



ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

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

Vol. 03 No. 02. April-June 2025. Page#. 448-457

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)

Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)



Challenges in Counterterrorism Cooperation Between Pakistan and Afghanistan After the US Withdrawal

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Abstract

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 has changed the security situations of the region while providing new prospects and obstacles for joint counterterrorism efforts between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Pakistan had anticipated that the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan would lessen the threat of militancy in the country; however, the situation went beyond expectations. The Taliban's reemergence intensified the security situation in Pakistan, which further increased the conflict between the two states. The study investigates counterterrorism efforts and challenges to Pakistan and Afghanistan since the US withdrawal. Pakistan's and Afghanistan's interests in fighting terrorism face obstacles from distrust, unstable politics, and differing main concerns for national security. This research article uses qualitative research to examine how regional states and international organizations influence the anti-terrorism plans of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Their counterterrorism cooperation has been limited for a long time due to their distinct political frameworks and security issues. The analysis concludes that strong cooperation between them is needed to boost cross-border efforts and strengthen security coordination between the two states.

Keywords: Counterterrorism, Cooperation, Pakistan, Afghanistan, US Withdrawal.

Introduction

The political turmoil of the last four decades in Afghanistan has had a major impact on the instability of all South Asian states, particularly the bordering countries. Afghanistan's lengthy conflict receives influence from major powers, including the Soviets, Americans, and British, as well as several insurgent groups in the region. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 triggered the current wave of global terrorism, which forced millions of Afghans to leave their homes and created a chaotic political scenario in the country. Furthermore, these instabilities have frequently had consequences for Pakistan, along with several neighbouring countries. Pakistan's long porous border and shared cultural, linguistic, and religious ties allowed the Afghanistan conflict to threaten Pakistan's peace. On the other hand, Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan's political and internal affairs let this wave spill over to its land (Gunaratne & Iqbal, 2011). The Afghan Jihad against the Soviet forces, which was launched by the US and Pakistan and supported with the help of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), introduced the Kelashankove culture in the Af-Pak region. Moreover, the Taliban rule (1996-2001) attracted jihadist groups throughout the world to this region.

The September 11, 2001, attacks on the Twin Towers and Pentagon revealed that these attacks were carried out by Al-Qaeda. As a result, the United States started Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan, which shaped a new phase of regional geopolitical conditions. The United States presence in Afghanistan dramatically affected security conditions for Pakistan by forcing the militant outfits to infiltrate Pakistan across the Pak-Afghan border. Pakistan joined the U.S.-led coalition against terrorism, but their alliance consistently faced strains due to political conflicts, different security priorities, and historical rivalries. Thus, Pakistan confronted terrorist groups operating out of Afghanistan. In December 2007, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) formed as an umbrella group of all militant groups inside Pakistan (Khattak, 2021).

Resultantly, an extreme wave of militancy started in Pakistan. This militancy was particularly prevalent in the former FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province for over two decades. Later on, Pakistan perceived that without peace in Afghanistan, it is difficult to bring peace and stability to the region. Pakistan, on one hand, fighting against terrorism, also started efforts with the help of major global powers for reconciliation between the US and Afghan Taliban. Consequently, in February 2020, a peace agreement was signed between the two conflicting parties. According to that agreement, the US and its allied forces withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the Afghan Taliban gained their control again in Afghanistan (Jan, 2022).

The United States military withdrawal from Afghanistan transformed the entire geopolitical situation in 2021. The swift collapse of the Afghan government and the Taliban resurgence brought severe uncertainties about counterterrorism activities in Afghanistan. The power transition in Afghanistan not only affected Afghanistan's home security but also brought new security threats to Pakistan. As militant groups based in Afghanistan started militant activities against Pakistan using Afghan soil.

Following the US withdrawal resulted in a power vacuum in Afghanistan, which was exploited by multiple militant groups to increase terrorism throughout the area. Currently, security developments have affected Pakistan significantly because, based in Afghanistan, the TTP terrorist group, along with other militant groups, intensified their activities against Pakistan. IS-Khorasan (IS-K), a regional affiliate of the Islamic State, made the security situation even more complicated for Pakistan, thus complicating its counterterrorism response (Giustozzi, 2021).

Political and Military Challenges

Counterterrorism cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan faces its main challenge in the post-U.S. withdrawal era because of poor political ties between these countries. Pakistan and Afghanistan hold similar security aims, but political trust between these states stands as an important barrier to collaboration. History provides the foundation for this mistrust between the two countries along with their conflicting national goals. Pakistan has persistently blamed Afghanistan for sheltering terrorist groups who attack its security forces, especially toward the TTP operating in the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and adjacent border regions. On the other hand, the Afghan interim government of the Taliban holds Pakistan responsible for their domestic instability (Jamal, 2021).

The current political situation in Afghanistan after the Taliban came into power is complicated. Despite its commitment to restricting militant groups within its domain, the Taliban leadership shows a pattern of refusing or being unable to restrain TTP from launching attacks against Pakistan from Afghan soil. Hostile relations continue because Pakistan expects Afghanistan to implement more aggressive counterterrorism operations against these militant groups. However, the Taliban faces a challenge in its ability to control insurgent elements operating inside Afghanistan (Khalid, 2016).

The resurgence of local militant organizations, cross-border terrorist activity, and international militant organizations poses security risks to Pakistan and Afghanistan. In many cases, Pakistan and Afghanistan have differing strategic security requirements. Pakistan continues to prioritize internal security in its counterinsurgency efforts against TTP terrorists, while Afghanistan's security forces focus on regional challenges posed by ISIS-K and other foreign militants (Sayed, 2021). Due to the disparate areas of concentration of their respective forces, Pakistan and Afghanistan have challenges in successfully collaborating on counterterrorism strategy.

Socio-Economic and Border Security Issues

The economic conditions in Pakistan and Afghanistan hinder effective counterterrorism collaboration. The economic hitches in Pakistan and Afghanistan pose significant challenges to the financing and implementation of comprehensive counterterrorism initiatives. The Taliban's seizure of power in Afghanistan precipitated the collapse of its labor market and budget, resulting in profound poverty, widespread unemployment, and considerable developmental shortcomings across the country. The economic vulnerabilities in these regions provide an appealing atmosphere for terrorist involvement and bolster their agenda, consequently complicating counterterrorism efforts. The issue of border security is of particular significance for Pakistani territory. Since the establishment of the Durand Line border, which delineates Afghanistan from Pakistan, this boundary has persistently been a source of contention between the two countries for many decades. Militants and rebel groups use this boundary between countries to facilitate unrestricted mobility, hence hindering cross-border counterterrorism efforts. Furthermore, Pakistan is unable to control cross-border militancy due to its hilly terrain and the support of local residents for terrorist organizations in border regions (Hussain, 2023).

Regional and International Dynamics

Managing the security situation in Afghanistan is made more challenging by the regional political ties between neighboring countries. Pakistan's engagement with Afghanistan is contingent upon its diplomatic relations with the latter and the global consensus on regional matters. The intimate partnership between Pakistan and China and Iran and Russia possess divergent interests over the envisioned future of Afghanistan. The Belt and Road Initiative facilitates China's expansion of commercial and security ties with the Taliban regime of Afghanistan, especially in Asia. Iran prioritizes counterterrorism due to the presence of Sunni extremist organizations near its borders, rendering Afghanistan's strategies against terrorism essential (Baqai, 2021). Pakistan has often expressed concern over India's increasing influence in Afghanistan since the United States' withdrawal from the region. Historically, Afghanistan has received substantial financial contributions from India, which also included military help to its government. The growing Indian engagement in Afghanistan's security issues alarms Pakistan, since it jeopardizes Pakistan's regional strategic goals (Siddique A, 2023). The engagement of the international community, particularly the United States, is a crucial aspect after the U.S. exit. The United States has mostly removed its military from Afghanistan while maintaining its influence over South Asia's security via diplomatic measures and humanitarian initiatives. The U.S. and NATO member nations should continue to help Pakistan and Afghanistan via training programs, information sharing, and financial assistance. The United States faces resistance because of its limited involvement in regional security issues as the Taliban consolidates its authority (Shahid, 2023).

Importance of Counterterrorism Cooperation

The stability of Pakistan and Afghanistan, along with the security of the whole region, hinges on effective counterterrorism cooperation between these two countries. Due to their contiguous border and the existence of several terrorist and extremist groups, Pakistan and Afghanistan

must collaborate closely to successfully combat terrorist activities. These factions will continue to jeopardize peace in both Pakistan and Afghanistan, along with the broader South Asian region. Statistics indicate that the international community, through its principal representatives at the United Nations and alongside significant global powers, needs to aggressively facilitate bilateral dialogues between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The changing security dynamics in Afghanistan require that Pakistan and Afghanistan collaboratively establish mutual countersecurity measures while enhancing their trust ties with each other (Zartman, 2020).

Literature Review

Since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, research on Pakistan-Afghanistan counterterrorism cooperation has increased. After the Taliban regained control, analysts examined regional security by looking at how their return impacts terrorist activities and border terrorism. The literature study provides a comprehensive picture of the challenges that Pakistan and Afghanistan face in their counterterrorism cooperation by combining the key results of several research studies.

The Impact of Taliban's Return on Cross-Border Terrorism

The security dynamics of South Asia underwent a significant transformation with the Taliban's reemergence in 2021. This reemergence has encouraged terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan, such as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K), and the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) (Jan, 2022). Under the Taliban government, these militant groups have increased their activities and encouraged the formation of a government in the erstwhile FATA based on the pattern of Afghanistan. The article demonstrates that the Taliban's dominance in Afghanistan leads to increased militant attacks on Pakistan, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the erstwhile FATA regions, which have long suffered from militancy. Furthermore, this research indicates that terrorist groups based in Afghanistan pose significant threats to Pakistan's national security and hinder the nation's efforts to fight terrorism (Jan, 2022).

The resurgence of terrorist groups imposes dual security challenges for Pakistan, i.e., security forces and civilian attacks have increased. The Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (2021) reports a 42% increase in terrorist attacks in 2021 compared to the previous year due to the actions of the TTP. The resurgence of Taliban authority has led to an escalating security issue for Pakistan, as evidenced by this statistical data.

Political and Diplomatic Implications

Numerous studies demonstrate that the resurgence of the Taliban poses significant political challenges for Pakistan and the entire region. The current political instability in Afghanistan presents significant challenges for Pakistan and Afghanistan in developing a cohesive counterterrorism strategy (Wazir, 2012). The historical context of distrust and distinct national security interests hinders effective collaboration between the two countries. The prevalent challenge posed by cross-border terrorism does not foster a consistent political commitment to establishing significant collaborative initiatives.

Khan (2017) is of the view that the vacuum of power following the US withdrawal has increased these challenges. The Taliban's control over key regions in Afghanistan, coupled with Pakistan's ongoing concerns regarding potential attacks from Afghan territory, has increased tensions between the two countries.

Militant Groups and the Complexity of Counterterrorism Cooperation

In Afghanistan, many terrorist groups are increasingly making it harder to combat terrorism. Mir (2022) claims that the TTP and IS-K both resumed operations in the area by exploiting the power vacuum that resulted from the US departure. As Pakistan and Afghanistan attempt to handle the

situation, the growing number of militant groups, which include both Taliban-affiliated organizations and independent elements, creates significant counterterrorism obstacles.

Jalalzai (2019) examines the internal conflicts within the Taliban that provide outside militant groups, such as IS-K, an advantage in internal power struggles. The rise of IS-K has increased security threats for both Pakistan and Afghanistan. The IS-K targets the Taliban leadership and the Afghan Shia population, adding to the already precarious security situation in Afghanistan. Since ISIS-K terrorists often enter Pakistani territory, Pakistan's security forces must guard against them when conducting TTP-related operations.

Challenges in Border Security and Intelligence Sharing

The security situation in Pakistan after the US withdrawal has deteriorated because militants utilize porous borders across Pakistan (Noor, 2021). The border fencing process along the Durand Line faces resistance from Taliban forces, who reject the validity of the Durand Line, which holds historical disputes between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Both countries face major difficulties when it comes to counterterrorism cooperation because they cannot properly share intelligence information effectively. Hussain (2019) asserts that the limited capabilities of militants in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa allow them to remain undetected due to weak intelligence-sharing structures. Joint intelligence operations between Pakistan and Afghanistan and their neighbors need immediate implementation to break down cross-border militant ties.

Research Questions

What factors most strongly hinder the development of a counterterrorism partnership between Pakistan and Afghanistan following the United States' withdrawal of its military forces in 2021?

What are the difficulties in counterterrorism cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan?

Objectives

To analyze major obstacles that prevents Afghanistan and Pakistan from cooperating in counterterrorism efforts in the post-US withdrawal era.

To examine the effect of the political situation, security concerns and regional factors on counterterrorism strategies and joint efforts between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Research Methodology

This research work is qualitative in nature, with the aim of examining the obstacles and potential benefits of the post-US withdrawal for the Pakistani-Afghan counterterrorism partnership. The research includes expert interviews involving security professionals as well as government officers and academic researchers who have knowledge and experience in Pakistan and Afghanistan terrorism and counterterrorism studies.

This study also employs document analysis from policy reports and academic literature to examine the security situations of both countries after 2021. It utilizes government official declarations, national and international journals, and newspaper reports from distinguished media organizations. This research approach deepens the analysis of the various barriers to successful cooperation and identifies potential steps for improvement.

Results and Discussion

Challenges in Counterterrorism Cooperation Between Pakistan and Afghanistan

The collaboration between Pakistan and Afghanistan in counterterrorism is increasingly challenged by several historical, political, and security factors. Effective collaboration encounters its most significant obstacle due to the profound hostility between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Participants from Pakistan and Afghanistan highlighted the complexity of their interrelations. The Ambassador to Afghanistan, retired Wazir (2022), a prominent Pakistani diplomat, said that conflicting national security interests and political instability hinder Pakistan's capacity to

collaborate effectively against terrorism. Pakistan has significant political mistrust toward Afghanistan, believing that its neighbor facilitates terrorist groups that assault Pakistan, particularly Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Historically, Afghanistan has alleged that Pakistan influences Afghan internal political matters and has always remained a major factor in every Afghan conflict (Khan, 2022). Dr. Khan, a Pakistani military expert, elucidates that internal divisions within the Taliban, coupled with its incapacity to exert control over terrorist organizations operating in Afghanistan, render effective counterterrorism partnerships unattainable. Groups such as IS-K and the TTP possess considerable operational autonomy due to the internal discord within the Taliban. The Taliban's reluctance to combat transnational terrorist groups poses a significant obstacle to Pakistan-US counter-terrorism collaboration. Major R underscored that Pakistan necessitates explicit assurances from the Taliban to avert their provision of refuge to militants that threaten Pakistan's security.

Political and Security Concerns Post-U.S. Withdrawal

In the post-US withdrawal scenario, Afghanistan and Pakistan faced serious security challenges because militant organizations started to reemerge across Afghanistan. The rapid Taliban ascension to power created favorable conditions that enabled IS-K and the TTP to have a presence in the region. The senior politician and former governor of Afghanistan Noor ul Haq, revealed that the IS-K and TTP's growing influence in Afghanistan and the increase in the number of terrorist attacks by these groups on Pakistani security forces will jeopardize relations between the two countries. A Pakistani police officer stated that TTP terrorist organizations have expanded rapidly because Taliban forces have failed to stop them; therefore, Pakistan security forces lack faith in Taliban promises of cooperation. Security issues emerge because terrorist organizations are more frequently using the Pak-Afghan border region to conduct their activities. The efforts by Pakistan to construct border fences and improve surveillance of the Durand Line have failed to stop militant groups from performing operations across the border. Military personnel from Pakistan and Afghanistan agreed that terrorist organizations could operate without any obstacles because border defenses were insufficient to stop them. A retired Pak Army officer stated in his interview that border security presents challenges to both Pakistan and Afghanistan. The successful implementation of border security requires joint efforts between agencies, though we fail to achieve sufficient mutual trust together with functional mechanisms.

Internal Divisions Within the Taliban

The domestic fragmentation among Taliban forces serves as a vital obstacle to the terror cooperation attempts between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Numerous respondents in interviews noted how the Taliban remained unsuccessful at gaining comprehensive control of Afghan insurgent groups operating throughout the country. Dr. Saleem, an Afghan political analyst, believes that Taliban leadership operates without unified control, leading to difficulties in interagency cooperation because they cannot manage terrorist groups such as IS-K and TTP operating on border regions. The multiple goals of Taliban leaders cause further splits in the organization. Among various factions inside the Taliban, those who maintain strong ties with Pakistan tend to cooperate with them to fight terrorism. Several Taliban factions hold a hostile perspective toward Pakistan since they consider the country a historical adversary. The divisions within the Taliban leadership prevent Pakistan from determining whether their promises regarding border militant control will be fully fulfilled. One of the senior former members of the Taliban organization, "While some factions seek Pakistan's cooperation," the Taliban has factions that remain suspicious about Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan, according to a lawyer interview. An internal conflict within the organization produces difficulties for our position because it makes firm assurances challenging to provide.

The Role of Regional and International Actors

Counterterrorism cooperation becomes more challenging because of overlapping international and local diplomatic forces. Security strategies in Pakistan operate based on strategic interests that particularly focus on the growing Indian presence in Afghanistan. The Afghan former governor pointed out that Pakistan observes Afghanistan's affairs through its animosity with India (pseudonym: Wazir). Since Pakistan views its interests in Afghanistan as a binary proposition, the country perceives every advancement by India within the country as detrimental to Pakistani objectives. The regional security landscape has been affected by the direct actions of China and Russia, along with Iran. The Taliban receive substantial financial backing from China because China made huge investments in both Afghanistan's infrastructure development and mining sector. The relationship between China and Afghanistan holds economic benefits for the country but Pakistan views this development through its strategic parallel with China. The security situation has become more complicated because Pakistan must handle relations with China along with the Taliban and simultaneously address its security priorities (Raza, 2023). After leaving Afghanistan, the United States retains significant influence in molding regional security relationships. Pakistan has shown wariness about the U.S.'s failure to play an active role in counterterrorism operations after its withdrawal. A former Ambassador to Afghanistan stated that the U.S. maintains engagement through humanitarian and diplomatic means yet its capacity to affect ground security developments in Afghanistan has reduced.

The Need for a Joint Counterterrorism Framework

Interviews with essential stakeholders demonstrate that Pakistan and Afghanistan must develop a unified counterterrorism framework to fight against growing security threats. The majority of the respondents asserted that effective counterterrorism requires well-defined communication systems and bilateral intelligence exchanges combined with joint operational coordination to stop terrorism from spreading between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The former Ambassador to Afghanistan underlines that a successful strategy demands Pakistani military and civilian institutions to unite in a coordinated approach. Proper counterterrorism operations start with shared intelligence, joint border security and cooperative law enforcement activities. The former Governor of Afghanistan, stated that his country faces ongoing threats alongside Pakistan. Unity stands as the sole pathway to success between both nations. These conditions necessitate trust between the parties together with their dedication to engagement and understanding of their security interests.

Regional Cooperation and International Support

Collaboration in counterterrorism stems from the broader effects that exist between neighboring states. Pakistan and Afghanistan must initiate cooperation with Iran and China to construct an anti-terrorism alliance. Dr. Khan made it clear that regional cooperation is essential for counterterrorism needs. IS-K must be stopped from remaining unchecked because our nations cannot tolerate their growth so we need cooperation across all neighboring areas. The international community should provide support to both Afghanistan and Pakistan during their counterterrorism operations. The effective fight against terrorism requires both countries to receive enhanced diplomatic support as well as humanitarian help and specialized assistance programs to enhance border protection while developing counterterrorism capabilities.

Major Findings and Recommendations**Major Findings**

The lack of political trust between Pakistan and Afghanistan acts as the main obstacle that prevents these countries from working together on counterterrorism operations. The Taliban's inability to regulate terrorist groups that exist inside Afghan territory makes joint work nearly

impossible. Both countries maintain different security orientations since Pakistan concentrates on domestic safety and Afghanistan emphasizes regional diplomatic objectives, which prevents them from achieving common counterterrorism strategies. The counterterrorism efforts face multiple complications from China, Iran, and India because their regional interests continuously compete in Afghan territory. There exists a problem of uncoordinated border management for terrorism between the countries, which hinders both countries from properly addressing their joint security issues.

Recommendations

Both Pakistan and Afghanistan must enhance their diplomatic connections to develop trust while working together on counterterrorism strategies. Pakistan and Afghanistan must implement a joint system for sharing intelligence data to monitor terrorist movements that occur between their national territories. Pakistan needs to work toward counterterrorism by harmonizing goals with Iran and China through regional collaboration for unified efforts against terrorism throughout the region. International agencies should assist Pakistan and Afghanistan by supporting their development of enhanced counterterrorism capabilities and missions.

Conclusion

The security landscape of South Asia saw a significant transformation with the Taliban's ascension to power in Afghanistan in 2021, coinciding with the withdrawal of U.S. military forces, which introduced new threats and opportunities for collaboration between Pakistan and Afghanistan in counterterrorism initiatives. Despite the mutual threat of terrorism posed by the border camps of TTP, IS-K, and other militant groups, Afghanistan and Pakistan face significant obstacles in establishing comprehensive counterterrorism cooperation. Pakistan and Afghanistan have trouble working together to fight terrorism because of a deep-seated mistrust that has built up over time, i.e., unstable politics, different security plans, and the Taliban's struggles to keep insurgent control inside Afghanistan. For many decades, Pakistan and Afghanistan have had a strained diplomatic relationship due to Pakistan's support of the Taliban, while Afghanistan has consistently accused Pakistan of meddling in its internal affairs. Weak counterterrorism collaboration is hindered by profound distrust between the two governments, as each prioritizes its interests above collective efforts. Expert and diplomatic assertions indicate that a lack of confidence is the primary obstacle to establishing successful counterterrorism partnerships. The government of Pakistan is profoundly concerned as the Taliban supports terrorist organizations, notably the TTP, which carry out attacks against security forces and civilians from Afghan soil. The political landscape in Afghanistan under the Taliban government is characterized by internal power conflicts and political divergences that hinder cohesive counter-terrorism efforts. The regional political dynamics among parties impede any endeavors. The increasing influence of China, India, and Iran in the area has posed issues by intertwining national security objectives with the dynamics of rising regional power struggles. The influence and interests of the regional countries further complicate the situation for joint counterterrorism efforts. Global powers such as the U.S. and Russia aim to shape the future security landscape following the withdrawal, making the situation more difficult for cooperation. Diverse strategies are available to improve the existing collaboration between the two states. Regional security necessitates the establishment of integrated intelligence-sharing frameworks, unified border security protocols, and coordinated counterterrorism initiatives for an effective response to terrorism. None of these initiatives can advance effective relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan unless both parties address past animosities and engage in open diplomatic discussions to restore mutual confidence. An effective counterterrorism policy for South Asia requires extensive collaboration between China, Iran, and other relevant regional stakeholders.

Pakistan and Afghanistan require international assistance to achieve their security objectives through humanitarian aid financing, capacity-building efforts, and diplomatic programs. The establishment of regional counterterrorism partnerships between Pakistan and Afghanistan would provide their security requirements and foster broader stability throughout South Asia. The successful trajectory relies on sustained commitment among international players, along with cooperative efforts and shared determination to address evolving terrorist threats.

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