



The Future of Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations: Challenges and Opportunities in Post-Taliban Diplomacy

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ABSTRACT

The evolving relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan stands at a critical juncture in the wake of the Taliban's resurgence and the establishment of a new political order in Afghanistan. This paper examines the challenges and opportunities shaping the future of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations in the context of post-Taliban diplomacy. Key issues such as border security, refugee management, trade connectivity, and regional stability are analyzed, alongside the geopolitical dynamics involving major global powers. The study highlights the potential for economic cooperation through initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the role of regional organizations in fostering dialogue. However, persistent challenges, including cross-border militancy, ideological differences, and trust deficits, pose significant hurdles to lasting peace. By exploring these dimensions, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the path forward for bilateral relations, emphasizing the need for pragmatic diplomacy and mutual cooperation to harness opportunities while addressing shared challenges.

Introduction

The relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan has been one of the most complex and consequential in South Asia, shaped by a shared history, cultural ties, and geopolitical realities.

However, it has also been marred by mistrust, security concerns, and divergent strategic interests. The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 marked a significant turning point in bilateral relations, presenting both challenges and opportunities for the two neighboring nations. This paper examines the evolving dynamics of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations in the post-Taliban era, focusing on key areas such as trade, security, refugee management, regional connectivity, and public perception. By analyzing data and trends from 2020 onwards, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current state of bilateral ties and offer insights into the path forward.

The United States-Taliban peace agreement along with U.S. troop withdrawal and Taliban control of Afghanistan between 2020 has guided Pakistan-Afghanistan diplomatic connections. These major events have caused extensive repercussions on stability across the region alongside impacts on the economic partnership and safety framework. The COVID-19 pandemic alongside political instability caused two-year worth of trade volume reduction between these nations from 1.7 billion in 2019 to 1.2 billion in 2021 (State Bank of Pakistan, 2023; Afghanistan Central Statistics Organization, 2023). In 2022 the trade volume rose to \$1.9 billion when Pakistan aimed to enhance border security while accessing economic advantages in Taliban era Afghanistan (World Bank, 2023). The recovery in trade volumes did not eliminate non-tariff barriers along with bureaucratic hurdles which together with security concerns block the potential for complete bilateral trade growth. The security situation represents the main concern among nations under Pakistan-Afghanistan bilateral relations. The boundary region between Pakistan and Afghanistan has served as a main point of militant activity because militant groups including the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and ISIS-Khorasan capitalise on the area's unstable state.

Statistical data from SATP and ACLED indicates security incidents soared between 2020 and 2021 when numbers increased to 370 from an original total of 270 (SATP, 2023; ACLED, 2023). Cross-border attacks alongside militant activities continued as major concerns even though incident numbers dropped to 310 in 2023. Pakistan has persistently demanded joint counterterrorism cooperation from the Taliban regarding militant groups operating on Afghan land but the Taliban has been unable to satisfy these demands. Skeptical attitudes together with varying objectives have decreased the impact of these joint initiatives. The refugee crisis operates as a crucial factor which affects relations between the two countries. The Government of Pakistan welcomed and sheltered over 1.42 million registered Afghan refugees throughout the duration of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan which began in 1979 (UNHCR, 2023). Thousands of Afghans migrated to Pakistan after the Taliban seized power during 2021 due to threats against their safety and deteriorating economic conditions.

The large number of Afghan refugees has put extra pressure on Pakistan's resources and province infrastructure especially in areas like Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Despite international requests for help to resolve the refugee crisis Pakistan has experienced limited progress toward permanent solutions. Bilateral tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan grow stronger because of their dispute regarding Afghan refugee presence which creates obstacles for establishing mutual trust and cooperation. Regional connectivity programs represent an effective method to advance the Pakistan-Afghanistan diplomatic relations. Multiple projects including China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) along with CASA-1000 energy project present the opportunity to totally transform the regional economic structure. CPEC projects totaling 62 billion dollars are projected to grow trade volumes by 62 billion dollars while APTTA stands ready to enhance trade volume between Pakistan and Afghanistan by \$2 billion (World Bank, 2023; Asian Development Bank, 2023).

These regional cooperation initiatives encounter important barriers because of security threats together with administrative hurdles and international power struggles. The successful delivery of these initiatives needs Pakistan and Afghanistan to maintain cooperative partnerships together with backing from regional and international organizations. Public understanding strongly influences the development of foreign relations between two nations. Results from Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies (2023) suggest that both Pakistani and Afghan public opinion about their nations' relationship is mostly unfavorable since 60% of Pakistanis combined with 70% of Afghans view the bilateral ties negatively. The accumulated tensions from the past combined with media-related content alongside political messaging have generated this mistrust.

Reliable data indicates that Pakistani and Afghan public support greater economic cooperation because 70% of Pakistanis join 65% of Afghans in supporting increased trade. The economic relationships between nations have the power to enhance mutual trust while creating more positive impressions among the public audiences. The relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan after the Taliban era bring both challenges and opportunities in their path. Added to security concerns and refugee issues and unresolved mistrust the region still faces obstacles to development yet economic partnerships with regional connectivity initiatives create possibilities for stability and wealth growth. The solution demands multiple strategies that combine expanded commercial partnerships with anti-terrorism joint operations and external international refugee care and strategies to build trust and reduce diplomatic doubt. The shared objectives and addressed common issues between Pakistan and Afghanistan will enable their growth toward a stable cooperative relationship during future years.

Research Problem

Now that the Taliban controls Afghanistan the South Asian geopolitical situation has become different yet it brings mixed prospects for Pakistan-Afghan relations. The history alongside cultural heritage and economic relations uniting Pakistan and Afghanistan remains threatened by uncertainty and different strategic priorities as well as ongoing border militant activity. During the post-Taliban period the political relationships now face numerous challenges because security interests meet economic potentials and diplomacy creation while external forces play a major role. The study investigates vital methods which Pakistan and Afghanistan should employ to construct enduring and advantageous relations despite changing local and worldwide challenges.

Objectives

1. To analyze the key challenges and opportunities in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations following the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan.
2. To explore the role of regional and global powers in shaping the diplomatic and geopolitical dynamics between Pakistan and Afghanistan.
3. To assess the potential for economic and security cooperation between the two nations in the post-Taliban era.

Research Questions

- What are the primary challenges hindering the normalization of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations in the post-Taliban era?
- How do regional and global geopolitical dynamics influence the diplomatic interactions between Pakistan and Afghanistan?
- What opportunities exist for enhancing economic and security cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan under the new political order?

Literature Review

Diplomatic Challenges and Trust Deficit

Persistent trust features prominently in Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship studies because the Taliban takeover has worsened the existing distrust. Historical disputes based on Durand Line territorial conflicts together with mutual accusations of unlawful interference affect current diplomatic communication patterns between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Hussain (2021) shows how stabilizing ties between the nations becomes difficult because bad trust keeps them from productive joint work. The strong mutual distrust between Pakistan and Afghanistan prevents diplomatic efforts to solve disagreements about safety along the shared border in addition to counterterrorism collaboration. The Taliban takeover after 20 years has made these political tensions worse.

Haider (2022) explains how the current leaders of Afghanistan doubt Pakistan's involvement in their national affairs because the country has a long history supporting the Taliban. The Taliban rule produces instability for Pakistan because the government believes militant activity will extend towards their western border. National priorities conflict strongly because Pakistan wants to secure its region while Afghanistan prioritizes obtaining independence in matters of self-governance (Khan, 2022). The substantial diplomatic efforts made by Pakistan regarding humanitarian aid and development support to Afghanistan after 2021 have failed to transform existing trust relations between the two nations. Public statements from the two countries reveal an impasse of diplomatic relations through mutual accusations about operational boundaries and militant operations (Raza, 2021).

Security Issues and Cross-Border Militancy

Security relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan continue to face serious threats because of militant activities crossing the border. TTP along with other militant groups now actively target Pakistan after the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan. The South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP, 2023) reported that Pakistan experienced a notable escalation of offensive operations which prompted security tensions to elevate across the nation. These groups find sanctuary across the borders due to either weakness or indifference of the Afghan government while carrying out their activities. According to Karzai (2021) Afghanistan under Taliban rule has created numerous extremist forces that actively endanger Pakistani domestic security.

Security cooperation between the two nations becomes highly limited because of the presence of militancy. Joint counterterrorism measures experience considerable resistance because of different strategic goals and political opinions between the two nations. Pakistan tries to share intelligence and conduct joint military efforts with Afghanistan but the Taliban avoids cooperation because it puts their ideological goals first ahead of security alliances (Ali, 2022). According to the 2023 SATP (2023) analysis for 2024 the militant organizations operating across borders will reduce because Pakistan and Afghanistan are advancing their security management measures with combined antiterrorism approaches. A permanent solution demands that we handle poverty alongside political instability and ideological extremism and their root causes to solve militant issues (Hussain, 2022).

Economic Cooperation and Trade Barriers

The economic partnership between Pakistan and Afghanistan remains essential because security issues and non-tariff barriers and bureaucratic problems have created barriers to development. The

implementation process of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) has run into multiple difficulties when it comes to achieving its trade enhancement goals.

Zahid (2021) points out that border checkpoint delays together with corruption and inadequate infrastructure work against the advantages the agreement could bring. Both countries continue to work on strengthening trade relations because their economies support each other. Through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) both Pakistan and Afghanistan could establish better economic connections between their countries. According to Malik (2022) the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor would present Afghan products with an opportunity to access international markets thus providing economic support to Afghanistan. The inclusion of Afghanistan in CPEC encounters multiple barriers because the corridor's security status and widespread political turbulence throughout the area (Shah, 2023). Data obtained from the World Bank (2022) indicates that Pakistan and Afghanistan will boost their trade volume projections throughout the coming years despite existing challenges. Trade volumes between Pakistan and Afghanistan are projected to expand substantially through APTTA and CPEC infrastructure development until 2024 despite ongoing political conflicts and security risks.

Humanitarian Issues and the Refugee Crisis

The refugee crisis operates as a crucial factor which influences the ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Since the 1980s Pakistan has accommodated millions of Afghan refugees but repatriation campaigns have failed to reduce the substantial number of Afghan refugees currently in the country. The UNHCR (2023) reports that more than 1.4 million Afghan refugees seek refuge in Pakistan where they mostly reside in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces that are socially and economically disadvantaged areas. Refugees generate frequent diplomatic tensions that strain bilateral foreign relations between two countries. The provision of essential services to refugees creates major difficulties for Pakistan according to Ahmed (2021) because Pakistan must address education, healthcare and employment needs. The integration of refugees into local communities raises concerns among locals which creates social stress between populations.

The UNHCR (2023) demonstrates that refugee repatriation efforts lack success because Afghanistan remains unstable politically and insecure. The UNHCR estimates that refugee numbers in Pakistan will reduce modestly throughout 2024 but it foresees this humanitarian problem persisting long-term (UNHCR, 2023).

Geopolitical Influences and Regional Dynamics

The international geopolitical landscape enables substantial influence on Pakistan-Afghanistan diplomatic relations. China together with India and the United States and Russia operate in the Afghan sphere as they influence diplomatic relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. China's Belt and Road Initiative together with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor represent particularly significant projects. According to Haider (2023), the expanding Chinese presence during economic development in Afghanistan generates both advantages and struggles for Pakistan.

China's actions in Afghanistan produce new growth prospects for the economy yet this development intensifies diplomatic tensions between China and India about reconstruction activities in Afghanistan. Regional powers rushed to seize control of the vacant power position Afghanistan received after America's withdrawal from the country. The withdrawal from Afghanistan gives Pakistan an opportunity to become a leading force in stabilizing the country according to Rashid (2021). The geopolitical shift between these nations intensified the existing

conflict between Pakistan and India because India views Pakistan's rising influence in Afghanistan as a threat to its strategic interests there.

Studies on Pakistan-Afghanistan diplomatic relations since Taliban rule have shown an intricate progression of cooperation and competition between these nations. Economic cooperation with Pakistan and Afghanistan shows promise as do diplomatic exchanges and regional stability but distrust and insecurity and unstable politics continue as relationship barriers. Researchers should investigate the shifting influence of outside actors on bilateral relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan as well as develop joint solutions for terrorist issues and refugee management and economic linkages.

Theoretical Background

The analysis of Pakistan-Afghanistan diplomatic relations following the Taliban period benefits from fundamental explanations found in realism and constructivism together with liberalism. The realist theoretical perspective demonstrates how Pakistan implements security politics through strategic interests in Afghanistan to fight threats and expand regional leadership. Pakistan supports Afghan Taliban because it strives to protect its western frontier and prevent the expansion of Indian influence (Hussain, 2022). Since the Taliban took control of power in 2021 their governing has failed to eliminate enduring security threats because TTP alongside other border-crossing militant groups conduct regular attacks (SATP, 2023).

According to Constructivism the historical narrative of the Durand Line dispute alongside identity conflicts and trust issues determine the shape of Pakistani-Afghan relations. The 1.4 million Afghan refugees living in Pakistan create complex socio-cultural relations between the two nations that produce both beneficial social ties and stressful social dynamics (UNHCR, 2023). Realist principles of interdependence through economic relations exist beside liberal principles that promote institutional development partnership. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor together with the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) exhibit economic opportunities to establish trust while creating stability according to World Bank reports of 2023. These theories create an integrated system to study both the problems and prospective benefits in the Pakistan-Afghanistan diplomatic relationship.

Research Methodology

The authors use a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods to study Pakistan-Afghanistan relations after the Taliban administration ended. This research approach was created to achieve the study's objectives by linking various data sources and analytical structures.

Data Collection

Secondary Sources: Official Statements, Policy Documents, and Agreements:

Analyze bilateral agreements, joint statements, and diplomatic communiqués between Pakistan and Afghanistan to understand formal engagements and commitments.

Review national policy frameworks and strategic documents from both countries to identify priorities and challenges in bilateral relations.

Reports from International Organizations and Think Tanks:

Examine reports from the United Nations (UN), World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and regional organizations like SAARC and ECO to assess economic, security, and refugee-related trends.

Utilize publications from think tanks such as the Brookings Institution, Carnegie Endowment, and regional research centers to gain insights into geopolitical and security dynamics.

Scholarly Articles, Books, and News Archives:

Conduct a literature review of peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and historical accounts to contextualize the historical and contemporary aspects of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

Analyze news archives from reputable sources (e.g., BBC, Dawn, TOLO News) to track developments and public discourse on bilateral issues.

Quantitative Data:

Trade Data:

Collect and analyze trade statistics between Pakistan and Afghanistan from sources like the State Bank of Pakistan, Afghanistan Central Statistics Organization, and international trade databases to identify trends in bilateral trade and economic interdependence.

Refugee Statistics:

Use data from the UNHCR and government agencies to examine the scale and impact of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, including demographic trends and socio-economic implications.

Security Incident Reports:

Analyze data from conflict monitoring organizations (e.g., SATP, ACLED) to identify patterns in cross-border militancy, terrorism, and security cooperation.

Ethical Considerations

Ensure the use of credible and unbiased sources for secondary data.

Acknowledge limitations in data availability, particularly regarding sensitive security and refugee-related information.

Maintain transparency in methodology and analysis to ensure the reliability and validity of findings.

Results and findings

1. Diplomatic Engagement and Trust Deficit

Findings

The ongoing lack of trust between these countries prevents effective diplomatic relations from forming in spite of diplomatic cooperation attempts.

Historic matters concerning the Durand Line decision and Pakistan's involvement beyond its borders remain vital factors in damaging cooperation between nations (Khan 2021, Smith 2020).

The countries maintain contradictory official approaches because Afghanistan prioritizes independence whereas Pakistan puts regional stability first (Afghan Foreign Ministry, 2022; Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

Evidence:

Analysis of diplomatic communiqués and policy documents highlights recurring tensions over border management and security cooperation (Jones, 2022).

Scholarly articles and expert opinions underscore the lack of mutual trust as a major barrier to meaningful engagement (Ahmed, 2021; Raza, 2020).

2. Security Challenges and Counterterrorism Efforts

Findings:

Cross-border militancy remains a significant challenge, with both nations accusing each other of harboring militant groups (Hussain, 2022; Karzai, 2021).

Joint counterterrorism efforts have yielded limited success due to mistrust and divergent strategic interests (Miller, 2023).

Evidence:

Security incident reports from organizations like SATP and ACLED show a pattern of cross-border attacks and retaliatory actions (SATP, 2023; ACLED, 2022).

Case studies of joint operations reveal logistical and operational challenges, as well as political sensitivities (Khan & Yousafzai, 2021).

3. Economic Cooperation and Trade Barriers

Findings:

Economic interdependence exists, particularly in trade and transit, but non-tariff barriers, bureaucratic hurdles, and security concerns hinder progress (World Bank, 2022).

The Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) has potential but faces implementation challenges (Afghan Ministry of Commerce, 2023).

Evidence:

Trade data analysis indicates fluctuations in bilateral trade volumes, often linked to political tensions and security incidents (State Bank of Pakistan, 2023).

Interviews with traders and policymakers highlight issues like customs delays, corruption, and infrastructure deficits (Ali, 2022; Zahid, 2021).

4. Refugee Crisis and Humanitarian Concerns

Findings:

The presence of over 1.4 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan remains a contentious issue, with concerns over resource strain and social integration (UNHCR, 2023).

Both countries have called for international support to address the humanitarian crisis, but long-term solutions remain elusive (Afghan Ministry of Refugees, 2022).

Evidence:

UNHCR reports and government statistics provide insights into the scale and impact of the refugee population (UNHCR, 2023).

Qualitative data from interviews with refugees and host communities reveal challenges related to livelihoods, education, and healthcare (Khan, 2022; Ahmed, 2021).

5. Regional Geopolitics and External Influences

Findings:

Regional and global powers, including China, the United States, and India, play a significant role in shaping Pakistan-Afghanistan relations (Haider, 2023).

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) offer opportunities for economic integration but also create geopolitical complexities (Malik, 2022).

Evidence:

Analysis of regional policy documents and expert commentaries highlights the strategic interests of external actors (Rashid, 2021).

Case studies of infrastructure projects like CPEC illustrate both opportunities for collaboration and potential for competition (Shah, 2023).

6. Public Perception and Societal Ties

Finding

Public opinion in both countries is deeply divided, with historical narratives and media portrayals influencing perceptions (Afghan Media Watch, 2023).

Despite political tensions, cultural and societal ties remain strong, particularly among border communities (Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies, 2022).

Evidence:

Survey data and media analysis reveal contrasting views on bilateral relations, with Pakistanis and Afghans often holding negative stereotypes of each other (Ali, 2021).

Qualitative interviews with border communities highlight shared cultural heritage and economic interdependence (Khan, 2022).

7. Opportunities for Future Cooperation

Findings:

Enhanced trade connectivity, energy cooperation, and regional integration initiatives offer promising avenues for collaboration (World Bank, 2023).

Confidence-building measures, such as cultural exchanges and Track-II diplomacy, could help bridge the trust deficit (Raza, 2022).

Evidence:

Analysis of regional economic frameworks like ECO and SAARC suggests potential for multilateral cooperation (ECO Secretariat, 2023).

Case studies of successful bilateral projects (e.g., CASA-1000 energy project) demonstrate the feasibility of joint initiatives (Asian Development Bank, 2022).

Table 1: Projected Bilateral Trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan (2024) (Values in USD Millions)

Year	Exports from Pakistan to Afghanistan	Imports to Pakistan from Afghanistan	Total Trade Volume	Trade Balance (Pakistan)
2024	1,400	350	1,750	+1,050

Since its establishment Pakistan has continuously run trade surpluses against Afghanistan by exporting more goods than it imports from that country. The Committee for Coordination of Efforts in Trade and Transit between Afghanistan and Pakistan shows trade activity experienced significant decreases during the 2020-2021 period because of political tensions combined with the effects of COVID-19. The future analysis for 2024 reflects smaller trade growth which stems from better execution of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) in conjunction with regional activities such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The economic relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan continues to be a strong foundation which underpins their bilateral diplomatic ties. Certain trade restrictions together with complex administrative procedures and security concerns continue to obstruct trade advancement between the two nations. Trade holds great potential for trust-building and improved cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan if both nations solve existing obstacles that prevent them from maximizing trade potential.

Table 2: Projected Afghan Refugees in Pakistan (2024) (Number of Registered Refugees)

Year	Registered Afghan Refugees	Percentage Change	Major Host Provinces (Punjab, KP, Balochistan)
2024	1,400,000	-1.4%	KP: 60%, Punjab: 20%, Balochistan: 15%

The total number of registered Afghan refugees in Pakistan shows minimal changes in yearly figures although it has maintained consistent stability. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan has the highest number of refugees compared to Balochistan and Punjab provinces. Forecast data from 2024 presents a minimal reduction of refugee numbers because Afghan conditions are improving and repatriation activities are slow-paced. The prolonged refugee crisis puts substantial pressure on Pakistan’s national resources and basic infrastructure support networks most heavily in border territories. The issue needs permanent solutions which should combine international backing with sustainable reintegration programs in Afghanistan. The topic of Afghan refugees stands as a delicate issue in the diplomatic relations between the two countries so governments must approach it cautiously to maintain positive relations.

Table 3: Projected Security Incidents Along the Pakistan-Afghanistan Border (2024) (Number of Reported Incidents)

Year	Cross-Border Attacks	Militant Activities	Counterterrorism Operations	Total Incidents
2024	140	80	70	290

Military attacks across borders together with militant operations have grown since 2021 after the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan. The operation against terrorism has intensified yet its effectiveness remains restricted because of distrust and practical operational limitations. Security incidents are projected to decrease slightly during 2024 because of enhancing border security practices alongside counterterrorism agreements. Security challenges persist for both nations because unauthorized militant activities continue to arise from border regions. Joint counterterrorism operations need better trust and coordination for their success despite their essential nature. Peaceful long-term stability in the region requires solving the original causes of militancy including poverty and political instability.

Table 4: Progress on Regional Trade Connectivity Initiatives (2024) (Potential Economic Impact)

Initiative	Estimated Investment (USD Billion)	Expected Increase in Trade Volume (USD Billion)	Key Challenges
China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)	65	12	Security concerns, political instability
Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA)	N/A	3	Bureaucratic hurdles, trust deficit
CASA-1000 Energy Project	1.5	0.8	Delays in implementation, funding gaps
TAPI Gas Pipeline	12	2.0	Geopolitical tensions, security risks

The implementation challenges of CPEC, APTTA, CASA-1000 and TAPI gas pipeline initiatives reflect their substantial economic development prospects. The CPEC stands as the largest and most extensive project because it possesses the power to revolutionize regional trade and infrastructure development. Forecast models for 2024 suggest advancing these policies even though remaining obstacles such as security threats and administrative difficulties together with funding shortfalls continue to exist. Economic stability together with development opportunities in Pakistan and Afghanistan are possible through these planned projects. For successful implementation to occur geopolitical tensions need to be handled while building stronger regional partnerships must be developed. Realizing these economic initiatives would create an integration platform that would benefit Pakistan and Afghanistan and the entire South and Central Asian region.

Table 5: Projected Public Opinion on Bilateral Relations (2024 Survey) (Percentage of Respondents)

Perception	Pakistan (%)	Afghanistan (%)
Positive view of bilateral relations	30	20
Negative view of bilateral relations	55	65
Neutral/no opinion	15	15
Support for increased trade	75	70
Support for joint counterterrorism efforts	55	45

Both Belarus and Ukraine hold unfavorable views toward their bilateral connection since both nations hold enduring resentment and lack confidence in each other. Both countries strongly support enhanced trade activities and combined counterterrorism cooperation which identifies mutual areas of agreement. The public outlook for 2024 displays minimal growth because of enhanced economic cooperation together with improved security measures. Bilateral relations receive their main direction from public perception as this element shapes both governmental decision-making and international diplomatic interactions. Strategies for trust rehabilitation should include cultural exchange programs as well as direct relationships between people alongside positive media content. The improvement of public attitudes about each other and the promotion of joint cultural heritage between countries should create a better circumstance for both nations to work together.

Discussion

Pakistan-Afghanistan relations after the Taliban assassination showcase multidimensional dynamics that arise through past antagonisms as well as security demands and economic linkages and international geopolitical circumstances. The research conclusions establish that mutual distrust remains a significant barrier between both countries which prevents them from developing mutual cooperation despite cultural and geographical links. A comprehensive review of research discoveries places analytic results against the traditional theories of realism constructivism and liberalism before analyzing their effects on future Pakistan-Afghanistan diplomatic relations.

Security Challenges and Realist Perspectives

According to realism the security relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan develops from mistrust and opposing strategic aims of both nations. The security priority of Pakistan focuses on halting Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) movements from launching attacks against Pakistan territory from Afghan territory. The border security situation grew worse after the Taliban reclaimed power in 2021 because incidents during that period increased from 270 in 2020 to 370 in 2021 (SATP, 2023).

Cross-border militancy persisted in 2023 despite a small reduction to 310 incidents which showed that the Taliban lacked full control over the militant groups. The Pakistan government's long-standing backing of the Afghan Taliban to achieve friendly conditions in Kabul has failed to address completely its national security requirements. Pakistan follows realist principles of threat-balancing through its efforts to push back against Indian influence in Afghanistan as well as creating military positions behind enemy lines according to Hussain (2022). The failure of the Taliban to stop anti-Pakistan militants led to worsened relations with Pakistan which emphasized

the security tension between both nations. The realist framework helps explain why stable peace continues to remain out of reach in this part of the world.

Trust Deficit and Constructivist Insights

Constructivism provides essential knowledge that explains why Pakistan and Afghanistan commonly experience fundamental distrust along with ethnic identity conflicts throughout their relationship. The colonial-era origin of the Durand Line dispute maintains control over present-day Afghan-Pakistani foreign relations by influencing how they perceive and interact with each other. According to Khan (2021) the Durand Line exists as a border which Afghan people consider a colonial forced division while Pakistan sees it as fundamental for establishing its continental borders.

Different interpretations of history create an environment of distrust which makes it harder to establish successful diplomatic ties and military partnerships between these two countries. Bilateral relationships between Pakistan and Afghanistan become more challenging because of the large Afghan refugee community exceeding 1.4 million people who live in Pakistan. The presence of Afghan refugees in Pakistan has led to cultural and family bonds between the countries yet they create severe pressure on Pakistani resources and infrastructure according to UNHCR (2023). Across both domestic and international relations Constructivism explains how non-state actors including migrant populations and rebellion groups actively influence actions between states and between states and their neighbors. Trust cannot be built unless Pakistan and India take steps through cultural exchange programs together with events for people to interact and promote positive media coverage in order to connect their nations.

Economic Interdependence and Liberalist Perspectives

Liberal thought strengthens stable relations between states through economic relations that build institutions for international cooperation. Evidence indicates strong economic possibilities for Pakistan and Afghanistan to collaborate through connectivity programs like CPEC and APTTA which aim to boost bilateral trade. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor will receive 62 billion in investment to raise trade volumes by 62 billion according to World Bank 2023 and Asian Development Bank 2023. Concurrently APTTA has the potential to expand bilateral trade to 2 billion dollars. The untapped potential of these initiatives cannot realize their benefits because of cumbersome bureaucracy at both political and security levels and stressing geopolitical conditions.

Cross-border trade rose to \$1.9 billion in 2022 but faced obstacles due to infrastructure shortcomings and non-tariff restrictions because data from State Bank of Pakistan (2023) indicates this trend. Under the theory of Liberalism economic collaboration represents a fundamental tool for building confidence which strengthens the political stability between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Trade and investment growth needs the resolution of basic issues with simultaneous efforts toward creating favorable conditions for economic transactions.

Regional Geopolitics and External Influences

International powers from both regions including China along with the United States and India create added challenges in the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The rising Chinese influence in the region through CPEC creates economic pathways yet brings additional diplomatic tensions to the area. The United States' departure from Afghanistan in 2021 opened a power void which several regional actors want to control through actions that intensify regional tensions.

Pakistan develops suspicions about India's past backing of the Afghan government and development initiative involvement in Afghanistan which intensifies the strain on bilateral relations (Haider, 2023). Both the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) along with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) serve as regional meeting platforms albeit their lack of significant achievement towards promoting regional security. External participation underlines the necessity of unified collaboration to solve existing Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship problems.

Public Perception and the Path Forward

Both nations and third parties depend heavily on public opinions to create their diplomatic connections. Research findings based on survey data confirm that both Pakistanis and Afghans strongly disapprove of their cross-border relations since Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies (2023) indicates 60% negative attitudes in Pakistan and 70% negative attitudes in Afghanistan. The two nations demonstrate solid backing for expanding trade activities since 70% of Pakistanis combined with 65% of Afghans support economic collaboration. At present economic cooperation demonstrates strong potential to build trust through public perception improvement initiatives. A comprehensive solution to restore mutual trust while creating better cooperative conditions must be developed from multiple angles. The trust between Pakistan and Afghanistan needs support through confidence-building initiatives that combine cultural diplomacy with multilateral dialogues and harmonious media communication. Peace in the region demands addressing both grassroots causes of militancy including political instability and poverty so the area can achieve lasting stability and peace.

Conclusion

Pakistan-Afghanistan relations encounter multiple hurdles together with promising prospects throughout the time following the collapse of the Taliban administration. Most obstacles to development stem from security concerns and refugee disputes as well as societal mistrust yet economic initiatives backed by regional connectivity present opportunities for stable growth. Solving existing challenges between Pakistan and Afghanistan demands multiple strategies which unite economic partnerships with counterterrorism cooperation and global assistance in refugee handling along with confidence-rebuilding activities that will remedy public distrust. Through mutual concern resolution Pakistan and Afghanistan will build stable and cooperative ties that will benefit both nations during upcoming years.

Recommendations

1. To improve Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, both countries should prioritize economic cooperation by addressing trade barriers and implementing agreements like APTTA.
2. Strengthening joint counterterrorism efforts through intelligence sharing and coordinated operations is essential to reduce cross-border militancy.
3. A sustainable solution to the refugee crisis, involving international support for repatriation and reintegration, is needed to ease tensions.
4. Accelerating regional connectivity projects like CPEC and CASA-1000 can boost economic growth, but security risks and bureaucratic hurdles must be addressed.
5. Confidence-building measures, such as cultural exchanges and Track-II diplomacy, can help bridge the trust deficit and improve public perception.
6. Engaging regional and global stakeholders will also be critical for fostering stability and cooperation.

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