



IMPLICATIONS ON REGIONAL STABILITY AFTER USA WITHDRAWAL

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Abstract

A major shift in the geopolitical dynamics and regional security of South and Central Asia occurred with the United States' of America withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021. By examining the effects of the U.S. exit on security, diplomacy, and regional power politics. This article investigates the consequences for regional stability. It examines the rebirth of terrorism, the refugee and humanitarian crises, and the shifting strategic objectives of key regional players, such as Pakistan, China, Iran, and Russia. The article also evaluates the difficulties in Pak-Afghan relations and Pakistan's changing foreign policy. The results show that the withdrawal increased security risks, political unpredictability, and humanitarian difficulties while also opening doors for further regional engagement. The study comes to the conclusion that effective counterterrorism cooperation, coordinated diplomatic efforts, humanitarian aid, and the creation of an inclusive and stable political order in Afghanistan are all necessary for long-term regional stability.

Key Words:

Geopolitical Dynamics, Withdrawal, Strategic Objectives, Foreign Policy, Regional engagement

INTRODUCTION

A major turning point for both Afghanistan and the larger regional dynamics in South Asia was the United States of America exit from the state in 2021. This incident has changed the geo-political environment and the strategic planning of surrounding states, with significant ramifications for regional stability. For regional actors, the abrupt void left by the USA withdrawal has produced a complicated web of possibilities and difficulties that need them to reevaluate their foreign policy, security plans, and economic partnerships. With an emphasis on the contacts and reactions of significant South Asian states including Pakistan, India, China, and Iran, this article explores the complex effects of the USA departure from Afghanistan on regional stability. It looks at the changes in power dynamics, the formation of new rivals and alliances, and the effects on economic cooperation and counterterrorism initiatives. Afghanistan saw severe domestic unrest immediately following the evacuation, and the Taliban quickly took over. In addition to impacting Afghanistan's internal stability, this change in power has repercussions for the whole region. At the vanguard of this transformation are states like Pakistan, which has a long and porous border with Afghanistan. They must manage their ties with the Taliban and the international community while also dealing with security issues and refugee inflows. This article, which emphasizes the interdependence of security, diplomatic, and economic interests among the regional actors, seeks to offer a thorough understanding of how the USA departure from Afghanistan has redefined regional stability in South Asia by examining these components. Policymakers,



academics, and other interested parties need to use this information to navigate the dynamic geo-political environment and develop measures that advance cooperation and stability in the area.

The political, economic, and security dynamics in South and Central Asia, as well as regional stability, have been greatly impacted by the USA withdrawal from Afghanistan. First, the Taliban has risen to power again and is in charge of Afghanistan as a result of the power vacuum left by the pullout. This has sparked worries about the resurgence of extremist organizations and the possibility that Afghanistan would once more serve as a shelter for foreign terrorists, endangering regional security (Amnesty International, 2023).

Pakistan and other neighboring states deal with challenging issues. Pakistan is concerned about the spread of violence and the emergence of extremist organizations within its borders, notwithstanding its historical links to the Taliban. The situation is exacerbated by the surge of Afghan refugees, adding to the economic and social strains on Pakistan and other surrounding states.

The security, politics, and economy of South and Central Asia were all impacted by the USA departure from Afghanistan in August 2021. The following are some major ramifications:

1. Regional Power Competition

The end of the West's almost two decades long presence in the war-torn country was signaled by the disorganized departure of USA and NATO soldiers from Afghanistan. Now that the Taliban is in charge of Afghanistan once more, other countries that have strained relations with the West or are seen as its adversaries are competing to take over. Some have predicted that the region of Central and South Asia would become a center of anti-Western sentiment as a result of the geo-political realignment.

The next phase of the major game, which alludes to the 19th century fight between major powers for control over Afghanistan, a strategically placed country in the center of Asia, might see the alliance of Russia, China, Pakistan, and Iran, according to some commentators. However, some contend that under the new global order, Tehran, Beijing, Islamabad, and Moscow are all just trying to forward their own agendas (Synovitz, 2021).

2. Terrorism

The USA withdrawal is likely to strengthen extremist and terrorist organizations, who would interpret it as an obvious win. The USA previous setbacks in Afghanistan and Iraq offer insight into the effects of withdrawal on September 11th. By the end of 2016, the former President Obama had pledged to remove all American forces from Afghanistan; nevertheless, the Taliban were encouraged by this deadline. Similarly Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was able to get control of Mosul three years later, in 2014, thanks to the hurried departure of USA forces from Iraq. Under each scenario, hard won victories in the war against terrorism were damaged by miscalculation drawdown. If the United States of America is unable to get vital human intelligence, surveillance, and direct action capabilities, it could be unable to properly monitor the expansionist activities of different terror organizations in Afghanistan. There is a serious possibility that the Islamic State or an invigorated Al-Qaeda may regroup and threaten people in Afghanistan, neighboring states, and the West.

The Taliban gave Al-Qaeda shelter before the USA got involved in Afghanistan in 2001. Al-Qaeda used the sanctuary to set up jihadi training camps across the country. Al-Qaeda's pre-9/11 power has been eroded by Western troops' relentless counterterrorism efforts. The group has showed its tenacity and determined to launch strikes against the USA.



Since 2015, the Pakistani Taliban have backed Al-Qaeda as an ally, and a large portion of the organization's top leadership is located in Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda is still politically united and has a considerable capacity for weaponry. It can also organize in a number of important national regions. Despite having committed to terminate connections with terrorist groups in last year's agreement, the Taliban have maintained a tight contact with Al-Qaeda and would likely increase ties following withdrawal of Western forces.

Al-Qaeda was provided with sanctuary by the Taliban prior to America's involvement in Afghanistan in 2001. Al-Qaeda established terrorist training centers all around the country using the refuge. The unrelenting counterterrorism operations of Western forces have degraded Al-Qaeda's pre-9/11 dominance. The organization has shown resilience, though, and they remain committed to attacking the West, especially the USA. The majority of Al-Qaeda's top leadership has been stationed in Afghanistan since 2015, and the organization is supported by the Pakistani Taliban, the Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and other powerful Asian armed groups. Al-Qaeda still maintains a strong political unity and a sizable arsenal of weapons. It has the ability to organize in several significant national regions. The Taliban have had close relations with Al-Qaeda despite their commitment last years to cut off ties with terrorist organizations, and it is probable that they would deepen those ties after Western soldiers go (Synovitz, 2021).

3. Refugees Crisis

One of the main causes of the millions of global displacements is conflict. Due to violence and war, refugees arrive in host states in a fragile mental condition and leave their resources behind. The majority of refugees seek sanctuary by traveling to the closest state. As a result, there are challenges for the refugees and ramifications for the host countries, which must make concessions by accepting a significant number of migrants (Brenner & Wallin, 2021).

After more than 40 years of bloodshed and instability, an estimated 28.3 million Afghans a third of the nation's population, including women and children need humanitarian relief and protection. With almost 1.6 million Afghans having left their state since 2021, currently, 8.2 million Afghans reside in the neighboring countries, making it one of the greatest protected refugee situations globally. Nearly forty years of conflict, natural calamities, continuous poverty, and erratic food supply, the Covid-19 pandemic, and, most recently, a change in political power have all befallen Afghanistan. Before the Taliban took control of Kabul in August 2021, there was a great deal of instability and murder in Afghanistan, which led to a rise in suffering and the displacement of people. Afghans are the world's third-largest displaced population, after refugees from Syria and Ukraine. As of 2023, there were at least 8.2 million Afghans living in 103 different states. Most of them have been in the region for a long time; they are mostly citizens of Pakistan and Iran. Women and children make up more than 70% of individuals who want assistance (Brenner & Wallin, 2021).

The majority of Afghan refugees do not travel to the West. Pakistan's 1,640-mile land border with Afghanistan has long allowed it to accept the largest number of Afghan refugees, despite not being a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol. After the Mujahideen's arrival in 1979 and the Soviet invasion of their state, 1.5 million Afghans were forced to flee their homeland in less than two years. By 1986, about five million Afghans had fled to Pakistan and Iran. Since March 2002, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has facilitated the repatriation of about 3.2 million Afghans. However,



due to ongoing violence, unemployment, and political upheaval in Afghanistan, the UN stated in April 2021 that over 1.4 million Afghan refugees were in Pakistan. Iran is a key host country for Afghan refugees, with around 800,000 registered and at least two million unregistered. In comparison, there are somewhat less Afghan refugees and asylum seekers in India (15,689), Indonesia (7,692), and Malaysia (2,478). Turkey is the state that hosts the most Syrian refugees, with over 3.8 million of them registered. In Turkey, there are 116,000 Afghans seeking asylum and 980 Afghan refugees who are officially registered (Brenner & Wallin, 2021).

Afghans in the neighboring host states are facing more and more difficult circumstances. The region's economic status has declined, there are far less options for a living, and natural and climate related calamities are occurring more frequently and with greater severity. Inflation has reached all-time highs in Iran and Pakistan, driving up the price of essential products and services as well as rent. All of this continues to have a disproportionately negative impact on Afghan refugees, repatriates, and asylum seekers, as well as the host communities that graciously provide housing for them.

Since 2021, approximately 1.6 million Afghans have migrated to nearby states, severely taxing the host nations, which are home to over 8 million Afghans. The Islamic Republic of Iran officially became the second largest refugee host state in the world in 2023, with a population of at least 3.4 million refugees and people in situations similar to that of refugees, after adding 2.6 million "headcounted" Afghans, including over 1 million who arrived since 2021. There are 4.5 million Afghans living in Iran.

Iran made its universal health and education policies available to all Afghan nationals living in the country. Afghans continue to enter Iran covertly through unofficial border crossing points, despite the fact that borders are officially blocked to anybody attempting to seek refuge and are only available to those with proper passports or visas. Only holders of current passports and visas are permitted access into Pakistan through the Torkham border. In contrast, only those with valid visas are permitted to enter Central Asia. More than 1.4 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) have made the decision to go back to their original locations in Afghanistan (Anwar et al., 2021).

Pakistan is the only state who endures largest burden of Afghan refugees. Here are some implications on Pakistani society which faces by Afghan refugees.

a. **Economic Impacts:**

Afghan immigrants brought with them a competition for resources, including land, water, food, and property, which the local population soon began to battle over. This created a rift between the people living in the Pakistani provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and Balochistan, which were home to a large number of refugees, and the refugees themselves. The need for resources, education, energy, transportation, and jobs among refugees expanded over decades, it further enraged the people living in the two provinces.

KPK and Balochistan, two impoverished regions, have also reported human rights violations, and the Afghan exodus has severely hindered the locals' capacity to achieve their economic objectives. The rights of the impoverished and those who depend on monthly payments are violated by the economic acts of refugees, even when they may benefit a particular class of people or an entire country. Since the market is driven by profit and favors cheap labor for its financial interests, refugees' labor has an impact on local laborers. Another factor contributing to inflation is the



presence of refugees, as their presence quickens consumer demand for goods. As resource demand rises, so will commodity prices. Although the market benefits from these operations, the residents suffer from inflation, which fuels their resentment of one another.

The fact that most Afghan businessmen operate in several Pakistani locations without submitting taxes is another source of economic problems. For instance, these dealers did not pay taxes even though they made billions. Such measures not only burdened local tax payers and companies, but they also had a detrimental effect on the expansion of revenue collection (Anwar et al., 2021).

b. **Social Impacts**

Refugees have an influence on people' life in two ways: directly and indirectly. When migrants come from similar cultural backgrounds, their neighbors are more understanding and ready to provide them a place to live. For example, in Yugoslavia, people welcomed nearly 400,000 migrants into their homes just out of ethnic pride. Conflicts of interest can cause a lot of problems when immigrants have different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The native Baloch community in Balochistan sees immigration as a danger to the region's demographic equilibrium. It is believed by them that a significant number of refugees have gotten Computerized National Identity Cards (CNICs) and assumed Pakistani identities, thereby endangering their majority status. Consequently, they think that the arrival of migrants might lead to a demographic change that would reduce the Baloch population in the region to a minority.

The arrival of Afghan refugees in Pakistan resulted in an increase in terrorism, crime, ransom ware killings, prostitution, child labor, drug trafficking, and alcoholism, among other social ills. An estimate is that youngsters, who start working at the age of five or seven, make up 25% of Pakistan's labor force. The majority of these kids are from families that emigrated from Afghanistan. Afghan youngsters labor at hotels as car wash attendants, boot polishers, and other jobs. Owing to substandard living circumstances, youngsters put in over sixteen hours of work per day. Additionally, terrorist groups in the area use young kids by brainwashing them into suicide bombers or utilizing them as facilitators.

The increase in crime and interethnic strife brought on by Afghan immigration was another societal problem. During the Afghan War, Pakistan gained access to Kalashnikov culture. In order to further their financial interests, refugees began importing illegal firearms into Pakistan from Afghanistan, which fueled interethnic and tribal conflicts and raised the country's crime rate. 481,948 crimes were recorded to have been perpetrated between 1981 and 1991, with 361,461 of those crimes being committed by refugees (Anwar et al., 2021).

c. **Political Impacts:**

Political and security effects make up the third main consequence. It mostly hurts the host country, as the presence of refugees poses serious security risks. The political loyalty of refugees to their mother state creates instability in the host state, much as what occurs in Pakistan. During the Afghan battle against the USA, Afghans living in Pakistan actively took part in anti-state actions and directly supported the Taliban movement against the Soviet Union. Conflict, chaos, and terrorism resulted from this, and the host state and the surrounding area became



unstable as a result of the refugees' actions. Millions of people have experienced internal migration within Pakistan as a result of this vile war on terrorism, which has mostly hit the provinces of Balochistan, KPK, and tribal areas. Numerous individuals were compelled to escape their homes as hospitals and schools were bombed, as well as establishments in tribal areas (Anwar et al., 2021).

d. **Environment Impacts:**

The influx of Afghans into Pakistan created a toxic environment that facilitated the spread of numerous diseases. Poliomyelitis, for example, spread from border regions to other parts of the country, particularly to the provinces of Balochistan and KPK. Moreover, the migration of Afghan refugees to Pakistan's north is a major factor in the country's inability to eradicate the disease, as millions of these refugees are unable to receive vaccinations due to their migration. The country's continuous cross-border migration from Afghanistan is the main source of polio infections, with border regions accounting for the majority of cases of polio in Pakistan.

Sustainably reanimation will be negatively impacted in the long run by refugees' lack of access to resources such as food, fuel, water, land, and shelter. Soil erosion and declining soil fertility are the two primary environmental problems associated with migration. The environment is further strained by the clearance of woods and the hunting and scavenging of refugees for food. Moreover, disposing of human waste improperly can contaminate ground water and cause a number of diseases. Over three million migrant shave harmed Pakistan's roads and rivers. For shelter and food preparation, large amounts of wood are needed to build camps.

Pakistan has been a refugee the country for about thirty years, during that period, the camps have been turned into settlements, and as time goes on, the country's forest resources are under pressure. Near their camp, the almost two million animals that the Afghan refugees brought with them were grazing. Families relied on foraging to satisfy their basic needs, which resulted in soil deterioration and overgrazing. The loss of feed and the burning of fuel also seriously jeopardize the ecosystem's capacity to replenish its groundwater reserves (Anwar et al., 2021).

The Taliban and Pakistan: How Much Will It Cost to Win?

Pakistan was the neighbor of Afghanistan in the area that embraced the Taliban takeover the most fervently. The day after the Taliban came in Kabul, Pakistan's Prime Minister, Imran Khan, stated that the Afghans had finally "broken the shackles of slavery". Undoubtedly, Pakistan would have preferred that the Taliban be included in a government that has both financial and international credibility in order to be reintegrated into Afghan institutions. However, in many respects, the terrorist group's effective takeover of Kabul was the result of a strategy that Pakistan had been implementing since the USA led invasion in 2001. After giving Taliban leaders refuge and safe havens for many years, Pakistan was prepared to reap the rewards of its 20 years of involvement and assistance in August 2021 (Filippo, 2022).

The Taliban's victory in Kabul was especially noteworthy because of Pakistan's contentious relations with the elected governments of Afghanistan. Whichever political party has ruled on either side of the Durand Line, the relationship between the consecutive Pakistani governments and their counterparts in Kabul has always been difficult and marked by mistrust. The most recent instance of mutual mistrust occurred in mid-July 2021 when the



prime minister of Pakistan angrily refuted former Afghan President Ghani's accusations that Pakistan was playing a "negative role in the Afghan conflict." With India, Pakistan's principal adversary, in a weaker position, having the Taliban in power seemed like the best course of action from a strategic standpoint. However, immediately after the Taliban took power, worries about the Taliban regime's legitimacy abroad, Pakistan's real power over the Taliban, and the internal fallout from Afghanistan's instability began to surface in Islamabad.

Pakistan has made it plain that it supports the Taliban administration, even if it has not recognized it. Notably, Islamabad has undertaken a diplomatic campaign to secure international and regional legitimacy for the newly established Kabul administration. In his speech to the UN general assembly in September 2021, Imran Khan stated that there was "only one way to go." The existing administration has to be stabilized and strengthened. Furthermore, Pakistan has granted visas to diplomats nominated by the Taliban to take the place of those employed by the former government. Additionally, Islamabad has made an effort to persuade Western countries that using incentives rather than coercion will be more successful in modifying Taliban behavior. Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi advised attempting "new approaches" to communicate with the Taliban and seek recognition in an Associated Press interview. He also warned that "the international world needs to realize: What's the alternative? Which choices are available? This is how things actually are (Filippo, 2022).

17th Extraordinary Session of Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM)

The OIC Council of Foreign Ministers held its Extraordinary Session in Islamabad, Pakistan, on December 19, 2021, with a focus on the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

Approximately twenty foreign ministers and ten deputy foreign ministers from various Muslim states were present at the National Assembly Hall for the 17th Extraordinary Session. Seventy delegates were attended the historic meeting, which is being hosted by Pakistan and called by Saudi Arabia in its capacity as OIC chair, to review the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. Pakistan's foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi was presiding over the meeting, which began with the reading of passages from the Holy Quran. Given the mounting global worry about the humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan and the pressing need to find a resolution, the OIC emergency session is very important. In addition to OIC members and observers, additional invited parties include the UN system, international and regional organizations, International Financial Institutions (IFIs), and not on the OIC members such as the UN Permanent member countries, the European Union, and further important countries like Germany and Japan. PM Khan would give a keynote speech at the opening session to emphasize the circumstances and call attention to the rapidly worsening situation in Afghanistan. In addition to OIC Summit Chair Hissein Brahim Taha, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, the chair of the Extraordinary Session, and Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal Bin Farhan Al-Saud would also speak (*Daily Times*, 2021).

Foreign Minister Qureshi stated that his country has been drawing attention to Afghanistan's dire humanitarian and economic conditions during a meeting with the country's foreign minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, in Islamabad. According to Qureshi, Pakistan has been making an effort to bring attention to Afghanistan's mounting need for financial support ever since the Taliban took control in mid-August. In order to provide a briefing on Afghanistan to the foreign ministers attended the 17th extraordinary summit of the OIC, Muttaqi is in Islamabad. The minister asked for progress and stated that Pakistan would use the summit to



encourage the international community not to make the same mistakes it did in the past in Afghanistan. As part of its efforts to assist its Afghan brothers and sisters, Pakistan also hosted the emergency OIC session. In reference to the Rs 5 billion assistance package for Afghanistan, Pakistan has planned for food, medication, and 50,000 metric tons of wheat for the people of Afghanistan. Muttaqi expressed gratitude to Qureshi for his kind invitation to the OIC summit and for his kind reception upon his arrival in Islamabad (Shah, 2021).

China and Afghanistan: Analyzing the 2021 Diplomatic Approach

The assault on China's interests in Pakistan that was recently addressed exemplifies the potential hazards that Afghanistan's instability may pose to China's foreign and domestic policy. More generally, China believes that an unstable Afghanistan might have a substantial impact on its own internal security in Xinjiang. China's concerns over the security of its western border are reflected in the situation in Pakistan. Beijing's primary worry is that the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) won't be able to plan assaults against China's mainland thanks to Afghanistan. In the subsequent part of 2021, there were allegedly between 200 and 700 fighters from the ETIM and TIP operating in Afghanistan, according to a report written by the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team for the UN Security Council. Along with calling for a "return to Xinjiang for jihad," These organizations were "active in military training and in planning terrorist attacks against Chinese interests," the report added" and "Members of ETIM/TIP regularly visited the Wakhan corridor." China has taken two linked actions to allay these worries: first, Officials from China have had direct conversations with the leadership of the Taliban; second, China has stepped up regional collaboration with Pakistan and the Central Asian Republics (CARs) (Filippo, 2022).

First, Hu Xijin, the editor-in-chief of the Global Times, stated China's stance on the Taliban in a piece published in the middle of July. Hu stated that China did not want to be enemies with the Taliban since the organization was of enormous significance to China's capacity to exercise influence in Afghanistan and keeping peace in Xinjiang. The second-in-command of the Taliban, Abdul Ghani Baradar, led a team that visited the Tianjin Municipality in north China on July 28th, 2021, where they met with Wang Yi, China's foreign minister. Wang sent a very clear message to the Taliban: break all links with terrorist organizations, including the ETIM. China made this message in the hopes of using its economic might something the Taliban strongly prized during their period of international isolation. We welcome them, to quote a well-known Taliban official, [China]. Of course, we guarantee their security if they have investments. We are quite concerned about their safety. The Taliban spokesperson, Zabiullah Mujahid, announced the new government's intention to join the CPEC at the beginning of September. China, for its part, committed to providing Afghanistan with humanitarian help worth US\$31 million, which would include grains, winter supplies, vaccinations, and medications. A flurry of editorials and news reports emerged in international media in the weeks after the Taliban took power, suggesting that China was willing to support Afghanistan financially and include the nation in the Belt Road Initiative (BRI). By the last of 2021, this was still unfulfilled. As we have just watched, China has been approaching Afghanistan with extreme caution; any kind of financial support will unavoidably be conditional on assurances from the newly elected Kabul administration that measures taken to meet China's security interests (Filippo, 2022).

Second, China has actively cooperated with its neighbors in addition to its bilateral interaction with the Taliban leadership to keep an eye on the changing circumstances in



Afghanistan over Pakistan; the objectives of the two countries over Afghanistan have been tightly coordinated. Beijing and Islamabad are both concerned about safeguarding CPEC investments and are apprehensive about possible instability arising from Afghanistan. Security was a top priority during the Pakistani Foreign Minister's July 2021 visit to China, as evidenced by the fact that the Director General (DG) ISI accompanied the Ministers. A spokesman for China's foreign ministry stated that the both countries talked about strengthening their counterterrorism and security collaboration as well as guaranteeing the safety of Chinese citizens, Initiatives and associations in Pakistan during the visit (Filippo, 2022).

Regarding the Central Asian Republics, July 2021 saw the commencement of a high-profile week-long travel by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, which included stops in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Because it is home to a Chinese military outpost at the Afghan-Tajik border as well as a Russian military facility, the latter in particular continues to be a crucial state in terms of security. Reports in October 2021 indicated that Tajikistan had accepted the building of a new Chinese funded facility close to its border with Afghanistan, indicating the significance of the state in China's regional calculations. China views the Afghan situation primarily via the security stability nexus. Beijing has been extremely careful in its dealings with Afghanistan to date, even as it has increased its contact with the Taliban and with neighboring states (Filippo, 2022).

Engagement to Contain between Russia and the Taliban

Similarly, Pakistan and China, Russia's primary goals in Afghanistan are to stop terrorist strikes against Russia by Afghan based militant groups and to stop instability spreading from Afghanistan to neighboring CAR's. Russia has taken a two pronged approach to counteract the instability that the first few months of the Taliban administration brought about: first, Second, Moscow has strengthened its relations to Pakistan while also engaging with the new Taliban leadership.

First, a Taliban envoy traveled to Moscow to allay Russian fears as the insurgent group's control looked near. During the meeting, Zamir Kabulov, the Russian envoy, emphasized the need to prevent tensions from escalating outside of Afghanistan and stated that the Taliban had assured him that they would neither cross the boundaries of Central Asia nor allow their territory to be used for strikes against Russia. Russia is now taking advantage from the Taliban's years-long involvement through backdoor routes in the hopes that these unofficial connections may develop into some kind of political and economic collaboration. The Taliban's desire to allow Russia to use natural resources of Afghanistan was cited by Dmitry Zhirnov, the Russian ambassador to Afghanistan.

Second, Russia is stepping up its security cooperation with Pakistan in Afghanistan. President Vladimir Putin of Russia talked with the Prime Minister of Pakistan over the phone in the days that followed the Taliban's comeback to power. As stated in the official release, "both bilateral and multilateral approaches to the Afghan issue would have coordinated." Analysts analyzed the decision's importance, calling it a "defining moment" in the history of ties between Pakistan and Russia and the first ever implicit recognition that Russia has come to rely on Pakistan to achieve its interests.

The development of the Islamabad-Moscow axis began in 2011, when high profile bilateral visits by both military and civilian officials led to an intensification of interactions. The two states linked a defense accord in 2014, and in 2016 they conducted joint military drills known as "Druzhba 2016" (Friendship 2016). These exercises have been held yearly



ever since. In general, Pakistan is seen by Russia as a vital backchannel to the Taliban and believes that fortifying its ties with Islamabad would have beneficial to security (Khan, 2023).

USA Withdrawal and the Future of Pak-Afghan Relations

Beginning in 2014, the USA and its NATO allies began to withdraw their soldiers from Afghanistan, and by the end of 2021, they had done so completely. Pakistan, which has been a vital partner of the NATO forces in the War of Terror (WoT) and a major transit route for NATO supplies throughout that war, was deeply impacted by the pullout. Pakistan has to develop a proactive and strategic foreign policy to protect its interests as it adapts to the region's changing dynamics. Pakistan has always maintained cordial ties with its neighbors, particularly Afghanistan, through its foreign policy. But the withdrawal of NATO has changed the security landscape in the area, which affects Pakistan both favorably and unfavorably. Positively, it has given Pakistan more chances to deepen its political and economic connections with Afghanistan in order to advance stability and peace in the area. However, it has also raised the possibility of terrorism and security risks from militant organizations active in the area, such as the TTP's terrorist attacks in KPK and Balochistan the cross border offensive on the western front.

After two years of the Taliban's provisional control over Afghanistan, Pakistan's initial joy in having a cordial government in Kabul has given way to a more sober understanding of the political and security risks it presents. The Taliban regime's resistance to accepting the Durand Line as an international border, their ongoing cross-border attacks, their safe havens, and Pakistan's refusal to recognize them diplomatically. The issue of refugees, and the sporadic border closures and flare-ups have all contributed to the ongoing tensions between Islamabad and Kabul. Even with growing strain, the relationships haven't entirely broken down. The TTP's cross-border attacks and safe havens in Afghanistan are the primary factors undermining the two-way partnership. After assembling militants in the districts of Kunar and Nuristan, the TTP launched a huge raid in Chitral to take control of many villages, escalating tensions to a breaking point. Even though the onslaught was repelled, it took Pakistani security personnel many days to clean the area. Islamabad claims that TTP has been given operational leeway to plan and carry out cross-border assaults by the Taliban, who are providing it with refugee and favors. Sadly, Pakistan's efforts to block extremist movements and assaults across its porous border with Afghanistan have not been successful. It is important to note that the TTP seeks spiritual guidance from Haibatullah Akhundzada, the Supreme Leader of the Taliban, and swears loyalty to him. Following the USA withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Taliban has also divided its presence in Pakistan into nine "shadow provinces," seven ministries, and two military zones, reorganizing its organizational structure following the lines of the Taliban's insurgency model. Pakistan has requested that the Taliban government either surrender the group's leaders and fighters or fulfill its responsibilities under the 2020 Doha Agreement by eliminating the TTP's presence in Afghanistan. The Taliban government, however, disputes the TTP's existence in Afghanistan and refers to it as a domestic issue in Pakistan. According to the Taliban, Pakistan's shortcomings in internal security are not their fault. Furthermore, they have declined to acknowledge Pakistan as a signatory to the Doha Agreement. The Taliban have responded strongly to the unilateral move, even though it is unclear if Pakistan has the infrastructure and logistical capacity to deport this many migrants. According to Pakistan, 14 out of the 24 suicide strikes that occurred there in 2023 were carried out by people from Afghanistan. Pakistan's crackdown on



unregistered Afghan refugees and its subsequent forced departure would exacerbate already fragile ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Tensions between Islamabad and Kabul have also been exacerbated by Pakistan's unwillingness to formally recognize the Taliban government. In addition to housing the Taliban's top leadership in Balochistan throughout the insurgency, Pakistan assisted the group in negotiating the withdrawal agreement with the USA that cleared the path for its resurgence. The Taliban anticipated diplomatic recognition from Pakistan right away. Nonetheless, Islamabad has maintained its stance in line with the international community's strategy of not recognizing the Taliban regime in the absence of an inclusive, ethnically and politically diverse government, ensuring that women and girls have equal access to education and employment, and stopping terrorists from using Afghan land to carry out attacks on other nations. Regretfully, since the Taliban took back control of Afghanistan, Pakistan has experienced a 72% increase in terrorist attacks, making it the state most affected. The TTP's backing and the Taliban's unwillingness to recognize the border as an internationally recognized border have increased Pakistan's suspicion of the Taliban government. The Taliban are utilizing the border dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan as a political ploy to break the perception that they are a Pakistani proxy and to gain the support of Pashtun nationalism. Pakistan finds itself in a difficult situation due to its strained ties with the Taliban government. On the one hand, the state has been forced to reconsider its justification for arming the militant organization due to the Taliban's unwillingness to collaborate with the TTP and acknowledge the boundary between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Maintaining the current quo would only exacerbate Pakistan's never ending list of internal and foreign issues. However, the Taliban have brought peace back to Afghanistan, and if their rule is overthrown, a civil war would break out, which would be far worse than the current situation. Pakistan will need to resolve this policy impasse by combining diplomatic and security measures (Zia, 2022).

Pakistan's Foreign Policy towards Afghanistan

Ever since President Obama made the decision to remove a portion of the combat troops in 2014, Pakistan has worked to establish a positive role in maintaining regional peace and stability. This involves attempts to strengthen social and economic links between the two countries as well as diplomatic measures to end the war between the Taliban and the Afghan government. Pakistan has been an important ally in advancing the peace process in Afghanistan, serving as the venue for many rounds of talks between the USA and the Taliban. In November 2021, following the withdrawal of USA and NATO forces, Pakistan sent an invitation to the Taliban regime's acting foreign minister to visit Pakistan. Pakistan's State Minister for Foreign Affairs, during a visit to Afghanistan, demonstrated Islamabad's dedication to a stable and peaceful neighbor. Pakistan has also worked to strengthen the two countries' links in terms of education and culture. This includes setting up healthcare and educational facilities as well as the Pak-Afghan Educational Exchange Program, which permits students from both countries to attend colleges in the other.

Additionally, Pakistan has worked to fortify its security connections with Afghanistan, as seen by the September 2021 visit to Kabul by a group headed by DG ISI General Faiz Hameed. The goal of these security talks was to increase mutual trust and understanding between the two countries while fortifying their coordinated counterterrorism operations. Regretfully, the most intense period between Pak-Afghan ties following the USA exit in 2021 appears to be the latest escalation at the Chaman border. The overall goal of Pakistan's foreign policy toward Afghanistan has been to advance regional security and



peace. Pakistan has worked to create positive connections and bridges between the two states so that they may both gain from them (Zia, 2022).

Conclusion

The withdrawal of the United States of America from Afghanistan has brought out a wide range of opportunities and challenging problems. The internal conflicts in Afghanistan, the sanctions that followed, and the Taliban's comeback to power have all contributed to an unstable atmosphere that has serious ramifications for both regional stability and international relations. Pakistan and other regional actors would have to negotiate this complex terrain with diplomatic dexterity and strategic vision in order to minimize dangers and seize possibilities for a secure and prosperous future.

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