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Rethinking Pakistan's Afghan Policy

After a long tenure of tense relations, Pakistan and Afghanistan have agreed to reinstate their diplomatic and trade ties. However, the two countries need to take pragmatic measures to foster cordial long-term ties.



History of Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations

The relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have always been marked by phases of instability and shifting dynamics. Since the independence of Pakistan, the two countries have territorial disputes. However, Pakistan's alliance with the United States in the Cold War minimized their bilateral differences. The Pakistan army provided training to the Afghan Taliban during the 1970s. This marked the beginning of Islamabad's flawed Afghan policy. Since then, the Pakistani establishment looked at Afghanistan through a lens of strategic depth.

The Afghan Taliban government needs to act as a legitimate and responsible state

To achieve this ambition, Pakistan heavily relied on Islamic proxies inside Afghanistan, drawing significant domestic and international criticism. This policy fostered religiously motivated terrorism and extremism inside Pakistan as well. Islamabad was the key supporter of the Taliban government in the 1990s, which alienated all the stakeholders of Afghanistan. However, the 9/11 attacks put the Pakistani government in a tougher situation. The country adopted a paradoxical approach. It provided military bases to NATO, while allegedly providing sanctuaries to the Afghan Taliban in its tribal areas.

This erroneous policy had catastrophic implications for the country. Pakistan became a victim of immense terrorism. Some Pakistani extremists, the Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), blamed the country for supporting the United States in its so-called War on Terror and announced an indiscriminate war against the whole nation. Pakistan suffered more than 80000 civilian and military casualties due to the surge of terrorism in the country. TTP's terrorist activities had a debilitating effect on the country's economy as well.

Pakistan sought to counter rising Indian influence in Kabul by backing the Afghan Taliban. It also endeavored to establish a docile government in Afghanistan. However, it was unable to realize these ambitions. Pakistan's pro-Taliban policy also ruptured its relations with Washington and other NATO countries. This strategy further compromised Pakistan's regional geo-economic interests.

Challenges and Opportunities in Bilateral Cooperation

With the resurgence of terrorism in Pakistan, After the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, a moment initially celebrated by the Pakistani establishment, Islamabad's ambition of a strategic depth on its Western border also failed. The relations between the two sides soured profoundly. Soon after the establishment of the interim Taliban government in Afghanistan, Pakistan faced a renewed tide of terrorism inside the country, with ISKP* and TTP at the forefront. Despite Pakistan's recurrent appeals, the Taliban government remained reluctant to act against these terrorist groups. The Taliban government also made irredentist claims on Pakistan's Pashtun regions, further intensifying relations between the two countries.

As Pakistan grapples with the failure of its Afghan policy, its policymakers need serious introspection. This re-evaluation demands a tenacious assessment of previous miscalculations and a lucid vision for the future. However, the country's establishment is still pursuing the same policy regarding Afghanistan. Advocates of this policy argue that it is influenced by regional security and politics. Although the regional geopolitical influence is irrefutable, Pakistan has numerous policy alternatives that need to be explored.

The recent agreement between the two sides to resume transit and trade, along with the opening of the Torkham border crossing, is encouraging. However, the two countries have to follow a multipronged strategy to establish long-term peace and sustainable bilateral relations. In 2024, the bilateral trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan stood at \$1.6 billion. They hold the potential to increase this trade to a significant amount. However, this is only possible if the two sides take pragmatic measures.

Pathways to Sustainable Peace and Stability

Pakistan needs to re-evaluate its foreign policy goals, security priorities, and nation-building strategies. This requires sincere democratic inspection, political will, and vision. It must hold the former decision-makers accountable for their failed policies. However, the absence of accountability has greatly eroded the state legitimacy. Most of the policy decisions of Pakistan have always been prejudiced and elitist, resulting in agitation among the nation. Numerous local movements and even a significant number of members of the Police and other state institutions blame the policymakers for the current economic predicament and security crisis in the country. Therefore, the state must make inclusive policy decisions. The political parties must step out of the elitist mindset and take policy advice from people from the peripheral regions.

Afghanistan, on the other hand, also needs to revisit its regional and domestic policies. Providing safe havens and sanctuaries to terrorist organizations like TTP, BLA, and ISKP* will only deteriorate its relations with regional countries, further exacerbating its economic crisis and diplomatic isolation. The interim Taliban government must act against the terrorist organizations using Afghan soil to conduct terrorism in the neighboring countries. The Afghan Taliban government needs to act as a legitimate and responsible state. They must take the concerns of neighboring countries seriously. Otherwise, regional peace and stability will remain a far-fetched dream, and Afghanistan will continue to grapple with obtaining international legitimacy.

**-banned in Russia*

Abbas Hashemite, March 30, 2025

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