

ECONOMIC DIPLOMACY AND PAKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY: ANALYZING TRADE RELATIONS IN THE POST-2021 AFGHAN SCENARIO

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Abstract

The political changes that happened in Afghanistan post 2021 have been largely affecting the foreign policy priorities of Pakistan making more emphasis on economic diplomacy as a strategic instrument to enhance the bilateral trade ties. The paper examines how the trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan is changing with special focus on the formal and informal trade flows, socio-economic impacts, and policy institutional frameworks in the post-Taliban environment. The results show that despite the favorable balance of trade, the country is facing continuous issues including informal cross border trade, inefficiency in border management and poor infrastructure that hinder the effectiveness of the regulations and prevents a fair distribution of the economy. The current institutional frameworks, such as Afghanistan Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA), China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) connectivity projects, and regional forums, such as ECO and SAARC, are very helpful in establishing orderly trade and stability in the region. It suggests that the research plan includes enhancing formal trade systems, improving systems of border control, encouraging inclusive economic engagement, and using economic diplomacy in strategic pursuit of larger political and regional interests. Pakistan is able to maximize the economic benefits without compromising stability of the bilateral relationship with Afghanistan in the long run through adoption of coordinated and sustainable policies related to trade. The study has provided useful policy suggestions that help to balance trade growth and regulatory governance and socio-economic development.

1. INTRODUCTION

The restoration of the Afghan Taliban government in August 2021 was the beginning of a significant change of political and economic events in South Asia. The abrupt collapse of the former Afghan government and the retreat of foreign forces transformed the regional balances, re-arranged the traditional trade patterns and introduced some new diplomatic ambiguities. The 2021 transition posed a strategic threat to Pakistan, whose 2,600-kilometer

boundary with Afghanistan and a long historical, cultural, and economic relationship with that country. This changing political situation in Kabul required the rebalancing of foreign policy in Pakistan especially the areas of trade, transit cooperation, frontier management, and connectivity in the region. Economic diplomacy has become a pivotal tool in the foreign policy of Pakistan in this changing regional landscape. Economic diplomacy can be

defined as the strategic application of economic instruments e.g. trade agreements; transit arrangements; development assistance; investment projects; and connectivity projects to help advance national interests and foreign policy goals. However, instead of using the old diplomatic interaction processes, Pakistan has increasingly employed the trade facilitation, humanitarian corridors, and infrastructure cooperation as the means of stabilizing the western border and encouraging the integration of the region. This change can be seen as part of a larger global trend where the economic statecraft is becoming crucial to determining bilateral and multilateral relations. (Rana, 2024).

Traditionally, Afghanistan has been a major export market, as well as, a strategic transit route where Pakistan can access Central Asia. Some of the bilateral goods that have been traded between the two countries include construction materials, agricultural goods, textile goods and consumer goods. But, the change in politics in 2021 interfered with traditional patterns of the trade because of the border closures, sanctions against Afghanistan, financial isolation and liquidity deficits in the Afghan banking system. Informal cross-border trade increased on certain aspects and formal volumes of trade fluctuated. The changes brought of regulatory complications and questioned the usefulness of the current frameworks like Afghanistan Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA). It therefore became the two-fold responsibility of Pakistan to maintain economic activity and border security and regulation. Simultaneously, the post-2021 environment also opened new possibilities to Pakistan to increase its economic advantage with the help of connectivity efforts. China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a landmark of Belt and Road Initiative that can be expanded to Afghanistan and Central Asia, hence emphasizing the increased integration of the region with the national security notion. Trade relations no longer exist as a commercial trade but are actually included in wider strategic calculations of regional stability, counterterrorism alliance, and economic resilience. (Wolf, 2023).

Additionally, the post-2021 strategy of Pakistan with regard to Afghanistan demonstrates a strategy of balancing. On the one hand, Pakistan tries to sustain

positive relations with Kabul so that to avoid the instability on the western border. Conversely, it has to deal with international diplomatic pressures such as issues of sanctions, human rights concerns, and international counterterrorism schemes. Economic diplomacy is thus an expedient option that enables Pakistan to seek engagement without the official political sanctioning. Pakistan has been able to maintain bilateral relations and at the same time met the expectations of the region and the world via trade facilitation, humanitarian exports, and access to transit. The fact that economic diplomacy is intertwined with foreign policy in the post-2021 situation in Afghanistan highlights the shift in the external policy direction of Pakistan. Security needs and economic considerations are becoming more and more interdependent and the trade policy is no longer a commercial practice, it is a strategic tool. In that regard, it seems necessary to comprehend the relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan in terms of trade to assess the overall course of the foreign policy of Pakistan. (Siddique, 2023).

Statement of the Problem

The resurgence of the Afghan Taliban in August 2021 was the event that altered the geopolitical and economic situation in South Asia in many ways, and its effects on the trade and diplomatic relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan are significant. Since Pakistan is a neighboring state that is linked historically, economically, and in terms of security, it has had to redefine its foreign policy tool especially the economic diplomacy as a way of balancing the changing trade relations in a highly uncertain regional atmosphere. To the extent that Afghanistan continues to be a significant trading partner, as well as a transit route to allow Pakistan to reach the markets in Central Asia, the post-2021 situation has presented some structural challenges. Periodic closures of the borders and disturbances at major crossing points like Torkham have hampered the steady flow of goods and services leading to the loss of economies on both sides of the border and market instability (AP News, 2025; Reuters, 2025). Moreover, the dynamics of bilateral trade volume, the rise of informal trading systems, financial limitations due to sanctions and declining international assistance, and the interference of the

traditional banking channel have made it difficult to manage and formalize the cross-border trade (Afghan Studies Center, 2025; The Diplomat, 2025).

The main issue, hence, is how Pakistan can successfully use economic diplomacy to support and stabilize bilateral trade relationships with Afghanistan and, at the same time, how to address geopolitical pressures and service the national interests. It is important to take a critical look at the question of whether the existing trade policies of Pakistan in the post 2021 period reflect a well-thought-out and proactive economic diplomatic perspective, or it is a retaliatory policy influenced more by the factors of security imperatives and short-term political events. In the absence of a robust and coordinated system that combines trade facilitation with the overall aims of foreign policy, bilateral trade relationships will further remain unstable, which can significantly derail further objectives of foreign policy consistency and economic integration of the region (Ali et al., 2025; Siddique, 2023).

Significance of the Study

The research has significant academic and policy implications because it provides a systematized examination of the connection between economic diplomacy and foreign policy of Pakistan in the post 2021 Afghanistan. Since the Taliban came back to power, the political and economic processes in the region have changed immensely, forcing Pakistan to employ trade and economic relations as a tool of statecraft and not a mere commercial exchange. The study also highlights the role of bilateral trade agreements, transit and border management systems, and regional connectivity initiatives especially the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) towards the diplomatic involvement of Pakistan in Afghanistan. The research, through an analysis of dynamics of trade flows and economic interdependence, as well as policy re-calibration since 2021, contributes to the academic knowledge about how economic instruments may be used to advance foreign policy agendas in the context of geopolitical uncertainty and security instability. In addition, this research would provide a practical policy and policy oriented recommendations to the decision-makers, academicians, and regional analysts on the issue through the identification of structural flaws,

institutional limitations, and prospects of sustainable economic collaboration between the two states. By so doing, it suggests an analytical framework of assessing economic diplomacy in destabilized and post-war regional contexts, which can be applied to further discussion of regional integration, economic statecraft, and foreign policy adjustment in South Asia (Khan et al., 2024; World Bank, 2024).

Objectives of the Study

The main aim of the research is to examine the contribution of the economic diplomacy on the formation of the foreign policy of Pakistan, focusing on the trade relations in the situation in Afghanistan after 2021. It aims at assessing the role of economic engagement in terms of its strategy in improving the stability of the region, economic growth, and diplomatic leverage.

Sub objectives

- I. To investigate the dynamics of the changes in the trade relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan following 2021.
- II. To examine how security issues, geopolitical interest and pressure of international interests influence trade diplomacy.
- III. To evaluate how well Pakistan has been using its economic diplomatic strategies to ensure the economic connectivity in the region.
- IV. To suggest the policy recommendations to help enhance sustainable and mutually advantageous trade relations in the changing regional environment.

Research Questions

- What is the impact of the post-2021 changes in the Afghan politics on the trade relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan?
- How does economic diplomacy affect the decisions of the foreign policy process in Russia in the framework of Afghanistan?
- Which obstacles like sanctions, border security and financial constraints limit effective economic interaction?
- What is the best way Pakistan can have a balance between economic cooperation and security to manage the long-term regional stability?

Literature Review

A complex combination of strategic opportunities and structural constraints is observed in scholarly discourse of the economic diplomacy of Pakistan to its economic ties with Afghanistan in the aftermath of the 2021 political transition. Available literature studies the interplay between economic instruments such as trade agreements, transit frameworks, connectivity programs, and national security issues, local geopolitics, and national economic demands. The post-2021 environment has led to a reconsideration of the concept of economic diplomacy as not only a business approach to engaging with foreign countries but as an inseparable element of foreign policy reevaluation in South Asia. It is well-known that economic diplomacy is a significant instrument of a modern foreign policy. It is a strategic implementation of trade, investment, financial aid and infrastructure cooperation as a means of promoting national interest and reinforcing international relations. Bayne and Woolcock (2022) define economic diplomacy as a systematic application of economic assets and policy instruments to attain diplomatic purpose. In weak and politically unstable areas like South Asia, economic diplomacy is especially significant in leveling the inter-state affairs and counteracting economic interference caused by conflicts.

In the case of Pakistan, the scholars suggest that economic diplomacy has become a two-fold approach that aims to steer economic development and increase geopolitical power at the same time. According to Rana (2023), Pakistan is becoming more dependent on trade facilitation and regional connectivity as a means to gain strategic power in Afghanistan and Central Asia. In the same vein, Nye (2023) also states that economic engagement, in conjunction with the development cooperation, strengthens soft power and helps to stabilize the region. These lessons are especially applicable in the context of post-2021 Afghanistan, where the political change has demanded the policy innovation and diplomatic realignment (Rana, 2023; Nye, 2023).

Traditionally, Afghanistan has served as a valuable trading ally as well as a route through which Pakistan can have access to Central Asia. Past studies also show that porous borders, informal business networks, and security changes have always affected

bilateral trade since there are formal trade agreements but still the trade flows are always interrupted by regulatory inconsistency and political tensions. New financial and economic restrictions were observed after the Taliban returned in August 2021. Banking prohibitions, uncertainties surrounding sanctions, and border controls had a strong impact on formal trade routes. Nevertheless, the modern research also represents the new opportunities of Pakistan to extend its economic power with the help of transit trade regulations, barter agreements, and infrastructure developments like the China Pakistan Economic Corridor. These reports indicate that bilateral trading is structurally vulnerable, but economic diplomacy continues to be an effective tool to maintain the engagement and avoid economic isolation. (Imran, 2023; Farooq, 2024).

The geopolitical and economic challenges faced by the region in the post-2021 situations pose serious challenges to trade diplomacy in Pakistan. Security risks and instability across borders remain a stumbling block to the formal trade growth, and the existence of informal trade networks poses regulatory challenges and loss of revenue (Khalid, 2024). Meanwhile, external financial limitations against Afghanistan have made it more difficult to make payments across its borders, and some havens have implemented alternative systems, including barter trading and humanitarian corridors (Ahmed, 2023). Multilateral regional organizations such as the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) are also often referenced as the means of increasing the systematized economic interaction and adherence to the international standards (Farooq, 2024). However, researchers warn that the lack of alignment between domestic economic priorities and external strategic interests of Pakistan can restrict the usefulness of the economic diplomacy in the process of reaching sustainable regional integration (Rana, 2023; Khalid, 2024).

One of the consistent themes of the literature is that economic diplomacy needs coherent institutional structures in order to become more effective. It is suggested that structured trade arrangements, revamped border controls systems, digitalised customs processes and coordinated regional plans

should be used to decrease volatility and reinforce formal trade processes.

In general, the current literature recognizes the strategic significance of economic diplomacy in Pakistan Afghanistan relations but finds the lack of the comprehensive post-2021 comparative analysis that conducts extensive trade policy adjustments inside the framework of a broader foreign policy. This research fills such a gap by incorporating trade analysis, geopolitics and diplomatic issues into the changing regional environment (Ahmed, 2023; Farooq, 2024).

Together with empirical research on trade and institutional structures, theoretical basis of economic diplomacy helps to emphasize its applicability in transitional settings, such as post2021 Afghanistan. Economic diplomacy is based on the ideas of international political economy and foreign policy analysis, specifically on the idea that states use economic instruments to pursue geopolitical objectives, reduce security dangers, and influence interstate relations (Bayne and Woolcock, 2022). This theoretical prism is useful in explaining the reason as to why Pakistan has increasingly embraced economic engagement as a strategic choice to the conventional securityrelated diplomacy in the South Asian context. The inclusion of economic statecrafts into the foreign policy practice has been a reflection of a global trend to move into multidimensional modes of diplomacy where trade, investment, and development cooperation are combined to drive political consequences and create interdependent relationships with one another (Nye, 2023; Rana, 2023).

In spite of these improvements, the current literature has some critical gaps that need to be filled by conducting research. To begin with, a significant part of the existing studies is concerned with descriptive explanations of trade interruptions and border issues without providing comparative studies of the results of pre and post2021 trade diplomacy. Second, little assessment is done on the extent to which certain institutional changes, including digital custom clearance systems, transit corridors management, and banking cooperation frameworks, have been converted into quantifiable trade results or diplomatic capabilities. Third, even though regional connectivity projects like the ChinaPakistan

Economic Corridor (CPEC) are often mentioned, the intersection of these projects and the Pakistan foreign policy objectives in Afghanistan beyond the infrastructure discourse is not properly studied (Wolf, 2023; Farooq, 2024). Resolving these gaps would not only inform academic knowledge, but it would also provide practical ideas to policy-makers who want to ensure that economic diplomacy is aligned with the wider strategic goals in the unstable regional settings.

Furthermore, researchers have highlighted socio-economic impacts of post-2021 trade relationships on local communities and the development of the region, in general. Not only do trade disruptions, border delays and informal economic exchanges impact on macroeconomic indicators, but they also affect livelihoods, employment and stability of local markets (Khalid, 2024; Ahmed, 2023). Studies have suggested that the economic diplomacy practiced in Pakistan should, therefore, entail putting in place social factors that should be able to see the policy interventions to favor inclusive growth, and curb inequalities that can be brought about due to unequal benefits of trade. On the same note, institutional alignment between the customs, financial institutions and regional institutions is essential in order to convert the diplomatic effort into actual economic results. By targeting these socio-economic and institutional aspects, economic diplomacy can be more regarding bilateral relations stabilization and sustainable trade development (Rana, 2023; Imran, 2023).

3. DISCUSSION

3.1 Economic Impacts of Pakistan's Post-2021 Trade Diplomacy

Afghanistan is still one of the important trade partners and strategic gateway into the Central Asian markets of Pakistan. Since the Taliban came back to power in 2021, Pakistan has been employing economic diplomacy to ensure the bilateral trade remains stable, as well as enhancing its military muscle in the region. Pakistan showed an export rate of about 2.1 billion dollars to Afghanistan in 2023 and imported 1.2 billion dollars leading to a positive trade balance of 0.9 billion dollars. Construction materials, food products, machinery, and consumer goods are the main exports and dry fruits, minerals,

and essential commodities form the major imports. These patterns of trade explain how Pakistan uses economic engagement as a way of not only creating commercial value, but as a strategy to pursue foreign policy interests, encourage regional interconnection and economic interdependence. The information

highlights the significance of economic diplomacy in dictating the economic interests of Pakistan as well as its overall strategic location in the post-2021 Afghanistan situation.

Table 1: Annual Pakistan–Afghanistan Trade Indicators (2023)

Indicator	Value
Exports to Afghanistan	\$2.1 billion
Imports from Afghanistan	\$1.2 billion
Trade Balance	+\$0.9 billion
Informal Trade Share	30–40%
Major Border Crossings	Torkham, Chaman, Spin Boldak
Key Export Commodities	Construction materials, food, machinery
Key Import Commodities	Dry fruits, minerals, essential goods
Exports to Afghanistan	\$2.1 billion

3.2. Geopolitical and Security Implications

The interaction between trade and Pakistan and Afghanistan is directly connected to geopolitical and security concerns, when the stability of the border and control over the administration of Afghan Taliban plays an important role in the flows of goods. The major border crossing periods, such as Torkham and Chaman, banking restrictions, currency shortages, dependence on informal trade networks are some of the key factors that lead to uncertainties that may disorient economic transactions and the ability to regulate trade. Such disruptions do not only impact on business but

extend to greater projections of stability in the region and the strategic goals of Pakistan. Pakistan, in turn, has progressively employed economic diplomacy as a weapon to deal with such risks, and it is through trade engagement that it is able to retain influence and negotiate cooperation on border management and be able to provide regional connectivity initiatives. Through the interconnection of the trade policy and security and political strategy, Pakistan aims to make sure that economic relations with Afghanistan can lead to both commercial advantages and the overall foreign policy objectives, despite the complicated post-2021 issues.

Table 2: Key Border Management Challenges and Measures

Challenge	Impact	Policy/Management Response
Border closures	Delays in trade, reduced revenue	Coordination with Afghan authorities, APTTA agreements
Currency shortages	Barter trade, informal exchange	Encourage legal banking corridors, regional banking cooperation

Informal trade networks	Revenue loss, security risks	Regularization, enhanced customs monitoring
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3.3. Policy and Institutional Dimensions

Successful economic diplomacy requires that institutions are well organized in order to coordinate trade policies to the national security and foreign policy goals. The ministries of Commerce, Foreign Affairs, and Border Administration are the key departments in Pakistan that are involved in bilateral trade with Afghanistan, controlling cross-border operations, and the negotiation of agreements that focus on the economic and strategic interests of the country. The adoption of modernization of customs business such as the use of electronic documentation services and real time monitoring tools has enhanced effectiveness, minimized time wastage, and

minimized chances of informal business that can compromise regulatory measures. Also regional cooperation organizations, including Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and South Asian Association to Regional Cooperation (SAARC), offer multilateral platforms to standardize trade policies, encourage regional connectivity and economic integration. Combined, these institutional actions allow Pakistan to pursue economic diplomacy in a more efficient way so that trade relations with Afghanistan will not only facilitate economic development but also stability in the region (Rana, 2023; Shah, 2022; Farooq, 2024).

Table 3: Institutional Mechanisms for Trade Facilitation

Mechanism	Function	Impact
APTTA	Legal trade facilitation	Streamlined customs, reduced smuggling
CPEC projects	Regional connectivity policy	Improved transport & logistics
Frameworks	alignment	Encourage cross-border trade & investment

3.4. Socio-Economic and Regional Implications

The socio-economic implications of economic diplomacy in Pakistan-Afghanistan trade are enormous. It creates job opportunities in the logistics, customs and transportation sectors, which sustain the lives of several local societies. Also, trade attracts national and provincial revenue in terms of tariffs, duties and other legal trade procedures. Economic diplomacy also promotes regional integration and economic interdependence by promoting bilateral trade, which improves collaboration in the development of infrastructure, connectivity and energy projects. However, there are a number of issues that restrict its efficacy. Closing boundaries, political insecurity, and uncertainty in

the Afghan governance interfere with the trade processes and cause operational risks. Although the informal trade networks keep the economy going, regulatory and legal issues are raised. Moreover, the failure to coordinate policy execution between federal and provincial agencies prevents the full capacity of the economic diplomacy in promoting the economic and strategic interests of Pakistan (Raza, 2023; Imran, 2023; Khalid, 2024).

Table 4: Socio-Economic Effects of Post-2021 Trade Diplomacy

Effect	Positive Impact	Negative Impact
Employment	Increased jobs in border towns & logistics	Seasonal dependency, unstable in border closures
Revenue	Customs duties & trade taxes support economy	Loss from informal trade channels
Regional Stability	Promotes interdependence, reduces tension	Border incidents disrupt trade



The figure demonstrates that bilateral trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan in 2023 stood at about \$2.1 billion in exports and \$1.2 billion in imports, reflecting a favorable trade balance for Pakistan. In terms of composition, construction materials hold the largest share (25%), followed by food items, machinery, and dry fruits (20% each), while minerals and other goods represent smaller segments. Formal trade has shown a consistent upward trend from 2021 to 2023, increasing from \$1.8 billion to \$2.1 billion, alongside gradual growth in informal trade. Key initiatives such as APTTA, CPEC, and ECO/SAARC have strengthened economic cooperation, security coordination, and regional connectivity. Collectively, these developments highlight the positive socio-economic impact of trade

diplomacy on employment, revenue generation, and regional stability.

Conclusion

The 2021 Afghan situation has greatly changed the economic diplomacy of Pakistan especially the trade relations with Afghanistan. As noted in this study, the exports of Pakistan have exceeded the imports to create a positive balance in trade, and informal trade has remained a problem to the formal avenues of economic exchange. Trade relationship is not only based on economic requirements but also on geopolitics, border control, as well as regional security relationships. The analysis has shown that economic diplomacy can be used to enhance the foreign policy goals of Pakistan in the sense that it

will allow it to strengthen the cooperation across the borders, the stability in the region and the growth of the economies of the countries. Other programs like APTTA, transport infrastructure related to CPEC, and regional cooperation models like ECO and SAARC have been instrumental in facilitating business and reducing hurdles that are encountered in informal sources. Nevertheless, the paper also highlights the necessity of having the mechanisms of controlling trade in a sustainable and institutionalized way. Although economic benefits are clear, anomalous trade flows, currency and customs issues, and disruptions during seasons serve as a weakness that needs to be identified. Moreover, the socio-economic gains such as job creation and increase in revenues are also not fairly distributed and there is a need to have inclusive policy structures that focus on both economic growth and social stability.

Policy Recommendations

Strengthen Formal Trade Channels

- Increase facilities and improve border processes in Torkham and Chaman among other points of crossing to minimize the use of informal trade.
- Introduce electronic trade documentation systems in order to enhance transparency and efficiency.

Improve Regional Collaboration:

- Increasing efforts by APTTA, ECO and SAARC to allow easier cross border trade and simultaneous monitoring of goods.
- Encourage synchronized economic strategies with Afghanistan in order to stabilize the currency exchange and prices.

Infrastructure and Logistics: Investment:

- Modern transport systems and storage facilities should be developed to facilitate expansion of trade.
- Beef up on reducing congestion at the border points to reduce delays and losses.

Encourage Economic Benefits that are inclusive:

- Make sure trade generated earnings contribute to the local communities in terms of creation of jobs and support of small businesses.
- Promote the development of skills in border and logistics employees to enhance human capital.

Enhance Policy and Regulatory Formations:

- Implement formal systems that can control the informal trade, and avoid smuggling without affecting livelihoods.
- Always implement trade agreements to safeguard the economic interest of the two nations.

Use Economic Diplomacy to bring about Political Stability:

- Trade was used as a means of building trust with each other, cool border tensions, and security at the regional level.
- Have bilateral discussions to solve any conflicts that present themselves due to interruption of trade or any regulatory challenges.

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