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Issue Brief

Pakistan's Afghanistan Problem

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S*ummary*

It will be an overestimation of Pakistan's leverage to believe that Afghanistan, the 'graveyard of empires', one that defeated superpowers, will plainly succumb to Pakistan's whims. Pakistan must learn to engage the Taliban on par, as they are a full-fledged government now, unlike the past when they could be treated as dependent and subordinate.

The bitter Pakistan–Afghanistan standoff has intensified, and negotiations have reached a stalemate. This was after the third round of talks in Istanbul (mediated by Qatar and Turkey) ended in a deadlock.¹ In 2021, when the US-NATO forces withdrew from Afghanistan, Pakistan was exhilarated after a friendly Taliban broke the shackles of slavery, having pushed the international forces out. Pakistan was mainly hopeful that the Taliban in power would tighten the leash on the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Pakistan was also gratified that India’s painstakingly built foothold in Afghanistan looked shaken. However, barely four years down the line, as India and the Taliban enter a strategic embrace on one hand, Pakistan and the Taliban are struggling to arrive at a consensus despite multiple rounds of negotiations.²

The current hostilities broke out after a Pakistani drone attack led to an explosion in Kabul on 9 October. The Taliban in retaliatory strikes killed at least 58 Pakistani soldiers.³ Later, three young Afghan cricketers were killed in a grisly attack in Paktita province in Pakistani strikes.⁴ Pakistan’s defence minister, Khawaja Asif, has held New Delhi responsible for the Islamabad–Taliban rift. He has accused India of supporting anti-Pakistan elements in Kabul. In his remarks after the Turkey round of negotiations failed, Khawaja noted: “The people in Kabul pulling the strings and staging the puppet show are being controlled by Delhi”.⁵

The statement is part of a series of denunciatory remarks by Khawaja Asif against India in recent months. He has blamed New Delhi for wanting to keep Pakistan “engaged”⁶ and “playing dirty”.⁷ Besides, he also seems to believe that India is doing so as it is seething after Operation Sindoor and “compensating for its defeat on their western border through Kabul”.⁸ Asif blamed the Taliban for acting as India’s proxy and New Delhi for sabotaging the Pakistan–Taliban negotiations. He said so while also drawing upon the current crisis as a two-front situation on its eastern and western borders.⁹

¹ [“Pakistan-Afghanistan Peace Talks Break Down in Istanbul Amid Rising Border Tensions”](#), *PBS News*, 8 November 2025.

² [“Afghanistan-Pakistan Peace Talks Collapse, Ceasefire Continues, Taliban Says”](#), *Reuters*, 9 November 2025.

³ Stephen Quillen, [“Pakistan and Afghanistan Announce Ceasefire After Deadly Border Clashes”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 15 October 2025.

⁴ Ian Aikman, [“Afghanistan Pulls Out of Cricket Series After It Says Pakistan Air Strike Killed Local Players”](#), *BBC*, 19 October 2025.

⁵ Abid Hussain, [“Why is Pakistan Making India a Key Figure in Its Dispute with the Taliban?”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 5 November 2025.

⁶ [“India Wants to Keep Pakistan ‘Busy’ on Western and Eastern Fronts: Defence Minister Khawaja Asif”](#), *Dawn*, 1 November 2025.

⁷ Sanstuti Nath, [“‘India Could Play Dirty’: Pakistan’s Controversial Remarks On ‘Two-Front War’”](#), *NDTV*, 17 October 2025.

⁸ [“Afghan Negotiators Backpedalled on Agreement After Contacting Kabul: Khawaja Asif”](#), *Dawn*, 28 October 2025.

⁹ [“‘India Wants to Keep Pakistan Busy on...’: Defence Minister Khawaja Asif’s Fresh Claim”](#), *Hindustan Times*, 2 November 2025.

The New Delhi Factor

Notwithstanding the baselessness of Khawaja Asif’s recent claims, India has remained the most potent and perhaps foremost external determinant of Pakistan’s Afghanistan policy. It was this sentiment that probably fuelled Pakistan’s enthusiasm after the Taliban came to power, deposing all forms and structures of the democratic set-up in Kabul. Pakistan looked supremely content as India’s stakes in Afghanistan—a country it zealously invested in for its reconstruction and development—apparently looked upended.

Today, the rosy equilibrium of 2021 seems disrupted. As a result, owing to mounting tensions with the Taliban government, on one hand, and the India–Taliban rapprochement on the other, it is instead natural that Pakistan would blame India for the mess. Pakistan has had a consistent tendency to blame India for its most minor problems. The current turmoil with the Taliban has caused both embarrassment and anxiety, and Pakistan needs to scapegoat somebody while attempting to overcome this significant challenge.

Pakistan has remained focused on maintaining what it calls a ‘strategic depth’ in Afghanistan. For Pakistan, the goal is to maintain friendly regimes in Kabul and, more importantly, to curtail the influence of “non-friendly states”—particularly India.¹⁰ The application of strategic depth to justify Pakistan’s objectives in Afghanistan has been a consistent plank in its policy towards Afghanistan. For instance, in a 2010 press briefing at the General Headquarters of the Army, its former chief, Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, noted: “A peaceful and friendly Afghanistan can provide Pakistan a strategic depth”.¹¹ Marvin Weinbaum notes that Pakistan has long harboured its preference for a

friendly regime in Afghanistan, expectedly an Islamic one, in Kabul that would enable Pakistan to avoid traditional insecurity or at least neutralise its western tribal borderlands and avoid future Afghan governments with strong links to New Delhi.¹²

Pakistan has done so by “supporting favourites” who were not only unamenable to New Delhi but also opposed to it.¹³

Historically, apart from cultural affinities, Afghanistan's veering towards India has also to do with the former’s animosity with Pakistan. As the British withdrew in 1947,

¹⁰ C. Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War*, Hardcover, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 103.

¹¹ [“Kayani Spells Out Terms for Regional Stability”](#), *Dawn*, 2 February 2010.

¹² Marvin G. Weinbaum, [“Pakistan and Afghanistan: The Strategic Relationship”](#), *Asian Survey*, Vol. 31, No. 6 June 1991, p. 498.

¹³ Riaz Mohammad Khan, *Afghanistan and Pakistan: Conflict, Extremism, and Resistance to Modernity*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2011, p. 167.

Afghanistan became extremely insecure about the new Pakistani state.¹⁴ As the British presence and influence withered, Afghanistan started to assert its demand for a Pashtun homeland that would also encompass areas under Pakistan’s territory.¹⁵ Besides, in the early years after Pakistan’s creation, as the Cold War peaked, the US courted Pakistan while the Soviet Union exercised considerable influence in Afghanistan. India became a logical choice for Kabul to partner with, given its cordial ties with the Soviet Union.

Lastly, Pakistan has unapologetically used the Afghanistan card to seek unending concessions from the US. For this, it has disproportionately blown up the New Delhi angle to create perceptions against India’s strategic objectives and how they are designed to undermine Pakistan’s strategic interests. Unfortunately, there has been some amount of receptivity to Pakistan’s paranoia about India related to Afghanistan in some Western countries. Diversionary tactics such as these have benefitted Pakistan for decades, and its acts of terrorism against India went unacknowledged and unquestioned.

Pakistan’s Illusions

For two decades of the War on Terror, Pakistan tirelessly worked to deepen its so-called strategic depth in Afghanistan, even if that meant surreptitious support to the anti-US forces, including the Taliban. This was mainly because Pakistan seemed to hold certain illusions about how the return of the Taliban was strategically beneficial. For this, Islamabad and its agencies promoted the Taliban’s interests. They aided their empowerment to such an extent that they were able to destroy the long-built democratic structures in Afghanistan within weeks of coming to power.

More conspicuously, this Pakistan did so at the expense of betraying the objectives of its decades-old partner—the US. Pakistan forged its strategy on Afghanistan under the US’s nose and later succeeded in bringing the Taliban to the fore just as the US forces were readying to quit. Before the US withdrawal, it was Pakistan that elevated the Taliban leadership to a level seeking negotiations at par with Washington during the Doha Peace talks. Later, Pakistan received credit for the breakthrough peace deal between the first Trump Administration and the Taliban.¹⁶

Pakistan and the Taliban have an umbilical link, given that the group has been nurtured inside Pakistani madrassas and seminaries, primarily situated in the north of the country. During the Cold War, the group fought the Soviet forces in Afghanistan under Pakistan’s aegis. Pakistan’s machinations helped the group to

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Tara Vassefi, [“The Forgotten History of Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations”](#), *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, 22 February 2012.

¹⁶ [“US Credits Pakistan for Historic Doha Talks”](#), *The Express Tribune*, 14 September 2020.

decimate the pro-Soviet, pro-New Delhi Najibullah government and assume power in 1996.¹⁷ There was a point in time under Taliban 1.0 when Pakistani aid made up for the salaries of the Taliban workers.¹⁸ Besides, Pakistan facilitated the Taliban’s arms purchases from Ukraine and Eastern Europe. Its US\$ 30 million aid in 1997–98 was instrumental in running the Taliban’s air force, airports, infrastructure and electricity.¹⁹ The fuel requirements were met through Saudi Arabia.²⁰ The telephone lines were interconnected, and the Pakistani rupee replaced the devalued Afghan currency.²¹

Pakistan believed that, given the background of its support to the Taliban 1.0 during the War on Terror, it would tighten the noose around the TTP and compromise on issues of territoriality and ethnic tensions. Pakistan was convinced that the Taliban would keep New Delhi at bay, given a history fraught with total lack of engagement, particularly the unsavoury memories of the Kandahar Hijack crisis under Taliban 1.0.²²

Taliban Asserts

In power and in government, the Taliban 2.0 have disrupted the tandem with Pakistan. They have refused to bow to Pakistan’s dictates. It is not as if there was no resistance to Pakistan’s demands in the Taliban 1.0. Notably, the Taliban did not heed to repeated requests from Islamabad to recognise the Durand Line, citing they weren’t a “national government” but an “emergency transition” that “cannot decide on such important issues”. Besides, the Taliban 1.0 also knew when to punch their weight—they demanded that Pakistan implement Islamic law when former President Pervez Musharraf, under US pressure, tried to coax them to comply with “international demands”.²³

Thus, there were enough signs from the past that the Taliban as a group may not be amenable to specific core issues of ideology and uphold their own interests as Afghans. That also entailed that the Taliban are clear on their approach and commitment towards the Pashtun nationalist cause. Though the Pakistani state

¹⁷ Sidhant Sibal, “[EXCLUSIVE: Afghanistan's Heela Najibullah Sees Pakistan's Involvement in the Killing of Her Father](#)”, *DNA*, 18 August 2020.

¹⁸ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (Second edition), Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2010, p. 183.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

²⁰ Riaz Mohammad Khan, *Afghanistan and Pakistan: Conflict, Extremism, and Resistance to Modernity*, no. 13.

²¹ Abubakar Siddique, *The Pashtun Question: The Unresolved Key to the Future of Pakistan and Afghanistan*, Hurst & Company, London, 2014, p. 58.

²² Praveen Swami, “[New Taliban Chief Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour Oversaw IC-814 Ops at Kandahar](#)”, *The Indian Express*, 2 August 2015.

²³ Abubakar Siddique, *The Pashtun Question: The Unresolved Key to the Future of Pakistan and Afghanistan*, no. 21, p. 60.

propped up Pashtun Islamism as a weapon to neutralise Pashtun nationalism, the former turned into a “formidable force” with its “own cross-border realities” and is now difficult to contain given fundamental incongruity with Pakistan’s “strategic vision” and its “state’s security agenda”.²⁴

Meanwhile, in their quest to achieve the desired strategic depth in Afghanistan, Pakistan perhaps overlooked that the Taliban, even in their earlier avatar, were seeking their own strategic depth inside Pakistan. This they did by engaging with a cross-spectrum trade and transport networks, government sector representatives, religious outfits, extremist sectarian groups, secular parties and politicians alike.²⁵

Despite pressure from Islamabad, the Taliban 2.0 has not taken steps against the TTP, a Pashtun-dominant outfit, to an extent that satisfies Pakistan. The Taliban have retorted to Pakistan’s military actions with full force. Today, the Taliban are negotiating from a position of strength—they have not budged on Pakistan’s demands during the ongoing peace negotiations as well. Earlier, Pakistan tried some punitive measures in the form of fencing and the return of the Afghan refugees from inside Pakistan. But that hasn’t led the Taliban to relent. In many ways, the mounting attacks by TTP against Pakistan, and the Taliban’s reticence in restraining the group from doing so, can be seen as also making Pakistan get a taste of its own medicine. Pakistan, for decades, has promoted proxies and terrorists that have targeted the neighbourhood, especially India and Afghanistan.

The Taliban came to power after decades of conflict with international forces. They have demonstrated considerable grit in reaching the echelons of highest power in Afghanistan. While in power, they have also been on a swift learning curve and, only a few years down the line, feel confident enough to pursue traditional Afghan claims regarding Pashtun contiguity and the validity of the Durand Line. Besides, after an interregnum of breakdown, the Taliban have been forthcoming to restore normalcy in bilateral ties with India. Mutual diplomatic dexterity has dramatically repaired India–Taliban relations. This later led to the Taliban's foreign minister’s week-long visit to India, which is being interpreted as a warm, friendly gesture.²⁶

History and Geopolitics

Pakistan has never treated Afghanistan as a neighbour on par. For the most part, it was a backyard that was of specific nuisance value in terms of territorial challenges and ethnic fault lines. Hence, this was a front that Pakistan must manage and manoeuvre to safeguard what it perceives as its strategic interests.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 59.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Dawood Azami and Cherylann Mollan, [“Why Taliban Minister's Visit to India is So Groundbreaking”](#), *BBC*, 10 October 2025.

In the years preceding the US withdrawal, Pakistan, overwhelmed by a heightened preconceived optimism, failed to make a pragmatic assessment of what the Taliban (in power) was capable of delivering. The current confrontation is a sober reminder that independent countries (and those who rule them) will assert their sovereignty and territorial claims. The Taliban are now in government and firmly entrenched, having bided their time after August 2021. Their influence and control within Afghanistan has grown, not waned. Pakistan must learn to engage the Taliban on par, as they are a full-fledged government now, unlike the past when they could be treated as dependent and subordinate.

Labelling it “shackles of slavery”, Pakistan seemed to have missed a step by calling out the international presence in Afghanistan. It conveniently ignored how its status as a frontline partner gave it leverage to engage in double-dealing. The absence of the allied forces has reduced Islamabad’s vantage and instead flared challenges in its trust with reality. In today’s context, it is an overestimation of leverage to believe that the ‘graveyard of empires’—one that defeated superpowers—will succumb to Pakistan’s whims.

Besides, it is worth noting how the Taliban have adapted to new realities. For years, they fought to defeat and overthrow the Soviet Union in Afghanistan with American help. Later, they fought the Americans during the War on Terror—perhaps more fiercely. Today, Russia has become the first country to recognise the Taliban government officially. The Taliban have opened up to the outside world, asking for development and infrastructure aid. They perhaps no longer need Pakistan as a front of representation. Pakistan could be disgruntled at the Taliban’s defiance. However, Pakistan could least complain after what they did to their own decades-old strategic benefactor—the US—flagrantly undercutting American efforts across years of ‘international’ war in Afghanistan.

About the Author



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