

Q2: Pak - Afghan relationships continue to remain tense even after mediation by China. What do you think are the major factors and how could it be improved? (Noa-Mock exam Oct 2025)

PAK- AFGHAN RELATIONS CONTINUE TO REMAIN TENSE EVEN AFTER MEDIATION BY CHINA

INTRODUCTION: Pakistan-Afghanistan relations remains one of the most volatile bilateral ties in South Asia, characterized by historical mistrust, border disputes and security challenges. Despite China's repeated mediation through the trilateral dialogue mechanism, tensions persist. To understand why stabilization eludes both countries - and how China's role could be more effective - we must understand the underlying drivers of friction and propose concrete, realistic measures for improvement. This analysis explores major factors behind strained relationships and offer policy-oriented recommendations for sustainable rapprochement.

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF MISTRUST:

1) **Durand Line Dispute:** The legacy of the Durand

Line continues to haunt bilateral relations. Afghanistan has historically refused to recognize it as an international boundary considering it as colonial imposition. This non-recognition underpins a foundational strategic distrust.

2) **Sovereignty Concerns:** After Pakistan's creation in 1947, Kabul's early diplomatic posture was wary, Afghanistan was among the few states that initially opposed Pakistan's UN membership contributing to a political ^{trust} defect.

3) **Ethnic And Pashtun Ties:** The Pashtun population straddles both sides, which fuels cross-border nationalism. Afghanistan has at times leveraged Pashtun nationalism, raising Pakistani fears of irredentism, while Pakistan has been accused of manipulating Pashtun identity for strategic leverage.

SECURITY AND MILITANCY DYNAMICS:

a) **Cross-Border Terrorism:** Pakistan repeatedly accuses Afghanistan of giving safe haven to Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants who

launch attacks into Pakistani territory. This perpetuates a deep security dilemma.

a) Proxy Accusations: On the flip side, Kabul often charges Islamabad with supporting elements like Haqqani Network, implying that Pakistan meddles in Afghan internal affairs, especially in insurgent politics.

c) Recent Border Skirmishes: In early 2025, the Torkham crossing was closed following mortar and rocket exchanges over the construction of a Pakistani border outpost - a clear demonstration of how security and border management remains flashpoints.

d) Airstrike Controversies: According to Taliban officials, Pakistani airstrikes in Eastern Afghanistan reportedly killed civilians, including women and children. Such incidents exacerbate mutual hostility and undermines confidence building.

BORDER MANAGEMENT AND CONNECTIVITY CHALLENGES

a) Porous Border: Over 2600 km long Durand Line is inherently porous. This facilitates illegal crossings,

smuggling, and militant movement, undermining both states' security.

b) Infrastructure Disputes: Pakistan's effort to build border outposts or fencing are resisted by Kabul, which sees such moves as an attempt to divide Pashtun communities.

c) Trade Disruptions: When borders close, as happened during February - March 2025 skirmishes, trade suffers. For a landlocked Afghanistan dependant on Pakistani transit routes, this has significant economic implications.

REFUGEE CRISIS AND HUMAN RIGHTS PRESSURES

a) Refugee Burden: Pakistan has hosted millions of Afghan refugees for decades. These refugees exert economic, social and security pressure on Pakistan.

b) Forced Repatriations: Islamabad has carried out large-scale deportations. Among those effected are Afghan women's rights activists who fear persecution under the Taliban - a humanitarian

dimension that complicates bilateral trust.

- c) Symbolic Disputes: Such deportations are not merely administrative, they symbolize a breakdown of empathy and could fuel long-term resentment in Afghanistan.

DIVERGENT STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES:

- a) Strategic Depth vs Sovereignty: Historically, some in Pakistan's security establishment have sought "strategic depth" in Afghanistan. Kabul however perceives this as interference.

- b) Geopolitical Competition: External actors magnify tensions. India, for instance, has sought influence in Afghanistan (though this remains contentious). Meanwhile, China champions regional connectivity via BRI/CPEC, seeking stable neighbours.

- c) Power Vacuum After US Withdrawal: The 2021, US exit created instability. Both Pakistan and Afghanistan are adjusting to a new strategic architecture, where China, regional powers, and non-state actors play increasingly prominent roles.

THE ROLE AND LIMIT OF CHINA'S MEDIATION:

- a) Tripartite Dialogue Mechanism: China has revived and institutionalized high level talks between the three countries; Pakistan, Afghanistan and China. In August 2025, the Sixth Tripartite Foreign Ministers Dialogue was held in Kabul.

- b) Joint Counterterrorism Pledge: In the dialogue, Pakistan, Afghanistan and China committed to greater collaboration on terrorism, including law enforcement and security cooperation.

- c) Economic Connectivity: A key deliberable has been the proposed extension of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Kabul.

- d) Diplomatic Normalization: Pakistan and Afghanistan agreed in principle to upgrade relations by exchanging ambassadors - a symbolic but important step.

- e) Challenges: Nevertheless, deep seated mistrust, asymmetry in interest and inconsistent implementation have limited the impacts of China's mediation. China's calls for "indivisible security"

and non-interference signals its attempt to balance conflicting Pakistani and Afghan concerns.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS : ESCALATION AND CEASEFIRE

a) October 2025 Border Clash: In October 2025

Pakistan and Afghanistan engaged in deadly skirmishes along the border. The closure of the border including at Tokhsam, disrupted trade and strained relations further.

b) Mediation by Qatar and Turkey: The ceasefire was brokered by Turkey and Qatar demonstrating that China is not the only mediator in play.

c) Joint Counter Terrorism Consensus: Following the skirmish both sides reaffirmed a commitment to jointly tackle border terrorism, with China and Saudi Arabia praising the truce.

d) Extension Of the Trilateral Mechanism: The role of China remains central but these developments show that broader multilateral support is also critical.

KEY CONSTRAINTS TO RECONCILIATION:

a) Lack Of Trust In Implementation: Agreements on paper like CPEC extension or ambassador exchange are promising, but lack a follow-through and verification mechanisms remain problematic.

b) Asymmetric Incentives: Pakistan's security concerns are immediate and existential; Afghanistan's priority may lie more in economic reconstruction and internal consolidation, making alignment difficult.

c) Proxy Dynamics: Both countries still suspect one another of fostering proxy actors. Without credible mechanism to monitor and reduce proxy behavior, trust will remain fragile.

d) Sovereignty vs Cooperation Tensions: While trilateral dialogue emphasizes sovereignty, practical cooperation (eg border infrastructure) inherently touches on sensitive territorial issue.

WAYS FORWARD : POLICY RECOMMENDATION AND HOW RELATIONS COULD IMPROVE:

1) STRENGTHENING SECURITY COOPERATIONS

a) Joint Border Security Commission (JBSC):

Establish a high level body (with Chinese facilitation) mandated to oversee border posts, joint patrols and intelligence sharing.

b) Confidence Building Military Measures: Agree on no-first-strike pledges for border outpost, demilitarized "buffer zones", and hotlines for deescalation.

c) Counter Terrorism Task Force: Create a trilateral law enforcement task force, supported by China, to trace funding, recruitment, and movement of TTP, Haqqani Network and other groups.

2) ECONOMIC AND CONNECTIVITY BOOST:

a) Extend CPEC to Afghanistan: Operationalize the agreement to expand CPEC to Kabul, focusing first to transport corridors, power lines and logistic hubs.

b) Transit Trade Facilitation: Simplify custom regimes, reduce non-tariff barriers, and ensure Torkham and other border crossings remain open under

stable conditions.

c) Regional Energy Projects: Promote trilateral or quadrilateral pipelines or power projects (eg CASA-1000, TAPI revival under Chinese and regional finances).

3) DIPLOMATIC NORMALIZATION AND TRUST BUILDING:

a) Full Ambassadorial Exchange: Fast track the exchange of ambassadors to institutionalize diplomatic relations and improve bilateral dialogue.

b) People-to-People Initiatives: Expand scholarships, cultural exchange and visa facilitations, particularly for students, women group and youth.

c) Track-II Dialogue: Encourage academic, religious and civil society dialogues (with support from China) to build grassroots trust and reduce propaganda.

4) HUMANITARIAN COOPERATION:

a) Refugee Management Framework: Design a trilateral refugee policy (Pakistan - Afghanistan - China) that ensure humane treatment,

repatriation options, and third country resettlement for vulnerable groups (eg women's right activist)

b) Human Right Safeguards: Create a joint monitoring mechanism to ensure deportations respect international norms, with Chinese and possibly third party observers.

c) Development Aid for Repatriation: China can help fund infrastructure and economic projects in Afghanistan to absorb repatriated refugees and reduce push factors.

5) INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND REGIONAL INTEGRATION:

a) Use Multilateral Platforms: Leverage regional bodies such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) or Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) for border systemic cooperations.

b) Third Party Mediation Mechanism: While China is central, involve other impartial regional actors (eg. Turkey and Qatar) in a permanent mediation forum.

RISKS AND CHALLENGES TO THE PROPOSED WAY FORWARD:

a) Implementation Gap: Even if accords are signed, weak institutions or lack of capacity in Afghanistan may delay delivery.

b) Spoilers: Non-state actors (TTP, IS-KP, Nacro-traffickers) may try to sabotage peace and cooperation.

c) External Interference: Other powers (eg. India, US, Gulf states) could exploit divisions.

d) Sovereignty Sensitivities: Pakistan or Afghanistan may back track on joint mechanisms if they feel their core interests are threatened.

e) Sustainability: Without long term funding and political buy-in, economic projects like CPEC extensions could falter.

CONCLUSION: In sum, while mediation by China via the tribals dialogue mechanism has brought some momentum, deep rooted mistrust between Pakistan and

Afghanistan continues to fuel their ^{strained} relationship.

Historical grievances, border security issues, the refugee crisis, and asymmetric strategic goals all contribute to persistent friction. However, with political will, China and potentially other regional actors - can help broker long term cooperation through a multilayered strategy that combines security architecture, economic connectivity, diplomatic normalization, and humanitarian framework. A sustained, inclusive and institutionalized trilateral effort offers the best path towards converting tensions into trust and conflict into constructive partnership, which is vital not just for Pakistan and Afghanistan, but for the broader stability of the region.