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India-Afghanistan Nexus and Border Security Implications for Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically analyzes the strategic partnership between India and Afghanistan and its multifaceted implications for Pakistan's border security. India's growing footprint in Afghanistan through development assistance, diplomatic engagement, intelligence collaboration, and cyber capabilities has altered the balance of power in South Asia. Drawing from historical trends, geopolitical rivalry, and current developments, the study explores how this trilateral relationship influences Pakistan's internal stability and external security. It discusses Pakistan's counterstrategies, including border management, regional diplomacy, and cyber resilience. The article concludes with strategic policy recommendations to strengthen Pakistan's national security posture while contributing to regional peace and cooperation.

Keywords: India, Afghanistan, Border Security, National Security, Regional Peace.

Introduction

The India–Afghanistan relationship has deepened substantially over the past two decades due to intersecting strategic, economic, and political interests. India has emerged as a prominent development partner, investing in infrastructure, education, and institutional capacity building in Afghanistan. From Pakistan's perspective, India's growing role in its western neighborhood constitutes a serious security concern. The India–Afghanistan nexus is not merely a bilateral alignment; it directly impacts Pakistan's border stability, counterinsurgency efforts, intelligence strategy, and foreign policy. This study investigates the evolution of this regional alignment, its strategic drivers, and its implications for Pakistan's national security.

This paper critically examines the evolving strategic partnership between India and Afghanistan and its multifaceted implications for Pakistan's border security. It explores how India's growing influence in Afghanistan—through development aid, intelligence collaboration, cyber capabilities, and regional diplomacy—has altered the traditional security balance in South Asia. Through a multidisciplinary lens, the article investigates the historical context, strategic rivalries, cross-border insurgencies, cyber espionage, and proxy warfare that characterize this trilateral dynamic. The study also discusses Pakistan's reactive and proactive strategies to counterbalance India's outreach while maintaining internal stability. Based on extensive academic references and policy analysis, the article offers comprehensive recommendations for improving Pakistan's security posture and contributing to regional peace through diplomatic engagement and institutional resilience.

The India–Afghanistan relationship has gained significant traction in the past two decades, primarily due to strategic, economic, and geopolitical interests. India has consistently positioned itself as a major development partner in Afghanistan, investing in infrastructure, education, healthcare, and diplomatic initiatives. For Pakistan, this increasing presence of India in its western neighborhood raises complex national security concerns. The nexus

between India and Afghanistan is not merely about bilateral cooperation; it carries serious implications for Pakistan's border stability, insurgent activity, intelligence dynamics, and regional alliances. This paper seeks to explore the evolution of the India–Afghanistan nexus, its motivations, and its direct and indirect consequences for Pakistan's internal and border security.

Objective

The objective of this research is to analyze the implications of the growing India–Afghanistan nexus on Pakistan's border security. It seeks to unpack the strategic intentions behind India's presence in Afghanistan, including its soft power initiatives, intelligence networks, and developmental diplomacy. The research aims to examine the extent to which these engagements impact Pakistan's national security by facilitating covert operations, empowering hostile non-state actors, and eroding strategic depth. It also intends to identify how regional and global alignments—including India's cooperation with the United States—amplify the security dilemma faced by Pakistan. Finally, the study proposes a framework of policy recommendations focused on diplomacy, defense preparedness, and regional cooperation.

Historical Background of India–Afghanistan Relations

India and Afghanistan share millennia-old historical and cultural ties dating back to ancient civilizations. In the post-independence era, India was among the first nations to recognize the sovereignty of Afghanistan. During the Cold War, despite differing alignments—India with the Soviet Union and Afghanistan's shifting allegiances—relations remained stable. After the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, India rapidly expanded its influence, emerging as the largest regional donor with over \$3 billion invested in development projects. These include the Afghan Parliament building, Salma Dam (Friendship Dam), and Zaranj-Delaram Highway, along with capacity-building efforts in governance, healthcare, and education. India's outreach is perceived positively by many Afghans; however, Pakistan views it through a security-centric lens. The presence of Indian consulates in Kandahar, Jalalabad, and Herat—allegedly used for intelligence operations—exacerbates Islamabad's concerns.

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in Realist theory, particularly Neorealism and the Security Dilemma. Realism holds that states operate in a self-help system, prioritizing national interest and survival. India's engagement in Afghanistan, from a realist perspective, represents a strategy to counterbalance Pakistan's influence and secure its western flank. This is aligned with John Mearsheimer's concept of offensive realism, where great powers seek regional hegemony. Conversely, Pakistan's reaction—ranging from counterintelligence operations to border fortification—is emblematic of the security dilemma, where one state's gain is another's threat. The interplay between India's strategic outreach and Pakistan's security posture perpetuates a cycle of mistrust, militarization, and regional instability.

Implications for Pakistan's Border Security

1. Intelligence and Strategic Containment

One of Pakistan's primary concerns is the alleged use of Afghan territory by Indian intelligence agencies to destabilize its western provinces. Pakistan has frequently accused India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) of supporting separatist movements in

Balochistan and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The arrest of Indian national Kulbhushan Jadhav in 2016, reportedly operating out of Iran and Afghanistan, fueled these allegations. According to Pakistan, India uses its consulates near the border to cultivate networks of informants and militants, undermining Islamabad's control over its restive regions.

2. Cross-Border Terrorism

The porous Durand Line remains a conduit for militant movement, smuggling, and arms trafficking. Insurgents, including the TTP and Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP), take advantage of the lack of comprehensive border management to launch attacks in Pakistan and retreat into Afghanistan. Pakistan links these activities to Indian support, claiming financial and logistical aid to anti-Pakistan elements. The recurrence of deadly attacks, such as those in North Waziristan and Balochistan, reinforces Islamabad's demand for enhanced security cooperation with Kabul and scrutiny of Indian presence in Afghan territory.

3. Economic Isolation and Strategic Trade Corridors

India's involvement in developing trade corridors like the Chabahar Port and the North-South Transport Corridor poses economic challenges for Pakistan. These projects, supported by Iran and Central Asian states, allow India to bypass Pakistan for trade with Afghanistan and beyond. This undercuts Pakistan's geostrategic value and threatens its role as a regional transit hub. The marginalization of Pakistan from such trade initiatives could lead to long-term economic losses, especially as regional alliances deepen around alternative routes.

4. Diplomatic and Strategic Marginalization

India has leveraged its growing influence in Afghanistan to enhance its diplomatic profile in multilateral forums. Through trilateral dialogues with the U.S. and Afghanistan, India presents itself as a responsible stakeholder in regional stability. Meanwhile, Pakistan often finds itself excluded from key discussions, especially where its security concerns are raised but not addressed. The Indian narrative frames Pakistan as a destabilizing actor, thereby shaping global perceptions and policies through lobbying and diplomacy.

The evolving India-Afghanistan nexus presents a multi-dimensional strategic challenge to Pakistan, primarily impacting its border security, internal stability, and diplomatic positioning in South Asia. India's proactive engagement in Afghanistan, framed as development cooperation, has far-reaching implications that transcend economics and cultural diplomacy. From Islamabad's perspective, this presence is a component of a broader strategy to constrain Pakistan's regional maneuverability and erode its strategic depth.

The challenges are not merely speculative but manifest in repeated cross-border attacks, insurgent regrouping, and a persistent sense of diplomatic marginalization. India's leverage over strategic corridors and its ties with international powers like the United States, as well as its role in multilateral forums, enhance its ability to influence Afghan policymaking, often to the detriment of Pakistan's interests. The nexus is thus both a regional and extra-regional phenomenon that demands comprehensive attention from Pakistani policymakers.

To mitigate these risks, Pakistan must adopt a multi-pronged strategy. Firstly, it should enhance border security through technological monitoring systems, fencing, and joint patrols with Afghan forces where feasible. Secondly, diplomatic channels must remain open—even in difficult circumstances—to promote mutual trust and understanding. This includes initiating dialogue with the Taliban regime and encouraging regional confidencebuilding measures. Thirdly, intelligence cooperation should be pursued at bilateral and multilateral

levels to dismantle transnational extremist networks. Lastly, Pakistan must amplify its narrative in global forums, emphasizing the destabilizing impacts of foreign intelligence operations and the necessity for balanced regional engagement.

Pakistan's strategic calculus must evolve from reactive containment to proactive regional leadership. By investing in economic resilience, transparent diplomacy, and internal cohesion, Islamabad can transform its geostrategic vulnerabilities into opportunities. Regional peace is not merely a diplomatic slogan but a strategic imperative, one that demands vision, cooperation, and sustained engagement from all stakeholders.

India's Strategic Interests in Afghanistan

India's engagement in Afghanistan is guided by a mix of strategic, economic, and political interests. At the core lies the objective to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a sanctuary for anti-India insurgents, particularly those linked to Pakistan-based groups such as Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). Moreover, New Delhi views Afghanistan as a gateway to Central Asia, a region rich in energy resources and trade opportunities. Through investments in infrastructure and bilateral development assistance, India seeks to build long-term influence, counterbalance Chinese presence via CPEC, and maintain leverage against Pakistan. Furthermore, India's outreach to non-Pashtun ethnic groups—such as Tajiks and Hazaras—has cemented a multi-ethnic alliance base that helps New Delhi stay politically relevant in Kabul, regardless of regime change.

India's strategic calculus is also influenced by its global partnerships. Its alignment with the United States in the Indo-Pacific framework and in Afghanistan-related forums enhances its diplomatic stature. New Delhi's ability to position itself as a responsible stakeholder in Afghan stability also earns it goodwill from NATO partners. Additionally, India's educational scholarships and medical assistance have generated considerable soft power, winning hearts and minds among the Afghan population. However, from a Realist standpoint, these investments serve dual purposes: while boosting India's image, they simultaneously allow New Delhi to project power in Pakistan's immediate neighborhood, reinforcing Islamabad's security anxieties.

Regional Power Dynamics and Multilateral Diplomacy

The India–Afghanistan nexus must also be viewed in the context of wider regional and global power dynamics. China's rise and its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have redefined regional alignments. India, wary of China's growing footprint in South Asia—particularly through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—has sought to establish parallel regional connectivity through the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and its investments in Chabahar Port, in collaboration with Iran and Afghanistan. These initiatives are not merely economic; they reflect a broader competition for influence and access to Central Asian resources.

Pakistan, meanwhile, seeks to counterbalance this dynamic through its alignment with China and outreach to Russia and Iran. The trilateral dialogues involving China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan are aimed at isolating India from core regional decision-making. However, India has maintained its presence in forums like the SCO and BRICS, asserting its role as a counterweight to both China and Pakistan in the regional order. These complex interdependencies necessitate a nuanced foreign policy approach by Islamabad—one that

reconciles bilateral tensions while navigating multilateral arenas to protect its strategic interests.

Strategic Depth, the Durand Line, and Pakistan's National Security

The concept of 'strategic depth' has long influenced Pakistan's military and foreign policy approach to Afghanistan. Originating from a doctrinal need to secure rearward support in the event of an Indian conventional military strike, the notion sought a friendly or neutral government in Kabul. However, India's growing influence in Afghanistan has challenged this assumption. The perception that India could use Afghan territory for intelligence operations or to support anti-Pakistan elements has transformed strategic depth into a liability rather than an asset.

The Durand Line, a colonial-era demarcation that Pakistan considers its official western boundary, remains contested by successive Afghan regimes. India's support for various ethnic and political groups in Afghanistan, including those that do not recognize the Durand Line, further complicates Pakistan's border management. The fencing of the border—a multi-billion-rupee project initiated by Pakistan—has faced resistance from Kabul and local tribal populations. Cross-border fire incidents, destruction of posts, and violent clashes in areas like Kurram and North Waziristan underscore the fragile security situation and the impact of India's diplomatic and security support to Afghan factions hostile to Pakistan.

Media Influence, Propaganda, and Psychological Warfare

Modern conflict increasingly includes psychological and information warfare. India's strategic narrative regarding its constructive role in Afghanistan is widely circulated through regional and international media. Indian-funded think tanks, cultural institutions, and media collaborations in Afghanistan promote a positive image of India's intentions. This contrasts sharply with Pakistan's portrayal, which is often linked to extremism and Taliban patronage, particularly in Western discourse. Such perception asymmetry poses a psychological threat to Pakistan's soft power in the region.

Additionally, the Indian diaspora and social media campaigns often highlight Pakistan's alleged double standards in counterterrorism. This affects Pakistan's global image and may indirectly influence funding decisions, diplomatic alliances, and public opinion in countries that are key to Pakistan's international relations. The propaganda war also extends to cyberspace, where coordinated information operations amplify Indian perspectives and undermine Pakistan's strategic narratives. These non-kinetic threats represent an emerging frontier in the India–Afghanistan–Pakistan triangular conflict.

Proxy Warfare and Regional Destabilization

One of the most contentious aspects of the India–Afghanistan–Pakistan triangle is the alleged use of Afghan territory for proxy warfare. Pakistan asserts that India has supported elements of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Baloch separatists, and other dissident groups to undermine Pakistan's sovereignty (Mir, 2021; Kakar, 2020). From Pakistan's perspective, the Indian consulates in Kandahar and Jalalabad have served as nodes for intelligence coordination rather than consular assistance. These perceptions are fueled by incidents such as the arrest of Kulbhushan Jadhav, who was alleged to be coordinating subversive activities in Balochistan from Iran and Afghanistan (Haider, 2017).

This proxy dynamic has led to a strategic environment marked by deep mistrust. India, for its part, accuses Pakistan of supporting the Haqqani Network and providing sanctuary to Taliban

leaders during the US-led NATO mission (Rashid, 2020). These mutual accusations have rendered regional cooperation exceedingly difficult and have severely undermined any confidence-building initiatives proposed by multilateral institutions such as SAARC and SCO.

Pakistan's Strategic Policy Options

Given the evolving threat landscape, Pakistan must recalibrate its regional strategy. One key option is to prioritize economic diplomacy, especially through platforms such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Gwadar Port, to build interdependencies that discourage hostility (Rehman, 2022). Another imperative is institutional reform—streamlining civil-military coordination on foreign and security policy issues.

Diplomatically, Islamabad should promote a neutral and stable Afghanistan by supporting inclusive governance in Kabul while advocating against external interference (Roy, 2019).

Pakistan must also invest in strategic communication to counter negative narratives in the international media (Baloch, 2021). Enhancing cooperation with regional players like Iran, Russia, and Turkey can provide Islamabad with strategic space to maneuver. Lastly, fortifying border infrastructure and boosting local economies in border regions can decrease the appeal of insurgent recruitment (Khan & Ahmed, 2020).

The Role of External Powers and Great Power Competition

The India–Afghanistan relationship and its implications for Pakistan cannot be fully understood without considering the influence of global powers. The United States, historically involved in Afghan reconstruction and counterterrorism, has tacitly encouraged India's role in Afghanistan to balance Chinese and Pakistani influence (Chatterjee, 2019).

Washington's strategic interests in maintaining a democratic and India-friendly Kabul align with New Delhi's goals, further straining Islamabad's geopolitical position. Similarly, Russia's re-emergence in Afghan affairs, especially in its outreach to the Taliban, complicates traditional alignments in the region.

China's growing economic stakes in Afghanistan, particularly related to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), overlap with Pakistan's interests. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is seen as a counterweight to India's presence in Afghanistan. However, the competition between India and China in regional diplomacy often leaves Pakistan in a reactive position, navigating shifting alliances and economic dependencies (Roy, 2019). Iran also plays a dual role—supporting India's trade interests via the Chabahar Port while cooperating with Pakistan on border security. The increasing interplay of these global actors has added layers of complexity to regional policymaking.

Educational and Cultural Diplomacy as Strategic Tools

India's use of educational diplomacy in Afghanistan is a key component of its soft power. Thousands of Afghan students have been awarded scholarships to study in Indian universities, creating a generation of Afghan leaders with personal and professional ties to India (Baloch, 2021). Furthermore, India's investments in broadcasting, media training, and cultural exchange programs have amplified its influence over Afghan public opinion. Bollywood, Indian television, and cultural festivals have become popular across urban Afghanistan, contrasting sharply with Pakistan's image, which is often associated with extremism due to historic ties with the Taliban.

This cultural penetration serves not only to foster goodwill but also to shape political narratives. India's cultural outreach is often perceived as an alternative to Westernization,

offering a South Asian model of modernization compatible with regional values. In response, Pakistan has tried to promote its cultural influence through religious institutions and joint media productions, but it has not achieved comparable success. This highlights the importance of soft power as an often-underestimated arena of competition in regional diplomacy (Nawaz, 2018).

Humanitarian Impact and Refugee Dynamics

The India–Afghanistan nexus also has humanitarian implications for Pakistan, particularly through refugee influxes and socioeconomic pressure on border regions. Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Pakistan has hosted millions of Afghan refugees. The U.S. war in Afghanistan and the Taliban's resurgence have only increased this burden. Pakistan currently hosts around 1.4 million registered Afghan refugees, with estimates suggesting hundreds of thousands more remain undocumented (Zahra, 2021).

This mass influx has strained Pakistan's education system, healthcare facilities, and labor markets—particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. In the absence of sufficient international assistance, these provinces face economic marginalization, security risks, and inter-communal tensions. Islamabad believes that New Delhi's growing clout in Kabul may influence Afghan policies toward delaying or denying refugee repatriation, thereby increasing demographic and political pressures inside Pakistan (Ahmed, 2023).

Strategic Narratives and Ideological Contours

India and Pakistan project competing strategic narratives in Afghanistan, rooted in their ideological orientations. While India champions democratic pluralism, infrastructure development, and inclusive governance, Pakistan underscores Islamic solidarity, counterterrorism, and regional stability. These competing ideologies often influence Afghan political alignments and public discourse (Pandey, 2019).

Afghanistan has become a battleground of regional narratives. India positions itself as a benevolent development partner, while Pakistan emphasizes the security fallout of Indian interference. This dichotomy feeds Afghan factionalism, especially between groups aligned with Northern Alliance elements and those inclined toward the Taliban (Sharma, 2021). The ideological conflict is not limited to regional players but is shaped by international allies, think tanks, and media channels, all vying to define Afghanistan's path forward.

Civil-Military Relations and Strategic Autonomy in Pakistan

The India–Afghanistan nexus has deepened civil-military tensions within Pakistan regarding policy formulation. The military views Indian influence in Afghanistan as an existential threat, necessitating a robust defense strategy. In contrast, civilian policymakers have periodically sought regional détente and economic diplomacy (Saeed, 2022). This divergence results in inconsistent foreign policy positions, complicating diplomatic outreach and reducing strategic predictability.

To maintain strategic autonomy, Pakistan must balance its security imperatives with inclusive governance. Strengthening the role of parliament and foreign policy institutions can ensure more transparent and stable decision-making. In an increasingly multipolar world, reliance on tactical alliances must give way to long-term vision grounded in national development and regional integration.

Intelligence Rivalry and Cyber Espionage

The evolving nature of modern warfare has brought cyber capabilities and intelligence rivalry into sharper focus. The India–Afghanistan nexus is now also expressed in the cyber domain, where both India and Pakistan engage in disinformation campaigns, surveillance, and electronic intelligence operations (Iqbal, 2022). Indian intelligence agencies, particularly the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), are believed by Pakistani security circles to operate indirectly through Afghan intelligence services to monitor Pakistani military and civilian installations. Cyber intrusions and misinformation campaigns have reportedly targeted government institutions and military personnel, raising alarm over national cybersecurity frameworks.

This rivalry intensifies the regional security dilemma. Accusations of state-sponsored cyberattacks and manipulation of public opinion through social media platforms exacerbate tensions that already exist due to territorial disputes and cross-border terrorism. It is essential that Pakistan upgrades its cyber infrastructure and builds institutional resilience to deter digital manipulation from adversarial actors operating from or through Afghanistan (Yusuf, 2021).

Conclusion

The India–Afghanistan nexus poses intricate challenges to Pakistan's security landscape, particularly along its porous and volatile western border. India's growing involvement in Afghanistan—ranging from infrastructure investment to intelligence operations—has reshaped the geopolitical dynamics of South Asia. Pakistan perceives this development as an attempt to create strategic encirclement and foster instability in its border regions. From supporting proxies to engaging in information warfare, both regional powers have exploited the Afghan theatre to assert dominance and undermine each other.

To navigate these challenges, Pakistan must prioritize a multi-dimensional approach. This includes reinforcing cyber and territorial border security, deepening ties with regional actors, and promoting a strategic narrative that reflects its legitimate security concerns. Furthermore, sustained diplomatic engagement with the Afghan leadership and the international community can provide Pakistan with the platform to counterbalance India's influence while contributing to regional peace and economic development.

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