

## *Original Paper*

# Post-9/11 Analysis of Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations (2001-2021)

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Received: October 13, 2024    Accepted: November 7, 2024    Online Published: November 12, 2024  
doi:10.22158/sss.v5n4p82                      URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sss.v5n4p82>

### **Abstract**

*In the post-9/11 era, Pakistan and Afghanistan share a closely interconnected geopolitical relationship characterized by a mutual prosperity that not only affects the well-being of their populations but also significantly influences regional and global developments. This study employs historical analysis and case studies to examine the bilateral interactions between Pakistan and Afghanistan in the political, security, and economic spheres since the events of 9/11. It finds that their relationship has long remained at a subdued level. The core thesis of this research is that border disputes, terrorism, strategic mistrust, issues with refugees and narcotics, and Indian interference are the principal barriers preventing an improvement in their bilateral ties. Strategic suspicions between Pakistan and Afghanistan have accumulated over many years. The return to power of the Afghan Taliban has once again made terrorism a major impediment in their relationship. In the short term, it remains unlikely that there will be any fundamental change in their bilateral relations.*

### **Keywords**

*Pakistan, Afghanistan, Pak-Afghan relations*

### **1. Introduction**

Afghanistan and Pakistan are in a key position at the crossroads of South Asia, West Asia and Central Asia, holding significant strategic importance as regional nations and external powers intertwine their competitive interests in this area. As neighbors, Pakistan and Afghanistan have close connections in multiple domains. Economically, since 2003, bilateral trade between the two countries has grown significantly, especially following the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement signed in 2010, which greatly enhanced regional trade and economic activity. This agreement not only strengthened the economic ties between the two nations but also promoted prosperity and development in the border

areas. Politically and in terms of security cooperation, Pakistan has played a crucial role in the Afghan peace process, particularly by supporting and mediating talks with the Taliban, which has helped to foster political stability in Afghanistan. Additionally, both countries share common interests in counter-terrorism, enhancing intelligence sharing and border management. This cooperation not only helps to reduce instability in the border regions but also fosters trust and collaboration between their military and security institutions. Internationally, multiple platforms and regional initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, provide new opportunities for Pak-Afghan cooperation. The active involvement of regional powers like China not only aids in advancing political dialogue between Pakistan and Afghanistan but also deepens their economic and security cooperation. It can be said that both countries possess the potential for mutual prosperity.

However, considering the historical and current interactions between Pakistan and Afghanistan, their bilateral relationship has long remained subdued. To this day, Pak-Afghan relations are still fraught with disputes, and the negative impacts continue to ferment. The studies on Pak-Afghan relations in the post-9/11 era often analyze the relationship from only one aspect or part, and comprehensive studies are scarce. This paper focuses on the Pak-Afghan relationship in the post-9/11 era, tracing the evolution of these interactions and exploring why it has been difficult for the relationship to improve. Studying this particular period of Pak-Afghan relations can help in understanding the recent dynamics between the two countries and even in predicting future trends.

It should be specifically noted that the "post-9/11 era" mentioned in this text refers to the period from 2001 to 2021, which corresponds to the duration of the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan.

## **2. The Pak-Afghan Relationship has Remained at a Low Level in the Post-9/11 Era**

Prior to the 9/11 attacks, the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan was long troubled by historical, territorial and religion issues, primarily focused on the "Durand Line" and the "Pashtunistan" issues. After its formation in 1947, Pakistan inherited the Durand Line boundary from the British Indian era, a demarcation Afghanistan deemed illegitimate, continually seeking to reclaim the Pashtun-dominated areas east of this line, which has been a long-standing source of resentment between the two countries.

The relationship was tense from the beginning, with Afghanistan opposing Pakistan diplomatically and supporting Pashtun separatist movements. Although diplomatic relations were briefly restored in the mid-1960s through the mediation of a third-party country, this thaw was not to last. With Daud Khan's ascension in 1973, Afghanistan's relations with the Soviet Union strengthened, its stance hardened, and it supported separatist movements within Pakistan, further exacerbating hostilities between the two.

Entering the 1980s, with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan began to support Afghan anti-Soviet forces, hoping to establish a pro-Pakistan regime to achieve "strategic depth" as a buffer against Indian influence in Afghanistan. Overall, the long-term confrontation over territorial and ethnic issues between Pakistan and Afghanistan has led to deep "strategic distrust," not only hindering the

development of bilateral relations but also laying the groundwork for regional instability and the emergence of terrorism.

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan underwent multifaceted changes across regional security, counterterrorism cooperation, and economic interactions, particularly complicated by the U.S.-led war on terror. Afghanistan became the epicenter of the global war on terror, while Pakistan, due to its unique geographical and political position as Afghanistan's neighbor, was thrust onto a complex international strategic stage. The relationship between the two countries during this period was characterized by deep cooperation as well as severe trust issues and conflicts, leading to continuous adjustments in their diplomatic and security policies in search of strategic balance.

At the onset of the U.S.-initiated war in Afghanistan, Pakistan opted to support the United States and join the counterterrorism coalition. This decision was not only a response to international pressure but also reflected Pakistan's attempt to leverage international cooperation to combat terrorist groups within its borders. Pakistan provided crucial military support for U.S. military operations in Afghanistan and opened its borders for U.S. military logistics, enhancing its standing in the counterterrorism alliance through military contributions, intelligence sharing, and joint operations.

However, as a large number of Afghan refugees poured into Pakistan, the security situation in the border areas rapidly deteriorated, placing significant pressure on Pakistan's political, economic, and social structures. Despite Pakistan's public stance on counterterrorism, its strategy in dealing with the Taliban drew widespread controversy. There were internal divisions within Pakistan regarding the Taliban, with some security sectors accused of turning a blind eye or even providing sanctuary to Taliban elements, especially in the tribal areas along the Pak-Afghan border. The Afghan government and the international community were discontented with Pakistan's dual policy, which involved fighting Al-Qaeda while adopting a relatively lenient approach towards the Taliban. This nuanced stance towards the Taliban led to a trust deficit between Afghanistan and Pakistan, also impacting U.S.-Pak relations.

Border security issues became a focal point in Pak-Afghan relations amid ongoing turmoil along their shared border, with frequent terrorist attacks and armed conflicts posing continuous threats to the security stability of both countries. Pakistan intensified its military presence along the border to curb cross-border terrorist activities, and post-2010, accelerated the construction of a border fence to better control security. However, this action further escalated tensions with Afghanistan, whose government vehemently opposed the border fence, arguing that it hindered the free movement and ethnic unity of local residents, exacerbating territorial sovereignty and border management disputes.

Despite tensions in border security and counterterrorism, Pakistan and Afghanistan made progress in economic and development cooperation. Under the advocacy of the U.S. and international organizations, both countries participated in regional economic integration projects, such as the Kabul River Basin development and cross-border energy infrastructure, including the construction of electricity grids and natural gas pipelines, notably the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project

aimed at promoting regional economic development and enhancing Afghanistan's energy supply. Pakistan actively contributed to Afghanistan's reconstruction by aiding in building roads, schools, and hospitals to boost the Afghan economy.

Although this economic cooperation alleviated some bilateral tensions, the outcomes were unstable due to security issues and political circumstances. Overall, the post-9/11 Pak-Afghan relationship, while necessitating cooperation, was continually marred by insufficient trust and persistent conflicts. The interactions between the two countries in counterterrorism, border security, and economic development were complex and challenging. Pakistan continually balanced its domestic security needs with the demands of the counterterrorism alliance, aiming to play a more significant role in regional security. Meanwhile, Afghanistan's lingering suspicions towards Pakistan, believing it lacked genuine cooperation on critical issues, further complicated by the Indian factor, as Afghanistan's increasingly close ties with India added pressure to Pakistan in regional competition.

The bilateral relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan has long been influenced by deep-seated historical disputes and geopolitical factors, exhibiting complex and variable characteristics. Since the establishment of Pakistan in 1947, the territorial and ethnic disputes surrounding the "Durand Line" and "Pashtunistan" have never subsided. Afghanistan's support for the Pashtuns in Pakistan and its deepening ties with the Soviet Union posed a strategic threat to Pakistan, prompting it to support Afghan anti-Soviet forces in an effort to establish "strategic depth" within the region. Following the Cold War, particularly after the events of 9/11, Pakistan served as a key ally to the United States in the war on terror, providing significant military and intelligence support. However, Pakistan's dual policy towards the Taliban exacerbated the trust crisis with Afghanistan. Border security issues, exacerbated by frequent terrorist attacks and military deployments, have long been a focal point in their relations. Although there has been progress in economic cooperation, such as in the TAPI natural gas pipeline project, the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan continues to be constrained by ongoing security challenges and political distrust, rendering the outcomes of their cooperation unstable.

### **3. Factors Influencing the Long-term Downturn in Pak-Afghan Relations in the Post-9/11 Era**

Since the events of 9/11, the bilateral relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have undergone changes on multiple levels, yet overall, the relationship has consistently remained at a low ebb. The reasons for the prolonged downturn in Pak-Afghan relations are complex and varied, involving both the enduring impact of historical issues and the contemporary threats to security interests. These factors are interwoven, resulting in a persistent lack of strategic trust between the two countries, making it difficult for them to openly address and collaboratively tackle cross-border issues. Specifically, this phenomenon originates from the 19th-century dispute over the "Durand Line," which later evolved into Afghanistan's demands for "Pashtunistan." Territorial and border disputes have fostered strategic mistrust between Pakistan and Afghanistan, leading to a security paradox where issues requiring cooperation, such as narcotics and refugees, have instead been used as political tools. Additionally, India's strategic

"interference" further deepens the "strategic distrust" between Pakistan and Afghanistan, both internally and externally.

### *3.1 Territorial and Border Disputes*

Sovereign states, as geopolitical entities, inevitably need to delineate boundaries with their neighbors. When these demarcations fail to satisfy the countries involved, disputes may arise, potentially escalating into conflicts or even wars. As closely intertwined neighbors, Pakistan and Afghanistan have not achieved satisfactory results in their boundary delineations, and territorial and border disputes have become threats to their bilateral relations, growing in significance with changes in the geopolitical strategic situation.

In 1893, under the threat of an economic embargo, the Afghan King Abdur Rahman was compelled to accept the "Durand Line" as the boundary between Afghanistan and British India. Over the following decades, Afghanistan continuously sought opportunities to reclaim territories ceded by the British. Consequently, upon the emergence of the nascent and fragile state of Pakistan, Afghanistan immediately denied the legitimacy of the "Durand Line" and raised the issue of "Pashtunistan." Throughout this period, Afghanistan never abandoned its demands to redraw the border with Pakistan, not even recognizing the "Durand Line" as legitimate during the Taliban's rule. The events of 9/11 led to changes in the Pak-Afghan situation, where historical issues related to territory and borders evolved into new problems, continuing to damage Pak-Afghan relations:

Firstly, differing stances on the "Durand Line" issue have exacerbated cross-border terrorism. Upon assuming office, President Karzai revisited the territorial and border disputes, leading to further deterioration in Pak-Afghan relations. Afghanistan has consistently held that the colonial period of British India has passed, and the "Durand Line" no longer holds legitimacy. Meanwhile, Pakistan cites on Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties to reaffirm that the "Durand Line" issue is resolved, refusing diplomatic negotiations with the Afghan government on this matter. Both countries remain vigilant against any discourse regarding boundary issues, which is a sensitive subject between them. Additionally, unresolved territorial and border issues have led to a lack of effective control over the border area, with Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas becoming havens for terrorist groups, complicating efforts to combat cross-border terrorism and plunging both countries into a blame game over counterterrorism.

Secondly, revisiting the "Durand Line" issue allows the Afghan government to seek support from Pashtun nationalists domestically, thereby consolidating its regime and maintaining national unity. First, both the Karzai and Ghani administrations faced issues of governmental legitimacy, and garnering support from the Pashtun community helped enhance their ruling authority. Second, given Afghanistan's resentment towards Pakistan for its past support of the Taliban, adopting a tough stance against Pakistan could to some extent unify domestic consensus, using Pak-Afghan tensions to mask internal ethnic conflicts. Lastly, advocating for "Pashtunistan" prevents Pakistan from approaching Pashtuns within Afghanistan, avoiding a repeat of Taliban-like control.

### *3.2 Lack of Strategic Trust*

Interactions between sovereign states inevitably involve recognition of the other. Recognition determines a country's position in world politics, defining its friends and enemies. In the context of Pak-Afghan relations, differences in perception have led to strategic mistrust, resulting in a lack of strategic trust between the two countries.

Firstly, the two countries have differing perceptions of security needs. Since its inception, Pakistan has faced existential threats from India, prompting it to seek the establishment of a friendly regime in Afghanistan to avoid being flanked by India in any potential conflict. However, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent toppling of the Taliban regime drastically altered Pakistan's regional political and security environment. This meant that Pakistan's decades-long efforts to establish a pro-Pakistan government in Afghanistan for strategic depth vanished virtually overnight. Pakistan had to redouble its efforts to reestablish its "security guarantees" in Afghanistan, choosing to continue its support for the Taliban. Afghanistan, due to Pakistan's pro-Taliban policy, pivoted towards an India-centric foreign policy, intensifying Pakistan's sense of insecurity. This led to a trust crisis between the two countries, with each side quick to suspect and accuse the other. For example, on March 25, 2019, the Express Tribune published remarks by Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan about the formation of an "interim government" in Afghanistan, which could facilitate U.S.-Taliban peace talks. The next day, the Ghani administration recalled its ambassador to Pakistan in protest, prompting Khan to clarify that his remarks were not an interference in Afghan internal affairs.

Secondly, the two countries perceive strategic motives differently. It is widely believed that U.S. military presence in Afghanistan is not sustainable, and Pakistan should seize this opportunity to strengthen its influence in Afghanistan. To change this status quo, Afghanistan has supported opposition forces within Pakistan during interactions. Pakistan accuses Afghanistan of pulling India into supporting Baloch and Pashtun separatists creating unrest within its borders. In 2003, Pakistan reported that its army faced strong resistance from the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Waziristan, blaming India for stirring up trouble there. Pakistani officials announced that they had collected all the information on India's involvement in the Waziristan insurgency, stating, "Indian consulates in southern Afghanistan have been providing funds, weapons, and ammunition to radicals, causing trouble in Pakistan's tribal areas." Similarly, Afghanistan views Pakistan's sanctuary for the Taliban as one of the biggest destabilizers of its internal situation; Pakistan's support for the Taliban is an open secret. Many authorities have noted that Pakistan has supported the Taliban through its Inter-Services Intelligence for over a decade, worsening the political situation in Afghanistan. In August 2009, U.S. General McChrystal reported that all major insurgent groups in Afghanistan had direct links to Pakistan, with their senior leadership residing in Pakistan and linked to Al-Qaeda. Additionally, vulnerabilities along the Pak-Afghan border have allowed the Taliban and Al-Qaeda to use the Federally Administered Tribal Areas as sanctuaries, leading to rampant cross-border terrorism. Whenever a terrorist attack occurs in Afghanistan, the Afghan government immediately points the finger at Pakistan.

Thirdly, the two countries differ in their approach to dealing with the Taliban. After taking office, President Ghani saw political reconciliation with the Taliban as his most important task. The Murree Peace Process in 2015 was seen as a positive start. The Afghan government and the public held high hopes for Pakistan facilitating negotiations with the Taliban. However, events showed that Pakistan lacked absolute control over the Taliban's will. The Taliban's launch of a spring offensive to gain leverage in negotiations also angered the Afghan government. Afghanistan expects Pakistan to either bring the Taliban back to the negotiation table or expel them from Pakistani territory. Afghanistan's Ministry of Defense spokesperson demanded that the Pakistani Chief of Army Staff take action against these "irreconcilable" elements, with Pakistani officials worried that any punitive actions against the Taliban might force them to join forces with other militants attacking from within Pakistan, threatening Pakistan's internal security. In May 2016, Pakistan's Foreign Affairs Advisor Sartaj Aziz stated that military actions over the past 14 years had produced no results. Furthermore, Pakistani officials openly declared that Pakistan would not go to war with other countries on its own territory. All these statements were seen as Pakistan's refusal to meet Afghan government demands to take action against the Taliban. In fact, Pakistan's support for the Taliban is a core pillar of its foreign policy and strategy. South Asia expert Christine Fair categorized the Taliban as state proxies operated with the support of the Pakistani government, calling them "an instrument of statecraft." According to a RAND Corporation report titled "India and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan," Pakistan's goals in Afghanistan can only be achieved through its support for the Taliban.

Lastly, the perceptions among the public in both countries differ. For a long time, Afghan media, catering to political needs, have extensively reported anti-Pakistan sentiment. Pakistan's image in Afghanistan is negative. Afghans wonder why Pakistan supports their enemies, such as the Taliban. Even "in a 2015 Afghan public opinion survey, the public widely perceived that Pak-Afghan interests were divergent, clearly not conducive to improving relations between the two countries." Afghan media frequently report on the arrest of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. An Afghan news television host cited an international organization's survey, according to which 92% of Afghans hold anti-Pakistan views, shaped by local media. Similarly, many Pakistanis are unaware of the realities in Afghanistan. Often, Pakistani media depict Afghan society as conservative, mountainous, and comprising tough tribal people, deliberately ignoring Afghanistan's modern aspects. To some extent, Pakistani media also report on the Taliban's victories. The Pakistani public resents the influx of many Afghan refugees, who strain social resources and cause unrest domestically. More importantly, given the historical grievances between India and Pakistan, Afghanistan's closeness with India has displeased the Pakistani public.

### *3.3 Refugee and Narcotics Issues*

Pakistan has offered asylum to Afghan refugees for humanitarian reasons, geopolitical factors, and in response to international support for Afghan refugees. Pakistan, a significant neighbor to Afghanistan and sharing similar religious, language, and cultural ties, has historically been the preferred destination for Afghan refugees. However, the situation within Afghanistan remains unstable to this day, and

international assistance for Afghan refugees has dwindled, causing the protracted Afghan refugee issue to intertwine with narcotics problems, becoming a substantial burden for Pakistan and one of the factors deteriorating Pak-Afghan relations.

Since the late 1970s, due to wars and natural disasters, large numbers of Afghans have poured into Pakistan to seek refuge. Following the 9/11 events, Pakistan has hosted approximately five million refugees. About 85% of these refugees are Pashtuns, with the remainder including Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras. These refugees are primarily located in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Quetta, Karachi, Islamabad, and Rawalpindi. The refugee issue has placed a heavy burden on Pakistan: Firstly, Pakistan's economy is under strain, and it can hardly sustain the enormous task of accommodating five million refugees. Over time, as international attention to Afghan refugees has decreased, so has the assistance, increasing Pakistan's burden. Many believe that the worsening law and order in Pakistan, the smuggling of firearms and lethal weapons, and the narcotics black market are all consequences of the Afghan refugees who have been living and moving freely in Pakistan for the past two decades. Secondly, the millions of Afghan refugees pose a security challenge for Pakistan. As early as during the Afghan resistance against the Soviet invasion, refugee camps in Pakistan supplied a large number of fighters. Post-9/11, these camps became hotbeds for criminal and militant religious activities, continuously supplying "manpower" to terrorist organizations. They also serve as crucial meeting points for members of the Taliban and Pakistani extremist militant groups. In fact, Pakistan is not a signatory to the UN's 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, meaning legally, Pakistan is not obliged to accept Afghan refugees and lacks a clear refugee policy to address these issues. Pakistan's policy on Afghan refugees is continuously adjusted, insisting on repatriation, but its implementation is closely tied to Pak-Afghan relations. When relations deteriorate, Pakistan threatens to repatriate refugees to pressure Afghanistan. The refugee issue is a long-standing humanitarian problem, and Pakistan's approach is a shortsighted strategy and political consideration, sacrificing the rights of refugees on its territory and its relationship with the Afghan government at the expense.

The unresolved Afghan refugee issue, complicated by intertwined narcotics problems, adds layers of complexity. Firstly, the presence of a large number of Afghan refugees facilitates narcotics smuggling. The Bramchah refugee camp in Balochistan, straddling the border between the two countries, is a well-known drug smuggling route. Afghanistan is the epicenter of the narcotics issue, producing over 90% of the world's opium. In 2012, it was estimated that 6.45 million adults in Pakistan used drugs, representing 5.8% of the population aged 15 to 64. Most narcotics produced in Afghanistan enter Pakistan through the Durand Line, then smuggled through Iran and the Persian Gulf to European countries. In 2013, according to a government survey conducted in collaboration with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, heroin transited through Pakistan alone was valued at \$27 billion. Secondly, the intertwining of terrorism with narcotics issues poses the greatest obstacle to counter-terrorism efforts between Pakistan and Afghanistan, severely threatening national cohesion and stability. Organized crime networks often have connections with terrorists, indirectly relying on drug proceeds, with terrorist



organizations' activities largely financed through drug money. In April 2016, Afghanistan's Minister of Counter-Narcotics stated at the UN General Assembly Special Session on Drugs that narcotics are a significant cause of insecurity in Afghanistan. In Pakistan, poppy fields in the Tirah Valley of Khyber District have long financed armed groups, including the Pakistani Taliban. The continuous influx of drug money poses a lasting and potential threat to Pak-Afghan development. Some government officials colluding with criminal groups enjoy the political convenience brought by massive drug money, continuously targeting political rivals while providing cover for drug traffickers, forming a detrimental symbiotic relationship to societal development.

As mentioned, the refugee and drug issues bring severe political, economic, and social problems to Pakistan. To address these issues, the Pakistani government has attempted solutions such as repatriating refugees and trying to close borders to prevent cross-border movement, which Afghanistan opposes. With existing territorial and border disputes and a lack of strategic trust, the refugee and drug issues have become intractable, hopelessly complicating and continuously worsening bilateral relations and depleting public sentiment in both countries.

### *3.4 The Obstruction of India*

Given the United States' problematic past record, Pakistani policymakers worry that, once the US achieves its objectives in the war on terror, it might once again "abandon" Pakistan, potentially allowing India to fill the resulting vacuum. Whenever Pakistan and Afghanistan blame each other for cross-border terrorism, India seizes the opportunity, allowing its proxies to use Afghan territory to launch terrorist attacks inside Pakistan. Thus, India's strategic "obstruction" feeds Pakistani suspicions about Afghanistan's intentions, becoming a key factor in the deterioration of Pak-Afghan relations.

Firstly, India is determined to enhance its role in Afghanistan, squeezing the living space of Pakistan. This strategic goal arouses suspicions and fears of encirclement in Pakistan, viewed by the Pakistani military as a "serious security threat." India's primary interest in Afghanistan is to counter Pakistani influence to prevent Afghanistan from being used as a base for anti-India militant groups within Pakistan. In 2008, India's permanent representative to the United Nations explicitly stated, "Security within Afghanistan and efforts to prevent terrorists from enjoying impunity outside Afghanistan must be our collective priority in Afghanistan." India's involvement in Afghanistan is also influenced by "Gujral Doctrine," which posits that India, as a dominant force in the region, has a duty to support and strengthen its neighbors without expecting reciprocity. In supporting Afghanistan's reconstruction, Indian projects span healthcare, education, power, telecommunications, and transportation. India also undertakes various other small-scale projects aimed at training Afghan security forces and government officials and building schools and hospitals. It is especially noteworthy that Indian projects in Afghanistan are concentrated along the Afghan-Pakistani border, which alarms Pakistan. Pakistan accuses Indian consulates of being fronts for espionage activities. Furthermore, India's construction of the Jalalabad-Chabahar highway allows Afghanistan to bypass Pakistani transit routes, naturally heightening Pakistani suspicions of India's ulterior motives in Afghanistan.

Secondly, India supports separatist forces within Pakistan using Afghanistan. Afghanistan is accused of engaging in supporting Baloch and Pashtun separatist movements through its consulates in Kandahar and Jalalabad. On August 13, 2004, the Chief Minister of Balochistan, Muhammad Yusuf, abruptly announced that Indian intelligence maintained 40 terrorist camps across Balochistan. Since then, Pakistani media have reiterated these accusations, claiming to have found evidence of Indian consulates' involvement in the Baloch separatist movement. In early July 2006, Pakistani Senator Mushahid Hussain formally reiterated these two accusations, claiming that "India's Research and Analysis Wing is training 600 Baloch in Afghanistan, supporting the Baloch conflict," and condemned connections between Afghan intelligence and border security officials with the Indian Research and Analysis Wing. Over the subsequent decade, the closeness between India and Afghanistan has directly affected the quality of Pak-Afghan relations.

Post-9/11, territorial and border disputes remain a contentious issue between Pakistan and Afghanistan, with problems of cross-border terrorism and domestic Pashtun separatism in Pakistan further straining relations, leading to misalignments in perceptions of security needs, strategic motives, and issues surrounding the Taliban. Under deliberate governmental guidance, societal antagonism between the two countries has gradually intensified, leading to a complete loss of strategic trust. In this context, the Afghan refugee issue, along with the ensuing drug problem, presents a series of political, economic, and security challenges for Pakistan and has also become a political tool for Pakistan to pressure Afghanistan, severely damaging bilateral relations. As part of its counter-strategy, India continues to strengthen its influence in Afghanistan, undermining Pak-Afghan relations.

#### **4. Conclusion and Outlook**

In August 2021, the Taliban surged into Kabul, ushering Afghanistan into the "Taliban 2.0 era." However, contrary to the expectations of the Pakistani authorities, the Pak-Afghan relationship did not see the comprehensive improvement envisioned. Issues left unresolved by Afghanistan's previous government continue to impede the development of bilateral relations. Moreover, the Taliban view Pakistan's role during the U.S.-led war as dishonorable and a "betrayal" of the Islamic world, which has damaged the mutual sentiments between the two countries. Observing the interactions between the two countries after the Taliban's return to power, it is apparent that the leadership on both sides lacks the ability to rebuild strategic trust in the short term. Consequently, the level of bilateral relations is expected to remain low. In 2023, Pakistan experienced 789 terrorist attacks resulting in 1,524 deaths and 1,463 injuries, with nearly 1,000 of the deceased being civilians and security personnel, marking the highest level since 2017. Additionally, since the beginning of 2021, the number of domestic terrorist attacks has risen for three consecutive years. The Pakistani Army Chief attributes this continual increase in terrorism to Afghanistan, a stance that traces back to Afghanistan's opposition to Pakistan's entry into the United Nations in the late 1940s. The Afghan interim government, however, denies allegations of TTP activities on its soil and states that Pakistan's security is not Afghanistan's responsibility. Pakistan believes

Afghanistan has not adequately addressed its security concerns and decides to retaliate. In October 2023, following investigations that implicated some "illegal immigrants" in terrorist activities, Pakistan decided to expel nearly one million Afghan refugees residing within its borders. This action did not achieve its counterterrorism goals, as terrorist attacks continued and also damaged Pakistan's standing among the Afghan populace.

Afghanistan, facing a food shortage and an economic crisis under international sanctions, saw Pakistan's actions as exacerbating its fragile domestic economy. The Afghan interim government strongly reacted, deeming Pakistan's actions "unacceptable." It insisted that under its supervision, no organization should use Afghan territory against other countries, and it has arrested some TTP members. Additionally, the Afghan interim government invited the chairman of the Pakistan-Afghanistan Joint Committee, Rahman, to visit in an effort to alleviate the bilateral tensions. However, Pakistan may perceive this as the Afghan leadership still maintaining ties with the TTP. This tension escalates, especially with Pakistan's national elections scheduled for February 2024, and the issue of water resource sharing gaining more political significance. In December 2023, Balochistan's interim Interior Minister described Afghanistan's proposal to build the Gambiri Dam on the Kunar River as a hostile act against Pakistan. Previous dam projects on rivers such as the Kabul have also raised concerns, with Pakistan claiming that these projects reduce downstream water flow, particularly affecting Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Additionally, any foreign investment in dam construction, especially from India, such as the Shahtoot Dam on the Kabul River, has faced opposition from Pakistan. Furthermore, the merging of the Islamic State Khorasan branch with Baloch terrorist organizations has led to a surge in terrorist attacks, forcing the Balochistan interim government to issue a ban on gatherings before the elections on February 8. These interactions have continuously eroded political trust between the two countries' leadership, with Pakistan's joint international pressure on the Afghan interim government for counterterrorism being viewed as containment. In January 2024, the Afghan interim government convened the "Afghanistan's Regional Cooperation Initiative" conference in Kabul, inviting multiple countries including China, Russia, India, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Indonesia, and Central Asian nations. At this conference, the Afghan side expressed dissatisfaction with the pressure from Pakistan. In March, Pakistan's permanent representative to the United Nations requested that the Security Council demand that Afghan authorities sever ties with the TTP and not threaten the sovereignty and territorial integrity of neighboring countries. Despite multiple temporary ceasefire agreements with the TTP (the latest in May), the TTP has not complied, even using these ceasefires to expand their influence and activities. Some scholars believe that the Afghan authorities use the TTP as a bargaining tool with Pakistan. In this context, Pakistani scholars also believe that Pakistan's policy of pressuring the Afghan authorities has had little effect, with domestic security remaining unstable and bearing the consequences of strained relations with Afghanistan. Pakistani policymakers should devise a more precise "carrot and stick" policy and cooperate with neighboring countries, especially China, to prompt action from the Afghan authorities.

At present, the bilateral relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan are at a critical turning point. Both countries are facing the dual pressures of internal political turmoil and external geopolitical competition. As a result, recent interactions between Pakistan and Afghanistan have been filled with pressures and counter-pressures, but these efforts have not been effective, and entrenched issues remain unresolved. This situation necessitates that both countries adopt more flexible and proactive strategies in their bilateral engagements. Together, they need to address cross-border issues, rebuild strategic trust through cooperation, and continuously deepen their bilateral relations.

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