



TALIBAN'S TRANSITION FROM A MILITARY MOVEMENT TO A POLITICAL FORCE: POLICY RESPONSE BY PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This paper explores the transformation of the Taliban from a militant insurgency to a political force and examines Pakistan's evolving policy response to this shift. Following the United States withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban return to power in 2021, Pakistan's strategic calculations have faced both opportunities and challenges. Drawing on realist theoretical frameworks, this paper analyzes the nature of the Taliban's political behaviour, Pakistan's diplomatic and security adjustments, and the resulting regional implications. The paper also examines the role of outside powers including Russia and China in according diplomatic recognition to the government of Taliban. Through qualitative analysis the paper analyses the international consensus of not according the Taliban government a diplomatic status without the Taliban government delivering in key areas of international concern. The paper examines the missed opportunity of treating Taliban as a political force after they were removed from power in 2001 and recommends that the world may consider extending a diplomatic olive branch to the current government of Taliban. The paper also analyzes Pakistan's policy approach towards Taliban government especially in the context of the threat from the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The paper concludes by giving policy recommendations for Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan, geared towards according diplomatic status to the current Taliban government.

Key Words: *Geopolitics, Diplomacy, Foreign Policy, Strategy, Great Powers, Afghanistan, Pakistan*



Introduction

The Taliban's first conquest of Afghanistan came in 1996 when as a military movement Taliban's stormed the capital of Afghanistan. The conquest resulted in the first Taliban rule of Afghanistan which lasted for almost 5 years from 1996-2001 (Maizland, 2023). After 9/11 and after the American military intervention in Afghanistan the Taliban's were removed from power (Maizland, 2023). For almost twenty years Taliban's had no political role to play in Afghanistan until the movements return to power in August 2021 (Smith, 2024). It is in this gap of almost twenty years that the world treated Taliban's only as a militant organization and a rouge military outfit that had no role to play in Afghan politics. This paper critically views the missed opportunities by the world to engage Taliban's during this period and analyzes how the transition of Taliban's from a military movement to a political force could have been more beneficial for the world if it had chosen to engage with Taliban's during this period. Considering that ultimately the United States chose to directly engage with the Taliban movement and created the circumstances for Taliban's return to power in August 2021 that lost opportunity of dealing with Taliban's for twenty years stands out as a mistake. After being removed from power in 2021, Taliban's were willing to surrender, yet they were deprived this opportunity and with it the opportunity to become part of any political process in Afghanistan. The political consequence of this mistake is that the movement returned to power in 2021, with no political experience in these last twenty years that they were left out from Afghan politics. Today, Taliban's are considered a political force but only a force that the world is struggling to deal with as it is considered a repressive regime that now rules over 40 million Afghans in a strategically vital area of Eurasia (Mir & Watkins, 2024).

Taliban's reconquest of Afghanistan has come at a time when both its neighbors Iran and Pakistan with whom it shares long borders are experiencing turmoil at home. Iran has fought a short war of 12 days that was imposed on it by the United States and its ally Israel. Pakistan on the other hand faced a military aggression by India and both countries fought a short war of four days. Pakistan also faces an upsurge in terrorist attacks, deepening economic troubles with rise in inflation and its growing dependence on loans from International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Khalid , 2024). Yet, both Pakistan and Iran enjoy a great degree of influence in Afghan politics and as two big neighbours play a vital role in providing access to a landlocked Afghanistan to the outside world. Iran is also facing financial pain as it bears the brunt of international sanctions and thus both the huge neighbours of Afghanistan have problems of their own and under such an unfavourable political and economic regional environment it will become challenging preposition for Taliban to deliver as a political force. Add to this, the apprehension of both Pakistan and Iran that Afghanistan may export unrest, refugees and militancy across the borders, it makes matters of good governance by Taliban all the more challenging. This paper examines the strategic aspect of Pakistan and Iran's relationship with Afghanistan and its bearing on Taliban's as a political force in Afghanistan. The United States leads the global consensus on diplomatic isolation of Taliban which raises important question on the role of external powers in the recognition of Taliban as a political force (Mir & Watkins, 2024) . Russia and China lead the external powers that are contributing to the erosion of this global consensus and that is also argued in this paper as the role of external powers in the



process of transition of Taliban from a military movement to a political force. When the world treats Taliban as a militant resistance and insurgent group with a religious ideology that has created a repressive regime, it misses a point that Taliban today enjoy political power in Afghanistan and they have come to power after engaging in a prolonged conflict against the United States led coalition forces. Not just a de facto ruling in authority but a movement that enjoys a good degree of support of people of Afghanistan (Felbab-Brown, 2024). If the United States could treat Taliban as a political force and engage in a political process that led to Doha Agreement in 2020 than it can surely consider helping it in transitioning from a militarized insurgency to a political governing body. The Taliban government in Afghanistan is reshaping the internal dynamics of Afghanistan and by coming to power they have forced all external stakeholders to recalibrate their geopolitical calculations about the future of Afghanistan.

Pakistan has a complexed relationship with Taliban with a history of strategic patronage and periods of engagement and disengagement with the movement. Pakistan facilitated the Doha peace process as its security, regional alliances and internal stability are all linked with a stable Afghanistan which only a legitimate and credible political authority in Afghanistan can create. Pakistan is thus inclined to diplomatically support Taliban's political ascendancy. This paper examines the implications of Pakistan's foreign policy balancing against the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan. Pakistan's great diplomatic challenge is to convince the outside world to stop looking at Taliban's government as a product of radical Islamist insurgency based on religious extremism, tribal conservatism and external sponsorship but as a political entity that is capable of good governance, statecraft and diplomacy. Doha Agreement of 2020 stands out as a watershed moment of this recognition and has laid the groundwork for re-determining assumptions about the political capacity of Taliban's and treating them as a political force. Pakistan's military establishment has historically pursued the policy of 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan. This paper argues that Pakistan must make policy adjustments in light of the emergence of new political and security dynamics in Afghanistan. Contextually, to explain Pakistan-Afghanistan inter-state relations this paper utilizes international relations theory of realism in which the anarchic system postulates security and national interests as paramount for both states. In case of Pakistan, the pursuit of strategic depth in Afghanistan can be interpreted through professor Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism. The theory helps in understanding the security dilemma Pakistan faces and how it attempts to enhance its own security by supporting the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and how in return it has increased the internal security issues of Pakistan due to resurgence of TTP. The realist theoretical framework helps best to understand the evolving nature of Pakistan's Taliban policy.

The current Taliban government has assumed all state functions and unlike their first tenure they now face the responsibility of state- building. The major driver of Pakistan's current relationship with Taliban's is about Taliban's inaction against TTP. Pakistan resorted to cross border airstrikes in April 2022 against the TTP sanctuaries in Afghanistan and Pakistan's assertive posture is also indicative in its more assertive posture in form of enhanced border control, border fortifications and implementation of its policy of return of Afghan refugees (Shah, 2024). To bring about an



Afghan state behaviour, Pakistan needs regional support of not only China, Central Asian States and Iran but also Russia which has become the first country to formally recognize the Taliban government. The regional responsibility and diplomacy of recognizing Taliban as a political force and helping them to transition from a military movement to a political force is also argued in this paper as an essential aspect in helping Taliban to make this transition.

Pakistan and Iran: Their Influence and Role in Assisting Taliban's Becoming a Political Force

Pakistan and Iran are largest neighbours of Afghanistan and are two countries that enjoy most influence and the most stake. In comparison, none of the three neighboring Central Asian states or China, which also border landlocked Afghanistan, have the same level of influence in the country and in the aftermath of the U.S. departure, Iran and Pakistan will be the main competitors shaping the future of a Taliban-run Afghanistan (Bokhari, 2022). Both countries are weary of the ISIS threat that can emanate from their borders with Afghanistan and don't want the jihadist threat to grow both on their eastern and western flanks respectively. Both countries fear that the presence of such a jihadist movement has the capacity of galvanizing militant movements within their own countries. In this respect, both countries share a common interest in politically viable and stable Afghanistan. Pakistan enjoys a geographic and cultural advantage over Iran. Its border with Afghanistan is nearly three times as long as Iran's border with Afghanistan, allowing Pakistan more scope to influence events in the landlocked country (Bokhari, 2022). Iran has traditionally maintained ties to Afghanistan's various minorities (including the Tajik, the Uzbek, the Hazara, the Turkmen, the Aimak, and the Baluch communities) and benefited from the fact that the country's lingua franca is Dari (the Afghan variant of Persian), which allows Tehran to cultivate deep ties with not just these minority groups but also the Pashtuns (Abedin, 2019). Islamabad, on the other hand, has principally exerted influence in its western neighbor via the Pashtuns, who are the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan and make up as much as 45 percent of the population (Abedin, 2019). Pashtuns form nearly a fifth of Pakistan's population. Historically, both countries have supported different political groups in Afghanistan. In the 1990's Iran supported Tajik's and Shiite Hazaras and allied with the United States and its allies in supporting the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. After the fall of Taliban government in 2021, Iran supported the United States backed regime in Kabul supplying it with bags of cash worth over \$1 million annually (Bokhari, 2022).

Despite the thaw in Saudi Arabi-Iran relationship the ideological difference between these two states forces Iran to view with caution Pakistan's close ties with Saudi Arabia and its Gulf partner states. Iran fears that the Saudis and the Emiratis will leverage those relations to create problems for Iran (Bokhari, 2022). Iran is afraid that the Gulf states could try to counter Iranian moves in the Arab world by fomenting trouble for Iran in Afghanistan. For decades, Afghanistan represented a shared strategic backyard for Iran and Pakistan (Bokhari, 2022). Pakistan's pursuit of the policy of strategic depth is powered by its long-standing ambitions to have a friendly Taliban government on its western front so that it can avoid a two front war scenario and focus on its main adversary



on the eastern front. Correspondingly, for the Iranians the priority has been the Arab world to the west and Afghanistan only a secondary arena (Bokhari , 2022). But now with the departure of United States and its allies from Afghanistan and the dramatic collapse of the internationally backed Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the new Taliban government offers an opportunity to both the neighbors to set aside their differences and pursue the commonality of their interest to have a stable political government in the country that borders them. On Taliban's part, in September 2021, their government included figures from minority communities with close ties to Iran and placed them in key portfolios (Maizland, 2023). Politically, Taliban by creating an inclusive government are seeking to achieve two goals, first, on the domestic front, the Taliban government is trying to convince minority communities that they will be represented in the provisional authority and in a future government. Second, the ruling Islamist movement seeks to signal to the international community that it is responsive to calls for an inclusive government (Bokhari , 2022).

Iran's willingness to invest in the idea of Taliban's becoming a viable and credible political force is based on four assumptions. The first assumption is that it is in the Iranian interest to counter American influence in Afghanistan and in light of the Americans not according Afghanistan diplomatic recognition Iran should join hands with the other two great powers Russia and China to extend diplomatic support to the Taliban government. The second assumption is related to Iran's vulnerability against ISIS threat emanating from Afghanistan. In January 2024, twin suicide bombings in Kerman marked one of Iran's deadliest attacks in decades, killing at least 94 people, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), an Afghanistan-based offshoot of ISIL, claimed responsibility (Mroue, 2024). It is not in Iran's interest that Afghanistan's land be used to carry out terrorist attacks in its country. The third assumption is based on the presence of Afghan refugees in Iran. Iran needs a "willing partner" in addressing the issue of some 780,000 Afghan refugees on its soil (Siddiqui, 2025). The fourth assumption is related to how the 1973 water treaty between Iran and Afghanistan prevents Afghanistan from restricting the flow of water from the Helmand River that supplies water to Iran's eastern region (Shah, 2024). It is not in the interest of Iran that Taliban should violate this treaty. Additionally, the economic aspect of politically stable Afghanistan under Taliban's means that the Chabahar Port can be utilized by Afghanistan as an alternative sea route to the outside world and help both Afghanistan and Iran to benefit not only from mutual trade but the trade with the Central Asian countries.

Pakistan, which provides the landlocked country's primary transit route, serves as its largest export market, and has acted as its principal diplomatic emissary to the world (Shah, 2024). Pakistan's current problems with the Taliban regime revolve around four main issues; safe heavens and sanctuaries provided by Afghanistan to TTP, historic ethnic and demographic conflict and future of Pashtuns, Taliban's strategic push to undo economic reliance on Pakistan and the problem of return of Afghan refugees from Pakistan. Taliban's reluctance to assist Pakistan in handling the problem of TTP contributes to the growing dispute Islamabad and the regime in Kabul. Since 2021, Pakistan has endured a surge of attacks by the Tehreek-e-Taliban, also known as the Pakistani Taliban or the TTP. This surge follows almost fifteen years of attacks on Pakistani targets by



Taliban using safe heavens in Afghanistan. When Afghan Taliban came back to power in 2021, they released thousands of TTP fighters who were jailed in Afghanistan prison. This helped TTP to regroup and reorganize and under the senior commanders that were also released from the prison they now constitute a militant fighting force of an estimated 10,000 TTP fighters. Pakistan initiated airstrikes against the suspected TTP hideouts in Khost and Kunar province of Afghanistan in April 2022 in which over 40 people were killed (Agencies, 2022). This triggered a strong reaction from the Taliban regime but Pakistan was determined to deliver a strong message to Taliban that it sought a political solution to the problem else it retained the option of resorting to military action to deal with the problem. So far, Taliban regime has made promises but has not yielded to the diplomatic and military pressure from Pakistan to deal with the problem. Domestically, one of the TTP's main demands is that Pakistan restore the special autonomous status afforded this area until its absorption into the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018, a move that would allow the group to establish a local version of sharia rule (Shah, 2024). Pakistan on its part has also aggravated the problem by its decision to differentiate between the "good" Afghan Taliban and the "bad" Pakistani Taliban, overlooking their inextricable connections (Shah, 2024). The safe heavens in Afghanistan, political instability and economic meltdown have tied Pakistan's security services hands to push for a concrete military action against TPP. The public backing in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province is also not of the same level as it was in 2014 when Pakistan security forces took carried out military operation termed Zarb-e- Azb in North Waziristan (Shah, 2024). The demographic component of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations also has a bearing in how both countries view each other's actions with suspicion. Demographically both countries were split into two by a colonial-era border known as the Durand Line, Pashtuns are a sizable minority in Pakistan (more than 18 percent of the total population) but form a majority in Afghanistan and have ruled that country for most of its history (Shah, 2024). After Pakistan won independence in 1947, Afghanistan refused to recognize the border and opposed Pakistan's entry to the United Nations. This border contestation, mixed with Islamabad's fears of Kabul backing Pashtun nationalist causes within Pakistan, has long undermined the trust between the two countries (Lieven, 2021).

Pakistan has hosted Afghan refugees on its soil since the time of Soviet invasion in 1979 in Afghanistan. But now marred with its own growing political and economic problems many people in Pakistan consider the refugees as a source of economic anxiety and cultural replacement. Many people in Pakistan believe that these refugees have introduced criminality, smuggling, drug-trafficking and thus discriminate against the refugee's presence in their country. In October 2024, the country's military-backed caretaker government announced that all "illegal foreigners"—a thinly disguised reference to millions of Afghan refugees who reside in Pakistan—were to leave the country by 1st November or face arrest and expulsion (Shah, 2024). At least for now: one million Afghans have renewable permits that allow them to stay in the country, while an estimated 800,000 hold so-called Afghan Citizen Cards that grant them the temporary right to stay but not the full protections due to refugees under international law (Lieven, 2021). Yet an estimated 1.7 million Afghans lack the documentation needed even for temporary residence, this group, which includes over half a million people who fled Afghanistan after the Taliban recaptured power in



August 2021, is now in the cross hairs of Pakistani authorities (Lieven, 2021). Hounded and fearing for their safety, an estimated 450,000 Afghans have already returned to Afghanistan and the uncertain fates that await them in the country they wanted to escape (Relief, 2025). Authorities in Pakistan are also apprehensive of the current Taliban regime's policy of reducing Pakistan's economic influence by courting Iran for trade and investment opportunities, including access to the more cost-efficient Iranian port of Chabahar (Islami, 2024). Pakistan served as the primary sanctuary for Taliban insurgency when it was in its formative stage and thus today it faces the classic realist security dilemma of having produced the unintended consequence of promoting the Afghan and Pakistan Taliban alliance and even worst, of having incentivized Afghan Taliban's to support TTP as a leverage to draw concessions from Pakistan. For Pakistan to assist the Taliban regime in transitioning from a military outfit to a political force that is good enough to govern the country it needs to resolve these main issues with the Taliban government on priority basis. Unless these critical issues that proliferate doubt and suspicion between these neighboring countries are not resolved, no headway can be made in Pakistan helping Taliban's to achieve any political legitimacy.

Role of Great Powers: According Political Force Status to Taliban's

The United States went to war in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, less than a month after al Qaeda terrorists murdered nearly 3,000 people on September 11 (News, 2021). In early December 2001, a conference of Afghan and international officials meeting in Bonn, Germany, created a temporary government helmed by Hamid Karzai (Jami, 2020). The United States fought a failed war but it continues to view the current Taliban government from the point of view of significant cost it paid to address the Afghan problem. More than \$1 trillion, the deaths of 2,400 U.S. service members (and thousands of contractors), more than 20,000 wounded Americans (McKinley P. M., 2021). At best the greatest victory in Afghanistan that United States can claim is the fall of the initial Taliban government in 2001. Hungry for vengeance, and confident of the Taliban's complete defeat, the United States sought neither reconciliation nor compromise with Afghanistan's former leaders instead, it sought to make an example of them (Cohen, Preble, & Toft, 2024). In doing so, the George W. Bush administration planted the seeds for the Taliban insurgency that would emerge and eventually wipe away two decades of sacrifice in Afghanistan (Cohen, Preble, & Toft, 2024). Post 2021, the United States policy in Afghanistan is reflective in its actions. Foreign aid to Afghanistan was immediately suspended, most western embassies in Kabul evacuated staff, and the United States froze \$7 billion in Afghan central bank assets that were held in U.S. banks (Mir & Watkins, 2024). During the Taliban's final military campaign to retake Kabul in the summer of 2021, the United States repeatedly warned the group that any return to power by force would result in "global pariah" status for the Taliban (Mir & Watkins, 2024). Former National Security Adviser General H. R. McMaster echoed the sentiments of many when he declared that Afghanistan is a "humanity problem on a modern-day frontier between barbarism and civilization." (McKinley P. M., 2021). The United States has made the possibility of normalization of its relations with the current Taliban regime explicitly conditional. Fearing that the Taliban will undo decades of changes that have brought the people of Afghanistan basic human rights and access to public



sphere, in September 2021 at the United Nations, the United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken asserted that the world “must stay united in holding the Taliban to their commitments in key areas.” (Qazi Zada & Qazi Zada, 2024). Three key areas that the United States want Taliban’s to deliver are giving up violence as an instrument of power, respecting human rights and women rights. Diplomatic pressure from other countries and international organizations that do have a presence on the ground has not prevented the Taliban from erasing the rights of girls, who are now banned from secondary schools and sports facilities (Mir & Watkins, 2024). For United States to facilitate the transition of Taliban’s from a military movement to a political force it will have to deal more directly with Taliban’s, including possibly restoring a U.S. presence in Kabul and even formally recognizing the Taliban government. Addressing the country’s dire humanitarian situation, confronting terrorist organizations in Afghanistan, and improving regional security all require more official engagement with the Taliban. However, critics of such a policy will continue to argue that unless Taliban’s give up their unshakable commitment to oppressing half the country’s population—the United States should not be the country to take any steps toward normalization (McKinley P. M., 2021).

Both the other two great powers in the world, China and Russia are together throwing up challenge to the United States led international consensus against normalization with Taliban regime. In January 2025 Chinese President Xi Jinping accepted the credentials of the Taliban’s newly appointed Afghan ambassador to China (Zahidi, 2024). Although the step did not amount to formal recognition of the Taliban but explains Chinese belief that, ‘China believes that Afghanistan should not be excluded from the international community’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). Taliban’s on their part are anxious to tap into China’s regional connectivity efforts through the vast infrastructure program known as the Belt and Road Initiative. China is also planning to sign a \$10 billion lithium contract and a \$4 billion copper contract in Afghanistan (Rafiq, 2023). China can also support the efforts for the resumption of a planned \$10 billion gas pipeline running from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan and Pakistan to India, which would bolster Afghanistan’s economy and create hundreds of local jobs (Arab News , 2024). China’s largest BRI project is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which runs through areas near the Afghan border and is vulnerable to strikes from Pakistani Taliban rebels as well as Baluch separatist militants (Shahid, 2024). China doesn’t want uncertainty in Afghanistan to upset its plans for Central and South Asia and it would do everything to politically and diplomatically engage with Taliban’s to ensure that the insecurity radiating out of Afghanistan does not undermine its billions of dollars of investment in its neighboring country Pakistan.

Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was driven by the fear that Moscow was losing a crucial piece of its sphere of influence and was based on the calculation that United States and its allies, distracted by other events, would not mount an effective response (Bearden, 2022). Russia laid the seeds of initial armed insurgency by the resistant Afghan fighters. Afghan insurgents quickly organized into effective guerrilla forces and created safe havens in Pakistan, where they were armed and trained by Pakistani intelligence officers (Bearden, 2022). Russian invasion invited the



American political and military intervention in Afghanistan as it fought a covert war against Russian invading force. The total U.S. funding for the Afghan resistance grew from about \$100 million in the first year to \$500 million in the fourth year; in the last two years of the war, it would top \$1 billion (Bearden, 2022). A million Afghans were killed, a million and a half were wounded, three million sought refuge in Iran and Pakistan, and an unknown number were internally displaced—all out of a population of fewer than 20 million people (Bearden, 2022). However, Russia put its historical grievances with aside and became the first country to accord official recognition of the Taliban as Afghanistan's legitimate government (Gafarov, 2025). This Russian move holds tremendous geopolitical implications and can pave the way to contribute further to the growing tensions between the East and the West. Russia is not only looking to consolidate its position in Central Asia but together with China is determined to utilize Afghanistan's as a doorway to the Asian markets. Russia is engineering regional connectivity as there is a huge demand for Russian oil and wheat in the Asian markets. Already Russia's bilateral trade with Afghanistan has reached \$1 billion annually and it plans to push it to \$3 billion by the end of year 2025 (Fatima, 2025). Afghanistan serves as an important continental corridor for both Russia and China and is seen as a country where political stability is must to achieve regional connectivity. By recognizing the Taliban government Russia has triggered a domino effect wherein more and more countries in the region may consider according a similar status to Taliban in view drawing economic benefits by being part of such an arrangement and partnership.

Even India, a regional power that has been most wary of the Taliban takeover, reopened its embassy in Kabul in 2022 and in 2023 allowed the Taliban to take control of the Afghan embassy in New Delhi (Mir & Watkins, 2024). India has also invested heavily in building infrastructure projects including building the Afghan parliament building, many roads and a dam worth \$265 million (Mir & Watkins, 2024). After the U.S. exit from Afghanistan and the subsequent implosion of the internationally backed Afghan state have created a huge strategic problem for India. With the Taliban now in control in Kabul, New Delhi has lost its influence in Afghanistan. However, working with Russia, China and Iran, India can play a crucial role in the establishment of Taliban as a recognized political force in the country and contribute significantly in advancing regional connectivity and the concept of regionalism.

Missed Opportunity to Accord Taliban the Status of a Political Force

The United States missed a great opportunity for peace in late 2001 and early 2002. If the United States had shown some flexibility in its hardline approach towards Taliban and accorded them space in the future politics of Afghanistan it could have prevented an insurgency from emerging later (Cohen, Preble, & Toft, 2024). Afghanistan was to them an abstraction, a venue for fighting global terrorism and a place to demonstrate American power to others (Cohen, Preble, & Toft, 2024). The United States policy towards Afghanistan at that time was governed by the idea that removing the Taliban government was as a way of communicating to state sponsors of terrorism that there are very heavy penalties to be paid for being associated with groups that attack the United States (Maizland, 2023). Such an approach only contributed in building Taliban's animosity



towards the United States and contributed to the growing frustration in Taliban that resorted to violence as a means to contest power. By actively targeting the remnants of the Taliban and treating them as little more than a proxy for Al Qaeda, Washington created enemies where none had existed, inadvertently helping spawn an insurgency that, if not for U.S. actions, might never have emerged (Cohen, Preble, & Toft, 2024). By demanding the total military and political defeat of the Taliban—and pursuing the group long after it posed a threat to U.S. national security—the United States directly undercut its own efforts to help establish a stable and secure Afghanistan (London & Ahmad, 2024). After toppling the Taliban government the Karzai government that was installed in Afghanistan demonstrated all the signs of engaging in a political compromise with the Taliban. A Taliban delegation led by Defense Minister Mullah Obaidullah and Tayeb Agha, a close aide to Mullah Omar, traveled to meet Karzai and work out a surrender agreement (Cohen, Preble, & Toft, 2024). Karzai quickly announced the deal to reporters saying that the Taliban had agreed to surrender the remaining provinces under their nominal control (Cohen, Preble, & Toft, 2024). Karzai said that, “the Taliban would lay down their weapons and go to their homes with honor and dignity” and that “the Afghan Taliban are our brothers, and there is no cause for them to worry” (Cohen, Preble, & Toft, 2024). He even added that, “Let there be no revenge and no vendetta and that that the former Taliban officials could play a role in a future Afghan government (Cohen, Preble, & Toft, 2024). On the question of whether Mullah Omar would face justice, he replied that, ‘This is an Afghan question’ (Cohen, Preble, & Toft, 2024) meaning thereby that the United States had no role to play in this. But the United States took a hardline position, after all, the Taliban had given shelter to al Qaeda and had refused repeated U.S. demands before 9/11 to hand over the terrorist group’s leaders and shut down its training camps (Riede, 2013). Bin Laden allegedly did not inform Mullah Omar in advance about the attacks, just as he had kept him in the dark about strikes on U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 (Riede, 2013). Two journalists, Gopal and Bette Dam claim that Karzai told them he received a phone call from Rumsfeld demanding that he rescind the surrender offer (Cohen, Preble, & Toft, 2024). In his book *The Good War*, the journalist Jack Fairweather reported that one of the U.S. special operators with Karzai at the time, David Fox, was “directed” to tell Karzai that “such an arrangement with the Taliban was not in American interests” (Rubin B. R., 2025). No administration official played a larger role in shaping this hardline approach than Rumsfeld—and his attitude toward reconciliation grew more intractable as the odds of a Taliban surrender began to increase (Rubin B. R., 2025). At a December 6, 2001 press conference, Rumsfeld citing the emerging reports of a surrender agreement that would allow Mullah Omar to remain in Afghanistan, Rumsfeld made clear that such a deal would be “inconsistent with [U.S.] interests” and thus unacceptable (Cohen, Preble, & Toft, 2024).

Karzai was under pressure not just from the United States but also from members of the Northern Alliance; Deputy Security Minister Abdullah Jan Tawhidi complained that he was ‘taking the side of the enemy of the people of Afghanistan’ and so Karzai quickly changed course (Cohen, Preble, & Toft, 2024). In a December 8 interview with Reuters, he called for Mullah Omar and top Taliban leaders to be held accountable. “If he is found, he must face trial,” Karzai said. He went on: “Of



course, I want to arrest him. He is a fugitive from justice” (Cohen, Preble, & Toft, 2024).

In 2001, after the fall of Taliban government the American administration was giving a clear message that the war against Taliban will not stop and that the United States will not engage in any political negotiations related to Taliban surrender and thus it completely shut the doors of any participation in Afghan politics by Taliban. Two years later, the Bush administration would repeat this mistake in Iraq, when it quickly disbanded the Iraqi army and pursued a policy of “de-Baathification” that plunged the country into chaos and, eventually, civil war (Article , 2024) (Cohen, Preble, & Toft, 2024). In both cases, by offering its enemies no way to surrender, the United States gave them few options other than to fight. In 2009, President Barack Obama, who had promised a new strategy for the country’s forgotten war, surged 50,000 more troops to Afghanistan, still refusing to offer a political olive branch to the Taliban (Warden J. K., 2013). By the time it finally reversed course under President Donald Trump and began direct talks with the Taliban, the situation bore remarkable similarities to the failed U.S. war in Vietnam. American diplomats were simply negotiating their own country’s eventual defeat (Rubin B. R., 2025).

Policy Recommendations for Pakistan

Lessons From 2001-2021: Redefine Pakistan’s Strategic Assumptions

Pakistan must learn from its experience and redefine its strategic assumptions regarding Afghanistan. For too long the concept of strategic depth has driven Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. The first step to formulate new assumptions should be based on taking seriously the lessons of 2001 and 2021. Both Soviet Union and the United States tried to achieve total military victory in Afghanistan but both failed. Pakistan participated in both the wars in which the military intervention in Afghanistan was unsuccessful and both the outside powers were defeated. As the largest neighbor of Afghanistan Pakistan should act as the leading diplomatic emissary of Afghanistan for the outside world. Pakistan’s core foreign policy assumption must be based on the fact that Taliban are a political force and they may be trusted with the state building process in Afghanistan.

National and Regional Security: Countering TTP

Pakistan must engage in the political and diplomatic support of Taliban but it should not lower its guard from the threat emerging from Afghanistan. Pakistan’s diplomatic support to Afghanistan should be conditional to Afghanistan’s willingness to prevent any TTP threat emerging from Afghanistan. Such a quid pro quo should be the basis of Pakistan’s political engagement with Taliban. If only Taliban inaction against TTP continues should Pakistan resort to cross-border operations against the TTP threat emanating from Afghan soil. A deepening coordination with Russia and China and using the platform of SCO to leverage a favorable response from Afghanistan would be the right way forward. Both great powers should be made to realize that a secure and politically stable Afghanistan is not only important for the national security of the individual nations but for the overall regional security.

Diplomatic Presence



The international consensus against the diplomatic recognition of Taliban is a great barrier in according Taliban a status of a political force. The United States leads the global opinion on how Taliban must deliver in key areas before diplomatic recognition can be according to it. Pakistan must encourage the United States and its western allies to have some kind of diplomatic presence in Afghanistan. With their diplomatic presence the western world will have a better understanding of what is happening inside Afghanistan and be able to calibrate their policy of according diplomatic recognition to Taliban government accordingly. Western diplomatic presence in Afghanistan may also encourage the tens of thousands of educated Afghans, who left the country to return back home. Taliban's may also view favorably to undo the clampdown on women's rights in view of the possible diplomatic recognition. Russia, China, India, Japan, the European Union, and the United Nations have reopened or retained diplomatic missions in Kabul. It is time that the other countries may also follow their lead.

Geopolitics Must Precede Geoeconomics

The outside world especially China and the Western investors and seeking an opportunity to extract Afghanistan's vast mineral resources, which include huge deposits of rare-earth minerals and a large supply of lithium critical to the green energy transition. Pakistan must advocate to the outside world that the leading driver of engagement with Afghanistan should be geopolitics and not geoeconomics. Without political stability all economic investment in Afghanistan will remain risk prone.

Policy on Refugees

Return of Afghan refugees from Pakistan is a sour issue and Pakistan needs to not only engage the Taliban government but also the UNHCR to ensure a smooth process of return of Afghan refugees through proper registration and structured repatriation.

Civil-Military Coordination and Collaboration in Policy Making

The civilian government in Pakistan must take up the issue of diplomatic recognition of the Taliban government in the Parliament. The resulting debate in the Parliament will help Institutionalize Afghanistan policy. The military advice must also be sought and the issue may be discussed in the National Security Council for a joint civilian-military coherence, cooperation and coordination on this important issue.

Conclusion

By shifting the balance of power toward the Taliban, the world may help to create the conditions for the proliferation of politics in Afghanistan. The world has for too long tried the stick as a method to change the Taliban behavior, it is time that carrot be used to induce the change. Vindictive Taliban rode an insurgency to come back in power but now in power the world may consider giving politics a chance and ending the endless war that Afghanistan has fought for over four decades. Different countries and organizations have different reasons for dealing with the Taliban. Some want to work with Taliban to help the Afghan people. Others are concerned with



the growing presence of terrorist organizations in the country. There are yet others which want Taliban to moderate their policies on women and girls. The United States as a great power maybe wants to counter Chinese and Russian influence in Afghanistan and contest the access to rich and critical minerals. All countries will have to put their individual interests aside and recognize Taliban as a political force and give diplomacy a chance.

The Taliban's return to power has presented Pakistan with both strategic openings and complex challenges. Pakistan as a large and influential neighbor must support political stability in Afghanistan in return for Taliban guarantees to mitigate the TTP threat emanating from Afghan soil. In the end the future Taliban actions and political behavior will determine whether Pakistan can treat Taliban as a suspect and untrustworthy movement or a political force that can act a compliant ally.



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