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**PAKISTAN AND AFGHANISTAN: STRATEGIC CHALLENGES
AND POLICY PATHWAYS IN A POST-TALIBAN ERA**

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the complex relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan, focusing on the strategic challenges and policy options available to Pakistan following the Taliban's resurgence in August 2021. Given the historical tensions surrounding the Durand Line, Pakistan's pursuit of "strategic depth," and the impact of international influences, Pakistan has historically maintained an active engagement in Afghan affairs. With the Taliban now in power, Pakistan faces heightened security concerns, particularly with the resurgence of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), as well as economic strains from the influx of Afghan refugees. The study analyzes Pakistan's multi-faceted response, which includes diplomatic engagement with the Taliban, advocacy for humanitarian support, and bolstering of regional alliances. Key findings indicate that Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan must balance ideological support and pragmatic security needs, particularly in countering cross-border terrorism and fostering economic stability. This study contributes valuable insights for policymakers, emphasizing the importance of international cooperation, regional alliances, and internal security measures in managing Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. The analysis offers policy recommendations to enhance stability and long-term peace in South Asia through a balanced approach that prioritizes both national security and humanitarian considerations.

Keywords: Pakistan, Afghanistan, US, TTP, Afghan Taliban, Militancy

Introduction

Shared history, cultural ties, strategic interests, and security concerns shape the complex relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Geographically contiguous and socio-politically connected, the two countries have historically influenced each other's political landscape. Developments in Afghanistan, particularly the security threats posed by cross-border militancy, refugee crises, and the evolving dynamics of regional alliances, have closely tied Pakistan's stability. The recent

resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan presents Pakistan with a unique set of policy challenges and opportunities, compelling Pakistan to adopt a nuanced approach to protect its national security interests while promoting regional stability.

Afghanistan's importance to Pakistan stems from both historical and strategic dimensions. Since Pakistan's independence in 1947, the country has viewed Afghanistan as a critical aspect of its foreign policy. Initially, Pakistan's concerns centered on the Durand Line. This boundary has remained a significant point of contention, as successive Afghan governments have refused to recognize it, asserting claims over Pashtun-majority areas within Pakistan. The unresolved border issue laid the foundation for a relationship marked by mutual suspicion and occasional hostility, with each country accusing the other of harboring anti-state elements (Khan, 2019).

Pakistan's involvement in Afghan affairs deepened in the late 20th century, as geopolitical dynamics shifted during the Cold War. Pakistan's alliance with the United States and Saudi Arabia to support Afghan Mujahideen against the Soviet Union significantly influenced its foreign policy. The strategic alliance, which aimed to counter Soviet expansion in the region, aligned with Pakistan's desire to prevent a pro-Soviet government in Afghanistan, which could pose security risks by strengthening alliances with Pakistan's rival, India (Haqqani, 2018). This period of cooperation laid the groundwork for a complex relationship between Pakistan and various Afghan factions, including the Taliban, who later emerged as a dominant force in the Afghan civil war.

In the 1990s, Pakistan became one of the three countries to formally recognize the Taliban regime, aiming to establish a friendly government in Kabul that could serve as a buffer against India. The "strategic depth" doctrine, often known as this approach, aimed to secure Pakistan's western border and establish a submissive Afghan government. However, this policy faced significant criticism as it isolated Pakistan from other regional powers and contributed to the rise of extremist ideologies along its border regions. Following the U.S. invasion in 2001, the Taliban fell, forcing Pakistan to ally with the United States in its "War on Terror" and manage the domestic repercussions of supporting anti-Taliban factions within Afghanistan (Jones, 2022).

The Taliban's resurgence in August 2021 has once again placed Pakistan in a challenging position. The return of the Taliban to power has revived concerns about cross-border militancy, particularly the activities of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an extremist faction that has conducted numerous attacks within Pakistan. TTP's alignment with the Afghan Taliban complicates Pakistan's security strategy, as the Taliban's ideological ties with TTP limit their willingness to act against the group (Jan, 2022). Moreover, the humanitarian and economic crises in Afghanistan have led to an increase in refugee flows to Pakistan, exacerbating economic and social pressures. Pakistan currently hosts over three million Afghan refugees, a demographic strain on resources that has intensified as Afghanistan's economic situation worsens (UNHCR, 2022).

Pakistan's current approach to the Taliban regime emphasizes diplomatic engagement while advocating for international assistance to prevent a humanitarian disaster. Pakistani leaders, including those from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, have repeatedly urged the global community to recognize the

urgent need for humanitarian aid in Afghanistan. They have also called for the release of frozen Afghan assets to stabilize the economy, arguing that an economically fragile Afghanistan poses significant security risks not only to Pakistan but also to the broader region (Rana & Sial, 2023). In line with this approach, Pakistan has facilitated cross-border trade and reduced tariffs on Afghan goods to support Afghanistan's economy, signaling its willingness to foster economic interdependence (PIPS, 2023).

Pakistan's internal political landscape, where views on the Taliban regime vary widely, complicates the policy of engagement. Religious political parties such as the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (JUI-F) have openly supported the Taliban's return, interpreting it as a victory for Islamic governance. In contrast, nationalist groups and civil society organizations within Pakistan have voiced concerns regarding the Taliban's restrictive policies on women's rights and education, warning that these issues could exacerbate tensions in Pakistan's own society (Hussain, 2022). This polarization reflects the broader challenges Pakistan faces in formulating a cohesive policy that balances ideological support from certain factions with pragmatic security considerations.

Pakistan's broader foreign policy objectives, including its relations with India, China, and the United States, intertwine regionally with its relationship with Afghanistan. The emergence of Afghanistan as a site of competing international interests has prompted Pakistan to pursue closer ties with regional powers like China and Russia to counterbalance Western influence. Afghanistan's instability has affected the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a key component of China's Belt and Road Initiative, as secure transit through Afghanistan is essential for regional trade (Kugelman, 2022). Additionally, Pakistan's historical ties with Saudi Arabia and Iran place it in a unique position to act as a mediator in Afghanistan's complex sectarian dynamics, further complicating its policy choices (Zahid, 2022).

Despite Pakistan's strategic attempts to stabilize its relationship with Afghanistan, several challenges persist. Chief among these is the Taliban's ideological rigidity, which conflicts with Pakistan's desire for a moderate Afghan government that respects human rights and engages constructively with international actors. The Taliban's ban on women's education and employment, as well as its restrictive policies on civil liberties, have attracted international criticism, creating diplomatic challenges for Pakistan as it attempts to advocate for international engagement with the Taliban (Haqqani, 2018). The Taliban's internal factions and ideological commitments, often resisting foreign pressure, limit Pakistan's significant influence over the Taliban.

In the context of these challenges, this paper aims to analyze Pakistan's policy options and strategic responses to the evolving situation in Afghanistan. By examining Pakistan's historical engagement in Afghan affairs, its responses to the Taliban's resurgence, and the security and economic challenges that Afghanistan's instability poses, this study seeks to provide insights into Pakistan's approach to managing a stable and cooperative relationship with its neighbor. Furthermore, this paper explores potential pathways for Pakistan to address its security concerns, including diplomatic engagement, regional alliances, and humanitarian assistance. Through a balanced policy that prioritizes security and regional cooperation, Pakistan can potentially mitigate the risks associated with Afghanistan's current

political landscape while promoting a stable environment conducive to peace and development (Fair, 2014; Khan, 2023).

Historical Context of Pak-Afghan Relations

The relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan is rooted in a shared history, cultural ties, and geographic proximity, but it is also marked by historical tensions and strategic rivalries. Since Pakistan's founding in 1947, Afghanistan has played a crucial role in shaping its foreign policy, especially regarding border security and regional stability. The enduring dispute over the Durand Line, the 2,640-kilometer boundary established by British colonial rule in 1893, has been a persistent source of friction. Afghanistan has refused to recognize the Durand Line as the official border, asserting historical claims over Pashtun-majority areas within Pakistan (Khan, 2019). This unresolved boundary issue created an atmosphere of mutual distrust and suspicion that persists to this day.

Pakistan's early years were characterized by Afghanistan's resistance to its statehood. Afghanistan was the only country to oppose Pakistan's membership in the United Nations, citing territorial claims over Pashtun tribal areas (Haqqani, 2018). In the 1950s and 1960s, Afghan governments supported Pashtun separatist movements in Pakistan, aiming to establish an independent "Pashtunistan." This period saw Afghanistan's government applying diplomatic pressure and using cross-border tribal incursions to advance its agenda, which escalated tensions between the two nations (Tellis, 2011). To counteract Afghanistan's influence, Pakistan developed a policy of supporting Afghan Islamist groups that opposed the Afghan government's secularist policies.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 marked a turning point in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, as Pakistan became a frontline state in the fight against Soviet expansionism. Pakistan, under the leadership of General Zia-ul-Haq, aligned with the United States and Saudi Arabia to support Afghan mujahideen groups resisting the Soviet occupation. This alignment was motivated by Pakistan's strategic desire to prevent a pro-Soviet government on its western border, which could strengthen alliances with India, Pakistan's regional adversary (Jones, 2022). Pakistan's support for the mujahideen included providing resources, training camps, and intelligence support, fostering close relationships with Afghan factions that would later play significant roles in Afghan politics (Fair, 2014).

In the 1990s, the emergence of the Taliban further complicated Pakistan's approach to Afghanistan. Pakistan was one of the few countries to recognize the Taliban regime, seeing it as an opportunity to secure "strategic depth" against India. The "strategic depth" doctrine, developed by Pakistan's military establishment, aimed to use Afghanistan as a buffer zone to deter Indian influence. By supporting the Taliban, Pakistan sought a friendly government in Kabul that would counteract Indian influence and provide security along its western frontier (Haqqani, 2018). However, this policy also isolated Pakistan internationally, as most countries opposed the Taliban's repressive rule, especially their human rights abuses and support for extremist ideologies (Sial, 2023).

The events of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan shifted the geopolitical landscape. The Taliban were ousted, and Pakistan found itself in a challenging position. As the United States launched its "War on Terror," Pakistan became a key ally, providing logistical and intelligence support to the U.S.-led coalition forces. This alliance was complicated by

Pakistan's historical ties with Taliban factions, which it was reluctant to sever completely. Consequently, Pakistan faced criticism from both the United States and Afghan governments for allegedly harboring Taliban leaders and providing sanctuary to insurgents (Jones, 2022). These dynamics created a complex triangular relationship among Pakistan, the United States, and Afghanistan, with Pakistan often caught between counterterrorism commitments and strategic interests in maintaining influence within Afghanistan.

The period following the fall of the Taliban saw significant political shifts within Afghanistan, including the establishment of a new government under President Hamid Karzai. Relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan were further complicated by Afghanistan's strengthening ties with India. India invested heavily in Afghanistan's infrastructure, building roads, schools, and hospitals, which Pakistan viewed with suspicion as a means for India to encircle Pakistan strategically (Rana & Sial, 2023). Afghanistan's warming ties with India fueled Pakistan's concerns about a "two-front" threat, with adversaries on both its eastern and western borders.

The emergence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in the mid-2000s exacerbated tensions. The TTP, an offshoot of the Afghan Taliban, launched attacks within Pakistan, particularly targeting military and government installations. Pakistan blamed the Afghan government for allowing the TTP to operate from Afghan territory, while Afghan leaders accused Pakistan of supporting Afghan Taliban factions that destabilized Afghanistan (PIPS, 2023). These mutual accusations highlighted the limitations of cooperation between the two countries and underscored the complex nature of their relationship.

Pakistan's Responses Post-Taliban Takeover

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 prompted a strategic recalibration within Pakistan's foreign policy and security circles. Pakistan's response has largely centered around diplomatic engagement, advocating for international aid, and encouraging the Taliban to adopt inclusive governance. Pakistani officials, including Prime Minister Imran Khan, expressed hope that the Taliban's leadership could stabilize Afghanistan and prevent it from becoming a base for transnational terrorism (Hussain, 2022). Pakistan has taken an active role in urging the global community to engage with the Taliban regime, cautioning that isolating Afghanistan could lead to a humanitarian catastrophe.

One of Pakistan's primary concerns has been the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. Economic collapse and widespread food insecurity have led to a worsening situation, with millions of Afghans facing extreme poverty. In response, Pakistan has facilitated the flow of humanitarian aid into Afghanistan, opening border crossings and reducing tariffs on Afghan imports to support local economies. Pakistan has also provided medical assistance, including establishing healthcare facilities near the border for Afghan refugees and allowing the transit of Indian-supplied wheat and medicine to Afghanistan through its territory (PIPS, 2023).

Pakistan's diplomatic strategy has focused on advocating for international recognition of the Taliban to avoid the isolation of Afghanistan. Pakistani leaders argue that recognizing the Taliban government, or at least engaging diplomatically, is essential for stabilizing Afghanistan and curbing potential security threats. At regional forums, including the Organization of Islamic

Cooperation (OIC), Pakistan has lobbied for international assistance, emphasizing that economic aid can prevent Afghanistan from becoming a breeding ground for extremist ideologies (Kugelman, 2022). However, Pakistan has also clarified that it will not unilaterally recognize the Taliban regime, aligning its stance with the broader international community.

Domestically, the Taliban's resurgence has been met with mixed reactions. Religious and political parties in Pakistan, particularly Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (JUI-F), have expressed support for the Taliban, viewing their return as a symbolic victory for Islamic governance. In contrast, civil society and human rights organizations have voiced concerns over the Taliban's policies on women's rights and education. The Taliban's restrictions on women's participation in public life, including the closure of secondary schools for girls, have sparked domestic debates, with critics urging Pakistan's government to adopt a cautious stance in its engagement with the Taliban (Zahid, 2022).

The Pakistan military has prioritized border security in light of the Taliban's return. The rise of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) poses a direct threat to Pakistan's internal security. Although Pakistan has attempted to engage with the Afghan Taliban to counter the TTP, the Taliban's ideological alignment with the TTP has limited their willingness to take decisive action. This has led to a strategic dilemma, with Pakistan strengthening its border defenses and increasing patrols along the Durand Line to prevent cross-border infiltration by militant groups (Jones, 2022).

Pakistan's approach to the Taliban regime reflects a balancing act between ideological support, security concerns, and pragmatic diplomacy. By advocating for international engagement and providing humanitarian aid, Pakistan seeks to prevent Afghanistan from descending into chaos. However, the Taliban's repressive policies and links to extremist groups complicate Pakistan's engagement, as it attempts to navigate both domestic and international pressures.

Current Challenges and Concerns for Pakistan

The Taliban's return to power has intensified several key challenges for Pakistan, particularly in terms of security and economic stability. Chief among these challenges is the resurgence of the TTP, which has exploited the Taliban's victory to intensify its operations within Pakistan. The TTP has conducted attacks against Pakistani military and civilian targets, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Pakistan's efforts to engage the Afghan Taliban to contain TTP activities have been met with limited success, as the Afghan Taliban view TTP as an ideological ally rather than a security threat (Sayed, 2021).

Economic challenges stemming from the influx of Afghan refugees have also strained Pakistan's resources. With over three million Afghan refugees already residing in Pakistan, the government faces significant pressures in providing for this population, especially in light of Pakistan's own economic constraints. The refugee crisis has led to calls for international assistance, with Pakistani officials urging the United Nations and other bodies to support refugee management efforts in Pakistan (UNHCR, 2022).

In addition to security and economic pressures, Pakistan's geopolitical positioning is affected by Afghanistan's instability. The disruption of trade routes and the potential impact on projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) underscore the economic implications of an unstable Afghanistan. Pakistan's

regional alliances, particularly with China and Central Asian states, reflect its need to secure Afghanistan's stability to support its own economic interests (Kugelman, 2022).

Policy Options and Strategic Pathways

To address these challenges, Pakistan has several policy options:

1. **Security Engagement with the Taliban** Pakistan's foremost priority is ensuring the security of its western border. Collaborative security efforts, such as intelligence sharing and joint border monitoring, could mitigate TTP's cross-border activities. However, Pakistan's attempts at fostering collaboration have faced resistance due to the Taliban's ideological alignment with the TTP (Jones, 2022; PIPS, 2023). Pursuing security collaboration through diplomatic pressure and regional cooperation remains critical to addressing these threats.
2. **Strengthening Regional Alliances** Pakistan has also aimed to strengthen regional alliances with neighboring states that share concerns about Afghan instability, including China, Iran, and Central Asian nations. Regional cooperation through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) or other multilateral frameworks could enhance counterterrorism efforts and secure economic interests (Zahid, 2022). By collaborating on security and trade with these countries, Pakistan can work towards a more stable Afghanistan while building a coalition to advocate for Afghan reconstruction (Fair, 2014; Khan, 2023).
3. **Promoting Inclusive Governance** An inclusive Afghan government is pivotal for long-term stability, and Pakistan has consistently advocated for this. By supporting international calls for inclusivity, Pakistan aligns itself with the global stance on human rights while addressing ethnic tensions that fuel extremism within Afghanistan (Sial, 2023; Haqqani, 2018). Pakistan's diplomatic push for an inclusive Afghan government reflects its interest in mitigating cross-border militancy, as disenfranchised Afghan groups are less likely to align with militant ideologies if they are politically represented.
4. **Humanitarian and Economic Assistance** Pakistan has facilitated humanitarian aid and encouraged trade with Afghanistan by reducing tariffs on Afghan goods and maintaining open trade routes. This strategy reinforces Pakistan's influence over Afghan economic channels while promoting interdependence. Ensuring secure trade routes benefits both nations by creating economic resilience, especially for Afghan border communities reliant on Pakistani markets (PIPS, 2023; UNHCR, 2022).

Recommendations

Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan must balance security concerns with humanitarian and economic imperatives. Given the complexities of Afghanistan's political dynamics and Pakistan's own security challenges, the following recommendations can help promote stability and cooperation:

1. **Enhance Border Security through Regional Cooperation:** Collaborate with the Taliban and regional allies on counterterrorism and intelligence-sharing measures to curb TTP activities and secure border areas.
2. **Strengthen Economic Ties and Interdependence:** Foster trade partnerships and economic support mechanisms to stabilize Afghanistan

and deepen bilateral ties, particularly through shared trade routes and regional initiatives like CPEC (Jones, 2022; Kugelman, 2022).

3. **Focus on Humanitarian Support with Controlled Security Measures:** Support Afghan refugees through international assistance while implementing security checks at refugee processing points to balance humanitarian needs with security priorities (UNHCR, 2022).
4. **Advocate for International Involvement in Afghanistan:** Engage actively in international forums to support Afghanistan's integration into the global community, encouraging aid and investment that can relieve Pakistan's economic strain and stabilize the region (Haqqani, 2018; Khan, 2019).

By adopting a balanced approach that prioritizes security, economic aid, and regional diplomacy, Pakistan can support Afghan stability while mitigating the domestic challenges posed by its neighbor's volatile political climate.

Conclusion

The evolving situation in Afghanistan presents Pakistan with complex challenges and strategic opportunities. While Pakistan seeks to maintain stability on its western border, the Taliban's ideological stance, particularly regarding the TTP, complicates this objective. The resurgence of the TTP, economic strains from refugee influx, and the potential disruption of regional trade are significant concerns for Pakistan's policymakers.

To address these challenges, Pakistan must adopt a balanced approach that integrates diplomatic engagement, security measures, and economic policies. Strengthening regional alliances, particularly through mechanisms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), can support Pakistan's security objectives. Engaging the Taliban diplomatically while advocating for an inclusive government can reduce the risk of extremist influences spilling over into Pakistan. Additionally, international engagement and humanitarian support are essential for stabilizing Afghanistan, as an economically stable Afghanistan will benefit Pakistan's own security and economic landscape.

By pursuing a pragmatic foreign policy that balances ideological support with national security interests, Pakistan can work towards fostering a cooperative and stable relationship with Afghanistan. This balanced approach is crucial for mitigating cross-border security threats, promoting regional economic integration, and ultimately contributing to long-term peace in South Asia.

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