

**U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan: Strategic Implications for Pakistan**Muhammad Farhan¹, Farooq Arshad Rana², Sundas Abbas³, Muhammad Ikram⁴¹ Visiting Faculty, Department of International Relations, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Pakistan.² Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Pakistan.
Email: dr.arshadfarooq@bzu.edu.pk³ M. Phil. Scholar, Department of International Relations, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Pakistan.⁴ Visiting Faculty, Department of International Relations, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Pakistan.**ARTICLE INFO****ABSTRACT***Article History:*

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The withdrawal of the United States military presence in Afghanistan in August 2021 ended this war after twenty years and changed the strategic landscape of the region of South and central Asia drastically. The demise of the Afghanistan government and the subsequent swift rise of the Taliban to power left a kind of geopolitical vacuum that has had an immense effect on Pakistan who happens to be an immediate neighbour and a significant powerhouse in the region. Pakistan, being historically related to the country of Afghanistan and having security interests in the region, is now exposed to the complicated picture of challenges and opportunities. This paper explores the strategic implication of the U.S. withdrawal on Pakistan based on the following four central dimensions: security, foreign policy, economic stability, and regional power relations. It examines the emergence of militant threats in the form of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the escalated flow of high-level of weaponry into Pakistani borders, as well as by the continued pressure of an emergent influx of Afghan refugees. The paper also reviews the changing foreign relations of Pakistan, especially its deteriorating relationship with the United States and the growing relationship with China, Russia and other regional groups, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). On the economic side, the study analyses how regional instability has derailed development of connectivity plans including the TAPI pipeline and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), along with the trade with Central Asia. It also examines how the Pakistani-India rivalry has changed with the dynamics of Afghanistan at the political level. In the aggregation of policy studies, scholarly articles and regional data, this paper reached a conclusion that U.S. pullout offers Pakistan both the prospects of regional interaction and strategic re-calibration but also risks due to increased internal and external risk factors. It is not going to take a simplified measure to solve them but a weighted solution to combine security improvements, diplomatic flexibility and longevity of regional solution.

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Corresponding Author's Email: dr.arshadfarooq@bzu.edu.pk

1. Introduction

The August 2021 withdrawal of the United States and NATO forces in Afghanistan turned into a landmark event in the geopolitics of South Asia. After almost twenty years of military presence in the region following the 9/11 attacks, the rapid collapse of the Afghan government and the rising power of the Taliban when the international community was unprepared left a huge gap in the security structure of the region. Pakistan plays a leading role among the countries, which have been most affected by these developments thanks to the geographic closeness, political connections, and historical relation, as well as security threats emanating out of Afghanistan. Pakistan has traditionally been involved in Afghan politics as it was involved

in the Soviet Afghan War during the 1980s, where it actively supported the moujahideen, under the guidance of the United States and Saudi Arabia. Ever since, Pakistan has exerted a powerful influence over the internal stake of Afghanistan through diplomacy, military, and other intelligence platforms. As a result, Pakistan was severely affected by the U.S.-led war on Afghanistan, and this led to security issues within the country, economic problems and a complicated relationship with Washington that was characterized by interchanging phases of collaboration and suspicion. At first, Pakistan welcomed the U.S. withdrawal with a cautious hopefulness following a hypothesis that the Taliban-led regime could deliver some stability and an amicable government in Kabul. Such expectations, however, were soon doused following the revival of militant activity, especially on the part of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) which started to exploit the unregulated Afghan borders and the libertine nature of existence in the Taliban regime. Simultaneously, Pakistan has not only experienced threats due to security issues but also due to changes in alliance, increased economic stress coupled with rising regional tensions primarily with India on strategic fronts. This research paper will look into the far-reaching implications of the U.S withdrawal on Pakistan by reviewing how it will affect its national security, recalibration of foreign policy, economic issues, and regional relations. It also examines the possible measures that Pakistan can take to mitigate the impacts of these multidimensional challenges to maintain a stable internal environment and ensure its strategic interests in this fast-changing regional and global environment.

2. Theoretical Framework: Neorealism and Pakistan's Strategic Calculus Post-U.S. Withdrawal

Structural realism, commonly known as neorealism, forms a potentially interesting theoretical approach to study the strategic behaviour of Pakistan (in the wake of the U.S. military pull-out in Afghanistan). A large school of thoughts in the international relations theory, neorealism assumes that the international system is an anarchic system without a central authority to direct state behaviour. The survival of the states is the main issue in this environment and in order to survive states have to use self help as well as more strategies to help gain them security and relative power. The distribution of capabilities, particularly military and economic power, shapes the behaviour of states, influencing their alliances, rivalries, and foreign policies. Unlike classical realism, which attributes state actions to human nature or the personal traits of political leaders, neorealism emphasizes the structural forces that constrain and guide state behaviour. These systemic pressures lead states to adopt defensive or offensive strategies depending on their relative position in the power hierarchy. For Pakistan, situated in a volatile and strategically significant region, neorealism helps to explain how shifts in the balance of power—such as the withdrawal of a major external actor like the United States compel recalibrations in its security posture, regional alliances, and engagement with neighbouring Afghanistan (Waltz, 1979).

The withdrawal of U.S. forces in August 2021 significantly altered the regional security architecture of South Asia. Through the lens of neorealism, Pakistan's strategic recalibrations can be seen as a response to the emerging shifts in regional power dynamics. The exit of a dominant external actor created a power vacuum, exposing Pakistan to new risks and strategic uncertainties. These include the potential resurgence of militant groups, increased Indian influence in Afghan affairs, and the unpredictable behaviour of the Taliban-led government. In the absence of a stabilizing hegemon, Pakistan is compelled to adopt a combination of regional alignments, internal balancing, and hedging strategies to safeguard its national interests. From a neorealist standpoint, Pakistan's engagement with post-withdrawal Afghanistan is primarily motivated by its desire to maintain strategic depth and to prevent the emergence of a government in Kabul that might align with India its chief geopolitical adversary. Pakistan's historical policy towards Afghanistan has been driven by longstanding security anxieties linked to its eastern border and enduring tensions with India (Rashid, 2010). Islamabad sees the possibility of India getting a strategic handhold in Afghanistan as a lockdown strategy and is striving to have a friendly or at least non hostile regime in Kabul. It can thus be seen that the tacit acceptance or lack of resistance to the reestablishment of the Taliban in Pakistan is to be understood in neorealist terms as a manoeuvre in order to create a favourable regional balance and cut down Indian strategic leverage.

Increasing collaboration of Pakistan with China, especially via China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) suggests further influences of neorealist logic of external balancing. It is due to

this fact that as U.S. security guarantees in the area become weaker and the U.S. commitment to the Indo-Pacific region continues to wind down, Pakistan is turning more and more to the strategic alliance that it has, with China, as a means of countering both regional instability as well as Indian influence. Such balance-seeking through this alliance-building is a classical approach by a neorealist strategy to preserve equilibrium in a multipolar world. Moreover, the existence of the security challenge after withdrawal has motivated Pakistan to boost its internal capacities confronting the strengthening of the border, monitoring, and military readiness along the Afghanistan border. These measures are inner balancing, the fundamental neorealist reaction to changing dangers in an anarchic system. Of the security imperatives faced by Pakistan, the threat of cross-border militancy, extremist spill over and refugee in-flow are of extreme concern as they are of a potential that can undermine the internal socio-political balance of Pakistan. In such a way, the lack of the American forces has not only changed the regional balance of power but it has also forced Pakistan to reconsider its domestic and foreign policy strategies and strengthen them. Neorealism offers a strong impression as to why Pakistan has adopted such a strategy in the aftermath of the U.S. pullout. In the conduct of the state lie several important neorealist themes; the relevance of attempts to achieve security in the anarchic system, the importance of relative power and the structuring of alliances to overcome perceived threats. In as much as Pakistan might claim to uphold peace diplomacy and regional cooperation on paper, the strategic choices it makes would demonstrate a tangible logic of realism based on balancing of powers, aversion of risks and maintenance of national interest in immediate effect.

3. Security Implications

3.1. Rise of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), or Pakistani Taliban, is an alliance that began in 2007 unifying different armed groups that acted in Pakistan, mostly in the tribal areas particularly the historical Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Baitullah Mehsud formed the group in reaction to the move of Pakistan to join the United States against the war on terror and the military offensives initiated in the tribal belt. Contrary to the Afghan Taliban which has limited goals within the territory of Afghanistan, the TTP has always been on a mission to undermine the Pakistani state, targeting military bases, police and government functionaries and civilians. It has strived to impose the strict view of Sharia law in Pakistan. A 2014 attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar, which resulted in the deaths of more than 140 students and teachers, was one of its most heinous crimes, leading to a nationwide and international outcry and the subsequent drink-up of counterterror in Pakistan (Group., 2021). In the years that followed, military operations such as Zarb-e-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasaad significantly degraded the TTP's infrastructure and forced many of its leaders and fighters to flee into Afghanistan, where they found sanctuary. However, the U.S. and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, followed by the Taliban's takeover, created a strategic opening for the TTP to regroup and revive its operations. The Afghan Taliban's ideological alignment with the TTP and their unwillingness to take decisive action against it have contributed to a renewed wave of militant activity along Pakistan's western frontier. The organization has since intensified its operations, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan attacking security forces and making cross-border attacks (Akhtar & Holland, 2023).

The revival of the TTP poses an expanding and diverse challenge to Pakistan internal security. However there has been a lot of unsuccessful peace efforts by Islamabad which has been in the form of negotiations with the group mostly on the part of intermediation by the Afghan Taliban, during these periods the TTP was able to gather ground, regain its structure, recruiting, and expanding its operational bases. Its revival underscores more structural problems along the lines of weaknesses related to borders, lack of effective governance in tribal areas and growing radicalisation. Also, the emerging power of the organization presents a diplomatic dilemma to Pakistan particularly in how it treats its relations with the Taliban-regime in Kabul. The re-formation of the TTP following the U.S. withdrawal of Afghanistan speaks to how complex militancy in the region has always been and why a decent and overarching counterterrorism deterrent is needed.

3.2. Infiltration and weaponization

The retreat of the U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan in August 2021 resulted in a major security vacuum that several militants took advantage of the instability in the region. In case of Pakistan, this has manifested itself in the deplorable surge in cross-border infiltration

and weaponization of the Afghan terrain with extremist elements. Upon the Taliban assuming power in Afghanistan, organizations like Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), and Al-Qaeda remnants are enjoying more freedom to operate. Through this porous Durand Line, these organizations have been able to infiltrate Pakistan, stage attacks, and then back into the Afghanistan territory, making the counterterrorist efforts of the Islamabad to be more complex. This has even been worsened by availability of sophisticated weaponry abandoned by the U.S. and NATO (Bashir, 2023). A substantial amount of these weapons that involve automatic rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, communication equipment and night-vision equipment have ended up in the possession of non-state actors. Such weapons have not only amplified the avenues of groups such as the TTP in terms of operational capability but it has also given them confidence to execute well organized and devastating attacks. The greater complexities of their weaponries have complicated and costly Pakistani military and security campaigns particularly in the susceptible areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan.

The Black market of illegal arms trade has also thrived post-U.S withdrawal. The existence of black-market networks that trafficked arms across the Afghanistan Pakistani border has led to the proliferation of the weapons into the tribal and urban regions of Pakistan to include intensifying the possibility of greater instability within the country. The developments have given strength to militant cells and extremist sympathizers who are active in Pakistan providing a potential background to a new insurgency and sectarian violence. The frequency and magnitude of the attacks indicate that the militant groups are not only well equipped but also convinced of the need to question state authority (Chattha, 2023). Pakistan has diplomatically suffered strains in its expectations of a kind relationship with the Taliban regime. The Afghan Taliban, despite the long established relations, has been hesitant to take effective actions against anti-Pakistan elements who have found hiding places in its territory. This passivity has caused an increasing level of frustration in Islamabad and has called into question the Taliban-led Afghanistan being a strategic asset. Rather, Pakistan has had to come to terms with the fact that its internal security is being compromised through the use of Afghan soil, putting into doubt the success of its regional policies. To sum, the security environment that has come after the withdrawal has put infiltration and weaponization in severe threats to the stability of Pakistan. Uncontrolled movement of militants and advanced weapons across the border have renewed the old menaces in new ways and this requires redefining of Pakistan policies on counterterrorism and foreign policy. Unless the borders are better secured, the overall intelligence cooperation in the region improved, and the ability to intensify the diplomatic pressure on Kabul, Pakistan will have to contend with the considerable numbers of challenges that threaten its security and strategy in the upcoming years.

4. Foreign Policy Realignment

The fact that the U.S. is pulling out of Afghanistan and that the Taliban has reemerged has forced Pakistan to redefine its foreign policy priorities so as to accommodate the new dynamics in the region. In the past, Pakistan had a complex and at times a tense relationship with the United States, especially during the War on Terror. Although the two countries had collaborated against terrorism, distrust, different strategic expectations and the complaints that Pakistan had encouraged extremist groups undermined the partnership in the long term. Following the U.S departure, Pakistan has become more focused on developing stronger regional alliances, particularly with powers, like China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey, as one of the measures to decrease its dependency on Western partners (Chattha, 2023). Tightening ties with China especially the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), points to an economic and strategic divergence that is turning towards China. Pakistan has also been a member of regional groupings such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization(SCO) to enforce its diplomatic influence and to find diplomatic policy to its security issues in common. At the same time, Islamabad has been investing in a cautious policy regarding the Taliban regime not wanting to lose the stability of its borders but not wanting to support a regime that is diplomatically isolated. This recalibration will also entail working on the competition within the region with India, especially in respect to influence in Afghanistan. Altogether, the developing foreign policy of Pakistan can be seen as the compromise to mitigate the impact of shifting regional and global geopolitics through the acceptance of regional multipolarity and the search of more diversified opportunities of strategic alliances and coalitions.

4.1. U.S-Pakistan Relations

Following the withdrawal of the U.S. in Afghanistan relations between the U.S and Pakistan have changed significantly; however the situation represents a general rebalance of strategic priorities on both sides. The cooperation and mistrust have been a long and complex source of interaction between the two, once considered to be crucial allies in the War on Terror. Although Pakistan did extremely well in assisting American forces in terms of logistics and intelligence, American policy-makers remained wary of Pakistan allegedly tolerating insurgent pop-up locations of Afghan Taliban or even the Haqqani network. Pakistan, in turn, voiced frustration over the perceived lack of recognition for its counterterrorism sacrifices and strongly objected to unilateral U.S. operations, most notably the 2011 raid that killed Osama bin Laden. Following the withdrawal, the partnership has moved away from a deep security alliance toward a more issue-specific engagement, focusing on counterterrorism coordination, humanitarian concerns, and regional peace efforts. However, the strategic distance between the two has widened, particularly as the United States strengthens its defense and economic ties with India under its broader Indo-Pacific framework a shift that Pakistan views with growing uneas (Cohen, 2021) Despite reduced strategic intimacy, both Washington and Islamabad acknowledge the necessity of maintaining diplomatic channels to address shared concerns such as nuclear security, extremism, and regional stability. Consequently, the relationship is likely to remain functional and interest-driven, shaped by mutual needs rather than ideological or long-term alliance commitments.

4.2. Shift towards China and Russia

In the evolving geopolitical landscape following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan has increasingly turned towards China and Russia as alternative strategic partners to balance its foreign policy and safeguard national interests. This pivot reflects both a response to the cooling of ties with the United States and a broader effort to align with emerging regional power centres. China has become Pakistan's most crucial ally, with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) serving as the flagship project of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Beyond economic cooperation, China provides Pakistan with critical defence support, diplomatic backing on international platforms, and alignment in strategic competition against India. Meanwhile, Russia, once distant due to Cold War rivalries, has gradually emerged as a pragmatic partner (Zhai, 2021). Military exchanges, joint exercises, and converging interests in regional counterterrorism and energy cooperation have laid the groundwork for a steadily improving bilateral relationship. Both Beijing and Moscow share Islamabad's interest in a stable Afghanistan that does not serve as a base for extremism or U.S. military reengagement. By strengthening ties with these two powers, Pakistan is seeking to reduce its strategic dependency on the West, increase its leverage in regional affairs, and diversify its security and economic partnerships. This shift also reflects a broader realist foreign policy orientation, where Pakistan is recalibrating its alliances based on shifting power dynamics and regional interests rather than ideological alignment (Medvedev, 2020).

5. Economic and Humanitarian Fallout

5.1. Afghan Refugee Burden

The reestablishment of the Taliban rule in Afghanistan after the U.S withdrawal in August 2021 has resulted in a considerable escalation of the amount of Afghan refugees taking shelter in the neighbouring Pakistan thus further complicating the situation. One of the largest and most persistent refugee groups has been taking shelter in Pakistan that hosted millions of Afghans fleeing their country as Soviet invaded it in the 1980s and after the conflicts. Another process is a new stream of refugees caused by recent unstable developments in Afghanistan; many of them fear persecution or the destruction of basic infrastructure (Refugees, 2021). The arrival puts immensely stress on the Pakistani borderlands, like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, which have already scarce resources. The hosting of the refugee population is a serious problem concerning the issues of housing, medical care, education, workplace, and security, and social fabric. Another issue with refugees, especially when they are in uncontrolled camps or informal settlements, is the possibility of infiltration of the militant activities making it hard to control the borders of the country and maintain national security. Despite the fact that Pakistan has not abandoned its international humanitarian obligations, it has urged the international community to give it more assistance in solving the crisis (Oxfam, 2021). Unless a more effective, coordinated international assistance is provided to deal with the refugee problem in Afghanistan, the destabilizing effects of the Afghan refugee crisis may

compound the economic and security problems facing Pakistan, which may increase pressure on its internal stability.

5.2. Disruption of Trade and Connectivity

The American exit of Afghanistan has led to a massive disturbance in regional trade and connectivity, especially that which affects Pakistan. Afghanistan has been used as an essential trading route between the countries of Pakistan and Central Asia and between goods entering and leaving the region. Nevertheless, the resurgence of the Taliban has destabilized the region and threatened the security of trade corridors and transport networks even more. Major border crossings and also along the Khyber Pass have been shut down or made less effective resulting to delays, increment in transport costs and a retreat in cross border trade. Moreover, further security risks around Afghanistan have caused major infrastructure projects, including the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) pipeline and the Central Asia-South Asia (CASA) 1000 power transmission project, which played a crucial role in elevating the economic relations between Pakistan and Central Asia, to be suspended (Shukla, 2011). The deterioration of these trade routes has also negatively impacted Pakistan's economic relations with its neighbouring countries, including India, as regional trade networks are indirectly affected. The rise in insurgent activities within Afghanistan has forced Pakistan to reroute shipments, further straining the country's infrastructure and logistical capabilities. Additionally, the Taliban's reluctance to engage with international institutions has hindered prospects for regional economic integration, making it less likely that a stable, collaborative economic environment will emerge. Consequently, the disruptions in trade and connectivity after the U.S. withdrawal underscore Pakistan's vulnerability to regional instability, highlighting the need for improved infrastructure and diplomatic efforts to restore seamless trade routes throughout South and Central Asia (Hussain, 2021).

5.3. Strategic Dynamics with India

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan has significantly altered Pakistan's strategic calculus, particularly in relation to its rivalry with India. With the Taliban's return to power in Kabul, Afghanistan has once again become a focal point of geopolitical manoeuvring for both nations. Historically, Afghanistan has acted as a buffer state for Pakistan, limiting Indian influence in the region. However, the Taliban's resurgence presents a complex challenge for Islamabad, as it risks further strengthening India's position in Afghanistan, which Pakistan perceives as a potential threat to its security. India, which had cultivated strong diplomatic and development ties with the previous Afghan government, now stands to reassert its influence, particularly in the areas of reconstruction and regional security. For Pakistan, the possibility of an India-friendly government in Kabul raises concerns about encirclement and the likelihood of increased Indian intelligence and military operations along its western border (Basit, 2021).

In response, Pakistan has sought to engage with the Taliban, aiming to preserve its strategic interests in Afghanistan, albeit cautiously to avoid direct involvement with an internationally isolated regime. The overarching concern for Pakistan remains the preservation of its strategic depth in Afghanistan, ensuring that the Taliban does not become a proxy for Indian interests. Additionally, the rising security challenges posed by militant groups such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have forced Pakistan to redirect military and intelligence resources to its western border, further intensifying tensions with India, which also has a vested interest in Afghanistan's security. It is the case in Afghanistan which has made both the nations reevaluate their military approach. The withdrawal of the U.S. poses a perceived vacuum to Pakistan, which is already concerned about the influence of India on the region at the expense of Pakistan (Hussain & Jahanzaib, 2015). This change is an added agony to the security crisis that Pakistan is facing (security dilemma), to contain the instability that is driven by the presence of the Taliban and also to contain the external force which is being driven by India gaining influence in the region. Finally, Afghanistan is still a critical geopolitical frontier between the two nations as Pakistan is on a mission to protect its vested interests and strive to counter Indian geopolitical interests in Afghanistan.

6. Opportunities in the Midst of Travails

With the complicated risks created by the U.S withdrawal in Afghanistan, some strategic opportunities emerge to be exploited by Pakistan to establish its regional power and economic potentials. The improvement of regional economic integration is one of the main opportunities.

Pakistan is located in Afghanistan, which borders South and Central Asia, and hence it can act as a trade and transit center to the region. The possible extension of such projects as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Central Asian nations would allow direct access to Pakistani ports and enhance trade flows and economic connectivity in the region. Not only would this aid in the development of infrastructure in Pakistan but it would promote more economic integration and stability in the region (Aggarwal, 2017). Furthermore, a shift in the political environment of Afghanistan offers an opportunity to Pakistan to enhance the strategic cooperation, especially with China. As Beijing has become more interested in stabilizing Afghanistan and gaining access to the resources of Central Asia, Pakistan finds itself ideally placed to strengthen its cooperation with China in the form of infrastructure developments, trading, and counterterrorism. Furthermore, the developing relations between Pakistan and Russia provide additional diplomatic and economic benefits, where Moscow needs to put forward a more even-handed presence in Central Asia to offset the Western capacity. The alliances will provide Pakistan an opportunity to decrease U.S. dependence as well as enhance regional independence and authority.

Altering circumstances in Afghanistan also gives a chance to Pakistan to redesign its foreign policy. Pakistan can develop a more cohesive and workable regional security system by developing better relations with its neighbours, the likes of Iran and the republics of Central Asia. Participation in multilateral bodies like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) may place Pakistan in vantage position to launch dialogue on peace and stability in the region and especially in Afghanistan. Finally, the changing geopolitical situation offers Pakistan an opportunity to diversify its economy (Hussain, Chaichi, & Gasura, 2023). Shifting to other non-traditional industries such as technology, manufacturing, and renewable energy instead of relying on popular industries such as agriculture and textile, Pakistan stands a chance to overcome any global shocks thereby making any further economic growth more sustainable. Finally, although the opportunities created by the U.S. departure are serious, they provide Pakistan with an opportunity to establish its authority in the region, improve economic relations, and reduce the reliance on foreign influence. With the assistance of these opportunities, Pakistan will be able to develop resilience and position itself strategically in an era where everything is changing.

6.1. Recommendations

6.1.1. Strengthen Regional Diplomacy and Multilateral Engagement

Pakistan is facing a geopolitical vacuum in Afghanistan due to the U.S. withdrawal. Pakistan needs a delicate and strategic approach to diplomacy to safeguard its strategic interests. Since Afghanistan has been a center-point of great-power competition, Pakistan needs to implement an inclusive regional form of relations in order to escape the threat of remaining isolated, overcome the security menace, and embrace economic opportunities that can arise. Firstly, Pakistan is expected to enhance its dialogue with other countries in the region to foster a common solution to stabilization of Afghanistan. Approaching the future, since China is rapidly gaining its presence in the region, Islamabad needs to use its strategic alliance with Islamabad in an attempt to ensure that Afghanistan does not become the creator of instability. The Belt and Road Initiative and Chinese investment in Afghanistan have mineral resources which involves Chinese interest complementing the Pakistani idea towards greater connectivity of this region. The coordination of policy on counterterrorism, trade and infrastructure development in Afghanistan can be facilitated through cooperation in multilateral platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Meanwhile, Pakistan should re-balance its ties with Iran, a major neighbour, which has significant influence in the western Afghan region. Though historically tensed, the two nations share threats of groups such as ISIS-K and cross border militancy. These security challenges may be improved by increased intelligence-sharing and collaborative cross border security activities. In addition, as a continued effort, energy cooperation between Pakistan and Iran, including a revival of the Pakistan-Iran gas pipeline, would not only give diversity in Pakistan source of energy but also foster such relationships between the two countries. Another important aspect of Pakistani diplomacy is relations with Central Asia (Naz & Shahzad, 2021). The interest of the Central Asian republics in the security of their southern borders and the widening of economic connectivity with the use of Afghanistan has been raised by the U.S. exit. By supporting projects such as the Trans-Afghan Railway and the CASA-1000 electricity project, Pakistan should use its position as a gateway between South and Central Asia.

Untainted participation in regional initiatives like the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), and the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program (CAREC) shall play an imperative role in linking Afghanistan to the broader trade and energy sets in the regions of Eurasia.

Internationally, Pakistan will have to take on a firm role in forming international coverage concerning Afghanistan based on global bodies such as the United Nations (UN), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Pakistan can also get into alignment with international stakeholders by supporting humanitarian aid, aiding refugees and empowering inclusive rebuilding in Afghanistan. Also, Islamabad can play the role of a negotiator between The Taliban and the West to avoid the diplomatic isolation of Afghanistan which can further augment regional instability and humanitarian crises. Lastly, it takes a deft maneuvering to wade through the growing U.S.-China rivalry. Pakistan cannot turn its back on the West when strengthening its strong connections with China. A moderate policy consistent with non-exclusive cooperation with the United States on critical matters such as counterterrorism, climate change, and technology will enable Pakistan to remain quite geopolitically relevant and not overdepend on a particular power too much.

6.1.2. Address Border Security and Counterterrorism Cooperation

The U.S. withdrawal to Afghanistan has posed critical security problems to Pakistan particularly on the porous Durand Line. Since the Taliban returned to power, the militant groups like Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and ISIS-K have gained new leeway in operation, and highly-reinforced counterterrorist and border security operations are becoming the necessary requirement on a national level. A diversified approach is required to curb cross-border militancy, which would combine technological innovation, infrastructure development, and regional cooperation that must be adopted by Pakistan. Enhancements in the form of drone surveillance, motion detectors, and biometric verification systems at important border crossing points like Torkham and Chaman will be critical to enhancing restriction at the borders without compromising on the legal trade and civilian movement. The process of counterterrorism in Pakistan with the Taliban government should be approached in the most balanced ways. Islamabad played a pivotal role when it comes to the political revival of the Taliban, but the current use of Afghanistan as a safe haven by the group itself serves as a direct detriment to the Pakistani security agenda (Jones, 2021). A practical approach would entail trading privileges and energy connections alongside strict requirements of the Taliban to conduct physical action against anti-Pakistan militant forces. Formalized intelligence-sharing procedures and extradition treaties will increase trust, but Pakistan must also plan worst-case scenarios, including cross border targeted attacks in case diplomacy does not work. Strategic prudence is paramount considering the past tendency of the Taliban on acts aimed at sustaining two-pronged policies.

Criminal co-operation in the area provides a more sustainable way of combating transnational terrorism. Pakistan ought to increase engagement of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in counterterrorist structures and seek trilateral security cooperation with China and Iran. These coalitions may be used to destabilize the militant networks that span across regional frontiers. Building partnerships with those countries in Central Asia, especially Uzbekistan and Tajikistan-would also be critical, since they, too are worried about the possibility of spillover violence in Afghanistan. Internal deradicalization campaigns must supplement these multilateral security initiatives, particularly the most vulnerable zones along borders where militants recruit their members. Community developmental activities and rehabilitation can be used to guide the communities at risk towards countering radical messages. Man should not be left out of border security. Afghan refugees continue to find shelter in Pakistan where there are some complex issues such as possible infiltration by militants. It is essential to introduce an effective registration and screening system in cooperation with UNHCR in order to differentiate between real refugees and security threats. At the same time, it is this long-term stability that necessitates the problem of the socioeconomic roots of radicalization at borderlands. Training-related initiatives including those related to the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) like educational reform and job creation opportunities may decrease militant recruitment and create resilience at the community level. Strict military campaigns are not enough; they should be supplemented by soft power instruments that support loyal appeals.

The technological modernization is the second important aspect of the border security architecture of Pakistan. Counter-drone technology should also be invested in to deal with the increasing trend of weaponized drones being used by militants. In the same way, the emergence of cyber warfare capabilities will help Pakistan take down the extremist online propaganda and communication cells (Rana, 2022). The above technological measures must be incorporated into a wider comprehensive security that takes account not only of defence exigencies but also humanitarian and economic interconnectedness considerations. To sum up, Pakistani coping with the changing security landscape after withdrawal should be tactful, adaptable, and multidimensional. However, deep border enforcement is required, but it should be carried out without aggravating tensions with Afghanistan or keeping away the local communities. Smart combination of security, diplomacy, regional cooperation, and even socioeconomic development leads the way to long-term peace and stability. How Pakistan copes with such intertwined problems will be not only crucial to its future, but also to more regional stability in South and Central Asia.

6.1.3. Collaborate on Afghan Refugee Management

The Afghanistan withdrawal of the U.S. has shown a complicated situation of a refugee crisis that Pakistan has to overcome through vast strategic planning of policies and partnering closely with foreign players. With more than 1.4 million registered Afghan refugees together with hundreds of thousands of the undocumented people, Pakistan is under significant social-economic and security strains. This issue requires a holistic refugee management strategy that will consider both humanitarian needs and the national security concerns. This should be conducted by international help; it cannot be undertaken by Pakistan itself (UNHCR, 2023). To this effect, the Islamabad needs reinforce its interaction with the UN, Western leaders, and regional allies to finance refugee infrastructures, such as camps, health and education systems. Pakistan, on the other hand, ought to support third-country resettlement of susceptible refugee gatherings. Establishing documentation of residents as refugees should be among the priority problems, including collaboration with the UNHCR and NADRA on a nationwide program of documentation. Population management and tracking including biometric registration and issuance of smart ID cards can assist in separating out the genuine asylum seekers and economic migrants. Creation of temporary work permits would allow skilled refugees to make substantial contributions to the national economy, particularly in fields in which the Labour shortages are still experienced such as construction and healthcare industries. This would curb labour exploitation through unofficial workers and hence, local economic gains. Nevertheless, documentations should be coupled with high levels of security vetting to curb infiltration by militants across borders.

Security is one of the most important issues of refugee policy. Pakistan must integrate with the Taliban-headed Afghan administration to design mutual processes of verifications of inflow refugees, as well as improve internal coordination amongst intelligence agencies such as FIA, ISI, and international agencies including Interpol. Counter-radicalization should include refugee settlements, especially those located in the borderlands, where the threat of militants recruiting them exists. Such efforts have to be dealt with tactfully so as not to alienate the refugee communities or raise complaints which can be harvested by radical circles. Finding a balance between being watchful and being humanitarian will also be essential in managing the refugees. Economic integration offers a permanent solution to refugees and host communities. Pakistan can set up special economic zones along Afghan border and offer legal jobs within such industry sectors as textiles and manufacturing. Refugees could get international-funded vocational training programmes, which would help arm them with skills to be readymade labourers, relieving their domestic labour markets. Simultaneously, part of the foreign aid must go into improving the infrastructure in the host communities to ensure there is no resentment by the local populations. Such economic plans can transform the refugee settlements into fruitful communities and open up the path to either sustainable local integration or homeward relocation. In the future, Pakistan has to be ready to voluntary, phased repatriation after Afghanistan restores stability. Refugees have to be safe and dignified; this means any process of returning has to be conditional and operate under international supervision. Islamabad must also engage in talks with the Taliban to grant protection to the returning Muslims under the law and other aspects on properties. They must leave asylum opportunities available to any Muslim who cannot come back. The international community should contribute to the immediate humanitarian requirements and reconstruction of Afghanistan in the long term. The refugee

policy of Pakistan will have implications on general regional security balance, which must be an exercise of prudence involving humanitarian care, national interest and international diplomacy.

6.1.4. Improve Strategic Cooperation with China and Russia

With the American pullout in Afghanistan, Pakistan has had to reconsider its international relationships and as such a closer relationship with China and Russia has been of vital importance. With the declining presence of the U.S in the region, such relationships provide Pakistan with significant economic and security strengths to balance against the continued unrest in Afghanistan. The resolute Chinese backing of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor provides sorely needed infrastructure investments, energy projects and an avenue into growing economic ties across the much needed Afghanistan border. This type of triangular interaction might serve to balance out the region by bridging the linkage between Pakistani ports to the mineral abundance of Afghanistan through transportation lines supported by China, although Pakistan must watch out to avoid getting into debt traps or environmental harms by these projects (Small, 2022). The rise of Moscow in engagement with Islamabad is a significant shift in regional politics that is driven by shared security concerns over terrorist organizations such as ISIS-K, and energy deals especially cheaper oil and potential natural gas pipelines assist Pakistan in overcoming long-term power issues whilst increasing the access to energy. The cooperation by both on defense against terrorism in drills and the purchase of weapons enhances Pakistan to defend its troubled western frontier. Nevertheless, the leaders of Pakistan have to carefully balance to maintain their relations with the western powers at the same time building these new relationships hoping to maintain their foreign policy options.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization has become a very important process through which Pakistan seeks to advance its regional agenda through group diplomacy. Thanks to this platform, Pakistan is given a chance to develop stronger relations with China and Russia as well as enhancing better relations with the Central Asian countries. The focus on combating terrorism is an excellent opportunity that aligns the needs of the SCO with the security requirements of Pakistan because this format provides solutions that can develop information exchange channels and connect armed forces to terrorist threats present on the common border (Korybko, 2021). Through active participation in the SCO-related activities, Pakistan positions itself as a significant player in solving the issues of Afghanistan, as well as receiving the access to more favorable trade and energy agreements. As Pakistan fosters closer relations with China and Russia, it has to develop a sophisticated strategy that would not bind it strongly to one of the sides. Pakistan is an important geographical and a nuclear country and many global powers may want to invest in it because of this and its government ought to take advantage of that in maintaining a flexible foreign policy. Creating ties with the mid-sized powers such as Turkey, or Gulf states can bring such additional political and financial support, and maintaining communications with America in common issues such as terrorism and environment. This kind of international relations strategy assists Pakistan to maximize its benefits in various alliances and ensure that its own authority is not taken over. The power vulnerability shift that occurred when the U.S. exited Afghanistan prompts threats and opportunities to the global standing of Pakistan. The financial might of China and the military expertise of Russia are a good combination to satisfy the diverse needs of Pakistan consisting of the construction of infrastructure and combating extremists. Nevertheless, the leaders of Pakistan should manage these relationships delicately to keep themselves out of greater tensions between major world powers, particularly, the rising rivalry between China and America. Being cautious and maintaining a balance in its partnerships as well as acting as a member of the regional organizations allows Pakistan to handle the complex aftermath of the pullout successfully and defend its own interests and contribute to the stability of the region.

6.1.5. Stabilize Domestic Security and Counter the TTP Threat

The withdrawal of the American military forces in Afghanistan has escalated the domestic security problems in Pakistan, especially in the rebranded menace of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The rise of the Taliban to power in Kabul has benefited the TTP in two ways by allowing the group to reorganize itself in border provinces in Afghanistan as it increased its transborder attacks into Pakistan. This trend poses a serious challenge that requires a comprehensive approach to counter-terrorism including, military, intelligence, and the socio-economic effort. The most pressing challenge that Islamabad must confront is the problem of acute militant danger and the underlying preconditions that spur the growth of

extremism, specifically in the turbulent tribal territories on the Afghan border. The existing security situation is quite urgent and requires decisive action to ensure that we will not witness the same levels of violence that we used to witness in the past decades. The reason is that, the armed forces in Pakistan have tried to deal with the TTP resurgence through specific military offensives but these short-term military actions can be insufficient to support the long-term security. Security agencies need to improve its counter-insurgency strategies to surgically strike the top leadership of the TTP without causing an excessive number of civilian deaths that would lead to local enmity. At the same time, Pakistan must seek to strengthen its border safeguards using high-tech surveillance tools such as aerial reconnaissance and biometric checking on transit points. Intelligence sharing with Taliban leadership of Afghanistan despite the ideological leanings is still a critical measure to eliminate the safe haven of militants (Jones, Afghanistan future and the regional terrorist threat, 2021). Nonetheless, Pakistan should work out some contingency plans in case the diplomatic solutions fail to rein in the actions of TTP, and in this case, consider the long-term diplomatic implications that such an intervention might carry.

The need to combat the TTP menace will rise beyond military solutions, as there is a need to address the actual causes of radicalization. Chronic underdevelopment, state failure and economic hopelessness in the former tribal areas has been providing perfect recruitment grounds to militants. The government needs to fast track the post-merger growth projects in these regions with the provision of quality education, healthcare services, and other sustainable livelihood facilities. Extensive deradicalization initiatives to rehabilitate ex-fighters and respond to extremist ideology via community-based measures are also of high importance. Unless these complementary non-military actions are in place, securities operations may end up being a continuous exercise that cannot guarantee permanent peace. Security strategy in Pakistan has to change as well in combating the TTP, which is gaining new highs in hidden operational capacities. The group has also proved quite profound in the utilization of contemporary communication instruments in its recruitment process and its use of advanced IED technology in its attacks. This requires some form of counter terrorism training of the security personnel in urban warfare techniques and disposal of explosive ordnance. No less important is the degradation of the financial infrastructure of the TTP, conducted with the participation of the international community which should locate financing channels and even interfere with their work, especially the use made by the group of informal money transfer vehicles that are not regulated formally.

The intellectual war on TTP extremism is, perhaps, the most complicated one. The capability of the group to trigger sectarian conflicts and spread anti-state propaganda necessitates a healthy counter-messaging strategy. Pakistan ought to co-opt the moderate religious voices to oppose the extremist interpretations and ensure madrassa reforms are advanced to make sure they are not used as the center to radicalization. Pluralistic values should be propagated by civil society and media institutions, particularly in the regions that are not susceptible. At the same time, constitutional methods by which political grievances are resolved can rob the recruiting stories of the TTP. With the political and security balance in the region of Pakistan being impacted by the American withdrawal in Afghanistan, it is important that its internal security remains stable, and this depends on a number of essential factors. These consist of maintaining subtle relations to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, while demanding firm action being taken against TTP sanctuaries, and adopting a balanced internal policy that equally spans between security operations and development and ideology-based counter-measures. The threat is catastrophic a successful TTP might extinguish all the gains of counterterrorism, destabilize the political system in Pakistan, and end the economic development. Pakistan can only hope to create balance in this changed regional order, through a more detailed, adequately funded and regularly implemented security system.

6.1.6. Demand a Comprehensive Afghan Political process

The American military pull out of Afghanistan has brought about a lot of political instability that has a direct effect on national security of Pakistan. As Pakistan it has a strong strategic interest in ensuring the establishment of an inclusive political system in Afghanistan which is accommodative to different ethnical and political groupings. Studies have shown that the risk of the reoccurrence of civil conflict increases if the model of governance is exclusionary (Jones, 2021), which may leave the region prone to even more active militancy and population displacement. The diplomatic role of Pakistan should thus focus on brokering talks between the

Taliban and other parties in Afghanistan. A political system that represented the people of Afghanistan would benefit the long run interests of Pakistan because there would be few chances of international isolation that might fuel regional instability. The history of Afghanistan has revealed time and again that the stability in Afghanistan has always rested on the ability to balance interests of the diverse ethnicities such as Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks. Pakistan must instead use its leverage to influence the Taliban toward the incorporation of these communities into governing structures, and at the same time maintain coordination with its regional partners through the various multilateral fronts and organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The incumbent Taliban led-regime presents a number of challenges to Pakistan. To start with, it exposes itself to the risk of fueling the environment where anti-Pakistan militants can operate more freely. Second, it makes the relationship between Pakistan and the Western countries and international financial organisations problematic. Third, it has a potential effect of destabilizing economic interconnectivity efforts that are linked to economic stability within the region. These elements become especially significant when it is pointed out that Pakistan must embrace a more subtle policy towards Afghanistan.

6.1.7. Emphasis on Political Unity at Home

With the American withdrawal in Afghanistan, Pakistan has increased its capacity in the variety of political values raised within the country that need urgent intervention to maintain national integration. With the changes in regional dynamics, the fissiparous nature of the political environment in Pakistan is showing risk of undermining its ability to adequately respond to new security challenges, especially in the wake of extremist organizations such as the TTP gaining an upper hand due to some overlap in the political friction. Extensive partisan separation between the roles of governments and opposition groups that characterize current political climate has overshadowed important security and economic issues that require collaborative effort. The Pakistan leadership should develop a bipartisan consensus on key national priorities like strategy of counter terrorism, economic stabilization and regional diplomacy to steer through this era of regional change successfully.

Strength in unifying the democratic system of governance is one of the key elements to national stability. Past conflicts between civilian leaderships and military leaderships have often shown to contradict policy continuity, more so in the case of Afghanistan related decisions. As the main mechanism of policy decision-making and policymaking process, parliamentary process must serve as the absolute source of regional policy development in Pakistan with civilians in charge of security policies and policy to account the feedback of the provincial governments, especially those cities which are directly linked to the border regions in terms of cross-border militancy. A coordinated national position would help the Pakistani nation in putting its position strong, in the eyes of international partners, including China to the Western countries, about the future direction of Afghanistan. It is also important to preserve the trust of people on governmental bodies. Not only has economic struggle and security fears driven a wedge between the government and its citizens, economic struggles and fears of insecurity threaten to undermine citizen confidence in the government. The government has to focus on communicating the developments of the Afghanistan policy and their national implications in a transparent manner and counter disinformation that may lead to social destabilization (Muzaffar, Muhammad. 2021). The media and civil societies are in a position to positively assist in creating national solidarity so long as they uphold ethics of reporting on sensitive issues related to security.

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