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Afghanistan After the U.S. Withdrawal: Implications for Pakistan and South Asian Regional Security

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Abstract

The withdrawal of the United States and NATO forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 fundamentally altered the strategic and security environment of South Asia. Rather than producing the anticipated stabilization of Afghanistan and a reduction in regional insecurity, the post-withdrawal period has generated a complex security dilemma between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Taliban's return to power created expectations in Islamabad that the new authorities in Kabul would prevent Afghan territory from being used against Pakistan, particularly by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). These expectations have increasingly been frustrated by the persistence of militant sanctuaries, cross-border attacks, border confrontations and political disagreements. The problem has been compounded by the emergence of Baloch insurgent networks, including the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), as an additional concern in Pakistan's western security environment. Pakistan maintains that militant leadership and networks operate from Afghan territory, whereas the Afghan Taliban repeatedly deny providing sanctuary or permitting anti-Pakistan operations.

This article examines the post-U.S.-withdrawal Afghan security environment and its implications for Pakistan and wider South Asian regional security. It argues that the central problem is not simply the existence of militant organizations but the emergence of an unresolved cross-border security dilemma in which militant mobility, disputed border management, diplomatic mistrust, border closures, refugee repatriation and retaliatory military actions mutually reinforce one another. The article further argues that Pakistan's attempts at diplomatic engagement, negotiations, border management and counterterrorism cooperation have so far failed to generate a sustainable security arrangement. The resulting instability has implications beyond bilateral relations, affecting regional connectivity, CPEC, trade with Central Asia, refugee governance and the broader security architecture of South Asia. The article concludes that durable stability requires Kabul to provide verifiable assurances against the use of Afghan territory for attacks on neighboring states, while Pakistan must combine calibrated security measures with sustained diplomacy, humanitarian safeguards and regional multilateral engagement.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, Pakistan, TTP, BLA, Taliban, border security, terrorism, South Asian security, refugees, regional stability*

1. Introduction

The withdrawal of United States and NATO forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 represented one of the most consequential geopolitical developments in contemporary South Asian politics. The Taliban's rapid return to Kabul ended two decades of Western military intervention and created a new strategic reality in which Afghanistan became governed by a Taliban administration without a conventional foreign military presence. For Pakistan, the development initially appeared to offer an opportunity for a more manageable western frontier. Islamabad had long argued that the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan constituted a major source of instability and had hoped that a Taliban government would be more responsive to Pakistan's security concerns.

The post-withdrawal reality, however, proved considerably more complicated. Instead of eliminating the security dilemma, the Taliban's return produced new tensions between Islamabad and Kabul. Pakistan increasingly confronted attacks attributed to the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), while Kabul repeatedly rejected Pakistani accusations that Afghan territory was being used for attacks against Pakistan. The resulting disagreement has moved beyond diplomatic rhetoric into border clashes, temporary closure of major crossings, disruption of bilateral commerce, retaliatory military operations and deterioration in political relations.

The United Nations Security Council's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team provides particularly important independent evidence in this context. Its sixteenth report stated that TTP had conducted numerous high-profile attacks in Pakistan from Afghan soil and concluded that the Taliban authorities' assertion that terrorist organizations do not operate from Afghan territory was not credible. The report further identified the TTP issue as the most significant short-term threat to the stability of the Taliban authorities themselves.

For Pakistan, the problem is not confined to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The western security environment increasingly encompasses Balochistan, where the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and other Baloch insurgent organizations have conducted increasingly sophisticated attacks. The Baloch insurgency has its own historical, political and socioeconomic roots and should not simply be reduced to external sponsorship. Nevertheless, Pakistan has repeatedly expressed concern about cross-border facilitation and militant networks operating from neighbouring territory. The BLA's increasing operational sophistication has also acquired regional significance because attacks have targeted state institutions, security personnel and projects associated with Chinese investment and CPEC.

The consequences therefore extend beyond the bilateral Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship. Afghanistan occupies a critical geographic position between South Asia and Central Asia. Instability along its borders affects regional connectivity, trade, migration, counterterrorism cooperation and the security calculations of China, Iran, India, Russia and the Central Asian states. Pakistan's western border is consequently not simply a bilateral frontier; it is part of a wider regional security system.

This article examines these developments through a security-oriented International Relations perspective. It focuses particularly on the use or alleged use of Afghan territory by militant organizations, the TTP's post-2021 resurgence, the Baloch insurgency, Pakistan-Afghanistan

border confrontations, closure of Chaman and other crossings, refugee repatriation and Islamabad's efforts to address the problem through diplomacy and security measures. The central argument is that Afghanistan after the U.S. withdrawal has generated a cross-border security dilemma in which the persistence of militant sanctuaries, Afghan denial, Pakistani counterterrorism responses, border restrictions, economic disruption and population displacement have become mutually reinforcing sources of regional insecurity.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The article draws primarily upon Realism and the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). Realism emphasizes the centrality of state survival, territorial integrity and security in an international system lacking an overarching authority capable of guaranteeing state security. From this perspective, Pakistan's concern regarding militant organizations operating from neighbouring territory is fundamentally a national-security problem.

At the same time, the Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship cannot be adequately explained through conventional interstate rivalry alone. Regional Security Complex Theory is particularly useful because it conceptualizes security as relational and geographically interconnected. Security developments in one state can directly affect neighbouring states because threats move across borders through migration, insurgency, terrorism, economic disruption and political instability.

The Afghan situation illustrates this logic. Instability within Afghanistan does not remain geographically confined to Afghanistan. Militant organizations can exploit porous borders, ideological networks, ethnic linkages, refugee movements and weak state capacity. Similarly, Pakistan's military response, border fencing, border closures and refugee policies influence Afghanistan's political and economic environment.

A further analytical dimension is the concept of the security dilemma. Pakistan's efforts to protect its territory through border controls, military pressure and counterterrorism operations are interpreted by Kabul as hostile actions. Conversely, Kabul's reluctance or inability to take visible action against anti-Pakistan militants is interpreted in Islamabad as evidence of tolerance or support. Each side therefore interprets the other's actions through a framework of mistrust.

The problem is therefore institutional as well as military. Without a mutually accepted mechanism for verification and enforcement, competing narratives become increasingly difficult to reconcile.

3. Afghanistan After the U.S. Withdrawal

The U.S. withdrawal transformed Afghanistan's strategic environment in three important ways. First, it removed the principal external military actor that had dominated Afghan security for two decades. Second, it returned the Taliban to effective control over the Afghan state. Third, it created an environment in which numerous militant organizations continued to operate within Afghanistan.

The Taliban have achieved a degree of internal consolidation. The UN Security Council monitoring mechanism has noted the consolidation of Taliban control and the existence of a degree of internal stability. At the same time, the same UN assessment highlights the continued presence of terrorist organizations and considers Taliban claims that no terrorist groups operate from Afghan territory to be unconvincing.

This distinction is important. Afghanistan under the Taliban is not equivalent to Afghanistan during the period of fragmented civil war. The Taliban have considerably greater territorial control and coercive capacity than most previous Afghan governments. The question is therefore increasingly one of political will, organizational relationships and selective enforcement, rather than simply the absence of state authority.

For Pakistan, this creates an uncomfortable strategic paradox. A strong Taliban government theoretically possesses greater capacity to control Afghan territory, yet the existence of historical ideological and organizational connections between elements of the Afghan Taliban and TTP complicates Kabul's willingness to take decisive action against the latter. The Taliban's relationship with the TTP is therefore central to understanding the post-withdrawal crisis.

4. TTP and the Afghan Sanctuary Problem

The TTP represents the most direct security challenge to Pakistan emanating from Afghanistan. Established in 2007, the organization developed as an umbrella network of Pakistani militant factions and subsequently became one of the principal militant threats to the Pakistani state.

The Taliban's return to power provided the TTP with a dramatically improved strategic environment. Pakistan's central concern is that TTP leadership, fighters and support networks have operated from Afghan territory and have used that environment to plan or facilitate attacks against Pakistan.

This is no longer merely an allegation made by Islamabad. The UN Security Council Monitoring Team's 2025 assessment specifically stated that TTP had conducted numerous attacks in Pakistan from Afghan soil. It also concluded that the Taliban authorities' broad denial concerning terrorist groups operating from Afghan territory was not credible.

The issue is complicated by the relationship between the Afghan Taliban and TTP. Although the two organizations are distinct, they share ideological, historical and organizational connections. During the war against the United States, Pakistani militants and Afghan Taliban elements interacted extensively. The Taliban's victory consequently altered the psychological and strategic balance in favour of the TTP.

Pakistan initially sought to resolve the problem through dialogue rather than immediate confrontation. Several rounds of negotiations and mediation efforts were attempted, reflecting Islamabad's preference for avoiding a direct confrontation with the Taliban authorities. However, the failure to establish a sustainable arrangement demonstrated the limitations of relying solely on political assurances.

The critical problem has been verification. Islamabad wants concrete and demonstrable action against TTP leadership and infrastructure. Kabul has generally rejected the characterization of Afghanistan as a sanctuary for anti-Pakistan terrorism. In such circumstances, negotiations become trapped in a cycle in which Pakistan demands action, Afghanistan rejects the premise of the demand and militant violence subsequently reinforces Pakistan's original concerns.

5. Balochistan and the BLA Dimension

The security implications of Afghanistan's post-withdrawal environment are not limited to TTP activity. Pakistan's Balochistan province has experienced a serious resurgence of separatist militancy, particularly involving the Balochistan Liberation Army and related organizations.

The Baloch insurgency must be approached carefully. It has deep domestic roots involving political alienation, perceptions of economic exclusion, centre-province tensions, governance problems and competing interpretations of Baloch political identity. An academically credible analysis should therefore avoid reducing the insurgency exclusively to external sponsorship. At the same time, the regional dimension cannot be ignored. The BLA has demonstrated an increasingly sophisticated capacity for coordinated attacks, suicide operations and attacks against infrastructure and Chinese interests. Research from the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point has identified the growing operational sophistication of BLA factions and their implications for Pakistan's internal and regional security.

Pakistan has repeatedly alleged that some Baloch militants obtain support, facilitation or sanctuary beyond Pakistan's borders. Kabul has rejected accusations that Afghanistan is being used systematically against Pakistan. The evidentiary picture concerning BLA networks is more contested than that concerning TTP and therefore claims concerning BLA leadership or operational bases in Afghanistan should be treated cautiously unless independently verified.

Nevertheless, the simultaneous presence of TTP-related concerns in the northwest and Baloch insurgency in the southwest creates a strategic problem for Pakistan. The country's western frontier can no longer be conceptualized as a single security theatre. Instead, it consists of interconnected but distinct security challenges stretching from the former FATA/Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region through Balochistan.

This has particular significance for CPEC. Gwadar, western Balochistan and the routes linking Pakistan with China and Afghanistan possess both economic and strategic importance. As argued elsewhere, CPEC has increasingly become part of a broader regional security environment rather than merely an economic project (Magray et al., 2026a). The persistence of militancy in Balochistan therefore affects not only Pakistani internal security but also Chinese strategic calculations and regional connectivity.

6. Border Stand-Off and the Durand Line Question

The Pakistan-Afghanistan border has historically been politically contentious. Afghanistan has periodically questioned the legitimacy of the Durand Line, while Pakistan regards it as an established international border.

The Taliban's return to power did not eliminate this dispute. Instead, border-management disagreements increasingly became intertwined with counterterrorism concerns. Pakistan's efforts to strengthen border controls and fencing have frequently generated resistance from Afghan forces and local communities.

The border is therefore simultaneously a territorial, political, security and economic issue.

The deterioration became particularly visible during 2025, when Pakistan and Afghan forces engaged in serious exchanges of fire. In October 2025, armed clashes resulted in the closure of Pakistan's major crossings with Afghanistan, including Torkham and Chaman, as well as several smaller crossings. Reuters reported that the escalation followed exchanges of fire between the two sides and that Pakistan accused the Taliban administration of harbouring TTP militants, an accusation Kabul denied.

The significance of these confrontations extends beyond the immediate military dimension. Border clashes undermine the assumption that Pakistan and Afghanistan can manage their disagreements through diplomatic channels alone. They also increase the probability that a militant incident will produce an interstate confrontation.

The December 2025 exchange of fire near Chaman further demonstrated the fragility of the ceasefire arrangements. Both sides blamed each other for initiating the confrontation, illustrating how deeply mistrust had become embedded in bilateral relations. The border has thus become a manifestation of the wider security dilemma.

7. Chaman, Torkham and the Weaponization of Connectivity

Border crossings are not merely economic gateways. In the Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship, they have increasingly become instruments of political and security policy.

Chaman and Torkham are particularly important because they facilitate trade, migration and humanitarian movement. Their closure therefore imposes economic costs on both sides. Pakistan's western provinces are affected through disrupted commerce and transportation, while Afghanistan, being landlocked, depends heavily upon neighbouring states for external trade.

The October 2025 crisis demonstrated this vulnerability. Pakistan closed Torkham, Chaman and several smaller crossings following border clashes.

The subsequent disruption affected traders, transporters and border communities. Reporting in early 2026 described prolonged disruption of commercial activity and significant economic consequences for communities dependent upon cross-border trade.

The economic dimension creates an important policy dilemma for Islamabad. Continued border closure can impose costs on militant networks by restricting movement and logistical access, but it can simultaneously harm legitimate commerce and border populations. Afghanistan can also seek alternative routes through Iran or Central Asia, reducing Pakistan's traditional geographic leverage.

Consequently, the long-term strategic value of border closure is questionable unless it is combined with an effective political and security mechanism.

The more sustainable approach is therefore conditional connectivity: trade and transit should remain available where security conditions are met, while specific crossings can be temporarily restricted in response to verified security threats.

8. Pakistan's Counterterrorism Response

Pakistan has repeatedly argued that diplomatic engagement is preferable to permanent confrontation with Afghanistan. Islamabad's policy since 2021 has therefore combined diplomacy, border management, negotiations and counterterrorism operations.

However, the persistence of attacks has progressively narrowed Pakistan's policy options.

The Pakistani state has conducted counterterrorism operations against militant networks inside the country and has increasingly emphasized the need to eliminate external sanctuaries. Where Pakistan believes that militant organizations are preparing attacks from Afghan territory, Islamabad has also demonstrated a willingness to undertake direct military action.

Such action represents a major escalation because it violates the conventional expectation that disagreements will remain within diplomatic boundaries. It also carries significant risks, including civilian casualties, Afghan retaliation, nationalist mobilization and the possibility of prolonged interstate confrontation.

The escalation during 2025 demonstrated this danger. Reuters reported that Pakistan-Afghanistan tensions intensified following alleged Pakistani strikes in Afghanistan and

retaliatory Afghan action, with both sides subsequently entering a cycle of accusations and military confrontation.

From Pakistan's perspective, the argument is straightforward: a state cannot indefinitely tolerate attacks originating from another state's territory. From Kabul's perspective, however, Pakistani military action constitutes a violation of sovereignty.

The strategic problem is therefore not simply whether Pakistan has the capability to strike militant targets. It is whether military action can produce a sustainable change in Afghan behaviour.

Military action may suppress an immediate threat, but without a political mechanism for preventing the reconstitution of militant networks, the security dilemma remains.

9. Afghanistan's Denial and the Crisis of Verification

One of the defining characteristics of the Pakistan-Afghanistan security dispute is the persistence of mutual denial.

Pakistan maintains that TTP leadership and networks are located in Afghanistan. Afghan authorities reject the allegation and argue that Pakistan's internal security problems should not be attributed to Afghanistan.

The UN Monitoring Team's assessment is particularly significant because it challenges the credibility of the blanket denial while simultaneously demonstrating the complexity of the Afghan militant environment.

The central problem is therefore a verification deficit.

Neither side trusts the other's intelligence assessments. Pakistan believes that Kabul has sufficient information and influence to act against TTP but lacks the political will to do so. Kabul argues that Pakistan exaggerates Afghan involvement and uses security allegations to justify pressure against Afghanistan.

A durable bilateral mechanism should therefore focus less on competing public narratives and more on verifiable evidence.

An independent or jointly supervised monitoring mechanism could investigate specific allegations, track cross-border militant incidents and establish agreed procedures for addressing suspected militant infrastructure. Such a mechanism would not eliminate disagreement, but it could prevent every incident from immediately becoming a bilateral crisis.

10. Refugee Repatriation and the Security-Humanitarian Dilemma

Afghan refugee movements constitute another major dimension of the post-withdrawal relationship.

Pakistan has hosted millions of Afghans over several decades. The refugee population has created extensive social, economic and humanitarian linkages between the two countries. At the same time, Pakistan argues that prolonged undocumented migration creates governance, security and economic challenges.

The Pakistani policy of repatriation intensified after 2023 and expanded considerably during 2025. UNHCR reported that more than one million Afghans returned from Pakistan during 2025.

By the end of 2025, UNHCR and IOM data indicated very large cumulative return movements from Pakistan and other neighbouring states. UNHCR estimated that Afghanistan experienced approximately 2.9 million returns during 2025 from different

neighbouring countries, reflecting changes in documentation policies, economic conditions and migration pressures.

Pakistan's security argument cannot simply be dismissed. States have legitimate interests in regulating borders and determining who enters and remains within their territory. However, repatriation policy also carries humanitarian and strategic consequences.

Large-scale return movements can increase pressure on Afghanistan's already fragile economy and social services. They can also create grievances that militant organizations may exploit.

The refugee question should therefore be separated from counterterrorism wherever possible. Individuals suspected of terrorism should be dealt with through lawful security and judicial mechanisms, while vulnerable refugees should be protected from collective punishment. This distinction is essential for Pakistan's international credibility as well as regional stability.

11. Implications for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

The most immediate domestic consequence of Afghanistan's instability has been experienced in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

The province's geographic proximity to Afghanistan, tribal and ethnic linkages, difficult terrain and historical militant networks make it particularly vulnerable to cross-border insecurity. The resurgence of TTP activity has placed significant pressure on provincial law-enforcement agencies and security institutions.

The post-2021 environment differs from earlier periods because the TTP now operates in the shadow of a Taliban government in Kabul. This changes the strategic calculations of both militants and Pakistan.

For the TTP, the Taliban victory provides ideological inspiration and strategic depth. For Pakistan, the same development means that the group may have greater access to a neighbouring territory controlled by a government ideologically closer to it than the previous Afghan government.

This creates a serious security dilemma for Islamabad.

The danger is that persistent violence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa may become normalized. If attacks become sufficiently frequent, they can affect investment, tourism, education, local governance and public confidence.

The problem is therefore broader than counterterrorism. It is a question of provincial stability and state legitimacy.

12. Implications for Balochistan and CPEC

Balochistan presents a different but equally important security challenge.

The province connects Pakistan to Afghanistan, Iran, the Arabian Sea and Central Asia. Its geographic importance has increased because of Gwadar and CPEC.

Consequently, instability in Balochistan has consequences beyond Pakistan's internal security. Attacks on Chinese citizens and CPEC-linked infrastructure can influence Chinese perceptions of Pakistan's security environment and affect the pace of investment.

Magray et al. (2026a) argue that CPEC has evolved into a broader geopolitical and geoeconomic framework linking Pakistan's domestic security with regional connectivity. This argument is especially relevant to Afghanistan because an unstable Afghanistan can obstruct the realization of Pakistan's aspiration to connect China, Central Asia, Afghanistan and the Arabian Sea through a secure regional network.

The interaction between terrorism and geoeconomics is therefore becoming increasingly important.

A secure western frontier is necessary for Pakistan's transformation from a geographically constrained state into a regional connectivity hub. Conversely, persistent instability reduces Pakistan's ability to exploit its geographic advantages.

13. Implications for South Asian Regional Security

The Afghanistan-Pakistan security crisis has consequences for the broader South Asian regional order.

First, it contributes to the militarization of Pakistan's western frontier. Pakistan must allocate increasing resources to counterterrorism and border security, potentially reducing resources available for economic and developmental priorities.

Second, it complicates Pakistan's relations with India. Islamabad has repeatedly accused hostile external actors of exploiting Afghan territory to destabilize Pakistan, while India rejects such accusations. The resulting triangular dynamic adds another layer of strategic mistrust to South Asian politics.

Third, instability threatens regional connectivity. Pakistan's location provides a potential bridge between China, Central Asia, Afghanistan and the Arabian Sea. Persistent insecurity along the western frontier weakens this potential.

Fourth, instability creates opportunities for transnational militant organizations. The UN has noted the continued presence of multiple terrorist organizations in Afghanistan, including ISIL-K, al-Qaeda and TTP.

Fifth, prolonged Pakistan-Afghanistan confrontation could contribute to a broader regional arms and security dilemma. Iran, China, Russia and Central Asian states all have interests in preventing Afghanistan from again becoming a centre of transnational militancy.

Afghanistan's security problem is therefore increasingly a regional security problem rather than a purely domestic Afghan issue.

14. Pakistan's Diplomatic Strategy: From Bilateral Engagement to Regional Diplomacy

Pakistan's experience after 2021 demonstrates the limitations of a predominantly bilateral approach.

Islamabad has repeatedly engaged Kabul diplomatically and attempted to use political dialogue to address TTP-related concerns. Yet bilateral talks have struggled because the parties disagree about the basic factual premise of the dispute.

Pakistan argues that militant sanctuaries exist. Kabul denies this. Pakistan demands action. Kabul demands an end to Pakistani military operations.

Pakistan argues that military action is a response to cross-border terrorism. Kabul describes it as aggression against Afghan sovereignty.

The resulting diplomatic deadlock suggests that a wider regional framework is necessary.

China, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Iran and the Central Asian states all possess different degrees of influence and interest in Afghan stability. A regional mechanism could establish common expectations regarding terrorism, border security, refugee protection and economic connectivity. Pakistan should therefore move from bilateral crisis management toward multilateral security diplomacy. This would also reduce the perception that Pakistan's Afghan policy is solely security-driven.

15. Toward a Sustainable Pakistan-Afghanistan Security Framework

A sustainable framework should rest on five principles.

First, Afghanistan must provide verifiable assurances that its territory will not be used for terrorism against neighbouring states. General statements of denial are insufficient. Verification is essential.

Second, Pakistan should continue strengthening border security but avoid allowing border management to become a permanent substitute for diplomacy. Border controls should facilitate legitimate movement and trade while preventing militant infiltration.

Third, both countries should establish a permanent Pakistan-Afghanistan counterterrorism communication mechanism capable of investigating specific incidents and exchanging information.

Fourth, refugee repatriation should remain orderly, documented and humanitarian. Pakistan has legitimate security and sovereignty interests, but collective treatment of refugees should be avoided.

Fifth, economic connectivity should be protected. Chaman and Torkham should not become permanent casualties of political disputes. Trade can become an incentive for cooperation if it is separated from militant politics.

The objective should not be an unrealistic normalization of relations overnight. Rather, the immediate objective should be to prevent the security relationship from moving from militant confrontation to interstate conflict.

16. Conclusion

Afghanistan after the U.S. withdrawal has generated a new and increasingly complex security environment for Pakistan and South Asia. The Taliban's return to power initially created expectations that Afghanistan would become a more predictable neighbour for Pakistan. Instead, the relationship has progressively deteriorated because of the resurgence of TTP violence, disagreements concerning militant sanctuaries, border confrontations, trade disruptions, refugee repatriation and competing interpretations of sovereignty.

The most important finding of this study is that the Pakistan-Afghanistan crisis cannot be explained through a single variable. TTP activity is the immediate security problem, but the broader crisis is generated by the interaction of militancy, border politics, mistrust, economic interdependence and population movements.

The evidence concerning TTP is particularly significant. The UN Security Council Monitoring Team has identified attacks conducted by TTP from Afghan territory and questioned the credibility of the Taliban's blanket denial regarding terrorist groups operating from Afghanistan. This provides an important basis for understanding Pakistan's increasingly assertive security policy.

At the same time, Pakistan's military responses carry risks. Cross-border strikes and prolonged border closures may address immediate threats but can also deepen Afghan nationalism, produce civilian suffering, disrupt trade and make diplomatic reconciliation more difficult. Military power can therefore be an instrument of deterrence, but it cannot substitute for a political settlement.

The Balochistan dimension further demonstrates that Pakistan's western security environment has become interconnected. The BLA insurgency has domestic roots that require political and socioeconomic responses, but its growing operational sophistication and alleged external linkages have increased the regional security implications. CPEC and

Gwadar make the stability of Balochistan particularly important for Pakistan-China relations and regional connectivity.

The refugee issue presents another challenge. Pakistan's concerns regarding undocumented migration and national security are legitimate, but mass repatriation must be balanced against humanitarian obligations. UNHCR's documentation of more than one million Afghan returns from Pakistan in 2025 demonstrates the magnitude of the transformation.

Ultimately, Pakistan faces a strategic choice between an escalating security confrontation and a more structured regional security strategy. The latter is preferable. Pakistan should maintain credible counterterrorism capabilities while simultaneously pursuing sustained diplomacy, regional engagement and institutionalized verification mechanisms.

For Afghanistan, the long-term strategic interest also lies in preventing its territory from becoming a source of insecurity for neighbouring states. International legitimacy, economic connectivity and regional integration will remain difficult to achieve if neighbouring states continue to perceive Afghanistan as a sanctuary for hostile militant organizations.

The post-U.S.-withdrawal period therefore represents not merely the end of America's Afghan war but the beginning of a new phase in South Asian security politics. The central challenge is to prevent Afghanistan from becoming once again a source of transnational insecurity while preserving the possibility of regional connectivity and cooperation. A stable Afghanistan is ultimately in Pakistan's interest; equally, a stable Pakistan is indispensable to Afghanistan's economic survival and regional integration. The security of the two states is therefore increasingly interdependent, even when their political relations remain deeply antagonistic.

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