
7. Political Dynamics in South Asia through the Analysis of Afghanistan under the Taliban Interim Government and Its Relations with Pakistan

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Abstract

In August 2021, the Taliban regained control over the entire territory of Afghanistan, including the capital. A key factor contributing to the Taliban's resurgence was neighboring Pakistan. Since its founding, Pakistan has faced challenges in national integration, which gave rise to various internal conflicts, culminating in the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. Consequently, how to address the perceived threat from India, the major power in South Asia, emerged as a critical security concern. In response to its adversarial relationship with India, Pakistan has actively intervened in Afghan affairs since the 1970s to secure what it considers "strategic depth." Since seizing power, the Taliban interim government has generally pursued a policy of multidirectional diplomacy while simultaneously advancing economic development projects with other countries. Domestically, however, the government has imposed strict restrictions, particularly regarding women's education and moral policing, raising significant international concerns over human rights. Amid these developments, Russia became the first country to formally recognize the Taliban interim government as Afghanistan's legitimate government. At the same time, tensions with Pakistan have led to border skirmishes, Pakistani airstrikes targeting Kabul, mutual distrust, and prolonged border closures, generating substantial shifts in South Asian international relations. In this context, the forced repatriation of millions of Afghan refugees residing in neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan and Iran, has been carried out, placing Afghanistan's political, social, and economic structures—and the lives and futures of its refugee population—under

severe threat.

Keywords: Taliban, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Afghan Refugees, TTP, ISKP

1. Introduction

Afghanistan constitutes one of the members of SAARC and, as a country forming part of South Asia, shares borders with the Central Asian states that were formerly part of the Soviet Union, with Pakistan and China, as well as with Iran—one of the major powers in the Middle East, which in recent years has also occupied an increasingly important position in relation to Israel, Syria, and the Gulf states. Since the Soviet military invasion at the end of 1979, Afghanistan has experienced devastation caused by war and civil conflict, and from the 1980s onward, millions of refugees fled the country. As a result, prolonged turmoil and stagnation characterized all aspects of political, social, and economic life. Following the September 11 attacks in 2001, a new state-building and reconstruction effort was carried out under the aegis of the United Nations, albeit with the United States playing a central role. From the perspective of maintaining security, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was established, and NATO, with U.S. forces at the core, effectively took on the role of the stationed security force. ISAF concluded its mission at the end of 2014, after which NATO launched the Resolute Support Mission with the aim of enabling Afghanistan to develop its own capacity for security maintenance. However, as widely known, on 15 August 2021, the Taliban—engaged in armed struggle against the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and referring to their own state as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan—captured Kabul and subsequently consolidated control over the entire country, leading to the current situation¹.

¹ For a comprehensive overview of the political situation in Afghanistan, see Barfield, T. J. (2010) and Saikal, A. (2004).

Afghanistan is one of the South Asian countries that achieved early independence, having secured its sovereignty from British protectorate status following the Third Anglo-Afghan War, which began with its invasion of British India in 1919. After independence, Afghanistan quickly established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, which had emerged after the Russian Revolution. It subsequently strengthened ties with European states, including Germany, France, and Italy, and during the interwar period maintained diplomatic relations with both the Axis and Allied powers. However, at the time of the independence of India and Pakistan in August 1947, Afghanistan signaled its refusal to recognize the Durand Line—drawn under British rule in 1896—as the official border with the newly formed Pakistan. In contrast, Pakistan regarded the Durand Line as an “international boundary” and declined to engage in renegotiations. This divergence in territorial perceptions, combined with issues concerning ethnic groups—such as the Pashtuns—distributed across the border region, led to persistent political tensions between the two countries².

This article examines how the deterioration of relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan since the establishment of the Taliban interim government has affected regional politics and international relations. To this end, it first provides an overview of how the importance of securing influence over Afghanistan has evolved for Pakistan since its founding as a “Muslim state.” It then offers a concise historical review of Afghanistan–Pakistan relations, followed by an analysis of recent developments in bilateral responses to the Tehrik-e Taliban-e Pakistan (TTP), which constitutes a central cause of tension between the Taliban interim government and Pakistan. This analysis is based primarily on local reporting and information disseminated by the Taliban³.

² The contents of the 1893 Durand Line Agreement are reproduced in Yunas, S. F.(ed.) (2005), pp. 70–72). Discussions of the Pashtunistan movement, which emerged during the same period as the initial bilateral confrontation over the Durand Line before and after the creation of Pakistan, can be found in Khan, A. H. (2005), pp. 179–211 and Qayyum, A. (2018).

³ With regard to the media reports cited in this article, radio and television sources on the Afghan side include RTA Pashto, which corresponds to the state broadcaster, as well as Tolo News (Dari and English) and Shamshad News (Pashto). On the Pakistani side, broadcast sources include Geo News (Urdu) and Khyber News (Pashto). In addition, reporting by BBC Pashto and BBC Urdu was also consulted. As for print media, this study draws on Pakistan’s English-language newspaper *Dawn*, the Urdu-language

Furthermore, the article examines recent developments concerning the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), which, while hostile to the Taliban, operates primarily in and around Afghanistan and poses a significant security threat to the region. It also analyzes the Taliban's domestic governance, internal organizational structure, and economic policies, which have been emphasized in their propaganda and public messaging. Finally, the article provides an analysis of the current situation surrounding the forced repatriation of Afghan refugees, an issue that represents one of the most significant contemporary impacts on Afghanistan–Pakistan relations.

By synthesizing these issues, the article considers the current dynamics and future prospects of South Asian politics in the wake of the establishment of the Taliban interim government, with particular focus on Afghanistan–Pakistan relations.

2. The Formation of Pakistan as a “Muslim Nation” and the Emergence of Diverse Political and Social Movements

Pakistan, founded on the ideological premise of establishing a “Muslim state” in South Asia, was led by individuals such as Muhammad Ali Jinnah—who spearheaded the Pakistan Movement, became the country's first Governor-General, and remains revered as the “Qā'yed-e-A'āzam” (“Great Leader”)—and Liaquat Ali Khan, his close associate and Pakistan's first Prime Minister. Both were among the leadership of the All-India Muslim League and hailed from regions that became part of “India” after partition, and they subsequently played a dominant role in guiding Pakistan's post-independence politics⁴. From an economic perspective as well, Muslim entrepreneurs based in India—particularly those from the

newspapers *Jang and Mashriq*, and *Afghanistan's Anīs* (Dari and Pashto). A series of statements and orders issued by the Taliban Interim Government were examined through official online announcements released by each ministries, as well as statements announced by the Arg, the de facto governing headquarters.

⁴ Numerous studies have examined Muslim-centered political movements during the period of British India, as well as the Pakistan Movement, from a variety of perspectives; for a relatively recent study, see Zaman, M. Q. (2018), pp. 14–53.

Gujarat region—formed the financial backbone of the Pakistan Movement, and after independence their enterprises came to be known collectively as “founding companies.”

Following independence, Pakistan aligned itself with the Western bloc led by the United States in the field of security, and in parallel adopted capitalist economic policies to attract active investment. In 1948, the government issued the “Statement of Industrial Policy” and, through the Pakistan Industrial Development Corporation (PIDC), devoted efforts to nurturing key industries. Similar policies continued under the military regime that emerged after Ayub Khan’s 1958 coup. During this period, collusion between political and business elites, special demand created by the Korean War, and the extraction of economic resources from East Pakistan by West Pakistan contributed to the rapid expansion of certain business conglomerates. These groups ultimately evolved into powerful “industrial families” (*zaibatsu*-like conglomerates), thereby solidifying the oligarchic structure that continues to characterize Pakistan’s political economy⁵.

However, immediately after independence, national unity under the banner of a “Muslim Nation” was heavily emphasized. Urdu— which, from the nineteenth century onward, had served as a linguistic medium for the political, social, and intellectual movements of South Asian Muslims—was designated the national language and symbol of unity. Urdu, however, had not been widely spoken in the territories incorporated into Pakistan after independence; rather, it had functioned as a *lingua franca* in North India, and was also the mother tongue of leaders such as Jinnah who had driven the Pakistan Movement. The imposition of Urdu thus exemplified the broader assumption that Pakistan’s diverse languages, cultures, and ethnic distributions would be subordinated to national unity. As a result, various political and social movements emerged across the country⁶.

⁵ A detailed analysis of the process through which family-owned conglomerates were formed in Pakistan and their impact on the domestic economy is provided by Kawamitsu, N. (2017).

⁶ An overview of the fragmentation among various ethnic groups and their respective political and social movements is presented in Siddiqui, F. H. (2012). In addition, issues concerning religious minorities arising from Pakistan’s policies of so-called “Islamization” since the 1970s are discussed in Zaman, M. Q. (2018), pp. 164–194.

Furthermore, as indicated earlier, Pakistan's political, economic, and social cores were dominated by politicians and entrepreneurs originating from "India." Consequently, populations residing within Pakistan's territory—particularly those in East Bengal (corresponding to present-day Bangladesh), which appeared as a geographically detached exclave from the perspective of West Pakistan, as well as those in the frontier regions bordering Afghanistan—became increasingly marginalized from political and economic power. In addition, the languages and cultural traditions of Pakistan's various ethnolinguistic groups were subordinated to the ideology of the "Muslim Nation," and political and social movements rooted in regional nationalism were strictly suppressed from the standpoint of national integration, as seen most clearly in the Bengali Language Movement that emerged in East Bengal⁷.

Ultimately, resistance to the top-down imposition of a "Muslim Nation" identity, along with opposition to the structural dominance of two groups—urban elites of "Indian origin," who had driven Pakistan's founding and formed the nucleus of the emerging conglomerates, and the Punjabis, who constituted both a demographic majority and the social and economic core of West Pakistan—culminated in the independence movement of East Bengal (East Pakistan). Amid heightened tensions, Pakistan's attack on India in December 1971 prompted direct Indian military intervention, leading to the secession and independence of Bangladesh.

Confronted with the greatest national crisis in its history, Pakistan subsequently adopted foreign and security policies that placed paramount importance on securing "strategic depth" vis-à-vis India. From this perspective, the establishment and maintenance of a pro-Pakistan regime in Afghanistan—often conceptualized as Pakistan's "backyard"—became a central pillar of its diplomatic, security, and international relations strategy⁸.

⁷ For a detailed account of the conditions and political movements of Bengalis and other groups in Pakistan leading up to the independence of Bangladesh, see Chattha (2025), pp. 16–59.

⁸ An overview of Pakistan's Afghanistan policy, with particular attention to its diplomatic relations with both the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, is provided by Khan, A. H. (2005), pp. 212–241.

3. Historical Relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan

In the 1970s, Afghanistan experienced profound political upheaval. Following the republican revolution of 1973, the monarchy collapsed, and Mohammad Daoud—who had previously served as prime minister and was known for his hardline diplomacy toward Pakistan, even contributing to the severance of diplomatic relations between the two countries—consolidated near-dictatorial power as president. In 1978, the Saur Revolution, led by the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), brought a pro-Soviet leftist regime to power. As a result, Pakistan, which since its founding had been an important partner of the United States in political, economic, and security domains, found itself in deepening confrontation with Afghanistan not only over longstanding border disputes but also within the broader context of international relations in South Asia.

Consequently, General Zia-ul-Haq—who led the 1977 military coup and thereafter assumed de facto control in Pakistan—initiated covert operations in Afghanistan through the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). These operations relied on anti-government Islamic groups that had been severely repressed by both the Daoud regime and the PDPA government and had consequently fled into exile in Pakistan. During this period, Pakistan cooperated with Saudi Arabia’s General Intelligence Presidency (GIP) and adopted measures to prevent Afghanistan from intervening in Pakistani domestic affairs. Furthermore, after the Soviet Union launched its direct military intervention in December 1979 in response to factional conflicts within the PDPA, the United States and other Western states began providing indirect support—under the pretext of “refugee assistance” to those who had fled into Pakistan—to multiple Islamic armed groups collectively known as the *mujahideen*, who spearheaded the resistance against both the Soviet forces and the communist regime⁹.

⁹ Rubin, B. (1995), pp. 177–264, offers a useful account of the political turmoil and fragmentation in Afghanistan during the same period, as well as of the *mujahideen*.

Supported by the United States and other Western countries, Pakistan continued its active involvement throughout the 1980s and maintained its engagement even after the Geneva Accords of 1988 paved the way for the withdrawal of Soviet troops. In the 1990s, Pakistan further undertook mediation efforts in the internecine conflict among mujahideen factions. When the Taliban expanded its influence and captured the capital, Kabul, in September 1996, Pakistan formally recognized the Taliban government. However, the Taliban never succeeded in securing control over the entire country. Following the attacks of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, the Taliban regime collapsed. It is widely believed, however, that some Taliban leaders who had dispersed and fled the country subsequently took refuge in various parts of Pakistan. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that Pakistan continued to maintain clandestine personal networks with members of the Taliban leadership¹⁰.

4. Pakistan-Taliban Relations Following the Establishment of the Taliban Interim Government and Divergent Perceptions Regarding the TTP

In 2017, the first Trump administration in the United States announced its “New South Asia Strategy” with the aim of bringing an end to the protracted deployment of American forces in Afghanistan. As part of efforts to break the deadlock in Afghanistan, Washington sought the cooperation of Pakistan, which had long been regarded as the primary external supporter of the Taliban. In response, Pakistan dramatically altered its previously official position of denying involvement with the Taliban and adopted a posture of active cooperation. As a result, the United States bypassed the then Afghan government and initiated direct negotiations with the Taliban. At that time, Pakistan released Abdul Ghani Baradar—an early Taliban member captured in Karachi through a joint U.S.-Pakistan operation and a childhood

¹⁰ For Pakistan’s relations with the Taliban from the 1990s to 2001, as well as its diplomacy with neighboring states during that period, see Murshed, S. I. (2006), written by S. Iftikhar Murshed, Pakistan’s former Special Representative for Afghanistan.

companion of the movement's founder, Mullah Omar—who was appointed head of the Taliban's political office in Doha, Qatar. Baradar subsequently served as the Taliban's chief negotiator in extended direct talks with the United States.

The Taliban, for their part, had already begun to enhance their international presence by participating directly in multilateral forums such as the Moscow-format meeting hosted by Russia in 2017. After direct negotiations with the United States commenced, their political visibility increased substantially. Meanwhile, fierce fighting between the Afghan government and the Taliban continued across the country, compounded by the growing activities of ISKP (discussed in detail later), which further deteriorated the security environment.

Ultimately, on 29 February 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed the *Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan* in Doha, stipulating a phased reduction of U.S. forces and a complete withdrawal. Although the original deadline was later revised to September 2021, the Taliban rapidly seized key strategic areas across the country and advanced toward Kabul before the withdrawal date. The Afghan government collapsed, enabling the Taliban to capture the capital and effectively establish an interim administration.

A review of the sequence of events leading to the Taliban's return to power clearly demonstrates Pakistan's substantial influence. Moreover, the core members of the Taliban belong to the Pashtun ethno-linguistic group, whose populations are spread across both sides of the Afghanistan–Pakistan border. The Islamic ideological foundations underpinning the Taliban's governance model are deeply rooted in Deobandi thought—particularly the Neo-Deobandi tradition—widely disseminated among Pashtun communities in these borderlands¹¹. Consequently, the withdrawal of international forces led by the United States, the collapse of the previous Afghan government, and the Taliban's resurgence were interpreted in Pakistan as tangible progress toward achieving “strategic depth.” Indeed,

¹¹ For a historical overview of the Deobandi school of Islamic thought, which originated in North India and spread across the Afghanistan–Pakistan borderlands, see Metcalf, B. D. (1982). Recent research on the “Neo-Deobandi” school, which developed distinctive characteristics in the border regions of the two countries, including its process of formation, is provided by Awasthi, S. (2026), pp. 94–182.

numerous analyses at the time portrayed the Taliban interim administration as effectively a Pakistani client regime.

Following the Taliban's return to power, Pakistan continued to pursue an active diplomatic approach. Its central concern was the TTP, an umbrella organization formed in the mid-2000s by various anti-government Islamist militant groups dispersed throughout Pakistan¹². The TTP's close relationship with the Afghan Taliban rendered it a critical security challenge for Islamabad. Initially, peace talks between Pakistan and the TTP were held with mediation by the Taliban interim administration, resulting in a temporary ceasefire. However, negotiations stalled, and on 28 November 2022 the TTP unilaterally ended the ceasefire. Subsequently, attacks and terrorist incidents escalated across Pakistan, particularly in border regions. By 2023, the TTP had carried out 784 attacks within Pakistan, causing 1,533 deaths and 1,463 injuries, making TTP-related violence one of Pakistan's most urgent domestic security concerns.

Pakistan demanded that the Taliban uphold the 2020 Doha Agreement and intensify efforts to crack down on TTP elements allegedly operating from Afghan territory. The Taliban, however, consistently denied the presence of the TTP within Afghanistan and maintained that the issue was strictly an internal matter for Pakistan. This persistent divergence in positions generated significant frustration in Islamabad, prompting the Pakistani government to strengthen measures targeting undocumented foreign nationals—policies that in practice disproportionately affected Afghan refugees and migrants. As will be discussed later, Pakistan's forced repatriation policies toward Afghans became increasingly severe, while the Taliban continued to insist that no TTP presence existed within their territory.

As a result of these developments, Pakistan experienced a further deterioration in its domestic security environment. In 2024, attacks attributed to the TTP—as well as to the Balochistan Liberation

¹² A detailed discussion of the formation of the TTP, as well as its subsequent transformations and activities, is presented in Guistozzi, A. (2023), pp. 65–122.

Army (BLA), which had concurrently intensified its anti-government activities—rose to 1,166 incidents, resulting in 2,546 fatalities and 2,267 injuries. According to data from the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS), the first half of 2025 (through June) recorded 502 attacks, causing 737 deaths and 991 injuries, indicating that no improvement in the overall security situation has yet been observed.

5. Taliban Diplomacy and International Concerns over ISKP

Since the establishment of the Interim Government, the Taliban has essentially adopted an omnidirectional diplomatic posture. Immediately after taking power, only four countries—Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and China—maintained embassy operations in the capital, Kabul; however, the Taliban has since shown willingness to build friendly relations with a wide range of states, including neighboring Iran, Pakistan, the Central Asian countries, China, as well as Russia, Turkey, the Gulf states, Germany, Switzerland, Norway, the EU, and even Japan. As mentioned above, frictions have emerged between the Taliban and Pakistan over the handling of the TTP and, as discussed later, refugee issues. Nevertheless, this situation stands in stark contrast to that of the First Taliban Regime, when only three states—Pakistan, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia—granted formal recognition, leading to severe international isolation. However, as of 2025, no state had formally recognized the Taliban Interim Government as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.

A major reason for the tendency among surrounding states and other stakeholders to tolerate Taliban rule is the Taliban's confrontation with ISKP. ISKP emerged around 2015 as various armed groups in the region corresponding to Afghanistan and Pakistan coalesced and intensified their activities¹³. It subsequently pledged allegiance to the leadership of the Islamic State (IS), which had expanded from its strongholds in Syria and Iraq through the use of global armed force, and began full-

¹³ For the formation of ISKP, see Jadoon, A. with Mines, A. (2023), pp. 1–28.

scale operations as the “eastern branch” of IS. Yet, with the weakening of IS, ISKP has generally conducted local operations based mainly in Afghanistan and Pakistan, despite the movement of some fighters. This localized nature distinguishes ISKP from the core IS organization, even though it similarly seeks to expand its influence over the entire *umma*, attempting to conduct activities beyond existing state boundaries. This stands in sharp contrast to the Taliban, whose fundamental priority lies in establishing a governance order within the nation-state of Afghanistan. ISKP also harbors deep hostility toward Shi'a communities, repeatedly carrying out attacks on Hazara civilians—an ethnic group largely adhering to Shi'ism—as well as on Shi'a religious facilities within Afghanistan. Violent clashes between the Taliban and ISKP have continued since ISKP's early formation.

In this context, Russia granted official recognition to the Taliban as Afghanistan's legitimate government for the first time on 3 July 2025. As noted earlier, Russia had hosted the Moscow Format peace talks on Afghanistan, providing the first opportunity for the Taliban delegation to participate in an international conference. Russia also approved a Taliban appointee as ambassador, and Taliban representatives attended economic forums held in Kazan and St. Petersburg, demonstrating a highly proactive stance. Furthermore, following the 23 March 2024 terrorist attack at a concert hall on the outskirts of Moscow—which resulted in 145 deaths and 551 injuries and for which ISKP claimed responsibility—Russia announced on 4 October of the same year its intention to remove the Taliban from its list of extremist armed groups and implemented this decision on 17 April 2025. On 3 June, Russia formally accepted the Taliban diplomat in Moscow as ambassador, and finally, on 3 July, recognized the Taliban Interim Government as the official government of Afghanistan. Considering that Defense Minister Mohammad Yaqub reportedly sought to purchase weapons from Russia shortly afterward on 11 July, it is clear that the two sides intend to cooperate at least in counter-ISKP measures within Afghanistan.

From the perspective of ISKP countermeasures, Iran—the western neighbor—also finds cooperation with the Taliban indispensable, much like Russia. Even before the establishment of the Interim Government, Iran had intensified de facto “diplomatic exchanges” with the Taliban, adopting an approach markedly different from its antagonistic relationship with the First Taliban Regime. ISKP

carried out a terrorist attack on 6 October 2022 at the Shah Cheragh Shrine, a Shi'a site in the central Iranian city of Shiraz, and on 3 January 2024 conducted another attack targeting the commemoration ceremony for Qasem Soleimani, the former IRGC commander, in the eastern city of Kerman, killing over 95 people and injuring nearly 300. In Pakistan—whose relations with Afghanistan have rapidly deteriorated over the TTP issue—a suicide attack targeting a political party gathering in the Bajaur district on 30 July 2023 killed more than 64 people.

Naturally, ISKP, which is hostile toward the Taliban, has also carried out numerous attacks and terrorist incidents within Afghanistan. Even limiting attention to major incidents, a notable attack occurred on 17 May 2024 in Bamiyan targeting foreign tourists, and on 11 December, Khalid al-Rahman Haqqani—Minister for Refugees and Repatriation, a major figure of the “Haqqani faction,” and the uncle of the Interior Minister—was assassinated within his ministry. ISKP continues to perpetrate frequent attacks targeting both the Taliban and civilians. As noted, its attacks once focused primarily on Shi'a-related facilities and the Hazara community, but it has since expanded its targets. Despite these circumstances, the Taliban continues to deny the existence of ISKP bases within the country.

Although Russia remains the only state to have granted formal recognition as of now, by 2024 China, the UAE, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Oman had accepted diplomats appointed by the Taliban Interim Government as ambassadors. In 2025, Germany, Norway, and Switzerland also began steps to formally receive Taliban-appointed diplomats, while Pakistan upgraded its *chargé d'affaires* in Afghanistan to ambassadorial rank. Moreover, the World Bank reopened its Kabul office in May. These developments demonstrate a clear trend in the international community toward increasing engagement with the Taliban Interim Government. The expansion of diplomatic contacts has, in particular, facilitated progress in economic development projects with neighboring countries, a topic that will be discussed separately.

6. International Concerns Regarding the Taliban's Domestic Rule

At the same time, the Taliban continues to face intense scrutiny from the international community over its domestic policies. In particular, the “Moral Law” issued on 22 August 2024 by the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, as well as the deployment of *muhtasib* (moral oversight officers) across the country to ensure its strict implementation, has drawn widespread condemnation. These measures are viewed as part of the Taliban’s long-feared pattern of human rights violations and restrictions on freedom of expression.

With regard to women’s rights, the Taliban has maintained its policy of allowing girls’ education only up to the fifth grade and has instead announced a series of increasingly stringent measures further limiting women’s access to education and employment. Private tutoring centers—which had functioned as an alternative source of education—are now prohibited from offering instruction to girls above the seventh grade. Moreover, training for midwives and nurses in medical institutions has been banned. Given that women are currently required to receive medical treatment, including maternity care, from female doctors and nurses only—despite an already chronic shortage of personnel—the situation is expected to deteriorate into an even more critical state.

Restrictions on women’s employment have also intensified. At the end of December 2024, the Ministry of Economy issued a warning instructing domestic and international NGOs to enforce the ban on female employment. By September 2025, the Taliban even prevented female staff from working in UN offices. Collectively, these restrictive policies have resulted in a dire situation in which more than 80 percent of young women are neither enrolled in school nor engaged in employment.

In addition to these developments, the Taliban has increasingly imposed restrictions on the media, banned various forms of entertainment, and ordered the closure of certain hospitals and medical facilities. These trends have heightened international concern regarding Taliban governance and fears of further deterioration. Such actions undeniably hinder the establishment of trust between the Taliban and individual states as well as international organizations.

7. Intra-Taliban Struggles for Leadership

In the mid-1990s, the original Taliban emerged as a “moral reform movement” initiated by young students at Islamic schools (madrasas) in southern Afghanistan under the banner of restoring security amid extremely dire circumstances. As the movement rapidly expanded across Afghanistan, diverse groups from various regions joined the Taliban. Among the most influential of these were the *Harakat-e Islami Khalis* faction, based in the eastern cities such as Jalalabad. During the anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s, the Khalis faction received various forms of support from Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the United States, and its leader, Yunus Khalis, even met President Ronald Reagan at the White House. Jalaluddin Haqqani, his right-hand man, played a central role in intelligence operations against the Soviet Union and the communist regime, building his own network—known as the Haqqani Network—with support from Pakistan. After the Geneva Accords of 1988 formalized the Soviet withdrawal, completed in February 1989, the group also engaged in public outreach, such as publishing the Urdu-language monthly *Nusrat al-Jihad* to garner support among the Pakistani public.

Both Khalis and Jalaluddin Haqqani had studied Islamic sciences at the Haqqani Madrasa, a Deobandi Islamic school located in Akora Khattak in northwestern Pakistan. The ideological core of the Taliban has itself been heavily shaped by the Deobandi tradition. After the collapse of the First Taliban Regime, the group relocated its base to North Waziristan in Pakistan’s former Federally Administered Tribal Areas and continued its armed struggle. In this paper, this group is referred to as the “Haqqani faction.”

In contrast, the current Supreme Leader, Haibatullah Akhundzada, and many of his close associates originate from southern Afghanistan and include long-time friends, acquaintances, and aides of the Taliban’s founding leader, Mullah Omar. For the purposes of this analysis, this group is referred to as the “Kandahar faction.” After the regime’s collapse at the end of 2001, the Kandahar faction based itself in Quetta, the capital of Pakistan’s Balochistan Province, and organized a leadership council known as the “Quetta Shura.”

These two groups—the Haqqani faction and the Kandahar faction—differ in several respects. Until the establishment of the Interim Government, these differences rarely surfaced openly. However,

once Taliban governance began in practice, divergences in their views on domestic affairs, foreign policy, and institutional design became increasingly visible, producing what might be characterized as an emerging struggle for leadership. For example, as noted above, there are significant differences between the two factions regarding issues that have drawn intense international criticism, particularly women's rights and education. While the Haqqani faction has shown a willingness to permit women's education, the Kandahar faction has remained opposed to reopening girls' education beyond the sixth grade at the present time. Divergent views also extend to external relations, especially regarding the TTP, which plays a central role in Afghanistan–Pakistan relations. The Haqqani faction seeks to support and continue backing the TTP, whereas the Kandahar faction favors cracking down on the group and improving relations with Pakistan.

Due to these intra-factional differences, the Kandahar faction has become increasingly dominant in governmental appointments, and power has further consolidated around Supreme Leader Haibatullah Akhundzada and his close associates.

8. Economic Policy of the Taliban Interim Government

In governing the country, the Taliban have placed their highest priority—despite imposing various domestic restrictions—on reconstructing Afghanistan's socio-economic foundations. Historically, Afghanistan's geographic position, linking Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia, has made it central to a number of regional infrastructure initiatives, including road networks, railway construction, and energy-related projects connecting surrounding states. However, chronic insecurity in Afghanistan repeatedly impeded progress, forcing many development projects to be suspended. Following the establishment of the Taliban Interim Government, the nationwide security situation improved sharply, and over the past four years these development initiatives have advanced at an accelerated pace.

The Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) natural gas pipeline—designed to transport Turkmen gas through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India—began construction in Turkmenistan in 2015. Yet the deteriorating security environment prevented the Afghan section from

beginning as originally planned in 2018. With the improved security situation, an inauguration ceremony was held on the Afghan side of the border in November 2024, and the project has continued to make progress throughout 2025. Similarly, the high-voltage CASA-1000 transmission line project, intended to link Central and South Asia, had already been nearly completed in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan, but Afghanistan remained the only incomplete segment. In August 2024, the Taliban engaged in substantive consultations with the World Bank, leading to the commencement of construction on 24 May 2025. The Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan (TAP) power transmission project has likewise advanced, with detailed discussions initiated between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan in June.

Railway development has also moved forward. A feasibility agreement for the UAP North–South Railway—extending from Termez on the Uzbekistan border, through Hairatan to Mazar-e Sharif (a segment already opened in 2011), onward through Kabul, and ultimately terminating in Peshawar near the Pakistan border—was discussed and signed at a trilateral foreign ministers’ meeting hosted by the Taliban Interim Government. China has similarly begun container freight transport to Mazar-e Sharif via its rail link through Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and progress has also been made on road construction in the rugged mountainous region along the Sino-Afghan border. As a result, bilateral trade volumes between the two countries continue to increase steadily.

Resource development has likewise advanced. At Mes Aynak—one of the world’s largest known copper deposits—substantive extraction finally began in 2025. Although Chinese companies had already secured a 30-year contract in 2008, the contract was extended by an additional fifteen years following the commencement of mining.

As these examples illustrate, the establishment of the Taliban Interim Government and the resulting improvement in Afghanistan’s internal security environment have enabled substantial progress in infrastructure development and energy-related projects. Nonetheless, the continued advancement of these initiatives fundamentally depends on the Taliban’s ability to maintain long-term domestic stability and to preserve cooperative relations with neighboring states.

9. Impact on Refugees and Trade Relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan

The emergence of Afghan refugees, beginning with the Soviet invasion, has continued uninterrupted to the present day. During the 2015 European refugee crisis, Afghans constituted the second-largest displaced population—following refugees from the Syrian civil war. At that time, Afghanistan was experiencing deteriorating security conditions, entrenched political corruption, and a deepening socio-economic crisis, leaving particularly younger generations with virtually no prospects for the future. Consequently, more than one million Afghans made the decision to journey to distant Europe in search of new opportunities. Furthermore, the turmoil surrounding the Taliban's return to power, as well as fear and uncertainty regarding their governance, prompted many additional Afghans to flee abroad. While significant numbers sought asylum in Western countries and Japan, the overwhelming majority naturally sought refuge in neighboring Iran and Pakistan. Due to more than forty years of war and protracted instability, much of the Afghan refugee population now consists of second- and third-generation individuals born and raised in host countries, most of whom are young. As a result of inadequate refugee registration procedures, large numbers have faced restricted access to essential social infrastructure, including education and employment. In Pakistan, the UNHCR introduced Proof of Registration (PoR) cards in 2006 as part of a policy to regularize undocumented refugees, and as of 2023, approximately 1.45 million Afghans were registered as PoR card holders. Additionally, the Pakistani government launched the Afghan Citizen Card (ACC) program in 2017, through which roughly 880,000 Afghans had been registered by 2023. However, the number of unregistered refugees—categorized by Pakistan as irregular or undocumented migrants—reached 1.73 million. On 4 November 2023, Pakistan's interior minister stated that the total number of Afghan migrants and refugees residing in the country stood at approximately 4.4 million, of whom 600,000 to 800,000 had arrived after the Taliban's return to power.

Against this backdrop, growing tensions between Pakistan and the Taliban concerning the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) prompted Islamabad to announce the “Illegal Foreigners Deportation

Plan (IFDP)” on 2 October 2023. The measure effectively initiated stricter border controls and forced repatriation targeting Afghans residing in Pakistan. The IFDP was implemented in three phases. The first phase involved voluntary departure followed by enforcement measures directed at undocumented migrants (beginning in October–November 2023). The second phase required ACC holders (as well as undocumented individuals) to depart voluntarily by the end of March 2025, with forced deportation beginning in April of the same year. The third phase mandated voluntary departure for PoR holders (whose cards had been declared expired) and for Afghans awaiting resettlement to Western countries by 30 June 2025, with forced deportation of PoR card holders commencing on 1 September. Orders were also issued to close and dismantle Afghan refugee camps within Pakistan, accompanied by the demolition of housing and commercial structures. According to an IOM announcement on 6 October 2025, approximately 1.5 million Afghans had “returned” to Afghanistan since September 2023, with more than 750,000 of them departing after the beginning of 2025.

In addition, the tightening of cross-border controls has exerted significant negative effects on bilateral trade and economic relations. Previously, the movement of persons between the two countries had been permitted on the basis of identity documents alone. However, between 2023 and 2024, Pakistan made passports and visas mandatory for Afghan citizens entering the country, while truck drivers transporting goods were required to obtain temporary entry permits. These more cumbersome procedures, the financial cost of acquiring temporary permits, and the difficulties associated with the application process generated strong public backlash, including protests and demonstrations. Extended sit-ins resulted in injuries and considerable disorder. Furthermore, due to Pakistan’s increasingly stringent measures against Afghan nationals, on 6 May 2025 the country announced that Afghan drivers lacking passports and visas would be denied entry, making adverse impacts on bilateral commercial relations effectively unavoidable.

10. Fluidity in South Asian Geopolitics and Afghanistan’s Socio-Economic Crisis

Pakistan, citing the Taliban's failure to take action against the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), conducted direct airstrikes—using drones and aircraft—against TTP facilities and leaders inside Afghan territory. The Taliban strongly condemned these actions as violations of Afghanistan's sovereignty, and minor clashes between the two militaries frequently occurred along the border. However, following a meeting on 8 January 2025 in Dubai between India's foreign minister and the Taliban's acting foreign minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, during which both parties agreed to strengthen trade relations and cooperate on development projects, diplomatic exchanges between Pakistan and the Taliban Interim Government intensified between March and April in an effort to improve bilateral relations. After a terrorist attack targeting civilians in Pahalgam in Indian-controlled Kashmir prompted military clashes between India and Pakistan, which ended in a ceasefire on 10 May, China facilitated an emergency trilateral foreign ministers' meeting among China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan on 21 May. Additional diplomatic engagements continued between July and August.

Nevertheless, between 9 and 16 October, Foreign Minister Muttaqi undertook an official visit to India. Coinciding almost exactly with the commencement of this visit, Pakistan launched an airstrike in Kabul targeting senior TTP figures, followed over the next several days by additional border clashes and repeated cross-border attacks by Pakistani drones and fighter aircraft. Although the two sides agreed to a temporary ceasefire on 15 October and subsequently entered ceasefire negotiations, no definitive resolution has yet been reached.

It is evident that the tensions that had been steadily escalating between Pakistan and the Taliban Interim Government have entered an entirely new phase due to the deepening relationship between India and the Taliban authorities. Historically, in the broader diplomatic landscape of the region, Pakistan served as a key partner of the United States during the Cold War, whereas India and Pakistan remained entrenched rivals. Within this structural antagonism, Afghanistan—facing territorial disputes and adversarial relations with Pakistan—consistently maintained friendly ties with India. Yet following the Soviet invasion in 1979 and the civil war that ensued, Pakistan increasingly strengthened its ties with the Taliban from the late 1990s onward as part of its pursuit of "strategic depth." With the establishment of the Taliban Interim Government in August 2021, Pakistan succeeded in extending its

influence across Afghanistan. However, within only a few years, a variety of bilateral disputes surfaced, leading to repeated border closures and frequent armed skirmishes.

Against the backdrop of military confrontation between India and Pakistan over Kashmir in spring 2025, the Taliban's foreign minister proceeded with his official visit to India. As noted above, India and Pakistan had engaged in armed hostilities in May, and from Pakistan's perspective the Taliban's diplomatic rapprochement with India under such circumstances was unacceptable. On the night of 9 October—the very day Muttaqi began his visit—Pakistan carried out an unprecedented drone strike on Kabul targeting TTP leadership. By the early morning of 10 October, Pakistan had also conducted air force strikes inside Afghan territory. In response, the two militaries clashed along the border, Pakistan carried out additional airstrikes, and the two states effectively entered a state of armed conflict. Although a temporary ceasefire was later agreed, the prospects for a comprehensive cessation of hostilities remain uncertain.

The confrontation between the Taliban Interim Government and Pakistan, the prolonged closure of border crossings, and the mass “return” of refugees have also cast a deep shadow over Afghanistan's socio-economic situation. Most returnees lack any socio-economic foundation upon “returning” to Afghanistan. Given the country's already fragile industrial base, Afghanistan does not possess the economic capacity to provide employment for the millions of returnees. Consequently, unemployment has risen sharply, and large numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) have emerged. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), approximately 350,000 IDPs were recorded in the first quarter of 2025 alone.

Under these conditions, humanitarian assistance has become indispensable. Yet the establishment of the second Trump administration in the United States and its substantial reductions in contributions to the United Nations have resulted in severe funding shortages across UN agencies, forcing significant cutbacks in their operations. As a result, the provision of temporary housing for returnees, food assistance, and other humanitarian services has become gravely inadequate. On 19 August 2025, the World Food Programme (WFP) announced that 10 to 15 million people required food assistance, but that a lack of funding rendered a response impossible.

Furthermore, various economic development projects that had made progress since the establishment of the Taliban Interim Government have suffered major setbacks due to the rapid deterioration of relations with Pakistan, prolonged border closures, and the escalation of armed conflict. As noted above, projects prioritized by the Taliban for the reconstruction of Afghanistan's social and economic foundations have been forced into stagnation. If these circumstances persist, it is certain that the already dire socio-economic conditions faced by the Afghan population will worsen even further. Prolonged economic hardship may also translate into growing domestic criticism of Taliban governance. In November 2025, Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Ghani Baradar, who oversees economic affairs in the Taliban Interim Government, publicly called on Afghanistan's commercial actors to adopt trade routes that bypass Pakistan. Such developments have the potential to deepen bilateral divisions not only in the security and political spheres but also in economic relations.

11. Conclusion

This study has examined the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan, with particular attention to recent developments since the establishment of the Taliban Interim Government. Since its founding in 1947, Pakistan has faced persistent disputes with Afghanistan, most notably over border issues, leading to longstanding bilateral tensions. At the same time, following Pakistan's defeat in the 1971 Third Indo-Pakistani War and the subsequent secession and independence of Bangladesh, projecting influence into Afghanistan in order to secure "strategic depth" vis-à-vis India came to hold paramount importance for Pakistan's national security. Consequently, Pakistan has consistently remained involved in Afghan affairs.

After the collapse of the First Taliban Regime triggered by the U.S.-led military intervention following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, an extensive "state-building project" began in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the country continued to experience protracted instability. The "New South Asia Strategy" announced by the Trump administration in 2017 marked a turning point, as it paved the way for direct negotiations between the United States and the Taliban. Pakistan played a mediating role

in these talks, culminating in the February 2020 agreement that included the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces. However, just before the withdrawal was finalized, the Taliban seized the capital in August 2021 and took power.

From Pakistan's perspective, the establishment of the Taliban Interim Government initially represented a strategic victory, insofar as it appeared to secure the "strategic depth" the country had long sought. Yet, subsequent disagreements between the two sides over the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Afghan refugees, and—since 2025—the intensification of what has effectively become a "state of war," prolonged border closures, and the forced repatriation of refugees have significantly heightened regional tensions and contributed to a broader fluidity in the political landscape of South Asia. As discussed in this study, Afghanistan and Pakistan share various transnational linkages, including extensive interpersonal exchanges, overlapping linguistic and cultural backgrounds rooted in common ethnicities, and the influence of Deobandi Islamic thought in the borderlands. At the same time, historical structural antagonisms persist between the two countries, and the regional and international environment surrounding South Asia remains highly volatile, rendering the future trajectory uncertain. In any case, the severe political and international environment that surrounds Afghanistan suggests that dramatic improvements in the country's socio-economic conditions are unlikely in the near term. While the Taliban's governance—typified by measures such as restrictions on women's education—has imposed numerous regulations, it may also have garnered a degree of public support due to the end of large-scale armed conflict and a marked improvement in security compared with the previous regime. However, if the prolonged confrontation with Pakistan continues to stall major economic development projects, and if living conditions deteriorate further amid a rapid influx of returnees from abroad, the foundation of the Taliban Interim Government may become unstable. As Afghanistan's political situation has the potential to significantly reshape the wider international environment of South Asia, close attention to future developments remains essential.

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