

Pakistan–Afghanistan Relations: Challenges, Security Concerns & Future Prospects

Research Paper

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Abstract

Pakistan–Afghanistan relations are shaped by geography, shared history, cultural linkages, economic interdependence, border disputes and persistent security concerns. The two countries share a border of more than 2,600 kilometres and have maintained close social and economic connections for decades. However, relations have repeatedly been affected by disagreements over the Durand Line, border management, cross-border militancy, refugee movements, trade restrictions and competing regional interests.

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 initially created expectations in Pakistan that security cooperation and bilateral relations could improve. Instead, relations subsequently became increasingly strained, particularly because of Pakistan's allegations that Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) operates from Afghan territory. Afghan authorities have rejected these allegations and have also objected to Pakistani military actions and border policies.

The situation became particularly serious in 2026, when Pakistan and Afghan forces engaged in some of the most severe fighting between the two countries in years. The clashes generated civilian casualties, displacement and disruptions to trade and border crossings. UNAMA reported at least 146 civilian casualties in Afghanistan between 26 February and 2 March 2026, including 42 deaths. Subsequent diplomatic efforts, including Chinese mediation and talks in China, demonstrated that despite severe tensions, both sides retain an interest in preventing a prolonged conflict.

This paper examines the historical, political, security, humanitarian and economic dimensions of Pakistan–Afghanistan relations. It argues that sustainable relations require a shift from a predominantly security-centred approach toward a broader framework combining counterterrorism cooperation, border management, regulated trade, refugee coordination, diplomatic engagement and regional connectivity.

Keywords: Pakistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan–Afghanistan relations, TTP, Taliban, Durand Line, border security, Afghan refugees, regional security, trade, China, Central Asia.

1. Introduction

Pakistan and Afghanistan occupy strategically important positions in South Asia and Central Asia. Their geographical proximity has created extensive economic, cultural and social links, but it has also generated persistent political and security challenges.

Pakistan officially describes Afghanistan as an important pillar of its foreign policy and highlights the two countries' shared faith, culture, history and geographical proximity. Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs notes that the two countries share a border extending over 2,600 kilometres and that Pakistan has maintained diplomatic relations with Afghanistan since 1948.

Despite these connections, bilateral relations have rarely been stable for long periods. The unresolved dispute surrounding the Durand Line, differences over border management, Afghan refugee issues, terrorism, militant activity and regional competition have repeatedly produced tensions.

The Taliban's return to Kabul in August 2021 represented a major turning point. Pakistan initially hoped that the new Afghan authorities would cooperate against militant organisations and help create a more stable security environment along the border. However, Pakistan subsequently became increasingly concerned about attacks attributed to the TTP and other militant groups.

By 2025, terrorism and security had become central issues in bilateral diplomacy. In talks held between Pakistani and Afghan officials, Pakistan called for concrete action against terrorist groups operating from Afghan territory.

The crisis intensified dramatically in 2026, when cross-border fighting escalated into a major military confrontation. The conflict demonstrated that Pakistan–Afghanistan relations had moved beyond traditional diplomatic disagreements into a much more serious security crisis.

Therefore, understanding the future of this relationship requires examining not only historical disputes but also the interaction between security, diplomacy, refugees, trade and regional geopolitics.

2. Historical Background of Pakistan–Afghanistan Relations

The relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan predates the creation of Pakistan in 1947. The region connecting present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan has historically been characterised by migration, trade, tribal connections and cultural interaction.

After Pakistan's independence in 1947, Afghanistan initially opposed Pakistan's admission to the United Nations, partly because of disagreements concerning the status of Pashtun-majority areas and the border inherited from British India.

The **Durand Line**, established in 1893 between Afghanistan and British India, subsequently became one of the most persistent sources of disagreement. Pakistan considers the Durand Line its internationally recognised border with Afghanistan, while Afghan governments have historically expressed reservations regarding the border.

During the Cold War, Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan was strongly influenced by the broader rivalry between the United States and Soviet Union. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 transformed Pakistan into a frontline state. Millions of Afghans sought refuge in Pakistan, while Pakistan became deeply involved in the Afghan conflict.

The Soviet withdrawal did not end instability. Afghanistan subsequently experienced civil war, the rise of the Taliban, the US-led intervention after 2001, and eventually the Taliban's return to power in 2021.

Consequently, Pakistan–Afghanistan relations have been influenced by several overlapping historical layers:

- Colonial-era border arrangements
- Pashtun nationalism
- The Soviet-Afghan War
- Afghan refugee movements
- Taliban rule
- US-led intervention
- Post-2001 militancy
- Taliban's return to power in 2021

These historical experiences continue to influence contemporary perceptions on both sides.

3. Pakistan and Afghanistan: Shared Borders, Culture & Strategic Interests

Geography is perhaps the most important structural factor in the bilateral relationship.

Pakistan and Afghanistan share a border of more than 2,600 kilometres. The border connects Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan regions with several Afghan provinces.

Shared cultural connections

The border region contains communities with:

- common languages,
- tribal relationships,
- family connections,
- religious traditions,
- historical trade links, and
- cultural similarities.

These links make the relationship between the two societies considerably deeper than a conventional interstate relationship.

Strategic interests of Pakistan

Pakistan's major interests include:

1. preventing militant attacks from Afghan territory;
2. maintaining border security;
3. preventing large-scale refugee crises;
4. maintaining access to Afghan and Central Asian markets;
5. promoting regional connectivity;
6. preventing hostile strategic encirclement;
7. supporting stability in Afghanistan.

Strategic interests of Afghanistan

Afghanistan's interests include:

- maintaining sovereignty;
- preserving cross-border trade;
- obtaining access to international markets;
- improving relations with neighbours;
- maintaining freedom of movement;

- resisting external pressure over border issues; and
- gaining access to regional transit corridors.

Thus, although both countries have significant reasons to cooperate, their strategic priorities sometimes conflict.

4. Major Political and Diplomatic Challenges

The political relationship has been affected by a number of recurring disputes.

4.1 The Durand Line

The Durand Line remains one of the most sensitive issues.

Pakistan considers the existing international border a settled matter, whereas Afghan political positions have historically challenged its legitimacy.

This disagreement becomes especially important when Pakistan attempts to strengthen border controls, construct fencing or establish new border-management arrangements.

4.2 Border crossings

Major crossings such as **Torkham** and **Chaman** are economically and strategically important.

Temporary closures can affect:

- traders,
- transporters,
- exporters,
- importers,
- refugees,
- patients,
- families divided by the border.

Therefore, border management has both security and humanitarian consequences.

4.3 Diplomatic trust deficit

Perhaps the most important political problem is the lack of trust.

Pakistan believes Afghanistan must take stronger action against militant organisations targeting Pakistan.

Afghan authorities, meanwhile, have rejected accusations that they deliberately facilitate anti-Pakistan militants and have objected to Pakistani military actions inside Afghanistan.

This creates a cycle:

Militant attack → Pakistani accusation → Afghan denial → border tensions → military response → diplomatic deterioration → further mistrust.

Breaking this cycle is essential for long-term stability.

5. Border Management and the Durand Line Issue

Pakistan has invested heavily in border management, including fencing and the establishment of controlled crossing points.

From Islamabad's perspective, improved border management is necessary to prevent:

- militant infiltration,
- illegal movement,
- smuggling,
- weapons trafficking,
- undocumented migration.

However, Afghan objections to certain border measures have periodically resulted in confrontations.

The deeper problem is that border security cannot be separated from the political dispute surrounding the Durand Line.

A sustainable arrangement therefore requires:

- regulated crossings,
- biometric/documentation systems,
- coordinated border patrols,
- customs cooperation,
- communication mechanisms between border forces,

- rapid dispute-resolution mechanisms.

A permanent hotline between military and border authorities could help prevent local incidents from escalating into broader confrontation.

6. Security Concerns and Militancy

Security is now arguably the most important issue in Pakistan–Afghanistan relations.

6.1 TTP

The **Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)** has become a central point of disagreement.

The UN Security Council identifies TTP as an established militant organisation whose stated objective includes overthrowing Pakistan's government and establishing its own interpretation of Islamic rule.

Pakistan has repeatedly accused Afghan territory of being used by TTP militants for operations against Pakistan.

Afghan authorities reject the allegation that they deliberately provide sanctuary to TTP.

This disagreement has become one of the fundamental obstacles to bilateral relations.

6.2 The security dilemma

Pakistan's position can be summarised as:

Afghan territory must not be used for attacks against Pakistan.

Afghanistan's position has focused heavily on sovereignty and opposition to Pakistani military operations inside Afghan territory.

This creates a classic **security dilemma**: measures taken by one state to increase its security may be interpreted by the other as a threat.

6.3 2025 diplomatic tensions

In 2025, Pakistan and Afghanistan held diplomatic discussions addressing security, trade and connectivity. Pakistan emphasised the need for concrete action against terrorist groups operating from Afghan territory.

Later in 2025, Pakistan publicly stated that terrorist attacks from Afghan territory had become a major source of tension and expressed dissatisfaction with the Afghan authorities' response to TTP.

6.4 The 2026 military escalation

The relationship deteriorated dramatically in 2026.

Pakistani and Afghan forces engaged in severe fighting along the border, with Pakistan carrying out airstrikes inside Afghanistan and Afghan forces responding with military action. Reuters described the confrontation as the worst fighting between the two neighbours since the Taliban returned to power in 2021.

The humanitarian consequences were significant.

UNAMA reported that between 26 February and 2 March 2026, at least **146 civilians were killed or injured in Afghanistan**, including 42 deaths and 104 injuries.

The conflict therefore demonstrated the danger of allowing bilateral disputes to move from diplomacy to military confrontation.

7. Afghan Refugees and Humanitarian Issues

Pakistan has hosted Afghan refugees for more than four decades.

This has created both humanitarian responsibilities and economic/social pressures.

According to UNHCR data, Pakistan remained host to approximately **1.42 million Afghan refugees and other Afghans in need of international protection at the end of 2025**.

The broader Afghan population in Pakistan is larger when people with different documentation statuses are included.

Pakistan has increasingly pursued policies encouraging undocumented Afghans and other categories of Afghan nationals without valid permission to return to Afghanistan.

Humanitarian dilemma

Pakistan argues that:

- it has hosted Afghans for decades;
- undocumented migration creates security and administrative problems;
- the country has limited economic resources;
- Afghanistan should increasingly absorb its own population.

Humanitarian organisations emphasise:

- protection concerns,
- family unity,
- access to education and healthcare,
- the risk of returning vulnerable people to unstable conditions.

2026 returns

UNHCR/IOM data recorded more than **650,000 returns from Pakistan to Afghanistan during 2026 by 1 August 2026**, within total returns to Afghanistan of more than one million from neighbouring countries.

The refugee question therefore represents both a bilateral issue and a major humanitarian challenge.

A long-term solution should combine:

- legal documentation,
 - voluntary repatriation,
 - international assistance,
 - resettlement for vulnerable cases,
 - Afghan reintegration programmes,
 - improved border management.
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8. Trade and Economic Relations

Economic relations represent one of the strongest potential areas of cooperation.

Pakistan has historically been an important trading partner and transit route for Afghanistan. Pakistan's geographical position provides Afghanistan with access to the Arabian Sea and international maritime markets.

However, political and security tensions have increasingly damaged bilateral trade.

The World Bank reported that Afghanistan's trade routes have increasingly shifted toward Iran and other alternatives amid restrictions and periodic border closures. Pakistan's share of Afghan imports declined from 19% in 2023 to 14% in 2024.

The situation became more difficult during the 2025–26 period as border closures disrupted commercial activity.

The economic cost is not limited to governments. Border closures affect:

- Pakistani exporters,
- Afghan importers,
- transport companies,
- customs agents,
- farmers,
- wholesalers,
- retailers,
- border communities.

Potential areas of economic cooperation

Pakistan and Afghanistan could expand cooperation in:

- bilateral trade,
- transit trade,
- customs digitisation,
- agricultural products,
- mining,
- energy,
- transport,
- logistics,
- banking,
- telecommunications,
- Central Asian connectivity.

Economic interdependence could become an important tool for reducing political tensions.

9. Pakistan–Afghanistan Relations and Regional Powers

The relationship cannot be analysed in isolation because Afghanistan sits at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, China and the Middle East.

Important external actors include:

- China
- Iran
- India
- United States
- Russia
- Central Asian states
- Gulf countries

Their policies influence the strategic environment surrounding Pakistan and Afghanistan.

10. Role of China, Iran, India and the United States

10.1 China

China has an important interest in regional stability.

Beijing is concerned about:

- terrorism,
- instability in Xinjiang,
- security of Chinese citizens and projects,
- regional connectivity,
- economic corridors.

China played a diplomatic role during the 2026 Pakistan–Afghanistan crisis.

Chinese mediation reportedly helped reduce the intensity of fighting, while Beijing subsequently urged both sides to resolve disputes through dialogue rather than force.

This demonstrates China's growing diplomatic relevance in the relationship.

10.2 Iran

Iran shares borders with both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Its influence has increased as Afghanistan has expanded its use of alternative trade routes through Iran.

The World Bank reported that Iran's role as an Afghan trade and transit partner strengthened as Afghanistan shifted routes away from Pakistan.

For Pakistan, this means that maintaining competitive trade corridors is increasingly important.

10.3 India

India has maintained significant economic, humanitarian and political interests in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has historically viewed India's Afghan role through the lens of its broader strategic rivalry with India.

For Afghanistan, however, relations with India can provide:

- development assistance,
- infrastructure cooperation,
- education,
- healthcare,
- diplomatic diversification.

The Indian factor therefore remains an important part of Pakistan's strategic calculations.

10.4 United States

The United States remains an important external actor because of its historical military involvement in Afghanistan and continuing concerns regarding terrorism.

Washington's priorities include:

- counterterrorism,
- regional stability,
- humanitarian concerns,
- preventing Afghanistan from becoming a base for international terrorist groups.

However, the US role is substantially different from the post-2001 period because American military forces are no longer deployed in Afghanistan as they were during the previous intervention.

11. Impact of the Taliban Government

The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 fundamentally changed the regional strategic environment.

Pakistan initially hoped that a Taliban government would provide:

- greater border stability,
- improved security cooperation,
- reduced Indian influence,
- increased bilateral communication.

However, relations became increasingly complicated.

The central issue has been the gap between Pakistani expectations and Afghan policy.

Pakistan expected the Taliban authorities to prevent anti-Pakistan militant groups from operating from Afghan territory.

When militant violence increased, Pakistan's confidence in the Afghan government's willingness or ability to address the problem declined.

The Taliban authorities, meanwhile, have sought to maintain their sovereignty and resist external pressure.

This has created a difficult situation in which Pakistan has strong reasons to engage Afghanistan but also strong security reasons to pressure it.

12. Recent Developments and Changing Relations

The period from 2025 to 2026 represents one of the most important phases in modern Pakistan–Afghanistan relations.

2025

In 2025, diplomatic mechanisms were established to discuss:

- security,
- trade,

- transit,
- connectivity.

The two sides recognised terrorism as a major threat to regional peace and security, although they disagreed on its causes and responsibility.

By late 2025, Pakistan publicly expressed increasing frustration regarding militant attacks attributed to groups operating from Afghan territory.

2026

The crisis escalated substantially in early 2026.

Major developments included:

1. serious border clashes;
2. Pakistani airstrikes inside Afghanistan;
3. Afghan military responses;
4. civilian casualties;
5. displacement;
6. border closures;
7. disruption of trade;
8. international calls for restraint;
9. Chinese mediation;
10. subsequent diplomatic talks.

The UN warned that the fighting was worsening Afghanistan's humanitarian situation and causing civilian casualties and displacement.

Pakistan and Afghanistan subsequently held talks in China aimed at ending the conflict and addressing cross-border attacks.

This suggests that military confrontation eventually generated pressure for renewed diplomacy.

13. Major Challenges for Pakistan

Pakistan faces several interconnected challenges in managing its Afghanistan policy.

13.1 Cross-border militancy

The most immediate challenge is preventing militant attacks from Afghan territory.

13.2 Risk of prolonged military confrontation

Continued military escalation could:

- increase defence costs,
- destabilise border provinces,
- create civilian casualties,
- damage trade,
- increase refugee flows.

13.3 Refugee pressure

Large-scale Afghan migration creates humanitarian, economic and administrative pressures.

13.4 Trade losses

Border closures can hurt Pakistani exporters and Afghan traders simultaneously.

13.5 Regional competition

Pakistan must manage relations with Afghanistan while also considering China, India, Iran, the United States and Central Asia.

13.6 Diplomatic isolation risk

If bilateral relations become dominated by military confrontation, Pakistan could lose opportunities for economic diplomacy and regional connectivity.

13.7 Public opinion

Strong nationalist sentiment on both sides can make compromise politically difficult.

14. Opportunities for Bilateral Cooperation

Despite the serious problems, significant opportunities remain.

14.1 Security cooperation

The two countries could establish:

- intelligence-sharing mechanisms;
- border hotlines;
- joint verification mechanisms;
- coordinated action against recognised terrorist threats;
- regular military-to-military communication.

14.2 Trade cooperation

Both countries could work toward:

- predictable border opening procedures;
- digital customs systems;
- simplified documentation;
- trade facilitation agreements;
- designated commercial corridors.

14.3 Transit connectivity

Pakistan could use its ports and transport infrastructure to connect Afghanistan with global markets.

Afghanistan, in turn, can provide a geographical bridge toward Central Asia.

14.4 Regional connectivity

A stable Pakistan–Afghanistan relationship could support broader projects linking:

Pakistan → Afghanistan → Central Asia

This could create opportunities in:

- transport,
- energy,
- telecommunications,
- logistics,
- minerals,
- agriculture.

14.5 Humanitarian cooperation

A coordinated refugee framework could reduce tensions while protecting vulnerable populations.

15. Policy Recommendations

A sustainable Pakistan–Afghanistan policy should combine security, diplomacy and economic engagement.

Recommendation 1: Establish a permanent security dialogue

A formal bilateral security mechanism should meet regularly rather than only during crises.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen border communication

Local military commanders and border authorities should have direct communication channels.

Recommendation 3: Separate terrorism from broader bilateral disputes

Counterterrorism negotiations should be treated as a distinct diplomatic track.

Recommendation 4: Create a joint border incident mechanism

Whenever a border confrontation occurs, both sides should have a mechanism to investigate the incident before military escalation.

Recommendation 5: Keep trade channels open

Even during political crises, humanitarian and essential commercial corridors should remain operational wherever possible.

Recommendation 6: Develop a comprehensive refugee policy

Pakistan should coordinate with Afghanistan, UNHCR, IOM and other international partners to manage returns humanely and systematically.

Recommendation 7: Expand regional diplomacy

China, Qatar, Türkiye and other credible actors can play supporting roles when direct bilateral negotiations become difficult.

Recommendation 8: Promote economic interdependence

Greater economic cooperation can create incentives for both governments to maintain stability.

Recommendation 9: Avoid permanent military escalation

Military force may sometimes be presented as a security necessity, but prolonged confrontation can create consequences that neither country can easily control.

Recommendation 10: Adopt a long-term regional strategy

Pakistan's Afghanistan policy should be connected with its broader Central Asian connectivity, economic diplomacy and regional security strategy.

16. Future Prospects

The future of Pakistan–Afghanistan relations can be understood through three possible scenarios.

Scenario 1: Continued confrontation

Under this scenario:

- TTP-related attacks continue;
- diplomatic trust deteriorates;
- border closures become frequent;
- military clashes recur;
- trade declines;
- refugee pressures increase.

This would be the most damaging outcome for both countries.

Scenario 2: Managed competition

This is perhaps the most realistic medium-term scenario.

Under managed competition:

- political disagreements remain;
- Pakistan continues to demand action against militant groups;
- Afghanistan continues to resist external pressure;
- border incidents are controlled through diplomacy;

- trade continues despite political tensions.

This would not produce complete reconciliation but could prevent major conflict.

Scenario 3: Strategic stabilisation

The most positive scenario would involve:

- a formal security mechanism;
- meaningful counterterrorism cooperation;
- improved border management;
- stable trade routes;
- coordinated refugee policies;
- greater regional connectivity.

Such an outcome could transform the relationship from a predominantly security-driven relationship into a broader economic and strategic partnership.

17. Conclusion

Pakistan–Afghanistan relations are entering one of the most difficult phases in their modern history.

The relationship is complicated because security, geography, history, migration and economics are deeply interconnected. Pakistan cannot ignore the security threats associated with militant activity along its western border, while Afghanistan cannot ignore the political and humanitarian consequences of prolonged confrontation with its neighbour.

The events of 2026 demonstrated the serious consequences of allowing disagreements to escalate into military confrontation. The fighting produced civilian casualties, displacement and economic disruption, while international actors including the United Nations and China pushed for restraint and dialogue.

At the same time, the existence of diplomatic talks after the escalation shows that neither side can easily escape the reality of geographical interdependence.

The central challenge for Pakistan is therefore to maintain national security without allowing the bilateral relationship to become permanently militarised.

A successful strategy should follow a three-track approach:

Security → Diplomacy → Economic Connectivity

Pakistan should continue demanding credible action against militant threats while simultaneously maintaining diplomatic channels and protecting legitimate economic and humanitarian links.

For Afghanistan, stable relations with Pakistan can provide important access to markets, transit routes and regional connectivity.

For Pakistan, a stable Afghanistan can reduce border insecurity, refugee pressures and economic risks while opening opportunities toward Central Asia.

Therefore, the long-term future of Pakistan–Afghanistan relations will depend not only on military strength but on the ability of both states to develop **institutionalised dialogue, effective border management, counterterrorism cooperation and mutually beneficial economic relations**.

The most sustainable outcome is not necessarily complete political agreement. Rather, it is the creation of mechanisms that allow both countries to **manage disagreements without returning to large-scale conflict**.

18. Research Findings

The research produces five major findings:

Finding 1

Security is the dominant factor shaping bilateral relations.

The TTP issue has become the principal source of mistrust between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Finding 2

The Durand Line remains a structural political problem.

Even when security tensions decrease, border disagreements can continue to affect relations.

Finding 3

Refugees are both a humanitarian and foreign-policy issue.

The large Afghan population in Pakistan creates responsibilities as well as economic and security pressures.

Finding 4

Economic interdependence remains underdeveloped.

Despite geographic advantages, political tensions and border closures have pushed Afghanistan toward alternative trade routes, including Iran.

Finding 5

Regional diplomacy can help prevent escalation.

The role of China during the 2026 crisis demonstrated the importance of third-party diplomacy when bilateral communication breaks down.

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