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PAKISTAN'S VIEWPOINT OF AFGHANISTAN

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About the Series 'Neighbourhood Perspectives

Neighbourhood Perspectives is a paper series on Afghanistan written from the perspective of her neighbouring countries to bring together a mosaic of different perspectives and also highlight the different historic experiences of various actors. Mr. Gul wrote the fourth paper in this series and have summarized the challenges and complexities that Pakistan and Afghanistan face.

List of Abbreviations

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
FAF	Free Afghans Front
FDM	Freedom and Democracy Movement
FU	Freedom Uprising
FTT	Free Tigers of Turkistan
HGB	Hafiz Gul Bahadur
IEA	Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organizations
ISKP	Islamic State Khorasan Province
KP	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NFF	National Freedom Front
NIFMA	National Islamic Freedom Movement of Afghanistan
NRF	National Resistance Front
PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
PF	Patriotic Front
SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
SRC	Supreme Resistance Council
TTP	Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan
UN	United Nations
USIP	United States Institute of Peace
US/NATO	United States/North Atlantic Treaty Organization
WNFF	Western Nooristan Freedom Front
WU	Wolf Unit

Table of contents

1	Abstract	5
2	Security Situation in Afghanistan	6
2.1	Post August 2021	6
2.2	Existing threats & dynamics among militant groups	6
2.3	Other armed, but sporadic opposition groups	6
2.4	Drone surveillance as security concerns heighten	7
3	Regional Stakeholders	8
3.1	Pakistan	8
3.2	China and Russia	9
3.3	Central Asia	9
4	Pak-Afghan relationships: conundrum of mistrust & complexities	10
4.1	TTP – A complicating irritant	10
5	Pakistan's Afghan Policy Post August 2021	11
5.1	Negotiations	12
5.2	Further strain in ties	13
5.3	Eviction of undocumented Afghan migrants	14
5.4	Pakistani air strikes on Afghanistan March 2024	14
6	International Engagement with Afghanistan - Past and Present	16
6.1	What went wrong?	16
7	Recommendations	17
8	Bibliography	19
	About the author	21

1 Abstract

This comprehensive paper delves into Pakistan's post-August 2021 Afghan policy, analysing its evolving dynamics, security implications, and the role of regional actors. Initially optimistic following the Taliban's takeover, Pakistan faced escalating tensions due to increased Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) activity and cross-border attacks. The paper scrutinizes Pakistan's response to the TTP threat, including the military action in Afghanistan and the deportation of undocumented Afghan migrants, leading to diplomatic friction with Afghanistan.

Furthermore, the paper investigates international engagement with Afghanistan, emphasizing the hurdles faced by the Taliban regime and advocating for pragmatic approaches to prioritize humanitarian aid and safeguard the rights of marginalized groups.

The paper also briefly touches upon the overall security profile of Afghanistan post August 2021. Additionally, it examines the role of regional actors, including Pakistan emphasizing its pivotal position in stabilizing Afghanistan and the need for constructive engagement with neighbouring countries to address security challenges effectively.

Lastly, strategic recommendations for the international community are offered, advocating for realistic engagement with the Taliban, support for grassroots peace initiatives, and preparations for potential humanitarian crises. The importance of dialogue and collaboration among Afghan stakeholders and regional actors to promote peace and security in the region is underscored.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPE

Today, the withdrawal of direct aid from major Western powers, declining humanitarian assistance, and the country's exclusion from the global financial system because of the sanctions represent daunting challenges.

This crisis is accompanied by complications arising out of an obscurantist rights regime, denial of women's rights, the absence of an inclusive government, and a fragile economy.

For most countries disengagement with the current Afghan government would mean punishing these vulnerable Afghans.

- Are most countries ready – at least for the time being – to re-strategize and redefine the terms of engagement with Kabul and Kandahar?
- What is the trade-off for universal women's rights?
- Should the international community let the millions of Afghans starve and suffer just because the Taliban regime has restricted life and livelihood options for females?

Most focal persons for Afghanistan tend to prefer "engagement despite..." in the interest of combatting hunger and poverty in the country.

2 Security Situation in Afghanistan

The near abrupt withdrawal of the U.S.-led international forces enabled the Taliban to re-capture Kabul in mid-August 2021. This brought with it a complex web of challenges for all stakeholders – the Afghans, the neighbouring Central Asian republics, Pakistan, Iran, China, and Russia as well as the extended international community, confronting them with a to-do-or-not-to-do dilemma; how to deal with a government they do not recognize but where they should preserve their interests in Afghanistan as well as take care of the millions of Afghans facing political uncertainty and economic adversity.

2.1 Post August 2021

Security conditions drastically improved with literally no armed resistance to the Taliban rulers. More importantly, there seems to be no appetite from the international and regional stakeholders for supporting opposition groups or militant proxies following decades of state of war. There are, instances of opposition members in exile having talks with the international community, but an upfront opposition or rejection of the Taliban as a de facto authority is not present. However, a huge mistrust exists in the international community regarding the Taliban's willingness and capacity to tackle terror outfits operating on Afghan soil against other countries.

2.2 Existing threats & dynamics among militant groups

- **ISKP (Islamic State of Khorasan)** represents the most potent threat to the Taliban Emirate, particularly in the eastern provinces. It is the only outfit that the Taliban deems a direct and serious threat to Afghanistan and its government. ISKP has claimed several attacks but its capacity to operate has been restricted by a series of counteractions from the Taliban.
- **NRF (National Resistance Front):** Led by Ahmad Masoud, NRF has little presence in the country, with hardly any militant presence even in the Panjshir Valley and Kapisa province. Attempts to operate against the Taliban have been countered.
- **Presence of Multiple Terrorist Groups:** Including Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Al-Qaeda, and Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) that claims to represent Uyghur Muslims in China's western Xinjiang province. Their presence, even if inactive, remains a source of concern for Pakistan, China, and the Central Asian republics.

- **Ideological Partnerships of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Afghanistan (TTA):** These include relations with a meanwhile degraded Al-Qaeda, TTP, and Jaish-e-Mohammed. These groups stood by the TTA against the US-led NATO troops since the launch of the global war on terror in late 2001.



Figure 1: Najiba Faiz, TV Host/ Actor

Source: <https://twitter.com/najibafaiz5/status/1770041815573405979?s=48&t=waxBld3tu2yw2ZZYFK3cZw>

2.3 Other armed, but sporadic opposition groups

Several opposition groups emerged immediately after the return of the TTA to power in August 2021. However, their presence and activity are reported as sporadic (UNICRI, 2023) because of the limited space available under the Taliban regime. Some of them are:

- **The Resistance Movement for Justice (RMJ),** originally founded in 2003 by the ethnic Hazara community

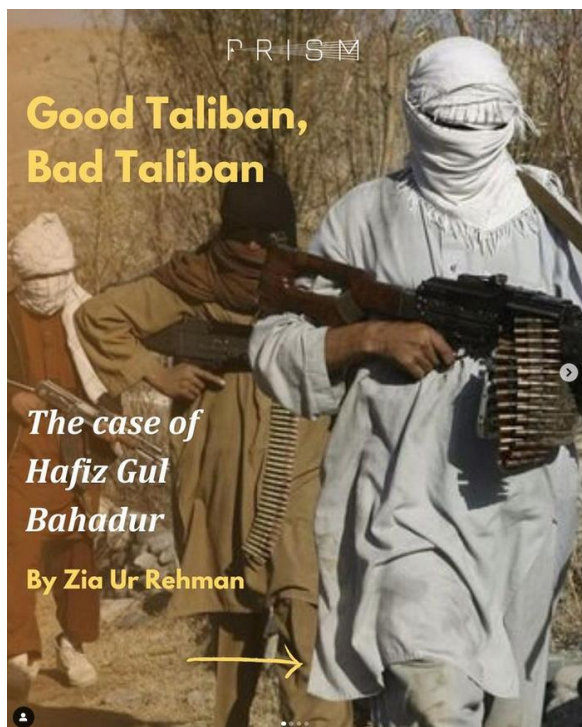
- **The National Freedom Front (NFF)**, formed in January 2022, is led by General Mohammad Yasin Zia, formerly the Chief of General Staff of the Afghan armed forces.
- **The Free Afghans Front (FAF)**, created in January 2022, reportedly operates in several provinces and has connections to the NRF.
- **The Free Tigers of Turkistan (FTT)**, led by Yar Mohammad Dostom, operates in the northern provinces of Faryab and Jawzjan, mainly comprising the Uzbek ethnic group.
- **The National Islamic Freedom Movement of Afghanistan (NIFMA)**, established by General Khalid Aziz in March 2022, predominantly includes Pashtun members and operates in the eastern and southern provinces.
- **The Freedom and Democracy Movement (FDM)**, formed in April 2022, is primarily comprised of Hazara ethnic group members and operates in predominantly Shia-inhabited regions. **The Supreme Resistance Council (SRC)**, known as the Ankara Circle, includes leaders like Atta Mohammad Noor and conducts limited insurgent operations in central and northern Afghanistan.
- **The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA)**, established in April 2022, is composed of members with socialist beliefs and operates in eastern and southern Afghanistan.

- Other groups include **the Western Nooristan Freedom Front (WNFF)**, **The Freedom Uprising (FU)**, which is predominantly Hazara, **The Wolf Unit (WU)** committed to Marshal Abdul Rashid Dostom, and **The Patriotic Front (PF)**, active in the provinces of Ghazni, Kabul, and Herat.

The current opposition to the Taliban is in its infancy phase, with little support from outside. Their only chance of survival and eventual success lies in a socio-political upheaval against the Taliban regime.

2.4 Drone surveillance as security concerns heighten

In early April 2024, Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid condemned US drone surveillance over Afghanistan, labelling it a violation of sovereignty. While not specifying the exact provinces under surveillance, reports indicated drone presence in Kandahar, Badakhshan, Panjshir, and Kunar over the previous days. Mujahid called for an immediate halt to these missions and urged nations facilitating them to cease support, citing violation of international law. The statement coincided with increased drone activity, although the US has yet to respond formally. Meanwhile, a UN report warned of al-Qaida's establishment of new training camps in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, assisting anti-Pakistan militants in cross-border attacks. Additionally, Daesh claimed fewer attacks recently, including assaults on Shi'a civilians, amid concerns over its resurgence and threat to global security, notably to the US. (Amu TV, 2024)



PRISM
**Good Taliban,
 Bad Taliban**

*The case of
 Hafiz Gul
 Bahadur*

By Zia Ur Rehman

prism.dawn and dawn.today

prism.dawn Tensions simmering along the Pak-Afghan border have recently erupted into violence yet again, with a familiar player returning to the forefront — Hafiz Gul Bahadur's militant group.

Blamed for the devastating March 16 suicide attack on a Pakistani military post in North Waziristan, which claimed the lives of seven soldiers including two officers, the militant group's actions have sent shockwaves through the region. Meanwhile, Pakistan's retaliatory airstrikes inside Afghanistan on March 18, targeting suspected hideouts of Bahadur's group, have further strained the already fragile relations with Kabul's Taliban rulers and raised fears of regional instability.

But beyond the immediate violence lies a story of transformation.

Once lauded as the 'good Taliban' for refraining from carrying out attacks against Pakistan's security forces, Bahadur's group finds itself labelled 'bad Taliban' due to its role in the recent terror attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's southern region. This dramatic shift sparks a multitude of questions: What drove this transformation? Where does Bahadur's group fit within Pakistan's complex militant landscape, dominated by the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)? And perhaps most crucially, what factors led the Bahadur-led group to engage in such a dramatic escalation?

Read the full piece titled 'Good Taliban, bad Taliban: The case of Hafiz Gul Bahadur' on Prism Dawn by visiting the link in bio.

#dawn today #dawnprism #taliban

1w

1,180 likes
 March 21

Add a comment...

Figure 2: Dawn Prism "Good Taliban, Bad Taliban"
 Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/C4xvZOGC2kF/>

3 Regional Stakeholders

3.1 Pakistan

Pakistan and Afghanistan share deep socio-political, linguistic, ethnic, and trade ties. Challenges like cross-border militancy and the presence of nearly 2.2 million registered Afghans as well as 1.7 million undocumented Afghans (most of whom came to Pakistan after the fall of Kabul to TTA in August 2021) constitute almost constant irritants in bilateral relations. Tensions also heightened after the Pakistani government began deporting the undocumented Afghan migrants from November 1, 2023, onwards – a move that coincided with similar deportations from Iran of up to a million Afghans.

The Taliban's alleged support for its ideological offshoot - TTP - remains a concern for Pakistan as the insurgent group has gained momentum post-August 2021.

Broadly, **key strategic priorities for Islamabad** include

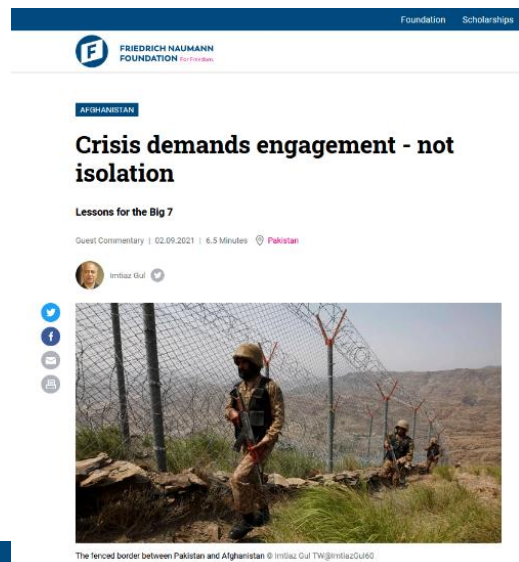
- **regional peace** and stability
- fostering **a cooperative relationship** with the Afghan Taliban
- robust **bilateral trade** and transit
- more **influence in the region** to counter India

Besides, despite the geopolitical dynamics and neighbourhood rivalries at play, Pakistan deems economic connectivity crucial to its stability. Hence Afghanistan remains a pivotal partner in terms of accessing and

facilitating Central Asian trade and transit. But for all that, regional peace is a prerequisite.



Figure 3: Senator Mushahid Hussain Tweet
Source: <https://twitter.com/Mushahid/status/177005436100929559> 0?s=20



"In the West, in the international community at large, we have to ask ourselves if military interventions are suitable to export a form of government which we prefer. This was not successful in Afghanistan ... This is why we have to draw the necessary lessons that ... military interventions are not suited to export a specific form of government. We need to think about the purposes and also the duration of military interventions."

With these words German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas summed up the lesson the US-led West hopefully learns from the ignominious exit from Afghanistan in the witching hours of August 31, 2021. The date is now etched in history as the culmination of a foreign intervention that began as a revenge campaign for the twin-tower attacks on September 11, 2001 but drifted into a haphazard and deeply corrupt nation-building project in a country largely governed by conservative tribal culture.

When Maas made these remarks, he resonated what the British academic Anatol Lieven (TW @LievenAnatol), a senior research fellow at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft and the author of *Pakistan: A Hard Country* has been saying for long.

Lieven told me in a virtual interview, *"American commanders and officials either completely failed to understand these aspects of Afghan reality or failed to report them honestly to their bosses in Washington, the Congress, and the public at large"*. He also placed the larger part of the blame for the shift from counter-terrorism to nation-building project on major European allies. Most European officials knew nothing or little about Afghanistan's socio-cultural dynamics. *"The US embarked on the mission as revenge but the rest of the west committed itself to nation-building in order to please Washington,"* Lieven said. They were pathetically desperate to keep American committed to the defense of Europe.

3.2 China and Russia

Both nations seek Afghanistan's stability for various reasons. While China eyes investment prospects via the Belt and Road Initiative, Russia is keen on preventing jihadism from permeating its sphere.

The appointment of a new ambassador to Afghanistan underscores China's growing interest in the region (VOA, 2023). While some Chinese companies have announced investments in Afghanistan, experts believe that large-scale Chinese projects might face challenges due to the unstable conditions.

Russia, too, is eager to push for peace through regional dialogues. Moscow aims to retain as well as amplify its influence in Central Asia to deter extremist propensities (Arab News, 2023). The Moscow Format* is one such initiative. Concretely, **Russian objectives in Afghanistan involve establishing symbolic ties with the Taliban, exploiting geopolitical opportunities for trade access, and mitigating Western sanctions.** Economic motives drive Moscow's engagement, seeking partnership diversification while dispelling claims of international isolation. Given that, it actively pursues opportunities to establish ties across the Global South, even with the de facto Taliban rulers – a government that it sees as primarily anti-Western/US. (Suleymanov, 2023)

**Moscow Format is a Russia-led dialogue initiative involving Afghanistan and all regional stakeholders. Under this, Moscow had also brought the TTA and officials of former president Ashraf Ghani under one roof.*

3.3 Central Asia

The Central Asian states have traditionally desired trade with Pakistan and India via Afghanistan. However, Afghanistan's instability over the past 32 years has hindered this. Due to continued political volatility in Afghanistan, the Central Asian countries have fortified their borders to prevent the movement of people as well as narcotics from Afghanistan (Pannier, 2023).

The Central Asian states, nevertheless, view the Taliban Emirate as a potential stabilizing force and a bulwark against terrorist outfits such as ISKP/Daesh. While the Taliban regime seeks trade to shore up its fledgling economy, **the Central Asian nations aim for regional stability, with some, like Uzbekistan (Murtazashvili, 2023), planning major infrastructure projects to boost trade with Afghanistan.**



Figure 4: China appointed its first Ambassador to Afghanistan after Taliban's takeover

Source: <https://twitter.com/AfghanistanTime/status/1701964552617799701>

4 Pak-Afghan relationships: conundrum of mistrust & complexities

Afghanistan and Pakistan share a 2,560-kilometer border, and their relationship over the years can be described as a symbiotic, love-hate relationship as once said the former Afghan president Hamid Karzai.

For decades, Pakistan's longstanding "strategic depth" policy sought to ensure a friendly government in Kabul, limiting India's influence and preventing encirclement. Especially during the Ghani administration, Pakistan's "fear of India" was more persistent and became the major cause of bad blood between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The alleged Indian involvement in destabilizing activities led by rebel Pushtuns and Balochs also remained Pakistan's gravest concern throughout that period. Resultantly, Pakistan's support for the Taliban served as a counterbalance against perceived Indian-Afghan collaboration. (Constantino, 2020)

Besides, the relationship has been profoundly influenced by two major Afghan conflicts i.e. the US-backed jihad against the former Soviet Union in the 1980s and the global war on terrorism – this time led by the US. On both occasions, Pakistan served as the springboard for these military campaigns.

- The first conflict saw millions of Afghans fleeing violence and uncertainty during the Soviet invasion in the 1980s. **Nearly five million of them landed in Pakistan alone.** Most of the documented ones returned in phases post-2001.
- The second conflict – the global war on terror following the 9/11 attacks in the U.S.– also turned Pakistan into the crucial staging post for ousting the Taliban regime in December 2001 as part of Operation Enduring Freedom.

By implication, Pakistan, for many Afghans turned into the "near-enemy" that "facilitated" the unleashing of two wars on Afghan soil. It was also seen as the primary force behind the rise of the Afghan Taliban that the US-led forces eventually came to disempower. It was an ironical twist of history that the US struck a peace deal with the same enemy (the Taliban) and prematurely withdrew from Afghanistan, re-empowering the same group it had come to vanquish. **Most Afghans meanwhile forget the then Soviet Union, the US, and its NATO allies, but continue to look at Pakistan with mistrust that often borders animosity.**

 **Michael Kugelman**
@MichaelKugelman

"There is an irony here. During the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, Taliban militants used Pakistan as a base to stage attacks in Afghanistan. Then, Afghanistan counted on operational support from NATO forces, but now Pakistan must wage its battle alone."



From foreignpolicy.com

7:39 AM · Mar 22, 2024 · 19.7K Views

13 replies · 46 retweets · 160 likes · 19 bookmarks · Share

Figure 5: Michael Kugelman, The Wilson Center

Source: <https://twitter.com/michaelkugelman/status/1771003718835622193?s=48&t=waxBld3tu2yw2ZZYFK3cZw>

4.1 TTP – A complicating irritant

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan or TTP is an anti-Pakistan terrorist outfit and a close ally of the Afghan Taliban. Created in December 2007, the TTP provided shelter, logistical, and manpower support to the TTA during its insurgency against the US-led NATO troops until August 2021.

TTP violence in Pakistan has since risen dramatically, particularly after it revoked in November 2022 a temporary cease-fire deal with Islamabad that the Afghan government had brokered.

Pakistan's demands on the TTP were to:

- surrender to the state,
- accept the constitution,
- stop demanding the release of TTP detainees with incriminating evidence, and
- disband the violent organization.

The TTP turned down all demands and instead placed its own conditions for "peace." These included the restoration of former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)* that abut Afghanistan and the removal of the army from border regions. It also wants to dictate where the Pakistan army can establish its security check posts along the border with Afghanistan.

* FATA regions had enjoyed an autonomous status since the creation of Pakistan in 1947 until May 2018, when the government finally abolished the special status and turned them into seven districts of the northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

5 Pakistan's Afghan Policy Post August 2021

Afghanistan-Pakistan relations have never experienced an elixir of cordiality even when the ties were at their supposed "positive trajectory". This relationship has remained maligned due to the securitization of the region and mutual mistrust. Where Afghanistan has faced the maximum brunt of the proxy wars, Pakistan, despite aligning with the US/NATO alliance to beat militancy in the region, has not been short of its share of miseries.

But post August 2021, a new chapter emerged in the Pak-Afghan relations, or so it was expected. Pakistan initially greeted the development with a sense of victory, and many Pakistanis cherished it as a defeat for arch-rival India. The government even urged the international community to engage with the Taliban to prevent a potential humanitarian crises, governance collapse, and the outbreak of civil war in Afghanistan.

Despite the mounting tensions and challenges, including persistent cross-border attacks and the TTP sanctuaries, Pakistan continued to provide diplomatic and humanitarian support to the Taliban-led government. It also facilitated bilateral as well as Afghanistan's transit trade via the Karachi port, without recognizing the regime.

However, the euphoria turned out to be short-lived for reasons rooted in history. And, as spelled out by Dr. Jochen Hippler, former country director, FES Pakistan, (Baqai & Wasi, 2021) "the new chapter cannot be viewed in isolation of history, national and regional frameworks, without continuities and discontinuities." While Pakistan has historically supported the Taliban to maintain influence in Afghanistan and address security concerns, tensions persist due to the group's autonomy and changing dynamics. The Taliban's evolution, including global engagement and attempts to project inclusivity and self-reliance, challenges Pakistan's control. At Pakistan's end, mistrust emerges from TTA's alleged support for TTP and

cross-border attacks.

Pakistan's current, unprecedented crackdown on undocumented Afghans is an aftermath of its persistent belief that "the Taliban victory in Afghanistan has emboldened and strengthened the TTP. With the Taliban in control of Afghanistan and sympathetic to the TTP, the TTP now enjoys a level of 'strategic depth' that is arguably unparalleled in its history." (Sayed & Hamming, 2023)

The **Taliban takeover further bolstered TTP by releasing numerous members from Kabul prisons** (BBC Monitoring, 2021). Among them were **key figures like Maulawi Faqir Muhammad Bajauri and Mufti Khalid Bulti**. Bajauri, the TTP's founding deputy emir, addressed TTP fighters in Kunar province, pledging to continue the anti-state struggle in Pakistan. He expressed gratitude for local support, declaring the TTP's aim for a comparable victory in Pakistan.

While the **Afghan Taliban leadership openly discourages** its members from engaging in **hostilities against the Pakistani state** (Geo News, 2021) (Geo News, 2022) , **the group's grassroots view supports the TTP as a religious and national obligation**. This perspective is rooted in ideological beliefs and longstanding tribal and personal connections developed over the past two decades of insurgency.



Pakistan's current, unprecedented crackdown on undocumented Afghans is an aftermath of its persistent belief that "the Taliban victory in Afghanistan has emboldened and strengthened the TTP. With the Taliban in control of Afghanistan and sympathetic to the TTP, the TTP now enjoys a level of 'strategic depth' that is arguably unparalleled in its history.

Sayed & Hamming, 2023



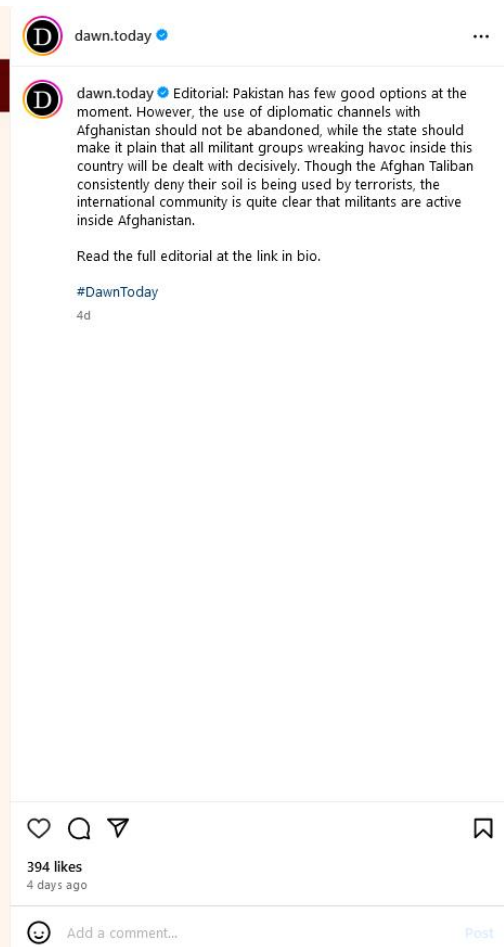
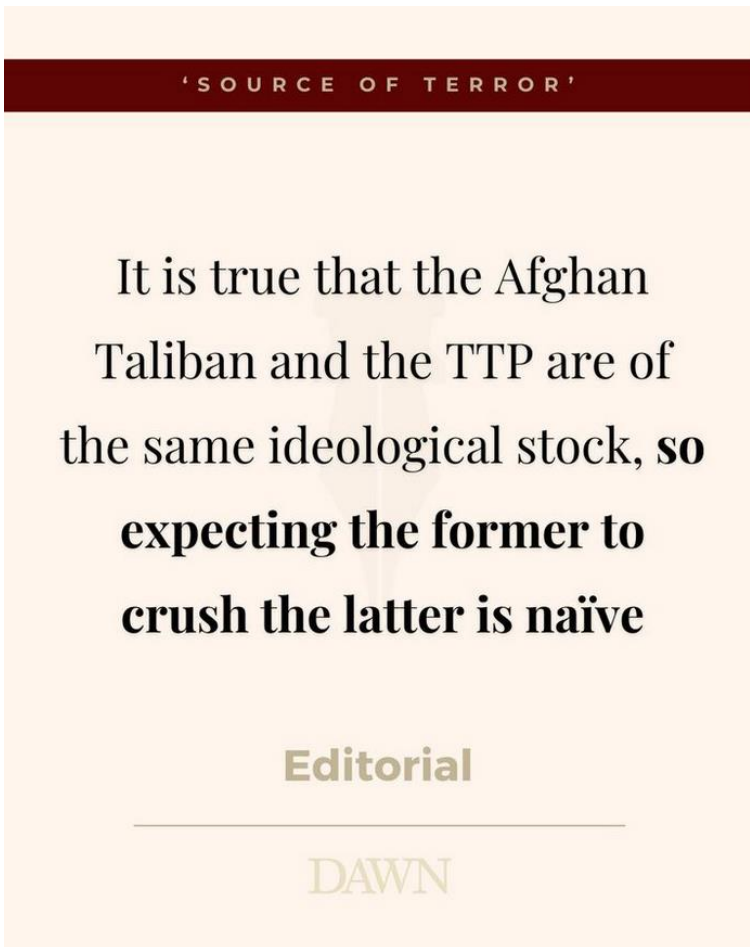


Figure 6: Dawn Editorial March 29 2024 Instagram
 Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/C5FufZlqOkU/>

5.1 Negotiations

On the behest of the Kabul regime, the Pakistan government entered into talks with the TTP assuming Kabul would withdraw its support to the outfit. Key officials at the time, including then Prime Minister Imran Khan offered a general amnesty to militants, if they surrendered arms and agreed to reintegrate into normal life within the country (Dawn, 2021) . However, the TTP declined this proposal, expressing its intent to its fight until Pakistan gave in to its demands, including enforcement of Sharia laws and replacing democracy.

Subsequently, Pakistani officials conducted multiple rounds of talks with TTP leadership in Kabul and the eastern Khost province, with Sirajuddin Haqqani, the Taliban's interior minister, playing as the arbiter. However, the initial rounds of talks – as indicated earlier - yielded no progress.

In late 2021, TTP attacks against Pakistani security forces notably surged in frequency and intensity following the ceasefire's conclusion. The TTP claimed responsibility for 45 attacks in December 2021 alone, marking the highest monthly tally in several years (BBC Monitoring, 2022).



Figure 7: "How Pakistan Sees Afghanistan" Op Ed by Moeed Yusuf
 Source: <https://twitter.com/ForeignAffairs/status/1446202790087364608>

In April 2022, TTP claimed 54 attacks, thus setting a new 'record.' Furthermore, TTP went beyond regular small-scale attacks. On March 30, 2022, a three-member squad of suicide fighters attacked a military fort in the Tank

54

The TTP claimed responsibility for 45 attacks in December 2021 alone, marking the highest monthly tally in several years (BBC Monitoring, 2022) In April 2022, TTP claimed 54 attacks, thus setting a new 'record.'

district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, killing and wounding 24 soldiers.

In retaliation, Pakistani security forces mounted multiple operations against TTP militants, including a hot pursuit of militants into refugee camps in Khost and Kunar provinces of Afghanistan. Suspected covert operations led to the killing of TTP spokesperson Mufti Khalid Balti and left senior military commander Mufti Burjan critically injured (Abdul Sayed 2022)

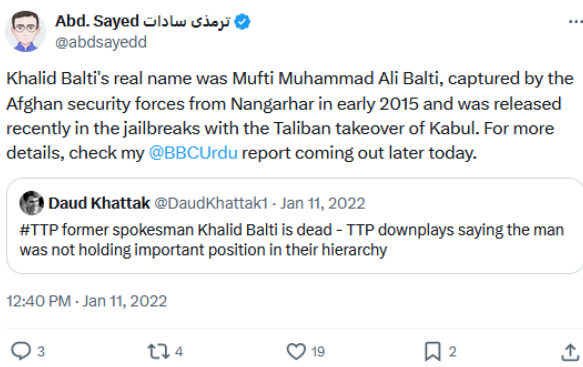


Figure 8: Tweet by Abdul Sayed, Source: <https://twitter.com/abdsayed/status/1480806888434548739?t=oWs3HJTHkS4nUI2EMCscXA&s=08>

Following a cross-border attack by Afghan guards that killed three Pakistani soldiers in April 2022, Islamabad reacted sternly and demanded strict action against TTP and other militants operating from inside Afghanistan.

Despite mounting violence in Pakistan, the volatile ceasefire held through to late November, when the TTP unilaterally revoked it, citing the government's "lack of interest" in negotiations. From then onwards, **Pakistan suffered an unusual spike in TTP-linked violence, particularly in the border Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces. Violence through 2023 reached an eight-year high, resulting in the deaths of over 500 security personnel in the first ten months alone.**

5.2 Further strain in ties

Pakistan's patience wore thin in September 2023 when several hundred TTP militants launched a vicious attack (September 5) on military posts in Chitral, the northernmost of Pakistan. Islamabad issued a diplomatic démarche on September 9 (Dawn, 2023) ,asking the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) for stern action against TTP – whose leader Noor Wali Mehsud reportedly lives in Kabul (where top Pakistani officials met him in June 2022). Pakistan temporarily closed the Torkham border crossing, bringing the two-way movement of people and trade to a halt for several days.

Later, Pakistan's caretaker Prime Minister, Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar, sent a letter to Prime Minister Mullah Hasan Akhund, emphasizing the need to address shared security and economic challenges. The indirect message was to address the Pakistani concerns on the TTP issue (Gul, 2023a).



Figure 9: The attack on the northernmost district Chitral Source: <https://twitter.com/ChitralPK/status/1699405288674390144>

On September 22, in a high-level bilateral meeting led by Pakistan's special representative on Afghanistan, Asif Durrani, with Amir Khan Muttaqi, the Taliban Foreign Minister, the Taliban pledged "concrete steps" to combat the TTP (Gul, 2023b).

Durrani conveyed to the Taliban leadership that the existence and activities of the TTP in Afghanistan constitute a red line for Pakistan. Pakistan's key demands include the surrender of TTP members, the disbandment of the organization, acceptance of the Pakistani

constitution, and the trial of TTP suspects with records of heinous crimes in judicial proceedings.

IEA* expressed a commitment to gradually disarm TTP commanders and relocate them away from border provinces, such as Kunar, Nuristan, Nangarhar, and Helmand.

*Authors interview with the Special Envoy, September 25, 2023.

5.3 Eviction of undocumented Afghan migrants

As Pakistan's patience eventually wore thin following the Chitral incident in September 2023, it not only imposed more restrictions on Afghanistan's transit trade but also decided to deport all those Afghans residing in the country without visas or forged documents (RFE/RL, 2023).

The crackdown forced nearly half a million Afghans back

Pakistan defends the documentation of illegal migrants and deportations as the need to balance national interests with humanitarian concerns is vital. They say the current security and economic situation demands regulation and documentation.

to their country. This does not include the 1.4 Afghans who hold Proof of Residence (PoR) cards as well as well as nearly 800,000 others who possess Afghan Citizens Cards (ACC) issued by the Pakistani government.

The move to evict undocumented Afghans not only enraged Afghans at large including the Taliban regime but also invited global reaction. The anticipated negative impact of deportation on vulnerable individuals, especially girls, and women, has already sparked criticism of the country. The UN also reacted to Islamabad's "Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan," with calls for caution and restraint, and a halt to this initiative.

The expulsion triggered a slew of harsh criticism by Taliban regime ministers led by Prime Minister Mulla Hasan Akhund. They asserted that these "refugees" are innocent and have no connection with the TTP violence. "TTP attacks originate from within Pakistan" (Express Tribune, 2023), said spokesperson Sohail Shaheen, adding the eviction of refugees amounted to "pressure tactics" against the Taliban, urging Pakistan to treat Afghanistan as an equal and provide the necessary support.



"We are helpless."

Tens of thousands of Afghans who had been living in Pakistan for years are now returning home ahead of a deportation deadline. Activists urge the Pakistani government to give the refugees more time.



5:47 PM · Oct 31, 2023 · 7,108 Views

Figure 10: DW News reported on the challenges faced by a looming deadline before forced deportation of Afghan refugees without documentation

Source: <https://twitter.com/dwnews/status/1719335236402577856>

In an audio message Mulla Yaqoob, the defense minister even threatened retaliation and urged Pakistan to "sow as much as it can reap."

Pakistan defends the documentation of illegal migrants and deportations as the need to balance national interests with humanitarian concerns is vital. They say the current security and economic situation demands regulation and documentation.

Critics, however, believe that a more calibrated approach through consultations with stakeholders, such as the Taliban regime and refugee groups would have prevented much of the fallout from the abrupt deportations.

5.4 Pakistani air strikes on Afghanistan March 2024

On March 2024, Pakistan carried out airstrikes against suspected militants within Afghanistan, following an attack on Pakistani soldiers in Mir Ali, North Waziristan. The operation targeted individuals associated with the Hafiz Gul Bahadur (HGB) group and TTP. An official announcement by Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) said that Pakistan had "repeatedly expressed concerns to the Afghan interim government regarding the presence of such terrorist outfits within Afghan territory

and the alleged patronage they receive from elements within the Afghan government". The statement added that Pakistan realized the challenge Afghan authorities faced in combating the threat posed by TTP and that Islamabad continue to work toward finding joint solutions in countering terrorism and preventing terror organizations from sabotaging bilateral relations with Afghanistan.

Afghanistan, however condemned the airstrikes, labeling them as a reckless violation of its sovereignty. Spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid reported "civilian casualties," urging Pakistan to cease its military actions and warning of potential consequences. Afghanistan's defense ministry stated that its border forces retaliated by targeting Pakistani military centres.



Figure 11: Pakistan Air Strikes on Afghanistan Tweet by Najiba Faiz
 Source: <https://twitter.com/NajibaFaiz5/status/1770047312909242395>

Militancy in Pakistan, as highlighted previously in the chapter, has seen a progressive trajectory since August 2021. Hence, in response to persistent terror wave, Pakistan has implemented a multifaceted strategy aimed at pressuring the Afghan Taliban. This strategy includes airstrikes, direct diplomatic accusations against Taliban

"Afghanistan wants to move away from the branding of a "state in war" to a country that offers opportunities for investment"

Iftikhar Firdous, Khorasan Diary

elements supporting TTP, and a planned repatriation of Afghan refugees. The goal is to prompt a reassessment of the Taliban's stance towards Pakistan. Unlike previous isolated strikes, Pakistan intends to maintain a sustained aerial campaign to deter future attacks. However, the planned refugee repatriation after Ramadan could further escalate tensions between Islamabad and Kabul amidst the ongoing security challenges (Atlantic Council, 2024).



Figure 12: Aljazeera Tweet for Abid Hussains 'Cousins at War' Pakistan-Afghan ties strained after cross-border attacks
<https://twitter.com/AJEnglish/status/1770118033991983333>

While the new government in Pakistan is now dealing with Taliban through a real political lens, this approach may not be sustainable. The long-term implications of such a relationship with Afghanistan will be tiring for Pakistan, which wants to move away from the branding of a "state in war" to a country that offers opportunities for investment as it finds itself in a deplorable economic situation, says Iftikhar Firdous of the Khorasan Diary,

However, the ground realities cannot be overlooked. For Pakistan, it is not only TTP now, but its affiliates like HGB too. HGB alone has around 60-70 sub-factions, each with 200-300 members. Researcher Riccardo Valle reports that talks between the TTP and Bahadur's group regarding a unified platform have taken place. While the outcome of these discussions is unknown, Valle expresses concern that a successful merger would "further jeopardize the situation in south Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, while expanding the TTP base in the province and posing new challenges to security forces" (Valle, 2024).

6 International Engagement with Afghanistan - Past and Present

As Pakistan remains entangled in its own security challenges claimed to be stemming from Afghanistan, the war-stricken country is itself facing a multitude of socio-political and economic challenges

Today, the withdrawal of direct aid from major Western powers, declining humanitarian assistance, and the country's exclusion from the global financial system because of the sanctions represent daunting challenges.

This crisis is accompanied by complications arising out of an obscurantist rights regime, denial of women's rights, the absence of an inclusive government, and a fragile economic economy. These pressing problems are rooted in three crucial factors:

1. the **unstructured and reckless engagement of the international community** with Afghanistan after the Bonn Conference in January 2002
2. the **abrupt manner in which the Taliban assumed power** following the collapse of the Ashraf Ghani government,
3. the **to-do-or-not-to-do approach of the international community** as far as engaging with the Taliban regime is concerned.

Two notable reports – one by the *US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2022* (SIGAR) and another one *Securing Afghanistan* (2009), which was a working paper by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), identified what precisely went wrong in Afghanistan (Eckert, 2009) during the over a trillion dollar “nation-building” and counter-terror endeavors.

6.1 What went wrong?

The USIP working paper (Fair & G, 2009) extrapolated the following factors in the Western powers' attempt to stabilize Afghanistan:

- **Top-Down Approach Ineffectiveness:** The top-down nation-building approach, focused on consolidating the central government in Kabul, proved ineffective due to Afghanistan's historically decentralized structure.
- **Lack of Local Leadership Cultivation:** The international community failed to cultivate local leadership, which could have not only supplemented but also strengthened the national government.

- **Neglect of Decentralized Tribal Dynamics:** The failure to recognize and address the decentralized tribal dynamics within Afghanistan hindered reconciliation efforts.
- **Inadequate Focus on Anti-Corruption:** Tackling corruption, especially within the Ministry of Interior and high-ranking officials involved in the drug trade, was not given sufficient attention.
- **Overemphasis on Troop Increases:** Haste and expedience only resulted in a security force that was more a militia than a professional army, beset with inefficiency and regular desertions. A more effective approach than reliance solely on troop increases would have been to focus on mentoring Afghan police and army seniors professionally.
- **Absence of Political Will in Combating Corruption:** Missing political will in combating institutional corruption as well as little notice of several officials' involvement in the drug trade also obstructed the emergence of efficient state institutions.

“More U.S. forces in Afghanistan may be helpful, but only if they are used to build Afghan capacity”, concluded the paper.

More than a decade later, in a parallel narrative, the SIGAR report highlighted **six key factors** leading to the Republic's collapse (SIGAR, 2022).

1. First, the Afghan government **failed to anticipate the actual U.S. withdrawal**, leaving it ill-prepared.
2. Second, **exclusion from U.S.-Taliban talks** weakened the government, emboldening the Taliban.
3. Third, the Ghani government's insistence on **integrating the Taliban** into the Republic hindered peace talks.
4. Fourth, the **Taliban's unwillingness to compromise** impeded a political settlement.
5. Fifth, **President Ashraf Ghani's narrow circle of loyalists destabilized the government**.
6. Finally, long-standing issues like **centralization, legitimacy challenges, and corruption** contributed to its eventual collapse, marking the Republic's final chapter.

7 Recommendations

Although the Taliban literally lord over the entire Afghanistan, recognition of their regime remains elusive. Despite this, all major countries continue to engage with Kabul, primarily because of the vulnerabilities that millions of Afghans currently face. Curbs on women's freedoms remain a big, across-the-board concern for nearly all countries, something the Taliban leaders are generally averse to discussing.

For most countries, including the United States and the ones in EU, disengagement would mean punishing these vulnerable Afghans. Are most countries ready – at least for the time being – to re-strategize and redefine the terms of engagement with Kabul and Kandahar? What is the trade-off for universal women's rights? Should the international community let the millions of Afghans starve and suffer just because the Taliban regime has restricted life and livelihood options for females? (Based on the author's discussions with Tom West, the US special envoy as well as Afghanistan-focused diplomats of the UK, Germany, and China).

Most focal persons for Afghanistan tend to prefer "engagement despite..." in the interest of the hunger and poverty in the country.

1. **Engage with the Taliban Realistically:** Even if recognition does not seem possible as of now, diplomatic channels should remain open to exert influence and push for inclusive governance.
2. **Prioritize Humanitarian Assistance:** With the humanitarian situation worsening, the international community can use aid as a leverage point to ensure the protection of human rights and secure necessary services for Afghan citizens.
3. **Protect the Rights of Women and Minorities:** Continue advocating the importance of the rights of women, children, and ethnic minorities. However, an over-emphasis on women's rights in particular runs the risk of annoying the Taliban rulers for the simple reason that Afghanistan primarily remains an extremely conservative tribal society where women traditionally are the secondary members.
4. **Strengthen Regional Diplomacy:** Neighboring countries like Pakistan, Iran, China, and the Central Asian republics must continue to play a constructive role in ensuring stability and curbing extremist influences. But this begs the question of whether this diplomacy can be insulated against the US and allies' aversion to Iran and China.

5. **Facilitate Grassroots Peace Initiatives:** Instead of top-down approaches, emphasize grassroots initiatives that address local grievances, tribal disputes, and socio-economic challenges. The idea is to foster local peace ecosystems that can also gradually, and indirectly, re-empower women by rejecting official restrictions on their education and employment.
6. **Promote Economic Stability:** International organizations can help by investing in Afghanistan, supporting its farmers, and assisting in the development of infrastructure. Unhindered trade with neighbors can also help moderate some of the Taliban policies.
7. **Girls' Education:** Promotion of distant, online learning possibilities for girls can be – in the short term – a good option to prevent further loss of academic years.



Figure 13: Aljazeera English Op- ED by Dr. Sultan Barkat
Source: <https://twitter.com/AJEnglish/status/1774742390202409010>

8. **Support Civil Society and Media:** Support for civil society organizations, journalists, and activists – in whatever way possible – should continue to prevent a complete slide in favor of the Taliban's radical worldview.
9. **Categorical NO to Terrorist Entities:** The Taliban must ensure that Afghanistan does not become a sanctuary for international terrorist groups. Disengagement can only aggravate the issue and create a more facilitating environment for various terrorist franchises.
10. **Prepare for Contingencies:** The international community, especially neighboring countries, should also be prepared to be ready to assist

displaced persons in case of an internal socio-economic implosion. At the same time, western countries must expedite cases of thousands of Afghans who await resettlement from Pakistan to a third country.

11. **No Way Around Pakistan:** Pakistan remains the only major conduit for all sorts of support to Afghanistan (Iran being at odds with the West is no option).

Traditionally the country has been viewed as the problem (because of its relations with the TTA) but **history dictates that Pakistan remains the pivot for any humanitarian, and economic assistance, as well as peace and security.** Afghanistan's path to stability also necessitates a willingness among the Afghan stakeholders to engage with Pakistan. This approach can pave the way for a productive collective engagement with the Taliban. **Pakistan can also serve as the pressure point to coax the Taliban into a more lenient and liberal governance regime.** Based on the bitter experiences of the past two decades, the world needs to recalibrate its engagement with Afghanistan, anchored in the social makeup of the society i.e. social conservatism, tribal traditions, and the sense of victimhood rooted in over four decades of conflict.

END

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