



ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol. 05 No. 01. Jan-March 2026. Page#.5611-5624

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21850739>

US Withdrawal and the Regional Vacuum: Pakistan's Strategic Positioning in a Transformed Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

The August 2021 withdrawal of United States and NATO forces from Afghanistan precipitated the most consequential transformation of South Asian security architecture in two decades, creating a regional vacuum that simultaneously presented Pakistan with historic strategic opportunities and acute security dilemmas. This article examines Pakistan's strategic positioning in the post-withdrawal environment across four analytical dimensions: the collapse of the US-backed Afghan republic and Pakistan's ambivalent relationship with the resulting Taliban-led Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA); the competitive dynamics among regional powers, China, India, Iran, and Russia, seeking to fill the geopolitical vacuum; the TTP security paradox through which Pakistan's erstwhile strategic asset became its most pressing domestic security threat; and the structural tensions between Pakistan's security imperatives and its soft power ambitions in Afghanistan. Drawing on constructivist and realist theoretical frameworks alongside primary interview evidence and the most recent scholarly literature (2021–2026), the article argues that Pakistan has been unable to translate its structural geographic and civilisational advantages into durable strategic gains due to four intersecting pathologies: civil-military policy incoherence, the TTP security nexus, economic dependency vulnerabilities, and the absence of a coherent public diplomacy framework. The article concludes with a strategic recalibration agenda identifying the institutional, diplomatic, and communicative reforms through which Pakistan could convert its structural proximity advantages into sustained regional influence.

Keywords: Pakistan, Afghanistan, US withdrawal, Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, regional vacuum, strategic positioning, Taliban, TTP, soft power, South Asian security

1. Introduction

On August 15, 2021, Taliban fighters entered Kabul as the US-backed Afghan republic collapsed with a speed that confounded even the most pessimistic analysts. The images of desperate Afghans clinging to departing US military aircraft at Hamid Karzai International Airport announced the definitive end of America's twenty-year nation-building experiment and the beginning of a transformed regional

order whose full strategic implications are still unfolding (Rashid, 2024). For Pakistan, Afghanistan's most consequential neighbour, the state with the deepest historical entanglement in Afghan politics, and the country whose strategic calculus had been most intimately shaped by the post-2001 US presence, the withdrawal represented simultaneously a vindication, a warning, and a test.

The vindication was ideological: Pakistani strategic planners, civilian and military alike, had long argued that the Taliban could not be defeated militarily and that a negotiated political settlement incorporating Islamist forces was the only sustainable path to Afghan stability (Afzal & Mushtaq, 2024). The collapse of the Ghani government appeared to confirm this assessment and to reward Pakistan's long-maintained, if officially denied, relationships with Taliban networks. The warning was operational: the same Taliban victory that appeared to validate Pakistani strategic patience also empowered the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), whose attacks on Pakistani soil escalated dramatically following August 2021, converting a foreign policy success story into a domestic security emergency (Khan et al., 2025). The test was strategic: with the United States withdrawn and the regional order transformed, Pakistan faced the fundamental question of whether it possessed the institutional capacity, the diplomatic coherence, and the strategic vision to translate its structural advantages into durable regional influence (Bashir, 2025).

This article examines Pakistan's strategic positioning in the post-withdrawal environment through four analytical lenses. The first section establishes the theoretical framework, drawing on both realist and constructivist traditions to explain why states in Pakistan's structural position simultaneously pursue and undermine their own strategic interests. The second section analyses the immediate strategic consequences of the US withdrawal for Pakistan's regional position, with particular attention to the competitive dynamics among the regional powers, China, India, Iran, and Russia, that moved quickly to fill the geopolitical space vacated by Washington. The third section examines the TTP paradox, the mechanism through which Pakistan's most significant strategic asset became its most dangerous liability. The fourth section analyses Pakistan's soft power and public diplomacy failures in the post-withdrawal environment, arguing that structural advantages have been systematically squandered by institutional pathologies. The concluding section proposes a strategic recalibration agenda for Pakistan's Afghanistan policy.

2. Theoretical Framework: Realism, Constructivism, and Strategic Paradox

Understanding Pakistan's Afghanistan strategy requires engaging with two competing theoretical traditions that capture complementary dimensions of a fundamentally paradoxical relationship. Classical realism, with its emphasis on the primacy of security interests and the balance of power logic, provides the most straightforward account of Pakistan's traditional Afghanistan policy: Islamabad has consistently sought to maintain strategic depth in Afghanistan by supporting political forces, including the Taliban, that would prevent Indian encirclement and provide Pakistan with a sympathetic western neighbour (Afzal & Mushtaq, 2024). From this perspective, the US withdrawal and the Taliban's return to power

represents a realist success story: Pakistan's long-term security interest in an Afghanistan free of Indian strategic influence appears, at first analysis, to have been realised.

The realist framework, however, cannot explain the paradoxes that have characterised Pakistan's post-withdrawal position: the TTP escalation that converted strategic victory into security crisis; the diplomatic isolation from Western partners that has deepened Pakistan's economic vulnerability; and the reputational collapse among Afghan publics that has undermined Pakistan's capacity for influence precisely when structural opportunities for influence are greatest (Akhtar & Iqbal, 2025). These paradoxes require a constructivist supplement.

Constructivist international relations theory, following Wendt (1999), emphasises that strategic interests are not given by material structure alone but are socially constructed through the identities, norms, and intersubjective understandings that states bring to their interactions. Applied to Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, constructivism directs analytical attention to the social construction of Pakistani identity in Afghan public consciousness — a construction shaped not merely by Pakistan's material capabilities but by decades of behavioural patterns, narrative framings, and lived experiences of Pakistani engagement (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). The dominant construction of Pakistan in Afghan public discourse, as an unreliable, self-interested actor that supports the Taliban when convenient and closes borders when economically pressured, has become a strategic liability that material power advantages cannot easily overcome (Reyaz & Ahamed, 2022).

The article adopts an integrated framework that treats the realist and constructivist dimensions as mutually constitutive: Pakistan's material strategic interests in Afghanistan cannot be realised without the social legitimacy that constructivist analysis identifies as absent, and the constructivist legitimacy deficit cannot be addressed without resolving the realist security dilemmas, particularly the TTP nexus, that generate the behavioural patterns that undermine Pakistani legitimacy. This integrated framework illuminates why Pakistan has been unable to translate structural advantages into strategic outcomes and points toward the specific interventions that a strategic recalibration agenda must address.

3. The US Withdrawal and the Architecture of the Regional Vacuum

3.1 The Collapse of the US-Backed Order

The speed of the Afghan republic's collapse in August 2021, Kabul fell within days of President Biden's announcement that US forces would be out by August 31, reflected the depth of the institutional failures that two decades of American state-building had been unable to overcome (Yasin et al., 2024). The Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF), which had cost the United States an estimated \$88 billion to build and equip, dissolved almost without resistance, with many units surrendering or defecting to the Taliban rather than fighting for a government they had long since ceased to believe in (Mumtaz et al., 2025). The rapidity of the collapse created a power vacuum of historic proportions: overnight, the elaborate diplomatic, military, and intelligence architecture of the US-led

international presence was dismantled, leaving regional states to navigate a fundamentally altered strategic landscape without the stabilising, if deeply imperfect, framework that American power had provided.

For Pakistan, the immediate strategic consequence was a paradox of premature success. Pakistani military planners had invested decades in maintaining Taliban networks as a hedge against a hostile Afghanistan aligned with India, a strategy of strategic depth that had been consistently criticised by the United States, India, and the Afghan republic as the primary obstacle to a negotiated settlement (Zarawar et al., 2024). The Taliban's victory appeared to vindicate this strategy: the IEA's leadership, shaped by years of sanctuary in Pakistani territory, was unlikely to permit Indian intelligence operations from Afghan soil or to align Afghanistan geopolitically with New Delhi. The strategic depth doctrine appeared to have delivered its promised outcome.

The paradox emerged almost immediately. The same Taliban military capacity that had defeated the republic was now directed, through the TTP, against Pakistani territory. The IEA's religious and ideological solidarity with the TTP, both drawing on Deobandi traditions, both united by resistance to Pakistani state authority in tribal regions, made the IEA structurally unwilling to act against TTP sanctuaries in Afghan territory despite Pakistani diplomatic pressure (Qazi et al., 2024). Pakistan found itself in the uncomfortable position of having helped bring to power a government that was simultaneously its closest regional alignment partner and the primary sponsor of its most dangerous domestic security threat.

3.2 Regional Powers and the Competition to Fill the Vacuum

The US withdrawal triggered an immediate scramble among regional powers to position themselves advantageously in the transformed Afghan landscape. China, India, Iran, and Russia each moved quickly, though with different instruments, different objectives, and different degrees of success, to extend their influence in post-withdrawal Afghanistan (Rasool et al., 2024). Understanding this competitive dynamic is essential to assessing Pakistan's strategic positioning, because Pakistan's regional influence is always relative to that of its competitors.

3.2.1 China's Strategic Opportunity

China moved most decisively to exploit the post-withdrawal vacuum, leveraging its existing relationships with Taliban leadership, Chinese diplomats had met with Taliban representatives in Doha and Tianjin before the republic's collapse, to position itself as the IEA's preferred great power partner (Qazi et al., 2024). Beijing's calculus was straightforward: a stable, Taliban-governed Afghanistan offered the prospect of extending the Belt and Road Initiative into Central Asia, securing mineral resources including Afghanistan's estimated \$1 trillion in untapped lithium and rare earth deposits, and reducing the threat posed by East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) militants who had historically found sanctuary in Afghan territory.

China's engagement with the IEA has been pragmatic rather than ideological: Beijing has consistently resisted pressure to formally recognise the Taliban government while maintaining active diplomatic and economic engagement that functions as de facto recognition. The appointment of a Chinese ambassador to Kabul in 2023 and ongoing negotiations over the extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan signal Beijing's intention to use economic diplomacy as the primary instrument of Afghan engagement (Akhtar & Iqbal, 2025). For Pakistan, China's deepening Afghan engagement is simultaneously welcome, as CPEC extension would convert Pakistan into the primary transit hub for China-Afghanistan connectivity, and concerning, insofar as it reduces Pakistan's unique value to both China and the IEA as an indispensable intermediary.

3.2.2 India's Strategic Retreat and Resilience

India's post-withdrawal position has been the most dramatically altered of any regional power. New Delhi had invested approximately \$3 billion in Afghan development projects during the republic period, roads, dams, power infrastructure, the new parliament building, and had built an extensive network of cultural, educational, and intelligence relationships that constituted the most institutionally coherent soft power presence of any regional actor in Afghanistan (Shah et al., 2025). The Taliban's return to power forced India to close its embassy and all consular offices in Afghanistan, eliminating its institutional presence overnight.

However, India's Afghan soft power has proven more resilient than its institutional withdrawal might suggest. The approximately 15,000 Afghan graduates of Indian universities, the extensive Indian diaspora networks in Western countries hosting large Afghan refugee populations, and Indian digital and media platforms have maintained cultural and informational influence channels that operate independently of physical diplomatic infrastructure (Reyaz & Ahamed, 2022). India has also maintained back-channel communications with the IEA, and by 2024 had quietly reopened a limited diplomatic presence in Kabul. The competitive implication for Pakistan is significant: the window of opportunity created by India's institutional withdrawal is narrowing as New Delhi develops a post-IEA engagement strategy that bypasses the institutional infrastructure it lost in 2021.

3.2.3 Iran's Cultural Consolidation

Iran has pursued a distinctive engagement strategy in post-withdrawal Afghanistan, leveraging its Persian cultural heritage and Shia religious networks to consolidate influence among Afghanistan's Hazara and Tajik communities while carefully managing its relationship with the IEA, whose Sunni Deobandi ideology is in fundamental tension with Iranian Shia political theology (Ahmed & Akbar, 2023). Tehran's investment in Persian-language cultural diplomacy, Rumi, Hafez, and Ferdowsi as shared cultural symbols; Persian-language media; educational exchanges, has generated the most institutionally coherent cultural soft power presence of any regional actor in Afghanistan, providing a model that Pakistani strategic planners have repeatedly cited but failed to emulate.

Iran's post-withdrawal position is complicated by its own economic isolation, US sanctions have severely constrained Tehran's capacity for development assistance, and by the IEA's treatment of Hazara communities, which has generated significant Iranian diplomatic pressure. Nevertheless, Iran's cultural influence in Afghanistan has proven durable precisely because it is embedded in living cultural practices rather than dependent on formal institutional infrastructure (Ahmed & Akbar, 2023).

3.2.4 Russia's Hedging Strategy

Russia's post-withdrawal strategy has been characterised by pragmatic hedging: Moscow removed the Taliban from its list of terrorist organisations in 2024, hosted Taliban diplomatic delegations, and signalled interest in economic engagement while simultaneously maintaining its security partnerships with Central Asian states concerned about Taliban-inspired instability (Rasool et al., 2024). Russia's primary strategic interest in Afghanistan is stability at its Central Asian periphery rather than direct influence in Kabul, and its engagement has been correspondingly cautious. For Pakistan, Russia's posture is strategically relevant primarily insofar as it contributes to the multilateral legitimisation of the IEA that reduces Pakistan's leverage as one of the few states willing to engage the Taliban government.

3.3 The TTP Security Paradox: When Strategic Assets Become Liabilities

The most consequential and least anticipated strategic consequence of the US withdrawal for Pakistan has been the dramatic escalation of TTP terrorism on Pakistani soil following August 2021. The TTP, an umbrella organisation of Pakistani militant groups that emerged in 2007 in response to Pakistani military operations in FATA, had been significantly degraded by Pakistani counter-terrorism operations and US drone strikes during the republic period (Khan et al., 2025). The Taliban's return to power transformed the TTP's operating environment: Afghan territory became a secure sanctuary beyond Pakistani military reach, IEA ideological solidarity provided political cover for TTP operations, and the hundreds of TTP fighters released from Afghan government prisons following the republic's collapse substantially rebuilt the organisation's operational capacity.

The scale of the TTP escalation has been severe. Pakistani security forces suffered over 1,500 fatalities in TTP attacks in 2023 alone, the highest casualty figure since the peak of the insurgency in 2009-2014, and attacks have extended from the traditional Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA theatres into Punjab and Balochistan (Batool et al., 2025). The TTP's capacity to strike urban centres, including multiple attacks in Peshawar and a devastating attack on a police mosque that killed over 100 officers in January 2023, has demonstrated a qualitative as well as quantitative escalation in operational capability.

The diplomatic consequences for Pakistan's Afghanistan strategy have been severe. Every Pakistani request for IEA action against TTP sanctuaries has been met with Taliban denials of TTP presence in Afghanistan, denials that Pakistani intelligence assessments directly contradict, and with

counter-demands regarding Pakistani treatment of Pashtun communities and the Durand Line boundary (Akhtar & Iqbal, 2025). Pakistan has responded with border closures, trade restrictions, and, most dramatically, military strikes against TTP positions inside Afghan territory, each of which has generated IEA condemnations that further degrade bilateral relations and undermine the soft power investments that Pakistani public diplomacy programmes have made.

The TTP paradox has also created a fundamental strategic contradiction at the heart of Pakistani Afghanistan policy: the same instruments of coercive pressure, border closures, deportations, trade restrictions, that Pakistan deploys to signal displeasure with IEA support for the TTP are precisely the instruments that most damage Pakistan's soft power standing among Afghan publics. The Pakistani state thus finds itself trapped in a dynamic where security imperatives systematically destroy the reputational assets that a long-term influence strategy requires (Bashir, 2025). This trap cannot be escaped through public diplomacy reform alone; it requires either a resolution of the TTP security dispute or the institutional design of protected humanitarian spaces that insulate soft power investments from security-driven policy oscillations.

4. Strategic Opportunities and Pakistan's Positioning Failures

4.1 The Geographic and Civilisational Advantage

Pakistan's structural position in post-withdrawal Afghanistan is characterised by a paradox of abundant assets and inadequate returns. No other regional actor can match the combination of geographic proximity, civilisational affinity, linguistic heritage, and demonstrated capacity for Afghan engagement that Pakistan brings to the post-withdrawal competitive landscape (Yousaf, 2021). Pakistan shares a 2,640-kilometre border with Afghanistan, the longest of any neighbouring state. Approximately 35,000 Afghan nationals have graduated from Pakistani universities since 2001, representing the largest single cohort of Afghan-educated professionals and the most extensive bilateral educational investment in South Asian diplomatic history (Bukhari, 2017). Over 4 million Afghan patients have received medical treatment at Pakistani hospitals since 2001. Pakistan hosts the world's largest Afghan refugee population, an estimated 3.7 million registered and undocumented Afghans as of 2024.

These structural assets provide Pakistan with points of contact, influence, and potential leverage that no competitor can replicate. The shared Pashto cultural heritage, the Sufi religious traditions that connect Pakistani and Afghan spiritual communities, the cricket diplomacy that generates mass popular engagement, and the media and entertainment industries that reach deep into Afghan cultural life constitute a soft power portfolio of genuine depth and breadth (Akhtar, 2018). The question is not whether Pakistan has sufficient assets for regional influence, it manifestly does, but why those assets have generated such limited strategic returns.

4.2 Four Pathologies of Strategic Failure

4.2.1 Civil-Military Policy Incoherence

The most fundamental structural pathology underlying Pakistan's Afghanistan strategy is the persistent disconnect between civilian diplomatic objectives and military security imperatives that has prevented the formulation and implementation of a coherent, whole-of-government approach (Afzal & Mushtaq, 2024). Pakistan's Afghanistan policy has historically been made in GHQ Rawalpindi rather than the Foreign Ministry in Islamabad, with civilian governments exercising limited authority over the strategic framework within which diplomatic instruments operate. The consequences for Pakistan's post-withdrawal positioning have been severe: civilian public diplomacy investments in scholarships, cultural exchanges, and development assistance are routinely disrupted by military-driven border closures and counter-terrorism operations that reflect security priorities that civilian officials have limited capacity to influence.

The civil-military imbalance has also produced a strategic ambiguity in Pakistan's public messaging about Afghanistan that undermines its credibility with all audiences simultaneously. Pakistan publicly distances itself from the Taliban internationally while maintaining the operational relationships that critics identify as support for the IEA. It condemns TTP terrorism while declining to take the military action against IEA leadership that resolving the TTP problem would require. It advocates for Afghan humanitarian needs while implementing deportation operations and border closures that generate acute humanitarian crises (Ali et al., 2025). This strategic ambiguity may be domestically necessary, the military cannot publicly acknowledge its IEA relationships; the civilian government cannot publicly endorse military operations in Afghanistan, but it is strategically corrosive, preventing Pakistan from developing the consistent behavioural reputation that durable regional influence requires.

4.2.2 Economic Dependency and Leverage Asymmetry

Pakistan's capacity for strategic positioning in Afghanistan is severely constrained by its own economic vulnerabilities, which limit the resources available for sustained engagement and create leverage asymmetries that undermine Pakistani bargaining power. Pakistan's fiscal crisis, chronic current account deficits, recurring IMF programme requirements, and a debt-to-GDP ratio that constrains public investment, has limited the resources available for the scholarship programmes, cultural infrastructure, and development assistance that constitute the primary instruments of soft power (Alam & Mustafa, 2025). India's \$3 billion Afghan development investment during the republic period dwarfs Pakistan's comparable engagement, reflecting a fundamental resource asymmetry that strategic proximity advantages cannot fully compensate for.

The economic dependency dynamic runs in both directions. Afghanistan's own economic collapse following the withdrawal, GDP contracted by approximately 30% in the two years following the IEA's takeover, with international aid reduced from approximately \$8 billion annually to a fraction of that

figure, has made the IEA dependent on Pakistani transit trade, Pakistani medical facilities, and Pakistani educational institutions in ways that should theoretically provide Islamabad with significant leverage. In practice, this leverage has proven difficult to operationalise: Pakistan's coercive use of border closures and trade restrictions has generated sufficient economic pain to damage bilateral relations without generating sufficient IEA concessions on TTP to justify the soft power costs (Mumtaz et al., 2025).

4.2.3 Narrative Incoherence and Soft Power Deficit

Pakistan's public diplomacy in Afghanistan suffers from a narrative incoherence that prevents individual initiatives, however substantial, from accumulating into a coherent reputational asset. India's Afghanistan narrative during the republic period was architecturally simple: India as a development partner committed to Afghan sovereignty, democratic governance, and civilisational friendship, with the New Delhi-Kabul relationship framed as a counterweight to Pakistani interference. Pakistan has never developed a comparable master narrative, a single, consistently communicated story about what Pakistan aspires to be for Afghanistan, and the absence of this narrative framework means that Pakistani investments in scholarships, medical care, and cultural exchanges remain disconnected from each other and from any coherent Pakistani identity that Afghan audiences can recognise (Ahmad, 2016).

The absence of narrative coherence is compounded by Pakistan's near-total failure to develop strategic communications capacity in Dari and Pashto. While Iranian media platforms reach deep into Afghan cultural life through Persian-language content, and Indian media, Bollywood, news channels, digital platforms, maintains substantial organic reach despite India's institutional withdrawal, Pakistan has made almost no investment in the Dari and Pashto language content production that would be necessary for a coherent digital public diplomacy strategy (Manor, 2019). The result is a one-sided information environment in which Pakistan's critics, including both Indian and Western media, shape Afghan perceptions of Pakistani motivations and behaviour without effective Pakistani counter-narrative capacity.

4.2.4 Institutional Fragmentation

Pakistan's Afghanistan engagement involves at least eleven government bodies, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Inter-Services Intelligence directorate, the Ministry of Education (HEC), the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the National Disaster Management Authority, the Ministry of Information, Pakistan Television, the Ministry of Culture, and increasingly the KP provincial government, operating without strategic coordination, unified messaging, or integrated impact assessment (Yousaf, 2021). This institutional fragmentation produces the contradictions and sequencing failures that most damage Pakistan's public diplomacy: scholarship announcements are undermined by simultaneous border closures; cultural exchange programmes are overshadowed by deportation operations; diplomatic goodwill built by one ministry is destroyed by the security operations of another.

The coordination deficit is not merely administrative but reflects the deeper civil-military imbalance: effective coordination would require a convening authority with sufficient institutional weight to impose coherent strategic direction on both civilian ministries and the security establishment, and no such authority currently exists. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs lacks the institutional weight to coordinate ISI operations; the Prime Minister's office lacks the political capacity to override military security priorities; and the result is a public diplomacy apparatus that operates as a collection of disconnected initiatives rather than as a coherent strategic instrument (Afzal & Mushtaq, 2024).

5. Strategic Recalibration: A Reform Agenda for Pakistan's Afghanistan Policy

5.1 Resolving the TTP Impasse

No sustainable strategic recalibration of Pakistan's Afghanistan policy is possible without addressing the TTP security paradox that has converted a potential strategic success into an ongoing security emergency. The resolution pathway is structurally difficult but analytically clear: Pakistan must either develop sufficient leverage over the IEA to compel meaningful action against TTP sanctuaries, or it must develop a counter-terrorism strategy that does not require IEA cooperation and does not impose the collateral soft power costs that coercive bilateral measures currently generate (Bashir, 2025). The most promising avenue for developing IEA leverage is economic: the CPEC extension negotiations, through which Afghanistan stands to gain enormously from Chinese investment transiting Pakistani territory, give Pakistan a positive incentive instrument, CPEC progress conditional on TTP cooperation, that the coercive instruments of border closures and trade restrictions cannot provide.

The TTP resolution agenda should also include a multilateral dimension: bringing China, which has its own security interests in Afghan stability given ETIM concerns, into a coordinated framework for pressuring the IEA on TTP would both strengthen the leverage Pakistan can bring to bear and share the diplomatic costs of coercion among multiple actors (Qazi et al., 2024). Russia and the Central Asian states, equally concerned about Taliban-inspired instability at their periphery, constitute additional potential partners for a multilateral security framework that reduces Pakistan's isolation in its security confrontation with the IEA.

5.2 Institutional Reform: National Public Diplomacy Authority

The institutional fragmentation that has prevented coherent strategic direction of Pakistan's Afghanistan engagement requires a structural solution: the establishment of a National Public Diplomacy Authority for Afghanistan with cross-ministerial coordination mandate, dedicated budget, and direct reporting to the Prime Minister's office. Such an authority would consolidate the Afghanistan engagement functions currently distributed across eleven government bodies into a unified strategic framework, with the power to set messaging priorities, coordinate programme timing, commission impact assessments, and crucially, represent public diplomacy considerations in security policy

deliberations to prevent the sequencing failures that have characterised Pakistan's engagement to date (Alam & Mustafa, 2025).

The authority should include a Research and Evaluation Division responsible for commissioning annual Afghan perception surveys, a function that currently does not exist in Pakistan's public diplomacy apparatus, to provide the evidence base for adaptive resource allocation. Pakistan cannot improve its reputational standing in Afghanistan without systematic measurement of where that standing currently is and how it is responding to specific interventions (Ahmad, 2016).

5.3 Converting Assets: Alumni, Cultural Centres, and Medical Diplomacy

The three most immediately actionable reforms available to Pakistan's Afghanistan public diplomacy are the conversion of existing assets, the 35,000 Afghan university alumni, the 4 million Afghan medical patients, and the deep Pashto-Sufi cultural heritage, into strategically attributed soft power returns. The HEC Afghan Alumni Foundation, the Pakistan Medical Diplomacy branding programme, and the network of Iqbal Cultural Centres in Kabul, Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif, and Jalalabad represent the institutional investments that would convert Pakistan's unattributed humanitarian and educational investments into visible, branded, and strategically coherent soft power assets (Bukhari, 2017; Yousaf, 2021).

The Pashto cultural heritage dimension deserves particular emphasis as Pakistan's most distinctive and least replicable soft power asset. The shared Pashto literary tradition, Rahman Baba, Khushal Khan Khattak, Ghani Khan, the Sufi shrine pilgrimage networks, and the cross-border musical and poetic heritage connect Pakistani and Afghan Pashtun communities at a depth of cultural authenticity that no competitor can manufacture (Akhtar, 2018). A Pashto Cultural Centre in Jalalabad, an annual Pakistan-Afghanistan Pashto Literary Festival, and systematic investment in the digital distribution of Pashto cultural content would convert this organic cultural asset into a strategic diplomatic instrument at relatively modest cost.

6. Conclusion

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has created a transformed regional order in which Pakistan's structural advantages, geographic proximity, civilisational affinity, the largest bilateral educational and medical engagement in South Asian diplomatic history, should theoretically translate into dominant regional influence. That they have not done so reflects not a deficit of assets but a failure of strategic wisdom: the institutional incoherence, the TTP security trap, the narrative vacuum, and the civil-military imbalance that have characterised Pakistani statecraft in Afghanistan for two decades have proven as durable as the structural advantages they prevent from being exploited.

The regional vacuum created by the US withdrawal will not remain unfilled indefinitely. China's CPEC extension ambitions, India's resilient soft power networks, Iran's cultural consolidation, and

Russia's cautious hedging all reflect the accelerating competition among regional powers to establish durable influence in a strategically critical state. Pakistan's window of opportunity, the period in which its structural advantages are most available for strategic conversion, is real but finite. The reform agenda this article has outlined, TTP resolution, institutional coordination, asset conversion, and narrative coherence, is achievable within Pakistan's current policy environment if the political will can be found to implement it.

The theoretical framework of this article suggests that Pakistan's strategic challenges in Afghanistan are not fundamentally material but ideational: the social construction of Pakistani identity in Afghan public consciousness as an unreliable, self-interested actor has become a self-fulfilling strategic liability that prevents the positive bilateral relationships which Pakistan's material investments should generate. Reversing this construction requires not merely better public diplomacy but better behaviour, the sustained demonstration, through consistent and coherent policy, that Pakistan's engagement with Afghanistan is genuinely oriented toward mutual benefit rather than unilateral security gain. That demonstration, if sustained over time and institutionally grounded, is the foundation on which Pakistan's durable regional influence in a transformed Afghanistan must ultimately be built.

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