

Q₃ Pak-Afghan relations...

Introduction:

The relationship between Pakistan and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan is full of contradictions. Although Pakistan supported the Taliban for decades, their return to power in 2021 has led to increasing conflict, including cross-border attacks and a major rise in terrorism within Pakistan.

This worsening situation continues despite attempts by China to help mediate. The hope for a more moderate "Taliban 2.0" has faded.

Instead of being a friendly neighbor, Taliban-controlled Afghanistan has become a serious security threat for Pakistan, forcing it to completely rethink a relationship that has become more hostile than ever.

Major Factors for Continued Tension:

1- The Unresolved TTP Conundrum:

Pakistan's primary expectation from the Taliban was a decisive crackdown on the TTP, which uses Afghan soil to launch attacks into Pakistan. The main reasons behind this is:

Ideological Kinship

The Taliban and TTP are bound by a shared Deobandi ideology and a pledge of allegiance to the same supreme leader,

Mullah Hibatullah

Atkinszada

Strategic Leverage

Elements within the Taliban use the TTP as a card to counter Pakistani pressure on other issues like the Durand line and refugee repatriation.

Internal Divisions

The pragmatic Kabul faction may offer assurances, but the hardline Kandahar leadership refuses to act.

2. The Collapse of the 'Taliban 2.0' Myth and Strategic Disappointment

Pakistan's entire policy was predicted on the hope of a more pragmatic Taliban, but the hope was misplaced. The Taliban's failure to form an inclusive government, their systematic erosion of women's rights, and their reengaging on counter-terrorism commitments have shattered international goodwill. Furthermore, Pakistan invested heavily in the Taliban for decades to secure "strategic depth" against India. The current reality is quite opposite as Taliban-controlled Afghanistan provides sanctuary for anti-Pakistan militants, creating a strategic nightmare.

3. The Taliban's Ideological Intransigence and Worldview:

The Taliban's leadership, educated in rigid madrasah system, sees itself as victors over a superpower. They believe the world

should accommodate them not the other way around. This explains their,

Policy Reversal

Revoking China's oil contract and banning the internet based on obscenity concerns demonstrate a disregard for economic and diplomatic consequences

Rejection of International Norms

This refusal to reconsider policies on women's rights, even when urged by Islamic scholars, isolates them and makes state-to-state relations nearly impossible

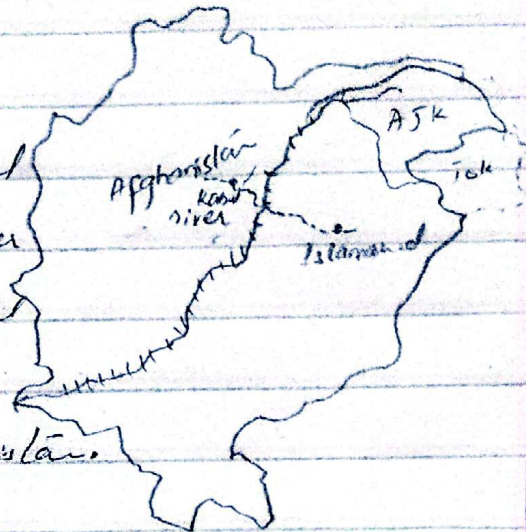
4. The India Factor and Regional Encirclement Fears:

Pakistan's historical fear of a two-front conflict is being realized. Firstly, India's growing engagement with the Taliban undermines Pakistan's leverage. It gives the Taliban diplomatic and economic alternatives, reducing their dependence on Pakistan. Secondly, the potential for an "India-Taliban-Iran" triangle, with trade routes bypassing Pakistan, is perceived in Islamabad as a deliberate strategy to encircle and constrain Pakistan.

5- Bilateral and Humanitarian Issues:

Durand Line:

The Taliban's refusal to recognise the border remains a fundamental dispute between Pakistan and Afghanistan.



Water Dispute:

The construction of dams on the Kabul River without a bilateral water treaty is a major future flashpoint.

Refugee Crises:

The pressure of Afghan refugees in Pakistan is a continuous source of social and economic strain.

Policy Options for Pakistan in Managing the Afghanistan Crisis

1. Forge a Coherent National Strategy:

A persistent weakness in Pakistan's Afghan policy has been the perceived disconnect between the civilian government and the military establishment's security priorities. To present a strong, unified front, Pakistan should create a permanent high-level council that includes both political and military leaders. This ensures that all diplomatic and military actions are aligned and based on a single plan.

2. Execute Targeted Counter-terrorism Operations:

Beyond general airstrikes, Pakistan needs to use its intelligence assets inside Afghanistan for more precise operations. The goal is to identify and target the TTP's leadership, finances, and supply lines within their sanctuaries.

3- Build a Unified Regional Front:

Pakistan must work with neighboring countries like China, Iran, and Central Asian states, who also worry about extremism spreading from Afghanistan. By acting together, these countries can increase pressure on the Taliban, linking international engagement and aid to concrete actions against terrorist groups.

4- Establish Verifiable Counter-Terrorism Mechanisms:

Pakistan could propose setting up joint intelligence teams with the Taliban, moderated by a neutral country. These teams will share real-time information on TTP activity.

5- Deploy Calibrated Economic Statecraft:

Pakistan has significant economic influence over Afghanistan through

trade routes and transit access. It should clearly tie these economic benefits to the Taliban's proven actions against the TIP.

6- Fortify the Border with Techno-Surveillance System:

Pakistan must in a "smart fence" using drones, sensors, and satellite imagery to detect and prevent militant crossings. This technological barrier would provide proof of militant movement.

7- Initiate Sustained Backchannel Diplomacy:

Pakistan should use backchannel communications, engaging tribal elders, religious scholars, and other influential figures who have the Taliban's ear.

Conclusion:

The relationship is trapped in a vicious cycle. Pakistan's security concerns are immediate and dire, demanding decisive action from the Taliban. The Taliban, however, are constrained by ideological, internal politics and strategic calculations. Until this fundamental paradox is resolved, the borderlands will remain a flashpoint, and the bilateral relationship will continue to be defined by mistrust and conflict.