

POLICY BRIEF

Neighbours in a New Normal? Pakistan and Afghanistan beyond 2021

Timor Sharan, Andrew Watkins

**FRIEDRICH
EBERT** 
STIFTUNG

This policy brief explores Pakistan's engagement with Afghanistan after a U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan. It discusses how increasing uncertainty surrounding the nature of the U.S. withdrawal affects Pakistan's internal and regional security. It asks which scenarios are the most realistic ones and calls for short and mid-term policy adjustments in Kabul, Islamabad, and European countries. It examines Islamabad's future engagement with Afghanistan, highlighting the challenges and prospects for cooperation between the parties beyond the peace process and identifying which factors need to be addressed in EU and regional strategies to mitigate possible conflict effectively.

Relations between the two countries have been strained since Pakistan's independence in 1947 when Afghanistan cast the only opposition vote against Pakistan's admission to the UN.¹ Pakistan's Afghanistan policy has been India-centric and in recent decades driven by two main objectives: (1) achieving strategic depth in Afghanistan by utilising the large Pashtun population to ensure a relatively friendly government in Kabul and (2) avoiding a strategic encirclement by India and undercutting India's increasing diplomatic and commercial presence in Afghanistan and the region.² Delhi's on-and-off support to Baloch and Wazir separatist movements inside Pakistan with Afghanistan's help has only further fueled suspicions and threat perceptions. Additionally, Kabul has long disputed the status of the 1893 Durand Line as the official border.³ During the Soviet intervention, Pakistan provided sanctuaries and arms to Sunni Mujahedeen groups to launch attacks in Afghanistan. With the withdrawal of the Soviet Union, Pakistan facilitated several failed political settlements among the warring groups, including the Rawalpindi, Islamabad, and Peshawar accords, eventually ending up politically and militarily siding with the Taliban until 2001. Pakistan has taken credit for aiding the 2019 U.S.-Taliban deal and has positioned itself as central to the Afghan peace process, given its leverage over the Taliban.

A Genuine Change or Window Dressing?

Pakistan's post-2001 policy towards Afghanistan has been opaque and contradictory, especially in its covert support for the Taliban, raising deep suspicion in Kabul and elsewhere

about Pakistan's motives and ambitions. Pakistani officials stress that both countries have a historic opportunity to seize the momentum of the intra-Afghan talks and urge Kabul to look beyond the "blame games" that have too often dominated their relationship. Within the region, there is also a general sense that for the first time in modern history, there is a strategic convergence of interests among Pakistan, Iran, and Russia on a shared vision for Afghanistan around regional economic and trade integration. There is a realisation that the region itself should take a more significant role in addressing the Afghan war rather than leaving it to international players and that further de-stabilisation of Afghanistan is not in any nation's interests.

Yet since 2001, the Afghan government has consistently maintained that Pakistan's fundamental incentives and guiding principles have not changed. In addition to concern about India's expansion, Pakistan's Afghanistan policy has been and remains aimed at thwarting domestic threats with a divide-and-conquer strategy of backing some militants against others. Despite Pakistan's dire economic situation and long-term circular debt problem, Kabul believes that Pakistan is unwilling to reorient its policy because of these factors, asserting that Pakistan's rhetoric of change is nothing but window dressing and posturing for Washington. Afghan officials have noted that previous combinations of inducements and deterrents, including the Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act of 2009, commonly known as the Kerry-Lugar Act, which provided billions of dollars to the country, failed to convince Pakistan's leadership to re-think or re-shape their national security policy.

¹ The project "From Uncertainty to Strategy: What are the odds for future win-win scenarios in Afghanistan's Neighborhood?" is an independent effort of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) to develop and discuss likely scenarios for Afghanistan's neighbors, policy adjustments, and the need for a comprehensive strategy among European foreign policymakers. This brief is part of a series authored by Andrew Watkins and Dr. Timor Sharan to discuss the implications of the US withdrawal and the ongoing Afghan Peace Negotiations on existing policy tools, strategic interests, and challenges for key stakeholders in- and outside of Afghanistan. The complete list of policy briefs may be accessed here: <https://afghanistan.fes.de/publications>

² Qandeel Siddique, *Pakistan's Future Policy Towards Afghanistan: A Look at Strategic Depth, Militant Movements and the Role of India and the US* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, August 2011).

³ In the 1893 Agreement, the Afghan side conceded significant territories, part of today's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan provinces in Pakistan.

While the Afghan side receives friendly signals from their Pakistani civilian counterparts, Kabul officials privately point out that they are yet to see these translated into action and communicated to Pakistani security agencies. Islamabad has been privately communicating to Kabul and other Afghan domestic players that it has learned from its 1990s mistakes and that it seriously wants a stable western neighbour, to avoid instability and its repercussions, including mass refugee flows. Islamabad policymakers point out that there is a new realisation in Islamabad around the following key issues.

- Pakistani officials appear to be departing from the previous strategy of only supporting ethnic Pashtuns in Afghanistan and expand their relations with non-Pashtun ethnic groups, including Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks in the North and Central Highland. Recent visits by Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, the Chair of the High Council for National Reconciliation, and Mir Rahman Rahmani, the Lower House Spokesperson, and others are part of this new strategy. Non-Pashtun

Afghan politicians have also tried to reach out to Islamabad informally, speaking of broadening relationship around economic cooperation, mutually beneficial trade relations and other issues.

- Policymakers in Islamabad recognise Afghanistan's potential as a connecting hub for regional integration and economic cooperation rather than viewing the country as a buffer zone and source of "strategic depth" which could only be attained through a security policy. As such, officials have also indicated that they seek to disentangle the Afghan issue from India, and more specifically, the Kashmir dispute, which would be very much welcomed by Afghans.
- Broadening Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, many believe, goes beyond geopolitical dynamics and the peace process to other issues, including border management, tariff rationalisation, a more liberal transit agreement, and the repatriation of Afghan refugees and others.

Possible Scenarios in Afghanistan: The View from Pakistan

Islamabad has privately expressed concern about the repercussions of a sudden U.S. exit from Afghanistan, recalling the 1992 post-Najibullah state collapse in the aftermath of which Pakistan asserts it has carried most of the burden. Officials have noted that Islamabad also prefers a "responsible" U.S.-withdrawal from Afghanistan, a position shared by Kabul and other regional and international countries, including the EU. A recent NATO meeting in October also emphasised the need for a structured and conditions-based withdrawal of troops.

Of the three broad scenarios under frequent discussion, Pakistani policymakers are optimistic about achieving one of the first two options below.

- **A stable and internationally legitimate government:** This scenario would see the Afghan state survive in approximately its current form, which would include the Taliban in a new power-sharing arrangement. However, policymakers in Islamabad, including generals, have hinted that they might not work with the current administration and that, more generally would prefer a new government that is not close to India. Kabul takes these statements as proof that Pakistan's policy, if any, has not changed towards Afghanistan.
- **A stable but Taliban-dominated government:** In this scenario, the current government in Kabul is collapsing and the Taliban, with little commitment to human rights and existing constitutional principles, take over. In this scenario, Pakistan could exploit the situation to work towards establishing a client state in Kabul, with the Taliban leading it but possibly including some provincial powerbrokers, especially from the north and the central highlands.
- **A civil war scenario:** This is the least favourable outcome for Pakistan and other regional players. If the peace settlement fails and international forces continue to draw down, the war would likely continue and escalate, with regional players including Pakistan supporting rival domestic forces to assert their security interests. Other countries such as Iran, India, and Russia might enter the game, turning the country towards greater bloodshed and division. This would have disastrous humanitarian consequences, with Pakistan and Iran having to shoulder most of the spillover, including the refugee crisis, as they did in the 1990s. Despite these negative impacts, Pakistan would still likely engage, in line with the zero-sum strategic thinking that prioritises denying India influence above almost all else.

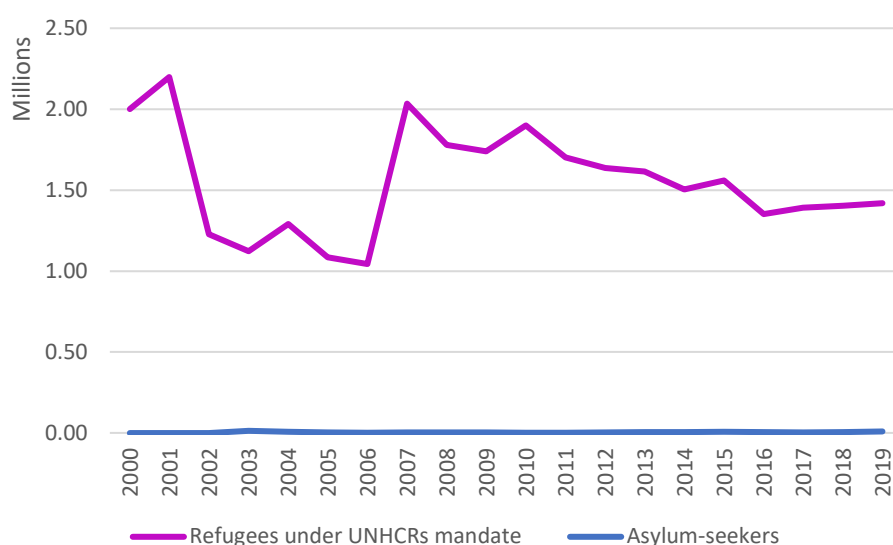
A Common Regional Vision? Taking Ownership of the Region's Problems

Given the complex, multi-faceted nature of the challenges, both Afghanistan and Pakistan should take steps to improve their relationship in ways that support the peace process and go beyond short-term peace-making. Both countries should work jointly on potential areas of cooperation in the short-to-medium term. These include working on border management, refugees, trade and economic connectivity, and terrorism.

- **Regional Security:** The US departure presents an opportunity to improve Afghanistan's regional security dynamics because Iran, Pakistan, China, Russia, and other regional actors will no longer perceive a potential threat from a long-term US footprint in Afghanistan. This may allow for a shift in focus from security to economic integration. If followed through, Pakistan's possible decoupling of the Afghan issue from India is promising. Russian rapprochement towards Pakistan since 2013, if continued, is likely to reduce the risk of more significant regional tensions in the post-NATO exit.⁵
- **Repatriation of Afghan Refugees:** Presently, Pakistan is hosting around three million registered and unregistered refugees on its soil – a critical factor in future bilateral relations.⁶ Both countries, with the help of the EU's expertise and relevant UN agencies, should work together to develop a practical and coherent set of policies and effective solutions for the repatriation of Afghan refugees, including mobilising sufficient financial and political resources.
- **Economic Integration and Trade:** To resolve its internal problems – especially around the struggling economy, energy shortages, climate change, and infrastructure development – Pakistan needs stability in Afghanistan. This would enable economic connectivity, including key energy projects such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, the Central Asia-South Asia (CASA-1000) power project, and railway projects. As the EU and the U.S. have publicly suggested, future investment in Pakistan is likely to be contingent on good relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan and stability within the region.
- **Counterterrorism:** Pakistan has come under immense pressure, international and domestic, to address militant Islam and terrorist groups operating from its soil, notably via the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). The first condition of the United States' agreement with the Taliban is a commitment to counterterrorism. In practical terms, both the Afghan government and the Taliban have spent years battling the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). Countering ISKP could be an important area of convergence for both sides of the war, in addition to Pakistan and international actors.
- **Investment and medical tourism visa:** Afghans have welcomed Pakistan's recent relaxation of its visa policy especially for medical and business purposes. Pakistan remains one of the primary destinations for medical treatment for many Afghans. Further liberalisation of the visa requirements for all Afghans, especially long-term and multiple-entry visas, would help further improve relations between the two countries. Such people-to-people relations are a necessary condition for building friendly relations between the two countries.

Afghan refugees and Asylum seekers in Pakistan (2000-2019)

Source: [UNHCR](#)



⁵ See "Meeting in the Middle? Russia, Afghanistan, and Europe" Timor Sharan, Andrew Watkins, FES, December 2020.

⁶ "Pakistan Situation of Afghan Refugees", European Asylum Support Office, May 2020.

Recommendations for the European Union

The EU can build on its experience of other fragile political contexts to support and enhance Afghanistan-Pakistan relations to a constructive level that offers peace and stability for the region and beyond.

- The EU could utilise its convening power and relations with Pakistan to facilitate dialogue between the two countries, including trilateral exchanges on issues beyond the ongoing peace talks, including repatriation and management of Afghan refugees, border dispute resolutions, economic cooperation, and trade integration. It should lobby both countries to use this opportunity to redefine their relations accordingly, following NATO's military exit.
- The EU should put additional pressure on Pakistan to force the Taliban to take the ongoing talks seriously and commit to reducing violence, as seen at the 2020 Geneva Conference. Otherwise, in their maximalist approach to the peace talks, the Taliban might overplay their hand and further undermine the process. Delays in the negotiations might impact and complicate other provisions of the Taliban-U.S. deal, including the partial lifting of UN sanctions and additional prisoners' release.
- The EU should use its convening power and positive relations with other countries, particularly China and Iran, to push for regional cooperation and economic interdependency.
- The EU and the U.S. should pressure Pakistan to close Taliban sanctuaries on its soil. Kabul has consistently raised concerns that without a policy shift from Pakistan, the Taliban will always be able to survive the Afghan government's attempts to defeat the group decisively. The experience of other countries has shown that the existence of safe havens significantly extends the longevity of armed conflict plus the risk of interstate violence.
- Using existing mechanisms such as the Afghanistan Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS) brokered by the UK in 2013, the EU should mediate a discussion between the two states to resolve other disputes, including the long-running disagreement over the Durand Line. It can push and boost intra-regional connectivity between South Asia and Central Asia via Afghanistan, and support mechanisms to rationalise and liberalise tariffs and transit agreement between the two countries.

About the authors

Andrew Watkins is a researcher and analyst of Afghanistan's conflict and prospects for peace, and is deeply engaged in conflict prevention. He has previously worked in Afghanistan for the United Nations, the humanitarian community, the U.S. government and as an independent researcher.

Dr Timor Sharan is an Adjunct Professor of Public Policy at the American University of Afghanistan and was formerly the International Crisis Group's senior analyst for Afghanistan.

About the cover photo

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani (R) meets with Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan at the presidential palace in Kabul, Afghanistan November 19, 2020. REUTERS/Mohammad Ismail/Pool

Imprint © 2021 Friedrich Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Afghanistan

Website: www.afghanistan.fes.de

Commercial use of all media published by the Friedrich Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is not permitted without the written consent of the FES.

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.