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Pakistan's Strategic Depth Policy in Afghanistan: Militancy, Strategic Interests, and the Crisis of State Legitimacy

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the structural evolution, strategic viability, and internal contradictions of Pakistan's "strategic depth" policy in Afghanistan. Grounded in a critical security studies framework, the study investigates how the Pakistani military establishment's historical reliance on selective militant proxies as foreign policy instruments has institutionalized a self-perpetuating war economy and induced a systemic crisis of state legitimacy. Utilizing securitization theory and Max Weber's typology of legitimate authority, the analysis demonstrates how the perpetual securitization of the Pakhtun borderlands traditionally masked by narratives surrounding the Durand Line and Pakhtunistan has systematically depoliticized the periphery, subverted democratic governance, and replaced human development with institutionalized militarism. Through a critical assessment of the post-9/11 landscape, the study evaluates the fragmentation of former proxy networks into hostile anti-state insurgents specifically the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and analyzes the strategic failure of the policy following the August 2021 Taliban resurgence in Kabul. It shows how the Islamic Emirate's subsequent refusal to disown the TTP, coupled with India's soft-power regional posture, has effectively inverted Pakistan's traditional buffer zones into strategic vulnerabilities. Furthermore, the paper interrogates the ongoing policy paralysis regarding state-TTP negotiations, demonstrating that both military counter-insurgency operations and transactional peace deals lack public legitimacy in the absence of institutional accountability. The study concludes that Pakistan's traditional strategic depth framework has lost global and domestic viability; without a decisive transition from a state-centric military-militant nexus to a human-centered security paradigm, any renewed military campaign risks being perceived not as a legitimate counter-insurgency drive, but as an extractive, coercive imposition on marginalized peripheral populations.

Keywords: Strategic Depth, Securitization, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), State Legitimacy, War Economy, Pak-Afghan Border, Military Establishment, Proxy Warfare.

1. Introduction

The concept of "strategic depth" has long been a cornerstone of Pakistan's foreign and security policy, particularly in relation to Afghanistan. This policy, rooted in the military establishment's desire to secure territorial and ideological depth against perceived threats from India, has manifested through the cultivation and deployment of militant proxies across the Pak-Afghan border region. This paper critically examines the evolution, implementation, and consequences of this policy, arguing that it has produced a counterproductive cycle of militarism, instability, and legitimacy crisis for the Pakistani state.

In response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), with financial and logistical assistance from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and

Saudi intelligence, played a central role in organizing, training, and supporting various Afghan militant factions along the Pak-Afghan border for an armed struggle against Soviet forces (Coll, 2004). Driven by concerns that Soviet expansion into Afghanistan could pose a direct strategic threat to Pakistan, the Pakistani state facilitated the mobilization and training of Islamist fighters in the border regions, transforming the frontier into a major theater of the anti-Soviet resistance (Shoaib, 2021).

These fighters were imbued with religious sentiments and nationalist spirit to effectively launch them against the Soviet Union (Haqqani, 2005; Hussain, 2007). The main motive behind the militants' unification was the calculated strategy of Pakistan's military establishment to glorify its national security assumptions and war economy, thereby winning the strategic game against democratic actors within the country and strategic rivals in Afghanistan.

The concept of a "war economy" is central to understanding this phenomenon. As defined by scholars of conflict studies, a war economy refers to a system of production, mobilization, and allocation of resources to sustain conflict. In Pakistan's context, this has involved the military establishment's institutional and financial interest in perpetuating a state of insecurity to justify its oversized budget, political dominance, and control over national resources (Siddiqi, 2007). This economic imperative has historically aligned with the strategic imperative of maintaining proxy forces in Afghanistan. Most members of the split militant organizations were illiterate, which eased the state's strategic project by convincing them to fight against the Soviet Union in the name of Islam and the greater national security interest of Pakistan (Shoaib, 2021). After the Soviet defeat, the state continued its strategic relations with the militant organizations operating across the Pak-Afghan border. They were given financial assistance and safe operating zones. After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the militants were re-settled and allowed to strengthen their ranks and files in the peripheral tribal regions (Taj, 2011). This period witnessed the consolidation of what would later become the Afghan Taliban, with direct support from Pakistan's military establishment (Rashid, 2000).

The events of 9/11 fundamentally transformed global political and security dynamics. Pakistan, despite its history of supporting the militant factions that had defeated the Soviet Union, ostensibly joined the US-led war on terror against Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban, which apparently ended the strategic alliance between Pakistan and the split militant factions. However, this alliance was never fully severed; rather, it was recalibrated (Shoaib, 2021). Pakistan-based militant factions justified their so-called Holy War (Jihad) against Pakistan on the pretext that it had allied with the invader and un-Islamic powers against the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Lamb, 2012). Following the attacks of 11 September 2001, the resulting policy shift, coupled with extensive military operations against militant networks, disrupted their organizational structures and intensified confrontation between the state and armed groups. In this context, the fragmentation and subsequent reorganization of militant factions contributed to the emergence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which increasingly challenged the authority and writ of the Pakistani state, particularly in the former South Waziristan Agency (Lamb, 2012).

Pakistan's last massive military operation, Operation Zarb-e-Azb, officially announced the eradication of militancy in the ex-tribal regions (Shoaib, 2019). However, when militancy re-emerged in some peripheral tribal regions, state authorities claimed that due to the military's quick and massive response, some militant organizations had shifted their networks to Afghanistan and now from they have been operating their violent campaign against Pakistan, allegedly now with the prior impunity of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. These allegations

are rejected by the Taliban regime (Khan, 2025). United Nations monitoring reports have, however, documented the presence of TTP fighters and their families in Afghanistan, lending credence to Pakistan's claims (United Nations Security Council, 2023).

The post-9/11 era is menaced by a blend of factors, including the self-believed autocratic military regime, the once-favored militant factions, the destructive role of rival foreign spy agencies, and Pakistan's decision to join the US's war against Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban. More importantly, this blend of factors was mainly inspired by the military establishment to sustain its war economy and strategic influence. Pakistan's policy of joining the US war on terror was a committed strategy for restoring and reconstructing the militarization project on the Pakhtun belt. The military's incensed policies wounded the state's Achilles' heel, imposing asymmetric militancy on the nation. Moreover, they faced the state with a kind of war where everyone was fighting against everyone, creating a perpetual security dilemma that served the interests of the military high command.

2. Theoretical Framework

This paper employs a critical security studies framework to analyze Pakistan's strategic depth policy. Critical security studies challenge the traditional, state-centric view of security, arguing that security should be reoriented towards the emancipation of individuals and communities rather than the preservation of state power (Booth, 2005). Central to this framework is the concept of securitization, developed by the Copenhagen School. Securitization refers to the process by which an issue is framed as an existential threat requiring extraordinary measures beyond normal political procedures (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). In Pakistan, the military establishment has consistently securitized the Pakhtun belt, framing it as threat to national security that justify military intervention, the suspension of normal governance, and the allocation of disproportionate resources to the security apparatus. This process has effectively depoliticized the region, removing it from the realm of democratic debate and human development.

The second key concept is state legitimacy. Drawing on Max Weber's typology of legitimate authority, legitimacy refers to the belief by the governed that the ruling authority has the right to rule (Weber, 1919). In Pakistan, the military establishment's reliance on coercion, its patronage of militant groups, and its failure to provide basic security and development to peripheral regions have fundamentally eroded its legitimacy. The crisis of legitimacy is particularly acute in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), where the state has historically been experienced not as a provider of welfare and justice but as an occupying force (Ahmad, 2017). This has created a vacuum of legitimacy that militant groups like the TTP have sought to fill, offering their own brutal version of order and justice.

The third pillar of the framework is the war economy. This concept explains the material incentives that underpin the military establishment's commitment to the strategic depth policy. The war economy in Pakistan is characterized by:

- A disproportionately large defense budget that consumes resources that could otherwise be allocated to health, education, and infrastructure.
- The military's extensive business interests, known as "Milbus," which thrive in conditions of instability and insecurity (Siddiqi, 2007).
- The flow of external military aid, particularly from the United States, which is contingent on Pakistan's continued role in regional conflicts.
- The informal economy of the border regions, which includes smuggling, narcotics trafficking, and the arms trade, all of which benefit from the absence of effective state control.

This theoretical framework allows us to understand Pakistan's strategic depth policy not merely as a rational response to security threats but as a deeply embedded system that serves the institutional, economic, and political interests of the military establishment at the expense of human security and state legitimacy.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretivist research design grounded in critical security studies to interrogate Pakistan's strategic depth policy in Afghanistan. The methodological approach prioritizes historical-process tracing and discursive analysis to examine how securitization narratives, institutional interests, and material incentives have shaped policy continuity despite demonstrable strategic failures.

Research Design

The paper adopts a single-case study design, treating Pakistan's strategic depth policy as a critical case for understanding the relationship between militarism, proxy warfare, and state legitimacy crises. Process tracing is utilized to establish causal mechanisms linking policy decisions to outcomes across distinct historical phases: the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989), the civil war and Taliban emergence (1989–2001), the post-9/11 recalibration (2001–2021), and the post-Taliban resurgence period (2021–present).

Data Sources

Primary and secondary sources inform the analysis. Primary sources include official government statements, military communiqués, parliamentary records, United Nations Security Council monitoring reports, and policy documents. Secondary sources comprise peer-reviewed academic literature, think tank analyses, investigative journalism, and documented accounts from former officials and militants. Particular attention is given to United Nations monitoring reports documenting TTP presence in Afghanistan, which provide empirical grounding for claims regarding cross-border militancy.

Limitations

The study acknowledges inherent limitations, including restricted access to classified military and intelligence documents, reliance on contested accounts of covert operations, and the impossibility of verifying all claims regarding state-militant relationships. These limitations are mitigated through source triangulation and explicit acknowledgment of evidentiary uncertainty where applicable.

Ethical Considerations

The research adheres to ethical standards regarding the representation of conflict-affected populations, avoiding the reproduction of securitized narratives that dehumanize or homogenize borderland communities.

3. India's Two-Tier Afghan Policy and the Crisis of Strategic Depth

India's two-tier Afghan policy has significantly undermined Pakistan's traditional strategic depth policy in Afghanistan. India sided with the new Afghan political setup that resulted from 9/11, which cemented state-to-state and people-to-people contact between India and Afghanistan (Ahmad, 2024). After 9/11, India initiated various projects pertaining to human investment and social welfare, which shaped Afghans' friendly perceptions of India. India invested in areas with huge and visible public interest and interaction, constructing its image as a primary aid supplier to war-torn Afghanistan (Ganaie & Ganaie, 2022; Haque, 2024). India's development-focused approach, including the construction of roads, schools, hospitals, and the Afghan Parliament building, represented a direct challenge to Pakistan's security-centric approach.

More importantly, India skillfully rooted its strategic influence in Afghanistan, which undermined Pakistan's decades-old strategic depth policy. India's approach was based on soft power and economic engagement, contrasting sharply with Pakistan's reliance on militant proxies and coercive diplomacy. Consequently, Pak-Afghan bilateral relations deteriorated, and both states alleged each other of sponsoring militancy. India's well-planned Afghan policy hugely impacted Pakistan's long-term geostrategic relations with the Afghan Taliban and other split militant organizations operating across the Pak-Afghan border (Ahmad, 2024). Currently, the worst is waiting for Pakistan, as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and its followers in the Pak-Afghan border regions have demonstrated a greater tilt towards India than Pakistan, a significant reversal of historical alignments.

The worst scenario has been observed in Pak-Afghan bilateral relations after the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan in August 2021. Pakistan expected that the Afghan Taliban would disown the militant organizations, specifically the TTP, operating from Afghanistan against Pakistan (Khan, 2025). This expectation was based on the assumption that the Afghan Taliban, having benefited from Pakistani support for decades, would reciprocate by reining in anti-Pakistan militants. The situation turned into a major strategic failure for Pakistan when the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan refused and distanced itself from Pakistan's strategic depth policy in the Pak-Afghan border region (Rana, 2025). Moreover, the TTP was given safe havens under the reign of the new Islamic Emirate, posing a serious security threat to Pakistan's stability. This detachment between Pakistan and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan restored India's confidence and trust in the Afghan Taliban, whom they had previously considered an ideological rival and strategically close to Pakistan (Ahmad, 2024; Qazi, 2023).

This shift has profound implications for Pakistan's strategic position. The failure of the strategic depth policy has not only failed to secure a friendly government in Kabul but has actively contributed to the emergence of a hostile or, at best, indifferent regime that tolerates anti-Pakistan militancy. Pakistan now faces the prospect of a two-front threat: from India on its eastern border and from a hostile or uncooperative Afghanistan on its western border. This is the direct consequence of a policy that prioritized the cultivation of militant proxies over the development of normal, mutually beneficial relations with Afghanistan.

4. The Declining Relevance of the Pakhtunistan and Durand Line Narratives

The Pakhtunistan question is currently less relevant, as it has lost the supporters who once imbued it with deep emotional and nationalist fervor. Common people across the Pak-Afghan border have now distanced themselves from the Pakhtunistan narrative, as it has no viable way forward. Furthermore, the disputed nature of the Pakhtunistan and Durand Line issues has obstructed regional peace and progress and only justified wars and conflicts in the Pak-Afghan border region (Shoaib, 2019). Conversely, Pakistan's military establishment has exploited these narratives for its own security considerations to sustain its strategic influence in the region. The Durand Line, a 2,640-kilometer border drawn by the British in 1893, has never been formally accepted by successive Afghan governments, serving as a perpetual source of tension that Pakistan has at times manipulated to justify its interventions.

The Pakhtunistan and Durand Line narratives, which were originally raised by Afghanistan and Pakhtun nationalists in Pakistan, are now, paradoxically, backed and pursued by Pakistan's military establishment. Historically, these issues have placed the Pakhtun belt of Pakistan and various Afghan regimes in the worst conflicting situations and have only benefited Pakistan's military establishment and the so-called nationalist factions. Pakistan has not intended to resolve these issues, as doing so would block the military's war earnings and its strategic and security influence in the region. The FATA merger, the Pak-Afghan border fencing, and then leaving the

border open again for militants' exchange reflect Pakistan's policy commitment to its traditional strategic depth policy in Afghanistan.

Pakistan is not ready to lose the conflicting narratives that lead to security dilemmas and conflicts in the Pak-Afghan border region, as this would diminish its geostrategic importance in great power rivalries. The perpetuation of these disputes allows Pakistan to position itself as an indispensable security partner for external powers, thereby securing military and economic aid. However, this strategy is fundamentally short-sighted, as it perpetuates instability that ultimately undermines Pakistan's own security and development.

The current Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan knows that issues once settled cannot be rejected and denied unilaterally. Their apparent policy is to focus on internal matters while keeping regional issues with the status quo, playing on all sides (Times, 2026; Fabrizio Foschini, 2026). It is also well known to them that Pakistan is playing strategically with these issues, which has only created wars and conflicts in Afghanistan. Pakistan changing its securitization policy in the Pak-Afghan border region would escalate human investment and economic development, which would definitively end the long-term monopoly of the military establishment on national affairs—something that is not acceptable to them. The persistence of the Durand Line dispute, in particular, serves the military's interests by providing a perpetual justification for its heavy presence in the region and its control over border trade and security.

5. The Anatomy of a Security State

Pakistan, being a security state, is structurally oriented towards war and militarization. The concept of a "security state" refers to a political system in which security institutions, particularly the military and intelligence agencies, dominate the state apparatus and shape national policy across all sectors (Ayoob, 1995). In Pakistan, this dominance has been evident since the country's founding, with the military ruling directly for nearly half of its history and exercising indirect control even during periods of civilian rule (Jalal, 1990). The Pakistani military establishment recognizes that abandoning its traditional strategic-depth policy could undermine its long-standing strategic relationships with the United States and militant factions, thereby weakening the institutional foundations of its coercive dominance over national security policymaking.

The central agenda of the US-Pakistan alliance has historically been to sustain the militant infrastructure in the Pak-Afghan border region and strategically use it against their strategic rivals in the region. During the Cold War, this meant using the mujahideen against the Soviet Union. In the post-9/11 era, it has meant using Pakistan's cooperation against Al-Qaeda while tacitly tolerating its support for groups like the Haqqani network and the Afghan Taliban, which the US has sometimes viewed as potential negotiating partners or as counterweights to Indian influence (Coll, 2019). This transactional relationship has perpetuated a cycle of instability that serves the institutional interests of both the Pakistani military and certain elements within the US security establishment.

Pakistan's national security policy clashes with realities and facts, being loaded with fake narratives that have no public support or legitimacy. The high command in the military establishment formulates and implements policies in absolute contrast with realities and public perceptions, which has contributed to the state's characterization as a failed project. Pakistan is based on internal colonialism, where the military establishment has surrendered the states and people's interests to its institutional interests. This concept of internal colonialism is particularly relevant to the peripheral regions, including the former FATA, KP, Balochistan, and parts of Sindh, where the state has been experienced as an extractive and coercive force rather than a provider of services and rights (Khan, 2019).

This hypocritical bargaining has continued since the creation of Pakistan, with power centralized in a single institution (Fair, 2016). Force is used as the first and last option whenever people dare to raise their voice against the illegitimate strategic contract between the state and militants. The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), a peaceful social movement demanding basic rights for Pashtuns and an end to enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, has been met with state repression, further eroding the military's legitimacy in the Pakhtun regions (International Crisis Group, 2020).

The current situation has unfolded everything, including fake narratives previously covered in sacred packaging. The military establishment's invocation of Islam and national security to justify its policies has increasingly lost credibility as the human costs of these policies have become undeniable. Now, the military establishment faces two options: either to suppress the growing consciousness of its failures or to acknowledge and address them. When reality is known to everyone, then everyone will discuss and judge it as it is, and no one can change its exact structure. The expansion of social media and the increasing access to information have made it increasingly difficult for the military establishment to control the narrative and suppress dissent.

6. The State's Hangover of Dialogue with TTP

The question of whether the state should negotiate with the TTP has become a deeply polarizing issue in Pakistani society. This debate reflects the broader crisis of state legitimacy and the absence of a coherent national consensus on how to address the militancy that the state itself helped to create.

6.1 The Case for Negotiations

One segment of society views that the state should start formal, decisive talks with the TTP to end the menace of militancy and insurgency. This segment argues that the split militant factions were mainly sponsored by the state. They were given everything by the state; even their violent ideology is not their own scheme of mind but an absolute state construct. Their journey from a common man to a militant was absolutely inspired, patronized, and legitimized by the state. This argument draws on the concept of "blowback," wherein the state's own proxy forces turn against it, and it suggests that the state bears significant moral and political responsibility for the current crisis.

Their understanding with the state began with criminal character building and internalizing the so-called Afghan war against the Soviet Union. The enforcing of Islamic Shariah by Sufi Muhammad in the Malakand division, the ex-Provincially Administered region, in 2009 was initially backed by the state, but the experiment proved futile when the militants violated the state's strategic line of command and operation. This history of state-militant collaboration complicates any simplistic narrative of "good state" versus "bad militants."

It is also argued that while the TTP is blamed for every security menace, it is a visible fact that after 9/11, various rival spy agencies have been involved in numerous security adventures in Pakistan. They enlarged, financed, and extended their sleeper cells in different corners of the state. The notorious Blackwater, the Indian RAW, the Israeli MOSSAD, the United States CIA, and the Afghan NDS have a track record of creating social, political, and security uprisings and instability in various regions. Some of them are still operating through their sleeper cells and hired contractors. Their distorted role is blatant in KP, Balochistan and Sindh, where various insurgent and militant groups have been linked to external support. Therefore, ignoring the damage done to the state by rival spy agencies while placing all the blame for destruction on the TTP is analytically flawed and politically convenient.

Pakistan is also forced to negotiate with the TTP, as their involvement in any regional or global incident will place blame on Pakistan, given that they hold Pakistani nationality and their families

are settled in Pakistan. Secondly, Pakistan cannot face their counter-attacks, as they are quite familiar with Pakistan's geography and topography and are currently given safe operating zones in Afghanistan. More importantly, in case of any clash with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan or due to regional or international pressure, the TTP will try to resettle in Pakistan. They were born into war, and they will bring a violent ideology with them wherever they settle, stay, and live. This creates a perpetual security dilemma that can only be broken through political, rather than purely military, means.

It is also viewed that if the US can negotiate with the Afghan Taliban after two decades of a long, fatal war, then why not Pakistan with the TTP, who are living a life of mercenaries in Afghanistan? The US-Taliban Doha Agreement of 2020, which led to the complete withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, is cited as a precedent for negotiating with ideologically hostile militant groups (Dobbins et al., 2020). The TTP is a serious security threat to Pakistan's stability and peace. In case of successful negotiations with the TTP, their assimilation into society and reversing their journey from militant to peaceful citizen will be a gigantic task for the state. On the other hand, if the state keeps them as militants, their mercenary status and nature will be exploited by Pakistan's enemy states. Neither appeasement nor confrontation is the answer; a middle way is better to launch the project of assimilation, which would include disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs, amnesty for non-violent fighters, and investment in the socio-economic development of the affected regions.

6.2 The Case Against Negotiations

The other segment of society views that Pakistan must come out of its negotiations honeymoon with the TTP. Talks in any form with the militants will be perceived as a state weakness, surrendering its sovereign will to the militants and paving the way for their re-emergence and reunification in the peripheral Pakhtun belt. Their violent and failed scheme of Shariah in the post-9/11 period has already been experienced by the state. The TTP's brutal rule in Malakand division and other areas between 2007 and 2009, which included public executions, the destruction of girls' schools, and the imposition of a harsh interpretation of Islamic law, is cited as evidence of their incompatibility with peaceful coexistence (Rashid, 2009).

They have no choice but to force people to accept their violent agenda and way of working. Any type of appeasement to the militants will mean bringing back the project of militancy and insurgency to the country. Previous peace deals with the TTP, such as the 2008 Swat agreement and the 2014 peace talks facilitated by the Afghan Taliban, have been short-lived and have allowed the militants to regroup and rearm (Zahab, 2016). This history of failed negotiations has created deep skepticism about the viability and sincerity of any new peace process.

It is also viewed by people that negotiations between the state and militant organizations will come at the cost of people's lives and blood. Their understandings revolve around war alliances and counter-alliances, which result in people's economic, political, and social exploitation and deprivation. Their engagement is expected to produce nothing except war, fighting for others, extending their economic and political influence, and spreading violence and terror among the people. The repeated cycles of violence and negotiation have created a situation of "protracted social conflict" in which the civilian population bears the brunt of the suffering while the military establishment and militant leaders maintain their power and privileges (Azar, 1990).

The debate over negotiations with the TTP reflects a deeper crisis of state legitimacy. The state's history of using and then fighting militant proxies has left it with little credibility among any segment of society. Those who favor negotiations see the state as morally culpable and pragmatically incapable of winning a military victory. Those who oppose negotiations see the state as weak and unable to protect its citizens from violent extremists. Both perspectives agree

on one fundamental point: the state's current approach has failed, and a fundamental policy transformation is urgently needed.

7. Restoring the Troika Alliance and Regional Implications

There is growing evidence that Pakistan is proceeding with old game tricks that cannot succeed in the current age of transformation and digitization (Rizwan, 2012). The rise of social media, the proliferation of information, and the increasing interconnectedness of the global community have made it much more difficult for states to conduct covert proxy wars with impunity. It was a calculated strategy to provide a little stay and break by initiating the FATA merger and Pak-Afghan border fencing after the long-lasting war on terror. However, this was not intended to change Pakistan's securitization policy in the Pak-Afghan border region. Rather, these measures were aimed at consolidating state control while maintaining the underlying strategic posture. Pakistan's restoration of its policy of militants' exchange on the Pak-Afghan border will backfire on peace and stability not only in the country but also in the region. There are credible reports that Pakistan continues to maintain relationships with certain militant groups, including the Haqqani network and elements of the Afghan Taliban, despite official denials (Giustozzi, 2019). Any strategic scheme by Pakistan involving understandings with the US and split militant factions, patterned on the 1979 model, will force regional powers with a stake in Afghanistan to restructure and revisit their policies. It will raise suspicions about Pakistan's role in allying with non-state actors and using them for diverse security objectives in the region. It will raise security concerns for China, Russia, Iran, India, and the Central Asian Republics. China, despite its close economic ties with Pakistan through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), has been increasingly concerned about the security threats posed by militant groups operating in the region (Small, 2015). Russia and Iran have also expressed concerns about the potential for instability to spill over into their territories and have increased their engagement with the Taliban as a counterweight.

It could obstruct the following developments in the South and Central Asian regions:

- China-Russia future strategic engagement in Central Asia, which is aimed at promoting regional connectivity and economic integration.
- China's regional economic expansionism in South Asia and Central Asia, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which requires stability and security to succeed.
- India, Iran, and Afghanistan trilateral strategic and economic engagement, which includes the development of the Chabahar Port in Iran as an alternative trade route to Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan.

The restoration of a troika alliance between the US, Pakistan, and militant factions will not be tolerated by regional powers, as it has fragmented regional peace and economic development in the past. This time, Pakistan's military re-engagement with the US and militant factions will be considered a direct confrontational policy against the regional powers. The changing geopolitical landscape, characterized by the rise of China, the resurgence of Russia, and the growing assertiveness of India and Iran, means that Pakistan can no longer rely on the unconditional support of the United States. A return to the old model of proxy warfare would isolate Pakistan diplomatically and exacerbate its security dilemmas.

8. Conclusion

Pakistan is committing a blunder by sustaining its obsolete and dysfunctional security-centric strategic depth policy in Afghanistan. This policy needs serious evaluation to effectively regain Afghanistan's confidence and to address the root causes of militancy and instability within Pakistan's own borders. Pakistan's Afghan policy is moving ahead with broken wings and

seriously needs to be revisited and rethought. It has lost some of its major past justifications, such as the narratives of Pakhtunistan, Afghanistan's aggressive stand on the Durand Line, and communist infiltration on the border. More importantly, after 9/11, all regional powers formulated a new Afghan policy that strengthened their role in Afghanistan. Pakistan lost its influence in Afghanistan mainly due to its obsolete, security-centric policy.

Pakistan's traditional strategic depth policy has neither internal nor external legitimacy. It is a mistaken, self-believed policy framed and formulated by a military establishment to sustain its own economic empire. Pakistan is now caught between the devil and the deep blue sea and cannot move in any direction. Moving ahead with the traditional strategic depth policy means hitting its head against an iron wall, as the policy is now fragile, futile, and fantasy. The only panacea for these problems is to dismantle the invisible military-militant alliance, which is the central catalyst for the construction of security dilemmas in the Pak-Afghan border region.

This paper argues that a fundamental paradigm shift is required. Pakistan must transition from a securitized, militarized approach to a human-centered security paradigm that prioritizes the well-being and emancipation of its citizens. This would involve the following concrete steps:

1. Dismantling the War Economy: Reduce the military budget and redirect resources towards health, education, infrastructure, and social welfare. Subject the military's commercial enterprises to civilian oversight and taxation. End the reliance on external military aid that perpetuates conflict.

2. Security Sector Reform: Bring the ISI and other intelligence agencies under civilian oversight and parliamentary accountability. Reform the military justice system to ensure due process and accountability for human rights violations. End the practice of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings.

3. Comprehensive Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR): Develop a credible and comprehensive DDR program for former militants, including vocational training, psychological counseling, and community-based reconciliation initiatives. Ensure that amnesty is granted only to those who renounce violence and commit to peaceful reintegration.

4. Investment in the Former FATA: Implement the FATA merger in letter and spirit, ensuring that the region receives its fair share of resources, political representation, and judicial rights. Invest in education, healthcare, infrastructure, and economic development to provide alternatives to militancy.

5. Rebuilding Trust with Afghanistan: Shift from a policy of proxy warfare to one of economic cooperation and people-to-people contact. Support Afghan-led peace and reconciliation efforts without seeking to impose Pakistan's strategic interests.

6. Promoting Democratic Governance: Strengthen democratic institutions, ensure free and fair elections, and uphold the rule of law. Allow civilian governments to formulate and implement foreign and security policy. End the military's interference in politics and its manipulation of the judicial system.

The failure to undertake these reforms will perpetuate the cycle of violence, instability, and underdevelopment that has plagued Pakistan for decades. The strategic depth policy has not only failed to achieve its objectives but has actively undermined Pakistan's security, stability, and legitimacy. The time has come for a fundamental rethinking of Pakistan's relationship with its own citizens and with its neighbors. Only by embracing a human-centered security paradigm can Pakistan hope to achieve sustainable peace, prosperity, and legitimacy.

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