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Afghanistan and Pakistan: A Complex Diplomatic Relationship

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ABSTRACT

This article investigate the convoluted and persistently volatile diplomatic relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan, tracing its evolution from colonial legacies to the contemporary post-2021 landscape. Rooted in shared Pashtun ethnic, cultural, and tribal ties across the 2,640-kilometer Durand Line, the relationship has been marked by profound interdependence alongside deep mistrust, territorial disputes, and security dilemmas. Historical analysis reveals Afghanistan's longstanding rejection of the Durand Line, Pakistan's pursuit of "strategic depth" through proxy support for mujahideen and the Taliban, and mutual accusations of harboring militants that intensified after 2001. The Taliban's 2021 resurgence initially promised alignment but rapidly deteriorated into open antagonism, driven by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)'s resurgence from Afghan territories, resulting in thousands of attacks, retaliatory Pakistani airstrikes, border clashes, mass refugee deportations, trade disruptions, and collapsed mediation efforts. Employing a qualitative methodology that integrates historical review, case studies of recent escalations, and analytical frameworks of security dilemmas, trust dynamics, and regional security complexes, the study highlights how ethnic linkages complicate state control, sovereignty-security tensions perpetuate cycles of violence, and external influences from India, China, and others amplify frictions. Findings demonstrate that post-2021 realities have inverted Pakistan's strategic calculations, turning anticipated advantages into liabilities and exposing the fragility of proxy-based policies. The article concludes that without addressing core issues sovereignty recognition, credible counter-militancy cooperation, and economic interdependence the relationship risks fueling broader instability, transnational terrorism, humanitarian crises, and great-power competition in South Asia.

Keywords: Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations, Durand Line, Strategic Depth, Tehrik-E-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Cross-Border Terrorism, Regional Security Complex.

Introduction

The historical and geographical proximity of Afghanistan and Pakistan has forged a tapestry of shared identities and enduring interconnections, rooted in centuries of intertwined fates across the rugged Hindu Kush Mountains. Spanning over 2,640 kilometers, their shared border known as the Durand Line traverses arid deserts, towering peaks, and fertile valleys, binding the two nations through ethnic Pashtun communities that dominate both sides, comprising about 42% of Afghanistan's population and 15% of Pakistan's (Encyclopædia

Britannica, 2026). This Pashtun heartland, often referred to as the Pashtun belt, fosters deep cultural affinities, including the Pashto language, adherence to the Pashtunwali code of honor, and Sunni Islamic traditions that emphasize tribal loyalty and hospitality. Religious ties are amplified by shared Sufi heritage and madrasa networks, while tribal structures like jirgas facilitate cross-border dispute resolution and kinship alliances. Geographically, the porous frontier has historically enabled fluid migration, trade in goods like fruits and gemstones, and nomadic herding, creating an economic symbiosis where Afghanistan relies on Pakistani ports for global access, and Pakistan benefits from Afghan markets. Yet, this closeness stems from colonial legacies; the Durand Line, drawn in 1893 by British diplomat Sir Mortimer Durand and Afghan Emir Abdur Rahman Khan, was intended as a buffer against Russian expansion during the Great Game, arbitrarily slicing through Pashtun homelands and sowing seeds of future discord. This proximity, while nurturing mutual dependence, has also amplified vulnerabilities, as ethnic solidarities often transcend state boundaries, challenging national sovereignties in a region where borders feel more like suggestions than separations.

Paradoxically, these profound interconnections coexist with layers of persistent mistrust, outright conflict, and fleeting episodes of cooperation, rendering Afghanistan-Pakistan relations a volatile mosaic of alliance and antagonism. From Pakistan's inception in 1947, Afghanistan opposed its UN membership, rejecting the Durand Line as a colonial imposition that divided Pashtun tribes and demanding a "Pashtunistan" referendum, fueling decades of irredentist claims and border skirmishes. This mistrust deepened during the Cold War, with Afghanistan aligning with India and the Soviet Union, while Pakistan backed mujahideen against the 1979 Soviet invasion, later supporting the Taliban in the 1990s for "strategic depth" against Indian encirclement. Post-2001, U.S.-led interventions saw Pakistan accused of a "double game" harboring Taliban elements while aiding coalition forces exacerbating security dilemmas where each views the other as a proxy enabler. The 2021 Taliban resurgence initially promised alignment, with Pakistan offering early diplomatic support and humanitarian aid, yet quickly devolved into acrimony over the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which Islamabad alleges operates from Afghan sanctuaries, launching thousands of attacks since 2021. Escalations peaked in October 2025 with Pakistan's "Operation Khyber Storm" airstrikes targeting TTP leaders in Kabul and eastern provinces, prompting Afghan Taliban retaliatory ground assaults on Pakistani posts along the Durand Line, resulting in dozens of casualties on both sides and temporary border closures (Britannica, 2025; Kugelman, 2026). Kabul counters with accusations of Pakistani airstrikes violating sovereignty, as seen in ongoing clashes through late 2025 and into 2026, including heavy fire exchanges killing civilians and soldiers. This cycle of proxy influences Pakistan's historical Taliban patronage clashing with Afghanistan's ethnic ties to TTP militants highlights a security paradox: interdependence breeds suspicion, where cooperation, like joint border commissions or Qatar- and Turkey-brokered ceasefires in Doha and Istanbul, emerges only under duress but rarely endures amid collapsed talks and renewed strikes.

The significance of this complex diplomatic relationship extends far beyond bilateral frictions, profoundly impacting regional stability, South Asian geopolitics, counterterrorism efforts, and global power dynamics. Unresolved tensions along the Durand Line risk spilling into broader instability, empowering groups like ISIS-K and al-Qaeda, which exploit ungoverned spaces to plot transnational attacks, as evidenced by TTP's escalation threatening Pakistan's nuclear

security and potentially drawing in U.S. counterterrorism interests. In South Asia, the rift has pushed the Taliban toward warmer ties with India, including ministerial visits and embassy reopenings in late 2025, countering Pakistan's influence and heightening risks of Indo-Pak escalation amid mutual proxy accusations. China's mediation attempts, such as trilateral talks, aim to safeguard Belt and Road investments, yet falter against entrenched mistrust, while Iran's growing economic embrace of Afghanistan via alternative trade routes undermines regional integration. Globally, the impasse hampers counterterrorism, with experts warning of heightened crisis risks in 2026, potentially fueling refugee crises, narcotics flows, and jihadist recruitment that affect Europe and the U.S. Mediators like Qatar and Turkey have brokered fragile truces, but sustainable peace demands addressing root causes sovereignty, ethnicity, and security to prevent this frontier from igniting wider conflagrations in an already volatile arc from Central Asia to the Middle East (Kugelman, 2026; Council on Foreign Relations, 2025).

Literature Review

Scholarship on Afghanistan-Pakistan relations has evolved significantly, integrating historical, security, and geopolitical lenses to unpack the enduring volatility between these neighbors. Early works emphasize the colonial roots of discord, particularly the 1893 Durand Line agreement that arbitrarily divided Pashtun tribes, fostering Afghanistan's irredentist claims over Pashtun territories in Pakistan (Maley, 2010). Post-1947 dynamics are dissected in analyses highlighting Afghanistan's opposition to Pakistan's UN membership in 1947, viewing it as an illegitimate partition of Pashtun lands, and demanding a "Pashtunistan" referendum that strained nascent bilateral ties (Rubin, 2006). Geopolitical perspectives frame this as a security dilemma, where Pakistan's quest for "strategic depth" in Afghanistan envisioning a compliant neighbor as a buffer against India clashed with Kabul's sovereignty assertions (Fair, 2014). Borderland instability studies reveal how porous frontiers enabled ethnic solidarities but amplified mistrust, with tribal jirgas often superseding state authority (Cheema et al., 2021). Trust theory applications underscore mutual perceptions of betrayal: Afghanistan saw Pakistan as a neo-colonial manipulator, while Islamabad viewed Kabul's India alignments as encirclement tactics (Taye, 2021). These themes persist in critiques of Pakistan's "double game," where support for proxies undermined regional stability, as evidenced by historical analyses of pre-1947 ethnic politics fueling post-independence antagonism (Stobdan, n.d.). Overall, literature portrays the relationship as a regional security complex, where interdependence breeds conflict rather than cooperation (Buzan & Waeber, 2003, as cited in Threlkeld & Easterly, 2021).

Cold War-era scholarship illuminates shifting alignments that deepened fissures, with Afghanistan gravitating toward India and the Soviet Union for arms and support, while Pakistan aligned with the US and backed Islamist proxies to counter perceived threats (Hussain, 2022). Pakistan's pivotal role in arming the anti-Soviet mujahideen funneling billions in US-Saudi aid through the ISI radicalized borderlands, embedding jihadist networks that later birthed the Taliban (Ahmed, 2012, as cited in Ahmed, 2024). Geopolitical analyses critique this as a proxy war extension, where Islamabad nurtured mujahideen factions for influence in post-Soviet Kabul, prioritizing Pashtun Islamists over nationalist groups to avert Pashtunistan revival (Cohen, 2004, as cited in Johnson & Mason, 2008). The 1990s Taliban support is framed as an extension of "strategic depth," with Pakistan recognizing the regime

in 1997 to secure trade routes and counter Indian encirclement, yet enabling al-Qaeda's entrenchment (Rashid, 2000). Security dilemma theories highlight how this patronage exacerbated mistrust: Afghanistan accused Pakistan of exporting extremism via madrasas, while Islamabad feared Kabul's ethnic politics destabilizing its frontiers (Idris, 2019). Critiques of the "double game" emerge here, portraying Pakistan's mujahideen-Taliban sponsorship as shortsighted, fostering ungoverned spaces that invited global intervention (Zanchetta, 2025). Historical narratives underscore how Cold War realignments transformed tribal affinities into ideological battlegrounds, setting the stage for enduring proxy conflicts (Greentree, 2021). Post-9/11 literature scrutinizes mutual accusations of harboring militants, with Afghanistan and the US alleging Pakistan's ISI provided safe havens for Taliban resurgence, enabling cross-border attacks that killed thousands (Threlkeld, 2021). Border fencing initiatives, launched in 2017 to curb infiltration, are analyzed as unilateral securitization efforts amid Kabul's rejection of the Durand Line, exacerbating sovereignty disputes and refugee flows (Gregory, 2016). Strategic depth policies face sharp critique: once a hedge against India, they morphed into liabilities as Taliban proxies' fueled domestic extremism like the TTP, inverting the buffer logic (Fair, 2014). Trust/mistrust dynamics dominate, with game-theoretic models illustrating how Pakistan's "double game" public anti-terror alliance with the US while covertly aiding insurgents eroded bilateral confidence, prolonging the insurgency (Taye, 2021). Borderland instability studies link fencing to humanitarian crises, displacing tribes and disrupting trade, while failing to stem narcotics or arms smuggling (Cheema et al., 2021). Geopolitical frames highlight external influences: US drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal areas amplified anti-Western sentiment, while India's Afghan investments intensified Islamabad's paranoia (Akram, 2023). Overall, this era's scholarship reveals a vicious cycle where security measures deepened alienation, underscoring the need for joint mechanisms over unilateralism (Rubin, 2006).

Recent post-2021 works pivot to the Taliban's resurgence, analyzing how initial Pakistani optimism soured amid TTP revival, with over 3,000 attacks since 2021 attributed to Afghan sanctuaries (Kugelman, 2024). Cross-border terrorism escalations, including 2025 Pakistani airstrikes, are dissected through security dilemma lenses: Kabul's TTP tolerance as leverage against Durand Line fencing, while Islamabad's retaliations violate sovereignty (Khan, 2025). Trust dynamics fracture further, with mutual blame for instability Pakistan accusing the Taliban of ideological kinship with TTP, Afghanistan retorting with claims of ISI manipulation undermining mediation efforts (Popalzay, 2024). Impacts on refugees, trade, and narcotics are profound: mass deportations of 1.7 million Afghans in 2023-2025 disrupted economies, while opium surges fueled regional addiction crises (Herbert, 2024). Critiques of Pakistan's "double game" evolve, portraying post-2021 Taliban autonomy as a backfire, shifting from asset to liability in a multipolar order (Rehman, 2025). Borderland studies highlight ethnic ties enabling TTP safe havens, exacerbating instability and jihadist recruitment (Romaniuk, 2025). Geopolitically, literature warns of spillover risks, urging confidence-building via joint patrols and economic corridors to avert wider conflict (Bukhari, 2026).

Problem Statement

Despite profound ethnic, cultural, and historical interconnections, Afghanistan-Pakistan relations remain profoundly strained by deep-seated mistrust, unresolved territorial disputes, and escalating security threats. The Durand Line, a colonial-era boundary rejected by

Afghanistan as an artificial division of Pashtun homelands, continues to fuel sovereignty clashes and border instability. Since the Taliban's resurgence in 2021, initial Pakistani optimism about a friendly regime has eroded into open antagonism, primarily due to the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)'s resurgence from alleged Afghan sanctuaries. This has triggered thousands of cross-border attacks in Pakistan, resulting in heavy casualties among security forces and civilians, prompting retaliatory Pakistani airstrikes and ground operations that violate Afghan sovereignty and cause civilian deaths. Mutual accusations persist: Islamabad claims Kabul tolerates or supports TTP operations as leverage, while the Afghan Taliban denies involvement, viewing Pakistani actions as aggression. Failed mediations by Qatar, Turkey, and others have yielded only fragile, short-lived ceasefires, with border closures, mass refugee deportations, disrupted trade, and surging narcotics flows exacerbating humanitarian and economic crises. This volatile cycle risks broader regional instability, empowering transnational jihadist groups and complicating South Asian geopolitics amid external influences from India, China, and the United States. Without addressing root causes mutual recognition of borders, credible action against militants, and confidence-building mechanisms the relationship faces persistent deadlock, threatening both nations' stability and the wider region's security.

Research Objectives

1. To trace the historical evolution of Afghanistan-Pakistan diplomatic ties from 1947 to the present.
2. To analyze major contentious issues (Durand Line, militancy/TTP, border security) and their persistence post-2021.
3. To examine recent developments (e.g., clashes in 2025, mediation efforts) and their impact on bilateral and regional stability.
4. To identify potential pathways for de-escalation and improved diplomatic engagement.

Research Questions

1. What historical factors have perpetuated mistrust in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, particularly regarding the Durand Line and territorial claims?
2. How has the 2021 Taliban resurgence altered the diplomatic and security landscape, including shifts in militant group dynamics (e.g., TTP attacks)?
3. To what extent do cross-border terrorism accusations, border clashes, and refugee/trade issues contribute to the current diplomatic impasse?
4. What role do external actors (e.g., mediators like Qatar, Turkey, or influences from India/China/US) play in shaping or hindering resolution?
5. What are the prospects for sustainable diplomatic normalization amid ongoing security and sovereignty disputes?

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design that integrates historical analysis, a focused case study approach on post-2021 bilateral tensions, and thematic review to examine the complex diplomatic relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Historical analysis traces the evolution of ties from colonial legacies through Cold War alignments, the mujahideen era, Taliban support in the 1990s, post-9/11 dynamics, and the pivotal shift following the Taliban's 2021 resurgence, providing essential context for understanding persistent mistrust and

security dilemmas. The case study component centers on recent escalations, including cross-border clashes, Pakistani airstrikes under operations like "Khyber Storm" in October 2025 targeting TTP leaders in Kabul and eastern provinces, retaliatory Afghan actions, failed mediations in Doha and Istanbul by Qatar and Turkey, and ongoing border closures amid TTP attacks exceeding thousands since 2021. Data sources draw exclusively from secondary materials: scholarly articles and books on regional security; policy reports and analyses from think tanks such as the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), Brookings Institution, and Council on Foreign Relations (CFR); official statements from Pakistani and Afghan authorities, including military spokespersons and foreign ministries; media reports detailing events from 2021 through 2026; and international organization documents, particularly UN reports on terrorism, cross-border militancy, refugee deportations, and narcotics trafficking. The analytical framework applies security dilemma theory to explain mutual perceptions of threat and defensive escalations, trust/mistrust dynamics to unpack cycles of accusation and betrayal (e.g., Pakistan's claims of Afghan Taliban harboring TTP versus Kabul's accusations of Pakistani aggression), and geopolitical/regional security complex lenses to situate the relationship within broader South Asian and great-power influences involving India, China, the US, and mediators. Limitations include heavy reliance on publicly available sources due to restricted access in conflict zones along the Durand Line, potential biases in partisan media and official narratives from both sides, and challenges in verifying real-time casualty or operational details amid information warfare and restricted independent reporting. This methodological approach ensures a rigorous, contextualized exploration of the relationship's volatility while acknowledging the constraints of open-source research in a highly contested domain.

Findings and Results

Empirical insights into Afghanistan-Pakistan relations reveal a chronology of entrenched territorial disputes and strategic maneuvering, beginning with the colonial-era Durand Line that has perpetually undermined bilateral trust. Established in 1893 to demarcate British India's frontier from Afghan territories, the 2,640-kilometer boundary arbitrarily bifurcated Pashtun tribal lands, fostering Afghanistan's enduring rejection of its legitimacy as an international border and fueling irredentist claims over Pakistani Pashtun regions (Hashimy, 2023). This rejection manifested starkly in 1947 when Afghanistan uniquely opposed Pakistan's UN membership, invoking the Durand Line as a colonial imposition that severed ethnic kinships and demanded a Pashtunistan referendum, thereby igniting decades of border skirmishes and diplomatic friction. Thematically, this period underscores a security dilemma where Pakistan perceived Afghan territorial ambitions as existential threats, prompting Islamabad to cultivate ethnic Pashtun alliances to neutralize irredentism while Kabul leveraged Pashtun nationalism to assert sovereignty. Such dynamics not only perpetuated mistrust but also intertwined with broader geopolitical rivalries, as Afghanistan aligned with India to counterbalance Pakistan, embedding the dispute within South Asian power struggles and setting the stage for proxy interventions.

Transitioning into the Cold War era, Pakistan's proxy support for Afghan militants emerged as a calculated extension of its strategic depth doctrine, aimed at securing a compliant neighbor against Indian encirclement. During the 1979 Soviet invasion, Islamabad funneled billions in U.S.-Saudi aid through its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to Pashtun-dominated mujahideen

factions, radicalizing borderlands and embedding jihadist networks that later coalesced into the Taliban (Grare, 2006). By the 1990s, Pakistan's overt backing of the Taliban regime recognizing it in 1997 and providing military, logistical, and financial aid sought to install a Pashtun-led government in Kabul for territorial security and trade route control, while suppressing Pashtun irredentism. Thematically, this proxy patronage exacerbated mutual suspicions: Afghanistan accused Pakistan of exporting extremism via madrasas and undermining its sovereignty, whereas Islamabad viewed Kabul's ethnic politics as destabilizing its frontiers. This era's empirical patterns highlight how Pakistan's interventions, intended as defensive hedges, inadvertently fostered ungoverned spaces prone to militancy, transforming ideological battlegrounds into enduring conflict drivers.

Post-9/11 tensions amplified these historical frictions, as U.S.-led interventions exposed Pakistan's dual policy of public anti-terror alliances and covert Taliban support, leading to accusations of a "double game" that prolonged the Afghan insurgency. Kabul and Washington alleged ISI safe havens enabled Taliban cross-border attacks, killing thousands and thwarting stabilization efforts, while Pakistan's 2017 border fencing initiative aimed at curbing infiltration intensified sovereignty disputes amid Afghanistan's Durand Line rejection (Threlkeld & Easterly, 2021). Thematically, this period illustrates a vicious cycle of mutual harboring claims: Pakistan blamed Afghanistan for Baloch insurgent sanctuaries, while Kabul decried Pakistani proxy manipulations, eroding trust and humanitarian ties. Empirical evidence from this era, including U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal areas that fueled anti-Western sentiment, underscores how external geopolitical pressures such as India's Afghan investments heightened Islamabad's paranoia, perpetuating instability and complicating regional counterterrorism.

The Taliban's 2021 resurgence initially sparked Pakistani optimism for aligned interests, yet swiftly devolved into friction as TTP militants, allegedly sheltered in Afghan territories, surged attacks on Pakistan, reversing the proxy dynamic. Early diplomatic overtures, including humanitarian aid and border talks, faltered amid escalating TTP operations from Afghan sanctuaries, culminating in over 3,573 claimed attacks in 2025 alone, with thousands dead including security personnel (Global Terrorism Index, 2025). Border clashes peaked in October 2025 with Pakistan's "Operation Khyber Storm" airstrikes targeting TTP leaders in Kabul, Khost, and Paktika, prompting Afghan retaliatory assaults on Pakistani posts and killing dozens on both sides, displacing thousands of civilians (Pakistan-Afghanistan Conflict, 2025). Diplomatic efforts, such as Qatar-mediated ceasefires in Doha and Turkey-hosted talks in Istanbul, collapsed over sovereignty violations and TTP extradition demands, highlighting thematic breakdowns in bilateral mechanisms amid mutual blame for militancy spillover.

Quantitatively, terrorist incidents in Pakistan escalated post-2021, with 699 attacks in 2025 marking a 34% increase from prior years, predominantly TTP-driven in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, resulting in 1,229 fatalities and underscoring border instability's toll (Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, 2026). Refugee dynamics saw over 942,200 Afghans return or deported from Pakistan in 2025, including mass expulsions of 1.7 million since 2023, exacerbating humanitarian crises and straining Kabul's resources amid funding shortfalls (UNHCR, 2025). Trade disruptions intensified, with bilateral volumes plummeting from \$1.8 billion in 2021 to below \$600 million by 2025 due to prolonged border closures since October 2025, inflicting disproportionate export losses on Afghanistan at 10% versus Pakistan's 0.6%, while

prompting Kabul's pivot to Iranian and Central Asian routes (Afghanistan Studies Center, 2025). Qualitatively, patterns of mutual accusations Pakistan alleging Taliban TTP complicity, Afghanistan decrying airstrike aggressions reveal failed bilateral dialogues and overreliance on third-party mediations like Qatar and Turkey, perpetuating a security paradox where interdependence fuels antagonism and risks wider regional jihadist empowerment.

Discussion

The post-2021 realities in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations starkly challenge longstanding assumptions in the literature regarding Pakistan's "strategic depth" doctrine, which posited a compliant Afghan regime as a buffer against Indian influence and a means to neutralize internal threats like the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Empirical findings from recent escalations, including the October 2025 border clashes and Pakistani airstrikes targeting TTP leaders in Kabul, reveal how the Taliban's resurgence has inverted this paradigm, transforming an anticipated asset into a liability that exacerbates domestic instability. Earlier scholarship, which framed Pakistan's Taliban patronage as a pragmatic hedge for territorial security and countering Pashtun irredentism, underestimated the Taliban's post-victory autonomy and ideological affinities with the TTP, leading to over 3,500 attacks in Pakistan since 2021 and a surge in fatalities exceeding 1,200 in 2025 alone. This shift undermines the strategic depth narrative by exposing its inherent contradictions: rather than providing depth, the Taliban's governance has enabled militant sanctuaries, compelling Pakistan to resort to unilateral strikes that violate Afghan sovereignty and provoke retaliatory actions, thus perpetuating a cycle of mistrust and failed diplomacy. Thematically, these developments align with security dilemma analyses in the literature, where defensive policies like border fencing and operations such as "Khyber Storm" inadvertently heighten tensions, challenging optimistic pre-2021 views of Taliban alignment as a pathway to regional stability. Instead, the findings illustrate a "strategic nightmare," where Pakistan's historical proxy investments backfire, fostering TTP resurgence and compelling a reevaluation of trust dynamics in bilateral ties. This inversion not only erodes Pakistan's leverage but also amplifies vulnerabilities in its western frontier, as the Taliban's refusal to dismantle TTP networks rooted in shared Pashtun ethnic bonds renders earlier assumptions of manipulability obsolete.

At the root of these frictions lie clashing sovereignty and security priorities, compounded by ethnic and tribal linkages that defy state control and external influences that intensify divisions. Afghanistan's persistent rejection of the Durand Line as a colonial artifact prioritizes national sovereignty and Pashtun unity over Pakistan's security imperatives, viewing border fencing and airstrikes as aggressions that fragment tribal communities and provoke cross-border solidarity with the TTP. Conversely, Pakistan's security-driven actions, including mass deportations of over 1.7 million Afghans since 2023, stem from fears of militant infiltration, yet they overlook how ethnic Pashtunwali codes and kinship ties enable TTP safe havens in Afghan provinces like Khost and Paktika, blurring state boundaries and complicating enforcement. Tribal jirgas and madrasa networks further erode centralized authority, as shared cultural affinities foster ideological spillovers, allowing the Taliban to tolerate TTP operations as leverage against Pakistani encroachments. External actors amplify these tensions: India's renewed diplomatic engagements with Kabul, including embassy reopenings and ministerial visits in late 2025, heighten Pakistan's encirclement paranoia, while China's trilateral mediation efforts falter amid Belt and Road vulnerabilities to TTP attacks. Iran's

economic overtures to Afghanistan via alternative trade routes undermine Pakistan's transit dominance, exacerbating competition and proxy dynamics. Analytically, this interplay reveals a zero-sum logic where sovereignty assertions clash with security needs, perpetuated by ethnic transborder loyalties that resist state monopolies on violence and loyalty.

The implications of prolonged instability are profound, posing risks to counterterrorism, precipitating humanitarian crises, disrupting regional connectivity like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and fueling great power competition. Counterterrorism efforts suffer as ungoverned border spaces empower groups like ISIS-K and al-Qaeda, exploiting the rift to recruit and launch transnational attacks, with TTP's escalation threatening Pakistan's nuclear assets and drawing renewed U.S. scrutiny. Humanitarian fallout includes mass displacements from 2025 clashes and deportations, straining resources and fueling radicalization amid surging narcotics flows that finance militancy. Regionally, trade disruptions bilateral volumes dropping to under \$600 million by 2025 jeopardize CPEC links, with TTP targeting infrastructure to undermine Chinese investments and prompt Beijing's hedging toward Kabul. Great power rivalries intensify as the impasse invites Indian inroads, Iranian pivots, and U.S. led pressures, potentially escalating into broader conflicts in South Asia. Limitations of this analysis include reliance on secondary sources amid access restrictions, introducing potential biases from partisan narratives; alternative perspectives highlight Afghan views of Pakistani "aggression" through airstrikes as neo-colonial overreach, versus Pakistani claims of Taliban duplicity in harboring TTP, underscoring the need for nuanced, multi-stakeholder approaches to de-escalation.

Conclusion

The Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship stands as one of the most enduringly complex and volatile diplomatic entanglements in contemporary South Asia, characterized by a profound paradox: deep ethnic, cultural, religious, and geographical interconnections coexist with persistent mistrust, recurring conflict, and only sporadic, fragile cooperation. From the colonial imposition of the Durand Line in 1893 through Afghanistan's rejection of Pakistan's statehood in 1947, the Cold War proxy alignments, the mujahideen and Taliban eras, the post-9/11 accusations of double-dealing, and the dramatic reversal after the Taliban's 2021 resurgence, the bilateral dynamic has consistently been shaped by clashing priorities of sovereignty and security. The Taliban's return to power initially appeared to offer Pakistan a long-sought strategic advantage a friendly, ideologically aligned regime in Kabul yet within months this hope unraveled as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) exploited Afghan sanctuaries to launch thousands of deadly attacks inside Pakistan, prompting retaliatory airstrikes, border closures, mass deportations, and collapsed mediation efforts. These developments have exposed the limitations of Pakistan's historical "strategic depth" doctrine, transforming what was once envisioned as a defensive asset into a source of acute domestic insecurity and diplomatic isolation. The cycle of mutual accusations Islamabad blaming Kabul for tolerating or enabling TTP operations, and the Afghan Taliban decrying Pakistani violations of sovereignty has entrenched a zero-sum logic that undermines any prospect of genuine reconciliation without fundamental concessions on both sides.

Sustainable improvement in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations demands pragmatic, incremental steps that address root causes rather than symptoms. Both governments must prioritize confidence-building measures, including joint border management commissions, verifiable

action against cross-border militant sanctuaries, and the resumption of high-level dialogue insulated from immediate security crises. Economic incentives reopening trade corridors, facilitating refugee returns with dignity, and cooperating on narcotics interdiction could create mutual stakes in stability, while third-party mediators such as Qatar, Turkey, or even China could facilitate de-escalation when bilateral channels fail. Failure to break this deadlock risks not only continued bloodshed along the Durand Line but also broader regional consequences: empowered transnational jihadist networks, humanitarian deterioration, disrupted connectivity projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and intensified great-power rivalries involving India, the United States, Iran, and others. Ultimately, the frontier between Afghanistan and Pakistan will remain a source of instability until both nations recognize that interdependence, rather than domination or denial, offers the only viable path to mutual security and prosperity in an increasingly multipolar and contested region.

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