



A ROAD UNTRAVELED

Revival of a favourable Afghanistan? Security relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan beyond 2021

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This policy brief explores the history of security relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. It investigates the reasons behind the minimal military-to-military ties between the two countries and examines common ground for military cooperation, considering the recent developments in Afghanistan, particularly the return of the Taliban to power. The brief elaborates on the implications of the American and NATO withdrawal for bilateral relations between the two countries. It concludes with recommendations for future engagement between Pakistan and Afghanistan.¹

A history of Pakistan's security engagement in Afghanistan

Pakistan and Afghanistan share a long border but not easily. It is the primary source of bilateral tensions since Pakistan's establishment in 1947. Pakistan claims to have inherited the 1,660-mile Durand Line border that British India previously shared with Afghanistan, which divides Pashtun ethnic communities between the two countries. Although the Durand Line is internationally regarded as Pakistan's western border, Afghanistan does not recognize it as a formal border.² And since the founding of Pakistan, subsequent Afghan governments have supported and sympathized with Pashtun and Baloch tribes across the Durand Line, which worsened relations between the two countries.³

Pakistan's objective in Afghanistan has been to enhance its interests and undermine India's influence.⁴ The critical concern for Pakistan has been India's remarkable presence in Afghanistan since 2001, which led to the Pakistani presumption that India, through its diplomatic missions in Afghanistan, gathered intelligence against Pakistan and supported separatist groups in Pakistan.⁵ Hence, good relations between India and Afghanistan have been a red flag for Pakistan, understood as detrimental to its national security interests. Islamabad has persistently raised concerns over being trapped between a powerful adversary, India, and a supporter of the Pashtun tribes within its territory, Afghanistan. Pakistan has always regarded a friendly government in Kabul as in its best interest.

However, it is believed that there is a recent and significant policy shift within the Pakistani government regarding India's role in Afghanistan. Pakistan is now seen as realizing that India is a rightful stakeholder in Afghanistan due to its massive investments over the past decades. According to Pakistan's current narrative, there is no ill will towards India's presence in Afghanistan as long as it is not working against Pakistan's interests.⁶ The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 became an entry point for Pakistan's intervention into the affairs of its neighbour. Pakistan used its geographic leverage to coordinate aid to the Afghan Mujahideen from the United States, Saudi Arabia and other Western and Arab countries. Pakistan took on a substantial role in supplying weapons and logistics to the seven recognized groups of Mujahideen fighting the Soviet Army. After nearly a decade of war, the Soviets were defeated in Afghanistan and withdrew their troops in 1988.

Subsequently, the Soviet-backed regime of Afghanistan collapsed in 1992, allowing the Jihadists to take power. After the emergence of the Taliban in 1995, Pakistan shifted its support from the Mujahideen to the Taliban. Pakistan believed it possible to infiltrate the Taliban because most of its members had graduated from Pakistani madrasas. Pakistan financially supported the Taliban and provided them with training, weapons and even fighters, enabling them to ultimately control nearly 95 per cent of Afghanistan's territory. By establishing the Taliban's Islamic Emirates in 1996, Afghanistan became a functional base for pro-Pakistani militants and a sanctuary for international terrorist groups.⁷

1 The project "A Road Untraveled? Options, Scenarios, and Recommendations for Future International and Regional Stabilization Efforts in Afghanistan" is an independent effort of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and the Institute of War and Peace Studies (IWPS). This brief is part of a series discussing the implications of the American withdrawal for bilateral relations between Afghanistan and its neighbours. The list of policy briefs can be accessed at <https://afghanistan.fes.de/publications>.

2 Julia Jacobson, "Pakistan's Necessary Role In Afghan Peace Negotiations", 15 August 2021. Available at <https://theowp.org/reports/pakistans-necessary-role-in-afghan-peace-negotiations/>.

3 Interview with Afrasiab Khattak, politician and senior leader, National Democratic Movement (with Rajab Taieb), 26 November 2021.

4 Zachary Constantino, *The India-Pakistan Rivalry in Afghanistan*. Special Report, USIP, 2020.

5 Harsh V. Pant, *India's Challenge in Afghanistan: With Power Comes Responsibility*, Working Paper, Pennsylvania: Center for the Advanced Study of India, University of Pennsylvania, 2010.

6 Interview with Amina Khan, Director Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East and Africa, Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (with Alamuddin Rizwan), 27 October 2021.

7 Michael Rubin, "Who Is Responsible for the Taliban?" 1 March 2002. Available at www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/who-responsible-taliban.

Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia were the first three countries to recognize the Taliban regime in the 1990s. Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan was at its peak during the Taliban tenure then, enabling Pakistan to undercut India's influence in the country.⁸ After the 9/11 attack in the United States, the international community, under American direction, decided to counterattack Afghanistan, where Osama Bin Laden, the leader of the Al-Qaida terrorist group, resided and had planned the four-airplane assault. The United States gave Pakistan an ultimatum to either support the invasion against their favoured regime in Afghanistan or become isolated as a supporter of radical extremism. Highly dependent on its relationship with the United States, Pakistan chose the first option and supported the new government in Afghanistan.⁹

Nevertheless, Pakistan pursued a hedging strategy by formally supporting the Afghan government while simultaneously backing the Taliban. Pakistan kept providing assistance and sanctuary to the Taliban leaders and their families. Several times, Pakistani officials publicly acknowledged their influence on and support for the Taliban. Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed, for instance, admitted that Taliban families reside in Pakistan, and their fighters receive medical treatment in its hospitals.¹⁰

Pakistan's former army chief, General Ashfaq Kayani, who also headed the Pakistan Inter-Services Intelligence agency, reportedly told an American diplomat in 2007, "If you think we are going to turn the Taliban and Haqqanis and others into mortal enemies of ours and watch you walk out the door, you are completely crazy. Are we hedging our bets? You bet we are."¹¹

Pakistan–Afghanistan security cooperation

Pakistan historically has been inclined towards a security partnership with the government of Afghanistan and has made similar proposals to all previous regimes. Although there was a short warming in relations, a genuine partnership between the two countries has never materialized. In contrast, Afghanistan has signed partnership agreements with the other neighbouring countries of India and the Islamic Republic of Iran.¹²

Pakistan's desire for a bilateral partnership with Afghanistan goes back to the Mujahideen's takeover of Kabul in 1992, when Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif handed a draft security partnership agreement document to Mujahideen leader and then-President of Afghanistan Sibghatullah Mujadedi, who declined to sign the proposed agreement due to sensitive provisions, such as border issues. Then during the Taliban regime, Pakistan Interior Minister

Moinuddin Haidar led a delegation of officials to Kabul, met with the acting leadership council of the Islamic Emirate and offered a security cooperation protocol between the two countries. It was later revealed that the issue was refused in the initial talks and not discussed with the authorized officials.¹³ In 2012, Pakistan Foreign Minister Hena Rabani Khair handed a proposed strategic partnership agreement to Zalmi Rasoul, then Foreign Minister of Afghanistan. Rasoul later stated that a strategic agreement was impossible unless it became clear that Pakistan did not threaten Afghanistan.¹⁴

And then in 2015, the Pakistan Inter-Services Intelligence agency signed a first-of-its-kind deal with Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security on intelligence sharing and coordinated operations against the Taliban militants. The memorandum of understanding included provision for Pakistan to train and equip National Directorate of Security officers. That support, however, did not progressed in a meaningful way.¹⁵ This agreement suggested friendly relations were possible, but it did not last long, especially in military terms.¹⁶

Implications of the American–NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan

Since 2001, Pakistan officially supported a negotiated political settlement in Afghanistan and advocated for the Taliban's inclusion as an important stakeholder. Pakistan supported the Afghan Peace Process and contributed considerably to bringing the Taliban to the negotiation table and organizing the United States' agreement with the Taliban in February 2020. Because of its historical relations with the Taliban, Pakistan also aimed to be an essential facilitator in the intra-Afghan negotiations and, ultimately, ease a power-sharing agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban.¹⁷

Since the Taliban's August 2021 takeover of the country, Afghanistan has been transitioning. The Taliban are working to consolidate their power throughout the country. In exchange for international recognition and support, the international community and the region expect commitments to inclusivity, human rights and counterterrorism assurances.¹⁸

Since the Taliban's takeover, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, a militant group of mostly ethnic Pashtuns who share a history with the Afghan Taliban and is responsible for hundreds of suicide attacks, targeted killings and kidnappings in Pakistan since 2007, has increased violence.¹⁹ The violence in Pakistan's restive western region bordering Afghanistan that followed the

8 Harsh V. Pant, *India's Challenge in Afghanistan: With Power Comes Responsibility*. Working Paper, Pennsylvania: Center for the Advanced Study of India, University of Pennsylvania 2010.

9 Harsh V. Pant, *India's 'Af-Pak' Conundrum: South Asia in Flux*, Elsevier Limited, 2012.

10 Ayaz Gul, "Families of Afghan Taliban Live in Pakistan, Interior Minister Says", 27 June 2021. Available at www.voanews.com/a/south-central-asia_families-afghan-taliban-live-pakistan-interior-minister-says/6207547.html.

11 Zachary Constantino, *The India-Pakistan Rivalry in Afghanistan*. Special Report, USIP, 2020.

12 Khan, 2021.

13 Afghanistan Analyst Network, "An Afghan-Pakistani Strategic Agreement: Side-steps, Back Steps and New Steps", 4 March 2013. Available at www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/regional-relations/an-afghan-pakistani-strategic-agreement-side-steps-back-steps-and-new-steps/.

14 *ibid.*

15 Economic Times, "Pakistan and Afghanistan's spy agencies sign intelligence sharing agreement", 19 May 2015. Available at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/pakistan-and-afghanistans-spy-agencies-sign-intelligence-sharing-agreement/articleshow/47341563.cms>.

16 Khan, 2021.

17 Julia Jacobson, "Pakistan's Necessary Role in Afghan Peace Negotiations", 15 August 2021. Available at <https://theowp.org/reports/pakistans-necessary-role-in-afghan-peace-negotiations/>.

18 *ibid.*

19 France 24, "Islamabad bids to quell rise in Pakistani Taliban attacks", 15 November 2021. Available at www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211115-islamabad-bids-to-quell-rise-in-pakistani-taliban-attacks.

Taliban's co-opting of power led to the death of several Pakistani security soldiers and is believed to be partly due to the militant groups being emboldened by the successful ousting of the United States from Afghanistan.²⁰

Although the Taliban pledged to prevent militants from using Afghan territory to launch attacks against other countries,²¹ such assurances seem to be more for Western countries than regional States.²²

Since the collapse of the previous Afghan government, Pakistan has advocated the international community for economic assistance and development aid to its neighbour. And it has called upon the international community not to make the humanitarian aid conditional to political developments.²³ If the country's economic system collapses, the first countries suffering will be the closer neighbours: Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Given the large number of Afghan refugees in Pakistan already, the country cannot receive another wave of migrants from Afghanistan due to its struggling with a weak economy.²⁴

The immediate neighbours – China, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan, Russia and the Central Asian States (excluding Tajikistan) – are all on the same page. These countries have a common position concerning the Taliban and are somewhat open to cooperating with them. There have been many meetings between the delegations of these countries and the Taliban already. They jointly advocate for humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan through a neutral party and probably will make a joint decision on recognition of the Taliban government.²⁵

In terms of economic cooperation, Afghanistan relies on its neighbours for the smooth transit of trade because it is a landlocked country. The Afghanistan–Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement, signed in 1965 and amended in 2010, facilitates exports from Afghanistan to the Wagah border with India and to the Karachi and Gwadar seaports. As part of this agreement, the two countries formed a joint chamber of commerce.²⁶ The Central Asia–South Asia electricity transmission project, known as CASA-1000, transmits 1,300 MW of electricity from the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India (TAPI) gas pipeline

is another joint project and is supposed to carry 33 billion cubic metres of gas to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India annually.²⁷

Pakistan's future relationship with Afghanistan depends on how the Taliban consolidate power. As with other countries, Pakistan also expects the Taliban to fulfil the pledges of an inclusive government, honouring human rights, women's rights and counterterrorism assurances.²⁸

Some Taliban are not interested in reintegrating into civil life and instead prefer to fight, which benefits the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP), an affiliate of the Islamic State active in South Asia and Central Asia in terms of recruiting soldiers. A destabilized Afghanistan would allow militant groups, including transnationally operating terrorists, to take advantage of the situation and infiltrate the region, posing an immediate threat across borders, including to Pakistan. If the Taliban do not consolidate the power, there will be a new war. The IS-KP have grown stronger as a result of the Taliban triumph.²⁹

A stable and secure Afghanistan will help Pakistan reach its economic goals in the region, including connecting with the Central Asian States.³⁰ Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi³¹ and the chief of the country's Inter-Services Intelligence agency, Lt. Gen. Faiz Hameed, were the first high-ranking Pakistani officials to visit the Taliban weeks after their takeover.³² Pakistan also was the first country to allow the Taliban's envoy and diplomats to open an Afghan embassy.³³

Pakistan is one of the few countries publicly performing the Taliban's bidding on the world stage to convince the international community to assist them. However, Pakistan remains concerned about several issues, including the Durand Line, which the Taliban also refuses to recognize as a border, and the increase of the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan's activities. Pakistan wants the Taliban to curb these activities. This is something the Taliban leadership appears unwilling to address. However, the Haqqani network that is affiliated with the Taliban has taken the initiative and begun mediating between the government of Pakistan and the Tahreek-e-Taliban Pakistan.³⁴

20 Khan, 2021.

21 Kathy Gannon, "Minister pledges Taliban govt won't allow militant attacks", 14 September 2021. Available at <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-cabinets-taliban-militant-groups-3652ae786079637a56a4edff5063fe5f>.

22 Khan, 2021.

23 Reuters, "Pakistan, Qatar call for unconditional humanitarian aid to Afghanistan", 9 September 2021. Available at www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/first-post-evacuation-flight-has-taken-off-afghanistan-qatar-says-2021-09-09/.

24 Khan, 2021.

25 *ibid.*

26 Ishrat Husain and Muhammad Ather Elahi. *The Future of Afghanistan-Pakistan Trade Relations*. USIP, 2015. Available at www.usip.org/publications/2015/08/future-afghanistan-pakistan-trade-relations.

27 Bruce Pannier, "The prospects of TAPI and CASA 1000", 8 May 2016. Available at <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghanista-entral-asia-tapi-casa-1000/27722356.html>.

28 Interview with Michael Kugelman, Deputy Director, Asia Program, and Senior Associate for South Asia, Wilson Center (with Alamuddin Rizwan), 29 November 2021.

29 *ibid.*

30 Khan, 2021.

31 Gibran Naiyyar Peshimam, "Pakistan foreign minister makes first trip to Kabul since Taliban takeover", 21 October 2021. Available at www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-foreign-minister-makes-first-trip-kabul-since-taliban-takeover-2021-10-21/.

32 Aamir Latif and Shafiq Ahmad, "Pakistan's intelligence chief visits Afghanistan's capital", 4 September 2021. Available at www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/pakistan-s-intelligence-chief-visits-afghanistan-s-capital/2355359.

33 Jibran Ahmad, "Afghan Taliban appoint new envoy to run embassy in neighbouring Pakistan", 30 October 2021. Available at www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/afghan-taliban-appoint-new-envoy-run-embassy-neighbouring-pakistan-2021-10-29/.

34 Kugelman, 2021.

Recommendations

- Pakistan should switch its policy towards Afghanistan from geopolitics to geoeconomics. A secure Afghanistan can connect South Asia and Central Asia and help Pakistan's fragile economy by pursuing big regional economic projects as well as trade and transit.
- Pakistan should avoid exporting religious extremism into Afghanistan because it is likely to create a problem for Pakistan in the long run.
- Pakistan should push for increased people-to-people contact between the two countries and decrease sensitivities towards Pakistan among ordinary Afghans.
- Instability in Afghanistan poses risks to Pakistan in terms of mass migration and halting economic projects, which will burden Pakistan's unstable economy. Islamabad and Pakistan's army, thus, should use their influence on insurgent groups and contribute towards Afghanistan's stability.
- Islamabad should encourage the Taliban to include non-Taliban political parties and leaders in the government to avoid a new wave of violence that could destabilize the region, including Pakistan's tribal areas.
- Pakistan should help the Taliban pursue big regional economic projects to create jobs and receive transport fees from TAPI, CASA-1000 Turkmenistan- Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP), natural Gas pipeline project, to prevent a total collapse of the economy and keep the state apparatus functioning.
- The Taliban and Haqqani network should mediate talks between the Pakistani Taliban and the Pakistan government to stabilize the border between the two countries to bring peace and stability in Pakistan and the border areas. This peace would be a further step towards stability as well as Central Asia and South Asia connectivity.
- The Taliban should secure trade and transit routes to allow for big projects (such as TAPI, CASA-1000 and TAP) and trade and transit to be enhanced to convince Pakistan that geoeconomics serves its interests more than geopolitics.
- The Taliban should avoid any engagement with India that could make Pakistan suspicious and encourage it to continue its geopolitics approach and pursue the so-called strategic depth ambition.
- The Taliban should seriously fight militant groups, especially IS-KP, to avoid insecurity in Afghanistan and prevent expansion of IS-KP into South Asia.
- Pakistan should support the Taliban in countering terrorism because the Taliban lack technical knowledge and personnel. Pakistan should also help the Taliban train a new army for the country.
- The Taliban should adopt a neutral policy towards Pakistan and India by not interfering on certain issues, such as Kashmir and the Pashtun Protection Movement.

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About the cover photo: National Flag of Pakistan Pixabay / Syed Wasiq Shah

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