

The US Retreat from Afghanistan, Taliban Resurgence, and Regional Implications in South Asia: A Special Focus on Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

In August 2021, when the United States military left Afghanistan, nearly 20 years of direct intervention ended, radically shifting the geopolitical balance in South Asia. The paper will consider the complex causal linkage between the US withdrawal, the rapid Taliban resurgence, and the various regional consequences, particularly in Pakistan. The paper relies on literature in the field of strategic studies, policy reports, and empirical data to examine the historical background of the rise and fall of the Taliban, the key factors that contributed to the American withdrawal and the Doha Agreement, the shift in priorities of the US foreign policy, and how the power ended up in the hands of the Taliban. The paper will discuss the security, economic, humanitarian, and diplomatic impacts of these developments on South Asia with a particular emphasis on how Pakistan, the nearest neighbor and most caught in the crossfire of all neighbors, Afghanistan, has been forced to reestablish its security stance, its foreign policy and its domestic governance in response to the growing cross-border militancy, influx of refugees and the great-power realignments. The findings emphasize that the situation after 2021 is a paradox: the decreased external military presence did not result in increased stability, and the role in correcting the dysfunction in Afghanistan has been distributed unequally among regional forces, with Pakistan on the losing end.

1. Introduction

In August of 2021, the United States decided to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, a decision that became one of the most significant in the history of twenty-first-century foreign policy. The exit of the US, which lasted nearly 20 years of military operations, resulted in the rapid breakdown of the Afghan administration. It enabled the Taliban to be reinstated in national power within only a few weeks (Baker, P., 2021). The speed and noise of this transition - epitomized by the iconic

scenes of desperate civilians clinging to departing planes - reverberated across South Asia and beyond, prompting debates about how far a military coup could be excused, whether forced state-building would be sustainable, and how this kind of withdrawal would be handled, BBC News. (2021, August 15).

Pakistan, in particular, has been dramatically affected by the implications. As the nearest neighbor to Afghanistan, Pakistan, whose border stretches 2,600 kilometers, with a complex history, ethnic and political relations have been both an asset and a liability to the Afghan war (Bergen, P., 2011). Historically, the ambivalent struggle between Islamabad and the Taliban between strategic support and tactical alliance with the Western anti-terrorist operations placed Islamabad in a very vulnerable situation when the Taliban took hold of Kabul (Bergen, P., 2011). .

In addition to security, the withdrawal of the US has reshaped the region's economic landscape, stalled trade routes, caused refugee flows, and shifted the balance of power among regional powers, including India, China, Iran, and Russia Congressional Research Service. (2023). The rise of the Taliban to power has introduced new governance problems with international isolation and a humanitarian crisis that is likely to turn Afghanistan into a perpetual source of instability in the region (Fair, C. C., & Jones, S. G. 2021).

These developments are discussed in this paper from an analytical perspective. It traces the history of the Taliban, examines the causes of the US withdrawal, and the multidimensional effects of the situation in the region, using Pakistan as an example. The paper utilizes major policy documents, expert reports by international agencies, and a wide range of literature to give a critical account of one of the most historic geopolitical developments in South Asia today.

2. Historical Context: The Taliban's Rise, Rule, and Resurgence

2.1 Origins and First Regime (1994–2001)

The Taliban was formed in the early 1990s as a result of the Soviet-Afghan War and the ensuing civil war that rocked Afghanistan following the Soviet pullout in 1989 (Farhan, M., Khalid, N., & Iqbal, M. 2024). The movement was mostly made up of Pashtun religious students in Pakistani madrasas and was able to capture Kandahar in 1994 and, by September 1996, took over Kabul and declared the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan under Mullah Mohammed Omar (Giustozzi, A. 2008).

The Taliban rule in this initial phase was marked by a strict interpretation of Sharia law that grossly limited the freedoms of people, especially females and girls. Women were not allowed to be educated or employed; they frequently used public executions, amputations, and floggings as forms of enforcement; and the Ministry of the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice was in charge of keeping an eye on how people behaved Human Rights Watch. (2022). The regime was subject to universal condemnation by the international community, and only three countries, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, gave it official recognition International Crisis Group. (2020).

The strategic alliance between the Taliban and al-Qaeda, which was symbolized by sheltering Osama bin Laden, was disastrous. Following the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States, the Taliban declined to hand over bin Laden, leading to the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom in October 2001, which led to the rapid military defeat of the Taliban regime in two months International Crisis Group. (2021).

2.2 Insurgency and Reconstitution (2001–2021)

Despite a military defeat, the Taliban was reorganized across the Afghan-Pakistan border. They established a strong insurgency network that, over the following 20 years, incrementally weakened

the government of Kabul, with support from the US International Crisis Group. (2022). The group also showed a great adaptive capacity to transform its traditional form of confrontation to guerrilla warfare that involved ambushes, improvised explosive device (IED) campaigns, and the assassination of government officials and civil society leaders International Crisis Group. (2023).

More to the point, the Taliban has formed a parallel government in rural areas and has offered dispute resolution, local security, and basic services, which the central government, with its corruption and inefficiency, was not in a position to provide International Crisis Group. (2024). This low-level administrative competence gave the Taliban a degree of credibility within the disenfranchised communities, particularly in the rural districts that were predominantly Pashtun. The Taliban gradually regained political capital in the south and east of Afghanistan by exploiting local grievances over land issues, tribal hostilities, and the belief that the government was raping them (Iqbal, Z. 2022). .

3. Us Decision To Withdraw

3.1 The Doha Agreement (2020)

The US withdrawal was formally instituted under the Doha Agreement signed between the United States and the Taliban on 29 February 2020 (Iqbal, Z. 2022). . The agreement tied a schedule of gradual withdrawal of all US and NATO troops to Taliban conditions to avoid Afghanistan being utilized as an international terrorism base and participating in intra-Afghan peace talks. It was also criticized that the agreement amounted to legitimizing the Taliban and bypassing the elected Afghan government, which sent a clear message to the Taliban as well as the Afghan people that the US military assistance had an expiration date (Katzman, K. 2021).

3.2 Strategic and Political Drivers

The retreat was the result of a combination of strategic, political, and social pressures. Following almost 20 years, the US occupation in Afghanistan was the longest war in the history of the US, where more than 2,400 American lives were sacrificed, and an estimated expenditure of 2.3 trillion was incurred (Katzman, K. 2021). The original mission goals of eliminating al-Qaeda and ousting the Taliban had turned into an open-ended nation-building effort that was essentially unsuitable to Afghan political realities (Katzman, K. 2022).

The Doha Agreement was passed over to the Biden administration that took office in January 2021, and the new administration justified the withdrawal as part of strategic interest. The US foreign policy became more centered on great-power rivalry with China and Russia, and the strategic sustainability of an expensive military force in an outlying theater was unsustainable (Katzman, K. 2022). This was given an added impetus by popular opinion: opinion polls remained to show majority American support to withdraw, and this showed two decades of military fatigue and question of whether the mission could be achieved (Malakian, C. 2021).

3.3 Afghan Government Capacity

At the back of the decision was an admission that the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) could not sustain themselves. Despite the ANDSF investing upwards of 88 billion in training and equipping, endemic problems of corruption, including high rates of ghost soldier payrolls, low morale, high turnover, and weak command cohesion, undermined operational effectiveness (Malakian, C. 2021). These pre-existing evaluations were validated by the speed with which Afghan troops failed during the Taliban offensive in 2021, albeit in a way that surprised many analysts and policymakers (Mansoor, P. R. 2020).

4. The Revival and Strengthening of the Power of the Taliban

4.1 Military Offensive and Fall of Kabul

With the US and NATO forces starting to withdraw in spring 2021, the Taliban initiated an organized military operation, which quickly took control over provincial capitals until they entered Kabul on 15 August 2021 [1]. President Ashraf Ghani escaped the country, and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan crumbled with little opposition. The pace of Taliban progress, compared with the optimistic predictions of US and Afghan officials in previous weeks, underscored that the Afghan government's power had been reduced to complete reliance on foreign military support (Mansoor, P. R. 2020).

4.2 Governing the Islamic Emirate

The Taliban swiftly proceeded to set up the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, with Mullah Mohammad Hasan Akhund being designated as acting prime minister and a cabinet of almost all hardcore Taliban members (Muzaffar, M., Sultan, I., & Yaseen, Z. 2020) being assembled, including several who had been the targets of UN sanctions. The rule system was similar to the Taliban administrative framework of the 1990s, which was based on an extreme view of Sharia law and was marked by the systematic marginalization of women, ethnic minorities, and non-Taliban political forces (Muzaffar, M., Sultan, I., & Yaseen, Z. 2020).

Months after the Taliban returned to power, it brought back harsh limitations on the rights of women; girls were not allowed to attend higher education and secondary school; women were not welcomed in the formal labor market; movement was not permitted without a male escort. International condemnation of these policies was almost unanimous, leading to diplomatic isolation and restrictions on access to international financial aid Human Rights Watch. (2022).

Table 1: Key Events Leading to U.S. Withdrawal (Afghanistan Timeline)

Year	Event	Description	Strategic Impact
2001	U.S. Invasion of Afghanistan	Removal of the Taliban regime after 9/11	Beginning of long-term military intervention
2011	Death of Osama bin Laden	Conducted by U.S. forces in Abbottabad	Shift in U.S. counterterrorism priorities
2018	U.S.–Taliban Negotiations Begin	Direct talks initiated in Doha	Taliban gains diplomatic legitimacy
2020	Doha Agreement	Agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban	Timeline for troop withdrawal established
2021	U.S. Withdrawal Completed	U.S. forces exit Afghanistan (August)	Collapse of the Afghan government; Taliban takeover

By Author Calculation

There are two components of the dynamics of insurgency and ISIS-K.

The Taliban have been unable to overcome security challenges despite the success of their rule in the country. Its ideological opponent, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), has launched many high-profile attacks on Taliban forces, religious minorities, and civilian events, most infamously the suicide bombing of Kabul airport in August 2021, which claimed the lives of more than 180 people Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies. (2022). The ability of ISIS-K to conduct multi-level operations within Afghanistan challenges Taliban assertions of order and stability. It poses a major current threat to the region's security Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies. (2022).

5. South Asian Implications

5.1 Security Dynamics

The Taliban had returned to its power in South Asia, altering the circumstances in the region in terms of security. The US and NATO pullout has deprived the external equilibrium of militant action, which has enabled all the armed groups to exercise greater freedom in the Afghan theater (Pant, H. V. 2022). The more dynamic and uncertain threat environment has compelled states in the region, particularly Pakistan, India and Iran to realign their defense and intelligence postures. As a result, the rise of transnational militant networks that are based on Afghan soil has become a security issue of the day in the eyes of the neighboring states. The ongoing presence of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, which is recognized by the UN monitoring reports, the growth of ISIS-K, and the unification of Pakistan-centered militant organizations all indicate the ineffectiveness of the Taliban counterterrorist pledges under the Doha Agreement (Pant, H. V. 2022).

5.2 India's Strategic Dilemma

The possibility of the Taliban coming back to power has raised a lot of strategic concerns for India. The Islamic Republic had seen New Delhi spend about \$3 billion in Afghan infrastructure and development projects to construct roads, dams, schools, and the Afghan Parliament building as a tool of soft power and strategic influence Pew Research Center. (2021). The rise of the Taliban was a threat to this investment and likely to increase the presence of Pakistani influence in Kabul at the expense of India.

Pragmatism has crept into Indian policy: by 2022, India had reestablished diplomatic contact with the Taliban and a limited level of diplomatic presence in the country, driven by the necessity to protect Indian assets, intelligence, and ensure that Afghanistan was not a launchpad of terrorist attacks against Indian territory or interests, especially by the likes of Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed.

5.3 Iran's Complex Calculus

The relations between Iran and the Taliban have traditionally been characterized by ideological hostility: the Sunni Islamism of the Taliban is in stark opposition to the Shia theocracy of Iran, and the two groups were on the verge of open conflict after the Taliban assassinated Iranian diplomats in Mazar-e-Sharif in 1998 (Shahid, A. 2024). However, the post-2021 era has witnessed Tehran take a realistic diplomatic stance by involving Taliban leaders to coordinate efforts to secure the joint border, regulate the flow of refugees, and restrict the US influence in the area. This policy of Iran is an expression of a calculation that the engagement, although not pleasing to ideology, is more conducive to its overall strategic interests than isolation (Shahid, A. 2024).

5.4 China's Strategic Engagement

The US withdrawal has been viewed by China as a strategic move to expand its influence in Afghanistan and the rest of Central and South Asia region. Beijing has engaged with Taliban leaders, shown interest in Afghanistan's vast mineral deposits, such as lithium, copper and iron ore, and has shown the desire to make Afghanistan part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) system South Asia Strategy Monitor. (2025). The participation of China is, however, conditional due to the high security interest, especially concerning the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and the instability that can be caused by Afghanistan-based extremism in the Xinjiang region of China. Beijing has attempted to secure clear Taliban assurances that they will not engage in ETIM operations as a prerequisite for more intensive economic interaction.

Table 2: Causes of U.S. Withdrawal

Category	Factor	Explanation
Political	War Fatigue in U.S.	Longest war created domestic pressure to withdraw
Economic	High Financial Costs	Trillions spent with limited success
Strategic	Shift to China/Russia	U.S. reoriented focus to great power competition
Diplomatic	Doha Agreement	Formalized exit strategy
Military	Weak Afghan Forces	Inability to sustain control without U.S. support

By Author Calculation

5.5 Humanitarian Crisis and Migration

The Taliban conquest brought one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world. The freezing of \$9.5 billion in Afghan central bank assets in the United States, the suspension of international aid, which had been funding about 75 percent of Afghan government spending, created an instant economic meltdown (Muzaffar, M., Sultan, I., & Yaseen, Z. 2020). The World Bank approximated that GDP had decreased in the year after the Taliban takeover by about 20-30 percent, which caused an estimated 97 percent of the population to live below the poverty line, and made more than 24 million people dependent on humanitarian aid.

Table 3: Impact on Pakistan and South Asia

Impact Area	Effects on Pakistan	Regional Consequences
Security	Rise in cross-border militancy	Increased instability in South Asia
Economic	Refugee burden, trade disruptions	Strain on regional economies
Humanitarian	Influx of Afghan refugees	Regional humanitarian crisis
Diplomatic	Pressure to engage the Taliban	Shifting alliances and power dynamics
Strategic	Recalibration of foreign policy	Emergence of new regional alignments

By Author Calculation

Displacement is bound to result from the humanitarian crisis. The majority of Afghans are living in the world as refugees in Pakistan and Iran, where the UNHCR estimates the population of Afghan refugees at nearly 3.7 million in Pakistan, and about 3.4 million in Iran as of 2022 (Malakian, C. 2021). This inflow places enormous pressure on already strained host-country services and has worsened socioeconomic tensions in border communities.

6. Implications to Pakistan: Multidimensional Analysis

6.1 Security Implications

Pakistan is in a distinctly vulnerable position within the regional order after 2021. Being the largest neighbor of Afghanistan and with the longest historical involvement in the Afghan conflict, Pakistan has been the most affected by the US withdrawal, with immediate and grave effects on its security. Most notable has been the revival of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Pakistani Taliban group, which finds ideological and operational assistance from the Afghan Taliban (Bergen, P., 2011).

The Taliban's assumption of power once again emboldened the TTP, which had been set back by Pakistani military operations, especially Operations Zarb-e-Azb (2014-2016) and Radd-ul-Fasaad (2017-2021). Still, it maintained the ability to organize in the Afghan border regions. According to the data provided by the Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS), terrorist attacks in Pakistan

have grown by 51 percent in 2022 in comparison to the previous year, which can be directly associated with the TTP being reconstituted under the patronage of the Afghan Taliban (Bergen, P., 2011). The TTP took advantage of the ideological congruence with the Afghan Taliban and the decreasing international pressure after the US withdrawal to reorganize, reequip, and restart the activities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan.

The apparent lack of interest of the Afghan Taliban in cracking down on TTP activities, regardless of the many requests made by Islamabad, has emerged as one of the main issues of strained bilateral relations. Pakistan has even launched airstrikes within the Afghan soil against TTP bases, which has further worsened a relationship that Islamabad initially believed would provide a strategic payoff, according to the International Crisis Group. (2024).

6.2 Border Management Challenges

The Durand Line, a 2,600-kilometer-long border officially not recognized by Afghanistan but disputed by the Kabul government after Kabul government, has posed management issues that have continued to trouble it, and the US withdrawal only aggravated the situation. The breaking up of NATO coordination systems placed Pakistan in a position where it was largely left to do border security along a rugged border, with tribal cross-border kinship networks and high illicit trade levels (Iqbal, Z. 2022).

Table 4: Trend of U.S. Troop Presence in Afghanistan (2001–2021)

Year	Troop Level (Approx.)
2001	2,500
2005	20,000
2010	100,000
2015	10,000
2020	8,000
2021	0

By Author Calculation

Pakistan has made significant investments in border fencing and surveillance infrastructure, with an estimated 90 percent of the Durand Line fence completed by 2023. Nevertheless, the Afghan Taliban have occasionally torn down fence posts and complained that fortification of the border is infringing on the sovereignty of Afghanistan, which has resulted in armed confrontations between Pakistani border troops and Afghan Taliban militants. US intelligence sharing has also been halted, further impairing Pakistan's situational awareness along the border and making counterterrorism efforts more difficult (Iqbal, Z. 2022).

6.3 Refugee and Humanitarian Burden

Afghan refugees have been in Pakistan for more than 40 years, and the 2021 events brought new momentum to the already huge number of refugees. As of 2022, there were about 3 million Afghans in Pakistan, both registered refugees on the UNHCR list and unregistered migrants, making Pakistan one of the world's largest countries hosting refugees (Malakian, C. 2021). The refugee population has created an enormous burden on the social services, especially in terms of healthcare, education, and housing in the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan.

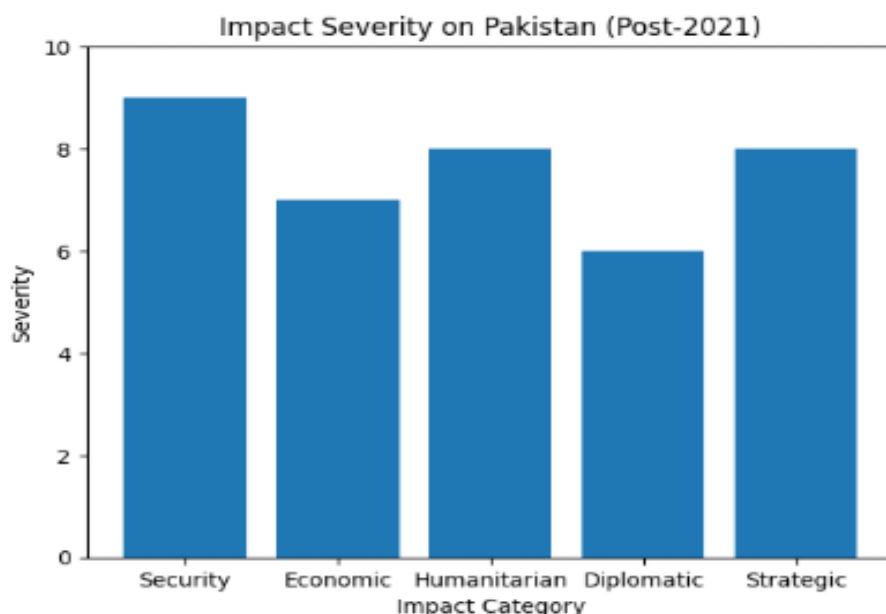


Figure No. 1: Unlike in the past when there were Afghan displacements during the Soviet-Afghan War and the post-2001 conflict, the international financial aid to cope with refugees in the post-2021 period has decreased significantly.

The weariness of Western donors and political sensitivity to the Taliban government has limited the commitment to multilateral funding, and Pakistan has been left to contribute a bigger chunk on its own. In this respect, the social tensions between the host communities and Afghan refugees have worsened the situation, which also adds to the anti-refugee sentiments and complicates the humanitarian response (Shahid, A. 2024).

6.4 Economic Implications

Many years ago, Afghanistan was a transport corridor between Pakistan and Central Asian markets; the bilateral trade relationship, estimated at 1.5 billion per annum prior to 2021, was a key component of Pakistan's regional economic policy. The Taliban's conquest and the subsequent international sanctions regime shook this trade relationship to a considerable extent. Often, the closure of the Torkham and Chaman border crossings, the breakdown of Afghanistan's banking system, and the decline in the buying power of the Afghan population due to economic contraction have drastically reduced Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan (Giustozzi, A. 2008).

The delay in major regional connectivity projects has also been a setback to Pakistan's long-term economic strategy. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline and the CASA-1000 electricity transmission project (both of which pass through Afghanistan) remain halted due to security concerns and the non-recognition of the Taliban government by many countries. Such delays deny Pakistan access to important energy resources and potential transit revenues as the country faces an acute energy crisis at home (Katzman, K. 2022).

6.5 Geopolitical and Strategic Recalibration

The US pullout has radically changed the strategic environment in which Pakistan will be operating. Over 20 years of US military involvement in Afghanistan, Pakistan has been an invaluable logistics and intelligence partner that gave Islamabad significant influence in its relationship with Washington despite its ongoing tensions with Pakistan over its so-called dual-tracking, which is cooperating with US counter-terrorism operations and maintaining connections with the Taliban International Crisis Group. (2021).

Since 2021, the US strategic focus has shifted firmly toward conflict with China in the Indo-Pacific, and Pakistan's geopolitical role in Washington's calculations has become less significant. This change has led to the diminution of the diplomatic cover and funds that Pakistan had formerly enjoyed as the frontline in the war on terror, pushing Islamabad towards closer relations with Beijing and Riyadh and giving rise to additional weaknesses in its ties with Western donors and multilateral financial institutions (Katzman, K. 2022).

The US withdrawal has opened new avenues for China to increase its presence in Afghanistan. This project is consistent with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the larger connectivity agenda of China in Central Asia. However, the unstable situation in Afghanistan is also a threat to Chinese investments in Pakistan and a security concern of the flow of extremist factors in the area. The fact that Pakistan has security and economic problems limits how it can be a reliable partner in dealing with these risks South Asia Strategy Monitor. (2025).

6.6 Foreign Policy Realignment

The post withdrawal stage has made a recalibration of Pakistani foreign policy to take place. Islamabad has tried to position itself as a mediator between the Taliban government and the international community which demands the release of frozen Afghanistan funds, restoration of humanitarian assistance and gradual international intervention in Kabul. This habit denotes a twofold interest of Pakistan in preventing the economic collapse of Afghanistan, which would result in an uncontrollable refuting and security externalities and regulating the choices of the Taliban (Malakian, C. 2021).

Pakistan has also started engaging more in multilateral arrangements, particularly Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which includes China, Russia and Central Asian countries. This is representative of an even greater foreign policy drift towards diversification and regionalism, less reliant on the US-led Western order and more focused on pursuing alternative bases of economic sustenance and strategic legitimacy (Pant, H. V. 2022).

However, Pakistani manoeuvre space is limited by rival demands: the necessity to sustain western financial aid: especially that of the IMF and World Bank, but also the management of perceptions of Taliban alignment; the necessity to deal with the TTP threat without incurring a complete break with the Afghan Taliban; and the need to balance relationships with India, China and the Gulf states in a more fragmented regional order (Shahid, A. 2024).

7. The Future Outlook

7.1 Afghanistan's Stability Prospects

The future of Afghanistan in the post-2021 era is highly unpredictable. Although the Taliban has terminated widespread conventional warfare, the development of a stable government is challenged by strong structural impediments. The lack of inclusive political institutions, the organized marginalization of women and ethnic minorities, the lack of international acknowledgment, and the continuation of ISIS-K violence all limit the ability of the Taliban to convert military dominance into good governance Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies. (2022).

The restoration of the economy will depend on the partial restoration of international financial relations, such as the release of assets and the provision of banking facilities, which the Taliban has not yet achieved, given its human rights record. In the absence of economic stabilization, humanitarian dependence will increase, nourishing poverty-displacement-radicalization cycles that jeopardize the region's security Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies. (2022).

7.2 Regional Cooperation Imperatives

The new strategic environment of the post-US has generated both incentives and barriers to regional cooperation. The problem of cross-border security threats, refugee movement, and economic disruption caused by dysfunctional Afghanistan is of interest to the neighboring states; however, historical animosity, especially between India and Pakistan, and conflicting interests in the involvement of the Taliban make it difficult to establish coordinated regional policies (Pant, H. V. 2022).

Multilateral systems such as the SCO, UN-led regional diplomatic arrangements, and the troika-plus system comprising the US, China, Russia, and Pakistan provide platforms for coordinated engagement. However, achieving their potential will entail some degree of great-power alignment, which is challenging under current geopolitical circumstances Pew Research Center. (2021).

7.3 Pakistan's Strategic Choices

In the case of Pakistan, the post-2021 environment is very challenging and has few opportunities. The TTP threat reinvigorates the security apparatus of the country; the economy is overstretched by costs on refugees and disrupted trade; and the diplomatic position is confounded by its relationship with the Taliban. Nevertheless, the withdrawal has given Pakistan increased strategic freedom, freeing it from its status as a frontline alliance, and the possibility of capitalizing on its geographical position as a mediator and a connector node Pew Research Center. (2021).

In order to achieve these opportunities, long-term domestic reform, credible counterterrorism performance, and realistic diplomatic practice that does not undermine international credibility of Pakistan but preserves its relationship with Afghanistan are needed. The sustainability of the position of Pakistan in the long-run will be based on how far Afghanistan will reach the necessary state of stability to de-escalate cross-border tensions. This is something that is far out of the immediate control of Islamabad International Crisis Group. (2024).

8. Conclusion

The American withdrawal of Afghanistan in August 2021 and the related Taliban resurgence can be characterized as a game changer in the south Asian geopolitics. As has been shown in this paper, the impact extends well beyond Afghanistan's borders and has transformed the region's security dynamics, economic connections, humanitarian status, and diplomatic alignments.

The implications have been counterintuitive to Pakistan. The event that a segment of the strategic community in Islamabad had initially perceived as a positive consequence, the diminished Indian influence in Kabul and the recovery of a certain level of strategic depth in Pakistan, has quickly become a factor in heightened security stress, economic instability, and diplomatic exposure. This re-emerging of the TTP, the refugee burden, the non-progress of regional connectivity initiatives, and the loss of Pakistani leverage with US allies all highlight the expense of a laissez-faire Afghan environment to the Taliban control.

In a broader sense, the Afghan order post-2021 demonstrates the constraints of military means in resolving political crises, the risks of externally imposed state-building without enduring domestic institutions, and the timeless relevance of regional collaboration in handling the impacts of great-power withdrawal. With Afghanistan still falling into the Taliban rule, the international community is confronted with a tough decision between principled isolation and pragmatic engagement; a decision that directly impacts the stability of South Asia and the security of its people.

Future studies ought to focus on the changing nature of Taliban rule, the ability of regional structures to cope with the Afghan crisis, and the direction of Pakistan's strategic realignment in

the post-US period. What is not obscure is that the withdrawal in 2021 has not rendered Afghanistan irrelevant to the security of the region and the world as a whole-it has just shifted the nature of the burdens it causes and their distribution.

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