



## Pakistan's Strategic Calculations and Policy Responses Towards Afghanistan

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**Abstract:** *Traditionally, Pakistan's foreign policy responses towards Afghanistan have been predominantly shadowed by the former's security apprehension towards India and any Indian closeness towards Afghanistan raised serious suspicions in Islamabad. Pakistan's policy makers continued to see Afghanistan from the Indian prism even after 9/11, even when Pakistan become an ally of the US in the War against Terror to overthrow the Afghan Taliban, Islamabad former ally. As a frontline ally of the US, Pakistan provided all the necessary support to the US to dethrone the Afghan Taliban from Kabul and apprehend Al Qaeda militants. However, Islamabad performance against the War on Terror was compromised when India established a strong foothold in Afghanistan by developing close relations with the Anti-Pakistan forces in Afghanistan. This article argues the Pakistan's strategic calculations demanded the country to maintain an alliance with the US and at the same time to limit Indian role in Afghanistan.*

**Key Words:** War on Terror, Strategic Rivalry, The Afghan Taliban, Pakistan, Afghanistan

### Introduction

Since Pakistan's appearance on the World map in August 1947, the country's foreign policy remained fixated on the security threats emanating from India, a neighbouring country with better economic indicators and military strength compared to Pakistan. The Pakistani policymakers have long harboured the perception that India would leave no stone unturned in undoing Pakistan. Indian involvement in the East Pakistan crisis in 1971 which led to the secession that further enhanced the perception of India as an enduring rival bent on the destruction of Pakistan. Therefore, Pakistan's obsession with security threats from its eastern neighbour guided the country's foreign policy. Pakistani state approach towards Afghanistan is largely a product of this strategic thinking. Afghanistan's hostility towards Pakistan exhibited through laying claims on Pakistan's territory and its cordiality towards India

affirmed the thinking in Pakistan that the country has been facing serious security threats from both its eastern and western borders. This prevailing security environment propelled Pakistan to seek a favourable Kabul government, enabling the former to focus on countering the threat from its eastern neighbour.

Pakistan has largely faced a hostile Afghanistan closely aligned with India. From 1947 until 1992, India grabbed every opportunity to intensify Afghan hostility towards Islamabad by fanning the differences between Pakistan and its Western neighbour. With the arrival of the Afghan Taliban into power in 1996 that continued till 2001, Pakistan had a sigh of relief from its western border when the Taliban regime demonstrated a friendly posture towards Pakistan. Islamabad maintained good relations with the Taliban regime until they were removed from power in October 2001.

The US attacked Afghanistan in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist incident and the removal of the Taliban regime presented Pakistan with new security challenges. Pakistan's strategic calculus changed when the country decided to align with the US helping the latter to destroy the Taliban regime and capture Al Qaeda militants. Under the new regional security environment, Pakistan had to provide crucial support to the US which led to the removal of the Taliban from Kabul, forcing them and other international fighters to seek refuge in Pakistan's tribal territories adjacent to the Afghan border. India's massive presence in Afghanistan in the post-Taliban Afghanistan in 2001 did not sit well with Pakistan's strategic calculation, thus preventing the country from providing enduring support for the complete destruction of the Taliban forces. However, Pakistan provided all the crucial support when the US decided to engage the Afghan Taliban in a dialogue to exit the war-torn country where the US badly failed in bringing peace using military forces. Pakistan's policymakers believed that the Taliban's return to Kabul would deny any Indian role in Afghanistan, thus alleviating Pakistan's security apprehensions. However, the situation within Afghanistan did not turn out to be what Islamabad anticipated, thus presenting Pakistan with new security challenges from its Western neighbouring country.

### **Pakistan's Perpetual Security Apprehensions from India**

A well-known maxim in international politics dictates that one can afford to choose friends but not neighbours. Despite sharing historical connections and cultural ethos, both Pakistan and India remained bitter towards each other and exhibited unprecedented hostility and mistrust. The motivation of this enduring rivalry is predominantly shaped by the ideological differences in the form of philosophical underpinnings of both civilizations, reflected in Islam and Hinduism. S. M. Burke highlighted (1975, 22), "Centuries of dedication to such diametrically opposed systems as Islam and Hinduism could not but nurture an utterly different outlook on the outside world among their respective followers." Consequently, the enmity from both sides was marked in civilizational terms

(Fair 2014). Pakistan's relatively feeble economic foundations and weak military strength right after the independence vis-à-vis India further fuelled the former's security concerns that led to a negative perception of the latter. Howard Wriggins observed (1977, 303-04):

"However unjustified Indian leaders may have thought it, Pakistan's overriding concern vis-à-vis India" is the "fear of India's size, the size of its army ... and fear compounded out of not infrequent public statements by prominent Indians regarding the tragedy of partition and reiterating the inherent unity of the subcontinent."

Compounding the problems of mutual inimical attitude, the misfortunes attached to the partition process and the resultant bitter memories added another layer of distrust and hostility, further degrading the prospects of any better relations between them. Leo Rose and Richard Sisson (1992, 35) pointed out, "Most of the political and social concepts that dominated the ideology and psychology of the narrow élites that controlled these two movements survived into the independence period and have not disappeared."

A territorial dispute over Kashmir generated further bitterness between the two countries that caused three full-scale wars, a conflict in Kargil in 1999 and several crises that included Brass Tacks exercises in 1987, Kashmir uprising in 1990 and a military standoff in 2001-2 (Rose & Sisson, 1992). With the nuclearization of South Asia, when both countries went nuclear, the Kashmir dispute emerged as a nuclear flashpoint threatening regional and world peace seriously (Hussain, 2006). A zero-sum attitude largely dictated the relations. The lingering of the Kashmir dispute and the inability of the international community to resolve this largely diminished any prospects of better relations between the two nuclear-armed countries (Khan, 2009). The first war between the two countries was fought in 1948 over the Kashmir issue. India's forcible annexation of Kashmir and disregard of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions that call for the resolution of the dispute further cemented the rivalry between the two neighbours (Khan 2009). The nuclearization of both countries in 1998 alarmed the international community over the

possible use of nuclear power in case of any war between them. An expert on Kashmir noted, "There is no guarantee that it will not lead to war or military adventures involving nuclear deployment and possibly the use of a nuclear weapon" (Thomson, 2007).

The rivalry between Pakistan and India took a new turn with the start of the war in Afghanistan motivated by the 9/11 terrorist incidents. India accused Islamabad Pakistan of harbouring terrorist organizations such as *Lashkar-e-Tayyiba* alleged to attack the Indian legislature on December 13, 2001 (Reuter 2001). To pressure Pakistan and to isolate the country diplomatically, India broke its diplomatic relations with Pakistan and threatened to launch war against Pakistan by mobilizing 750,000 troops (Aneja, 2001). Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee expressed his frustration, "We cannot tolerate such attacks anymore. We have reached the limits of our tolerance." Pakistan responded by mobilizing its military forces to confront the Indian threat. (BBC, 2001). General Musharraf in an interview warned, "I would like to warn (New Delhi) against any precipitous action by the Indian government against Pakistan. This would lead to very serious repercussions" (Guardia 2001). President Musharraf categorically rejected India's accusations regarding the country's involvement in terrorism in India. In an address to the nation, Musharraf slammed terrorist attacks on the Indian legislature building and vowed to act against the militant groups found involved in such activities (Official report, 2001).

Assurances from Pakistan could not prevent India from indulging in a blame game against Pakistan. India blamed Pakistan for orchestrating another terrorist attack against the Indian army camp in Jammu in May 2002 (Puri, 2002). Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee threatened, "We will teach the perpetrators of the proxy war a lesson. Our forces are standing like rocks on the borders" (Ibid). Pakistan responded in a befitting manner to confront any Indian aggression. Pakistan diverted 50,000 troops engaged in fighting against the militants to focus on India (Hussain, 2006). Recognizing the seriousness of the confrontation between the two rivals and the possible diversion of Islamabad away from Afghanistan to India, the US Deputy Secretary

of State, Richard Armitage intervened which led to the de-escalation of tensions between both countries (Nadzri, 2002). American intervention played an effective role in the demobilization of their respective forces on both sides.

President Musharraf took several steps to assuage Indian concerns about terrorism emanating from Pakistan. For example, Pakistan restrained the United Jihad Council comprised of mujahideen groups involving *Hezb-ul-Mujahideen* and *Harkat-ul-Mujahideen* (Ahmad 2007). These moves were welcomed in India prompting Indian leadership to offer Pakistan in May 2003 peace talks aimed at making headway to find a solution to longstanding disputes between the two countries (The Hindu, 2003). This motivated a meeting on 6 January 2004, between the leaders of two countries during a summit in Islamabad. The leadership of both countries pledged to revive talks between them, exhibiting determination about "the resumption of the 'Composite Dialogue' aiming at finding of peaceful ways to settle all bilateral issues including Jammu and Kashmir" (Akhlaque, 2004). Several Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) were taken with the resumption of composite dialogue in 2004 but these moves largely failed in making any progress towards the resolution of disputes including Kashmir. India seemed quite determined to portray Kashmiris' struggle for self-determination as terrorism against India. (Ahmad, 2007). Both countries largely remained at loggerheads regarding Afghanistan.

### **Pakistan's Security Perils Amid Growing India-Afghanistan Strategic Relations**

A fierce rivalry led both rivals to vie for influence in Afghanistan at the cost of each other. Only the Taliban regime (1996-2001) provided Pakistan with an opportunity to cultivate cordial relations between Islamabad. Other than this period, Afghanistan maintained a hostile posture towards Pakistan. Afghanistan not only remained averse to Pakistan's joining of the United Nations (UN) after the country's independence in 1947 but also laid claims on some parts of Pakistan including Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and Baluchistan. To damage Pakistan, India

provided support to the Afghan claims on the Pakistani territory (Freedberg, 2007). In addition, India also attempted to entice the Pakistani Pashtuns by supporting the Pashtunistan issue, a call from the Pashtun population on both sides of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border to establish a separate homeland for Pashtuns.

The "Friendship Treaty" in 1950 between India and Afghanistan is a testament to the growing relationship. Since then, several agreements made their way in the coming decades that consolidated the relationship between the respective countries. Indian Premier, Jawaharlal Nehru affirmed: "Ever since India's independence, we have grown closer to each other, for a variety of reasons. The long memory of our past was there, and the moment it was possible to renew them, we renewed them. And then came mutual interest, (our common hostility towards Pakistan) which is a powerful factor" (Baloch and Niazi, 2008).

India continued to provide support to the communist regime in Afghanistan whereas Pakistan aligned itself with Mujahedeen who confronted Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Pakistan emerged as a frontline state against the Soviet invasion and supported the militants engaged in fighting the Soviet forces with the help of Western countries and some Gulf states. A fierce resistance from Mujahedeen forced the Soviets to leave Afghanistan in 1988. However, India provided support to the Communist government until its removal in 1992, whereas Pakistan remained closely aligned with the resistance forces known as Mujahedeen. In an attempt to retain its influence after the removal of the communist government, India tried to win over the first mujahedeen government comprised of non-Pashtuns by offering generous humanitarian and technical aid.

On the contrary, Pakistan largely supported Gulbuddin Hekmathar's Hizb-e-Islami, although he could not establish his writ in Kabul. Resultantly, Pakistan put its weight behind the newly emerged Taliban forces, who proved successful in capturing Kabul including most parts of the country and establishing the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan in 1996. India remained averse to the Taliban regime and ceased its diplomatic relations with Afghanistan. However, India

continued to back the Northern Alliance which comprised ethnic groups other than Pashtuns opposed to the Taliban government. The Northern Alliance mainly swayed their control in the north of Afghanistan.

Afghanistan emerged as a place of a proxy war between Pakistan and India. While opposing the Taliban government in Afghanistan, India provided military support to the Northern Alliance such as the provision of high-altitude warfare equipment worth \$10 million (Swami, 2001). To contain the Taliban government, India always provided aid to the anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan and enticed anti-Taliban states such as Russia and Iran.

### **The Post-9/11 Afghanistan: The Security Challenges for Pakistan**

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The Taliban regime during their rule in Kabul from 1996 to 2001 denied India any role in Afghanistan. However, the overthrow of the Taliban from Kabul after the US attacked Afghanistan in 2001 created space for India which was well exploited by India to make inroads in the country. The Indian foreign minister criticized the Taliban government by labelling them an illegitimate force, thereby considering the Northern Alliance as the only legitimate force in Afghanistan. In an interview in October 2001, Jaswant Singh said (Times of India 2001) "India has never recognized the Taliban as a legitimate regime. We have continued to recognize the government of Afghanistan as represented by President Rabbani. They have formed the Northern Alliance ... it should be the effort of the international community now to strengthen the legitimate government of Afghanistan."

The Taliban's exit from power in Afghanistan and the arrival of the Northern Alliance allowed India to play a larger role in the country. Fair argued that the Indian leaders believed that the absence of the Taliban from Afghanistan would seriously limit the support available to the militants engaged in fighting against the Indian forces in Indian-held Kashmir (Fair, 2009). Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced, "We are ready to work with the government and people of Afghanistan to ensure that Afghanistan will never again be hostage to, or become a haven for, terrorists" (Ahmed 2005). Therefore, India

was bent on exploiting this opportunity for its strategic gains while engaging the anti-Taliban forces through increased diplomatic and intelligence presence in the country.

Apart from countering Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan, India also eyed developing strategic and economic Central Asian Republics through Afghanistan. Therefore, a pro-Indian government in Afghanistan would best serve the Indian strategic goals. Stephen Blank (2003, 142) marked this as a "great game" strategy, "India's goals reflect the desire to control overland routes to maritime ports for Central Asian resources by denying both China and Pakistan the ability to threaten Indian assets in the region." Navtej Sarna, a high Indian official affirmed this, "We have strong bilateral relations with Afghanistan, and we want to help them rebuild their country. India also sees Afghanistan as a route to Central Asia" (Baldauf, 2003, 2).

India vied not only to limit Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan but also to exploit natural resources in Central Asia. Indian strategic design and its growing influence in Afghanistan created serious security concerns for Pakistani policymakers. Fair observation affirms this view, "Militarily and strategically, Central Asia is an important theatre for India. While India's objectives in the region reflect interests that reach far beyond Pakistan, the fact remains that India is interested in countering Pakistan in this region" (Wirsing 2007, 164).

The ouster of the Taliban from Kabul allowed the Northern Alliance to assume power. The Bonn Conference in December 2001 decided the interim political setup in Afghanistan which was disproportionately represented by the Northern Alliance. India provided diplomatic support to the newly established government led by Hamid Karzai. The majority of the Northern Alliance members harboured sympathy for India because their family resided in India after they were expelled from Afghanistan by the Taliban regime. India opened its embassy in Kabul and established consulates in different cities of Afghanistan including Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif, Kandahar and Jalalabad.

Using its soft power to gain influence in Afghanistan, India granted US\$100 million in

the form of reconstruction aid and built the Indira Gandhi Children's Hospital in Kabul (Ramachandran, 2002). India received a favourable response from Afghanistan in return for her role in the development of the country. Masood Khalili, Afghan ambassador to India expressed his desire for a larger Indian role in Afghanistan, "People in Afghanistan have long memories. They will not forget who a friend and others were, who supported and propped up the Taliban." He added "It's natural that we will turn to India for assistance" (George 2002). In a gesture to demonstrate a long-term partnership with Afghanistan, India poured billions of dollars into developing infrastructure and other development projects in the country. As part of its image building through soft power, India extended its role in other sectors such as in health and development and provided financial and technical aid. India therefore envisioned to deepen its relations with Afghanistan to achieve its strategic objective related to security and economic gains. However, India's extensive engagement and close relations with Afghanistan were abhorred by Pakistani policymakers who regarded these developments as detrimental to the country's security.

### **Pakistan's Policy Responses towards Afghanistan**

The ongoing discussion has clearly demonstrated that historically India remained one of the key determinants of Pakistan in approaching Afghanistan. Even Pakistan's joining the War against Terror was mainly motivated by the Indian factor. The then Pakistani President General Musharraf clearly mentioned India for the country's becoming part of the alliance against the Afghan Taliban, who in the past enjoyed close relations with Islamabad and Al Qaeda (The News, 2001).

Retrospectively, Pakistan's strategic objectives in Afghanistan mainly focused on enhancing its influence in the country and keeping India away from its Western border. To keep a close eye on the involvement of regional powers in Afghanistan, particularly India, Pakistani former President General Zia once advised the head of the intelligence wing of the military, ISI, that "the water [in Afghanistan] must boil at the right

temperature" (Swami, [2005](#)). The Pakistani policymakers largely pursued the strategy of "strategic depth" in Afghanistan which means that Pakistani forces could use Afghan territory if India made any military advances in the Pakistani territory during the war with the country. Pakistan is believed to have achieved the objective of strategic depth when a close ally of Islamabad, the Afghan Taliban captured power in Afghanistan. General Hameed Gul a former top ISI official further detailed the idea of strategic depth, "Pakistan's military leaders supported the Taliban to attain their goal of strategic depth in Afghanistan by squeezing out the interests of other regional rivals including Iran and India and the forces of the Northern Alliance" (Zaidi, [2001](#)). Pakistan's strategic leadership invariably looked for a pliant government in Kabul to avoid any conflict on the Western border, to enable Islamabad to focus on countering the security threats on its Eastern borders from India, its arch-rival.

This strategic Pakistani mindset largely directed Islamabad's policy in Afghanistan in post-Soviet Afghanistan. An internecine conflict among the mujahedeen factions in Afghanistan posed a serious challenge to the Pakistani strategy of seeking a friendly regime in the country. The Pakistani-supported factions could not establish their hold in Kabul which led Pakistan to support the newly emerged group known as the Taliban who showed their willingness and capacity to put an end to the ongoing civil war and to establish their hold in the country. Therefore, Islamabad's support was forthcoming when the Taliban demonstrated their capability to achieve "success in suppressing unruly Mujahideen commanders and imposing peace in and around Kandahar" (Kux, [2000](#), 235).

After the Taliban won the confidence of the Pakistani policymakers, they received massive financial and military support to establish their control in Afghanistan. An Afghan cell was set up in 1994 in the Interior Ministry to provide logistic support to the Taliban movement. The then interior minister, General Babar closely advised the ISI to assist the Taliban movement through 'transportation, fuel, communications equipment and advice' (Kux, [2000](#)). Through the Taliban's ascendance to power in Afghanistan, the Pakistani policymakers envisioned and expected to

achieve strategic objectives ranging from military to economic. For example, a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan would provide Pakistan with easy access and establish trade links with the energy-rich Central Asian States. Security threats emanating from the Western border would diminish as the Taliban followed a strict interpretation of Islam and downplayed ethnic nationalism. Because of the Taliban's Islamic orientation, any Indian role in Afghanistan would be hardly possible. Most importantly, Taliban-controlled Afghanistan would not only materialize Pakistan's pursuit of the 'strategic depth' in the country but also enable Islamabad to provide a "base where Kashmiri militants could be trained" (Hussain, [2002](#)). Pakistan was well-positioned to achieve these enumerated objectives during the Taliban rule in Afghanistan. Most importantly, India was almost denied any role in Afghanistan and the Taliban largely refrained from laying any claim on the Pakistani territory. However, no steps were taken to resolve the issue of the Durand Line, which has traditionally marred the relations between the two countries (Fair [2009](#)).

After the American attack on Afghanistan and the removal of the Taliban government, Pakistan was confronted with a serious strategic setback in the form of losing a reliable regime in Kabul. The Taliban's exit from power in Pakistan provided space for the Northern Alliance to establish their control of Kabul. The Northern Alliance's dislike for Pakistan was well-known and their arrival was marked as a strategic setback for Islamabad. One Pakistani newspaper observed, "Pakistan's worst nightmare has come true with Northern Alliance control of Kabul" while others marked it "a strategic debacle for the army" (Rashid, [2008](#)). Pakistan policymakers were seriously frustrated over the US's inability to fulfil its promise of taking care of Islamabad's interests in Afghanistan.

Pakistan's security apprehensions came true with the heavy Indian involvement in Afghanistan after the Northern Alliance assumed power in 2002. An emerging close partnership between India and Afghanistan raised serious suspicion among Pakistani policymakers (The Washington Times, 2005). The Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf heavily criticised and raised questions about

the Indian involvement in Afghanistan: "India's motivation in Afghanistan is very clear; nothing further than upsetting Pakistan. Why should they (India) have consulates in Jalalabad and Kandahar? What is their interest? There is no interest other than disturbing Pakistan, doing something against Pakistan" (Raina, [2008](#)).

Later the Pakistani government accused India of using its presence in Afghanistan to provide logistic support to the ethnically motivated terrorists in the country. On 16 October 2003, Pakistan's interior minister blamed the Indian intelligence network in Afghanistan for their involvement in terrorism (BBC, 2003). Pakistani security officials blamed India for sponsoring terrorist activities in Pakistan in the guise of humanitarian assistance, "India's activities have less to do with humanitarian aid and more to do with India's top-secret intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW)" (Baldauf, [2003](#), 2).

The Pakistani government uncovered India's involvement in running terrorist training camps in different parts of Afghanistan (Baldauf, [2003](#)). In May 2003, the Pakistan authorities found Indian involvement in providing financial and logistic support to anti-Pakistan militants such as the Pakistani Taliban and Al-Qaeda militants operating in the former FATA region (Hussain, [2006](#)). The Pakistani media revealed credible evidence about India's involvement in creating unrest in Pakistan's southwestern province of Baluchistan. Chief Minister of Baluchistan in August 2004 also highlighted that evidence strongly suggested that Indian Indian-origin intelligence network based in Afghanistan is massively involved in providing logistic and financial support to over 40 terrorist camps across the Baluch territory (Yousaf, [2004](#)). Similarly, Pakistan's Minister of State for Information alleged India for supplying arms to Akbar Bugti and Sardar Khair Bakhsh Marri who waged an insurgency in Baluchistan and regularly attacked the Pakistani security forces in the province (Pakistan Press, 2006).

Pakistani officials collected credible evidence that exhibited Indian deep involvement in the insurgent movement in Baluchistan. Adviser to the Prime Minister, Rehman Malik disclosed in a briefing to the Senate (Upper House of Pakistan's Parliament)

that the Baluch Liberation Army (BLA) received significant financial and military support from India. He noted, "India is now funding the BLA and its activities," stating further that India provided training to some 4,000 to 5,000 Baluch terrorists through its training centres established in Afghanistan (United News, 2009). Interior ministry officials of Pakistan presented the Senate with "documentary proof" of India and Afghanistan collaborating in fomenting terrorism in Baluchistan and the former FATA (BBC, 2009).

Pakistan raised objections to the growing US-India strategic relationship which got impetus after the 9/11 attacks as Islamabad termed it detrimental to the country's strategic interests in the South Asian region. The Indo-US civil nuclear deal signed in October 2008 also brought the two countries into a strategic collaboration, which favoured the Indian position in the region (Saddiqa, 2009). A similar civilian nuclear cooperation request from Pakistan tabled in 2006 was turned down by the US which created a perception among the Pakistani policymakers that the US preferred India over Pakistan in strategic matters (Weinbaum and Harder [2008](#)). In addition, the US signalling in 2005 of its declining interest in Afghanistan also changed Pakistan's perception of US commitment towards Afghanistan. The US officials in the media hinted at cutting down American troops in Afghanistan and bringing NATO in full swing, reducing the burden on the US. As the head of the US Central Command, reportedly stated in 2005, "It makes sense that as NATO forces go in, and they're more in numbers, that we could drop some of US requirements somewhat" (New York Times, 2005). Assessing American waning commitment to Afghanistan, the Afghan government further relied on India as its strategic partner. These developments led Pakistan to look for the Afghan Taliban again as their best bet in Afghanistan to secure the country's strategic interests (New York Times, 2005). In the changing strategic milieu of the region, Pakistan in a reversal to its immediate post-9/11 strategy started coveting the Afghan Taliban to take centre stage in Afghanistan to protect its geostrategic interests. Ahmed Rashid, an expert in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region similarly argued that Pakistan had to think of the Taliban as the only protector of

Islamabad's strategic interests due to the Northern Alliance's capture of power in Kabul in the post 9/11 political settings (Rashid, 2008). India's larger role in Afghanistan also irritated the Pakistani policymakers. General McChrystal in his September 2009 report reported Pakistan's apprehensions about growing Indian interests and expansion in Afghanistan. He stated (Hasnat 2009):

Indian political and economic influence is increasing in Afghanistan, including significant development efforts and financial investment. In addition, the current Afghan government is perceived by Islamabad to be pro-Indian. While Indian activities largely benefit the Afghan people, increasing Indian influence in Afghanistan is likely to exacerbate regional tensions and encourage Pakistani countermeasures in Afghanistan or India.

Pakistan has always been wary of the possibility of an encirclement by India from its Eastern and Western borders. Hasan Askari Rizvi, a Pakistani foreign policy expert commented, "Pakistan, which has fought three wars with India, was worried over India's growing influence in Afghanistan, which borders Pakistani territory" and a "growing influence of India in Afghanistan creates problems for Pakistan" (Zaheer, 2006). Pakistan felt disappointed over the US endorsement of India's growing sway in Afghanistan (Grare, 2006).

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that Pakistan's strategic worries compelled the country's leadership to take a soft approach towards the Taliban, even Islamabad was coerced to become part of the international coalition against the Taliban under the same strategic compulsions. Stephen P. Cohen observed, "Pakistani officials freely admit that their main concerns in Afghanistan are Indian penetration (which would mean encirclement for Islamabad) and Afghan President Hamid Karzai's dependence on New Delhi" adding further, "Given this strategic compulsion, it is not surprising that Pakistan tolerates if it does not directly support, the Taliban; it has no other instrument available to it than this Pashtun tribal hammer" (Wirsing, 2007). An American scholar, Fair, affirmed this view that Pakistan's strategic apprehensions towards India were mainly driven by India which determined Islamabad's course of action towards the

Taliban (Fair 2009). To Fair (2009, 159), "Pakistan's fears are quite genuine. India's attempt to develop its influence in Afghanistan is aimed at isolating Pakistan politically, diplomatically, and militarily." Afghanistan's policymakers' preferences for India against Pakistan for building a strategic relationship mainly prevented the development of cordial relations between Kabul and Islamabad. These strategic imperatives mainly shaped Pakistan's lacklustre support in the War against Terror that aimed to crush the Taliban. To the Pakistani policymakers, the Taliban comprised of the Pashtuns were the only option available that could serve to protect Islamabad's strategic interests in Afghanistan (Wirsing, 2007).

### **Pakistan's Role in the Talks between the Taliban and the US**

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In the late 2000s, the Western countries seemed weary of the ongoing war in Afghanistan and started contemplating ways to get out of this imbroglio. The US realized that Washington alone could not fight a war in Afghanistan as the efforts could not yield the desired objectives. The onus fell on finding a political settlement through a regional approach. In January 2009, General David Petraeus suggested that "it's not possible to solve the challenges internal to Afghanistan without addressing the challenges, especially in terms of security, with Afghanistan's neighbours. A regional approach is required." This regional approach started to materialize gradually in the following years. (Motwani & Boss, 2014). In November 2010, the NATO member states pledged to take measures to enable the Afghan security forces to get complete control of the country's security through the end of 2014. In June 2011, President Obama hinted that initial efforts were underway to make peace with the Taliban and announced to gradually cut down troops in Afghanistan to enable Washington to complete withdrawal from the country (CFR, 2020). Since the uncovering of this strategy of the US intended to exit from Afghanistan, Pakistan expedited its efforts to seek a stable and peaceful Afghanistan with the inclusion of the Afghan Taliban, who were considered by Islamabad as its best bet to protect its strategic interests.

Following these developments, the Afghan High Peace Council issued a roadmap for the



peace process inviting all political forces in Afghanistan who were willing to renounce violence (Motwani & Boss, 2014). The changing regional scenario offered Pakistan an opportunity to play a larger role by facilitating the process of political reconciliation among the Afghan warring groups with the participation of the Afghan Taliban. Pakistan considered this an appropriate time for redressing the strategic worries developed in the post-9/11 settings in Afghanistan (Ali, 2012). According to General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, "Pakistan sees the Taliban not as potential conquerors of Afghanistan but more of an anti-Indian asset in a post-NATO world" (Gall, 2014). Admiral Mike Mullen said that "Pakistan's long-term goal was to use the Taliban as a 'hedge' to redress the imbalance in regional power" (Ibid., 261). Pakistan's policymakers believed that the Afghan Taliban's inclusion in any political setup in Afghanistan would help to decrease Islamabad's worries regarding huge Indian involvement in Afghanistan (Afzal, 2020).

The US announcement of its exit strategy in 2011 was accompanied by a change in Pakistan's strategic approach that required a peaceful and stable Afghanistan. Due to the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan's role as a frontline state, Islamabad faced massive destruction due to the spread of terrorism on its own territory originating from Afghanistan (Hughes, 2016). Pakistan's conflicted role and compromised performance in the war on Terror provided the international terrorists linked with Al Qaeda an opportunity to form bonds with the Pakistani militants known as the Pakistani Taliban who attached the Pakistani security forces and citizens alike (Gussain, Z. 2011). The militancy and terrorism waged in Pakistan emanating from Afghanistan convinced Islamabad that a stable Afghanistan is imperative to bring an end to instability and terrorism in the region. Therefore, Pakistan took a deep interest and played an active role in the peace process in Afghanistan.

As part of the practical measures, Pakistan released the Afghan Taliban leaders on the Afghan High Peace Council's visit to Pakistan in 2012. This move paved the way for the reconciliation efforts between the different groups in Afghanistan. The inclusion of the Afghan Taliban in the peace process would help to end the ongoing insurgency raging in

Afghanistan. Salahuddin Rabbani who led the Peace Council marked the Afghan Taliban release as a significant step in making peace in Afghanistan. (Ali, 2012).

Pakistan's willingness to play a larger role in the Afghan peace process was motivated by several factors. Pakistan faced consistent criticism from Western countries for not doing enough to reign in the insurgents that continued to mar the Afghan government's efforts to bring stability to the country (Ali, 2021). Pakistan's role was mainly seen with suspicion marking it a part of the problem in Afghanistan. The Pakistani policymakers viewed the opportunity of its role in the peace process to address the Western concerns that Islamabad wanted a peaceful and stable Afghanistan. In addition, in CPEC where Pakistan is positioned to play a crucial role due to its geographical location, peace in Afghanistan is indispensable. A peaceful Afghanistan is crucial to meeting Chinese BRI-related objectives that are envisioned for energy-laden Central Asia states, Afghanistan, and the Middle East.

Given the changing international and regional scenarios, Pakistan played a crucial role in the reconciliation process including convincing the Afghan to join the political process of reconciliation. Pakistan actively became part of regional initiatives taken by other states such as China, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Russia to find an amicable solution to the continued unrest in Baluchistan. In October 2018, Pakistan closely coordinated with Qatar to open the Taliban political office in Doha to facilitate the US-Taliban peace dialogue. Furthermore, Pakistan released the Taliban's central leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar to participate in the peace process (Aljazeera, 2018). Mullah Baradar proved quite instrumental in bringing peace talks between the US and Afghan Taliban to a positive end.

Finally, in February 2020, the US and Afghan Taliban reached to conclude a peace agreement in Doha that aimed at bringing the long-standing conflict in Afghanistan to an end that could pave the way for stability in the country. On its part, the US agreed "to withdraw all troops within 14 months if the militants uphold the deal." President Trump said, "It had been a long and hard journey in Afghanistan. It's time after all these years to

bring our people back home” (BBC, 2020). Pakistan's role earned international recognition for playing a constructive role in a long fourteen-month negotiation process.

Pakistan is believed to play a larger in the political settlement of any future governmental set-up in Afghanistan with the Afghan Taliban taking centre stage in the peace process that culminated in the signing of a peace truce with the US. An apparent win for Pakistan was interpreted in India as a strategic setback. India anticipated a denial of any role if the Taliban established their rule in the country. Consequently, New Delhi initially seemed bent on providing support to the anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan to prevent the Taliban from establishing their control in Afghanistan. The US advised India to engage the Taliban in negotiation instead of going against them. To seek their role in Afghanistan, the Indian leadership approached the Taliban for a rapprochement whose results would unfold in the time to come (Jamal, 2020).

President Biden on assuming office as the US president publicly stated to withdraw American forces completely in Afghanistan by August 2021 (Miller & Madhani, 2021). Biden pledged to continue to abide by the agreement signed by his predecessor. By marking their victory after the US withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan, the Afghan Taliban expedited their military campaign against the Afghan security forces (Aljazeera, 2021). Ultimately, the Afghan Taliban established their control of control in most parts of Afghanistan by defeating the Afghan security forces who could not resist the Taliban onslaught.

With the Taliban back into power in Kabul, peace has remained largely elusive. The Taliban have been facing a threat from Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) who are opposed to the Taliban rule in the country. The diplomatic isolation of the Afghan Taliban internationally and the economic woes of the country posed a serious challenge for the Taliban regime to bring peace and prosperity to the country. In addition, the Taliban ban on women's education and their restrictions on women working have angered the Western countries who marked it a violation of human rights in the country. This further pushed the Taliban regime into diplomatic isolation. Moreover, contrary to Pakistan's expectations, the

Taliban did not reign in elements such as the Pakistani Taliban to stop attacking the Pakistani forces. Instead, the Pakistani Taliban was emboldened by the Taliban's success in Afghanistan which aggravated the security situation in Pakistan. Furthermore, the Afghan Taliban released many members of the Pakistani Taliban from the Afghan jails which led them to launch a new campaign of violence in Pakistan. Pakistan has protested on many occasions with the Afghan Taliban and threatened to take action inside the Afghan territory, but these moves could not get any positive response from the Afghan Taliban. Although, the Indian role in Afghanistan has been considerably constrained Pakistan's security concerns in the country still haunt the policymakers in Pakistan.

Notwithstanding the Afghan Taliban rule in the country, Afghanistan has continued to pose a challenge to Pakistan's internal security. In particular, the Pakistani Taliban's revival of terror campaign in Pakistan has gravely threatened security in neighbouring Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and parts of Baluchistan. The Afghan Taliban's refusal to reign in the Pakistani-origin militants has aggravated the security situation in the country. In addition, the Afghan Taliban's inability to militants belonging to the Islamic State of Khorasan, Al Qaeda has apparently diminished the prospects of freeing the region from terrorism.

## **Conclusion**

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Pakistan had consistently faced harsh criticism from Washington and the international community during the former's role in the war against terror, marking it conflicted or compromised performance by Islamabad. However, the US remained largely unable to recognise Pakistan's Indian-related security concerns in general and particularly in Afghanistan. Therefore, Pakistan remained mainly focused on addressing its Indian-centric security concerns thus leading to its less than wholehearted performance in the war against terror. Furthermore, Pakistan's cooperation with the US, in its efforts to make peace with the Afghan Taliban and to exit the country, was forthcoming which earned appreciation from the international community including the US. Pakistan saw an

opportunity to assuage its security concerns vis-à-vis India and Afghanistan with the Taliban winning a fair share in Afghanistan's power structure. However, the Afghan Taliban style of governance based on the strict interpretation of sharia and their hardened stand regarding women and minorities proved a stumbling block in gaining international

diplomatic recognition. In addition, the Afghan Taliban's inability or unwillingness to control terrorism emanating from Afghanistan has degraded security not only in Pakistan but in the whole region.

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