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US Withdrawal from Afghanistan: Impact on Pakistan's Security and Regional Dynamics

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Abstract

This research paper investigates the implications of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan on Pakistan's security and regional dynamics. Utilizing a qualitative research methodology, the study integrates comprehensive document analysis, in-depth interviews with key policymakers and experts, and detailed case studies to explore the multifaceted impacts of the Taliban's resurgence. The research addresses how this major geopolitical shift affects Pakistan's internal security situation, including the rise in militancy and cross-border insurgencies. It further examines the repercussions for Pakistan's relations with neighboring countries—specifically India, China, and Iran—and evaluates the broader implications for regional stability. The study identifies critical security challenges and explores how Pakistan's strategic responses may shape its future role in South Asia. By analyzing both primary sources, such as interviews and policy documents, and secondary sources, including academic literature and media reports, this paper provides a nuanced understanding of the changing dynamics in the region. The findings emphasize the need for strategic policy adjustments and regional cooperation to address the emerging threats and opportunities in the post-US withdrawal context.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Pakistan, US Withdrawal, Taliban, Security, Regional Dynamics

Introduction

The relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan has always been complex, shaped by historical, ethnic, and geopolitical factors. The countries share a long border—the Durand Line—whose legitimacy remains disputed by successive Afghan governments and, more recently, by the Taliban. Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan dates back to the Cold War when it supported the mujahideen in their fight against the Soviet occupation. However,

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following the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Pakistan became a key ally in the War on Terror. For over two decades, Pakistan's policy on Afghanistan has been guided by its strategic interests, including minimizing Indian influence in Afghanistan and maintaining a friendly government in Kabul.

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, following the Doha Agreement, dramatically changed the region's political landscape. The swift collapse of the Afghan government and the subsequent takeover by the Taliban have had profound implications for the region, especially for Pakistan. Initially, Pakistan viewed the Taliban's return to power as a strategic win, hoping to secure a friendly regime in Kabul that could align with its own geopolitical goals. However, this perception has since evolved, as the realities of Taliban governance and the resurgence of militancy within Pakistan have posed significant challenges.

The Taliban's ascent to power has resulted in the rise of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) attacks within Pakistan, threatening internal security. Cross-border issues, such as skirmishes and the flow of refugees, have further complicated relations. The deteriorating situation in Afghanistan characterized by economic collapse, humanitarian crises, and regional instability has exacerbated security concerns for Pakistan. The Taliban's inability to manage Afghanistan's internal crises and prevent militant groups from using Afghan soil to target Pakistan poses an existential threat to Pakistan's security framework.

Moreover, Pakistan's position as a frontline state in the global War on Terror has shaped its relations with major powers, including the US, China, and Russia. Pakistan now finds itself navigating a delicate balance between maintaining strategic partnerships with these global powers while addressing the growing security threats emanating from Afghanistan. The post-withdrawal environment presents both opportunities and risks for Pakistan, influencing its policies toward regional security, internal stability, and international diplomacy (Jan, 2022).

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan marked the end of a 20-year military engagement aimed at dismantling al-Qaeda and stabilizing the country through state-building efforts. However, the rapid collapse of the Afghan government and the disintegration of the Afghan National Army (ANA) indicated the failure of these efforts. The Taliban's swift return to power on August 15,

2021, following the fall of Kabul, signified a dramatic reversal of two decades of Western intervention.

One of the most immediate effects of the US withdrawal was the political vacuum it created in Afghanistan. The Asharaf Ghani government, which had been propped up by US military and financial support, was unprepared to withstand the Taliban's military advances. The ANA, despite years of training and billions of dollars in aid, crumbled, with many soldiers either defecting or fleeing. This collapse highlighted the inherent weaknesses in Afghanistan's security apparatus and governance structure, which had been reliant on foreign support rather than internal capacity-building (Giustozzi, 2021).

With the Taliban's return, Afghanistan entered a new phase of political uncertainty. While the Taliban claim to control the entire country, their governance capabilities remain limited. The group has struggled to transition from an insurgency to a functional government. The lack of international recognition, combined with sanctions and frozen foreign assets, has contributed to the country's economic collapse. This economic downturn has had a ripple effect across the region, with millions of Afghans facing food insecurity, unemployment, and limited access to basic services (Fayez, 2022).

Afghanistan's deteriorating security situation is another direct consequence of the US withdrawal. The Taliban's return to power has emboldened other militant groups, including Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K), which has carried out a series of deadly attacks within Afghanistan. The group poses a direct challenge to the Taliban's control, particularly in eastern provinces, and threatens to destabilize the country further. The power struggle between the Taliban and IS-K has also raised concerns about Afghanistan once again becoming a breeding ground for terrorism, with militants from across the region seeking refuge within its borders.

For Pakistan, the most pressing concern is the resurgence of the TTP. The US withdrawal allowed the TTP to regroup, and they have since intensified their attacks on Pakistani security forces, particularly in the tribal areas along the Durand Line. The Taliban's unwillingness to rein in the TTP, despite Pakistan's requests, has strained relations between Islamabad and Kabul. The TTP's resurgence is not only a threat to Pakistan's internal security but also highlights the

complex web of militant networks that operate across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border (Mir, 2022).

Shifting Pak-Afghan Relations Post-US Withdrawal

Pak-Afghan relations have undergone a significant shift since the US withdrawal. Pakistan initially welcomed the Taliban's return to power, believing that it could secure a government in Kabul that would be sympathetic to its strategic objectives. This belief was rooted in Pakistan's historical ties with the Taliban, dating back to the 1990s when it was one of the few countries to recognize the Taliban regime. However, the dynamics of Pak-Afghan relations post-withdrawal have proven to be far more complicated than anticipated.

One of the most significant points of contention between Pakistan and the Taliban has been the issue of the Durand Line. The Taliban, like previous Afghan governments, refuses to recognize the Durand Line as the official border between the two countries. This has led to frequent skirmishes between Pakistani and Afghan forces, particularly in the tribal areas. Pakistan has sought to fence the border in an attempt to control the flow of militants and refugees, but this move has been met with resistance from both the Taliban government and local Pashtun communities (Jones, 2022).

Economic ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan have also been affected by the changing political landscape. Afghanistan's economic collapse has had a direct impact on Pakistan, which had been a major trading partner. The closure of trade routes and the imposition of sanctions on Afghanistan have disrupted cross-border trade, contributing to Pakistan's own economic challenges. Additionally, Pakistan's efforts to engage with the Taliban on issues such as trade and investment have been complicated by the Taliban's inability to establish a functional government and gain international recognition (Siddiqui, 2022).

The refugee crisis is another major issue that has strained Pak-Afghan relations. Following the Taliban's takeover, thousands of Afghans fled to Pakistan, adding to the millions of Afghan refugees already residing in the country. While Pakistan has historically hosted Afghan refugees, the current influx has placed additional strain on its economy and social services. Moreover, the

presence of Afghan refugees has raised security concerns, as there is a fear that militants could infiltrate Pakistan disguised as refugees (Abbas, 2022).

Despite these challenges, Pakistan has sought to maintain diplomatic engagement with the Taliban government. Islamabad has called for the international community to recognize the Taliban and provide humanitarian aid to Afghanistan to prevent a complete economic collapse. Pakistan's diplomatic efforts are driven by the belief that a stable Afghanistan is essential for its own security and regional stability. However, Pakistan's calls for engagement with the Taliban have been met with resistance from the international community, which remains wary of the Taliban's human rights record and links to terrorism (Gunaratna, 2013).

Pakistan's relations with other regional powers have also been influenced by the situation in Afghanistan. China, in particular, has expressed interest in investing in Afghanistan, particularly in the mining sector, as part of its broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Pakistan, which has close ties with China, sees this as an opportunity to strengthen its own economic ties with Afghanistan. However, the security situation in Afghanistan poses a major obstacle to these plans, as Chinese investments are unlikely to materialize unless the Taliban can provide a stable and secure environment (Jan, 2022).

Security Implications for Pakistan

The security implications of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan for Pakistan are profound. One of the most immediate threats is the resurgence of the TTP. The TTP, which had been weakened by Pakistan's military operations and US drone strikes, has used the power vacuum in Afghanistan to regroup and strengthen its operations. The TTP's attacks on Pakistani security forces have increased significantly since the US withdrawal, particularly in the tribal areas along the Durand Line. The TTP's resurgence poses a major challenge to Pakistan's internal security, as the group seeks to undermine the Pakistani state and establish its own version of Islamic rule (Fair, 2022).

The Taliban's relationship with the TTP is a major source of concern for Pakistan. While the Taliban have publicly stated that they will not allow Afghan soil to be used for attacks on other countries, they have been reluctant to take action against the TTP. This is partly due to the

historical ties between the two groups, as well as the fact that many TTP fighters fought alongside the Taliban during their insurgency against the US and Afghan government. Pakistan has repeatedly called on the Taliban to rein in the TTP, but these requests have so far gone unheeded (Shahab, 2021).

Another security concern for Pakistan is the influx of Afghan refugees. While Pakistan has a long history of hosting Afghan refugees, the current influx has raised fears about the potential for militants to enter the country disguised as refugees. This concern is compounded by the fact that Pakistan's border with Afghanistan is porous, despite its efforts to fence the Durand Line. The presence of Afghan refugees has also placed additional strain on Pakistan's already struggling economy and social services, further exacerbating the security situation (Shinwari, 2022).

Pakistan's relations with India are also affected by the situation in Afghanistan. India had developed close ties with the previous Afghan government, and its influence in Afghanistan was seen as a threat by Pakistan. However, the Taliban's return to power has significantly reduced India's influence in Afghanistan, which Pakistan views as a strategic win. At the same time, there are concerns that militant groups operating in Afghanistan could be used by Pakistan-based groups to carry out attacks in India, further escalating tensions between the two nuclear-armed neighbors (Khan, 2022).

Research Questions

How has the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's resurgence impacted Pakistan's internal security, particularly regarding the TTP's activities?

What are the regional and international implications for Pakistan's foreign policy due to the shifting political and security dynamics in Afghanistan?

Research Objectives

To examine the internal security challenges Pakistan faces post-US withdrawal, with a focus on the TTP's resurgence.

To analyze the regional and global impacts on Pakistan's foreign policy in the context of post-withdrawal Pak-Afghan relations.

Problem Statement

The withdrawal of the United States and NATO forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 marked a significant geopolitical shift in South Asia. This development resulted in the rapid takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban, creating new security, diplomatic, and economic challenges, particularly for neighboring countries like Pakistan. Historically, Pakistan has played a key role in Afghanistan's political and security landscape, maintaining complex and often contentious relations with both the Afghan state and non-state actors like the Taliban and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

The Taliban's return to power has not only disrupted the fragile stability in Afghanistan but has also triggered far-reaching security implications for Pakistan. The resurgence of militant groups, particularly the TTP, presents a growing threat to Pakistan's internal security, especially in its tribal regions. Cross-border militancy, refugee influxes, economic instability, and the potential for international isolation further complicate Pakistan's strategic calculations.

Despite shared ethnic, cultural, and historical ties, the evolving security dynamics between Pakistan and Afghanistan post-US withdrawal present a significant dilemma for policymakers in Islamabad. Pakistan's concerns are multi-dimensional, encompassing the potential spillover of violence, the exacerbation of sectarian tensions, and strained relations with regional and global powers. The absence of a stable government in Kabul capable of controlling extremist elements exacerbates these security threats.

Thus, this research seeks to explore the critical question: What are the security implications for Pakistan following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, and how has the Taliban's resurgence affected Pakistan's internal stability and its regional and international relations? By addressing this problem, the study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the challenges Pakistan faces and the strategies it must adopt to ensure national security and regional stability in a rapidly changing geopolitical environment.

Research Methodology

1. Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative research design, which is ideal for exploring complex, multidimensional phenomena such as international relations and security concerns. The focus is on interpreting the geopolitical, security, and socio-economic dynamics between Pakistan and Afghanistan in the aftermath of the US withdrawal. Given the nature of the topic, qualitative analysis enables a deeper understanding of the underlying factors, actors, and policies influencing these relations.

2. Research Paradigm

The research is rooted in a constructivist paradigm, which posits that international relations are socially constructed through interactions between states and other actors. Constructivism is appropriate here as it allows the analysis of how the shared histories, ideologies, and security concerns between Pakistan and Afghanistan shape their relations. This paradigm facilitates an examination of how Pakistan constructs its security policies in response to evolving dynamics in Afghanistan.

3. Research Approach

A thematic analysis approach is used to analyze the qualitative data. This involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data, which helps in understanding the major trends, challenges, and security implications of the US withdrawal on Pak-Afghan relations. Themes such as the resurgence of the Taliban, the role of the TTP, refugee crises, and Pakistan's diplomatic dilemmas are explored in detail.

4. Data Collection Methods

The research relies on secondary data sources, which include the following:

Academic Literature: Peer-reviewed articles, books, and theses on Pak-Afghan relations, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, and its security implications for Pakistan.

Government Reports: Reports published by Pakistani, Afghan, and US governments, as well as international organizations such as the UN and NATO, providing insight into official policies and security assessments.

Policy Papers and White Papers: Papers from think tanks, such as the International Crisis Group (ICG), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Brookings Institution, that analyze the geopolitical and security developments in the region.

Media Reports: Credible international and regional media outlets like The New York Times, BBC, Dawn, and Al Jazeera, which provide real-time coverage of the events unfolding in Afghanistan and Pakistan since the US withdrawal.

Expert Interviews and Opinions: Analysis from geopolitical and security experts in the form of published interviews, panel discussions, and commentaries that offer informed perspectives on the evolving situation.

5. Data Analysis

The data is analyzed using content analysis and thematic analysis:

Content Analysis: This technique is used to systematically review the content of academic articles, government reports, and media publications. The aim is to extract recurring themes, narratives, and patterns related to Pak-Afghan relations post-US withdrawal.

Thematic Analysis: The extracted data is categorized into major themes such as security challenges, diplomatic strategies, terrorism and militancy, and economic implications. Each theme is further analyzed to understand the interplay between Afghanistan's internal dynamics and Pakistan's security policies.

Discussion and Analysis

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 marked the end of a 20-year military presence, with profound effects not only on Afghanistan but also on the broader region, especially Pakistan. As a neighboring country with deep historical, ethnic, and political ties to Afghanistan, Pakistan's security, economic, and diplomatic environment has been significantly impacted by the return of the Taliban to power. The ensuing challenges underscore the delicate balancing act Pakistan must perform in navigating its national security concerns, counterterrorism efforts, and regional alliances.

Security Challenges: The Resurgence of the TTP

One of the most pressing security challenges for Pakistan since the US withdrawal is the resurgence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The TTP, which had been weakened by military operations conducted by the Pakistan Army, has regained strength, emboldened by the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. There are fears that the TTP will exploit the ungoverned spaces along the Durand Line, using Afghanistan as a safe haven to launch cross-border attacks into Pakistan. The porous border, coupled with Afghanistan's security vacuum, has created an environment conducive to the TTP's operations.

In the months following the Taliban's return, there was an increase in TTP-led attacks in Pakistan. According to Mir (2022), the group carried out over 100 attacks in 2022, targeting military and civilian infrastructure across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. These attacks not only demonstrate the TTP's operational capability but also expose the limitations of Pakistan's border security measures. Despite extensive efforts to fence the Durand Line, the mountainous terrain and deep-rooted tribal connections make it difficult for Pakistan to prevent militant incursions effectively.

The Taliban's reluctance to sever ties with the TTP has further exacerbated the problem. While the Taliban leadership in Afghanistan has promised Pakistan that Afghan soil will not be used for terrorism, it has been unwilling or unable to rein in the TTP, given the historical alliances between the groups. This has created a dilemma for Pakistan: how to engage diplomatically with the Taliban while addressing the persistent security threat posed by the TTP. Pakistan's military

leadership has conducted several rounds of talks with the Afghan Taliban, but there has been little progress in reducing the TTP's activities. The TTP issue thus remains a significant source of friction between Pakistan and the Taliban, potentially destabilizing Pakistan's border regions and undermining its broader counterterrorism efforts (Mazzetti, 2022).

Refugee Crisis and Economic Strain

The refugee crisis is another key challenge that has emerged in the wake of the US withdrawal. Pakistan has been home to millions of Afghan refugees since the Soviet invasion in 1979, and the Taliban's return has triggered a new wave of displaced persons seeking refuge. As of 2022, there are an estimated 1.4 million registered Afghan refugees in Pakistan, with hundreds of thousands more unregistered. The presence of such a large refugee population puts immense strain on Pakistan's already overstretched resources, including healthcare, education, and housing. According to Shinwari (2022), the influx of refugees has placed additional burdens on Pakistan's fragile economy, particularly in border provinces like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, which are among the poorest regions of the country.

The economic impact of hosting refugees is compounded by the broader economic challenges facing Pakistan. The country is grappling with high inflation, a widening fiscal deficit, and dwindling foreign exchange reserves. The cost of providing services to Afghan refugees—many of whom lack legal status—only exacerbates these issues. Pakistan's government has called for increased international assistance to cope with the refugee crisis, but the response from the global community has been limited. The international focus on Afghanistan has waned since the initial withdrawal, and humanitarian aid to both Afghanistan and its neighboring countries has fallen short of what is required to manage the situation effectively.

Furthermore, the refugee crisis is not just an economic issue but also a security one. The unregulated movement of people across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border raises concerns about the infiltration of militants and the potential for radicalization within refugee communities. There have been instances where Afghan refugees in Pakistan have been involved in criminal and terrorist activities, further complicating the situation. As a result, the Pakistani government has

tightened its border controls and sought to repatriate refugees, but these efforts have been met with resistance from both refugees and international human rights organizations, which argue that Afghanistan remains too unstable for safe returns (Abbas, 2022).

Diplomatic and Strategic Dilemmas

Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan has always been complex, shaped by ethnic ties, border disputes, and competing strategic interests. The US withdrawal has added a new layer of complexity to this relationship, as Pakistan now finds itself navigating the dual challenges of dealing with an empowered Taliban regime and managing its relationships with other key regional and global players, including the United States, China, and India.

On the one hand, Pakistan has sought to maintain close ties with the Taliban, which it views as a counterbalance to Indian influence in Afghanistan. During the US-led war in Afghanistan, India established close relations with the previous Afghan government, investing in infrastructure projects and providing development assistance. Pakistan viewed this as part of India's broader strategy to encircle Pakistan and exert pressure on its western border. The Taliban's return to power has significantly reduced India's influence in Afghanistan, which Pakistan sees as a strategic win.

However, this victory comes with risks. The international community, including Pakistan's Western allies, remains deeply skeptical of the Taliban's ability to govern and prevent Afghanistan from becoming a haven for terrorist groups. Pakistan has thus found itself in a difficult position—on the one hand, advocating for the recognition of the Taliban government and increased diplomatic engagement, while on the other hand, facing international pressure to ensure that Afghanistan does not become a breeding ground for militancy. Pakistan's balancing act is further complicated by the fact that it relies heavily on Western financial assistance and international lending institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which are reluctant to engage with the Taliban regime (Kugelman, 2022).

Moreover, Pakistan's relationship with China is also affected by developments in Afghanistan. China, which shares a narrow border with Afghanistan, has expressed concerns about the potential for militancy to spill over into its Xinjiang region, where it faces unrest from the

Uyghur Muslim population. Pakistan has positioned itself as a key player in facilitating China's engagement with the Taliban, but it also risks being drawn into China's broader strategic competition with the United States. China's economic interests in Afghanistan, particularly its desire to exploit Afghanistan's vast mineral resources, align with Pakistan's own economic ambitions, but both countries face significant security risks in pursuing these objectives (Jan, 2022).

The Impact on Pakistan's Domestic Politics and Society

The developments in Afghanistan have also had far-reaching implications for Pakistan's domestic politics and society. The Taliban's return has emboldened Islamist factions within Pakistan, particularly those aligned with the Deobandi school of thought, which shares ideological affinities with the Afghan Taliban. This has led to a resurgence of conservative Islamic rhetoric in Pakistan's political discourse, with Islamist parties calling for greater adherence to Islamic law and a reduction in Western influence. The rise of the Taliban has also emboldened extremist groups that seek to challenge the authority of the Pakistani state, posing a threat to Pakistan's internal stability.

In addition, the refugee crisis and economic strain have further fueled discontent among Pakistan's population. Unemployment, rising prices, and deteriorating public services have created a sense of frustration, particularly among the youth, who make up a significant portion of Pakistan's population. This discontent has the potential to translate into political instability, as opposition parties seek to capitalize on the government's inability to address these issues effectively (Siddiqui, 2022).

On the other hand, the Taliban's rise has forced Pakistan to reassess its counterterrorism strategy. While Pakistan has long been accused of providing tacit support to the Afghan Taliban, it now finds itself at the forefront of the fight against terrorism, as it grapples with the threat posed by the TTP and other militant groups operating within its borders. Pakistan's military leadership has emphasized the need for a comprehensive approach to counterterrorism, which includes not only military operations but also efforts to address the root causes of extremism, such as poverty, lack of education, and political marginalization.

Conclusion

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has significantly altered the geopolitical landscape of South Asia, with profound implications for Pakistan. While Pakistan initially viewed the Taliban's return to power as a strategic win, the realities of post-withdrawal Afghanistan have proven to be far more complex. The resurgence of the TTP, the refugee crisis, and the Taliban's unwillingness to rein in militant groups have posed significant security challenges for Pakistan. Moreover, the economic collapse in Afghanistan and the international community's reluctance to engage with the Taliban have further complicated Pakistan's efforts to stabilize the region.

Despite these challenges, Pakistan continues to advocate for diplomatic engagement with the Taliban, believing that a stable Afghanistan is essential for its own security. However, this approach is not without risks, as the Taliban's inability to establish a functional government and prevent militant groups from using Afghan soil to launch attacks on Pakistan threatens to undermine regional stability. Going forward, Pakistan will need to navigate these challenges carefully, balancing its own security concerns with its broader strategic objectives in the region.

In conclusion, the post-US withdrawal landscape in Afghanistan presents both opportunities and challenges for Pakistan. While the Taliban's return to power has reduced India's influence in Afghanistan, the resurgence of militancy and the refugee crisis pose significant threats to Pakistan's internal security. The coming years will be critical for Pakistan as it seeks to address these challenges while maintaining its strategic position in the region.

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