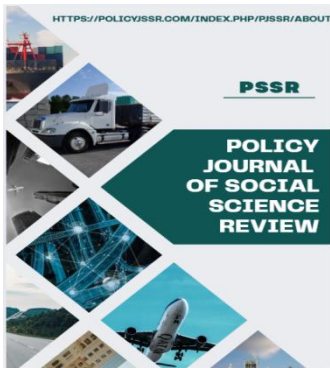
Pakistan (TTP) is focused on international crossings' securitization (The Asia Foundation, 2024). But these containment measures clash with the fact that the borderlands' socioeconomic context is fundamentally informal and fluid, with micro-level transactions taking place between the two sides (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2026). As an economic ecosystem, these can be viewed from a kinetic lens, with top-down state policies causing significant structural harm to civilian lifeline systems on the pretext of national security (Bloomsbury Intelligence and Security Institute, 2026).

A prime example of this structural conflict is the regular open-ended and unpredictable freezing of significant trade routes like the Torkham, Chaman and Spin Boldak, after an increase in militancy in the region (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2026). The operationally induced closures have immediate and catastrophic micro-level shocks on the lives of marginalized border communities (The Asia Foundation, 2024). Bilateral and transit trade drastically decreases, leaving thousands of supply containers in distress and costing local economies millions of dollars a day (Bloomsbury Intelligence and Security Institute, 2026). These market closures can be described as an economic blockade in the informal sector, as communities are completely reliant on daily cross-border movements and the

informal sector for their livelihoods and agrarian supply chains (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2026). At checkpoints, perishable agricultural produce goes bad, local businesses grind to a halt, and supply chains for key commodities break down, pushing food prices and inflation up higher and increasing food insecurity in the country (The Asia Foundation, 2024). These policies break the basic pillars needed to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8 on decent work and economic growth, by effectively blocking informal trade routes and not offering alternative economic opportunities from the state (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2026).

All this engineered economic stagnation, importantly, produces a bad, vicious security cycle (Vision of Humanity, 2026). Transnational extremist groups, such as ISKP, take advantage of the disenfranchisement of many people as a result of market freezes imposed by the state (Bloomsbury Intelligence and Security Institute, 2026). When the jobs either go away or aren't available, the people are driven into poverty (The Asia Foundation, 2024). The economic crisis is exploited to recruit economically vulnerable, marginalised youth for violent non-state actors (VNSAs) by providing them with alternative livelihood options through smuggling networks or by using financial

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incentives to drive financially vulnerable and marginalised youth into their recruitment and retention networks (Vision of Humanity, 2026). This state-centered approach that views trans-border economic flows mainly as an operational vulnerability, therefore, undermines community resilience in the face of radicalisation (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2026). So effective regional stability must be built on a policy change that acknowledges the need for local people to survive economically, rather than through heavy-handed militarization that freezes local markets, as the first step in tackling transnational extremism (Vision of Humanity, 2026).

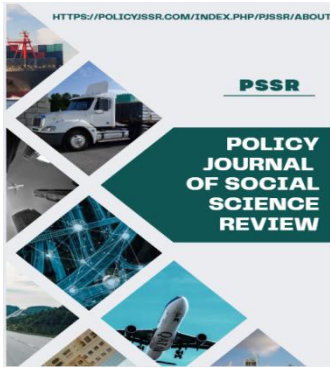
The State-Response Catch-22:

The interaction between the state and transnational violent non-state actors in peripheral frontiers is dynamic and finally results in a serious administrative problem, in conceptual terms, a state-response catch-22. The natural tendency of nation-states in the face of a more powerful group than them is to launch top-down, hyper-militarized counter-insurgency measures (Ahmad, 2024). They are structural in nature, with extensive use of rigid border fencing project construction on the Durand Line, network checkpoints, sweeping identity verification exercise, prolonged curfews and the like all designed to cut off the militant supply lines and protect territorial sovereignty (Rehman &

Sayed 2025). When applied to highly integrated borderland human ecosystems, however, these hard power policies produce some very serious system level paradoxes. The state-centric machine treats these socio-economic corridors that are lived as passive geographical buffer zones, and has the consequences the same way that directly reduces human security in the local area (Yusuf, 2024).

The essence of this catch-22 is that the military containment policies are counterproductive, because they inevitably feed the very conditions of marginalisation that fuel and radicalise extremists. Restrictions on mobility and sudden closure of borders do not just cut off militant networks, they also stifle the informal economies of marginalised populations that are fluid and cross-border, which is the main way they survive (Ahmad, 2024). Heavy-handed state action is causing vulnerable communities to sink deeper into poverty and resentment against central state authority by blocking agribusiness supply chains, reducing day-labor opportunities, and dividing families (Conflict Security Development Network [CSDN], 2026). The institutional alienation also means that the trust of the grassroots in the security apparatus of the state is being destroyed (Rehman & Sayed, 2025). The result is a cycle of policy failure as military responses to suppress the insurgents inadvertently weaken the socio-

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ISSN Online:3006-4635

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economic resilience of the community that is needed to withstand the attacks, and as attacks like those by ISKP cause social and economic despair, this further undermines state defenses (Yusuf, 2024).

Moreover, this security-focused deadlock provides transnational networks with a governance void created through the actions of states in response to their disruption. State military authorities and forces tend to overlook or underutilize traditional civic administrative structures and tribal mediation councils while focusing on kinetic metrics, which oftentimes results in marginalization of these institutions and/or exclusion of them from the process of institutional preservation and mediation (CSDN, 2026). State's presence is felt only through compulsion and economic limitations, therefore, there is lack of legitimacy in the house (Rehman & Sayed, 2025). These socio-economic networks or financial rewards are provided to young people who are disenfranchised or unemployed, who are also receiving messages from ISKP and its affiliates that the state is occupying them. The young disenfranchised, unemployed, are receiving messages from ISKP and its affiliates that the state is occupying them, while at the same time being offered parallel socio-economic networks or financial rewards. Finally, the state-response catch-22 highlights the weaknesses of the state-centric territorial

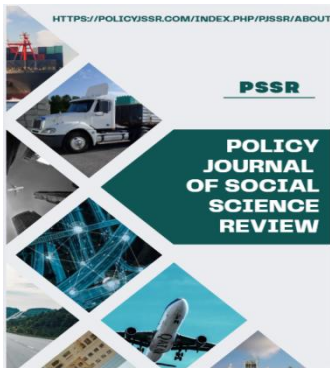
defense model, which inadvertently creates the conditions that breed long-term insurgency recruitment from human security concerns (CSDN, 2026; Yusuf, 2024).

Synthesis of Findings

The findings of this study indicate that the prevailing policy reality is that a "purely kinetic" definition of counterterrorism, based on military action alone, is fundamentally unsustainable in the long term unless it is connected to a realization of the underlying human security shortfalls. The kinetic operations, by their own nature, are meant to be operations that deter immediate physical threats, disrupt insurgent logistics and reinforce territorial boundaries against transnational threats, such as ISKP. This study shows however, that while active violence must be dealt with militarily, military action is only a symptom-buster and not a root cause solver of militancy. If security is seen only through kinetic measurements and structural human security gaps like economic paralysis, institutional decay, food insecurity and localized marginalization are not tackled, one is inadvertently perpetuating the very socio-economic void that is exploited by extremist networks for their survival and recruitment.

Importantly, these findings have to be put into perspective with the overwhelming burden that military forces of Pakistan

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have to shoulder. The Pakistan Armed Forces have shown remarkable resilience to the ever-changing, fluid, and asymmetrical threat environment along the very complex Durand Line, and the tremendous sacrifices of their institutions. The military's relentless counterterrorism operations have played a crucial role in stopping the wholesale territorial capture by transnational gangs, in also disrupting well-fabricated, urban terror cells, and in ensuring a vital element of security in an extremely hostile environment. These risky operations have been performed professionally, thus protecting the state center and creating an important buffer against a multi-directional security threat from outside.

But the main conclusion drawn from this study is that the military cannot alone be tasked with maintaining long-term political stability in the region. The military has eliminated the kinetic threat and put it under initial operational control, but the longevity of that peace will hinge on what happens next. For sustainability, a complete shift is needed from a kinetic to a comprehensive civil-administrative paradigm. The gains of operational space made by the military must be translated into strong civilian governance, revitalisation of the market economy of the borderland, infrastructural development and targeted human development. The results confirm that the capacity to use

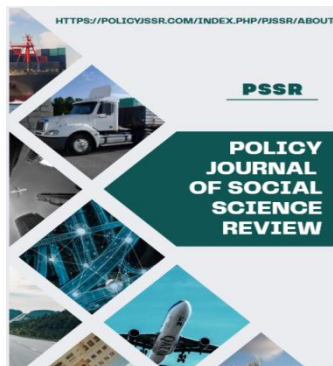
military force is a necessary condition for the creation of immediate order, but ultimately, success against transnational extremisms will rely on a more comprehensive, human-centric framework that sees the capacity to develop the local community and build community resilience as key elements of defence forces.

Policy Recommendations

If Pakistan is to evolve a viable security architecture based on these findings, it needs to move away from the military first approach and towards a comprehensive approach involving a whole-of-government approach. It is important to shift borderlands from conflict areas and regions to secure and resilient socio-economic systems through the elaboration of policies.

First, the state needs to set up a progressive and well-planned transfer of authority to a civilian government, whereby the community takes charge of the government. In this context, the federal and provincial governments should urgently enhance the operational security achieved by the Pakistan Armed Forces and build-up the operational capacity of local police and civilian administrative mechanism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Strengthening civil institutions and traditional conflict resolution councils (jirgas) is key to regain the trust of the public at the grassroots level and to

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counteract the narratives of governance of actors such as ISKP.

Second, the state should have a "Smart Border Management" procedure instead of blanket, open-ended border closures. Biometric scanning and separate transit lanes will enable the state to reduce the security risks without cooling local markets. Preserving major trade routes helps informal livelihoods, and supports United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Lastly, the state must strategically use specific socioeconomic development funds to the borderlands, focusing on youth employment, vocational training and development and critical infrastructure to structurally break extremist recruitment pipelines.

Conclusion

The changes in the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) landscape since 2021 have changed the geopolitical and security scenario of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. The methods and approaches currently used in conventional, state-centric counterterrorism are not enough to neutralise highly adaptive and decentralised transnational networks, as this study illustrates. The Pakistan Armed Forces have played the key role in ensuring a 'tactical balance' and establishing an 'institutional balance' by sacrificing deeply whenever the country faced any 'imminent external shock' while the military-first

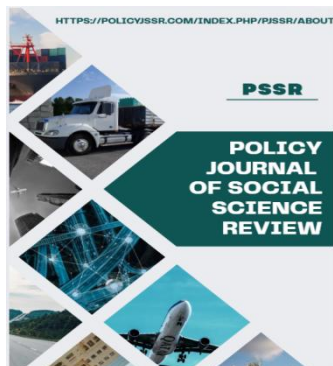
approach is not sustainable in the absence of any 'developmental vacuum'.

Top-down security processes are distorting grass-roots socio-economic processes that are necessary to realize the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 8 and 16 through blind spots in the handling of fluid borderlands. Such structural marginalisation and institutional alienation can, in the end, help to breed the very grievances which extremist groups are exploiting to develop recruitment pipelines. To break the human security paradox, there needs to be a paradigm shift. True regional stability can only be achieved through a holistic, human-centric framework which is fundamentally able to integrate the tactical gains of the military into a responsive civilian management of state, border and local economy.

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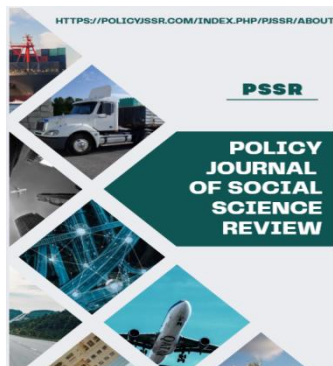


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