



## A Critical Review of Policy Shift in Pak-Afghan-US Relations after Withdrawal of USSR from Afghanistan (1988-2023)

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### ABSTRACT

*The USSR invaded Afghanistan in 1979. The United States of America took this situation as an opportunity and became actively involved in the conflict. Pakistan joined the USA and supported the militant factions in Afghanistan. However, the end of war and emergence of the USA as the sole superpower of the world gave a new dimension to the Pak-US ties. The relations became strained until the 9/11 incident took place in 2001. Pakistan-US relations again reflected the warmth of good relations during the war against terrorism. But after the withdrawal of American-led NATO forces the USA viewed its ties with Pakistan through the lens of Afghanistan. The study explored the key factors that have shaped the policy shift in US relations with Pakistan since the US evacuation from Afghanistan. The study followed a longitudinal design while covering the period from 1990-2023. A qualitative approach was applied to trace, evaluate, and understand the US strategic interests in Pakistan and Afghanistan as the US is the sole 'superpower'. Moreover, the triangular relations between the US, Pakistan, and Afghanistan is examined. A way forward is suggested based on the findings of the study.*



### Introduction

Afghanistan was invaded by the USSR in 1979. The Hafizullah Amin administration was toppled on December 27, 1979, and the Russian army invaded Afghanistan. Due to the uncertainty surrounding the security of its interests in the region, the United States was unable to remain neutral when the Soviet Union captured Kabul. The United States approached Pakistan in these circumstances. The Cold War between the USSR and the US was well underway. Pakistan sided with the Taliban in Afghanistan and the United States of America throughout the War. Pakistan received \$2.3 billion in arms and cash from the US after receiving a \$1 million arms delivery (Abdul, 2011). It was believed that the US was defending its interests when it provided funding to the Mujahideen under the guise of Islamic Jihad to topple the Soviet Union. The US exerted pressure on Pakistan to provide the US more bases when President Reagan was elected in 1982. The US Senate and Congress also showed their support for Pakistan by adopting the financial aid bill. At this time, India began spreading propaganda against Pakistan as well. But the United States stepped in and prevented a conflict between Pakistan and India. During this time, Pakistan began to carry out its nuclear program. President Reagan refrained from discussing Pakistan's nuclear program due to the Afghan War, and the US Senate exempted Pakistan from nuclear sanctions on May 15, 1981. But the US stopped providing assistance to Pakistan in 1987 (Abbasi, Akhtar, & Quadri, 2023). The United States made it apparent that it wanted to offer Pakistan conditional help and that it needed give up its nuclear program. When the US Deputy Secretary of State visited Pakistan and proposed halting the nuclear program to Junejo, Zia-ul-Haq listened carefully and instructed the Secretary of State to report back to Reagan that Pakistan's peaceful

nuclear program is not going to end. Pakistan will join the Geneva Agreement without it. Thus, the 1988 Geneva Accord resolved the Afghan issue. As a result of this agreement, USSR forces left Afghanistan. With the disintegration of the USSR in 1991, the Cold War also came to an end, and the USA became the only superpower in the unipolar globe (Firdos, 2006).

The US-Pakistan relationship now has a new dimension as a result of these global changes. There were ups and downs in the relationship between Pakistan and the USA in the 1990s. But following the events of 9/11, Pakistan turned into the United States of America's most important ally in the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan. When Pervez Musharraf was still in power as a dictator in Pakistan, the US asked for Pakistan's logistical support under threats and warnings because it was very difficult for the US to act and provide the proper attention without Pakistan's cooperation. When he was asked for support, he promised to provide logistics support, share intelligence reports with the US, and cooperate with the US on his behalf. As a result, throughout the War on Terror, the US-Pakistani relationship once again demonstrated warmth and good will (Shahid, 2003). The United States has once again viewed its relations with Pakistan through the lens of Afghanistan following the withdrawal of American-led NATO forces from the country, which has given Pakistan-US relations a new angle. The US has consistently accused Pakistan of playing a double game. After their discussion, Trump administration acknowledged Pakistan's contributions and asked Pakistan to assist the United States in the peace process in Afghanistan. However, Pakistan was placed on the United States' blacklist for violating religious freedom, a move that might result in economic sanctions (Abbasi, Akhtar, & Quadri, 2023). The study is centered on the US's involvement in the area through an examination of the historical developments in Afghanistan.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This research intends to critically assess the many policy adjustments in Pakistan-US relations following the Afghan conflict from 1990 to 2023 in the light of changing geopolitical forces and priorities. The main issue that needs to be addressed is how this relationship is complicated and frequently turbulent, with periods of collaboration and discontent that have a big impact on regional stability, counterterrorism initiatives, and both countries' strategic interests. In order to better comprehend the potential and problems this partnership brings for both the two nations and the larger international community, this research aims to analyze the major decisions, factors, and outcomes that molded this relationship over this time."

### **Objectives**

This study is fueled by the purpose of assessing the impact of the Afghan issue on Pakistan-U.S. relations. This study will focus on:

- Explore the key factors that have changed Pakistan-US relations since the US left Afghanistan.
- Explore the changes in the US policies towards Pakistan due to the domestic factors in Afghanistan.
- Assess the impacts of the role of regional powers (China, USSR, India & Iran) in Afghanistan.
- Explore the prospects for future cooperation between Pakistan and the US on Afghanistan related mutual interest.

### **Literature Review**

Ahlawat & Izarali (2022), discussed the Taliban's ascent to power, their difficulties cooperating with the new administration, and the ramifications for the security of Pakistan and India in connection to Afghanistan. Baqai and Wasi (2021) tends to state the position of Pakistan as a front-line ally in the war on terror. It has led to increased tension among Islamic militant groups. They opined that Pakistan's strategic success lies in destroying command and control of Taliban. Pakistan should not focus on blocking the infiltration from Afghanistan.

Hussain (2021), sheds light on the aftermath of 9/11 and Pakistan-United States relations. He observes that the alliance between both states has always been tense. As the years passed, their relationship became increasingly strained, with both sides struggling to reconcile their competing interests. Mazhar and Goraya (2021) explains that Pak- Afghan relations have never remained smooth. The relations observed many ups and downs in previous decades. The post 9/11 scenario predicts the future of these relations. He observed the overall impact of war against terrorism on the relations between both countries.

Nawaz (2020) lays bare the apprehensive partnership between Pakistan and the US, a decades long rollercoaster marked by mutual mistrust. Pakistan's neighbors, especially Afghanistan, have crucial impacts on Pakistan-US relations. Internal crises, including economic stagnation, demographic pressures, and militant threats, necessitate Pakistan-US relations. The author also seeks to dig out Pakistan's struggle to balance Pakistan's allegiance with the US and Afghanistan and illuminates the profound implications for regional equilibrium and global security. Through a meticulous examination of clandestine maneuvers, high-wire diplomacy, and shadowy dealings, he exposes the obscure forces driving this volatile relationship.

Jain (2016) argues that spirit of strategic partnership between the USA and India centers on threat

perception of China. He discusses mutual relationships in areas such as defense, security and strategic partnership. Marshall (2016) states that Pakistan shares a long border with Afghanistan known as the Durand Line. Though it has been a longstanding point of contention, it plays an important role in the foreign policy choices of Pakistan because “geography has dictated that Pakistan will involve itself in Afghanistan”. In 1979, the USSR invaded Afghanistan in search of a hot water port, and Pakistan aligned itself with the US in Afghanistan against the USSR. In contrast to Pakistan’s decision, India chose to support and help the USSR in Afghanistan. Pakistan and the US operated closely in Afghanistan against the USSR. Pakistan wanted to limit the USSR in Afghanistan to restrict its approach to the “hot waters” of the Indian Ocean and the US wanted to contain the USSR. After the 9/11 attacks, Pakistan-US relations, which were at their lowest ebb, again improvised on the demand of the US. Pakistan was left with no other option except to be aligned again with the US in its global campaign against terrorism. Therefore, again Afghanistan had a critical role in Pakistan-US relations.

Samad (2011) explains US policy initiatives and counterproductive measures and sheds light on the connection between the Taliban and Al Qaeda. He explores the implications of this struggle in Afghanistan and Pakistan’s border regions, before and after 9/11. Ahmad (2010) provides a comprehensive review of Pak- US relationship. He discusses Pakistan’s foreign policy towards USA in different times and stages.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions could be addressed in a critical review of the policy shift in post-Afghanistan Pakistan-US relations:

1. What are the key factors that have shaped the shift in US foreign policy towards Pakistan since the US evacuated Afghanistan?
2. What are the alterations in the policies of the United States of America towards Pakistan due to the domestic factors in Afghanistan?
3. What are the impacts of the role of regional powers (China, USSR, India & Iran) in Afghanistan?
4. What are the prospects for future cooperation between Pakistan and the US on Afghanistan of mutual interest?

### **Research Gaps and Significance**

Afghanistan lies between South and Central Asian regions of the continent. It played a key role in Asia due to its geography. The Country acted as buffer state between Russian Empire and the British Empire during the Anglo-Russian conflicts in nineteenth century. Its war with USSR steered the process of disintegration of the USSR. After 9/11 incident it became the center stage of the problem during the war against terrorism in the world. Now the world is concerned about the political and economic development of the people in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime. The Afghan issue is reviewed and researched in the World under different angles. However, the study of specific aspect of Afghan issue, a critical review of policy shift in post Afghanistan Pakistan-US relations (1990 to 2023) will determine the new aspects of the problem. Furthermore, the study will help the Government of Pakistan to shape its policies to develop relations with different countries of the world.

### **Methodology**

The research covered the immediate post-Afghan war era, from 1990 to 2023, through a longitudinal design. Considering the US as the sole ‘super-power’, this study explored and evaluated its strategic interest and triangular relations with Pakistan and Afghanistan by using qualitative research methodology. The data analysis involves several strategies and techniques. Firstly, the reason for the US's persistent and deep interest in Pakistan and Afghanistan is identified by systematically reviewing the relevant and available literature. The second step involves applying deductive reasoning to classify and organize data, into categorized form, obtained from the literature review. For this purpose, different sources including government documents and new articles are examined. The main field of interest is composed of security, political, and economic matters revolving around the US’s foreign policy, from 1990 to 2023, towards Pakistan and Afghanistan. Lastly, this study dissects how the decade-long triangular relations of the US, Pakistan and Afghanistan have been reshaped through the lens of situational analysis.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual discussion is based on epistemological frameworks which examine presumptions, beliefs, and ideologies that support the foreign policy of the United States towards the region. It also highlights how important it is to find an underlying, complex and situation-specific scenario that explores US strategic foreign policy. However, the debate begins by pointing out that there is a fundamental difference of opinion over the underlying presumptions and principles of US strategic objectives in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Thus, to name a few theoretical stances that have shaped US foreign policy aims toward Pakistan and Afghanistan, the conceptual framework includes constructivism, realism, liberalism, and post-

colonialism. All things considered, this theoretical framework provides diverse analyses of the US foreign policy towards Islamabad and Kabul to understand how this policy decisions were maximized in the aftermath of the conflict.

In the context of international politics, realism heavily emphasizes the quest for power and security. They argue that the main focus of the US is on safeguarding its interests in South Asia. It is strategically maintaining its global hegemony, by keeping a hold on the influence of strong geographical forces like China and Russia. They contend that strategic concerns, particularly the need to maintain regional peace to protect US economic and security interests, are the only purposes of US policy toward Islamabad and Kabul (Rajagopalan, 2022). Often, the US strategy has put fortifying military and economic connections with Pakistan and India ahead of furthering democratic norms (Walt 2013; Mearsheimer ,2001). Conversely, liberals emphasize the importance of institutions, free trade, and democracy in promoting global peace and stability (Doyle, 1983). It is believed that the US has tried to further these ideals through ongoing financial assistance, human rights advocacy, and diplomatic involvement (Parry, 2021).

Constructivists contend that the West has made an effort to forcefully inject its standards and values throughout the East, particularly in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which are crucial strategic allies in the war against terror. Despite worries about Pakistan's human rights record and potential for nuclear proliferation, some academics contend that the US developed Pakistan as an ally in its worldwide crackdown on terrorism, which led to giving armed and fiscal backing to Pakistan (Malhotra, 2022). Post-colonial academics argue that the US's foreign approach toward Islamabad and Kabul was driven more by personal political and economic concerns than by genuine concern for the local populace and regional peace. The US policies have hampered Afghanistan's growth and sustained socioeconomic disparity, according to post-colonial perspectives (Seth 2013).

### **Discussion and Analysis**

The Key Factors influencing Pakistan-Afghanistan -US relations are Mistrust, Extremism and Militancy in Pakistan:

#### ***Mistrust in Pakistan-US Relations***

The correlation between Washington and Islamabad has been characterized by significant friction, complexity, and adversity throughout its history. The element of mistrust has always dominated relations, reducing the level of engagement. The perception in the US about Pakistan's involvement in War on Terror is somehow ambiguous due to Pakistan army's preeminent influence over policy. It is believed that the Pakistani army is not prepared to act against specific militant groups because of their proximity and shared interests. Pakistan has a vested interest in the support and regulation of such entities (Khan, Ahmad & Dadda. ,2017). The perception is the result of Pakistan's failure to take action against specific organizations. The primary issue arises within the Haqqani group. In North Waziristan, the United States has been advocating for action, but Pakistan has been hesitant to intervene. Pakistan's inclination to engage in dialogue with certain militant factions is also a source of friction. The United States has explicitly declared that if Pakistan shows reluctance to address these sanctuaries, it would take action independently, which has intensified the rhetoric in Pakistan against the US (Ahmad, Yousaf & Shah,2017).

#### ***The Extremism and Militancy in Pakistan***

The current condition of extremism in Pakistan is not only the focus of concern in its adjacent countries but it is of high importance to the USA too. The Assassination of Salman Taseer, the governor of Punjab from 2008 to 2011, because of his comments regarding the country's Blasphemy, provoked different nations around the world. He was brutally murdered by his guard on January 4, 2011. This violent act got mass appreciation which was seen as a horrific stance by the USA. The same year on March 2, the Federal Minister for Minorities, a Christian, was assassinated. He was the only non-Muslim minister in the federal cabinet. These events did not portray Pakistan as a liberal or tolerant country. Without any doubt, this was a violation of the rights of minorities in Pakistan. These significant events made the Pak-US relations bitter. Pakistan has been urged repeatedly by the US to address continuing violations of rights within its borders (Kronstadt, 2012).

#### ***Killing of Osama Bin Laden***

The Pak-US relations suffered a serious setback on May 2, 2011. Osama Bin Laden was killed in Abbottabad, Pakistan, in a well-pre-organized plan by the US president, Barak Obama and the US military. This attack took place near the Federal Capital i.e., Islamabad and the Pakistani government was not informed beforehand. A significant amount of international criticism and a decline in the country's image followed this event because of the discovery of such a high-profile terrorist in Pakistan. The awareness of Pakistani security agencies regarding his presence there remains uncertain. Moreover, the role of Pakistan in the war on terror became doubtful. As its role became questionable, it became more visible that the aptitude



of its agencies could not be trusted or there were chances of Pakistan getting close collaboration with opponents of the US (Soherwordi & Khattak, 2020).

### ***The Salala Check post Attack***

The Salala check post attack marked the culmination of Pakistan's resentment against the United States. It was deemed an unintended event by ISAF. However, Pakistan thought that this might be a deliberate move by NATO forces. This incident prompted Pakistan to take concrete measures. In response, Pakistan cut off logistical supplies to NATO forces stationed within Pakistan by cutting off their Ground Lines of Communication (Cheema, 2012). Pakistanis were so outraged that they demanded an apology from the United States. However, no such step was taken until July 2012 when Hillary Clinton, Secretary of State, acknowledged its mistake. The relationships were adversely affected by the events that transpired in 2011. In July 2011, the Congressional and State Department announced that \$440-\$500 million in counterinsurgency compensations were denied owing to visa issues for American operatives. Pakistan was accused that it was intentionally delaying the visa process. On the other hand, the Pakistani government declared that they have completed the operations while carrying on good bilateral relations with the US (Kronstadt, 2012).

### ***Pak-Afghan-US Triangular Relations***

Afghanistan has been significant in shaping the dynamics of Pakistan-US relations. The Afghanistan factor significantly transformed these relations in the 1980s and subsequently redefined the relationship following the September 11, 2001, attacks. The relationship between Pakistan and the United States, which was established in the 1950s, has become weaker over the years. Following the 1971 war, there was a notable shift in US foreign policy regarding South Asia. The newly appointed Prime Minister of Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, initiated a transformation in foreign policy by visiting China and the USSR, which caused dissatisfaction of the United States (Abdul, 2011). The nuclear program of Pakistan was initiated in order to preserve a balance of power in the region, which resulted in deterioration of relations with the United States. The Carter administration's criticism of Pakistan's nuclear program further exacerbated the situation. Zia's Marshal Law, US sanctions and public demonstrations against the US strained relations. However, Afghanistan's influence improved them (Bashir & Mustafa, 2014).

In 1979, Pakistan-US ties were at an all-time low. In 1979, the relations between Pakistan and the United States were at a significant low point. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 revived the previously strained relationship between the two states. On December 26, 1979, as Soviet forces attacked Afghanistan, Pakistan encountered a multitude of internal and external challenges. US President Carter demanded Pakistan to publicly denounce the USSR's aggression. He vowed to renew the two-decade-old Bilateral Security Agreement from 1959 (Sattar, 2010). In fact Pakistan's geostrategic location held significant importance for both superpowers of the era, the USSR and the US. Senior officials from both nations engaged with Pakistan to obtain its support in Afghanistan. The Soviet Ambassador tried to persuade General Zia of Pakistan of the necessity of the Soviet invasion, citing the internal circumstances in Afghanistan. Therefore, the Soviet invasion positioned Pakistan as an important ally for the United States and the Western bloc (Kux, 2001). Pakistan remained cautious of Soviet aspirations for access to the warm waters of the Arabian Sea. Thus, Pakistan had to act reasonably in this situation. In 1981, Reagan was elected as the president of the United States and took office in January 1981 to revitalize American prestige and restrain the influence of the USSR. He pursued to get Pakistan's support in containing Soviet influence in Afghanistan (Sattar, 2010). Recognizing Pakistan's strategic relevance in fighting Soviet influence in Afghanistan, the Reagan administration boosted ties with Pakistan. A \$3.2 billion, five-year aid package was designed to meet Pakistan's concerns and emphasise the United States' commitment. Washington sought to obtain Islamabad's collaboration in promoting mutual regional interests and the establishment of a quid pro quo arrangement. This strategic cooperation allowed both countries to achieve their respective objectives, with the US attempting to limit Soviet expansion and Pakistan getting important backing for its security and stability. The United States has granted a six-year waiver for assistance to Pakistan, emphasizing the importance of addressing security concerns through collaborative relations and military support. In 1982, the United States extended \$600 million in annual military and economic aid. But the nuclear issue continued to be a contentious matter, with the United States expressing its apprehensions and Pakistan assuring its peaceful intentions. (Rafique, 2011)

In 1987, the Soviet Union declared its intention to withdraw from Afghanistan. The United States and Pakistan had divergent priorities: the United States concentrated on the evacuation of Soviet forces, whilst Pakistan aimed for the establishment of a friendly government in Kabul. After the withdrawal of USSR from Afghanistan the relationship between Pakistan and the United States witnessed a significant decline due to multiple factors. The United States lost its interest in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Pakistan was a key ally of the United States during the Soviet Afghan War, but the country lost its status as a strategic ally

following the departure (Rashid, 2000). The relationship between the United States and Pakistan following the withdrawal of the USSR was intricate and strained. When President George Bush assumed office in 1989, the Cold War was ending, and the global balance of power was undergoing a transformation. As a result of Pakistan's nuclear program, the United States put sanctions on the country in 1990 under the Pressler amendment. The sanctions froze \$564 million in military aid, including delivery of F-16 aircraft. The United States criticized Pakistan for allegedly harboring Islamic radicals and supporting militant organizations. Pakistan believed the United States had treated it unfairly, especially delaying the delivery of the F-16 fighter jets, despite payment (Hilali, 2017). The ties were further deteriorated by the issues like corruption and drug trafficking etc. Pakistan's hawkish stance towards India and Afghanistan made the relationship more difficult despite hopes for improvement, and the US showed little interest in fostering better ties. Diplomatic attempts and high-level visits were ineffective, and tensions in the relationship persisted. But, the Brown Amendment, which eased certain sanctions, was considered as a victory for Pakistan, but its impact was symbolic. Pakistan's support for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and their eventual victory in 1996 in Afghanistan was initially acknowledged by the US. However, the Taliban's harsh policies towards women and human rights abuses led to later criticism. (Jabeen & Mazhar, 2020). The emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan has exacerbated tensions in diplomatic relations. The United States withdrew from Afghanistan following the Soviet Union's exit, leading to political instability that had repercussions for Pakistan. The Taliban assumed control of Kabul in 1996, with Pakistan, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia recognizing their regime. The United States refrained from recognizing the Taliban because of concerns regarding human rights violations and their connections to al-Qaeda. The United States did not extend economic assistance to Afghanistan, leading to a power vacuum that was eventually occupied by the Taliban (Rashid, 2001). In 1998, Pakistan executed nuclear tests in response to India's nuclear tests, resulting in US sanctions and additional economic pressure. The coup led by Musharraf and the ensuing sanctions related to democracy worsened relations.

Pakistan-US relations had reached an all-time low in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Pakistan and the United States were able to revitalize their relationship through the lens of Afghanistan factor. It became apparent that Pakistan's cooperation was essential for the attainment of strategic objectives as the United States prepared to commence a global campaign against terrorism, with a primary focus on Afghanistan, under the code name "Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan." The United States endeavored to bolster diplomatic relations with Islamabad to secure its support, realizing Pakistan's critical role in the region. On September 13, 2001, the United States provided a detailed list of expectations to the leadership of Pakistan, which President Musharraf subsequently accepted, indicating a notable change in the bilateral relationship (Akhtar, 2012).

Al-Qaeda has been identified as the terrorist organization for the attacks on the US. Pakistan was required to make a strategic decision regarding the looming counter terrorism measures. This incident positioned Pakistan as a key ally in the War on Terror. This event had a profound impact on the global community. The UN Security Council immediately followed three resolutions within three days (Jabeen & Mazhar, 2020). The world was encouraged to intercede; it was resolved to freeze terrorists' assets. After the Taliban's resistance to handover Osama Bin Laden, the era of feasible relations between the United States and the Taliban came to an end. Pakistan was forced to interfere with the Taliban. Subsequently, Pakistan was compelled to either terminate its relationship with the Taliban or endure the repercussions. Therefore, partnership was established between Pakistan and the US by the lifting of sanctions and aid, which enabled the resumption of military sales and assistance. Pakistan became a non-NATO ally after the Bush Administration provided \$3 billion in economic and military assistance and the US President was able to withdraw democracy sanctions because of the Brownback II Amendment. Additionally, the Bush Administration extended soft-term loans to Pakistan in exchange for F-16 fighter aircraft and other military equipment (Asghar, 2015). The altered policy was clearly due to the growing of US interests in the region with another decade of involvement in Afghanistan. Pakistan had the concern that after the Soviet Union disintegrated, the US immediately ignored the region while showing no concern for regional and Pakistan's security. In Afghanistan and within its tribal belt, Pakistan struggled to maintain political stability and economic resilience. The events of 9/11 profoundly shaped global politics, driving the US's to take assertive measures in Afghanistan. In the region, only Pakistan could provide ultimate security support and logistical assistance. This fact proved to be a center of concern for foreign policy decision-making, and it decided on its future actions within hours. The Obama administration supported the Kerry Lugar measure, which sought to enhance economic assistance to Pakistan. It authorized \$1.5 billion in US aid; however, this amount might be increased if Pakistan made strides towards democracy and stability. But the efficiency of the aid is reduced by its attachment to certain conditions (Yaqoob & Sattar, 2021).

In February 2020, the Trump government and the Afghan Taliban shook hands in a peace agreement. The USA announced the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners and set a specific date i.e. May 1, 2021, to completely withdraw its troops from Afghanistan. However, this withdrawal, which was originally scheduled for May 1, 2021, was postponed by President Biden. The Biden administration implemented a withdrawal strategy by August 31, 2021, despite the Taliban's failure to comply with the terms of the agreement (Miller, 2023). The Afghan national government, established under the supervision of the USA, crumbled before the official deadline set by President Biden. On August 15, 2021, the capital of Afghanistan, Kabul, was occupied by the Afghan Taliban, forcefully (Brenner & Wallin, 2022). Pakistan was suspected as being partially responsible for the adverse conditions in Afghanistan by the Biden administration. They present a convincing case that Pakistan has become a hindrance in the establishment of peace as it supported the Afghan Taliban against the USA (Boni, 2022). While ignoring the \$1 trillion that the US invested in Afghanistan throughout the last two decades, the West continues to lodge on the \$33 billion that the USA gave to Pakistan during the same period, when debating who and how the Afghan Taliban funded. To divert the world's attention from the true causes of the failure of its evacuation plans, i.e., poor planning, a corrupt national government, the crooked National Afghan Army, the local allies of the US in Afghanistan, the pre-existing Taliban's power, etc., western media extensively spread this made-up story (Akbar, 2021). However, it was rationalized when the US's attention diverted from South Asia to the Indo-Pacific region which led to a sudden and imbalanced pullout from Afghanistan. But what the US lacked was a clear, functioning and dependable policy for leaving Afghanistan in a workable state. The ideal way to bring the USA and the Afghan Taliban on the same page was bilateral cooperation which was interrupted by the rapid pullout of the US forces and occupation of Kabul by the Afghan Taliban. As Pakistan has played a crucial role in the peace process in Afghanistan since the very beginning of the issue, it deserves recognition for its efforts by the US. It has geographical, historical, and ethnic ties with Afghanistan, along with its connections to the Afghan Taliban. This situation puts Pakistan in a position to facilitate negotiations for peace talks between the West and the Afghan Taliban (Humza & Khan, 2022). While sticking to the Peace Deal, Pakistan played a central role in enabling the safe withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan. It also played a vital role in facilitating the evacuation of the US citizens living in Afghanistan along with the US's Afghan Allies. The USA used Pakistan's land and airspace as a route for supporting NATO forces. (Khalid, Hussain & Mahmood, 2023).

However, unlike in previous administrations, the Biden government chose to not give enough importance to Pakistan in its state's foreign policy (Hussain & Khan, 2023). Since 2001, Pakistan has played a significant role in the war on terror as a non-NATO ally. However, the current US foreign policy shows that it has no concern whatsoever for regional security. The United States has centered its attention on addressing other currently significant matters like climate change, its local economy, and competition with China and Russia instead of carrying on the war against terror in South Asia. The post-withdrawal period has been a challenging time for the foreign relations between Pakistan and the US. The United States confronts China's increasing assertiveness, which poses new strategic challenges in the region to the US. Due to these political threats, the United States is actively strengthening its old alliances and making new partnerships, with a special focus on India. India's alliance is crucial to the US administration for keeping a well-organized and controlled equilibrium in the Indo-Pacific region while combating China. The overall rising Indian engagement in Afghanistan in terms of developmental projects and diplomatic initiatives deteriorated Pakistan-U.S. relations; it played up the security concerns to Islamabad. Pakistan saw India's direct involvement in Afghanistan's infrastructure development, educational aid, and investments in Afghan institutions as a strategic move to encircle it and decline its potential influence in Afghanistan. The U.S., interested in stabilizing Afghanistan and acting against extremist forces, increased India's involvement. It considered it a constructive participant in regional development, but in Pakistan, this alignment was perceived as a threat to strategic depth; for Pakistan, India's relationship with the Northern Alliance and other anti-Taliban factions was a particular security concern (Malik & Naz et al, 2022). Not only did the perception of an emerging U.S.-India partnership in Afghanistan strained relations with Pakistan, which accused Washington of compromising its security interests by forcing Pakistan to act against militant networks allegedly operating from its territory, but it also exacerbated the difference in priorities further deepening mistrust complicating already fragile alliance issues (Hanauer & Chalk, 2012).

As the US shifted focus away from Afghanistan and started to withdraw, China took advantage as it strengthened engagement with Pakistan and increased influence in Afghanistan as well. Initiatives such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) under Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) attempt to strengthen the economic as well as strategic importance of Pakistan and stabilize Afghanistan for securing investments and countering extremism around its Xinjiang region. The active engagement of China, particularly in

providing economic diplomacy and negotiation with the Taliban after the U.S. withdrawal, became a factor to mitigate the U.S. and subsequently India's hold in that part of Asia. Such bilateralism between Islamabad and Beijing, however, disturbed the US-Pakistan equilibrium as Washington considered Pakistan's turning eastward towards China as a deviation from their common strategic objectives. There was also the threat of China's rise in South Asia, through Pakistan, that the United States had doubts about for its own interests. Thereby cooperation was reduced, and the bilateral relationship worsened (Tahir & Hussain, 2022).

Iran's role in Afghanistan, and in particular its support for anti-Taliban movements, added a layer of complexity that affected both the relations between the US and Pakistan, as well as the whole regional balance. Iran's support for anti-Taliban movements, especially the Shia Hazara group, was motivated by the need to prevent Sunni militant groups and similar threats reaching Iran's borders. Iran had a very clear anti-Taliban policy at first. However, the return of the Taliban to power saw a pragmatic recalibration that had an engagement with the Taliban at its core. The US was suspicious of Iran and its actions regarding Afghanistan, relegating this to a campaign by Tehran aimed at rolling back any US influence in the area. This led the US to be more concerned with the regional allies of Iran and anxieties between Iran and Pakistan concerning Afghanistan began to surface. For Pakistan, the Iranian factor was both a positive and negative development. While Pakistan wanted stability in Afghanistan, it was also concerned that the increasing Iranian involvement would reduce its own importance in the region. This apprehension has been a source of tension in U.S.-Pakistan relations because any mistrust that the U.S. has for Iran causes the U.S. to scrutinize Pakistan's regional ambitions. (Shah & Ismail, 2023).

In March 2022, the former Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa while addressing the audience, amid the Islamabad Security Dialogue, ensured to opt for a new approach for a better future. He underlined the importance of addressing past clashes to lead a path to peace and progress between the US and Pakistan. Pakistan aims to collaborate with the US, beyond getting help for national security, including technological enhancements and climate change. (Ullah, Sulaiman & Bukhari, 2023) Pakistan's security policy prioritizes economic security to help with its current problems in managing its economic affairs. However, implementing this plan demands relentless hard work and Islamabad's relations with Washington are restricted in scope, as they lack a strategic plan while prioritizing tactical considerations.

Pakistan and the United States both are interested in making sure Afghanistan does not become a haven for ISIS-K and Al-Qaeda, so they may cooperate concerning sharing intelligence-gathering operations and counterterrorism work. They may cooperate in terms of humanitarian assistance and investing in reconstruction activity in Afghanistan, both of which may take advantage of Pakistan's geography and U.S. resources. Both the countries can very well balance two competing objectives by cooperating on Afghanistan's stabilization while teaming with Pakistan's emerging relations with China. Cooperative work then becomes possible on complementary goals such as regional connectivity and enforcing anti-terrorism and not a containment of China's activities in the region.

## **Conclusion**

The Pakistan-Afghanistan-U.S. triangle since 1989-the Soviet withdrawal-suggests many complexities in regional geopolitics, security imperatives, and changing international priorities. The systemic changes in the triangle have animated it for decades, motivated by the changes at home and internationally. Despite the total withdrawal of the U.S. from the region just a short period after the Soviet withdrawal, it allowed Pakistan to cope with the leftovers of an unstable Afghanistan. A post-9/11 period of renewed U.S. interaction with Pakistan brought that state as an indispensable partner into the War on Terror, but this time has sharply escalated mistrust: Washington often accuses Pakistan of harboring militant groups, while Islamabad feels that U.S. policy is nearly directed toward short-term military goals. This further development has resulted in the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, thus bringing about salient questions regarding cooperation that may be possible in an increasingly transformed regional and global landscape.

Pak-Afghan-U.S. Ties today, shaped by a mix of challenges and opportunities, reflect similarity on Pakistan's part with the U.S. over ensuring that Afghanistan does not turn into a haven for ISIS-K and Al-Qaeda and other extremist elements menacing regional and international security. This shared goal forms a basis for co-operation in counterterrorism, but the mode of engagement with the Taliban is still a point of contention. However, Pakistan's strategic relationship with China only makes matters more complicated and creates a need for nuanced diplomacy to exert influence in that region. However, even at such complexity, tremendous scope exists for pragmatist cooperation between Pakistan and the United States concerning issues of mutual interest. For example, humanitarian assistance and rebuilding the Afghan economy would facilitate coordination of efforts through overlap in terms of proximity to Pakistan and sources with expertise available in the U.S. Pakistan and the U.S. may collaborate on their respective priorities or regional arrangements without challenging one another's regional partnerships and the future depends on a shared



understanding of the central role Afghanistan needs to play in the regional stability. For Pakistan, an economically viable and peaceful Afghanistan is critical for securing its western border and setting up regional trade connectivity. The United States will have some influence in Afghanistan to ensure that extreme threats are contained, and regional power dynamics are balanced. This depends on the recognition of the mutual interests of the two nations to constructively engage with other powers at the regional level, coupled with a flexible approach that accommodates changing geopolitical environments. Thus, Afghanistan emerges not as a source of instability but as an incubator for regional integration and mutual progress.

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