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From Strategic Depth to Strategic Distrust: Reassessing Pakistan's Afghanistan Policy after the U.S. Withdrawal and the Taliban's Return

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Abstract

The withdrawal of United States forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the subsequent return of the Taliban marked a turning point in South Asian geopolitics. For Pakistan, these developments initially appeared to create favorable strategic conditions after two decades of regional instability and external military intervention. Many policymakers and observers expected that a Taliban-led government in Kabul would contribute to border stability, reduce security threats, and facilitate regional connectivity initiatives linking South Asia, Central Asia, and China. However, developments in the post-withdrawal period have challenged these expectations. The resurgence of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), disputes over border management, tensions surrounding the Durand Line, and diverging policy priorities have generated increasing mistrust between Islamabad and Kabul. This article examines the evolution of Pakistan's Afghanistan policy following the U.S. withdrawal and analyzes the transition from the traditional concept of strategic depth to a policy environment characterized by strategic distrust. It argues that while Pakistan initially viewed the Taliban's return as an opportunity to secure a more favorable regional environment, subsequent developments revealed significant differences between expectations and realities. Consequently, Pakistan is reassessing its Afghanistan policy through a framework that prioritizes security management, pragmatic engagement, and regional stability rather than assumptions of political alignment.

Keywords: Pakistan–Afghanistan Relations, Strategic Depth, Strategic Distrust, U.S. Withdrawal, Taliban, TTP, Durand Line, Regional Security, South Asia, Foreign Policy.

1. Introduction

Pakistan and Afghanistan share one of the most complex bilateral relationships in contemporary international relations. Bound together by geography, history, culture, ethnicity, and security concerns, the two countries have experienced periods of cooperation as well as prolonged episodes of mistrust and confrontation. Developments in Afghanistan have consistently occupied a central position in Pakistan's strategic thinking, influencing foreign policy decisions, security calculations, and regional engagement.

The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 represented a major geopolitical event with significant implications for regional politics. The collapse of the Afghan Republic and

the rapid return of the Taliban transformed the political landscape and created a new strategic environment for neighboring states. For Pakistan, which had long advocated a political settlement to the Afghan conflict, these developments appeared to provide an opportunity for greater stability and cooperation.

Many analysts expected that the Taliban's return would improve Pakistan–Afghanistan relations. The assumption was based on the belief that historical interactions, political contacts, and shared interests would encourage closer cooperation between Islamabad and Kabul. Furthermore, the absence of foreign military forces was expected to reduce regional tensions and create opportunities for economic integration and connectivity.

These expectations were particularly important within the context of Pakistan's broader regional strategy. Successive governments had emphasized the importance of a stable Afghanistan for national security, economic development, and regional connectivity. Projects linking Pakistan to Central Asia depended heavily upon improved conditions in Afghanistan. Consequently, the emergence of a cooperative government in Kabul was viewed as an important strategic objective.

However, the post-withdrawal environment has produced outcomes that differ considerably from these expectations. Rather than ushering in a period of strategic convergence, the return of the Taliban has coincided with rising security concerns and increasing diplomatic tensions. The resurgence of the TTP has emerged as a major challenge, while disagreements over border management and the Durand Line have continued to complicate bilateral relations.

The persistence of these disputes highlights the limitations of assumptions that political or ideological affinity automatically translates into policy alignment. Instead, the relationship increasingly reflects competing national interests, domestic constraints, and differing strategic priorities.

This article examines how Pakistan's Afghanistan policy has evolved in response to these developments. It argues that the traditional notion of strategic depth has become increasingly difficult to sustain under contemporary conditions. In its place, a more cautious and pragmatic approach is emerging, one focused on managing security risks, protecting national interests, and adapting to a changing regional environment.

2. Strategic Depth and Pakistan's Afghanistan Policy

To understand contemporary developments, it is necessary to examine the origins and evolution of Pakistan's Afghanistan policy. Since independence, Pakistan's security outlook has been shaped by concerns regarding territorial integrity, regional competition, and external threats. Within this framework, Afghanistan has occupied a unique position due to its geographic proximity and political significance.

The concept of strategic depth emerged as part of broader discussions regarding Pakistan's security environment. Although often interpreted in different ways, the concept generally reflected the belief that a friendly and stable government in Afghanistan would contribute to Pakistan's national security by preventing hostile actors from using Afghan territory against Pakistani interests.

Historical developments reinforced this thinking. Afghanistan's opposition to Pakistan's admission to the United Nations in 1947, disputes regarding the Durand Line, and support for Pashtun nationalist movements created concerns within Pakistan regarding the intentions of successive Afghan governments. As a result, developments in Afghanistan became closely linked to Pakistan's security calculations.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 further elevated Afghanistan's strategic importance. Pakistan became a frontline state in the anti-Soviet campaign and developed extensive

relationships with various Afghan political and military actors. During this period, Afghanistan was viewed not only as a neighboring country but also as a critical arena affecting regional security and great-power competition.

The emergence of the Taliban during the 1990s appeared to provide an opportunity for stability following years of civil conflict. Pakistan was among the few countries to recognize the Taliban government, hoping that a more stable Afghanistan would contribute to regional security and facilitate economic engagement.

The events of September 11, 2001 transformed the regional environment once again. Pakistan became a key partner in the U.S.-led War on Terror while simultaneously confronting the consequences of instability in Afghanistan. The next two decades witnessed growing security challenges, including the rise of militant organizations operating on both sides of the border.

Throughout this period, Pakistan's Afghanistan policy evolved from a narrow security-oriented framework toward a broader approach incorporating counterterrorism cooperation, border management, refugee issues, and regional diplomacy. Nevertheless, the objective of maintaining a stable and cooperative government in Kabul remained an important element of policy thinking. By the late 2010s, as negotiations between the United States and the Taliban gained momentum, many policymakers believed that the eventual return of the Taliban could create more favorable conditions for Pakistan. The expectation was that a Taliban-led government would be more responsive to Pakistan's security concerns and more supportive of regional connectivity initiatives.

These assumptions played a significant role in shaping Pakistan's expectations following the U.S. withdrawal. However, the realities of post-withdrawal Afghanistan would soon challenge many of these long-standing beliefs.

3. U.S. Withdrawal, Taliban Return, and Pakistan's Strategic Expectations

The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan marked the end of a twenty-year military engagement and fundamentally altered the strategic landscape of South Asia. For Pakistan, the departure of foreign forces was widely perceived as an opportunity to reset regional dynamics and pursue long-standing objectives related to security and stability.

Several factors contributed to this optimism. First, Pakistan had consistently advocated a negotiated political settlement to the Afghan conflict. Islamabad maintained that military solutions alone could not bring lasting peace to Afghanistan and supported diplomatic initiatives that ultimately culminated in the Doha Agreement.

Second, the Taliban's return was expected to improve bilateral relations. Many observers assumed that historical connections and years of interaction would encourage greater cooperation between the two governments. This expectation was particularly significant given the often-strained relationship between Pakistan and previous Afghan administrations.

Third, policymakers anticipated improvements in border security. The presence of a government perceived as friendly to Pakistan was expected to facilitate cooperation against militant organizations and reduce cross-border violence.

Fourth, economic considerations also shaped expectations. Pakistan's vision of regional connectivity depended heavily upon stability in Afghanistan. Access to Central Asian markets, energy resources, and transportation corridors required a secure and cooperative regional environment. Consequently, the Taliban's return was viewed as a potential catalyst for economic integration.

Finally, the withdrawal was expected to reduce geopolitical competition within Afghanistan. Without a large foreign military presence, regional states would theoretically enjoy greater flexibility in pursuing cooperative initiatives related to trade, connectivity, and development.

Despite these expectations, important structural challenges remained. Afghanistan faced severe economic difficulties, international isolation, and governance challenges. The Taliban's primary focus was the consolidation of domestic authority and the management of internal political dynamics. These priorities did not always align with Pakistan's expectations regarding regional security and cooperation.

Furthermore, the assumption that political affinity would automatically translate into strategic alignment underestimated the complexity of state behavior. Governments ultimately pursue national interests, and the Taliban administration proved no exception. Its policies were shaped primarily by domestic considerations rather than external expectations.

As the post-withdrawal environment evolved, Pakistan gradually encountered a series of challenges that complicated bilateral relations. Security concerns, border disputes, and differing priorities increasingly overshadowed the optimism that had initially accompanied the Taliban's return.

The gap between expectations and realities would become one of the defining features of Pakistan's post-2021 Afghanistan policy and lay the foundation for a broader reassessment of long-standing strategic assumptions.

4. From Strategic Depth to Strategic Distrust

The period following the Taliban's return to power witnessed a gradual but significant transformation in Pakistan's perceptions of Afghanistan. Initial optimism regarding strategic cooperation increasingly gave way to concern as security challenges, diplomatic disagreements, and conflicting priorities emerged. This shift did not occur suddenly; rather, it developed through a series of events that collectively undermined confidence and reshaped bilateral relations.

At the center of this transformation lies the growing divergence between Pakistan's expectations and the realities of Taliban governance. While Islamabad anticipated greater cooperation on security matters and border management, developments after 2021 suggested that the interests and priorities of the two governments were not as closely aligned as many had assumed.

The Resurgence of the TTP

Among the most important factors contributing to strategic distrust has been the resurgence of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). For Pakistan, the TTP remains one of the most serious threats to internal security. The organization has been responsible for numerous attacks against military personnel, law enforcement agencies, and civilians, causing significant human and economic losses.

Following the Taliban's return, Pakistan expected meaningful cooperation in preventing Afghan territory from being used by anti-Pakistan militant groups. These expectations were reinforced by repeated assurances that Afghan soil would not be used against neighboring states. However, the security situation evolved differently than anticipated.

Pakistan experienced a notable increase in militant violence in the years following the Taliban takeover. Security officials repeatedly expressed concerns regarding the presence of TTP fighters inside Afghanistan and their ability to conduct operations against Pakistan. The issue became a major source of friction because it touched directly upon Pakistan's core national security interests.

From Islamabad's perspective, effective action against the TTP represented a fundamental test of bilateral cooperation. The absence of satisfactory progress therefore contributed significantly to the erosion of trust. The issue also revealed a broader reality: the Taliban's domestic priorities and political calculations often differed from Pakistan's security expectations.

The TTP challenge transformed the nature of bilateral engagement. Rather than focusing primarily on opportunities for cooperation, discussions increasingly centered on security threats,

border management, and counterterrorism concerns. This shift marked a significant departure from the optimism that had initially accompanied the Taliban's return.

The Durand Line and Border Tensions

The Durand Line has historically been one of the most contentious issues in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. Although Pakistan considers the border internationally recognized and legally settled, successive Afghan governments have expressed reservations regarding its status.

The Taliban's return did not resolve this longstanding dispute. Instead, disagreements concerning border management and fencing continued to generate tensions. Pakistan's efforts to strengthen border security through fencing projects were frequently met with resistance, resulting in periodic confrontations and diplomatic friction.

These tensions underscored the persistence of historical grievances despite changes in political leadership. Expectations that ideological affinity would override longstanding disputes proved unrealistic. National interests and historical narratives continued to shape policy decisions on both sides of the border.

Border incidents further complicated the relationship. Clashes between security forces, temporary border closures, and disagreements regarding crossing points created an atmosphere of uncertainty that affected both security cooperation and economic activity.

For Pakistan, effective border management is essential for controlling cross-border militancy, regulating trade, and maintaining national security. For the Taliban, however, border issues are intertwined with questions of sovereignty, legitimacy, and domestic politics. The resulting divergence in perspectives has made compromise difficult.

Diverging Strategic Priorities

Another factor contributing to strategic distrust is the growing divergence in strategic priorities. Pakistan's primary concern is security. Counterterrorism, border stability, and the prevention of militant infiltration remain at the center of Islamabad's Afghanistan policy. Economic connectivity and regional integration are also important objectives, but they depend upon a stable security environment.

The Taliban administration faces a different set of challenges. Its leadership must address economic collapse, humanitarian pressures, political consolidation, governance deficiencies, and international isolation. Securing domestic legitimacy and maintaining internal cohesion often take precedence over external concerns.

This divergence has created a situation in which both governments prioritize different issues. While Pakistan seeks immediate action against militant groups, the Taliban leadership often focuses on domestic political calculations. As a result, expectations on one side frequently fail to align with realities on the other.

The consequence is a relationship characterized by engagement but limited confidence. Both countries recognize the necessity of maintaining dialogue, yet neither has succeeded in establishing the level of trust required for a genuine strategic partnership.

Economic and Diplomatic Constraints

The emergence of strategic distrust has also affected economic and diplomatic relations. Although trade between the two countries continues, security concerns and political tensions periodically disrupt commercial activity. Border closures and administrative restrictions create uncertainty for businesses and undermine broader regional connectivity initiatives.

Diplomatic engagement remains active, but relations are increasingly shaped by crisis management rather than long-term strategic planning. Security concerns dominate discussions, reducing opportunities for cooperation in other areas.

This development is particularly significant because Pakistan's broader regional vision depends upon a stable Afghanistan. Projects connecting South Asia with Central Asia require secure transit routes and cooperative political relationships. Continued tensions therefore limit the realization of geoeconomic objectives.

The evolution from strategic depth to strategic distrust does not imply hostility or the collapse of relations. Rather, it reflects a growing recognition that Pakistan must approach Afghanistan through a more pragmatic and realistic framework. Assumptions regarding automatic alignment have given way to a more cautious assessment of interests, capabilities, and risks.

5. Regional Implications and Pakistan's Strategic Reassessment

The changing nature of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations has broader implications for regional politics and security. The post-withdrawal environment has prompted regional powers to reassess their own policies toward Afghanistan while simultaneously influencing Pakistan's strategic calculations.

For China, stability in Afghanistan remains important for both security and economic reasons. Beijing seeks to prevent instability from affecting Xinjiang and views regional connectivity projects as important components of its broader economic strategy. However, persistent security concerns and uncertainty regarding militant groups have limited progress.

Pakistan and China share an interest in a stable Afghanistan, yet both remain cautious regarding the security situation. Consequently, regional connectivity projects continue to face significant challenges despite their economic potential.

Iran has similarly adapted its Afghanistan policy in response to changing realities. Concerns regarding refugees, border security, water resources, and regional stability influence Tehran's approach toward the Taliban government. While Iran maintains engagement with Kabul, it also seeks to protect its own strategic interests.

Russia and the Central Asian republics face comparable concerns. The possibility of militant activity, narcotics trafficking, and regional instability remains a major consideration. As a result, regional actors increasingly prioritize security cooperation and risk management over ambitious political expectations.

These developments have encouraged Pakistan to adopt a more balanced approach toward Afghanistan. Rather than viewing the relationship exclusively through a bilateral lens, Islamabad increasingly recognizes the importance of broader regional dynamics. Cooperation with neighboring states, multilateral engagement, and regional security frameworks have therefore become more important components of policy.

The shift also reflects changing perceptions regarding influence and leverage. The assumption that Pakistan could significantly shape Afghan political outcomes has become increasingly difficult to sustain. Contemporary policy discussions instead emphasize engagement, diplomacy, and practical cooperation where possible.

In many respects, Pakistan's strategic reassessment reflects a broader regional trend. Expectations associated with the Taliban's return have largely been replaced by a more cautious recognition of Afghanistan's enduring challenges. Regional actors continue to engage with Kabul, but they do so with greater emphasis on security concerns and realistic expectations.

6. Policy Options for Pakistan

As Pakistan reassesses its Afghanistan policy, several options emerge for managing the challenges associated with the post-withdrawal environment.

First, Pakistan should continue diplomatic engagement with the Taliban administration while maintaining realistic expectations. Geography ensures that both countries will remain interconnected, making sustained dialogue essential. Engagement does not require complete

agreement; rather, it provides mechanisms for managing disputes and addressing areas of mutual concern.

Second, border management should remain a priority. Strengthening border infrastructure, improving surveillance capabilities, and enhancing coordination mechanisms can contribute to greater stability. Effective border management is essential not only for security but also for facilitating legitimate trade and movement.

Third, counterterrorism cooperation should be pursued through both bilateral and regional channels. Given the transnational nature of contemporary security threats, cooperation with regional partners is increasingly important. Shared concerns regarding militant organizations create opportunities for broader collaboration.

Fourth, Pakistan should continue supporting regional connectivity initiatives while recognizing the constraints imposed by current realities. Economic engagement remains one of the most effective tools for promoting stability and reducing incentives for conflict.

Fifth, Pakistan should diversify its approach to Afghanistan by incorporating economic, diplomatic, and humanitarian dimensions alongside security considerations. A comprehensive strategy is more likely to produce sustainable outcomes than a narrowly security-focused approach.

Finally, policymakers should adopt a long-term perspective. Afghanistan's political and economic challenges are unlikely to be resolved quickly. Effective policy therefore requires patience, flexibility, and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances.

7. Conclusion

The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan and the return of the Taliban marked a historic turning point in regional politics. For Pakistan, these developments initially appeared to create opportunities for enhanced cooperation, improved security, and greater regional connectivity. The expectation was that a Taliban-led government would contribute to a more favorable strategic environment and facilitate the realization of long-standing policy objectives.

The years that followed, however, revealed a more complex reality. The resurgence of the TTP, disputes regarding border management, tensions surrounding the Durand Line, and diverging strategic priorities gradually undermined confidence between Islamabad and Kabul. Rather than producing strategic depth, the post-withdrawal environment increasingly generated strategic distrust.

This transformation does not signify the failure of Pakistan's Afghanistan policy, nor does it imply the impossibility of future cooperation. Instead, it highlights the need for a more realistic understanding of bilateral relations. Historical connections, ideological affinity, and political expectations cannot substitute for concrete cooperation on issues of mutual concern.

Pakistan's Afghanistan policy is therefore entering a new phase characterized by pragmatism rather than optimism. Security management, border stability, regional cooperation, and diplomatic engagement are becoming more important than traditional assumptions regarding influence and alignment.

Ultimately, the transition from strategic depth to strategic distrust reflects a broader lesson in international relations: states pursue interests rather than expectations. The future of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations will depend not on historical narratives or political assumptions but on the ability of both countries to address shared challenges and develop practical mechanisms for cooperation in an increasingly complex regional environment.

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