

MIGRATION DIPLOMACY AND REFUGEE DYNAMICS: THE AFGHAN INFLUX AND ITS IMPACT ON PAKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY AND BORDER SECURITY

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Abstract

This article discusses the Afghan influx in Pakistani in the context of migration diplomacy and contends that, the issue of Afghan displacement has never been a humanitarian issue in Pakistan. Instead, it has served as a domestic governance problem, a regional security problem and a tool of diplomacy. The article introduces the notion of migration diplomacy and demonstrates how states utilize admission, regulation, documentation, and return of migrants and refugees to achieve more political ends. It then follows the history of the Afghan influx since the initial mass immigration following 1979 to the more recent policy reversals and return pressures following 2023 and 2025 in particular. It is concluded in the analysis that the policy of Pakistan on refugees has become less long-term strategic hospitality and managed ambiguity and more of securitized selectivity, coercive repatriation, and tightened border control. This change has impacted on the relationships of Pakistan with Afghanistan, the United Nations system, Western donors and other regional players like China. The article further states that militancy has been rhetorically conflated with the refugee problem although the greatest cross border security threat facing Pakistan is the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other armed groups based in Afghanistan and not the refugee communities as an entity. To have a lasting policy, protection must be separated out of policing, ad hoc documentation must be replaced with a consistent legal framework, and border security must be part of a wider regional approach of burden-sharing, controlled movement, and counterterrorism collaboration.

Introduction

The connection between forced migration and foreign policy is frequently characterized in moral or humanitarian terms, which is incomplete. The flows of refugees change the bargaining power

redistribute costs, impact border regimes, and how the neighboring states interact with each other. The Afghan refugee issue in the case of Pakistan has long been a point of conflict between domestic politics, regional politics, aid

politics, and counterterrorism. That is why the phenomenon of the Afghan influx can be perceived not only as the crisis of refugees, but also as a prolonged example of migration diplomacy in action. The problem has gained even greater acuity following the Taliban re-takeover in 2021, increasing Pakistani tensions with Kabul and the repatriation drives that are being scaled up in 2025 (Hayat & Ahmadi, 2025).

Though, not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol, Pakistan has continued to respond to refugee crises primarily on humanitarian grounds, frequently in the absence of persistent international support or sufficient institutional capacity. This multifaceted, dynamic issue not only tests Pakistan's political and humanitarian terrain but also presents a key prism through which we can view the convergence of security, foreign policy, and international cooperation in the case of one of the world's most long-standing refugee crises.

Objective of the Research:

The sole Objective of this research is:

1) To Analyze the Pakistan's Afghan Refugee Policy and its alignment with the migration diplomacy.

Methodology:

This research applies qualitative research design focusing on secondary resources of data. The UNHCR, UN and Government of Pakistan's published reports and official data is utilized to interpret the refugees' policies, and laws. The ethical considerations are followed while citing the data properly.

In its deconstructive scrutiny of Pakistan's high-tech refugee management strategy from the vantage points of migration diplomacy, an increasingly emerging paradigm by which matters related to refugees are within foreign policy logic, local geopolitics, and country interest in security, the research pursues a triangular analytical paradigm which takes foreign relations, national political interests, and border security imperatives into consideration to provide insight into the way

border mobility has influenced Pakistani strategic thinking throughout the years.

Migration Diplomacy

According to Adamson and Tsourapas (2019), migration diplomacy is the tactical application of cross-border population movement by states in the pursuit of diplomatic results. Migration is not merely a process that states respond to, but rather something that states control, instrumentalized and bargain over. This concept is the key to the comprehension of the migration diplomacy; it can be extended to understand the fact that states, including Pakistan, use the refugee population as a bargaining tool in regional and international affairs. In the case of Pakistan, the decades long presence of the Afghan refugees has ceased to be a humanitarian issue, and turned out to be a strategic instrument of diplomacy. First, the invasion of Afghan refugees gave Pakistan an opportunity to gain more political and economic power, not only in the region, but also in the world (Faisal, 2024).

Traditionally, migration diplomacy used to be perceived based on the way the states reacted to migration flows. Initial theories paid attention to states as inactive bodies responding to external migration pressures. But with increasing complexity in migration patterns, the perception of the interaction of states with migration increased as well. This was furthered by Thiolllet (2024) who noted that migration and mobility do not simply inform labor markets or humanitarian activities but can also form regional and international politics. This principle is especially applicable to the example of Pakistan, in which the idea of geopolitical strategy has been closely connected to the idea of refugee hosting, both in the domestic interests of Pakistan and the foreign policy of this country.

1) *Migration Diplomacy: Cooperative and Coercive Logics*

Migration diplomacy is carried out by coercive and cooperative logics. On the one hand, the host countries may introduce refugee protection as a public good, and demand help, burden-sharing, and international acknowledgment in

return. Alternatively, they can apply migration as a form of coercion, i.e. by threatening to move on, to stay in detention or to be deported, they can demand political, economic or security concessions by their neighbors, international agencies or even donors (Fayyaz & Siddiqui, 2023).

The example of Pakistan in dealing with Afghan refugees is the ideal example of the management of migration diplomacy to strike a balance between cooperative and coercive logic. An example is the Cold war period and the Afghan-Soviet war whereby Pakistan put up its reception of the Afghan refugees as a sacrifice and collaboration with the western nations. The extent and magnitude of the crisis of refugees were applied by Pakistan to obtain international assistance and support, especially the United States and Saudi Arabia. The issue of Afghan refugees was presented as a burden yet it also served as a tool to gain military support, humanitarian aid, and diplomatic support (Kumia & Febrina, 2022).

Meanwhile, coercive aspects were also a part of the refugee policy in Pakistan. The size of the Afghan refugee population provided Pakistan with bargaining power in its relationships with the global community, and political and financial aid was obtained through the threat of repatriation or border closures. The refugee problem turned into one of the key bargaining chips in the Pakistani diplomacy where it had to strike a balance between being a host country and pursuing its geopolitical interests. Such migration politics enabled Pakistan to safeguard its interests in regional and international fronts (Dhabitah, 2021).

1) Migration Diplomacy and Global South

Migration diplomacy acquires a new form in the Global South, where most of the countries with high populations of refugees are not the richest and most developed ones. Hospitality and refugee hosting in these areas are also highly pacified as sacrifices that the host states make, and refugee management is the way to demand international aid and geopolitical power. This trend is particularly applicable to Pakistan a nation that

has received millions of Afghan refugees in the past four decades (Qassem, 2024).

The treatment of Afghan refugees by Pakistan underscores the role of the developing nations in the international regime of refugees. As Western nations are usually well equipped in resources and facilities to handle the number of refugees, the nations in the Global south are compelled to depend on foreign aid and international negotiations to absorb the pressure. The hosting of the Afghan refugees in large numbers has been put in the context of a sacrifice that must be recognized internationally and supported in the case of Pakistan. The international community, especially the United Nations has recognized the role of Pakistan in hosting refugees, indeed, the capacity of the country to host the refugees has always remained reliant on international financial and logistical aid (Khan et al., 2021).

The history of the host different Afghan refugees in Pakistan has been developing with time, depending on the domestic and regional processes. The refugee problem during the early years of the refugee crisis especially in the 1980s was brought forward by Pakistan as a humanitarian issue and used its status as a host country to win political and economic favor of the international community. The magnitude of the Afghan refugee crisis served as the basis of the strategic importance of Pakistan to the world powers especially United States. The fact that Pakistan was the major regional actor in the cold war was also enhanced by the fact that it was the major host to the Afghan refugees who fled Soviet troops (Rahman, 2025).

Nevertheless, when the situation in Afghanistan was still unstable, and the number of refugees increased, the problem became more complex. The foreign policy of Pakistan towards the Afghan refugees started changing in the 1990s and early 2000s to a less cooperative and more restrictive stance. The emergence of militant groups in Afghanistan, and the increasing issues on cross-border militancy compelled Pakistan to take a more securitized approach to Afghanistan refugees. The refugee population which initially was regarded as a diplomatic asset were now

perceived as internal destabilization factor and security threat (Fahad et al., 2025).

The changes that occurred in the foreign policy of Pakistan during the post-9/11 period were further. When the U.S invaded Afghanistan and overthrew the Taliban regime, Pakistan proved an important partner in the War on Terror. The refugee problem was once again included in the diplomatic talks of Pakistan with the west, however this time it was more about counterterrorism and border security than the humanitarian aid. The existence of Afghanistan refugees was regarded as a threat to militant activity, especially when the Taliban and other militant groups were hiding in the tribal areas of Pakistan (Alimia, 2022).

Another change in the Pakistan policy towards refugees was the Taliban revival in 2021. As the Taliban came back into power in Afghanistan, once again the Pakistan diplomacy was changed. Although Pakistan had expected the Taliban to make Afghanistan a safer place to reside in and enable refugees to safely reenter the country, the situation was a lot more complicated (Khan et al., 2023). The inability of the Taliban to manage militant groups acting off the Afghan soil resulted in a radical change of the attitude of Pakistan to the Afghan refugees. In 2025, the refugee policy of Pakistan was already predominantly concerned with the national security issues, with the border control and repatriation gaining a stronger priority.

3) Migration Diplomacy and Security Concerns

Since the issue of Afghan refugees became more interconnected with the issue of security, Pakistan was more and more presenting the population of refugees as the threat to its national security. The permeable border of Pakistan and Afghanistan became a critical issue of concern and the militants used the refugee camps and border regions to penetrate Pakistan. Through the use of different instruments of migration diplomacy, the Pakistani government through the different administrations tried to strike a balance between protection of refugees and security issues. They involved enhanced border security, stricter visa policies and

deportation or repatriation of Afghan refugees (Oztig, 2021).

The part played by the migration diplomacy in this is evident: Pakistan leveraged the refugee issue as a bargaining tool in its relationship with Afghanistan and the international community. The politicization of the refugee crisis by presenting it as a security crisis allowed Pakistan to garner political compromises and funding resources among the international actors. Nonetheless, this has not been a strategy without its own costs. The growing securitization of Pakistan policy on refugees has led to a worsening of the relationship between the country and the international bodies like the UNHCR which have demanded that the country adopt a more rights based approach to managing refugees. Meanwhile, diplomatic ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan have been strained as Kabul accuses Pakistan of leveraging the refugee matter as a bargaining tool in regional politics (Tariq, 2024).

4) Regional geopolitics and Pakistani Refugee Policy

The policy of Pakistan towards refugees is not merely domestic matter of the country; it has a great impact on geopolitics in the region. The fact that there are Afghan refugees in Pakistan has always been a source of dispute between Pakistan and its neighbors especially India. The problem of refugees has been commonly set in the context of the regional rivalry of Pakistan and India. The refugee crisis has also served both nations to support their respective political interests with Pakistan taking advantage of its position as a hosting nation to gain international attention and backing whereas India has condemned the way Pakistan has handled the refugees especially in matters concerning their security (Annus et al., 2023).

The Pakistan relations with Iran and China also depend on the issue of refugees. Iran borders Afghanistan and has a long history of housing refugees yet it has experienced major challenges with the management of the refugee population (Faisal et. al, 2024). Both Iran and Pakistan have urged that there be increased cooperation by all the countries in the handling of the refugee crisis

but their methods have remained different because of the differences in political interests of Afghanistan. China, being a rising regional power has expressed interest in Afghanistan reconstruction and stability, yet the refugee issue and the possibility of cross-border militancy has been a cause of concern (Raza, 2024).

5) Migration Diplomacy and Pakistan's Foreign Policy

Although Pakistan continues to grapple with the challenges of accommodating the Afghan refugees, its migration policy will be at the center of determining its foreign policies and relations with other countries. Going forward, Pakistan should aim to find the middle ground between handling the refugee problem and focusing on security and humanitarian aspects of the problem. This will necessitate more international burden-sharing and a resurgence of regional collaboration especially with Afghanistan, Iran and China.

The future policy of Pakistan regarding the refugees will have to be based on the definite legal framework that will allow separating between the refugees and the militants and provide the protection of the rights of refugees. Pakistan also needs to have more positive diplomacy with the global community so that the problem of refugees is not used as a source of political bargaining but as a collective burden in the quest of ensuring regional stability (Hussain et. al, 2023).

To sum it up, the policy and approach towards the Afghan refugees in Pakistan has changed to one of diplomatic bargaining to a more restrictive and securitized policy. Although the security issues are justified, the sustainability of such strategy in Pakistan in the long term will be determined by how the country will strike a balance between national security and its international obligations on refugee protection. An even more integrated and cooperative form of addressing the Afghan refugees and putting more emphasis on the regional cooperation and international burden-sharing will be necessary in the process of securing the long-term sustainability of both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Afghan Influx Overview

In 1979, the Afghan influx into Pakistan started in large scale. In April of the same year, Pakistan sought the help of UNHCR to take urgent action and the exodus gained momentum following the Soviet invasion. During the peak of the initial wave, it was estimated that between 80,000 and 90,000 Afghans were crossing every month in 1980. They were not transient and closed movements. As time went by, the waves of refugees superimposed each other: people who have fled the Soviet occupation, civil war, Taliban rule in the 90s, drought, post-2001 instability, and even the political turmoil after the Taliban seized power in August 2021. What came out was not a one-time refugee crisis but an extended, multi-generational dispensation regime (Dashti, 2022).

1) The Major Influx

The migration of Afghans into Pakistan started to take serious heed with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. This was the start of the long refugee crisis that was to follow. Pakistan being a strategically located country in Central and South Asia, it was not only a refuge to the refugees, but also a frontier country in the geopolitical battle of the Cold War. Hosting of refugees in the 1980s was bound up with the overall foreign policy objectives of Pakistan in the Soviet-Afghan war.

The major foreign policy goal of Pakistan in the 1980s was to oppose the Soviet influence in the area. The international allies of Pakistan especially the United States and Saudi Arabia shared this objective. The existence of the Afghan refugees in Pakistan turned into an instrument that Pakistan could utilize in order to reinforce its status in the world geopolitical arena. The Afghan refugee crisis was packaged and sold as a humanitarian crisis, but it was also used as a diplomatic tool: Pakistan could seek backing and assistance of the international community, which strengthened its position as a focal point in the Cold War game. As a reward to taking millions of refugees, Pakistan used its status to obtain military support, economic support, and

international acclaim to its attempts to face the Soviet threat (Tahir-Khel, 2022).

But the reality that the problem of refugees continued long after the Soviet pullout in 1989 left Pakistan in an intricate diplomatic dilemma. The nation was no longer left to depend on the international narrative of a Cold War ally and the increasing numbers of refugees were now seen to be a diplomatic challenge as well as a source of political leverage.

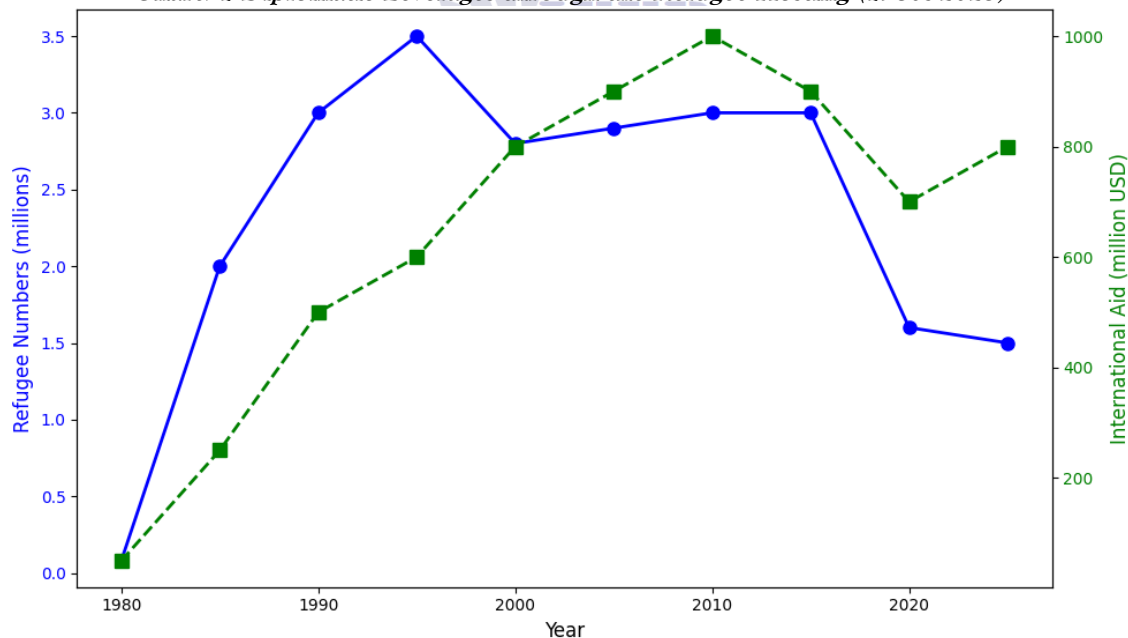
2)Post-Soviet Withdrawal and Diplomatic Influence

The issue of refugees even after the Soviet withdrawal in Afghanistan remained a diplomatic issue. The continued presence of Afghan refugees in Pakistan as late as 1990s and early 2000s played a major role in making Pakistan an important country to be mentioned in any discussion concerning the future of Afghanistan. The fact that there were millions of Afghan refugees rendered the stakeholders in the

international arena unable to overlook the role that Pakistan had played in the Afghan peace processes and Afghanistan reconstructions debates (Ali, 2022).

Pakistan found itself in a strategic position to play a key role in the affairs of the Afghanistan by harboring such population of refugees. The hosting role of Pakistan, especially by the UNHCR and the World Bank, was seen as an important aspect of the stability of the region. During the 1990s and even the early 2000s, the Pakistani diplomatic capital in the region developed further as it was still trying to package the Afghanistan refugees into its greater geopolitical interest. Pakistan may defend the refugees by saying that it was not only a humanitarian burden but also a demonstration of what the country had contributed to regional peace. This framing helped Pakistan justify international financial support and burden-sharing initiatives (Sultan et. al., 2025).

Chart: 1 Diplomatic Leverages through the Refugee Hosting (1980s-2025)



3)The Post 2001 Migration Diplomacy

The era of 9/11 was characterized by a major change in the foreign policy of Pakistan since it emerged as a very crucial partner in the War on

Terror led by the U.S. The problem of Afghan refugees assumed a new aspect when once again Pakistan was involved in the process of stabilizing Afghanistan which was under the international

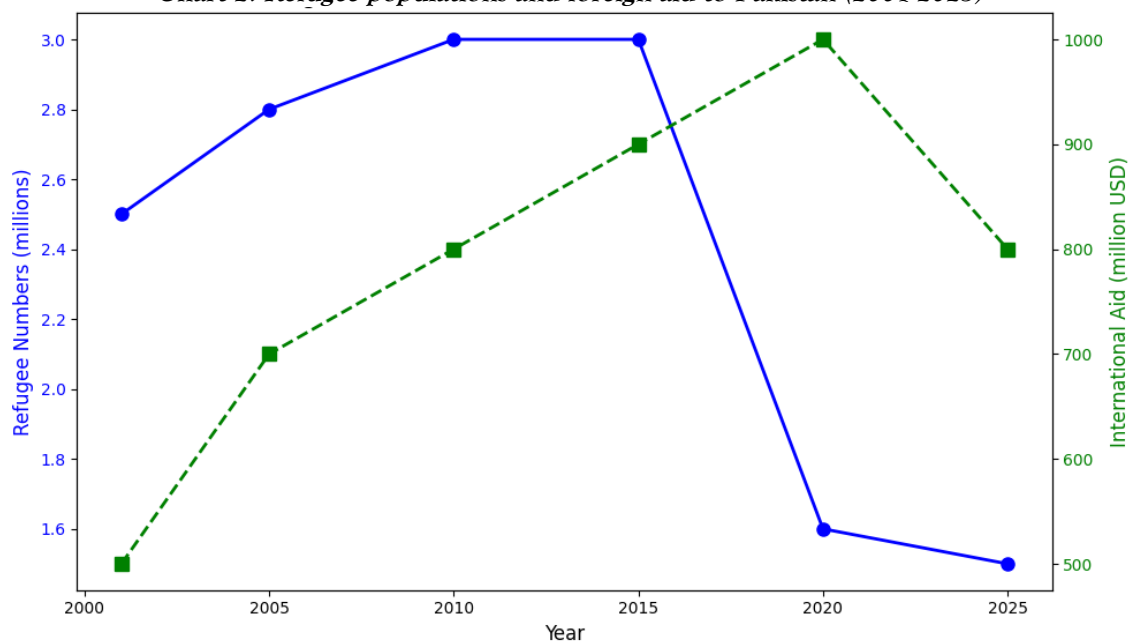
pressure. Although the problem of refugees was still acute, it was now mixed with the issues of terrorism, militancy, and security in the region (Mansoor, 2021).

Pakistan took the hosting of the Afghan refugees as a way of enhancing its diplomatic ties with the west, especially the United States. By early 2000s the foreign policy of Pakistan towards the Afghan refugees was no longer a mere humanitarian approach but was now connected to counterterrorism efforts. The fact that there were Afghan refugees in the country was a bargaining tool to the negotiations about the U.S. military and financial assistance. The Pakistani plan involved seeking the help of the international community in managing the refugees, but at the

same time, there was a call to receive greater help in counterterrorism (Khan, 2025).

Nonetheless, in the mid-2000s, Pakistan experienced mounting pressure in the country regarding the number of refugees. The less employment opportunities, poor public services, and social integration problems became more pronounced as the Afghan refugee community became increasingly more established in Pakistan. In spite of these domestic problems, Pakistan still managed to hold on to its diplomatic capital by presenting the problem of Afghanistan refugees as regional and international in nature which needed mutual burden sharing by the international donors (Delawar, 2022).

Chart 2: Refugee populations and foreign aid to Pakistan (2001-2025)



This chart give information about the population of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and the level of international assistance (including American assistance) received by Pakistan within this timeframe displaying the correlation between the number of refugees and diplomatic power.

4) Post Taliban Diplomatic Decline

The sharp change in the Pakistani foreign policy towards Afghan refugees was the resurgence of the Taliban to power in 2021. First, Pakistan had dreamt of having a friendly or at least manageable government in Kabul to assist in stabilizing the situation in the region and also help improve the

situation of security in Pakistan. The Taliban however re-emerged to deteriorate the security situation along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The problem of Afghan refugees became even more mixed with the security issue of cross-border militancy because Pakistan was under the threat of increasing danger of cross-border

militancy of Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other armed groups performing their actions on the territory of Afghanistan (Kaleem & Iqbal, 2023).

The unwillingness of the Taliban to act against anti-Pakistan militants who were operating on the Afghan territory compelled Pakistan to change its diplomatic discourse. Pakistan could no longer afford to merely raise its fingers and complain that it was a host state to the Afghan refugees, but rather, slowly started to create a security problem out of the problem of refugees. This mass movement of Afghan refugees was now regarded as a possible source of security threat with the fears of militant penetration of Pakistan border areas.

Such changed attitude resulted in a shift in the foreign policy of Pakistan. Diplomacy to reach out to the Taliban was aimed at convincing them to reduce militant actions along the border, and Pakistan was now mounting pressure to have increased control over the number of refugees. In 2025, the government of Pakistan declared that it will repatriate the Afghan refugees faster and argued that the situation in Afghanistan demanded a tougher stance. Pakistan also aimed at pushing back any international narrative that was aimed at protecting the Taliban government with the highlight that being instabilized in Afghanistan was a direct threat to the national security of Pakistan (Hussain & Yousafzai, 2023).

Chart 3: Change in the Pakistani Diplomatic Policy towards Afghan Refugees (2021-2026)



The developed table shows that how the diplomatic position of the Pakistani government regarding Afghan refugees has changed since 2021. This chart will demonstrate the way the policy of Pakistan has changed its strategic hosting to more restraining approach because of the security issues.

Regional and Global Diplomacy

The foreign policy of Pakistan towards Afghan refugees has also resulted in a lot of repercussions in its foreign relations with the neighboring countries especially with India, Iran and China. The refugee problem has always been a subject of disagreement in the regional diplomacy. Its historical history as the major host of Afghan refugees in the region has been complicated by its

poor relationship with India, who have been accusing Pakistan of being home to militant groups who use the Afghanistan land to base themselves.

In the meantime, the relations between Pakistan and Iran have been influenced by the common interests concerning the situation in Afghanistan and the high population of Afghan refugees in the two countries. Iran and Pakistan have

demanded more international help towards the Afghan refugees, and they have demanded more responsibility of the Taliban (Eisenstadt, 2021).

China is another emerging power in the region which has been interested in the reconstruction and stability of Afghanistan. Nonetheless, the aid that China has given Pakistan has been viewed as a means of counterbalancing the influence of the U.S. and India in the area. This has made the refugee issue a means of diplomacy that Pakistan can use in its relations with China. This relationship is part of the overall foreign policy approach of Pakistan to provide a balance of relationships between the global and regional powers (Rippa, 2025).

1) Analysis of Border Security Problems

The issue of border-security faced by Pakistan is not a mere political rhetoric. Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier is not merely the longest border but also one of the most disputed borders in the world. The border is about 2,600 kilometers long, and has long been both a location of collaboration and discord, as the social and economic relationships on either side of the border have been marked by strong social and economic ties. Such interconnections as trade, family mobility make border control difficult and require a delicate insight into the dynamics of the region. According to the description by Reuters in October 2025, the crossings were closed due to significant conflicts, which underscores the unstable security situation, which Pakistan experiences along the western border. The border is not just a line dividing two nations, but it is an area where legal commerce and smuggling, family interchange, and militant encroachment intersect and therefore harder to control (Micko & Riegl, 2022).

2) The Border Hardening Dilemma

The physical hardening of the border by fencing, surveillance, and building of fortified posts has been one major reaction to the border insecurity. This has however not solved the underlying political and security problems. An example of this can be the March 2025 Torkham crossing, which is one of the most important gateways

between Pakistan and Afghanistan, being closed almost a whole month over a dispute over an outpost in the border area. Not only does the closing of such crossings make the free movement of goods and people difficult, but it also increases the tensions between the two nations. The Torkham crossing has been termed as an essential artery of trade and importation of food into Afghanistan and its economic significance to both countries has been highlighted. Because of this, Pakistan has been under growing pressure in balancing between tightening security and facilitating essential cross-border transactions (Koehler et al., 2021).

3) Border Closure: Socio-Economic Impacts

As the activities of Pakistan to secure its boundaries have been increasing, these have been accompanied by high economic and social costs. In October 2025, larger border closures caused trade and transit disruptions with devastating economic impacts. In Pakistan and Afghanistan, prices of basic commodities like food and fuel shot up because the supply lines across the borders were blocked. These interferences have a long-term effect to the local economies particularly in areas like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan where border trade plays a vital role in livelihoods. Moreover, the effect of these closures is the social pressure on communities that rely on family relationships across the border, further making the border an object of tension and sufferings (FAROOQ & Ashraf, 2025).

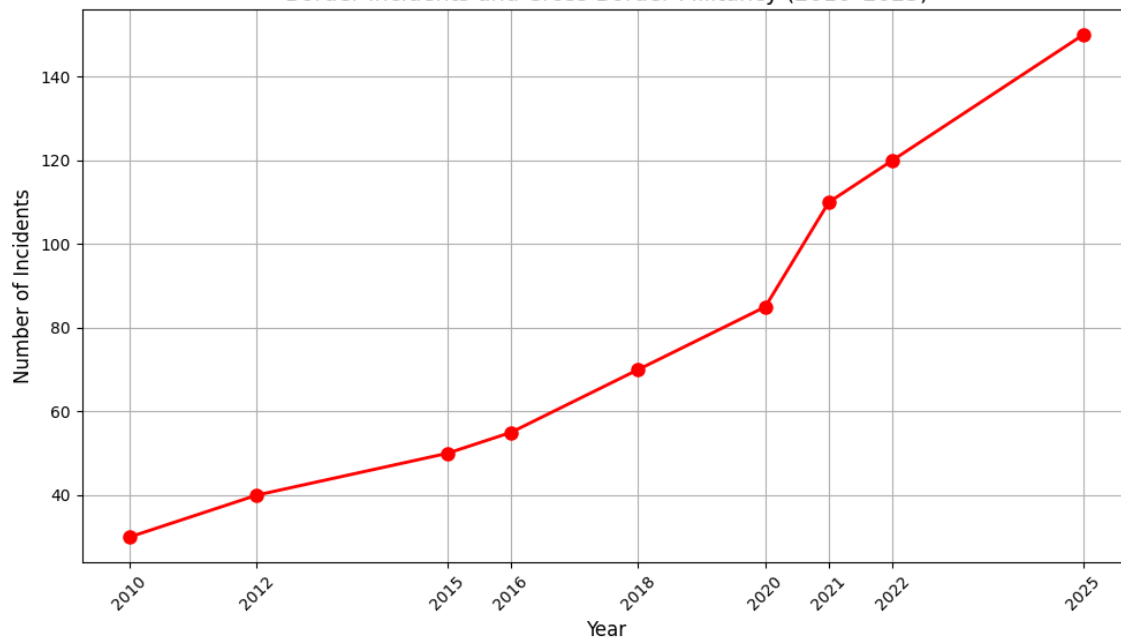
4) Taliban Rule and Border Security

The Taliban regaining power in Afghanistan in 2021 is a major deterioration of the security situation on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The Taliban activities have provided a free ground to other militants such as the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) that is based in Afghanistan and attacks the security forces of Pakistan. The military in Pakistan has been raising alarm on the Taliban inability to contain cross border militant activities. To this, Pakistan has been urging Kabul to contribute more to counterterrorism activities but due to diplomatic

tensions, this has not been possible. This is an ongoing danger of armed militants and it has necessitated the tightening of the security along the border, yet the efficiency of these security

measures is not so good. The border is a very porous area of militancy and this has complicated and made security management a difficult task to Pakistan (Khan & Kaunert, 2026).

Chart 4: Border Incidents and Cross-Border Militancy (2010-2025).



The chart is drawn to graphically depict how often the border incidences and militant attacks take place along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border with major spikes in the violence and cross-border militant attacks. The chart will be useful in reflecting the increasing insecurity trend that has been associated with the Taliban resurgence and the cross-border tensions.

Conclusion

The Afghan influx has been a major influence on the foreign policy of Pakistan during the last forty years. During the first years of time, the accommodation process of Afghan refugees was a diplomatic resource of Pakistan, which placed it in the center of world politics. This was a strategic position that enabled Pakistan to position itself with the leading world powers like the United States and Saudi Arabia and got substantial foreign aid and support. Initially treated as a temporary burden, refugees came to dominate the Pakistani diplomatic policies throughout the Cold War and particularly following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. The fact that Pakistan was a front-line state during the Cold War gave it a special chance to use its accommodation of the Afghans as refugees

to acquire international recognition and material help.

But, with time, the case changed. Pakistan started experiencing serious challenges with the long-term Asian hosting of refugees, especially as the number of refugees continued to rise and the strain on host communities become more socio-economic. This was also made complicated by the escalating security issue relating to cross border militancy. The emergence of extremist factions in Afghanistan, especially when the Taliban was back in power in 2021, changed the refugee problem as an instrument of diplomatic leverage to a security threat. The inability of Taliban to contain militancy inside Afghanistan saw Pakistan rethink its policies on refugees with more emphasis being made on border security and control.

Consequently, the Afghan refugee question became not a source of diplomatic capital, but a diplomatic and security problem. The Pakistani government was gradually taking the Afghan refugees as not only a humanitarian issue, but also a security issue associated with militant actions along the porous border. The increasing strength of the Taliban and their inability to control insurgent organizations which based their operations on the Afghan soil increased the level of security concerns by Pakistan, resulting in the enactment of stricter refugee policies. These policies that involved the attempts to repatriate the Afghan refugees and secure the borders have diminished the diplomatic standing of Pakistan with international partners who have spoken against the actions as Pakistan in terms of coercive and not in line with international standards of protection of refugees.

Traditionally, the problem of Afghan refugees gave Pakistan a special chance to earn diplomatic capital, remain relevant in the region, and receive foreign aid. But this advantage has been slowly eroded with the change in the character of the refugee crisis. Long-term displacement, the legal ambiguity, the tediousness of donors, and the increasing tensions with Afghanistan have led to the major change in the foreign policy of Pakistan. By 2025 and early 2026, Pakistan's refugee policy had become more focused on national security and border control, aligning with a broader, securitized foreign-policy stance aimed at pressuring Kabul and asserting Pakistan's sovereignty.

Although the current strategy will solve some of the short term security challenges, it will not solve the structural problems that give rise to instability along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Forcing people to go back to their homeland and securitizing the refugee problem indiscriminately might bring short term political and administrative benefits but not the causes of instability and insecurity. Such policies are threatening to further isolate foreign allies and increase the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

Pakistan needs to take a complex approach to get closer to a more sustainable solution. This must involve the formulation of a more explicit

domestic law on the status of asylum and refugee which will offer the refugees a feeling of security and decrease the political and legal uncertainty of their presence in Pakistan. Further, Pakistan needs to transition to intelligence based anti-terrorism campaigns where the two categories of refugees and militants are not confused but rather, innocent refugees are not wrongly victimized.

Controlled and reported border movement, as opposed to the random border closures that have been placed in the reaction to the security requirements, would enable to control the refugee movement in a more effective way without breaching the humanitarian obligations. Lastly, rejuvenated international burden-sharing is essential. The protection of refugees should not be placed on the shoulders of Pakistan, rather the international community should do more to assist both Pakistan and Afghanistan, by providing funds, resettlement programmes and regional cooperation.

To sum up, although Pakistan has a point in terms of the security risks and the burden on its resources, the existing strategy of dealing with the issue of the Afghan refugees is not long-term viable. There must be a balanced, well-structured, and collaborative solution that guarantees the security of refugees and at the same time meet the security interests of Pakistan. Changing the emphasis on a more securitized model to a more open and legally based one, Pakistan can not only ensure that its borders are closed to invaders but also sustain its diplomatic ties and abide by the international commitments. This will be used to establish a more stable and secure environment to both Pakistan and Afghanistan; this will help in bringing peace and stability to the region.

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