




Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif chairs meeting on June 24th (Photo from PMO)

INDO-PACIFIC

Intelligence-Based Operations to be the Focus of Pakistan’s Counter-Terrorism Campaign

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Last Saturday, Pakistan’s Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif came under fire after his administration abruptly announced a new anti-terrorism campaign called *Azm-i-Istehkam*—or *Resolve for Stability*—without parliamentary consent. When opposition parties heard of plans to upgrade the “kinetic operations” of counterterrorism efforts, they heavily criticized Sharif for the lack of disclosure and pointed out previous failures of anti-militant operations. Today, Sharif insisted these critiques came from a misunderstanding: *Azm-i-Istehkam* is not a new military offensive involving civilian displacement but rather an intensification of ongoing intelligence-based operations (IBOs).

Here’s what you need to know.

Criticism of the Resolve for Stability

The campaign is, according to Sharif, an upgrade of Islamabad’s National Action Plan, which was designed to fight terrorism in 2014. The National Action Plan included dozens of actionable steps to combat Pakistan’s constant struggle with militant attacks—particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in the northwest and Balochistan in the southwest—including the development of policy for the deportation of Afghans and the destruction of terrorist finances and communication networks. Critics of the ambitious plan accuse Islamabad of only implementing one step of the plan: the establishment of military courts to bring terrorists to trial. The Prime Minister’s Office, meanwhile, has claimed that previous “kinetic operations” had degraded the ability of militants to carry out large-scale operations. Pakistani Defense Minister Khawaja Asif addressed some of the concerns of opposition parties, saying that the previous National Action Plan had been formed due to the “takeover” by terrorists of certain areas in Pakistan. Because previous military offensives were successful and the terrorist threat was greatly reduced, so too was the need for such large-scale offensives, which often displace both civilians and terrorists alike.



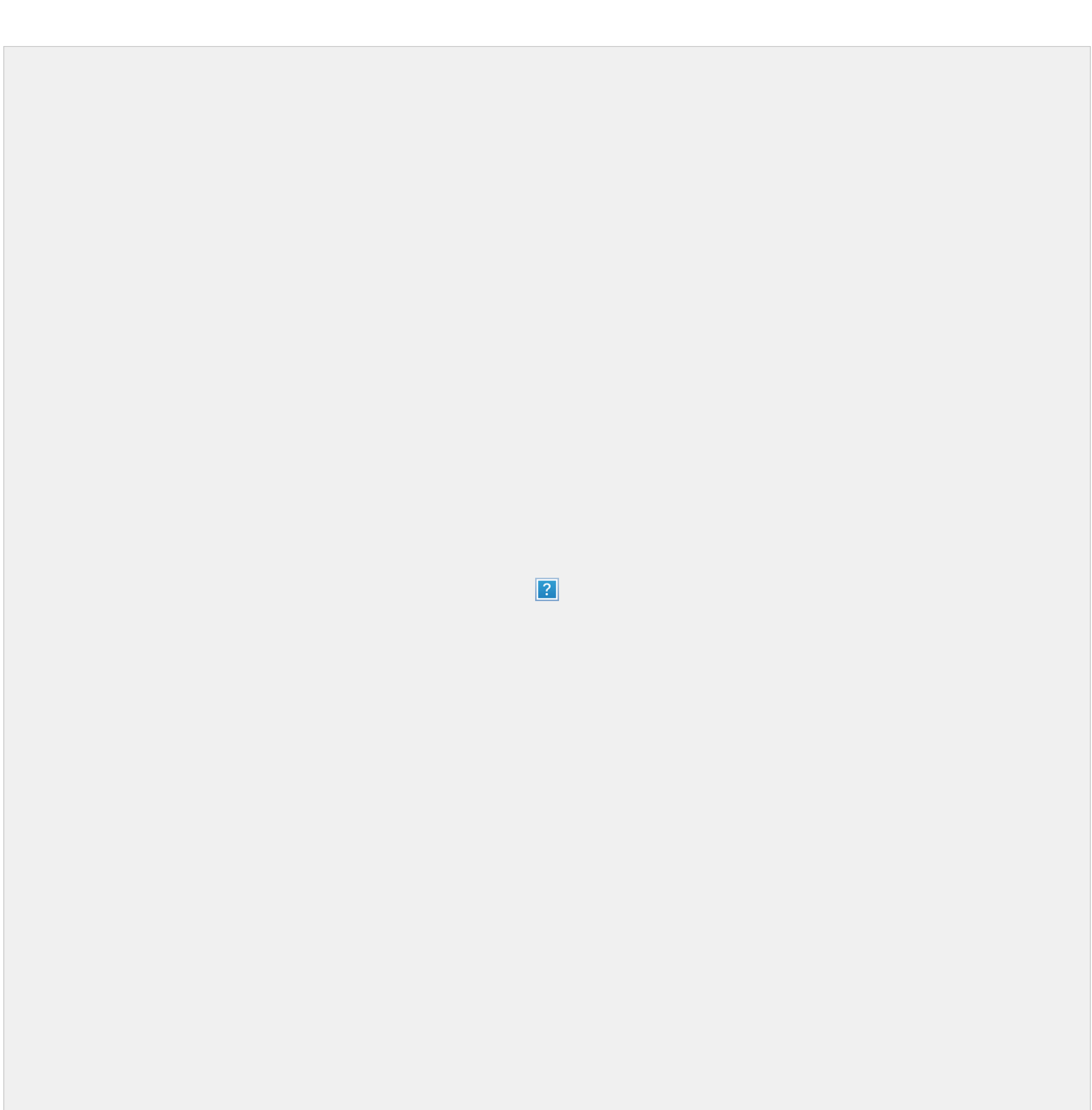
But critics still might have a point. Oftentimes, Pakistan’s various military operations against terrorists were successful in the short term, only for the militants to return to the areas after the operations concluded. One such example would be the Pakistani Taliban, who mostly reside in Afghanistan, crossing the border into Pakistan only for temporary residency and to evade significant pressure from US counterterrorism forces prior to the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021.

Intelligence-Based Operations

The new *Azm-i-Istehkam* campaign will involve the cooperation of Pakistan’s security agencies along with the state system. Reportedly, the campaign will also include adjacent socioeconomic measures to deter extremism, seemingly in line with Islamabad’s previous goal in the National Action Plan of deterring hate speech.

Although the campaign itself is described as utilizing “intelligence-based operations,” these operations will still be conducted by security forces, who are oftentimes unpopular in violence-stricken areas of Punjab where many militants operate. This coordination of different agencies is the intelligence basis for future operations.

Islamabad’s Strategy



Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif at a meeting of the Central Apex Committee of the National Action Plan on June 22nd 2024 (Photo by PMO)

The Pakistani Taliban—also known as the Tehreek-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan (TTP)—are able to cross the Afghan-Pakistani border to conduct militant activities. As of now, it’s unclear how Islamabad plans to deal with these militants under its new campaign. Many of these fighters re-emerged as a larger threat after the end of the Afghan War and the withdrawal of US troops in 2021, when they came back from Afghanistan to Pakistan, anticipating less counterterrorism pressure. The Taliban-led government in Kabul denies harboring any of these TTP militants today; if Pakistan decides to conduct operations cross-border, a diplomatic mess would ensue between the two governments.

Conversely, Islamabad faces increasing pressure from Beijing to secure the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Sharif made a visit to Beijing a few weeks ago, where that was emphasized. Additionally, during Chinese official Liu Jianchao’s visit to Pakistan last week, the concern of Chinese investors over the security situation was again brought up. Pakistan has long suffered from terrorist attacks, but many of the recent ones have targeted Chinese CPEC workers. Reportedly, Beijing has personally pressured Afghanistan to take control of the militant attacks, offering potential investment opportunities in exchange.

Islamabad is stuck between two difficult options. Even disregarding the TTP attacks, Pakistan faces the challenge of dealing with other local militant groups, like the Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba in Kashmir province, and largely remains focused on groups emanating from India, which Pakistan views as an existential threat. Without public support, the *Resolve for Stability* could ultimately fail to enact meaningful change. In recent statements, Defense Minister Asif reportedly suggested that opposition parties were only criticizing the campaign in a bid to win voters. Public unity on an appropriate approach to dealing with militant threats doesn’t seem likely anytime soon. Until Pakistan is able to re-determine its strategic priorities and its interpretation of the country’s security closer to the needs of the population, it is unlikely to practice successful counterinsurgency warfare.

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