

## Regional Dynamics in Afghanistan: Unraveling the Roles of India, Pakistan, and China and Charting a Path Ahead

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### Abstract:

The abrupt withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 led to a swift collapse of the Afghan government and the Taliban's resurgence, exacerbating existing governance and humanitarian crises. This paper examines the involvement of Pakistan, China, and India in post-US withdrawal Afghanistan, analyzing their approaches, motivations, and the implications for regional security and politics. Through a qualitative analysis, the study explores the historical, cultural, economic, and strategic factors shaping the countries' engagement with Afghanistan. Pakistan's complex relationship with the Taliban, China's preference for multilateral diplomacy, and India's security concerns and efforts to counter Pakistan's influence are investigated. The paper employs a rational choice model to understand the decision-making processes of these states, highlighting areas of overlap, cooperation, and competition in Afghanistan, such as security, economic interests, regional influence, and strategic positioning. Despite some limited cooperation, historical baggage, domestic politics, and regional rivalries hinder deeper collaboration. The paper concludes with recommendations for Pakistan to enhance its role in Afghanistan, including adopting a multilateral approach, facilitating the international socialization of the Taliban, engaging constructively with the Afghan government, collaborating with regional powers, engaging with India on shared interests, promoting economic development, and addressing domestic security challenges.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, Pakistan, Security, Politics, Challenges

## Introduction

### Brief overview of the Post-US Withdrawal situation in Afghanistan

After two decades of war spearheaded by US-led NATO forces has put severe implication internally in Afghanistan and externally in the region. The Biden Administration decided the full withdrawal for September but rather abruptly withdrew from the country on August 15, 2021. The precipitant withdrawal from Afghanistan further worsened the Governance issues and in result the government collapsed. The Taliban took little time and faced almost no resistance in recapturing major Afghan cities in the immediate withdrawal of Afghanistan (Jan, 2022). The withdrawal and the ensuing Taliban takeover created multiple crises emerged as the country was already lacking resources. Humanitarian crisis such as food shortages, Women Rights and Freedom of Speech were the prominent issues that surfaced. Afghanistan remains the world's largest humanitarian crisis in 2023. The UN and partner organizations are seeking \$4.6 billion this year to assist the Afghan population. The UN Special Representative Mr. Alakbarov reported that over the past 18 months, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) declined by up to 35 per cent, the cost of a basic food rose by 30 per cent and unemployment increased by 40 per

cent. Additionally, roughly 75 per cent of people's income is now spent just on food. (United Nations Report, 2023).

Similarly, Economic sanctions levelled against the de facto authorities, which has resulted in the collapse of the Central Banking System; ratio of unemployment spiked due to imposition of ban on women's outdoor working. In addition, Taliban has recently announced ban on education of women in Afghanistan which pivotally got the attention across the world. The Human rights organizations raised the voice over the decision made by Taliban administration and called it as suppressing and violation of basic rights. Also the local human rights activists held protest in Kabul and other Urban areas of Afghanistan against the decision. The United Nations Security Council passed a resolution in March 2022 extending the United Nations Assistance Mission for Afghanistan (UNAMA) and its mandate to report on human rights conditions. The UN Human Rights Council in Geneva renewed and strengthened the mandate of the UN special rapporteur on Afghanistan in October. Key donors, including the United States, European Union, United Kingdom, and Japan continued to maintain restrictions on donor assistance and took inadequate steps to ensure that legitimate banking transactions involving Afghanistan are not restricted by UN or bilateral sanctions on Taliban officials. (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Since no country has officially recognized the newly claimed/emerged regime of Taliban government i.e Islamic Emirat of Afghanistan. The UNSC has cleared parameters regarding the recognition of a state by others as it will be Democratic (People's will), Counter terrorism spirit and Human rights protection. So far, the Taliban administration has been criticized for all of the mentioned obligations and yet to manage its international recognition.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The precarious situation created in post-American withdrawal Afghanistan creates another potential venue for conflict or cooperation in a divided regional environment with competing interests. This study looks at how the three major regional states will approach the Afghan problem and what their respective approach will entail for Afghanistan and for regional security and politics. The study argues that Afghanistan provides opportunities for both cooperation and competition and that the three countries can calibrate their policies to avoid escalation of the conflict and regional destabilization.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

Qualitative approach has been used for data collection and analysis in this study. Main focus of the study is to explore and collate the role of regional and neighboring countries in Afghanistan from different perspectives including cultural, economic, historical, political and strategic. The data collected as such includes reports, statements and earlier works on Afghanistan. The application of comparative analysis is the goal in order to single out similarities as well as contrasts in approaches of the countries towards Afghanistan. (Balancing US interests in India and Pakistan. (Chaudhuri, 2011)

### **Involvement of Pakistan, China, and India in a Taliban-Led Afghanistan**

**Pakistan and Taliban: A Complex Relationship**

The association between Afghan Taliban and Pakistan is very intricate with complex past. Allegedly, Pakistan has been a staunch supporter of Taliban on one hand, but on the other hand, Taliban blamed and targeted Pakistan for its alliance with the West especially USA in the war on terror. (The India-Pakistan rivalry in Afghanistan. United States Institute for Peace) (Zachary Constantino, January, 2020). The regard between Afghan Taliban and Pakistan dates to 1990s, when Pakistan along with Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) were the first to recognize the Taliban Government in Afghanistan as legitimate and representative. In that period, Taliban enjoyed defense as well as financial support of Pakistan, as Pakistan extended training facilities to Taliban and safe havens. (Afghanistan in South Asia: Regional cooperation or competition? South Asian Survey, (D'Souza, 2009). The US-led invasion of Afghanistan by the West put the Taliban Government out of power. Consequently, many leaders found sanctuaries in Pakistan. Since then, Pakistan has been blamed for shouldering Taliban insurgency in

Afghanistan, which Pakistan has always denied. Still Taliban Leaders have been located in Pakistan on many occasions. Some of the Pakistani officials have been accused by the international community for providing assistance to Taliban. (A deadly triangle: Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. The Brookings Essay) (Dalrymple, June 25, 2013)

Despite the support and connections, the alliance between Pakistan and USA in war on terror has provoked Taliban to target Pakistan and people. Taliban considered Pakistan a key associate in war on terror, and extended its hostilities towards the people of Pakistan as well as the state institutions. (China, India & Pakistan strategic triangle – The Pakistan factor in Sino-Indian relations. Global Affairs, H. J. Freddy (2021)). When peace deal was signed between Afghan Taliban and USA, the link between Afghan Taliban and Pakistan became more convoluted. Pakistan played a key role in the negotiations and finalization of the agreement. Among other provisions of the agreement, Taliban agreed to terminate their connections with terror groups in exchange for complete withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan. After US withdrawal, both sides are trying to maintain a pragmatic relationship, but it is marred by unfortunate incidents and lack of trust. Pakistanis especially concerned due to the ambiguous Taliban policy on Pakistani Taliban (TTP). (Enemy at the gates: An analysis on India's experiences with the Taliban. Jadavpur Journal of International Relations, S. Ghosh (2020)

### **Chinese Preference for Multilateral Diplomacy in Afghanistan**

China has been following a multisided approach in its relation with Afghanistan, it shows its willingness to take a significant role in regional as well as global affairs as a great power, and in the meantime, protect its economic and security interests. The Chinese concerns in Afghanistan extend to the Chinese homeland security from groups such as the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and the security of Chinese regional interests. China has been involved positively with Afghanistan and other regional powers to promote stability and peace in Afghanistan and ensure a peace settlement to all outstanding conflicts. In continuation of such efforts, China led the Afghanistan Contact Group in SCO and simultaneously engaged with the Taliban with the help of Pakistan. (India's neighborhood policy during 2014–2019:

Political context and policy outcomes. Indian Journal of Public Administration. (Rani, March, 2020)

### **Indian Security Concerns and the desire to Curtail and Counter Pakistan's Influence in Afghanistan**

For ideological reasons, when Taliban took control of Afghanistan, India's concern for its security as well as clout in the country worried it. In order to secure its strategic interests and maintain its influence in not only Afghanistan, but also the whole region, India engaged with Taliban for the purpose. Taliban has remained close to Pakistan for decades. Pakistan as an arch-rival of India, the return of Taliban jeopardized its interests due to its closeness to Pakistan as well as the alleged support of Taliban to different groups that attacked India has given India many sleepless nights. The situation became more volatile when US led forces left Afghanistan for good, these reasons persuaded New Delhi to engage with Taliban despite their past bitterness. (India has lost its leverage in Afghanistan, Foreign Policy, (M. Kugelman, November 11, 2021).

### **Cost-Benefit Analysis**

Theoretical Framework - Rational Choice Model and Motivations of the Three States and their Engagement in Afghanistan. The rational choice model is a theoretical framework used to analyze decision-making processes in individuals or organizations. The rational choice model falls within the broader framework of realist theory. It assumes that decision-makers are rational actors who make choices based on the costs and benefits associated with different options. Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan under the Taliban can be analyzed using the rational choice model. Pakistan has a complex relationship with Afghanistan, which has been marked by historical, cultural, and economic ties as well as geopolitical interests. From the standpoint of Pakistan, the strategic as well as ideological factors guide its relationship with Afghan Taliban. Pakistan has been regarded as time tested and staunch supporter of Afghan Taliban, Pakistan can utilize this connection for its purposes. It can use this position to

secure its interests in Afghanistan as well as counter the clout of India in the region. In this way it can ensure its security. (The real winner of the Afghan war? It's not who you think. The New York Times. (J. Perlez, 2021)

In light of China's multilateral approach in its relation with Afghanistan, Pakistan has also adopted a multi-sided approach than its previous approach that was purely based on security concerns. China has been heavily investing in economic and infrastructural facilities in Afghanistan to ensure stability in the region and prevent the rise of religious extremism again, which can add fuel to the restive Xinjiang Province. So the interests of China in Afghanistan have grown in few years. This has provided an impetus to Pakistan to adopt an inclusive approach towards Afghanistan and work with other regional powers to enhance stability. India previously counted the influence and rise of Afghan Taliban to power in Afghanistan, as Taliban were close to Pakistan. In contrast, India supported the Afghan Government against Taliban. So rise of Taliban created concerns for India, and India was persuaded to engage with Taliban, as the Pakistan-Taliban nexus is viewed by New Delhi as a new threat to its interests in the region. So the inclination of India towards Afghan Taliban is a new development. (Dynamics of trust and mistrust in the Afghanistan: Pakistan relationship. Asian Studies Review. (S. Taye & Z. S. Ahmed, 2021))

### **Areas of Overlap, cooperation, and competition in Afghanistan**

As stated earlier, most of the times the interests of these three countries are mutually exclusive and overlap, these interests cover the following areas: Security: China, India and Pakistan adhere security interests in Afghanistan for their own reasons. Xinjiang Province of China borders with Afghanistan, this area is restive because of their cultural differences from the rest of China. China is always concerned for the import of extremism to this area from Afghanistan. Previously, ETIM held training bases in Afghanistan where they would recruit, train and indoctrinate fighters. Indian concerns are about past support and assistance to different groups that targeted India and its people. Area of Pakistan that borders Afghanistan is very prone to rise of extremism in Afghanistan, as these people have cultural and ethnic ties with each other, this concerns Pakistan and allure it to secure its interests connected with Afghanistan. Secondly, Pakistan sees Afghanistan as a buffer against India. (Afghanistan's Neo-Taliban puzzle. South Asia Research. (Zahoor Ahmad Wani, March 17, 2021)

### **Economic Interests:**

According to one estimate, Afghanistan holds natural resources worth \$1000 billion. All the above states especially China is interested in exploration and exploitation of these resources fuel its industries and benefit both countries. It is the reason that these countries have made huge investments in infrastructure and other fields. China focuses on bringing stability to the region to secure its investments and economic interests. India has been a key exporter of food items to Afghanistan, while Pakistan desires to connect with Central Asian Republics through Afghanistan. Pakistan has made investments in improving the infrastructure in Afghanistan. (Decoding Pakistan's 'strategic shift' in Afghanistan. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. (Yousaf, May, 2013)

### **Regional Influence:**

Due to vital interests of all the three countries, these states struggle to maintain their influence and clout while reduce the same for the other two states. Both India and Pakistan see Afghanistan as a gate way to Central Asia and a potential market for its food items while export minerals from there especially natural gas. In this way they struggle to enhance their soft power. China on the other hand, has made huge investments to exploit natural resources in Afghanistan as well as infrastructure to promote its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). (The US-Taliban peace deal and India's strategic options. Australian Journal of International Affairs. (Raj Verma, June, 2020).

### **Strategic Positioning:**

The world sees Afghanistan as a playground to promote its interests in the region; the same is true for China, India and Pakistan. They see Afghanistan as a strategic platform to vie for regional clout and interests. Due to the connectivity of Afghanistan with South Asia and Central Asia, both regions and its states enhance their relationship with Afghanistan to bring prosperity to its states. (India in the emergent multipolar world order: Dynamics and

strategic challenges. (Veena Kukreja, March, 2020)

## Conclusions and Recommendations

### Summarizations and Key Findings

Cooperation between Pakistan, India, and China in Afghanistan has been limited, and their interests in the country often overlap and compete. Pakistan has historically had close ties with the Taliban, while India has been working to support the Afghan government and promote economic development in the country. China, on the other hand, has been taking a multilateral approach to Afghanistan, seeking to promote stability and economic development in the country. Despite these differences, there have been some efforts at cooperation between these countries in Afghanistan. For example, all three countries have been involved in peace talks with the Taliban, and they have expressed a shared interest in promoting stability and countering extremism in the country. China has also been investing in infrastructure projects in Afghanistan, which could benefit both Pakistan and India. However, cooperation between these countries is limited by their historical baggage, domestic politics, and regional rivalries. Pakistan and India have a long-standing conflict over Kashmir, which spills over into their relations in Afghanistan. China's growing influence in the region has also created a power dynamic that can be challenging for both Pakistan and India. In summary, while there have been some limited efforts at cooperation between Pakistan, India, and China in Afghanistan, their interests in the country often compete, and cooperation is hindered by historical baggage, domestic politics, and regional rivalries.

### B. Recommendations

Here are some recommendations for Pakistan to improve its role in Afghanistan in the presence of India and China: Adopt a multilateral approach to the resolution of Afghan crisis: Pakistan should refrain from recognizing and deepening ties with the Taliban government unilaterally. The country should seek to establish a broad regional or international coalition or contact group that engages the Taliban. A unilateral policy can potentially isolate Pakistan from the rest of the world at a time of economic and security issues of its own. Facilitating International Socialization of the Taliban: Research has shown that radicalized groups have softened their positions once exposed to greater international integration. Pakistan should advocate for extending limited and conditional membership to Taliban on the international forums such as the United Nations. Pursue a constructive approach to the Afghan government: Pakistan should seek to build a constructive relationship with the Afghan government, which could help to reduce tensions and promote stability in the region. This could involve working to address concerns about cross-border militancy and border disputes, as well as supporting economic development and regional integration initiatives.

Work with China and other regional powers: Pakistan could work with China and other regional powers, such as Russia, to promote stability and economic development in Afghanistan. This could involve supporting infrastructure projects and other development initiatives, as well as facilitating peace talks and promoting regional cooperation. Engage with India on shared interests: While Pakistan and India have significant differences, they also have some shared interests in Afghanistan, such as promoting economic development and countering extremism. Pakistan could seek to engage with India on these shared interests, potentially through the establishment of a joint commission or other bilateral mechanism. Promote economic development in Afghanistan: Economic development is critical for promoting stability and reducing conflict in Afghanistan. Pakistan could work with other regional powers to promote investment in the country, and could also take steps to improve economic ties with Afghanistan, such as easing restrictions on cross-border trade and facilitating the movement of people and goods. Address domestic security challenges: Pakistan faces significant security challenges in its own territory, with several militant groups operating in the country. Addressing these challenges would not only improve security in Pakistan but also reduce the risk of cross-border militancy in Afghanistan.

## Notes:

Pak-Afghan Transit Trade Agreement

China-Afghanistan Boundary (1884 Boundary Agreement British-Russia) Buffer Xinjiang

Spillover of Afghan militancy into Indian occupied Kashmir (1989 Soviet Withdrawal) Pipeline politics (TAPI)

International socialization

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