
9. Dynamism of Geopolitics over the Hindu Kush–Khorasan Area: The Trajectories of Afghanistan and Pakistan in the Midst of Geopolitical Struggles

Mohammad Jawad Ali Aqa and Hideaki Shinoda

Abstract

This article examines the Hindu Kush–Khorasan frontier as a dynamic geopolitical crossroads shaped by a series of decisive critical junctures. Historically, the Hindu Kush has been both as a protective frontier of the Indian subcontinent, forced migration, and civilizational exchange. In the nineteenth century, the Great Game—and later the Cold War—consolidated Afghanistan’s role as a buffer state caught between competing empires. Following the partition of British India, Pakistan emerged as a pivotal actor: geographically rooted in the subcontinent but culturally aligned with the Islamic world. Therefore, it has used its position to oscillate between maritime and continental powers. In recent decades, militant groups have reactivated the symbolic weight of Khorasan, investing the region with eschatological significance. Together, these turning points demonstrate how geopolitical perspectives continue to shape the intertwined trajectories of Afghanistan and Pakistan amid broader regional rivalries.

Keywords: Hindu Kush–Khorasan Frontier, Geopolitical Crossroads, Buffer State Dynamics, Pakistan’s Strategic Positioning, Militant Symbolism

1. Introduction

The Hindu Kush–Khorasan frontier is one of Eurasia’s most durable strategic hinge points, alternately serving as a defensive rampart for the Indian subcontinent and as a conduit for conquest, trade, and political expansion between Central and South Asia. This dual character—safeguard and gateway—has repeatedly drawn great powers into contests that set the parameters for regional order. Afghanistan and Pakistan, situated on either side of this highland corridor, continue to carry the imprint of those contests in their security posture, foreign alignments, and exposure to external leverage.

Afghanistan’s role was consolidated in the nineteenth century as British–Russian rivalry formalized a buffer state whose sovereignty was circumscribed by imperial demarcation, not organic consolidation. The drawing of the Durand Line and the three Anglo–Afghan Wars fixed Kabul within a perimeter of managed neutrality that later Cold War dynamics reinforced: the country became a terrain of access denial and proxy competition rather than incorporation. Geography—high altitude, fractured communications, and difficult passes—both enabled local resistance and incentivized outside powers to seek influence without permanent occupation.

Pakistan emerged from the partition of British India as a pivotal actor at the junction of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Although geographically rooted in the subcontinent, its westward connective tissue positioned it as a hinge between maritime and continental strategy. During the Cold War, Islamabad joined SEATO and CENTO, functioning as a shield against Soviet reach toward the Indian Ocean and drawing sustained U.S. attention and assistance. The post-1991 interlude, as great-power interest receded, enabled a more autonomous Pakistan policy toward Afghanistan, including support for the Taliban through the late 1990s. After 2001, Islamabad recalibrated under U.S. pressure—publicly aligning with counterterror operations even as cross-border linkages in the Pashtun belt complicated enforcement. The U.S. raid in Abbottabad (2011) underscored mutual distrust; the Taliban’s return to Kabul (2021) revived old geographic frictions along the Durand Line rather than producing strategic convergence. By 2023–2025, shifting global alignments—heightened India–U.S. trade tensions, renewed Gulf ties culminating in a Pakistan–Saudi defense pact, and Pakistan’s

balancing among Washington, Beijing, and regional partners—reaffirmed its role as a critical edge where sea-power and land-power logics meet.

This study proceeds by tracing a sequence of decisive turning points that reveal how geography, state formation, and external rivalry interact across time. The analysis is structured as a comparative reading of Afghanistan and Pakistan across four episodes—frontier and conquest, buffer construction, Cold War consolidation, and post-Cold War recalibration—linking mechanisms such as boundary-making, access denial, alliance formation, and cross-border connectivity to outcomes observable in military posture, foreign alignment, and border management. Periodized narrative, close reading of primary accounts, and table-based synthesis (see Table 1) are used to cross-check claims and keep inference anchored in historical sequence and spatial constraints.

By situating Afghanistan’s buffer logic and Pakistan’s pivot role within this ordered sequence of critical junctures, the article clarifies why the Hindu Kush–Khorasan belt remains a strategic fault line in South Asia’s security architecture. It also speaks to current policy debates by foregrounding how altitude, passes, and perimeter management still shape the choices available to Kabul and Islamabad amid evolving great-power competition.

2. The Hindu Kush as a Safeguard, and a Frontier of the Indian Subcontinent

The Hindu Kush’s historical role as both a protective frontier and a corridor of conquest represents a foundational critical juncture that set long-term dynamics in motion. The duality of protection and vulnerability, inscribed in its very name *Hindu Kush* “Hindu Killer,” embedded the region as a paradoxical security space.¹ In the historical and geopolitical imagination of the Indian subcontinent, it has served

¹ See R. A. Huttenback, “The ‘Great Game’ in the Pamirs and the Hindu-Kush: The British Conquest of Hunza and Nagar. *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1975, pp. 1–29, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/311795>; National Archives of India (Nai). (1887, October). *Sec. procs. 286–291, memo. on the present position in Central Asia* (H. M. D; Durand, May 21, 1887); C. A. Durand, *The Making of a Frontier* (John Murray, 1899), <https://archive.org/details/details/dli.ernet.29125>; J. J. Gommans,

both as a protective wall,² a natural frontier of India,³ that the British strategists such as Viceroy Lytton and Sir Mortimer Durand regarded as a safeguard of the subcontinent against imperial powers advancing from Central Asia.⁴

Yet the same geography also made the Hindu Kush a corridor of conquest. From the Macedonians and Kushans to the Ghaznavids, Ghurids, and Mughals,⁵ successive invaders crossed its passes to establish dominion over northern India. These incursions underscored the paradox of the mountains: while providing protection, they also exposed India to external domination. In turn, the subcontinent absorbed and reshaped these influences, as waves of conquest transformed its political and social orders.⁶

The Hindu Kush was equally a conduit of forced migration and slavery, linking India to the wider markets of Central Asia. The etymology of the word “Hindu Kush” is closely linked to this violent history. During the Middle Ages and the early modern era, Indian captives, especially Hindus taken during invasions and raids, were trafficked across these passes to Ghazni, Bukhara, and Samarkand. There was a high demand for skilled artisans, agricultural workers, and craftsmen, whose skills were highly valued throughout the Persianate world. The *Tarikh-i-Firishta* recounts that after the Ghaznavid capture of Thanesar in 1014, some 200,000 captives were marched to Ghazni, turning the city into what contemporaries described as an “Indian town.” Such episodes reveal how the Hindu Kush operated not

Mughal Warfare: Indian Frontiers and Highroads to Empire, 1500–1700 (Routledge, 2002); M. Q. Firishta, *Tarikh-i-Firishta* (Lucknow, 1864); S. C. Levi, “Hindus beyond the Hindu Kush: Indians in the Central Asian slave trade,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 12, no. 3, (2002), pp. 277, 288, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186302000240>; and B. Manz, *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

² Huttenback, “The ‘Great Game’ in the Pamirs and the Hindu-Kush”.

³ National Archives of India (Nai). (1887, October). *Sec. procs. 286–291, memo. on the present position in Central Asia.*

⁴ Durand, *The Making of a Frontier*, pp. 60–61.

⁵ Gommans, *Mughal warfare*, p. 83.

⁶ Manz, *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane*, pp. 80, 89; Firishta, *Tarikh-i-Firishta*, pp. 27–28, 48–49; Levi, “Hindus beyond the Hindu Kush,” p. 277; Huttenback, “The ‘Great Game’ in the Pamirs and the Hindu-Kush.”

only as a military frontier but also as a site of dispossession, where the human wealth of the subcontinent was extracted for the enrichment of Central Asian polities.⁷

It has also been imagined as a graveyard at times. The geography itself compounded this tragedy. Weakened by fatigue, starvation, and inclement weather, captive caravans frequently died in large numbers while traveling over this high-altitude route. Over time, this recurring catastrophe etched itself on regional memory, giving rise to the grim association of the mountains as the “killer of Hindus.” The name thus encapsulates both the physical dangers of Afghanistan’s rough terrain and the brutalities of imperial expansion, slave raiding, and the commodification of human lives in Indo-Central Asian geopolitics.⁸ Yet the Hindu Kush was not only a space of violence and domination. Additionally, it functioned as a zone of civilizational contact. Indian artisans contributed to monumental architecture such as Timur’s Bibi Khanum Mosque in Samarkand, while traders and scholars carried cultural forms and knowledge across the frontier.⁹ Even amid conquest and coercion, the mountains functioned as a bridge linking South Asia to the broader Persianate and Turkic worlds.

In the longue durée of Indian historical consciousness, the Hindu Kush has thus been imagined in multiple, often contradictory registers: a shield against imperial penetration, a gateway of conquest, a channel of enslavement, and a bridge of exchange. These layered connections still endure in modern geopolitics. The range continues to embody both strategic anxieties over India’s northwestern frontier and the memory of civilizational encounters, violent and productive, that have defined the subcontinent’s engagement with the wider Eurasian space.

3. Afghanistan: Tragedy of a Buffer Zone

⁷ Firishta, *Tarikh-i-Firishta*, pp. 27–28

⁸ Levi, “Hindus beyond the Hindu Kush,” p. 280.

⁹ *Ibid.*

The nineteenth-century Great Game constitutes another decisive critical juncture. Afghanistan's statehood was the product of deliberate external engineering intended to create buffer statehood rather than organic political consolidation. British fears of Russian expansion and the need to protect India made Afghanistan a neutral barrier,¹⁰ institutionalized through the three Anglo-Afghan Wars, the cultivation of compliant rulers, and the drawing of the Durand Line in 1893.¹¹ Long-lasting path-dependent vulnerabilities were brought about by this artificial statehood, including a fragmented Pashtun polity throughout Afghanistan and British India/Pakistan, brittle sovereignty, and limited modernization. As Russia and Britain both avoided incorporating Afghanistan completely while solidifying its role as a cordon sanitaire, the buffer logic became self-reinforcing.¹²

Due to its rugged terrain, Afghanistan has long been a formidable geopolitical barrier that has resisted domination by neighboring powers such as Persia, Russia, and British India. The country's topography, dominated by the Hindu Kush Mountain range, was central to this role. More than two-thirds of Afghanistan lies above 2,000 meters in elevation,¹³ with peaks rising to 6,411 meters and high eastern mountains remaining snow-covered year-round. Prolonged winters and the inhospitable terrain made both governance and military operations extremely difficult, discouraging direct imperial occupation. This enduring inaccessibility has earned Afghanistan the epithet "Graveyard of Empires,"¹⁴

¹⁰ See Durand, *The Making of a Frontier*.

¹¹ M. Ballesteros, and A. Miguel, *Analysis Document of the IEEE 12/2011 – Geopolitical analysis of Afghanistan* (Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies [IEEE], 2011), pp. 6-9; T. J. Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton University Press, 2012); Huttenback, "The 'Great Game' in the Pamirs and the Hindu-Kush"; Durand, *The Making of a Frontier*, pp. 60-61.

¹² See M. Z. Ispahani, *Roads and Rivals: The Politics of Access in the Borderlands of Asia* (I. B. Tauris, 1989); J. Chay (ed.), *Buffer States in World Politics* (1st ed.) (Routledge, 1986) <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429040658>.

¹³ K. McLachlan, "Afghanistan: The Geopolitics of a Buffer State," *Geopolitics and International Boundaries*, vol. 2, no.1, 1997, pp. 82-96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629379708407579>; and Ispahani, *Roads and Rivals*, pp. 94-96.

¹⁴ J. Fergusson, and R. G. Hughes, "Graveyard of Empires: Geopolitics, War and the Tragedy of Afghanistan," *Intelligence and National Security*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2019, pp. 333-351, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2019.1571695>.

as successive great powers have attempted—and failed—to subdue it.¹⁵ The country's mountainous terrain, notably the Hindu Kush, has functioned as a natural fortress, making Afghanistan a prime candidate for imperial strategists during the Great Game of the nineteenth century and later the Cold War. In these periods, Afghanistan became a buffer state, a contested zone where rival empires sought influence while depending on its hostile terrain to prevent military incursions.

This containment logic is best exemplified by the three Anglo-Afghan Wars (1839–42, 1878–80, and 1919). Britain, unable to secure Afghanistan through prolonged military occupation, was forced instead into uneasy negotiations with Pashtun tribal elites, which ultimately resulted in the recognition of Afghan independence in 1919.¹⁶ The disastrous retreat from Kabul in 1842, where more than 4,500 British soldiers and 12,500 accompanying civilians lost their lives, remains a sobering testament to the limits of imperial power. Elizabeth Butler's haunting painting of Dr. William Brydon, the lone survivor staggering into Jalalabad, gave human face to this tragedy and immortalized one of the most profound failures of nineteenth-century empire.¹⁷

Formal agreements marked the culmination of Afghanistan's buffer statehood. In 1844, Russia proposed neutral zones to avoid costly conflict with Britain, and in 1873 Lord Granville and Prince Gorchakov agreed to establish neutral buffer states. Although some British strategists favored a "forward policy" to keep Afghan territory, British control never went beyond select passes, and permanent occupation was avoided. Russia, in the meantime, advanced across Central Asia—capturing Merv (1884), Penjdeh (1886), and the northern sub-Pamir (1896)—but consistently refrained from crossing into Afghanistan. The commencement of border delimitation in 1885 marked a mutual recognition of Afghanistan's strategic value as a neutral buffer.¹⁸

¹⁵ N. Manchanda, "The Graveyard of Empires: Haunting, Amnesia and Afghanistan's Construction as a Burial Site," *Middle East Critique*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2019, pp. 307–320, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2019.1633745>.

¹⁶ Ballesteros and Miguel, *Analysis Document of the IEEE 12/2011*, p. 6; Manchanda, "The Graveyard of Empires."

¹⁷ Fergusson and Hughes, "Graveyard of Empires."

¹⁸ McLachlan, "Afghanistan,"; and Ispahani, *Roads and Rivals*, p. 85.

The drawing of the Durand Line in 1893 cemented Afghanistan's role as a buffer, but it came at a profound human cost. Negotiated by Sir Henry Durand, the 1,500-mile frontier sliced through Pashtun homelands¹⁹, dividing families, tribes, and communities that had long lived as one. An estimated 40 million Pashtuns suddenly found themselves separated—27 million on the side that would become Pakistan and 13 million in Afghanistan. What began as a colonial cartographic exercise hardened into a lasting wound, solidified after 1947, that continues to fuel mistrust and tension on both sides of the border. More than a line on a map, the Durand Line remains a living reminder of how externally imposed borders reshaped identities and destabilized the region.²⁰

British geostrategic anxieties were compounded by fears of Russian encroachment through the Hindu Kush. Haunted by the Russo-Turkish War of 1877 and intelligence of possible Russian overtures to Kabul, Viceroy Lytton gave full expression to Russophobic thinking, declaring that Britain's "ultimate boundary should be the great mountain range," specifically the Pamirs and Hindu Kush. In 1884, Colonel W.S.A. Lockhart was dispatched to assess India's vulnerability through this frontier. After a year-long survey, he concluded that while a large Russian army could not traverse the Hindu Kush, small and mobile detachments might, necessitating a forward British presence.²¹

Afghanistan's harsh geography and landlocked position thus made it an archetypal buffer state. As Chay²² argues, Afghanistan's natural conditions were in line with imperial interests to keep it neutral, while Ispahani's more recent definition of a buffer state as "a neutral state lying between two others and serving to render less possible hostilities between them"²³ aptly describes Afghanistan's enduring role. Afghanistan's rugged topography helped to limit the ambitions of great-powers, sustained its contested neutrality, and played a decisive role in shaping the balance of power in modern Eurasian history.

¹⁹ T. J. Barfield, *Afghanistan*, p. 24.

²⁰ Ballesteros and Miguel, *Analysis Document of the IEEE 12/2011*, pp. 9-11.

²¹ Huttenback, "The 'Great Game' in the Pamirs and the Hindu-Kush."

²² Chay, *Buffer States in World Politics*.

²³ Ispahani, *Roads and rivals*, p. 94.

The Soviet invasion of 1979 was another important critical juncture, embedding Afghanistan into the Cold War order and reinforcing its status as a geopolitical pivot. The rugged geography of the Hindu Kush once again proved central, functioning as both shield²⁴ and insurgent sanctuary.²⁵ During this period, Afghanistan became the platform for a “mini-Great Game”,²⁶ Initially, Western strategic calculations tacitly conceded Afghanistan to the Soviet sphere of influence, in line with the broader balance-of-power logic of containment.²⁷ However, this fragile equilibrium was shattered by the Soviet Union’s large-scale military intervention in December 1979, which profoundly redefined Afghanistan’s role within the Cold War geopolitical order.

The invasion highlighted Afghanistan’s pivotal location at the intersection of the Middle East, South Asia, and Central Asia, transforming it into a potential corridor for Soviet access to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean littoral. Recognizing the implications of this move, the United States recalibrated its strategic posture. The Carter Doctrine acknowledged that any external attempt to dominate the Persian Gulf would be deemed as a direct threat to U.S. vital interests, justifying military intervention if necessary, which led to the U.S. support for the Mujahideen through Pakistan’s ISI institutionalized transnational trust networks.²⁸ The Cold War thus deepened the path dependence of Afghanistan as both buffer and battleground, layering new actors (CIA, ISI, Saudi Arabia, Iran, China) onto long-standing geopolitical patterns of rivalry and access denial. The Soviet efforts to build infrastructure (e.g., the Salang Tunnel) to integrate Afghanistan more directly into its sphere paradoxically reinforced the country’s centrality as a contested frontier, rather than resolving its structural marginality.²⁹

²⁴ McLachlan, “Afghanistan.”

²⁵ Fergusson and Hughes, “Graveyard of Empires.”

²⁶ Z. Khalilzad, “Afghanistan in 1995: Civil war and a mini-Great Game,” *Asian Survey*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1996, pp. 190–195, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2645816>.

²⁷ Ispahani, *Roads and Rivals*, pp. 421–429.

²⁸ Ballesteros and Miguel, *Analysis Document of the IEEE 12/2011*, p. 7.

²⁹ Ispahani, *Roads and Rivals*, pp. 421–429.

With the end of the Cold War, the superpowers' interests in Afghanistan declined, leaving the country trapped in struggles among local warlords. This opened the door for Pakistan's involvement through the Taliban in the 1990s. Pakistan expanded its influence by enabling the Taliban to dominate almost all of Afghanistan, except for the Panjshir Valley in the Hindu Kush, where the Northern Alliance maintained a stronghold until 2001.

The 9/11 attacks suddenly prompted a U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, completely altering the situation. To the detriment of Eurasian land powers, the United States, together with its allies, dominated Afghanistan for the next 20 years. During this period, it faced challenges not only from the Taliban but also from IS-K. Neighboring countries were initially more or less accommodating to the U.S., given the shock of 9/11, but the prolonged foreign military presence soon became a source of frustration. Cooperation between the U.S. and regional actors remained very limited.

When Afghanistan appeared on the agenda of international conferences, discussions were largely confined to major Western donors. Even after the so-called Bonn Process ended in 2006—following the Bonn Conference of 2001, the Tokyo Conference of 2002, and the Berlin meeting of 2004—subsequent conferences continued to be held mainly in Western donor capitals: London (2006, 2010, 2014), Rome (2007), Paris (2008), The Hague (2009), Bonn (2011), Tokyo (2012), and Brussels (2016).

This West-dominated period came to an end in August 2021 with the complete withdrawal of U.S. and allied forces, leading to the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban's return to power. Since then, the geopolitical configuration has shifted once again. China, Russia, and Iran have been relatively supportive of the Taliban government, while Pakistan has clashed with it over border issues. Although international interest in Afghanistan has diminished, the buffer-zone dynamic appears to have been revived, with regional powers now reasserting their balance of influence.

4. Pakistan: A Critical Edge of Geopolitical Theories

With the dissolution of the British India, Pakistan emerged as a separate state independent from India. It is at the root of the Indian subcontinent, but it is no longer part of the Hindu civilizational zone.

Pakistan is closer to the Islamic community stretching westward. It is the area of the Islamic community that curtailed the Indian subcontinent. Once continental powers are linked with the Islamic community through Central Asia up to Pakistan, they marginalize the Indian subcontinent to occupy the critical pillar of the Eurasia. Pakistan thus could also be the safeguard of sea powers to block continental powers to penetrate the Eurasia to reach the Indian Ocean.

During the Cold War, Pakistan as well as Iran betrayed the bond of the Islamic community to be linked with the US to deter the expansion of USSR toward the Indian Ocean. India as well as the Arabic countries tended to be inclined toward USSR. With the strong tie with the United States seeking to contain the expansion of USSR's influence and communist movements, Pakistan joined the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), an international organization for collective defense in Southeast Asia created by the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty signed in September 1954 in Manila, Philippines. The organization's headquarters was located in Bangkok, Thailand. A total of eight members joined the organization in its lifetime, namely, Australia (which administered Papua New Guinea until 1975), France (which had French Indochina until 1955), New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand, the United Kingdom (which administered Hong Kong, North Borneo and Sarawak) the United States, and Pakistan. While Pakistan had East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, until 1971, it was an outskirt of the Southeast Asia. In fact, there were only two countries in SEATO which were purely Southeast Asian countries. Pakistan joined in SEATO as a shield against the expansion of communism for the anti-communist camp. Yet, with the importance of the bilateral tie with the US and also with China, Pakistan lost the interest in SEATO in the 1970s, which was eventually dissolved in 1977.

For almost the same purpose in the opposite direction, Pakistan joined in the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), formerly known as the Middle East Treaty Organization (METO) and also known as the Baghdad Pact, which was a military alliance during the Cold War period. It was formed in 1955 by Iran, Iraq, Turkey, the United Kingdom and Pakistan and continued to exist until 1979. CENTO was also not a pure regional organization. The real Middle Eastern states were only Iran and Iraq, while Turkey and Pakistan may constitute the outskirt of the region. CENTO was formed for the purpose of creating an anti-communism shield in or around the Middle East. With the dissolution of the structure

of international politics in the early Cold War period signified by the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran, this anti-communism organization was dissolved.

Pakistan, before and after the secession of East Pakistan as Bangladesh, remained an anti-USSR shield in geopolitical terms by linking itself with Southeast Asian states and Middle Eastern states separately. In the end, Pakistan enjoyed the attention of the US and received assistances from the US during the Cold War period due to its geopolitical location. Iran as a US ally collapsed with the Islamic Revolution in 1979, in which the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan began. Pakistan remained an indispensable stronghold of the US even more strongly to aspire to prevent the Soviet influence from spreading throughout the region.

However, with the end of the Cold War, namely the collapse of the USSR, the US lost the geopolitical interest in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. There was simply no geopolitical need for the US to contain the USSR, as the latter ceased to exist in 1991. Russia could not afford to expand its influence during the 1990s. Pakistan began to act independently to extend its influence in a neighboring country. With Afghanistan falling into the turmoil of the civil war among Mujahedeen forces after the downfall of the regime in Kabul, Pakistan captured the momentum to back the Taliban that culminated its dominance in Afghanistan by controlling almost 90% of its territory by 2001. This was the rare period when great powers lost interest in Afghanistan – Pakistan area and Pakistan was almost overwhelmingly dominant in the military situation in Afghanistan among foreign forces except more indirect involvements of Central Asian countries and Iran.

Nevertheless, when the US all of sudden began to invade Afghanistan in 2001, Pakistan had to comply with the geopolitical logic of global politics by virtually abandoning the Taliban regime to cooperate with the US. General Pervez Musharraf, who had overthrown Nawaz Sharif's government in the 1999 coup d'état and proclaimed himself the chief executive of Pakistan, under martial law, and had become President in June 2001, explained to the nation that he decided to cooperate with the US, considering the national interests of Pakistan. This was a move in line with the tradition of foreign policy of Pakistan. If great powers lose interest in the region, Pakistan may become more independent. If they

regain interest, Pakistan adjusts its policy accordingly. This is the logic of geopolitics, that has been determining the course of Afghanistan-Pakistan areas for a long period of time.

Behind the scene, however, Pakistan remained linked with the Taliban and even Al-Qaida through the Pashtun tribal area during the period of the US-backed Islamic Republic of Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021. This was natural in the sense that many in Pakistan had close links with the Taliban figures. The Taliban's leaders hid themselves in the southern mountain area in Afghanistan and many of them were believed to have crossed the national border with Pakistan to seek refuge in the Pashtun tribal area, Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). This was destined to happen in light of the geopolitical nature of the area.

The US continued to pressurize the government of Pakistan to eradicate the elements of Al-Qaida and the Taliban from within its own territory. They often jointly conducted anti-terrorist operations across on the side of territory of Pakistan, almost in vain. The US government began to be frustrated with Pakistan due to its inability to eradicate such elements. When the US conducted the special operation to assassinate Osama bin Laden in 2011 at his compound in Abbottabad in Pakistan, the US in suspicion of Pakistan did not inform the government of Pakistan of the secret operation to their great shock. President Musharaf had resigned in 2008 in order to avoid impeachment through his controversial attempt to seize control of the Supreme Court. With the assassination of former Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto, in 2007, Pakistan's political scenes fell into continuous instability. Tribal issues as well as Islamic fundamentalism were among those destabilizing issues. Prime Minister between 2013 and 2017, Nawaz Sharif, maintained relative stability. But the populist tone figure, Imran Khan, who served as Prime Minister between 2018 and 2022, brought about a new factor. Since non-confidence vote against Prime Minister Khan in 2022, the brother of Nawaz Sharif, Shehbaz Sharif, has been serving as Prime Minister to maintain stability of politics in Pakistan.³⁰

³⁰ See A. Sattar, *Pakistan's Foreign Policy 1947-2019* (5th ed.) (Oxford University Press, 2020); S. S. Raza and M. J. Shapiro (eds.), *Geopolitics of the Pakistan-Afghanistan Borderland* (Routledge, 2021); S. S. Raza, *United States and Pakistan in the 21st Century: Geostrategy and Geopolitics in South Asia* (Routledge, 2021);

When the Taliban took power in Kabul with the complete withdrawal of the US and NATO countries in August 2021, Pakistan should have been triumphant over Afghanistan. It is paradoxical that the renewed Taliban regime in Afghanistan intensified its tension with Pakistan after it took full control over Afghanistan in accordance with the historical logic of the Durand Line. At this moment the government of Shehbaz Sharif runs the mainstream political management in the country, while antagonizing Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban's Afghanistan.

Now, Taliban's Afghanistan is an air pocket while it maintains relatively stable relations with neighboring countries including Central Asian states, Iran and China. Pakistan has constant tensions with the Taliban after the intensification of the apparent tension. Despite the remaining tension over the national border with Afghanistan, for Pakistan, it is critically important to maintain and develop its bond with the Islamic community. If Pakistan loses Afghanistan, it is severed with Central Asia and would be in a complicated circumstance as regards its relation with Iran. If Pakistan continues to go hostile against India as the subcontinental Hindu civilizational power, the country would find it vital to solidly keep the bond of the Islamic community membership. With the genocidal military operation of Israel over Gaza from October 2023, Pakistan increased its anti-Israel tone. The move enables Pakistan to consolidate the bond of the Islamic community, as exemplified de-facto support of Iran and Turky over the eruption of the Kashmir conflict in May 2025. The military pact reached between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in September 2025 symbolized the immersion of Pakistan into the Arabic area through its anti-Israel tone over Gaza.

M. Lodhi (ed.), *Pakistan: Search for Stability* (Oxford University Press, 2024); B. T. Khoo, V. R. Hadiz, and Y. Nakanishi, (eds.), *Between Dissent and Power: The Transformation of Islamic Politics in the Middle East and Asia* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); S. W. Fuchs, *In a pure Muslim land: Shi'ism between Pakistan and the Middle East* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2019); A. Davis, "Lashkar-e-Taiba," in P. Burke, D. Elnakhala, and S. Miller (eds.), *Global Jihadi Terrorism: Terrorist Groups, Zones of Armed Conflict and National Counter-Terrorism Strategies* (Edward Elgar, 2021).

US President Trump imposed 50% tariff on India due to the reason that India continues to purchase oil from Russia. The US attitude toward India is somewhat mixed. Initially, the Trump administration seemed to take a benign attitude toward India. President Trump still continues to make friendly remarks for Prime Minister Modi even after he actually introduced 50% tariff on imports from India. The US wants India to detach from Russia and China. India remains balanced between the US, Russia and China; it never rejects or succumb to the US. Then, the US cannot abandon Pakistan as the safeguard against the expansion of influences of Russia and China toward the Indian Ocean. Pakistan does not have to antagonize the US, it should simply maintain good relations with Russia and China as well as Iran and Turkey, while even cultivating its renewed relationship with Saudi Arabia and possibly some other Islamic countries. The phenomenon of the closeness of Pakistan and the United States in 2025 after the armed confrontation between India and Pakistan, and especially the introduction of 50% tariff on India by the US was very dramatic.

The signing of the Mutual Defense Pact between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in September 2025 should be understood in the context of the development of these political events. Pakistan emerged as a major partner of Arab nations with Türkiye in its anti-Israel tone to form an international group to bring about peace over the Gaza crisis, while India signed a new investment pact with Israel. The logic of civilizational confrontations apparently stood out in the relationship between Pakistan and India in their relationship with Middle Eastern countries. If the US bypasses India, it must approach Pakistan to maintain a balance against other great powers and mediate the peace process in the Middle East. China, keeping the benign relationship with Pakistan to reach out other Islamic countries, would seek to maintain a constructive civilizational relationship with India for the sake of rivalry against the US. Russia approaches both the Islamic community and India against the Global West.

5. Conflict-prone Path and Geopolitical Theories

The logic of geopolitical theories over the Hindu Kush–Khorasan Area is complex and paradoxical to say the least. In accordance with the Anglo-American tradition of geopolitical theory, Afghanistan is

compelled to be neutral, otherwise, it is subject to invasion of either of land powers and sea powers. Pakistan tends to be regarded as a safeguard for sea powers against the expansion of the influences of land powers stretching toward the Indian Ocean. In accordance with the Continental tradition of geopolitical theory, both Afghanistan and Pakistan should belong to the Islamic civilizational zone against the Hindu zone. If the US approaches India, Pakistan may furthermore get closer to some other continental powers like Russia and China. If the US accommodates the concerns of Pakistan, the bond of the Islamic community remains neutral as such in relation to other civilizational zones including the West, Eurasia and Confucianism. This complexity, flexibility and instability of Afghanistan and Pakistan in the Hindu Kush–Khorasan Area are almost a destiny in such a border area between sea powers and land powers and between civilizations.

Taken together, these historical junctures have produced path-dependent continuities that explain contemporary conflict dynamics in the Hindu Kush–Khurasan frontier. The Durand Line's ethnic incongruence continues to destabilize the Afghan–Pakistan borderlands.³¹ The buffer state logic persists in Afghanistan's vulnerability to external manipulation, now by regional powers and transnational militant groups. The Cold War networks of jihad and external patronage resonate in today's insurgencies, where IS-K and other groups mobilize historical narratives of Khorasan as an eschatological frontier. The discursive framing of Afghanistan as the "Graveyard of Empires"³² further entrenches its identity as an exceptional geopolitical space.

Overlaying these geopolitical continuities is the eschatological imagination of Khorasan, which transforms the Hindu Kush from a mere buffer into a sacred frontier,³³ Prophetic traditions about black banners rising from Khorasan,³⁴ culminating in the conquest of Jerusalem, embed the region within

³¹ T. J. Barfield, *Afghanistan*, p. 24.

³² Fergusson and Hughes, "Graveyard of Empires,"; Manchanda, "The Graveyard of Empires."

³³ M. Barzegarzadeh Zarandi and H. Noorali, "Imaginary Geographies of Religious Terrorism: ISIS's Popular Culture," *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2025, pp. 577–601. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2025.2484061>.

³⁴ M. H. Musselwhite, *ISIS & Eschatology: Apocalyptic Motivations behind the Formation and Development*

a mythic temporality of imminence. IS-K's discourse thus resonates with the long durée history of the Hindu Kush as a frontier of invasion, conquest, and resistance, while simultaneously sacralizing it as the stage for the final battles of Islamic eschatology.³⁵ The result is a fusion of geopolitical path dependence and religious mythic geography, producing a frontier that is at once historical, structural, and cosmic.

In sum, the longue durée of the Hindu Kush–Khorasan frontier demonstrates a persistent path dependence (see table 1). These structural legacies help explain why the frontier persists as both a geopolitical and eschatological space of contestation. Its relevance today lies in the way these historical dynamics continue to reverberate in contemporary conflicts, from cross-border insurgencies and Pashtun trust networks to the eschatological narratives mobilized by the Islamic State–Khorasan.

Table 1. *Path Dependence of the Hindu Kush Khurasan Frontier*

Critical Juncture	Mechanism	Path-Dependent		Implication Today
		Outcome		
Frontier/ Corridor of Conquest (Antiquity–Early Modern)	Dual role of protection and vulnerability	Hindu Kush	Frontier remains as symbolically paradoxical “wall charged; IS-K fuses and gateway”; this history with memory of violence	IS-K fuses eschatological imagery of Khorasan as both shield and launchpad
Macedonian, Ghaznavid, Mughal				

of the Islamic State (Master's thesis), Western Kentucky University, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses/1611>.

³⁵ D. N. Petit, *Eschatology in the ISIS Narrative*, University of Texas at Austin, 2015, Retrieved from <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/items/9d2334b5-b3a5-459b-b56c-aca64f8ac746>; and Manchanda, “The Graveyard of Empires.”

incursions; forced

migration & slavery³⁶

Great Game & Buffer External imposition Afghanistan National and Ethnic State Construction of buffer logic; institutionalized as Incongruence fuels (19th c.) Anglo- partition of Pashtun natural buffer cross-border Afghan Wars, polity between insurgency; trust Durand Line³⁷ Afghanistan and networks transcend Pakistan state centric security frameworks

Soviet Invasion and Militarization of Entrenchment of IS-K inherits Cold Mujahideen frontier; insurgent War jihad insurgency³⁸ institutionalization infrastructures infrastructures; of jihad networks transnational call for jihad echoes historical mobilizations

Eschatological Layer Sacralization of Hindu Kush- IS-K mobilizes (Late 20th c.- territory; fusion of Kurasan belt eschatological Present) Prophetic geopolitical frontier reframed as geography to traditions of black legitimate violence;

³⁶ Firishta, *Tarikh-i-Firishta*, pp. 27–28.

³⁷ Barfield, *Afghanistan*, p. 24; Ballesteros and Miguel, *Analysis Document of the IEEE 12/2011*, pp. 3-9; and Huttenback, "The 'Great Game' in the Pamirs and the Hindu-Kush."

³⁸ Fergusson and Hughes, "Graveyard of Empires;" and Ispahani, *Roads and Rivals*.

banners	from	with	mythic	"promised	frontier"
Khorasan ³⁹		temporality		of final battle	

6. Conclusion

The Hindu Kush–Afghanistan–Pakistan nexus epitomizes the paradoxes of Eurasian geopolitics, where geography, empire, and civilizational boundaries converge to produce enduring patterns of conflict and accommodation. The Hindu Kush has long embodied the duality of protection and vulnerability: a shield for the Indian subcontinent and yet a corridor for conquest, slavery, and exchange. Afghanistan, constructed as a buffer state during the Great Game, institutionalized this logic of frontier politics, with its rugged terrain both deterring conquest and ensuring perpetual external manipulation. Pakistan, in turn, inherited and extended these dynamics, positioning itself as both a safeguard for maritime powers and a bridge for continental ones, oscillating between autonomy and dependency according to the attention of great powers. Colonial cartographies, Cold War alignments, and post-9/11 interventions have layered new strategic calculations onto older structures of buffer logic and frontier insecurity. The Durand Line continues to fracture Pashtun society; Afghanistan remains trapped between neutrality and intrusion; and Pakistan maneuvers between its Islamic civilizational ties, rivalry with India, and shifting alignments with the United States, China, Russia, and the Arab world.

Ultimately, the region's destiny lies in its geography: a liminal space between sea and land powers, between civilizations and empires, where protection and exposure are inseparable. The longue durée of the Hindu Kush, Afghanistan, and Pakistan demonstrates how frontiers generate not stability but volatility, embedding structural vulnerabilities that reverberate in contemporary conflicts. Recognizing these continuities is essential for rethinking South and Central Asia not as peripheral, but as a pivotal fault line in the architecture of global order.

³⁹ Zarandi and Noorali, "Imaginary Geographies of Religious Terrorism"; and Musselwhite, *ISIS & Eschatology*; and Petit, *Eschatology in the ISIS Narrative*.