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From Cooperation to Conflict: Key Challenges shaping Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations

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ABSTRACT

The relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have shifted radically from cautious cooperation to protected confrontation especially after the Taliban reasserted their power in Afghanistan in August, 2021. Even with strong historical, ethnic and cultural interconnections, the bilateral relations are currently characterized by growing lack of trust, cross border terrorism, narcotics production, diplomatic breakdown, having close relation with India and economic disruption. This study focuses on the changing nature of the relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan through the lens of major security, political, economy and humanitarian issues that are defining the current stage of their interaction. A mixed-method design, which involved both the analysis of empirical data on terrorism, trade, narcotics trafficking, and refugee flows, and the use of qualitative research of the policy documents and official statements, the study can identify the key factor in worsening the relationships the resurgence of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its central role in this cross-border militancy. It also examines the consequences of border conflict and lack of resolutions, informal networks of trade and smuggling, mass deportation of the Afghans and how Afghanistan is increasingly engaged in more diplomatic activities with India. The analysis indicates that militarized reactions and reactive policies have not led to sustainable stability on the contrary they have intensified insecurity in the region and human suffering. The study suggests that unless the counter-terrorism is coordinated, systematic economic interaction and legitimate diplomatic processes, then the relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan will be reduced to the same cycle of wars, which are threatening regional peace and security in South and Central Asia.

Keywords: Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations, Terrorism, TTP, Border Security, Refugee Crisis, Cross-Border Trade, Taliban, IEA, Regional Security

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan- Afghanistan relations are among the most complicated and significant bilateral processes in South Asia. Although, these two countries are bound by strong ethnic, cultural, and religious ties yet their relationship has been characterized by mistrust, unresolved border issues and security interests since Pakistan gained independence in 1947, divided by a porous border that is 2,611 kilometers long (Idrees, 2024). The months that followed the IEA return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 have seen the most significant decline in bilateral relations ever, shifting from cautious collaboration to over hostility and military conflict.

The most severe border violence between Pakistan and Afghanistan was witnessed in October 2025 when skirmishes had turned into an open-scale clash. Pakistan Army also stated that 200 Afghan and TTP troops were killed, 23 Pakistani troops died and 29 were wounded during the cross-border firing (Orion Policy Institute, 2025). This was a military standoff, headed by Qatar and Turkey, which led to a weak ceasefire that is still being challenged by constant tensions.

The study will explore the history of the development of relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan, the analysis of the current issues with the use of empirical data and statistics, and the evaluation of possible options to achieve a stable peace and partnership. The research is also highly timely in the light of the humanitarian crisis that afflicted millions of Afghans, the security consequences of the regional stability, and the financial cost of prolonged bilateral tensions.

Problem Statement

The relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan has reached a critical stage mark by deep mistrust, violence, and the closure of diplomatic channels. In 2024, Pakistan became the second-most terrorism-impacted nation on the planet, and the amount of terrorism-related fatalities increased by 45 percent 748 in 2023 and 1,081 in 2024, with over 1,099 terrorist attacks, -the first time to cross the 1,000 threshold (Global Terrorism Index, 2025). One of the primary sources of this decline is the security threat posed by the Afghan soil and especially the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which has been rated as the fastest-growing terrorist group in 2025, with a growth of 90 per cent in the number of people killed by its attacks (Orion Policy Institute, 2025). These security issues have been devastating trust and collaboration between the two neighbors.

Scope of the Study

The study critically discusses some of the thematic aspects such as cross-border terrorism, narcotics production and trafficking, informal trade and smuggling networks, border management and crossing operations, the repatriation of Afghan refugee, India-Afghanistan relations and their implications to Pakistan, the role of anti-Pakistan militant groups, diplomatic tensions and blame-game politics, and the role of social media on the feeling of the people. The geographical area of the study

is the border areas of Pakistan-Afghanistan specifically, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan in Pakistan and the neighboring eastern and southern provinces in Afghan land. In its methodology, it combines quantitative analysis (terrorism data, trade statistics, number of refugees, etc.) with qualitative analysis of policy documents, official statements and evaluations of experts.

Historical Context

Afghanistan was the only state to cast the vote against the first perceptions of Pakistan joining the United Nations even though it later reneged on the negative vote in October 1947. This initial hostility was due to the Pashtun problem where Kabul did not accept the Durand Line as the international boundary. In 1952, the Afghan government led by King Zahir Shah had started extending assistance to Pashtun nationalist groups in Pakistan and had in that year, printed a tract claiming Pashtun-majority areas of the northwestern and southwestern regions of Pakistan.

This took a new course with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. As a country receiving millions of Afghan refugees, Pakistan came to play a leading role in the cold war as a conduit of western and Arab aid to Afghan mujahedin. This time period provided the intelligence agencies of Pakistan with strong working relationships with different factions of the Afghans, which would significantly influence how things would work in the future.

Challenges

The IEA Takeover and Deteriorating Relations (2021-Present)

Pakistan was initially pleased to see the Taliban restored to power with the thinking that it has strategic depth against India and can collaborate against the TTP. These expectations however, turned out to be disastrous. The Taliban that tookover Afghanistan in 2021 was expected to provide Pakistan with strategic depth against India since they were the former proxies of Islamabad. Contrary to hopes, the Taliban have grown closer diplomatically to India than to Pakistan (The Diplomat, 2025).

The relationship fell very fast because of a number of factors. First, the Afghan Taliban were reluctant to act against the TTP despite repeated Pakistani demands. A 2024 UN report indicates the TTP is the largest terrorist organization in Afghanistan that is sponsored by the Taliban government to launch cross-border attacks in Pakistan with the total number of TTP fighters in Afghanistan ranging between 6,000 and 6,500 (PRIF Blog, 2025). Second, Afghanistan's persistent refusal to recognize the Durand Line created constant friction. In reaction to aerial assaults, the Afghan Defense Ministry claimed that they had assaulted a number of points above the so-called hypothetical line because Afghanistan does not acknowledge the Durand Line that was drawn by the colonial British between the two states (PRIF Blog, 2025).

Cross-Border Terrorism: The TTP Threat

Tehrik Taliban Pakistan (TTP) pose threat to the security of Pakistan and the leading cause of the bilateral conflicts. The data is alarming: the TTP was the deadliest terrorist organization in Pakistan in 2024, responsible for 52% of all terrorism-related deaths. In 2024, the outlawed outfit made 482 attacks that resulted

in the death of 558 people. Last year, the attacks organized by the group were doubled and the number of deaths was also increased in the same year by 90 percent (The News International, 2025). It is the highest recorded count of attacks carried out by the TTP in 2024 and the mortality rate caused by the organization was the highest since 2011.

In addition, the 2024 alone witnessed 25 border crossings and confrontations along the Pak-Afghan border that led to 143 deaths, with 136 militant deaths and seven security personnel deaths (Pakistan Security Report 2024). These attacks caused 520 people to die and 633 more to be injured in Pakistan with the main militant groups being the TTP, local Taliban groups, including Hafiz Gul Bahadur group and Lashkar-e-Islam, and the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-KP).

Pakistani military spokesperson Lt Gen Ahmad Sharif Chaudhry reported that Pakistan eliminated 2,597 militants last year, compared to 1,053 the year before. It was also reported that the number of militant attacks in the country was 5,397, which is much higher than the 3,014 attacks in 2024 (ABC News, 2025). He has also stated that in 2025, almost all significant attacks within Pakistan involved Afghan nationals.

TTP tactics have evolved, with armed assaults now causing close to 72 percent of all deaths. Moreover, the number of bombings is three times higher than the data of the last year, which indicates that the transition is to more aggressive and destructive approaches (Swarajya, 2025). Security forces are the major target with the police personnel taking 51 percent and the military personnel taking another large share and the civilian population has also increased with 19 percent of the total deaths.

Narcotics: The Drug Economy Challenge

The fact that Afghanistan is the major opium producer in the world poses colossal challenges to Pakistan. Afghanistan produces over 80% of the world's opium, and opiates constitute more than 90% of illicit drugs in some global markets (Daily Times, 2025). Narcotics trade persistently thrives via stores and the production of synthetic drugs even though the Taliban has banned opium in 2022.

The closeness of Pakistan to Afghanistan makes the country very susceptible to the adverse impacts of drug traffic by its western frontier. In Pakistan, this is because it is a victim and transit state with an estimated 40% of smuggled Afghan-based drugs going through it (Daily Times, 2025). The opium to synthetic drug conversion is now more of a challenge as production of methamphetamine drugs has soared up in Afghanistan.

Besides production, Methamphetamine seizure in and around Afghanistan continued to be 50 percent higher by late 2024 than in 2023. Every year, Methamphetamine production and trade coming out of Afghanistan are on the rise (Pakistan Observer, 2025). The manufacturing plants of methamphetamine have become a regular occurrence in Afghanistan, and especially those regions located near borders.

The losses in revenue are so high. The wholesale price of opium, sold by Pakistan to UNODC, increased by 2021 to 270, and in 2023, the price was reported

to be 400 per kilogram. The prices of heroin in Pakistan also rose to approximately higher than 2,200 in 2021 to a figure of more than 3,600 in 2023 (UNODC, 2025). The war on drugs in Pakistan is ongoing. The Pakistani governments used the Poppy Eradication Campaign-2024/2025 to arrest and send back 110 Afghan nationals that illegally entered the country and were directly engaged in the poppy farming within Pakistan (Pakistan Observer, 2025).

Informal Trade and Smuggling

The smuggling of goods and the informal economy are huge amounts of revenue that Pakistan is losing and weakening its official trade relations. In an estimate made by the Policy Research Institute of Market Economies (PRIME) in A report by the Policy Research Institute of Market Economies (PRIME) estimates annual losses at Rs. 3.4 trillion roughly 26% of the annual tax target, and the estimate is based on 123 billion informal economy (The Express Tribune, 2025).

The Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) has been abused in an organized way. Revenue loss from the misuse of the APTTA is estimated at approximately one trillion rupees (Pro Kerala, 2025). The smuggling activities are complex and extensive.

In the estimation, about 5 million dollars are smuggled across the border of Pakistan-Afghanistan daily (The Khorasan Diary, 2023). The volume has grown tremendously over the years with the customs officials accepting the fact that the major routes are well guarded but the pedestrian points are being used into making illegal flows. Transit trade brought about a level of smuggling which hit 63 percent and the smuggling gone through the roof, increasing to 2.287 billion to 3.731 billion (The Khorasan Diary, 2023). Some of the very popular products that are smuggled are petroleum products, vehicles, electronics, pharmaceuticals, and consumer goods.

The economic impact is indicated by the trade statistics. In 2024, Pakistan had an exports value of \$1.24 billion to Afghanistan with the growth of 7.55 percent annually over the past five years with Afghanistan registering a surplus of trade value with Pakistan amounting to 900 million dollars in 2024 (ISSRA, 2025). Nonetheless, the potential bilateral trade is so huge and untapped. Pakistan Customs stated that Kabul increased goods exports to Pakistan by crossing the border in the 2024-25 fiscal year by exporting goods of up to Rs170 billion. More than 70 percent of the shipments have been through Torkham border, then a fifth of it through Ghulam Khan (The Express Tribune, 2025).

Afghanistan's Growing Relations with India under IEA Regime

Kabul's rapprochement with New Delhi marks a significant strategic shift, altering the South Asian strategic triangle. In October 2025, the most senior Taliban official to visit India, the Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi, came to the country, the first such leader to do so since the group regained power in Afghanistan in 2021 (Chatham House, 2025).

In this historic visit, several agreements have been reached. In their joint declaration, New Delhi and the Taliban declared to keep in close contact and proceed with frequent engagement. The Afghan leaders also welcomed the Indian firms to invest in the mining industry in Afghanistan (Al Jazeera, 2025). India

declared that it was to improve its technical mission in Kabul to the rank of an embassy which had been closed four years before. The foreign policy has been pluralistic. In May 2024, the Taliban appointed an envoy at New Delhi and a consul general acting at Mumbai. Muttaqi sat with the Indian foreign secretary Vikram Misri to discuss it in Dubai (ECPR, 2025). In Pahalgam, Indian-controlled Kashmir, the Taliban also criticized the April 2025 attack which India claimed had been planned by Pakistan.

Infrastructure and connectivity have been of major concern. India declared the commencement of air freight route on Delhi-Kabul route and Amritsar-Kabul route and also the resumption of air cargo services. Both parties further declared that they would be dispatching trade attaches in Delhi and Kabul, respectively (The Geopolitics, 2025). The Trump Administration has granted a six-month waiver on the Chabahar Port, to India, with effect of October 29, 2025, which is important to India to access Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Pakistan has responded fiercely to this. Shehbaz Sharif, the Prime Minister of Pakistan has accused India of inciting the Afghanistan Taliban, and Khawaja Muhammad Asif, the Defence Minister, has accused Kabul of being the proxy of India (NUS ISAS, 2025). To Pakistan officials, the actions of Afghanistan on the occasion of the visit by the Muttaqi to India, which coincided with military confrontations between the two countries, should be defined as provocative.

Repatriation of Afghan Refugees

Since September 15, 2023 to November 29, 2025, Pakistan has already repatriated 1.7 million Afghans (Wikipedia, 2025). The United Nations estimated the number of Afghans in Pakistan at 3.8 million when the deportation order was declared in October 2023, when the Pakistani authorities estimated that it was 4.4 million.

It has been an unprecedented scale of deportation of 2025. Iran and Pakistan have illegally displaced over 2.6 million individuals to Afghanistan in 2025, and nearly 60 percent of the displaced have been women and children (Amnesty International, 2025). The dis-aggregation indicates that there are about 1.8 million Afghans deported out of Iran and 930,000 out of Pakistan in 2025, which is 62 percent more deportations than that of the previous year. In addition to hundreds of thousands more who have since returned since the Taliban takeover and the Government taking in January 2025 an Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan, since January 1, 2025, over 300,000 Afghans have been returned since January 1, 2025, in Pakistan alone (OHCHR, 2025).

In the year 2025, the number of Afghans who were arrested numerically increased by eleven times than the previous year. By January 1, 2025, to November 8, 2025, at least 100,971 Afghans were detained compared to 9,066 Afghans arrested between January 1, 2024, and November 8, 2024.

The step-by-step policy of Pakistan was aimed at various categories. The initial stage was aimed at Afghanistan nationals who had not been registered. The second step started on April 1, 2025, and involved deporting approximately 800,000 Afghan Citizen Cards (ACC) holders. The third stage will cover at least 1.4 million

Afghan refugees with the Proof of Registration (PoR) cards that will expire on June 30, 2025 (Amnesty International Canada, 2025).

Anti-Pakistan Organizations: TTP, BLA, and BLF

Other militant groups are also outside the TTP that bring a great threat to the security of Pakistan and complicate the relations with Afghanistan. Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) have escalated insurgency efforts, and have been said to seek refuge in Afghanistan.

BLA and other groups of this nature stepped up the number of attacks to 504 in 2024 and 388 with deaths rising four times to 88 in 2023. In the year 2024, the BLA took the credit of the most devastating terror attack when a suicide bomber killed at least 25 civilians and soldiers at the Quetta railway station.

The complexity of the activities of the BLA has grown. At least 74 individuals, among them 14 soldiers, were killed in a wave of attacks on August 26, 2024, in Baluchistan that the BLA took responsibility of. On November 9, 2024, BLA-aligned Majeed Brigade declared its involvement in the suicide bombing of the Quetta railway station resulting in the deaths of at least 31 people. Between March 11 and 12, 2025, BLA rebels hijacked a train named Jaffar Express where they killed at least 59 individuals and took hundreds of people as hostages. During a sequence of altercations by the Pakistani military, 346 hostages were released and all the 33 rebels were killed.

Pakistan has been making cross border attacks against these groups. In response, on January 18, 2024, Pakistan launched attacks on the Baloch separatist leadership in Iran on Sarvan in the Sistan and Baluchistan province. The Pakistani Foreign Affairs ministry reported that firing hideouts of the BLA and BLF were hit and destroyed (Wikipedia, 2025). The BLF has also been active. On November 12 to 13, 2024 the Baloch Raji Aajoi Sangar (BRAS), comprising of BLF and BLA-Jadhran, directly reported 45 attacks in 42 locations in Baluchistan. In March 27–30, 2025, the coalition alleged 88 attacks in various locations to Baluchistan (Combating Terrorism Center, 2025).

Economic Instability in Afghanistan

Afghanistan's prolonged economic instability has severely limited its capacity to participate in meaningful regional trade and economic cooperation. Decades of war, destruction of infrastructure, lack of industrial development, and the freezing of international aid have weakened state institutions and reduced employment opportunities. As a result, Afghanistan remains heavily dependent on foreign assistance and informal economic activities, making it difficult to build sustainable trade relations with neighboring countries, including Pakistan.

This economic weakness has direct spillover effects on Pakistan, particularly in the form of large-scale migration. Due to poverty, unemployment, and lack of basic services, many Afghans are forced to seek refuge across the border in Pakistan. While Pakistan has provided shelter on humanitarian grounds, the continuous inflow of refugees places pressure on its economy, public services, housing, and job markets. This situation also complicates border management and strains Pakistan's limited resources.

Moreover, economic instability in Afghanistan contributes to insecurity in the region. Poverty and lack of opportunities create conditions in which extremist groups, smuggling networks, and criminal activities can thrive. Cross-border militancy, illegal trade, and drug trafficking increase security challenges for Pakistan, forcing it to spend more on border control and internal security. Thus, Afghanistan's fragile economy not only hampers bilateral cooperation but also poses serious economic and security concerns for Pakistan.

Findings

Security Crisis

The security environment in Pakistan deteriorated in the most catastrophic way, and the number of terrorist-related deaths rose by 45 per cent between 748 in 2023 and 1,081 in 2024, placing it second on the list of countries that are most affected by terrorism internationally (Global Terrorism Index, 2025). The TTP became the most rapidly growing terrorist organization in the world, with 482 attacks and 558 victims in 2024, which is 90 percent more deaths than in the year before. The fact that most of the TTP violence was concentrated in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa where 96 percent of the group attacks have been carried out indicates that the group has strategically exploited the location of the province to Afghanistan (Swarajya, 2025).

Militant Sanctuaries

It has been repeatedly shown that 6,000-6,500 TTP fighters work with the support or even the toleration of Taliban on the territory of Afghanistan (PRIF Blog, 2025). The unwillingness of the Afghan Taliban to initiate a decisive action against the TTP, even after being requested to do so by Pakistan, is the key contributor to the bilateral tensions. The military retaliation of Pakistan, which left 2,597 militants dead in 2025, has wrongly not been able to curb the cross-border terrorism, implying that military measures cannot be used to resolve the crisis (ABC News, 2025).

Economic Devastation

Repetitive border closures and diplomatic tensions reduced bilateral trade by up to 5 billion dollars to less than 1 billion dollars because of these measures (Wikipedia, 2025). Pakistani traders lost an estimated 15 million in October November 2025 and Afghan traders lost 500 000 a day due to the 50-day shutdown of major crossings (Al Jazeera, 2025). Smuggling and informal trade which were estimated to take off close to Rs3.4 trillion a year (26 percent of the tax target in the two countries) weakens the economies of both countries and emboldens the criminal networks (The Express Tribune, 2025).

Narcotics Proliferation

The fact that Afghanistan produces 40 percent of all drugs in the world and 40 percent of the drugs that originate in Afghanistan are passed through Pakistan generates a colossal problem (Daily Times, 2025). The development of methamphetamine production at the expense of opium, as the seizures doubled in the end of 2024 compared to 2023, is a changing threat that needs new strategies of

counteractions (Pakistan Observer, 2025). The fact that the wholesale cost of opium and heroin in Pakistan is on the rise is a sign that the demand remains strong despite interdiction (UNODC, 2025).

India-Afghanistan Rapprochement

The development of an Afghan diplomatic bond with India, in the form of the October 2025 visit by the Foreign Minister, Muttaqi, to New Delhi, fundamentally changed how regional powers were calculating (Chatham House, 2025). The increase of the technical mission to the embassy level in Kabul, the creation of airfreight routes, and the development of the trade relationship between India and Afghanistan (positive balance of \$331.3 million in 2023-2024) is an indication of a fundamental geopolitical realignment (The Diplomat, 2025). The Taliban was expected to provide strategic depth against India, which turned out to be disastrous to Pakistan.

Border Management Failure

The failure to successfully control border crossing points especially the most important Torkham and Chaman routes, reflects on underlying governance and trusting shortages (Daily Sabah, 2025). Border construction, control over the Durand Line, and mutual border violations have again and again led to military conflicts, such as the October of 2025 military conflicts that resulted in the death of 23 Pakistani soldiers and an estimated 200 Afghanistan and TTP fighters (Orion Policy Institute, 2025).

Diplomatic Breakdown

The inexistence of efficient diplomatic tools to handle conflicts has enabled the tactical events to develop into strategic crisis. Qatari and Turkish mediation became crucial to the peaceful agreements, even temporary ones, and the failure of bilateral channels became apparent (Wikipedia, 2025). The war of the social media and incendiary pronouncements by the authorities on both parties have made public opinion toxic and a compromise politically expensive on the part of leaders.

Human Smuggling Networks

Motivated by the high percentage of irregular Asian-Pacific arrivals, over 40 percent of whom are Afghans, in 2024, the advanced trafficking systems of Afghan and Pakistani migrants to Europe are indicative of the desperation of populations and the inefficiency of legal migration pathways (UN News, 2025). The human cost is deadly as demonstrated by tragic events such as the boat disaster in January 2025 that claimed the lives of 86 individuals (44 Pakistanis) and the rising number of cases of torture and extortion by the traffickers (Business Recorder, 2025).

All of these developments prove the fact that the relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have fallen into the crisis of unprecedented crisis of military conflict and military confrontation, economic crisis and the humanitarian disaster and diplomatic stalemate. A combination of several overlapping crises such as terrorism, narcotics trafficking, refugee movements, disruption of trade and external power rivalry results in a web of problems that cannot easily be solved. This decline has now gone through rapid speed following the Taliban re-gaining power in 2021, which has baffled the strategy of Pakistan and has left the two nations in poorer

position than it was under the preceding regime in Kabul.

CONCLUSION

The history of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations is an example of how historical bitterness, boundary conflicts, and changing regional affiliations can quickly turn the relationship of weak collaboration into a conflict form of hostility. Another characteristic of the post-2021 period is an unprecedented globalization of security challenges in cross-border terrorism, militant sanctuaries, drug trafficking, and the escalation of insurgent violence to a level that has seriously damaged mutual trust. At the same time, the recurring border shutdowns, breakdown of the official trading systems, and widespread deportations of refugees have cost both societies a lot in terms of economic and humanistic terms. Failure of bilateral diplomatic channels to cope with the crisis has made the situation even tensed and the tactical incidences turned into strategic confrontation with the regional wider scale implications.

In spite of this decay, the research highlights that Pakistan and Afghanistan are still structurally interdependent in terms of security, trade, and made up of regional links. Coercive actions are not enough to bring sustainable stability and it should be formed in a holistic structure that incorporates verifiable and cooperative aspects of counter-terrorism, adequate border control, controlled trade, and compassionate policies towards refugees. The restoration of trust will be based on long-term diplomatic interactions that will rely on the support of neutral mediation and institutionalized conflict-management systems. Devoid of such a change to the much-needed collaborative problem-solving, the perpetuation of hostile policies will lead to the long-term instability, and the outcomes will go beyond the bilateral relationships to the security architecture of South and Central Asia.

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