

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF COUNTER-VIOLENT EXTREMISM STRATEGIES IN SOUTH ASIA AND AFRICA: LESSONS AND PATHWAYS FOR SUSTAINABLE SECURITY

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Abstract

This article examines the threat of violent extremism and terrorism in South Asia and Africa, comparing counter-violent extremism (CVE) strategies to identify effective measures for sustainable security. It explores the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural factors driving radicalisation and terrorist activities in both regions. South Asian countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India face extremism fuelled by historical grievances, political instability, and religious ideologies. In Africa, nations such as Nigeria, Somalia, and Kenya contend with groups like Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab, exacerbated by poverty, governance issues, and ethnic conflicts. The study aims to highlight successful interventions and the limitations of existing approaches, emphasizing the role of international organizations and regional bodies in shaping CVE efforts. By fostering collaboration between South Asia and Africa, the research seeks to develop comprehensive strategies to address the root causes of violent extremism and promote long-term peace and stability.

Keywords: Violent Extremism, Terrorism, Counter-Violent Extremism Strategies, South Asia, Africa, Radicalisation.

Introduction

Violent extremism and terrorism have emerged as formidable threats to global peace and security, necessitating a nuanced understanding and multifaceted approach to counteract their spread. South Asia and Africa, despite their diverse sociopolitical landscapes, share common vulnerabilities that have made them fertile grounds for extremist ideologies and terrorist activities. This research endeavours to conduct a comparative analysis of Counter-Violent Extremism (CVE) strategies in these regions to uncover effective interventions and derive lessons for sustainable security.

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In South Asia, the roots of violent extremism are deeply intertwined with historical grievances, political instability, and socioeconomic disparities.¹ For instance, Pakistan has grappled with the Taliban insurgency, which has been fuelled by a combination of religious radicalism and disenfranchisement among certain segments of the population. Similarly, India's struggle with various insurgent groups, including those in Kashmir, highlights how extremist ideologies can exploit local grievances. Afghanistan's prolonged conflict, exacerbated by the Taliban's resurgence, further underscores the complex interplay of regional politics and extremist agendas. These examples illustrate the multifaceted nature of violent extremism in South Asia, necessitating comprehensive and context-specific CVE strategies.²

Africa, on the other hand, faces its own unique set of challenges in combating violent extremism.³ The rise of Boko Haram in Nigeria, Al-Shabaab in Somalia, and various extremist factions in the Sahel region can be attributed to a mix of governance failures, economic deprivation, and ethnic tensions. For instance, Boko Haram's insurgency in northeastern Nigeria has thrived on the region's chronic underdevelopment and weak state presence. In Somalia, Al-Shabaab has capitalised on its fragmented political landscape and lack of effective governance to establish its stronghold. These cases underscore the necessity for targeted CVE strategies that address the root causes of extremism, while also taking into account the region's distinct sociopolitical dynamics.⁴

The research aims to bridge the gap between the experiences of these two regions by examining the effectiveness of existing CVE strategies and identifying practices that can be transferred or adapted. Employing a qualitative approach, the study has gathered information through case studies, policy analyses, and interviews with key stakeholders, including government officials, security experts, and community leaders. This comprehensive approach facilitated a deeper understanding of the factors driving violent extremism and the efficacy of different intervention strategies.

Given the global nature of violent extremism, this research has also explored the role of international organisations and regional bodies in supporting and shaping CVE efforts. Organisations like the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU), and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) are pivotal in coordinating and implementing CVE strategies across borders.⁵ By fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange, these bodies can enhance the effectiveness of CVE initiatives and contribute to a more cohesive global response to terrorism.

This research seeks to provide a critical comparative analysis of CVE strategies in South Asia and Africa, offering valuable insights into effective measures and sustainable security pathways. By identifying successful practices and context-specific adaptations, the study aims to contribute to the development of comprehensive CVE strategies that address the underlying causes of violent extremism and promote long-term peace and stability.

Key Drivers of Violent Extremism

Geopolitical Situation

The geopolitical landscape in South Asia and Africa is deeply intertwined with the rise of violent extremism, with each region's internal and external dynamics contributing to persistent instability. The enduring rivalry between India and Pakistan in South Asia shapes the regional security architecture. Their long-standing conflict over Kashmir has become a focal point for militant activity, where extremist groups exploit geopolitical hostility. Pakistan, in its strategic calculus, has historically supported the indigenous Kashmir freedom struggle as a means of counterbalancing India's military and economic dominance. This proxy conflict has not only fuelled militancy within Kashmir but also contributed to the radicalisation of youth in both countries while weakening prospects for peaceful resolution.

Afghanistan remains at the heart of South Asia's geopolitical tensions, influenced by the competing interests of regional and global powers. The country has been a battleground for external actors, from the Soviet Union's invasion in 1979 to the US-led intervention after 2001. Afghanistan's internal divisions, tribal loyalties, and ethnic fragmentation have been exacerbated by foreign interference, resulting in a fractured state where extremist groups like the Taliban continue to assert power. The US withdrawal in 2021 further complicated the geopolitical situation, as neighboring countries, including Pakistan, India, Iran, and China, jockeyed for influence in the post-war order. Pakistan shares a porous border with Afghanistan and seeks to maintain its strategic depth against India by maintaining good relations with Afghanistan, further contributing to the region's instability.

In Africa, the geopolitical situation is similarly marked by rivalries, both within the continent and among external powers. The Sahel region has become a focal point for violent extremism, driven by a combination of local grievances, weak governance, and external interventions. Countries like Nigeria, Somalia, and Kenya are at the forefront of this struggle, with extremist groups like Boko Haram and al-Shabaab exploiting the porous borders and political fragility of the region. Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, faces internal divisions between its largely Muslim north and predominantly Christian south, with extremist groups capitalising on these ethnic divides. Boko Haram's insurgency is further complicated by geopolitical dynamics, as neighbouring countries like Chad, Niger, and Cameroon are drawn into the conflict, making it a regional issue with international ramifications.

Somalia's position in the Horn of Africa places it at the nexus of competing geopolitical interests. The presence of al-Shabaab has invited foreign military interventions, including from the US and the AU, as well as regional powers like Ethiopia and Kenya, which seek to curb the group's influence. However, these interventions are often driven by national security concerns rather than a cohesive regional strategy, leading to fragmented efforts and, at times, exacerbating the conflict.

Somalia's strategic location along key shipping routes has also drawn attention from global powers, with countries such as China and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) investing in port infrastructure, adding another layer to the country's geopolitical competition.

Through military interventions under the AU Mission to Somalia (AMISOM), Kenya's involvement in Somalia is rooted in geopolitical strategy and national security concerns. Kenya faces direct threats from al-Shabaab, which has conducted numerous attacks on Kenyan soil, including the Westgate Mall and Garissa University attacks. However, Kenya's military involvement in Somalia has also been seen as a means of securing its geopolitical interests in the Horn of Africa, ensuring that it remains a dominant regional power and a key ally of Western nations in the fight against terrorism.

The involvement of global powers, such as the US, Russia, and China, further complicates the geopolitical dynamics in both South Asia and Africa. In South Asia, China's strategic partnership with Pakistan, through initiatives such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), is viewed as a counterbalance to India's increasing influence in the region. This relationship has geopolitical implications that extend beyond economics, influencing the regional balance of power and contributing to tensions between India and Pakistan. China's growing economic presence in Africa, particularly through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has positioned it as a major player in the region. At the same time, the US and European nations continue to focus on counterterrorism efforts.

Sociopolitical Factors

Sociopolitical factors play a crucial role in the emergence and persistence of violent extremism in both South Asia and Africa. These factors often create instability and discontent, which extremist groups exploit to further their agendas. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing effective CVE strategies.

In South Asia, the complex interplay of historical grievances, political instability, and governance issues has significantly contributed to the rise of violent extremism. For instance, in Pakistan, the political marginalisation and perceived injustices experienced by certain groups have been exploited by extremist factions like the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The lack of effective governance in tribal areas has allowed these groups to establish a foothold, further destabilising the region.⁶ Additionally, the political turbulence in Pakistan, marked by military coups and unstable civilian governments, has hindered consistent and effective policy implementation against extremism.

Similarly, in India, the longstanding conflict in Kashmir illustrates how sociopolitical factors can fuel violent extremism. The region's political status, coupled with human rights abuses and economic underdevelopment, has created a breeding ground for insurgent groups.

These groups capitalise on local grievances, recruiting disenfranchised youth and perpetuating cycles of violence. The Indian government's approach to addressing the Kashmir issue, often marked by heavy-handed security measures, has at times exacerbated the problem by alienating the local population further.⁷

In Africa, sociopolitical factors such as weak governance, corruption, and ethnic tensions have similarly contributed to the proliferation of extremist groups. Nigeria's struggle with Boko Haram is a prominent example.⁸ The group's rise can be linked to the Nigerian government's failure to address the socioeconomic and political grievances of the northeastern region. Chronic corruption and mismanagement have led to widespread poverty and unemployment, creating a pool of vulnerable individuals susceptible to radicalisation. Furthermore, the Nigerian government's heavy-handed military response has often resulted in civilian casualties, fostering resentment and inadvertently aiding Boko Haram's recruitment efforts.⁹

Somalia presents another stark example, where the absence of a stable central government has allowed Al-Shabaab to thrive. The protracted civil war and the subsequent collapse of state institutions have left a power vacuum that the extremist group has exploited. Al-Shabaab has positioned itself as a provider of basic services and a source of order in the absence of effective governance, thereby gaining the support of some local communities.¹⁰ The group's ability to leverage clan dynamics and local grievances further complicates efforts to counter its influence.

In both regions, the interplay of sociopolitical factors highlights the need for CVE strategies that go beyond military solutions. Practical CVE efforts must address the underlying political and social grievances that drive individuals toward extremism. This includes promoting good governance, ensuring political inclusion, and addressing human rights concerns. Moreover, efforts to build trust between governments and local communities are crucial. In regions where government actions are perceived as unjust or oppressive, extremist groups can more easily gain support.

International cooperation and support from regional bodies can be vital in addressing these sociopolitical challenges. For instance, the AU's involvement in Somalia through the AMISOM has been crucial in providing stability and supporting the Somali government's efforts to counter Al-Shabaab.¹¹ Similarly, regional cooperation in South Asia, such as initiatives under the SAARC, can help address cross-border terrorism and foster a collaborative approach to CVE.¹²

Sociopolitical factors are fundamental in understanding and addressing violent extremism in South Asia and Africa. By critically examining these factors and their impact, this research aims to highlight the importance of comprehensive and context-specific CVE strategies that address the root causes of extremism and promote long-term stability and peace.

Economic Factors

Economic factors play a significant role in fueling violent extremism in both South Asia and Africa. Poverty, unemployment, and economic marginalisation create fertile grounds for extremist recruitment, as disenfranchised individuals seek alternative means of economic survival and social inclusion. Understanding these economic dynamics is essential for developing comprehensive CVE strategies.

In South Asia, the economic conditions in certain regions have significantly contributed to the rise of extremist groups.¹³ In Pakistan, for instance, the lack of economic opportunities in the tribal areas and rural regions has pushed many young people towards joining militant groups. The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), now merged into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, have long suffered from underdevelopment and neglect. With limited access to education and employment, the youth in these areas have few prospects for the future, making them vulnerable to recruitment by groups like TTP. These groups often offer financial incentives and a sense of belonging, filling the void left by the state's inability to provide basic services and economic stability.¹⁴

India also faces economic challenges that contribute to violent extremism. The insurgency in the Naxalite belt, which spans several central and eastern states, is driven by socioeconomic grievances. The Naxalite movement, primarily composed of marginalised tribal communities, arose as a response to decades of economic exploitation, land dispossession, and neglect by the state. Living in some of India's most impoverished regions, these communities have turned to armed struggle to demand their rights and improve their economic conditions. The government's development programmes have often failed to reach these areas effectively, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and insurgency.¹⁵

In Africa, economic factors are equally critical in understanding the rise of violent extremism. Nigeria's northeastern region, plagued by the Boko Haram insurgency, is one of the poorest in the country.¹⁶ High levels of unemployment, illiteracy, and economic disenfranchisement have created a desperate situation for many young people. Boko Haram exploits these conditions by offering financial rewards, a sense of purpose, and a sense of belonging to a community. The group's ability to offer economic incentives, albeit through illicit means, makes it an attractive option for those with limited prospects. The Nigerian government's failure to address these economic disparities has hindered efforts to combat the insurgency effectively.

Somalia's economic landscape further illustrates the link between economic factors and violent extremism. Decades of civil war and the absence of a functioning central government have devastated the country's economy. High unemployment rates, especially among the youth, coupled with widespread poverty, have created a fertile recruiting ground for Al-Shabaab.¹⁷ The extremist group has capitalised on the lack of economic opportunities by positioning itself as providing basic services and livelihoods.

Al-Shabaab's ability to generate revenue through illicit activities, such as smuggling and extortion, enables it to sustain its operations and attract recruits. The absence of viable economic alternatives leaves many Somalis with little choice but to align themselves with the group.

Addressing the economic factors that drive violent extremism requires a multifaceted approach. CVE strategies must improve economic opportunities and reduce poverty in vulnerable regions. This involves investing in education, vocational training, and job creation programmes that can offer sustainable livelihoods to at-risk populations. Additionally, efforts to improve infrastructure and access to basic services are crucial in fostering economic development and reducing the appeal of extremist groups.

International cooperation and support from development agencies can play a significant role in addressing these economic challenges. Initiatives such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank's efforts in promoting economic development and resilience in conflict-affected regions are essential. Moreover, regional organisations like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) can help coordinate and support economic initiatives that address the root causes of extremism.¹⁸

Economic factors are fundamental drivers of violent extremism in South Asia and Africa. By critically examining these factors and their impact, this research highlights the importance of comprehensive CVE strategies that address the economic roots of extremism. Through targeted economic development and poverty reduction efforts, it is possible to mitigate the conditions that foster violent extremism and promote long-term peace and stability.

Cultural and Religious Influences

Cultural and religious influences significantly shape the landscape of violent extremism in both South Asia and Africa. Extremist groups often exploit cultural and religious narratives to legitimise their actions and recruit followers.¹⁹ Understanding the nuances of these influences is essential for developing effective CVE strategies.

In South Asia, religious ideologies have played a central role in the proliferation of extremist groups. Pakistan, for instance, has witnessed the rise of various militant groups that use religious rhetoric to justify their actions. The Taliban and other jihadist organisations often frame their struggle as a holy war against perceived enemies of Islam, including the state of Pakistan and Western influences. Madrasas (religious schools) in Pakistan have sometimes been implicated in promoting extremist ideologies, although it is essential to note that not all madrasas engage in such activities. The intersection of religion and politics in Pakistan, particularly the state's historical use of jihadist proxies for strategic purposes, has further complicated efforts to combat extremism.²⁰

India faces its challenges related to religious extremism. The country's diverse religious landscape includes significant Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Sikh populations. Communal tensions and religious polarisation have occasionally erupted into violence, providing fertile ground for extremist ideologies. The rise of Hindu nationalist groups, some of which have been involved in violent activities against minority communities, illustrates how religious identity can be manipulated for political ends. Similarly, Islamist extremist groups in India, such as the "Indian Mujahideen", have exploited grievances among the Muslim minority to recruit members and justify attacks.²¹

In Africa, religious and cultural factors also play a crucial role in the dynamics of violent extremism. Boko Haram in Nigeria is a prominent example of how religious ideology can be weaponised. The group's name, which roughly translates to "Western education is forbidden", reflects its opposition to Western cultural and educational influences. Boko Haram's leader, Abubakar Shekau, has used religious sermons and propaganda videos to recruit followers and justify the group's brutal tactics. The group's stronghold in Nigeria's predominantly Muslim north highlights the intersection of religious identity and regional marginalisation.²²

Somalia's Al-Shabaab similarly leverages religious narratives to further its agenda. The group adheres to a strict interpretation of Islam and seeks to impose Sharia law across Somalia. Al-Shabaab's propaganda often emphasises themes of religious duty and martyrdom, appealing to devout Muslims.²³ The group's ability to present itself as a defender of Islam against foreign intervention and corrupt local authorities resonates with some segments of the population. Additionally, Al-Shabaab has exploited traditional clan structures and rivalries to bolster its influence and control.

The influence of cultural factors cannot be overlooked. Traditional norms and practices significantly shape societal behaviour in many parts of South Asia and Africa. Extremist groups often tap into these cultural frameworks to gain legitimacy and support. For instance, in Afghanistan, the Taliban's enforcement of Pashtunwali, a traditional code of conduct among the Pashtun people, has helped them maintain a stronghold in Pashtun-dominated areas. Similarly, in parts of Nigeria, Boko Haram has exploited local customs and grievances to strengthen its foothold.

Addressing the cultural and religious influences that drive violent extremism requires a nuanced and sensitive approach. CVE strategies must engage with religious leaders and communities to counter extremist narratives and promote alternative interpretations of religious texts. Initiatives encouraging interfaith dialogue and cooperation can also help bridge divides and reduce tensions. Additionally, efforts to preserve and respect cultural traditions while promoting inclusive and progressive values are crucial in undermining extremist ideologies.

International and regional organisations have a role to play in supporting these efforts. Programmes that provide platforms for moderate religious voices and promote cultural exchange can help counter the appeal of extremist narratives. The involvement of community leaders and grassroots organisations is essential in ensuring that CVE initiatives are culturally relevant and locally accepted.

Cultural and religious influences are deeply intertwined with violent extremism in South Asia and Africa. This research underscores the importance of culturally sensitive and context-specific CVE strategies by critically examining these factors and their impact. Engaging with religious and community leaders and promoting inclusive cultural values helps challenge extremist ideologies, fostering long-term peace and stability.

External Actors

The involvement of external actors, both state and non-state, has significantly shaped the rise of violent extremism in regions like South Asia and Africa. These actors, through various forms of political, financial, and military support, have directly or indirectly fueled extremist ideologies and empowered militant organisations. In South Asia, countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India have long been battlegrounds for external interventions, while in Africa, nations such as Nigeria, Somalia, and Kenya have faced similar challenges.

In South Asia, the involvement of foreign powers during the Cold War set the stage for the rise of extremist groups. Afghanistan became a focal point during the Soviet invasion in the 1980s when the US and its allies supported the mujahideen with weapons and financial aid. The intent was to counter Soviet expansion, but this external intervention sowed the seeds for future militant groups, such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Pakistan, a key ally of the US in this period, also played a central role by providing logistic and ideological support to these fighters, some of whom later turned into extremist factions operating across the region. Initially bolstered by foreign powers, these movements evolved into organisations that exploited political instability and a lack of governance, growing beyond the control of their original sponsors.

Similarly, in Africa, external actors have had a profound impact on the rise of violent extremist groups. In Nigeria, the emergence of Boko Haram can be traced back to a combination of internal grievances and external influences. Boko Haram's growth has been fueled by funding from various foreign sources, including illicit arms trafficking networks linked to Libya after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi. The collapse of the Libyan state, accelerated by NATO's intervention, created a power vacuum that allowed weapons and fighters to flow across the Sahel region, exacerbating instability in northern Nigeria. Furthermore, extremist groups in Somalia, such as al-Shabaab, have long benefited from external support, particularly from regional actors like Eritrea, which has been accused of providing arms and training to the group as part of its broader geopolitical contest with Ethiopia.

This involvement has enabled al-Shabaab to sustain its insurgency, destabilising Somalia and its neighbours, including Kenya.

India, too, has faced the consequences of external support for extremist organisations, particularly in Kashmir. Elements pursuing the agenda of freedom in Kashmir have received moral and diplomatic support from Pakistan, as part of a broader strategy to challenge India's control over the disputed territory. These groups, while serving the strategic interests of their external sponsors, have perpetuated cycles of violence and insurgency, making the peaceful resolution of the conflict more difficult. This external backing has not only prolonged the conflict but also radicalised segments of the population, contributing to the rise of homegrown extremist ideologies.

In both regions, the involvement of foreign actors has had complex, long-lasting effects. External support for extremist groups has often been driven by short-term strategic goals, such as countering rival states or ideological opponents. However, this involvement has frequently backfired, leading to the proliferation of extremist networks that operate transnationally and destabilise entire regions. For example, in Kenya, al-Shabaab's capacity to conduct terror attacks, including the infamous Westgate Mall attack in 2013, has been facilitated by foreign training and financing. These groups use external support to advance their agendas, recruit followers, and challenge state authority, creating security dilemmas that local governments are often ill-equipped to handle.

The lessons from South Asia and Africa demonstrate that external involvement in local conflicts rarely leads to sustainable security. Instead, it often exacerbates divisions, empowers militant groups, and undermines state institutions. For sustainable solutions to CVE, a shift is needed toward addressing the underlying political, social, and economic grievances that extremist groups exploit while reducing the influence of external actors that have historically fueled these conflicts.

Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) Strategies in South Asia: Case Studies of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India

Case studies offer a detailed examination of specific instances of violent extremism and the CVE strategies employed to address them. By analysing these cases, we can gain insights into the effectiveness of various approaches and identify best practices that can be adapted to different contexts.

The CVE strategies employed in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India offer insightful examples of how different countries address the complex issue of extremism. Each country's approach reflects its unique sociopolitical and cultural context, highlighting the successes and challenges of CVE efforts.

In Pakistan, the response to violent extremism has evolved, reflecting shifts in domestic and regional security dynamics. Initially, Pakistan's CVE strategies were heavily focused on military operations, particularly in the tribal areas and KP, where groups like TTP were most active.²⁴ The military Operation Zarb-e-Azb, launched in 2014, aimed to dismantle militant strongholds and reclaim territory with subsequent military campaigns, succeeded in reducing the operational capabilities of the TTP and other militant groups. However, military actions alone proved insufficient in addressing the underlying issues driving extremism. The government's focus has increasingly shifted towards a more comprehensive approach that includes counter-radicalization efforts, community engagement, and socioeconomic development. The National Action Plan (NAP), introduced in 2014, outlines a multifaceted strategy that includes measures to curb hate speech, strengthen law enforcement, and improve judicial processes. Despite these efforts, challenges remain, such as the persistence of militant groups and the need for more effective implementation of CVE policies across diverse regions.²⁵

Afghanistan's approach to CVE has been heavily influenced by its long-standing conflict and the presence of the Taliban. The US-led coalition's military strategy, alongside Afghan government initiatives, aimed to weaken the Taliban and reduce their influence.²⁶ However, military operations alone have not resolved the underlying conflict, which is deeply rooted in ethnic divisions, political instability, and economic deprivation. The Afghan government, with international support, has implemented various CVE initiatives, including peace negotiations and reintegration programmes for former militants. For example, the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Programme (APRP) aimed to offer economic and social incentives for insurgents to surrender their arms and reintegrate into society. While these efforts have had some success, they have also faced significant hurdles, including ongoing insurgent activities and difficulties in achieving a broad-based political consensus. The recent resurgence of the Taliban following the US withdrawal underscores the challenges of building a feeling of sustainable peace in a context marked by persistent conflict and fragmented governance.²⁷

In India, CVE strategies have been shaped by its diverse and complex sociopolitical landscape. The country faces a range of extremist threats, from insurgent movements in Kashmir to radical Islamist groups like the Indian Mujahideen. The Indian government has employed security measures, intelligence operations, and community outreach to address these threats. For instance, the use of counter-terrorism laws and special security forces, such as the National Investigation Agency (NIA), has been pivotal in disrupting extremist networks and preventing attacks. Additionally, the government has implemented community-based programmes to prevent radicalisation, including initiatives to promote education and economic development in vulnerable areas. However, India's approach has been criticised for its heavy reliance on security measures, which some argue can exacerbate tensions and alienate local communities.

In Kashmir, the security-centric approach has sometimes led to allegations of human rights abuses, further fueling resentment and undermining efforts to counter extremism. Effective CVE strategies in India require a delicate balance between security and community engagement, focusing on addressing grievances and fostering trust between the state and local populations.

In summary, the CVE strategies in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India highlight the complexities and challenges of countering violent extremism in diverse contexts. While military and security measures have been crucial in reducing the immediate threats posed by extremist groups, addressing the root causes of extremism requires a more nuanced approach. Socioeconomic development, community engagement, and efforts to address political and cultural grievances are essential components of a comprehensive CVE strategy. Each country's experience offers valuable lessons for developing and implementing effective counterextremism policies, emphasising the need for tailored and context-specific solutions that address both the symptoms and underlying causes of violent extremism.

Effectiveness

The effectiveness of CVE strategies in South Asia varies considerably across different countries and contexts. Examining the successes and shortcomings of these strategies provides valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of combating violent extremism in the region.

In Pakistan, the CVE strategy has been multifaceted, incorporating military, political, and social elements. The military operations, notably Operation Zarb-e-Azb, launched in 2014, aimed to dismantle the infrastructure of groups like TTP. This operation resulted in significant territorial losses for TTP and a reduction in their capacity to launch large-scale attacks. Despite these gains, the approach has faced criticism for its impact on the civilian population and the displacement of local communities. The Pakistan government's National Action Plan (NAP), introduced in 2014, includes measures such as regulating madrasas, enhancing law enforcement, and promoting judicial reforms.²⁸ However, implementing these measures has been inconsistent, and political challenges have undermined their effectiveness. For example, while the regulation of madrasas is intended to curb radicalisation, some institutions continue to operate with minimal oversight, allowing extremist ideologies to persist. Furthermore, the political instability and fluctuating commitment to counterterrorism have hampered the sustained implementation of the NAP.

In Afghanistan, the CVE strategy has been heavily influenced by the ongoing conflict and the resurgence of the Taliban. The US-led NATO forces' efforts, including military operations and counterterrorism raids, have aimed to weaken the Taliban's control and prevent the expansion of extremist influence. While these efforts have achieved some tactical successes, they have also faced challenges.

The protracted conflict has led to a high civilian toll and significant infrastructural damage, which in turn has exacerbated local grievances. The Afghan government's own CVE initiatives, such as the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme, which sought to negotiate with and reintegrate moderate Taliban fighters, have had mixed results. The reintegration programme has struggled with issues of credibility and implementation, partly due to the lack of trust between the government and local communities. The persistence of the Taliban's influence and the recent resurgence of the group following the US withdrawal in 2021 highlight the limitations of the CVE strategy in a protracted conflict environment.²⁹

In India, CVE strategies have focused on a combination of security measures, socioeconomic development, and community engagement. The Indian government's approach to insurgencies in regions like Kashmir and the Naxalite belt includes a mix of military operations and development initiatives. For instance, Operation Green Hunt, launched in 2009, aimed to dismantle Naxalite networks through extensive military action. This operation has had some success in weakening the Naxalites' capabilities, but it has also faced criticism for its impact on civilians and the exacerbation of local grievances.³⁰ Concurrently, development programmes such as the Integrated Action Plan have been implemented to address socioeconomic issues in affected areas. These initiatives focus on infrastructure development, education, and employment opportunities. However, the effectiveness of these programmes has been limited by bureaucratic inefficiencies and inadequate resource allocation. In Kashmir, the government's heavy-handed security approach has at times exacerbated local resentment and fueled support for insurgent groups. Efforts to promote dialogue and address political grievances have been sporadic, contributing to the ongoing cycle of violence.³¹

In all three countries, the effectiveness of CVE strategies is constrained by a combination of factors, including inconsistent implementation, political instability, and the complex interplay of socioeconomic and cultural factors. While military operations and security measures are necessary components of CVE strategies, they must be complemented by efforts to address the root causes of extremism, such as poverty, political exclusion, and cultural grievances. Furthermore, engaging with local communities and respecting human rights is crucial for building trust and fostering sustainable peace.³² Overall, the case studies from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India underscore the need for comprehensive and context-specific CVE strategies that integrate security, socioeconomic development, and community engagement.

Lessons Learnt

South Asia's experiences in addressing violent extremism offer valuable lessons and best practices that can be applied to other regions grappling with similar challenges. The diverse approaches and outcomes in countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India provide critical insights into effective CVE strategies.

In Pakistan, the CVE strategy has highlighted several important lessons. The success of Operation Zarb-e-Azb in weakening TTP underscores the importance of a robust military response in countering organised extremist groups. However, the operation also demonstrated the necessity of balancing military actions with efforts to mitigate civilian suffering and address underlying grievances. The displacement caused by the operation revealed the need for comprehensive post-conflict rehabilitation programmes to assist the affected population and prevent them from being exploited by extremist groups.³³ Additionally, the Pakistan government's NAP demonstrates the value of a multifaceted approach that encompasses not only military measures but also efforts to regulate madrasas, enhance law enforcement, and implement judicial reforms. While implementation challenges and political instability have impeded the NAP's effectiveness, the plan's emphasis on comprehensive measures remains a key takeaway for other regions.³⁴

Afghanistan's experience with the Taliban and counterterrorism efforts highlights the importance of integrating military and political strategies. The US-led military operations aimed at weakening the Taliban have achieved tactical successes but have struggled with the broader goal of establishing lasting peace.³⁵ The failure of the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme to fully reintegrate moderate Taliban fighters underscores the need for trust-building measures between the government and local communities. Effective CVE strategies must include robust reconciliation processes and address the root causes of insurgency, such as political exclusion and socioeconomic deprivation. The Afghan case demonstrates that military solutions alone are insufficient without accompanying efforts to address political and economic grievances.

India's approach to CVE, particularly in regions like Kashmir and the Naxalite belt, provides additional lessons. Military operations, such as Operation Green Hunt, and socioeconomic development initiatives reflect a balanced approach to addressing extremism. However, the challenges faced in implementing these initiatives effectively highlight the importance of addressing bureaucratic inefficiencies and ensuring adequate resource allocation.³⁶ The mixed results of development programmes in addressing the socioeconomic drivers of extremism indicate that targeted and well-resourced initiatives are crucial. Additionally, the experience in Kashmir emphasises the need for political dialogue and addressing grievances to complement security measures. Heavy-handed approaches can exacerbate local resentment and fuel support for insurgent groups, demonstrating the need for a more nuanced and inclusive strategy.³⁷

In summary, the key lessons from South Asia's CVE strategies include balancing military actions with socioeconomic development, addressing underlying political and economic grievances, and engaging with local communities. Effective CVE strategies must integrate security measures with efforts to promote reconciliation, enhance governance, and provide financial opportunities.

The experiences of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India offer valuable insights for other regions facing similar challenges, highlighting the need for comprehensive, context-specific approaches that address both the symptoms and root causes of violent extremism.

Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) Strategies in Africa: Case Studies of Nigeria, Somalia, and Kenya

Examining CVE strategies in African countries such as Nigeria, Somalia, and Kenya reveals a range of approaches and outcomes that provide essential insights into the effectiveness of various counter-terrorism interventions. Each country faces unique challenges that shape its CVE strategies, offering valuable lessons for addressing violent extremism in diverse contexts.

In Nigeria, the CVE strategy primarily revolves around combating the Boko Haram insurgency. Deep-seated socioeconomic issues, including poverty and lack of educational opportunities in the northeastern regions of Nigeria, have fueled Boko Haram's rise.³⁸ The Nigerian government has adopted a mix of military and non-military approaches to counter the insurgency. Military operations such as Operation Lafiya Dole have made significant strides in reclaiming territory from Boko Haram. However, these operations have also faced criticism for their impact on the civilian population and the resultant humanitarian crisis.

The Nigerian government has also implemented non-military CVE measures, such as the Safe Corridor programme. This initiative aims to support the deradicalisation and reintegration of the former Boko Haram fighters. The programme includes psychological counseling, vocational training, and support for social reintegration. While the Safe Corridor program represents a positive step towards addressing the root causes of extremism, its effectiveness has been mixed. Challenges such as stigmatising former fighters and limited resources have affected their impact. Additionally, efforts by the Nigerian government, supported by international partners such as the UNDP, to promote community resilience and development are crucial in addressing the underlying socioeconomic factors that contribute to extremism.³⁹

Somalia's struggle with Al-Shabaab offers another critical case study. Al-Shabaab's continued presence and influence in Somalia are deeply intertwined with the country's political instability and weak governance. The AMISOM has been a central component of the CVE strategy, providing military support to the Somali Federal Government in its efforts to combat Al-Shabaab. AMISOM's operations have successfully reclaimed key territories from Al-Shabaab and reduced the group's control over large areas. However, the ongoing conflict and the group's ability to carry out high-profile attacks, such as the 2017 Mogadishu bombing, highlight the limitations of a pure military approach. In response to these challenges, Somalia has implemented additional CVE measures, including efforts to strengthen local governance and provide alternative livelihoods to vulnerable youth.

Programmes such as the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) initiatives aim to rehabilitate former Al-Shabaab fighters and reintegrate them into their respective societies. Despite these efforts, the effectiveness of the DDR programme has been constrained by ongoing political instability and limited state capacity. The case of Somalia underscores the importance of building robust governance structures and providing economic opportunities as part of a comprehensive CVE strategy.⁴⁰

Kenya's approach to countering violent extremism is shaped by its experiences with the Al-Shabaab threat, particularly following the 2013 Westgate Mall attack and subsequent attacks. Kenya has adopted a combination of security measures and community-based initiatives. The government has implemented strict security protocols and counterterrorism operations to address the Al-Shabaab threat. At the same time, Kenya has sought to engage with communities through initiatives such as the National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism, which aims to address radicalization and promote community resilience.⁴¹

One notable initiative is the "Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism" (PCVE) programme, which enhances community engagement and promotes alternative narratives to counter extremist ideologies. The programme includes educational outreach, vocational training, and support for vulnerable youth. Despite these efforts, challenges such as limited resources, trust between communities and law enforcement, and the complexity of addressing radicalisation in diverse contexts have affected the program's effectiveness. Kenya's experience underscores the importance of ongoing community engagement and addressing grievances that may fuel extremism.⁴²

The case studies from Nigeria, Somalia, and Kenya illustrate the complexities of CVE strategies in Africa. Various factors, including the underlying socioeconomic and political conditions, the role of military and non-military measures, and the need for robust governance and community engagement, influence the effectiveness of CVE approaches. By critically analysing these case studies, we gain valuable insights into the best practices and challenges of CVE strategies, which can inform efforts to combat violent extremism in other regions facing similar challenges.

Effectiveness

The effectiveness of CVE strategies in Africa varies widely depending on the approach employed and each country's specific context. Evaluating the success and limitations of these strategies requires a nuanced analysis of military, political, and community-based interventions.

In Nigeria, the military's role in combating Boko Haram has been a central element of the CVE strategy. Operations such as Operation Lafiya Dole have achieved notable successes, including the recapture of territories previously held by Boko Haram and the weakening of the group's operational capabilities.

However, the heavy-handed nature of these military operations has led to significant civilian casualties and displacement, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis and creating new grievances that can fuel further extremism. The limitations of a purely military approach are evident, as the group's resilience and ability to carry out attacks persist despite territorial losses.

Complementing military efforts, the Nigerian government has implemented non-military CVE strategies, including the Safe Corridor programme, which aims to reintegrate former Boko Haram fighters into society. This initiative provides psychological counseling, vocational training, and social support. While the Safe Corridor programme represents a significant effort to address the root causes of extremism, its effectiveness has been constrained by issues such as limited resources, stigmatisation of former fighters, and challenges in community reintegration. The programme's mixed results underscore the need for a more comprehensive approach that integrates socioeconomic development, community engagement, and deradicalization efforts.

In Somalia, the military component of the CVE strategy is led by AMISOM, which has played a crucial role in recapturing territories from Al-Shabaab and supporting the Somali Federal Government. AMISOM's military successes are notable, but the group's continued ability to conduct high-profile attacks, such as the 2017 Mogadishu bombing, highlights the limitations of relying solely on military measures.⁴³ The ongoing conflict and political instability in Somalia have complicated the effectiveness of military operations, emphasizing the need for a more holistic approach.

Somalia has pursued additional CVE strategies to address these challenges, including strengthening local governance and implementing Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programmes for former Al-Shabaab fighters.⁴⁴ While these initiatives aim to address the sociopolitical and economic factors contributing to extremism, their impact is limited by the broader challenges of state-building and the ongoing conflict. The case of Somalia demonstrates that while military operations can achieve tactical gains, long-term success requires robust governance, economic development, and reconciliation efforts.

Kenya's approach to countering extremism has involved a combination of security measures and community-based initiatives. The government has implemented strict security protocols and counterterrorism operations to address the threat from Al-Shabaab. At the same time, community-based programmes like the National Strategy to PCVE aim to engage communities in preventing radicalisation and promoting alternative narratives. These programmes include educational outreach, vocational training, and support for vulnerable youth.⁴⁵ However, the effectiveness of Kenya's CVE strategy is challenged by several factors. Limited resources, issues of trust between communities and law enforcement, and the complexity of addressing radicalisation in a diverse context have affected the success of these initiatives.

The reliance on security measures alone can exacerbate community tensions and undermine trust, making it crucial to strike a balance between security and efforts to address grievances and promote inclusive dialogue.⁴⁶

The evaluation of CVE strategies in Africa reveals successes and limitations across military, political, and community-based interventions. Military operations have achieved significant tactical successes but are often limited by humanitarian impacts and the persistence of extremist groups. Political and community-based strategies, while essential for addressing the root causes of extremism, face challenges related to resources, implementation, and local engagement. The key to effective CVE is integrating these approaches, ensuring a balance between security measures and efforts to address socioeconomic and political grievances, and fostering community trust and resilience.

Lessons Learned

The experiences of African countries in developing and implementing CVE strategies offer critical lessons and best practices that can be applied to other regions facing similar challenges. Examining the successes and shortcomings of CVE efforts in Nigeria, Somalia, and Kenya reveals several key insights that can inform global approaches to combating violent extremism.

One of the most significant lessons from Africa is the importance of integrating military and non-military approaches to achieving practical solutions. In Nigeria, combining military operations against Boko Haram with non-military initiatives, such as the Safe Corridor programme, illustrates the need for a balanced strategy. The Safe Corridor program's focus on deradicalisation and reintegration of former fighters is a crucial component that addresses the root causes of extremism, such as socioeconomic deprivation and lack of opportunities. This holistic approach aligns with the broader understanding that while military action can achieve tactical successes, long-term effectiveness requires addressing grievances through socioeconomic development, psychological support, and community reintegration.

In Somalia, the experience with the AMISOM highlights the necessity of complementing military efforts with strong governance and state-building initiatives. AMISOM's success in reclaiming territories from Al-Shabaab underscores the effectiveness of coordinated military action.⁴⁷ However, the ongoing political instability and weak governance structures have limited the overall success of these efforts. The lesson is that military operations alone cannot sustain long-term stability without concurrent efforts to build effective local governance, promote political inclusivity, and address socioeconomic challenges. This insight is crucial for regions where extremism is deeply intertwined with political and governance issues. Kenya's approach to countering violent extremism demonstrates the value of community-based interventions.

The National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism (PCVE) focuses on engaging communities, promoting alternative narratives, and supporting vulnerable youth. This community-centered approach helps to prevent radicalisation by addressing local grievances and fostering resilience against extremist ideologies.⁴⁸ However, Kenya's experience also reveals the challenges of implementing such strategies in the face of resource constraints and trust issues between communities and law enforcement. The lesson is the importance of ensuring sustained community engagement and adequate support to build trust and effectiveness in CVE programmes.

A critical lesson from these African case studies is the need for a comprehensive approach that integrates security, governance, and community engagement. Effective CVE strategies must address both the symptoms and root causes of extremism.⁴⁹ This includes disrupting extremist activities through military and law enforcement measures, as well as addressing the socioeconomic and political factors that contribute to radicalization.⁵⁰ Providing economic opportunities, improving governance, and fostering community resilience are essential to a successful CVE strategy.

Moreover, the importance of adaptability and context-specific solutions is evident. Each African country's CVE strategy has been shaped by its unique sociopolitical and economic context, underscoring the need for a tailored strategy that addresses local conditions and challenges. Best practices from one region should be carefully adapted to fit the specific circumstances of another area, taking into account local dynamics, cultural factors, and existing governance structures.

The key lessons from Africa's CVE strategies emphasise the need for an integrated approach that combines military, governance, and community-based efforts. Addressing underlying grievances, promoting political inclusivity, and ensuring robust community engagement are crucial for the long-term success of CVE initiatives. These lessons provide valuable guidance for developing effective CVE strategies in other regions, underscoring the importance of comprehensive, context-specific solutions to combat violent extremism globally.

Comparative Analysis and Transferable Practices

A comparative analysis of CVE strategies in South Asia and Africa reveals commonalities and distinct practices that offer valuable insights for addressing global violent extremism. The effectiveness of CVE strategies can often hinge on the adaptability of successful practices across different contexts, highlighting the importance of identifying transferable practices and lessons learned.

In South Asia, Pakistan's approach to countering violent extremism through Operation Zarb-e-Azb and the National Action Plan (NAP) provides a valuable reference point. The military operation aimed to dismantle TTP and regain control over territories affected by the insurgency.

While this strategy led to significant territorial gains, it also highlighted the limitations of purely military approaches, including the displacement of civilians and humanitarian concerns.⁵¹ The NAP's multifaceted approach, which includes regulatory measures for madrasas and judicial reforms, underscores the importance of integrating security measures with sociopolitical reforms. This approach aligns with lessons from other regions that emphasise the need for a holistic strategy combining security, governance, and development efforts.⁵²

In contrast, Nigeria's CVE strategy against Boko Haram incorporates both military and non-military components, with the Safe Corridor programme focusing on deradicalisation and reintegration of former fighters. This initiative reflects a critical lesson from South Asia's experience, where addressing the root causes of extremism through socioeconomic and psychological support is crucial. The Safe Corridor program's emphasis on vocational training and social support for former fighters parallels efforts in South Asia to address underlying grievances and provide alternatives to extremism. However, Nigeria's challenges with limited resources and stigmatisation of former fighters echo the difficulties faced by South Asian countries in implementing effective reintegration programmes.

Somalia's experience with Al-Shabaab and the role of AMISOM offers another comparative dimension. AMISOM's military support has been crucial in countering Al-Shabaab's control, like military interventions in South Asia. However, Somalia's ongoing political instability and the need for local governance reforms highlight a common theme across both regions: the necessity of combining military operations with efforts to build effective governance structures and address socioeconomic factors. While aiming to rehabilitate former fighters, the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programmes in Somalia face challenges reminiscent of issues seen in South Asia, such as integrating fighters into a fragile sociopolitical environment.

Kenya's CVE strategy, which encompasses community-based initiatives and the national strategy to counter violent extremism, offers valuable insights into the importance of community engagement and alternative narratives. Kenya's approach parallels community-focused strategies in South Asia, where engaging local communities and promoting counternarratives are integral to prevent radicalisation. Kenya's challenges with resource limitations and trust issues between communities and law enforcement highlight the need for sustained community engagement and resource allocation, lessons that apply to similar contexts in South Asia.

In synthesising these comparative insights, several transferable practices emerge. Integrating military operations with comprehensive socioeconomic and political reforms is a critical lesson in South Asia and Africa. Effective CVE strategies must address underlying grievances and support reintegration and community resilience. Additionally, community engagement and the promotion of alternative narratives are essential components that enhance the effectiveness of CVE efforts.

Ensuring these strategies are contextually adapted and supported by adequate resources and local buy-in is crucial for their success.

The comparative analysis of CVE strategies across South Asia and Africa highlights shared challenges and effective practices. Transferable lessons, such as integrating military and non-military approaches, community engagement, and addressing underlying grievances, offer valuable insights for designing effective CVE strategies in diverse contexts. These insights enable policymakers and practitioners to develop a more comprehensive and adaptable approach to combating violent extremism globally.

Conclusion

CVE strategies in South Asia and Africa reveal a complex landscape of approaches, successes, and limitations. A detailed analysis of military, political, and community-based interventions in countries like Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Somalia, and Kenya reveals several critical insights that underscore the nuanced nature of combating violent extremism.

In South Asia and Africa, reliance on military operations as a primary CVE strategy has shown effectiveness but has significant limitations. In Pakistan, Operation Zarb-e-Azb achieved considerable territorial gains against the TTP. However, it also caused extensive civilian displacement and humanitarian issues, revealing the need for a balanced approach that integrates security measures with humanitarian considerations. Similarly, in Somalia, AMISOM has made notable strides in weakening Al-Shabaab's control but has struggled with the persistent challenges of political instability and governance deficits. These examples highlight that while military actions are essential, they must be complemented by efforts to address the underlying sociopolitical and economic factors that fuel extremism.

The analysis also underscores the importance of political and community-based interventions. In Nigeria, the Safe Corridor programme highlights the crucial role of deradicalization and reintegration efforts in addressing the root causes of extremism. Despite facing challenges such as limited resources and stigmatization, the programme reflects an essential lesson: addressing the socioeconomic and psychological dimensions of radicalization is crucial for long-term success. Similarly, Kenya's community-based initiatives and the National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism (PCVE) emphasize the importance of engaging local communities and promoting alternative narratives. However, Kenya's resource limitations and trust issues underscore the need for sustained community engagement and adequate support.

The comparative analysis across regions reveals several transferable practices that can enhance CVE strategies globally. Integrating military efforts with comprehensive socioeconomic and political reforms is a key lesson, as evidenced by the experiences in both South Asia and Africa.

Effective CVE strategies must address grievances, support reintegration, and build resilient communities. Community engagement and the promotion of alternative narratives are also vital components that enhance the effectiveness of CVE efforts. Ensuring these strategies are contextually adapted, supported by adequate resources, and having local buy-in is crucial for their success.

In conclusion, the fight against violent extremism requires a multi-faceted approach that goes beyond military solutions. By incorporating lessons learned from the experiences of South Asia and Africa, policymakers and practitioners can develop more effective, adaptable, and comprehensive CVE strategies. Addressing the root causes of extremism, integrating community-based efforts, and ensuring robust governance and resource allocation are essential for achieving sustainable security and long-term peace.

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