Advocacy for Sustainable Policy and Implementation Reforms – Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (ASPIRE-KP)

National Security Workshop on "Administrative Voids in Merger and Way Forward"

Date: 13 January 2026
Venue: Corps Headquarters Peshawar
Organized by: Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa & Corps Headquarters
Keynote Address by: Mr. Mohammad Shehzad Arbab
Chairman, (ASPIRE-KP)

1. Introduction

A National Security Workshop was convened on **13 January 2026**, jointly organized by the **Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa** and **Corps Headquarters**, bringing together senior civil and military leadership, policymakers, practitioners and Tribal Elders from Merged Districts to deliberate on governance and security challenges in the post-merger context of the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (now Merged Districts).

In recognition of ASPIRE-KP's research-based and non-partisan policy work, **Mohammad Shehzad Arbab, Chairman ASPIRE-KP**, was invited to deliver a **Keynote Address** on the theme:

"Administrative Voids in Merger and Way Forward"

The keynote was designed to provide an evidence-based assessment of the post-merger governance landscape and to highlight structural gaps affecting stability, service delivery, and trust in state institutions.

2. Context and Background

The merger of the erstwhile tribal areas with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa marked one of the most significant constitutional and administrative transitions in Pakistan's recent history. While the merger aimed at mainstreaming the region into the national legal and governance framework, the transition has presented complex challenges requiring careful assessment and coordinated responses.

The National Security Workshop provided a forum to examine these challenges through a **governance–security lens**, emphasizing that administrative effectiveness and institutional legitimacy are critical enablers of long-term peace and stability.

3. Objectives of the Keynote Address

The keynote presentation aimed to:

- Revisit the **original promises** associated with the merger
- Examine the **recommendations of the FATA Reforms Committee**
- Assess the **gap between planned transition and actual implementation**
- Identify major **administrative, fiscal, judicial, and governance voids**
- Offer a **constructive and forward-looking framework** for addressing these gaps

The presentation was explicitly framed as a **diagnostic and policy-oriented exercise**, not an attribution of blame.

4. Overview of the Presentation

The keynote address was structured around the following thematic areas:

4.1 Merger – The Promises

The presentation recalled the commitments made at the time of merger, including:

- Mainstreaming into the national constitutional framework
- Equal rights and access to courts
- Political representation in the province
- An end to FCR-era deprivation
- A **Ten-Year Development Plan** financed through **3% of the Divisible Pool**

These commitments had generated legitimate expectations among the population of the merged districts.

4.2 FATA Reforms Committee – Proposals

The keynote highlighted the **sequenced and transitional approach** recommended by the FATA Reforms Committee, including:

- A five-year transition period
- Preparation of land records
- A hybrid justice system combining *Rewaj* with formal courts
- Strengthening of Levies/LEAs and civil administration
- Provision of 3% from the Divisible Pool for ten years

The Committee's guiding principle — *"Mainstreaming is a process, not an end"* — was emphasized as central to sustainable integration.

4.3 What Actually Happened

The presentation noted that implementation diverged significantly from the proposed roadmap, citing:

- An instant merger without transition planning
- Incomplete land record preparation
- Removal of *Rewaj* without fully functional judicial alternatives
- Rushed absorption of Levies
- Non-implementation of the 3% NFC share

This divergence was identified as the origin of subsequent administrative voids.

5. Key Administrative Voids Identified

The keynote systematically outlined major governance gaps, including:

5.1 Judicial Void

- Cumbersome and expensive access to justice
- Increased burden on litigants
- Erosion of trust in formal legal processes

5.2 Policing and LEA Capacity Gaps

- Incomplete integration of Levies
- Training and investigation deficiencies
- Obsolete equipment and capacity constraints

5.3 Fiscal Void

- Absence of predictable and sustained financing
- Insufficient ADP/AIP allocations
- Lack of a guaranteed long-term development envelope

5.4 Service Delivery Void

- Teacher shortages and non-functional schools
- Understaffed health facilities and medicine shortages
- Weak monitoring mechanisms

5.5 Local Governance Void

- Local government elections held without empowerment
- No fiscal transfers or administrative delegation
- Councils existing largely on paper, limiting grassroots governance

5.6 Border Closure and Human Hardship

- Collapse of local livelihoods dependent on cross-border trade
- Rising humanitarian and economic pressures
- Growing community resentment

6. Political Mainstreaming – Positive Developments

The keynote also acknowledged positive outcomes of the merger, including:

- Political representation from the merged districts at the provincial level
- Increased local political ownership
- Greater participation of youth in political processes

These developments were recognized as valuable assets that require complementary administrative and fiscal reforms to translate into tangible outcomes.

7. Way Forward: Completing the Merger through Governance, Justice, and Development

The keynote emphasized that the merger of the former tribal areas into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is **constitutionally complete but administratively incomplete**. The way forward, therefore, lies not in revisiting the merger decision itself, but in **closing the administrative, fiscal, judicial, and governance gaps** that have emerged during implementation.

The proposed way forward rests on the principle that **security, governance, and development must progress simultaneously**, with each reinforcing the other.

7.1 Consolidating the Merger by Honouring Commitments

A central theme of the keynote was that **trust deficits** in the merged districts are rooted in the **non-fulfilment of commitments** made at the time of merger. These include legal, administrative, and development-related promises.

Moving forward requires:

- Reaffirmation at the federal and provincial levels of the original merger commitments
- Translation of policy announcements into **measurable, time-bound actions**
- Clear articulation of roles and responsibilities among federal, provincial, and district institutions

The keynote stressed that **confidence in the state is rebuilt not through declarations, but through delivery**.

7.2 Strengthening District Administration and Executive Authority

District administration remains the **primary interface between the state and citizens**, particularly in the merged districts where institutional depth is limited.

Key steps required include:

- Enhancing the **field presence** of district administration across tehsils and remote areas
- Addressing workload pressures by providing **additional operational support and technical capacity**, particularly in:
  - land administration
  - development planning
  - dispute resolution
- Ensuring continuity and stability in postings to reduce administrative disruption
- Supporting officers through merit-based induction, orientation, and contextual training specific to post-merger governance

The keynote emphasized that the extension of executive authority must be **visible, functional, and responsive**, rather than nominal.

7.3 Judicial Reforms and Adoption of a Hybrid Justice Model

Access to justice was identified as one of the most critical challenges affecting public trust.

The way forward includes:

- Recognizing the limitations of a purely CRPC-based system in the merged districts
- Introducing a **hybrid judicial model** that combines:
  - formal courts operating under CRPC
  - Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanisms
  - regulated and supervised Jirga processes
- Establishing **clear timelines for case disposal** to reduce protracted litigation
- Expanding access to justice through:
  - context-sensitive judicial access mechanisms
  - district-level grievance redressal mechanisms

The keynote stressed that the objective is not to dilute constitutional safeguards, but to **adapt justice delivery to local socio-cultural realities**, thereby restoring confidence in the legal system.

7.4 Policing and Law Enforcement Capacity Enhancement

Effective policing is essential for both security and governance.

The way forward requires:

- Completing the transformation of Levies/Khasadar forces through:
  - structured training programs
  - improved investigation and prosecution capacity

- o modern equipment suited to terrain and threat environment
- Shifting from a purely urban policing model to a **border- and terrain-sensitive policing approach**
- Strengthening coordination between police, administration, and intelligence institutions

The keynote underlined that policing reforms must be **substantive rather than cosmetic**, focusing on functional capability rather than formal conversion.

7.5 Addressing the Fiscal Void and Ensuring Predictable Financing

Financial sustainability was highlighted as a foundational requirement for all reforms.

Key actions proposed include:

- Enforcement of the **3% share from the Divisible Pool** for the merged districts
- Transition from ad hoc annual allocations to a **predictable, multi-year financing framework**
- Aligning development funding with realistic absorption capacity and implementation timelines
- Ensuring that staffing approvals, institutional creation, and service expansion are backed by assured financing

The keynote emphasized that **no governance reform can succeed without fiscal predictability**.

7.6 Improving Service Delivery in Social Sectors

The way forward in education, health, and social services requires urgent and targeted intervention.

Priority actions include:

- Addressing teacher shortages and restoring functionality of schools
- Strengthening health facilities through:
    - o staffing surges
    - o reliable medicine supply chains
- Improving monitoring systems to track service availability and quality
- Focusing on **visible improvements in daily life**, as public perception of the merger is shaped primarily by service delivery outcomes

7.7 Empowering Local Governments as the Missing Tier of Governance

The keynote identified Local Governments as a **critical missing link** in post-merger governance.

The way forward includes:

- Moving beyond elections to **actual empowerment** of local governments

- Providing:
  - fiscal transfers
  - administrative authority
  - staffing and technical support
- Clearly defining the role of local governments in service delivery, dispute resolution, and development oversight

Empowered local governments were described as essential for **bringing governance closer to the people** and reducing the burden on district administration.

7.8 Addressing Border Closure Impacts and Livelihood Challenges

Economic and humanitarian consequences of border closures were highlighted as a significant source of public grievance.

Proposed measures include:

- Mitigating livelihood losses through targeted economic support
- Exploring regulated and secure mechanisms for economic activity where feasible
- Integrating humanitarian considerations into border management policies

The keynote cautioned that prolonged economic stress can undermine both governance and security objectives.

7.9 Community-Based Monitoring and Accountability

To strengthen implementation and accountability, the keynote proposed the introduction of **community-based monitoring mechanisms**.

This entails:

- Involving local communities in monitoring:
  - school functionality
  - health facility performance
  - progress of development projects
- Establishing simple reporting channels linking communities to district and provincial authorities
- Using community feedback to inform corrective action and improve service delivery

Community-based monitoring was presented as a tool to enhance **transparency, ownership, and trust**, not as a substitute for state oversight.

7.10 Integrating Security, Governance, and Development

The keynote concluded that long-term stability in the merged districts depends on **synchronisation**.

Key principles include:

- Security operations must be followed by governance and service delivery
- Development initiatives must reinforce legitimacy and public confidence
- Administrative reforms must be sensitive to local context and sequencing

The central proposition was that:

Administrative voids, if left unaddressed, ultimately transform into security voids.

7.11 Concluding Perspective

The way forward is not about assigning responsibility for past shortcomings, but about **completing an unfinished transition**.

With coordinated action, predictable resources, and people-centric governance, the merger can still achieve its original objective of **inclusive development, justice, and lasting peace** in the merged districts.

8. Core Message and Conclusion

The keynote concluded with a central message:

"Administrative voids eventually become security voids if not addressed."

It was emphasized that:

- Transitions must be planned, not assumed
- Hybrid justice, empowered local governance, and predictable financing are pillars of stability
- **Sustainable peace requires governance to reach people faster than militancy does**

9. Institutional Role of ASPIRE-KP

ASPIRE-KP participated in the Workshop in its capacity as a **non-partisan advocacy and research platform** comprising public service professionals from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

The forum reiterated its readiness to:

- Undertake policy diagnostics and research
- Develop evidence-based reform options
- Facilitate structured dialogue among stakeholders
- Support monitoring frameworks and knowledge products

ASPIRE-KP's engagement was analytical, constructive, and aligned with its institutional mandate of promoting people-centric and sustainable governance reforms.