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Post-US Withdrawal Situation in Afghanistan: Implications for Pakistan



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Abstract: *Due to geographical, ethnic and cultural proximity, Pakistan has advantaged and suffered like jugular vein from the peace and conflict-ridden circumstance of Afghanistan. Daniel S. Markey in his book analogizes Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the USA with three sinners who were trapped in hell and tormented each other for decades (Markey, 2013). The primary purpose of this article is to examine the effects of post-US withdrawal on Pakistan being a neighbouring country. This research paper also delves into the situation in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime and their relationship with TTP. Taliban are sitting at the helm of affairs who had close relations with Pakistan and ideological leanings with TTP which remained active and involved in terrorist activities in Pakistan. After identifying the core problems, some recommendations are suggested by applying the theory of economic integration and behavioural decision-making, to re-establish stability in this region.*

Key Words: Terrorism, Security, Human Rights

Introduction

Pakistan and Afghanistan not only share a frontier region but also have historical, religious, ethnic, and cultural similarities. Yet the relationship remained hostile for most of the time. After partition, Afghanistan was the only country to oppose the establishment of Pakistan. The Durand Line and Pashtunistan are the misfortune between the countries. Despite the claim of territory, Pakistan has always tried to maintain good relations with the neighbouring countries. The Soviet-Afghan conflict of 1979 dramatically changed the dynamics and retained Pakistan's position as a key player in the game. The situation was exploited by the military dictator Zia-ul-Haq, who in scavenging the USA military and economic assistance, provided bases and prepared jihadists on Pakistan's soil to fight

against the Soviets. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and with the beginning of the civil war the country became divided into various groups. The Taliban, supported by Pakistan as well, started their own movement and rose to the helm of affairs in 1996. The relations between the Taliban's regime and Pakistan remained cordial in nature because the former served the latter as a proxy for regional interests. Since 9/11, there has been a drastic change in the relations between both countries. Pakistan paid the price in terms of lives and economy for having a destabilized and war-ridden neighbour. When the West specifically America gave up their interests, the new players assumed a new position in the region. Thus, relations with Afghanistan mean dealing with India, China, Russia, the US, and Iran. After the US withdrawal Taliban took over the control of the

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government and with the resurgence of ISIS, Pakistan became more concerned about its role as a key player in regional stability.

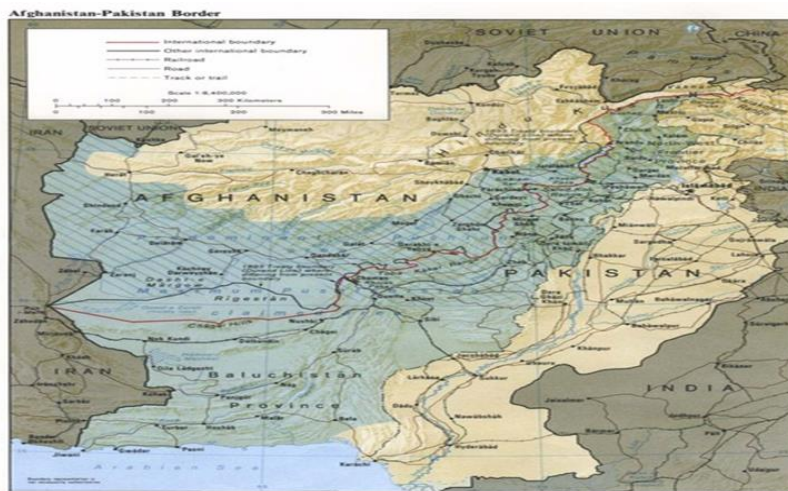
Research Objectives

This research paper delves into the situation in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime and their relationship with TTP. The main purpose is to examine the effects of post-US withdrawal on Pakistan. After identifying the core problems, some recommendations are suggested to re-establish the stability in this region.

This research work talks about the regime change in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the US. Taliban took over the govt. Afghanistan

Taliban had close relations with Pakistan when they were in opposition. Taliban also has close ideological relations with TTP which is working in Pakistan and responsible for terrorist activities. As Pakistan is the neighbouring country of Afghanistan and due to open borders like the Durand Line, it also suffered a lot in the war on terror especially in the FATA and in Waziristan. This research paper deals with the effect of the changing regime in Afghanistan and as well as in Pakistan. I also put some recommendations for the betterment of Pakistan with the help of certain theories, especially the theory of economic integration and the theory of behavioural decision-making.

Figure 1



Literature Review

Many notable writers and eminent journalists talked about the situation of Afghanistan under the Taliban and its implications for Pakistan. V Modebadze talked about the Afghan Taliban as a new entity threat to international stability and peace. He talked about the extremist approach of the Taliban and its implications on regional stability. H Hamdi also made a comparison of the past and present systems of higher education in Afghanistan and mentioned the status of Women under the Taliban regime in his research work "Higher Education of Afghanistan under the Taliban Rule-Review and Analysis of Past and

Current Impacts." F Yousaf and M Jabarkhhail in the Journal of Policy and Intelligence made an analysis of the future of the Taliban's foreign policy. N Sakhi in the Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs talked about the security challenges after the takeover of the Taliban government. Z Ullah talked in his journal, Small Wars & Insurgencies, an analysis of whether the government of the Taliban would prove a victory for Pakistan or cause serious problems for Pakistan. This research work mentions the problem of the Taliban government and their ideological bias towards TTP and its implications on Pakistan.

Situation in Afghanistan after US withdrawal

Taliban are ethnically Pashtun ideologically fundamentalist who returned to power after fighting a decade-long war with the USA. They adopted an orthodox interpretation of Islam as a system of government and imposed severe restrictions on Afghanistan. In the following paragraphs is the description of the US post-withdrawal situation in Afghanistan and its implications for Pakistan.

Human Rights Violation

Human rights violations are a major concern under the Taliban regime. Almost 200 news organizations are closed, protests are prohibited and the Christians are forcefully disappearing. Prevailing liberal laws and principles are nullified and declared un-Islamic under the camouflage of Sharia. The Council on Foreign Relations mentioned in its report that, Public executions and floggings resumed when judges were forced to interpret shariah in November 2022 (Lindsay, 2023). Freedom of speech and expression are curtailed without any opposition. Moreover, the security forces of the Afghan Taliban are also involved in the threatening, torturing and detention of former government officials by declaring them US puppets.

Status of Women under the Taliban Regime

Afghanistan has a hardcore patriarchal social structure like the Taliban who do not believe in the idea of women empowerment. That's why they have imposed severe restrictions on any work and movement of women and banned the secondary education system for them in 2022. This issue was highlighted by the United Nations and many other human rights organizations in the world. They are not allowed to participate in governance and to serve in institutions like the Judiciary. Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 has expressed deep concerns over the situation of women in Afghanistan right now, 'rules regarding prohibition of women pertaining to travel and leaving the homes is enforced by the authorities' (World Report, 2023).

Economic crisis

The economic crisis in Afghanistan worsened with the regime change. The United States put severe restrictions on the Central Bank of Afghanistan due to which they are not authorized for many international transactions and failed to get economic assistance. The country is facing a deep economic crisis after the return of the Taliban. Price hikes in commodities resulted in one of the largest and most dreadful hunger crises. Even though it's been more than a year now but economic condition is still in deplorable condition. Afghan Taliban appealed for economic aid from many countries but managed to get some from Pakistan, India, Turkey, Iran and Qatar.

Extrajudicial Killings

Taliban started extrajudicial killings of former security officials. Although many of them fled from the country some remaining ones are under their target. Military operations and raids against some groups claiming that they are supporting the ISKP (Islamic State of Khorasan Province). Many people are being killed for having alleged connections with the National Resistance Front. Suffice it to say the Taliban are crushing all the opposition.

Freedom of Media and Speech

Media has been facing extensive censorship and unprecedented restrictions since the Taliban came into power. According to a survey, nearly 80 per cent of women journalists lost their jobs during this government. Moreover, intelligence reports claimed that 'forces are involved in abduction and killing of journalists. News agencies like Voice of America and BBC are shut down. To tell the truth to the public becomes very difficult under the Taliban regime' (Tangen, 2022).

Afghan Taliban's Impact on Pakistan

When the Taliban were in opposition, they always had good ties with Pakistan. The former Afghan Government remained in a tussle as they accused the former of supporting the Taliban.

They also have serious concerns about the issue of the Durand line. On the other side it was the common opinion in Pakistan that whenever the Taliban come into power, they will admit the Durand line and would have good relations with Pakistan. Although relations between both the actors are good there are now some conflicts on which both states are confronting each other.

Durand Line problem

The main bone of contention between Pakistan and Afghanistan is the Durand Line. Pashtun people are living on both sides of the border who do not accept the line and want to redraw it. Due to illegal infiltration of non-state actors especially TTP and smuggling, Pakistan has started fencing the border. This issue became a point of confrontation between the Taliban and the Pakistani government. Afghanistan Information Minister and Chief spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid showed his grave concern regarding this Durand Line by saying, 'The unresolved issue of Durand Line and border fencing creates quarrel. For Pashtuns, it is equivalent to dividing a nation' (Khan, [2022](#)). Pakistan's DG ISPR (Inter Service-Public Relations) reacted to this statement and said that the Durand line is a solved issue. The fencing has the blood of our martyrs and would guarantee peace between the two states. Hence it has to be completed at all costs. The visit of National Security Advisor Moeed Yusuf in 2021 to reduce tension at the border, held many bilateral issues under discussion but the Durand Line remained unaddressed in the meeting (Khan, [2022](#)).

TTP, Taliban and Pakistan

Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan is a group having the same ideological leanings as the Afghan Taliban except for the fact that this group is active in Pakistan. TTP also wanted control of the state of Pakistan through the implementation of Sharia. This group is highly influenced by the Afghan Taliban and came into being in 2007 with the same ideology as the Afghan Taliban. Along with native Afghans, TTP also fought against the US for almost 15 years. During these years a strong bond developed between both the groups and provided militant support to each other.

When the Taliban came into power, they freed many members of TTP from the jails captured by the US army. TTP has its strong roots and bases near the Pakistan-Afghan border. They are responsible for conducting terrorist activities in Afghanistan. Almost 80,000 people lost their lives in the attacks in Pakistan conducted and claimed by TTP. In 2014, the Pakistani government launched Operation Zarb-e-Azb against TTP and consequently many of their leaders fled to Afghanistan.

Afghan Taliban have their interests in TTP as they see this group as a righteous organization. Pakistani governments always sought help and demanded serious action against TTP in Afghanistan but the Taliban due to their strong connections and bias towards them didn't take any action. In a report released by the United Nations last year in September, Mehsud was blamed for 80% of suicide bombings in Afghanistan (Zaidi, [2008](#)).

Taliban offered the role of arbitrator and "the outlawed Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) agreed to an indefinite ceasefire with the government of Pakistan on May 29, 2022." But TTP insisted that they want to implement their interpretation of Islam in Pakistan otherwise will carry out their struggle until they succeed. Under the regime of former President Ashraf Ghani, almost 2000 workers of TTP were captured and put into jail. When the Taliban came into power, they freed their leader and all the prisoners. As a result, they rejoined their organization and strengthened it. "The TTP has obtained new more sophisticated weapons and relocated fighters from Afghanistan to Pakistan and is now turning its focus back to its war against the Pakistani state." Afghan Taliban due to their strong ideological ties also provided operational support to TTP. As long as the Afghan Taliban have a soft corner about TTP there would be no chances of good relations between both states.

India's Relation with Afghan Taliban and its effects on Pakistan

Pakistan and India are traditional enemies and have had hostile relations since independence. Kashmir is the bone of contention between the actors and fought three major wars on the issue.

Both states are striving for their regional supremacy. Pakistan always had good relations with China while India stands in opposition. Both states are trying to use the changing dynamics of Afghanistan for their own national interests. India wants to use the Afghan Taliban and their territory against Pakistan as both are neighbouring countries.

The previous Afghan Government had good relations with India while Pakistan was at conflict on the issue of the Durand Line. It is also a fact that Pakistan always supported the Afghan Taliban against Ashraf Ghani's government. It was a presumption that whenever the Afghan Taliban came into power, the relations between both states would be improved as they always remained dependent on Pakistan and the Taliban would also support the Pakistani stance on Kashmir Issue.

When the Taliban came into power they tried to seek help from India the staunch opponent of Pakistan. The caretaker Defence Minister of the Afghan Taliban Mullah Yaqoob, the son of the founder of the Taliban, talked about sending their troops to India for better training. He remarked, 'They do not have any problem in sending troops to India and strengthening relations with it (News Desk, [2022](#))'. This statement indicates that the Taliban are seeking good relations with India to break the hegemony of Pakistan in the Afghanistan region.

This statement showed the increasing relations between both states. Mullah Yaqoob also said in his interview that they will never allow Pakistan to use their land against Afghanistan. Pakistan always thinks that the Afghan Taliban would support its stance on the Kashmir issue. But the Taliban also made their position very clear that Kashmir is a bilateral issue between Pakistan and India and they have to solve it. Taliban has no interest in this issue. Their defence minister also urged that both countries should try to solve this problem diplomatically.

Issue of Drone Attacks in Afghanistan

Drone attacks in Afghanistan by the US are another major problem between both states. Although the US left Afghanistan in 2021, they

continued drone attacks in Afghanistan. According to the US, several Al-Qaeda groups are working in Afghanistan and in order to defeat them in the global war against terrorism it is necessary to crush them in their home and will try their best to eliminate the terrorist outfits. The US also held drone attacks against the Afghan Taliban. Now Afghan Taliban accused the Pakistani Government of providing land or support to the US for drone attacks in Afghanistan.

In an interview, the Afghan Deputy Foreign minister blamed Pakistan for providing assistance in drone attacks to the US and accused of receiving millions of dollars in rewards to help against Al-Qaeda. He also blamed Pakistan is giving its air space to the US for conducting operations in Afghanistan. Pakistani Foreign Minister's spokesperson called this as an unfortunate statement. He also stated that this statement is unacceptable as Pakistan has always strived for peace in Afghanistan. According to Pakistan, this statement from the Deputy Foreign Minister is 'against the essence of friendly relations' (Syed, [2022](#)).

Afghan Taliban considered the main evil and force behind these drone attacks to be the US. And they also considered the Pakistani role in this scenario a negative one. On the other side, Pakistan condemned and made it clear that Pakistan is not involved in any kind of help or attack against the Afghan Taliban. Pakistan will never allow anyone to use its territory against other countries and also accepted the same from the Afghan Taliban that they would also not allow any terrorist group to use Afghan soil against Pakistan. However, the issue of drone attacks has intensified the relations between states.

Attack on Pakistan's Embassy in Afghanistan

In Nov 2022, a suicide bomb blast attack was conducted to hit the polio team in Quetta in which three people were killed. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) claimed responsibility for the attack two days after announcing an end to a ceasefire agreed with the government in June. Pakistani government asked the Taliban

government to take serious steps against TTP as their territory is being used against Pakistan. A week later an assassination attempt was held against Pakistan's top diplomat at the embassy compound in Kabul. The Pakistan Foreign Ministry summoned the senior diplomat of the Afghan Government in Islamabad and showed their concerns against the attack. According to an official statement issued by the foreign office, 'it is the responsibility of the Afghanistan Taliban to provide protection to the diplomatic mission and the attack was a security failure of the government' (Reuters, 2022). There are several non-state actors present in Afghanistan, especially the TTP. They are using the territory against other states. As long as Afghanistan does not take any serious steps against these banned outfits, the relations between both countries will remain intensified. Afghan Taliban due to their ideological biases is not ready to eliminate such kinds of groups.

Another reason that prevents the Afghan Taliban from taking any kind of step against TTP is fear of a coalition between TTP and ISIS. This coalition would become an inevitable danger against the Taliban government. Their national interest would not allow them to take this kind of step. On the other hand, Pakistan is continuously putting pressure on the Afghan Taliban, especially after the incident of the attack on their embassy in Kabul. As long as the Taliban does not take any serious steps against non-state actors present in Afghanistan the relations between both countries cannot possibly be normalized.

How should Pakistan react?

The presence of non-state actors in Afghanistan is a serious threat to Pakistan and it needs to revisit its policy. Here are some recommendations for Pakistan.

Fencing the Durand Line

Durand Line is an open border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Many non-state actors used this line for cross-infiltration. It is very easy to smuggle all kinds of weapons and arms across the border undermining peace and security in the region. Moreover, many separatist movements in tribal areas of KPK are empowered by these

groups on the other side of the border. By fencing the Durand Line, Pakistan will be able to control the flow of terrorism from either side and the TTP will also lose its momentum. Pakistan's first and most important priority should be fencing the border at all costs.

Solve the Issue of TTP without the Taliban

Dialogues are the best possible way to solve any kind of conflict. Pakistan should negotiate with TTP to meet their concerns. However, these negotiations could be done without the assistance of the Afghan Taliban. Pakistan must minimize its dependence on the Taliban regarding TTP. First of all, Pakistan needs to negotiate with the terrorist outfit. If they do not agree on any kind of peace terms then strict action should be taken. Pakistan would also use its influence on the Afghan Taliban and demand strict action against TTP on the opposite side of the border. Secondly, Pakistan needs to convince the Taliban to break all kinds of ties with TTP which is a perpetual threat to Pakistani integrity and security. TTP is a major threat to Pakistani peace and security and for the attainment of peace it is necessary to solve the issue otherwise Pakistan has to suffer from terrorism.

Addressing Grievances of Pashtuns in Pakistan

People of FATA were badly affected during the War on Terror through drone and terror attacks resulted in many casualties and, the destruction of their homes and buildings. A large number of the population migrated from these conflict-ridden areas. A negative sentiment prevails against Pakistan for choosing the wrong side instead of neutrality. Many drone attacks have caused a heavy death toll on Pakistani citizens. For instance, 86 students of Madrassas were killed in a drone attack in Waziristan (Shah, 2010). These types of incidents produced a sense of marginalization among the people of FATA Waziristan against their home country.

There is a dire need to put endless effort into addressing their grievances by providing them with education health and other basic facilities.

All the damage which has been done during the war on terror should be compensated. Pakistan should take steps to promote the business and for the establishment of industries. Their youth should be properly educated, trained and empowered by youth development programs. Loans should be given to them on easy terms so that they can re-establish themselves again. More autonomy would make them less dependent on non-state actors like TTP. Moreover, local people would be able to use this opportunity according to their traditions and customs.

Regional Economic Integration

Pakistan should strive for regional economic integration. There must be open and free trade in the region especially between Pakistan and India. The economic dependency would eliminate the non-state actors and no state would allow them

to use their own land against the other. Thus, Pakistan needs to strive for regional economic integration as the EU did in the 1990s.

Conclusion

Two decades-long foreign policy of Pakistan regarding the Afghan Taliban failed to fulfil its objectives. Pakistan's dream of a pro-Pakistani government in Afghanistan that would work for national interests remained unsuccessful. Afghan Taliban have their own way of thinking and interests in TTP. Taliban not only strengthened the TTP but also pushed them to Pakistan which is not in the favor of both states. It is the need of the hour for Pakistan to revisit its policy towards Afghanistan by fencing the Durand Line, solve the issue of TTP and strive for intra-regional economic integration.

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