

PAK-AFGHAN RELATIONS:

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND EVOLUTION

Durand Line and Partition (1893–1947): The Durand Line was drawn in 1893 by British India and is now Pakistan's 2,670 km western border. Afghanistan has never formally accepted it. When Pakistan was created in 1947, Kabul rejected the border and claimed "Pashtunistan". Afghanistan even abstained on Pakistan's UN membership vote (the only country to do so) in protest.

Cold War and Soviet Invasion: During the 1980s Soviet–Afghan war, Pakistan (as a U.S. ally) hosted millions of Afghan refugees and trained mujahideen fighters. This forged deep ties but also sowed seeds of militancy that later affected Pakistan's security.

Taliban Era (1996–2001): In 1996 the Taliban took Kabul and declared the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan". Pakistan was one of only three countries (with Saudi Arabia and UAE) to de facto recognise the Taliban regime. Pakistan maintained close ties with Kabul's Taliban rulers and supported their control of Afghan territory.

Post-2001 (U.S. Invasion and Afghan Republic): After 9/11, the U.S. invaded Afghanistan and toppled the Taliban. Pakistan quickly joined the U.S.-led War on Terror, launching operations in its northwest to root out al-Qaeda and allied militants. Karachi and Peshawar remained hubs for diplomatic engagement with the new Afghan government, but mistrust grew as Afghanistan accused Pakistan of sheltering Taliban remnants. Pakistan in turn blamed India for interference and some insurgent attacks.

Taliban Comeback (2021): In August 2021 U.S. forces withdrew and the Taliban retook Kabul. Pakistan publicly welcomed stability in Afghanistan but stopped short of formal recognition. Pakistan's leaders (e.g. PM Imran Khan) hailed the Taliban's return, hoping to leverage historical links to rein in militancy. Since then Islamabad has pivoted to pragmatic engagement: Pakistani envoys meet Taliban officials (often with Chinese facilitation) and call for an "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned" peace, even as security ties are strained.

SECURITY AND MILITARY ISSUES:

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP): The TTP (Pakistani Taliban) has found safe havens in Afghanistan's border regions. After 2021 its attacks inside Pakistan surged. For example, on 21 Dec 2024 TTP gunmen attacked a Pakistani post at the border, killing at least 16 soldiers. Pakistan fiercely condemned Kabul for "harbouring" the TTP.

Pakistan's Cross-Border Actions: In response to such attacks, Pakistan launched military strikes across the border. In late December 2024 Pakistani jets bombed TTP hideouts in Afghanistan's Paktia/Paktika provinces. Kabul's Taliban government protested that dozens of

civilians (including women and children) were killed and promised retaliation for violations of Afghan sovereignty. This tit-for-tat accentuates mistrust.

Afghan Taliban and Militancy: Officially, the Taliban deny supporting the TTP; they call the TTP “guests” but insist they do not coordinate attacks on Pakistan. In practice, analysts note the Afghan Taliban have been reluctant to crack down hard on the TTP or ISIS-K in their territory. Pakistan accuses the Taliban of turning a blind eye to Pakistani insurgents (and even Baloch separatists) operating from Afghan soil.

Domestic Militancy Spillover: Pakistan’s own military offensives (e.g. 2014’s Zarb-e-Azb) pushed many militants into Afghanistan. Pakistan has also faced attacks by Afghanistan-origin groups. Islamabad alleges that some Indian-backed militants use Afghan territory against Pakistan (claims which India denies). Overall, militant violence is a top security concern in bilateral ties, and Pakistan has warned the Taliban it will “not advocate” the Afghan regime internationally unless militancy is curbed.

POLITICAL AND DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

Recognition and Representation: No country has formally recognised the Taliban government. However, Pakistan has upgraded its engagement. In May 2025 Pakistan announced it will appoint an ambassador to Kabul – the first since 2021. (Previously Pakistan and Afghanistan each had only a chargé d’affaires.) Islamabad says this step “will further contribute towards enhanced engagement”. Likewise, China hosted informal talks between Pakistani diplomats and Afghan Taliban leaders, after which both sides agreed to “upgrade their diplomatic ties”.

Bilateral Diplomacy: Pakistani and Afghan officials meet on security, trade and border issues. Pakistan insists on dialogue rather than cutting off contact. Islamabad hosted Taliban envoys in 2022 (as OIC guests) and regularly sends special envoys. In turn, the Taliban maintain a liaison office in Islamabad (headed by a “charge d’affaires”). Summits like the Heart of Asia/Istanbul Process included Pakistan and (pre-2021) Afghanistan; after 2021 the platform is suspended, but Pakistan calls for Afghanistan’s inclusion in forums like the OIC and ECO.

Tense Exchanges: At times rhetoric has been harsh. In Nov 2023 Pakistan’s interim PM Kakar publicly accused the Taliban of “enabling” the TTP and warned Islamabad would not “advocate the Afghan Taliban’s interests” internationally unless they acted on terrorism. Taliban spokesmen retorted that Afghan soil is not a base for anti-Pak forces. Despite this, both sides keep channels open. Pakistani Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar’s 2025 visit to Kabul

was billed as improving relations, and Islamabad says it remains “confident” that dialogue will yield results.

Foreign Relations Context: Pakistan’s Afghanistan policy is also affected by India and China. Islamabad sees Afghan diplomacy partly through an India lens: it frequently alleges (without public evidence) that India supports anti-Pak militant factions via Kabul. Conversely, Pakistan and China present a united front: Beijing has engaged with the Taliban while hosting Pakistan as a mediator. Russia (sharing Afghanistan’s northern border) has quietly built ties with Kabul (even formally recognising the Taliban in July 2025) – but Pakistan remains an important interlocutor for Moscow on Afghan issues. Meanwhile, the U.S. maintains a consulate in Kandahar and will coordinate on counter-terrorism and refugees, though direct U.S. influence is limited post-withdrawal.

REFUGEE AND HUMANITARIAN ISSUES

Numbers and Status: Pakistan hosts one of the world’s largest protracted Afghan refugee populations. As of end-2024, over 2.8 million Afghans resided in Pakistan. About 1.35 million are “registered refugees” under UNHCR’s Protection (PoR) scheme, many having fled Soviet invasion or the Taliban era. In addition, hundreds of thousands entered since 2021 during the Taliban takeover. UNHCR reports there are roughly 1.4 million PoR cardholders in Pakistan (mostly Pashtun and Hazara families). Pakistan does not recognize refugees under the 1951 UN Convention, but it has historically allowed Afghan refugees freedom of movement and access to some services (schools, jobs) in a de facto “temporary guest” arrangement.

Legal Framework: Pakistan has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention or 1967 Protocol. Instead, Afghan arrivals are technically “foreigners” under Pakistan’s 1946 Foreigners Act. Since 2007, registered Afghans are issued biometric PoR cards by UNHCR, giving them legal stay and rights to work and travel. In 2020, Pakistan also introduced the Afghan Citizenship Card (ACC) for recent migrants. Nonetheless, protection is tenuous: renewal of documents is needed periodically, and Pakistan can repatriate undocumented Afghans at will.

Repatriation and Pressures: Since Taliban’s return, Pakistan has accelerated repatriation drives. In Oct 2023 Islamabad unveiled an “Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan” requiring Afghans to regularize or exit. By mid-2025 over 1.08 million Afghans have been forcibly returned to Afghanistan under this policy. UNHCR data indicate that about 639,000 Afghans left Pakistan between Sept 2023 and mid-2024 amid these campaigns. The Pakistani government has extended the validity of some registrations – for example, in July 2024 it

announced a one-year extension to June 2025 for 1.45 million registered PoR cardholders – but tens of thousands of others remain undocumented and at risk of deportation.

Humanitarian Concerns: Aid agencies warn that forced returns violate international norms. Amnesty International urges Pakistan to respect the non-refoulement principle, noting that as a party to human-rights treaties “the principle of non-refoulement applies to all countries”. Aid groups also point out that many refugees left due to insecurity and have no homes or jobs to go back to. Inside Pakistan, refugee communities face hardships (poverty, lack of land rights, restricted movement when clashes happen). Health and education services in refugee camps (e.g. Kacha Ghari, Jalozai near Peshawar) have been scaling down as people depart. Islamabad says its moves are lawful (Afghan returns are “voluntary” or due to overstaying), but the mass outflows since late 2023 remain a controversial issue in bilateral ties.

TRADE AND ECONOMIC TIES

Bilateral Trade Volume: Economic ties are growing but remain below potential. According to Afghan Commerce Ministry data, trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan reached roughly \$1.0 billion in the first half of 2025. In that period Kabul exported about \$277 million worth of goods (mostly cotton, coal, marble and dry fruits), while Pakistan exported \$712 million (industrial and food products). This reflects an imbalance: Pakistani goods make up about 70% of total bilateral trade. By comparison, peak trade a decade ago was over \$3 billion annually; analysts say political and security restrictions have since held volumes down.

Transit Trade: Afghanistan is landlocked and relies heavily on Pakistan for imports and exports. The Afghan Transit Trade (ATT) scheme lets Afghan goods move through Pakistani ports (Karachi/Gwadar). Afghan media report this transit trade collapsed from about \$7.1 billion in 2022–23 to only \$2.89 billion in 2023–24 (a 59% drop), largely due to Pakistan’s stricter anti-smuggling measures. In early 2025 it plunged further: by Feb 2025 the first eight months of FY2024–25 saw ATT fall 66% year-on-year (from \$2.24B to \$754M). This hurts Afghanistan’s economy and Pakistani transporters alike. Traders on both sides argue that cracking down on illicit trade should not hamper legitimate commerce.

Trade Barriers and Agreements: Tariffs and closures have been thorny. Pakistan has imposed high duties and bans on some Afghan imports (like fruits) during political crises, prompting Afghan complaints. Conversely, Afghan authorities have at times restricted Pakistani goods. In July 2025 Pakistan’s cabinet approved an “early-harvest” tariff-cut deal: it eliminated the 5% duty on Afghan tomatoes and sharply cut taxes on grapes, apples and pomegranates. In return Afghanistan agreed to cut duties on key Pakistani exports (e.g.

lowering potato and banana tariffs). Such measures are meant to bolster cross-border trade and ease consumer prices, signaling goodwill.

Border Closures: Frequent security-related closures disrupt trade flows. For example, the Torkham crossing (the main Kabul–Peshawar highway) was shut in early 2025 after a border clash. Trucks piled up for weeks. Islamabad estimates that trade with Afghanistan was over \$1.6 billion in 2024, and local authorities warned the temporary closure cost tens of millions of dollars in lost commerce. Reopening often requires diplomatic or tribal mediations (jirgas). Observers note that lasting growth will need separating commerce from politics: as one Afghan official put it, “we must separate trade from politics, security concerns, and the TTP”.

BORDER MANAGEMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Trucks queue at the Torkham border crossing, illustrating the heavy trade flow between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Pakistan has invested in formal border infrastructure. Major crossings – Torkham (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and Chaman/Spin Boldak (Balochistan) – have customs, immigration and modern gates. In 2017 Pakistan began erecting a security fence along much of the Durand Line; by 2024 about 85% of the border was fenced. Checkposts like Angoor Ada and Badini are operational, and Pakistani checkpoints scan all traffic. On average about 10,000 people cross Torkham daily (often on foot), including laborers, traders and patients seeking medical care.

Disputes and Closures: Small incidents can spark major shutdowns. In March 2025, for example, a disagreement over renovation of border posts led Afghan forces to fire on Pakistani check-tations. Pakistan responded with fire; the Torkham crossing closed on 21 Feb 2025. At least \$72 million of trade and humanitarian cargo (food aid for Afghanistan) were delayed. After lengthy tribal jirga talks and mediation, the border was reopened for goods on 19 March 2025. Such episodes underscore the need for clear protocols: both sides agree in theory to notify each other of any new border works, but miscommunication has periodically led to standoffs.

Customs and Visas: Pakistan has tightened entry rules. Since late 2023, even registered Afghans must hold valid PoR or Citizenship Cards. Travel permits are required beyond the immediate border zones. All other Afghans (and foreigners) need Pakistani visas to cross, a shift from earlier more lenient policies. These measures aim to control illegal crossings and smuggling. Infrastructure projects (like roadway improvements on the Torkham–Jalalabad highway and proposed Peshawar–Jalalabad rail link) are touted as future enhancers of connectivity, but full implementation depends on sustained security.

REGIONAL AND GLOBAL GEOPOLITICS

India: Pakistan views Afghanistan as a frontline in its rivalry with India. Islamabad alleges that New Delhi seeks influence in Kabul through aid and covert channels. (India has indeed funded Afghan development and maintained consulates, but denies interference in Pakistan.) Pakistan has repeatedly charged India with supporting anti-Pakistan militants from Afghan soil. The two nuclear neighbours also held border exchanges in late 2023 that briefly spilled into Afghan regions. Overall, Pak-Afghan ties cannot be fully understood without the India factor, and Pakistan watches any sign of an Indian role in Afghan security with alarm.

China: Beijing is Pakistan's closest ally and has deepened ties with Kabul. China sees Afghanistan as strategically important (mineral wealth, entry to Central Asia) and hosted Taliban envoys. Both Pakistan and Taliban welcome China as a broker. China is eager for an extension of CPEC through Afghanistan to Central Asia, and has offered loans and projects. Islamabad has coordinated with Beijing to nudge the Taliban on women's rights and anti-drug policies, though China's main insistence is on countering separatist extremism (e.g. of Uighur militants).

United States: The U.S. pulled out combat forces in 2021 but still retains interests in the region. Pakistan was historically a U.S. ally in Afghanistan; today Washington expects Islamabad to curb terrorists. The two governments consult on refugee flows and terrorism. However, ties have cooled: Pakistan's espionage charges and the Taliban's hostility to U.S. interests mean cooperation is limited. The U.S. prefers a multilateral approach (e.g. via the UN or quadrilateral talks including China and Afghanistan) to address terrorism threats.

Other Players: Central Asian republics (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, etc.) seek Afghan trade access; Pakistan has advocated trans-Afghan road and rail links to these neighbours. Iran maintains influence in western Afghanistan (Herat) and has offered transit routes (Chabahar port) that compete with Pakistan's. Gulf states (especially Qatar and UAE) are engaged with the Taliban diplomatically; Pakistan works closely with them on economic aid. Russia and Iran formally recognized the Taliban in 2025, and Pakistan – which enjoys good relations with those capitals – expects that to help legitimize Afghanistan. Pakistan's main goal in this geopolitics is a stable, moderate Kabul that does not threaten Pakistani security or allow hostile proxies.

SOCIO-CULTURAL AND PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE TIES

Ethnic and Tribal Links: Pakistan and Afghanistan share deep social bonds. Pashtun tribes straddle the porous Durand Line, with kinship ties, shared customs (Pashtunwali), and intermarriage. Even beyond Pashtuns, many Hazara, Tajik and other groups have communities on both sides. As one analyst put it, “Pashtuns, Hazaras and other ethnic groups straddle both sides of the Durand Line, reinforcing the reality that these are not just neighbouring states, but socially and historically intertwined societies”. Historically, before strict border controls, families easily moved for trade, weddings and pilgrimages.

Refugee Integration: Decades of refugee influx have created a significant Afghan-origin community in Pakistan. Millions of Afghans grew up or were born in Pakistan, attending its schools and speaking Urdu or Punjabi alongside Pashto/Dari. Many now are small-business owners, laborers, doctors or even government officials in Pakistan. For example, in education: over 100,000 Afghan students graduated from Pakistani universities under scholarship programs. These people-to-people ties give Pakistan social stakes in Afghanistan’s future.

Cultural Exchange: Urdu-language Afghan TV dramas and Pakistani media are popular among Afghans; likewise, Afghan poetry and Pashto music are enjoyed across the border. Religious and cultural sites (like Sufi shrines and mosques) draw worshippers from both countries. Cross-border trade has fostered cultural mingling – Afghan dry fruits and carpets at Pakistani markets, Pakistani textiles and electronics in Afghan bazaars. Even sport (cricket) has fans on both sides, though no formal matches occur.

Strains on Social Fabric: Recent policies have strained these ties. Pakistan’s border fence and visa regime have separated some communities. Refugee returns have split families: some Afghans deported from Peshawar find relatives remaining. Analysts warn the fence and migration crises could make “tens of millions of Pashtuns” feel divided, eroding shared identity. Nevertheless, the prevailing sentiment is that Pakistan and Afghanistan are linked by history and kinship. As one commentator noted, “Pakistan and Afghanistan are more than neighbours. They are linked by history, kinship and shared trials”. This sense of shared destiny is often cited as a reason both sides should cooperate rather than conflict.

CURRENT CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS (POST-2021)

Tense Security Situation: The post-2021 era has seen both cooperation and confrontation. Cross-border shootings and missile strikes (late 2024 events) underline how quickly incidents can escalate. Pakistan remains fixated on terrorism: recent leadership has made cracking the TTP a precondition for improved ties. Taliban leaders, for their part, face pressures at home and internationally (e.g. over women’s rights) that complicate their

response to Pakistan's concerns. Any uptick in Islamist militancy in Pakistan, such as a brazen border attack, tends to strain relations sharply.

Economic and Humanitarian Woes: Afghanistan's economy is under severe strain. Sanctions, frozen assets and reduced foreign aid have led to unemployment and food insecurity. This hampers bilateral trade – a poor Afghan market means fewer imports. Pakistan hopes regional development (through CPEC corridors or Central Asian trade) can revive Afghan growth, but so far both sides see slow progress. On the humanitarian side, many Afghans who repatriated or been deported lack jobs or homes in Afghanistan. Pakistan must manage the balance between encouraging returns and preventing human suffering at the border.

Water and Environment: Shared rivers (Kabul River, Helmand, etc.) are contentious. Pakistan has water treaties (like Kabul River Agreement 2022) but expects Afghanistan to honor them. Both countries were hit by the 2022 floods; Islamabad urges Kabul to improve flood-warning cooperation. Climate change and natural disasters remain joint challenges.

Regional Integration as Opportunity: Many analysts argue that peace in Pakistan is tied to integration of Afghanistan. A stable Afghanistan open to trade and transit (TAPI pipeline, electricity grids, rail links) would be economically beneficial. Pakistan has lobbied for Afghanistan's inclusion in projects like the CASA-1000 power line and TAPI gas pipeline. The Taliban government says it wants development, and Pakistan advocates international investment in Afghanistan's mining and infrastructure sectors. If successfully implemented, such projects could strengthen ties and reduce Pakistan's security burden. As one expert remarked, only an Afghanistan "brought into the regional fold – through trade corridors, energy transit lines or counterterrorism coordination" can ensure lasting peace in South and Central Asia.

Outlook: Relations remain fragile. Mutual distrust runs high, but both capitals recognize the cost of a breakdown. Pakistani officials publicly emphasise Pakistan's desire for a friendly and secure Afghanistan. Taliban leaders, aware of their economic dependency, have sought Pakistan's support (for example in getting IMF or aid funds). The coming years will test whether pragmatism prevails: can security dialogues, border agreements and trade initiatives outpace political suspicions? Current indicators (rising trade volumes, planned tariff cuts) are cautiously positive, yet every major militant incident or refugee controversy risks backsliding.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND WAY FORWARD

Sustain Dialogue: Both sides should keep communication channels open at all levels. The recent upgrade to ambassadorial representation should be followed by regular political and security talks. Confidence-building (joint commissions, military hotlines) can defuse crises early.

Separate Trade from Politics: As one Afghan trade official urged, “we must separate trade from politics, security concerns, and the TTP”. Pakistan and Afghanistan should empower joint trade facilitation bodies, ease non-essential tariffs, and ensure border crossings stay open for commerce even during diplomatic tensions. Implementing the July 2025 tariff reductions fully can be a model. Pakistan should also simplify transit procedures for Afghan shipments to CARs, reviving the Afghan Transit Trade that the Afghan economy needs.

Collaborative Security: Islamabad and Kabul should cooperate on counterterrorism with mutual respect for sovereignty. Pakistan can share credible intelligence on militants hiding along the border, while the Taliban can work (even unpublicly) to disarm TTP cells or prevent new fighters from crossing. Joint border patrols or UN monitoring (as some experts suggest) could be considered to build trust. The principle of non-refoulement must guide refugee policy: Pakistan should frame repatriation as voluntary and humane, coordinating with UNHCR.

Humanitarian Support: Pakistan should continue humanitarian assistance (food, medical care) to Afghan civilians, especially during crises, regardless of political issues. Involving NGOs in aid to border communities can ease local pressures. Maintaining schools and clinics for remaining refugees (extending PoR status beyond June 2025 if possible) will mitigate the suffering of those who can’t yet return. This also burnishes Pakistan’s regional image.

People-to-People Exchanges: Long-term peace depends on social bonds. Both governments and civil society should expand cultural and educational links. Programs like the Allama Iqbal Scholarship (for Afghan students in Pakistan) could be renewed and increased. Joint cultural festivals, media exchanges, and Pashtun jirgas (tribal assemblies) can keep dialogue alive at the grassroots. Pakistani and Afghan civil-society leaders could organize conference to tackle shared issues (e.g. health, education) and counter anti-Pak narratives.

Regional Cooperation: Pakistan should work with China, Central Asian states and the UN to support Afghanistan’s economy. This includes completing infrastructure (roads, pipelines) and easing Afghanistan’s access to global markets. Islamabad (and the international community) can press the Taliban to reform: for example, by tying aid and recognition to improvements in human rights and counterterrorism. Analyst suggestions

include a multi-party aid consortium that channels funds through government ministries, conditional on performance.

Trust-Building: Ultimately, experts note that enduring relations require trust and long-term commitment. As one commentator put it, the future of Pak-Af relations lies “not just in high-level visits or official declarations, but in robust people-to-people diplomacy”. Both sides should resist short-term blame-game politics and instead invest in mutual confidence. If Pakistan and Afghanistan treat each other as strategic partners rather than adversaries, they can turn shared history into a foundation for cooperative security and prosperity.