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# The India-Afghanistan-Pakistan Conundrum

Tilak Devasher

## Abstract

*It has been two years since the US withdrew from Afghanistan in an ignominious manner, though in keeping with the declared US objective to exit Afghanistan. This article carries out a recapitulation and an assessment of the security situation since then which can best be described as a conundrum. Forward progress appears to be very slow as the conflicting interest of the three countries impede it and the Taliban's continuation of their non-inclusive government and persistence with a closed society shackles it. The article indicates the limited options in the road ahead in order to make the best out of a bad situation.*

## Introduction

There have been several critical developments in the region during the last two years that vitally impact the triangular India-Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship. The key development, of course, was the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and especially the manner in which it was done. The immediate impact of the withdrawal was that it led directly to the Taliban

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military takeover of Kabul and most of the country. In Pakistan, there was a regime change when the incumbent Prime Minister Imran Khan was removed in April 2022 through a democratic process. His government was replaced by a coalition headed by Shehbaz Sharif. The deposed Imran Khan, however, refused to accept the democratic process and made all kinds of allegations about a US conspiracy being behind his ouster. He wanted to force fresh elections through a demonstration of street power. Unprecedented floods in Pakistan devastated the country, throwing millions out of their homes and forcing them to seek shelter in the open. In contrast, in India, there was political stability with a strong government in power and the economy marching ahead confidently.

## **Afghanistan**

After bolstering the Afghan government for 20 years, the US left quite abruptly in August 2021 though it was obvious that it would right since the February 2020 so-called peace deal with the Taliban. This deal, in effect, handed over the country to the Taliban simply because the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) did not have the requisite training or equipment to deal with the Taliban. Without air support and artillery, they just melted away, as had the various mujahideen factions in 1995-96 when confronted with the Taliban.

The Taliban have consolidated their hold since coming into power in August 2021 but there are major issues of governance, serious restrictions on women like during 1996-2001, a humanitarian crisis and ungoverned spaces where the al Qaeda (AQ), the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and a host of other terrorist organisations are festering and growing in strength. The composition of the Taliban government does not instil confidence that they would be amenable to any kind of inclusive government. Nor are there any indications that they would be willing to compromise on their hard-line ideology. Those who believed that the Taliban had changed were only fooling themselves.<sup>1</sup>

Both the AQ and the ISKP have grown in strength and even doubled their numbers. They could, thus, pose a significant threat beyond Afghanistan according to recent US government estimates.<sup>2</sup> As a recent UN Security Council assessment concluded “terrorist groups enjoy greater freedom in Afghanistan than *at any time in recent history*.”<sup>3</sup> It is assessed that both ISKP and AQ have the intent to conduct external operations and could be able to launch attacks on Western targets sooner rather than later.

The issue of international recognition of the Taliban continues to be a question mark, though a lot of countries are bypassing this by resorting to ‘engagement’ rather than recognition. Russia, China Iran, and Turkey have kept their missions open. There is also the issue of Afghan funds frozen in the US.<sup>4</sup> In a nutshell, the Taliban are holding the Afghans hostage and hoping that Afghan suffering would force the international community to step in to provide humanitarian aid and recognition.

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### **Afghanistan-Pakistan Dynamics**

When the Taliban captured power in Afghanistan in August 2021 there was jubilation in Pakistan. It was perceived as a victory of Pakistan’s decade-long project of clandestine support to the Taliban despite being a ‘major non-NATO ally’ in the US ‘War on Terror’. The then-prime minister,

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Imran Khan, triumphantly proclaimed that the Afghans had broken the shackles of slavery.<sup>5</sup> Religious parties in Pakistan saw it as the victory of jihad with barely concealed assertions of a similar 'revolution' in Pakistan. These parties were inspired by the Taliban to achieve full Islamisation through the implementation of Shariah in Pakistan.<sup>6</sup>

The euphoria was understandable. Pakistan's policy of support for the Taliban was premised on the assessment that an Afghanistan ruled by the Taliban would strengthen Pakistan's security. First, it would ensure that India was booted out of Afghanistan. Second, a grateful Taliban would recognise the British-era Durand Line as the international border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Apart from securing Pakistan's borders, it would also quash the aspirations of the Pashtuns on both sides of the Durand Line for Pashtunistan. Third, the Taliban would help Pakistan against the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) by disarming them and removing their camps from Afghanistan's territory. Part of Pakistan's jubilation was also due to the apparent failure of Indian strategy and policy. The perception was that with the Taliban in Kabul, Indian investment of over US\$ 3 billion since 2001 on development and reconstruction projects would come a cropper. Since Pakistan viewed its relations with Afghanistan partly through the Indian prism, the Taliban victory was seen as a massive boost to its influence in Afghanistan at the cost of India. However, today, almost two years after the Taliban stormed into power, Pakistan's policy is in tatters and none of its objectives have been met. Not surprisingly, the jubilation of 2021 has been replaced with serious security concerns.

While India did leave Kabul after the Taliban came to power, today India is back and at the request of the Taliban. They want India to restart the infrastructure projects it was working on. Above all, Mullah Yakub,

the acting defence minister and son of Mullah Omar, the Taliban founder, offered to send Afghan military officers to train in India.<sup>7</sup> Then, the Taliban declined to recognise the Durand Line. Most likely they will not do so in the future too. They have gone a step further by removing parts of the fence in some areas. Adding salt to injury, they have termed the issue of the Durand Line as not settled and described the fence as dividing a nation.<sup>8</sup> In their earlier rule in the 1990s too, the Taliban had refused to recognise the Durand Line on at least three occasions according to Mullah Zaeef, the then Taliban ambassador in Islamabad.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, the Taliban have openly refused to take any action against the TTP and instead have offered to facilitate talks between the outfit and Pakistan. As Sirajuddin Haqqani, a staunch ally of Pakistan and the acting Interior Minister told a visiting Pakistani Jirga that they did not want to coerce the TTP. “They have waged jihad with us against the Americans and made sacrifices. It would be better that Pakistan and TTP come to terms, after giving each other some concessions.”<sup>10</sup> Though talks were held on at least two separate occasions, accompanied by a ceasefire, they have broken down. The TTP has carried out several devastating attacks in parts of Pakistan, including Balochistan, Punjab and Islamabad the capital, apart from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK).

A new and potentially dangerous development is the assertion of the Taliban government that US drones entered Afghanistan through Pakistan airspace<sup>11</sup> and that Pakistan was receiving millions of dollars in return. The Taliban have maintained that they have evidence, and videos, at their disposal to back their claims of how Pakistan has given the US access to its airspace.<sup>12</sup>

What Pakistan did not factor in its assessment was that the relationship between the Taliban and the TTP was deep. When the US intervened in Afghanistan in 2001 and the Taliban were forced to flee, the tribal elements of the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) provided them refuge. Today, these tribal elements are bunched together as the

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TTP. Under the unwritten code of the Pashtuns known as Pashtunwali, the Taliban have a responsibility to provide TTP protection in Afghanistan. Not to do so would make them '*baigarat*' or without honour in the eyes of other Pashtuns.<sup>13</sup>

The basic demand of the TTP is the establishment of a Shariah-based Islamic regime in Pakistan. However, of late, they have taken to articulating a nationalist line. For one thing, they want the demerger of FATA with KPK and in an interview, Noor Wali Mehsud, the TTP Amir, said that his

group aimed to make the tribal districts of Pakistan (along the Afghan border) independent. This projection of being a Pashtun nationalist group is new and is similar to the Taliban's position of not recognising the Durand Line as an international border.<sup>14</sup>

Pakistan is thus faced with a twin problem on both sides of the Durand Line. While the Taliban have disputed the Durand Line, challenging Pakistan's territorial integrity, the TTP is pursuing a reversal of the merger of the former FATA and KPK. This Pashtun pincer from either side of the Durand Line may lead to strengthening the idea of a larger Pashtun-inhabited area. If not handled imaginatively such an idea could morph into a Pashtun separatist movement with all its attendant consequences.

The leverage that Pakistan thought it could exercise of securing international recognition and economic assistance for the Taliban has had little success. The international community has made it clear that it would not rush to recognise the Taliban unless they changed their behaviour.

The Pakistan narrative that the Taliban had evolved and changed has fallen flat in the face of their refusing to relinquish their hard-line stance on ideology, women's rights and allowing girls into school. Pakistan is now faced with the prospect of having to prop up a cash-starved Afghanistan just when its own economy is struggling. Clearly, Pakistan will have to revisit its decades-long policy regarding Afghanistan and look for a different strategy. Such a strategy could encompass kinetic action against the TTP inside Afghanistan. By doing so Pakistan could very likely get sucked into a war of attrition not just with the Taliban but also other ethnic groups in Afghanistan.

### **India-Afghanistan Dynamics**

India has deep cultural, historical, and civilisational ties with Afghanistan and these longstanding linkages will continue to guide the Indian approach. India has been among Afghanistan's most significant donors<sup>15</sup> over the past twenty years. New Delhi has provided scholarships to Afghan students, offered food and medical assistance, and helped restore Afghanistan's war-ravaged power grid.<sup>16</sup> All this has strengthened India's position in the country and there is across-the-board goodwill towards India in Afghanistan. This is one of the key reasons for the Taliban's outreach to India.

The decision of the Indian government to send 50,000 tonnes of wheat,<sup>17</sup> 13 tonnes of medicines, and 500,000 doses of COVID vaccines as humanitarian assistance<sup>18</sup> provided the first big opening. It was recognised that this expanding humanitarian outreach needed an Indian presence on the ground rather than relying on only multilateral organisations for the distribution of aid. Therefore, outreach to the Taliban became an important policy priority.

An Indian delegation led by a joint secretary in the external affairs ministry went to Kabul in June 2022. During the visit, several Taliban leaders underscored their preference for an Indian diplomatic presence.<sup>19</sup>

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The Taliban possibly recognise that there is no getting away from India's economic, regional, and global clout. For the Taliban, an outreach to India allows it to put in place some sort of hedging strategy to offset its dependence on Pakistan. Quite possibly they also realise that India could be a better or an additional interlocutor than Pakistan. Hence, it appears that they are investing major political capital by reportedly giving assurances of acting

against Pakistan-backed terrorist groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Muhammed.<sup>20</sup>

India is, however, not likely to break away from the international consensus and recognise the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA). Though it has entered a period of engagement by opening a 'technical' office in its embassy, India will remain in a wait-and-watch mode, to see how the rest of the world reacts and responds to the developments inside Afghanistan. India does not have any illusions about what the Taliban are and what they represent or that they would change. This also means that India would be looking very closely at their assertions about the Jaish and the Lashkar. Tactically, Indian moves, however, do signal that New Delhi is not willing to give up its geo-political stakes in Afghanistan or give up on the Afghan people. Overall, the India-Taliban relationship will take time to work itself out. It can be described as a work in progress.

### **India-Pakistan Dynamics**

There have been a couple of positives on the bilateral front. A key one was the reinstatement of the ceasefire on the LoC in February 2021. This, however, did not translate into a process despite Pakistan's assertions



during the March 2021 Islamabad Security dialogue, the aim of which was to showcase Pakistan's desire to change the narrative from 'geopolitical contestation to geo-economic integration'. The key takeaway on Indo-Pak relations was General Bajwa saying that Pakistan was keen to 'bury the past and move forward.'<sup>21</sup> The expectations raised were crushed, however, when Imran Khan, as PM, shot down what Imran Khan as Commerce Minister had approved: the import of sugar and cotton from India. He stated that there could be no trade with India unless the August 5, 2019 changes pertaining to J&K were reversed.<sup>22</sup> There was a lot of perplexity in India as to why this was done because, for a change, it appeared that the army was on board to normalise relations. The major political event that could have favourably impacted bilateral relations was the exit of Imran Khan from the helm in Pakistan. Imran Khan had injected into the bilateral discourse such personal animosity and rancour against Prime Minister Modi that was not only surprising for a head of government, but made the resumption of a political dialogue impossible. His efforts to praise Indian diplomacy in his post-exit speeches have been noted but seen as a desperate attempt to claw back some goodwill in India. No one is, however, buying this.

Bilawal Bhutto, the incumbent Foreign Minister, on a visit to Goa for the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) meeting in May 2023 also made it clear that Pakistan's position remained the same as under Imran Khan, i.e., no dialogue till the constitutional changes of August 5, 2019 in J&K were reversed. This is not going to happen. Hence, the possibility of resumption of dialogue seems remote. Moreover, taking a leaf from Imran Khan, Bilawal Bhutto, too, has resorted to some very unparliamentary words about the Indian prime minister.

Moreover, given the scale of internal problems—political, economic, judicial, security and coping with the after-effects of the devastating floods—inherited by the Shehbaz Sharif government, it is unlikely that any political capital would be expended on Indo-Pak relations.

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On the negative side, since August 2019 there has been evidence of Pakistani drones dropping arms, ammunition, IEDs and drugs in Punjab and J&K.<sup>23</sup> This is a clear indicator that the ISI and the Khalistani terrorists in Pakistan are attempting to revive the insurgency in Punjab, using narco-terrorism in a big way.

There has also been a spurt of Khalistani propaganda activities abroad. Such activities can hardly be conducive to fostering a climate for bilateral dialogue.

Thus, the focus in Indo-Pak relations is likely to be on the management of relations rather than on normalisation till there is clarity about what is happening in Pakistan. In other words, not letting relations deteriorate. In general, the relationship with Pakistan is unpredictable, and a single terror incident can change the discourse.

Here a word about the role the US has played a critical role in the region is in order. Twice in the past, the US has abandoned Afghanistan and left it to Pakistan to deal with. It was Pakistan's two-faced approach over the last two decades that was singly responsible for the US not being able to meet its objectives in Afghanistan. Even if the US national security interests in Afghanistan are now restricted to transnational and regional terrorist activity emanating from the region, if outsourcing Afghanistan to Pakistan is on the cards again, it could be a mistake. It will have all the attendant consequences, like in the past, of funding Pakistan, without Pakistan changing its military mindset of crafting a dependent Afghanistan. It is unlikely to succeed, as it hasn't in the past, because Pakistan's national interest is not to have a strong and inclusive government in Kabul that could challenge the validity of the Durand Line. A weak government, however, would allow for ungoverned spaces

where international and regional terror groups will incubate and multiply, threatening the entire region with terrorism, drugs and refugees.

### **The Road Ahead**

Finally, what does the road ahead look like for the region? Overall, security issues are likely to remain predominant in the India-Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship, at the expense of economic ones. In Afghanistan, the Taliban will further consolidate their regime but will be vulnerable due to the humanitarian suffering of the Afghans, total marginalisation of women, lack of international recognition and the growth in the attacks by the ISKP. Pakistan is unlikely to find the kind of security it was looking for with a Taliban government in Kabul — neither with regard to India nor the Durand Line nor the TTP. In an ideal world, the Pak leaders would re-assess reality and look at India and Afghanistan as trading partners as its own National Security Policy (NSP) claims — prioritising geo-economics instead of geopolitics. This, however, seems unlikely at the moment. India is likely to adopt a cautious wait-and-see approach while at the same time pushing for humanitarian assistance for the Afghan people. Indo-Pak relations are likely to be in limbo till the political and economic situation clarifies and stabilises in Pakistan and Pakistan walks back on its position about the August 5, 2019 events. So, what is the way out? Possibly, there are no short-term solutions or quick fixes. For the medium and longer term the road to stable Af-Pak relations and the region would lie in a democratic and pluralist Pakistan. Such a Pakistan could gradually change the prevalent security mindset of the Pakistani establishment and evolve beyond seeing Pakistan's security purely in military terms. It would be easier for such a democratic Pakistan to treat Afghanistan as a sovereign country and a trading partner instead of a strategic space that Pakistan could manipulate to set up a dependent government and fulfil distant foreign policy and security goals. It would also be easier for such

a government to stop seeking parity with India and look at it as a trading partner.

## Notes

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