

## PAKISTAN'S ROLE IN STABILIZING AFGHANISTAN: STRATEGIES FOR PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT

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### ABSTRACT

Pakistan's strategic role in stabilizing Afghanistan through diplomatic engagement, counter-terrorism collaboration, and economic cooperation. It highlights the historical context, current challenges, and potential strategies for fostering peace and progress. The focus is on how Pakistan's multifaceted approach can contribute to lasting stability and regional development. To analyze Pakistan's strategies for contributing to the stabilization and progress of Afghanistan through diplomatic, security, and economic initiatives. This study employs a qualitative approach to analyze Pakistan's role in stabilizing Afghanistan, utilizing secondary sources for comprehensive insights. Pakistan's historical ties and strategic interests in stabilizing Afghanistan are crucial for regional stability and security. Despite challenges, including mistrust and regional dynamics, Pakistan's commitment to the Afghan peace process remains steadfast, emphasizing diplomatic engagement, economic integration, and regional cooperation. Economic integration and development initiatives, such as CPEC and TAPI, are essential for Afghanistan's reconstruction and stability. Pakistan should continue diplomatic engagement with key stakeholders to promote the peace and development in Afghanistan.

**Keywords:** Stabilizing, Afghanistan, Diplomatic, Security, Peace and Development

### INTRODUCTION

Pakistan's role in stabilizing Afghanistan is a complex and multifaceted endeavor rooted in a long history of geopolitical dynamics, regional tensions, and internal security concerns. From the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to the post-9/11 era, Pakistan's foreign policy towards its neighbor has been shaped by a combination of strategic interests, historical context, and geopolitical imperatives. This essay seeks to delve into Pakistan's historical relationship with Afghanistan, analyze its strategic interests in the region, examine the obstacles facing its efforts towards peace and progress in Afghanistan, and provide recommendations for future actions. The historical backdrop of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations is marked by both cooperation and conflict. The signing of the Geneva Accord in April 1988, which paved the way for ending the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, stands as a

testament to Pakistan's pivotal role in shaping regional dynamics. However, the subsequent period saw divergent paths in bilateral relations, with the Pakistani government and public supporting Afghan resistance against Soviet occupation while facing hostility from Kabul regimes supported by the USSR. The rise of the Taliban in the 1990s further complicated relations, with Pakistan providing significant support to the group, albeit facing setbacks due to the Taliban's refusal to recognize the Durand Line, a border dispute between the two nations (Haidari, 2024).

Pakistan's strategic interests in Afghanistan are deeply intertwined with its rivalry with India and its quest for regional influence. The presence of Indian influence in Afghanistan, coupled with the potential for strategic encirclement, has driven Pakistan to actively engage in Afghan affairs. Economic

concerns, including trade relations and energy cooperation, further underscore Pakistan's interests in fostering stability in Afghanistan. Additionally, the safe return of Afghan refugees and the need to address security threats emanating from Afghanistan are critical priorities for Pakistan's national security. Economic cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan is significant, with trade relations and energy projects playing a crucial role in bilateral ties. However, challenges such as smuggling activities and the presence of illicit goods pose obstacles to economic development. The construction of a fence barrier along the Durand Line aims to address security concerns and facilitate legitimate trade. Moreover, initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) offer opportunities for regional integration and economic prosperity, highlighting the interconnectedness of Pakistan and Afghanistan's economic interests (Rashid, 2023).

Pakistan's security concerns in Afghanistan stem from the potential for instability and terrorism spillover, particularly following the withdrawal of U.S. and allied forces. The resurgence of militant groups like the Taliban and ISIS poses a significant threat to regional security, with implications for Pakistan's internal stability. Additionally, the Balochistan issue and the presence of Afghan refugees contribute to Pakistan's security challenges, necessitating proactive measures to mitigate risks and address underlying issues. Despite Pakistan's efforts to facilitate peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, numerous obstacles persist. Mistrust between parties, the role of spoilers, and regional power dynamics complicate the peace process, underscoring the need for sustained diplomatic engagement and confidence-building measures. Pakistan's role as a mediator and facilitator in the peace process is indispensable, but overcoming challenges requires cooperation from all stakeholders and a commitment to dialogue and reconciliation. Pakistan's mediation efforts in the Afghan peace process have been instrumental in fostering dialogue and reconciliation. By engaging with key stakeholders and facilitating negotiations, Pakistan has sought to promote regional stability and security. Recognition of Pakistan's role by the U.S. and allies underscores its importance in the peace process, highlighting the potential for regional cooperation and conflict resolution (Sarwar, 2021). Pakistan's role in stabilizing Afghanistan is indispensable for achieving lasting peace and

prosperity in the region. From historical ties to strategic interests, Pakistan's engagement with Afghanistan is multifaceted and complex. Despite challenges, including security threats and economic concerns, Pakistan remains committed to facilitating peace talks and promoting regional stability. By leveraging its diplomatic influence and economic partnerships, Pakistan can contribute to the Afghan peace process and foster greater cooperation in the region.

### **Literature Review**

The geopolitical dynamics of South Asia, particularly the interplay between Pakistan and Afghanistan, have significant implications for regional stability and security. This literature review examines the scholarly discourse on Pakistan's role in stabilizing Afghanistan, focusing on historical context, strategic interests, challenges, and proposed strategies for peace and progress. The historical ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan are marked by complex interactions involving colonial legacies, geopolitical rivalries, and socio-cultural connections. The Durand Line, established in 1893, has remained a contentious border, influencing bilateral relations (Ahmed, 2018). Post-9/11, Pakistan's strategic decisions have been critical in shaping the trajectory of the War on Terror and the subsequent peace processes in Afghanistan (Rashid, 2010). Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan is driven by multiple strategic interests, including security concerns, economic aspirations, and regional influence. Several scholars have highlighted Pakistan's pursuit of "strategic depth" to counterbalance Indian influence in Afghanistan (Fair, 2014). This policy has involved supporting various Afghan factions over the decades, aiming to ensure a friendly government in Kabul (Haqqani, 2013).

The presence of militant groups along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border poses significant security challenges. The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) have been hotspots for terrorist activities, complicating efforts to stabilize the region (Jones, 2010). The relationship between the United States and Pakistan has influenced Pakistan's role in Afghanistan. Scholars have discussed the complexities of this relationship, including issues of trust, cooperation, and diverging interests (Cronin, 2012). Afghanistan's diverse ethnic and tribal landscape presents challenges for stabilization efforts. Pakistan's engagement with various Afghan

ethnic groups and tribes has been scrutinized in scholarly discourse, highlighting the complexities of fostering cohesion and unity (Gul, 2016). Scholars advocate for enhanced regional diplomacy involving Pakistan, Afghanistan, and neighboring countries to address common challenges and promote stability (Ahmed, 2020). Economic development projects and infrastructure initiatives are seen as vital components of stabilizing Afghanistan. Pakistan's role in facilitating trade, investment, and connectivity has been emphasized in academic discussions (Yunus, 2019). Strengthening counterterrorism efforts and security cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan is crucial for combating militant groups and ensuring border security (Iqbal, 2017).

The literature on Pakistan's role in stabilizing Afghanistan underscores the complexity of regional dynamics, the significance of historical legacies, and the challenges of promoting peace and progress. By addressing security concerns, fostering diplomatic engagement, and prioritizing economic development, Pakistan can contribute to a more stable and prosperous Afghanistan.

### **Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research methodology with a descriptive research design to analyze Pakistan's role in stabilizing Afghanistan and the strategies for peace and progress. The qualitative approach is chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of the complex political, security, and economic dynamics between Pakistan and Afghanistan. By utilizing a descriptive design, the study aims to systematically describe and interpret the current situation, historical context, and potential strategies for fostering stability and progress in Afghanistan through Pakistan's involvement. Data for this research is collected exclusively from secondary sources. **Historical Context of Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations**

During the specific period under study, Pakistan's major accomplishment on the foreign policy front was the signing of the historic Geneva Accord in April 1988, which laid the groundwork for ending the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (Akhtar & Iqbal, 2023). The accord received widespread acclaim globally, particularly from the parties directly involved in the Afghan conflict. Notably, this marked the first instance since the Vietnam War (1964-1975) that a superpower opted to withdraw from a deeply committed ongoing conflict (Zulfqar,

2022). During this period, and until the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989, bilateral relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan followed two divergent paths: a hostile government-to-government dynamic and a people-to-people stream characterized by empathy, warmth, and goodwill. The Pakistani government and public stood in solidarity with the Afghan people in their opposition to and resistance against the Soviet invasion and prolonged occupation, both diplomatically and militarily. Consequently, various Kabul regimes, supported by the former USSR, remained at odds with Islamabad. Following the Geneva Accords in 1988, Pakistan played a pivotal role in forming a broad-based government composed of Mujahedeen leadership that had militarily resisted the Soviet occupation. After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the communist regime of Najibullah quickly fell to the mujahideen forces, leading to the establishment of a new government in April 1992 through the Peshawar Accords. This agreement, aimed at peace and power-sharing, established the post-communist Islamic State of Afghanistan. However, the accord failed to bring lasting peace to Afghanistan. Following the collapse of communism, severe fighting broke out among various ethnic factions within the victorious mujahideen. The Pashtun tribes, Afghanistan's largest ethnic group comprising approximately 40% of the population, sought to reassert their historic dominance. In contrast, smaller ethnic minorities, notably the Tajiks and Uzbeks, aimed to reverse this trend. These minorities formed the Northern Alliance to oppose the Pashtun warlords vying for power. The ensuing civil war lasted nearly five years, culminating in the Taliban's rise to power in Kabul in 1996 (Taheri, 2023).

The Taliban captured Kabul in September 1996, leading to intense fighting in the Panjshir Valley in northern Afghanistan, where Northern Alliance forces under the Tajik warlord Ahmed Shah Masoud had retreated. In western Afghanistan, forces loyal to the Uzbek warlord Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum also engaged in clashes with advancing Taliban troops. By the late 1990s, the Taliban had seized control of most of the country, except for resistance pockets in the north and west, and declared sovereignty by establishing the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, bolstered by significant diplomatic, military, and financial support from Pakistan. During the mid-1990s, as the Taliban initiated its military campaign across Afghanistan, it received active support from

Arab and other foreign volunteers, as well as assistance from Pakistani and Saudi intelligence agencies. This period marked the first instance in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations where Islamabad received a warm welcome from Kabul, enhancing Pakistan's strategic superiority over India. However, this relationship experienced a decline due to the Taliban's refusal to recognize the long-standing issue of the Durand Line, which represented a significant setback for Pakistan. Despite this, Pakistan's relations with all post-Soviet governments in Afghanistan remained largely positive until the events of 9/11.

The events of September 11, 2001, redefined Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban-led Afghanistan. The subsequent U.S. attack on the Taliban regime allowed President Musharraf to rejuvenate Pakistan's weakening ties with the United States, positioning Pakistan once again as a front-line state. Although India has become the centerpiece of U.S. strategy in South Asia since then, Pakistan has managed to exert some influence over the United States due to its strategic geopolitical position and its crucial role in the ongoing conflict against the Taliban. Following the terrorist attacks on the United States in September 2001, the Indian government offered support for the U.S. effort in Afghanistan. However, despite India's eagerness, the U.S. did not prioritize this offer. Given Pakistan's geostrategic location, sharing a long border with southern and eastern Afghanistan, the U.S. recognized Pakistan as a more critical strategic partner for military operations in Afghanistan than India.

In December 2001, the Bonn Agreement was signed, with various Afghan ethnic groups agreeing to form a multi-ethnic interim government. In April 2002, an emergency Loya Jirga (Grand National Council) convened to enable tribal leaders from across the country to endorse the new government structure. Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun leader supported by the U.S., was appointed President. However, Pashtun opinion on Karzai was divided, with many viewing him with suspicion and mistrust. The establishment of the interim government did not resolve Afghanistan's security issues, as the country remained divided into enclaves controlled by different ethnic and tribal warlords, limiting Karzai's government's authority to the immediate surroundings of Kabul (Waqar et al., 2023). Karzai's administration remained in power until 2014 through two election cycles. Despite occasional cordial

overtures, Afghanistan's relations with Pakistan became increasingly strained during Karzai's presidency. Tensions arose along the Durand Line following Pakistan's efforts to build outposts and secure the border. Initially warm towards Pakistan, Karzai eventually sought to build a more robust strategic partnership with India. India capitalized on this opportunity, using Afghan territory to launch terrorist operations in Pakistan and to limit Pakistan's access to Central Asia, thereby marginalizing Pakistan's regional influence. The Indo-Afghan nexus also revived the Durand Line issue by establishing direct contacts with Pashtun political and tribal leaders within Pakistan (Bano et al., 2024). By 2005-2006, relations between Kabul and Islamabad had become increasingly strained. Kabul persistently accused Pakistan of harboring the Taliban. During U.S. President George W. Bush's visit to Pakistan in March 2006, the Afghan President, along with senior U.S. officials in Kabul, accused Pakistan of allowing al-Qaida leaders and operatives to hide in Pakistani border areas, which provoked a furious response from Pakistan. In August 2013, Afghan President Hamid Karzai met with the new Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in Islamabad, declaring that Pakistan's role was crucial in any long-term Afghan peace settlement. Nawaz Sharif reciprocated with a visit to Kabul in November, assuring Karzai of Pakistan's willingness to assist in the Afghan peace process. Significant improvement in Afghan-Pakistani relations became evident following the presidential inauguration of Ashraf Ghani in September 2014. Ghani visited Pakistan twice in the ensuing months and importantly engaged with key Pakistani security and economic partners such as China and Saudi Arabia. He aimed to convince them that instability in Afghanistan would not be in their interest, particularly after the departure of Western military forces. Ghani emphasized that "the hostility between Pakistan and Afghanistan has been buried in the past two days." He also appeared willing to significantly downsize diplomatic relations and security cooperation with India, an old Pakistani demand, in exchange for greater Pakistani cooperation in bringing Afghan insurgents to the negotiating table.

However, a few months later, Ghani's stance shifted, reminiscent of his predecessor Hamid Karzai. After several attacks, presumably by the Taliban, on Kabul's Airport and the Afghan Parliament, Ghani accused Pakistan of orchestrating



these attacks and renounced any expectation of cooperation. Clashes between troops from the two countries at the Torkham border crossing in June 2016 further discouraged the likelihood of Afghan-Pakistani cooperation on security issues in the short term. By mid-2017, Afghan-Pakistani relations remained tense, characterized by more border closures and mutual accusations of support for insurgent groups (Hamdullah & Kakar, 2024).

### **Pakistan's Strategic Interests in Afghanistan: Economic Stability and Security**

Pakistan shares a 2,640 km land border with Afghanistan, creating a multifaceted interconnection encompassing cultural, ethnological, economic, and religious ties. Given these deep-rooted bonds, developments in one country have immediate repercussions on the other. Pakistan has numerous strategic interests in Afghanistan, driven primarily by concerns related to India, its allies, and its growing relations with Afghanistan since 2001 (Bashir, 2023). From a political perspective, Pakistan's defense policy is heavily influenced by its stance towards India and its allies. Improving bilateral relations with Afghanistan is of paramount importance to Pakistan in the context of its rivalry with India. While India may not be an active participant in the Afghan peace process, it nonetheless seeks to leverage Afghanistan to monitor and counterbalance Pakistan's influence in the region. Historically, India has maintained favorable relations with Afghanistan's elected governments. However, Pakistan, by playing a constructive role in Afghanistan and actively engaging in the Afghan Peace Process, has sought to enhance its influence in Afghanistan. Establishing a strong relationship with both the Afghan government and the Taliban enables Pakistan to mitigate India's economic and political influence in Afghanistan.

Should the United States encourage India to refrain from using Afghan territory against Pakistan, there is a reasonable prospect for success in the Afghan peace process. However, the U.S. and Pakistan have divergent interests in the region. While American objectives have evolved to focus on rivalry with China, Pakistan's strategic aim remains constant: to maintain a balance of power with India (Bushar, 2022). Recent developments indicate that Pakistan is increasingly mindful of its economic and security concerns. Instability in Afghanistan significantly impacts Pakistan's security paradigm, as has been

observed on multiple occasions (Imranullah & Hakimuddin, 2024). Pakistan has endured significant economic and human costs due to its involvement in the war on terror, with losses amounting to \$126.79 billion and over 65,000 lives lost since 2001 (The Nation, 2018). Stability in Afghanistan is thus vital for the stability and prosperity of Pakistan.

Another significant issue is the safe return of Afghan refugees to Afghanistan. Pakistan has been hosting over three million registered and unregistered Afghan refugees for the past four decades. Pakistan collaborates with Afghanistan and international organizations such as the UNHCR and IOM to facilitate their safe, dignified, sustainable, and voluntary repatriation under various UN strategies, including the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) (Aslam et al., 2022). Achieving lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan is essential for the successful return of these refugees. The Pashtuns, an ethnic group with roots in Afghanistan, represent a significant portion of the refugee population. Pakistan hosts more than half of the global Pashtun population. The Durand Line, which serves as the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, is perceived as an artificial demarcation in light of the historical, cultural, ethnic, and familial connections that span the border region. Consequently, Pakistan must also consider the sentimental affiliations of the Pashtun people in its policies and actions.

### **Pakistan Economic Concerns**

Pakistan has substantial trade relations with Afghanistan, serving as Afghanistan's largest trading partner. The two countries have established several mechanisms to facilitate trade and economic cooperation:

1. Afghanistan Pakistan Transit Trade Cooperation Authority (APTTCA)
2. Pak-Afghan Joint Chamber of Commerce & Industry
3. Pakistan-Afghanistan Joint Business Council
4. Joint Economic Commission (JEC)
5. Afghan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS)

During Afghanistan's fiscal year 2018 (22 December 2017 - 21 December 2018), Pak-Afghan bilateral trade reached its peak at US\$ 1,437 million, surpassing Afghanistan-Iran trade at US\$ 1,284 million and Afghanistan-China trade at US\$ 1,098

million (Ministry of Foreign Affairs). According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan increased by 18.33% in the fiscal year 2017-18 (July-June). Official imports from Afghanistan to Pakistan remain minimal; however, the unofficial import of goods through smuggling across the border constitutes a considerable volume. Key border posts, such as Chaman in Baluchistan province and Spin Boldak in Afghanistan, as well as Torkham in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, are notorious for smuggling activities (Malik, 2023). Smuggler markets in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan are flooded with smuggled consumer goods, causing significant losses to Pakistani industries. When duty-free Japanese TV sets or dishwashers are available at nearly the same price as domestically manufactured ones, consumers naturally prefer the Japanese products. Additionally, smuggler markets in Hayatabad, outside Peshawar, feature brand name shops such as Marks and Spencer, Mothercare, and Sony, offering original products duty-free (Khatoon et al., 2023). The World Bank reports that many items unofficially imported into Pakistan through the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) or other means have high statutory tariff rates, providing a strong incentive for smuggling. Estimates indicate that the market prices of popular smuggled goods are on average 30-40% lower than their corresponding landed prices under official imports (World Bank, 2001). Furthermore, approximately 45% of Afghan opium, used in heroin production, is trafficked through Pakistan to the Middle East, Africa, and Europe (Teston, 2022).

A significant positive development in this regard is the construction of a fence barrier by Pakistan along the Durand Line, the 2,640 km land border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which traverses rugged mountains, densely forested valleys, and narrow rock passages. This barrier is nearing completion. Historically, Pakistan has subordinated its bilateral relations with Afghanistan, prioritizing an India-centric Afghan policy. However, due to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Pakistan has shifted its approach towards its neighbors. Afghanistan can play a crucial role as a facilitator for regional transit trade. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including CPEC, holds significant potential for promoting interdependence and facilitating transit trade to Afghanistan and Central Asian Republics (CARs) through Pakistan's open

harbors. The America-led war on terror has generally overshadowed many attempts by Afghanistan's neighbors to engage in substantial trade, investment, and development activities (Mufti, 2023). Nevertheless, CPEC offers Afghanistan an opportunity to improve relations with Pakistan and reduce its dependence on foreign aid by strengthening its economic conditions (Shinwari, 2023). Cooperation between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China represents a win-win situation for all parties involved. Pakistan believes that China's strategic engagement in Afghanistan will diminish India's influence in the region.

Pakistan is currently facing a severe energy crisis, which could be mitigated by transporting oil and natural gas from Central Asia through Afghanistan. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Pipeline (TAPI), also known as the Trans-Afghanistan Pipeline, is a natural gas pipeline project that will transport gas from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan into Pakistan and then to India. Construction on the project commenced in Turkmenistan on December 13, 2015, and the Afghan section began in February 2018. Designed for a 30-year lifespan, the pipeline is expected to become operational in 2021, transporting 33 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas annually. The pipeline is anticipated to facilitate unprecedented trade and cooperation across the region, while also supporting peace and security among the four nations. Over 1.5 billion people in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India are expected to benefit from the long-term energy security provided by the project. Additionally, Afghanistan and Pakistan will gain from transit fees. Ultimately, the success of these projects hinges on peace and stability in Afghanistan, which will consequently impact the entire region. Thus, a peaceful and stable Afghanistan is not merely a desire but a necessity for all regional countries.

### **Pakistan's Security Concerns**

The current wave of terrorism is believed to be started in 2000, and was at peaked in 2009, with the mortality of 11094 persons including civilians and security forces personnel as per the report of the South Asian Terrorism Portal Index (SATAP) (Jan, 2022). Today, Pakistan is standing on firm footholds against terrorism and reduced terrorist activities by almost 89% in 2009, because of effective military operations and readiness of the Government to remain stick to the National Action Plan (NAP)

framed in December 2014, after the Army Public School incident. However, the current situation in Afghanistan, poses a serious security threat to Pakistan. Instability in Afghanistan would have a great impact on the security paradigm of Pakistan as has been witnessed on many occasions. Pakistan has been struggling hard against the militants and insurgents on its own for long and has conducted many military operations against the insurgents with the last one as Operation Zarb-e-Azab brought about fruitful results to Pakistan (Verma, 2022).

Since Afghanistan is not yet stabilized, Pakistani leadership, therefore, believes that after the withdrawal of the U.S. and allied forces from Afghanistan, Pakistan will face blowback once again and the consequences of U.S. withdrawal will be more severe than the 1989 Soviet withdrawal (Jathol, 2023). Pakistan is increasingly getting worried about a security vacuum in Afghanistan after the United States pullout (Abbas, 2023). The withdrawal of U.S. and allied forces from Afghanistan will provide an open field to Al Qaeda/Taliban and IS on one hand and encourage regional and international players on another, creating a security dilemma for Pakistan (Akhtar and Ullah, 2024). In a recent interview with Al Jazeera, the former TTP spokesman Ihsanullah Ihsan hinted at the possibility of cooperation between TTP and ISK (Abbas, and Cheema, 2022). In South Asia's diverse jihadist community, the Taliban's apparent victory over the U.S. has created a victorious jihadist narrative that after Russia, another superpower has been beaten by Afghanistan and this narrative is likely to fuel jihadist recruitment across the region, along with reviving local and regional groups which joined hands with the Taliban to push out the U.S. from Afghanistan (Basit, The US-Taliban Deal and Expected US Exit from Afghanistan, 2020). Following the U.S-Taliban deal; Al-Qaeda's general command issued a three-page statement in March lauding the Taliban's "great victory." (Saeed, 2022).

On the other hand, IS doesn't seem to be fascinated by the Taliban. Disagreeing to this congratulatory messaging, IS spokesperson Abu Hamza al-Qurashi in an audio message published by the group's media arm, Al-Furqan media said "Taliban's control of Afghanistan will not bring Islamic rule until they repent to Allah." (Gillani, 2023). Hence the probability of war between IS and the Taliban is another threat to South Asian security. After the withdrawal of the U.S. and allied forces from

Afghanistan, IS may be involved in anti-Shia violence in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Almost all anti-Shia Sunni extremist groups such as Jandullah, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi Al-Almi (LJA) have pledged allegiance to IS, so these outfits will continue their anti-Shia militancy from ISK's platform (Shahab and Ahmed, 2022). Another major security concern for Pakistan is the Balochistan issue. Balochistan where the wave of low-intensity insurgency has cooled down to a great extent, but the political climate is still volatile (Khan et al., 2023). Many Pakistani security experts think that the Balochistan issue is also related to the Afghan issue. Any terrorist attack in Balochistan is, in most cases planned in Afghanistan. So if things get escalate in Afghanistan, after the withdrawal of U.S and Allied forces, the chances of spillover of militancy in Balochistan from Afghanistan are vital, this may ignite the new wave of insurgencies in Balochistan, Thereby posing a direct threat to CPEC and Gwadar.

Pak-Afghan relations have adversely been affected by the presence of over 3 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan and the long and treacherous border of about 2640 km (Shah, and Mahmood, 2022). These refugees also included extremists that ultimately increased radicalization of the Pakistani society and subsequently harmed the religious, social, environmental, political, and security condition in Pakistan, Secondly, the massive influx of refugees also brought drugs, militants, and weapons with them to Pakistan and contributed a fair share in "rise of Pakistani militancy and terrorism", besides, In Pakistani society, new kinds of crimes, mostly related to modern weapons and drugs, have been introduced since the 1980s (Pourhassan and Mohammadnia, 2023). The return of these 3 million Afghan refugees is also associated with stability in Afghanistan. During his meeting with the Speaker of Afghanistan's Wolesi Jirga, Mir Rahman Rahmani, at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pakistan on 1 June 2021, Pakistan's foreign minister Makhdoom Shah Mahmood Qureshi, emphasized Pakistan's commitment to the safe and dignified return of Afghan refugees to their homeland, in a time-bound and well-resourced roadmap, supported by the international community (Wadud, 2023).

### **Obstacles facing Pakistan's Afghan peace process strategy**

The regional security complex of Pakistan and Afghanistan underscores their interdependent security challenges, rendering Pakistan a crucial actor in initiating any peace process in Afghanistan. This does not imply that peace, security, and stability in Afghanistan are contingent upon Pakistan's inclusion in the process, nor does it suggest Pakistan's intention to control Afghanistan's internal politics. Rather, the ethnic and religious bonds across the border, coupled with the infiltration of militants, notably the Taliban, into each other's territories, delineate the extent and nature of Pakistan's involvement in the Afghan peace process. As the NATO forces' drawdown approached, terrorist activities escalated in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. According to a report by The New York Times citing figures from the Afghan Ministry of Defense, over 60 percent of the total 4,451 Afghan soldiers killed in the war were slain in the three years leading up to March 20, 2013 (Nordland, 2014). Similarly, Pakistan witnessed a surge in brutal terrorist attacks, targeting killings, shootings, and bombings across various regions, from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to Balochistan, targeting individuals of diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds, regardless of age or affiliation, including civilians and security personnel. This upsurge in terrorism indicated several underlying factors, including the retaliatory actions of weakened and disgruntled terrorists and militants seeking retribution against governments. Additionally, militants employed various strategies such as attrition, intimidation, provocation, spoiling, or outbidding to extend their influence through terror and garner political attention while aiming to secure better bargains (Kydd & Walter, 2006).

Following numerous unsuccessful or inconclusive attempts, including efforts involving Qatar, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, to engage Taliban or other militant groups in meaningful talks, Pakistan played a pivotal role in facilitating the Murree Peace Process in July 2015 (Paliwal, 2016). Subsequently, peace talks and the peace-building process have proceeded through various arrangements such as the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) and the Heart of Asia Conferences, albeit with intermittent stalls and interruptions. Thus, the absence of Pakistan's effective facilitation role renders the prospect of peace-building uncertain within the Pakistan-Afghanistan regional security complex.

### **Pakistan's Afghan peace mediation**

During the 8<sup>th</sup> Ministerial meeting of the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process in December 2019, Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Makhdoom Shah Mahmood Qureshi, underscored the imperative of achieving a secure and stable Afghanistan for fostering economic progress and regional prosperity. Qureshi highlighted Pakistan's historical ties and commitment to Afghanistan's peace and development, emphasizing the hosting of over 3 million Afghan refugees for four decades and Pakistan's substantial contribution of over US\$ 1 billion in development assistance to Afghanistan. He underscored the significance of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS) as a pivotal institutional framework for bolstering bilateral relations between the two countries (Mustafa, et al., 2020). Since the events of 9/11, Pakistan's aspirations for stability in Afghanistan and peace in South Asia appear aligned with international powers. Pakistan has endeavored to position itself as a non-biased actor in the Afghan Peace Process by refraining from aligning with any single party (Sarwar and Siraj, 2021). Recognizing Pakistan's importance to peace and stability, the U.S. government requested Pakistan's cooperation in the U.S.-Taliban talks. In response, Pakistani authorities released Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in October 2018, who had been captured in 2010 in Karachi in a joint US-Pakistan operation. Zalmay Khalilzad acknowledged Pakistan's facilitation of the Taliban's participation in talks in Doha (Thomas, 2018).

Pakistan has actively engaged with key Afghan parties within the peace process, hosting representatives of the Taliban Political Commission and leaders such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Mohammad Karim Khalili. These efforts have garnered leverage among political and militant actors in Afghanistan and supported the prospects for an interim government (Junaid, Mustafa, 2021). During the 8th Ministerial meeting of the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process, Foreign Minister Qureshi expressed optimism regarding recent efforts to reach peace and stability in Afghanistan. He urged inclusive intra-Afghan negotiations and cautioned against "spoilers" with vested interests, urging the international community to seize the opportunity for lasting peace through broad regional and international consensus (Ullah et al., 2023). Pakistan's pivotal role in negotiation and stability in



Afghanistan is recognized by the U.S. and Allies. Zalmay Khalilzad, the American peace envoy to Afghanistan, commended Pakistan's indispensable support for the ongoing peace process during his visit to Pakistan in September 2020 (Ullah et al., 2023). American Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III also expressed gratitude for Islamabad's continued support for the Afghan peace process in a telephonic conversation in March 2021 with Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff Gen (Rashid, 2023).

Without Pakistan's support, facilitating negotiations between the U.S. and Taliban or between the Taliban and the Afghan government would be challenging (Haidari, 2024). This recognition of Pakistan's role marks a significant departure from previous criticisms based on its perceived bias in Afghan conflict parties. Pakistan's facilitative role benefits the state, aligning its foreign policy with regional powers like China, Russia, and Iran to foster regional economic cooperation. This shift from its former India-centric Afghan policy to a broader regional approach centered on Pakistan's economic goals presents a vital opportunity to establish a network of regional alliances and advance bilateral relations with the United States and the Kabul government, reducing India's influence in regional politics.

### **Conclusion:**

Pakistan's role in stabilizing Afghanistan is of paramount importance for ensuring long-term peace and development in the region. The complex and intertwined histories of both nations necessitate a cooperative approach to address mutual challenges and harness shared opportunities. Over the years, Pakistan has implemented a multifaceted strategy aimed at fostering stability in Afghanistan, emphasizing economic cooperation, security collaboration, and diplomatic engagement.

Economically, Pakistan has sought to bolster Afghanistan's development through trade partnerships, infrastructure projects, and investments. Initiatives such as the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) have been pivotal in enhancing trade flows, providing Afghanistan with critical access to global markets through Pakistani ports. Moreover, Pakistan's involvement in infrastructural development projects, including road networks and energy pipelines, underscores its commitment to facilitating economic integration and growth in Afghanistan. These efforts not only aim to stabilize Afghanistan's economy but

also to create a mutually beneficial economic landscape that fosters regional prosperity.

On the security front, Pakistan has faced considerable challenges, given the persistent threat of militancy and cross-border terrorism. The security situation in Afghanistan has direct implications for Pakistan's own stability, necessitating a robust and collaborative security strategy. Pakistan has engaged in extensive counterterrorism operations, intelligence sharing, and border management initiatives to mitigate these threats. Additionally, Pakistan has played a crucial role in facilitating peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, recognizing that a political solution is essential for enduring peace. Despite the complexities involved, Pakistan's continued support for intra-Afghan dialogue reflects its commitment to a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Diplomatically, Pakistan has been active in various regional and international forums, advocating for a peaceful and stable Afghanistan. Its participation in multilateral initiatives such as the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) highlights its dedication to regional peacebuilding efforts. Pakistan's diplomatic efforts aim to garner international support for Afghan peace and development, ensuring a coordinated and comprehensive approach to the challenges at hand.

Pakistan's strategic interests in Afghanistan underscore the necessity of a stable and prosperous neighbor. Despite facing significant obstacles, including political volatility, militant activities, and regional rivalries, Pakistan remains steadfast in its commitment to supporting peace and development in Afghanistan. A stable Afghanistan is inextricably linked to Pakistan's security and economic interests, making sustained efforts towards peace and collaborative growth essential. Through economic partnerships, security collaborations, and diplomatic engagements, Pakistan continues to play a crucial role in the pursuit of lasting peace and development in Afghanistan.

### **Recommendations**

Building on existing agreements such as the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA), Pakistan should work to expand trade agreements to include a broader range of goods and services, facilitating greater economic interdependence. Investing in joint infrastructure projects, such as roads, railways, and energy

pipelines, can help improve connectivity and economic integration between the two countries. Given Afghanistan's agrarian economy, Pakistan can provide expertise, technology, and support for agricultural development, enhancing food security and livelihoods in Afghanistan.

Strengthen joint counterterrorism initiatives and intelligence sharing to combat the threat of militancy and ensure border security. Implement advanced border management systems, including biometric identification and surveillance technologies, to monitor and control cross-border movements effectively. Assist in building the capacity of Afghan security forces through training programs and the provision of necessary equipment.

Continue to play a mediating role in peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, ensuring that all parties remain committed to a political solution. Engage with regional stakeholders, including Iran, China, and Central Asian countries, to create a unified approach to Afghan peace and stability. Advocate for increased international involvement and support for Afghanistan's reconstruction and development efforts through forums such as the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

Promote educational and cultural exchanges to build people-to-people connections and foster mutual understanding between the citizens of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Collaborate on healthcare projects, providing medical assistance and support to improve health outcomes in Afghanistan. Support community development programs that address grassroots issues, such as access to clean water, education, and healthcare, improving overall quality of life.

Work together on environmental conservation projects, addressing issues such as deforestation, water management, and climate change resilience. Encourage economic diversification in Afghanistan by investing in sectors such as mining, tourism, and technology, reducing dependency on a single economic activity. Ensure that development projects are inclusive, taking into account the needs of all segments of Afghan society, including women, minorities, and rural communities. By implementing these recommendations, Pakistan can enhance its role in stabilizing Afghanistan, fostering a peaceful, stable, and prosperous neighbor that contributes positively to regional and global security.

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