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Alamgir Khan & Christian Kaunert

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## US drone strikes, securitization processes and practices: A case study of Pakistan

Alamgir Khan <sup>a</sup> and Christian Kaunert<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Political Science, University of Swabi, Ambar, Swabi, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan; <sup>b</sup>School of Law and Government, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland & International Centre for Policing and Security, University of South Wales, Pontypridd, United Kingdom

### ABSTRACT

This article explores the importance of inter-related securitisation processes on each other, most notably the impact of securitisation practices in one country on the securitisation processes in another. It analyses the impact of US drone strikes on the securitisation processes related to the militancy conducted by successive Pakistani governments in the aftermath of 9/11. The successful securitisation of the war on terror by the US allowed the latter to take extraordinary measures to eliminate terrorism, most notably through the use of drone strikes. However, these securitisation practices inhibited the securitisation of militancy inside Pakistan. While we understand successful securitisation processes, we understand much less about unsuccessful securitisation cases. This article analyses the use of drone strikes as securitisation practices by the US and their impact on the unsuccessful securitisation process of militancy in Pakistan after 9/11. The empirical contribution of this article is its focus on the case of Pakistan where more than 400 drone strikes took place, reportedly killing approximately 7000 people. The article demonstrates how the drone strikes in Pakistan turned the war on terror into an American war and made it difficult for the domestic audience in Pakistan to accept the securitisation moves of the security actors.

### Keywords

Securitization; Drones; Pakistan; Terrorism; Radicalization

### Introduction

This article examines the importance of inter-related securitisation processes on each other, most notably the impact of securitisation practices in one country on the securitisation processes in another. It analyses the impact of US drone strikes on the securitisation processes related to the militancy conducted by successive Pakistani governments in the aftermath of 9/11. The successful securitisation of the war on terror allowed the US to take extraordinary measures to eliminate terrorism, most notably through the use of drone strikes. However, these securitisation practices inhibited the securitisation of militancy inside Pakistan. The key argument of this article is that as a result of US drone strikes, as implicit securitisation practices, the Pakistani security actors could not effectively securitise the militancy after 9/11, which became an important factor in its inability to

**CONTACT** Christian Kaunert  [christian.kaunert@dcu.ie](mailto:christian.kaunert@dcu.ie)  School of Law and Government, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland & International Centre for Policing and Security, University of South Wales, Pontypridd United Kingdom

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fight it in the aftermath of 9/11. The article argues further that despite the government's efforts to securitise the militancy, the securitisation move was unsuccessful which helped the militants to fight the Pakistani government on the issue.

The incident of 9/11 and the successful securitisation of the war on terror and the following extraordinary measures profoundly affected the securitisation efforts in Pakistan. After the terrorist attacks on the US twin towers, the Bush administration informed the then military government of Pervez Musharraf that Pakistan should either work with the US or against it (Abbas 2015, 217). Musharraf later maintained that if Pakistan had not supported the US in the war against terror, "direct military action by a coalition of the United States, India, and Israel against Pakistan was a real possibility" (Abbas 2015, 221). Fearing India's increasing role in the war against terror, and to consolidate his position, Musharraf's government decided to become part of the US campaign against terrorism. However, Pakistan's reluctance to take indiscriminate action against all the militant groups created differences between the two allies, and the trust deficit led the US to initiate drone attacks to target high-profile leaders of Al-Qaeda and Taliban in the tribal areas.

Drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal areas is a hugely debated topic. There is general disagreement among scholars on whether drone attacks are part of the problem or the solution. For instance, one study suggests that drone strikes have caused 98% of civilian deaths, while another study maintains that civilian deaths are only 10% (Bergen and Tiedemann 2010, 2). Bergen and Tiedemann in their study on drone strikes in Pakistan conclude that drone attacks killed very few high-level Al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders. According to them, one out of seven drone attacks killed a militant leader and the majority of Taliban and Al-Qaeda operatives killed in strikes were low-level fighters; civilians were also killed (Bergen and Tiedemann 2011, 12). The drone strikes have contributed to the death of 50,000 people. According to Aslam, the characterisation of the drone policy as a "success" because it has reduced the threat of terrorism, is flawed and must be re-evaluated (Aslam 2014, 15–16).

In opposition to the above literature, numerous other scholars consider drone warfare as an effective strategy against Al-Qaeda and its affiliates. For instance, Byman maintains that drone strikes have put the Taliban leaders on the run, and they have the potential to prevent another 9/11 (Byman 2013). Aqil Shah's study finds the argument that drone strikes turn the relatives of drone victims into bloodthirsty militants deeply problematic (Shah 2018). Defending the use of the drone, Fair argues that reviewing different literature on the tribal areas, it seems that there is no other alternative to drones (Fair 2014). Fair, Kaltenthaler and Miller's study maintains that only those people with little education are opposed to drone strikes, and poorly educated women in particular have a more negative opinion about drone strikes (Fair, Kaltenthaler, and Miller 2015). Concerning the use of drones in the future, Orr maintains that it is very likely that the US and other countries will continue to conduct drone strikes in Pakistan to try to prevent terrorist attacks in their own countries (Orr 2011). According to Madiha Tahir (2020), the existing literature has interrogated the construction of drone targets, collateral damage, and the rationality of the strikes; however, how governance in the tribal areas contributes to drone strikes in the area has largely been overlooked. She argues that governance structure in the tribal areas was the key reason that led to the US drone strikes in the area.

In contrast to the above literature, this study does not investigate the success and failure of the drone strategy and the number of militants and civilians killed in the drone strikes; rather it explores how securitisation practices in one country can be influenced by securitisation processes, such as the use of drones, in another country. Securitisation is arguably the most useful theoretical framework for analysing security beyond the military confines with the nation state as the dominant actor within the international system. It has become the gold standard for analysing emerging challenges such as migration, terrorism, human security, intra-state and cross-border issues. Yet, despite its broadening agenda, the framework has also been accused of a Western bias with a Western political context and democratic governance structure at its heart. The most popular concepts in international security, and the broader discipline of international relations and the debates thereof, are deeply rooted in western historical and political epistemology. The sub-discipline of security studies is not an exception in this intellectual parochialism – there is a Westphalian and Eurocentric bias in understanding security. The discussions coming from these various corners were anchored on certain historical or founding problematique created by the First World War, Second World War and the Cold War which were mainly European and Northern American creations. The problem with this lies with the Westphalian understanding of the state which does not appreciate other societies from other cultures at various stages of socio-political development.

This article aims to adapt the framework in a way that suits a non-Western context better. It stretches the conceptualisation of securitisation into South Asian statehood, characterised by a blurred line between the leader and the state. The existing literature has discussed the cases where actors successfully securitise a particular issue in a specific context and securitisation happened; however, there is limited literature that explains unsuccessful securitisation cases, which in turn has profoundly affected the way securitisation has been studied (Ruzicka 2019, 1). The key principle which guides the securitisation move is whether ‘the description of the threat as existential accepted or rejected [and] is the solution to the threat accepted or rejected?’ (Salter 2011, 120). Unlike desecuritization which “entails reversal of a previous successful securitisation” (Salter 2011, 116), a failed securitisation move is when the “moves” fail to gain “wider legitimacy among popular, expert and media audiences” (Hintjens 2019, 182). Similarly, Wilkinson maintains that the key factor responsible for the unsuccessful securitisation outside the West is that the theory is not suited outside the West (Wilkinson 2007, 5). Citing the example of the Kyrgyzstan revolution in 2005, he argues that the relationship between speech and action in Kyrgyzstan is more complex than the explanation provided by securitisation theory (Wilkinson 2007). Floyd further argues that “securitisation fails only when the would-be securitising actor, or another relevant actor, does not act in response to the threat” (Floyd 2016, 687).

Failed cases provide a better understanding of “why some securitising moves succeed while others do not” (Ruzicka 2019, 2). Security, according to the Copenhagen School, is a “process of social construction of threats which includes securitising actors (mostly political elites), who declares a certain matter as urgent, posing a threat for the survival of the referent object, that, once accepted with the audience, legitimises the use of extraordinary measures for neutralising the threat” (Šulović 2010, 3). An issue is securitised when the audience accepts it (Watson 2012, 284). Buzan, Wilde and Wæver argue that an issue is securitised by the securitising actors when an existential threat is being posed to

a referent object and the securitising actors seek extraordinary measures to neutralise it (Buzan and Wæver 1998, 36). The securitisation of an issue can thus provide some tangible benefits, including more efficient handling of complex problems, a mobilising of popular support for policies in specific areas by calling them security-relevant, the allocation of more resources and so forth. These achievements might not be obtained if the same problems were regarded only as “political matters” (Emmers 2013, 136).

The existing literature on securitisation suggests that the securitisation process can fail if the securitising actor does not know how to speak security in a specific context during the securitisation move. Second, the securitisation process might fail if the actors do not have sufficient authority over an issue with regard to the audience. Third, the threatening object projected as an existential threat may not be agreeable to securitisation. Lastly, the audience might not accept the securitisation move (Ruzicka 2019, 9). Furthermore, the securitisation process in its implementation stage can be “confronted with significant forces of resistance that can challenge securitisation through counter-securitisations” (Stritzel and Chang 2015, 549). Similarly, counter-securitisation can make the securitisation process more complex, and prolong, delay, stop or reverse the process (Ibid).

Numerous studies maintain that responses to insurgencies fuel radicalisation and provide success to the insurgents. For instance, Kilcullen (2005) suggests that insurgents aggregate the local grievances and seek to overthrow the existing political order. Similarly, Galula (1964) maintains that insurgents engage in a battle over the support of the population, a key feature of unconventional warfare, and they succeed when they alienate the population from the counterinsurgents. In Iraq, for instance, the violence decreased because the Sunni population feeling threatened by Al-Qaeda allied with the US forces (Rovner 2014, 300). Corum (2009) observes that insurgencies are different than conventional warfare because the support of the population plays a significant role, and civilian and military intelligence agencies often fail to acknowledge this.

The above literature explains the danger of prioritising militarised responses to insurgencies; however, the literature does not comprehensively discuss how the securitisation practices in one country can affect the securitisation processes in another country and can contribute to the failure of securitisation. This study fills this theoretical gap and contributes to the existing literature on securitisation. The empirical contribution of this study is that it discusses the case of Pakistan where more than 400 drone strikes took place which reportedly killed approximately 7000 people. Pakistan was fighting an insurgency in its tribal areas and the successive governments needed the support of the people to defeat the insurgents. The government attempted to securitise the militancy, but that process was significantly influenced by the US drone strikes. The article demonstrates how the drone strikes in Pakistan turned the war on terror into an American war and made it difficult for the audience to accept the securitisation moves of the security actors in Pakistan. This study also contributes to the debate on drone warfare by exploring its impact on the securitisation processes which has not been discussed in the existing literature.

This study has adopted a qualitative historical analysis design. Qualitative historical analysis “denotes a methodological approach that employs qualitative instead of quantitative measurement and the use of primary historical documents or historians’ interpretations thereof in service of theory development and testing’ (Thies 2002, 352). Therefore, archival sources are used if the data is missing from secondary sources. This study used

the archival record of a newspaper: “Newspapers allow the construction of a chronology of events . . . chronology is crucial because the sequence of events tells us how the actors were responding to each other” (Thies 2002, 357). As this study aimed to explore why the Pakistani government’s securitisation move failed, therefore, the newspaper not only helped to establish the chronology of the events, but it also helped to know how the different actors were responding to each other. Secondary data was obtained from books, online publications of scholars and experts, official reports, data published in the print media, reports of International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and other online sources.

The article is structured into three main sections. Section one deals with securitisation theory and securitisation practices. This section discusses how securitisation practices in one country impact the securitisation processes in another country. Section two explains the existing debate on the drone strikes in the tribal areas of Pakistan. It examines the arguments advanced in favour of and against the drone strikes. The last section discusses how the US drone strikes (practices) contributed to the failure of securitisation processes in Pakistan.

### Securitisation processes and practices

The core idea of the securitisation framework, which was originally developed by Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan in cooperation with other colleagues of the so-called “Copenhagen School”, is that there are no objective security issues that exist out there. In contrast, there are only issues that are socially constructed as security threats through processes of securitisation. These can be defined as “processes of constructing a shared understanding of what is to be considered and collectively responded to as a threat” (Buzan and Wæver 1998, 24). Buzan, Wilde and Wæver’s conceptualisation of securitisation has a strong linguistic dimension, as they argue that security issues are socially constructed as such through speech acts (Buzan and Wæver 1998, 36). In security discourse, an issue is dramatised and presented as an issue of supreme priority; thus, by labelling it as a security issue, an agent claims a need for and a right to treat it by extraordinary means. However, “a discourse that takes the form of presenting something as an existential threat to a referent object does not by itself create securitisation – this is a *securitising move*. The issue is securitised only if and when the audience accepts it as such” (Buzan and Wæver 1998, 25).

Over the years, the securitisation framework has attracted much praise, but has also been criticised from various perspectives (Léonard and Kaunert 2019). Scholars have also put forward ideas to further develop or refine the framework in several respects. Two issues are of particular importance for the purpose of this article. The first is the idea that issues cannot only be constructed as security issues discursively, but also through practices. The second concerns the understanding of security underpinning the securitisation framework. Léonard and Kaunert have analysed this in much detail, and have applied it to the securitisation of asylum and migration in the European Union (EU) (Ibid). They suggest that an issue can be securitised not only through a speech act, but also through the deployment of specific practices (Léonard and Kaunert 2019, 24). Buzan, Wæver and their colleagues themselves already observed that some practices, such as those of the security services of a state, may take place without any public discourse to acknowledge or justify

them. They also noted that securitisation may become institutionalised over time in cases of persistent or recurrent threats. In such instances, securitising speech acts become unnecessary in their view (Buzan and Wæver 1998, 28). Thus, although Buzan and Wæver emphasised the discursive dimension of the social construction of security threats, they acknowledged themselves that there might be securitisation dynamics at play even in the absence of securitising speech acts. According to Copenhagen School, in some cases securitisation becomes institutionalised and *talking* about an issue implicitly asks for urgent measures, in that case a new “drama” securitisation of an issue is not required (Buzan and Wæver 1998, 26).

Bigo argued that “[i]t is possible to securitise certain problems without speech or discourse and the military and the police have known that for a long time. The practical work, discipline and expertise are as important as all forms of discourse” (Bigo 2000, 194). In other words, non-discursive acts, such as the development of public policies or the establishment of institutional bodies, may matter as much as – if not more than – discourse in socially constructing an issue as a security threat. Moreover, Bigo highlighted that there can be significant differences between official discourses and everyday practices. With regard to the specific issue of migration, he argued that “[t]he securitisation of immigration [...] emerges from the correlation between some successful speech acts of political leaders, the mobilisation they create for and against some groups of people, and the specific field of security professionals [...]. It comes also from a range of administrative practices such as population profiling, risk assessment, statistical calculation, category creation, proactive preparation, and what may be termed a specific habitus of the “security professional” with its ethos of secrecy and concern for the management of fear or unease (Bigo 2002, 65–66). Advancing Bigo’s argument, Huysmans has highlighted the significance of security practices with a particular focus on technology. Huysmans argues that securitisation discourses are rooted in technology, more precisely “particular technological devices and the knowledge and skills required for their use” (Huysmans 2004). Similarly, Balzacq argues that “rather than investigating the construction of threats at the level of discourse, we should focus on the functions and implications of policy instruments used to meet a public problem” (Balzacq 2008, 75). Léonard and Kaunert built on this argument by suggesting that bureaucratic structures or networks linked to security practices may play an important role in securitisation processes (Léonard and Kaunert 2019, 25).

While the Copenhagen School put an emphasis on the importance of speech acts in securitisation process, Bigo has highlighted the importance of securitisation practices (Léonard and Kaunert 2019, 26). Léonard suggests that it is possible to combine insights from speech acts and securitisation practices to study both the discourses and the practices of securitisation (Léonard 2007). This can reveal interesting differences between the official discourse and the everyday practices (Bigo 1998). Léonard and Kaunert, thus, conclude that securitisation practices are more adequate to analyse securitisation processes than purely the securitisation discourse (Léonard and Kaunert 2019, 27). Bigo’s study does not define securitisation practices, but his concept is close to Balzacq’s concept of a “tool of securitisation” and “an instrument of securitisation” (Léonard and Kaunert 2019, 28). Léonard and Kaunert’s work explains two types of securitisation practices and argues that their deployment strongly suggests the presence of a security threat. The first type, according to Leonard and Kaunert, refers to practices that are usually

deployed to tackle those widely considered security threats such as a foreign attack or terrorism (Ibid). The second type of securitising practices, according to Leonard and Kaunert, are extraordinary practices. The deployment of extraordinary measures socially constructs the issue as security threat (Ibid).

For these reasons, the securitisation framework used in this article draws upon the Copenhagen School's work, but alters it in the two aforementioned ways suggested by Leonard and Kaunert. First of all, it focuses on security practices, rather than discourse, and conceptualises security as a continuum, rather than equating it with survival. As a result, the subsequent empirical analysis focuses on the practices in relation to drones in Pakistan and examines the extent to and the ways in which those can be considered to be "securitising practices", that is, practices which convey the meaning that the issue they are addressing is a security issue. This article argues that there are two main types of such securitising practices. First of all, practices that are usually deployed to tackle issues that are widely seen as security issues, i.e. issues that were previously successfully securitised, such as a foreign armed attack or terrorism, can be seen as securitising practices. For example, the deployment of military troops or military equipment such as tanks for dealing with an issue conveys the message that this issue is a security threat that requires addressing, thereby socially constructing this issue as a security threat. Another type of securitising practices is cooperation practices with bodies or organisations that have traditionally been considered security bodies or organisations, such as those dealing with military or policing matters.

The remainder of this article applies this analytical framework in order to analyse the role of drones in securitisation processes in Pakistan. The securitisation practices deployed to tackle terrorism can significantly impact related securitisation processes. The US drone strikes are a classic example of securitisation practices where the securitising actors does not use discourses but its deployment is suggestive of the presence of a security threat. This, as the empirical analysis below will demonstrate, profoundly affected the securitisation process in Pakistan and the securitising actors failed to securitise the related issue of militancy successfully.

### **The debate over drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal areas**

After the incident of 9/11, the war against terrorism became one of the most successful securitisation processes since the Cold War (Romaniuk and Webb 2015). Securitising actors justify extraordinary measures during the securitisation process in order to eliminate the threat to a referent object (Waeber 2004). Drone strikes became the direct tool of successive US administrations who justified them as an extraordinary measure to target the high-profile leaders of Al-Qaeda and Taliban operatives. In Pakistan, the Musharraf government assisted the US after 9/11, and according to Mahnaz Ispahani (a South Asian scholar), he was seen 'as the best alternative in Pakistan (Quoted in Otterman 2005). However, the tensions between the US and Pakistan increased after the resignation of President Musharraf in 2008. Sceptical of Pakistan's capacity and will to effectively eliminate the militants, the US government decided to use its Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) commonly known as "drone" to target operatives of Al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups.

In early 2008, in a unilateral decision President Bush authorised drone strikes in Pakistan without prior permission of the Pakistani government (Bergen and Tiedemann



2009). Between 2006–2007, only 10 drone strikes were reported while in 2008, 32 strikes were carried out killing 355 including 301 innocent citizens (Khan 2008). (See Table 1 for details). A majority of the drone strikes were conducted during the tenure of the Pakistan Peoples Party, between 2008 and 2013. Under President Bush, the drones attacks were concentrated on high profile leaders of Al-Qaeda, but President Obama widened the scope of the attacks to include local Taliban leaders. A *Dawn* report revealed a 631% increase in drone attacks under the Obama administration which reportedly killed 2,500 people, including 350 innocent people (Dawn 2016). The report further notes that, since 2001, the US government conducted 910 drone strikes in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia; of those, 424 were carried out in Pakistan (Ibid). (For year-wise drone strikes, see Table 2).

President Obama embraced the drone policy which had the advantage of needing high numbers of personnel on the ground (Boyle 2013). In the year 2009, Obama ordered 50 drone strikes, which reportedly killed between 517 and 729 people; among them, 98 to 207 were civilians (Zakaria et al. 2015, 204). Al-Qaeda operative Zabu Al Taifi, and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) commanders, Bait Ullah Mehsud and Malvi Gul Nazir, were also killed in 2009. Approximately 50% of drone strikes were conducted in South Waziristan and 38% in the North Waziristan Agency (Williams 2010, 876). A small number of attacks were also carried out in the Bajaur, Kurram and Orakzai agencies.

The US, according to Noam Chomsky, orchestrated the worst global assassination campaign that the world had ever witnessed (Chomsky 2015). Pakistan's tribal areas remained a significant testing ground for the employment of drone operations. Commenting on the employment of drones in Pakistan, Shane declared that for the "first time in history, a civilian intelligence agency [CIA] is using robots to carry out

**Table 1.** Total drone strikes and fatalities.

President	Total Strikes	Civilian Casualties	Militant Casualties	Unknown Casualties	Total Casualties
Bush	48	116–137	218–326	65–77	399–540
Obama	353	129–162	1,659–2,683	146–249	1,934–3,094
Trump	13	0–4	33–62	0–2	33–68
<b>All Presidents</b>	<b>414</b>	<b>245–303</b>	<b>1,910–3071</b>	<b>211–328</b>	<b>2,366–3,702</b>

Source: New America Foundation.

**Table 2.** Drone attacks in Pakistan: 2005–2017.

Year	Incidents	Killed	Injured
2005	1	1	0
2006	0	0	0
2007	1	20	15
2008	19	156	17
2009	46	536	75
2010	90	831	85+
2011	59	548	52
2012	46	344	37
2013	24	158	29
2014	19	122	26
2015	14	85	17
2016	3	7	1
2017	8	43	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>330</b>	<b>2651</b>	<b>354+</b>

Source: SATP Data until December 2017.

a military mission, selecting people for killing in a country where the United States is not officially at war” (Shane 2009).

The increasing use of drone technology to kill the high-value targets and its collateral damage left a profound impact on Pakistan-US relations and the ongoing efforts against insurgency in the tribal areas. A local newspaper in Pakistan reported that between 14 January 2006, and 8 April 2009, only 14 wanted leaders of Al-Qaeda were killed in 60 drone strikes while 687 innocent civilians were killed (The News 2009). Another leading Pakistan newspaper reported that in 2009, among 44 drone strikes, only five Al-Qaeda leaders were targeted at the cost of over 700 innocent civilians (Dawn 2010b). The report published in another local newspaper suggested that the CIA-operated drones killed 221 people including 103 children, in the hunt for four men who were on Obama’s Kill List (The Tribune 2014). The report further revealed that from 2004-to 2013, 142 children were killed while pursuing 14 high-value targets.

Some writers have stressed the effectiveness of drone strikes. For instance, Williams argues that after successfully targeting Nek Muhammad on 18 June 2004, a drone strike killed Haitham al Yemeni, a high-profile weapon expert of Al-Qaeda in North Waziristan on 14 May 2005 (Williams 2010). On 3 December 2005, another CIA drone strike killed Al-Qaeda number three Abu Hamza Rabia in the same tribal agency of North Waziristan. Despite the exact number of Al-Qaeda and Taliban operatives killed in the drone strikes, the constant drone threats have significantly damaged the enemy (Williams 2010). However, Zakaria argues that the increasing drone attacks between 2009-and 2012 in the tribal areas have merely led to the relocation of militant groups to the urban cities such as Karachi and did not affect their capacity to conduct terrorist attacks (Zakaria et al. 2015). Boyle concludes that “the most common claims for the effectiveness of drones is based on shaky empirical evidence, questionable assumptions and logical fallacies” (Boyle 2013, 13). He further observes that drone strikes have significantly damaged Al-Qaeda in Pakistan, but their operatives have not stopped fighting, and many of them have moved to other countries such as Yemen, Iraq, Somalia and Syria. Drone strikes have also killed local Taliban commanders, but these have soon been replaced by new ones.

### The impact of drones on securitization process in Pakistan

As stated above, an issue becomes a security threat not because it constitutes an objective threat but because an audience or several audiences accept the securitising actor’s claim that a particular issue poses an existential threat to a referent object (Kaunert and Wertman 2020, 101). The successful securitisation of the war on terror by successive US administrations and the justification of extraordinary measures such as drone strikes to eliminate the threat significantly affected securitisation processes in Pakistan related to the militancy. Islamabad, on different occasions, communicated the impact of US measures on the internal securitisation efforts, but to no avail. For instance, the PPP government in 2008 expressed their concerns over the excessive use of drone strikes, and also conveyed these concerns to the US government. In a meeting with US Central Command chief Gen. David Petraeus, the then President of Pakistan, Asif Ali Zardari, termed the drone attacks counterproductive. The President stated that “continuing drone attacks on our territory, which results in loss of precious lives and property are counterproductive and difficult to explain by a democratically elected government. It is creating a credibility

gap” (The Frontier Post 2008b, 1). President Asif Ali Zardari also reiterated in his interview with CBS that the US drone attacks were undermining the efforts to win the hearts and minds of the people against the militants (The Frontier Post 2008a, 1). In 2008, the Pakistan Defence Minister Ahmad Mukhtar observed that the US drone strikes were generating “anti-American sentiments” and creating “outrage and uproar among the people” (Perlez 2008). Browne (2019) argues that drone attacks cause psychosocial harms at communal level which needs to be addressed. He further maintains that drone surveillance has the effect of psychological colonisation (Browne 2019).

In 2009, the Pakistan Prime Minister said “We are trying to separate militants from tribesmen, but the drone attacks are doing exactly the opposite” (Pak Tribune 2009). The Prime Minister of Pakistan in his meeting with the British Minister of Defence asked for help to stop the drone attacks as they were counter-productive and negatively affected the government’s campaign against the militants (The Frontier Post 2009a). The Pakistan Foreign Office reiterated that differences existed over the use of drone attacks, stressing that a “holistic approach is needed to resolve the problem being faced by the region” (Khan 2009, 1). The government repeatedly expressed its concerns over the excessive use of drone attacks and requested that the US should give the drone technology to Pakistan to boost its indigenous capacity to eliminate insurgency in the area. However, the request was turned down even though they were supposed to be allies in the war against terrorism.

On 7 October 2010, Pakistani foreign office spokesman Abdul Basit maintained that the drone strikes in the tribal areas of Pakistan had “neither justification nor understanding.” He further said that the strikes were “not serving the larger strategic interests, especially in the context of our efforts to win hearts and minds, which is part and parcel of our strategy against militants and terrorists” (BBC 2010). The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hina Rabbani Khar, speaking at the Asia Society in 2012, stated: “This has to be our war. We are the ones who have to fight against them. As a drone flies over the territory of Pakistan, it becomes an American war again. And the whole logic of this being our fight, in our own interest is immediately put aside, and again it is a war which is imposed on us” (Asia Society 2012).

On 12 April 2012, the National Assembly of Pakistan passed a resolution which called for the immediate halt of drone strikes and a review of relations with the US. The resolution stated, “Pakistan’s sovereignty shall not be compromised . . . . Relations with the USA should be based on mutual respect for the sovereignty, independence and the territorial integrity of each other” (National Assembly 2012). Many Pakistani politicians questioned drone strikes on legal and moral grounds. Leaders of political parties such as Imran Khan questioned under what law the drone strikes were being conducted. Consequently, ordinary Pakistanis also started questioning why drones were being used in the tribal areas if they were not legally authorised. The debate on drone strikes therefore informed public opinion and increased anti-American sentiments in Pakistan while making it difficult for the audience to accept the militancy as an existential threat. A study conducted by Fair, Kaltenthaler and Miller indicates that 87% of people learn about drones from the word of mouth (Fair, Kaltenthaler, and Miller 2015). Pakistan’s Ambassador to United Nations Masood Khan told the 15-nation council during a discussion on the situation in Afghanistan that “Drone strikes infringe our sovereignty, violate international law, including international human rights and humanitarian law,

cause civilian casualties and are detrimental to the combined efforts to fight terrorism” (undefined).

The data collected for this study suggests how collateral damage from drones helped the insurgents to counter-securitise the militancy and garner public support. The killing of innocent people and children in tribal areas reduced the chances of a successful securitisation of militancy. The government’s securitisation efforts were, therefore, jeopardised by the loss of human lives caused by drone strikes. Furthermore, the disagreement and differences over the drone strike also left a significant impact on the securitisation efforts. Analysing the impact of drones, Hudson, Owens and Flannes argue that the drone strikes led to blowback and created hatred and retaliation against the US in Pakistan (Hudson, Owens, and Flannes 2011, 123). Instead of eliminating insurgents, the attacks created new insurgents. Thirdly, the excessive use of drone strikes made it difficult for the people to accept the war as Pakistan’s own. Pew Research Centre survey of Pakistanis in 2010 found that 93% of people considered drone strikes a bad thing and 90% believed that they kill too many innocent people (Enemark 2011, 226–227). A Pew Research Centre poll in 2012 revealed that 74% of Pakistanis considered America to be an enemy. The poll further suggested that only 17% supported drone strikes against militants, but even then, only if conducted with the support of the Pakistani government (Pew Research Centre 2012).

Mahmood argues that the US and Pakistan decapitation attacks against the Taliban not only created anti-US sentiments but also sympathies for militant groups (Mahmood 2015, 26). Initially, the Taliban focused their targets against the Pakistan government, but after the introduction of the decapitation policy, the Taliban increased their attacks against the US (Ibid). Similarly, Aslam maintains that

the drone attacks that kill innocent civilians may lead victims, (usually male) family members and friends to join militants active in those areas in order to take revenge upon the United States and its allies, the entities which they see as deserving of it

(Aslam 2011, 323). Furthermore, Aslam argues that drone attacks create more enemies than they eliminate.

Boyle further observes that the government’s inability to stop drones could potentially cripple the government and strengthen the militant groups to challenge the authority of the state through violence (Boyle 2013, 14). Boyle maintained that drone attacks corrode and undermine the credibility of local governments, and help the militant organisation to attract new recruits who fight to overthrow these governments (Boyle 2013). In his interview, Bait Ullah Mehsud, commander of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), maintained that every drone attack brought him 150 volunteers (Nawaz 2009, 18). Kilcullen and Andrew Exum in their study suggest that drone costs outweigh their benefits. In their opinion, the non-combatant victims of the drones have alienated families, who are then intent on revenge, thus helping militants to attract more recruits instead of accepting militancy as a threat (Kilcullen and McDonald Exum 2009). But the question is why then the US government continued its drone policy if it was counterproductive. Cameron Munter, who remained the US ambassador in Pakistan from 2010-to 2012, raised the issue with the CIA and tried to convince them that the drone attacks were increasingly destabilising Pakistan. He was told that “You know this is a never-ending war. Whose side are you on?” (Quoted in Coll 2014).

As noted above, the drone strikes not only influenced Pakistan's securitisation efforts but also contributed to the counter-securitisation of militancy in the tribal areas. The tribal areas are ruled by the centuries-old tradition known as Pakhtunwali (code of Pashtun life). *Badal* (revenge) is one of the key features of Pakhtunwali, where it is incumbent upon a person whose family or relative has been killed to take revenge. For instance, on 19 November 2008, the first drone missile was fired in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) settler district of Bannu, which killed 13 people. To take revenge on drone strikes, insurgents started attacking NATO supply vehicles to Afghanistan. The supply line passed through the Peshawar and Khyber Agency. On 8 December 2008, some 200 Taliban attacked and destroyed 50 NATO supply trucks near Peshawar (The Frontier Post 2008d, 1). Due to the increasing insecurity and threats to the truckers, some 3,500 drivers stopped supplying the NATO forces (The Frontier Post 2008c, 1).

Instead of containing the capacity of insurgents to undertake attacks, the drone attacks intensified the insurgents' brutality against pro-government suspects. On 20 January 2009, the Taliban killed six tribesmen over charges of spying for the US and warned that anyone found spying for the US, Pakistan and Afghanistan would face the same fate (The Frontier Post 2009a). On 23 January 2009, only three days after Obama was sworn in as a President, three missiles were fired in North and South Waziristan, killing 20 people (The Frontier Post 2009b, 1). While burying the victims, people expressed the deepest anger over the government's inability to protect the lives of its citizens. A tribal elder was quoted as asking "How could the children of five and eight years be terrorists?" (The Frontier Post 2009c, 1). TTP also warned the government that increasing drone attacks would lead to more attacks on government property. People from South Waziristan took to the streets on 19 June 2009, to condemn the US drone strikes which were killing innocent people, and termed them extremely counterproductive (The Frontier Post 2009d, 1). In an interview with local journalists on 5 October 2009, the TTP commander Hakeem Ullah Mehsud announced that the resistance against the government would continue and the group would take revenge for those killed in drone strikes (Shahid 2009, 1).

The local leading Pakistani newspaper reported that when "drones kill innocent bystanders it infuriates the Taliban – on both sides of the border – who use this campaign to recruit additional foot soldiers and suicide bombers" (Dawn 2010c). John Brennan, Obama's counterterrorism advisor, while defending the use of drones, also expressed concerns that "an action that eliminates a single terrorist but causes civilian casualties can, in fact, inflame local populations and create far more problems – a tactical success but a strategic failure" (De Young 2010, 2). *Dawn* observed that "Pakistanis feel that the US drone strategy compromises its sovereignty and enrages militants who then seek revenge by attacking the Pakistani military and civilians" (Dawn 2010a). Williams recounted one such story of a tribesman who rammed his explosive-filled vehicle into a Pakistan army convoy to take revenge for his family members killed in a drone strike (Williams 2010). Imran Khan, the then opposition leader and current Prime Minister of Pakistan (in 2021), took a long march to Waziristan in October 2012 to express solidarity with the victims of drone attacks. Addressing the rally, he criticised the government for allowing the US to kill innocent people. On another occasion, he stated that due to drone strikes the Taliban think that 'we are slaves of America, that the Pakistan government is taking money from the US and fighting its (America's) war and killing its own people . . . . Therefore, they have

declared jihad (holy war against the Pakistan army and Pakistan security forces) (Dawn 2013).

In March 2012, a newly formed FATA joint parliamentary group threatened to block all US and NATO shipments to Afghanistan if the government failed to stop drone attacks in the tribal areas. A tribal elder was quoted as saying that

30,000 innocent tribal people including women and children have been killed while hundreds of mosques, hospitals, educational institutions have [been] blown up. The war on terror triggers mass migration of a thousand families, but there is no one to speak for them

(Masud 2012, 1). Pakistan Foreign Office Spokesperson, Tasneem Aslam, stated in a briefing that the drone strikes are violating Pakistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity and negatively impacting the government's efforts to bring peace and stability to the region (Dawn 2014). In January 2013, the local Taliban commander from South Waziristan, Mullah Nazir, was killed in a drone attack. He was chief of the Ahmadzai Wazir tribe and played a key role in the ousting of Uzbeki Mujahideen from South Waziristan. Once a pro-government local Taliban leader, he turned against the government due to the US drone strikes (Fishman 2010). On 2 February 2013, a group of insurgents attacked a camp of security forces in the Southern district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, killing 13 security personnel and 11 civilians. Claiming responsibility for the attack, the TTP said that the attack was carried out in retaliation for a drone strike which killed two militant commanders in North Waziristan (The Tribune 2013).

In 2013, after general elections were held, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) came to power. The new government initiated high-level peace negotiations with the local Taliban, who accepted the government peace initiative and formed a committee to engage in dialogue. However, the killing of a Taliban leader Hakimullah led to the suspension of the peace process. Pakistan's interior minister, Chaudhry Nisar, said that "it was not an attack on an individual but murder of the peace process that was being diligently pursued by the government with unprecedented support of political parties, ulema and the army" (Khan 2013). Soon after the killing of its top commander in a drone strike, the local Taliban cancelled the offer and vowed to continue fighting. A Taliban spokesman, Azam Tariq, said "Every drop of Hakimullah's blood will turn into a suicide bomber. America and their friends shouldn't be happy because we take revenge for our martyr's blood" (BBC 2013). The internal securitisation efforts to obtain the support of the audience failed due to the drone attack.

## Conclusion

This article analysed the impact of US drone strikes on the securitisation processes related to the militancy conducted by successive Pakistani governments in the aftermath of 9/11. The successful securitisation of the war on terror by the US allowed it to take extraordinary measures to eliminate terrorism. Pakistan, which became an ally of the US in the war against terror, made efforts to securitise the threat of terrorism at home, but the linked securitisation practices of the US significantly undermined the process of securitisation of militancy within Pakistan. An issue becomes a security threat not because it constitutes an objective threat to

the referent object, but when the audience or audiences accept the securitising actor's claim that the issue poses an existential threat to a referent object (Leonard and Kaunert 2011). The securitisation process fails when the audience or audiences do not accept the securitising actor's position of threat to the referent object. As stated earlier, securitisation has been analysed by numerous scholars. They have discussed the different causes of securitisation failure but have overlooked the impact of related and interlinked securitisation processes between two different countries. This article contributes to the existing theoretical debate on securitisation by demonstrating that successful securitisation of an issue and the subsequent extraordinary measures can contribute to the failure of securitisation in another country.

The empirical contribution of the article is that it discusses the US drone strikes in Pakistan and analyses how they affected the securitisation processes in the country. Drone strikes in Pakistan have been widely discussed by different scholars. An increasing number of scholars have focused on the collateral damage of the drone attacks and have maintained that the strategy is not only counterproductive but illegal and unethical. Several scholars have, however, justified the use of drones in the tribal areas of Pakistan and considered it not only effective but the only alternative to target the high-profile leaders of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. While this study has discussed the debate on drone attacks in the tribal areas, its contribution to the existing empirical literature is the analysis of the impact of the US drone strikes on the securitisation processes in Pakistan. It argues that the US drone strikes in the tribal areas made the successful securitisation of militancy difficult. The audience did not accept militancy as an existential threat to the country; rather they considered it a threat to the US. The drone attacks also strengthened the insurgents' counter-securitisation process, projecting the US as the biggest enemy and the Pakistan government, its puppet, as killing its people for US dollars. This helped insurgents to garner audience support and contributed to the failure of the securitisation process. Huysmans

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

**Alamgir Khan** is lecturer of Political Science at University of Swabi, Pakistan. He holds a PhD in Politics from University of Dundee, M. Phil in International Relations from Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, and an MA Political Science from the University of Peshawar.

**Christian Kaunert** is Professor of International Security at Dublin City University. He is also Professor of Policing and Security, as well as Director of the International Centre for Policing and Security at the University of South Wales. Previously, he served as an Academic Director and Professor at the Institute for European Studies, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, a Professor of International Politics, Head of Discipline in Politics, and the Director of the European Institute for Security and Justice, a Jean Monnet Centre for Excellence, at the University of Dundee. He was previously Marie Curie Senior Research Fellow at the European University Institute Florence, and Senior Lecturer in EU Politics & International Relations, University of Salford. He is currently the Editor of the *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, *International Conflict and Cooperation* and the Edward Elgar Book Series 'European Security and Justice Critiques'. Professor Kaunert holds a PhD in International Politics & an MSc in European Politics from the University of Wales Aberystwyth, a BA (Hons) European Business from Dublin City University, ESB Reutlingen and a BA (Hons) Open University.

## ORCID

Alamgir Khan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2320-5872>

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