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US–AFGHAN RELATIONS POST-9/11: IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN'S DOMESTIC AND REGIONAL SECURITY

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ABSTRACT

The terrorist strikes of 9/11 changed the strategy of South Asia and redefined the dynamic between the United States and Afghanistan, the impact of which has been borne most by Pakistan. This review paper aims to answer the core issue as to how the changing dynamics of the US–Afghan relationship after the events of 9/11 affected the security landscape of Pakistan. It is asserted that while the American involvement was aimed at Afghanistan, it changed Pakistan to such an extent that its stability, economy, and regional status became vulnerable to this very involvement. The history of the region spanning from the Cold War period until the Soviet invasion, the civil war of the 1990s, and the rise of the Taliban is explored to reveal how Pakistan's move towards supporting the United States' Global War on Terror resulted in a violent blowback in the form of the rise of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), sectarian and urban terror, and insurgency in the tribal areas that required a decade of costly military operations, namely Al-Mizan, Zarb-e-Azb, and Radd-ul-Fasaad. While the article summarises the overall cost of war in terms of human life (around 80,000 deaths) and monetary loss (officially about US$126.79 billion) incurred by the people of the country, it also addresses the issue of deteriorating political stability, social capital, and investor confidence. The article also analyses the regional aspect of the problem, focusing on the escalation of Pakistan–India rivalry through Afghan soil, charges of external support of the Baloch insurgency, the disputed Durand Line, and China–Pakistan Economic Corridor concerns. Moving on from the original article, the paper discusses the situation after the Taliban took control of Kabul, the rise of the TTP, the breakdown of the relationship between Kabul and Islamabad, and the realignment in the region due to China, India, and Iran. The last part of the paper offers policy recommendations for the future stability of the country.

Keywords: *US–Afghan relations; Pakistan security; War on Terror; Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan; Taliban takeover; Balochistan insurgency; regional geopolitics*

1. Introduction

There are very few instances of bilateral relations having had such a definitive impact on the security situation in a third country as the relations between the US and Afghanistan have impacted Pakistan's security. After the attacks on 9/11, the changing priorities of the US in relation to Afghanistan spread beyond the Durand Line, influencing almost every aspect of Pakistani foreign policy and internal politics, including its civil-military balance, economy, society, and status in its neighborhood [1]. Geographically located between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, Pakistan could not be shielded from the war next door or control its terms. Instead, it became a "frontline state," which perfectly described its critical importance for the US military operation as well as its vulnerability to its risks [2].

However, this paper takes up a particular set of analyses that were initially generated to respond to a seemingly basic but complex question: How did the direction of US–Afghan relations after 9/11 affect the security of Pakistan? This is a question that is far from academic or answered definitively. More than twenty years after the invasion of Afghanistan, and a few years after the sudden withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan in August 2021, Pakistan continues to feel the repercussions of choices that have been taken by the US and the Afghan governments with only partial say. The resurgent activities of the TTP, the intensification of the insurgency in Balochistan, and the breakdown of ties with the Taliban regime, which Islamabad was said to be harboring for decades, make the story of the post-9/11 order incomplete [3].

The key thesis that will be argued here is that the US-led intervention in Afghanistan, regardless of its motives, had produced a number of destabilising effects which Pakistan could not help but experience. First, by participating in the anti-al-Qaeda and anti-Taliban coalition, Pakistan opened itself up for the harshest form of domestic reaction that it has ever faced; second, due to the influx of refugees and militants into Pakistan through the porous border region, Pakistan found itself dealing with an insurgency that would be impossible to eliminate; and third, because of the ongoing rivalry with India, Pakistan viewed Afghanistan as a ground for proxy struggle rather than as a buffer zone.

This study follows a stepwise approach. It starts with the examination of the literature on US-Afghan-Pakistan relations, along with an analysis of the debates that dominate the issue. This is followed by a reconstruction of the history prior to 9/11, from the colonial background of Afghan-Pakistani tensions, through the occupation of Afghanistan by the Soviets, to the rise of the Taliban. The main part of the paper is devoted to the post-9/11 period of US-Afghan relations, while its impact on Pakistan takes up two separate parts: one for the domestic dimension (terror, sectarian violence, economic damage, and political instability) and the other for the regional dimension (the role of India, the Baloch insurgency, the problem of the Durand Line, and the China factor).

2. Literature Review

There are several traditions of academic literature on the topic of US-Afghanistan relationship and its implications for Pakistan, which explore different dimensions of this complex issue. The first line of research considers the involvement of great powers and the impact of their intervention into Afghanistan as an unintended consequence. According to the comprehensive history of the US war in Afghanistan by Carter Malkasian, America did not solve the inherent contradiction between counterterrorism goals and state building in the country, which resulted in strategic ambiguity for regional powers, including Pakistan [4].

The second stream of research, more relevant to the present work, is devoted to the strategic culture of Pakistan in relation to Afghan crisis. According to the analysis of "the way of war" of the Pakistan Army by C. Christine Fair, the use of non-state proxies and the revisionist attitude towards India remain a part of Pakistan's strategy [5]. From his perspective as a former ambassador, Husain Haqqani suggests that Pakistan's support for the Afghan Taliban backfired, as it fostered the growth of entities that were eventually going to use their guns against them [6]. The works of Madiha Afzal that examine the relationship between extremism and society in Pakistan complement this thesis as she discusses the ways in which the interaction of state policies, madrasa network, and narratives generated a fertile ground for militancy [7]. These scholars provide a background for the key paradox discussed in the current article: Pakistan was simultaneously the sponsor, victim, and arena of the new world order after 9/11.

The third strand of literature revolves around the mechanisms of militancy in the borderland areas. The works of Amira Jadoon, Abdul Sayed, and Andrew Mines about the evolution of the TTP illustrate how the organization fragmented, reorganized, and finally became a consolidation of dozens of other groups in the context of changing power balance in Afghanistan [8]. Sayed and Hamming's research into the TTP's reemergence in the period following 2021 offers detailed evidence regarding the increase in operational activity of the organization, while analyses conducted by the senior study group on

counter-terrorism at the United States Institute of Peace have noted that the threat posed by this region is increasing rather than decreasing due to the withdrawal [9], [10]. Notably, Asfandyar Mir's research has provided concrete documentation of the causal relationship between the resurgence of the Afghan Taliban and their counterparts in Pakistan [11].

A fourth set of works relates to the human and economic impact of the conflict. The Costs of War project at Brown University's Watson Institute offers some of the most thorough documentation of this, with the total budgetary cost of the Afghanistan-Pakistan theatre of the conflict estimated to be well over $2.3 trillion to the United States and counting hundreds of thousands of deaths among the post-9/11 wars, including many thousands of Pakistani civilians [12], [13]. Meanwhile, official Pakistani sources have provided figures for the losses sustained by the state, which have led to the oft-cited $126.79 billion cost of the Pakistan Economic Survey [14]. This has been noted by scholars such as Haqqani, who has warned that some of these figures are notional, a warning that must be heeded even as one acknowledges the grim truth behind them.

Finally, there is a body of work that studies the realignments in the region following the resurgence of the Taliban. The reports from the Carnegie Endowment and the Observer Research Foundation and other institutions highlight China's realistic approach towards working with the Taliban government, as does the competitive diplomacy involved in India's approach towards reengaging with Kabul, ending up with the reopening of its embassy in 2025 [15], [16]. This article brings together all five of these schools, bringing out their insights into one comprehensive study, going into the more recent events of 2025 and 2026. This paper is an attempt to fill an apparent void in the literature – while each aspect of the problem has been discussed in isolation, very few papers cover the entire range from the early days of the war before 9/11 till after 2021, and even fewer are centered around Pakistan's security.

3. Historical Background: Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Great Powers before 9/11

The issues that would come to be associated with 9/11 had been brewing long before that date. As soon as Pakistan was created in 1947, there existed an unresolved dispute between Pakistan and Afghanistan in terms of territorial boundaries and ethnic issues. Afghanistan was the only country not to recognize Pakistan as a member of the United Nations because of the issue of Pashtun regions along the border of both states and their denial of accepting the Durand line established back in 1893 by British colonial powers as an international boundary [17]. The policy of Kabul promoting the "Pashtunistan" question of the idea of the creation of a separate autonomous state or even independent state for Pashtuns from Pakistan had laid the grounds of distrust. This background information is crucial in order to understand why Pakistan needed a friendly regime in Kabul as its strategic asset.

3.1 The Cold War and the Soviet Occupation

The Cold War led to the transformation of Afghanistan from being a marginalized buffer state into being the epicenter of superpower rivalry. The Soviet occupation that began in December 1979 as an effort to support a failing communist regime in Kabul led to the involvement of the United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia in a joint effort to support and fund the Afghan resistance. Pakistan under General Zia-ul-Haq emerged as the key player in this regard as money and weapons from the US and Saudi Arabia would pass via Pakistani intelligence to the mujahideen [18]. On one side, the country achieved tremendous strategic importance in the eyes of America, along with acquiring much-needed military and economic aid. On the other side, the country hosted millions of Afghan refugees, saw the spread of arms and heroin, popularly called the "Kalashnikov culture," and gave birth to militancy that would continue to exist even after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989.

Once the Soviets withdrew from the region and dissolved as a state soon afterward, there was no strategic importance for America in the region anymore. Consequently, the country found itself in possession of large quantities of arms and factional rivalries, while Pakistan was left to sort things out by itself. The civil war that raged in Afghanistan in the early 1990s, when the mujahideen leaders began fighting amongst

themselves, was the perfect breeding ground for a new movement.

3.2 The Rise of the Taliban and the Road to 9/11

In 1994 the Taliban, rising out of the madrasas and refugee camps along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, made promises of order, of religion, and of an end to the atrocities of the warlords. In 1996 they took Kabul, and by the close of the decade controlled most of Afghanistan. For Pakistan, along with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the Taliban regime was one more step towards its ultimate objective of "strategic depth" vis-a-vis India—a safe backyard that denied New Delhi any sway in western Pakistan [19]. Such calculations would lead to disaster. The shelter given by the Taliban to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda—the training camps of which operated freely in Afghanistan—would make the country the launching-pad of the 11 September 2001 attacks. With one morning, Afghanistan would cease to be a forgotten land and become the focus of American foreign policy—and Pakistan would find itself at the forefront of events yet again.

Table 1. Key milestones in Afghanistan–Pakistan–US relations, 1947–2001

Year	Event	Significance for Pakistan
1947	Afghanistan opposes Pakistan's UN admission; raises Pashtunistan claim	Origins of enduring bilateral mistrust and the Durand Line dispute
1979	Soviet Union invades Afghanistan	Pakistan becomes frontline conduit for the anti-Soviet jihad
1980s	US–Saudi–Pakistani covert support to the mujahideen	Influx of refugees, weapons, and militant networks
1989	Soviet withdrawal; US strategic disengagement	Pakistan left to manage Afghan chaos alone
1994–96	Taliban emerge and capture Kabul	Pakistan pursues "strategic depth"; recognises the regime
2001	Al-Qaeda attacks of 11 September	Pakistan pressured to abandon the Taliban and join the US coalition

Source: compiled by the author from the historical record and secondary literature [17]–[19].

4. US–Afghan Relations after 9/11

The response from the US following these attacks was immediate and, at first, decisive. Just weeks after the attacks, Operation Enduring Freedom began, and by December 2001, the Taliban government had been forced out. The US presented Pakistan with an ultimatum – famously condensed down to a choice between being "with us or against us" – and the Musharraf regime of Pakistan made the monumental decision of turning away from its Taliban protégés in favour of the coalition [20]. Pakistan allowed its airspace and logistics infrastructure to be used; provided intelligence; and mobilised to seal a border which had never before seen military action. It was rewarded for this by having aid money frozen to it restored, having some of its debt cancelled and being designated as a Major Non-NATO Ally. However, the very pragmatism that motivated this change of stance meant that Pakistan could no longer pursue the policy which it had long advocated.

4.1 From Invasion to Nation-Building

Following the success on the battlefield, the next phase was marked by an even grander project of nation-building. Within the Bonn process, the US and its partners attempted to establish a centralized Afghan state complete with its own constitution, national army, democracy, etc., all facilitated through massive flows of financial and military aid. For almost two decades, the coalition fought an insurgent movement, trying at the same time to build a state which would make its presence redundant. The contradiction

between counter-terrorism on the one hand and liberal nation-building on the other remained unresolved, and the war degenerated into a costly stalemate [4]. In this sense, a special significance is given to Pakistan since the insurgent movement did not recognize the Durand Line, crossing the border freely.

4.2 The Doha Agreement and the Collapse of the Republic

Finally, the last stage of relations between the US and Afghanistan started with attempts at negotiation of exit. In February 2020, the US made an agreement with the Taliban in Doha, according to which Washington would pull its troops out in phases, provided that the Taliban give counter-terrorism assurances – leaving the elected government of Afghanistan completely out of the deal [21]. In addition to reducing American forces dramatically, this agreement established a schedule for their full withdrawal. After announcing the withdrawal in 2021, President Biden caused a catastrophic blow to Afghan morale. Based on the exhaustive study performed by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, the main reason for the fall of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces was the withdrawal of US military personnel and contractors and the consequent reform of Afghan security institutions [22]. A great number of studies have since claimed that the very process of this negotiation, bypassing the elected Afghan government and based on unenforceable assurances, led to inevitable collapse [40], [41]. In August 2021, as the last US forces pulled out, the Afghan government fell apart very quickly, President Ghani fled Afghanistan, and the Taliban returned to Kabul after two decades of being thrown out.

The nature of the withdrawal of the Americans, abrupt, negotiated behind the backs of the Afghan government and carried out amidst scenes of chaos at the Kabul airport, had huge consequences for Pakistan. On one level, it meant that Pakistan had accomplished its much coveted goal: a pro-Pakistan and Pashtun government in Kabul as well as the withdrawal of the American and Indian presence. But as will become apparent in the sections to follow, it turned out to be a bitter pill for Pakistan [6].

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Table 2. The post-9/11 trajectory of US–Afghan relations and its bearing on Pakistan, 2001–2026

Period	Development	Implication for Pakistan
2001	Operation Enduring Freedom; Taliban ousted; Pakistan joins coalition	Reversal of Afghan policy; onset of domestic backlash
2004–08	Insurgency regenerates; militancy spreads into FATA	Emergence of the TTP (2007); tribal belt destabilized
2009–14	US troop surge; drone campaign intensifies	Peak of terrorism in Pakistan; major military operations
Feb 2020	US–Taliban Doha Agreement signed	Signals eventual Taliban ascendancy on Pakistan's border
Aug 2021	US withdrawal; collapse of the Republic; Taliban retake Kabul	Short-term relief followed by TTP resurgence
2022–26	Taliban consolidate; Islamabad–Kabul relations rupture	Cross-border attacks, airstrikes, and open confrontation

Source: compiled by the author [4], [21], [22]; post-2021 developments discussed in Section 7.

Figure 1. US military presence in Afghanistan and terrorism fatalities in Pakistan, 2001–2025

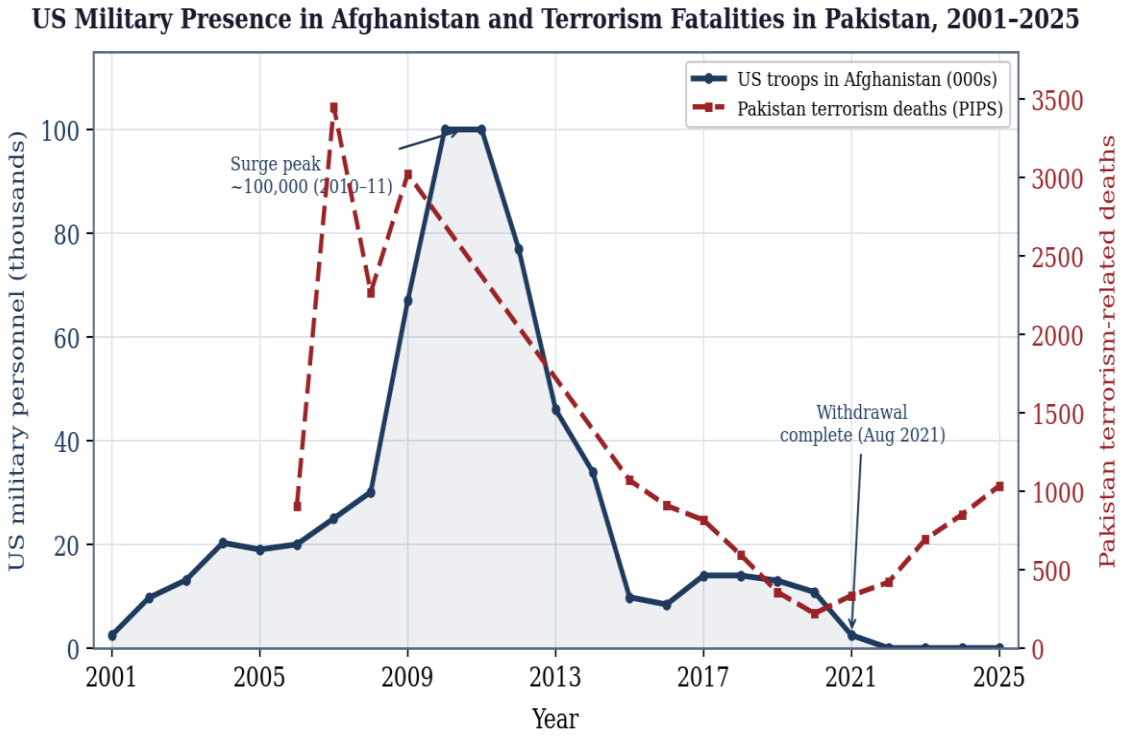


Figure 1. The US troop trajectory (solid line, left axis) rose to a surge peak of roughly 100,000 in 2010–11 before the withdrawal to zero in August 2021; Pakistan's terrorism-related fatalities (dashed line, right axis) peaked during the surge years and resurged after 2021. Data: Brookings Afghanistan Index and CRS troop figures; PIPS annual security reports [12], [22], [23], [37].

5. Domestic Implications for Pakistan

Pakistan experienced these impacts immediately and severely. It can be argued that the choice to align itself with the American alliance, no matter how justified from a strategic standpoint, unleashed a reaction in the country that resulted in turning the country, already suffering from militant activities, into the centre of a terrorist emergency. This paper will discuss in detail the four main ways through which this reaction manifested itself.

5.1 The Rise of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and the Terrorism Emergency

The primary domestic repercussion of the Pakistani government's association with the US has been the rise of an internal insurgency that aims at overthrowing the Pakistani regime. Following the expulsion of the Taliban and other insurgent groups from Afghanistan by military offensives and their movement into the FATA region, the border area has turned into a safe haven for a varied group of militant organizations. In December 2007, this diverse group merged together into the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan organization, which brought together the local interests and the jihadist agenda, thus launching a war against the Islamabad regime [8].

This decade saw levels of violence never witnessed before in Pakistan's history. Suicide bombing, attacks on army and police outposts, mosques, markets, and assassination attempts became daily occurrences. The militants had taken their struggle to the center of Pakistani cities, targeting Islamabad, Lahore, and Karachi, among others, while demonstrating an ability to strike even those places where one would least expect them to. The attack on the Pakistan army headquarters in Rawalpindi in 2009, the siege on the Karachi navy airbase, and, most horrifically, the killing of almost 150 people, mostly children from a school, in the Army Public School in Peshawar in December 2014 all reflected not only the scope of militant activities but also the gravity of the situation [7]. In mid-decade, total casualties from terrorism and the overall conflict had reached 80,000.

5.2 Sectarian Violence

The post-9/11 atmosphere did not generate new sectarian divisions in Pakistan, but it did

accentuate and weaponize existing ones. With arms being proliferated in the country, a segment of the population radicalized and the security situation being permissive, sect-based organizations started to indulge in activities with greater lethality. While groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Sipah-e-Sahaba increased their onslaught on the Shias, the Hazara population in Quetta, the capital of Balochistan, was the victim of several heinous acts that could only be characterized as an ongoing assassination campaign [7]. There were also synergies between the sectarian strife and the overall insurgency as militant organizations shared personnel, funds, and sanctuaries among each other. In other words, there was a multiplication of the rifts within Pakistani society—a society which was already torn apart along ethnic and sectarian lines because of years of violence.

5.3 The Military Response: A Decade of Operations

As a result of its internal existential threat, the Pakistani state embarked on a series of operations that became increasingly massive and resolute. Initially, when the state conducted Operation Al-Mizan in tribal Pakistan and various operations in Swat, they were partial and sometimes inconclusive, indicating the challenging nature of the territory and the state's ambivalence about cutting all its links to the militant proxies. However, as a result of the increasing level of violence, the state had to resort to broader efforts. First, in 2009, the military regained control over the Swat valley through Operation Rah-e-Rast; then Operation Rah-e-Nijat was conducted against South Waziristan; finally, in 2014, after the attacks at Karachi airport and Peshawar school, the military launched Operation Zarb-e-Azb, which was conducted throughout North Waziristan. This involved the relocation of hundreds of thousands of people and destruction of militant structures in tribal areas. In 2017, Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad was launched nationwide across Pakistan [3].

This operation led to a considerable reduction in violence, although not without its costs and being incomplete. There was a significant decrease in the number of terrorist attacks and deaths from 2015 to 2020, and there was a return of state control to territories that belonged de facto to the militants. However, the results came at a great cost both financially and humanely, and, as would be shown later on, these results were reversible. The military response managed to address the problem's symptoms but failed to solve the causes behind the problem.

Table 3. Major Pakistani counter-militancy operations, 2002–2017

Operation	Year(s)	Principal Theatre	Objective / Outcome
Al-Mizan	2002–06	South & North Waziristan	Early, partial clearing of foreign militants
Rah-e-Rast	2009	Swat Valley	Recaptured Swat from the Pakistani Taliban
Rah-e-Nijat	2009–10	South Waziristan	Dislodged TTP core; pushed militants north
Zarb-e-Azb	2014–16	North Waziristan	Comprehensive offensive; dismantled sanctuaries
Radd-ul-Fasaad	2017–	Nationwide	Intelligence-led consolidation of gains

Source: compiled by the author from the operational record and secondary analyses [3], [7].

5.4 The Economic Burden

The economic toll of the war against terrorism on Pakistan was enormous and far-reaching. Apart from the direct cost incurred in terms of military and security operations, the war brought about an indirect cost that was large and significant as well, including outflow of foreign investment, decline in tourism, interference in business, infrastructure damages, and diversion of fiscal resources from development to defence. The successive volumes of the Pakistan Economic Survey made attempts to calculate the losses suffered due to the war on terror, and in the aggregate the cost was estimated at around US$ 126.79 billion—both direct and indirect losses, sustained over a period of about

seventeen years [14]. It should be pointed out here, as many experts note, that the government stopped calculating the amount of the losses after 2017–18, and some of the figures provided by the parliament were just nominal [6].

Such costs should be viewed in light of the total cost of the war. According to the Costs of War project, the U.S. has paid more than $2.3 trillion in military spending on the Afghanistan-Pakistan campaign. It is also reported that casualties in the post-9/11 wars were more than 900,000 people killed directly in those wars and more than ten thousand Pakistani citizens [12], [13]. For Pakistan, such costs not only meant an economic problem but also made it impossible for the government to invest in health, education, and infrastructure. In addition, Pakistan remained financially weak and dependent due to its inability to overcome such economic problems. Economic Losses are discussed in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Dimensions of Pakistan's economic loss from the war on terror

Category	Nature of Loss
Direct security expenditure	Military operations, policing, border management, weapons and equipment
Foreign investment	Flight of capital and collapse of investor confidence amid instability
Trade and industry	Disrupted supply chains, damaged industrial output, higher insurance and risk premiums
Tourism and services	Near-total collapse of a once-significant tourism sector
Infrastructure	Destruction of roads, schools, markets, and public facilities in conflict zones
Human capital	Displacement of millions; loss of skilled labour; interruption of education
Cumulative (official)	Approximately US$126.79 billion recorded in the Pakistan Economic Survey [14]

Source: compiled by the author from the Pakistan Economic Survey and secondary literature [12]–[14].

Figure 2. Pakistan's officially estimated annual economic losses from the war on terror, FY2001–02 to FY2017–18

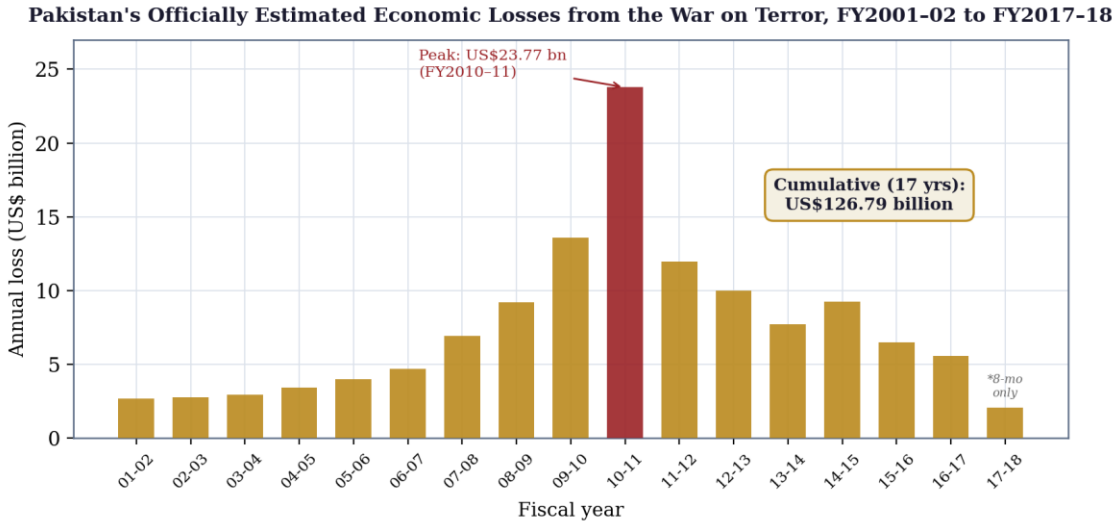


Figure 2. Annual losses recorded in successive editions of the Pakistan Economic Survey, peaking at US$23.77 billion in FY2010–11 and summing to approximately US$126.79 billion over seventeen years. The government discontinued the metric after FY2017–18 (an eight-month partial figure). Data: Pakistan Economic Survey series [14].

5.5 Political Instability and Social Erosion

Apart from these tangible losses of blood and money was another kind of cost – more difficult to quantify, perhaps, but no less significant for all that – which was that of political and social stability. The 'war on terror' contributed further to the distortion of the balance between the civil and military branches of government as, in light of the challenges of the security crisis, the influence of the army increased in national policymaking. It caused friction within the relationship between the central government and the provinces, especially in the case of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, provinces which suffered the brunt of the fighting. It fed into an antagonistic discussion about whether the war was the Pakistani one or whether it was being conducted in America's name. And it exacted a psychological cost from a society which had been subjected to years of fear, displacement, and loss.

Figure 3. Terrorist attacks and fatalities in Pakistan, 2007–2025

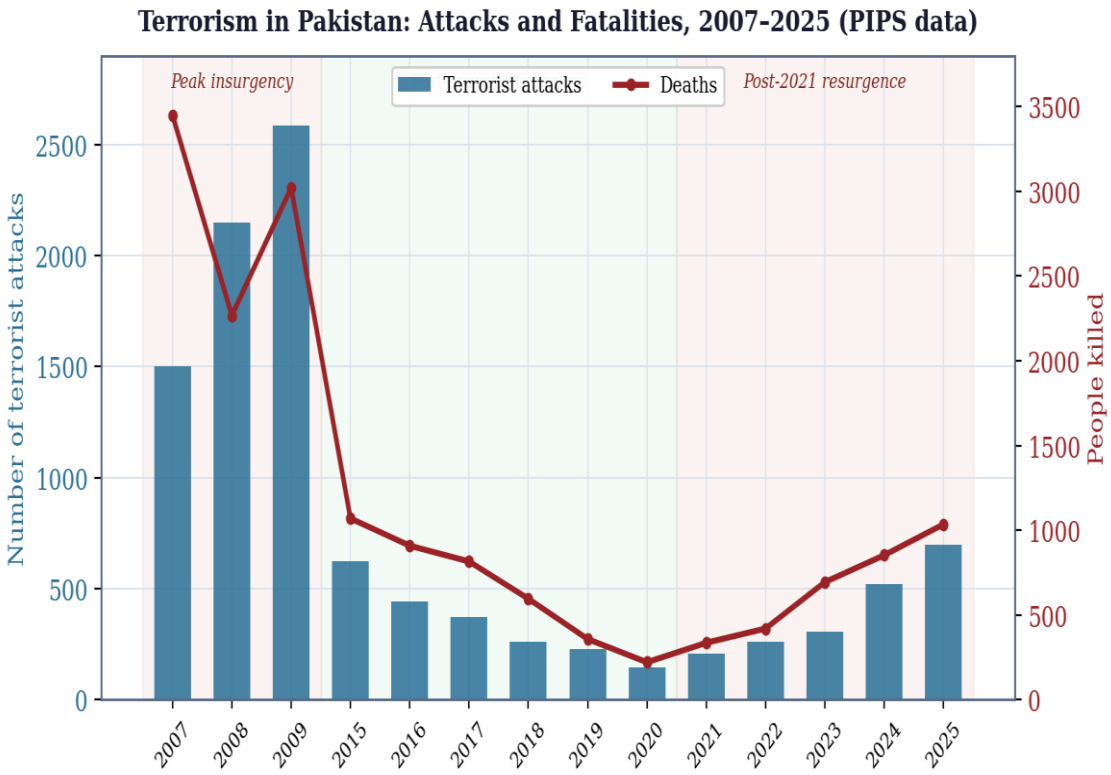


Figure 3. Terrorist attacks (bars, left axis) and people killed (line, right axis) in Pakistan. Violence peaked in 2009 (2,586 attacks; 3,021 deaths), fell to a trough in 2020 (146 attacks; 220 deaths) after Operations Zarb-e-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasaad, and resurged following the 2021 Taliban takeover, reaching 699 attacks and 1,034 deaths in 2025. Data: PIPS annual security reports [23], [37].

6. Regional Implications for Pakistan

While the domestic fallout of the post-9/11 world order may have been instantaneous and direct, the regional fallout was indirect but no less significant. Afghanistan's transformation into America's theatre of operations changed the regional strategic landscape, and Pakistan faced the ramifications of that change mainly because of its rivalry with India. The regional dimensions of the crisis were essentially driven by four key factors: the Indian factor in Afghanistan, insurgency in Balochistan and its external dimension, the age-old disagreement over the Durand Line, and the strategic issues concerning the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

6.1 The India Factor and the Contest for Afghanistan

The worst aspect of the post-9/11 settlement from the point of view of Pakistan is the rising influence of India in Afghanistan. The new

regime established in Kabul, which was backed by the West and had traditionally mistrusted Islamabad, forged very close ties with India. India was a key financial benefactor of the country, providing it with three billion dollars for development and setting up a whole range of consulates and infrastructure projects there along with cultural and educational initiatives [15]. For Islamabad, this was a perfect strategic encirclement: an unfriendly neighbor securing a foothold in the western direction, thus making real the very scenario which "strategic depth" strategy was supposed to ward off. Pakistani security experts were constantly accusing the consulates of India in Afghanistan of conducting intelligence activities against Pakistan and helping in the conduct of anti-Pakistan militancy.

Thus, the contest for domination in Afghanistan was nothing other than a continuation of the larger conflict between Pakistan and India on Afghan territory. Such a development had the effect of converting Afghanistan from the buffer zone that Pakistan wished for into a platform of proxy contestation, whereby events in Kabul were interpreted in terms of how they affected the balance of power vis-à-vis India. The nature of such a zero-sum game goes some way to explaining why there should have been a sense of ambivalence about the Afghan Taliban in Pakistan despite the very real terrorist threat situation that existed: in many quarters of the security establishment, the need to deny Afghanistan to India took precedence over all else.

6.2 The Balochistan Insurgency and Its External Dimension

The convergence of regional and internal aspects of Pakistan's situation was nowhere more apparent than in the case of Balochistan. The province, being the largest in Pakistan in terms of territory, the poorest in virtually all respects, and strategically significant due to its coast and natural resources, has been plagued by successive waves of nationalistic insurgency from the time the state was formed. This insurgency has seen an obvious upsurge following 9/11 as a result of longstanding tensions relating to political exclusion, distribution of resources, and the exploitation of Baloch territories [23].

Pakistan's official position regarding the Balochistan insurrection has always been that it has been funded externally, and in particular, that the Indian Intelligence Agency had been providing assistance to the insurgents in Balochistan from its bases in Afghanistan. It was the arrest of an alleged agent of the Indian Intelligence Agency from Balochistan in 2016 that was used by Islamabad to support its claims, and it remains a recurring theme in Pakistan's strategic rhetoric. New Delhi denies these charges, but despite the lack of any independent confirmation, they have had significant influence on Pakistan's policy formulation process and have served to securitize the province further, thus increasing the linkages in the Pakistani strategic thinking between the Afghan theater and Balochistan insurgency. In more recent times, the Pakistani government has officially branded Baloch insurgent groups as the proxies of their sponsors [23].

6.3 The Durand Line and the Afghan Refusal

The ambiguity surrounding the legal status of the Durand Line has been a continuing cause for tension since the post-9/11 period to date. No Afghan administration, whether it be the Western-backed republic or later the Taliban regime, has officially acknowledged the Durand Line as an international border, and its permeability made possible the movement of insurgents across the border, at the heart of Pakistan's security dilemma [17]. Beginning from 2017, Pakistan embarked on a programme to fence the frontier, and by the mid-2020s, the fencing project was said to be almost completed. However, the initiative met resistance from the Pashtun communities split up by the line and also from the government of Kabul, which saw fencing as an effort to establish a border it has never acknowledged. The concerns of the Pashtuns inhabiting the border region have been expressed politically by groups demanding civil rights and de-securitization of their communities, making the management of the frontier even more complex for Pakistan [38], [39]. Therefore, the Durand Line represents the underlying structural problem in the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan: a frontier that is uncontrollable by either party and not recognized by one, crossing an ethnic homeland shared by both.

6.4 China, CPEC, and the New Strategic Calculus

Lastly, the importance of China as an increasingly important player in Pakistan's strategic future and the potential threat that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the most prominent Chinese initiative within the region, might face due to the instability stemming from the Afghan theater cannot be overlooked. As a groundbreaking project that aims at linking western China with the Arabian Sea through Pakistani land, with the Gwadar Port in Balochistan being its south end, CPEC became the main hope for Pakistan's economic salvation. However, CPEC passes through those very areas where insurgency and militancy are deeply rooted, thus becoming an object of attack by both Baloch and jihadist militants [24].

The security of Chinese citizens and investments in Pakistan has become an issue of serious strategic concern. The murder of Chinese engineers at Dasu hydropower plant, attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and repeated attacks in Karachi have caused strain in the relations between Islamabad and Beijing as well as necessitated for Pakistan to form a special force comprising thousands of individuals to secure CPEC [24]. The Baloch insurgency perceives their operations against China as a means of fighting against what they consider a new form of imperialism, while the jihadists oppose China ideologically. For Pakistan, securing CPEC cannot be separated from the larger problem of stabilizing its western borders, which itself is a product of the post-9/11 era. This is made more complicated by the presence of Afghanistan, where the refuge and weaponry needed by the groups that threaten CPEC can be found.

7. Discussion: The Post-2021 Order and Its Lessons

The American pullout of August 2021 and the re-emergence of the Taliban regime in Kabul provide an opportune juncture at which to analyze the impact of the post-9/11 order on Pakistan and to test the thesis of the article against the latest developments. While the American pullout was considered, at the time, a strategic victory for Pakistan, as it would end the justification for drone strikes and other pressures from the US forces, bring an end to the period of Indian domination of Kabul, and ensure the emergence of a friendly government in Kabul dominated by Pashtuns, within a matter of months it became clear that this interpretation was far from accurate.

7.1 The Resurgence of the TTP

One of the most significant developments of this post-2021 period has been the resurgence of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan. Encouraged by the triumph of their Afghan counterparts, aided by the freedom of their imprisoned leaders and the availability of the weapons abandoned by retreating troops, and protected by the sanctity of Afghan borders, the TTP began mounting a renewed attack on the Pakistani state in an extraordinarily swift manner. It united dozens of fragmented splinter groups into one organization through mergers, creating a more solid enemy [8]. The scale of this threat was borne out by the evidence; studies using information from the United Nations revealed an unprecedented increase in the number of TTP attacks on Pakistan since the Taliban takeover, and by 2023-2024 the group had already been identified as the largest militant group based in Afghanistan [9], [11]. In 2022, there was a ceasefire agreement, but it only lasted for months before the violent activities resumed in full force.

This is evident in the quantitative data, which show a marked increase in the number of terrorist attacks and casualties, with the acts of violence overwhelmingly occurring in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan – the two provinces that border Afghanistan [23], [24]. By 2024 and 2025, the number of attacks per year and casualties had risen to numbers that had not been witnessed in almost a decade, with the majority of deaths being among security forces [23], [24]. This shows that the gains made through Zarb-e-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasaad were actually vulnerable, since the problem of sanctuary, which involved providing a safe haven for terrorists through the unmarked border of Afghanistan, was still unresolved.

7.2 The Rupture in Islamabad–Kabul Relations

The notion that the Taliban government would go after the TTP for Pakistan was based on a misunderstanding of the dynamic between the

two groups. The ties between the Taliban in Afghanistan and the TTP are ideological, personal, and reciprocal; the Taliban of Afghanistan owed their Pakistani brethren favors and were not in a position—or willing—to go after them [9]. As the TTP attacks escalated and Kabul refused to take any action, relations between the two governments became very poor. Pakistan reacted by resorting to coercive actions such as the forced repatriation of Afghan refugees in 2023—by 2025 more than a million people had either gone back voluntarily or been sent back across the border—with the closing down of major border posts like Torkham and Chaman, and—most significantly—by air strikes on suspected militant camps within Afghan territory [25], [26], [43]. By the end of 2025 and early 2026, this rivalry had reached the point of armed clashes between the two sides, with both making claims of suffering heavy losses [3]. This border, which for decades was hoped to provide a safe buffer for Pakistan, had quickly transformed into the country's most dangerous border. Adding to the danger, the emergence of Islamic State Khorasan Province provided another source of destabilization for both nations [44].

7.3 Regional Realignment: China, India, and Iran

This period after 2021 was also marked by the notable readjustment of regional relationship dynamics in the wake of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, which had eroded Pakistan's relative advantage. China took a pragmatic approach towards accommodating the new administration by sending in an ambassador, recognizing the credentials of the Taliban, offering trade privileges, and integrating Afghanistan into its regional connectivity initiatives [16]. While such an initiative is in line with the Pakistani national interest, it also meant that Pakistan was no longer an irreplaceable intermediary for China in the region. Even more remarkable is the course of relations between India and the Taliban. With the fall of the republic and the loss of its strong foothold, India made a calculated attempt to reach out to the Taliban regime, sustaining a technical presence in Kabul and even hosting the Taliban's acting foreign minister in 2025 in an attempt to re-establish its embassy—a scenario that would have been inconceivable just after the regime change [15].

Iran is also part of this regional recalibration, with its dealings with the Taliban regime marred by disputes over the right to use water from the Helmand river, the mistreatment of the Shia Afghan minority population, and skirmishes in the shared borders [35], [42]. In this sense, the situation represents a larger trend within the post-2021 world order, in which the Taliban regime in Afghanistan represents a threat to all of its neighbouring states, not just to Pakistan. The overall approach to dealing with this state has been cautious, wary, and transactional in nature, not marked by much confidence. As far as Pakistan goes, the result of this recalibration has been the loss of its privileged status in relation to the new Afghanistan, which is now much more independent and more courted.

7.4 Strategic Lessons

A number of strategic lessons can be drawn from the analysis. The first lesson is that the concept of "strategic depth" – the attempt to create a compliant Afghan government as a buffer state against India – has failed and become counterproductive in the long run. The government which Pakistan managed to put back in charge of Kabul neither provided the anticipated safety dividend to Islamabad nor kept India out of the region as was originally expected but instead created a refuge for the TTP. The second lesson is that military actions, although effective in the immediate context, will not work as a solution to underlying problems causing militancy in both the tribal belt and in Balochistan; in other words, a political settlement should accompany military actions if any success is to be achieved.

8. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Throughout this essay, there has been a discussion about the evolution of the relationship between Afghanistan and the United States, from the beginnings of the Cold War to the post-9/11 intervention period and the present post-2021 phase, and it has always been asserted that the course of this relationship had a highly influential role on the security of Pakistan in both domestic and regional dimensions. In other words, the evidence presented in this essay—the formation and

resurfacing of the TTP, the increasing rate of sectarian violence, the decade of costly military operations, the enormous economic cost of more than $126.79 billion that has been reported by the Pakistani government itself, the proxy rivalry with India within Afghanistan's territory, the insurgency in Balochistan, the unresolved status of the Durand Line, and the vulnerability of CPEC—provides sufficient support for the claim that Pakistan was the primary external victim of the war being waged right next door.

Nevertheless, there is also an indication that another future can come out of such an analysis. The ability to transform gains into sustainable stability still remains within the capabilities of Pakistan, if the right lessons are learned from its two decades of expensive lessons. The recommendations below, tailored to the current situation, pave the way to this goal.

8.1 Policy Recommendations

First, abandon the effort towards strategic depth and embrace a non-interventionist approach to policy in Afghanistan. The strategy of playing proxies and having an amenable Kabul government has proved counterproductive and has done much more harm to Pakistan than it ever has to any enemy. The approach of ensuring stability and sovereignty in Afghanistan through diplomatic engagement is the only sustainable way of ensuring stability on the western borders of Pakistan.

Second, make a political and developmental solution of the border regions and Balochistan the top priority. It has been shown that military action does not go beyond a certain point; a solution needs to be found that addresses the underlying issues of political and economic disenfranchisement and feelings of injustice. The incorporation of former tribal areas within the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa needs to be facilitated and completed, and political dialogue and development need to be encouraged in Balochistan.

Third, engage diplomatically with the Taliban regime regarding the issue of sanctuary for militants in a considered and sustained manner. Coercion – such as airstrikes, border closings, and large-scale deportations – has aggravated tensions without solving the problem, and has done so at considerable cost to the humanitarian situation. Only a negotiated agreement based on verified mechanisms to preclude sanctuary for the TTP, potentially assisted by regional and international mediation, can bring about a lasting solution.

Fourth, enhance the capacity of the state and society to resist extremism. The ability of Pakistan's security successes to endure is compromised by the endurance of the ideological and social foundations of militancy. A sustained effort must be made to build resilience through education, counter-radicalization programs, madrasa reforms, and the strengthening of civilian institutions.

Fifth, diversify and stabilize the economy in order to minimize the strategic vulnerability that stems from fiscal instability. The war on terrorism institutionalized a model of dependency and underinvestment that restricts Pakistan's room for maneuvering. Diversifying the economy, securing CPEC both politically and militarily, and cutting down dependency on outside help will boost both economic prosperity and strategic autonomy.

Sixth, participate constructively in regional diplomacy and promote cooperation rather than competition regarding Afghanistan. With China, Iran, Russia, and even India re-calibrating their relationship with Kabul, there is an opening for Pakistan to contribute towards the construction of a regional framework where Afghan stability becomes a common interest rather than a winner-takes-all game. Participation in multilateral diplomacy constitutes a way to deal with the Afghan dilemma which is impossible unilaterally.

8.2 Concluding Reflection

More than two decades have passed since the events that led the United States to enter Afghanistan and pushed Pakistan to the forefront, and the problem continues to persist. In a war where the beginning and the end both were decided by events far away from its boundaries, Pakistan has lost so much—lives, wealth, peace, and reputation—that it might never come back from this conflict. While the new order that followed after the departure from the area in 2021 seemed like it was about to bring some rest to the nation, instead, the situation has turned into an even stronger

insurgency and an unfriendly border. The way out for Pakistan is not in continuing with the same approach but rather in moving on from it—the time has come for the country to build up its politics, economy, diplomacy, and state institutions to face all the challenges coming from beyond the Durand Line. Whether Pakistan would take this chance or not will determine not only its fate but largely the fate of the whole region, too.

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