



Pak-Afghan Relations: A Case of Taliban Regime Past and Present

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Abstract

In 1996, Afghanistan saw the establishment of the Taliban government, which emerged as a radical Islamist regime following a period of civil war and instability in the country. The regime received recognition from only a few countries, including Pakistan, while the rest of the international community largely rejected their rule. In the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Pakistan-Afghanistan relations entered a complex and often contentious phase. The United States invasion of Afghanistan to oust the Taliban regime and dismantle Al-Qaeda had a profound impact on the region. Pakistan, which had previously supported the Taliban, had to recalibrate its policies as it joined the U.S.-led War on Terror. While Pakistan officially became a U.S. ally in the fight against terrorism, suspicions persisted on both sides. Afghanistan accused Pakistan of supporting militant elements within its territory, while Pakistan expressed concerns about Indian influence in Afghanistan. These tensions have had far-reaching consequences, contributing to instability in both countries and complicating efforts to achieve lasting peace in Afghanistan. Pak-Afghan relations during Hamid Karzai's government (2001-2014) were marked by cautious cooperation and a degree of diplomatic engagement. Pakistan officially recognized the Karzai administration, but underlying tensions persisted due to Afghan allegations of Pakistani support for insurgent groups. In contrast, during the Taliban government's rule in the 1990s and their return to power in 2021, Pakistan had recognized and provided significant support to the Taliban. This research analyzes the relations between Pak-Afghan past and present.

Keywords: Pak-Afghan, Relations, U.S., Karzai, Taliban

1. Background

The conflict in Afghanistan from 1996 to the present has been marked by significant shifts in power, the presence of various insurgent groups, international interventions, and ongoing instability (Roberst, 2009). The Taliban, an ultra-conservative Islamist group, took control of Afghanistan in 1996 after years of civil war and political instability. Their rule was marked by strict interpretation of Islamic law and severe restrictions on women's rights and civil liberties. During this period, Afghanistan became a safe haven for extremist groups, including al-Qaeda. The 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, carried out by al-Qaeda, prompted international outrage and led to the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan. In October 2001, the United States, along with its NATO allies, launched Operation Enduring Freedom with the primary goal of ousting the Taliban regime and dismantling al-Qaeda's operations in Afghanistan. The initial military campaign was swift, leading to the Taliban's removal from power and the establishment of a transitional Afghan government (Leurdijk, 2004).

In the years following the invasion, efforts were made to rebuild Afghanistan, with a focus on establishing democratic institutions, improving security, and delivering humanitarian aid. The Afghan government held elections, and President Hamid Karzai was elected as the country's leader. The Taliban regrouped and launched an insurgency against the Afghan government and international coalition forces, leading to a protracted conflict. The security situation deteriorated, and violence escalated, especially in the southern and eastern regions of Afghanistan. The conflict became increasingly complex, involving multiple insurgent groups and warlords. Several countries, particularly the U.S. and NATO allies, increased their troop presence in Afghanistan to counter the growing insurgency. Counterinsurgency strategies, often known as the "surge," were implemented in an attempt to stabilize the country and build up Afghan security forces. Over time, international forces began transitioning security responsibilities to Afghan government forces.

By 2021, the U.S. announced its complete withdrawal from Afghanistan, which had profound implications for the country's future. Following the U.S. withdrawal, the Taliban launched a rapid offensive across Afghanistan. By August 2021, they had taken control of Kabul, effectively ending the Afghan government's rule and leading to the collapse of the Afghan state. As of my last knowledge update in September 2021, the Taliban had retaken control of Afghanistan, and efforts were being made to form a new government. The situation remained fluid, with concerns about human rights, governance, and the potential for the country to once again become a safe haven for extremist groups. During the Afghan-Soviet War (1979-1989), Pakistan played a crucial role in supporting Afghan mujahideen (guerrilla fighters) who were opposing the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. This support was primarily facilitated by the Pakistani government and its intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). The backing of the Afghan mujahideen by Pakistan included various forms of assistance:

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1.1. Training and Military Support

Pakistan, with assistance from the United States and other Western countries, provided military training, weapons, and ammunition to Afghan mujahideen groups. The training camps were primarily located in the border regions of Pakistan, such as Peshawar and Quetta.

1.2. Logistic Support

Pakistan served as a vital logistical hub for the mujahideen, enabling the transportation of arms and supplies into Afghanistan. The porous and mountainous border between Pakistan and Afghanistan facilitated these activities.

1.3. Refuge and Safe Havens

Pakistan offered refuge and safe havens to Afghan fighters, allowing them to rest, regroup, and receive medical care on Pakistani soil. The Afghan mujahideen leadership and fighters often used Pakistan as a base for launching operations in Afghanistan.

1.4. Diplomatic Support

Pakistan lobbied for international recognition of the Afghan resistance against the Soviet invasion and was instrumental in garnering political and financial support from various countries.

1.5. Humanitarian Aid

Pakistan, along with international organizations and governments, provided humanitarian assistance to Afghan refugees who fled the conflict and sought shelter in Pakistan.

1.6. Political and Ideological Support

Pakistan supported various Afghan mujahideen factions, including those with Islamist ideologies. The goal was to undermine Soviet influence in Afghanistan and to install a government sympathetic to Pakistan interests in the region.

1.7. Cultural and Religious Connections

Pakistan shares cultural, religious, and ethnic ties with Afghanistan, making it easier to build support networks for the Afghan mujahideen. The assistance provided by Pakistan and other external actors contributed to the eventual withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. However, the Afghan-Soviet War left a legacy of instability in Afghanistan, as competing mujahideen factions turned on each other, leading to a civil war that continued throughout the 1990s and culminated in the rise of the Taliban regime. It's important to note that the consequences of the Afghan-Soviet War and the subsequent conflicts in Afghanistan continue to shape the region's geopolitical dynamics and have had long-term implications for Afghanistan and its neighbors, including Pakistan.

1.8. Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

TTP is a militant organization that has been responsible for numerous acts of terrorism and violence in Pakistan, with the goal of establishing its interpretation of Islamic law in the country. Since the Taliban government in Afghanistan, the role of TTP in Pakistan has been marked by periodic attacks on security forces, government institutions, and civilians. The Pakistani military had been engaged in operations to combat TTP and other militant groups in various regions of the country, such as North Waziristan and the tribal areas along the Afghan border. However, the TTP activities in Pakistan badly affect the Pak-Afghan relations (Z.S, 2023).

1.9. Objective of the Study

The bilateral relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan from 1996 to 2023 have been characterized by a complex interplay of geopolitical, security, and socio-cultural factors. Beginning with the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s, Pakistan's role as a key supporter of the Taliban regime drew international scrutiny, with allegations of Pakistan providing sanctuary and support to Afghan militant groups. The post-9/11 era witnessed a shift in Pakistan's stance as it became a key ally in the U.S.-led War on Terror, leading to the ousting of the Taliban regime. Despite the joint efforts, border skirmishes, and mutual mistrust persisted, often exacerbated by the alleged presence of the Afghan Taliban's leadership on Pakistani soil. The period following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 brought new challenges, as the Taliban retook control of Afghanistan, raising concerns about the role Pakistan played in facilitating this process. Meanwhile, both countries continued to grapple with issues of cross-border terrorism, refugees, and trade, highlighting the ongoing complexities in their relationship.

2. Literature review

(Laub, 2004) discusses that during the Mullah Omar regime in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, Pak-Afghan relations were marked by a close alliance between Pakistan and the Taliban government. Pakistan was one of only three countries to formally recognize the Taliban government and provided significant political and material support. Author further explores that the Afghan Taliban, which had its roots in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, was seen as a strategic asset by Islamabad. This alliance allowed Pakistan to exert influence in Afghanistan and served its interests in countering the influence of its regional rival, India. However, it also drew international criticism, as the Taliban's strict interpretation of Islam and repressive policies, particularly towards women and minorities, raised human rights concerns. The period under the Mullah Omar regime ultimately ended with the U.S.-led intervention in 2001, which ousted the Taliban from power and dramatically altered the dynamics of Pak-Afghan relations.

(Qayum et al, 2017) described that during Karzai's presidency in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014, Pak-Afghan relations experienced a mix of cooperation and tensions. While Karzai, a moderate Pashtun leader, aimed for friendly ties with Pakistan, he frequently accused Pakistan of providing safe havens and support to Afghan Taliban insurgents who were conducting cross-border attacks. These allegations strained the relationship, particularly as Afghanistan aimed to consolidate its post-Taliban democracy and stabilize the country. The two countries did make attempts at cooperation, especially during efforts to hold peace talks with the Taliban, but these efforts were marred by mistrust and conflicting interests. Karzai's presidency was characterized by a complex interplay of security, political, and economic issues that reflected the broader challenges of the post-9/11 era in Afghanistan.

(Uatanable, 2021), describes in research that since the September 2021, Afghanistan's political landscape had undergone significant changes with the Taliban retaking control of the country. The relationship between Pakistan and the Taliban-led government was expected to be of critical importance, given Pakistan's historical ties with the Afghan Taliban. Pakistan had played a role in facilitating talks between the Taliban and the United States, and it was expected that they would seek to leverage their influence with the Taliban for regional stability and their own strategic interests. However, the dynamics and specifics of Pak-Afghan relations with the current Taliban-led government in Afghanistan would likely be complex, with a range of security, political, and economic considerations at play, and these would continue to evolve over time as the situation in Afghanistan unfolds.

(Khalilzad, 1986), the Afghanistan civil war, a protracted and multifaceted conflict that has spanned several decades, has been marked by the rise and fall of various factions, foreign interventions, and a devastating toll on the Afghan people. Emerging from the power vacuum left by the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989, the civil war witnessed the disintegration of the Afghan state, with different mujahideen factions vying for control and causing widespread instability. The Taliban's emergence in the mid-1990s led to a period of authoritarian rule and brutal repression, which was followed by the U.S.-led invasion in 2001. Despite attempts at nation-building and diplomacy, the conflict has persisted, resulting in immense human suffering and leaving Afghanistan in a state of uncertainty and fragility.

(Weinbaum, 1991), discusses that during the Afghan-Soviet War (1979-1989), Pakistan played a pivotal role in supporting Afghan mujahideen in their struggle against the Soviet Union's invasion. The Pakistani government, with assistance from the United States and other Western countries, provided extensive military and logistical aid to the Afghan resistance. This support included weapons, training, and safe havens in Pakistani border regions. The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan intelligence agency, coordinated these efforts and helped forge alliances among various Afghan resistance factions. Pakistan support to the Afghan mujahideen played a significant role in weakening the Soviet occupation and eventually led to the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan, albeit with complex and long-lasting consequences for the region.

(Tarzi, 2012), explores that the Taliban rule in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, Pakistan maintained a close relationship with the Afghan Taliban regime. Pakistan was one of the few countries to officially recognize the Taliban government, with Islamabad providing diplomatic support and acting as a conduit for international recognition. This relationship was partially driven by a desire to have a friendly and stable government in Afghanistan, as well as shared religious and ideological affinities, given that the Taliban emerged from Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan and many of their members had received education in religious schools there. The Pakistan-Taliban connection, however, has remained a complex and contentious issue, as it has had implications for regional stability, security, and ongoing dynamics in the region, particularly concerning the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan in recent years.

(Akhtar, 2008), finds out that Pakistan has played a significant role in the Afghan peace process by facilitating negotiations and supporting efforts to bring stability to its neighboring country. It has served as a crucial mediator, helping to bridge the gap between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Pakistan influence over the Taliban, stemming from historical ties and shared ethnic and religious affiliations, has been instrumental in pushing the insurgent group toward the negotiating table. Pakistan has also encouraged regional cooperation, including involving countries like China and Russia in peace talks, and has advocated for a peaceful resolution to the Afghan conflict. While Pakistan role in the Afghan peace process has been instrumental in fostering dialogue, the success of these efforts remains contingent on the broader complexities of the situation, the willingness of all parties to engage in meaningful negotiations, and the stability of the region.

(Dobbins, 2019), the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 marked a significant turning point in the protracted conflict. Announced by President Joe Biden, the decision to pull out all American forces after nearly two decades had profound consequences. The withdrawal was seen as the culmination of a broader shift in U.S. foreign policy priorities and the desire to end America's military involvement in a conflict that had become increasingly unpopular. It led to a rapid and chaotic Taliban offensive that culminated in their seizure of Kabul and the Afghan government's collapse. The withdrawal raised questions about the fate of Afghanistan, the future of the Afghan people, and the global struggle against terrorism. The aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal underscored the challenges and complexities of managing the transition to Afghan self-reliance and achieving a stable and peaceful resolution to the conflict.

(Sultana, 2015), Pakistan relations with the Taliban in the period from 2021 to 2023 have remained a subject of international attention and scrutiny. While Pakistan officially denies any direct support for the Taliban, it holds a position of significant influence due to its historical ties with the group and shared ethnic and religious affiliations. The Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan after the U.S. withdrawal raised concerns about whether Pakistan was providing tacit support to the group or exerting control over their actions. Pakistan, keen on maintaining stability on its western border, has called for a peaceful and inclusive government in Afghanistan, albeit in the context of a complex and fluid regional situation. The evolving dynamics between Pakistan and the Taliban continue to be closely watched in the context of Afghanistan future and regional stability.

Pakistan and Afghanistan share a complex and multifaceted relationship, characterized by both cooperative areas and confronting issues. These two neighboring countries face several common challenges, including combating terrorism and extremism, addressing the illicit drug trade, promoting economic cooperation, and managing the influx of Afghan refugees. Both nations have cooperated in counterterrorism efforts, with Pakistan assisting in facilitating peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. However, their relationship has also been strained by cross-border militancy, accusations of harboring insurgents, and disputes over the Durand Line, which serves as a de facto border. Balancing their shared interests and confronting these complex issues is crucial for achieving regional stability and peace, especially in the context of Afghanistan ongoing transition (Faheem, 2022).

(Shahab, 2022), discusses that since September, 2021 Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) presence and activities have significantly affected Pak-Afghan relations, as Pakistan has been accused of providing safe havens and support to TTP militants operating along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. This has strained relations between the two countries, with Afghanistan alleging that Pakistan support for TTP undermines its efforts to combat terrorism and stabilize the region. Tensions over the issue have hindered cooperation on counterterrorism and peace efforts and contributed to mutual mistrust.

3. Methodology

The article is based in secondary data review and presentation of findings. Data was consulted and presented through available secondary sources in a cross sectional time. Descriptive study was conducive to analyze findings in view of contemporary world. Study material consisting on books, journals, press release and audio-visual aids.

3.1. Significance of Pak-Afghan relations

The relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan is of immense significance, with several key dimensions that impact regional and global dynamics. Both countries share a strategic geographic location at the crossroads of South Asia and Central Asia. This makes their relationship vital for regional stability, trade, and connectivity, and positions them as important players in the larger geopolitical landscape.

The two nations have a shared interest in combatting terrorism and extremism. A stable Afghanistan is in Pakistan interest to prevent the spillover of violence and militants across the border, while Afghanistan benefits from Pakistan assistance in peace and security efforts, as well as countering transnational terror networks. Enhanced economic cooperation, trade, and infrastructure development can offer both countries substantial economic benefits. The potential for energy and trade corridors passing through both nations has the power to transform the economic landscape of the region.

The Afghan conflict has produced one of the world's largest refugee crises, with millions of Afghan refugees residing in Pakistan. The management of this crisis, along with their eventual repatriation or integration, is a significant issue for both nations. Pakistan and Afghanistan share cultural, linguistic, and historical ties that date back centuries, further underlining the importance of a stable and amicable relationship.

Given their positions as neighbors, the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan has a profound impact on the overall stability of the region. A peaceful and cooperative relationship contributes to regional security, while tensions can lead to instability with ripple effects throughout the region.

Pakistan influence on the Taliban and its ability to facilitate negotiations has been instrumental in the Afghan peace process. A cooperative relationship with Afghanistan is crucial for achieving a lasting peace and stability in the war-torn country. The status of the Durand Line, the de facto border between the two nations, remains a contentious issue. Resolving this matter could significantly improve their bilateral relations.

The significance of Pakistan and Afghanistan relationship is profound and multifaceted, touching upon issues of security, economics, culture, and regional stability. A cooperative, mutually beneficial relationship between these two countries is vital for addressing the many challenges they face and promoting peace and prosperity in the region.

3.2. The prospects and challenges of Pak-Afghan relations

Both countries have the potential to enhance economic cooperation, trade, and infrastructure development. This could include energy projects, trade corridors, and investments that benefit the economies of both nations. Collaborative efforts to combat terrorism and extremism, including intelligence sharing and coordinated operations, can contribute

to regional security. Improved relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan can positively impact regional stability by reducing cross-border militancy and contributing to peace in Afghanistan. The historical and cultural connections between the two countries can be a basis for people-to-people diplomacy, fostering goodwill and understanding.

3.3. Challenges

Persistent militancy and terrorism in both countries pose a significant challenge. Afghanistan has accused Pakistan of supporting Taliban elements, and cross-border attacks have strained relations.

The Durand Line issue remains unresolved, causing periodic tensions and disputes over border crossings.

The presence of millions of Afghan refugees in Pakistan presents a challenge in terms of management, repatriation, and integration.

Political instability and governance challenges within both countries can affect their ability to maintain a consistent foreign policy and cooperate effectively.

The involvement of regional and global powers in the region, including the United States, China, Russia, and Iran, can complicate the bilateral relationship and influence the direction of Afghanistan and Pakistan relations.

Afghanistan priorities, such as achieving stability and preserving its sovereignty, may differ from Pakistan interests in maintaining influence and ensuring a friendly government in Kabul, leading to potential conflicts of interest.

Historical grievances and mistrust between the two nations can impede the development of a constructive and cooperative relationship.

The prospects and challenges for Pakistan-Afghanistan relations are interlinked, and addressing the challenges will be crucial for realizing the prospects of economic cooperation, counterterrorism efforts, and stability. A cooperative, mutually beneficial relationship can lead to a more secure and prosperous future for both countries and the region at large.

3.4. Suggestions to improve Pak-Afghan relations:

Improving Pakistan-Afghanistan relations requires sustained efforts and constructive engagement. Here are some suggestions to enhance the bilateral relationship;

3.5. Resolving the Durand Line Issue

Address the longstanding border dispute diplomatically and in a way that respects the historical and cultural ties between the two nations. A mutually agreed-upon border would remove a significant source of tension.

3.6. TTP/Counterterrorism Cooperation

Pakistan and Afghanistan should enhance their counterterrorism cooperation. Both countries should share intelligence, coordinate military operations, and conduct joint efforts against militant groups like TTP. This can help reduce the threat posed by such groups and build mutual trust. Strengthen collaboration on counterterrorism efforts by sharing intelligence, conducting joint operations, and preventing the use of both countries' territories by extremist groups. This can enhance regional security.

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3.8. Economic Integration

Foster economic cooperation, including trade, energy projects, and infrastructure development., this can boost economic growth in both countries and create opportunities for cross-border investments.

3.9. People-to-People Diplomacy

Promote cultural exchange programs, educational opportunities, and tourism to enhance mutual understanding and goodwill between the people of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

3.10. Refugee Management

Collaborate on the management, repatriation, and integration of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, in coordination with international organizations. This can alleviate the refugee crisis and address a significant humanitarian issue.

3.11. Bilateral and Multilateral Dialogues

Engage in high-level diplomatic dialogues between the two governments and involve regional and global stakeholders in multilateral efforts to promote peace and stability in Afghanistan.

3.12. Conflict Resolution and Peace Talks

Support the Afghan peace process by facilitating negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Both countries can encourage dialogue and play a constructive role in achieving a peaceful settlement.

3.13. Cross-Border Trade Facilitation

Streamline customs and border procedures to ease the movement of goods and people across the border, reducing trade bottlenecks and encouraging legal trade.

3.14. Track II Diplomacy

Engage non-governmental organizations, think tanks, and civil society groups to promote dialogue and foster trust between various stakeholders in both countries.

4. Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

Develop mechanisms for dispute resolution and crisis management to address issues that may arise in the future, and work on building mutual trust.

4.1. Mutual Respect and Sovereignty

Acknowledge each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity while respecting each other's domestic affairs and interests.

4.2. Media and Public Perception

Encourage responsible reporting and messaging in the media to avoid the exacerbation of tensions and stereotypes.

4.3. Long-Term Commitment

Both countries should commit to a long-term vision for improving relations, recognizing that it may take time to build trust and address historical grievances.

These suggestions aim to create a framework for Pakistan and Afghanistan to work together toward peaceful coexistence, economic growth, and regional stability. Open communication, cooperation, and a commitment to resolving differences are key to building a stronger relationship between these two neighboring nations.

In conclusion, Pakistan-Afghanistan relations are complex and have been marked by a mixture of cooperation, challenges, and historical complexities. Both countries share a border, historical ties, and cultural affinities, making their relationship inherently significant. However, persistent issues, including security concerns, border disputes, and historical grievances, have strained these ties. It is essential for both nations to address these challenges and seize the prospects for cooperation. A stable, peaceful, and mutually beneficial relationship is not only in their interest but also crucial for regional stability and security. By resolving disputes, fostering economic collaboration, promoting people-to-people diplomacy, and engaging constructively in the Afghan peace process, Pakistan and Afghanistan can work towards a more harmonious and productive relationship, ultimately contributing to the peace and prosperity of the entire region. It will require patience, perseverance, and a commitment to shared goals in order to build a stronger, more positive partnership in the years to come.

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