

# Beyond Complex Histories, Charting a New Chapter in Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations

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## ABSTRACT

This research study aims to assess the implementation of Pakistan's Afghanistan policy, aiming to uncover both its strengths and weaknesses, identifying sources of tension, and recognizing factors that contribute positively. The primary objective is to provide recommendations for enhancement. The core purpose of this research is to reassess the dynamics of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, steering them towards a new trajectory that fosters peace and prosperity in the region. This article undertakes an analysis of various phases of Pak-Afghan relations in a chronological framework, aiming to pinpoint challenges obstructing the reconciliation process and perpetuating a contentious geo-strategic and geo-political atmosphere between the two neighboring nations. Following the identification of factors causing deteriorating relations, the research proposes measures to address these issues and outlines a strategy to facilitate amicable terms between the two neighbors.

**Keywords:** *Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations, Policy Assessment, Reconciliation Strategy*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Pakistan and Afghanistan share a 2240 km border, officially referred to as the Durand Line<sup>1</sup>. Despite their common geography, ethnicity, and faith, bilateral relations have been consistently strained<sup>2</sup>. The presence of the Indian threat from the East has compounded the challenges faced by Pakistan, with Afghanistan's hostile stance further contributing to a delicate security environment that poses a threat to Pakistan's very existence<sup>3</sup>.

The surge in violent extremism and terrorism within Pakistan, exacerbated by the instability in Afghanistan, has not only inflicted significant damage on Pakistan's economy but has also led to widespread human suffering through extensive and indiscriminate attacks on innocent Pakistani civilians<sup>4</sup>.

It is in the collective interest of South and Central Asia for Pakistan and Afghanistan to engage in efforts to address and resolve their persistent deadlock. Given the close geographical and demographic proximity of both nations and their shared economic interests, the pursuit of peace would yield substantial benefits<sup>5</sup>. Afghanistan's strategic and economic significance, positioned at the crossroads of South and Central Asia, emphasizes its importance for Pakistan, and vice versa. Despite Pakistan's sincere endeavors to promote a peaceful and stable Afghanistan, challenges persist, notably with the Afghan Taliban complicating the issue of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), presenting a complex and unyielding problem.

The establishment of a comprehensive diplomatic understanding between Islamabad and Kabul is impeded by the lack of cooperation from the Afghan Taliban regarding Pakistan's legitimate

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requests for more decisive measures against the TTP<sup>6</sup>.

## 2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Former Afghan President Hamid Karzai once remarked, 'Pakistan and Afghanistan are conjoined twins,' encapsulating the essence of this relationship. Pakistan and Afghanistan share a bond akin to two inseparable brothers. Despite the challenges and attempts by common adversaries to exploit their relationship, these efforts have met with limited success.

In Pakistan, there is a sense of gratitude towards Afghans, recognizing their historical role in introducing Islam to the subcontinent. Whether through military expeditions led by figures like Mahmood Ghaznavi, Ahmed Shah Abdali, Ghouri, or through the spiritual teachings of mystics like Syed Ali Hajveri, Moeen-ud-Din Chishti, and Lal Shahbaz Qalandar who traveled from Afghanistan to propagate Islam, Afghans have significantly contributed to the spread of Islam in the region. Muslims in Pakistan acknowledge the debt owed to the Afghan nation for bringing Islam to their land.

### 2.1 Pre-Partition Era

Before the formation of Pakistan in 1947, the region comprising Afghanistan and Pakistan was part of British India.

The Durand Line, establishing the border between Afghanistan and British India in 1893, has been a consistent source of contention between the two nations.

### 2.2 Partition and Independence (1947)

Pakistan emerged as a separate state for Muslims during the partition of British India in 1947.

Afghanistan, primarily due to unresolved border issues, was the sole country to vote against Pakistan's admission to the United Nations in 1947.

### 2.3 Post-Independence Relations

Early relations were strained, with Afghanistan refusing to recognize the Durand Line as the legitimate border.

The issue of Pashtun nationalism and the call for an independent Pashtunistan further strained relations during the initial years.

### 2.4 Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989)

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 had a profound impact on the region. Pakistan, along with the United States and other allies, supported Afghan mujahideen fighters against Soviet forces.

Millions of Afghan refugees sought refuge in Pakistan during this period.

### 2.5 Taliban Era (1996-2001)

The rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s had repercussions for Pakistan, with some factions within Pakistan offering support.

Pakistan was among the few countries that recognized the Taliban government.

### 2.6 Post-9/11 and War on Terror

The events of September 11, 2001, marked a turning point in global affairs and significantly impacted Pakistan's foreign policy, particularly its Afghanistan policy.

Faced with the ultimatum 'either to be with us or against us,' Pakistan stood at a crossroads. The United States, under President George W. Bush, emphasized the non-distinction between perpetrators of terrorist attacks and those harboring them.

This historical overview reflects the nuanced and intricate nature of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, shaped by historical events, geopolitical dynamics, and the pursuit of shared interests in the region.

## 3. EVALUATING PAKISTAN-AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS

Initially, a Taliban triumph in Afghanistan was perceived as synonymous with a victory for Pakistan. However, dashed expectations on both sides have led to heightened tensions between the two neighbors.

Recent months have witnessed turmoil not only in Afghanistan under Taliban leadership but also in neighboring Pakistan, experiencing a downward trajectory with challenges in its security situation and economy. Amidst these domestic crises, the

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relationship between the two countries has become marked by significant friction.

The unexpected and abrupt deterioration of this relationship has surprised many observers. Pakistan was long considered a key supporter of the Taliban, even during the two-decade presence of international forces in Afghanistan following the events of 9/11. However, Pakistan has taken the unprecedented step of linking its security challenges to the support it alleges is provided by militants in Afghanistan, indirectly placing blame on the Afghan Taliban.

A recent report from the United States Institute of Peace suggests that militants targeting the Pakistani state receive assistance from the Afghan Taliban, who have assumed control since the withdrawal of international forces in August 2021. This development may not have been foreseen by Islamabad, as initially, a Taliban victory in Afghanistan was seen as a shared success due to the historical alignment of interests between the two.

Exploring the evolution of the Afghan Taliban-Pakistan relationship against the backdrop of regional geopolitical changes, it becomes crucial to understand why these two erstwhile friends find themselves at loggerheads today.

#### **4. THE PAKISTAN-TALIBAN RELATIONSHIP**

Pakistan has been commonly perceived as not only sympathetic to the Taliban in Afghanistan but also as the group's principal supporter since its inception in the 1990s. This background has fostered the belief that policymakers in Islamabad celebrated the Afghan Taliban's ascension to power in August 2021, despite concerns about the potential negative impact on regional peace and stability.

Some within Islamabad's policy circles even asserted that it was Pakistan itself that had achieved success in Afghanistan. Following the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, then-Prime Minister Imran Khan remarked that the people in Afghanistan had "broken the shackles of slavery," essentially praising the Taliban's victory.

However, despite Pakistan's longstanding association with the Taliban, the dynamics of the relationship are now more intricate than ever. Tensions are emerging between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban, primarily because both parties now

perceive each other differently than they did before 9/11 and the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan.

The Taliban are no longer willing to function as proxies for Pakistan. They have grown wary of the Pakistani state, especially its military, as it swiftly turned into an adversary under American pressure, even going to the extent of surrendering Taliban leaders to the United States. This perceived betrayal is considered unforgivable in Afghanistan's tribal Pashtun culture.

Pakistan later recalibrated its policy, renewing ties with the Taliban as the United States allowed its arch-rival India to play a significant role in Afghanistan. The Taliban became Pakistan's counterbalance to India's influence in Afghanistan. However, despite the revival of strategic bilateral cooperation, trust between the Taliban and Islamabad was eroded.

During the presence of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, the Taliban restored relations with Pakistan out of political necessity and the need for sanctuaries. With the absence of these sanctuaries, the Taliban no longer find it necessary to rely on Pakistan for their survival.

#### **5. CAUSES FOR THE DETERIORATING RELATIONSHIP**

In recent months, the strained relations between the Taliban and Pakistan have arisen due to several contentious issues. Following August 2021, the Taliban anticipated that Pakistan would use its influence with the international community, particularly Western powers with whom Islamabad has historically aligned, to secure either de jure or at least de facto recognition for the Taliban regime. However, global reluctance to recognize the Taliban, given their concerning track record on human rights, particularly women's and minority rights, dampened these expectations. Additionally, Pakistan's own deteriorating relations with Western powers diminished its diplomatic capacity to garner international recognition for the Taliban.

On Pakistan's side, there was a broad expectation that the Taliban would take concrete actions against the Pakistani Taliban (TTP), a distinct entity from the Afghan Taliban, which primarily targets Pakistani forces, or at least prevent them from launching attacks within Pakistan's borders. Despite the Afghan Taliban's assurances that they would not allow militant activities from the territory they control against

other states, the TTP escalated attacks within Pakistan in recent months. The Afghan Taliban also offered their assistance in facilitating reconciliation or a truce between Pakistan and the Pakistani Taliban, but this commitment has not materialized.

The third contentious issue between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban revolves around the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The Taliban, in line with previous Afghan governments, refuses to recognize the Durand Line as the official border between the two nations. Skirmishes along this border between the Pakistani military and Taliban forces have surprised many observers.

There are allegations that U.S. drones targeting suspected terrorists in Afghanistan may be operating from bases in Pakistan. After a U.S. drone strike killed al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul, the Taliban accused Pakistan of allowing its airspace for such strikes, issuing a veiled threat of "bad consequences." Pakistan denies permitting the use of its bases or airspace for U.S. drone strikes inside Afghanistan.

Another potential factor contributing to the deterioration of Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban is the group's unprecedented overtures to India. Mullah Yaqub, the influential defense minister of the Taliban regime and son of Taliban founder Mullah Omar, expressed willingness to send Afghan personnel to India for military training, signaling a potential shift in the Taliban-Pakistan-India dynamic. Whether this represents a game-changer in the region remains uncertain, as Islamabad historically nurtured the Taliban to counterbalance India's influence. Only time will reveal the implications of these evolving geopolitical dynamics.

## 6. THE PATH FORWARD

The relationship between the Afghan Taliban and Islamabad has become more intricate and strained than ever, posing challenges for both parties.

As militants escalate attacks within Pakistan, preventing the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) from using Afghanistan as a base for launching attacks becomes crucial. If these attacks persist, Islamabad might consider taking military actions, including airstrikes or pursuing militants across the Afghanistan border, actions that could prove counterproductive and harm regional peace.

Simultaneously, for the Taliban regime, Pakistan remains a crucial external actor. The absence of Islamabad's support could jeopardize stability in Afghanistan. Achieving sustained economic growth in Afghanistan also necessitates close cooperation with Pakistan.

Both nations must navigate this delicate situation cautiously, recognizing that a prosperous future hinges on inclusive peace and decision-making aligned with contemporary socio-political realities globally. The international community should play a role in facilitating cooperation between Islamabad and Kabul, steering them away from recent tensions and promoting shared stability in the region.

- TTP's anti-Pakistan terror campaign

The relationship between Islamabad and Kabul faces increasing complexity and tension, with potential adverse consequences for both parties.

As Pakistan intensifies its pressure campaign and the Afghan Taliban continues to support the TTP, relations between the two are on the brink of further deterioration. The Afghan Taliban leadership dismisses Pakistan's legitimate concerns about the TTP, labeling it as a "domestic issue." This casual stance neglects Pakistan's genuine worries regarding the TTP and aggravates the diplomatic strain.

Caretaker Prime Minister Anwar ul-Haq Kakar, in a press conference on November 8, 2023, strongly criticized the Taliban government in Afghanistan. He highlighted that since the Taliban took control in August 2021, over 2,800 Pakistanis lost their lives in the TTP's anti-Pakistan terror campaign, backed by the Afghan Taliban leadership. Despite previous caution in depicting the relationship, PM Kakar asserted there was "clear evidence of [the Taliban] enabling terrorism" by the TTP.

In response, Pakistan launched a broader pressure campaign, including the expulsion of illegal migrants and the repatriation of 1.7 million undocumented Afghan refugees. The UN confirmed the redirection of 327,000 refugees to return to Afghanistan.

Taliban Prime Minister Hassan Akhund urged Pakistan's government and military to follow "Islamic guidelines," while Emir Hibatullah Akhundzada expressed concern over the treatment of undocumented Afghan refugees. Acting Taliban Defence Minister Moulvi Muhammad Yaqoob

Mujahid warned Pakistan of the consequences of its actions and criticized its treatment of Afghan refugees, urging the global community to pressure Pakistan to change its stance.

The Taliban's and Afghans' resentment over Pakistan's repatriation of refugees is evident in these statements, reflecting growing anger. The Taliban leaders' frustration, coupled with the collapse of TTP-Pakistan talks, indicates a consensus within the Taliban on their anti-Pakistan stance.

Pakistan is leveraging its economic influence to compel the Taliban to reconsider their support for the TTP. As the primary transit route for Afghanistan's commerce, Pakistan holds significant economic sway, contributing to over 40% of Afghanistan's customs revenue. Pakistan has tightened regulations for transit trade, imposed strict bank guarantees, restricted product categories, and levied processing fees, impacting its informal economy. These measures also strengthened the Rupee against the U.S. dollar.

The situation underscores the delicate nature of the Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship, with economic leverage and refugee issues further complicating the already strained ties between the two nations.

## **7. PAKISTAN & AFGHANISTAN ECONOMICAL IMPACT**

Economically, both countries have maintained trade relations since 1965. The 'Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement,' revised in 2010, marked a significant step in enhancing transit trade between the two nations. Bilateral trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan reached up to 2.5 billion, with Pakistan providing economic assistance packages covering education, health, and infrastructure to Afghanistan.

In the education sector, Pakistan has granted scholarships to Afghan students, with more than 40,000 people currently having graduated from Pakistani universities in Afghanistan. Additionally, Pakistan established faculties in Afghan universities and constructed schools like Rahman Baba school and hostel in Kabul to promote education opportunities for Afghan youth.

Pakistan has also extended assistance in the health sector, constructing hospitals such as Jinnah hospital in Kabul, Naib Amin Ullah Khan Hospital in Logar, and a Kidney Hospital in Jalalabad.

Moreover, Pakistan has trained numerous doctors and paramedics in Afghanistan.

Over the past 40 years, Pakistan has hosted millions of Afghan refugees, providing warm hospitality regardless of their ideology, ethnicity, or language. Despite diverse opinions within society, both countries share a common future, and Afghan refugees play a crucial role in strengthening bilateral ties.

According to the Taliban, Pakistan has reduced the flow of containers reaching its ports from Afghanistan, impacting Pakistan's economy to some extent. However, Pakistan's dependence on the Afghan economy has diminished, with reduced coal imports as global prices have fallen.

In response to the strained relationship, Pakistan has implemented economic strategies, including the repatriation of Afghan refugees and tightening trade regulations. If economic measures prove ineffective, Pakistan may resort to cross-border military operations, targeting TTP's senior cadre and training camps in Afghanistan. However, this would be a last resort due to potential consequences such as intensified hostility and revenge attacks.

To counteract Pakistan's pressure, Kabul may diversify its foreign policy alliances, seeking support from Central Asian Republics, India, and Iran. A Taliban delegation visited Tehran to sign economic collaboration pacts, indicating efforts to reduce reliance on Pakistan. Additionally, the Taliban may strengthen ties with India and seek trade concessions in exchange for financial support.

Considering the hostile sentiments from Afghanistan towards Pakistan, extremist activity escalation using proxies may be employed. However, this approach is deemed unwise and unlikely to prompt a change in Pakistan's conduct. Alternatively, the Taliban may explore diplomatic backchannels or seek mediation from Qatar and China to defuse tensions with Pakistan.

The evolving economic and diplomatic dynamics between Pakistan and Afghanistan underscore the delicate nature of their relationship and the potential impact on regional stability.

## **8. A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO COUNTER TERRORISM IN PAKISTAN**

As Pakistan grapples with political and economic uncertainty, various terrorist groups seek to exploit the situation. The recent surge in

terrorism underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive strategy as security forces contend with bold extremist attacks that have resulted in the loss of lives, especially in 2023.

Addressing this imperative requires the formulation of an effective and sustainable counterterrorism strategy to neutralize all threat vectors posing a danger to the nation's fragile security. Pakistan must promptly reassess its national security policy, rectifying the deficiencies that have contributed to the current dire situation. Key initiatives include reactivating the National Counter-terrorism Authority of Pakistan (NACTA) and endowing it with the necessary enforcement powers. Additionally, there is a need to update and enhance the 2014 National Action Plan, making it more comprehensive and current. Empowering Federal and recently established Apex Committees is crucial to undertaking bold and decisive actions to counter violent extremism (CVE).

## 9. CONCLUSION

The border region between Pakistan and Afghanistan has become a focal point in the war on terror, and both nations share common challenges, including the threat of terrorism and the imperative for regional stability.

While the current situation is indeed troubling, the history of bilateral relations has witnessed ups and downs. Both countries should exercise restraint and seek amicable resolutions to their differences. Publicly airing negative statements is not advisable, and relying on media diplomacy offers no real solution. The leadership of both nations must earnestly work to understand and address the underlying issues, as hostility between neighbors only benefits common adversaries.

Emphasizing commonalities rather than differences is crucial. Despite political disparities, the two nations share a common border, religion, history, language, ethnic bonds, and more. Resolving political disputes, such as border issues, should take a backseat to prioritizing economic cooperation. Public statements regarding Afghanistan's internal matters should be avoided, and Kabul needs to ensure that Afghan soil is not utilized to destabilize Pakistan. Observers of the border situation should recognize the local dynamics at play, understanding that many incidents have limited connections to government policies and practices.

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