
Pakistan-Iran Converging and Conflicting Interests in Afghanistan

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Abstract

Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan are three geographically contiguous Muslim countries. They share strong sociocultural and ethnolinguistic similarities as well as a common history. Given the volatile nature of the region and the recent establishment of the Taliban government in Afghanistan, both Pakistan and Iran are apprehensive due to potential threats to their internal security. This paper seeks to examine the points of agreement and disagreement between Pakistan and Iran in light of the evolving situation in Afghanistan. The study finds that despite having friendly relations and shared goals in Afghanistan, conflicting geopolitical interests and alignment led to tensions between the two powers. The strengthening of Iran's contacts with India and Pakistan's relations with Saudi Arabia have caused disturbances in their overall relationship. Following the collapse of the Republic of Afghanistan, Afghanistan has become a crucial element in the national security strategies of both Pakistan and Iran.

Keywords: *interests, convergence, divergence, security, stability, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan*

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Introduction

Both Pakistan and Iran have primarily focused on security and shared strategic goals in their relationship. The security paradigm has consistently influenced the political and economic engagement between the two states. Both states have expressed concerns about the security situation in Afghanistan due to their long shared borders with Afghanistan and their pursuit of security and geopolitical objectives. Moreover, the three states exhibit numerous similarities that extend beyond their geographical proximity. Hence, it solidifies the fraternal connection among Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan—the three longstanding allies and neighbouring Islamic countries—who are connected by profound sociocultural and ethnolinguistic similarities, as well as geographical closeness and a common heritage.

The relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan has consistently been fraught with issues. Despite Afghanistan's early opposition, Pakistan managed to secure United Nations membership upon its creation as a sovereign state, and this situation has remained unchanged ever since. The disputed Durand Line, originally demarcated by the British colonial authority, is a subject of dispute, with Pakistan asserting it as its official international border and Afghanistan refusing to recognise it. Continuous political turbulence in recent decades has consistently posed challenges to the relationship between the two countries.¹

Conversely, Pakistan has consistently accused Afghanistan of colluding with India to undermine its interests and to provide a haven for anti-Pakistan militants within the Afghan territory. Recurring disagreements consistently hinder bilateral relations between the two countries, despite their numerous similarities. The Durand Line, which symbolises both a shared territory and animosity between Pakistan and Afghanistan, epitomises the legacy of colonial dominance. Given the common historical, cultural, and family connections among the Pashtuns living on both sides of the border, which imbued the

boundary with a sense of inheritance, it faced significant opposition. At this point, both commonality and enmity seemingly originate from the same source.

Due to the close relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as their different societies, it is peculiar that, up until now, only official dialogues between the two governments have occurred. While Afghan pundits have mostly emphasised the involvement of Pakistan in Afghanistan, Pakistani experts, including government officials, media outlets, think tanks, and researchers, have predominantly focused on the Afghan government and its real or potential association with India. While Pakistan typically disregards the subtle distinctions and complexities inside Afghan society, Afghanistan generally fails to acknowledge the difference between Pakistani state and society.²

The relationship between Afghanistan and Iran has consistently played a vital role in Iran's foreign policy since the Islamic Revolution. Tehran highly regards Afghanistan in various aspects. One important component that contributes to this significance is the mutual historical and cultural background of the two countries. The two countries have a unique bond due to their interconnectedness in terms of geography, history, culture, and populace. Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* is a remarkable and influential piece of Persian literature that eloquently demonstrates this connection.³ Despite different governments implementing racist policies, Afghanistan's Shia community is spread throughout the country. The Hazara people are predominantly located in the central part of the country, which is referred to as Hazarajat. Based on multiple evaluations, Afghanistan is a country with a total population of 42.6 million, of which Shiites comprise approximately 9 to 20 per cent.⁴

Tehran possesses a distinct perspective on Afghanistan and is actively pursuing its national interests by engaging with various political and social forces within the country. It is crucial to emphasise

that Iran's national interests in Afghanistan are not always beneficial. One may argue that negative aspects play a more substantial role in Iran's security and national interest framework. The current study assesses their common values and positions on several local and global issues. The study primarily focuses on the subject of Pak-Iran interests in Afghanistan and aims to identify the points of conflict and convergence between these interests.

Theoretical Explanation of the Triangular Relations

Putnam's theoretical approach of *two-level games* facilitates the comprehension of how the two countries perceive one another. States' foreign policy is shaped by a range of domestic variables as well as systemic elements that impact how they perceive one another, usually from a neo-realist standpoint. The elements encompassed in this context are local politics, the impact of social groups, consensus *gentium*, civil society, a state's political structure, and the discernment of decision-makers.⁵

The development of foreign policy by both Pakistan and Iran is mostly influenced by a broad or regional political aspect. The trajectory of bilateral relations is shaped by decision-making at this level, which prioritises security and is impacted by divergent strategic goals. The diplomatic and security policies of any state are still determined by the demands of its *Regional Security Complex (RSC)*. The influence has led to a greater interconnection of the security contexts between the two countries. This has had a detrimental impact on previously friendly bilateral relations and has posed challenges for the leadership on both sides in managing the relationship.⁶

Pakistan's focus on Indian security and Iran's ongoing rivalry with Saudi Arabia shape their security perspectives, enabling them to interpret systemic signals from other regional governments and respond accordingly. When examining Pakistan's foreign and security policy towards Iran, it is crucial to consider the influence of India. Similarly, when analysing Iran's relations with Pakistan, it is important

to include the influence of Saudi Arabia. The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), proposed by Buzan and Waever, seems to provide a more suitable framework for understanding how the converging and divergent regional interests between Pakistan and Iran have evolved.⁷ RSCT remains advantageous for analysing the Indian and Saudi factors and the systemic assumptions that shape bilateral interactions. Buzan and Waever have attempted to diminish the focus on the state and instead provide a comprehensive understanding of many units, which include regional non-state actors, international ideological and cultural forces, and monetary ties. However, their conceptual model still exhibits a bias towards a state-oriented approach.⁸

The influence of national political, social, and religious factors on influencing relationship choices highlights the limitations of the RSCT in incorporating these variables. Using solely an RSCT-based theoretical framework is insufficient to properly encompass the roles played by domestic political players and political institutions in both states. As a result, Putnam's technique is better suited to explain the dynamics of inter-regional security interactions and the impact of domestic issues on their relationships. At the domestic level, Pakistan and Iran have power structures that differ from Western democracies. Civilian leaders of the government firmly control the state's security apparatus in Western democracies. Consequently, both Iran and Pakistan exhibit a distinctive amalgamation of administration styles, characterised by the involvement of the state's security apparatus,⁹ where both the religious sector and the civilian leadership either govern or jointly hold authority.¹⁰ This regime jointure poses a challenge to Putnam's theory, which posits that the outcome is a consensus between two levels: political competition and negotiation between countries on one level, and domestic competition among domestic actors on the other level. Both states' domestic circles perceive the exclusive control of security services over foreign

policymaking as almost obligatory, resulting in policy decisions that are characterised by neo-realist principles and priorities enhancing security. The ongoing conflict between the civil and military elites hindered the attainment of a political breakthrough between Iran and Pakistan, thus, impeding progress.

Pak-Iran Interests in Afghanistan

Iran and Pakistan exert significant influence over the internal affairs of Afghanistan due to their long borders with the country and deep-rooted traditional, ethnic, and cultural connections. Neither the three landlocked neighbouring countries in Central Asia nor China possess an equivalent level of influence in Afghanistan. China is seeking to exert influence over Afghanistan while the Taliban is in power by leveraging its relationships with Iran and Pakistan. The Gulf nations depend on Pakistan to protect and promote their interests in Afghanistan. Iran and Pakistan will have a significant role in determining Afghanistan's destiny under the Taliban's leadership following the withdrawal of the United States.¹¹ The prolonged period of significant international involvement in Afghanistan has resulted in the emergence of a substantial political vacuum. Iran and Pakistan, despite their varied characteristics, share a common objective of achieving peace and stability in a conflict-ridden nation. Although their interests have sometimes clashed or deviated in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan will now be obligated to cooperate in unprecedented ways.¹²

Converging Interests

Economic Interests in Afghanistan

In the current rapidly evolving global landscape characterised by a shift from geopolitics to geo-economics, the importance of regional economic integration and connectivity has become crucial. Afghanistan and Pakistan have a unique connection since their economies complement each other through transit and bilateral trade.

The value of Afghan exports to Pakistan has witnessed a surge, rising from \$550 million to \$700 million since August 2021, indicating a notable increase in trade engagement between the two countries. Several factors have contributed to the rise, including bilateral collaboration, trade concessions granted by Pakistan, an increase in Pakistan's import of Afghan coal, and the establishment of an operational Integrated Transit Trade Management System (ITTMS) at Torkham. While Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan have declined, its shipments to Central Asian nations through Afghanistan have witnessed an increase. Several factors, including the ongoing US sanctions, the lack of a banking infrastructure, the paucity of currency in Afghanistan, and a decrease in consumer demand for some Pakistani products, contributed to the reduction in exports from Pakistan. Although the market now faces obstacles and imbalances, engaging in bilateral and transit commerce can enhance the prospects for trade between the two parties.¹³

One notable advancement of Iran's national interests in Afghanistan is the expansion of its economic and trade connections. The focus of its bilateral economic ties seems to be on trade. Iran has been at the forefront of fostering economic relations with Afghanistan throughout the period spanning from 2017 to 2021.¹⁴ The economic exchanges between entrepreneurs and the private sector of the two countries have remained mostly steady, despite US sanctions and the hurdles posed by anti-Iranian sentiments in the state. Deep links between these parties play a significant role in maintaining this stability. The reconstruction of Afghanistan provided a favourable setting for the creation of Iranian enterprises and contractors in the country. The recent US-imposed sanctions on Iran have created obstacles, limiting the involvement of Iranian companies in Afghanistan to a few minor projects. However, their work has significantly contributed to the development of Afghanistan's infrastructure.

The two countries have extensive and widespread commercial links. Pakistan is Afghanistan's primary trading partner. Based on data from Afghanistan's FY 2018 (22 December 2017–21 December 2018) Central Statistics Organisation (CSO), Ministry of Finance, the bilateral trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan was the highest, amounting to \$1,437 million. This was followed by trade between Afghanistan and Iran, which amounted to \$1,284 million, and trade with China, which amounted to \$1,098 million. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan increased by 18.33 per cent during July and June of 2017 and 2016–17, reaching a total of \$1,476 million.¹⁵

Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan have the opportunity to investigate the possibilities of regional economic integration and commercial connections. Initiatives like the Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline (the Peace Pipeline), the Chabahar Port, and several transportation and energy corridors have the potential to enhance regional economic cooperation. Afghanistan plays a significant role in facilitating Iran's and Pakistan's access to Central Asia for commercial routes and energy resources. Afghanistan eagerly engages in China's efforts to connect the region through the huge infrastructure project, the Belt and Road Initiative. Similarly, Iran anticipates that it will facilitate the Chinese efforts to expand the BRI into Iran. Iran and Pakistan share common interests in stabilising Afghanistan, recognising that achieving this goal shortly is highly unlikely. Nevertheless, the attainment of stability can be realised through the collaborative efforts of Pakistan and Iran, while refraining from engaging in competition within Afghanistan.¹⁶

The Problem of Refugees

Afghanistan has been frequently associated with some of the most extreme humanitarian catastrophes of the last five decades. Obtaining accurate statistics in a war-torn country like Afghanistan, which is both underdeveloped and notoriously difficult to access, is challenging. However, it is anticipated that over one-third of the

Afghan population has experienced displacement from their place of origin at some stage in their lives. While some argue that the resilience of Afghans in such conditions is primarily inherent, it is evident that the role of upbringing is as significant as genetics.¹⁷ Pakistan is currently hosting a vast number of Afghan refugees, amounting to millions. In 1979, after the Saur Revolution and the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, a substantial number of Afghans began seeking asylum. Pakistan has not signed both, the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees of January 31, 1967, and the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (the Geneva Convention). In August 2021, following the departure of the US and NATO soldiers and the subsequent Taliban rule, a substantial influx of Afghan refugees reached Pakistani territory. UNHCR data indicates that 35,289 people migrated from Afghanistan to Pakistan during the period from January 2021 to February 2022.

In recent years, Pakistan has altered its policy towards Afghan refugees. The state erected fences along more than 90 per cent of its border with Afghanistan in early 2017 and January 2022, making it extremely difficult for both authorised and unauthorised cross-border transit. Unauthorised entry persists due to the porous nature of the border.¹⁸

As a result of the volatility and uncertainty in Afghanistan, a vast number of Afghans have been forced to leave their homes, with the majority seeking refuge in the Islamic Republic of Iran. This latest and notable occurrence is, once again, a consequence of the volatility and uncertainty in Afghanistan. Iranian officials believe that the present population of Afghans residing in various Iranian cities exceeds six million. Iran undoubtedly has a daunting, arduous, and costly task in managing the affairs of its vast population, which surpasses the populations of most European states. For decades, Pakistan and Iran have hosted millions of Afghan refugees. The prolonged presence of refugees is causing a depletion of their

economies and resources. Hence, there is a shared apprehension about not only advocating for the voluntary, secure, and morally upright repatriation of Afghan refugees but also aiding them in their reintegration process in Afghanistan. Pakistan and Iran collaborate regularly with global allies to address the refugee issue stemming from their mutual apprehension.

Drug Trafficking

Akbar Durrani, federal secretary of Pakistan's Ministry of Narcotics Control, has stated that the volatile situation in Afghanistan has the potential to exacerbate drug trafficking and further compound Pakistan's existing drug problems. Pakistan has historically served as a terminus for drugs cultivated in Afghanistan. However, the ongoing war has significantly increased both the cultivation and illicit trafficking of drugs, resulting in substantial expansion of Afghanistan's drug economy as compared to two decades ago, when the United States first engaged and remained in the region. Considering the present security conditions, it is highly likely that it will continue to grow even more extensively. The pandemic has exacerbated the conducive circumstances for drug traffickers, who thrive amid chaos and a destabilised economy.¹⁹

Customs authorities allegedly seized a significant quantity of narcotics at Torkham, a border crossing between Afghanistan and Pakistan, during the latter part of 2021 and the beginning of 2022. They confiscated a record-breaking 130 kilograms of heroin. In October, a substantial anti-drug operation was conducted in Peshawar. A significant influx of drugs into the coastal regions of Balochistan and Karachi in November served as evidence that the incidence of trafficking has significantly increased since the Taliban took power.

Pakistan's proximity to Afghanistan renders it an optimal location for narcotics smuggling. Afghanistan, a leading global supplier of opium, has utilised Pakistan as a conduit for illicit drug

trafficking to international markets and for procuring precursor chemicals necessary for drug manufacturing. Although Pakistan has implemented measures to combat the illicit drug trade, the prevalence of substance usage and abuse among Pakistanis is increasing on a daily basis.²⁰

The political and security upheaval in Afghanistan has led to the emergence and expansion of drug production, processing, and trafficking industries in the state. The illicit trade of drugs has yielded significant financial gains throughout time, which have been utilised to support the military apparatus and have caused widespread devastation in Afghanistan. The international reports from 2018 that show Afghanistan is in charge of cultivating over 86 per cent of the world's opium production have proven this. Furthermore, the examination of the report substantiates the correlation between terrorism and drug trafficking. The manufacturing, processing, and trafficking of narcotics in Afghanistan yields an annual revenue ranging from \$1.8 billion to \$2.7 billion.²¹ Consequently, Afghanistan's drug problem is a major security concern.²² Regional cooperation in the fight against drugs is the need of the hour, and this is the issue where Iran, its neighbours, the United States, and its allies in Europe's interests converge.²³ Iran and Pakistan have been closely coordinating and working together to carry out mutually agreed-upon technical cooperation. This includes regular exchange of information and simultaneous efforts to combat drug trafficking operations. This collaboration has been ongoing for several years. The Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan are geographically positioned as neighbouring countries to Afghanistan, which is the primary global producer of opium. This geographical proximity is of utmost importance. To enhance the effectiveness of addressing the issue of the trafficking of opiates in Afghanistan, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) facilitated the establishment of the Triangular Initiative (TI) in June 2007. This initiative involves

collaboration between drug control authorities and counter-narcotics authorities in Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan. The TI umbrella of regional cooperation, which is backed by the UNODC, aims to get all three countries involved in finding real ways to stop the illegal trafficking of Afghan opiates and the diversion and smuggling of chemicals that are used to make them.²⁴

Stability in Afghanistan

Iran and Pakistan are depending on the Taliban to establish a government that can maintain security and control the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K). Iran aims to prevent the escalation of Islamist influence along its eastern border, following the successful containment of the ISIL threat in Iraq's western region. Pakistan is concerned about the potential impact of ISIL-K activities in Afghanistan on domestic terrorist organisations within its borders.²⁵ Despite attaining military dominance in Afghanistan, the Taliban is far from establishing a functional national government or a prosperous economy due to its lack of international recognition. Under these circumstances, ISIL could potentially advance. The militant group and other global Islamist movements will benefit from the Taliban's endeavour to balance the pragmatism necessary for government with their unwavering adherence to their basic philosophy. The Taliban may lose many of their supporters to more extremist organisations if they adopt a more temperate stance.

Currently, Iran and Pakistan are experiencing domestic turmoil, while the Taliban have regained control of Afghanistan. Pakistan is currently facing its most severe economic crisis since gaining independence. The country is grappling with rapidly increasing inflation, and the government is making efforts to negotiate another loan agreement with the IMF. Unprecedented tensions between the military establishment and civilian leaders have further exacerbated this situation. Similarly, Iran is also undergoing a transitional period where, after four decades, the country's moderate leadership is

shifting towards a hard-line dictatorship. It is unclear who will succeed the weakened supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Iran is experiencing significant economic difficulties as a result of international sanctions. The situation in both states will become distressing if Afghanistan starts to export chaos, refugees, and extremism.²⁶

Iran and Pakistan recognise the necessity of collaborating to address the security situation in Afghanistan. The establishment of an interim Taliban rule suggests a pragmatic collaboration between Iran and Pakistan. However, the majority of the Taliban's initial cabinet included terrorists with close ties to Pakistan. After a few days and after engaging in discussions during the SCO summit in Dushanbe in September 2021, Iranian and Pakistani delegations appointed leaders from smaller parties with strong connections to Iran to significant positions.²⁷ The rationale behind assigning significant ministries to members of these minority groups is twofold. Firstly, at the domestic level, the Taliban administration aims to convince marginalised groups that they will be adequately represented in both the interim administration and the forthcoming national government. Secondly, the ruling Islamist movement also seeks to demonstrate its willingness to establish an inclusive government for the international community.

Divergence of Interests

Regional Powers Contest

The political turmoil in Afghanistan following the emergence of the Taliban regime and the involvement of several regional players, each with its own strategic goals and concerns, as well as shared security concerns, have influenced the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East and South Asia.²⁸ While these negotiated cabinet decisions are indeed vital, Pakistan and Iran are employing other means as well to effectively handle the highly volatile situation in Afghanistan. In mid-October, Major-General Mohammad Hossein Bagheri, the Iranian

Joint Chief of Staff, headed a delegation to Islamabad. Bagheri and the other Iranian generals engaged in detailed discussions with their Pakistani counterparts over the strategic management of security concerns related to the Taliban regime.

Iran and Pakistan remain mutually sceptical, despite their ongoing efforts to collaborate. Tehran is concerned about the strong ties between Islamabad, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states. There is concern that the Saudis and the Emiratis may exploit their connections to create complications for Iran. The political discourse between Saudi Arabia and Iran, initiated in the late 1990s and culminating in their subsequent political reconciliation, represents a significant opportunity.²⁹ Nevertheless, their diverse proxy factions were actively pursuing each other on Pakistani territory. The Gulf governments may seek to exploit Iranian activity in the Arab world by instigating turmoil in Afghanistan and Pakistan against Iran.

In the Afghan landscape, Pakistan and Iran also experienced conflicts as they supported different factions with diverse sectarian views.³⁰ The visit of President Khatami of Iran to India contributed to the intricacy of regional affairs. The visit held great significance as both states acknowledged the compatibility of their respective strategic landscapes and the necessity to enhance them through robust defence and economic alliances.³¹ The proximity between India and Iran was rooted in their same strategic outlook on Afghanistan. India has consistently been cautious about Pakistani influence in Kabul and has cultivated strong relationships with members of the Northern Alliance that are also aligned with Iran.³² (Ramana 2012)

Given the fundamental differences between Pakistan and Iran concerning Afghanistan, India needed to establish a strategic foothold in Iran. Initiatives were undertaken in the energy and infrastructural domains, encompassing the construction of the Chabahar Port in Iran, the Zaranj-Delaram Road linking Afghanistan and Iran, and a gas pipeline interconnecting Iran, Pakistan, and India.³³ The formal

incorporation of the Indian element into Pakistani-Iranian relationships exacerbated suspicion and further weakened their bilateral relations. As a result of past conflicts between Pakistan and Iran over their interests in Afghanistan, both countries now have more chances to form alliances with other regional actors who have similar strategic outlooks. This elucidates the dual factors of Pakistan's geographical proximity to Saudi Arabia and the enduring collaboration between India and Iran in Afghanistan. Additionally, another aspect that contributes to the cooperation between India and Iran is the indisputable reality that Iran remains the sole practical means for Indian communication with Central Asia and trade with Afghanistan.³⁴

Pakistan is still extremely anxious about its bitter enemy India allying with Iran. The historical alignment of Iranian and Indian interests in Afghanistan has consistently coincided, particularly in their mutual objective to hinder the activities of Sunni Islamists, who pose a threat to both Tehran and New Delhi. In the 1990s, Iran and India collaborated extensively with Russia to advance the Northern Alliance, a coalition opposed to the Taliban. In November 2021, Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani, the head of Iran's national security, participated in a regional conference on Afghanistan organised by India's National Security Adviser, Ajit Doval. Representatives from Russia and the Central Asian republics were present at the conference. Notably, China and Pakistan chose not to attend. Nevertheless, the United States' departure from Afghanistan and the subsequent downfall of the internationally backed Afghan government have posed a substantial strategic dilemma for India. With the Taliban assuming control in Kabul, New Delhi has lost its influence in Afghanistan. However, India has the potential to establish an additional gateway into the country by collaborating with Iran.³⁵

Ethnic Connections

Afghanistan has experienced a hundred-year-old rivalry between administrations that originated in the Persian highlands to its

west and those located in the Punjabi plains to its east. The latest entities to become involved in this complex situation are the modern sovereign governments of Iran and Pakistan. Pakistan holds a competitive edge over Iran in this competition because of geographical and cultural factors. Pakistan's border with Afghanistan is significantly longer than Iran's, giving Pakistan an advantage in influencing the course of events in the landlocked state. Afghanistan is home to various minority communities, including the Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, Turkmen, Aimak, and Baluch. Iran has established enduring connections with these minority groups. In addition, Tehran benefits from the fact that Dari, an Afghan variant of the Persian language, is the official language of Afghanistan. This enables Tehran to establish strong connections not only with Pashtuns but also with various minority groups.³⁶ Conversely, Islamabad has mostly exerted its influence on its western neighbours through the Pashtuns, who are the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan and make up to 45 per cent of the country's population. Pashtuns constitute the fifth-largest ethnic group in the whole population of Pakistan.

Pakistan's support for the Taliban, a predominantly Pashtun group, in the 1990s served as evidence of the strength of this relationship. After Islamist cliques ousted the communist state in Kabul in 1992, the Taliban emerged as the dominant group in the Afghan struggle. They achieved this status four years later and received support from Pakistan. Pakistani support in 1996 was important in establishing the Taliban's initial regime. Islamabad continued to support the Taliban even after their overthrow by the United States in 2001.³⁷

Historical evidence suggests that the new leaders of Kabul would align themselves with Islamabad and distance themselves from Tehran. Nevertheless, the geopolitical landscape of the country has experienced a substantial change in the two decades following the US-led overthrow of the Taliban's initial rule in Afghanistan in 2001.

Pakistan's ability to exert effective control over the Taliban has diminished compared to the 1990s. The Taliban's expansion beyond the Pashtun community and their infiltration into ethnic minority groups played a significant role in facilitating their rapid takeover of northern regions in Afghanistan in early August 2021. Iran has developed alliances with certain Taliban insurgents over the past 15 years, recognising that these militants possess significant influence and force that cannot be ignored.³⁸

Analysing the Associations

Iran has made significant progress since 2001, when it actively collaborated with the United States in supporting intelligence operations to remove the Taliban, working alongside its friends in the Northern Alliance. Subsequently, Iran's pursuit of nuclear enrichment and the United States' military intervention in Iraq deteriorated their relationship. In around 2005, the Iranians started fostering relationships with the Taliban. Tehran collaborated with Taliban leaders, including Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour, who was killed in a targeted US drone strike in 2016, shortly after his car entered Pakistan from Iran.³⁹ Iran further bolstered its backing of minority factions and the US-backed regime in Kabul by providing them with a sum of over \$1 million.

Conversely, Pakistan also endeavoured to build connections with other Afghan forces. Roughly 15 years ago, it established its first communication with the Kabul administration and factions opposing the Taliban. The Taliban's strong opponents maintained a profound distrust of Islamabad; as a result, these initiatives were not always warmly embraced. Pakistan's assistance to the American war effort resulted in the loss of its exclusive ability to control the Taliban.⁴⁰ During the latter half of the 2010s, the Taliban established a connection with Iran, engaged in negotiations with the United States, established a political base in Qatar, and sought alliances with various states such as China, Russia, Turkey, European countries, and others.

Nevertheless, Islamabad continued to maintain significant connections with the Afghan insurgency, particularly with the Haqqani organisation based in eastern Afghanistan and the Quetta Shura, which represents the Taliban's original heartland in the southern region of the country.

The US Factor

The connection between the US and Iran, as well as the Afghan issue, had a significant impact on the relationship between Pakistan and Iran. The Islamic Revolution strained relations between Iran and the US. The US had sided against Iran in the Iran-Iraq war together with Saudi Arabia and other Arab nations. In contrast to its policy of nonalignment in Middle Eastern affairs, Pakistan discreetly supported Iran, although their conflicting alliances damaged their relationship in Afghanistan. Following the events of September 11, 2001, Pakistan emerged as a staunch ally of the United States in opposing the Taliban. This condition led Iran and the US to reach a mutual understanding. However, during that period, President George W. Bush classified Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as 'the axis of evil'.⁴¹ Consequently, the US factor that had brought these two neighbouring countries together is now widening the divide between them.

Following the 9/11 tragedy, the United States positioned Pakistan at the forefront of its counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan, which significantly altered Pakistan's perception of the Taliban. The longstanding Afghan dispute, which had caused division between them, could perhaps be resolved now that Iran and Pakistan have reached a consensus. Nevertheless, Iran's disruptive behaviour, characterised by the hostage crisis, the Iranian government's uncompromising stance towards the US, and its explicit threat to Israel's existence—a crucial ally of the US in the Middle East—has prevented any possibility of restoring relations between the two countries.⁴² Despite Iran's unambiguous condemnation of the 9/11 atrocities, friction continued to exist in the US camp. Throughout

President Khatami's tenure, efforts were undertaken to reconcile the diplomatic relations between the United States and Iran. Nevertheless, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's assumption of the presidency resulted in significant hardship. His unwavering anti-American position effectively shattered any possibility of a diplomatic reconciliation between Tehran and Washington.⁴³ Consequently, it caused a big blow to Iran and Pakistan's relations.

Iran and Pakistan were working together to find a solution to the Afghan crisis, but once again, the influence of the United States took centre stage. Additionally, it effectively isolated Iran from all regional forums and initiatives aimed at promoting peace in Afghanistan. Pakistan has long faced a dilemma due to its significant reliance on assistance from the United States. The country chose to rely on external powers instead of utilising its resources and implementing programs for national growth, both politically, economically, and militarily. In such circumstances, the only option was to acquiesce to the demands imposed by the United States.⁴⁴ Given Pakistan's primary focus on meeting US demands within its territory and in Afghanistan, it neglected its relations with Iran while engaging in a violent fight against terrorism, resulting in significant loss of life and the utilisation of limited resources. In response to enduring opposition and animosity from the United States, Iran deemed it fitting to strengthen its alliances with Russia and India. The United States eventually encountered significant domestic pressure to cease its engagement in Afghanistan following years of allocating public funds to the effort and sacrificing invaluable lives in the conflict with the Taliban for territorial dominance.

Upon the revelation of multiple reports and surveys indicating that the Taliban maintained control over a significant chunk of Afghanistan's territory, doubts arose over the likelihood of a serious withdrawal by the United States. The US also assumes that Pakistan did not adequately help its partners' efforts to combat the Taliban and

that its pursuit of maintaining influence in the region contributed to the strain in the relationship between these two countries.⁴⁵ The United States conveyed to Pakistan that it was no longer considered an ally in Afghanistan and encouraged India to assume a greater role in the region, particularly following the unveiling of the Trump administration's new Afghan strategy. The persistent instability in Afghanistan has consistently raised concerns among neighbouring states, such as China, Russia, and Iran. Consequently, the antagonistic attitude of the United States towards Pakistan in Afghanistan has once again facilitated a conducive atmosphere for Iran and Pakistan to engage in cooperation with other neighbouring countries.

Pakistan has once again aided in facilitating the US-Taliban negotiation that took place in the UAE in December 2018, since there are several regional peace-making initiatives underway.⁴⁶ Iran was excluded from participation again, and it has additionally declared that it is presently engaged in negotiations with the Taliban, with the approval of the Afghan government.⁴⁷ Once more, there was a missed opportunity to enlist Iran as a crucial collaborator, possibly as a result of US pressure or irrational comfort. Once again, Afghanistan acts as a dividing factor in the relationship between Iran and Pakistan. The discreetly monitored peace efforts in Afghanistan would only worsen the already tense conflicts in the region and negatively impact bilateral relations between Iran and Pakistan.

Conclusion

Over many decades, Afghanistan served as a communal strategic courtyard for Iran and Pakistan. Pakistan has been looking for a friendly administration on its western border for a long time to concentrate on India, its key geopolitical competitor. Afghanistan has traditionally primarily acted as a supporting stage for Iranian operations towards Arab countries. However, Afghanistan now plays a substantially larger role in the national security plans of both countries

as a result of the terrible collapse of the globally sponsored Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

Regardless of the circumstances in Afghanistan under Taliban rule, Iran and Pakistan will exert the most influence. To prevent the instability in Afghanistan from disturbing their strategic plans for Central and South Asia, big powers like China and Russia will rely on their bilateral connections with Tehran and Islamabad. Both Iran and Pakistan will leverage their influence to promote their economic interests in Afghanistan and the neighbouring region, contingent upon the country attaining a certain level of stability in due course. However, in the future, both parties will strive to safeguard their countries' national security from being jeopardised by the tumultuous area that lies between them.

Despite their defeat in 2001, the Taliban persisted as the dominant political force in the country, striving to regain control over their region. Iran, however, misjudged the situation in Afghanistan. During the 1990s, it provided support to a coalition of smaller, less influential groups that opposed the Taliban. These organisations were predominantly composed of ethnic groups, like Tajiks and Shiite Hazaras, who were predisposed to provide support to Tehran. The anti-Taliban movement has remained fragmented based on ethnic divisions and has failed to evolve into a leading political force capable of confronting the Taliban.

During the Taliban uprising, Iran and Pakistan actively maintained channels of communication and support with both the national authority and the terrorists. However, with the Taliban assuming control and the opposing troops nearly eradicated, Tehran and Islamabad find themselves confronted with a situation that they likely were not adequately prepared for. How do they guarantee that those they assisted in waging an insurrection will now rule in a way that does not exacerbate existing wobbly and jeopardise their general interests?

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