

Selective SDG Implementation, Grievances, and Terrorism in Pakistan: A Critical Discourse Analysis of National Policy Frameworks

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Abstract

This study examines how Pakistan's National Policy discourse positions the relationship between SDGs, grievances, and terrorism. Using qualitative content analysis framed by critical discourse analysis, examining key policy and planning documents, including Vision 2025, the National SDG Framework, the National Security Policy, the National Action Plan, against terrorism, and selective Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP) summaries. The finding shows a clear preference for security and growth focused goals, especially SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) and SDG8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), whereas SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) are mentioned less seriously and receive limited attention. In National Policy Discourse, terrorism is mainly presented as a serious threat to national security, whereas socio-economic, regional and identity-based grievances are discussed only in abstract or depoliticized terms. These findings suggest that selective SDG implementation allow structural grievances to persist, which can give rise to instability, highlighting the need for adopting integrated and inclusive development and security approaches in Pakistan

Keywords: Selective SDG Implementation; Grievance Formation; Terrorism and Security Discourse; Policy Discourse Analysis; Pakistan

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Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) are 17 goals formulated by Go Harlem Brundtland, the former Prime Minister of Norway and chair of World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) by United Nation. Her team coined the term “Sustainable Development”, defining it as “Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland Report, 1987). While leading WCED from 1983-1987, Brundtland and her team studies the global cause of inequality, poverty and environmental degradation, they found that regions with limited resources, social inequality, and weak governance were highly prone to conflict, which could escalate into political violence and terrorism (Zhao et al. 2024). Based on this study 17 SDG goals were formulated and adopted by United Nation in 2015 to guide countries around the world to eradicate poverty, reduce inequality and ensure justice, promote social development, and ensure to environmental sustainability by 2030 (UN, 2015).

During 2015-2016, Pakistan faced increase in terrorism and insurgency challenges, emphasizing the need for a development plan that addresses both socio-economic inequalities and security. The official adoption of the SDGs happened in 2016, with a strategic decision to reduce poverty, improve education and strengthen institutions which is essential for long term peace and stability (SDG 16) (Ayesha Hanif & Muhammad Zeeshan Hanif, 2024). These SDGs agendas were included in national plans such as the National Framework for implementation of SDGs (2018) and Vision 2025, showing commitment to inclusive socio-economic growth and effective governance (Government of Pakistan, 2018). However, progress across these goals has been inconsistent, with certain targets receiving more attention and funds while others were neglected. This selective implementation of SDGs can unintentionally marginalize certain communities, resulting in socio-economic grievances that lead to instability and security challenges (Mahendra, I. G. B., 2024).

Existing research in Pakistan have evaluated governance, development policies and terrorism independently, however, few studies have focused on how the selective implementation of SDGs interacts with grievance formulation and security issues (Riaz, A., 2018). While qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis have been widely used to analyze policy framing, securitization in governance and security studies (Hansen, L., 2011). This gap highlights the need for research that combine these methodological approaches to explore how development priorities, grievances and terrorism are linked through policy language and narratives in Pakistan. Accordingly, this study analyzes national policy and planning documents to examine how selective SDG implementation is prioritized, and others are ignored and how it relates to socio-economic grievances and security concerns. By carefully examining text excerpt to identify frames and narratives, the research aims to reveal which development goals are prioritized or neglected, and how these policy choices impact social stability and counterterrorism outcomes (Riaz, A., 2018).

Research Objectives

- To examine national policy documents how selective SDG focus and their implementation is framed in Pakistan.
- To identify socio-economic and political grievances that arise from uneven progress across different SDGs.
- To investigate how policy discourse and narratives show the connection between grievance and terrorism.
- To examine how policy documents frame development and security, whether certain SDGs are framed as security threats or as non-political issues.

Research Questions

- How selective implementation of SDGs are framed in Pakistan's national policy documents?
- What socio-economic and political grievances are emphasized or implied in the policy discourse?
- How does policy discourse link these grievances to issues of terrorism and national security?
- Are development and security concerns interrelated issues or are they addressed separately within the policy framework?

Background

Pakistan formally adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 and incorporated them into its national development agenda, specifically through Vision 2025 and National Framework created 2018 to implement SDGs. These policy instruments set SDGs as guiding principle for socio-economic development, and the implementation of these goals are put into action through Public Sector Development Program (PSDP) at federal and provincial levels (Government of Pakistan, 2018). While this framework shows official commitment to SDGs, but implementation has been inconsistent across different regions and sectors due to bureaucratic capacity, political priorities, limited budgets, and coordination challenges between federal and provincial government. As a result, progress on social-sector goals such as education, gender inequality, healthcare and access to clean water has remain uneven, especially across marginalized regions and vulnerable communities which raises concern about governance effectiveness and distributive justice (UNDP, 2020).

Over many years these development challenges are closely connected to Pakistan's long-standing security concerns (Buzan et al., 1998). Since 2001, the country has faced continuous terrorist activities linked to political instability, conflict in neighboring regions, and socio-economic vulnerabilities (Riaz, 2018). Significant incidents such as 2014 APS Peshawar attack and military operation Zarb-e-Azb, highlight that government's approach to terrorism has been mostly focused on security, supported by policy frameworks such as the National Action Plan (NAP) (NACTA, 2021). Even though counterterrorism policies have focused on military and legal strategies, but structural issues such as youth marginalization, regional inequalities, weak service delivery, and governance gaps continue to create conditions that make radicalization and insecurity possible. This broader context shows the importance of emphasizing development priorities; social grievances and security issues are discussed and managed within national policy discourse, especially through the lens of SDGs implementation (Riaz, 2018).

Methodology

Research Design

This study follows qualitative content analysis framed by discourse analysis to investigate how selective Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) implementations are emphasized or overlooked in Pakistan's National policy documents and how it relates to socio-economic grievances and terrorism. Official policy documents, including the National Framework for SDG implementation (2018), Vision 2025, Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP) summaries and related security policies were carefully examined to find recurring themes, narratives and policy priorities (Hansen, 2011; Buzan, Waever, & de Wilde, 1998). By combining quantitative coding with qualitative interpretation, the study provides both an organized framework and an in-depth understanding of policy discourse.

Data Collection and Coding

Text excerpts related to SDG implementation, governance, and security were taken from selected policy documents, copied, and organized in an Excel Sheet. They were later copied

from Excel and pasted in SPSS as a string variable, which reflects its main variables such as SDGs references, governance or development framing, security linkage and expression of grievances. For example, references to SDG 4 (Education) were categorized under “SDG Focus”, and mention of security linkage were coded from 0 (no link) to 7 (Structural/Strategic link). Other discourse frames, such as development-as-solution, grievance silenced, or human security, were also coded to enable organized analysis. This coding process could help spot common themes and trends across documents, while preserving the original context of individual excerpts for detailed analysis later.

Theoretical Framework

Analytical Orientation

This study uses existing theories “Theory-Informed” to understand the topic rather than running hypotheses or statistical tests as “Theory-Testing”. These theoretical concepts are used as interpretive lenses to understand how Pakistan’s national policy discourse frame development, grievances, and terrorism. The study combines 2 insights; Discourse Analysis and Securitization Theory to investigate how selective SDG implementation may contribute to grievance formation and security narratives. The aim is not to establish a causal relationship or prove cause and effect, rather this framework helps explain and understand how meanings are constructed, prioritized, and silenced in official policy texts.

Discourse Analysis: Framing, Silences, and Prioritization

Discourse analysis is the main tool used; it provides the primary analytical lenses to examine how policy language contracts social realities. For example, calling terrorism a “law-and-order issue” vs a “governance failure” creates a very different policy reality. Policies are not considered neutral or treated merely as technical documents, rather as discursive sites where power, priorities, and legitimacy are produced (Hansen, 2011).

In this study, discourse Analysis is used to examine:

- Which SDGs get more attention (e.g., SDG 16, SDG 8) and which are normally included or marginalized (e.g., SDG 1, SDG 5).

How development is framed or the kind of development Pakistan prioritized, whether as:

- Economic growth and competitiveness (GDP, Markets, Investment, CPEC)
- Expert-led governance and institutional reform (better management, institutions, monitoring system)
- Human development and social justice (health, education, dignity, well-being, rights)

How grievances are expressed, including:

- Explicit acknowledgment (e.g., regional deprivation)
- Implicit recognition (e.g., vague reference to inequality)
- Silencing or depoliticization (e.g., avoidance of identity-based grievances)

It explains how problems are mentioned and shows depth of grievance which is mentioned clearly, mildly or completely ignored.

According to Hansen (2011), a particular attention is paid to:

- Repetition and dominance of themes
- Absences and exclusion
- Hierarchies of concern across policy documents

This shows what is priority; whatever is missing is just as important as what is present, and some issues are treated urgent while others are secondary. This allows the study to find overall trends in selective development discourse instead of just looking at isolated policy statements (Hansen, 2011).

Securitization Theory: Development-security Linkage

Securitization theory is used to see how problems like terrorism, extremism, and instability are presented as security threats, and whether development issues are connected or detached to these security concerns (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998).

According to Securitization Theory, when an issue becomes a security threat it is framed as:

- Existential threat: (framed as a danger to the survival of the state, society or people)
- Require extraordinary measures: (when an urgent or special action is needed beyond normal rules)
- Justify exceptional policy responses: (why special actions are needed by the government)

In this study, securitization theory is used to examine:

- Whether terrorism is positioned as a serious or existential threat, especially after APS school attack.
- How development failures in issues like poverty, inequality or poor governance are incorporated into security narratives or just as technical, secondary or non-political issues.
- Whether grievances are securitized as linked to instability and extremism or considered as non-political or neutral problem through economic or administrative framing.

The framework also helps in identifying desecuritization tendencies, in which issues such as inequality or gender exclusion are discussed without linking them to conflict or violence.

Grievance Formation as an Interpretive Link

While grievance theory is not tested directly instead, the study draws a broad grievance-based understanding of conflict to interpret policy discourse.

- Grievances are conceptualized as:
- Socio-economic (poverty, inequality)
- Regional (Balochistan, merged districts)
- Governance-related (weak institutions)
- Identity-based (religious, ethnic and gender marginalization)

The framework investigates how grievances are framed discursively, rather the measuring grievance intensity based on data or through evidence. The focus is on whether grievances are:

- Recognizing as politically relevant
- Reduced to a technical development challenge
- Excluding from security discussions altogether

This allows the study to focus on whether selective SDG implementation may allow grievance narrative to be sustained indirectly that are later linked to extremism and insecurity.

Integrated Framework Logic

This theoretical perspective together allows the study to trace the following discursive pathways:

Selective SDG emphasis → Development framing → Grievance recognition or silencing → Security and terrorism narratives

By using these frameworks together can enable an in-depth understanding of how development, grievances, and terrorism are discursively connected or separated in Pakistan's National policy architecture.

Literature Review

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were a set of 17 goals formulated by UN in 2015 to improve economies, societies and environment by the year 2030. The aim of these goals was to reduce poverty, improve health and education, reduce inequalities and strengthen governance and justice system all around the world. Pakistan adopted and formally agreed to follows the

SDGs and created a national framework to achieve them, showing that wants inclusive development which benefits everyone (Government of Pakistan, 2018). However, progress has been uneven, and not all goals are being worked on equally, some get more attention and fundings while others are neglected. This selective implementation of development goals produces uneven social outcomes, generating grievances among marginalized groups. When such grievances remain unresolved, it creates an environment where terrorism can survive and spread easily (Buzan, Waever, & de Wilde, 1998).

SDGs are labeled as universal calls to action, but its implementation depends on local political system, institutions and priorities; each country implies them in their own ways. This can result in unequal outcomes and worsen existing social and economic inequalities (Rocha et al., 2025). This challenge is particularly acute, especially in low- and middle-income countries, where it's difficult to implement all SDGs equally due to limited resources and weak governance which leads to uneven progress across different goals (Clark, 2021). This shows the importance of examining how selective SDGs implementation can influence security outcomes in Pakistan, where governance and resource constraints shape selective prioritization (Rocha et al., 2025).

Following the idea that SDGs are essential worldwide and are part of global effort where all countries agree to work together to address challenges like poverty, education, health, inequality, and environment. In 2015, every member country of the UN agreed to adopt 17 SDGs. These goals serve as guides, a shared framework for development planning to reduce poverty, inclusive growth, protect the environment, and strengthen government institutions (UN, 2015). Countries are encouraged to set up a governance mechanism to track progress, report results, and ensure accountability, with the help of technical and institutional support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2020). Scholars argue that SDGs are meant for every country, but how well they work for; it purely depends on each country's government and political commitment. This means that results can differ from one country to another (Sachs et al., 2016).

Research shows that the interlinkage among SDGs; progress in one goal can create a positive or negative ripple effect on another, especially in countries with limited resources or capacity to work on all goals at once. For example, when a country invests in reducing poverty and growing the economy, it often helps improve other objectives like health, education, and overall well-being. Progress in these goals supports each other. However, goals tied to protect the environment or improving fairness in society can face tradeoffs (clash with each other). Even when countries are developing, deep-rooted systems and social structures keep inequality alive, this can create "inequality regimes" and "inequality traps", as a result progress benefits few groups while others remain left behind which makes it very difficult to achieve fair and inclusive development (Rocha et al., 2025).

At a national level, Pakistan has officially connected its development agenda with the SDGs through policy instruments such as Pakistan Vision 2025 and the National Framework for Implementation of Sustainable Development Goals. These frameworks include the SDGs into government planning, particularly through the Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP), which is the main way the government decides to allocate development funds (Planning Commission of Pakistan, 2018). However, SDG governance in Pakistan faces serious problems like uneven bureaucratic capacity, political support is not always strong, and poor cooperation between federal and provincial government (Government of Pakistan, PSDP Reports).

Due to low budget pressure, the government often prioritizes certain goals, particularly those linked to economic growth and infrastructure development, such as SDG 8, while goals related to social issues and strengthening institutions get less attention (Planning Commission of Pakistan, 2018). Similarly, a goal related to Climate change like SDG 13 is often framed as future or technical issues, which means real action is delayed instead of being addressed immediately (Sachs et al., 2016). This selective implementation shows why it is important to study how governance choices affect SDG progress and how this impact social fairness and security in Pakistan (UNDP, 2020).

When SDGs are not applied or achieved by countries equally, it can lead to socio-economic grievances, especially in countries where poverty and inequality are common. In Pakistan limited progress in certain SDGs such as Gender Equality (SDG 5), No Poverty (SDG 1), and Clean Water and Sanitation (SDG 6) has affected marginalized regions and vulnerable populations. Restricted access to clean water, Persistent poverty and gender-based exclusion begin the feeling of being ignored and forgotten among communities that are already socially and economically at a disadvantage. Even if government is committed or promises to achieve sustainable development but the basic needs of people remain unmet, they may feel that development policies are unfair or only benefit certain groups, leading to dissatisfaction and grievance formation (UNDP Pakistan Human Development Report).

Social and economic grievances caused by uneven development and unfair distribution of resources across region, which contributes to social and political instability in Pakistan. Areas where people do not have access to good education, healthcare, employment opportunities and women's participation in politics or society tend to feel more frustrated and disconnected from the government and state institutions. Such conditions can weaken social bonds and result in loss of trust on government institutions, creating an environment that may trigger political unrest and, in some cases, violence can emerge. Empirical studies on Pakistan indicate that persistent social and economic grievances contribute to pattern of conflict and instability, particularly, where development failures are combined with weak governance or ineffective institutions (Riaz, 2018).

After 9/11 attacks in United States, increase of terrorism in Pakistan has been witnessed, this led to the rise of extremist groups and cross-border militancy in the region (NACTA Pakistan, 2020). High-profile attacks, such as 2014 tragedy on Army Public School (APS), showed the severity of terrorist threats targeting innocent civilians, including children. Pakistan Army responded by launching Operation Zarb-e-Azb, a military campaign aimed to eliminate terrorist groups in North Waziristan and nearby regions. Despite these military actions, youth radicalization and their recruitment into extremist groups or organizations continued because of problems like social, economic, and ideological vulnerabilities (Fair, 2014).

Terrorism continues in Pakistan because of its close linkage to a combination of socio-economic, political and ideological factors (Riaz, 2018). Poverty, unemployment, lack of education and unequal development between regions leads to the feeling of marginalization, extremist groups take advantage of these frustrations by using propaganda and ideological messages to recruit and radicalize individuals (Ahmed, 2019). According to Structural Strain Theory, when people perceive unfairness such as some communities benefitting from development in certain areas while others are ignored result in relative deprivation which is exploited by extremist groups for recruitment (Gurr, 1970). Weak institutions, poor policy implementation, and lack of accountability fail to address these grievances, allowing non-state

actors or extremist networks to gain influence. This shows how governance gaps and social inequalities overlap to sustain conflict and radicalization (Krieger, 2019)

To fight terrorism and growing threats, the government of Pakistan has introduced counterterrorism policies, including the National Action Plan (NAP), which combines legal, social, and economic measures to tackle extremism activities (NACTA Pakistan, 2020). However, selective application of these policies and uneven enforcement makes them less effective, especially in marginalized areas. In some areas institutions have weak capacity, inadequate socio-economic development, not have enough access to justice, allowing extremist networks to exploit these governance gaps (Riaz, 2018). This highlights that it is essential to connect development policies, such as SGD implementation, with counterterrorism measures to reduce socio-economic factors or vulnerabilities that contribute to radicalization (NACTA Pakistan, 2020).

In developing countries such as Pakistan, uneven and selective implementation of Sustainable Development Goals can worsen existing socio-economic and political grievances. Inadequate progress on goals related to poverty reduction (SDG 1), gender equality (SDG 5), clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), and quality education (SDG 4) has resulted in many communities without access to basic services and opportunities (UNDP Pakistan). The sense of neglect by the feeling of being left out due to unfair government policies further intensifies when the government makes a formal commitment to sustainable development but fails to deliver real, visible improvement to people's daily life. As a result, incomplete SDG implementation leads to frustration, feel pushed to the margins of society, and develops grievance among vulnerable groups, particularly in underdeveloped and conflict-prone areas (World Bank).

When the ongoing socio-economic grievances left unresolved can eventually lead to pathways for individuals towards radicalization and militancy, becoming a serious threat to both national and regional security. Persistent inequality, lack of opportunity, and weak state presence create conditions where extremist groups can frame people's grievance as proof of deliberate injustice or state failure (Riaz, 2018). According to securitization theory, official policy discourse tends to see terrorism as a security threat, while social and economic grievances are depoliticized and treated as secondary concerns, this limits sustained policy attention to inequality, exclusion and development failures, contribute to increase in grievances beneath the surface and that give rise to terrorism (Buzan et al., 1998). This narrow focus limits addressing the real cause, allowing grievances to continue and can be used by militant actors. In Pakistan, empirical studies suggest that long-term grievances such as inequality, government failures, and social exclusion have played a role in the rise of terrorism and insecurity, emphasizing the need to integrate SDG-based development strategies into counterterrorism frameworks (Ahmed, 2019).

Existing research uses methods like discourse analysis and qualitative content analysis to study how policy and planning documents discuss and explain meaning about development, governance and security. These studies indicate that policy texts are not neutral; rather, language, framing and narrative choices influence what issues are important, assign responsibilities and which actions are justified. In development and security studies, researchers have used qualitative content analysis framed by discourse analysis to examine how government focus on certain issues such as economic growth or counterterrorism and which issues are overlooked including inequality, social justice and marginalization. This approach often helps to examine official texts such as national strategies, development plans, and security policies to identify which topics are prioritized and which are ignored (Hansen,

2011). In this study discourse analysis is carefully used by reading and analyzing of text excerpts from Pakistan’s National Policy and planning documents, to find common themes and narratives related to SDGs, governance, grievances, and security.

Complementing discourse analysis and securitization theory helps understand how politicians and policymakers present certain issues as urgent security threats, which can justify exceptional measures. Studies using securitization theory to development and terrorism are often depoliticized as technical or administrative matters, whereas violence and extremism are mainly framed as primarily as security concerns (Buzan, Waever, & de Wilde, 1998). However, few studies have examined how Pakistan’s policies connect the selective implementation of SDGs, grievance formation, and terrorism through language and framing. This highlights a critical gap in the literature, emphasizing the need for studies that combine discourse analysis and securitization theory to better understand how development issues, social grievances and security outcomes influence each other (Hansen, 2011).

Results

This section explains the empirical findings of the qualitative content analysis of Pakistan’s National Policy and Planning documents. The results are carefully organized to show (i) analyzed material distribution, (ii) prominent framing patterns, (iii) how grievances are framed, (iv) connection between development and security, (v) selective emphasis on SDGs.

Distribution of Documents and policy Sections

The final dataset comprises 183 text excerpts taken from a range of national development, security, and international policy documents. As shown in Table 1 (Document Distribution), most of these excerpts are from international policy texts, particularly UN General Assembly speeches and Prime Minister Addresses, which altogether made up more than one-third of the data. SDG related documents, such as the National SDG Framework (2018_ and the Voluntary National Reviews (2019, 2022) also featured frequently.

In contrast, key domestic planning documents including Vision 2025, PSDP Preface, and Federal Budget Speeches contribute to fewer proportions of excerpts.

Table 1: *Distribution of excerpts by document*

Document	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Vision 2025	5	2.7	2.7	2.7
NAP	9	4.9	4.9	7.7
Revised NAP	7	3.8	3.8	11.5
NSP	11	6.0	6.0	17.5
SDG Framework	18	9.8	9.8	27.3
PSDP 2022-23	9	4.9	4.9	32.2
VNR Pakistan 2019	17	9.3	9.3	41.5
VNR Pakistan 2022	16	8.7	8.7	50.3
UNGA General Debate Speech	25	13.7	13.7	63.9
UNGA Speech	25	13.7	13.7	77.6
PM Address UNGA	23	12.6	12.6	90.2
Federal Budget Speech	10	5.5	5.5	95.6
PSDP Preface	8	4.4	4.4	100.0
Total	183	100.0	100.0	-

By analyzing the different sections of the documents (Table 2), shows an introductory and agenda setting sections appeared more often (15.3%), while SDG-focused sections (9.8%), development and governance sections (8.2%), and sections of extremism and terrorism (7.7%). Explicit regional and provincial focus was limited (1.1%). Indicating that policy discourse rarely differentiates in different areas.

Table 2: Distribution Of Excerpts By Section Type

Section	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Vision / Framework	8	4.4	4.4	4.4
Policy Context	8	4.4	4.4	8.7
Agenda / Action Points	5	2.7	2.7	11.5
Security / Operations	7	3.8	3.8	15.3
Security / Governance	6	3.3	3.3	18.6
Regional / Provincial Focus	2	1.1	1.1	19.7
Development / Governance	15	8.2	8.2	27.9
Project Classification	3	1.6	1.6	29.5
Implementation Issues	11	6.0	6.0	35.5
SDGs Focus	18	9.8	9.8	45.4
International Context	5	2.7	2.7	48.1
SDG Implementation	4	2.2	2.2	50.3
Environment / Climate	6	3.3	3.3	53.6
Governance / Anti-Corruption	2	1.1	1.1	54.6
Extremism / Terrorism	14	7.7	7.7	62.3
Geopolitics / Conflict	16	8.7	8.7	71.0
Global Governance	8	4.4	4.4	75.4
Socio-Economic Development	7	3.8	3.8	79.2
Fiscal / Economic Policy	10	5.5	5.5	84.7
Preface	28	15.3	15.3	100.0
Total	183	100.0	100.0	-

Dominant Framing Patterns in Policy Discourse

The framing analysis indicates that the policy discourse is highly fragmented, with no single framing category dominating the data. The most common framing is policy and implementation, made up only 6% of the excerpts, followed by development framing (3.3%), development security framing (2.2%), and security-centric framing (2.2%), (Table 3).

Security focused frames such as militarized justice, hard security, surveillance, and punitive security appeared only occasionally rather than systematically. Similarly, normative and right based frames (e.g., human rights, justice based, inclusion) were present, but they received very little attention. The large number of framing categories that appear rarely indicates that policy discussions tend to focus on specific issues instead of integrating one clear and unifies development security narrative.

Table 3: Framing Type Frequencies

Framing Type	Frequency	Percent
Policy & Implementation	11	6.0%
Developmental	6	3.3%

Development–Security	4	2.2%
Security-Centric	4	2.2%
Relief / Social Protection	4	2.2%
Normative / Rights-Based (Human Rights, Justice, Inclusion)	6 (combined)	3.3%
Other Low-Frequency Framings (all remaining categories)	144	78.8%
Total	183	100%

Representation of Grievances in Policy Texts

Grievances representation differs widely across the analyzed excerpts (Table 4). The most common category was a clear reference to explicit structural or systemic grievance (2.3%), followed by indirect mention of implicit grievances (20.2%) and explicit policy-level grievances (15.8%). These categories together indicate that grievances are not entirely absent from national policy discussions.

However, some excerpts either did not mention grievances at all (12%) or discussed them in vague or weak terms (17%). Additionally, about 5% of excerpts reflected grievance silencing, where underlying socio-economic or political tensions were sensed but not clearly stated. Overall, grievances are framed more as a general background challenge rather than as a significant political factor that can drive conflict.

Table 4: Grievance Reference Categories And Frequencies

Grievance Reference	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Absent	22	12.0	12.0	12.0
Vague / No direct grievance	12	6.6	6.6	18.6
Weak	19	10.4	10.4	29.0
Implicit	37	20.2	20.2	49.2
Marginal	13	7.1	7.1	56.3
Silenced	9	4.9	4.9	61.2
Explicit (Policy-level)	29	15.8	15.8	77.0
Explicit (Structural/Systemic)	42	23.0	23.0	100.0
Total	183	100.0	100.0	-

Security and Terrorism Linkages

The analysis of security connection (Table 5) indicates an indirect link to security appearing more often in policy discourse (31.1%), followed by explicit (21.3%) and direct (16.9%) link. Furthermore, only 6% of the excerpts framed security as structural or strategic terms, link insecurity to broader development and governance conditions.

Similarly, 24% of the excerpts either lacked any security reference or hinted it indirectly on latent or implicit linkages, showing that securitization is selective across policy domains. Terrorism and insecurity are thus treated more as side issues or consequences, rather than as outcome deeply connected to development failures.

Table 5: Security linkage categories and frequencies

Security Link	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
None / Absent	22	12.0	12.0	12.0
Latent	1	0.5	0.5	12.6
Implicit	22	12.0	12.0	24.6
Indirect	57	31.1	31.1	55.7
Explicit	39	21.3	21.3	77.0

Direct	31	16.9	16.9	94.0
Structural / Strategic	11	6.0	6.0	100.0
Total	183	100.0	100.0	-

Selective Emphasis on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The frequency analysis of SDG references reveals a clear pattern of selectivity in national policy discourse (Table 6). SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) was the most frequently mentioned goal, appearing in 39.9% of excerpts, followed by SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) at 15.8% and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) at 9.8%.

In contrast, key human development goals including SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 13 (Climate Action) all appear in less than 7% of excerpts. Environmental Goals including SDG 14 (Life Below Water) and SDG 15 (Life on Land) were almost absent.

This distribution indicates that SDG discourse gives more priority to security and strong institutions while comparatively less attention to issues like welfare, equality, and environmental sustainability.

Table 6: Frequency of SDG references (YES/NO)

SDG	Yes (Mentioned)	No (Not Mentioned)	Percent Mentioned
SDG 1 – No Poverty	11	172	6.0%
SDG 2 – Zero Hunger	6	177	3.3%
SDG 3 – Good Health & Wellbeing	13	170	7.1%
SDG 4 – Quality Education	11	172	6.0%
SDG 5 – Gender Equality	11	172	6.0%
SDG 6 – Clean Water & Sanitation	12	171	6.6%
SDG 7 – Affordable Clean Energy	10	173	5.5%
SDG 8 – Decent Work & Economic Growth	18	165	9.8%
SDG 9 – Industry, Innovation & Infrastructure	14	168	7.7%
SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities	29	154	15.8%
SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities & Communities	3	180	1.6%
SDG 13 – Climate Action	11	172	6.0%
SDG 14 – Life Below Water	2	181	1.1%
SDG 15 – Life on Land	2	181	1.1%
SDG 16 – Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions	73	110	39.9%
SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals	12	171	6.6%

Development Security Linkages Across Key SDGs

To further investigate the relationship between development priorities and security framing, SDG references were cross tabulated with security linkages categories.

Table 7: SDG (SDG 16 & SDG 10) × Security linkage

SDG	Security Link	Count (No)	Count (Yes)	% of SDG Mentioned
SDG 16 – Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions	None / Absent	20	2	2.7%



	Latent	1	0	0%
	Implicit	21	1	1.4%
	Indirect	43	14	19.2%
	Explicit	17	22	30.1%
	Direct	5	26	35.6%
	Structural / Strategic	3	8	11.0%
SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities	None / Absent	16	6	20.7%
	Latent	1	0	0%
	Implicit	19	3	10.3%
	Indirect	48	9	31.0%
	Explicit	31	8	27.6%
	Direct	28	3	10.3%
	Structural / Strategic	11	0	0%

The presence of SDG 16 was linked with a stronger form of security, including explicit, direct, and structural framing. In contrast, documents that did not mention SDG 16 mostly referred to security in an indirect or implicit security association.

Whereas references to SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) were mostly connected to indirect and explicit security framing, while structural or strategic security linkages were notably absent, indicating that inequality in recognized but rarely framed as the root cause of insecurity.

Discussion

The study examines how Pakistan's national policy and planning discourse frames the relationship between development, extremism and security, with specific attention towards the treatment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Drawing on qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA), the discussion analyzes not only what themes appear more frequently but also how power, responsibility and causality are constructed within policy narratives (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998).

Qualitative Content Analysis: Fragmentation, Securitization, and Selective Integration

The findings show that Pakistan's policies discuss development and security separately, rather than in one clear or unified framework. Although terrorism and extremism are constantly considered major, national challenges while their causes and solutions are presented unevenly across documents (PSDP 2022-23). Security is often discussed through explicit and indirect linkages, which suggest that development is associated with stability without clearly addressing deeper socio-economic conditions. Terrorism is often described as a problem of poor governance and lack of control and capacity especially after APS attack, when a shift of narrative was seen, led to stricter measures like military courts, the death penalty, strong and expanded counterterrorism institutions such as NACTA (UNGA Speech, 2021).

Although some excerpts mention economic and human security, but these ideas are considered less important than traditional state security concerns including territorial integrity, counterterrorism operations, and international diplomacy. Development is frequently framed as a tool to maintain stability and control, not as a basic right for citizens (SDG Framework, 2018). Grievances representation further supports these patterns. Issues like poverty, inequality, and political marginalization are recognized, but there are no clear systems to hold anyone accountable. Rather than being seen as a political issue, grievances are often

downplayed or explained as a result of poor governance, extremism, or external factors. This prevents them from shaping major and meaningful development policies (VNR Pakistan 2019; VNR Pakistan 2022).

SDG 16: Security, Sovereignty, and the Centralization of Authority

Critical discourse analysis exposed that SDG 16 is considered a dominant “Security” issue rather than the social one, in national policy narrative. Policies prioritize fighting terrorism, state-centric security, national defense, and dealing with international conflicts, over involving people in decision-making or focusing on justice for ordinary citizens (NAP, 2015; NSP, 2022). Characterizing terrorism as an existential threat, used to justify extreme measures such as military courts, enhanced surveillance of media and cyberspace, and zero tolerance against militants. While policies mention rule of law, institutional reform, and criminal justice system often put these ideas aside in favor of immediate security actions (PM Address UNGA, 2021).

Significantly, SDG 16 discourse is not only about domestic concern but extends to international issues like Kashmir, Palestine, Afghanistan and UN reforms. In this geopolitical geography, Pakistan is consistently positioned as main victim of terrorism and a responsible global actor, doing peacekeeping, call for multilateralism and speaking against discrimination like islamophobia. This clearly mentions that the insecurity within borders comes mostly from outside geopolitical issues, rather than from domestic social or economic issues (VNR Pakistan 2022). Although policies do mention citizens at the center of security discourse through ideas like human security, deradicalization and youth engagement, but issues concerning local governance and democratic accountability are barely addressed. As a result, SDG 16 is used more to justify centralized security measures rather than to promote fair justice and citizen participation (SDG Framework, 2018).

SDG 10: Inequality as a Peripheral and Abstract Concern

In contrast to SDG 16, SDG 10 (Reduced to inequalities) is secondary to policies and is treated mostly as a technical and administrative issue. Policies explicitly acknowledged inequality in regional and fiscal terms, mentioning underdeveloped areas like Balochistan, AJK, merged areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Gilgit-Baltistan (Federal Budget Speech, 2021). However, inequality is rarely positioned as a driver of insecurity and extremism. Instead, inequality is treated as a problem which can be solved with proper development planning by allocating enough budgets, spending on infrastructure, health, education, and welfare of society (PSDP 2022-23).

Provincial responsibility is highlighted, even though some provinces may not have enough capacity. This makes it unclear that who is really accountable. The discourse also indicates more on keeping the country united over diversity, rather than recognizing differences such as ethnic, sectarian or socio-political exclusion. Afghan refugees are mentioned as needing aid or humanitarian terms, but they are often reframed as a security concern rather than people who could be included and supported in society (VNR Pakistan 2019). This framing mentioned that even though inequality is recognized but not treated as a serious or complex problem. Policies mostly describe it rather than analyze it, limiting its role in planning for peace and security strategies (PSDP 2022-23).

SDG 8: Growth-Centric: Stability and Instrumental Development

SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) is strongly focused on growth-security nexus, in which growth of economies is considered foundational to national stability. Infrastructure development, CPEC revival, SEZs, industrialization, and tax reforms dominate the overall discourse (Federal Budget Speech, 2021). Development is mainly about improving well-being, reducing poverty, and giving people opportunities to live better lives by creating employment

which eventually prevents unrest in society. Social investment in health, skill development, and education is mentioned but only as a supporting element for economic growth rather than as independent priorities (PSDP 2022-23).

Policies mostly focus on managing fiscal reforms such as simplifying taxes, POS systems, and collecting more revenue, which shows that development is like a management or administrative task. While these measure can make things run more efficiently, but they do not directly address job insecurity, informal employment, or deep structural inequalities (PSDP 2022-23). Overall, SDG 8 is positioned instrumentally, the kind of an idea that economic growth will indirectly resolve social and security challenges, instead of requiring political reforms or fair distribution of resources (SDG Framework, 2018).

Symbolic Inclusion and Marginalization: SDG 1 and SDG 5

SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality) are included as symbols rather than being addressed in a meaningful way. Poverty reduction initiatives such as Ehsaas programs and social protections schemes are frequently mentioned, but poverty is treated as financial and technical problems, limited by debt and lack of resources (SDG Framework, 2018). Similarly, gender equality is addressed through institutions such as gender policy framework, GBV helplines, and IT-based empowerment initiatives. However, gender inequality is not linked to bigger issues like security, governance, or large-scale development plannings. Although problems like unpaid care work, unsafe work conditions, and limited freedom of movement are identified, but are not included into macroeconomic or political reform agendas (VNR Pakistan 2019; VNR Pakistan 2022). The limited focus on SDG 1 and SDG 5 indicates that these goals function as formal signals that rules are being followed, rather than tools for real policy transformation (SDG Framework, 2018).

Overall Implication: Development Without Structural Transformation

Overall, the findings show that Pakistan's SDG discourse follows a model of selective approach: where security and strong institutions (SDG 16) dominate, while economic growth and stability (SDG 8) support this agenda, and goals about poverty, gender equality, and inequality (SDG 1, SDG 5, SDG 10) are mostly remain marginal (Buzan, B., Wæver, O., & de Wilde, J.,1998). This hierarchy reduces the ability of how much SDG can drive real transformation. By positioning terrorism primarily as a problem of governance issues and development as a tool for stability, policy discourse risk missing the root cause of political, social and economic drivers of insecurity (NAP, 2015).

Policy Implications / Recommendations

The study shows that Pakistan's national policy discourse prioritizes certain SDGs implementation with some goals, such as SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), whereas other goals including SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), are often mentioned symbolically or given limited attention (Griggs et al., 2014; UNDP, 2022). Terrorism and extremism are frequently framed in direct and explicit terms, particularly in documents like National Action Plan and National Security Policy, while sections dealing with development tend to employ indirect or muted security framing (Buzan et al., 1998; UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, 2018). Grievances are only partially recognized: structural and identity related issues are often silenced or depoliticized, and regional inequalities are discussed only in general terms (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Azam & Thelen, 2008). This indicates that development and security concerns are mostly positioned separately in policy discussions, and selective SDG attention may unintentionally worsen socio-economic and political grievances that contribute to or increase instability.

Recommendations

1. Integrate Development and Security Planning:

Policymakers should take holistic approach by linking SDG implementation with security planning, ensuring development gaps, especially in marginalized regions like Balochistan, merged districts, AJK, and GB, so that these issues do not turn into social or political grievances (UNDP, 2021)

2. Prioritize Structural Grievances:

Programs that are targeting poverty, inequality, and gender disparities should be actively implemented and monitored, rather than just being mentioned symbolically, and ensure to prevent grievances from being silenced in national narratives (Fukuyama, 2018).

3. Strengthen Local Governance:

to implement SDGs effectively, requires empowering provincial and district-level institutions with enough resources and capacity building, ensuring that development is inclusive and involves the participation of local communities (UNDP Local Governance Guidelines, 2019).

4. Promote Human-Centered Security:

Counterterrorism strategies should support development initiatives by prioritizing citizen protection, human rights, and social inclusion, instead of relying on military actions (UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, 2018)

5. Monitoring and Accountability:

a. Establish clear and transparent systems to monitor SDG progress, allocation of funds, and how grievances are addressed, include using AI tools to track that whether development initiatives help reduce vulnerability to radicalization (UN SDG Indicators, 2022).

Conclusion

The study indicates that Pakistan prioritizes certain SDGs those which are closely linked to policy framing, grievance recognition, and security discourse. SDGs that relate directly to security like SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) are prioritized and are closely associated to strong security measures, while goals addressing poverty, inequality, and gender are often ignored. Grievances are acknowledged inconsistently in policy discussions, and structural, identity-based, or regional inequalities are often depoliticized. These findings reveal a gap between development and security narratives, showing that selective policy focus may unintentionally worsen socio-economic and political grievances, creating conditions that contribute to terrorism and instability.

The study highlights the need for integrated policy making that combine development, addressing grievances, and security planning. Limitation of this study is that it is only based on policy documents qualitative content analysis, which may reflect grassroots experiences or gaps in policy implementation. Future research could combine policy discourse with field-level data to examine how selective SDG implementation affects people's lives and potential security outcomes. Overall, the study underscores that fair, inclusive, and well-monitored SDG implementation is critical not only for socio-economic development but also for national stability, offering practical insights for policymakers, development organizations, and security institutions.

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