

# The Fall of Kabul: Revisiting Taliban-Pakistan Relations

Zabihullah Barekzai\*

## Abstract

*Afghanistan has remained the epi-centre of Pakistani politics for the last four decades. The Taliban have shared historical ties with Islamabad for many decades, and Pakistan was one of the three countries to recognise the militia in the 1990s, whose government ended in the wake of 9/11 attacks on the United States. Pakistan had always held greater influence over the Taliban leadership. Paradoxically, for the last 20 years, different political personalities and presidential terms in Afghanistan have failed to stabilise their relations with Pakistan. Pakistan remained a principal supporter of the Taliban military struggle against the US-NATO presence in Afghanistan. Following 20 years of war, the US and its allies opted to withdraw from Afghanistan in August 2021 which led to the Taliban takeover, termed as Taliban 2.0. Contrary to their previous regime, Taliban 2.0 is not recognised by any country, including Pakistan. To what extent are Taliban-Pakistan diplomatically and commercially engaged? Will Pakistan recognise the Taliban regime in the foreseeable future? What are the irritants in Taliban-Pakistan relations? How does Pakistan view Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) ties with the Afghan Taliban? How does a peaceful Afghanistan address Pakistan's strategic interests? These are some of the questions that this study aims to answer underpinned by primary (official) and secondary sources.*

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, Pakistan, Taliban, TTP, Counterterrorism, US withdrawal.

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## Introduction

Despite deep religious, socioeconomic, and cultural ties, the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan has never been as stable and friendly as expected. Various factors have been part of this scenario; such as the demarcation of the Durand Line and Afghanistan's position of not formally recognising it,<sup>1</sup> Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan over the last four decades,<sup>2</sup> and Indian presence in Afghanistan post-2001.<sup>3</sup> Since the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, the decade-long war has impacted the people, development, and stability of Afghanistan. A large number of Afghan migrants fled to Pakistan, estimated at around five million in the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> Though Pakistan has sheltered the flow of migrants but also trained a large number of them to fight against the Soviet forces in Afghanistan, having financial and military support from the United States and its allies.<sup>5</sup> The withdrawal of the Soviet forces (1989) led to a civil war in Afghanistan, eventually leading to the emergence of the Taliban in the mid-1990s. Pakistan was among the three countries that have not only supported the Taliban but also formally recognised them, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>6</sup>

After the US invasion of Afghanistan and the toppling of the Taliban regime in the wake of 9/11, Islamabad continued backing its old ally, the Taliban, by providing sanctuaries in different parts of Pakistan. Quetta *Shura* and Waziristan *Shura* are some of the examples.<sup>7</sup> Taliban's

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<sup>1</sup> Borders and Durand Line, *Ministry of Borders and Tribal Affairs*. Retrieved from <https://mobta.gov.af/en/borders-durand-line>

<sup>2</sup> Razia Sultana, "Major threats to Pakistan in the wake of US withdrawal from Afghanistan: The case of FATA and KP," *FWU Journal of Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2015): 64.

<sup>3</sup> Shahzad Akhtar and Arshad Ali, "Indian Factor in Pakistan's Policy Towards Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, pp. 111-127. Routledge, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Nasreen Ghufuran, "The role of UNHCR and Afghan refugees in Pakistan," *Strategic Analysis* 35, no. 6 (2011): 945-954.

<sup>5</sup> Anchita Borthakur, "Afghan refugees: The impact on Pakistan," *Asian Affairs* 48, no. 3 (2017): 488-509.

<sup>6</sup> Nasreen Ghufuran, "The role of UNHCR..."

<sup>7</sup> Antonio Giustozzi and Adam Baczko, "The politics of the Taliban's shadow judiciary, 2003–2013." *Central Asian Affairs* 1, no. 2 (2014): 199-224.

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intellectual and ideological roots strongly relate to Pakistani religious schools (*Madrasas*). On that account, in the post-US invasion scenario, the *Jamaat-e-Islami* and other religious political parties, and a large number of people in Pakistan strongly backed the Taliban and held rallies in their support. During their presence in Pakistan, the former took no military action against the Afghan Taliban because it did not want to jeopardise its strategic position in Afghanistan to achieve its ‘strategic depth.’<sup>8</sup> The term ‘strategic depth’ is a non-military strategy owned by Pakistan that aims to bring Afghanistan into its sphere of influence, install a pro-Islamabad government in Kabul, protect its security interests, and restrain Indian influence in Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup> After a lapse of 20 years, the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in August 2021, resulting in some implications for Pakistan. Pakistan is accused of providing sanctuaries to the Taliban who are currently running the interim Afghan government; and meddling in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. Some of the immediate interests of Pakistan in Afghanistan include a friendly or pro-Pakistan government in Kabul, containment of the threats rising from *Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP), degrading Indian influence and presence in Afghanistan, and securing Pakistan’s economic interests.<sup>10</sup>

Given the foregoing discussion, this study tends to answer: To what extent are Taliban-Pakistan diplomatically and commercially engaged? Will Pakistan recognise the Taliban regime in the foreseeable future? What are the irritants in Taliban-Pakistan relations? How does Pakistan view *Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP) ties with the Afghan Taliban? How does a peaceful Afghanistan address Pakistan’s strategic interests? However, it is pertinent to briefly study the key literature on the subject

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<sup>8</sup> Madelina Barve, "Careless peacebuilding: A post structural policy analysis of the Afghanistan study Group Final Report: A pathway for peace in Afghanistan (2021)," Retrieved from <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1574030/FULLTEXT02.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> A Z Hilali, "FATA: The strategic depth of Pakistan," *Margalla Papers* 3, no. 1 (2010): 18-50.

<sup>10</sup> Asad Altaf, Zahid Mehmood Zahid, and Tahir Abbas Sial, "A critical analysis of Afghanistan's regime change and opportunities for Pakistan," *Multicultural Education* 8, no. 4 (2022).

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matter. Zahidullah in his study titled, *Contextualising the Taliban redux (2021): Is the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan a Pyrrhic Victory for Pakistan?* has explained the return of the Taliban and Pakistan's role in their victory. This study has focused more on the reasons for stressed Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, the difference between Taliban 2.0 from its predecessors, and the implication of Taliban takeover on regional rivalries i.e. India-Pakistan-China.<sup>11</sup> However, the author has not empirically explained the extent of Taliban-Pakistan diplomatic engagement post-2021. In "How was the Taliban 2.0 in Afghanistan seen in Pakistan?" the authors have investigated how the Taliban takeover is viewed in Pakistan to get a pluralistic idea. They have studied the responses of different civil society activists about the Taliban takeover and its implications for Pakistan. The result varied keeping in view different perceptions, i.e. some called it a success of Islam, and freedom from occupation, and safety of Pakistan from Indian proxy, however, others called it an increase in extremism and rise of TTP.<sup>12</sup>

In another study "The Taliban's Takeover of Afghanistan and Pakistan's Terrorism Problem" the author focused on the security challenges posed to Pakistan i.e. TTP and Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K). The study argues that various factors influence Pakistan's counter-terrorism efforts i.e. internal political instability, settlement/negotiations with TTP, and Pakistan-Afghan Taliban relations. Though this study has probed into the security challenges Pakistan faces post-2021, the nitty-gritty of the Taliban-Pakistan relations is not taken up empirically i.e. recognition, confrontation, and lobbying.<sup>13</sup> Lastly, Vinay Kaura in his article "The Geopsychology of Pakistan's Taliban Misadventure" has elucidated Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan affairs using B. M. Jain's geopsychology theory. He explains two factors that explain Pakistan's

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<sup>11</sup> Zahidullah, *Contextualising the Taliban redux (2021): Is the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan a pyrrhic victory for Pakistan?* *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 33, no. 7 (2022): 1177-1202.

<sup>12</sup> Muhammad Akram, Dania Mohamad, and Adeela Arshad-Ayaz, "How was the Taliban 2.0 in Afghanistan seen in Pakistan?" *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* (2023).

<sup>13</sup> Zahid Ahmed Shahab, "The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan and Pakistan's terrorism problem," *IPRI Journal* 2022, no. 1 (2022).

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geo-psychology to understand its policy regarding the Taliban. First, the sense of vulnerability from India's side. Second, a sense of entitlement as a Muslim country. The article also analysed the level of Pakistan's influence over Taliban post-2021.<sup>14</sup> Although Vinay Kaura has focused on regional geopolitics and Islamic factors, his paper did not thematically address the questions this study aims to answer.

As a result, the existing literature, as explained above, varies in focus and the scholarship needed. Some of the existing literature focused on the implication of the Taliban takeover on regional politics, and the difference between Taliban 2.0 and its predecessors, others have analysed the psychology of Pakistan's support for the Taliban and the security challenges posed post-2021. Hence the studies did not attempt to answer some of the core questions by analysing the prevailing and future course of Taliban-Pakistan entanglement, the irritants in Taliban-Pakistan relations, Pakistan's interest post-2021, and the likelihood of regime recognition by Pakistan. These are the core questions this study attempts to answer with primary and secondary data in the following sections.

#### **Taliban-Pakistan entanglement**

It is essential to understand the level of diplomatic engagement Taliban-Pakistan maintains to determine the future of their ties. Many of the current Taliban leadership council members who are holding key positions in the interim government grew up in Pakistan, studied, and took refuge after the collapse of their previous regime in 2001.<sup>15</sup> However, the level of influence Pakistan maintained over the previous Taliban regime is no more a privilege for the latter. Realistically, it had greater influence over the Taliban during their first regime. Unlike the past, the current Taliban regime is not under the greater influence of Pakistan. One of the reasons why Taliban 2.0 feels more independent as compared to their

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<sup>14</sup> Vinay Kaura, "The geopsychology of Pakistan's Taliban misadventure," *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 35, no. 2 (2022): 1-19.

<sup>15</sup> Hamzah Rifaat Hussain, "Haibatullah Akhundzada and the resurgence of the Taliban," *The Diplomat*, June 4, 2026. Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/haibatullah-akhundzada-and-the-resurgence-of-the-taliban/>

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previous dispensation is the restructuring of their close ties with other countries around the world. In the past, because of their limited external links and resources, the Taliban were more dependent on Pakistan. Meanwhile, they have close ties with Russia, China, Iran, Central Asia, and Gulf Countries.<sup>16</sup>

Russia has maintained informal relations with Taliban since 2015, and started official diplomatic relations in the absence of formal recognition since March 2022.<sup>17</sup> Taliban benefits from its diplomatic relations with Moscow in two ways. First, the Taliban seek closer ties with Russia to be integrated into the international community and Moscow could support the Taliban in major decisions on the global stage. Second, to achieve a level of international legitimacy by partnering with major powers.<sup>18</sup> Same goes in Taliban's relations with China. Beijing's policy towards Afghanistan is described as "fence-sitting," under which China maintained friendly relations not only with former Afghan republic government but also with Taliban.<sup>19</sup> Following the fall of Kabul, China has appointed its first ambassador to Afghanistan in September 2023, and accepted the credentials of Taliban ambassador to China in January 2024.<sup>20</sup> With the US unwilling to actively engage, regional powers like Russia and China remain the only hope for the Taliban. Iran, on the other hand, also handed over the Afghan embassy in Tehran to the Taliban, and

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<sup>16</sup> Zahid Ahmed Shahab, Abbas Farasoo, and Shahram Akbarzadeh, "The Taliban develops regional relationships as it makes territorial gains in Afghanistan," *Melbourne Asia Review* (2020). Retrieved from <https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/the-taliban-is-actively-developing-relationships-with-regional-powers-as-it-makes-territorial-gains-in-afghanistan/>

<sup>17</sup> Mikhail Bushuev, "Russia rebuilding ties with the Taliban," *DW*, June 6, 2024. Retrieved from <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-rebuilding-ties-with-the-taliban/a-69277920#:~:text=Moscow%20has%20kept%20informal%20ties,sides%20assumed%20official%20diplomatic%20relations.>>

<sup>18</sup> Burna-Asefi, Sophia Nina, "The strategic logic of Russia's embrace of the Taliban," *The Diplomat*, April 20, 2023. Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/2023/04/the-strategic-logic-of-russias-embrace-of-the-taliban/>>

<sup>19</sup> Fareeha Sarwar and Uzma Siraj, "Afghan peace process: Regional complexities and the role of China," *NUST Journal of International Peace & Stability* (2021): 40-52.

<sup>20</sup> Ruhi Kumar "Why has China recognised Taliban's envoy to Beijing?" *Al Jazeera*, February 14, 2024. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/14/is-chinas-recognition-of-afghanistan-envoy-a-diplomatic-win-for-taliban>>

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appointed diplomats in February 2023. Iran-Taliban agreed to create an Iran-Afghanistan joint chamber and enhance trade, and investment in the agricultural sector.<sup>21</sup>

In a recent development in the Central Asian region, Kazakhstan's President declared that his country removed the Taliban from the terrorist list. He stressed that the decision aimed to enhance economic ties with Afghanistan, and called upon Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to support Kazakhstan's proposal for establishing a UN regional center for the stable development of Central Asia and Afghanistan.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, the re-engagement of Uzbekistan with the Taliban was more evident when it hosted the Tashkent Conference in July 2022, where 30 different nations engaged with the Taliban officials. Uzbekistan endorsed the efforts of the Taliban in terms of improving socioeconomic relations with neighbours and reiterated the international community's conditions for granting formal recognition to the Taliban government.<sup>23</sup> Notably, in February 2024, the Taliban took over the Afghan embassy in the Uzbek capital. It is pertinent to mention that Qatar is the Taliban's second home in terms of their political presence. Since 2013, the Taliban has owned a political office in Qatar where the Afghan peace process has been completed resulting in the signing of the US-Taliban agreement in February 2020 in Doha.<sup>24</sup> Although neither Qatar nor the United Arab Emirates have granted formal recognition to the Taliban, nevertheless both countries handed over Afghanistan embassies to the Taliban-appointed diplomats. This indicates that Taliban 2.0 has an expanded diplomatic relationship with various countries in different regions, which makes them independent and not limited to the mercy of Pakistan.

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<sup>21</sup> Amina Bibi Hakimi, "Iran reaches agreements with Afghanistan in trade development," *Tolo News*, October 11, 2023. Retrieved from <https://tolonews.com/business-185501>>

<sup>22</sup> RFE, "Kazakhstan takes Taliban off of its terrorist list," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, June 3, 2024. Retrieved from <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-removes-taliban-from-terrorist-list/32977114.html>>

<sup>23</sup> Navbahor Imamova, "Nearly 30 nations engage with Taliban at Tashkent Conference," *VOA*, July 27, 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.voanews.com/a/almost-30-nations-engage-with-taliban-at-tashkent-conference-/6676107.html>>

<sup>24</sup> Hasan Alhasan and Asna Wajid, "The Gulf States' Pragmatism in Afghanistan," *Survival* 66, no. 3 (2024): 145-158.

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Despite this fact, Islamabad remains an important actor in Taliban-led Afghanistan. Following August 2021, Islamabad was active in lobbying for the Taliban. Pakistan under Prime Minister Imran Khan organised the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation's Council of Foreign Ministers meeting in Islamabad in December 2021, to address Afghanistan's humanitarian and economic crisis.<sup>25</sup> It has also allowed India to dispatch 50,000 metric tons of wheat and life-saving medicine to Afghanistan via Pakistan.<sup>26</sup> To curtail the humanitarian crisis, Pakistan pledged an aid of \$28 million, including 50,000 metric tons of food and medical equipment.<sup>27</sup> Following the fall of Kabul, in November 2021, Pakistan also arranged an Extended Troika Plus conference comprising China, Russia, and the US to discuss Afghanistan's humanitarian and socio-economic situation.<sup>28</sup> In the discussion above, Pakistan rationally handled the post-August 2021 scenario. On one side, Islamabad has shown its soft power diplomacy; on the other side, it avoided a bigger spillover effect of the Kabul fall in terms of the refugee influx, and humanitarian crisis, highlighted the socio-economic crisis of Afghanistan to the regional countries and the international community, which if not addressed could not only impact Pakistan but also the international community.

Despite the US and the EU's challenging position on the Taliban and their policies, Islamabad has engaged regional and international stakeholders, including civil society organisations, to take a holistic judgment of the

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<sup>25</sup> "OIC secretary general and Pakistan Prime Minister discuss the situation in Afghanistan, Jammu, and Kashmir, and Islamophobia," *Organization of Islamic Cooperation*, December 19, 2021. Retrieved from [https://www.oic-oci.org/topic/?t\\_id=30616&t\\_ref=19567&lan=en](https://www.oic-oci.org/topic/?t_id=30616&t_ref=19567&lan=en)

<sup>26</sup> Press Release, "Overland transportation via Pakistan of 50,000 MT of Indian wheat and lifesaving medicines for Afghanistan," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*. Retrieved from <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/overland-transportation-via-pakistan-of-50000-mt-of-indian-wheat-and-lifesaving-medicines-for-afghanistan>

<sup>27</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan sends humanitarian aid to Afghanistan," *VOA*, December 30, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-sendshumanitarian-aid-to-afghanistan-/6375649.html>

<sup>28</sup> Joint statement on Troika Plus meeting, *U.S Embassy & Consulates in Pakistan*, November 11, 2021. Retrieved from <https://pk.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-on-troika-plus-meeting-11-november-2021-islamabad/>



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critical juncture of Afghanistan.<sup>29</sup> In addition, to strengthen diplomatic engagement, there have been top-level visits between the Taliban and Pakistan. Afghanistan's interim government Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi visited Islamabad in November 2021, followed by the visit of Pakistani Foreign Minister, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, accompanied by Chief Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in October 2021. The meetings were centered on trade and transit, border management, regional connectivity, and the revival of bilateral mechanisms and institutional frameworks like the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS) to address the grievances of both sides.<sup>30</sup> Later, another high-level Pakistani delegation visited Kabul to ease the tension of border skirmishes and broker negotiations between the TTP and the Pakistani government. Pakistan's former State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Hina Rabani Khar, visited Kabul in November 2022 and discussed issues related to border management, regional security, socio-economic projects, and education.<sup>31</sup> TTP remains an integral part of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. Based on the frequent border violations and the terrorist attacks in Pakistan, it remained complainant of the sanctuaries given to the outlawed group by the Afghan Taliban on their soil. Whereas, this claim has been repeatedly denied by the former.<sup>32</sup> To address it, a delegation including the Pakistan Defense Minister and ISI Chief, visited Kabul and met their counterparts in February 2023. Their main agenda was to address security issues. Even though the Afghan Taliban denies TTP's presence in Afghanistan, they mediated several talks

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<sup>29</sup> Ejaz Hussain, "Taliban 2.0 and Afghanistan-Pakistan relations," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 9, no. 3 (2022): 462-474.

<sup>30</sup> Iftikhar Khan, "A. New Afghan FM arrives today on first visit to Pakistan," *DAWN*, November 10, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1657061/new-afghan-fm-arrives-today-on-first-visit-to-pakistan>

<sup>31</sup> Visit of the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs to Afghanistan, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs Government of Pakistan*, November 29, 2022. Retrieved from <https://mofa.gov.pk/visit-of-the-minister-of-state-for-foreign-affairs-to-afghanistan-29-november-2022/>

<sup>32</sup> Kamran Yousaf, "Shehbaz's UNGA speech sparks row with Kabul," *The Express Tribune*, September 25, 2022. Retrieved from <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2378510/shehbazs-unga-speech-sparks-row-with-kabul>

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between the outlawed group and the Pakistani delegation in Kabul. The negotiations resulted in a three-month ceasefire.<sup>33</sup>

Notably, despite high-level political and diplomatic engagements, and Pakistan's policy of lobbying for the Taliban, there still exists some defiance that led to the provocation of misunderstandings on both sides. The following section of the article attempts to theoretically and empirically explain the irritants between the Taliban and Pakistan. The major ones include the Taliban's stance on the Durand Line and opposing Pakistan to further fencing the border between the two countries. The recent security upheavals due to TTP's surge in attacks and lastly, the (re)engagement of India in Afghanistan were also some of the irritants that need in-depth comprehension.

#### **At a crossroads**

What can be deduced from the foregoing discussion is that Pakistan has been engaged diplomatically more than any other country in the region and the world. Nevertheless, Taliban-Pakistan relations are not as comfortable as expected. Different issues led to this malaise, fencing the Durand Line is one of the issues which has resulted in skirmishes between security forces of both sides. Following a military clash in Nangarhar Province in December 2021, the Afghan Defense Ministry spokesman called the Pakistani fencing 'illegal,' therefore, they are securing it in several locations.<sup>34</sup> Notably, the Taliban did not recognise the Durand Line as the official border of Afghanistan and Pakistan. They denied this border during their first regime, and so is now.<sup>35</sup> In January 2022, Afghanistan's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs said: "The Durand Line is an issue of the whole nation, not the government. It does not belong to

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<sup>33</sup> Asfandiyar Mir, "Five things to watch in the Islamabad-Pakistani Taliban talks," *United States Institute of Peace*, June 21 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/06/five-things-watch-islamabad-pakistani-taliban-talks>

<sup>34</sup> Reuters, "Taliban stop Pakistani troops from fencing border," *DAWN*, December 23 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1665245>

<sup>35</sup> Borders and Durand Line, *Ministry of Borders and Tribal Affairs*. Retrieved from <https://mobta.gov.af/en/borders-durand-line>

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the government. We will give the responsibility to the nation so that the nation will make the decision.”<sup>36</sup>The same month, *Maulvi* Sanaullah Sangin, who is commander of the Taliban’s border forces for the eastern zone said: “We will not allow fencing anytime, in any form. Whatever they (Pakistan) did before, they did, but we will not allow it anymore.”<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, Pakistan endeavours to accomplish this project, worth \$500 million. The former believes fencing would help in monitoring the militants crossing the border.<sup>38</sup> The security situation in Pakistan has worsened following a surge in attacks from the TTP on Pakistani security forces. Pakistan suffered about 512 militant attacks in 2022, which caused more than 1,500 fatalities and injuries. Compared to 2021, there has been a 27 per cent spike in the number of militant attacks.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, it has been reported that there has been a 70 per cent increase in TTP attacks in the past two years. Only in 2023, nearly 1,000 people, including Pakistani security forces were killed in different militant attacks.<sup>40</sup> Islamabad believes the deterioration of its security is due to TTP’s allegiance with the Afghan Taliban’s supreme leader, and the TTP could be targeted inside Afghanistan if aggressive measures are not taken by the Taliban. However, the Afghan government has asked Islamabad to address such concerns through official diplomatic channels and refrain

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<sup>36</sup> Umair Jamal, “Taliban-Pakistan ties run into trouble,” *The Diplomat*, January 11, 2022. Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/2022/01/taliban-pakistan-ties-run-into-trouble/>

<sup>37</sup> Umair Jamal, “Taliban-Pakistan ties...”

<sup>38</sup> Abdul Basit, “Pakistan-Afghanistan border fence, a step in the right direction,” *Al Jazeera*, February 25, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/2/25/the-pak-afghan-border-fence-is-a-step-in-the-right-direction>

<sup>39</sup> Muhammad Nawaz Khan, “Pakistan’s alarming rise in terrorism is fueled by Afghanistan,” *The Diplomat*, March 10, 2023. Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/pakistans-alarming-rise-in-terrorism-is-fueled-by-afghanistan/>

<sup>40</sup> Ayaz Gul, “Terrorist Attacks Kill Nearly 1,000 Pakistanis in 2023,” *VOA*, December 31, 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.voanews.com/a/report-terrorist-attacks-kill-nearly-1-000-pakistanis-in-2023-/7419344.html>

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from taking coercive measures, which do not benefit any side.<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, Pakistani forces in April 2022, carried out an air strike in Khost and Kunar provinces of Afghanistan. Islamabad claimed they had targeted TTP hideouts. Nonetheless, contrary to the claim, there was no credible evidence of the TTP leadership being killed in the air strike. Taliban claimed that Pakistan targeted the refugee camps.<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, Afghanistan's acting Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani, who is accused of having close ties with Pakistan, also advocated his government's non-allegiance in recent security upheavals in Pakistan. Haqqani called the TTP-Pakistan conflict as Pakistan's internal matter that could be resolved through negotiations.<sup>43</sup>

The decision to carry out military action inside Afghanistan shows a significant change in Islamabad's approach against the TTP and the Afghan Taliban for two reasons. First, it aims to convey to the Afghan Taliban that the TTP's cross-border attacks from Afghan soil would have serious implications, like air strikes. Secondly, Islamabad aims to let the TTP know that they could be targeted anywhere.<sup>44</sup> However, these policies would further harm the security dynamics and negatively impact the diplomatic relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. In case, if Taliban and Pakistan are unsuccessful or do not engage, the security situation would deteriorate even further. It might lead to a proxy war between both the countries.

Post 9/11, Pakistan has suffered a loss of about \$123 billion to its economy, and more than 70,000 Pakistanis have been killed in the 'War

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<sup>41</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Afghan Taliban Call on Pakistan to Avoid Baseless Terror Charges," *VOA*, August 3, 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.voanews.com/a/afghan-taliban-call-on-pakistan-to-avoid-baseless-terror-charges/7210354.html>

<sup>42</sup> Umair Jamal, "Pakistan Takes Fight Against TTP..."

<sup>43</sup> Mohammad Amin Pacha, "Security Incidents in Pakistan Due to Internal Problems: Haqqani," *Tolo News*, August 21, 2023. Retrieve from <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-184742>

<sup>44</sup> Umair Jamal, "Pakistan Takes Fight Against TTP..."

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on Terror.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, the statistics on the Afghan side is painful. It is estimated that around 70,000 Afghan security forces, 46,319 civilians, and about 53,000 opposition fighters have been killed.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, the focus needs to be on finding a peaceful solution to the issues. Contrary to this, speaking to the 77<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2022, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif accused Taliban governed Afghanistan of the presence of various militant organisations, like TTP, Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State of Khurasan (IS-K), the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).<sup>47</sup> Above all, speaking at the 59<sup>th</sup> Munich Security Conference in Germany, Pakistan's former Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari said, there had been security threats emanating from Afghanistan. He added that even if the Afghan Taliban have the will to counter terrorism, they cannot do so. He accused the Taliban of not having a standing army, border, and counter-terrorism forces to deal with threats that could have a spillover effect on immediate neighbours and the international community.<sup>48</sup>

Besides the aforementioned issues, a common approach that most policy analysts and bureaucrats in Pakistan believe is that the Taliban's foreign policy would have significant geostrategic and geo-economic limitations by not aligning with Islamabad's strategic objectives.<sup>49</sup> It reflects Pakistan's policy of containing greater India's influence or

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<sup>45</sup> Benish Khan, Muhammad Mohsin and Sajjad Ahmad, "Afghan Jihad and its after effects: A geographical context," *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs* 5, no. 3 (2022).

<sup>46</sup> Kate Bateman, "In Afghanistan, Was a Loss Better than Peace?," *United States Institute of Peace*, November 3, 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/11/afghanistan-was-loss-better-peace#:~:text=Forper cent20Afghansper cent2Cper cent20theper cent20statisticsper cent20are, relationper cent20to per cent20theper cent20Afghanper cent20war.>>

<sup>47</sup> Kamran Yousaf, "Shehbaz's UNGA speech sparks row with Kabul," *The Express Tribune*, September 25, 2022. Retrieved from <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2378510/shehbazs-unga-speech-sparks-row-with-kabul>>

<sup>48</sup> "Terrorism a threat to Pakistan and beyond, warns Bilawal," *DAWN*, February 19, 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1737942>>

<sup>49</sup> Siegfried O. Wolf, "Pakistan's Failure in Afghanistan," *SSRN* (2023), January 10, 2023. Retrieved from [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=4322346>](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4322346>)

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[re]engagement in Afghanistan.<sup>50</sup> Being a *de facto* government, the Taliban are open to every country in the neighbourhood and the world at large. The recent cue from India to the Taliban indicates that there is a willingness among both sides to get closer. During the visit of J.P. Singh who is leading the Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran division of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs in June 2022, both Afghan acting foreign and interior ministers urged India to reopen its embassy in Kabul. Above all, the Taliban officials also assured India of taking concrete steps against some militant groups that threaten Indian security like *Lashkar-e-Taiba*, *Jaish-e-Mohammed*, and to an extent Al-Qaeda. This indicates that either Taliban are willing to secure a neutral position regarding India-Pakistan impediments or it reflects Taliban's autonomy in the foreign policy; and are willing not to keep all the eggs in the Pakistani basket.<sup>51</sup> Even though India-Pakistan are rivals, a pledge not to use the political vacuum in Afghanistan as part of their proxy war tactics against each other would be a feasible approach for addressing their broader tensions in South Asia. They need to resolve their issues and find common grounds to address them rather than pervading their existential issues to neighbouring countries, specifically Afghanistan.<sup>52</sup> The former is more peaceful as compared to the last two decades. It could play a greater role in regional connectivity and trade via China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India gas pipeline (TAPI), and the Central Asia-South Asia power project (CASA-1000). Thus, it could be deduced that post-2021 is a unique opportunity for Pakistan. The perception already made in the last four decades regarding Pakistan's part in the insurgency of Afghanistan could be diluted if Pakistan partakes in

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<sup>50</sup> Muhammad Farooq, "Indian engagement with Taliban-led Afghanistan and implications for Pakistan," *Margalla Papers* 26, no. 2 (2022): 87-95.

<sup>51</sup> Siegfried O Wolf, "Pakistan's failure in..."

<sup>52</sup> Raza Khan Qazi, "As Pakistan's Afghanistan policy fails, the Afghan Taliban moves against Islamabad," *Atlantic Council*, September 6, 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/as-pakistans-afghanistan-policy-fails-the-afghan-taliban-move-against-islamabad/>>

the development of Afghanistan through soft power with a focus on trade, transit, peace, and stability.<sup>53</sup>

As discussed above, various issues that hinder positive developments in Taliban-Pakistan relations, recognition remains an important question to be answered. Pakistan was among the three countries that recognised the Taliban regime in the 1990s. This time, Pakistan has handed over the Afghan embassy in Islamabad to the Taliban envoy, but it has not granted formal recognition.

### **Recognition of the Taliban**

Contrary to the Taliban's previous regime, Taliban 2.0 is yet to be recognised by any country, including Pakistan. Previously, Pakistan recognised the Taliban due to their close affinity and its policy of 'strategic depth.' The former means to secure and support a pro-Pakistan balance of power in Kabul, advance its interests, and diminish or limit Indian influence. A friendly government in Kabul is a long-standing foreign policy objective of Pakistan. This policy has been broadly consistent since the 1970s.<sup>54</sup> This time, the appeal of Taliban 2.0 for granting recognition as a legitimate government of Afghanistan presents Pakistan with some choices, each with different implications. (1) granting formal recognition as of the 1990s; (2) waiting and watching; by observing the decision of other Muslim countries regarding the Taliban; (3) grouping with regional countries, specifically China and Russia in timing a formal recognition; and (4) support the conditions that the US, European countries, and United Kingdom have imposed on Taliban which include respecting human rights, formation of an inclusive government, and counter-terrorism before granting formal recognition.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Muhammad Farooq, "Indian engagement with Taliban-led..."

<sup>54</sup> Zachary Constantino, "The India-Pakistan rivalry in Afghanistan," *United States Institute of Peace*, Vol. 462, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep24909.pdf?acceptTC=true&coverage=false&addFooter=false>

<sup>55</sup> Kenneth M Holland, "Pakistan's national interest and recognition of Afghanistan's Taliban regime," *Journal of Security & Strategic Analyses* 7, no. 2 (2021): 7-22.

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Given the foregoing, Pakistan is willing to grant formal recognition to the Taliban regime, however, it cannot opt for unilaterally granting the recognition because it cautiously observes the international context as the US and European Union seem tough on the Taliban. Since Pakistan is dependent on the US and the West, it does not opt to offend the former and risk unilaterally deciding about the Taliban. Although Pakistan has given the Taliban *de facto* political recognition by allowing them to run the Afghan embassy in Islamabad, *albeit* it refrains from granting formal recognition.<sup>56</sup> Pakistan's approach of granting formal recognition to the Taliban is also based upon regional consensus and coordination of neighbouring countries.<sup>57</sup> It could be deduced that Pakistan is using a hybrid approach of onboarding both the US-led group and regional countries; at the same time, it granted *de facto* recognition to the Taliban by allowing them to run the Afghan embassy in Islamabad.

On the diplomatic front, Pakistan is urging the Taliban to form an inclusive government. If Pakistan maintains this position, this will preserve its pluralist stance and reflect its non-reliance on any Afghan political faction/group.<sup>58</sup> However, despite regional and global calls for forming an inclusive political setup, the Taliban has not yet taken the regional and international advice meaningfully. On the other hand, Pakistan's security situation continues to worsen as the TTP's military operations in Pakistan are increasing. Nevertheless, the growing security threats have not altered Islamabad's approach to supporting the Afghan Taliban.<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile, Islamabad is lobbying for the Taliban's cause through diplomatic engagement, lifting economic sanctions, and

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<sup>56</sup> Ejaz Hussain, "Taliban 2.0 and Afghanistan–Pakistan Relations," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 9, no. 3 (2022): 462-474.

<sup>57</sup> Kate Bateman, Mir, Asfandyar, Olson, Richard, Watkins and Andrew, "Taliban seek recognition, but offer few concessions to international concerns," *United States Institute of Peace*, September 28, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/09/taliban-seek-recognition-offer-few-concessions-international-concerns>

<sup>58</sup> M Ali Latifi, "How deep are divisions among the Taliban?," *Al Jazeera*, September 23, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/23/how-deep-are-divisions-among-the-taliban>

<sup>59</sup> Kate Bateman, Mir, Asfandyar, Olson, Richard, Watkins, and Andrew. (2021).



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recognition by the international community.<sup>60</sup> It is a bargaining approach in which Islamabad in the meanwhile is offering concessions and paving the way for the Taliban's legitimacy by engaging them with the international community, however, it is subject to the Taliban's position regarding Pakistani concerns and its legitimate interests. If the latter does not address, Pakistan in part can lobby or signal to the international community to put the Taliban's recognition off the table.

Pakistan's policy of recognising the Taliban government has taken a shift from the past. Pakistan is engaged in motivating the regional and international actors to provide economic and humanitarian assistance and diplomatically engage with Taliban but not unilaterally granting recognition to avoid global repercussions. To put it differently, Pakistan probably is desirous of formally recognising the Taliban as government, but it is worried about the possible international reaction. For instance, economic pressure by the US through the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) could be enacted once again.<sup>61</sup> In fact, Pakistan knows that a peaceful, stable, and legitimate Taliban regime is a viable approach for Pakistan in terms of both its political/security and economic interests, as discussed below

#### ***Political and security interests***

Keeping in view the political geography of Pakistan, the safety of its eastern (India) and northwestern (Afghanistan) borders is strategic. In the northwestern part, Pakistan primarily focuses on the Indian presence and the spillover effect of militancy from Afghanistan. Therefore, it is cautiously observing the new developments (post-2021) there. One of its paramount concerns is lesser Indian influence and its presence in Kabul.<sup>62</sup> Pakistan views Afghanistan as a major part of its area of influence. It aims to restrain New Delhi's foothold in Afghanistan which could impose

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<sup>60</sup> "Pakistan's hard policy choices in Afghanistan," *Crisis Group*, February 4, 202. Retrieved from <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/pakistan/pakistans-hard-policy-choices-afghanistan>

<sup>61</sup> Ejaz Hussain, "Taliban 2.0..."

<sup>62</sup> Sumayya Feroz, Mian Muhammad Saleem, and Shehla Naeem, "An Analysis of Pakistan's Role in US Dialogue with Taliban," *Tahdhib-al-Afkar* 7, no. 2 (2020): 79-93.

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strategic encirclement of Pakistan's 'strategic depth' policy.<sup>63</sup> In contrast to Pakistan's post-2001 diplomacy, India used its soft power in Afghanistan by heavily investing in education, energy construction, human capital, security, and infrastructural development of Afghanistan.<sup>64</sup> A former French diplomat and South Asia expert, Frederic Grare, very objectively explained the India-Pakistan sphere of influence in Afghanistan. He believes anything India does in Afghanistan—be it economic investment, infrastructural development, or any other connected matter—is a ruse against Pakistan. Therefore, Pakistan endeavours to oppose Indian interests whenever and wherever possible.<sup>65</sup> In the Afghanistan context, India-Pakistan relation is a 'zero-sum game,' meaning, any development that benefits Pakistan is considered a threat to India and vice versa.<sup>66</sup> Realistically, the proxy of India-Pakistan in Afghanistan would not serve any purpose. In other words, the tug of war between both the countries is unending unless both realise to resolve the nitty gritty of their relations through diplomatic means. It is an established fact that a peaceful Afghanistan can serve the interests of New Delhi and Islamabad both. Neither India nor Pakistan could achieve their regional political and economic goals from an unstable Afghanistan.<sup>67</sup>

Frederic Grare's theory is based on his decades-long observations. Pakistan, on different occasions, accused the then-Afghan government of giving space to India to use Afghan soil against Pakistani interests, specifically supporting the TTP and the Balochistan Liberation Army

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<sup>63</sup> Javaid, Umbreen, and Rameesha Javaid, "Indian influence in Afghanistan and its implications for Pakistan," *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan* 12 (2016).

<sup>64</sup> Peerzada Tufail Ahmed, "An analysis of India's soft power policy in Afghanistan," *India Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (2022): 634-653.

<sup>65</sup> Zahoor Ahmad Wani, "Geopolitical dynamics in the Afghanistan-India-Pakistan triangle," *India Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (2022): 617-633.

<sup>66</sup> Iram Khalid, "The new great game in Afghanistan: Role of India (A Pakistani Perspective)," *South Asian Studies* 26, no. 2 (2020).

<sup>67</sup> Muhammad Nadeem Mirza and Summar Iqbal Babar, "The Indian hybrid warfare strategy: Implications for Pakistan," *Progressive Research Journal of Arts and Humanities* 2, no. 1 (2020): 39-52.

(BLA) to inflict damages on Pakistan.<sup>68</sup> It believes that India's diplomatic missions are used to promote insurgency in Pakistan.<sup>69</sup> However, such claims have been consistently denied by previous Afghan governments.<sup>70</sup> Now that the republic has collapsed, Pakistan is still concerned about the use of Afghan soil against it. The spike of militancy in Pakistan has increased as the TTP and the BLA are targeting Pakistan's government facilities.<sup>71</sup> In 2023, militant attacks killed nearly 1000 civilians and security forces. It has been the highest number of fatalities the country has experienced in six years.<sup>72</sup> Pakistan authorities blame the Taliban regime for turning a blind eye to the activities of the outlawed TTP.<sup>73</sup> However, the Taliban's repeatedly claimed that Afghanistan's land would not be used against any country, including Pakistan.<sup>74</sup> To address Islamabad's grievances, the Afghan Taliban put forward their efforts in two ways. First, their *Darul Ifta* Office issued a decree that prohibits Afghans from going to *Jihad* (Holy war) abroad without the order of the supreme leader (Adib, 2023).<sup>75</sup> This decree was welcomed by many political leaders in Pakistan. Even though the decree does not name any country, it was issued following Islamabad's claim of TTP's presence in Afghanistan.

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<sup>68</sup> Khushboo Ejaz and Noor Abid, "Indo-Afghan strategic alliance in post 9/11 era: Implications for Pakistan," *Journal of Indian Studies* 7, no. 1 (2021): 27-42.

<sup>69</sup> Iram Khalid, "The new great game..."

<sup>70</sup> "MoFA rejects Pakistan's claims on use of Afghan soil as baseless," *Tolo News*, November 15, 2020. Retrieved from <https://tolonews.com/index.php/afghanistan-167774>>

<sup>71</sup> Muhammad Nawaz Khan, "Pakistan's alarming rise in terrorism is fueled by Afghanistan," *The Diplomat*, March 10, 2023. Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/pakistans-alarming-rise-in-terrorism-is-fueled-by-afghanistan/>>

<sup>72</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Terrorist attacks kill nearly 1,000 Pakistanis in 2023," *VOA*, December 31, 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.voanews.com/a/report-terrorist-attacks-kill-nearly-1-000-pakistanis-in-2023-/7419344.html>>

<sup>73</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Taliban declares use of Afghan soil against Pakistan or others as seditious," *VOA*, September 30, 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-declares-use-of-afghan-soil-against-pakistan-or-others-as-seditious/6770609.html>>

<sup>74</sup> Umer Karim, "The Taliban takeover in Afghanistan: Opportunities and challenges for Pakistan," *Rusi*, September 3, 2021. Retrieved from <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/taliban-takeover-afghanistan-opportunities-and-challenges-pakistan>>

<sup>75</sup> Fatima Adib, "Darul Ifta issues fatwa prohibiting Afghans from war abroad: Mujahid," *Tolo News*, August 12, 2023. Retrieved from <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-184593>>

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Second, they have mediated between the TTP and Islamabad. Sirajuddin Haqqani, who has friendly relations with Pakistan, has played a leading role in the talks. Both sides have held several rounds of talks in Kabul and Khost provinces of Afghanistan. It is the first time Islamabad is negotiating with the outlawed TTP on foreign soil. Even though Pakistan does not seem satisfied with the non-aggressive approach of the Afghan Taliban regarding the TTP, nevertheless, it is diplomatically backing the Afghan Taliban for two reasons. It believes that the Taliban are a source of strengthening Pakistan's aims in Afghanistan. Second, Pakistan cannot afford the fall of the Taliban or a renewed conflict inside Afghanistan because it would have a grim spillover effect on Pakistan. Therefore, it is trying to ease the Taliban's isolation and convincing them to make some concessions on issues related to governance and counter-terrorism.<sup>76</sup>

Islamabad needs to engage in constructive negotiations with the Taliban and motivate them to stand in a neutral position regarding India and take aggressive action against the TTP. In other words, The Taliban should not be allowed to let the TTP use Afghanistan against Pakistan. In addition, Islamabad and Kabul need to stop bickering and start cooperating on a coordinated counterterrorism strategy and economic stability.

### ***Economic interests***

Afghanistan being a conduit between Pakistan and Central Asia provides the latter with a geo-economic edge to access the Central Asian region.<sup>77</sup> Historically, it has been proved that instability in Afghanistan has adversely affected Pakistan economically as it is a direct frontline to any Afghan conflict.<sup>78</sup> Post-9/11, Pakistan has suffered a loss of about \$123 billion.<sup>79</sup> The influx of refugees is a major concern for Pakistan. It is already facing its worst economic crisis due to the devastating floods of

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<sup>76</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Taliban declares use..."

<sup>77</sup> Umer Karim, "The Taliban takeover in..."

<sup>78</sup> Sadia Kazmi, "Afghan Peace Process: Prospects and Challenges for Pakistan," *Journal of Security & Strategic Analyses* 2, no. 1 (2016): 119-143.

<sup>79</sup> Muhammad Fahim Khan, Asad Hassan and Aamer Raza, "Humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan: Changing global dynamics and Pakistan's policy choices," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 2, no. 8 (2023).

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2022, high inflation, current account deficit, and foreign exchange crisis.<sup>80</sup> In 2022, Pakistan completed the verification of some 1.3 million registered Afghan refugees.<sup>81</sup> Hence, the influx of more refugees as a result of any conflict would impose more burden on Pakistan's economy. Besides, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), is a project of \$46 billion aimed at regional and inter-regional connectivity considerably depends upon stability in Afghanistan. Islamabad could gain very little in the absence of a stable Afghanistan. Stability in Afghanistan would guarantee the success of CPEC.<sup>82</sup> This project aims to stimulate trade and enhance regional cooperation and development by building roads, railways, telecommunication, and pipelines and promoting tourism. The completion of this project would consequently improve Afghanistan's diplomatic relations with Pakistan and China. Secondly, Afghanistan would find more access to China and Pakistan's markets and, via this Corridor, to Central Asia markets, and vice versa. Some of the proposed infrastructure projects of the CPEC for Afghanistan-Pakistan include a railway line between Torkham-Jalalabad, investment in Afghan copper mines, the Peshawar-Kabul motorway, highways connecting Dera Ismail Khan with Angoor Adda of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with Ghulam Khan in Khost province of Afghanistan. Such projects would allow both countries to promote trade and business.<sup>83</sup>

Moreover, the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India Pipeline (TAPI) is yet another groundbreaking project to cater Pakistan's

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<sup>80</sup> News Release, "Pakistan economic recovery rests on resuming robust reforms," *Asian Development Bank*, April 4 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.adb.org/news/pakistan-economic-recovery-rests-resuming-robust-reforms-ADB>

<sup>81</sup> "UNHCR verify 1.3 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan," *UNHCR*, June 3, 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.unhcr.org/pk/13933-government-unhcr-verify-1-3-million-afghan-refugees-in-pakistan.html>

<sup>82</sup> Umar Farooq, and Dr Asma Shakir Khawaja, "China-Pakistan economic corridor: Geopolitical implications, regional constraints and benefits of CPEC," *South Asian Studies* 34, no. 2 (2020).

<sup>83</sup> Hafeez Ullah, Riaz Ahmad and Muhammad Mussa Khan, "Afghanistan: US-Taliban peace talks: CPEC perspective," *Conflict Studies Quarterly* 32 (2020).

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requirements in the gas sector. It is a \$7.7 billion project.<sup>84</sup> It starts from the gas fields in South Yolotan Turkmenistan, crosses through Afghanistan's Herat, Nimroz, and Qandahar provinces, and links with Quetta, Pakistan, and via Quetta-Dera Ghazi Khan-Multan, it connects India's Fazilka Punjab.<sup>85</sup> TAPI is a 1680-km long gas project that can supply around 3.2 (bcfd) per day. It would provide Afghanistan with 500 (mcf) and Pakistan with 1,325 (mcf) gas.<sup>86</sup> To Pakistan, the success of this project is necessary for several reasons. The gas through TAPI could generate 6,000 megawatts of cheaper electricity. Secondly, this project would improve Islamabad-Kabul and New Delhi-Islamabad relations which could likely reduce the chances of war between them.<sup>87</sup> Liberals argue that economically interdependent countries would rather trade than invade.<sup>88</sup> Afghanistan will also be a significant beneficiary of the TAPI project. It will gain \$400 annually as a transit fee, and once the project is completed, Afghan consumers will receive gas energy at lower prices and job opportunities.<sup>89</sup>

Last but not least, electricity transmission called Central Asia and South Asia (CASA-1000) is another ambitious renewable energy project between Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan aimed at

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<sup>84</sup> "Proposed loan, grant, partial credit guarantee, and transaction technical assistance Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project (Phase 1)," *Asian Development Bank*, June 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/project-documents/52167/52167-001-cp-en.pdf>

<sup>85</sup> Mirza Sadaqat Huda and Saleem H. Ali, "Energy diplomacy in South Asia: Beyond the security paradigm in accessing the TAPI pipeline project," *Energy research & social science* 34 (2017): 202-213.

<sup>86</sup> Youaf Ali, Manzoor Ahmad, Muhammad Sabir, and Sajjad Ali Shah, "Regional development through energy infrastructure: a comparison and optimization of Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) & Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipelines," *Operational Research in Engineering Sciences: Theory and Applications* 4, no. 3 (2021): 82-106.

<sup>87</sup> Saira Bibi, and Aisha Javed, "Turkmenistan Afghanistan Pakistan India Gas Pipeline and foreign policy of Pakistan," *Journal of Development and Social Sciences* 3, no. 4 (2022): 290-298.

<sup>88</sup> Mina E Tanious, "The impact of economic interdependence on the probability of conflict between states: The case of American-Chinese relationship on Taiwan since 1995," *Review of Economics and Political Science* 4, no. 1 (2018): 38-53.

<sup>89</sup> Saira, Bibi, and Aisha Javed, "Turkmenistan Afghanistan Pakistan..."

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harnessing a clean energy environment to fight climate change, water resource management, trade, and promoting a regional electricity market. It is a 1,387 km long project with 4,264 electric power transmission towers that will transmit 1,300 megawatts of surplus electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan (CASA, 2023).<sup>90</sup> This project is expected to cost \$1.17 billion, which the World Bank, Islamic Development Bank, and USAID will finance.<sup>91</sup> In terms of financial benefits, this project will generate an estimated \$40-60 million annually. It will provide huge revenue for *Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat* (DABS). As an emerging economy, Pakistan is in dire need of electricity. Its per capita electricity consumption has risen from 362 kWh in 2000 to 516 kWh in 2020. This indicates Pakistan's necessity for electricity, which is a serious constraint for its business and industrial operations.<sup>92</sup>

Pakistan is passing through one of its worst economic crises. In 2022, a 19.9 per cent inflation was recorded.<sup>93</sup> In comparison, according to the World Bank's report, in March 2023 Afghanistan's inflation record moved 1.94 per cent downward from 18.3 per cent in July 2022. Notably, there was an increase of 32 per cent in Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan in the first eight months of fiscal year 2022-2023. The exports moved from \$500 million to \$658 million. Similarly, imports from Afghanistan have improved from \$544.17 million to \$675.01 million which shows an increase of 24 per cent. On the other hand, Pakistan's exports with Afghanistan have increased by 32 per cent in the first eight months of the fiscal year 2022-2023.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, Pakistan's exports to the energy-rich

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<sup>90</sup> What is CASA-1000?, Retrieved from <https://www.casa-1000.org/>>

<sup>91</sup> Sayed Masood Sadat, "TAPI and CASA-1000: Win-win trade between Central Asia and South Asia," *Norwegian Institute of International Affairs: OSCE Academy* 25 (2015): 1-18.

<sup>92</sup> Pakistan, *CASA-1000*. Retrieved from <https://www.casa-1000.org/pakistan/> >

<sup>93</sup> Inflation rates in Pakistan, *World Bank Data*, Retrieved from <https://www.worlddata.info/asia/pakistan/inflation-rates.php>>

<sup>94</sup> "Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan increases by 32per cent," *Ariana News*, March 13, 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.ariananews.af/pakistans-exports-to-afghanistan-increases-by-32/#:~:text=Pakistan'sper cent20export per cent 20 volume per cent20to>per

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Central Asian states increased from \$124.774 million to \$166.205 million during the first nine months of the current fiscal year (FY2022-2023). On the other hand, its imports from Central Asia amount to \$22.623 million starting from July-March of the current fiscal year. It indicates that Pakistan has a trade surplus of \$143.582 million with the Central Asian states.<sup>95</sup> Keeping in view the above discussion, it is pertinent to say that Afghanistan could provide Pakistan with a geo-economic edge to access the Central Asian region and play an important role in Pakistan's economic stability, and this could not happen in the absence of a peaceful and stable Afghanistan.

### **Conclusion**

To put it succinctly, a variety of factors have played a role in escalating the intensity of tensions between Taliban and Pakistan in the post-US withdrawal scenario. Historical hostilities, mistrust, lingering threat of militancy, TTP's resurgence, and border clashes halted the progress of peaceful bilateral relations. It is crucial to acknowledge that security and sovereignty issues need to be addressed and any accident is required to be resolved through negotiations. Both political and economic cooperation should be more seriously encouraged.

Security matters have remained at the center-stage of Taliban-Pakistan relations. The year 2023 has been the deadliest for Pakistan as the country experienced the highest number of fatalities in the last six years. However, militancy is not only a threat posed to Pakistan, but Afghanistan and the international community in general. It needs coordinated efforts and mutually agreed mechanisms to tackle them. Looking into the last two decades, none of the governments in Kabul had friendly relations with Pakistan. Blame games, supporting various proxy groups and factions, meddling in internal affairs, and some historical issues like the Durand

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<sup>95</sup> "Exports to Central Asian countries grow by 33 percent," *The Nation*, May 5, 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.nation.com.pk/05-May-2023/exports-to-central-asian-countries-grow-by-33-percent>



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Line, had not let the two countries overcome their differences effectively. The approach used by various governments was coercive rather than peaceful. It has resulted in furthering animosity not only between the governments, but also the citizens. Hence, the study deductively concludes that all the positive expectations for friendly Taliban-Pakistan relations are heavily dependent on Islamabad's engagement with Taliban. It is pertinent to diplomatically resolve bilateral security concerns, address Afghanistan's political and economic crisis, and the assurances must be exchanged to avoid use of territory against each other. ■