



THE UNIVERSITY OF
BUCKINGHAM

SSEASRC
(South and South East Asia
Security Research Centre)

Centre for Security and Intelligence
Studies, University of Buckingham
(BUCSIS)



Research Note Series
Paper #2, November 2023

**AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN:
FRIENDS OR FOES?**

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Afghanistan and Pakistan: Friends or Foes?

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Abstract

After four decades of relative amity, relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan are deteriorating. From the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 to the departure of the last North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) soldier from the Kabul airport on August 15, 2021, Pakistan fully supported the Afghan Mujahidin, later the Afghan Taliban, both overtly and covertly in the hopes of promoting a pro-Pakistan regime in Kabul which would leave no room for anti-Pakistan elements and secure its western border. However, Pakistan's hopes have been dashed and the relationship has turned from one of friendship to one of foe. Therefore, a severe security threat is emerging between two neighbours in South Asia.

Historical Perspective

Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Pakistan supported anti-Soviet Jihad with the help of its Western allies. Later, during the five-year-long power struggle in Afghanistan among the warlords between 1989 and 1994, Pakistan's support shifted to a newly emerged religious armed group, the Afghan Taliban, intending to impose a pro-Pakistan regime in Afghanistan. Pakistan initially denied it supported the Afghan Taliban, in order to remain onside with the Americans, but intelligence increasingly showed the support from Islamabad was clearly there. This intelligence-providing, logistical and diplomatic support continued up to and beyond the withdrawal of the NATO forces and the Taliban's capture of Kabul in 2021. Evidently, Pakistan used the Afghan Taliban as an asset against Indian influence and anti-Pakistan elements in Afghanistan. Therefore, Pakistani officials firmly believed that the withdrawal of the US and other NATO forces and the Taliban's return to power would make its western borders safer from militant strikes and would contain terrorist actions by Tehrik-e-

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Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other militant groups active in Afghanistan.¹ Pakistan's generals see the Taliban as an essential partner in their competition with India.²

The former Director-General of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), General Hamid Gul (1987-1989), spoke out publicly in a TV interview in 2014 about how Pakistan played a double game by using the aid provided by the US after 9/11 to fund the Afghan Taliban. He said, "*when history is written, it will be stated that the ISI defeated the Soviet Union in Afghanistan with the help of America. Then, there will be another sentence. The ISI, with the help of America, defeated America*".³ After the signing of the Doha Peace Agreement between the US and the Afghan Taliban in February 2020, a former Pakistani Minister for Defence and Minister of Foreign Affairs tweeted a photograph of then US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, and Afghan negotiation team leader, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, during the signing ceremony and added a comment, "*you might have might on your side, but God is with us, Allah-u-Akbar*", (God is greatest).⁴ Therefore, until recently, Pakistan considered the so-called defeat of Western forces and the Afghan Taliban's return to power as a victory of their own.

However, Islamabad's expectations did not materialise after the withdrawal of NATO forces and the return to power of the Afghan Taliban in Kabul in August 2021. The caretaker Prime Minister of Pakistan, Anwar-ul-Haq Kakar, said in a news conference on national media that Pakistan had witnessed a "*60% increase in terror incidents and a 500% rise in suicide bombings since the Afghan Taliban return to power in Kabul, killing nearly 2,300 Pakistanis*". About 15 Afghan nationals were among the suicide bombers, while 64 Afghans were killed fighting Pakistani security forces in 2023. He asserted that Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan was carrying out their campaign of bloodshed from their bases in Afghanistan, and the Afghan government failed to control TTP-led cross-border terrorism.⁵ Therefore, Pakistan's government has decided to deport all undocumented foreigners, among which

¹ Muhammad T. Mahmood. (March, 2023). *The re-emergence of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Pakistan and the role of the Afghan Taliban*. Global Security and Intelligence Note (GSIN). No. 7. Centre for Security and Intelligence Studies (BUCSIS), University of Buckingham. https://www.buckingham.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/GSIN_7FF.pdf (Accessed on November 14, 2023).

² Haqqani, Husain. (July 22, 2021). *Pakistan's Pyrrhic Victory in Afghanistan*. Foreign Affairs. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-07-22/pakistans-pyrrhic-victory-afghanistan> (Accessed on November 14, 2023).

³ See, n. 2, p. 1.

⁴ *US and Afghan Taliban sign historic troop withdrawal deal in Doha*. (February 29, 2020). DAWN News. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1537384> (Accessed on November 14, 2023).

⁵ Gul, Ayaz. (November 8, 2023). *Pakistan to Taliban-Ruled Afghanistan: Choose Bilateral Ties or Support for Militants*. VOA, South and Central Asia. <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-to-taliban-ruled-afghanistan-choose-bilateral-ties-or-support-for-militants-/7346720.html> (Accessed on November 15, 2023).

are approximately 1.7 million Afghan nationals, and Islamabad believes that these illegal migrants are linked to the growing incidences of terrorism and instability in Pakistan.

Afghan Migration

The first wave of migration occurred after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. In the region of six million Afghans emigrated, 3.5 million went to Pakistan, two million to Iran, and the rest fled to other countries. The second wave of migration started after the Soviet withdrawal, and civil war erupted among the warlords; nearly 800,000 Afghan nationals migrated to neighbouring countries, including many who settled in Russia and India. The third wave began after the Afghan Taliban captured Kabul and took control over significant swathes of Afghan territory in 1996 and implemented extremely conservative laws; many fled to Western countries in this instance. The fourth wave of migration started after the fall of the Afghan Taliban regime in 2002 as the result of the “war on terror” launched by the US government and its allies in Afghanistan after the 9/11 terrorist attack by Al-Qaida. Many Afghans, including Taliban leaders, fled to Pakistan and Iran.⁶ While the last and the most recent wave of migration from Afghanistan happened after the withdrawal of the US and NATO forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the subsequent collapse of Ashraf Ghani’s government and takeover by the Afghan Taliban, this time at least 600,000 people migrated to Pakistan.⁷ It is evident that since 1979, approximately seven million people have migrated out of Afghanistan and settled in South and Central Asia, Europe, and the United States. Pakistan has been a top destination for Afghan refugees and has hosted circa four million Afghan nationals for decades.

An Emerging Security Challenge in the Region

Pakistan’s relations with the Afghan Taliban have worsened level because Islamabad believes that the Afghan regime has not done enough to restrain the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its affiliated militant groups based in Afghanistan. At the same time, TTP enjoys complete freedom regarding recruitment, training, movement and militant activities against Pakistan under the shelter of the Afghan Taliban government. Since the Afghan Taliban regained Kabul in August 2021, the regional militant armed groups, such as Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Islamic State- Khorasan (IS-K), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM), Lashkar-e-Islam (LeI), Punjabi Taliban, Mohajideen-

⁶ *Afghan Migration After the Soviet Invasion*. Education, National Geographic.

https://media.nationalgeographic.org/assets/file/afghan_MIG.pdf (Accessed on November 15, 2023).

⁷ Kugelman, Michael. (November 1, 2023). *Why Pakistan Expelling 1.7 Million Afghans*. Foreign Policy, South Asia Brief. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/11/01/pakistan-deports-million-afghans-undocumented-migrants/> (Accessed on November 15, 2023).

e-Albader (MeA), Tehrik-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP), and other splintered militant groups, have re-emerged as a severe threat to the region, posing the greatest threat to Pakistan in particular. Furthermore, Pakistan's security forces and law enforcement agencies claim to have gathered enough evidence proving that Afghan refugees are involved in terrorism in Pakistan. Moreover, evidence suggests that many Afghan nationals are involved in smuggling, particularly of foreign currency smuggling from Pakistan to Afghanistan.⁸ Islamabad believes that mass deportation will make Pakistan safer. Therefore, Pakistan decided to expel 1.7 million illegal and undocumented Afghans. According to official sources, around 200,000 Afghan nationals voluntarily left Pakistan in the last two months before the official deadline on the 1st of November 2023.⁹ After that, the threat was that they would be deported by force.

However, Afghan nationals expelled from Pakistan created a significant tension between isolated Afghanistan and a Pakistan plagued by security and economic crisis. The Afghan Taliban Prime Minister, Mullah Hassan Akhund, said in a video statement, "*the Pakistani rulers, the current interim government and the military generals should adhere to Islamic principles and prioritize the future and must refrain from mistreating Afghan refugees and confiscating their properties*". Meanwhile, the Taliban regime's Defence Minister said, "*as you sow, so shall you reap*".¹⁰ Taliban's Deputy Prime Minister warned Islamabad to "*not force their hands to react over the move*".¹¹ The Afghan Taliban's spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid, rejected Islamabad's allegations; he stated that Afghanistan is not responsible for security issues in Pakistan. The Islamic Emirate does not allow any person or group to use Afghanistan's territory against any country. They [Pakistan] should resolve their internal problems rather than blaming Afghanistan for failing to cope with terrorism.¹² With every passing day, relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan, particularly with the Afghan Taliban, are getting worse and hitting a dead-

⁸ Ahmed, Khurshid. (December 13, 2022). *Dollar Smuggling to Afghanistan continues to exert pressure on Pakistani currency*. Arab News. <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2215626/pakistan> (Accessed on November 16, 2023). Aamir, Adnan. (October 9, 2023). *Pakistan intends to deport 1.7 million Afghans*. Relief Web. <https://reliefweb.int/report/pakistan/pakistan-intends-deport-17-million-afghans> (Accessed on November 16, 2023).

⁹ *Thousands of Afghans leave Pakistan ahead of deportation deadline*. (November 1, 2023). Sky news. <https://news.sky.com/story/thousands-of-afghans-leave-pakistan-ahead-of-deportation-deadline-12997779> (Accessed on November 16, 2023).

¹⁰ Noor Nasar, Khudai. (November 3, 2023). *Taliban warns Pakistan about Afghan expulsion: Reap what you sow*. Nikkei Asia news. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Afghanistan-turmoil/Taliban-warns-Pakistan-about-Afghan-expulsions-Reap-what-you-sow> (Accessed on November 16, 2023).

¹¹ Hussain, Abid. (November 7, 2023). *As Pakistan deports refugees, tense Afghanistan ties come in sharp focus*. ALJAZEERA. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/7/as-pakistan-deports-refugees-tense-afghanistan-ties-come-in-sharp-focus> (Accessed on November 17, 2023).

¹² See, n. 5, p. 2.

end. A significant policy shift is that Pakistan has decided to no longer advocate for the Taliban government on an international level, ending any special privileges.¹³

According to security analyst, Abdul Basit, a research fellow at S Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore, Pakistan is not capable of controlling militant attacks and decided to expel Afghans as a frustrated response aimed at forcing the Afghan Taliban to act against the TTP. He further said Islamabad's talks with Kabul have failed repeatedly since August 2021, and realising they do not have any influence over the Afghan Taliban, they are using the deportation of Afghan nationals as a pressure tactic. An Islamabad-based former army officer and security analyst, Muhammad Zeeshan, said, *"the time has come to deal with Afghanistan firmly, if not strictly. We need to step out of the concept of brotherhood. It is not about that anymore but about the survival of Pakistan and peace and security."*¹⁴

Indeed, the contemporary tension between both countries will have severe adverse effects on relations and negotiations in the future and will lead to an emerging security conflict in the region.



Refugees arrive in trucks at the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Source BBC News.¹⁵

¹³ Siddique, Sabena. (November 14, 2023). *What's behind Pakistan's mass deportation of Afghan refugees?*. *The News Arab*. <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/why-pakistan-mass-deporting-afghan-refugees> (Accessed on November 17, 2023).

¹⁴ Hussain, Abid. (November 7, 2023). *As Pakistan deports refugees, tense Afghanistan ties come in sharp focus*. *ALJAZEERA*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/7/as-pakistan-deports-refugees-tense-afghanistan-ties-come-in-sharp-focus> (Accessed on November 17, 2023).

¹⁵ Azizullah Khan & Kelly Ng. (November 1, 2023). *Afghan refugees fear as Pakistan prepares for deportation*. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-67259108> (Accessed on November 21, 2023).

Conclusion

Two years ago, there was little concern regarding any potential tensions between the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan, which have since drastically deteriorated. Here, the stress is on “Afghan Taliban” because the relations of Pakistan with Afghanistan’s different regimes and different ethnic groups have ebbed and flowed over the course of history. Pakistan had held a long-standing relationship with the Afghan Taliban, and Islamabad’s policy towards Afghanistan was based on supporting and facilitating the implementation of a pro-Pakistan regime in Kabul. From 1979, Pakistan supported the Afghan Mujahideen in the Afghan-Soviet war and later the Afghan Taliban in the “war on terror” with the aim of creating a friendly government in Afghanistan and securing its western border. However, at the time of writing, Pakistan has not succeeded in achieving its objectives and meeting its hopes regarding the Afghan Taliban, and the Afghan regime is reluctant to take adequate measures against TTP and their affiliated groups. Indeed, it is a disastrous failure of Pakistan’s four decades of foreign policy towards its neighbour. In recent weeks, Islamabad’s decision to expel 1.7 million illegal and undocumented Afghan nationals spread a wave of hate against Pakistan. However, Pakistan has hosted almost four million Afghan refugees for four decades, protected Afghanistan’s interests on regional and international platforms and provided diplomatic support. As a result, in the present tension between both countries, the militant organizations in Afghanistan will find an opportunity to justify further terrorist activities and fuel the degradation of the relationship between the two neighbours. This has a significant chance of causing a severe security threat in the region, and there may be prospects of a limited war between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Therefore, Pakistan needs to enhance its military capability to secure its border from any militancy and aggression because it is a matter of the state’s peace, security and survival.