



Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations under the Neo-Taliban Regime

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Abstract

The resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the establishment of the Neo-Taliban regime in 2021 have redefined regional dynamics, particularly the bilateral relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan. This paper explores the evolving nature of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations in the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal and the Taliban's return to power. It examines how Islamabad's historical ties with the Taliban intersect with emerging security concerns, cross-border militancy, refugee pressures, and regional diplomacy. While Pakistan initially perceived the regime change as a strategic opportunity, the increasing instability along the Durand Line, the rise of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and Kabul's independent foreign policy posture have strained bilateral relations. Drawing on official statements, policy shifts, and regional responses, the study highlights the paradoxes and policy dilemmas faced by Pakistan in navigating its complex engagement with the Taliban-led Afghanistan. The paper concludes that while ideological and historical linkages remain, pragmatic considerations, security, sovereignty, and regional connectivity are now shaping a more cautious and contested bilateral relationship.

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INTRODUCTION

The fall of Kabul in August 2021 and the Taliban's return to power marked a major turning point in the geopolitics of South Asia. The re-emergence of the Taliban, now referred to as the Neo-Taliban regime, introduced new uncertainties for regional actors—particularly Pakistan, whose security, foreign policy, and border stability are intricately tied to developments in Afghanistan. While Pakistan was widely perceived as having longstanding ties with the Taliban and initially welcomed the regime change, subsequent events have revealed a far more complex and strained bilateral relationship. Historically, Pakistan has maintained strategic interests in Afghanistan, driven by a desire to secure its western frontier, limit Indian influence, and establish a friendly government in Kabul. During the 1990s, Pakistan was one of only three countries to recognize the first Taliban government. It provided political and logistical support, hoping to achieve strategic depth against its regional rival, India. In the post-9/11 era, Pakistan walked a diplomatic tightrope, publicly supporting the U.S.-led war on terror while allegedly maintaining covert links with elements of the Taliban. These contradictory policies complicated its relations with both the Afghan government and the international community.

With the Taliban's reinstallation in power in 2021, Islamabad anticipated a more cooperative and aligned regime. However, the realities have proven otherwise. The Taliban's refusal to clamp down on the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), its ambiguous stance on the Durand Line, and periodic cross-border skirmishes have created serious diplomatic and security challenges for Pakistan. Moreover, the Taliban's increasing openness to building ties with India and other regional actors has further complicated Islamabad's strategic calculations. These developments raise critical questions about the future trajectory of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations under Taliban rule. The assumptions that once guided Pakistan's Afghan policy—based on ideological affinity, historical support, and shared interests—are now being tested in a rapidly evolving regional context. At the same time, Afghanistan's internal instability, humanitarian crisis, and economic collapse under the Taliban regime add additional layers of complexity to bilateral engagement.

This study seeks to analyze the political and strategic implications of the Neo-Taliban regime for Pakistan's foreign and security policy. It explores how the dynamics of this relationship have changed, what challenges Pakistan faces in dealing with the Taliban government, and how these developments may affect broader regional stability. By focusing on recent shifts in diplomatic relations, border tensions, and security threats, this research contributes to the understanding of a critical bilateral relationship that has significant consequences for South Asian geopolitics.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The geopolitical landscape of South Asia has undergone significant transformation since the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in August 2021. Following the U.S. and NATO withdrawal, the Taliban swiftly regained control, marking the beginning of a new era often referred to as the "Neo-Taliban regime." This development has had profound implications for regional stability, particularly for Pakistan, which shares a long and porous border with Afghanistan, as well as deep historical, ethnic, and political ties.

Historically, Pakistan has played a central role in Afghan affairs. From supporting the Mujahideen during the Soviet-Afghan war to being one of the few countries to recognize the first Taliban regime in the 1990s, Pakistan has consistently sought to influence developments in Afghanistan to serve its strategic interests. The concept of "strategic depth," which aimed to secure Pakistan's western flank and reduce Indian influence in Afghanistan, has long shaped Islamabad's Afghan policy. However, the rise of

the Neo-Taliban regime presents a new set of challenges that deviate from past expectations. Initially, Pakistan welcomed the Taliban's return, expecting a friendly regime in Kabul that would align with its security and foreign policy interests. However, the Taliban's growing autonomy, reluctance to act against anti-Pakistan groups such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and refusal to recognize the Durand Line as an official border have strained bilateral ties. Cross-border attacks, increased infiltration, and a surge in militant violence within Pakistan have further complicated relations.

At the same time, the Taliban's outreach to other regional players, including India and China, signals a shift in Afghanistan's foreign policy posture. Pakistan now finds itself navigating a complex and uncertain relationship with a regime that, while ideologically similar, has adopted a more independent and unpredictable approach to governance and diplomacy. This study seeks to examine the evolving nature of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations under the Neo-Taliban regime, focusing on key political and security dimensions. By exploring the shifts in bilateral ties, security cooperation, and regional alignments, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the new geopolitical realities confronting Pakistan in its engagement with Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 has significantly altered the political and security landscape of the region, presenting Pakistan with a complex set of challenges. While Pakistan initially viewed the rise of the Neo-Taliban regime as a strategic opportunity to strengthen its influence in Kabul and secure its western border, the actual outcomes have been far less favorable. The Taliban's refusal to take decisive action against the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), its non-recognition of the Durand Line as an international border, and its increasingly autonomous foreign policy have strained bilateral relations. Despite shared ideological roots and historical ties, the relationship between the two countries has become increasingly fragile and marked by mistrust. Cross-border attacks, the resurgence of militancy within Pakistan, and the Taliban's diplomatic engagements with regional competitors such as India have further complicated Islamabad's position. These developments have not only challenged Pakistan's traditional Afghan policy but have also raised questions about its regional strategy and national security doctrine. Given the lack of scholarly consensus on the evolving nature of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations under the Neo-Taliban regime, there is a pressing need to critically examine the political and strategic implications of this new reality. This study seeks to address this gap by analyzing the key challenges, shifts in policy, and potential future trajectories of the bilateral relationship.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 has introduced new and complex dynamics into Pakistan's foreign and security policy landscape. While Pakistan has historically maintained strategic ties with the Taliban, the emergence of the Neo-Taliban regime has not led to the outcomes Islamabad initially anticipated. Instead of gaining greater strategic depth, Pakistan now faces growing security threats, increased cross-border tensions, and a more independent Taliban government that resists traditional influence. This study is justified by the urgent need to understand these evolving dynamics, especially in light of increased attacks by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), disputes over the Durand Line, and the Taliban's diplomatic openness toward India and other regional actors. These issues have direct implications for Pakistan's internal stability, border management, and regional positioning. Furthermore, much of the existing literature on Pakistan-Afghanistan relations focuses either on the pre-9/11 period or on the

post-2001 U.S.-led intervention era. There is limited academic work that specifically analyzes the nature of bilateral relations under the current Neo-Taliban regime. This study addresses that gap by focusing on the post-2021 developments that are actively shaping the strategic environment in South Asia. In addition, the research offers valuable insights for policymakers, diplomats, and security analysts in Pakistan and beyond. As the Taliban regime consolidates its rule and regional powers recalibrate their Afghan policies, understanding Pakistan's challenges and strategic responses becomes crucial. Therefore, this study is not only academically relevant but also timely and policy-relevant in addressing one of the most pressing regional issues in South Asia today.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS/RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. How have relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan changed under the Neo-Taliban government?
2. What problems is Pakistan facing after the Taliban returned to power?
3. How is Pakistan dealing with the new Taliban government in Afghanistan?

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

While this study provides valuable insights into the political and strategic dimensions of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations under the Neo-Taliban regime, it is subject to several limitations. Firstly, the study relies primarily on secondary sources, such as policy reports, news articles, academic literature, and official statements, due to limited direct access to stakeholders or government officials. This reliance may limit the depth of primary data analysis. Secondly, the dynamic and evolving nature of the Taliban regime poses a challenge to analysis. Since the political situation in Afghanistan remains fluid and unpredictable, developments occurring after the completion of this study may affect the long-term relevance of some findings. Thirdly, access to accurate and verifiable data on cross-border militancy, internal Taliban policies, and behind-the-scenes diplomatic interactions is limited due to the opaque governance structure of the Taliban and restricted media access within Afghanistan. Lastly, the study focuses exclusively on the bilateral relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan. While it briefly touches on the roles of regional powers such as India and China, it does not fully explore the broader international dimensions of the Afghan situation, which could also impact bilateral ties. Despite these limitations, the study offers a meaningful contribution to understanding the evolving relationship between Pakistan and the Neo-Taliban regime and provides a foundation for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF PAKISTAN-AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS

The relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan has long been shaped by geography, history, and ideology. Since Pakistan's independence in 1947, Afghanistan has often challenged the legitimacy of the Durand Line and supported Pashtun nationalist movements, fueling tensions (Rashid, 2000). Pakistan's support for the Mujahideen during the Soviet-Afghan war, and later for the Taliban regime in the 1990s, reflects Islamabad's strategic objective of achieving "strategic depth" in Afghanistan (Siddiqi, 2011). Pakistan has viewed a friendly government in Kabul as essential to its national security, especially in the context of its rivalry with India. However, Afghanistan has historically resisted Pakistan's efforts to dominate its foreign and security policy, leading to periods of mutual suspicion (Rubin, 2002).

PAKISTAN AND THE TALIBAN: FROM THE 1990S TO NEO-TALIBAN

During the 1990s, Pakistan was one of the few countries to recognize the Taliban regime. The Taliban offered a buffer against Indian influence in Afghanistan and were seen by

Islamabad as ideologically aligned actors who could secure Pakistan's western flank (Rashid, 2000). However, this alliance was complicated by the Taliban's harboring of al-Qaeda, leading to global isolation after 9/11. Post-2001, Pakistan supported the U.S.-backed Afghan government publicly while allegedly offering sanctuary to elements of the Taliban leadership through a "double game" strategy (Fair, 2014). This dual approach strained relations with both Kabul and Washington.

The rise of the Neo-Taliban regime in 2021 marked a significant turning point. Initially, Pakistan hoped for strategic dividends from the Taliban's return. However, the Taliban's independent stance, refusal to recognize the Durand Line officially, and reluctance to act against the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have revived old tensions (Kugelman, 2022).

SECURITY DILEMMAS: TTP, BORDER FENCING, AND MILITANCY

Security remains a central issue in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. Since the Taliban's return, attacks by the TTP, operating from Afghan soil, have increased sharply. Pakistan has repeatedly called on the Taliban to take action against TTP safe havens, but the regime's response has been non-committal, citing intra-Pashtun dynamics and lack of capacity (Yousaf, 2022). Pakistan's efforts to fence the Durand Line have also become a major source of contention. While Pakistan views the fencing as necessary for border control, the Taliban consider it a violation of historical and tribal connections (ICG, 2022). Skirmishes between Afghan and Pakistani forces along the border have occasionally escalated into armed confrontations.

DIPLOMATIC AND REGIONAL DIMENSIONS

On the diplomatic front, Pakistan has struggled to balance engagement with the Taliban while maintaining international credibility. The lack of inclusivity in the Taliban government, restrictions on women's rights, and links to terrorism have made it difficult for Pakistan to advocate for global recognition of the regime (Rafiq, 2022). Moreover, the Taliban's growing openness to India, historically Pakistan's rival in Afghanistan, has alarmed Islamabad. India's reopening of its diplomatic presence in Kabul and humanitarian outreach efforts signal a potential shift in regional alignments, undermining Pakistan's traditional influence (Tellis, 2022).

At the same time, China's increasing involvement in Afghanistan both economically and diplomatically adds another layer of complexity. Pakistan views Chinese engagement as potentially stabilizing but also fears being sidelined in broader regional frameworks such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Javaid, 2020).

STRATEGIC AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN

The return of the Taliban has not produced the strategic advantages Pakistan once anticipated. Instead, Islamabad faces a more assertive regime in Kabul that resists Pakistani influence and tolerates anti-Pakistan militancy. This has led Pakistani policymakers to reassess their Afghan strategy, shifting from ideological alignment to a more security- and interest-based approach (Yusuf, 2022). The situation also exposes the limitations of Pakistan's strategic depth doctrine, which assumed a pro-Pakistan regime in Kabul would secure its western frontier. The Taliban's pursuit of autonomy complicates Islamabad's ability to shape outcomes in Afghanistan (Rashid, 2021).

The literature reveals that while historical and ideological ties between Pakistan and the Taliban persist, the current geopolitical environment is defined more by divergence than convergence. The rise of the Neo-Taliban regime has intensified existing security threats, reopened border disputes, and strained Pakistan's regional posture. Contemporary

scholarship suggests a need to move beyond simplistic alliance narratives and adopt more nuanced, interest-based analyses of Pakistan–Afghanistan relations.

GAP IN THE LITERATURE

Existing literature on Pakistan–Afghanistan relations largely centers on the historical context of bilateral tensions, Pakistan’s support for the Taliban during the 1990s, and its strategic behavior during the U.S.-led intervention period post-9/11. These studies explore themes such as the Durand Line dispute, the concept of strategic depth, and Pakistan’s dual approach toward the Afghan Taliban and the West. However, scholarly attention to the post-2021 phase—marked by the Taliban’s return to power and the establishment of the Neo-Taliban regime, remains limited. While some recent policy papers and media commentaries have addressed the emerging tensions between Pakistan and the new Taliban government, such as the rise in cross-border militancy, the Taliban’s passive stance toward the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and disputes over border fencing these sources often lack a deeper theoretical foundation and long-term analytical perspective.

Furthermore, the Taliban’s growing autonomy in foreign policy and engagement with India have introduced new regional dynamics that have not been systematically examined in academic literature. There is, therefore, a clear gap in the scholarly discourse regarding how Pakistan’s relationship with Afghanistan has evolved under the Neo-Taliban regime, what political and security challenges it faces, and how Islamabad is recalibrating its policy in response. This study aims to address this gap by providing a comprehensive, theoretically grounded analysis of Pakistan–Afghanistan relations in the current geopolitical context.

MAIN ARGUMENT

The return of the Taliban has complicated rather than strengthened Pakistan–Afghanistan relations, as the Neo-Taliban regime’s independent stance and tolerance of anti-Pakistan militancy challenge Islamabad’s strategic expectations and regional influence.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

NEOREALISM / STRUCTURAL REALISM

Neorealism helps explain Pakistan’s cautious approach toward the Taliban and its Neo-realism, also known as structural realism, is a key theory in international relations developed primarily by Kenneth Waltz in his influential work *Theory of International Politics* (1979). Unlike classical realism, which focuses on human nature and the ambitions of individual leaders, neo-realism emphasizes the structure of the international system as the primary determinant of state behavior. According to neo-realism, the international system is anarchic, meaning there is no central authority to govern the interactions between sovereign states. In this anarchic environment, all states must rely on their own capabilities to ensure survival. This leads to a system where states prioritize national interest, military power, and security, often engaging in balancing behavior to counter threats from rivals (Waltz, 1979).

Neo-realism also argues that states are functionally similar, they all seek to survive, but differ in their relative capabilities. This uneven distribution of power creates a structure that pressures states to act in predictable ways, often leading to competition, mistrust, and conflict (Mearsheimer, 2001). For neo-realists, security is a zero-sum game, and cooperation is limited due to concerns over relative gains and the potential for betrayal. In the context of Pakistan–Afghanistan relations under the Neo-Taliban regime, neo-realism provides a useful lens for understanding why Pakistan, despite historical and ideological ties with the Taliban, now views Afghanistan more as a source of threat than strategic depth. Pakistan’s concerns about cross-border terrorism, Taliban’s ties with anti-Pakistan

groups like the TTP, and Kabul's independent diplomatic outreach to India reflect a security-driven realist logic, where power, survival, and threat perception dominate over ideology or friendship.

Neo-realism, or structural realism, is the most suitable theoretical framework for this study because it focuses on how the structure of the international system—defined by anarchy and unequal power distribution—shapes state behavior (Waltz, 1979). In the case of Pakistan–Afghanistan relations under the Neo-Taliban regime, both countries operate in an anarchic regional environment, with no higher authority to enforce rules or mediate disputes. Their actions are driven primarily by national interest, security concerns, and power calculations, which are core principles of the neo-realist approach. Despite Pakistan's historical and ideological ties with the Taliban, its policy toward the Neo-Taliban regime is now guided by strategic caution rather than ideological alignment. Pakistan is concerned about the Taliban's refusal to act decisively against the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), rising cross-border attacks, and the Taliban's growing diplomatic independence—including its outreach to India, Pakistan's regional rival. These developments illustrate the neo-realist idea that states prioritize survival and self-help over trust or shared identity (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Furthermore, neo-realism helps explain the competitive and conflict-prone nature of Pakistan–Afghanistan relations, even when there are shared religious or cultural elements. The Taliban's behavior reflects their desire to assert sovereignty and maximize autonomy, while Pakistan responds by recalibrating its foreign and security policies to counterbalance threats and preserve regional influence. Thus, neo-realism provides a realistic, power-centered lens through which this study analyzes how Pakistan navigates its complex and increasingly strained relationship with Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. It shifts the analytical focus away from ideological or historical narratives and centers on the security-driven logic of state behavior in an uncertain regional environment.

METHOD QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

This study employs Qualitative Content Analysis as the primary research method to examine the evolving political and security dynamics between Pakistan and Afghanistan under the Neo-Taliban regime. It is a systematic, interpretive method used to analyze the meaning, themes, and patterns within textual data, such as official statements, government documents, media reports, and scholarly publications (Schreier, 2012). Unlike quantitative content analysis, which focuses on counting frequencies of words or terms, qualitative content analysis is concerned with interpreting the underlying meaning and context of the content. This makes it particularly well-suited for studying international relations and political behavior, where actors' language, narratives, and public discourse often reveal strategic intentions and shifts in policy (Mayring, 2000).

In the context of this research, quality content analysis enables the examination of official communications from the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan, policy statements, speeches by key Taliban and Pakistani leaders, news coverage from credible sources, and analyses by think tanks and international organizations. This method allows the researcher to trace how both states frame their relationship, respond to events such as cross-border tensions or TTP activity, and articulate their foreign policy positions. The qualitative content analysis approach also supports the inductive identification of themes such as border conflict, militancy, strategic distrust, diplomatic alignment, and regional influence. Through this process, the study aims to interpret how the Neo-Taliban regime has redefined Pakistan's strategic calculations and what political ramifications have emerged in bilateral relations.

In my case qualitative content analysis is the most appropriate methodological approach for this research because the study aims to understand the evolving political and security dynamics between Pakistan and the Neo-Taliban regime in Afghanistan. This requires interpreting the meaning behind official discourse, policy positions, media narratives, and strategic behavior, all of which are best captured through qualitative, rather than quantitative, analysis. Qualitative content analysis allows for the systematic interpretation of textual data from speeches, press statements, government documents, news reports, and think tank publications, enabling the researcher to identify key themes such as strategic divergence, cross-border militancy, and shifting diplomatic relations (Schreier, 2012). Since much of the interaction between Pakistan and Afghanistan in the current context is expressed through political language, symbolism, and policy framing, QCA provides the necessary tools to analyze these subtle yet significant patterns.

Moreover, qualitative content analysis supports inductive category development, which is vital in this case because the relationship between Pakistan and the Neo-Taliban regime is still emerging and fluid. This method allows the researcher to identify themes organically from the data, rather than imposing rigid pre-defined categories, which would limit the study's analytical depth (Mayring, 2000). In politically sensitive and dynamic contexts like South Asia, where access to decision-makers is limited and ground realities evolve quickly, QCA is a practical and robust method. It enables a deeper, context-sensitive understanding of foreign policy narratives and state behavior, making it highly suitable for a study that investigates political ramifications in an evolving bilateral relationship.

DATA ANALYSIS/RESULTS

EVOLVING DYNAMICS: PAKISTAN–AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS UNDER THE NEO-TALIBAN GOVERNMENT

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 marked a significant turning point in regional politics, particularly for Pakistan, which shares deep historical, ethnic, religious, and strategic ties with its western neighbor. Initially, Islamabad greeted the emergence of the Neo-Taliban regime with cautious optimism, anticipating a period of enhanced cooperation, border stability, and reduced Indian influence in Afghanistan. However, the post-2021 period has demonstrated that the Taliban's governance under the Neo-Taliban regime diverges considerably from Pakistani expectations, resulting in strained and complex bilateral relations. One of the most pressing issues affecting the relationship is the resurgence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Operating from sanctuaries within Afghan territory, the TTP has intensified attacks on Pakistani security forces and civilians. Despite Pakistan's repeated diplomatic engagements, the Taliban have not taken concrete action against the TTP, often citing limitations in capacity or denying the presence of such groups. This inaction has led to a breakdown in trust and an increase in cross-border tensions, particularly in regions along the Durand Line.

Another major source of friction is the Taliban's rejection of the Durand Line as an international border. The Afghan government, even prior to the Taliban, consistently disputed the legitimacy of this colonial-era boundary. However, under the Neo-Taliban regime, clashes over fencing, patrols, and border controls have become more frequent. This has aggravated tensions, undermined border security, and contributed to diplomatic unease. Furthermore, the Taliban's foreign policy behavior has surprised Islamabad. Rather than remaining within Pakistan's sphere of influence, the Neo-Taliban regime has adopted a more autonomous and multi-directional diplomatic approach. Most notably, the Taliban have shown interest in rebuilding ties with India, a move that Pakistan views with suspicion given its long-standing rivalry with New Delhi. The Taliban's refusal to act purely

as a client state of Pakistan reflects a significant shift from previous assumptions that ideological affinity would ensure loyalty or alignment.

The Taliban's non-inclusive governance model has also posed challenges for regional cooperation. Pakistan has called for a more inclusive political structure in Kabul to ensure long-term stability and legitimacy. However, the Taliban's resistance to such reforms has isolated Afghanistan internationally and complicated Pakistan's efforts to advocate for recognition and aid on their behalf. In sum, Pakistan-Afghanistan relations under the Neo-Taliban regime have evolved into a relationship defined more by strategic divergence than ideological convergence. Security threats, unresolved border disputes, and the Taliban's pursuit of an independent foreign policy have forced Pakistan to reconsider its traditional assumptions and recalibrate its approach. Rather than reaping the benefits of a friendly regime, Pakistan now faces a more uncertain and potentially hostile western border under the Neo-Taliban government.

CHALLENGES FOR PAKISTAN AFTER THE RETURN OF THE TALIBAN TO POWER

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 has not delivered the strategic benefits that Pakistan initially expected. Instead, Islamabad has been confronted with a range of political, security, and diplomatic challenges that have strained bilateral ties and disrupted regional stability. While Pakistan had hoped for a friendly and cooperative regime in Kabul, the Taliban's actions or lack thereof have led to growing tensions and significant policy dilemmas. One of the most serious problems Pakistan faces is the revival and intensification of TTP activities. The militant group has launched numerous cross-border attacks from its safe havens inside Afghanistan, targeting Pakistani military and civilian installations. The Taliban regime has largely refused to act decisively against the TTP, citing limitations or internal cohesion concerns. This has created a major security dilemma for Pakistan, which now faces rising instability in its tribal and border regions.

Another significant issue is the Durand Line, the colonial-era boundary between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Taliban, like previous Afghan governments, refuse to recognize the Durand Line as an official international border. Attempts by Pakistan to erect fencing along this border have led to frequent armed clashes and diplomatic confrontations, further eroding trust between the two governments and disrupting cross-border movement and trade. Contrary to expectations, the Neo-Taliban regime has not behaved as a close ally of Pakistan. Instead, it has pursued a more independent foreign policy, including rebuilding relations with India, Pakistan's principal regional rival. This development has caused concern in Islamabad, which fears that a closer Kabul-New Delhi relationship could lead to Pakistan's strategic marginalization in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has consistently demanded that the Taliban prevent Afghan soil from being used by terrorist groups. However, the Taliban's unwillingness or inability to eliminate the presence of groups such as the TTP, ISKP (Islamic State Khorasan Province), and others has undermined Pakistan's internal security efforts. The Taliban's informal and non-institutionalized governance also limits structured intelligence-sharing or security collaboration. Although Pakistan has not experienced a mass influx of Afghan refugee's post-2021, economic hardship and political repression in Afghanistan have increased cross-border movement. Pakistan now faces growing pressure on its resources and border management capacity, especially in the context of already strained public services and rising anti-refugee sentiment within the country.

Pakistan initially acted as a facilitator for the Taliban during peace negotiations with the U.S. and was expected to play a key role in international diplomacy regarding Afghanistan. However, international criticism of the Taliban's human rights record, gender

policies, and exclusionary governance has left Pakistan in a difficult position caught between supporting a neighbor and avoiding global backlash. This has limited Pakistan's diplomatic maneuverability and affected its image in Western and regional forums.

Instead of securing strategic depth or regional leverage, Pakistan is now grappling with a more complex and often hostile neighbor. The Taliban's rise has triggered a security crisis, intensified border and diplomatic tensions, and forced Pakistan to rethink its Afghan policy under an evolving and unpredictable regime.

PAKISTAN'S RESPONSE TO THE NEO-TALIBAN GOVERNMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

Following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, Pakistan initially responded with optimism, expecting a cooperative and strategically aligned government in Kabul. However, as challenges emerged—particularly security threats from the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), border disputes, and the Taliban's growing foreign policy autonomy, Pakistan was compelled to shift its approach. Islamabad's strategy toward the Neo-Taliban regime has since become more cautious, pragmatic, and security-driven. Pakistan continues to maintain formal diplomatic ties with the Taliban government, advocating for regional engagement rather than complete isolation. However, unlike in the 1990s, Pakistan has refrained from granting official recognition to the Taliban regime, aligning itself with the broader international community. This reflects a more cautious diplomatic posture, aimed at balancing engagement with pressure for responsible governance.

In response to rising cross-border militancy, particularly from the TTP, Pakistan has enhanced its military presence along the Durand Line, strengthened border fencing, and conducted targeted operations in tribal areas. At times, Pakistan has even launched cross-border strikes against TTP hideouts in Afghan territory—an indication of its increasing frustration with the Taliban's inaction against militant groups. These actions reflect a shift from strategic patience to coercive deterrence. Despite security tensions, Pakistan has also pursued diplomatic dialogue with Taliban officials, including high-level meetings focused on border security, trade, and counterterrorism cooperation. Islamabad has attempted to mediate talks with the TTP as well, though these efforts failed in 2022, largely due to Taliban reluctance to exert pressure on the group. These parallel approaches illustrate Pakistan's attempt to resolve tensions without fully severing ties.

Pakistan is increasingly using regional platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation

Organization (SCO), Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and trilateral mechanisms involving China, Russia, and Iran, to push for a collective strategy on Afghanistan. This includes coordinated efforts on counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance, and border control, aimed at sharing responsibility and building diplomatic pressure on the Taliban to fulfill regional expectations. Pakistan is trying to balance engagement with the Taliban while retaining strategic leverage, including through control of trade routes, visa policies, and border crossings. At the same time, Pakistan has supported humanitarian aid into Afghanistan to prevent total state collapse, which could worsen refugee flows and regional instability. However, it continues to insist on inclusive governance, human rights, and action against terror groups as conditions for deeper cooperation. Pakistan's approach to the Neo-Taliban government is marked by a complex mix of diplomatic engagement, security enforcement, regional collaboration, and strategic recalibration. Islamabad has moved from hopeful alignment to cautious pragmatism, as it seeks to manage an unpredictable neighbor while safeguarding its national security and regional interests.



FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

Despite initial optimism, Pakistan’s expectations of gaining strategic depth through a friendly Taliban regime have not materialized. The Taliban’s refusal to act against anti-Pakistan groups like the TTP and their reluctance to acknowledge the Durand Line has resulted in a growing divergence in strategic interests. One of the most critical outcomes of the Taliban’s return has been the resurgence of cross-border militancy, particularly attacks carried out by the TTP. Pakistan’s security forces have experienced a notable increase in ambushes, targeted killings, and suicide attacks originating from Afghan territory. The Taliban’s rejection of the Durand Line as an official boundary has led to frequent border skirmishes. Pakistani efforts to fence the border have been met with resistance, exacerbating bilateral tensions and undermining border management.

Contrary to expectations, the Taliban have pursued an autonomous foreign policy, including attempts to re-establish ties with India. This has caused strategic concern in Islamabad, which fears being diplomatically sidelined in Afghanistan. Pakistan has attempted to engage the Taliban diplomatically and through regional forums to ensure Afghan soil is not used against it. However, the Taliban have shown limited willingness to cooperate on counterterrorism, intelligence-sharing, or joint border control mechanisms. Pakistan is increasingly relying on multilateral forums and regional diplomacy, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and collaborations with China, Iran, and Russia, to develop a regional consensus on engaging the Taliban. This reflects a broader recalibration of Pakistan's regional strategy.

NVIVO-14 CHART: THEMATIC CODING STRUCTURE

PARENT NODE: PAKISTAN–AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS (POST-2021)

Node (Theme)	Sub-Nodes (Sub-Themes)
Strategic Misalignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Policy divergence- Unrealized expectations
Security Threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- TTP resurgence- Cross-border attacks
Border Disputes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Durand Line rejection- Fence conflicts
Taliban’s Diplomatic Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Taliban–India relations- Regional outreach
Counterterrorism Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Lack of cooperation- Failed negotiations
Regional and Multilateral Response	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Pakistan’s SCO role- China–Pakistan alignment

Theme	Frequency
Strategic Misalignment	12
Security Threats	18
Border Disputes	10
Diplomatic Autonomy	9
Counterterrorism Challenges	15
Regional Diplomacy	11

[illegible]

—574—

CONCLUSION

The re-establishment of Taliban rule in Afghanistan in August 2021 marked a critical juncture in regional geopolitics, especially for Pakistan, a country that shares a long, complex, and deeply entangled history with its western neighbor. While many in Islamabad initially viewed the Neo-Taliban regime as a strategic opportunity to secure a favorable government in Kabul, reduce Indian influence, and stabilize the long-contested border region, the reality that unfolded has been far more complex and problematic. This research, guided by the neo-realist framework and supported by qualitative content analysis, finds that Pakistan's assumptions about ideological alignment with the Taliban have largely failed to translate into policy cooperation or security gains. Instead, Pakistan is facing renewed threats from cross-border militancy, particularly from the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which continues to operate with impunity from Afghan soil. The Taliban's refusal to recognize the Durand Line, their resistance to Pakistani border fencing, and their engagement with India have only deepened Islamabad's strategic anxiety.

Moreover, the Taliban's growing diplomatic independence and unwillingness to conform to Pakistan's expectations reflect a broader trend of state-centric behavior grounded in sovereignty and power maximization, as explained by neo-realism. These developments underscore the structural constraints of the international system, where survival and self-interest take precedence over ideological or religious affinity. Thus, despite historical ties and mutual religious identity, Pakistan and the Taliban now find themselves increasingly at odds, driven by divergent national interests and threat perceptions.

Pakistan has responded by recalibrating its approach, intensifying border management, initiating security operations, engaging regional actors like China, Iran, and Russia, and attempting to build consensus through multilateral platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). However, the path forward remains fraught with uncertainty. The Taliban's internal fragility, their international isolation, and Pakistan's own economic and security challenges complicate efforts to build a stable and cooperative bilateral relationship. In brief, this study concludes that the rise of the Neo-Taliban regime has not delivered strategic depth or stability for Pakistan. Rather, it has ushered in a period of increased volatility, requiring a shift in Pakistan's foreign policy from ideological proximity to realist pragmatism. As Afghanistan continues to redefine its role in the region, Pakistan must adopt a policy framework grounded in strategic clarity, regional coordination, and internal resilience to navigate the emerging security and diplomatic landscape.

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