

# UNRAVELING PAKISTAN-AFGHANISTAN STRATEGIC RELATIONS IN THE POST-US WITHDRAWAL ERA

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## Abstract

*The future and prosperity of Pakistan largely relies upon the nature of its relations with neighbouring Afghanistan. The strategic quandaries between Pakistan and Afghanistan like border issues and persistent cross-border terrorism directly affect Pakistan's domestic situation and are producing reverberating influence throughout South Asia. This paper sought to examine the strategic limitations influencing their relations significantly in the wake of American withdrawal from Afghan soil. Furthermore, elucidating the profound impacts stemming from the circumstances after the American exit, it explores the political dimensions and ramifications of their relations. To that end, this research builds multi-dimensional causal relationships and employs qualitative approaches. The study's findings depict that these strategic constraints are deep-rooted and multifaceted with implications for regional stabilization, manifesting through traditional security conundrums, disruption of trade routes, and obstacles to economic integration. The implications of this study accentuate the pressing need for coordinated measures to promote peace and stability in the region. It concludes by presenting some policy recommendations intended to lessen the existing challenges as well as encouraging a conducive environment to ameliorate relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan.*

**Keywords:** Strategic Relations, Security Dynamics, Post-US Withdrawal, Taliban Regime.

## Introduction

Pakistan and Afghanistan share a long and complex history of bilateral relations, marked by security concerns, territorial disputes, and the on-going socio-political enigma in Afghanistan. The recent US withdrawal has further added complexity to these challenges, introducing new obstacles to regional stability. Owing to the relentless mistrust and disagreement on the border, Pakistan and Afghanistan's frictional relations exacerbate regional instability. Even though Pakistan has recognized the Durand Line, which has historically been porous to regulate cross-border movement, as an international border and seeks to create a *fait accompli* on it.<sup>1</sup> Afghanistan sees it as a disputed border lacking legal sanctity. Another prominent constraint arises in the context of the Pashtunistan issue, which is premised on the reservations of Pashtun ethnic groups residing in the *Pashtun belt* of the northeastern frontier region of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Because of this, the socioeconomic turmoil in Pakistan's Pashtun region cannot be disregarded. Such disagreements have

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an impact on the two states' bilateral relations as well as present regional ramifications.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, both states have cooperated diplomatically and economically while showing their commitment to combating terrorism, but there is still a long-standing issue of mistrust and suspicion between them.

According to the *Institute of Policy Studies*, there have been historically strained bilateral relations, which can be attributed to five main factors i.e. sovereignty concerns, security interests, geopolitical dynamics, cross-border ties, and connectivity and trade.<sup>3</sup> Addressing these underlying issues is critical for the secure and peaceful future of both countries. Pakistan has had to deal with security issues brought on by transnational militant activities, such as insurgent infiltration, terrorist strikes, and the smuggling of drugs and weapons. It is an established fact that a stable and peaceful Afghanistan is essential to averting these escalating complications in other neighbouring states. To tackle these security threats, particularly border disputes and terrorism, it necessitates collaborative efforts and confidence-building measures involving multiple stakeholders. In an attempt to analyse the strategic constraints, this study sheds light on the core precipitating factors fuelling animosity between these states and analyses geopolitical dynamics along with the influence of external powers.

### **Strategic Constraints between Pakistan and Afghanistan: Analysis of the Post-American Departure Scenario**

The geopolitical landscape of Central and South Asia has significantly altered because of the US military defeat and the departure of American forces after a two-decade-long war. For instance, Pakistan, has suffered in the face of the US departure heightening the regional security risks and leaving a power vacuum. The Afghan government had to deal with the resurgent Taliban and other armed groups that took advantage of the situation and established their own regime. In his book, *'The Taliban Revival: Violence and Extremism on the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier'*, Hassan Abbas examines the variables that led to the rebirth of the Taliban in Afghanistan including the group's ability to exploit the security vacuum created by the withdrawal of the US and NATO troops, its use of violence to intimidate and control the local population, and its ability to gain support from disaffected segments of society.

Thus, this considerably caused instability in Pakistan and violent crimes across the border. During the humanitarian catastrophe that followed the departure, a larger number of Afghans experienced displacement, food insecurity, and restricted access to basic amenities. Afghan refugees began to migrate to adjacent countries in greater numbers, especially to Pakistan due to its porous border. This has posed enormous challenges in managing and providing support to them. Because of the shared border and the sizeable Pashtun community residing on both sides of the border, the flow of terrorists and weapons across the border has always been a major issue. In the backdrop of rising violence and terrorism, cross-border terrorism is currently the biggest security threat and the source of concern between the two governments.

## Negotiating with the ‘Good Taliban’

The Taliban, an early 1990s-era Sunni Islamist and pro-Pashtun and nationalist organisation, ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. It became more potent as the number of Americans in Afghanistan substantially decreased after 2014, and it seized control of Afghanistan again in August 2021. Generally, the phrase ‘*Good Taliban*’ has been used to refer to Taliban members or groups that may be viewed as being more moderate or amenable to negotiations and a political agreement compared to other factions that incited extremism and conducted terrorist attacks that threatened global peace and stability.<sup>4</sup> The Taliban in government essentially belong to the same Islamic fundamentalist group that took the opportunity soon after American departure. While the Taliban group took power, Pakistan immediately showed its concerns and made efforts to end the diplomatic isolation of the new Afghan regime from the international community. The Pakistani government has never opposed the Taliban, but it would encourage them to establish a government that had financial backing from the west along with international recognition. However, the forceful takeover drove out political rivals and infuriated the Western states that had supported the Afghan state. The Taliban are excluded from the political and economic incentives that are associated with international recognition. Thus, Pakistan is unlikely to sever its connections with the Kabul government’s new leaders.<sup>5</sup>

## Examination of the Key Strategic Limitations in Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations

While both the countries have worked towards improving their relationship over the years, their strategic relations remain fragile and volatile due to a few factors, which are as follow:

### Two-Front Security Dilemma as Underlying Strategic Factor

The foremost strategic limitation in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations is the two-front security dilemma of Pakistan. This refers to perplexing situation where Pakistan is facing a potential threat from two different fronts simultaneously due to its difficult relationships with both India and Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> The first front involves India on Pakistan’s eastern border. Pakistan’s concern about India’s military capabilities and intentions has led to antagonism and a significant investment in its own military capabilities, including nuclear weapons. Afghanistan is the second front. The long and permeable border between the two nations causes worries for Pakistan. Owing to the unrest in Afghanistan, Pakistan has had to deal with serious security issues, such as cross-border terrorism and the flow of militants and weapons. As a result, Pakistan now faces a potential conflict with both India and Afghanistan at the same time, greatly complicating its security predicament.

Pakistan’s border with Afghanistan at the western front causes security concerns. The on-going instability in Afghanistan has been affecting Pakistan,

specifically the existence of extremist ideological groups prompting terrorism. The porous border facilitates cross-border movement of militants, smugglers, and arms. Insurgency and militancy spill over into Baluchistan affects Pakistan's stability. Consequently, Baluchistan faces security threats due to the proximity of conflict zones and the ease of infiltration. The Afghan conflict has led to a significant influx of Afghan refugees into Baluchistan. This strains local resources, disrupts the social fabric, and poses security challenges. Consequently, Baluchistan becomes a theatre for proxy conflicts, impacting local stability. Given the porous border and longstanding ethnic and tribal ties, the flow of militants, weapons, and narcotics via the Durand Line has been curtailing Pakistan's security. Henceforth, due to the sporadic outbursts of violence, Pakistan has been considering Afghanistan as its top security threat.

### **Abrupt US withdrawal and Refugee Crisis**

The chaotic US departure reflects the interplay of socio-economic and political ramifications as the post-withdrawal scenario exacerbated strategic constraints between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The US departure has had a profound effect on their relationships. Pakistan's resources were strained amid escalating tensions in consequence of the sudden collapse of the Afghan government and the influx of refugees. The sudden US exit reinforced perceptions of unjust critique and left Pakistan with the feeling of being abandoned, despite its efforts to facilitate negotiations between the Taliban and the US. In fact, the perceived abandonment shifted the regional balance of power and led to a power vacuum for other regional players, specifically China, which eventually impacted the dynamics of South Asia.

In the aftermath, the strained relationship is fueled by accusations and denials, the TTP factor and refugee crisis. Firstly, Pakistan claims that the *Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP) is receiving backing from the temporary Taliban government while Kabul refutes such allegations of harbouring extremists. The TTP's cross-border strikes and its safe havens in Afghanistan deteriorate their bilateral ties. Tensions reached a breaking point when the TTP conducted a massive raid in Chitral to seize control of several villages after gathering fighters in the districts of Kunar and Nuristan. Secondly, owing to the Taliban's resurgence, Pakistan was apprehensive about violence and instability near the border. Until 2022, there were almost 3 million Afghans living in Pakistan.<sup>7</sup> This led to straining their erstwhile cordial relationship and inciting to the repatriation of Afghan refugees, as Pakistan government seeks to deport hundreds of thousands of unauthorized refugees.<sup>8</sup> According to analysts, this policy approach might have a major impact on their bilateral relationship and even exacerbate an already tense situation, as Afghanistan has called the Pakistani action 'unilateral' and 'humiliating.'<sup>9</sup> Pakistan has faced opposition from Afghanistan in its efforts to advance its strategic objectives, including the acknowledgment of the 'Durand Line'. In order to minimize Indian influence and assure a supportive administration in Afghan territory, Pakistan has historically supported Taliban rule in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, it has always sought to implement policies that are in line with its national interests and recognize the diplomatic intricacies of Afghanistan. These strategies have not

produced the desired results though and have encountered as evidenced by the failure of successive Taliban regimes.

## **The Geopolitical Dynamics in Afghanistan**

Pakistan's shifting influence amid the evolving Indian ascendancy and China's strategic engagement with Afghanistan constitute geopolitical dynamics and bringing new challenges for its foreign policy objectives.

### **Indian Meddling in the Afghanistan Conundrum**

In the wake of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, India has created space to further its strategic interests against Pakistan. To undermine Pakistan, it has discovered a substantial foothold in Afghanistan to carry out its covert operations through Baloch dissidents in Baluchistan and the TTP in newly merged districts of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP). India has allegedly been backing the TTP in its efforts to breed discontent and unrest within Pakistan's borders by exacerbating the already precarious circumstances.<sup>10</sup> This mistrust stems from animosity ingrained in geopolitical objectives, which was made worse by their competing objectives in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's changing circumstances reflect India and Pakistan's intricate geopolitical rivalry. While Pakistan has traditionally sounded security concerns, India seeks to maintain influence in Afghanistan through public diplomacy and development assistance. India has taken a proactive role in aiding Afghanistan's infrastructure growth, especially with regards to the hydropower industry. In current scenario, India is showing its support and has had a 'technical team' based in Kabul since June 2022 to oversee its distribution, despite the fact, it does not formally recognize Taliban government.<sup>11</sup> Projects like the *Afghan-India Friendship (Salma Dam)* and the *Shahtoot Dam* in Kabul province serve as evidence of India's substantial support to Afghanistan's hydropower ambitions. India's financial assistance, which is estimated to be worth more than *USD 3 billion*, demonstrates its dedication to supporting Afghan infrastructure.<sup>12</sup> India has pledged to continue and finish ongoing infrastructure projects in Afghanistan illustrating its determination to sustain the presence and influence in infrastructure development. Hence, India approaches Afghanistan by considering both its own regional interests and to meet the expectations of its Western allies, implying its efforts to limit the presence of a pro-Pakistani regime in Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup>

### **Strategic Engagement of China**

China has demonstrated a long-term and purposeful commitment to participation to support the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan by keeping its embassy open in Kabul. In a similar vein, China has maintained contact with the Taliban to the

extent that it resembles de facto recognition, as it has consistently engaged with the Taliban to expand its influence and capitalize on the void created by the US exit. One of the key elements of China's larger strategy for regional economic integration is the establishment of trade corridors connecting Central Asian resources to ports in South Asia, with a focus on trans-Afghan commerce and connectivity efforts. Consequently, in these changing dynamics, China is demonstrating its desire for greater interregional connection through its growing diplomatic outreach in the Middle East through BRI.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to India and China, Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan has had challenges and is gradually waning. The fact that the Taliban have direct control over Afghanistan may lessen Pakistan's ability to influence them. Pakistan's stability therefore depends on maintaining a stable relationship with Afghanistan, resolving transnational threats, reviving the *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor* (CPEC), and promoting greater economic connection and integration throughout the region.

### Obstacles for Pakistan in Pursuing Strategic Policies

A thorough comprehension of the intricacies of Pakistan's strategic policies in Afghanistan to pursue national interest in Afghanistan is crucial. Pakistan faces many obstacles in defending its strategic interests in Afghanistan, particularly given the dynamic geopolitical environment. Its strategy in Afghanistan is complex, involving border conflicts, issues with administration, and managing its repercussions internally while supporting the Taliban. A thorough examination of Pakistan's policy approach towards Afghanistan is necessary.

- **Recurring Clashes:** The absence of an effective government has made territorial disputes worse, resulting in a volatile atmosphere that seriously jeopardizes regional stability. This situation exacerbates the clashes along the border, cross-border terrorist activities, and other recurring challenges, including refugee crisis, disagreements on water resources and related issues, which have all gotten worse since the Taliban took control in 2021.
- **Afghanistan's Governance Challenges:** Similarly, the new leaders in Afghanistan are also facing several complex issues related to governance, including foreign recognition, humanitarian assistance, basic healthcare, women's education, and infrastructure development. Furthermore, there is a serious risk of internal terrorism due to the presence of ISIS-Khorasan Province (ISKP), which increases the threat of terrorism. For the Afghan Taliban, effectively handling this intricate terrorism threat is a difficult undertaking.
- **Lack of Political Commitment and Political Instability in Pakistan:** Another enduring problem that has stalled efforts to build stable connections and support Afghanistan's development is the lack of long-term political commitment to the country. The political volatility of Pakistan has made it difficult for it to support Afghanistan without

wavering, which has impeded the development of long-term regional stability and bilateral ties.<sup>15</sup> The power struggle, governance issues, smooth transition, and internal political turmoil complicate its efforts to engage with Afghanistan. Furthermore, Pakistan's domestic political issues have frequently taken effort and resources away from vital diplomatic initiatives meant to build a positive and long-lasting relationship with its neighbour.

- **Shift in US Dependence and Strategic Interests:** America's reliance on Pakistan has significantly decreased since the US withdrew its troops from Afghanistan. With their departure, Pakistan's standing in the United States' counterterrorism efforts has changed, and the nation is no longer a major frontrunner. Pakistan's strategic importance in this regard has significantly decreased with the end of the American military occupation of Afghanistan. Consequently, the US-Pakistan dynamic has changed, which has rearranged the power dynamics in the region and reevaluated Pakistan's place in the international war against terror.

### **Impact of US Withdrawal on Pakistan-Afghanistan Strategic Relations**

- **Pakistan's Growing Security Concerns:** There were concerns regarding the potential of strengthening extremist ideologies, which could contribute to the spread of radicalism beyond Afghanistan's borders. The US departure also sparked concerns about the rise of foreign terrorist organizations operating out of Afghanistan. Meanwhile, there have been potential implications of the Taliban's upsurge, their alleged ties with non-state actors, and reorganization or regrouping of different terrorist outfits like TTP's connections with Central Asian and foreign Al-Qaeda militants. TTP has orchestrated attacks in Pakistan's territory. Pakistan has provided evidence regarding the involvement of TTP members who have sought refuge in Afghan territory in carrying out these attacks. The international community has made all efforts to deny safe havens to terrorist outfits.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the political instability in Afghanistan has increased bitterness due to the infiltration of terrorists into Pakistan. Secondly, Afghanistan is a major grower of the opium poppy, which supports the illegal drug industry. Profits from this activity might be invested in supporting terrorist organizations and undermining regional attempts to establish security and stability. Illicit trade and smuggling are key sources of funding for terrorist and criminal organizations, and fighting against them is a colossal task for the Taliban, which runs an economically torn country. In March 2023, Afghan authorities arrested a group of smugglers who were trying to smuggle a large quantity of weapons into Pakistan.<sup>17</sup>

- **Impediments to Peace-Building Efforts in South Asia:** The frictional relationship of Pakistan with the Taliban regime brings political challenges to enhance their cooperation in political matters. Regional stability is being jeopardized by the global expansion of ISIL, and this poses an immediate danger to humanity. The regional states have reacted by stepping up their efforts to battle terrorist organizations and their networks, both through military operations and by adopting policies to counteract radicalization and propaganda from extremist outfits. ISIL's network in South Asia has tried to capitalize on local grievances and use sectarian divisions to garner support from there. ISIL has ties with proscribed TTP, which has carried out several high-profile assaults inside Pakistan, and with other organizations operating in South Asia such as *Ansar al-Islam* and *Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen based in Bangladesh* (JMB). This ISIL alliance poses a threat to regional and international peace.
- **Impact on Economic Growth and Regional Integration:** The post-withdrawal environment additionally impacted trade routes, infrastructure projects, and regional cooperation initiatives. The upsurge of the Taliban group into power and their subsequent policies, which led to the influx of refugees through the porous border caused disruptions. This placed additional strain on the pervasive economic obstacles in Pakistan. Afghanistan may also struggle to maintain its viability and security. The regional integration efforts through CPEC were adversely hit by Taliban upsurge and the power vacuum. This destabilizing environment would have a knock-on effect on Pakistan and regional security, halting the success of geo-economic objectives.
- **Regional Instability:** The long-term consequences of such frictional relations have a direct impact on regional stability. The American exit has sparked concerns about a potential overflow of Afghan migrants into neighbouring countries, particularly Pakistan and Iran, which have been hosting a sizeable population of Afghan refugees for decades. The deteriorating security conditions in Afghanistan are responsible for an upsurge of refugees, placing additional strain on the stability and resources of the area. It put both the law-and-order situation and the economy of Pakistan at risk, these strategic limitations are impeding the construction of border fencing, which is necessary to combat cross-border terrorism. Since November 2022, when the Pakistani Taliban, (TTP), broke a months-long ceasefire agreement with the government, the Taliban government has been threatening to remove the fence, which was followed by an attack on the *Chamman* and *Torkham* borders by the Taliban Local Afghanistan forces. A complex geopolitical competition that may exacerbate regional tensions is also a result of the instability in Afghanistan, which gives regional powers like Pakistan, India, China, and Russia a chance to expand their influence against the backdrop of assisting these factions.<sup>18</sup>



## Strategic Policy Framework for Strengthening PAK-Afghan Relations

The following recommendations aim at alleviating existing problems with Pakistan's strategy for Afghanistan.

- **Addressing Border Issues and Cross-Border Terrorism:** The *Durand Line* issue needs to be addressed urgently and comprehensively. Resolution requires acknowledging the facts the way are and finding an amicable and negotiated solution. It is vital to recognize the concerns raised by the locals on both sides of the border. Achieving long-term peace and stability in the region largely depends on addressing the grievances of the locals, prioritizing socioeconomic stability, and enhancing trade, development, and security cooperation.
- **Carrot and Stick Policy Approach:** To provide diplomatic and administrative assistance to Afghanistan in international reintegration, it is imperative to exert pressure on the Taliban regime to fulfil their commitments to the international community. Referring to the '*Carrot and Stick*' policy approach, Pakistan should offer incentives and withdraw those levers if it undermines Pakistan's territorial integrity. It encompasses a firm and comprehensive strategy to tackle the menace of extremism and terrorism, while subsequently rendering support to the incumbent Afghan government in consolidating its authority and addressing the concerns of various stakeholders. In the aftermath of the US exit, Pakistan wholeheartedly rendered humanitarian support, as 50,000 metric tons of wheat, winter housing, and critical medical supplies are among the USD 28 million in support being provided to the fraternal Afghan people.<sup>19</sup> By means of incentives, Pakistan can render its diplomatic assistance to the Afghan regime in managing its internal constituencies and addressing international diplomatic challenges. This can be accomplished through intelligence sharing to run the government, navigate complex political dynamics, and help the ruling group engage with the international community. Pakistan can even guide the Taliban regime in making informed decisions and formulating effective policies by sharing valuable information to address mutual security concerns. Alternatively, in pursuing counterterrorism operations, in the face of the imminent threat of terrorism, Pakistan should adopt a hard-line stance to ensure that the Taliban administration is not endorsing terrorism or providing safe havens to terrorist organizations. It should hold the Taliban accountable for their commitments if the group restrains compliance with internationally accepted obligations and norms. To combat this menace, South Asian nations will need to step up their counterterrorism operations and improve intelligence sharing.
- **Constructive Dialogue:** Despite strained relations, Pakistan should work with Afghanistan to settle border concerns through persistent diplomatic efforts.<sup>20</sup> This will help with border management and

diplomacy. The bilateral commission could aim to distinctly define the Durand Line. Likewise, cooperative border management techniques are essential to stop illegal activity, smuggling, and cross-border militancy. Inter-border security forces and regular consultations can improve coordination.

- **Intelligence Sharing to Combat Radicalization and Terrorism:** Pakistan and Afghanistan need to bolster intelligence-sharing arrangements to counter terrorism threats. Integrated efforts to combat groups such as *ISIS-Khorasan Province (ISKP)* could strengthen security. Educational initiatives aimed at promoting diversity, tolerance, and critical thinking are imperative to curb radicalization.
- **Domestic Consensus and Public Awareness:** Encouraging national discourse on Afghanistan policy by involving academia, civil society, and political parties to seek agreement on long-term policy is imperative. For Pakistan to successfully traverse the obstacles posed by its engagement with Afghanistan, a comprehensive and nuanced approach that strikes a balance between security, development, and diplomacy is needed.
- **Consideration of Regional Cooperation and Diplomatic Initiatives:** The sustained diplomatic efforts between these two states are crucial for bolstering confidence-building measures for mutual benefit. It is necessary to create channels for reviving diplomatic relations by persuading the international community to give de jure recognition to the Taliban-led government in Afghanistan. The mediatory role of China can be constructive in bringing diplomatic initiatives and encouraging international cooperation. In this regard, the *Belt and Road Project (BRI)* has the potential to spur regional cooperation and connectivity. To that end, the active engagement of China can pave the way for their rapprochement. China has been investing in the country financially. For instance, it has invested around USD 3.5 billion since 2005. It subsequently signed a deal with the Taliban regime to further extend its support and ensure the safety of its BRI project.<sup>21</sup> To address mutual security concerns, China can assist in mitigating such challenges by leveraging its robust ties with both states. Collaboration on economic, energy, and security issues can help achieve regional stability. In the same way, leverage China's influence to promote stability in Afghanistan while safeguarding Pakistan's interests and cooperating on economic initiatives is also constructive.
- **Endorsing SCO Efforts in Countering Terrorism:** The *Shanghai Cooperation Organization* assumes a pivotal role in enhancing coordination and facilitating joint responses to the incessant threats stemming from Afghanistan. Through SCO engagement in combined military exercises and operations, it can be instrumental in combating the spread of extremism and terrorism.<sup>22</sup> Its member states can enhance cooperation and border protection measures by recognizing the need to

prevent the movement and infiltration of ISIL terrorists across borders. Pakistan's SCO membership has tremendous benefits, elevating its stature in the context of regional security and peace and refuting false claims about the CPEC. The SCO has demonstrated its commitment to countering terrorism, separatism, and extremism by means of useful partnerships such as the 'SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group'.<sup>23</sup> This collaborative effort directly supports Afghanistan's efforts to achieve stability by concentrating on combating organized crime, drug trafficking, and terrorism. The 'Peace Mission' and joint military exercises also indicate their emphasis on counterterrorism operations to neutralize the simulated terrorist threats.<sup>24</sup> Exercises essentially enhance their tactical coordination, intelligence sharing, and operational readiness to address common security challenges originating from Afghanistan. Cross-border cooperation through the introduction of border liaison offices, joint patrols, and information sharing mechanisms can be effective in border security and minimize the threat of terrorism and illicit trade. For instance, the SCO's *Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS)* has been used as a platform for intelligence sharing, analysis, and coordination among member states. Implying that it can also be useful in combating the threat posed by ISIL and other terrorist organizations.

- **Enhancing Regional Cooperation:** There is a need for enhanced regional cooperation to resolve multifaceted challenges. Initiatives aimed at fostering stability and economic growth in Afghanistan may receive help from the SCO.<sup>25</sup> It may help to lessen the attractiveness of extremist ideology and foster inclusive governance by addressing socio-economic problems, which will make it harder for ISIL to expand. This can be done by promoting inclusive governance and socio-economic development. The active role of SCO member states is paramount for offering opportunities to the marginalized populace as well as minimizing the vulnerability of young minds to extremist recruitment. To locate and eliminate the ISIL fighters and their networks, security forces from member states can closely cooperate with Afghan security forces. The SCO can simultaneously contribute while assisting initiatives aimed at economic stability and peace, while bringing inclusive governance to move it towards a prosperous future. Investing in digital infrastructure, energy grids, and cross-border transport networks strengthens infrastructure connections, which facilitate trade, people-to-people exchanges, and economic integration. In addition, measures to improve trade and investment ties, such as lowering trade obstacles, streamlining customs processes, and encouraging intraregional trade via unified laws and trade agreements, are essential. Environmental cooperation is another component, which emphasizes joint efforts to address issues like pollution, water scarcity, and climate change through cooperative conservation and sustainable resource management techniques.

Fostering shared creativity and research via cooperative resource sharing, technological creation, and scientific research further fortifies the ability to address these challenges.

## Conclusion

To put it succinctly, there are multiple factors that have played role in the disputes and distrust between Pakistan and Afghanistan relations. The historical hostilities and mistrust between the two nations have hindered efforts to mend in the post-US withdrawal future. The lingering threat of terrorism, border clashes, and infiltration, along with illicit trade, persistently halts progress in bilateral relations and regional cooperation. Even though Pakistan has taken harsh action against militants operating from its territory, Afghanistan continues to have doubts about Pakistan's sincerity in combating the militants, who are wreaking havoc in Afghanistan. On the other hand, Pakistan criticizes Afghanistan for failing to control *Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan*, which is to blame for the on-going bloodshed in its territory. Owing to strategic considerations, the interlinked security of Pakistan and Afghanistan highlights the need for a stable and peaceful relationship. The on-going instability in Afghanistan has had a significant negative influence on Pakistan's security, and the influx of migrants and militants across the border has exacerbated socioeconomic issues. Given these difficulties, Pakistan and Afghanistan must seek to strengthen their bilateral ties. Nonetheless, promoting harmony with Pakistan can support regional growth and stability. For the benefit of the people of both states, security and sovereignty issues must be acknowledged and resolved via communication. In this complicated region, coordination and understanding between states are essential for fostering peace and stability. This can be done by stepping up economic cooperation, maintaining diplomatic efforts, and working together to fight terrorism. Richard Holbrooke, an analyst for Pakistan-Afghan relations, rightly pointed out, '*The problem with Pakistan and Afghanistan is that they are joined in the hip; you can't separate them.*' This indicates that one state's instability would lead to another state's instability. Otherwise, such eminent quandaries would have wider implications, leading to instability and economic disintegration in the South Asian region.

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