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An Analysis of the Changing Dynamics of Pak-Afghan Relations and Latest Developments

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ABSTRACT

The changing security dynamics of the regional and global politics has attracted the attention of the whole world to Pakistan. Besides being faced with new challenges of security along both of its eastern and western border, Pakistan has gained a great image in the global politics. Its mediating role in the de-escalation of tension between the US and Iran has been highly appreciated by the major powers and particularly the US. But after all, security has been a major concern of Pakistan in the post-9/11, 2001 scenario despite the fact that the country has to adopt different strategies for overcoming the issue. The escalation of tension along both sides of the border has created hurdles in the way of trade, business and economic activities for the people who remain dependent on the Pak-Afghan border. This study is an effort to analyze the changing dynamics of Pak-Afghan Relations and latest developments. Main findings of the study focus on Pakistan's emergence in the global politics, security concerns along the Pak-Afghan border and the need for the quest for peace in the region.

Keywords: Changing, Security, Dynamics, Relations, Developments

Introduction

The recent US-Iran conflict has greatly impacted the regional and global politics.

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Pakistan's active role as peace mediator and its preoccupation with facilitating talks between the US and Iran, while Pakistan's internal security challenges drew the attention of the government where Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan saw its worst scenario (Rana , 2026). Pakistan's significant role in the US-Iran conflict has also diverted the attention from pressing domestic and regional concerns since Pakistan had to face confrontation from India in May 2025 (Rana , 2026) . The conflict favored Pakistan and after the de-escalation of tension, the image of Pakistan was highly projected in the world politics. Though the conflict remained for a short period of time but it created a great impact on the regional and global politics resulting in drawing the attention of the world towards itself. Since the end of the conflict India has to increase its influence in Afghanistan as a strategic partner in the region despite the fact it does not share any border with Afghanistan.

Since the US-Iran war started on February 28, 2026, the regional and global politics has to face both economic and security challenges. But Pakistan's involvement in the conflict to the extent of mediating the peace process, has also led to the worsening of internal security in the country (Rana , 2026). Security situation in Pakistan and particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa remained very alarming in some parts of the province resulting in the death casualties and injuries of many people. A comparative analysis of the two quarters, October to December 2025 and January to March 2026 shows that the total number of attacks rose from 128 to 169, resulting in more than doubling from 169 to 349, showing a rise in both the frequency and severity of violence (Rana , 2026) . April 2026 also witnessed 55 attacks indicating that the Urumqi talks had little effect on the reconciliation process between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan was not an event of sudden withdrawal but was a consequence of the drawdown scenario initiated in 2014 by the US and the allied partners and to be completed by 2020 while passing through various tranches (Tariq, 2020). The law and order situation across the Pak-Afghan border is an additional security threat affecting the human lives and infrastructure across both sides of the border. The cross-border terrorism and insurgency continue with both Afghanistan and Pakistan accusing and counter-

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accusing each other for being responsible for the worst security situation along the border. It has resulted in affecting the civilian populations, and the livelihood of the common man along the border besides being loss to their business and economic activities. A new feature of security landscape is the growing use of the commercial and modified unmanned aerial devices (Rana , 2026). Attacks by such devices were observed recently when militants launched quadcopter attacks in Hangu, and its expansion in Bannu, North Wazirisan and other tribal districts (Rana , 2026).

These developments have greatly affected Pakistan's security paradigm indicating that Pakistan's security environment has entered a new phase, focusing on multi-facetted aspects of security (Rana , 2026). Besides escalation of tension as a result of the traditional and non- traditional warfare technology, the country is also witnessing transformation in war technology. The transformation of security dynamics has made the country face new challenges multifaceted in nature; the attacks from the various terrorist networks, cross-border terrorism and the use of sanctuaries along the border by the terrorist networks, retaliatory strikes and an expanding information war (Rana , 2026). The use of unmanned and unpiloted drone technology is another challenge adding to the worsening law and order situation in the country. The drone technology is not merely tactical innovations but instruments of psychological dominance, catering for stand–off attacks on checkpoints, law enforcement agencies and civilian areas with the aim of intensifying propaganda gains (Rana , 2026).

Security situation between Pakistan and Afghanistan witnessed a worsening condition between 10- 17th October 2025 where more than 500 civilians were killed and injured as a result of direct confrontation (UNAMA, 2026). To resolve the issue between the countries, a meeting was held in Doha on 18 and 19 October 2025 and another one in Istanbul from 25th to 30th October 2025 whereby both Pakistan and Afghanistan agreed to a ceasefire resulting in a reduction in civilian casualties for some time. UNAMA documented the death of over 750 civilian and injuries in Afghanistan between January 1 to March 31, 2026 on account of the cross-border terrorism and violence between Afghanistan and Pakistan (UNAMA, 2026). But tension has been increasing between the countries since no viable solution to the

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Pak-Afghan stalemate has been reached at. The regional dynamics need to focus on resolving the issue of terrorism and resultant security challenges between the two countries so as to bring about peace and stability in the region. Both the countries need to avoid the blame game and resolve issues of militancy and cross-border terrorism for a peaceful and stable region (Reuters, 2026).

Pakistan has been accusing Afghanistan of harboring militancy in Pakistan since most of the non-state actors have their affiliations with the non-state actors in Pakistan. The Afghan Taliban has denied this allegation by Pakistan saying that militancy is the internal problem of Pakistan (UNAMA, 2026) . Pakistani government has informed the Taliban regime categorically that in case they continued to harbor the terrorist organizations, Pakistan would not compromise on its security and protection of its citizens (UNAMA, 2026). Despite the blame-game and accusations and counter- accusations by both countries, security situation in Pakistan has been a matter of great concern since the 9/11 syndrome in 2001. During the twenty years stay of the US forces and the allied partners in Afghanistan, the democratically installed governments in Afghanistan remained at diggers drawn with the Pakistani counterpart over the issue of terrorisms and militancy coupled with cross–border infiltration. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan was expected to bring peace and stability in relations of both the countries of Afghanistan and Pakistan but that has not yet been materialized. The current Taliban regime is even tougher in their attitude towards Pakistan and for the first time in the history of Pakistan, the two countries have to come in direct confrontation against each other.

Significance of Torkham Border

Torkham border has been of utmost significance between the two countries and plays the most important role in their economy and friendly relations (Tribune, 2026) . The severity of law and order situation resulted in the closure of the Pak-Afghan border hence affecting the flow of people, trade, business and economy of the people who remained dependent on the border region for such activities. Keeping in view the significance of the area, Pakistan had to establish a state-of- the- art Pakistan- Afghanistan Friendship Hospital at Torkham border for providing medical facilities to the patients from Afghanistan (UNAMA, 2026). The escalated tension

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resulting in the frequent closure of border has had an alarming effect on the trade and business of the two countries. A decrease of nearly 50% has been reported from $2.7 billion to $1.4 billion in bilateral trade (UNAMA, 2026). Trade between the two countries owes its origin to the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement initiated as a result of the deal in 2010. But even the current trade volume, as per the reports of the chamber of commerce of the two countries, is highly weighted towards Pakistan, with its share standing at 80% (UNAMA, 2026).

The first three months of 2026 have proved very alarming for the Pak-Afghan relations since 372 Afghan civilians were killed and 397 injured as a result of the cross-border violence between the two forces (Aljazeera, 2026) . The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) which monitors the casualties in Afghanistan reports that the casualties recorded during the first three months of 2026 is higher since 2011 including 13 women, 46 children (31 boys and 16 girls) and 313 men (Aljazeera, 2026) . UNAMA also called on the belligerent parries to respect the international law by refraining from targeting health centers or from firing shells or use grenades into the areas of civilians. Pakistan has clarified its position in a written response urging that its actions were directed solely against terrorist and military infrastructure (Aljazeera, 2026) . In all cases the two states need to focus on the de-escalation of conflict and ceasefire so as to avoid future casualties of any kind and loss to the infrastructure on both sides. The early ceasefire talks in April 2026 facilitated by China between the two countries have resulted in the commitment by the two counterparts to avoid any escalation (Aljazeera, 2026). As a result of the peace talks, incidents of attacks have decreased but have not stopped.

Reconciliation between Pakistan and Afghanistan

Reconciliation between the two countries seems impossible particularly in the post-May 2025 Pak-India conflict and India's entry as a strategic partner of the Afghan Taliban (D; Souza, 2026). Indian Foreign Secretary, Vikram Misri met Afghanistan's Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi in Dubai on January 8, 2025 to strengthen bilateral ties between the two countries (D; Souza, 2026) . The establishment of cordial ties between the Afghan Taliban and India has been highly appreciated by

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the Indian government and terming it as a 'significant regional partner' (D; Souza, 2026). Though India has not yet accorded official recognition to the Taliban regime in Kabul yet it is no longer hesitant to deepen its engagement with Kabul. The reason being to weaken Pakistan further, particularly in the aftermath of the May 2025 Pak-India conflict and resultant Pakistan's victory, to sandwich Pakistan both on its eastern and western borders and mount up diplomatic pressure on Pakistan to destabilize it in the region. This testifies the statement that there are neither permanent friends nor foes but what is permanent is national interest.

The victory of the Taliban in August 2021 was regarded by some as the triumph of Pakistan but the post-governance policy of the Taliban proved wrong since the Taliban had to rule the country in a strategic and diplomatic way (Tharoor & Haqqani , 2021). An analysis of the Taliban regime during 1990s and the retake of Afghanistan in 2021 have some divergence towards Pakistan in their foreign policy (Mushtaq & Tariq , 2026) . The current regime has a different policy towards Pakistan despite the fact that the Taliban were believed to have friendly relations with Pakistan. Soon after the retake of the country by the Taliban, Pakistani officials held numerous meetings with the new Taliban government, both in Kabul and Islamabad since August (Thomas, 2026). The long, windy and porous Pak-Afghan border drew the attention of the entire world for its being used by the insurgents and the terrorists and the militants. Pakistan had to deploy security personnel on its western border in such a great number owing to the greater need for security from this border (Tariq, Khan , & Khan, 2020). The tribal belt has also served as the hub of economic activities between the two countries for many reasons; the Pashtun common culture, inter-marriages across both sides of the border and cross border terrorism (Tariq, Malik, & Afridi, 2020). The post-9/11 scenario, made the US and the NATO to launch military operations against the terrorist networks in Afghanistan. But the presence of the long and porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan made the people suffer along both sides of the border due to the infiltration of terrorists and the outlaws (Threklled & Easterly, 2021).

The Afghan Taliban remains concerned with the survival of their national interest and the protection of their regime in the country. During their first tenure from

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1996 -2001, their interest lay in maintaining friendly relations with Pakistan and the latter had also to extend all possible support to the new government of the Taliban. Pakistan has always been playing a significant role in the peace and stability of Afghanistan, which they did in helping the country withdraw the Russian forces from Afghanistan during 1988-89. Both the states had to follow the doctrine of being Muslim countries sharing common religion and basic tenets of Islam for the last many decades but the current Taliban regime is different from their predecessor. They want to keep themselves in power and establish diplomatic ties with the countries of the world irrespective of religion or the regional dynamics. India though does not share any border with Afghanistan yet has been maintaining cordial ties with it by serving as a check and balance over the eastern region.

Significance of Bagram Airbase

Bagram airbase has been of great significance to the regional and international community. US President, Donald Trump, while urging the need and his desire for reestablishing his authority and presence at Bagram Airbase in September 2025 (Thomas, 2026). He stressed that they want it back citing what he characterized as its strategic importance *vis-à-vis* China (Thomas, 2026). Till now, the US has been unable to re-establish its authority over the Bagram Airbase but it also depends upon the concern of the Afghan Taliban to allow the US for the recapture of the US or not. It is not clear whether the US would exercise force against the Afghan Taliban regime for the recapture of the base or not but it is also important for the Taliban regime to show their strength and sway in the country. The US had already spent 20 years in Afghanistan what may be termed as the attainment of the US objectives in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021, i.e. the dismantling of the Al-Qaeda network and the installation of a democratic regime in the country. The US was able to install democratic governments during the 20 years whereby different presidents had to rule the country.

During the 20 years of the democratic regime in Afghanistan relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan remained at daggers drawn leading to the blame-game upon each other to the extent of accusing the other for the interference in the internal affairs and worst law and order situation on their country. The rebirth of

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the Taliban in August 2021 was expected by many quarters of maintaining good relations with the neighboring countries and particularly Pakistan but it is worth-mentioning to note that Pak-Afghan relations entered the worst scenario when the law enforcement agencies of both the countries took recourse to open confrontation between the countries resulting in thousands of death casualties and injuries on both sides of the border.

The Taliban after assuming power in the country, called for international recognition, assistance and the relief of sanctions (Thomas, 2026). Since the return of the Taliban o power, they have not shown any willingness for making compromises on important issues to obtain benefits of recognition, assistance and the relief in different sanctions imposed upon the Taliban government (Thomas, 2026). The US and its allied partners have been urging the Taliban government to make an inclusive government by including all the stakeholders in the country but the Taliban have not shown any positive response to this stance of the US government. Moreover, the Taliban government is also unwilling to show leniency towards lifting of the restrictions on women and girls education and break ties with the non-state actors in the country (Thomas, 2026). The Taliban, in response to these calls, have either ignored or rejected these calls from the US and allied partners (Thomas, 2026). Foreign Policy tools that the US has traditionally used as leverage may not be as efficacious in Afghanistan as may be in some other countries of the world on account of the different environment and temperament of people

Discussion and Conclusion

Security dynamics of the world has entered a new phase of changing the hegemonic designs of the major powers. The US that has been instrumental in regime change in many parts of the world never faced a stiff resistance nor did it face any opposition to its policies in the regional and global politics. The US attack on Iran in February 2026 unfolded the story of the geostrategic and geopolitical significance of the Strait of Harmuz where its closure brought about great havoc in the prices of the oil, gasoline and petroleum products. The closure of the Strait of Harmuz by Iran surprised the US and regional dynamics as it caters for the supply of 20% to 25% of the world's oil and petroleum products. With Pakistan's excessive involvement in

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the peace parley between the US and Iran and the world's eyes focused on the mediating role of Pakistan, internal security situation in the country exacerbated due to many reasons; May 2025 Pak-India conflict, Pak-Afghan blame game over the cross border security issues, India-Afghan new phase of friendship, and role of the various non-state actors coupled with sectarian issues in Pakistan.

The current regime of the Afghan Taliban wants to rule the country in a diplomatic way and remains concerned with the survival of their government. With this end in mind, it establishes friendly relations with India despite the fact that it does not share any border with India but with ulterior motives of sandwiching Pakistan along both its western and the eastern border. The May 2025 Pak-India conflict gave Pakistan more strength and image in the world politics while Pakistan's stressing demand for the evacuation of the Afghan refugees from Pakistan and their repatriation to Afghanistan was not viewed as positive sign by either the Afghan refugees or the Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan. The retake of the country in August 2021 was considered as a sign of good omen for Pakistan but the Taliban did not adopt a positive attitude towards Pakistan and rather got itself more engaged with India. Relations got worsened between the two countries particularly during the two quarters; from October to December 2025 and January to March 2026 when the worst security destined Pak-Afghan relations with greater number of death casualties and injuries since 2011.

The regional dynamics have been trying to de-escalate the tension between Afghanistan and Pakistan since security of the region remains dependent on the peace and stability of the two countries. Both Pakistan and Afghanistan have easy mechanism of connecting the Central Asian States, Middle East and South Asia. Peace is *sine qua non* for the two states so as to maintain peace and stability in the region. Both the states need to avoid the blame game and establish friendly relations and work jointly for curbing terrorism, insurgency, militancy and sectarianism along the Pak-Afghan border. Their joint venture would of great help in bringing peace, security and stability in the region. The Middle Eastern countries and China have been trying to work for the harmonizing of the Pak- Afghan relations but no substantial result has yet been achieved. They need to enhance their efforts and

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struggle for the resolution of the Pak-Afghan stalemate. The role of the US, Russia, China and the United Nations can be of great help in bringing normalcy along the Pak- Afghan border and convert the two countries into two permanent friends.

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