

PAK-AFGHAN STALEMATE: SEARCH FOR RAPPROCHEMENT

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Abstract

The 9/11 syndrome, besides confronting the world with the worst security scenario, brought both Pakistan and Afghanistan in direct confrontation with each other. Pakistan's internal security dynamics have not suffered to such an extent during the last eight decades as was witnessed in the post-9/11 scenario where Pakistan, besides facing threats from the western border as well, has also to keep a vigilant eye on the internal security parameters too. Tension got escalated between both Pakistan and Afghanistan particularly during the recent four years when the Afghan Taliban retook Afghanistan in the aftermath of the US withdrawal. Both the states have to face direct confrontation of the security agencies resulting in the closure of the Pak-Afghan border placing the business and trade of the two states at jeopardy. The global actors have also shown their concern regarding the resolution of the Afghan security situation as security of the neighboring countries and the regional actors remain associated with the political stability of Afghanistan. This article explores the Pak-Afghan stalemate and the search of rapprochement between the two states. Main findings of the study emphasize the need for the normalization of relations, improvement of confidence building measures between the two states, creation of mutual trust and proper management of the Pak-Afghan border can lead to an atmosphere of friendly and amicable relations.

INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan has been faced with numerous challenges having implications for the regional dynamics but still there remains a shred instability and cooperation (ISSI, 2026). For long standing peace and stability sustained dialogues and constructive engagement between Pakistan and Afghanistan is *sine qua non* for the smooth functioning of the two states. Mutual understanding coupled with confidence building measures can create an atmosphere of trust and can lead to lasting peace in the region (ISSI, 2026). As per analysis of Asia Times, the Taliban Administrations has transformed Afghanistan

into a center of internal repression and cross-border militancy that may pose serious threats to regional and global security (News, 2026). The report further opines the presence of thousands of foreign fighters having their linkages with regional and international militant groups and can pose threats of security to the regional and the international communities (News, 2026). The outlaws aim at an increased infiltration into Pakistan and carry out armed attacks near the Tajikistan border with foreign national and economic installations among the targets (News, 2026).

The neighboring countries also face military incursions from the territory of Afghanistan while Iran is faced with the issue of cross-border smuggling (News, 2026). The tension on Afghanistan-Tajikistan border, regional security measures have been made more effective under the supervision of Russia (News, 2026). Coupled with these are the steps of the current Afghan Taliban government combining rigid religious interpretations with control of the political sphere of life, institutionalization of the public punishment system, flogging and executions (News, 2026). The report states that repression has become the driving force of regional instability rather than domestic human rights. Regional stability depends on the internal security dynamics and political stability of Afghanistan, having significant geostrategic location in the region. The United Nations Commission on International Religious Freedom has recommended Afghanistan as a "country of particular concern" over severe violations (News, 2026). Some of the more important issues faced by the people in Afghanistan include religious minorities, and facing of systematic restrictions by the women community who are largely excluded from the sectors of education, employment opportunities and sphere of public life.

Pak-Afghan Recent Skirmishes

December 2024 marked the beginning of direct confrontation between the law enforcement agencies of Pakistan and Afghanistan (Banerjee, 2025). The incident is part of a series of attacks having their origin in 2021 in the wake of the withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan. At first glance it appeared that the return of Taliban to power in Afghanistan would be of benefit for the national and strategic interest of Pakistan but the situation turned a reverse gear when security situation got escalated between the two countries making them face to face tussle on the issues of national interest. The tension resulted in the death of more than 200 Afghan fighters as per claims of Pakistan while the claims of Afghanistan testify 58 soldiers killed from Pakistani side alongside the border (Ali, 2025). Spokesperson of the Afghan government,

Zabihullah Mujahid, states that 30 other Pakistani soldiers were wounded in the skirmishes and significant weapons fell into the hands of the Afghan government (Ali, 2025). With the eruption of border hostilities in Afghanistan, both the Kabul and Islamabad started blaming each other for the escalation of tension. Proper management of the Pak-Afghan border can do a lot in the improvement of relations between the two states since the border is mostly windy, porous, mountainous and treacherous (Tariq, Khan , & Khan, 2020).

Pak-Afghan and US Ties

Pakistan and the United States have longstanding ties with the Afghan Mujahideen since 1979 when the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan (Banerjee, 2025). Afghanistan's Islamic insurgency that fought against the USSR and the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan that made victory during 1992 when it toppled down the government of Afghanistan. With the emergence of the Taliban in 1996, Pakistan was one of the few countries to recognize the Taliban, a Sunni Islamist nationalist pro-Pashtun movement (Banerjee, 2025). The birth of Taliban during 1990s led to the creation of many other non-state actors such as the Haqqani network, that was claimed to be based in Pakistan (Banerjee, 2025). Over the years, the Taliban's Haqqani network, responsible for many deadly attacks, was based in Pakistan, and was used strategically by the Pakistan government to covertly pursue its interests. This led Hillary Clinton, who was the US Secretary of State at the time, to remark, "You can't keep snakes in your backyard and expect them only to bite your neighbors" (Banerjee, 2025). Moreover, the United States has always remained active in the internal affairs of Afghanistan for some decades and particularly when the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan (Tariq, 2020).

The September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center buildings in the United States led to the US invasion of the al-Qaeda network that used to be operating in Afghanistan. Resultantly the US started the war on terror and Pakistan, owing to its geostrategic importance and strong

influence in the region, became partner of the US and the allied partners (Banerjee, 2025). Pakistan's alliance with the US in the war on terror, if on one hand, worsened Pakistan's relations with the neighboring country of Afghanistan but on the other hand, also had to face issues of internal security and religious sectarianism. During this era, internal security dynamics of Pakistan faced severe issues of insecurity, target-killings, suicide-bombings, use of improvised explosive devices and attacks on security personnel for getting vested interests achieved. With the capture of Osama bin Laden in 2011 in Abbottabad by the US forces made Pakistan lose credibility with the US partners (Banerjee, 2025). Though the retaking of power in August 2021 by Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan, was welcomed as a victory for Afghanistan yet it could not bring political stability to Afghanistan nor did it help in strengthening its relations with Pakistan. **Global Community on Security in**

Afghanistan

Regional and global community remains much concerned about the worsening of security situation in Afghanistan and want to have a viable solution to growing security concerns. The UN Security Council recently adopted a resolution unanimously adopting an extension by one year to the mandate of the Monitoring Team supporting the 1988 Afghanistan Sanctions Committee overseeing the sanctions imposed on the Taliban (Iqbal , 2026). All the 15 members of the UN Security Council voted in favor of the US-drafted resolution asking for renewal of the Monitoring Team's mandate until February 17, 2027 (Iqbal , 2026). The extension aims at the mounting international community's concerns over Afghanistan's worsening security situation, the growing influence of multiple terrorist groups and the potential for regional destabilization (Iqbal , 2026). Pakistan while supporting the resolution stressed the ongoing threat posed by the Tehreek-i-Taliban (TTP), the Baloch liberation Army (BLA), the ISIL-Khorasan and the Al-Qaeda (Iqbal , 2026). Pakistan's Permanent Representative to the UN,

Ambassador Asim Iftikhar Ahmad, said that these groups have been responsible for some of the most heinous and terrorist attacks against Pakistan citing that the recent attacks had killed 80 people during a period of one month alone (Iqbal , 2026).

Mr. Asim father added that he Taliban soil has been used by these groups for planning orchestrating attacks against neighboring countries and urged the Taliban administration to prevent the use of Afghan territory for terrorist operations (Iqbal , 2026). It is now for the Taliban to decide what path do they decide to choose for Afghanistan: whether the path leading to isolation or the path leading to peace and prosperity and show is worth as responsible member of the international community. The regional and the international community looks at the dire human rights conditions in Afghanistan and particularly the restrictions on women and girls, economic collapse, political exclusion, and the challenges posed by the drug-trafficking (Iqbal , 2026). The Council gives a very clear message through resolution that Afghan territory should not serve as a safe haven for terrorist activities and that all member states must prevent ransom payments or political concessions benefitting hostage-takers or terrorist groups (Iqbal , 2026).

The 37th UN Monitoring Team's Report presents a very grim picture of Afghanistan as a base for multiple numbers of terrorist organizations. The role of the *de facto* Afghan Taliban government in providing bases to such networks cannot be overruled. The report substantiates the growing regional anxiety over the cross-border attacks, the radicalization of vulnerable communities and the exploitation of commercial satellite communications and artificial intelligence by militant groups (Iqbal , 2026). The Afghan Taliban deny either the presence of any terrorist network in Afghanistan or the Afghan soil being used by the terrorist networks but the UN Monitoring Team stated that no UN member state support this assessment. After all, the 9/11 scenario and post- US withdrawal coupled with the retake of the Afghan government by the Afghan Taliban has created the power vacuum

resulting in the lack of inclusion of all stakeholders in the set-up of the government.

Pak-Afghan Bilateral Trade

Trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan has suffered a lot due to the direct confrontation of the security forces of the two states, resulting in the stuck of the trucks and other vehicles carrying goods to Afghanistan. For more than three months, an Afghan truck full of cement has been parked in Pakistan and was supposed to transport cement from Nowshera to Kabul (Joles, 2026). This happened as a result of the Pak-Afghan border closure in mid-October 2025 in response to fighting between the two countries. The stuck of vehicles has also led to the damaging of goods and materials kept in the vehicles. Both Pakistan and Afghanistan have maintained a significant trade relationship over the past years (Shakoor, 2025). The former exports food products, cement, pharmaceuticals, textiles, and manufactured goods to Afghanistan while the latter exports fresh and dried fruits, vegetables, and minerals to Pakistan (Shakoor, 2025). Thus, the import-export and business between the two states has faced stagnation from the hands of the business community and the business enterprises that remain dependent on trade and business through the border routes.

Trade improved a lot between the two countries during July 2020 to June 2024 where Pakistan's imports to Afghanistan have demonstrated a strong upward trend over the five-year period from 2020 to 2024 with a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 7.55% (Shakoor, 2025). In 2020, Pakistan exported goods worth \$852.31 million, which steadily increased to \$1,140.17 million in 2024. The highest export value was recorded in 2024, while the lowest was in 2022, when exports fell to \$805.14 million (Shakoor, 2025). After this decline in 2022, exports have recovered and have been growing. Pakistan's imports from Afghanistan, on the other hand, have seen more fluctuations during the stated period. Imports rose from \$468.34 million in 2020 to a peak of \$880.07 million in 2023 (Shakoor, 2025). However, in 2024, imports decreased sharply to \$566.44 million. Despite

this volatility, the overall import trend showed moderate growth, with a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 4.87% over the 5-year period (Shakoor, 2025). There have been ups and downs in the trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan during the stated period.

The closure of five active trade routes between Pakistan and Afghanistan is part of a larger dispute between the two countries that flared up as result of many factors; surge in militancy, cross border infiltration, blame game and counter blame game between the two countries, suicide attacks along the border belt and the evacuation of the Afghan Refugees to Afghanistan. Pakistan has been accusing Afghanistan of harboring militant groups for destabilizing the government of Pakistan and carrying out attacks which the Afghan Taliban government denies. On the other hand, the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) which aims at bringing down Pakistan's government by becoming more active in Pakistan since the Taliban retook power in Afghanistan in August 2021.

The tipping point for both the countries came when the forces of both Pakistan and Afghanistan opened fire at each other across the Pak-Afghan border in October 2025 (Joles, 2026). Both the countries agreed to ceasefire by taking part in multiple rounds of talks in Istanbul, Doha, and Riyadh (Joles, 2026). All these efforts failed to bring about any viable solution to the Afghan Stalemate (Tariq, The Tehran Format on Afghanistan and the Resolution of Pak-Afghan Stalemate, 2025). After the ceasefire, it was again the Taliban that made accusations against Pakistan making it responsible for carrying out airstrikes inside Afghanistan, which Pakistan denied. The blame game has always led to the worsening of security situation between the two countries and which also compelled Pakistani Prime Minister, Mr. Shahbaz Sharif to say that Pakistan had no choice but to close its border with the Afghan government (Joles, 2026).

Pakistan has always been urging the regional and the international dynamics to take stringent efforts for the resolution of the Afghan stalemate. The United Nations has been urged by Pakistan to prevent the use of Afghan soil by militant

groups to threaten neighboring countries stating that efforts must be made to prevent external spoilers from exploiting the situation" (News A. , 2026). For the first time, Pakistan has been witnessing a renewed surge in militant violence despite the fact that the Afghan Taliban are in control of the country. This surge triggered the skirmishes between Pakistan and Afghanistan in October 2025 resulting in the suspension of trade and the closure of border between the two counterparts (News A. , 2026). The United Nations remains more concerned about the restoration of peace and stability in Afghanistan and has adopted Resolution No. 2816, unanimously agreed upon by the 15-member United Nations Security Council urging that all states would continue to implement the sanctions measures imposed on the Taliban and the related individuals, groups, undertakings, and the entities that threaten the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan (News, 2026).

Discussion and Conclusion

For the last five decades, Pak-Afghan relations have not witnessed such worst scenario of security that made Pakistan in the aftermath of the 9/11 episode. Pakistan's internal security dynamics has been affected to such an extent that military operations had to be launched in the areas where law and order situation goes of the state control and where the outlaws challenge the writ of the government. Only mutual understanding and confidence building measures between the two countries can lead to lasting peace and security in the region. Both the states need to focus on the security dynamics of each other and stop the practice of blame game and counter blame game. The regional and the international communities can help resolve the issues of security between the two neighboring states by direct involvement in their affairs. The regional community and particularly the neighboring countries should play their due role in the political stability of Afghanistan since Iran, Pakistan and Tajikistan can be more vulnerable to any worsening of law and order situation inside Afghanistan. The United Nations Commission on International Religious Freedom has recommended

Afghanistan as a "country of particular concern" over severe violations of human rights, religious minorities, systematic restrictions on women and girls with regard to their education, jobs and their activities in public places.

Tension mounted up between Pakistan and Afghanistan in October 2025 when the two countries stood against each other on direct front and use of weapons resulting in the death and injuries of many people. The direct confrontation is the result of the series of skirmishes that has its origin to the withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan in August 2021. The retake of Afghanistan by Afghan Taliban was believed to be more friendly and amicable towards Pakistan but situation remained totally different when the direct war started between the two states during the second reign of the Taliban. The first reign of the Afghan Taliban during the late 1990s was more inclined towards Pakistan and relations remained more normal and smooth. It is also a fact both Pakistan and the United States have a history of close relations with the Afghan Mujahideen in Afghanistan and particularly during 1979 when the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan. But the post-9/11 scenario made Pakistan face issues of internal security, target killings, suicide-bombings, use of improvised explosive devices and attacks on security personnel for getting vested interests achieved. With the capture of Osama bin Laden in 2011 in Abbottabad by the US forces made Pakistan lose credibility with the US partners.

The worsening security situation in Afghanistan has been viewed by both the regional and the international community with great concern. To find a viable solution to the Afghan issue, the United Nations Security Council adopted a resolution unanimously asking for an extension of one year to the mandate of the Monitoring Team supporting the 1988 Afghanistan Sanctions Committee overseeing the sanctions imposed on the Taliban. All the 15 members of the UN Security Council voted in favor of the US-drafted resolution asking for renewal of the Monitoring Team's mandate until February 17, 2027. The international community looks at the grim state of affairs with particular reference to the

restrictions on women and girls, economic collapse, political instability and the challenges posed by the drug-trafficking. The tragedy with Afghanistan lies in the fact that during the period from 2001 to 2021 Afghan Taliban were excluded from the affairs of the government and the same is true of all stakeholders in the current regime who have not been given a chance of participating in the set-up of the government. Moreover, proper border management between the two states would further lead to the normalization of relations

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