



Pakistan-Afghanistan Security Puzzle: Changing nature of Threats and Options: 2014 Onwards

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Abstract

The case of the Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship, a constant fault line of conflict of interest, mistrust, suspicion, and divergent views of security has contributed towards competing misperceptions and deadlock on policy issues with each other. The historical legacy of Pak-Afghan relations particularly at the time of Soviet intervention continued as the main determinant of Pak-Afghan relations. In this context, 2001 became a pivotal year in the Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship, as it entirely changed the dynamics of their bilateral relationship as well as regional politics. Since then, the associated contemporary issues of security including border security, defense, and terrorism along with the non-traditional security threats are main concerns of the policymakers at both sides. This article by using a descriptive and analytical lens of research would be investigating the growing security challenges to Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Key Words: Pakistan, Afghanistan, security, US withdrawal, Taliban, Terrorism



Introduction

Security is an essential component for the stability and sustainability of the state. State as a part of the international community consists of variant threats and challenges that are associated with security. Thus security puzzle of a state is managed by the policymakers keeping in view the power position of the state in the international and domestic arena. It is a common notion in the international system that one cannot change its neighbors, therefore, border security is core to the state's overall security paradox. The territorial integrity of a state defines the national interest and national security of the state. Insecurities between the states to an extent becomes inevitable as competing interests between the states may transform into dissent, mutual distrust, and conflict. In this context, Pakistan- Afghanistan is a stimulating case study to understand the parameters of the security dilemma and its implications on the states that share a long porous border of 2,430 kilometers that has been subject to frequent instability and antagonism since the inception of their diplomatic relations. This article would bring an insight into the security puzzle between Pakistan and Afghanistan through the lens of defensive realism.

In this perspective, the following questions would be addressed

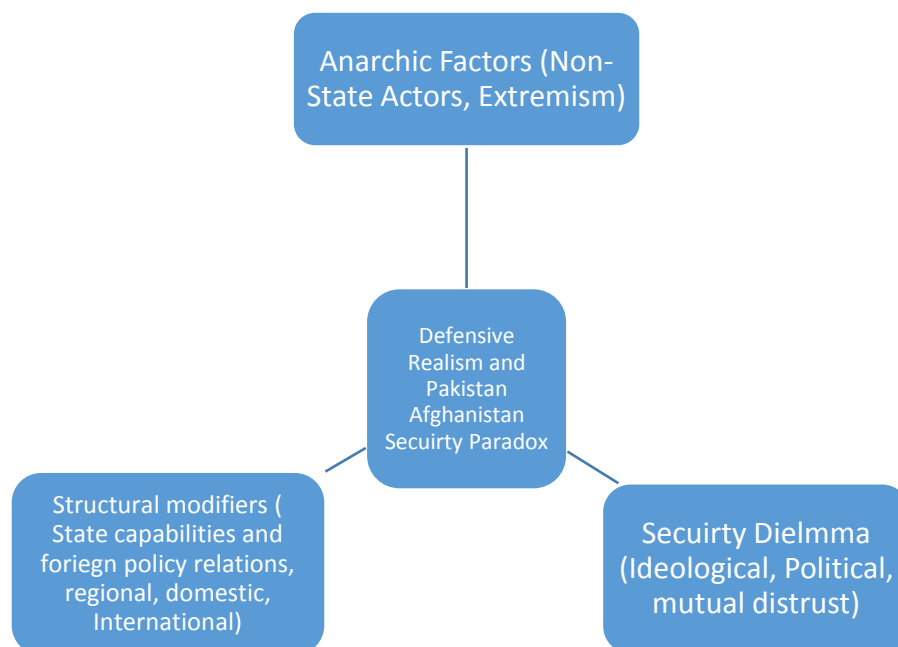
- What are the main components of the Pakistan-Afghanistan security puzzle?
- To what extent the nature of threats and competing interests between both states have changed from 2014 onwards?
- How security framework of Pakistan and Afghanistan is affected by the US withdrawal?

Kenneth Waltz in this regard encompasses that anarchy in the international system transforms a state into a self-correcting type of entity in which states follow a defensive mode to maintain their survival, integrity and maximize an advantageous position for the state (Lobell, 2017). Mostly moderate nature of policies is opted by the states to attain security as in the case of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Defensive realist main assumptions rest on the idea that there are certain controlled conditions in which states interact and cooperate keeping in view the insecurities that led to another assumption of security dilemma which is termed as an intractable aspect between the community of nations. In this regard, the vulnerabilities between Pakistan and Afghanistan in the contemporary era are challenged by the non-state actors in the shape of terrorist groups along with external power intervention. Moreover, structural modifiers act as a catalyst in increasing or decreasing the likelihood of dissent and ultimately conflict. Military capabilities, economic and political incentives, power, and regional military balance are the main modifiers. In the case of Pakistan and Afghanistan along with these above factors variant social agents, ideology, regional political dynamics, and external power influence and



penetration are the main structural settlers that defines the security equation of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Another significant dimension is the behavior of states towards each other which shows that whether a state has hostile, cooperative, competitive, or cautious behavior towards the other. A higher degree of security dilemma would bring a more competitive, cautious yet friction-oriented and sometimes hostile behavior towards the state. Consequently, mutual distrust towards each other increases as happens at the certain times between Pakistan and Afghanistan (Taliaferro, 2001, pp. 138-161) (Shiping, 2008, pp. 141-162). Another aspect of defensive realism that can be implied on Pak-Afghan security is related to balancing, as states try to avoid the escalation and friction by managing the affairs through the status quo (J.Mearsheimer, 2006).

Assumptions of Defensive Realism and Pakistan –Afghanistan Security Equation



In this context, (Cheema, 1983) has given a comprehensive insight into the question of security between Pakistan and Afghanistan. According to the author, Afghanistan has been an important security concern for Pakistan policymakers in particular because in the height of the cold war Pakistan was sandwiched between the Soviet invaded Afghanistan and Soviet friendly India, which brought new security challenges to Pakistan. At that point in time, the Pak-Afghan border increased insecurities for Pakistan but for the Afghan



resistance movement, it was an advantageous position. Later on, the huge influx of refugees contributed to the security quandary of Pakistan. Thus the question of security remained one of the most significant components between both the states.

(Chandran, 2012) defines Pakistan –Afghanistan security equation under two dimensions, one is strategic depth and the other is the strategic trap. Strategic depth became the main centerpiece in Pakistan's military and security circles to get a friendly government in Afghanistan. Thus Pakistan perceived the Afghan border as a security compulsion for Pakistan. In 1996, the government of the Taliban established in Afghanistan was seen as a pro-security regime, although Pakistan's overall image at the international level was seen with suspicion. In addition to it, the author has also emphasized the role of non-state groups as an important determining factor in Pakistan-Afghan security.

(Zulfqar, 2015) explains that although peace and stability within both the states are associated with each other, mutual distrust continued as a prominent feature of Pak-Afghan relations particularly years following 2002. In addition, the external intervention has been an important aspect in bilateral relations. In the case of Afghanistan, Pakistan is an important component of its political, economic, social and strategic security enigma. Pakistan is one of the largest trading partner of Afghanistan. In addition to it, Afghanistan is the third recipient of Pakistan's export. Moreover, Pakistan provides technical assistance, transit trade, and infrastructure development prospects to Afghanistan. According to the writer, this interdependence between both the states have considerably reduced since 2014 which have contributed to the insecurities at both sides. In this regard, terrorism has been the main irritant between both the states as both the states claim each other of providing safe havens to the terrorist. Particularly the movement of TTP (Tehrik-e-Taliban) leadership, Mullah Fazaullah in Afghanistan has significantly contributed to more complexities between the relationship on both the states. Such terrorist groups have contributed towards creating an anarchic environment that had negative repercussions on Pakistan and Afghanistan.

(Grare, 2006) is of the view that Pakistan Afghanistan relations are asymmetric. The decade-long issue of the Durand line is still not resolved as Afghanistan does not recognize it. Moreover, both the states have different strategic perceptions. For Pakistan, Afghanistan is part of a larger policy spectrum which includes border security, a tributary of religious extremism and terrorism, and a part of Indian designs to destabilize Pakistan. On the other hand, Afghanistan perceives Pakistan as a hegemonic state who always tries to intervene in the domestic political matters of Afghanistan. Furthermore, the global standing and power position of both the states is entirely different which makes the case of security more complex. Though in terms of military capability and power Pakistan is



superior to Afghanistan, but other regional, political and ideological factors are basic constraints for Pakistan which pushes Pakistan to opt for a moderate and defensive approach. The report further emphasized the fact that both states have high security-stakes towards each other.

(Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014) have assessed the Pak-Afghan relations after 2014. The report analyzes that stabilization of the Pak-Afghan nexus is very complex due to the complicated nature of security at both sides of the border. The non-traditional threat faced by the territorial frontiers of both states are influenced by wider international and regional dynamics. The report also highlights the fact that both states are structurally different from each other. The relative stability, development, and power of Pakistan are far sustainable than Afghanistan. Thus the indicators of human, economic, and political security of Pakistan are better off. On the other hand, Afghanistan has much more diversified challenges of security. Due to its close geographical proximity, it has a casual effect on Pakistan. In this way, their security compulsion is related to each other. After 2014, there is rise in the bilateral insecurity between both states. The main inter-linked challenges between the states identified by the report are the India-Afghanistan cooperation, the future of refugees and the unstable Pashtun areas where people associated with each other on either side of the border. In this context, the traditional nature of these challenges has been changed as the conflict in Afghanistan in particular has entered into a new phase. After the withdrawal of troops, the resurgence of conflict between the Afghan forces, Taliban and other allied groups has increased which also has an impact on Pakistan particularly, the tribal belt. On the political front, Pak-Afghan dialogue to seek future security either through dislodging Taliban or through engaging them is the main part of the security question. Thus according to the report, the overall insecurity between both the states is high due to competing interests and options.

Contrary to the above, (Sial, 2016) gives a different insight into Pak-Afghan relations. According to this paper, unlike the government of Karzai, the new government of Ashraf Ghani in Afghanistan had a different approach towards Pakistan which in turn is gradually facilitating both the states to resolve their security problems. His policy of rapprochement initially included the deliberate delay by the president to implement its policy of strategic partnership with India to improve relations with Pakistan, the commencement of trade deals, coordinating border patrols, and sharing of intelligence to decrease cross border terrorism. Consequently, it provided a conducive environment in which Pakistan is keen to support the peace process in Afghanistan. In addition to it, after the 2014 elections when Ghani became the president of Afghanistan, Pakistan also became part of the reconciliation process with other states like China and Saudi Arabia.



This approach facilitated both the states to understand each other security imperatives in a better way.

(Khan, 2017) illustrates that the main security concerns between Pakistan and Afghanistan following 2014 are associated with border management, cross-border terrorist activities, deteriorating trade and commercial activities, and settlement of refugee issues. The writers further narrate that the way forward between the bilateral relationship is linked with the mutual approach towards peace, stability, and a consensus to act against terrorist networks.

(Department of Defense, 2017) in their report explained the US new strategy for Afghanistan. As per the report, previously the US strategy was a time-based strategy but the new approach is a condition-based approach. 14,000 US personnel along with a 3,500 increase in troops which are part of NATO's Resolute Support (RS) and Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS). In addition, the reports highlight the potential threats to Afghanistan which includes Al Qaeda, IS, Taliban, and other insurgent groups. The basic collaboration of the US with the Afghan government would be to contain the resurgence of safe havens for terrorists. Keeping in view the above perspective, the following questions would be addressed

Changing nature of Threats and Options in Pak-Afghan Security Puzzle

The basic component of the security puzzle between Pakistan and Afghanistan in post-2001 years revolves around the impact of US intervention in Afghanistan, the menace of terrorism, border insecurity, and their associated issues. The political, strategic, and defense-related dynamics of Pak-Afghan relations have significantly changed since 2014 because of the number of developments. In terms of Afghanistan, in 2014 after the elections, Ashraf Ghani came into power and amid a multi-dimensional security reforms which included a political settlement of the Afghan conflict. Another important benchmark in the year 2014 was the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan that was announced by Barack Obama. This start of exit strategy provided a military vacuum as Afghan National forces struggled against Taliban, newly emerged IS, Al Qaeda defected pockets, and other terrorist groups. Furthermore, United Nations-mandated International Security Assistance Force Mission (ISAF) officially ended on 31st December 2014 and it was taken over by Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). On the other hand, the year 2014 was also significant in terms of Pakistan's security perspective as operation Zarb-e-Azab was launched by the military against terrorists across the tribal belt of Pakistan. It is said to be the most decisive and large operation so far as it targeted the Haqqani network and other groups which have their strings attached with Afghan



territory. In addition to it, years following 2014, TTP leadership, including Mullah Fazalullah, head of Tehrik Taliban Pakistan was hiding in Afghanistan, Kunar province. In March 2018, TTP safe hideouts were targeted in a drone strike in Kunar, that resulted in the fatality of Fazaullah's son Abdullah and other twenty terrorists (Marty, 2018). It is pertinent to note that both the Pakistani Taliban and Afghan Taliban have different objectives and they also differ in their tactical operations but both do not disown each other. Because of their mutual interest attached, certain pockets of Afghan and Pakistan Taliban have links with each other. Previously, the Afghan Taliban's main interest was to get safe hideouts in Pakistani tribal belt, in which TTP and their pockets had facilitated them. Later on, as the process of US withdrawal became speedy, the Afghan Taliban were able to get territorial control in parts of Afghanistan. On the other hand, in general, in the Pakistani Taliban draw ideological inspiration from Mullah Omer and their activities in Afghanistan. In addition, the activities of Al Qaeda, Haqqani network, TTP, and its off-shoots in the region have been a major security challenge for both states. Moreover, from 2014 onwards TTP also got sanctuaries in Afghanistan (Khattak, 2012).

This support nexus between the groups have emerged as a leading challenge for the Pak-Afghan security framework. In this context, the first new pivotal threat was the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan and its cross-border implications on Pakistan with the inclusion of new terrorist and radicalized organizations. Though the Al Qaeda factor to an extent has been contained at both sides of the border but it cannot be completely ruled out. Even in the national security strategy document of the United States, Al Qaeda remains have been identified. Besides this, the emergence of IS in 2014 in parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan contributed to another emerging threat. It was in 2014 that IS (Islamic State), which had its base in Iraq and Syria announced its establishment of the Khorasan region comprising of the Pak-Afghan region. The defected Taliban groups mostly were inspired by the IS ideology and started activities in Afghanistan and in the urban centers of Pakistan. It is pertinent to highlight that the threat of urban militancy increased in Pakistan after IS like-minded people became active in Karachi in particular. The containment of terrorism on both sides is essential for enduring peace and stability. Both the government since 2014 in this regard has tried to collaborate in the number of instances to thaw down the mistrust between each other. The official visits between both the states have contributed towards trust built up but unfortunately, both the states were unable to fully materialize the options in this regard. Nonetheless, both continued to meet each other at the official level. Here, it is interesting to note that Pakistan had been more active in such visits to endorse the commitment of cooperation against terrorism. In 2015, PM Nawaz visited Kabul and supported the idea of Afghan-owned peace process (Haider, 2015). Then in 2015, Ghani visited Pakistan and an MoU was signed between ISI and NDS – National Directorate of security, Afghanistan. The



basic purpose was to share intelligence information regarding safe hideouts of terrorist networks. But this step for mutual cooperation was short-lived as in August 2015, series of explosions hit Kabul which killed 50 people and more than 300 were injured. The name of the Haqqani network in the assault created friction between both states. Moreover, both intelligence agencies had reservations over sharing the information of the death of Mullah Omer with each other (Aziz, 2015). Furthermore, in June 2017, to shed the fumes of trust deficit, the then PM of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani met at the sidelines of SCO and agreed to work under the mechanism of Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) along with bilateral corridors for taking counteractions against terrorist groups (www.dawn.com, 2017). In November 2020, Prime Minister Imran Khan paid his first visit to Afghanistan. The timing of Khan's visit was significant as the Afghan government was part of Qatar's talks with the Taliban brokered by United States (Faiez, 2020). Recently, the visits of apex military leadership also reflect the sensitivities attached to the security situation in Afghanistan. Pakistan's major policy stance on Afghanistan is clear that peace within Afghanistan is linked with peace within Pakistan and across the region. Therefore, Pakistan is playing an active diplomatic role in supporting the major stakeholders in the Afghan conflict to opt the path of dialogue and diplomacy.

Another dimension that outlines the strategic and security environment between Pakistan and Afghanistan is the regional dynamics of South Asia. Though the security of Pakistan and Afghanistan is interlinked with the other regional states. China, India, Iran, Central Asian states, and the increasing role and interest of the US and Russia in the region contribute to the Pak-Afghan security environment. Pakistan sees the US- India-Afghan nexus as an emerging challenge mainly because despite the fact that Pakistan has acted as a front-line ally of the US in her war against terror campaign but United States has moved towards India for strategic partnership. In addition to it, opening up of Indian consulates in Afghanistan^{*1} along with investing in the construction of dams in Kunar and Kabul rivers are also seen with suspicion among Pakistan's policymakers (Khan T. U., 2017, pp. 1-17) (Javaid, 2016, pp. 137-147). On the other hand, Afghanistan seeks strategic and opportunity based partnership with India, which is rival to Pakistan, thus contributing to mistrust between the bilateral relationship of Pakistan and Afghanistan. In this context, the apprehensions of Pakistan have become more adverse mainly due to the Indian collaboration with Afghanistan on political and strategic front. Moreover, the movement of some Taliban leaders from the Iranian border in Pakistan from 2014 onwards also became a security related challenge for Pakistan. Recently, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is the main security concern for Pakistan in particular. Issues linked with

^{*1} Kandahar ,Herat, Jalalabad , Mazar-i-Sharif



border security, the influx of refugees from Afghanistan, and the future of the Afghan government, and the rise of Taliban as a major stakeholder in the post-withdrawal settlement are linked with Pakistan's internal and external security dynamics.

Hence, extracted from the above discussion, border security becomes an inevitable part of the Pak-Afghan security paradox. Cross-border movement of irritants has long been a subject of distress between Pakistan and Afghanistan. In 2017, Pakistan started an estimated 550 million dollars project of fencing the Pak-Afghan border as a step to contain and monitor the movement across the border. It was initially condemned by the Afghan government because of their disputed claim on the Durand line, but Pakistan has continued this unilateral fencing and completed over 90 percent of work. The double fence on the 2460 km of the border is equipped with surveillance cameras and infrared detectors. Approximately, 1000 forts are being constructed for security purposes (Basit, 2021). This is a major step to curtail the terrorist who has been using the border for anti-state and militant activities. Moreover, it would also reduce weapons, drug, and human trafficking across the border. Along with the wire fencing, small forts would facilitate surveillance and border observance. According to the ISPR statement, "And on the average, every 1.5 to 2 kilometers will have the physical presence [of our soldiers] (www.tribune.com.pk, 2017)".

The issue of refugee settlement is also one major factor in the Pak-Afghan security puzzle. According to ISPR, 'I can assure you the day these 2.7-million Afghan refugees go back to their country, our liberty of action will expand to trace the left-over facilitators and abettors (www.tribune.com.pk, 2017)'. Afghan settlements in Pakistan have long been an important source of insecurity for Pakistan. In addition, Pakistan has faced an economic and human cost for facilitating the refugees. In 2002, the process of refugee registration started in Pakistan. Till now estimated there are still 1 million unregistered Afghan refugees in Pakistan along with 2 million registered ones. For this purpose, Pak-Afghan Track-II dialogue had been initiated by both the states to settle the question of refugees keeping in view their stabilization and future living because according to Afghan officials they will not be able to accommodate large population of refugees in Afghanistan because of the law and order and economic situation in Afghanistan. Afghan delegates said that 'We also dealt with it as our international responsibility. The educational and health facilities in Pakistan were available to the Afghan refugees. I am glad to find out that 50,000 people educated in Pakistan are serving in Afghanistan presently' (www.tribune.com.pk, 2018)

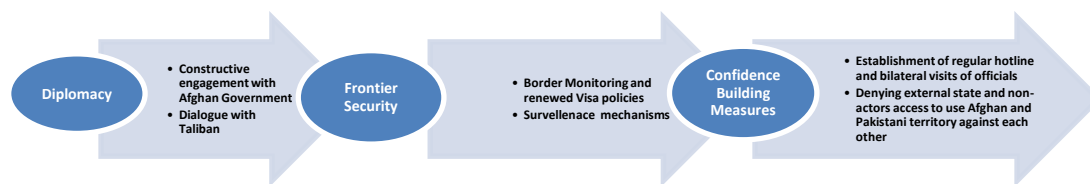
Options for Pakistan and Afghanistan

Pakistan and Afghanistan have struggled to achieve a stable security environment, it is an inevitable requirement for both states to seek options regarding building trust and mutual



understanding. Both the states can use ideological and ethnic ties to build a smooth relationship at the governmental level. In addition, all forms of extremism and terrorist activities should be condemned and contained by both the states through intelligence sharing and by respecting each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Furthermore, Afghanistan keeping in view its weak economic and military constraints should support the border fencing and surveillance mechanisms of Pakistan as it would reduce the movement of terrorist and anti-state groups to operate across the border. Constructive engagement is in the interest of both the states, as offensive built up against each other would have collateral damage at both ends. In addition to it, both the states must see each other's move with suspicion rather both the states must disseminate this realization among the local cadres that the security of Afghanistan and Pakistan are interlinked with each other. It would facilitate the future peace process and particularly the future of Afghanistan. In addition, Pakistan in particular, must reshape its diplomatic strategy and should highlight that Pakistan supports the peace process in Afghanistan. Moreover, Pakistan always sought diplomatic means to diffuse tensions between both the states. From the past few years, particularly since 2018, the resurgence of Taliban in Afghanistan is changing the security dynamics of Afghanistan and consequently will impact the Pak-Afghan relationship. According to reports, the Taliban are active in 70% of Afghanistan. Therefore, a viable pragmatic strategy of diplomatic engagement would reduce any escalation of conflict and diplomatic deadlock.

Proposed Model for security between Pakistan-Afghanistan



Conclusion

The security of Pakistan and Afghanistan is interlinked with each other. The security framework between both the neighbors is the combination of political, historical, economic, and strategic compulsions. Although both Pakistan and Afghanistan share societal norms and ethnic affinity, the issue of terrorism and the presence of terrorist and extremist organizations have increased insecurities between both states. In addition, the



role of US in this region and the withdrawal of the US forces contributes to new challenges and options for both the states to redefine their security environment.



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