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Pakistan–Afghanistan Relations: Challenges, Conflicts, and Prospects for a Cooperative Environment

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ABSTRACT

Pakistan-Afghanistan relations have historically been shaped by deep political mistrust, unresolved border disputes, and persistent security challenges. Since 1947, issues such as the Durand Line, cross-border militancy, refugee movements, and external interventions have strained bilateral ties and limited meaningful cooperation. The situation has become more complex after the Taliban's return to power in 2021, intensifying Pakistan's concerns over border security, terrorism, and regional stability. This study examines the key challenges and conflicts influencing Pakistan–Afghanistan relations, with a focus on security dynamics, border management, and the role of non-state actors, while also exploring prospects for cooperation in trade, transit, counterterrorism, and regional connectivity. It argues that despite enduring tensions, shared security and economic interests provide opportunities for pragmatic engagement, and that confidence-building measures, mutual respect for sovereignty, and effective regional diplomacy are essential for transforming a historically conflict-prone relationship into a more stable and cooperative partnership.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Conflict, Trade, Tension

Introduction

Pakistan and Afghanistan share a long, complex, and often turbulent relationship shaped by geography, history, security concerns, and socio-cultural linkages. As immediate neighbors connected by a porous border of more than 2,200 kilometers, the two countries share deep ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural ties, particularly among the Pashtun communities living on both sides of the frontier. Despite these historical and social connections, relations between Islamabad and Kabul have frequently been characterized by mistrust, political rivalry, and security tensions. Since the creation of Pakistan in 1947, bilateral relations have oscillated between limited cooperation and persistent conflict, largely due to border disputes, geopolitical rivalries, and concerns over cross-border militancy (Bibi, et, al, 2026).



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One of the central issues shaping Pakistan–Afghanistan relations is the dispute over the **Durand Line**, the boundary demarcated in 1893 between British India and Afghanistan. Pakistan regards the Durand Line as the legitimate international border inherited after independence in 1947, whereas successive Afghan governments have refused to formally recognize it. The border divides ethnic Pashtun populations and has historically fueled Afghan claims regarding the concept of “Pashtunistan,” which called for an independent Pashtun homeland or the incorporation of Pakistan’s Pashtun areas into Afghanistan. This unresolved border issue has remained a persistent source of political friction and security tensions between the two states (Kaleem, 2025).

The roots of bilateral mistrust can be traced to the early years after Pakistan’s independence when Afghanistan became the only country to oppose Pakistan’s admission to the United Nations in 1947, primarily due to disagreements over the Durand Line and Pashtun self-determination. Throughout the Cold War period, the relationship remained uneasy as both countries pursued different strategic alignments and political agendas. In the 1970s, tensions intensified when Afghan President Mohammad Daoud Khan openly supported Pashtun and Baloch nationalist movements inside Pakistan. In response, Pakistan became involved in Afghan internal politics, particularly during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, when it supported the Afghan Mujahideen with assistance from the United States and other allies. These developments deepened mutual suspicion and laid the foundation for decades of strategic rivalry and proxy conflicts.

The rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan during the mid-1990s further complicated the dynamics of Pakistan–Afghanistan relations. Pakistan was among the few countries that recognized the Taliban government (1996–2001), hoping that a friendly regime in Kabul would provide strategic depth and stability along its western border. However, the collapse of the Taliban regime following the United States-led intervention in 2001 and the subsequent establishment of a new Afghan government altered regional politics. During the post-2001 period, Afghanistan repeatedly accused Pakistan of supporting insurgent groups such as the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network, while Pakistan alleged that Afghan territory was being used by militant groups like the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) to conduct attacks within Pakistan. These mutual accusations intensified distrust and hindered meaningful diplomatic engagement between the two states. Security concerns have remained the most significant factor influencing Pakistan–Afghanistan relations in the twenty-first century. The porous border allows militant groups, smugglers, and insurgents to move easily across the frontier, creating serious challenges for border management and counterterrorism efforts. Pakistan has repeatedly urged Afghan authorities to take action against militant groups operating from Afghan soil, while Afghanistan has criticized Pakistan’s construction of border fencing and military operations near the frontier. The persistence of cross-border militancy has not only strained diplomatic ties but has also contributed to regional instability and humanitarian challenges, including refugee flows, displacement, and economic disruption (Farooq, 2025).

In addition to security concerns, political developments within Afghanistan have played a crucial role in shaping bilateral relations. The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in 2021 marked a new phase in Pakistan–Afghanistan relations. While Pakistan initially expressed hope that a Taliban-led government might contribute to regional stability, relations have remained fragile due to disputes over border management and the continued presence of militant groups such as the TTP. In recent years, tensions have periodically escalated into border clashes and military confrontations, highlighting the fragile and volatile nature of the relationship. Despite



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these challenges, Pakistan and Afghanistan also share significant opportunities for cooperation. Both countries occupy a strategically important position in South and Central Asia and serve as a natural corridor for regional trade, energy connectivity, and economic integration. Initiatives such as the **China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)** and regional projects like the **Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) gas pipeline** have the potential to transform Afghanistan into a transit hub linking Central Asia with South Asia. Economic cooperation, trade facilitation, infrastructure development, and regional connectivity could provide incentives for both countries to move beyond conflict and toward mutually beneficial partnerships (Jan, et, al, 2025).

Moreover, social and cultural ties between the populations of Pakistan and Afghanistan provide a strong foundation for cooperation. Millions of Afghan refugees have lived in Pakistan for decades, creating deep human connections between the two societies. Educational exchanges, cross-border trade, and shared cultural heritage continue to bind the two countries together despite political tensions. These social linkages highlight the potential for people-to-people diplomacy to play a constructive role in improving bilateral relations.

The Pakistan–Afghanistan relations represent one of the most complex and strategically significant bilateral relationships in South Asia. The relationship has been shaped by historical grievances, territorial disputes, ideological differences, and competing geopolitical interests. While persistent challenges such as the Durand Line dispute, cross-border militancy, and political mistrust—continue to hinder cooperation, opportunities also exist for improving relations through economic integration, regional connectivity, and confidence-building measures. A sustainable partnership between Pakistan and Afghanistan will depend on mutual recognition of sovereignty, effective border management, counterterrorism cooperation, and the development of inclusive regional frameworks aimed at promoting peace and stability in the broader region.

Literature Review

The relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan has attracted significant scholarly attention due to its complex historical roots, geopolitical significance, and implications for regional security in South and Central Asia. Researchers from the fields of international relations, security studies, and political geography have examined various dimensions of Pakistan–Afghanistan relations, including historical disputes, border issues, security challenges, militant networks, refugee dynamics, and prospects for regional cooperation. The literature demonstrates that the relationship between the two countries is shaped by a combination of structural factors such as geography and geopolitics, as well as domestic political dynamics and competing national identities.

Pakistan–Afghanistan relations highlights the historical and geopolitical factors that have shaped the complex interaction between the two neighboring states. Many researchers emphasize that the origins of bilateral tensions can be traced to the dispute over the Durand Line, which has remained a contentious issue since the creation of Pakistan in 1947. According to Ahmed Rashid (2010), Afghanistan’s refusal to formally recognize the Durand Line as an international border contributed to early mistrust and political rivalry between Kabul and Islamabad. Similarly, Barnett R. Rubin (2013) argues that historical grievances, ethnic divisions among Pashtun communities, and competing national narratives have significantly influenced the trajectory of Pakistan–Afghanistan relations.



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Another major theme in the literature focuses on the security dimension of the relationship, particularly the role of militant groups and cross-border insurgency. Scholars note that the porous border between the two countries has allowed militant networks to operate across the frontier, posing challenges for regional stability. According to Seth G. Jones (2010), militant organizations such as the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan have played a central role in shaping security perceptions in both countries. Afghanistan has often accused Pakistan of supporting Afghan insurgent groups, while Pakistan has expressed concerns about anti-Pakistan militants operating from Afghan territory. This mutual suspicion has reinforced the security dilemma and hindered diplomatic cooperation between the two states.

Despite persistent tensions, several scholars emphasize the potential for economic and regional cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Both countries occupy a strategically important location linking South Asia with Central Asia, which provides opportunities for trade and infrastructure development. Regional projects such as the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India Pipeline and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor have been identified as possible avenues for economic integration and regional connectivity. According to Frederick Starr (2018), greater economic interdependence could reduce political tensions and encourage cooperative engagement between Islamabad and Kabul. Therefore, while the literature highlights historical disputes and security challenges, it also suggests that economic cooperation and regional integration could provide a pathway for improving Pakistan–Afghanistan relations.

Historical Evolution of Pakistan–Afghanistan Relations

Early Relations (1947–1979)

After the creation of Pakistan in 1947, relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan quickly became strained due to disagreements over the status of the Durand Line. Afghanistan was the only country that initially opposed Pakistan's admission to the United Nations, reflecting Kabul's dissatisfaction with the colonial-era boundary that divided Pashtun tribal areas between the two states. Afghan leaders promoted the idea of "Pashtunistan," advocating greater autonomy or independence for Pashtun populations living in Pakistan's northwestern regions. This position created suspicion in Islamabad, which perceived the Pashtunistan movement as a challenge to Pakistan's territorial integrity and sovereignty (Rubin, 2013).

During the 1950s and 1960s, tensions between the two countries periodically escalated due to border disputes, political propaganda, and competing regional alliances. Afghanistan maintained closer ties with the Soviet Union, while Pakistan aligned itself with Western security alliances such as the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization and the Central Treaty Organization. Despite these tensions, both countries maintained diplomatic relations and continued limited economic and transit cooperation. However, mistrust persisted throughout the period, particularly due to cross-border tribal dynamics and political differences, which laid the foundation for the complex and often fragile relationship that continues to characterize Pakistan–Afghanistan relations today (Rashid, 2010).

Soviet Invasion and Regional Politics (1979–1989)

The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 dramatically transformed the geopolitical landscape of South Asia and intensified Cold War rivalries in the region. When the Soviet Union intervened to support the communist government in Afghanistan, neighboring Pakistan became a critical frontline state. Under the leadership of



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Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, Pakistan aligned closely with the United States and other Western allies to counter Soviet expansion. Pakistan provided logistical support, training facilities, and safe havens to Afghan resistance fighters known as the Mujahideen. With financial and military assistance from the United States and support from regional actors such as Saudi Arabia and China, the Afghan resistance movement gained strength and prolonged the conflict against Soviet forces.

The war had profound political, economic, and social implications for Pakistan and the wider region. Millions of Afghan refugees crossed the border and settled in Pakistani provinces such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan, creating humanitarian and administrative challenges. At the same time, Pakistan's strategic importance increased significantly in global politics, leading to greater economic and military aid from Western countries. However, the prolonged conflict also contributed to the spread of weapons, militancy, and narcotics trafficking in the region, which later created long-term security challenges for Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Soviet withdrawal in 1989 marked the end of direct Soviet involvement, but the instability and power struggles that followed continued to shape Pakistan–Afghanistan relations for decades.

Taliban Era (1996–2001)

During the 1990s, the Taliban emerged as a powerful political and military force in Afghanistan after years of civil war that followed the withdrawal of the Soviet Union. The Taliban movement, largely composed of religious students from madrassas and former Mujahideen fighters, gained support among sections of the population by promising to restore law and order in a country devastated by factional conflict. In 1996, the Taliban captured Kabul and established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan under the leadership of Mullah Muhammad Omar. Their rule was characterized by a strict interpretation of Islamic law and efforts to consolidate political authority across most of the country, although opposition groups continued resistance under the Northern Alliance (Rashid, 2004).

Pakistan formally recognized the Taliban government and maintained diplomatic relations with it, along with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Pakistan's support was largely driven by strategic considerations, including the desire for a friendly government in Afghanistan that could provide stability along Pakistan's western border and facilitate trade and connectivity with Central Asia. However, the Taliban regime faced widespread international criticism because of its restrictive policies, human rights violations, and its relationship with militant organizations such as Al-Qaeda led by Osama bin Laden. Afghanistan's growing diplomatic isolation and the presence of transnational militant networks eventually contributed to the downfall of the Taliban government following the September 11 attacks and the subsequent United States invasion of Afghanistan (Giustozzi, 2007).

Post-9/11 Period (2001–2021)

The September 11 attacks in 2001 marked a turning point in regional and global security politics. Following the attacks, the United States launched the United States invasion of Afghanistan to dismantle Al-Qaeda and remove the Taliban regime from power in Afghanistan. In this new geopolitical environment, Pakistan became a key ally of the United States and joined the global "War on Terror." Pakistan provided logistical support, intelligence cooperation, and access to supply routes that were vital for NATO operations in Afghanistan. This cooperation significantly increased Pakistan's strategic



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importance in international security affairs, while also bringing economic and military assistance from Western countries (Fair, 2014).

Despite this cooperation, relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan remained tense throughout the two decades following 2001. Afghan governments frequently accused Pakistan of allowing Afghan Taliban elements to operate from its territory, while Pakistan alleged that anti-Pakistan militant groups such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan found sanctuary inside Afghanistan. Border disputes, refugee issues, and cross-border militancy further complicated bilateral relations. Although both states shared concerns about terrorism and regional instability, mutual distrust and competing security interests continued to shape their diplomatic interactions until the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan in 2021 (Jones, 2014).

Taliban Return to Power (2021–Present)

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, following the withdrawal of United States and NATO forces, marked a significant shift in regional politics and security dynamics. The collapse of the Afghan government led by Ashraf Ghani and the Taliban's capture of Kabul re-established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. For Pakistan, the new political situation initially raised hopes that a Taliban-led government might contribute to stability in Afghanistan and facilitate improved bilateral relations. However, the rapid political transition also generated uncertainty regarding governance, humanitarian conditions, and the future direction of Afghanistan's foreign relations (Giustozzi, 2022).

Despite expectations of improved cooperation, Pakistan–Afghanistan relations have faced several challenges since 2021. A key concern for Pakistan has been the presence and activities of militant groups, particularly the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, which Islamabad claims operates from Afghan territory. Border tensions along the Durand Line, refugee management, and cross-border security incidents have further complicated bilateral relations. While the Taliban government has called for peaceful engagement and economic cooperation, mutual distrust and security concerns continue to influence diplomatic interactions between the two neighboring countries. Consequently, the post-2021 period remains a critical phase in determining whether Pakistan and Afghanistan can develop a stable and cooperative relationship in the long term (Ruttig, 2023).

Major Challenges in Pakistan–Afghanistan Relations

Durand Line Dispute

The Durand Line, established in 1893 as the border between British India and Afghanistan, remains a central point of contention in Pakistan–Afghanistan relations. While Pakistan considers the Durand Line as its internationally recognized border following independence in 1947, successive Afghan governments have historically refused to recognize it, claiming that it divides the ethnic Pashtun population across two countries (Noorzoy, 2017). This disagreement has fueled political tensions, cross-border disputes, and incidents of armed clashes along the frontier.

The border dispute has broader implications for regional security and governance. The porous nature of the Durand Line allows for the movement of militants, smuggling networks, and refugees, complicating Pakistan's efforts to maintain security in its western provinces. Additionally, Afghanistan's non-recognition of the border has hindered bilateral cooperation on trade, infrastructure, and counterterrorism. Despite attempts at dialogue and border management agreements, mutual distrust continues to



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impede a formal resolution, making the Durand Line one of the most enduring sources of tension in South Asian geopolitics (Johnson, 2011; Ruttig, 2023).

Cross-Border Militancy

Militant groups operating along the Pakistan–Afghanistan border have long posed a significant threat to the security of both countries. Organizations such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and affiliated networks have exploited the porous border to launch attacks in Pakistan while finding sanctuary in parts of Afghanistan (Fair, 2014). Similarly, Afghan Taliban factions and other armed groups have occasionally crossed into Pakistani territory, exacerbating tensions and complicating counterterrorism efforts. The presence of these militant groups has undermined regional stability, disrupted civilian life, and hampered economic development in border provinces such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Both Pakistan and Afghanistan have accused each other of providing tacit support or failing to control insurgent activities on their respective territories, creating a cycle of mistrust (Rashid, 2022). Efforts at joint security operations and intelligence sharing have faced challenges due to political differences, weak border management, and the complex tribal dynamics of the region. Consequently, cross-border militancy remains one of the most persistent obstacles to lasting peace and cooperation between the two neighbors (Ruttig, 2023).

Refugee Issues

Pakistan has been a major host of Afghan refugees since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and the flow of refugees continued during periods of Taliban rule, the post-9/11 conflict, and the Taliban's return to power in 2021. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Pakistan has accommodated over 1.4 million registered Afghan refugees as of 2021, with additional unregistered populations residing in border provinces such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Baluchistan, and Punjab (UNHCR, 2021).

While Pakistan has provided refuge and humanitarian support, hosting such a large population has placed considerable pressure on public services, infrastructure, and local economies. Refugee settlements have created competition for jobs, housing, and education, sometimes leading to social tensions with local communities. Security concerns have also arisen, as militant groups have occasionally infiltrated refugee populations to evade law enforcement (Bhatia, 2019). Despite international aid and bilateral cooperation, the long-term presence of Afghan refugees continues to present complex social, economic, and policy challenges for Pakistan, making refugee management a critical component of bilateral and regional stability (Gazdar, 2003; Khan, 2020).

Regional Geopolitics

Pakistan–Afghanistan relations are significantly shaped by the involvement of external powers, including the United States, China, and India, each pursuing strategic, economic, and security interests in the region. The United States has historically played a central role, from supporting Pakistan-backed Mujahedeen during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979–1989) to leading the post-9/11 intervention aimed at dismantling the Taliban and Al-Qaeda infrastructure (Rashid, 2008). U.S. involvement has reinforced Pakistan's strategic significance but also created tensions with Afghanistan over perceived cross-border support to militant groups.



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China has expanded its engagement with both countries through infrastructure investment, trade, and regional initiatives such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Beijing's involvement aims to secure regional connectivity, ensure border stability, and counter the influence of other powers, particularly in Afghanistan's mining and energy sectors (Wang, 2020). Meanwhile, India has strengthened ties with successive Afghan governments through development projects, military training, and humanitarian aid, seeking to increase its influence in Afghanistan and counterbalance Pakistan's strategic depth (Tellis, 2011).

The competition among these external actors has complicated Pakistan–Afghanistan relations, often exacerbating mutual distrust and creating overlapping spheres of influence. These dynamics have influenced border security policies, counterterrorism efforts, and regional economic cooperation, highlighting how Pakistan–Afghanistan relations cannot be understood in isolation from broader geopolitical interests (Ruttig, 2023; Rashid, 2022).

Prospects for Cooperation in Environment

Economic Cooperation

Economic cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan has the potential to strengthen bilateral relations and contribute to regional stability. Trade agreements, such as the Afghanistan–Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA), facilitate the movement of goods across borders, reduce informal trade, and create mutual economic incentives for maintaining peace (Rashid, 2022). Improved infrastructure, including road networks, border crossings, and customs facilities, enhances connectivity and reduces logistical costs, encouraging private sector investment and fostering cross-border business activities. Economic interdependence can also mitigate political tensions by aligning the interests of both nations toward shared prosperity (Khan, 2020).

Beyond bilateral trade, economic cooperation can be reinforced through regional connectivity projects that link South and Central Asia. Initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and proposed trade corridors connecting Afghanistan to Central Asian markets can expand access to energy resources, industrial zones, and regional markets (Wang, 2020). These projects not only support economic growth but also strengthen geopolitical stability by integrating Afghanistan into regional economic frameworks, reducing its isolation, and providing incentives for both countries to work collaboratively on security and development issues. In this context, economic cooperation serves as a critical mechanism for sustaining long-term stability and improving Pakistan–Afghanistan relations (Tellis, 2011; Ruttig, 2023).

Regional Integration

Regional integration plays a pivotal role in fostering economic development and political stability in South and Central Asia. By linking Afghanistan with neighboring countries, including Pakistan, via trade corridors, energy networks, and infrastructure projects, countries can enhance market access, reduce transportation costs, and promote cross-border investment (Wang, 2020). Initiatives such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), combined with proposed Central Asian transit routes, offer opportunities for Afghanistan to connect with regional energy resources, industrial hubs, and export markets, which could reduce its economic isolation and dependence on external aid (Tellis, 2011).

Regional integration also contributes to security and diplomatic stability by creating shared economic incentives and interdependencies. When states benefit collectively from



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trade, energy, and infrastructure cooperation, there is a stronger motivation to resolve conflicts peacefully and maintain border security (Ruttig, 2023). Multilateral platforms and regional forums can facilitate policy coordination, harmonize customs and trade regulations, and support joint development initiatives. For Pakistan and Afghanistan, effective regional integration could help address challenges such as cross-border militancy, refugee flows, and trade disputes, ultimately strengthening bilateral ties while promoting broader South and Central Asian connectivity (Rashid, 2022; Wang, 2020).

Diplomatic Engagement

Diplomatic engagement is essential for addressing the long-standing tensions and mutual concerns between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Regular dialogue, high-level visits, and bilateral commissions provide platforms to discuss sensitive issues such as border security, cross-border militancy, refugee management, and trade regulations (Rashid, 2022). Confidence-building measures, including joint monitoring of border areas and coordinated counterterrorism operations, can reduce mistrust and promote a sense of shared responsibility for regional stability.

Multilateral forums and regional organizations can further support diplomatic engagement by facilitating collaboration on economic, security, and social initiatives. Cooperation within frameworks such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) or Central Asian connectivity projects allows both countries to align policies, harmonize regulations, and engage in dispute resolution mechanisms (Tellis, 2023). Effective diplomacy not only helps manage immediate security and political challenges but also lays the groundwork for sustainable bilateral relations, ensuring that both Pakistan and Afghanistan can jointly benefit from peace, stability, and regional integration.

Conclusion

Pakistan–Afghanistan relations have been shaped by a complex interplay of historical, political, and geopolitical factors. From the early post-independence tensions over the Pashtunistan issue to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Islamabad’s strategic concerns have consistently revolved around security, border management, and the influence of external powers. Pakistan’s support for Afghan resistance during the Soviet–Afghan war, while enhancing its international importance, also created long-term challenges, including the proliferation of armed groups and the influx of millions of Afghan refugees, which continue to affect the social and economic fabric of Pakistan.

The Taliban era (1996–2001) further complicated bilateral relations. While Pakistan recognized the Taliban government with hopes of achieving stability along its western border, Afghanistan’s internal dynamics and the rise of militant organizations created tensions and international scrutiny. The post-9/11 period intensified these complexities, as Pakistan became a key ally in the U.S.-led “War on Terror” while simultaneously facing accusations from Afghanistan regarding support for insurgent groups. These overlapping security challenges underscored the persistent mistrust and fragile nature of bilateral ties, despite shared interests in counterterrorism and regional stability.

The Taliban’s return to power in 2021 introduced new uncertainties. While the regime offers Pakistan opportunities for engagement and potential stability, issues such as cross-border militancy, refugee flows, and the management of the Durand Line continue to strain relations. The re-emergence of the Taliban has highlighted the importance of maintaining a delicate balance between strategic interests, humanitarian responsibilities, and security imperatives. Both countries face the challenge of mitigating mutual distrust



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while navigating the broader regional and international pressures exerted by powers like the United States, China, and India.

Economic cooperation and regional integration emerge as key mechanisms for fostering long-term stability. Trade agreements, connectivity projects, and regional corridors not only enhance economic interdependence but also provide incentives for peaceful collaboration. Initiatives like the Afghanistan–Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) and broader South-Central Asian infrastructure projects can support development, reduce economic disparities, and integrate Afghanistan into regional markets. Alongside economic initiatives, sustained diplomatic engagement and confidence-building measures remain essential to address contentious issues, build mutual trust, and establish frameworks for resolving disputes over borders, security, and trade.

The trajectory of Pakistan–Afghanistan relations reflects a combination of historical grievances, security concerns, and the influence of regional and global actors. Sustainable improvement in bilateral relations requires a multidimensional approach that balances strategic interests, economic cooperation, humanitarian obligations, and robust diplomacy. While challenges such as cross-border militancy, refugee management, and the Durand Line dispute persist, opportunities for collaboration exist through regional integration, trade, and confidence-building initiatives. By fostering trust, enhancing connectivity, and promoting shared economic and security goals, Pakistan and Afghanistan can work toward a more stable and cooperative partnership that contributes to peace and development in South and Central Asia.

Policy Recommendations

To improve Pakistan–Afghanistan relations and foster regional stability, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

Formal Recognition and Management of the Durand Line Both countries should work toward a mutually acceptable understanding of the Durand Line. While Afghanistan may continue to contest its legal status, practical measures such as joint border commissions, coordinated fencing, and border checkpoints can enhance security and facilitate regulated cross-border movement. Regular consultations between security and diplomatic officials would help prevent border clashes and build confidence.

Enhanced Counterterrorism Cooperation, Both Pakistan and Afghanistan should establish joint intelligence-sharing mechanisms and coordinated operations to tackle militant groups such as the Taliban, Haqqani Network, and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan. By adopting a collaborative approach to counterterrorism, the two countries can reduce mutual accusations, prevent cross-border attacks, and enhance overall regional security.

Structured Refugee and Migration Policies the long-standing Afghan refugee population in Pakistan, both governments should coordinate on repatriation, registration, and access to basic services. Policies should balance humanitarian obligations with national security and economic considerations, ensuring that refugees are protected while reducing the potential for social and security tensions.

Economic and Trade Integration Pakistan and Afghanistan: should prioritize regional economic cooperation through infrastructure and trade projects, including the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor and the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India



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Pipeline. Enhancing cross-border trade, transit facilitation, and energy connectivity can create mutual economic incentives for peace and collaboration.

People-to-People Diplomacy and Cultural and environment Exchange: Programs promoting education, cultural exchanges, and tribal dialogues can strengthen social ties between Pakistani and Afghan communities. Engaging local stakeholders in conflict-prone border regions can help reduce tribal tensions, foster trust, and encourage grassroots-level cooperation.

Regional and Multilateral Engagement: Both countries should actively participate in regional organizations and forums such as South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and explore partnerships with China, Central Asian states, and the United States to support stability, economic development, and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. Multilateral initiatives can provide external support and incentives for bilateral cooperation.

Confidence-Building Measures and Regular Dialogue: Establishing formal diplomatic channels, joint committees, and regular dialogue mechanisms can help resolve disputes, manage crises, and promote long-term trust. Confidence-building measures could include joint border patrols, periodic summits, and shared security frameworks.

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