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The Dilemma of Existential Threat: Understanding the Resurgence of Conflict in Tribal Areas through the Lens of Ontological Insecurities

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Abstract

The re-emergence of conflict in Pakistan's tribal areas bordering Afghanistan has generated intense debate among academics. While existing research links the conflict to Afghanistan's situation, this study offers a distinct perspective, examining the conflict through the lens of ontological insecurities. In the context of ontological security, ideology, biographical narrative, and self-identity are interconnected elements that contribute to an individual's sense of stability and continuity. Ontological security, thus, is primarily concerned with the repercussions of anxieties and existential threats, and with how individuals and collective actors make sense of their lives. It plays a vital role in maintaining a stable sense of self. This research takes conflict in the tribal areas as a case study to examine how ontological insecurities function as nodes of instability between militants and the state of Pakistan, insecurities that not only perpetuate conflict but also sabotage peace efforts in the region. This study brings the concept of ontological insecurity into the analysis of the border conflict and, in doing so, enriches the existing body of knowledge.

Keywords: Ontological security, TTP, Pakistan, Tribal areas, Pashtunwali, Identity, Conflict resolution

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Introduction

For more than two decades, Pakistan's tribal districts along the Afghan norder have remained one of the South Asia's most persistent conflict zones. Military operations, peace agreements, cross-border militancy, and political reforms have all attempted to restore stability. However, stability and peace could not achieve yet (Hussain, 2025). The roots of militancy in the region run deep in the social and political history of the borders. It was the American-led intervention in Afghanistan that reshaped the local militant landscape (Hilali, 2013). The recent resurgence of the conflict after 2021 has renewed important questions about why this conflict is still prevalent despite security measures. Most studies explain this conflict through developments in Afghanistan, cross-border sanctuaries, militant capabilities, and regional security dynamics (Giustozzi, 2018). While these factors are important, they do not explain why conflict continues and why peace initiatives often produce only temporary results.

Previous studies on the tribal areas conflict have largely examined it from three perspectives. The first perspective focused on geopolitical factors, particularly the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the subsequent return of the Taliban to power. The TTP was identified as the largest terrorist group operating in Afghanistan, with the Afghan Taliban government provided support to conduct cross-border attacks against Pakistan. A 2024 UN report assessed that the TTP had between 6000 to 6,500 fighters in Afghanistan. The TTP had access to weapons and equipment left behind by NATO forces following their withdrawal from Afghanistan. A hasty and poorly managed withdrawal left weapons and safe havens available to militants (Banerjee, 2025). This research takes conflict in the tribal areas as a case study to examine how ontological insecurities function as nodes of instability between militants and the state of Pakistan, insecurities that not only perpetuate conflict but also sabotage peace efforts in the region.
A deeper struggle lies beneath the visible violence. The conflict is not only about territory, weapons, or political power. It is also about identity, belonging, and the need to preserve a stable sense of self. Ontological Security theory suggests that individuals and collective actors search for continuity in their identity and routines, therefore challenges to this continuity can be experienced as existential threats (Giddens, 1984; Mitzen, 2006, pp. 344–345; Steele, 2008). By examining the resurgence of conflict through the lens of ontological insecurities, this study offers a different explanation for why violence persists and why durable peace remains difficult to achieve in Pakistan tribal areas.

Pakistan's tribal districts were formerly known as the federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), a semi-autonomous region governed under the colonial-era Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR). However, after the 25th Constitutional Amendment Bill passed in the national Assembly of Pakistan on May 24, 2018. The region merged into the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and renamed as tribal districts (Ali, Ansari, & Firdous, 2020, p. 230). This renamed tribal districts along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border have seen conflict return since 2021. The Taliban takeover of Kabul and the hasty withdrawal of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces from Afghanistan led to a spike in conflict along with tribal areas

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in Pakistan as well. Besides, weapons were also left behind fell into the hands of militants. However, the extent to which this factor alone explained the rise in militant activities is debatable. Because issue is more complex and required deep research across multiple dimensions, such as, military, ideological, territorial, and psychological (Ismail, 2026).

The conflict treated as a grab over territory, funding and firepower that reflected a long scholarly tradition that interprets conflict largely through the lenses of resources, sanctuary, and manpower. Less attention was dedicated to a deeper layer of the conflict, i.e., the struggle over identity, meaning, and the continuity of the self. It is different from physical security. Physical security concerns survival of the body. When ideology, memory, and identity are disrupted, actors feel ontological insecurity. This insecurity can drive conflict as much as, or more than, material threat (Mitzen, 2006). This article examines the conflict between the TTP and the state of Pakistan through the concept of ontological security. Ontological security is the sense of stability a person or a group feels about who they are (Giddens, 1991).

In the context of TTP and sate of Pakistan conflict ontological insecurity works as a node of instability in the tribal areas. It links the TTP and the state in a cycle that resists resolution. Even when material conditions change, for example when foreign troops left Afghanistan, the conflict did not stop. The reason is simple. The conflict is no longer only about foreign occupation. It is about identity, legitimacy, and the fear of losing a stable sense of self. Ideology, biographical narrative, and self-identity are closely connected. Together they shape how TTP and the state make sense of an unstable world, and how each side reacts when that sense of self feels threatened.

Ontological insecurity is not an abstract idea but an observable driver of conflict persistence. The article proceeded in stages. It set out the theoretical framework and explained the study's methodology, reviewed existing elucidations of the conflict. Furthermore, it traced the historical background of militancy in the tribal areas. It also considered the dilemma of existential threat facing both TTP and the state of Pakistan. It examined how the TTP built ontological stability through narrative, how ethnic identity is instrumentalised, and how Pashtun social order has eroded. It then explained the ontological insecurity of the state of Pakistan, and the post-2021 transformation of TTP narrative before discussing the findings and implications for peace efforts.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of ontological security comes from the sociologist Anthony Giddens (Giddens, 1991). Giddens argued that individuals need a stable sense of self in order to function in daily life. This stability rests on routines, biographical narratives, and trust in the continuity of the social world. When routines break down, individuals feel anxiety. This anxiety differs from the fear of physical harm. It is a fear of losing coherence, meaning, and identity. A person facing this kind of anxiety often searches for a narrative that restores a sense of order, even if that narrative is built around conflict rather than peace.

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Jennifer Mitzen extended this idea to states. She argued that states, like individuals, seek a stable sense of self. States build this stability through routine relationships with other states, including hostile ones. A state can become attached to a conflict because the conflict offers a predictable role and a clear identity, even when that role is dangerous. Breaking the routine, even in pursuit of peace, can feel destabilising. This is one reason why long-running conflicts are so hard to end. Ending them requires actors to give up a familiar identity, not only a set of grievances (Mitzen, 2006).

Brent Steele developed this idea further. He argued that states act to protect their self-identity, sometimes at the cost of physical security. A state may take actions that raise material risk in order to protect its self-narrative as sovereign, honourable, or legitimate (Steele, 2008). In more recent work, Steele has argued that ontological security scholarship also needs to grapple with questions of order and justice, since the routines that stabilise identity are not neutral; they can entrench hierarchy as easily as they can provide comfort (Steele, 2024).

Catarina Kinnvall applied ontological security to religious nationalism. She showed that people often turn to religion and nationalism to restore a stable identity during periods of rapid change. This tendency grows stronger when other forms of security, such as economic security, are also under threat. Religious and nationalist narratives offer a clear boundary between self and other. They give individuals and groups a sense of continuity even amid disorder (Kinnvall, 2004). Kinnvall and Mitzen later argued jointly that ontological security is best understood in the plural, as ontological securities, since different actors within the same conflict may pursue stability through incompatible routines and narratives at the same time (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2017).

Bahar Rumelili and her collaborators, in an edited volume on conflict resolution, showed across cases including Cyprus, Northern Ireland, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that peace processes themselves can generate ontological insecurity, because they force actors to imagine identities no longer organised around an adversarial other (Rumelili, 2015). Catarina Kinnvall, Ian Manners, and Jennifer Mitzen extended this comparative turn to the European Union, showing how ontological insecurity operates above the level of the single state, shaping how regional blocs manage internal and external difference (Kinnvall et al., 2020).

These scholars provide the theoretical foundation for the present study. Ontological security, in this framework, rests on three connected elements: biographical narrative, trust in routines, and self-identity. When these elements are disrupted, both individuals and collective actors, including militant groups and states, experience ontological insecurity. They then act to restore a stable sense of self. This action often takes the form of conflict, because conflict provides continuity, purpose, and a clear line between self and other. Peace, by contrast, can feel like a loss of identity, especially for actors whose self-understanding has been built around resistance or sovereignty.

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Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to examine the resurgence of the TTP in Pakistan's former tribal districts through the theoretical lens of Ontological Security Theory. The study combined conceptual analysis with empirical evidence obtained through semi-structured interviews, enabled an in-depth exploration of identity, narratives, and perceptions of insecurity. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with security analysts, researchers, Journalists and subject experts who possess extensive knowledge of militancy, terrorism, and Pakistan's security environment, particularly in the former FATA.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed. The guide was consisted of open-ended questions designed to explore perceptions of the TTP's resurgence, identity construction, narratives of legitimacy, state responses, and the broader security dynamics shaping the conflict.

The study employed purposive sampling to identify subjects with direct expertise and professional experience relevant to the research topic.

The interview data used here is not a representative sample of all views held across the tribal districts. The study provides valuable insights into how experts understand the relationship between material factors, such as safe havens and weapons, and identity related factors, for instance narratives of legitimacy and religious justification. The interview findings are examined together with the existing literature on ontological security and conflict in Pakistan. This helps explain that ontological insecurity is not only a theoretical concept but also a factor that can be seen in the way experts understand and explain the conflict.

TTP Resurgence and the Missing Dimension of Identity

The resurgence of the TTP after 2021 has generally been explained in terms of material and organizational factors rather than identity or ideology. The return of the Afghan Taliban to power in August 2021 is widely considered a major turning point in this regard. With the Taliban back in control of Afghanistan, the TTP gained greater opportunities to operate from safe havens across the border. At the same time, a large number of TTP prisoners, including senior commanders, were released from Afghan prisons. These developments provided the group with an environment in which it could reorganise and rebuild its strength (Carnegie Endowment, 2021; International Crisis Group, 2026).

Another part of the literature focuses on the organisational restructuring of the TTP. From around 2020 onwards, several groups that had previously separated from the TTP began to rejoin it under the leadership of Noor Wali Mehsud. These included former al-Qaeda affiliates as well as groups that had broken away from the TTP in 2014. Their return helped reduce some of the internal divisions that had weakened the organisation in previous years and allowed the TTP to rebuild a more unified organisational structure (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2022).

The geographical pattern of TTP violence also shows the importance of Pakistan's tribal districts. According to ACLED (2025), around 40 percent of TTP violence since 2021 has

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occurred in the newly merged tribal districts. This is significant because these areas have historically been important to the TTP's social and operational presence. The concentration of violence there suggests that the group is not only trying to expand its operational capacity but is also attempting to rebuild a social and ideological base in an area that has long been central to its identity.

The TTP's resurgence has also been linked to governance problems within Pakistan. Researchers have pointed to the failure of peace talks in 2021–22, weaknesses in border management, and the limited reach of state institutions in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) (Yousaf, 2021; International Crisis Group, 2026). However, these problems did not emerge after 2021. They are connected to a much longer history of state–society relations in the tribal areas.

Before the 2018 merger, the tribal areas were governed under the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) of 1901. The system was based on collective tribal responsibility and did not provide residents with the same constitutional and legal rights enjoyed by citizens in other parts of Pakistan. Yousaf (2021) argues that these colonial legacies, combined with the strong role of the military in the region, contributed to long-standing grievances among local Pashtun communities. In the absence of fully developed formal state institutions, people often continued to rely on traditional mechanisms such as the jirga and lashkar for resolving disputes and maintaining order.

The 2018 merger was intended to change this situation by extending Pakistan's constitutional and legal framework to the former FATA. However, the process of implementation has remained incomplete. As a result, a gap has developed between formal political integration and the actual experience of governance in the region. This gap has provided space that militant groups can exploit. The TTP, in particular, has strongly opposed the merger and presents it as an attack on traditional tribal autonomy and identity (International Crisis Group, 2026).

This connection between weak governance and militant resurgence can also be seen in earlier research. Hassan Abbas (2014), in his study of the Taliban's revival after 2001, argues that weak state legitimacy in the tribal areas created conditions in which militant groups were able to recover. A similar argument is made in a 2023 study of the TTP's post-2021 resurgence, which links the group's return to problems of governance and state authority.

Taken together, this literature provides a convincing explanation of how the TTP was able to regain its strength after 2021. Safe havens in Afghanistan, the release of prisoners, organisational reunification, weak governance, and problems surrounding the implementation of the FATA merger all played an important role. However, these explanations do not completely answer a deeper question that why has the TTP continued to see itself as a meaningful movement despite years of military pressure, internal divisions, and organisational fragmentation?

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This raises two important gaps in the existing literature. First, relatively little attention has been given to the question of how the TTP has maintained a collective sense of identity despite repeated military defeats and serious internal divisions, particularly during the period between 2014 and 2020. Existing research explains how the organisation was able to rebuild its organisational capacity, but it tells us less about why its members continued to see the TTP as an organisation worth rebuilding in the first place.

Second, the existing literature does not sufficiently examine how political and governance-related developments are interpreted through narratives of identity. Events such as the FATA merger are not simply administrative or political developments. For the TTP, they are presented as part of a broader story about the loss of tribal autonomy, state intrusion, historical marginalisation, and the changing identity of the tribal areas. Similarly, memories of colonial rule and experiences of marginalisation can be brought together to create a particular understanding of who the TTP is and what it claims to represent.

This suggests that material and organisational explanations alone may not provide the complete picture. An important part of the explanation may lie in identity and narrative.

Ontological Security Theory and the Question of TTP Identity

Ontological Security Theory (OST) provides a useful way of examining this missing dimension. The idea was originally developed by the sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991), who argued that individuals need more than physical safety. They also need a stable understanding of who they are and how the world around them works. This sense of stability develops through routines, relationships, and a continuous understanding of one's own life story. In simple terms, people need to feel that their identity and their place in the world make sense over time.

Jennifer Mitzen (2006) later applied this idea to international relations and argued that states also seek a stable sense of self. For states, security is therefore not only about protecting territory or physical survival. It is also about maintaining familiar relationships, routines, and patterns of interaction. Interestingly, these routines can become so important that actors may continue relationships of conflict even when ending the conflict might provide greater material security. Conflict itself can become part of an actor's established way of understanding the world.

Brent Steele (2008) developed this argument further by showing that actors can sometimes act in ways that do not appear to serve their immediate material interests because they are trying to protect their identity, dignity, or sense of honour. This means that political behaviour cannot always be understood through material interests alone. Ideas about who an actor is, and who it believes it should be, can also influence its decisions.

Other scholars have expanded OST in different directions. Rumelili (2015; Rumelili & Çelik, 2017), for example, showed that physical security and ontological security do not always move together. An actor may become physically safer by ending a conflict, while at the same time

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experiencing greater insecurity if that conflict has become an important part of its identity and established routines.

The role of memory is also important. Mälksoo's (2015) concept of "mnemonical security" drew attention to the way contested memories of the past can affect how actors understand themselves in the present. Subotić (2016) similarly explains how political actors use particular interpretations of the past to create a sense of continuity, especially during periods of uncertainty and crisis. Kinnvall (2004) connects insecurity and anxiety with the search for stable religious and nationalist identities, while Zarakol (2010) argued how states can sometimes deal with insecurity by avoiding or denying uncomfortable parts of their history.

More recent work suggests that OST is now an established and expanding field. However, a review of 163 studies by Balkan-Şahin and Çetiner (2025) indicates that the majority of research continues to focus on states. Non-state actors remain much less studied from an ontological security perspective. This is where the literature on TTP resurgence and OST come together, but also where an important gap becomes visible. Research on the TTP provides detailed explanations of how the group has rebuilt itself after 2021. It highlights organisational restructuring, safe havens, prisoner releases, political developments in Afghanistan, and weaknesses in governance. OST, on the other hand, gives us concepts for understanding identity, narratives, continuity, memory, and perceived existential threats. Yet these two bodies of literature have rarely been brought together.

In particular, OST has largely been used to understand states and has been less frequently applied to militant organisations such as the TTP. At the same time, research on the TTP has generally focused more on what allowed the organisation to survive and expand than on what gives the organisation a continuing sense of identity and meaning.

Research Gap and Focus of the Study

This study seeks to address this gap by examining the resurgence of the TTP through the lens of ontological insecurity. Rather than treating the TTP's resurgence only as the result of favourable political circumstances, organisational reunification, or access to safe havens, the study asks how the group's understanding of identity, legitimacy, continuity, and threat may also contribute to its resilience.

The study therefore approaches the TTP as a non-state actor capable of developing and maintaining a collective sense of self. The focus is particularly on the TTP leadership and mid-level cadres because these actors play an important role in constructing, maintaining, and communicating the group's identity and narratives.

The study draws on expert interviews, TTP statements and communiqués, and existing academic literature. These sources are used to examine how the TTP talks about its past, its identity, its relationship with the state, and the threats it believes are directed against it.

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The purpose of this approach is not to dismiss existing explanations of the TTP's resurgence. Material conditions, organisational restructuring, safe havens, and weaknesses in governance remain important. Rather, this study seeks to add another dimension to these explanations. It asks a deeper question that how does the TTP maintain a sense of identity, continuity, and purpose despite repeated military defeats, organisational fragmentation, and changes in its political environment. By examining this question through Ontological Security Theory, the study aims to show that the resilience of the TTP may not only depend on its material or organisational capacity. It may also be connected to the narratives through which the organisation understands who it is, what it represents, what it has lost, and what it believes it must continue to defend.

Scholars such as Akbar Ahmed and Hassan Abbas have documented the erosion of tribal governance and the historical roots of militancy in the borderlands in rich detail. Ahmed, in particular, traces how the collapse of tribal authority structures created space for militant governance to take hold, drawing on his own earlier fieldwork among Pashtun tribes as a former political agent in South Waziristan (Ahmed, 2013). Hassan Abbas situates the TTP's post-2001 revival within the broader failures of reconstruction on the Afghan side of the border, arguing that the weakness of Afghan state institutions fed directly into instability on the Pakistani side (Abbas, 2014).

Mona Kanwal Sheikh presented the most detailed study of the TTP's own religious self-understanding, based on interviews and organisational literature collected inside Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the tribal districts. She argued that the group's violence cannot be understood without taking its theological reasoning seriously, even where that reasoning is contested by other religious scholars (Sheikh, 2016). Imtiaz Gul's account of the tribal frontier, based on interviews with Pakistani intelligence and military officials, provides a detailed narrative of how al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters embedded themselves in the tribal agencies after 2001 (Gul, 2010). Their work provides an empirical foundation for this article. However, none of these scholars applies ontological security as an analytical lens in a sustained way. This article has built on their historical and ethnographic groundwork while applying a framework that treats identity and narrative continuity as central drivers of conflict.

Historical Background of Conflict in the Tribal Areas

Conflict in Pakistan's tribal areas is not new. It has moved through repeated cycles of violence, negotiation, and breakdown for more than two decades (Malick, 2026). The current phase has roots in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. After the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Taliban and al-Qaeda-linked fighters moved into Pakistan's tribal districts. Local actors gave them shelter and helped create conditions for their settlement (Mehsud, 2026). This period, roughly 2001 to 2002, laid the foundation for organised militancy in the region. David Kilcullen's comparative study of counterinsurgency describes this pattern of displaced fighters embedding themselves in tribal terrain as a recurring feature of the post-9/11 conflict landscape, from Waziristan to the southern Philippines. (Kilcullen, 2009)

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Early militant figures, such as Nek Muhammad Wazir in South Waziristan, built networks that later evolved into larger structures. Another faction formed under Baitullah Mehsud, often called the Mehsud Taliban. A third strand emerged around Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, led by Omar Khalid Khorasani (Mehsud, 2026). Baitullah Mehsud brought several factions together under one banner in 2007, formally establishing the TTP after the Lal Masjid operation in Islamabad (Malick, 2026). The International Crisis Group's 2009 report on Pakistan's militant jihadi landscape traced how sectarian networks based in Punjab increasingly overlapped with tribal-area militancy during this same period, complicating the state's efforts to distinguish between different strands of the insurgency (International Crisis Group, 2009b).

The state responded with military operations, beginning in South Waziristan in 2004 and continuing through operations in North Waziristan, Swat, and other tribal districts. (Malick, 2026) The International Crisis Group's later report on countering militancy in FATA documented how these operations, while militarily effective in clearing territory, often failed to establish durable civilian administration behind them, leaving space for militant governance to re-emerge (International Crisis Group, 2009a). A subsequent Crisis Group report on the neighbouring Provincially Administered Tribal Areas found a similar pattern of temporary military success followed by administrative vacuum (International Crisis Group, 2013).

Between these operations, the state and militant actors periodically negotiated. The agreement with Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi, led by Sufi Muhammad, in Swat is one example. Peace deals in areas such as Tirah and Khyber followed a similar pattern. Almost all of these agreements collapsed, leading to renewed military action (Malick, 2026). The Crisis Group's 2015 assessment of Pakistan's counterterrorism strategy concluded that the reliance on short-term military deals, without parallel investment in policing, courts, and local governance, was a recurring structural weakness across these episodes (International Crisis Group, 2015).

Each collapse deepened mistrust between the two sides. Military operations caused civilian displacement and casualties, which created new grievances. The TTP used these grievances to strengthen its narrative of resistance and to support recruitment (Malick, 2026). This pattern, negotiation, breakdown, renewed conflict, and new grievance, cannot be explained by material factors alone. It reflects a deeper pattern in which each breakdown reinforces both sides' sense of threat, betrayal, and distrust. Neither side has experienced a stable, predictable relationship with the other since the conflict began. This has left both actors locked in a recursive cycle of ontological insecurity, of the kind Mitzen describes as a dangerous but stabilising routine (Mitzen, 2006).

The ideological dimension of the conflict also has deep roots. When militants began attacking Pakistani security forces, hundreds of clerics from a particular school of thought issued a religious ruling declaring such attacks permissible, on the grounds that Pakistan had aligned itself with foreign forces against the Afghan Taliban. This ruling provided a powerful source of legitimacy for the insurgency, framing the violence as defensive jihad rather than offensive warfare. Many early recruits also came from the Kashmir-focused jihadist landscape, shifting

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allegiance after Pakistan became a close ally of the U.S. following September 1, 2001 (Mehsud, 2026). The Afghan Taliban's own rise to power provides essential background for understanding the doctrinal and organisational models that later Pakistani militant groups borrowed, including the language of defensive jihad against foreign occupation (Rashid, 2000).

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 marked a new phase. It removed the foreign military presence that had justified much of the TTP's original narrative of jihad against occupation. However, violence in Pakistan increased sharply after 2021, continuing into 2022 and 2023 (Ismail, 2026). This apparent contradiction between the weakening of ideological justifications and the continued rise in conflict is not only because of ideological goals. But it helps maintain a sense of identity, continuity, and purpose and this is central to this article's ontological security argument.

The Dilemma of Existential Threat

This gap between weakening justification and rising violence points to a deeper conundrum at the heart of the conflict. Both sides confront what can be called a dilemma of existential threat. For the TTP, the Pakistani state is not simply a military opponent. It represents a governance system that, in the group's own framing, contradicts its interpretation of Islam and therefore threatens its ideological identity at the root. For the Pakistani state, the TTP represents a direct challenge to its identity as a sovereign authority with the sole legitimate claim to organised violence within its borders (Malick, 2026). In both cases, the "other" is constructed as an existential threat, not merely a competitor for resources or territory, in the sense described by securitisation theory (Buzan et al., 1998).

This mutual construction of existential threat extends beyond questions of governance to questions of legitimacy, continuity of power, and access to political and economic resources. (Malick, 2026) It also intersects with internal dynamics within the TTP itself. The group is not a single, unified actor. It comprises factions with different tribal affiliations, interests, and internal hierarchies. Maintaining relevance within a crowded militant landscape, and enforcing cohesion across these factions, gives the group additional incentives to use violence, independent of its stated grievances against the state (Malick, 2026).

TTP Narrative on Identity from the Perspective of Ontological Security

From an ontological security perspective, the TTP maintains cohesion not only through weapons and funding but through narrative. The group constructs a historical lineage that links its fighters to earlier struggles, including the defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and later resistance to U.S. and NATO forces. This narrative gives fighters a sense of continuity across generations. Many recruits joined as teenagers around 2004 or 2007. By the early 2020s, these individuals had become senior commanders. Their shared narrative of resistance provided identity continuity through this long transition (Khan, 2026).

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When the Afghan Taliban took Kabul in 2021, this narrative gained new force. Supporters interpreted the takeover as proof that faith, jihadist commitment, and what they saw as divine assistance, rather than external support, had defeated a global coalition. This perception strengthened a belief among TTP supporters that if a superpower could be defeated, Pakistan would present an easier challenge. Narrative identity, in this sense, is not simply descriptive. It is operational (Khan, 2026).

However, this narrative faced a problem after 2021, however. Its original justification, resistance to foreign occupation, no longer applied inside Pakistan, since no foreign force occupied Pakistani territory. To preserve ontological stability, the TTP needed a new narrative. It shifted its framing from anti-occupation jihad toward a claim that the Pakistani state itself is un-Islamic and shaped by American and British influence (Ismail, 2026). This shift preserved narrative continuity even as the concrete enemy changed. The storyline of resistance against an illegitimate power remained intact, even though the target moved from a foreign force to a domestic government. This pattern closely matches Jelena Subotić's study of how states, and non-state actors, use narrative to change policy while preserving a stable self-story (Subotić, 2016).

This adaptation illustrates that actors reconstruct, rather than abandon, their identity when circumstances change dramatically (Steele, 2008). This shift can be illustrated in the form of TTP 1.0 and TTP 2.0. TTP 2.0 rhetorically distanced itself from attacks on civilians and framed its struggle as territorial and state-focused echoed language the Afghan Taliban once used against NATO forces. It also avoided commentary on global issues such as Palestine, focused instead on localised, territorial goals such as reversing the merger of the former tribal areas into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Ismail, 2026).

Ethnic Identity and the Instrumentalisation of Pashtun Culture

The role of Pashtun identity in the conflict is complex rather than straightforward. The overwhelming majority of Pashtuns reject militancy and have been disproportionately affected by the violence it produces (Malick, 2026). Thomas Barfield's history of Afghanistan situates Pashtun identity within a much longer regional pattern in which tribal affiliation, rather than the modern state, has historically supplied the primary source of order and obligation (Barfield, 2010). Even so, the TTP has strategically drawn on elements of Pashtun identity, presenting its struggle as a defence of local dignity and autonomy against an external, often Punjabi-dominated, state apparatus. At the same time, Pashtuns serve within the Pakistani state itself, including in its military, which highlights the internal diversity of the community and undermines any simple equation between ethnicity and militancy (Malick, 2026).

Militant leaders have also drawn on tribal honour codes to frame their authority in cultural rather than purely religious terms. During the Swat insurgency, for example, Mullah Fazlullah used illegal FM radio broadcasts to issue directives framed around honour and religious obligation, blurring the line between cultural norms and militant ideology (Malick, 2026).

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Ethnographic studies of Pashtun tribal economy and social organisation that conducted decades before the TTP's emergence, describe the same honour codes that militant leaders would later selectively invoke, suggesting a continuity of cultural vocabulary even as its political uses have changed radically (Ahmed, 2013).

Pashtun Social Order and the Erosion of Ontological Anchors

Ontological insecurity in the tribal areas is not limited to militant actors. It also affects ordinary residents, whose sense of stability once rested on long-standing social institutions. Pashtun society historically relied on informal mechanisms for order and defence. These included the lashkar, a collective tribal militia mobilised in response to external threats; the salwashi, a standing group of fighters ready for rapid mobilisation; the chigha, a community alarm system using drum signals to warn of emergencies; and the badraga, a safe-escort system that protected travelers passing through tribal territory. These institutions provided more than physical protection. They offered predictability, identity continuity, and a stable sense of collective meaning (Dawar, 2026).

Prolonged militancy has weakened or displaced these institutions. Militant governance structures have partly replaced traditional authority. Trust in community-based justice and protection has declined, and informal mechanisms of dispute resolution have been pushed aside (Dawar, 2026). Security checkpoints, while a practical response to militancy, often clash with traditional norms of hospitality and respect, particularly toward families travelling with women and children. Local residents frequently experience these encounters not as routine procedure, but as a violation of cultural dignity and social trust (Dawar, 2026). This shift, from norm-governed social interaction to surveillance-based governance, intensifies alienation and insecurity among ordinary people caught between militant violence and state security measures. This intensifying alienation is consistent with the human security framework's insight that everyday insecurity, not only battlefield violence, shapes how ordinary people experience conflict (United Nations Development Programme, 1994).

This represents a breakdown of ontological continuity, in which everyday life is no longer governed by stable, predictable routines (Giddens, 1991). Public acts of violence by militants, including executions and mutilation of victims, deepen this breakdown. These acts are widely experienced locally not only as security violations, but as symbolic assaults on collective honour and moral order. The result is a layered insecurity that operates on several levels at once: physical insecurity from violence and attacks; social insecurity from the breakdown of trust and norms; institutional insecurity from the collapse of local governance systems; and ontological insecurity from the loss of identity continuity and predictability (Dawar, 2026).

The Ontological Insecurity of the State of Pakistan

The State of Pakistan, too, experiences ontological insecurity in this conflict. Modern states, including Pakistan, build identity around sovereignty and the exclusive claim to the legitimate

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use of force. The TTP's armed challenge directly contests this claim. Every attack is not only a security incident. It is also a challenge to the state's self-image as the sole legitimate authority within its territory. At the same time, the TTP perceives the Pakistani state as a system that systematically delegitimises and suppresses its own vision of governance, which reinforces the group's resistance and justifies continued insurgency in its own narrative (Malick, 2026).

The state's efforts to reassert control through military operations and securitised checkpoints can, somewhat paradoxically, deepen the very insecurity these measures seek to resolve. As noted above, security procedures often clash with local social norms, generating new grievances that the TTP can then exploit for recruitment and narrative purposes. The state seeks narrative stability through constitutional order, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. The TTP advances an alternative narrative rooted in religious authority and its own version of Islamic governance. This competition produces a recursive cycle in which each actor's identity claims undermine the other's sense of legitimacy and continuity (Dawar, 2026).

Mitzen's argument that actors can become attached to conflict because it provides a stable, if painful, routine (Mitzen, 2006). One of the Journalist lamented that negotiation, by contrast, threatens this routine. It requires both sides to imagine a different identity, one not defined primarily through opposition to the other. This may help explain why past peace agreements in Swat, Tirah, and Khyber collapsed relatively quickly (Malick, 2026).

Post-2021 Narrative Transformation and Peace Efforts

The period after 2021 illustrates how ontological insecurity, and not material capability alone, sustains conflict. One of the local journalists argued that TTP fighters gained access to advanced weapons left behind after the NATO withdrawal, including modern firearms, sniper rifles, and thermal night-vision equipment. Financial pressure on the group also eased, since the Afghan Taliban's takeover reduced its operating costs and improved its access to resources needed to sustain both fighters and their families (Mehsud, 2026).

The more decisive factor is ideological adaptation. Clerics based in Afghanistan reportedly issued new religious opinions supporting armed struggle against Pakistan, replacing the earlier justification based on foreign occupation (Mehsud, 2026). This new justification faces internal contradictions, however. Pakistani religious scholars, including figures who had historically supported jihad in Afghanistan against foreign forces, have not endorsed the TTP's campaign against Pakistan (Ismail, 2026). Pakistan's constitution already declares Islam the state religion, complicating the TTP's central claim that the state is un-Islamic (Ismail, 2026). These contradictions have not weakened the conflict. Instead, they appear to have driven further narrative adaptation, consistent with Kinnvall's argument that identity-based movements tend to respond to uncertainty by reinforcing religious and nationalist narratives rather than abandoning them (Kinnvall, 2004).

For peace efforts, this analysis carries practical consequences. Negotiations that address only material grievances, such as troop movements or economic packages, are unlikely to succeed

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on their own if they leave the identity-based dimension of the conflict unaddressed. Both the TTP and State of Pakistan have built substantial parts of their legitimacy around narratives that define themselves in opposition to the other. A durable settlement would require each side to find a way to maintain a stable sense of identity without depending on continued confrontation. This is a demanding, long-term task. Its absence from most past negotiations helps explain why previous peace processes in the tribal areas have proven fragile and short-lived (Malick, 2026).

Findings and Discussion

This study aimed to examine whether the resurgence of TTP linked conflict in Pakistan tribal areas after 2021 can be explained through ontological rather than purely material, insecurity. Three findings emerged from the above analysis. The first is related to the nature of resurgence itself. It involved renewed substantial capacity, safe havens, weapons, that reduced financial pressure. Besides, with the U.S. withdrawal the foreign occupation justification for jihad also lost. Therefore, the TTP did not continue activities. They actively pursued new religious and political grounds to continue the conflict. Therefore, they crafted a narrative of resisting the state and called it an illegitimate state. This is consistent with Subotić's (2016) argue of how actors preserve narrative continuity by changing the object of grievance while keeping the underlying narrative of righteous resistance intact. The TTP's resurgence cannot be read as simply the same conflict resuming. They reshaped their ideology to continue operating.

The second finding is about the state that Pakistan also experiences a kind of ontological insecurity; uncertainty or anxiety about its identity, role and sense of stability. Most of the existing research presents the state as a rational actor trying to protect itself from an external security threat. However, this overlooked the state's own identity concerns. The weakening of Pashtun institutions, together with the state's historical involvement in supporting some of the jihadist narratives that it latter came to oppose made a more complicated relationship. The TTP and the state may act comparatively to protect their identities, and these actions can make the conflict worse rather than solve it.

The third finding is related to ordinary people living in the tribal districts. They are neither militant not government officials, but they experience many consequences of the conflict. Traditional systems such as the lashkar, salwashi, chigha, and badraga have weakened. As a result, everyday life has become less predictable and secure. This kind of insecurity exists separately from the larger political narratives of either the TTP or the state. In other words, People can experience serious insecurity even when they are not directly involved in fighting. The findings show that material explanations such as resources, organization, military strength, and political conditions are important for understanding the TTP's resurgence, but they cannot explain the hidden causes. The conflict continued even after the TTP's original ideological justification had weakened. Because the persistent conflict helps the TTP in maintaining and their identity and sense of who they are.

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Conclusion

The resurgence of conflict in Pakistan's tribal areas through the lens of ontological security has argued that the conflict between the TTP and the state of Pakistan cannot be fully comprehended through material or geopolitical factors alone. Particularly, the TTP has been engaged in a struggle over identity, narrative continuity, and legitimacy, one that runs alongside, and often beneath, the visible contest over territory and force. The TTP has adapted its ideological justification since 2021, shifting from anti-occupation jihad to a claim of anti-state jihad, in order to preserve a stable sense of purpose. The state of Pakistan, in turn, struggles to preserve its sovereignty and constitutional authority, sometimes through measures that unintentionally deepen local grievances and ontological insecurity among ordinary residents of the tribal districts. The erosion of traditional Pashtun institutions, including the lashkar, badraga, salwashi, and chigha systems, has intensified this insecurity. These institutions once provided predictability and a stable collective identity. Their waning has left a vacuum that militant governance structures have partially filled and deepened the layered insecurity explained throughout this study.

Understanding this conflict through ontological security added a distinct dimension to existing research. It does not replace explanations rooted in material and geopolitical factors, such as safe havens, weapons flows, and financial support. It complements them by showing why the conflict persists even as its material and ideological justifications weaken. Future peace efforts in the tribal areas should account for this identity-based dimension of the conflict, alongside its material one. Without this recognition, agreements are likely to remain as fragile as they have been in the past, vulnerable to the same recursive cycle of mistrust and renewed grievance that has defined the conflict for more than two decades.

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