

AFGHANISTAN–PAKISTAN RELATIONS AND REGIONAL SECURITY DYNAMICS AFTER THE TALIBAN TAKEOVER OF AFGHANISTAN IN THE 2021

Qazi Hussain Asghar¹, Nazir Muhammad^{*2}, Nehal Malik³

¹An Islamabad Based Retired Civil Servant and M.Phil IR Scholar, Iqra University Department of IR

^{*2}Ph.D Scholar, School of Politics and International Relations, East China Normal University, Shanghai, China

³Lecturer, Govt. Graduate College for Women Sargodha

¹qazihussainasgharkhan@gmail.com, ²nazirmuhammad12@gmail.com, ³nehalmalik1994@gmail.com

²<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1458-0152>

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19398914>

Keywords

Afghanistan–Pakistan relations, Taliban takeover, regional security, cross-border militancy, refugee management, geopolitical dynamics

Article History

Received: 31 January 2026

Accepted: 15 March 2026

Published: 31 March 2026

Copyright @Author

Corresponding Author: *

Nazir Muhammad

Abstract

The 2021 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan significantly altered regional security dynamics, with profound implications for Afghanistan–Pakistan relations. This study examines the evolving bilateral interactions, security challenges, and geopolitical ramifications in the aftermath of the Taliban's ascendancy. Using a qualitative approach based on secondary data from government reports, scholarly articles, and regional policy analyses, the research identifies key areas of concern, including cross-border militancy, refugee flows, and regional diplomatic engagement. Findings indicate that while Pakistan's strategic engagement with the Taliban offers opportunities for mediation and economic cooperation, persistent threats from non-state actors and humanitarian pressures underscore the complexity of regional security. The study highlights the necessity of integrated security, diplomatic, and humanitarian strategies to promote stability in South and Central Asia. Implications for policymakers include the need for enhanced border management, multilateral cooperation, and sustainable refugee frameworks.

INTRODUCTION

The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 marked a watershed moment in South Asian geopolitics, fundamentally altering the security environment and bilateral relations in the region. On 15 August 2021, Taliban forces entered Kabul and swiftly consolidated control over Afghanistan, ending the two-decade presence of the Islamic Republic and reshaping the political landscape of the country (Wikipedia, n.d.). This dramatic shift had immediate and far-reaching implications for

Afghanistan–Pakistan relations, which concerns, ethnic linkages, and geopolitical rivalries.

In the wake of the Taliban's return to power, Pakistan's security calculus underwent significant stress. Initially perceived by some analysts as a potential strategic advantage for Islamabad due to its historical engagement with Afghan Taliban elements, the reality proved more complex. Relations between Islamabad and Kabul became increasingly strained as Pakistan accused the Taliban of providing sanctuary or failing to prevent the use of Afghan territory by

Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other militant groups, contributing to a resurgence of cross-border terrorism and internal security challenges for Pakistan (Ur Rehman, 2025). Reports from independent security analysts indicate that Pakistan became one of the most affected neighbors in terms of rising militant threats and deteriorating bilateral trust after 2021 (Qureshi, 2024).

These security concerns catalyzed a series of diplomatic and military tensions, including periodic clashes along the Durand Line, mutual accusations of harboring insurgent groups, and intermittent attempts at ceasefire negotiations mediated by third parties. Islamabad and Kabul entered China-hosted talks aimed at de-escalating what has been described as the most severe bilateral conflict since the Taliban's return, reflecting the intensity of the crisis and the broader stakes for regional stability and cooperation in South Asia (International Crisis Group, 2026).

Understanding the evolving trajectory of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations post-2021 is vital for comprehending broader regional security dynamics. The interplay of militant activity, border management, diplomatic engagement, and external mediation shapes not only bilateral ties but also influences the strategic calculations of neighboring powers and key international actors invested in South Asian stability (Popalzay, 2024; Taliban Control in Afghanistan, 2025).

Problem Statement

The 2021 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has fundamentally transformed the security and political landscape of South Asia, directly impacting Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. Historically, Pakistan's engagement with Afghan political actors, including the Taliban, has been influenced by strategic interests, ethnic linkages, and border security concerns. However, the resurgence of the Taliban introduced both opportunities and challenges, particularly in terms of cross-border terrorism, refugee influxes, and diplomatic friction. The presence of militant groups, including the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) along the Durand Line, has exacerbated

Pakistan's internal security challenges, while the lack of a formalized governance framework in Kabul has complicated bilateral negotiations. These dynamics have heightened regional instability, influencing not only Pakistan and Afghanistan but also the broader South Asian geopolitical order. Despite extensive media coverage and policy reports, there remains a lack of systematic academic research examining how the Taliban's return to power has reshaped Pakistan's security policies, diplomatic strategies, and broader regional security dynamics. This study aims to fill that gap by providing a structured analysis of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations post-2021 Taliban takeover and its implications for regional stability.

Research Questions

1. How has the 2021 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan affected Pakistan's national security and border management policies?
2. What are the key challenges and opportunities in Afghanistan-Pakistan diplomatic relations following the Taliban's return to power?
3. How have cross-border militant activities influenced bilateral trust and cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan?
4. What role do regional actors and international stakeholders play in mediating Afghanistan-Pakistan security dynamics post-2021?
5. How might the evolving Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship shape broader South Asian regional security in the coming years?

Research Objectives

1. To examine the impact of the Taliban takeover on Pakistan's national security and border policies.
2. To identify challenges and opportunities in Afghanistan-Pakistan diplomatic relations post-2021.
3. To assess the influence of cross-border militant activities on bilateral trust and cooperation.
4. To evaluate the role of regional and international actors in mediating Afghanistan-Pakistan security relations.

5. To analyze potential implications of Afghanistan–Pakistan relations for regional stability in South Asia.

Literature Review

The 2021 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has prompted renewed scholarly attention on the dynamics of Afghanistan–Pakistan relations. Historically, Pakistan has maintained strategic engagement with Afghanistan due to shared ethnic ties, particularly between the Pashtun populations, and geopolitical interests in South Asia (Rashid, 2022). The Taliban's return to power, however, has shifted the nature of this engagement, creating both opportunities for influence and challenges to security stability. Scholars emphasize that Pakistan's security calculus is heavily influenced by the risk of cross-border terrorism and the activities of militant groups such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which exploit porous border areas to launch attacks inside Pakistan (Ali & Khan, 2023; Mahmood, 2023).

Regional security studies indicate that the Taliban's governance approach and Afghanistan's political vacuum have complicated bilateral diplomatic relations. Pakistan's recognition and diplomatic engagement with the Taliban are constrained by international norms, human rights concerns, and the broader global discourse on legitimacy (Ahmed, 2024). Simultaneously, Afghanistan's instability exacerbates refugee flows into Pakistan, creating humanitarian, economic, and security pressures (Khan & Rahman, 2023). These issues underscore the interdependence of political stability in Afghanistan and domestic security in Pakistan.

Several studies highlight the influence of regional and international actors in shaping Afghanistan–Pakistan relations post-2021. China, Russia, the United States, and Gulf states have strategic interests in Afghan stability, affecting Pakistan's foreign policy calculus (Siddiqui, 2024). For example, China's investments under the Belt and Road Initiative and Russia's engagement with Taliban leadership have implications for Pakistan's regional leverage and security strategy (Qureshi, 2023). Moreover, the literature notes

that Pakistan's policy responses are contingent on balancing counterterrorism priorities with diplomatic engagement, economic incentives, and transnational strategic concerns (Rashid, 2022; Ali & Khan, 2023).

Emerging scholarship also explores the broader regional security dynamics influenced by the Taliban's return. Scholars argue that Afghanistan's instability creates potential spillover effects across South Asia, including increased militancy, narcotics trafficking, and border insecurity (Mahmood, 2023; Siddiqui, 2024). Simultaneously, Pakistan's involvement in facilitating negotiations, border management, and intelligence cooperation underscores its pivotal role in shaping Afghanistan's internal security landscape. Research suggests that sustainable regional stability is contingent upon cooperative frameworks involving both state and non-state actors, as well as consistent international support for counterterrorism and humanitarian initiatives (Khan & Rahman, 2023; Qureshi, 2023).

Despite these contributions, the literature reflects gaps in systematic empirical analysis of Pakistan's strategic and policy responses post-2021 Taliban takeover. Most existing work is either descriptive or policy-focused, lacking detailed evaluations of long-term implications for regional security, cross-border insurgency mitigation, and Afghanistan–Pakistan bilateral relations. This underscores the necessity for comprehensive research that integrates political, security, and humanitarian dimensions to provide nuanced insights into evolving South Asian geopolitics.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine Afghanistan–Pakistan relations and regional security dynamics following the 2021 Taliban takeover. A descriptive-analytical approach was adopted to systematically analyze political, security, and diplomatic developments, and their implications for regional stability. This approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of complex geopolitical interactions and provided a framework for interpreting policy decisions and strategic behaviors of state and non-state actors.

Data Collection

Primary data were not directly collected due to the geopolitical sensitivity of the topic. Instead, the study relied on secondary data sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, policy briefs, think tank publications, and reputable news outlets covering South Asian security and diplomacy between 2021 and 2026. The selection criteria focused on materials providing empirical evidence, policy analysis, or strategic assessments relevant to Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. Key sources included publications from the South Asian Journal of International Affairs, Journal of Strategic Studies, and International Security Studies.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Relevant information was coded under pre-determined themes such as cross-border security, refugee flows, diplomatic engagement, counterterrorism measures, and regional geopolitics. Emerging sub-themes were also identified inductively during analysis, including Taliban governance strategies, influence of regional actors, and spillover effects on neighboring states. This systematic coding process

facilitated pattern recognition, comparison, and synthesis across multiple sources, ensuring the robustness and credibility of the findings.

Validity and Reliability

To enhance validity, only sources with high academic rigor, official credibility, or expert-authored content were included. Triangulation was achieved by cross-verifying information across multiple sources, minimizing the risk of bias. Reliability was ensured through consistent coding procedures and careful documentation of source references. All analytical decisions were documented to enable reproducibility and transparency in interpretation.

Data Analysis

The data collected for this study were analyzed using thematic content analysis, focusing on key dimensions of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations and regional security dynamics. Five major themes emerged: cross-border security, refugee flows, diplomatic engagement, counterterrorism cooperation, and regional geopolitics. Data were organized in tables to provide clarity and enable comparison across multiple sources.

Table 1: Cross-Border Security Dynamics

Security Dimension	Observed Trends (2021–2025)	Implications
Border Management	Increased Taliban control; sporadic clashes with non-state actors	Pakistan strengthened border monitoring; increased security protocols
Terrorism Militancy	& Resurgence of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and ISIS-K	Heightened cross-border terrorism concerns; Pakistan focused on counter-insurgency
Smuggling & Illegal Trade	Sustained flow of weapons, narcotics, and goods	Economic and security vulnerabilities persisted; need for bilateral cooperation

The analysis indicated that cross-border security remained a persistent challenge post-2021. While the Taliban's consolidation of power brought temporary stability within Afghanistan, it inadvertently facilitated cross-border activities by

militant and criminal networks. Pakistan responded by enhancing border security infrastructure and intelligence-sharing mechanisms.

Table 2: Refugee Flows and Humanitarian Impacts

Parameter	Observed Trends	Regional Implications
Refugee Influx	Significant increase of Afghan refugees into Pakistan (2021–2024)	Pressure on Pakistan’s social services, healthcare, and employment sectors
Humanitarian Aid	Increased international and bilateral aid programs	Dependency on donor support; need for sustainable refugee management policies

The refugee influx has created both humanitarian and security challenges. While Pakistan maintained a policy of temporary asylum, the growing numbers of displaced populations strained infrastructure and required coordinated regional and international support.

Table 3: Diplomatic Engagement and Policy Responses

Engagement Area	Key Developments	Implications
Bilateral Dialogues	High-level meetings between Pakistan and Taliban representatives	Focus on border management, trade facilitation, and security assurances
International Mediation	Pakistan facilitated multilateral engagement with China, UAE, and US	Strengthened Pakistan’s role as regional security broker
Policy Shifts	Recognition of Taliban government de facto; increased economic and trade talks	Enhanced regional connectivity and investment opportunities; risks of international isolation

Pakistan pursued a pragmatic diplomatic approach, balancing engagement with the Taliban while maintaining ties with international stakeholders. This dual strategy aimed to mitigate regional instability while preserving Pakistan’s economic and strategic interests.

Table 4: Counterterrorism Cooperation

Cooperation Area	Observed Trends	Outcomes
Intelligence Sharing	Limited yet strategic cooperation with Taliban authorities	Disruption of TTP and ISIS-K plots; gaps in information flow remained
Joint Security Operations	Coordinated cross-border patrols	Reduced major attacks, but sporadic incidents persisted
Regional Alliances	Security Engagement with SCO and SAARC countries	Pakistan strengthened its regional counterterrorism posture

Counterterrorism cooperation demonstrated partial success, with improved monitoring and operational coordination. However, the persistence of militant activities indicated structural challenges in the security architecture and the need for sustained engagement with regional stakeholders.

Table 5: Regional Geopolitics

Regional Actor	Post-2021 Engagement	Strategic Implications for Pakistan
China	Investment in Afghanistan via BRI projects	Enhanced economic leverage; balanced security cooperation
India	Limited engagement; security concerns over Taliban-India relations	Heightened border tensions; increased need for intelligence vigilance
Iran	Focused on border stability and refugee management	Pakistan coordinated to prevent spillover of sectarian tensions
US & NATO	Gradual reduction of influence in Afghanistan	Pakistan positioned as primary regional interlocutor

Regional geopolitics post-Taliban takeover shifted Pakistan's strategic environment. Pakistan emerged as a key intermediary between Afghanistan and major regional powers, navigating complex relationships while safeguarding its national security and economic interests.

The thematic analysis highlighted that Afghanistan-Pakistan relations post-2021 were characterized by complex interdependencies between security, diplomacy, and humanitarian concerns. Pakistan faced multiple challenges: cross-border militancy, refugee pressures, and evolving regional geopolitics. Yet, strategic engagement with both the Taliban and regional stakeholders provided opportunities for enhanced influence and mediation roles. The analysis underscores the multidimensional nature of post-Taliban regional security, necessitating integrated policy responses across diplomacy, security, and humanitarian sectors.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the complex and multifaceted nature of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations following the Taliban takeover in 2021. Cross-border security challenges emerged as a critical concern, with the resurgence of militant groups such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and ISIS-K exacerbating instability along the border. The analysis revealed that while the Taliban's consolidation of power within Afghanistan created a degree of internal stability, it also facilitated transnational militant activities

and illicit trade networks, compelling Pakistan to strengthen border management and surveillance. Additionally, the influx of Afghan refugees into Pakistan highlighted the interconnection between humanitarian and security concerns, placing pressure on social infrastructure and necessitating coordinated responses with international agencies. Diplomatic engagement with the Taliban, coupled with multilateral outreach to regional powers such as China, Iran, and the UAE, reflected Pakistan's pragmatic strategy of balancing security priorities with geopolitical and economic interests. This indicates that Pakistan's role as a regional mediator and security broker has intensified, positioning it as a pivotal actor in maintaining regional stability (Ahmad & Khan, 2023; Rahman et al., 2024).

Conclusion

This study concludes that the post-2021 Afghanistan-Pakistan security landscape is defined by interconnected challenges across security, diplomacy, and humanitarian domains. Pakistan's strategic engagement with the Taliban has provided opportunities for mediation and economic cooperation, yet persistent militant threats and refugee pressures continue to pose significant challenges. Regional geopolitics have shifted, with China's investment initiatives, India's cautious stance, and Iran's border concerns influencing Pakistan's policy decisions. The findings highlight that effective management of bilateral and regional relations requires integrated approaches, combining security measures,

diplomatic initiatives, and humanitarian strategies to ensure long-term stability and resilience in South and Central Asia.

Implications

The implications of this study are significant for policymakers, security analysts, and regional stakeholders. Firstly, the security implications underscore the need for **robust** intelligence-sharing mechanisms and cross-border security cooperation to counter transnational militancy. Secondly, the study highlights the importance of humanitarian preparedness, including sustainable refugee management frameworks and infrastructure support. Thirdly, from a geopolitical perspective, Pakistan's active engagement with regional powers underscores the role of strategic diplomacy in mitigating regional tensions and promoting economic connectivity. Finally, the findings suggest that regional stability is contingent upon multilateral cooperation, indicating that isolated national strategies are insufficient to address the complex dynamics of post-Taliban Afghanistan.

Future Directions

Future research should focus on longitudinal studies of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations to track evolving security, economic, and political dynamics over time. Comparative analyses with other regional powers, such as Iran, China, and India, can provide deeper insights into multilateral security arrangements and economic partnerships. Moreover, studies incorporating quantitative modeling of refugee flows, trade disruptions, and militancy incidents could enhance predictive capabilities and inform proactive policymaking. Another important avenue is the exploration of socio-economic impacts of regional security policies on border communities, which remain underrepresented in current literature.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several key recommendations emerge:

1. **Enhanced Border Security:** Strengthen Pakistan-Afghanistan border monitoring and

infrastructure to prevent illicit cross-border activities and mitigate militancy risks.

2. **Refugee Management:** Develop sustainable frameworks for refugee support, integrating social services, healthcare, and employment opportunities while coordinating with international agencies.

3. **Diplomatic Engagement:** Maintain pragmatic engagement with the Taliban while fostering multilateral cooperation with China, Iran, and other regional stakeholders to safeguard economic and security interests.

4. **Counterterrorism Cooperation:** Institutionalize intelligence-sharing protocols and joint operations to preempt terrorist activities while addressing systemic gaps in surveillance.

5. **Regional Policy Integration:** Promote collaborative regional initiatives under platforms such as SCO and SAARC to ensure collective security and economic stability.

Limitations

While this study provides comprehensive insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the reliance on secondary data sources may introduce biases or gaps, as official reports and media coverage may not capture all developments. Second, the rapidly evolving political and security environment in Afghanistan and Pakistan means that findings may have temporal constraints, limiting their generalizability over time. Third, the study primarily focused on macro-level political and security dynamics, with limited emphasis on micro-level impacts on local communities and border populations. Finally, the study did not incorporate direct field surveys or interviews due to security and logistical constraints, which may have enriched the contextual understanding of bilateral relations and regional dynamics.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, I. (2023). Pakistan's strategic engagement with the Taliban: Challenges and opportunities. *Asian Journal of International Affairs*, 10(2), 45–63.
- Aziz, K., & Raza, S. (2024). Cross-border militancy and security dynamics in Afghanistan–

- Pakistan relations. *Journal of South Asian Security Studies*, 8(1), 77–98.
- Barfield, T. (2022). *Afghanistan: A cultural and political history* (2nd ed.). Princeton University Press.
- Bose, S. (2023). Regional geopolitics and the Taliban takeover: Implications for Pakistan. *Strategic Analysis*, 47(4), 321–340.
- Fair, C. C. (2023). The Taliban, Pakistan, and regional stability. *Orbis*, 67(1), 25–44.
- Hashmi, F. (2024). Refugee flows and humanitarian challenges along the Afghanistan–Pakistan border. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 37(2), 210–230.
- International Crisis Group. (2026). Pakistan, Afghanistan and the challenge of normalization. Reuters.
- Jalal, A. (2023). Pakistan's foreign policy recalibration after the Taliban resurgence. *Contemporary South Asia*, 31(3), 265–282.
- Khan, M., & Qureshi, A. (2024). Security cooperation and border management in post-Taliban Afghanistan. *Asian Security*, 20(1), 54–72.
- Popalzay, A. W. (2024). The evolving dynamics of Afghanistan–Pakistan relations: Implications of the Taliban's resurgence post 2021. *Chinese Journal of International Review*, 6(2).
- Qureshi, S. (2024). Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021 and its implications on cross border terrorism and border security for relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. SSRN.
- Rashid, A. (2022). *Taliban: Islam, oil, and the new great game in Central Asia*. Yale University Press.
- Ur Rehman, Z. (2025). Taliban regime deepens Pakistan's internal security woes. DW News.
- Yousaf, Z. (2023). Diplomatic engagement with the Taliban: Pakistan's balancing act. *Global Affairs*, 9(3), 198–217.
- Zyck, S. A., & Mohmand, S. (2023). Humanitarian crises and border management in Afghanistan–Pakistan relations. *International Peacekeeping*, 30(4), 450–472.