



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Nexus between TTP and Afghan Taliban: Impacts on Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations**

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**ABSTRACT**

Pakistan and Afghanistan share deep commonalities-social, cultural, religious, and political; which increases interdependency. This study deeply investigates the security implications for Pakistan since the Taliban regime 2.0. Afghan Taliban have strong connections with Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), such deep-rooted ties between the TTP and Afghan Taliban; thus, directly impacting bilateral ties. Regional Security Complex theory and Constructivism has been applied to explain the whole situation. Pakistan's security and stability greatly depend on Afghanistan's internal political and security environments. The Neo-Taliban takeover of Afghanistan poses several challenges to Pakistan. In the aftermath of August 2021, Pakistan has witnessed a rise in militancy. Various articles, research papers, and books regarding the mentioned issue have been reviewed to explain it. In order to counter said challenges, this paper highlights various ways forward for Pakistan such as pragmatic and proactive foreign policy, regional cooperation comprehensive joint plan of action with the Afghan official

**KEYWORDS** Afghanistan, Interests, Pakistan, Politics, Security, Taliban, Terrorism, TTP

**Introduction**

United States (US) left Afghanistan and paved the way to the neo-Taliban to return to power in August 2021, Pakistan expected that the Taliban interim government would help in developing a new era of peace and stability and would help evict TTP leadership. But these expectations were not met. Increasing escalation in border tensions and terrorist attacks targeting Pakistan's security forces intensified relations between Kabul and Islamabad- the post-US withdrawal aided TTP and facilitated its nexus with all the foreign extremist groups in Afghanistan.

The vital geo-strategic location of Pakistan brings both challenges and opportunities to it at the same time. Along with other important aspects, one of the major challenge is the common border, the Durand Line, between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Pak-Afghan relations have always been puzzling in practice. Since the independence of Pakistan, the bilateral relations have been complex. Trust was breached when Afghanistan's government refused to support the newly emerged Pakistan's membership in the United Nations. Similarly, the historic role of Pakistan against the erstwhile Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and later the War on Terror developed doubts in Afghanistan's people regarding Pakistan's unnecessary interference in their country. This developed a strong anti-Pakistan sentiment in the common Afghani citizens. On the other hand, Pakistan has always blamed Afghanistan for assisting India on its soil against, Pakistan. As a result of such sentiments on both sides, the relationships between Pakistan and Afghanistan have faced difficulty despite having so many commonalities such as religion, language, and ethnic factors (Khattak, 2021).

Along with religious, social, and cultural similarities Durand Line makes both countries greatly interdependent. Various dimensions of security have greatly created a gulf between Pakistan and Afghanistan due to this border. The controversial status of the Durand Line, across-the-border insurgencies, human trafficking, and threats of Non-State Actors are some of the major tensions Pakistan faces on the Pak-Afghan border. These factors collectively deteriorated relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. On August 15, 2021, the Taliban ousted President Ashraf Ghani from office and occupied Kabul. Taliban declared their rule throughout; which had a huge impact on its neighboring country Pakistan. Pakistan hoped to gain significant interest from the development and expected improvement in the bilateral ties. However, unlike the expectations, the Taliban's behavior further complicated the relationship between the two countries aggravated the security environment and unrest on the Western Borders. Currently, the security situations have become complex to a great extent in the North-Western borders of Pakistan that is Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (Jamal, 2021). As a result of such devastating security situations, the bilateral relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan greatly impact; which leads to several uncertainties. Owing to the Taliban's behavior and constraints—they refused to evict TTP from Afghanistan (Saeed, 2021).

One of the serious implications for Pakistan in the current scenario is the presence of TTP in Afghanistan has become more active and dangerous since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan as they developed a strong *grasp in operating terrorists' network from Afghanistan* after the Taliban government (Abdul, 2023). If one looks at the history of TTP Pakistan and other terrorist groups; they were very active in Pakistan. As more than 96% percent of the area was cleaned from terrorism and is under the control of state administration as a result of previous military operations, almost the entire terrorist network is either eliminated, captured, or escaped to Afghanistan (Khalid, 2016). Among such terrorist groups, the TTP is the major one that holds deep strategic relations with the Afghanistan Taliban As a result of the Taliban government in Kabul, the TTP is the most beneficiary organization in executing its anti-Pakistan policies (Abdul, 2023).

The Afghan Taliban has a long history of supporting TTP. There are apprehensions that the Taliban provide the TTP with safe havens in Afghanistan, and the TTP is persistently using Afghanistan as a base to launch attacks in Pakistan. (Hussain, 2023) Furthermore, the Taliban also failed to stop the flow of weapons from Afghanistan to Pakistan (Donnell, 2023). As mentioned earlier, Pakistan shares a huge border with Afghanistan, therefore it has increased serious uncertainties regarding the neighborhood, and both neighboring countries are facing unavoidable circumstances and these impacts are highly connected with the security concern (Yousaf, 2022).

Pakistan's establishments, political and security, are greatly concerned about the security situations; raised in the post-Taliban takeover of Kabul. It has been asking the Afghan Taliban leadership to address Pakistan's concerns regarding such security issues in this regard. Similarly, Pakistan has accused the Afghanistan government led by the Taliban several times, of providing safe heavens to the TTP outfit; which is a major security threat to Pakistan (Giustozzi, 2021). On the other side the Taliban the Afghanistan government has repeatedly denied Pakistan's accusation and stressed upon not allowing any country or group to use Afghan land against Pakistan (Tahir, 2023). However, despite the Afghan government's policy, Pakistan has repeatedly urged the Afghan Taliban to stop the operation of terrorist groups within Afghanistan. The former foreign minister, Hina Rabbani Khar, delivered a strong message to the Taliban but terrorists continued to attack Pakistan's security forces in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtun (KP).

The relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan has been overshadowed due to serious security concerns for the last few years. The security challenges have gained more prominence, especially with the formation of the Afghan Taliban government in Kabul since 2021 (Sayed, 2021). Security issues emanating from Afghanistan significantly impact Pakistan's internal security challenges in troubling areas- Balochistan and KPK. This study aims to delve into these challenges. TTP and Afghan Taliban share a close relationship due to ideological alignment, cultural and ethnic coherence, and mutual interests (Khan, 2023). TTP's activities have seen an uptick following the Afghan Taliban's control of Afghanistan, leading to a series of terror attacks in Pakistan. As a result of such rising prominence of the TTP, the bilateral relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan are greatly impacted (Akram, 2023). This paper tends to address several important questions such as investigating the close ties between TTP and Afghan Taliban and the impacts of their close nexus on Pakistan's security. Similarly, it comprehensively highlights the uncertain relations between the two neighbors in the context of security aspects and paves a comprehensive way forward for improvement in the ties.

### **Literature Review**

Taliban's interim government in Afghanistan is likely to emerge as the most influential actor that has far-reaching impacts on regional security and Pakistan. Taliban and Pakistan both are aware of and know their internal dynamics. Both countries are facing several challenges that need to be addressed to improve relations between the two neighboring countries. These challenges include the lack of trust between the two governments the perception that Pakistan interferes in Afghanistan's internal affairs, the presence of terrorist groups on both sides of the border, and the refugee crisis. Afghanistan should work to build trust with Pakistan by evicting the terrorist groups from its soil and improving its governance. Improving relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan is essential for the future stability of both countries. The two countries need to cooperate on issues such as counterterrorism and border security to create a more peaceful and prosperous region (Threlkeld, 2021).

The significance of Afghanistan in the region is very clear in terms of both based on military and security prospects. Pakistan, being a neighbor of Afghanistan, is greatly affected by the troubling circumstances in Afghanistan. Pakistan has a connection of different nature with Afghanistan, For instance, there is a religious and ideological association of Pakistan with Afghanistan. Similarly, due to strategic interests, Pakistan supported various war groups and military militias in the past to preserve its interests. This shows a deep connection of Pakistan with Afghanistan, and it is rightly said that any situation in Afghanistan impacts Pakistan directly. Moreover, after the disintegration of the former Soviet Union, Afghanistan became more divided internally. The Afghan [Mujahidin] Taliban emerged as an important political and military force in 1996. They received Pakistan's diplomatic and material support. The post-9/11 events changed the nature of relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Keeping in view the Taliban's anti-Pakistan behavior Pakistan's decided to support the U.S. policy on the war on terrorism-Thus Pakistan officially launched a war against the Taliban. (Akhtar, 2008).

After the takeover of the new regime of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the former Pakistani Prime Minister, Imran Khan, said in an interview that his government was negotiating with some branches of the TTP to seek reconciliation with the Pakistani state. However, the existing situation raises questions about the limitations of Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban and its ability to persuade the organization to take action against the TTP. Pakistan may also impose some conditions on bilateral trade with Afghanistan. In the coming times, this push-pull situation may continue (Jamal, 2021)

owing to the grave security environment on the Pak-Afghan borders and the Taliban's changing behavior that is not cooperative.

Tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan have increased since the neo-Afghan Taliban captured Kabul. Unexpectedly, cross-border military clashes and terrorist insurgencies have increased in various areas across Pakistan. TTP and other militant organizations such as Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) have strengthened their anti-Pakistan policies and activities in tribal areas of Pakistan. The post-US withdrawal from Afghanistan raised hopes for peace and stability in Afghanistan. Pakistan was confident that the Afghan Taliban would contain their ideological counterpart TTP. In his address to the United Nations General Assembly Pakistan's former prime minister, Shahbaz Sharif, they indicated that Pakistan shared global concerns about the threat posed by the major terrorist groups operating from Afghanistan, especially Islamic State, ISIL-K and TTP, as well as al-Qaeda. Pakistan urged Afghanistan authorities to take strong initiatives to prevent such terrorist organizations from attacking Pakistan (Kaura, 2022).

After the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, several controversies and tensions have dominated the bilateral ties, yet there are some instances of cooperation and friendship over history as well. Back in the British rule of this region; that era mainly shaped the contemporary relations between the two countries. Afghanistan served as a Buffer State between the Soviet and British-controlled subcontinent. Historical agreement currently affecting the ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan. For instance, the Durand line (the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan) is a major factor of tensions in bilateral ties. Similarly, there are several other factors as well; which are shaping and influencing Pakistan and Afghanistan bilateral relations over the years. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and Pakistan's role in that war is considered a dominant factor in changing the geo-strategic landscape. Moreover, the US war on terror and the US role in Afghanistan created major instability in the region; which ultimately hurt the relations vis-a-vis Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan is blamed for its dual role in the war on terror; such as supporting the Taliban which created complexities in the US-Pakistan ties. Despite the issues between Afghanistan and Pakistan, during Karzai's regime, there was cooperation and friendship between the two countries as both were dealing with terrorist networks. Cooperation and mutual consensus in several common grounds such as security, trade, culture, and counter-terrorism areas were the major factors to boost the relations between the two neighbors (Durani, 2002).

According to Huma Baqai: there is a close interconnectedness between Pakistan and Afghanistan; however, this interconnectedness often leads to tensions. Considering the case of refugees, hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees are badly impacting Pakistani society and economy. (Baqai, 2021).

### **Theoretical Framework**

In this paper, we have employed Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). This theory explains security dynamics with the help of regional prospects. The concept of security is highly regional in nature. The actions and policies of actors on the forum of the international security system are highly influenced by regional security. The importance of regional actors and their relationships has been given great emphasize in RSCT. Similarly, some states' primary national security concerns are so closely interconnected with each other that they cannot be addressed and dealt with independently. These interests are highly interdependent as a result of shared geographical, cultural, and historical factors moreover, the role of the Non-State. Actors

in shaping regional security dynamics are also important to RSCT. This theoretical framework gives a holistic perception of security by addressing the interactions among states, and non-state actors along with the distinguished character of a particular region.

The complex relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan can be best explained through the lenses of Regional Security Complex Theory. Afghanistan and Pakistan are the two South Asian states that have more than 2600 kilometers of border names Durand line. Besides this, both countries share several commonalities in terms of social, religious, and cultural aspects. More importantly, Pakistan considers its economic and national security and stability directly dependent on peace and stability in Afghanistan. There are several ways in which Pakistan and Afghanistan find their security issues interlinked and interdependent. For instance, due to a long common border between the two, Pakistan faces serious security implications on the western border that cannot be addressed alone, but rather with bilateral engagement and actions. Similarly, the role of the Non-state actor in the shape of TTP as a major insurgent group cannot be ignored which is deteriorating the relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan, especially in terms of security. The relationships between Pakistan and Afghanistan are greatly affected as a result of shared geographical interests, cultural and historical factors- and the rise of TTP has immensely damaged Pakistan-Taliban tie.

The existing situation, between Pakistan and Afghan Taliban, can also be expounded through the lenses of Constructivism Theory. For instance, Constructivism suggests that international relations are shaped by shared ideas, norms, and identities rather than solely by material interests (Wendt, 1999). Applying this theory to the Afghan Taliban and TTP nexus, one could argue that their collaboration is influenced by a shared interpretation of Islamic ideology, tribal ties, and historical grievances. The Afghan Taliban and TTP may see themselves as defenders of a particular interpretation of Islam, leading them to cooperate based on common beliefs rather than solely strategic interests. Additionally, shared tribal affiliations and historical connections between communities on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border may contribute to their collaboration. Regarding the recent uncertain bilateral ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan, a Constructivist perspective would emphasize the role of shared norms and perceptions. Factors such as historical mistrust, divergent national narratives, and differing views on regional stability may be influencing the strained relationship between the two countries. Constructivism would suggest that building common norms and fostering a shared understanding of security concerns could contribute to improved bilateral ties. Constructivism provides a lens through which to analyze the Afghan Taliban and TTP nexus, as well as the uncertain bilateral ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan, by focusing on shared ideas, norms, and identities shaping international relations.

### **Natural Alliance between TTP and Afghan Taliban**

In August 2021, when the Afghan Taliban took over Kabul by ousting President Ashraf Ghani, the policymakers in Pakistan perceived it as a positive change between the two states that have been facing a security crisis. Many in Islamabad believed in reshaping the bilateral ties with the brand-new strategy of re-engagement and cooperation previously such an approach was lacking in bilateral ties. Pakistan expected a serious crackdown against TTP by the new regime of the Taliban. As Pakistan had good ties with various groups of Afghan Taliban such as the Haqqani Network; therefore, Pakistan expected a collaboration with the Taliban regime on the issues of counter-terrorism. In the past, Pakistan always provided evidence to the Ghani and Karzai regimes for allowing Afghan soil against Pakistan (Kaura, 2022).

The post-Ghani political change in Afghanistan was considered encouraging and imposed serious restrictions and the TTP outfit would be expelled from Afghanistan. However, the situation became conflicting and the Taliban government released thousands of TTP fighters including their deputy, Molvi Faqir Muhammad. They were jailed by the previous governments in Afghanistan. Similarly, the TTP outfit gained massive freedom of movement within Afghanistan along with taking control of the US left sophisticated weaponry (Donnell, 2023). This remarkably increased the militant activities within various areas of Pakistan over the last year. There are various factors show that how both the TTP and Afghanistan Taliban are enjoying a natural alliance and have deep trust, and mutual respect in several ways.

In the wake of the 9/11 event, the US launched the war on terror and invaded Afghanistan. As a result, the Afghan Taliban, along with their several Jihadist allies such as Al Qaeda, decided to resist against the US invasion. As the outcome of the post 9/11 Jihadi politics, the TTP organization merged in 2007. The major leadership of TTP Bait Ullah Mehsud, Hakim Ullah, and Maulana Fazlullah -greatly assisted the Afghan Taliban in the insurgency against the US and developed a close association and deep understanding with them. TTP is highly inspired by the idea of the Islamic Emirate of Afghan Taliban- TTP claimed to implement sharia in Pakistan- but terrorists and anti-Pakistan activities have exposed them. The leadership of TTP considers their movement as the extension of the Afghan Taliban. During the war on terror, the TTP majorly provided shelter to the individuals Afghan Taliban and Al Qaeda in various areas of Pakistan. It considers Mullah Omar and later on other leaders of the Afghan Taliban as their spiritual leaders and tends to follow their footsteps. More importantly, the TTP always blames Pakistan for supporting the US against the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in the war on terror; which is one of the major reasons for its insurgency against Pakistan. This shows a close nexus between the TTP and the Afghan Taliban (Malkasian, 2021).

TTP made a major change in 2020 by announcing shadow governors for various areas within Pakistan and declared its group's first-ever centralized military training system. At the same time, the TTP Chief, Noor Wali Mehsud, proclaimed that the only way forward for the victory of TTP in Pakistan is the follow the footsteps of the Afghan Taliban (Ahmad, 2023). Apart from the ideological commonalities, the TTP looks highly influenced by the Afghanistan Taliban's organizational structure and war strategies; which shows close alliance between the two groups.

Apart from ideological and spiritual factors, the majority of Afghan Taliban and TTP share the same ethnicity. The majority of them belong to Pashtun ethnicity which further brings them close together. As mentioned, the reason behind sheltering Afghan Taliban in the war on terror is because of the same ethnic identity as well the ideological grounds. It is the reason for showing honour, and brotherhood; that made the TTP assist the Afghan Taliban remarkably in the war against the US. Thus, in return, the Afghan Taliban are also showing their loyalty and proof of mutual coordination by not expelling them from the soil of Afghanistan (Khan, 2023).

More importantly, the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) has strengthened its roots in the various areas of both Pakistan and Afghanistan. The ISKP is majorly detached fighters from both the TTP and Afghan Taliban. Unlike the TTP, ISKP launched its struggle for the implementation of its version of the caliphate and has refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Taliban caliphate. The Afghanistan Taliban have taken serious actions against ISKP and consider it as an existential threat to its Islamic Emirate (Ali, 2020). Therefore, the Afghan Taliban keeps strong ties with the TTP to avoid any possible collaboration between TTP and ISKP and keep the later completely

isolated. Such ties between the TTP and Afghan Taliban become further stronger as a result of their strong ideological, cultural, and ethnic connections which have been discussed above (Raza, 2023).

### **TTP and Afghan Taliban: Implications for Pak-Afghan Relations**

Pakistan faces serious security consequences owing to the TTP and Afghan Taliban nexus. TTP and the Afghan Taliban nexus have deteriorated traditional relations between the Taliban and Pakistan.

The post-Taliban Afghanistan has become a strong and safe haven for TTP to operate against Pakistan. TTP's attacks across the border have increased over the past two years. According to a report, an increase of 79 percent in such attacks occurred in the year 2023 (Manisha, 2023), and these attacks also continued in early 2024. Similarly, in the past few months, on the Chaman and Torkham border with Afghanistan, Pakistan came across several significant events; in terms of cross-border firings and clashes. Further, terrorists attacked the Chitral region of Pakistan from Afghanistan (Siddique A, 2023). These are serious security challenges that Pakistan is facing in the aftermath of the Taliban's control of Kabul in August 2021. Moreover, Pakistan experienced a surge in terrorist attacks in 2023 by the TTP newt the main terrorist group (Hussain, 2023). Apart from these cases, Pakistan faces constant security threats from the western border, which is badly impacting bilateral ties (Shahid, 2023).

Persistent attacks by Terrorists and security concerns have convinced Pakistan's political and security policymakers that Afghanistan's Taliban are assisting anti-Pakistan groups. Pakistani authorities accused the Afghan government led by the Taliban of providing safe sanctuaries to the TTP (Iqbal, 2023). Both Pakistan and Afghanistan are neighbour states that have great dependency on one another in several sectors, especially economy and security. As a result of such deep understanding between the Afghan Taliban and TTP, both Pakistan and Afghanistan lack consistency in various policies towards one another.

Most recently, Pakistan adopted a strict policy of sending the Afghan refugees back to home that was hosted by the country for several decades. According to several analysts such an extreme approach of Pakistan is the outcome of the Afghan Taliban's denial policy over the issue of TTP. The Afghan Taliban have expressed great concerns over Pakistan's decision to send the refugees and has declared it unethical and inhumane. Similarly, one can notice minor skirmishes and mismanagement on the border line between Pakistan and Afghanistan; that is the result of such strained bilateral ties. However, such an approach from both sides can't improve the bilateral ties; which are otherwise important for the people of both countries (Micinski, 2023).

In the past few decades, the Taliban enjoyed great relations with Pakistan in several aspects. Keeping their past positive experience in mind, Pakistan was highly optimistic when the Taliban took control of Kabul. Pakistan wanted to reshape its ties with the newly born regime on brand new patterns (Jamal, 2021). However, it could not achieve its goals and currently, the relations between the two neighbors are highly dominated by misunderstandings and uncertainties. However, there are several ways through which both states can frame a collective framework to improve bilateral ties and take maximum advantage of the shared opportunities.

It is rightly said that a state can change friends or foes; yet it cannot change neighbors. It is therefore both state should jointly work for enhancing the bilateral

relationship in order to pursue broader interests. Instead of building security walls and raising measures, both states can stabilize and build friendly ties by utilizing several common areas of interest. For instance, Same Pashtun culture and shared ethic norms could be used to improve bilateral relationship. On both sides of the Durand line, millions of Pashtun population exist that have several significant common grounds. Their food, physical getup, way of communication, and religious thoughts are remarkably identical. Therefore, instead of raising high-security walls and spending billions of money on border security, both states should work on confidence-building measures; that may cost much less. Being stable and powerful in several sectors as compared to Afghanistan Pakistan should start the initiatives in this regard. Similarly, Pakistan is more engaged diplomatically with the world as compared to Afghanistan; thus, it should play the role of big brother to normalize the ties.

As far as security and border management are concerned, instead of blame games and misunderstandings, both states should enhance security through collaboration and collective patrols. There should be a broad consensus and intelligence sharing between the two countries on overcoming border issues and security concerns. More importantly, the 21st century is the era of interdependence and cooperation. Thus, diplomatic channels should be used to develop an understanding of issues like terrorism and cross-border insurgency, etc. Along with state actors, influential non-state actors should be used on a regular basis to build regular channels and proper communication on such issues.

Similarly, the contemporary government of the Taliban in Afghanistan faces serious isolation in the international arena. Keeping its diplomatic crisis in mind, the Taliban government should abandon stubbornness and should address Pakistan's reservations over several matters. It should accept Pakistan's stance on counter-terrorism and security. In this regard, mutual consensus is the need of the hour and the Afghan Taliban should uphold a more responsible attitude while keeping its isolation and diplomatic hurdles in mind.

## Conclusion

Pakistan and Afghanistan are major states in South Asia. Being neighbouring states, both are significant to each other both are interdependent to the maximum extent in several sectors such as security, economic affairs, and social harmony. In fact, it is very important for both states to cooperate in these sectors in order to pursue smooth bilateral ties. However, the contemporary ties between the two states are greatly overshadowed by the security issues; which has negatively impacted bilateral relations. The whole discussion in this paper reveals that, the strong bondage between TTP and Afghanistan Taliban which is backed by historical, strategic, ethnic, cultural, and religious factors; is the main reason that contributes to the strained bilateral ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Pakistan and Afghanistan should seriously work to find some common grounds for cooperation and stability in the region. The International community should step forward as well, to develop constructive relationships between Pakistan and Afghanistan-both stable states are in the interest of the global community in bringing peace and harmony.

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