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# Conflict Transformation in Erstwhile FATA: Post-2018 Era

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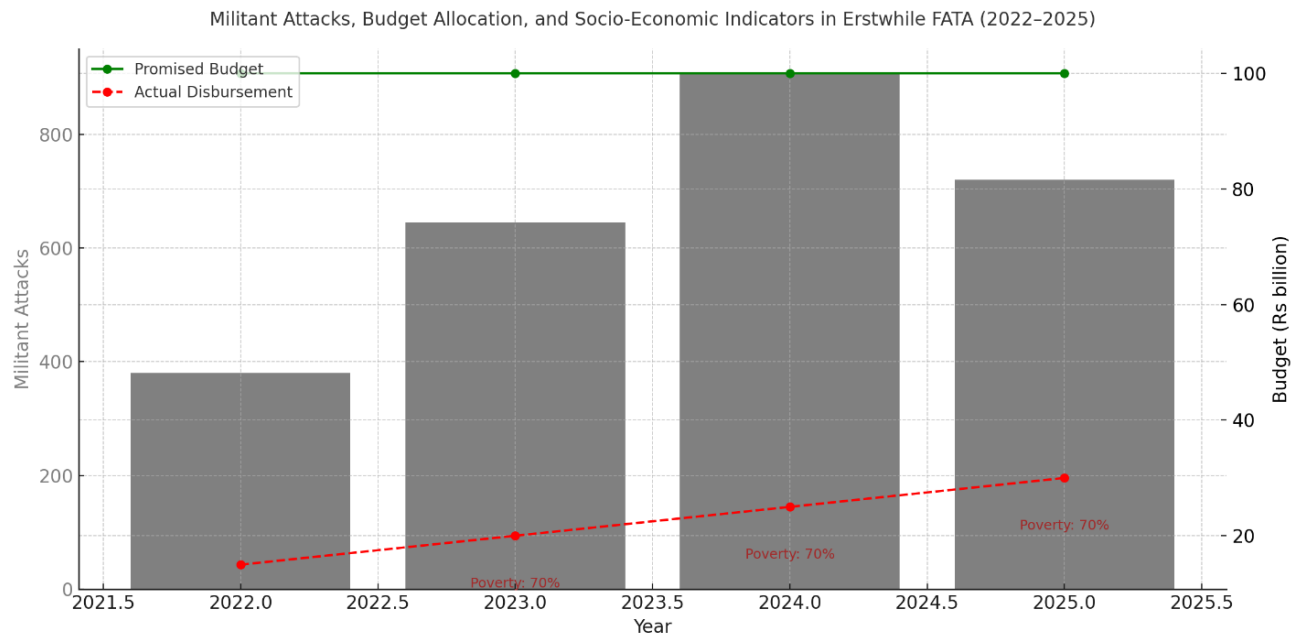
## Abstract

*The erstwhile FATA is still facing problems in almost every domain despite its merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province. The promises made during the merger process remain elusive. The research reveals that, constitutionally, the region is entitled to receive all the benefits available to citizens of Pakistan living anywhere in the country. However, in practice, there is a gap between the initiatives because of the lack of transformative strategies. John Galtung's transformative approach is relevant in this case to transform violent structures, repressive and ideological forms, into more balanced and inclusive ones, where justice prevails and the sense of marginalisation is minimised. Furthermore, the research suggests transformation within Galtung's theoretical framework is necessary at both macro and micro levels. Through these two mechanisms, grassroots solutions to decades-old, protracted conflicts are not only possible but also desirable for the peace and security of the region and abroad. Methodologically, the research focuses on a qualitative approach and discourse analysis of secondary data.*

**Keywords:** Transformation; Protracted Conflicts; Merger; Grass-root Solutions; FATA; KP.

## 1. Introduction

Despite the merger of the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province, the people's problems have increased. About seventy percent of its population lives below the poverty line, unemployment has plunged into two folds, terrorism has arisen, and still, there is no single university in the entire region to function. In the security domain, in 2023, the region faced 175 terrorist attacks; in 2024, it rose to 295 attacks. Ironically, in 2025, from January to June, 211 attacks were carried out by the militants, and cumulatively, about fifteen hundred people lost their lives (FATA Research Centre, 2025). The historical causes of this grave situation include the imposition of the 'Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR)' for strategic purposes, following the 9/11 attacks, the US increased its involvement in Afghanistan, and Pakistan's involvement in the 'Global War on Terrorism', which fueled resentment among local tribal militants (Nazeer, 2013).



The impacts of all these policies negatively contributed to the development of erstwhile FATA in all domains. Resultantly, in 2018, the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) was created to put a stop to proxy wars, enforce the Constitution, and ensure that people affected by extrajudicial killings and disappearances receive fair justice (Abbas, 2018). The struggle resulted in promises of increased quotas for the students, development funds, and integration of the former FATA region with other areas of Pakistan in the true sense. The conflict seemed to be managed and resolved after the merger of FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. However, despite all these efforts from the government side, gaps exist in the approaches to peace. Firstly, exploring grassroots-level factors is crucial to making a difference in understanding. Second, the imperative point here is to understand how the conflict in Erstwhile FATA has impacted the social, political, cultural, and economic fabric of the people living there. The localised approach to understanding this case is important. Lastly, a scientific examination is necessary to understand why transformative strategies are crucial for transforming violent structures and replacing them with more cooperative, democratic, and peaceful ones, thereby establishing enduring peace and stability in the region. Filling the gaps is crucial to preventing the eruption of any such violent conflict in the future.

## 2. Theorizing Conflict Transformation

The conflict transformation theory works in a situation where conflict has already occurred. After the conflict, the threat of resuming the conflict still exists to a greater extent. In that situation, transforming the drivers of conflict is necessary. The theory primarily focuses on strengthening the gains achieved because of the conflict resolution mechanism. Furthermore, conflict transformation is essential for achieving peace and prosperity, which are fundamental to the existence of human beings. It emphasises the protection of human dignity and guarantees basic life needs through nonviolence as a way of life and work (Reimann, 2004). Conflict transformation is important because constructive change can guarantee results beyond the conflict resolution mechanism. It not only considers conflict as normal in human relationships but also explains that conflict is a motor of change (FATA Research Centre, 2025). In this way, it brings inclusivity to its approach and makes it more attractive for

theoreticians, researchers, and practitioners to engage in this approach. Transformation provides a clear and important vision for building healthy relationships and communities, locally and globally. The level of analysis approach is important here.

It is crucial to consider three levels of analysis to comprehend conflict transformation. The primary level analysis conflicts in its present domains. It explains how certain patterns of behaviour and domains ignite conflict. It is the ontological level where the emphasis is on 'what we know about the conflict'. The secondary level emphasizes the importance of examining the conflict's dynamics beyond their current state and acknowledging its deep-rooted causes and underlying logic. The last level highlights the importance of having an appropriate theoretical approach to comprehend the conflict and formulate transformative strategies to achieve the required objectives (Reimann, 2004). This level of analysis necessitates describing how transformation works in personal, relational, structural, and cultural domains. The description not only highlights the conflict in specific domains but also provides an opportunity to work on the specified areas to transform the nature of the conflict.

The theory of Conflict Transformation suggests four levels of change that address the causes of conflict. These are known as transformers of conflict. The first transformer is based on personal changes, which consist of cognitive, emotional, perceptual, and spiritual dimensions. The second transformer emphasises the relational aspects, such as power dynamics, interdependence, and interactive dynamics. The third transformer suggests that structural changes in a positive sense can eliminate the chances of conflict in regions where conflict was previously possible. The final transformer highlights the role of cultural dynamics. It explains the cultural factors of the region (which experienced immense violence) and why culture plays an instrumental role in transforming conflict (Miall, 2004). The conflict transformation in the region known as the erstwhile FATA or 'Newly Merged Districts (NMDS) needs both structural and cultural approaches. Structural, because the colonial mechanism and its exploitation for strategic purposes are one of the major reasons why the need for transformation of the existing structure is necessary in an absolute sense. The culture is also important because the traditional and tribal bond of loyalty and patterns of interaction prolonged the conflict and have the power to erupt into conflict in the future as well.

The complexity of the nature of conflicts is due to the interdependent relations between states and societies complicate the nature and transformation of conflicts. John Galtung, an expert on the conflict transformation approach, proposed to transcend the method in this regard. Transcend, according to Galtung, is a combination of different scholars and practitioners who are doing research and action within this domain. Different approaches are important in this matter. Firstly, one is a peaceful transformation by emphasising nonviolence, empathy, and creativity in dialogue with a clear objective of achieving peace in acceptable norms and procedures, points of sustainability, autonomy, and positive participatory results. Secondly, empowering actors or parties engaged in conflict transformation is also necessary. Encouraging their conflict transformation skills, promoting cooperation and coordination, and empowering and mobilizing them for the desired objective are key components of effective transformative strategies (Galtung, Jacobsen, & Brand-Jacobsen, 2003). The process here is not only important in the case of erstwhile FATA but also necessary for confidence-building measures.

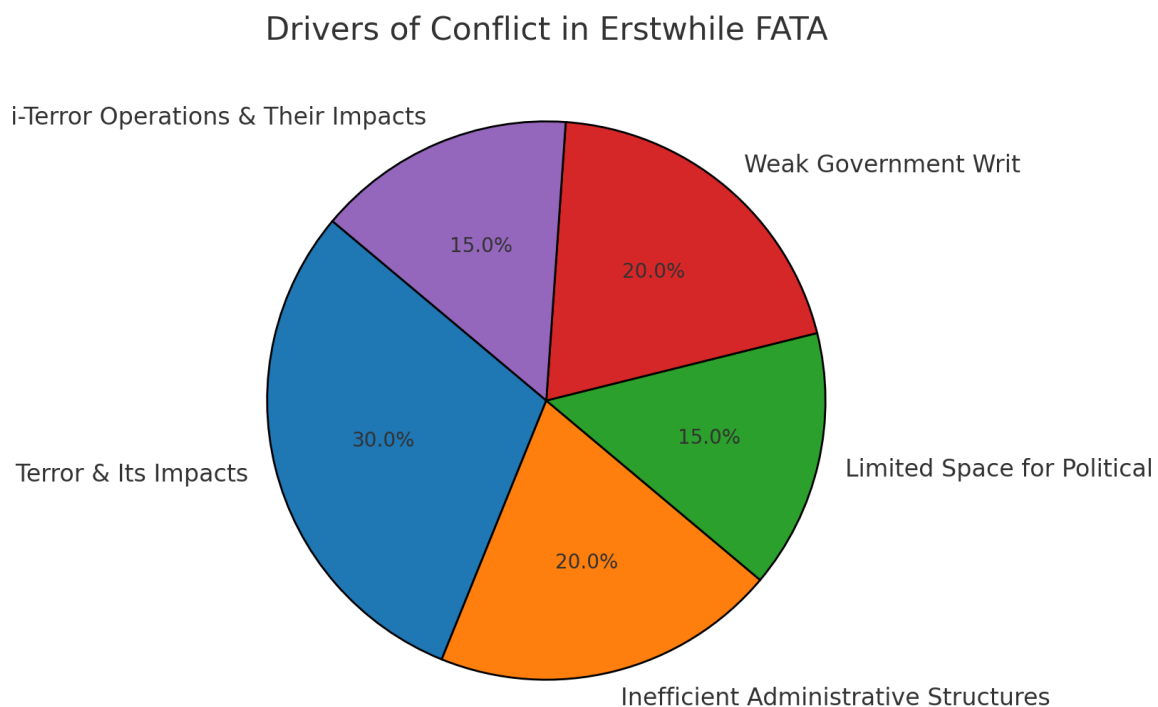
Adding further, Galtung proposed peaceful education as a remedy in this regard. For him, the process can be initiated at kindergarten, primary, secondary, high school, and university levels to eliminate the elements of conflict in a specific area. Besides this, peaceful journalism, according to Galtung, is also important because highlighting peaceful events and negating violent tendencies will create soft power dynamics and prospects for peaceful transformation. He has proposed peaceful zones and peacekeeping methods. The former emphasises the efforts to broaden the chances of peace

by decreasing the drivers of violence and facilitating peacebuilding and cooperation. The latter suggests how the presence of peacekeepers within national, regional, and international organisations can achieve the desired objective. Peaceful reconciliation and the peaceful development of businesses (FATA Research Centre, 2025). Does Galtung suggest two other important approaches in this regard? Both stress the importance of aggrieved parties' genuine demands and initiation of such activities, which may economically uplift the people.

Furthermore, Galtung stresses that development, equity, and sustainability, human rights, democratisation, and self-determination (Reimann, 2004) are crucial domains in transforming the structure of conflicts. Sustainable development can only be possible once it is initiated at the local level and ensures the basic or natural needs of everybody. In this process, credit, local money, and Indigenous approaches to technology may play a pivotal role. Respect for human rights is best possible in a democratic and principle-based society. Self-determination is a progressive approach to transform conflict because it addresses the autonomy issue of a community or group and provides mechanisms to resolve identity, resource distribution, and other issues.

Lastly, Galtung emphasises the gradual transformation of the regional governance order to a global one (Miall, 2004). The proliferation of human rights and governance models globally will create prospects for peace because no issue will remain local. The timely intervention of an international body will decrease the chances of any conflict in the future. He also established a fair link between peace and women. Peace is more likely where women are involved. Women as mothers, sisters, wives, and social activists always create incentives for peace and discourage conflict. Therefore, the inclusion of women in peace missions and initiatives is likely to yield positive outcomes.

### 3. Understanding Drivers of Conflict in Erstwhile FATA



The conflict in the erstwhile FATA region has multiple drivers, which are mentioned below:

**3.1. War on Terror and its Impacts on Erstwhile FATA:** Following the horrific attacks on the ‘World Trade Centre’, the United States and its allies invaded Afghanistan on the accusation of sympathisers to Al-Qaeda. To flee from devastation, both Taliban and Al-Qaeda entered the erstwhile FATA to seek sanctuary there. Residents welcomed them as saviours of “Islam and Pashtun honour and dignity”. A rally was organized in Kaniguram and Laddah, South Waziristan, under the leadership of Maulana Muhammad Zaman Burki against the US invasion of Afghanistan. It issued a Fatwa (religious decree) that Jihad (militant religious resistance) is necessary against the US (Alm, 2021). The entrance of Pakistan’s army under the influence of the United States’ pressure initiated a protracted conflict, which is still going on in one form or another.

**3.2. Inefficient Administrative Structure:** Until 2018, the erstwhile FATA was governed by the repressive colonial law known as ‘the Frontier Crime Regulation (FCR)’. It gave powers of judicial conduct, administration, and politics into the hands of a one-person Political Agent. The absence of a functioning police system and the lack of trust in the so-called judicial setup created a vacuum between the state and society. Inhuman laws like ‘collective responsibility’ provided sentiments of hatred and rebellion against the system. The system inculcated feelings of alienation and inequity in socioeconomic and educational domains. The emergence of the Taliban as an alternative to all these injustices and institutional lapses created sympathy for them (Bansal, 2011). This deep-rooted inculcation of conflictual tendencies strengthened with time. Resultantly, the ordinary people faced the brunt of those policies.

**3.3. Limited Space for Political Parties:** Political parties are crucial for societal cohesion and stability in any society. Its importance increases with the increased globalisation of social and political ideas. The inhabitants of erstwhile FATA had no political rights of participation, consolidation, or political accommodation. The adult franchise is only allowed in the 2009 Political Parties Act. However, its practical implementation remained a distant dream. Though the representatives were allowed in the upper and lower houses of the Parliament, they had no right to legislation. The increased unrest in erstwhile FATA compelled the state apparatus of Pakistan to introduce local government, but soon the move was repelled. The absence of political parties made breaking the centuries-old traditional system dominated by an alliance of the Mullahs and Maliks difficult (Waseem, 2016). Therefore, militants faced no substantial obstacle to exploiting the local dynamics in their favour and implementing their strict and rigid system.

**3.4. Weak Government Writ:** Tribal areas, particularly Waziristan, never experience a complete government writ. The area remained free and independent for centuries. Even in colonial times, Great Britain never succeeded in ruling this periphery. Whatever limited government authority existed was in semi-city areas like Wana, Miranshah, etc. However, the British were never able to implement the law there. The introduction of the Khasadar system by the colonial Raj never proved an effective tool in maintaining the law-and-order situation in the region. Consequently, the local population maintained a semi-autonomous system and resisted any form of state system (Mahsud, Naseer, & Fatima, 2023). When militants flocked there because the United States invaded Afghanistan, it was not difficult for them to exploit the local dynamics in their favour.

**3.5. Anti-Terrorist Operations and Their Impacts on Local Dynamics:** Anti-Terrorist Operations have both negative and positive impacts on the local dynamics of the region. It negatively impacted



the region as people perceived the move as American-inspired and influenced. The Pakistan army was targeted and declared an infidel army by local and foreign militants. A militant struggle in the name of Jihad started, which resulted in the widening gap between the state and society on the one hand and the creation of a soft corner for militants on the other hand. The positive impacts include that people once admired the militants and projected them as saviours of Islam, and saw the true face of the militants once they achieved power. The militants disturbed the local dynamics by attacking the tribal code of conduct and the way of life that had been practised for centuries in the areas of the region (Wahab, 2021). This significant interference in the daily lives of the people led to a deteriorating situation. Resentment and anger brewed, which prevented any chances of the transformation of conflict into a positive dimension.

Besides this, Jirga and Hujra were systematically made ineffective. The former has been considered as an 'indigenous conflict resolution and conflict transformation mechanism' for thousands of years. The latter is known as a place where the system sustains itself. It was like a parliament where equality persisted in every walk of life. People sitting there had equal rights and representation. In addition, the local people's dress code is systematically associated with terrorism. Local markets, which were the main economic activities in the area and represented a true reflection of local culture and values, were demolished by both militants and due to anti-terrorist operations by Pakistan's army. Moreover, the inhuman treatment of local people in refugee camps and profiling at checkpoints added fuel to the fire. Honour and respect of Women were breached, and movies were made which showed tribesmen as inferior and natural-born killers. Even during training, portraits of the people of the region have been used as terrorists (Ahmer, 2011). All these reasons negatively contributed to the ongoing conflict. Any sort of sincere effort was seen as suspicious and something contagious for the people of the tribal areas. Resultantly, Hobbesian fear and perpetual war of all against all prevailed.

**3.6. Competing Interests of the Stakeholders:** There are three stakeholders in the conflict in the erstwhile FATA. The first one is the government of Pakistan. It was supposed to bring inclusive reforms in the area and provide equal opportunities in all spheres of life to the people of the region. The military's only job is to create law and order situations and pursue strategic objectives through both kinetic and non-kinetic means in the region. The second one is the local tribal apparatus consisting of a Mullah and Maliks. The Colonial Raj created the system to pursue its 'forward policy' during a 'Great Game' period. The third stakeholder in countering terrorism is the international players, like the United States, whose job is to provide financial assistance to the above-mentioned two in countering terrorism in the region (Ahmed, 2015). Ironically, all these stakeholders who were supposed to coordinate seem to have competing and different interests. The government of Pakistan's efforts seem elusive and non-conformatory to a greater extent. Any move initiated in the Parliament is overly dominated by its military. This institutional imbalance prevented socio-political and economic efforts. Mullahs and Maliks, who were the local faces, cared only for their own interest instead of the broader totality. International players did provide aid, but their strategic designs in the region are still perceived as a threat in the region.

#### **4. Why Transformation of Conflict is Necessary for the Erstwhile FATA**

The merger of the erstwhile FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has provided relatively incentives to transform the nature of conflict. As mentioned above, both structural and cultural dynamics are responsible for triggering the conflict. The existence of the same factors without their transformation

may again contribute to the eruption of conflict in a more dangerous form in the region. Therefore, transformative strategies at both the macro-level and micro-level are necessary steps in this regard. Transformation of Conflict at the macro-level:

**4.1. Truth and Reconciliation Commission:** In January 2018, a social movement named the ‘Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM)’ was initiated by young Pashtuns from tribal areas, particularly in Waziristan with fair and justified demands of “an end to extrajudicial killings of people belong to tribal areas, fair treatment at security checkpoints, removal of landmines, an end to negative stereotypes of Pashtuns in media, recovery of all missing persons and their appearance in civil courts, native rights to natural resources, and an end to proxy wars and militancy”(Waseem, 2020). To accomplish its objectives, the PTM has proposed the creation of a “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” that would investigate the root causes of the conflict and hold those who violated the Constitution responsible. “Despite the government's willingness to engage in talks with PTM leaders, previous attempts have failed to produce any tangible outcomes” (The Nation, 2020). It is argued that demanding the establishment of the commission concerned is not extra-constitutional. It can transform conflict at the structural level. The apartheid era in South Africa ended because of the establishment of such a commission. Discouragement of future conflict eruptions in erstwhile FATA further necessitates its establishment.

**4.2. Developmental Plans:** Developing an underdeveloped region is a structural phenomenon. This is an area where violent structures can be transformed and help prevent conflict from occurring in future. Considering the importance of the desired structural change, on May 25, 2018, the government merged FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The incumbent government pledged to improve the local infrastructure through massive development projects and to integrate the region with mainstream areas of Pakistan at the social, political, economic, and cultural levels. To materialise the proposed objectives, the federal government and its federating units agreed to contribute 3% towards the upliftment of FATA (Rashad, 2022). Regrettably, the promises made have yet to be fulfilled, resulting in a lack of basic institutional structures, such as courts and police stations, in the area. This has caused the locals to travel long distances to register FIR or seek justice, leading to growing frustration and alienation among the poor who are unable to afford the lengthy, costly, and time-consuming processes. Despite the promise of a 3% allocation from provincial budgets, all provinces have refused to contribute, leaving KP unable to utilize its resources to integrate the area (Kiani, 2020). In June 2020, the fund designated for ‘Temporary Displaced Persons (TDPS)’ was converted for security purposes, resulting in a reduction from 32.5 billion to seventeen billion. This decision has caused frustration and disappointment among members of the tribal community (Ali, 2019). The need for structural changes through development is necessary. Structural changes will create economic activities that may positively contribute to conflict transformation. Similarly, the structural peculiarities caused the conflict in erstwhile FATA; if not transformed through developmental projects, the region may again experience mayhem and chaos.

**4.3. Mineral Act:** The former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) region has abundant natural resources, which need modern technology for efficient utilisation and extraction. On November 14, 2019, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) government passed a bill (KP Assembly Rule 82 of KP Procedure and Conduct of Business Rules, 1988) that declares all minerals as state property (Burton, 1986). The bill was passed without any discussion, and the opposition left in protest, claiming the government had abused its majority. Sardar Hussain Babak, a member of the Awami

National Party, expressed dissatisfaction with the way the bill was passed. The government, however, argued that this measure could help resolve conflicts between tribes over resources. To address the conflict over minerals, it is crucial to ensure that the people receive a fair royalty share, as well as job opportunities with local mineral extraction companies. It is also vital to include them in the Jirga form for resolving disputes over resources. The benefits derived from the minerals should first be used to benefit the people, and the government should avoid repeating the situation faced by Baluchistan. Secondly, the initiation of 'The Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC)' must be an opportunity, not a systematic way of usurpation of the resources. Fair distribution of resources is another recipe at a structural level for effective conflict transformation.

**4.4. Mainstreaming Militants:** According to John Burton's Basic Human Needs theory, needs are influenced by both biological and cultural factors. If these needs are not met within the accepted societal norms, it can lead to social conflicts since these needs are considered crucial (Nazeer, 2013). The conflict in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) has its roots in fundamental human needs. The people of the region seek peace and are unwilling to compromise on this requirement. The emergence of militants has transformed this once peaceful area into a place of devastation, death, psychological trauma, poverty, and underdevelopment. Educational and state institutions have also suffered destruction. With the conclusion of military operations, it is imperative to initiate discussions with militants who are willing to surrender to state authorities. These individuals are members of our society, and we cannot simply eliminate them (Mehsud, n.d.). Although attempts have been made to eradicate them, a considerable number of militants still exist and have formed multiple factions such as TTP, Jamat-ul-Ihrar, Hafiz Gul Bahadur group, and others (Noor, Hashmi, & Bukhari, 2018). The transformation of violent structures sometimes needs big compromises as well. The militants cannot be regarded as good humans. They only listen to war. However, for the greater good and structural transformation, effective negotiation for peace is necessary.

**4.5. Induction of youth in the state institutions:** To fulfil the material needs of the tribesmen, it is vital to offer sufficient employment opportunities to the youth. After the merger, the government must give priority to the development of state infrastructure and establish institutions correctly. One way to transform the nature of conflict is to recruit local tribesmen into these institutions (The Express Tribune, 2019). Converting Khasadar forces into regular police was a wise decision by the government (Awan, 2013). Additionally, it is essential to include youth in education, health, civil, and other judicial institutions.

**4.6. Education:** Access to education is a fundamental necessity for human development, and it cannot be neglected. Unfortunately, the education sector in the former FATA region has been adversely affected by militancy and has been ignored by the state for years. Consequently, there is a significant shortage of proper educational institutions in the area (Faqr & Fakhr, 2014). Furthermore, the few institutions that were established were destroyed by militants, especially girls' schools. It is worth noting that no university has been established in FATA since the creation of Pakistan, which poses a significant challenge for students in the area who must travel to other provinces for higher education, incurring prohibitive costs for accommodation and other expenses.

Despite successive governments' promises to improve the region's education sector, little has been done to date. During the merger process, tribal members were promised that their quota in all of Pakistan's educational institutions would be doubled and maintained for the next ten years. However,



many institutions have refused to enrol students based on their allotted quota, creating significant challenges for students in the current enrollment season (Verwimp, Justino, & Brück, 2009). Fortunately, PTM-affiliated MNA Ali Wazir and Mohsin Dawar intervened by raising awareness of this issue on social media and in the Pakistani Parliament. Therefore, it is imperative to fulfil all promises made to the tribe members to resolve the conflict and provide them with the education they deserve.

### **5. Micro level: Jirga as an Effective Mechanism to Transform Conflict**

Micro-level conflicts arise from clashes between individuals, social organisations, and communities (Justino, Brück, & Verwimp, 2013). These conflicts require localized strategies to address the problems. Incompatible objectives, resource clashes, and other goals can lead to conflict (O'Loughlin, Witmer, & Linke, 2010). In the former FATA region, social conflicts at the micro level have worsened due to the rise of militancy and state intervention (Akins, 2018). Tribal rivalries have grown into national insurgencies (Faqr & Atta, 2013). After military operations, the need for peace is paramount. Localised conflicts require localised transformative mechanisms. The traditional Pashtun Jirga, a council of tribal elders with political and judicial roles, can play a significant role in transforming micro-level conflicts (Mahmood, Ullah, & Ashfaq, 2018). It has existed for thousands of years. Despite decades of violence and militant systematic efforts to minimise its importance, the Jirga has retained its major role in recent years.

The Jirga decision-making process involves a council of odd-numbered elders hearing both sides of a case and then taking a few days to discuss it among themselves. The decision-making process is sacred and secret (Yousaf, 2021). The conflicting parties hear the decision, and they have three days to accept or reject it. If either party rejects the decision, forty men chosen by the Jirga will implement the decision by force (Smith, 2019). Loya Jirga is a significant development in this regard (Khan, 2014). Such a democratic, inclusive, and local approach is important to transform conflict from below. People trust the Jirga mechanism and accept its decisions, regardless of the outcome. Thus, productive use of it can avert the dangers of any future conflict for the well-being of society.

**5.1. Local Bodies:** Local bodies play a crucial role in promoting peace, prosperity, development, and justice in any region. Following the merger of FATA with KP, the government has pledged to establish local bodies at an early stage. The Local bodies can work in conjunction with the Jirga to transform conflicts (Khan, 2014). With the initiation of political activities and the decentralization of funds, grassroots leadership will emerge, equipped to understand problems in-depth and develop more effective solutions.

### **6. Conclusion**

Social conflict can arise due to numerous factors such as unequal distribution of resources, conflicting objectives, values, interests, needs, and religious or ethnic issues. In the case of the former FATA, the conflict can be traced back to the rise of militancy after the 9/11 attacks, which brought about values, interests (both material and non-material), and needs such as peace, dignity, education, and development. As a result, the traditional system in this strong hierarchical society crumbled, paving the way for militants to take control. The state intervened in the form of military operations. However, the high collateral damage generated resentment and alienation in tribal people against the military and other state institutions. This led to the rise of a social movement called PTM, which openly challenged these institutional policies and demanded justice for atrocities committed during the conflict. While the state's response to PTM has been mixed, there are opportunities that can

transform the conflictual tendencies at both cultural and structural levels. Macro-level conflict transformation involves structural elements, such as establishing the "Truth and Reconciliation Commission," materialising promised funding, and undertaking developmental projects, mainstreaming militants, and improving education and healthcare. At the micro-level conflict transformation may be ensured by the involvement of traditional Jirga and local bodies' roles. Transformative approaches are necessary to prevent the recurrence of future conflicts. The people of the former FATA deserve justice and dignity, and their voices need to be heard instead of being labelled as traitors or foreign agents. Political parties must step in during these troubling times to fill the gap left by the destruction and chaos of the Taliban era. The complete integration of tribes will ensure lasting peace and tranquillity in the region.

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